

SEEDS IN EXILE

Crouching in the underbrush, Richard's sides ached as he waited. The knife wound he'd received the previous evening troubled him, but he dared not move until he knew more of the intentions of the approaching group. He wiped his brow, it had to be at least 35 degrees he decided; the others in his group were tired and testy. None of them wanted a fight. So it was hoped the group would pass without observing them, giving his group time to slip away unnoticed.

It was hard to believe that only six weeks before they had been part of a civilisation from which they now faced eternal exile. It was then that the northern hemisphere had destroyed itself and left the south an unhealthy place to live. Humankind now faced two threats; the possibility of radiation from the north and the savagery of his fellow man.

When it happened, he'd been on exercises with over thirty of his military unit. Discipline had collapsed as soldiers left to find and defend their families from a new enemy. Now, he commanded only the six men and three women left. Few of his army comrades remained, their numbers being bolstered by civilians who joined to escape the other survivors hunting in packs like wild dogs. Few people in this new world retained any vision for the future, a dream to rebuild a new civilisation, one better than the old. Richard McCarthy was one who still retained that dream and attempted to instil that vision into his followers.

He'd armed them with military weapons, abandoned by the now extinct Defence Forces. Without a government to lead them, his people no longer retained any semblance of rank. He'd been elected to the position of leader, and he valued that position of trust. He knew all their lives depended on the decisions he made, and he looked upon them as his charges, his people. His command was now his life, his reason for existence; that and his vision. A new life had already begun for them all, signified by the dropping of their former identities and adopting new names reflecting their role in the group. All that is, except Richard.

He winced with pain as he tried to move his cramping legs, then he heard a sound that made him freeze and listen. They were coming and were not attempting to conceal their movement. Richard gave a signal which was passed on silently to the rest of his people, who lay concealed in the brush.

The other party came crashing through the bush, alert but unskilled in silent passage. Then Richard saw her, her clothes were soiled from weeks of wear and fell loosely from her bare shoulders, revealing her tanned slender arms. Her long brown matted hair, that had once been fine and silky, hung down to her waist that retained the well-rounded shape of a twenty year old model. Only the mask of anger and hatred she wore revealed what she'd become, further evidenced by the knife wound he carried in his side from their last encounter.

The group completed their rowdy passage and Richard indicated to his people they should move away in the opposite direction. They made a clean break and stopped to relax. They had escaped an encounter with one threat but were not so easily going to escape the threat offered by nature. The violence of the encounter that had destroyed the world had altered the structure of their environment. The aftermath would eventually render the planet uninhabitable.

"Richard!" Pulled back to reality, his thoughts drifting into recesses within in his mind, filed for future reference as he followed the sound. He observed Scie running up to join him. Scie had been a professional student all his life. Now, he boasted forty

years, but his balding head and glasses gave him the look of sixty. He appeared breathless and excited which always worried Richard for Scie was usually the quiet thoughtful type, observing and noting events taking place around him. When he raised an alarm it was serious. "Have you noticed the horizon?"

Richard followed the direction indicated and saw what looked like a gathering black cloud of smoke appearing on the horizon. It was swirling as it grew giving every appearance of an angry storm cloud. "What is it? A fire?" asked Richard concerned; it didn't look natural to him.

Scie checked to ensure no one could overhear. "I'm not sure what it is but I do have some scary theories."

"Scare me, Scie," suggested Richard as he watched the cloud moving rapidly towards them casting an ominous shadow over the land that soon would be noticed by all.

"In a study before..." He hesitated not wishing to bring up the past which they had all sworn to not talk about. "... it was estimated that between 2,500 and 3,000 megatons of explosive could be detonated and those explosions would raise over 500 million tons of dust into the atmosphere. It would ignite over 60% of all human constructions and produce 100 million tons of smoke. The resulting black clouds would block out the sun's rays and heat, creating a new Ice Age."

"A nuclear winter, but that is only happening in the north; we shouldn't be affected here in the southern continents," replied Richard.

Scie shook his head. "That was an assumption made by politicians. They failed to consider that as the northern hemisphere cools and we remain hot, a process of conversion begins as the two hemispheres exchange atmospheres at the equator, bringing the cloud into our hemisphere."

Richard stared at the cloud approaching them, a messenger of death. "And you think that cloud is coming from the radioactive north?" he asked, watching as it swirled silently towards them. Scie nodded solemnly. "How will that affect us?"

Scie took a deep breath and Richard knew it was all bad news. "Temperatures could drop up to 25 degrees. According to my instruments, our current temperature range is between 15 and 35 degrees in summer. That puts us below freezing at night in summer...worse in winter. Richard, we need shelter, clothing..." he indicated the lightweight summer gear they all wore. "...and we need protection from the radiation, otherwise we could all be dead in a week."

The cloud now filled a third of the sky and had been observed by the others who were asking questions and talking amongst themselves. "You mentioned radiation," queried Richard, knowing that Scie had his own Geiger Counter.

"I hadn't mentioned it so as not to worry anyone," began Scie hesitantly. "There has been a marked increase in radiation levels over the last few days. Not dangerous levels yet...but steadily rising. Richard! That cloud could be fatal."

"What will provide us protection?" asked Richard alarmed by the speed of the cloud's approach.

"We need to be...underground. But we will also need a food supply that has not been contaminated. Furthermore, we could be there a very long time." stated Scie apologetically.

Richard felt even more uneasy as he fought to contain a feeling of impending doom. "How long?"

Scie's response was brief and confirmed his worse fears. "I don't know...possibly years."

Richard knew the valleys to the east contained caves. They had once been the source of a big tourist industry in the area before the war. Previously, he'd avoided that area for fear the caves would attract people, and people meant trouble. Now, there was no choice. After Scie and he briefed the others, they departed the next valley and searched for a cave large enough to hold them, as the dark cloud billowed overhead, turning day into night, summer into winter. The temperatures plummeted and the wind quickly developed an icy chill. Only their movement offered any defence and that was decreasing by the minute.

"What are you going to do, Richard?" asked Scie, after they'd walked some distance in silence through the rapidly cooling terrain, all this set in an eerie twilight.

Richard shook his head, regretting he'd not planned earlier for winter. It was a basic survival rule, be prepared for all weather conditions but he'd been lulled into complacency by the hot weather and the reluctance of people, wanting to be free from carrying heavy clothing. His suggestion that they gather warm clothing some weeks earlier had been met with resistance that he had failed to override. "To tell you the truth, Scie, I just don't know. Somehow, we must find food and clothing...but where? Are there any towns in this area?"

Scie nodded. "I wouldn't go near them. Anyone living there is not likely to welcome us."

"I know, but it wouldn't hurt to look. It might just be abandoned," suggested Richard hoping upon hope. He knew he was grasping at straws but what choice did and of them have?

Scie pulled out a map and laid it on a nearby rock. People took this as an indication it was time to stop and rest. "There is one but it will be nightfall before we reach it."

Richard looked up at the darkening early afternoon sky. "Who would notice the difference? Besides we could do with the exercise to keep us warm." Richard took off at a quick pace, leaving Scie to refold his map. A few people moaned, showing signs of being tired, but reluctantly followed while at the same time welcoming the body heat generated as they wrapped themselves in blankets and any additional clothing they had with them. A few had coats, whose forward thinking was envied by those freezing. They all knew they were in trouble but their faith in Richard held...for now.

Richard pushed on, driven by his commitment to these people. He felt afraid of failure, afraid of letting his people down. He had to find some way to help them, and that determination swept over him, causing ripples in his wake. If only a man's mind could change the course of events by leaping beyond its normal limits to achieve the impossible. Somehow, just somehow, he had to find a way to achieve this, or they would perish.

"I don't believe it!" announced Scie. The two men sat on a ridge looking at the town in the valley below. Night had long since blotted out any light and without a moon or sun the world was pitch black and difficult to navigate. They had found a town twinkling in the night. Houses powered by electricity; people going about their business as if nothing had happened.

"This place is going to be like a beacon to every wandering group for miles and I don't see any defences," remarked Richard, as they were joined by Husk, a large brute of a man, who had served as a Sergeant overseas under Richard in the Nazis Containment Wars in Europe.

Husk eyed the town suspiciously. "Are you planning to go down there?"

Richard looked at him and smiled. "Do we have a choice? Let's see if they welcome strangers. We'll go in pairs, each group covering the others. Don't hurt anyone unless we have to, we want friends not enemies." Husk nodded having received his instructions, as Scie and Richard headed off together into town.

As they waited, Scie pulled out his Geiger-counter and took a reading. "That's strange! Radiation levels are normal here."

"That's not all, look at the sky?"

Scie looked up and saw stars. "Where's the cloud cover?"

"You noticed," stated Richard as he stepped off down the rise towards the town.

Gingerly, they walked down the main street, noting the sign greeting them as they entered. "Welcome to Yangalor in beautiful Gippsland, Victoria." No guards challenged their approach. Everything here was quiet and peaceful, strangely unaffected by the world events that had taken place around it. They decided to visit the sporting store on the edge of town which was fully stocked with camping gear, including knives, jackets and the like. Ideally located to accommodate people on their way out of town they guessed. What struck Richard and Scie was the fact that business seemed to be going on as usual despite the chaos and destruction occurring elsewhere in the world.

They cautiously entered and found a elderly, grey haired man standing inside. He had been reading a magazine and noted their weapons with some ill ease. "Can I help you, gents?" he asked nervously as he stood up behind the counter, his eyes fixed on their heavy automatic weapons, a bit more powerful than the usual hunter's rifle.

Richard noticed his uneasiness and dropped his weapon to a less threatening position. "Relax. We're not here to cause trouble but I am surprised you are not more prepared to receive it. You the proprietor here?"

The Proprietor nodded. "We're only a small business, not worth worrying about really," he replied his hands shaking slightly as he looked closer at their attire. He noted the dirty and torn remains of Richard's uniform which once had been worn proudly.

"I wouldn't say that," replied Richard looking around. "I can think of groups out there that would kill for this stuff."

The Proprietor swallowed hard and laughed nervously. "Really? Can I get you something? Perhaps a warm drink, it's cold out there?"

"What kind of drink?" asked Richard casually, uncertain how to accept the hospitality.

"A cup of tea, hot soup...maybe a beer? We offer a limited coffee shop service," he added as an afterthought.

Richard and Scie who'd been looking around the shop as they spoke, turned briskly back to face the man, surprise written all over their faces. "You've got tea? We haven't had tea for... I don't know how long. If it wouldn't be any bother, mate?"

The Proprietor smiled with some relief. "Oh, no bother. Just wait there. Take a seat." he said fussing over them while indicating a table and several chairs for them to sit at before he vanished out the back of the store.

"I don't believe this town. They're set up as if nothing ever happened." remarked Scie, deciding to sit down at the suggested table. "They seem oblivious to the danger."

"They do seem to have closed their eyes to reality. But they have somehow managed to keep a small pocket of civilisation alive in this crazy world," remarked Richard examining the brand new woollen winter jackets hanging nearby, enough to clothe his whole group.

"That illusion will not last much longer, eventually the radiation will spread here, and they'll die if they don't seek shelter underground," remarked Scie. "Meanwhile they have the supplies we need."

The hot water must have already been boiling for the Proprietor soon returned with two steaming cups of tea. He placed them on the table, then stood back expectantly as Scie sipped. Richard momentarily lost interest in the clothing and joined Scie.

The police car silently pulled up outside and a tubby policeman got out. Al Scrutney had been a country cop for over twenty years; in that time his most important case had been a teenage break-in to this very store. He'd solved that case, but some judge had let the kid off on probation. The result, the culprit had felt free to cause other mayhem in town. Now old Pete had trouble with a few hunters, the disruption made him irritable as he had planned an early night. He also hoped he might still get it if these guys would just move on peacefully. He opened the door and went in.

Richard heard the door and his senses on high alert. He noticed the Proprietor relax and then the uniform. It was immaculate unlike his own tattered uniform. This town really was untouched by the events outside. He felt uneasy that an Enforcer remained in charge of the town security.

"These the two you rang about, Pete?" Pete nodded and stepped back as the officer walked over. Richard put down his cup as he watched the officer's hand hovering nervously about his holster. Scie remained relaxed continuing to enjoy his cupper. The officer stopped near the table. "Now...we don't want any trouble, do we?"

Richard looked up at the stern official looking face and shook his head. "That's right, Constable. Why don't you join us for a cup of tea?"

The officer gave an unamused smile. "Why don't you just lay your weapons down and come with me; then you can explain where you got such fancy fire power. And it's Sergeant, not Constable."

Richard briefly looked down at his weapon resting upright against the table, then back at the Sergeant. "These weapons were issued to us. Why does it matter to you?"

"It's against the law to have weapons like that in this state. I'll have to confiscate them." He made a move towards the weapons, but Scie and Richard immediately took a tight hold of the barrels challenging him to try.

The policeman froze. "You're going to make things harder on yourselves."

"Typical, Enforcer mentality," snapped Scie feeling intimidated; his previous exposure to Enforcers having been a negative one.

Richard relaxed his hold on the rifle and gave a warning glance to Scie. "If we are not welcome here, we'll leave as soon as we've finished our tea. Before we leave though, I'll give you a piece of advice. There are hundreds of starving people out there in those hills. If you don't prepare some defences, you'll be over-run by those not as co-operative as ourselves."

"I see." The policeman drew his pistol and levelled it at Richard. "I don't know what kind of game you're trying to play here but you will lay those weapons down and come peacefully or I'll take them by force."

Richard and Scie didn't move. Scie's uneasiness grew, and he lost some of his composed manner. Richard on the other hand, casually picked up his cup and took another sip of his tea, "I'm afraid I can't permit you to jeopardise the safety of my people by taking our weapons. You may live in relative peace in this town but out there, we would not survive without them. We're here to transact business, not make trouble." he spoke gently, raising his cup again to his lips.

"So, that's your attitude is it?" responded the Sergeant. "Then I'm placing you both under arrest. Now! On your feet!"

“Sergeant! One question? How big is your jail?” asked Richard. The Sergeant didn’t respond, a little taken aback by the query. “Well, I presume you are going to want to arrest my friends, Husk and Manny here who are standing behind you as well as the others outside.”

The Sergeant smiled. “You can’t pull that old trick on...” he began then stopped as Husk and Manny, who had entered through the back, cocked their weapons to announce their presence. The Sergeant froze on the spot.

“Just drop the pistol, Sergeant. We have no desire to harm you or anyone else in this town. We came here in peace, and we’ll leave the same way but first, we’re going to finish our tea,” instructed Richard, still seated at the table. The Sergeant slowly placed his gun on the floor.

Scie moved quickly to empty the cartridges into his hand and threw them behind the counter, then lay the weapon on the table. Husk and Manny lowered their weapons. “Nice of you to invite us in or were you going to keep it all for yourself?” remarked Husk with a big grin, looking at the policeman standing uncertain and vulnerable.

Richard returned his empty cup to the bench and summoned the now petrified Proprietor out from behind his counter. Old Pete had taken refuge there thinking he was safe until he saw the policeman overpowered. Now he felt certain his living days were at an end. “I think my friends may want a cuppa as well,” he requested with a pleasant smile. “Scie! Would you help our host in case he decides to summon more friends?”

Scie grabbed his cup and led the old man out back. Richard turned back to his people. “Take a seat guys, while I talk to the Enforcer.” Richard picked up the pistol and walked over to the distressed Sergeant. “Relax.” He handed him back his pistol. The Sergeant took it, then mechanically holstered it, his face showing the fear and humiliation he felt. “We aren’t like your kind, though you seem different. Soft, not as cold hearted as most Enforcers I knew.”

The Sergeant watched them all keeping track of their movements, expecting some retaliatory action “I don’t understand you. What is an Enforcer?” Richard simply smiled, angering the Sergeant who was genuinely confused.

"You know...I was thinking of our people freezing in those mountains. They could use some of these jackets, they're wasted here," suggested Scie, emerging from the rear. He stood in the doorway where he could watch the old man and remain part of the activities in the store. "It occurs to me, this may be considered theft in this town. But this town is likely to have itself wiped out before too many more nights go past. I must consider our survival first. We're not thieves despite what you may think but at present we cannot pay. One day, if you all survive, you'll be paid with interest, so open an account."

The old man entered served the tea; then under instruction from Richard took inventory of everything they were taking. The old man agreed to the terms, happy to trade his life for the goods and disregarded the offer to pay as some game they were playing. When they finished Scie bundled it all together and tied it up with string for ease of carrying, then tied up the two captives. “I wish you well gentlemen. But do something to protect this town or you’ll lose it. That cloud will bring cold and death to you all.”

Neither replied apparently not understanding what he meant. The Sergeant remained proudly defiant refusing to ask further questions on principle, while the old man was too afraid to say a word. Richard decided he’d done all he could, and they were gone.

"They didn't kill us." Old Pete gave a sigh of relief he’d been convinced this was to be his last night on earth.

"No but they'll regret this day. I'll track them the ends of the Earth if necessary, until I get them." The old man looked at the Sergeant and saw the humiliation in his eyes. He felt glad they were gone but he wanted no part in any hunt. He knew however, that he would be drafted into the pursuit party

Richard's people located a cave in the next valley offering deep underground protection. They were reluctant to seek refuge deep within the cave just yet; holding on to that last remnant of the surface despite Scie's warning the radiation levels were high in this valley. Richard had chosen some time alone outside as a chance to escape the pressures of leadership and study the night sky. A pastime now denied him as he stared into the absolute darkness of a night clouded by the dust of a nuclear winter, blocking all light from the heavens; a cloud that had returned after they'd left the town.

When had this madness begun he asked himself, and tried to trace the events of that last fifty years. It had begun with the defeat of the Second Global Engagement. That had been the start. Hitler's Nazis had taken over all of Europe, Russia and North Africa while Japan had conquered India and Asia. This created a balance of power revolving around Germany and Japan's nuclear capability. After that, began the Nazi Containment Wars in Africa and South America as Australia and America fought to retain their independence through third party wars. Now, only Australia remained a leading military power in a hemisphere of third world countries and a dead north. A situation triggered by conflicts in the Middle East over Nazi-Japanese borders. But even at home, the infiltration of Nazi philosophy had filtered into law enforcement creating an almost SS-style police force that was initially empowered to seek out dissidents and spies but evolved into a limitation of free speech and a pseudo police state.

From where he sat, he could see his people huddled around the fire in cramped quarters, wrapped in blankets and wearing clothes obtained from the store. Morale was still clouded by fear and the loss of the sun which Scie indicated would not return for many years. Their mood was testy, fired by hunger which was not improved by Sandy in her new-found role of preacher, offering her prophecy of doom to people who were trying to ignore her ravings as she scrawled in the soil as she spoke loudly to the inattentive audience around her. "It's God's vengeance on the world; mark my words we are ..."

"Shut up Sandy! We can do without that crap," yelled Hairy, a man in his fifties who had developed his nickname because of his baldness and an insistence on remaining clean shaven.

She opened her mouth to continue, then shut it as challenging stares warned her to revert back to own thoughts and remain quiet. She pulled the blanket tightly around herself and turned away.

A chill went through him as Richard thought about joining them; the cold was boring right through him. As he rose, he wrapped his blanket closely around himself and started to go inside. Then he heard a noise. Instinctively, his eyes searched the darkness but without a moon the blackness was absolute he could see nothing. He dismissed it as an animal and remembered a similar incident the night before when he'd been stabbed.

He had detected movement while on watch and issued a warning whistle to his people. As he crouched down in expectation of visitors, he felt something fall on him and

realised he was under attack. His warning had placed the camp on alert, and they scattered into the bush in search of others attackers, leaving Richard to handle himself. He grappled with his attacker who fought like a wild cat until he managed to slam his fist firmly into their temple. The limp body collapsed across him. He lay still, gathering his strength as he listened to his people sweeping the area. There was no evidence of conflict. He then became aware of someone nearby.

“I thought you might need help, obviously I was wrong,” announced Husk, as others gathered around to view their leader lying on his back with the body of an unconscious woman on top of him. He ignored the chuckles and threw the body off as he scrambled to his feet.

“What did you find out there?” Richard asked, ignoring the attempts of a young blonde-haired woman to examine the attacker.

Canny knew Richard felt embarrassed and giggled to herself while examining the unconscious female. She enjoyed watching him trying to recover his composure and often teased him simply to get a reaction. Somehow, this had developed into a relationship from which they both drew comfort in this harsh world.

“She appears to be alone, perhaps a scout. I suspect her people are not far away.” reported Husk, hiding his own amusement.

“She’s alive and coming ar” began Canny, the blonde haired woman, as her face went tense with surprise and shock in that last second of life. She fell back as the new girl withdrew the knife from her chest and sat up wildly glancing around, ready for the next attack.

Richard stared incredulously at Canny’s body then kicked the woman violently in the abdomen, grabbed her knife hand and went for her hair with his other hand as she sat clutching her stomach. Husk took the knife as Richard pulled her head back. Her face filled with hatred as she struggled to regain her breath. When she did, her first reaction was to spit in his face. Richard responded by slapping her hard across the face, losing his hold on her hair. She crumpled on to her side and Richard kicked her violently until Husk restrained him.

“Leave her, Richard. We’ll deal with her properly, not like savages!” yelled Husk. Richard glared at his friend then broke free to go to Canny. The fire from the cave offered a dim light that lit up her face framed by her once beautiful hair which lay matted and dirty about her head. As he knelt beside her, she seemed asleep. She had looked like that when they had slept together. Her arm lay across her stomach as if resting peacefully. He reached out and touched it. It still felt warm and alive.

“Richard! Look out!” came the warning. He turned as he felt the knife leave his sheath. With skilful timing he grabbed her wrist and placed a powerful blow to her face sending her sprawling backwards into the bushes. In that split second he caught his first glimpse of her face as several men grabbed her and pulled her violently to her feet. His face turned to stone as a memory flashed through his mind.

“Tie her up.” Richard ordered, coldly as the rest of his people watched in stunned silence unable to comprehend such madness.

They abandoned the fire as it provided too much of a beacon for possible marauders and slept in pairs near the original camp, rotating the guard throughout the night. During his shift, Richard approached the woman- captive who had been tied and gagged to a tree and woke her up. Her eyes seethed vengeance as soon as she recognised him in the dim light of early morning. Carefully he removed her gag.

“Why Carmen? Why did you do it?” he asked his voiced drained of emotion.

“Because I swore to destroy you...and I will! Except now I won’t be satisfied until you are dead.” she replied venomously.

Richard was taken aback by vehement response and felt pity for her as he tried to understand how such hatred could be sustained for so long. “That was a lifetime ago, Carmen. And it did not involve an innocent young girl. What did Canny ever do to you?”

“She got in my way,” she replied through clenched teeth, staring defiantly at him.

Richard remained silent. Instead, he tried to remember her as she was years ago. She still retained her elegant figure which seemed out of place in this wilderness. Her clothes were torn and fell loosely from her shoulder, offering little protection from branches and thorns which had scratched her bare arms. “I pity you, Carmen, allowing such anger to dominate your life, it will destroy you.”

“Not before I destroy you, Richard.” she threatened.

“I don’t want to continue this fight though I feel I should avenge myself for Canny. But what would that achieve? It could be better to just leave you to drown in your own hatred. What we fought over is gone, past. There is nothing left. Hasn’t there been enough hate in the world? Let it go, Carmen.”

“And let you off the hook. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Well... no such luck. One day I’ll kill you. Mark my words,” she threatened, the look in her eyes left no room to doubt her threat.

“In that case, I can do nothing for you. In the morning you will be tried by my people, if you are released do not come anywhere near us again or I’ll kill you, myself. Do I make myself clear?” warned Richard.

“Perfectly!” she replied with a smile that sent a shudder down his spine.

He left her there after replacing the gag and finished his watch, feeling uneasy. He knew it would be a mistake to release her, but he could not bring himself to execute her. As full light returned, he joined the others by the fire. Few bothered to acknowledge him as he sat down. Richard surveyed the group and focused on young Mouse, a quiet girl in her twenties distinguishable by her quiet nature, pale skin, and glasses. She had cuddled up to Scie, they seemed a good pair, a librarian, and a walking encyclopaedia. Richard found the glum silence around the group depressing and jumped to his feet. “Come on Scie! Time for us to go seek out nourishment, let’s see what exciting morsel we can deliver before nightfall.” Scie dragged himself to his feet to follow Richard.

The flash of steel caught Richard’s eye but he moved too slowly and felt its cold biting edge pierce his side as the blade drove home. He fell to his knees as Doc rushed to his side. Without thinking he pulled the knife out and let it fall from his hands as he looked over to where Carmen had been bound. She was gone. “Richard. I need you to lie down. You’re losing a lot of blood.” warned Doc.

Husk found him still staring out into the darkness. “How’s your wound?” he asked, drawing him back to the present.

“I’m surviving,” replied Richard, offering no incentive to continue the conversation.

Husk sat down on a nearby rock and waited a few minutes. “You knew that girl, didn’t you?” Richard nodded silently, staring out into the blackness. “So what is it with you two?”

Richard did not respond. His thoughts exploring memories he would sooner have forgotten. Then came a need to share his pain with a friend. “It was a long time ago,

Husk. We knew each other back in the city. We were lovers but it was always doomed to failure. We argued continually and of course we broke up. She decided to get even - tried to destroy my career. But the Army needed experienced officers for the campaigns and conveniently found no case to answer. She swore to get even. I didn't realise it had become such an obsession."

"Did you release her?" he asked.

For the first time Richard ceased staring into the woods and stared at Husk, puzzled. "Do they think I did?" It was Husk's turn to nod. "No. I didn't but I wanted to. I spoke to her. Told her my revenge for Canny would be for her to live with her vengeance eating her up from the inside. I intended to plead for her life at the trial." He paused looking deeply into his friend's eyes. "Do you believe me, old friend?"

"Yes." replied Husk. "I had Scie examined the ropes she was bound in. They were chewed not cut."

Suddenly he was filled with rage. "She's a wild animal, a dangerous animal that must be destroyed. I know that now. If she was still here, I'd kill her in cold blood!" Richard glared into the distance as if his stare could find her in the darkness and strike her down, then turned back to his friend as Husk placed a hand on his shoulder. "Last night I attempted to play leader by setting an example of mercy. Tonight, the reality of Canny's loss is too real, she'll pay, I'll make her pay!" said Richard his teeth gritted in anger like he'd never felt before.

"She can wait, my friend. We have the future to worry about," stated Husk by way of distraction as Sandy and a few others emerged from the cave.

"There he is! Scie has told us of the future. Our doom is written in the sands. What is our great leader going to do to get us through this winter when we are like this in the summer?" she challenged.

Richard examined the frightened faces looking hopefully to him for assurance. He felt tired as he realised Sandy had only voiced his own thoughts; thoughts that had led him to seek solitude. He needed someone to give him hope but he was alone and somewhere within himself he had to draw strength and dole it out to those around him. He rose slowly and stared confidently at the group, burying his own fears. "Our ancestors survived the Ice Age, 25,000 years ago. We can survive this."

"Words! Will words bring us warmth and food?" she persisted.

It was only then that Richard was struck with his own stupidity. "You know, we're fools. We've missed out on a chance to recapture a piece of the world as it was."

At first there was no response, no one understood what he meant. "I'm not sure I want the world as it was. A world of Nazi Containment overseas and Enforcers at home." replied Scie, a little disappointed.

"That town! It has the supplies we need but not the means to defend itself. If we could form an alliance, we could build an underground community that could weather this hardship and re-emerge into a new world in the future," suggested Richard becoming animated by his own excitement.

Husk did not share his excitement. "Richard! You forget - to them, we're outsiders. We robbed their town, terrorised an old man and tied up their Enforcer. Do you think they are going to welcome us?"

"Perhaps we didn't try hard enough to convince them. Besides if we abandon them, they're going to be slaughtered and that one remnant of civilisation will be lost." Richard searched their faces but could only see scepticism. "We can only ask? If they knock us back, we've lost nothing."

"I suppose we haven't got anything to lose by trying," stated Scie looking around for other comment.

No one moved as the question lingered in their minds. The fire had been taken out of their fears and quietly they returned inside the cave to the warmth of the fire as it started to rain. They'd been given a slither of hope. Sandy watched them leave disappointed.

"The signs tell us we are doomed!" she yelled at their departing backs. Finally, she followed defeated. Richard and Scie followed. Scie did not mention the results of his latest radiation readings.

Richard did not sleep well that night, dreaming of the rickety little cross that had been erected over Canny's grave. In his dream he stood there for hours in the pouring rain blaming himself for her death. Outside the cloud dumped its poisonous load of black rain upon the earth.

Next morning, they awoke to a sky filled with inky black clouds that were thick and poisonous. The sunlight was pale and weak, almost non-existent. Scie tested the environment and his Geiger Counter crackled like crickets on a warm night. But there would be no more warm nights or crickets for many years on this planet. That sound now signified death.

As they approached the town, Scie was puzzled and frustrated by the fact that the town had normal radiation levels, while out here radiation was increasing rapidly towards lethal levels. He doubted whether that situation would persist after the heavy black rain over night. He therefore failed to inform Richard as he felt no purpose could be served at this stage.

Richard noticed that Scie was concerned about something and watched him fall further behind as they walked towards the town. Morale had been boosted by the distribution of jackets even if their stomachs remained empty. Richard hoped there was some expectation of success in this journey but the faces around him failed to reflect this. Eventually Richard decided to approach Scie. "How is it?"

"We had best proceed quickly. Radiation levels are approaching lethal levels and still rising. By tonight I suspect the outside world will no longer be accessible to us." replied Scie ominously.

"Last night in the town, you recorded almost normal radiation levels. This morning, radiation levels were still rising. Why was that?" asked Richard, having noted Scie's comment as they entered the town the night before.

Scie scratched his head and watched the dandruff peel off and drop on his instruments. "I don't know." he began hesitantly. "There is something strange about that town as if it was somehow isolated from the events around it. Things like that old man's phone working."

"That's good, isn't it?" queried Richard, unsure why he was troubled.

"I don't know and that is what concerns me," he replied, looking up into Richard's face.

"Hey! You two! Going to join us?" yelled Husk from the top of a ridge where the others had gathered.

Richard gave a wave to the shadowy figures in this world of perpetual twilight, to acknowledge they were coming as Scie collected his equipment. Richard led the descent down the ridge towards the bush on the last leg of their journey back to the town. Suddenly, the sky turned clear blue, blinding them with brilliant sunlight. The sun had returned warm and bright, and with it the high temperatures of mid-summer that began to thaw out their frozen bodies.

Part of the group was missing, only Husk and Mouse were to be seen, but there was nowhere for the others to hide. A slight wave of panic began to spread. "Where are they? What happened, Scie?" asked Husk, as Mouse huddled closer towards him for comfort. No-one responded as they stood frozen, afraid to move in case they too disappeared. Scie looked around him as his scientific curiosity was stimulated then he quickly retraced his last few steps and vanished into thin air. Mouse gave a scream of alarm and moved to chase after him, but Husk grabbed her.

Seconds later, Scie re-appeared with the remainder of the group, a jabber of questions erupted as they stood in wonder, their emotions tainted by fear and confusion. Only Scie and Richard remained silent. "Scie! What happened?" asked Richard, his voice failing in his attempt to hide the fear growing within him.

Scie looked up, his face appearing incredulous as he drew his conclusions. "I'm not sure but I suspect it's a gateway - a gateway to another world. This is not the world we knew; it's another Earth untouched by the war." Scie stopped then grabbed Richard's arm desperately. "Richard! This world is our salvation! The Earth we knew is dead, radiation levels back there are approaching lethal levels and rising rapidly. Soon, nothing will be able to survive there. Here, radiation levels are normal, and all trace of that cloud cover has vanished. Yet if you step over there." He indicated the ridge line they had stepped over. "It's as poisonous as ever." Richard looked puzzled. "It would take years for that cloud cover to thin not seconds. Go take a look for yourself." suggested Scie, knowing he wasn't making himself clear.

Richard walked back up the ridge and vanished. In a twinkling of an eye the sky went black, filling instantly with clouds that were thick and poisonous; the sunlight was pale and weak, the air cold. He stepped back into the sunlight scanning the sky for any trace of the black clouds. The frightened group bunched together like terrified children waiting for their parents to make it go away as Richard re-appeared.

Richard's thoughts returned to the town as he tried to grapple with the events and their implications. "If this is another world, then that town is not as stupid as we thought. They don't know about the war. For them it hasn't happened."

Husk remarked as he stared down at the town. "It doesn't make them any less vulnerable." Richard had to agree, their mission remained the same.

Scie speculated. "We may be the last seeds of our world, given a haven while our world regenerates. And you're right Husk, that same door is letting in the vermin from our world to loot this one as they did last night."

"So, if we're to survive in this world we're going to have to reconcile our differences or remain fugitives." Richard looked to the faces of his people and summoned them over for a meeting. "Our plan does not change. That town is an opportunity to rebuild our lives in a new world. Properly fortified it could be defended, if we can convince them to accept our help and take us in," he argued.

"And if they don't let us in, what do we do then?" demanded Sandy.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, we don't want to start a war before we've even got to know this world," replied Richard trying to stem the crowd of anxious faces.

While they debated the future, Scie made additional observations until Richard joined him. "You know there's no leakage of radiation from one world to the other, no air flow and the gateway is not very high." He threw a stone ten feet in the air to arc over the invisible gateway. They saw it fall onto the other side which seemed as sunny and warm as their side. "I can't tell how long it is, but I've walked a couple of hundred yards in both directions and found no end. The more important question is how long will it stay open?"

"How long will our world take to regenerate?" asked Richard.

Scie looked sorrowfully at him. "Probably hundreds of years."

"Then we will be the only surviving seeds of our world forced to live in exile forever," commented Richard, remembering Scie's earlier statement. Scie nodded solemnly in agreement and the two men started back towards the others. As they walked, Richard thought of Canny from whom he was now separated not only by death but by an entire reality.

"Richard! Look!" Husk pointed down the valley about half a mile to where a number of confused people were emerging from the gateway.

Richard and Scie looked towards the area indicated. "Carmen!" whispered Richard observing her gathering her group together as if she were in charge. He counted six then two more emerged.

"Who?" asked Scie.

"The woman who killed Canny," he replied.

"So you did know her!" responded Scie.

The anger welled up inside at the sight of her, he fought the urge to charge up to her and kill her. His survival instincts were the only thing holding him back. He didn't notice Husk at hand to stop him should he try anything rash. Scie was confused. "Yes." he replied through gritted teeth. "And I warned her if she followed... I'd kill her myself." He didn't stay to explain. "If we're going to help that town we'd better get there first." he announced and took the lead. Husk joined him in the lead as he entered the forest leading a tired and hungry group of people with Scie in the rear.

They hadn't gone far when a voice warned them to stop, and they found themselves surrounded by an armed party. They were not one of the packs; they were dressed in clean clothes and looked nervous. Richard noted their weapons would have been inadequate against those of Richard's group in a gun battle, but here, caught unawares and surrounded, they would be effective enough. He cautioned everyone to cooperate.

Sergeant Al Scrutney approached through the thick growth with a triumphant smile on his face. When he got close enough, he rammed his rifle butt into Richard's stomach and left him buckled over. Husk went to his aid as the Sergeant stepped back to issue his instructions. Richard's people hesitated, aware of the weapons trained upon them but indignant about their treatment.

"You will drop all your weapons or be shot where you stand," warned the Sergeant. "You are under arrest for assault, theft, possession of unlawful weapons, carrying weapons without a licence, resisting arrest and being in an unlawful place."

Richard was still catching his breath, so Husk stepped in. "Look! We've come to help you. Your town is in grave danger."

The policeman smiled. "I'm sure we can handle it," he replied sarcastically and looked to the townspeople. He was rewarded with some less than enthusiastic responses from a number of terrified people. "So, what is it to be, people? Drop your weapons or shoot it out. It's your choice." The Sergeant's eyes darted around as everyone waited for Husk and Richard to give them their orders. Husk nodded and the weapons were dropped as Richard got to his feet holding his bruised ribs.

Richard glanced at Husk and then at the others. He had led them into captivity. Helplessly he marched in the direction indicated and the others followed but he could feel their accusing eyes boring into his shoulder blades as they waited for him to find a means of escape. However, Richard had expected this result, now it was up to him to negotiate.

"Well. Great Leader! Is this the life of luxury, the return to the past you promised?." came the mocking words of Sandy that seemed to say what they all felt as they sat in the town jail waiting for judgement.

Richard impatiently snapped at her in response. He was tired of her negative prophecies and pseudo religious preaching. "What do you want from me, you have dry accommodation, beds, sheets, warmth and probably food. It's going to take time to gain their confidence."

The others looked at him. "You're going to need time to win back our confidence," pressed Sandy with a scheming smile on her face that spelt more trouble to come from her direction. Her biggest weapon was her ability to spread dissent and fear.

"Is that how you all feel?" Richard looked challengingly at the silent sullen faces, but no one replied. "Then who wants to take over leadership?" Once again, no one moved. "Then until you have the guts to find another leader you stick with me, and do as I say!" he stated, wishing he had the option to step outside and be alone.

"Why don't we make Husk leader?" suggested Sandy, daring Husk to refuse. She had sensed Husk felt he could do better but had not wanted to break his strong friendship. She now hoped he would choose what he thought was best for the safety of the group over his loyalty to Richard.

Husk shot an angry look at her. He knew she was a scheming bitch at the best of times but now he saw she was attempting to isolate Richard by pitting his best friend against him for leadership.

Richard looked at his friend and read the doubt in his face. "Then let it be." Richard turned away and went to lie on his bunk. "Richard." pleaded Husk but was ignored. The others looked away except for Sandy who sat with a satisfied grin on her face. Husk went over and slapped her hard across the face sending her sprawling across the floor then he went to lie on his bunk.

Carmen led a confused pack of people, uncertain about their new environment but as Richard had suspected, saw the town as easy pickings. Pete's store had been selected as being first on their agenda. There were eight of them gathering in the bush near the closed building. They had waited until dark, at first considering the town to be some kind of trap. Still unsure after careful reconnaissance, they broke in when no one was around. After taking what they wanted they burnt the place to the ground then took shots at the fire fighters, killing three before vanishing into the night.

Scrutney barged into the jail, wet and angry. Richard's people had heard gun shots and a fire engine. They suspected the raids had begun and were concerned about their own vulnerable position. The Sergeant produced a shot gun and began brandishing it at his prisoners with clenched teeth.

"You animals!" he yelled. "You'll pay for the three firemen your people killed. I promise you. I only wish I could shoot you all down where you stand."

Husk stepped forward to defend the group. "We had nothing to do with it. How could we? You've had us locked up in here."

"Members of your kind did it!" he snarled; all rational thought having left the policeman. "Don't you worry! We'll hunt down your friends. Soon they'll join you and you'll all regret ever coming to this town."

Richard then said still lying in his bunk. "We told you your town was in danger and you ignored us. You won't find them as easy to trap. We came in friendship. They came to take and kill."

Hank turned back to the Sergeant. "That's right. If we meant to harm you, we would have done that the first night, when we had you prisoner. Now you face desperate people who outgun you. Farmer's weapons are no match for military weapons. And I'll tell you something else; there are hundreds of them out there. Your whole town is in danger if you don't take precautions to defend it."

The Sergeant glared at them. "You people are all the same. Do you expect me to believe such nonsense? And where did these hoards come from." he scoffed. "Tomorrow you'll be tried and..." he hesitated.

"Hung! Is that the word," said Richard swinging his legs over the side of the bunk. The Sergeant turned at the movement. "If you want to catch those animals, then let me out and I'll take you to them. I have no loyalty to these people." he said contemptuously.

The Sergeant hesitated while the others looked at Richard with horror. Even Husk began to doubt his friend. Could he really be prepared to turn on them because they had dumped him as leader? The Sergeant stepped back a little astonished but curious, while noting the reaction of his cell mates. "I can't trust you."

"Why not?" asked Richard confidently. "If I fail, you still have all these hostages, if you think I care about them. And you've got me."

The Sergeant scrutinised Richard carefully. Finally, a devious grin crossed his face as he visualised shooting Richard as he attempted to escape or in self-defence. "All right! The rest of you step back," he fumbled for his keys as the others complied looking suspiciously at Richard as he approached the door. It opened and Richard stepped out watching the shot gun aimed at his middle. Richard looked unconcerned and disinterested in the Sergeant's actions as he proceeded to lock the door then Richard moved, silently and swiftly. The Sergeant suddenly found himself without his weapon and looking down the wrong end of his own gun.

"Well done, Richard." commended Husk, as the others clambered to the door. Richard ignored them.

The Sergeant stood nervously, still holding the key to the cell and watching the barrel of the gun pointed at him. "I knew you couldn't be trusted."

"You were wrong," replied Richard. "Open the door and step inside. The rest of you get out and take your new leader with you. As far as I'm concerned you are on your own. I'm going after Carmen. I have a personal score to settle."

His former friends hesitated then pushed passed the Sergeant and headed for the back door. Richard closed the cell door. Husk waited. "You can't go alone, Richard. You're one of us."

"Is that why they voted you leader? First sign of trouble and they switch allegiance." Richard coldly walked off to check the front of the building. Husk realised their friendship had been badly bruised in that cell and his respect for the group had been shattered. He didn't really blame Richard as he watched them clambering over their weapons in their haste to escape into the night. Husk was the last to leave but he did not follow the others, he took off after Richard after a final glance at the Sergeant contemplating his future as he sat angrily in the cell.

Richard's people sat silently in the sunlight watching the sun climb into the sky. They had missed the warmth even though it had only been two days since the dark cloud had descended over their world. Scie had speculated the gateway had been created as a result of the violence of their war ripping holes into the fabric of space. It was invisible to the eye but marking the way back to that world. All they had back there was gone,

here they had a chance to recover what they had lost, yet a dark mood hung over them. No-one had spoken since leaving the jail and an uneasy silence had befallen them. The only person immune was Scie. He had his own concerns that made him unaware of the group mood. He had found the gateway was closing.

Hairy was the last remaining military member of Richard's group. Husk's absence had given them all a strong message of shame felt by all, with the possible exception of Sandy. He decided it was his duty to take charge rather than leave them leaderless. "I think we should go back."

Everyone looked up, the sound of a voice like a beacon in the silence. "And do what? Fight for those who would imprison us." retorted Sandy, her tongue still coated with words of doom and hate.

"Would you have us return to our world and die? We need to make a stand here. Win a place in this world or run the risk of being out here living off the land for the rest of our lives," argued Hairy. He was unused to public speaking and felt nervous, his hand moving subconsciously to his face where his early morning stubble was beginning to appear.

"Camping out bush used to be fun," commented Manny, a skinny young man in his early twenties. "Now it's lost its appeal. I miss driving my car, going to restaurants. Seeing a movie, I want that back. There's nothing back there but death."

"That is our home," replied Sandy. "We are not wanted here. We should return or risk bringing down the wrath of God on us. It is not natural for us to be here."

"The wrath of God has already been brought down on us. Now we have a second chance, besides we can't go back. The gateway has closed." announced Scie re-joining the group.

"What!" exclaimed Sandy jumping to her feet. She reached the gateway, but the dark clouds did not reappear as she passed the threshold. No longer did they need to walk around it to gain access to the other side. "No! No! Come back! You cannot leave us here!" she cried, falling on her knees, and calling to the sky.

"Our future is set. Only certain death awaited us back there," announced Hairy. "Eternal shame on us, if we remain here and do nothing to help that town and our leaders - I for one, am going back to follow Richard, wherever he leads us." Hairy got up and walked off alone towards the forest where the Sergeant had captured them. One by one the others followed leaving Sandy to reluctantly follow defeated but not out.

It was mid-morning when they got back to the town but not before the pack had commenced their attack. There were only seven in the group all armed with heavy weapons against a small defending party with hunting rifles. They watched as the Sergeant's barrier of cars was sprayed with automatic fire by a concealed gunman while the others took up positions around the town. That one burst was enough to convince the townspeople to surrender or risk being cut to pieces. The Sergeant, not one driven by sense, failed to surrender and escaped into a building.

"At least most of them have the sense to surrender," remarked Scie.

Hairy was not so sure and realised this was no time for small talk. They had to act. "Everyone spread out. Take those men in guard positions quietly and be ready to back any move I make. Manny you come with me. Scie this isn't your scene. Keep watch up here and be prepared to provide us with covering fire."

Scie nodded as they moved off in pairs, his attention on the surrendering townspeople who were being approached by three of the pack people, their weapons

still raised in readiness. He wondered where Richard and Husk were hiding and wished he could get word to them.

Richard had kept himself out of the way since his escape, watching the events in the town. He positioned himself behind a Ute ready to move if necessary, hoping that Carmen would make an appearance and give him the opportunity of killing her. He was not aware that Husk had been watching him all night.

The surrendered civilians were gathered together in a line by a bearded dark-haired chap with Spanish like ancestry and a glimmer of expectant excitement in his eye that made Richard uneasy. He saw the glint in the man's eye and knew he was going to kill them all, Richard desperately tried to figure a means to assist them.

Meanwhile, one of the sentries sitting behind a rock on the edge of town suddenly vanished into the bushes, involuntarily. Mouse and Doc poked their heads out of the bushes to verify they hadn't been seen and took up positions closer to town.

Further along, another one of Carmen's people leaning against a building found his support seem to vanish as Manny and Hairy pulled him aside for a quiet chat. A third kneeling beside a tree had his skull crushed by an overenthusiastic crack across the head by Sandy. That left three remaining, all standing in the main street with the prisoners, laughing as they prepared their entertainment. A seventh had momentarily disappeared and there was still no sign of Carmen.

Richard climbed into the Ute and found Husk in the seat beside him. Richard hesitated, unsure how to respond then, without a word, started the engine. Ears pricked up but the invaders were not overly concerned, they knew they were not alone in town and proceeded as Richard drove right at them.

When they realised what was happening it was too late, one began to fire as Husk stood up and returned fire over the top of the cab. Richard drove over the first gunman while Husk sprayed the others unprotected in the street. The Ute swung around and then screeched to a halt in front of the townspeople. Richard leaned out of the window and smiled as the Sergeant emerged from his hiding place.

"You just can't get rid of us!" commented Richard.

The Sergeant stepped forward as the other townsfolk, consisting of about ten farmers, stood defiantly in the background trying to hide their wounded pride and fear. "So, what now? You have your fun with us instead?"

Richard sighed. "What does it take to convince you we're on your side? We're the good guys. We came to help you defend this town against these and others like them."

The Sergeant didn't reply, he was distracted by the appearance of Richard's men with their captives. Hairy walked up to him. "If you think you can defend this town without us, you're kidding yourself. These are desperate people, and you are not trained to deal with them. Some of us are soldiers, we can help. If you want that help." Hairy turned his back on the Sergeant and faced Richard. "All present and accounted for, sir." he reported with a salute.

Richard returned the salute and watched as the rest of his people responded. For a moment he was stunned at their return to his leadership. "Secure your prisoners, Corporal. We've at least two more to round up, assuming no one else has crossed the gateway."

Hairy picked up his prisoner and pushed him towards the jail as Richard climbed down out of the vehicle and approached the Sergeant.

The Sergeant searched for an insight into Richard's character. "I don't understand. Where do you people come from?"

"We can talk about that another time," replied Richard as he turned to address the townspeople. "Take those weapons off the dead and dump your own. Manny! Show them how to use them." Manny sprang to the task eagerly as Richard looked around. "Where is Scie?"

No one had seen him since he'd been left on guard duty. Richard decided to drive out to chase him up. "What's the plan of defence?" asked Husk as they drove to the edge of town.

"First we need intelligence on how many have come through. We know there are at least two more people on the loose and Carmen is probably the most dangerous of them..." Richard swerved to avoid Scie who came racing out of the bushes.

"They're coming! They're coming!" he cried breathlessly. Richard jumped out of the Ute followed by Husk.

"Who's coming?" queried Richard.

"That woman... and she has others. They're just beyond the ridge," prattled Scie.

"How many?" pressed Husk.

"Eight."

Carmen's original group had consisted of eight. The pack they'd just captured was only seven. "They must have been another group," announced Richard. "But are Carmen's people working with them? They may have formed the alliance on the basis that we might be around backed by the townspeople."

"Then again. She might be running independently." pointed out Husk.

"Either way, she's coming to our party and we'd best light the candles." replied Richard.

Carmen cautiously led her pack into the town. They were armed with an assortment of weapons, some automatic but most were hunting rifles or shotguns. The group included some women but no children. They were scruffy, dirty and unshaven, demonstrating they had not been highly successful at finding food or living hygienically in the field. They were desperate and irrational, driven by naked animal instincts of survival. Their enemy was anything that competed for that survival. They were ready for a fight but what they found was a town deserted.

At the lead with Carmen was a man. The man was tall, unshaven and dressed in torn clothing with rags tied on in several layers for extra warmth. Carmen was similarly dressed but had removed the trappings around her arms and legs given the rising heat. She looked young, around mid-thirties, but the ordeal of survival had taken its toll on her beauty which was hidden beneath a mask of dirt and a look of cold stone.

The man addressed two of his male followers. "Go drag a few of them out." They rushed off eagerly and burst into a house.

Manny placed his knife in one set of ribs while a town member threw himself at the other, knocking him off balance while Manny crushed his skull. Outside, unaware of the fate of her men, Carmen waited.

"You people! We have taken your town. Come out and surrender. Don't make us come and get you. I assure you, you won't enjoy that." She waited. Richard stepped out the door unarmed. He stood on the porch defiantly, no one else emerged and the town remained deadly quiet.

"Richard!" she said, loud enough for him to hear. "Are you claiming this town? Or are you surrendering it to me? If so... come all the way. Stand before me!" she ordered concealing her uneasiness at finding him there, although that was mixed with a

desire to finish their business together by killing him. However, she knew he was not there to surrender and that some trick was in play.

"I don't think so." Her eyebrows rose for a second alert to any threat. "Before you act, just stop and look around you."

An echo of cocking rifles sounded on queue all around them accompanied by the sight of barrels from windows which was reminiscent of some old western. "This is a peaceful town, Carmen. This is a world untouched by the stupidity of our world. It's not contaminated. Here we can return to the life we once had. Just lay down your weapons and you'll be welcome. Our world is dead, you've been through the gateway as we have, don't throw away the second chance we've been granted."

The unshaven man whispered to Carmen as she handed over her weapon and walked towards Richard. She knew she was still attractive, and she flaunted it as she approached, attempting to distract Richard. She stopped at the steps to the porch and looked up at Richard. "You the town negotiator?"

"No, I'm a soldier, tired of fighting. Give it up, Carmen. It's time to forget the past," pleaded Richard, his resolve to kill her turning to water in her presence. He realised then that he still had feelings for this creature but could not understand why.

She smiled. Richard eyed her elegant figure, her hair glistening in the sun as the wind ruffled through it. She started up the steps. "Maybe we could go inside and talk about it."

He had forgotten how alluring she could be as she came level with him; she gave off a sensuous perfume despite the heat forcing beads of sweat to cover her body now skimpily dressed for the heat. Some of the beads trickled down between her breasts and down her bare arms. Then his adrenalin rose as he saw a blade appear from nowhere. There was a shot and the girl bent forward as her magnificent figure crumpled and fell back into the dust of the road. Richard looked down, a small pistol smouldering in his hand.

A silence fell over the scene. Stunned disbelief at the death of the woman as the unshaven man gave a scream of rage and opened fire. With that, the town exploded. Bullets riddled the houses and the invaders as they fled for cover. One invader entered the house where Manny had been concealed. He gunned down the townsman as Manny turned and shot him but not before his weapon peppered Manny's chest. He fell backwards out the window as his murderer slid down the wall leaving fresh red scars of blood.

The encounter lasted only minutes but in that time two townspeople and Manny were killed along with three of Carmen's pack before they surrendered. Slowly, the townspeople emerged from their hiding places to see what they'd done. Richard stopped to look down at Carmen's body as he passed. "Why couldn't you forgive? You had every chance here, Carmen. Now what do you have?" he said aloud to her unhearing ears.

He threw his weapon down and stepped over her body towards the middle of the street. He felt disgusted at the waste. It had all been so unnecessary. Suddenly a single shot rang out and a bullet entered Richard's back below the shoulder blades. Husk, who had been walking over from another building had seen the temptress move but his reaction had been too slow. She lay resting on one arm, Richard's pistol in the other, bullets unmercifully tore the life from her body; she fell onto her face; never to move again. Husk dropped his weapon and ran over to Richard to pick him up. His friend's lips moved but said nothing while his eyes showed shock and helplessness, his mind had too much to say and no time to say it. His body went limp, and Husk held his friend close to him and wept.

Husk looked up as Richard's people gathered around in silence.

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