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Perdition's Crossing

By James Waugh

There were few things in the Koprulu sector that Jim Raynor hated more than Perdition's Crossing. But a man's feelings toward a geographical region didn't exactly factor into his duties as a Confederate marshal. So, Raynor once again made his way into that gulch of hellish desert in the middle of Mar Sara's notorious badlands—in the middle of nowhere.

Wind rushed and boomed around his vulture bike as he made double time across the desolate ravine so he could get back home to his now-pregnant wife, Liddy, within the two-day window he had promised her. The air was acrid, dry, and hot. The hard-packed desert beneath him had cracked in long veins from the sun's heat and what seemed like an eternity since even the slightest kiss of moisture had blessed it. Mankind was never meant to survive in environments like this, Raynor thought, but that fact sure as hell never stopped him from trying.

In the distance, he could see, like some twisted, unwelcome mirage, the vague outlines of Sheriff Glenn McAaron, a police hovertruck, and what Raynor was there to pick up, a medium-sized, Confederate-issued prison cube. Their bloated shadows bent in the afternoon's high sunlight.

"Damn," Jim muttered under his breath as the shapes started to become clearer, as clear as the memory of Liddy kissing him goodbye. Perdition's Crossing was at the center of Mar Sara's infamous "wave-band anomalies," which meant that vector-balance equipment often didn't work and that comm contact was heavily scrambled and limited, if possible at all.

This made dropship transport across the desert valley, even if it could be afforded, a dangerous proposition, but it was more so because the anomalies turned the 2,400 kilometer stretch into one of the most unpoliced regions on the planet—maybe even in the galaxy. It was a fact that Mar Sara's outlaws and roving packs of criminals knew all too well. Most eggheads from the Confederate Science Corps believed the wave-band anomalies were due to the electron impulses emitted from the rare crystal formations that seemed to sprout up like sharp, jagged crops from the mineral-rich depths below. No matter what the cause, the result was that Jim had to ride into the most dangerous pass in the sector to meet up with his least favorite sheriff in order to transport prisoners from one side of the planet to the other.

"You here to pick up this cube or join 'em in it, Marshal?" McAaron smiled a grisly, toothless grin as Raynor brought the vulture to a stop. It was the kind of ironic smile that implied flatly that humor wasn't its intent.

"Not unless you say something that rubs me wrong enough to cause me to do some lawbreaking." Raynor spit at the dusty ground. McAaron had let himself go soft over the years; the plump gut around his waist was protruding over his belt in a way it hadn't the last time the two men had crossed paths. It seemed to grow with each encounter. The sheriff was preparing for the easy life of retirement that loomed on a very near horizon.

"I wouldn't put that past you, son. You got a longer rap sheet than most of the criminals I bring out here. If you didn't have the friends you do, maybe it would be you heading out to El Indio this afternoon."

"Now, Sheriff, where's your faith in redemption?" Jim flashed his own prize-winning smile and stepped off of his bike. McAaron had worn a badge a long time, and he had heard about Jim's past. Men like the sheriff were stubborn and fixed in their ways. His attitude toward a former criminal wasn't personal; it was just a matter of practice.

"Ahh, men don't change, Marshal. You stay a lawman long enough, you'll know it's so. Why I keep my eye on you."

"And I do so 'preciate that, Sheriff." After a moment, Raynor continued. "What of our boys here?"

He kneeled down and looked through small, electrified bars. Confederate prison cubes had become a staple on frontier colonies and backwater planets where police dropships and other conveniences of more sophisticated worlds were too expensive to come by. The cubes had magnetic axles, hover technology that would keep them stable at speeds of up to 480 kilometers an hour, a controlled-temperature environment, support for all biological needs, and clean, purified oxygen replenished every 30 minutes. It seemed to Jim as if the criminals had it more comfortable than he did.

"Oh, you know, usual cheery lot, primed and ready for a long stay in Mar Sara's finest hotel." Suddenly the sheriff's voice went up several decibels. "You hear that, boys? El Indio Prison's where you all headin'!" The laugh that followed exploded into a hacking, wet cough. Again, there was no humor behind it; it was cold and cruel.

Jim didn't laugh. El Indio Prison was hardly a thing to make light of—an underfunded, hard-as-nails penitentiary that held only the roughest of criminals. It was a known fact that the survival rate for prisoners going into El Indio was a mere 64 percent. It was the embodiment of Confederate justice at its frontier finest.

"Look at 'em," the sheriff said, spitting onto the sand. "What a waste of tax credits, huh? We could always hope for the best and pray you don't make it out of the crossin'."

"Can we get this damned show on the road?" It was one of the criminals inside, a big, burly monster of a man with a jet-black mustache, bald head, arms as thick as telecom poles. His body was covered in hellish tattoos from across the sector. He glared through Jim as if not a thing in the world could shake his confidence, certainly no lone marshal, some errand boy carting him off to an inevitable fate.

"Watch out for that one. His mama never taught him no manners. That there is Marduke Saul, meanest mother you'll ever know. Here for assault, murder, terrorism, kidnapping, and being one rude sonofabitch." McAaron spat again, and this time the swath of fluid hit the cube near Marduke's face.

Marduke snarled back, "You lucky I'm in here, Sheriff."

"Ain't that the truth."

Raynor looked Marduke dead in the eye. Marduke stared back as if daring Raynor to treat him as McAaron did, daring him to disrespect. "Hell, he ain't so bad, Sheriff. The boy here's a teddy bear. Ain't ya, Saul? You be good to me and I'll be good to you, simple as that."

Marduke began to laugh heartily. "Oh, I'll be an angel, Marshal. I don't mean to be inconsiderate. I'm just excited to get to our luxury accommodations."

"Please, Marshal, please don't take me to El Indio. Please, sir, this is all a big misunderstanding." From the back of the cube came a scrawny prisoner with sandy blond hair and gentle features. His orange jumpsuit was too big for his wiry frame. He looked out of place in the desert heat and prison garb, as if he should be banking in the financial sector of Tarsonis City.

"That there's Rodney Oseen. Petty crimes, mostly. What they used to call *white collar*... Fleeced the Mar Sara government funds dry with hacking viruses. He's pretty, ain't he? He won't last a day in El Indio." McAaron laughed again.

"Good to meet you, Rodney." Raynor smiled. "You'll be alright."

"Like hell I will, sir. You know what they do in Indio. I'm not a killer. This is all a misunderstanding, a Confed judge with a personal grudge. I'm not cut out for this."

"Don't do the crime if you can't do the time. Ain't that right, Raynor? Oh, wait, you wouldn't know, would ya?"

"I heard 'bout you, Marshal Jim Raynor." The third prisoner moved into the light.

"T-Bone Smalls. Greatest train robber this side of Shiloh. You boys got a lot in common," McAaron sneered.

"That's right, we do. I think I took that title from you, ain't I?" T-Bone continued. Raynor studied him. He looked familiar; he had a beard like Jim's, a scar on his face. Young and

cocky. "I heard all 'bout the jobs you and that Tychus Findlay would pull back after the war. You boys were legends to me and my gang when we was comin' up."

Jim's stomach felt like a bag of snakes. He hadn't heard the name Tychus Findlay in years now. He liked it better that way. It allowed him to start anew, not to think about his old partner in crime or the life he tried so hard to push away, to redeem himself from. A life that Liddy had helped him get out of.

"But the thing I don't understand, and maybe you can explain it to me, is how an outlaw like you, type of guy that an upstart train robber like me looked up to, ended up here, a marshal." T-Bone leaned in. Jim could feel the cold glare from Marduke as he processed this information. He sensed the killer judging him.

"You see, boys, the marshal here has friends high up." McAaron smirked at Jim. "A magistrate."

"That's enough of that shit, McAaron." Raynor stood.

"I ain't never killed a man, Marshal. Just don't like working an honest day's wage," T-Bone went on. "How's it fair that you get your chance and I don't get mine?"

"Life ain't fair. The marshal is just one more example of it," Marduke finally said, cold. "Now can we get?"

Raynor looked at McAaron square in the eye. "You do that type of shit again, Sheriff, and we'll have more than words. You understand me?"

McAaron's blood ran cold. His sarcastic smile was wiped away. For the first time since Raynor had arrived, the sheriff felt the gravity of Jim's response, just how close he was to bringing out the old outlaw. McAaron could see the fire burning in Raynor's eyes as he fumbled in a pouch strapped to his leg and pulled out a digital wristband. "This is a new toy from central. Controls their anklets. Press this button, and *boom*, off goes a leg. Press this button here, and *zap*, they go to the ground in pain. Understand?"

Raynor took the device. Inside the cube, he could see that the prisoners had a large metal clamp wrapped tightly around each ankle.

McAaron continued. "Now I don't recommend that you let them out. There's enough water accessible in the cube, and each was given a nutrient implant for the transfer that should last two more days. It also regulates urinary and intestinal function. Convicts have been known to run at the prison or even to put up a fight before, so better to be safe than sorry."

"This ain't my first rodeo." Jim went to work hitching the long metallic cable from the prison cube to the back of his vulture bike. He was done wasting words. The cable was designed to maintain a solid lock between the cube and its transport vehicle. It was made of a fusion alloy bolstered with catalytic elements that were harder substances than even diamonds.

"Be seein' you, Sheriff. Sit tight, boys. May get a bit bumpy." Without waiting for a response, Raynor punched the accelerator and blasted into the desert wasteland ahead.

Jim's mind was racing. Clouds of thought breezed by, memories of the old days, the days when he and Tychus Findlay were branded notorious bandits, living life on the fly, stealing as much as they spent. It was an era of booze-hazed debauchery, without a care in the world or a thought toward not acting on impulse alone. It was an era that had nearly gotten Jim killed and, even worse, had nearly killed his faith in the value of living at all. He hadn't expected to be having these thoughts, not now, not while a baby was on the way and he was thinking toward the future, toward a better life for his newborn than he'd ever had. He wondered, as he scorched across the gulch at 320 kilometers per hour, if that past that was churning through his mind was something that his child would learn about one day. And if so, he wondered what he'd say. Could he truly preach the difference between right and wrong when he had done so many wrongs that seemed beyond righting?

Stay focused, Jim. Don't get lost down one of these rabbit holes. The threat of bandits was very real in Perdition's Crossing. Looters and pirates and other hard-as-nails bastards who didn't give a damn about anyone or any living thing could be anywhere. Killers, all of 'em. The last thing he could afford to do was stumble into the wrong sort of company because he wasn't paying attention to the terrain around him. Liddy was not going to be a single

mother because he fell down memory lane and started questioning himself. Damn, he hated McAaron.

The afternoon bore on into early evening, and the desert badlands turned into a mélange of color, crisp blues shredded by wisps of streaking red light, the beauty of day's death rattle. The desert looked different at this hour, like some mystical dream landscape, where a kaleidoscope sky went on forever and the harsh sands darkened into one large black ocean. The desolate shrubbery faded into the night, and the sweltering heat that scorched the day had given way to a winter chill.

Unable to see beyond the blade of luminescence from his vulture's headlight, Raynor eased off of the throttle and began to search for a place to make camp. He had gone 1,600 kilometers back. Eight hundred more to go.

"Why are we stopping?" Rodney barked as Raynor made his way to the back of the bike to rummage through the storage compartment. "Let's not stop... Come on, Marshal, you know what's out here."

"Hush up," T-Bone said to Rodney. "You just takin' a piss, right, Marshal?"

"No, I ain't. Not yet, anyways. We're makin' camp."

"We're what?" Rodney's voice went up several octaves.

"Even with tracking systems and route data, no way am I going to be tryin' to navigate through the crossing as dark as it is. The anomalies are at a peak this time of year. You boys want to make it there in one piece, don't ya?"

"That's exactly what we want to do, Marshal. So why we stopping?" Smalls pushed his face near the electrified bars.

"What're you so worried about, anyway?" Jim asked, unpacking the shelter. He cracked open an infralight that cast a red luminescence onto his face.

"Slavers... thugs... but slavers, mostly. Rather be a prisoner than some sold-off servant." Rodney was on edge.

"More likely they'd find us if we start traveling any further. Movement's when you should be worried. We'll be out first thing in the morning."

"There really slavers out here?" Marduke broke his silence.

"Mazor gang." Smalls added, "Been gettin' a reputation over the last year or so for raiding travelers in Perdition's Crossing or kidnapping scientists who come in to study the mineral fields."

"I hate slavers," Marduke said solemnly.

"You ever seen 'em?" Rodney asked Raynor.

"Nah. Nor do I intend to."

When Raynor was done making his camp, he cooked up a few rations and set aside three extra. The prisoners ogled the packaged food and hovered close to the bars.

"That's an awful lot of food for one man," Smalls chided.

"Not all for me, boys. I'm trying to keep my figure. I assumed you'd want some; those nutrient injections don't exactly fill a man's stomach up. I've taken 'em before. Army days." Raynor brought the three packages to the side of the cube and opened the insertion compartment. With a whirring of gears, the meals were securely transported through the barriers and pulled inside. "Now you all better share them equally." Raynor held up the wristband McAaron had given him. "Those cute little anklets you each got sure can cause a lot of pain."

"Why you lookin' at me?" asked Marduke.

"You look the hungriest, big man."

The prisoners took their rations and dug in, using their fingers to scoop up the skalet meat curry goop that had been sonic dried probably decades beforehand. Raynor did the same, but with a fork. With Liddy's home cooking, he had grown accustomed to not having to eat food like this. His prisoners, though, lapped it up as if it were gourmet dining.

"So, Marshal, you want to tell us about your outlaw days?" Smalls said when his meal was done.

"The man just gave us food," Rodney countered. "We can give him a break."

"You don't tell me what to do, pipsqueak." Smalls turned on Rodney with lightning speed, causing Raynor to hold up his arm and gesture to the wristband.

"Don't worry, Marshal." Marduke's grave voice was icy. "They do anything that spoils my dinner, you don't have to be the one to stop it."

"Just gotta stop you then, right?"

"Tha's right."

"You want to hear about my train-robbin' days?" Raynor acquiesced. "I was a dumb kid with nowhere else to turn. A hellblazer pissed off at a system that left my parents sick and poor, and disillusioned from a war that was rigged from the start. A game for those on Tarsonis to get richer and for people like me to break our backs over. Good men died for nothin'. Was I a rebel and a scoundrel? Yes, I was indeed. Am I proud of it? No. I am not."

"Well, I sure am. Hell, better than bein' some poor Confederate miner, scraping by just to get nowhere." T-Bone laughed. "You won't hear any of that saint talk from me. I just got drunk and dumb and got caught. You want to pretend you're not like me, Marshal. You didn't like it, or you're better. Fine, you do that. But that don't mean we have to believe you."

"What about you?" Raynor asked, looking at Rodney. "You want to tell me how you ended up here?"

"I... I got greedy, I guess. I mean, I'm—I'm not like these... I mean, I just got greedy. It was like once I started, I just couldn't stop. The creds kept pouring in. Next thing I knew, it was all I did."

"What about the people whose money it was?" Raynor said.

"You tell us. What about the people *you* hurt, Raynor? You sit outside these bars on your high horse because you have some friend in a high place. System's not fair. And that's what makes bad men like me." Marduke leaned back. "And makes lucky men like you."

They all sat in silence for a while after that, until finally, without words, Raynor entered his shelter and went to sleep.

Raynor woke to a cacophony of shouting, and he scurried out of his shelter and into the cold rush of morning. In the prison cube, Marduke held T-Bone up against the electrified bars. They fizzled with static charges around his body, not giving at all.

"You big sonuva—put me down!"

Raynor didn't hesitate. With one quick press of his wristband, Marduke's ankle bracelet lit up and produced a surge of direct nerve stimulus that must have felt like a dentist pushing a jagged and rusty instrument into a cavity, except in countless spots across his body all at once. The brute screamed and fell to the base of the cube. Smalls stood over him, clasping his hands and raising them up, ready to strike.

"Don't you dare!" Raynor's fingers hovered over the wristband.

"Marshal, come on. Just one good hit." Blood ran down T-Bone's face.

"Not a chance," Raynor said as Smalls unclasped his hands and fell back. "Now what the hell's going on here?"

"He runs his mouth too much, and not a worthwhile thing comes out of it." Marduke smiled at Raynor with a look of satisfaction. "I wasn't gonna hurt him too bad... just enough. He could use a good hurtin' to get his shit straight."

"There won't be no more of that. I'm packing up, and you boys got a hotel check-in to make."

Marduke blew a kiss at T-Bone. It was the most intimidating kiss ever blown. T-Bone smiled with respect for the man's bravado. It was something he would have done if he were

in Marduke's shoes. Rodney, on the other hand, turned to Raynor. "See!" he cried. "See, Marshal, I... I'm not cut out for this. Please, I can't go to Indio. I'm not like them."

Thirty minutes later, they were roaring through the canyons once more. The heat had returned full bore. It was that dry, acrid heat that dug through the flesh and into the bone with no respite.

They crossed into Judgment Canyon, a deep ravine where large minerals as big as hills sprouted up from the flat basin. Raynor made his way up one of the blue shafts of ore, avoiding the dark chasm below. Reaching the top, he could see a large plume of smoke drifting across the sky about sixteen kilometers north. A sight like that wasn't common in lands so desolate. Jim brought the bike to a halt and pulled out his binoculars.

Through the lenses, the smoke became clearer. He zoomed in to see the flames of a nearby explosion licking the hulk of a transport vehicle. "Dammit," Raynor muttered to himself. It was just his luck to run into something like this, with his mission near complete and Liddy at home making his favorite dinner.

"What're we stopped for, Marshal?" Rodney asked.

"There's a shot-up transport about sixteen clicks up."

"So what?" T-Bone added.

"So, we're going to take ourselves a look-see."

"Come on, now, Marshal, that's not your assignment," T-Bone continued. "We gotta get to Indio today."

"Don't do it, Marshal," Rodney pleaded.

"Shut it." Raynor cranked the ignition and rocketed toward the transport.

As they grew closer, smoke churned in thick black clouds, forming a dark haze of shadow around the wreckage of a skeletal transport. Flames poured out of the frame, charring it a burnt black. There were scattered bits and pieces from the blast, which must have come from a rocket launcher that had tipped the vehicle and sent shards of its body jetting across

the sandy ground. Raynor had seen destruction like this before, in the war. He'd also seen the type of damage a rocket could do to a transport during his outlaw days. He remembered Tychus blowing a hole in a bank truck, flipping it over and almost killing everyone inside. He remembered the guilt of it all as the guards raced from the crash just before they, along with the credits he and Tychus were trying to steal, would have been turned into ash.

Raynor brought the vulture to a stop. The smell of melted rubber and harsh chemicals clogged his nose. Bodies with spike wounds were strewn across the sand, their blood turning the ground to mud. They must have been scientists, each in a climate suit. Corporate research was a common thing in Perdition's Crossing. The minerals were some of the richest in the sector, and despite the risks, scientists and miners from across Mar Sara (and even Chau) would come to mine their bounty. The big Tarsonis-based conglomerates would spend a pretty penny to get scientists to risk life and limb to test the potency of the minerals in the region and bring back the type of info that would lead to the ability to synthesize them. There was intense debate as to why this area, out of so many in the sector, produced such resource-rich crystals. The first corporation that figured it out would find itself with a windfall of cash.

Just then something caught his eye, a movement to his right. He slowly drew his hand down to his holster. He could see the top of someone's head behind one of the smaller minerals.

"Come on out now. I don't want no trouble." Raynor stepped off of his bike and crouched behind it, pulling his gun and waiting for a response. When none came, he stood up slowly.

"What are you doing, Marshal? Get in cover!" Rodney called from the cube. Raynor put his gun back in his holster.

"I'm not here to hurt you!" Raynor yelled.

"Go away!" a female voice cried from behind the mineral boulder. "Just go."

"I'm a marshal, ma'am. Come on out now."

"Like hell you are. Go away."

"Look, I got a badge and everything." Raynor put his hands up. "See, I'm not here to harm ya. What happened?"

A thin, harried woman in a sleek gray climate-controlled suit, her face covered in ashy soot, stood up from behind the boulder. She was tightly holding a flare gun with both hands, aiming it right at Jim. She was trembling, and the gun rocked back and forth. "I said go away."

"Put that flare gun down, ma'am. It ain't gonna do what you think, anyway. Please, let me help." Raynor's voice was soothing and calm, and he could see her begin to be at ease as the gun lowered.

"Put the gun down, woman!" T-Bone screamed from the cube, causing her to raise it back up.

"Shut up, convict!" Raynor shouted before turning back to the woman. "My name's Jim Raynor. I'm a Confederate marshal on a prisoner-transport mission. They're my charge. Now, tell me what happened here."

The woman lowered the flare gun again. "I'm sorry. I'm—oh, God, I'm so sorry." She started to weep. Raynor made his way to her.

"It's alright. You're safe now. You're safe. Tell me what happened."

"Slavers. Mazor gang. We were doing field studies. They... they ran us down. Hit the transport. They didn't spare anyone. I hid. They found out about the camp. They—please, Marshal, they're heading to our base camp. The families are there, the rest of us. You gotta stop 'em."

"Calm down. Now, I can't just leave you out here."

"Hell yes, you can!" T-Bone shouted.

Raynor moved closer to her. "I'm sorry about them. You're safe. Come on."

The scientist came out from behind the boulder. "No, I'm not. None of us are. They've already killed my coworkers. Please, don't let them kill the others... There are children."

"Children?"

"We... we brought our entire community. It was the only way we could do it."

"Ah, hell. Why would you do that? I can't leave you here."

"Give me a gun and I'll hide. I'll give you the coordinates to the base camp. Just go. Get them out, at least. Please. I can't have this done to 'em, or worse. It's Mazor... You know what he does. You know."

Raynor sighed. He wanted to call for backup. He wanted to bring in a battalion of marines to lay waste to Mazor and his band of monsters. He wanted to get home to Liddy.

"Marshal, let's just get out of here. Please!" Rodney called out.

But Jim had already made a decision. He had no choice, really. Ever since he had been given a shot, ever since he had moved to Mar Sara, had put his old life behind him and started anew, he'd felt a compulsion to make up for a past he regretted. A life that he thought he could earn redemption from if he just did the right thing. This was the right thing, no matter how much it pained him. He dug into the storage crate in the vulture and pulled out a rifle, a blend-cloak—a nifty device that, when activated, modestly matched the appearance of what was around it, at least from a distance—and some rations, the kind he had eaten the night before. He handed them all to the woman.

"You can use this. Stay hidden. If anyone gets too close, that's what the gun is for."

"You can't be serious!" T-Bone shouted from the cube. "Hell no, no way am I gonna live a life as some slave. Come on, now."

"We don't even know what we're dealing with."

"This is how people end up dead, Raynor. No one cares about a dead hero."

But Jim was already sitting on the vulture. "I'll be back for you, ma'am," he said to the scientist before gunning the bike.

The manual nav guided him deeper into Judgment Canyon toward the coordinates the scientist had given him. The closer he got, the more his stomach balled into a knot. He could hear Liddy's melodic voice as he had left the front door and set out to Perdition's: *You come back soon, now. You come back safe!*

Raynor brought the bike to a halt at the top of a cliff, got off, lay flat on his stomach like some lizard, and brought his binoculars once again to his eyes. The coordinates of the base camp flickered in green text before the reticle closed in on a horizon point and zoomed in by 100x. Raynor could now see the base: it was round with a scanner on top, surrounded by several supply depots. He swept to his right, searching for movement, anything that could indicate the inhabitants' safety (or lack of). That was when he saw a ragged line of customized vulture bikes, painted black. Many had skulls dangling from them. A modified prison cube was attached to one of them. Inside, Raynor could see the emaciated shapes of two people being held. He couldn't tell if they were men or women; to him, they just looked like bones trying to break through sunburned, taut skin. They must have been kept for a long time. Not scientists, but some other poor bastards.

"Damn it."

"You see 'em, Marshal?" T-Bone pressed.

"Shut it. You want to alert 'em?" Raynor snapped.

"He sees 'em, then. He sees 'em. Ahhh, man," Rodney whined.

Raynor kept scanning. Where were they? Where were the children? Then, he saw a group of men and women, lined up with their hands on their heads and being marched forward by a man with a red-dyed mohawk, wearing black pants and a leather vest over a shirtless and tattooed chest. He had a spiked collar around his neck and a nose ring. Raynor's stomach sank... It was the Mazor gang.

He scanned further and saw more of them. Ten altogether, easy. Each armed. He realized that the children were being separated from their parents and pulled into their own line.

"Shoot," Raynor huffed. He was outnumbered, outgunned, and off the prisoner-transpo track by around 160 kilometers. No one would come looking out here. He gazed back into his binoculars. The reticle zoomed in on a teen boy being yanked into the children's line, making four total. Raynor scrolled up to see a face he'd seen a million times before, usually on wanted posters, or occasionally in vidmessages or interplanetary law-enforcement updates. It was Mazor himself. He was bald, with a snow-white beard, a muscular frame, and a distinct, bright red cybernetic optical implant.

"Well, I'll be damned." A thousand thoughts darted through Raynor's mind, but they all circled back to one. He was having a child. He was bringing a life into a world where men like Mazor prowled.

"They down there?" Marduke asked.

"They are."

"No. No. No!" Rodney whimpered.

"So what's it gonna be, Marshal?" T-Bone inquired. "You going to call this in when we get out of the crossing or what?"

"Marshal, look!" It was Marduke. Raynor quickly pulled his head out of the binoculars and turned in time to see a Mazor gang scout darting across the ravine. He could see the flash of sunlight bouncing off of goggles as the scout looked up at him.

"Damn it." Jim ran back to the vulture and began to turn knobs. "Gotta block his comms. Come on... come on... There!" A high-pitched frequency squealed, the connection made, and the scout's comms jammed. Raynor took out his long rifle from the back of the vulture and walked to the edge of the cliff.

Peering through the sniper lens, he zoomed in, the vulture bike becoming more and more distant by the second, charging forward. He took a deep breath, homed in on his target—he hated that this was his only way—and with certainty, squeezed the trigger.

The rifle kicked like thunder and hit the scout, tossing him over his bike and sending the vulture skidding across the desert floor. It was a good shot. The type of shot that woulda

made Tychus proud back in Raynor's outlaw days. The type of shot that his battalion's sniper, Ryk Kydd, could have made. But it was one that was going to be problematic. *If that scout doesn't report back, they'll come looking*, Jim thought. This complicated things. He had to act one way or another, and now. There was a dead scout; there were some slavers packing up the children, others preparing to execute the scientists; and there were three convicts huddled together like sardines in the prison cube. He was outgunned and outnumbered.

Raynor made his way to the prison cube. He set his eyes square on Marduke Saul. "You know how to use a slugthrower?"

"Might say I do," Marduke responded, a sly smirk coming on.

"What about you, loudmouth? You know how to use a needler or slugthrower?" Raynor's glance fell to T-Bone.

"What you think?"

"And you, Rodney. You ever fired a gun?"

"I... well..."

"He ain't fired no gun," T-Bone interrupted.

"I have. Sure, I have," Rodney responded.

Raynor turned back to the canyon below. A gust of wind juttet up from the valley and rushed over his face. It was cool and crisp in the hot sun and reminded him of days on Shiloh. He looked inside the cube again.

"Let's say I make you all a deal. There's ten bad-as-you-get killers down there, rounding up scientists and their children for either slaving or who knows what. Pretty soon they're gonna come looking for that scout... Seems to me like I'm a bit outnumbered to try to handle something like this on my own."

"You sure are," T-Bone said, cutting him off. "I'd say you're out of your depth."

"The thing is, there's three of you in here, and there's an entire cargo bin of weaponry in my vulture. A few spider mines, all sorts of nasty stuff."

"Now, Marshal, it wouldn't be smart to arm three known convicts."

"No, it wouldn't, Smalls. But I still have this here wristband with these six buttons that can bring ya down in a lot of pain—ask Marduke here—or they can take you out forever. So it ain't all that stupid."

"Explain to me why we would help you again," Smalls said, moving closer to the bars.

"What if I put in a good word down there at Indio? Helping a Confederate marshal at a time like this might score you some serious points with the warden."

"Or get us killed by the prisoners," Marduke scoffed.

Raynor knew he was right. That wasn't the sort of coaxing that was going to get them to help. He thought about his days in their shoes again. He thought about a life on the run, how romantic it had appeared at first, until it all had spun dangerously out of control and become a seemingly inescapable carousel of regret. That was until the magistrate of Mar Sara, a man he was lucky to have known from his youth, saw something in him, gave him hope, and made him the offer that changed his life... made him a Confederate marshal, no longer a criminal.

"Alright, big man." Raynor leaned in. He knew time was ticking. He had to act fast. "You ever want a shot at redemption?"

"You mean like you had?" T-Bone interrupted. "You mean a chance to have some fancy-pants shot-caller wipe the slate clean?"

"That's right... You help me save the lives of these people. I pretend that we got hit by raiders and you all were taken."

"So let me get this straight." Marduke moved forward. "We help you. You let us leave?"

"Sounds like a fair deal to me. Sounds like I'm giving you the type of shot I had."

"You gonna let this killer out?" T-Bone scowled at Marduke. "You know what he done?"

"Well, I'm in," Rodney said. "You better believe it. I'm in. Shot to not go to Indio? Hell. In."

"What do I have to lose? Fine... fine, then." T-Bone smiled.

"What about you, big man?"

Marduke sulked. "An' I'm supposed to believe you, huh?"

"That's right."

"Why would I?"

"Because all a man's got in this life is his word, Marduke. And I'm giving you mine." Raynor held eye contact with the killer. "If I say you can trust me, you can trust me."

"You know how many men have given me their word before, Raynor? Not a man kept it... Hell, my life would be different if they had. I trusted a man once, and he ended up getting my parents killed. I trusted a man once, and he brought me to my first stimbar. I trusted a man once, and he brought me to a family made up of killers and convicts. That's where a man's word has gotten me, Marshal. I sure would like a world where men honored their word."

"You got mine." Then Raynor prodded, "Don't you want a second chance?"

"I wish there was a second chance for men like me."

"I used to think the same thing," Raynor said. "I don't know how else to offer it to ya. The question is, you willing to take it?"

Marduke bent his head. He was thinking hard, weighing it all. Finally, he said, "I'm gonna trust your word, Raynor. You break it, well, I guess it wouldn't shock me, but... Hell. Okay. Never liked slavers much."

"Then looks like we got some slavers to stop, boys." Raynor pressed two buttons on the wristband, and the glow surrounding the bars fizzled away. He pressed another, and the bars in the rear of the cube rose. Raynor opened a compartment in the vulture and began

taking out Confederate-issued weapons. A needler, a slugthrower, a gauss. Beneath them was a green case of spider mines.

"Well, don't they look purty?" T-Bone quipped. "I'll take the big one. The gauss."

"Nah, that one's more fitted for me." And without hesitating, Marduke took the gauss.

"I have a plan," Raynor said.

The four men moved silently, step by step, closer to the southernmost supply depot. Outside, two of Mazor's crew rifled through storage containers, looking for the best goods to loot, tossing supplies across the desert floor. They were both dressed in black, with vividly bright hair and earrings, and they clearly had long been opposed to the idea of shaving.

Raynor and the convicts leaned against the back of the supply depot. Jim gave a hand signal, and Marduke and T-Bone drifted around to the other side. Raynor and Rodney moved forward. Before Rodney could get his bearings, Raynor had already sprinted out, lifting the butt of his rifle and charging at the outlaws. By the time they realized his presence, he had slammed the stock hard into an outlaw's brow, the impact sounding exactly like the hollow pounding of a mineral-mining hydraulic digging for ore.

The slaver tumbled back, now a geyser of his own blood. The other outlaw moved for his gun and pointed it at Rodney, who was still catching up. Before he could act, Marduke swept around the corner and lifted the outlaw in a headlock with his right arm while covering his mouth with his left.

"Bring him to the back." Raynor dragged the unconscious outlaw by his feet to the shade and cover of the supply depot, and Marduke held the other outlaw. No matter how hard the man squirmed, the giant con gripped him firmly. Once behind the building, Marduke dropped the slaver and fired a fist at what seemed like hypersonic speed into his jaw, knocking him to the ground and causing him to cough out blood. Raynor crouched down and lifted up the man's face by his chin.

"Where'd they take those children and the rest?"

The outlaw's head rolled to the left as if it were floating on a ball bearing. Then he smiled, opening up a jester's grin smeared with red. "A Confederate marshal. You'll be a pretty prize. Go for an awful lot."

THWWWACK! This time Raynor's fist came across the outlaw's face. Raynor had broken many men before; this one wasn't going to get off any easier than the others had. He raised his rifle to the man's temple.

"I just switched this to silencer mode. You do realize that I have jurisdiction to dispense law as I see fit in these parts, don't ya?"

"Don't matter. They taking the children to the auction... They takin' them scientists, well, to the grave."

"Scientists don't get as much as children," T-Bone said, spitting.

"Your deputy got a point," the outlaw said. He then turned to Rodney, smiled even bigger. "See this one here? He's the weak link."

In a flash, the outlaw was on his feet, reaching for Rodney's gun. But before he could grasp it, Marduke had already blown a hole through his head with the gauss.

"Shoot. They gonna have heard that," Rodney gasped.

"Then we move, now. Marduke, you and Smalls go after them children. Follow those tracks to the east. They ain't outside of the camp yet. Rodney, you come with me. We're gonna stop this execution! And, boys, the signal on those anklets goes mighty far."

"Ye of little faith." T-Bone grinned, then said to Marduke, "Come on, you big animal. Let's go save some children."

Jim and Rodney crouched as they maneuvered as close to the cover of supply depot walls as possible, toward the back of the encampment. They were following the long track of dusty

footprints, two by two, of marched victims and their captors. They could hear voices now, just up ahead and behind the command center. They were close. They dashed toward a wall in the shadow of a large sonar dish and slowly looked around the back.

"Dammit," Raynor muttered, yanking Rodney by his shirt to the ground. "Stay low. They're... they're making them dig their own grave."

He could see them now. Six scientists digging a mass grave with shovels. In the dirt was the body of a seventh, shot in the head, blood pooling around him. Behind the scientists stood Mazor and three of his cronies.

Raynor flung around his bag and placed it down. Inside were the spider mines. "Okay, we plant these and bring those punks over here. When I give the word, you'll push the firing pin. Got it?"

Raynor didn't know what hit him.

Just as he had turned toward Rodney, Raynor's face had met the side of a gun barrel, and it sent him to the ground. He tried to look up but couldn't pry his eyelids apart. He couldn't hear. All sound was overrun by a ringing that felt as if it were drilling deeper and deeper into the base of his skull. Was he flanked? Was Mazor a better tactician than he had counted on, leaving a scout behind? Finally, with all of his effort, Raynor forced his eyes open.

Standing over him, pushing him to the side, was Rodney, reaching past and grabbing the bag of spider mines.

"These'll fetch a pretty credit." Rodney looked down at Raynor and noticed that his eyes were slivered open and that his hand was reaching out, desperately grasping upward. "Shoot, Marshal." It was but a whisper. "Don't you know men don't change? I'm a convict, stupid!" And with that, Rodney brought his foot crashing down on Jim's nose. The world for Raynor went black.

Marduke and T-Bone had followed the tracks past the supply depots to where the Mazor gang's bikes were lined up near the moisture-conductor towers. Now, having heard voices,

the two crawled on the dirt, inching closer and closer. Marduke had crept up on a lot of men in his day, taken them out before they'd ever seen him. He'd done it in a lot of different ways: sometimes with a blade, mostly with a gun, and occasionally, when he had to, with his bare hands. He didn't like doing it that way. It was slow and hard work, and he knew it when the men were dead and the last whimper of life leaped from their lungs.

At first, each death had lingered, each one bubbling up at night or at times when he was alone with no one to distract him. But then, one day, it didn't bother him at all. He didn't blink an eye or think twice about it. That was more terrifying in a way, more haunting than all of the memories put together. Now, he was tired of it. The killing, the sneaking. If anything, he had embraced his sentence at El Indio as a blessing. None of his old associates would come looking for his services. They'd know he was done for.

But what if? he thought. What if he could start over? What if all of them assumed he'd died or been lost in the crossing? Then maybe, just maybe, Raynor had a point, and there was a chance for a wretch like him. Of course, first things first. His killing days weren't over yet. At least here, now, those on the receiving end would deserve it. They weren't going to know what hit 'em.

Marduke and T-Bone crawled to the edge of the moisture-conductor towers, their fans slowly spinning around and around, catching the barest of desert breezes. On the other side, the Mazor gang loaded the youths into their own prison cube. It was an older model, and the containment barriers looked rusted and brittle from time in the arid wastes. The kids were shell-shocked, their faces portraits of fear and worry.

As a moisture-conductor fan made one last grinding, squeaking rotation, Marduke turned to Smalls and shouted, "Now!"

Marduke Saul pushed himself to his feet and charged from cover, blasting his way forward with the gauss. The high-pitched whine from the hypersonic spikes was deafening as they tore through flesh and wrenched apart bone. T-Bone was quick to follow, lifting the slugthrower and firing tight bursts into the gang. The children ran screaming, some dropping to the ground, others hiding behind the cube. The Mazors never had a chance, really. Marduke was a pro, and the scales were tipped in his favor with the element of

surprise. It was over just as quickly as it had started, and that was the way with modern weaponry. Human bodies weren't meant to contend with spikes flung at hypersonic speeds, and even the best armor wasn't a match for someone who knew where he was aiming.

For a moment Marduke took in the scenery of the carnage he had just laid. He looked long and hard at the cringing kids, hiding behind anything they could find—vulture bikes, the prison cube. Their tears were a mixture of relief, uncertainty, and terror. Were these men here to steal them or save them? Marduke realized this. He saw their fear and knew that they weren't certain.

"Here, kiddy, kiddy. We don't bite... unless you girls like it." T-Bone was leering at one of the older girls, maybe sixteen, blonde, beautiful.

"You shut your mouth, Smalls. You shut your mouth and keep it closed, or I'll rip your jaw right off your damned face." Marduke looked at T-Bone Smalls with a gaze of pure ice. Then he turned to the children. "You're alright now, you hear? You all right." It was hard to make sense out of those words with so much blood and death around them.

"Ah, hell, I'm just joking, big guy. I wouldn't touch a hair on their precious heads. Well, maybe that one."

Without hesitation, Marduke lifted T-Bone by the throat and held him high in the air. "I said shut your mouth and keep it closed, didn't I?"

T-Bone gasped, choking, dropping the slugthrower and using both hands to try to loosen Saul's grip. "Okay," he managed to say. "Let go."

"Boys, boys! Stop it."

Marduke turned to see Rodney holding up Raynor's wristband, the one that controlled their anklets. "Put him down," Rodney continued. "We're free. Let's get out of here."

Marduke lowered Smalls and released his grip. "What happened to the marshal?"

Rodney grinned. "The man was simply too trusting." Then he pressed a button on the wristband, causing their anklets to fall off. "And who cares? You think he was ever gonna let

us go? Hell no. We got bikes right here. Hell, we even have them dead scientists' ID tags. Let's go before them Mazors come looking."

T-Bone laughed. He was overtaken by the hilarity of it all, the relief of being free. No El Indio, and much less risk. "*The man was simply too trusting.* Hot damn. Nice work, little man. And here I thought you was a choirboy."

"He alive?" asked Marduke.

"Who?" Rodney responded.

"The marshal."

"I think so... I don't know. Hit him pretty damned hard." Rodney walked toward the bikes. The children, sensing danger, cowered, gathering together near the prison cube.

"I do like that little precious thing there. Don't you, Rodney?" T-Bone leered at the blonde again. She slid down the prison cube wall, clinging to a bar and trying to hide behind it.

Marduke watched the criminals, men just like him, with sordid pasts and broken morals. Men he'd known his entire life. In that moment, he heard Raynor's voice rumbling through his mind: *All a man's got in this life is his word, Marduke. And I'm giving you mine.*

"T-Bone!" he called out.

As Smalls turned, Marduke brought his fist into the convict's face, sending him to the ground in a bloody burst of decisiveness.

"What in the hell are you—" But Rodney never had a chance to finish the sentence. Marduke struck him across the bridge of his nose, causing him to black right out.

The children watched in utter confusion. They'd seen more violence in the last hour than anyone ever should in their entire lives. None of it made sense to any of them.

"Well, look what we got ourselves here: a bona fide Confederate marshal." Mazor looked down at Raynor with a gold-capped smile that suggested the sadistic joy of his discovery. His cybernetic eye zoomed in, wheezing as it did so.

Raynor gently blinked his eyes open. His lids stuck together from the dried blood that had caked around them. His face hurt. It hurt bad. He could feel it puffing up and rising like a balloon. He could barely see the man looking down on him through the blood and general disorientation. When he finally could see, he said only, "Mazor."

Mazor's big smile glinted in the sunlight as he turned back to the two slavers standing behind him. "Well, look at that, boys. I'm famous."

"Famous for slavin'." Raynor coughed. Blood dripped down his throat.

"And who says that's a bad thing? Now get your ass up." Mazor lowered his slugthrower to Raynor's face.

Jim looked down the barrel. So, this was how it was going to end. Chasing after some foolish idea that he could somehow, somehow, make himself a better man than he was. His own damned guilt got him here, and he knew it. His own stupid desire to make up for the man he had been and to trust in the potential that others could also be redeemed. How childish. How naïve. He was going to pay for it. But worse, much worse, Liddy was going to pay for it, too, and so was the baby.

"Damn." Raynor pushed himself up and stumbled to his feet. He tried to right himself so he could look Mazor dead in the eye. He wasn't going to give this slaver the satisfaction of killing him on his knees or making him beg. If this was how he was going to go, he'd at least do it with dignity.

Mazor met his gaze, the servos of his cybernetic eye screeching as it adjusted. "I got something to show you. Turn around."

"No," Raynor said.

"No?"

"If you're gonna kill me, you look me in the eye."

Mazor did just that. His gaze was deathly. But then it lightened and a smirk crept back, flashing his gold-covered teeth and cavity rot. Then, in an instant, the smile vanished, and his face crumpled into a wrathful glare before that slugthrower cracked into Raynor's stomach, dropping him to his knees and causing him to cough up thick chunks of purple-red.

Raynor could hear the cacophony of laughter from the slavers all around him. His guts felt as if they were leaking inside. The slugthrower was once again lowered to his forehead.

"Marshal, I believe your services on Mar Sara are no longer needed."

Jim closed his eyes. He thought of how he had gotten here. He thought of the days with Tychus and the war all those years ago. He hoped he'd done enough. He hoped that at the end, he had done enough to be remembered as a good man. He hoped Liddy would think that of him when she told their child about its father. He took a deep breath and prepared for oblivion.

He exhaled to the *rat-tat-tat-tat* of hypersonic spikes shredding flesh. His eyes flashed open. None was piercing him. Mazor now lay dead, and so did the other two slavers. Spikes tore through the air all around him as the remaining slavers rushed out only to be cut down by a hail of steel. Raynor did the only thing he could. He lay on the ground and stayed low. Dust whipped around him, and he could no longer see anything; he just heard the screams of men bleeding out and the deadly grind and chug of gunfire.

It felt like an eternity, but the shooting finally stopped. In the silence, the dust settled, and Raynor found himself looking into the lifeless eye of Mazor. His cybernetic socket refocused, servos grinding back and forth and back and forth. Raynor took his gun and began to belly crawl forward, trying to find cover in the haze of dust and sand. He wasn't sure who was out there and had no idea whether they'd think he was friend or foe.

"Marshal?" a voice called out. "Marshal, it's all clear."

Raynor knew that voice.

"Marduke?" he whispered before speaking again, this time louder. "Saul, is that you?"

"Kept my word, Marshal."

Raynor could see him now, a shadowy outline through the whipping sand, a muscular silhouette against the hues of a burgeoning twilight. Jim tried to get up, but a jagged pain in his stomach forced him to buckle. Bodies were everywhere, scattered and shredded beyond the point of recognition. *What a strange way to find redemption*, Jim thought. He was still wobbly and his eyesight was blurred, but he was able to get to his feet.

"Question is," Marduke continued as he held out the gauss rifle in both hands, offering it back to Jim, "you gonna keep yours?"

Raynor was almost out of Perdition's Crossing by the time it fully hit him. He had picked up the scientist from Judgment Canyon and brought her to the base camp. He had helped her bury the bodies. He knew that those kids would never forget this day. That they'd have nightmares for years to come. But he also knew that they'd remember what he had done and, just as important, what Marduke had done, too, and he hoped that they would think about that aspect more, and that it would comfort them that there were those who stood up against all the darkness life could offer. Now, his scanners blinked back online, and the vulture's comm was buzzing with the chatter of mining trucks, dropships, and local hillbillies swapping barbs. El Indio was only 320 kilometers away. He'd be there in no time.

He wasn't coming with his expected cargo. Instead, there were only two prisoners in the cube: T-Bone Smalls and Rodney Oseen. Marduke Saul, the killer, had been murdered in the Mazor gang's raid. Saul and the rest of the crooks were buried with a few unfortunate scientists in the mass grave that they'd had to dig for themselves.

At least, that was the story he was running over and over in his mind and preparing to tell. In truth, Saul was gone. Jim was a man of his word, and Marduke had been set free with the potential for a new life and a new hope, a chance to be anything or anyone he wanted.

As the wind wobbled in his ears, Raynor crossed the official exit line and wondered if he had done the right thing. He pictured Marduke trekking across Perdition's Crossing on one of the Mazors' bikes, riding off into the setting sun just as Jim was, the slate (hopefully) wiped as clean as the day was by night. Jim wondered if that was possible. He wondered that about himself, too. What he did know, though, was that he'd like to believe it was. He was returning to Liddy, to their new baby, to a life he never thought he'd be worthy of. He liked knowing that. He liked that a lot.

END