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Rated: NC17

## DON'T CALL ME SNAKE

by the Scribe

tomorrow....

In the year 2013, life was the human race knew it, was at an end.

Its arrival was unlike anything anyone had expected. Contrary to the belief of religions across the planet, there was no Armageddon or day of Judgment. Neither was there a nuclear fireball, or a terrible environmental catastrophe often prophesied by so many. The age of mankind did not come to a swift demise like that of the dinosaurs. In fact, one could question if it was an end at all, instead of rebirth.

The end or rebirth, whatever one might like to call it, came almost like an afterthought, like a silent stalker creeping into night. It was unexpected, completely surprising actually and without any warning whatsoever. No ominous plotting of politics or some brewing dissent somewhere in the world. After it was all said and done, when the day had come and gone, the survivors who remained in its wake, were more astonished than afraid of the days to come.

Most people had no idea what an Electro-Magnetic Pulse was.

In the days to come, this would change. They would come to know it very well when their cars refused to move, their appliances lay dead and their telephones and television sets cut them off from everyone else. Eventually they would come to understand that two hundred years of electricity, internets, cappuccino makers and BMWs were gone. For the first time in their lives, it was necessary to learn to cook without a microwave, to communicate by some other means other than telephone or computer. Mankind had lived, but all that made him masters of the planet was gone.

It should have made things simpler, but it did not.

The descent into the dark age was swift. With the realisation of the catastrophe, came the initial panic and fear. In the United States, the most powerful nation in the world, the deterioration was at its apex. Its government scrambled to consolidate his realm by force, imposing martial law to deceive people into believing it had some plan to deal with the chaos when it was just as dumbstruck. The following days were of bloodshed from the enforcers as well as new savages who discovered the power they had now that civilian authorities were in disarray. In the end, the heavy handed soldiers, armed with terrible weapons, which ironically were the only thing that still worked, imposed martial law and were seen no better than the savages looting and pillaging freely. The revolt that followed was a taste of things to come.

A new leader was appointed to bolster public confidence in the dying regime, but it did little to stymie the flood of disaster. Rampant paranoia and fear brought out the savage worst in everyone. Local government disintegrated as old axioms began to exert themselves on years of civilisation "the survival of the fittest" became a prerequisite of the new future. The population began scrambling for resources and food. Without its vast communication network, the government was unable to consolidate any authority over its national boundaries. People began killing to survive and once that began, it was difficult to stop. Ordinary citizens armed themselves with weapons, now easily available to all, since high security systems keeping them contained were not disabled. The death toll began to rise steadily and inevitably the entire infrastructure collapsed upon itself like a house of cards. Some would argue that the infrastructure had been in danger of such a demise for a long time.

The Electromagnetic Pulse, or now simply called the Pulse, just moved things along faster.

It was in the depths of the collapse that a group of nameless thugs, whomever they might have been or whatever colours they may have worn, broke into a maximum security containment area. They found a group of terrified lab technicians who had stayed because they understood the threat they were attempting to contain now that the Pulse had destroyed all their security systems. It took little effort for the thugs to murder these unfortunate souls, who remained because they still believed in the sanctity of life, despite the carnage beyond the walls of their fortress. With blood still fresh on their hands, they destroyed the place, exalted by the raw power they now possessed. Driven by rage, paranoia, greed and all the things very much the ideology of the old days, they smashed everything once forbidden to them. Most of them were high on the drugs they'd looted from the pharmaceutical section of the building, caring little of the words emblazoned on walls everywhere. They knew nothing of what the place had been before the Pulse, knowing that the building was in ruination and thus ripe for plunder.

The canisters and vials looked like more candy for their addiction and when they were smashed, their glass shards flew in all directions across the steel floor. Their contents escaping like trapped wraiths, riding the air molecules as they travelled throughout the building, finding warmth in the living bodies around it and allowing it to be carried to the sunshine outside. The vandals left soon after, unaware of the things they carried, unaware of what they had done.

The building called CDC had little meaning to them.

The virus Ebola Zaire had less.

Once released, the pestilence travelled quickly. With little effort, it soon mutated and the worst fears of those dead lab technicians came to pass as Ebola took the city of Atlanta with more devastation than an ancient General Ulysses S Grant ever could. People began to get sick almost overnight and these numbers expanded geometrically as bloody corpses began to appear everywhere. As more and more people fell victim to it, panicked inhabitants scrambled to leave the city unaware that they were carrying Ebola to new victims.

Within a month of its escape, Ebola Zaire had reached epidemic proportions. It was found on the cool beaches of the New England coast, to the heat of the Nevada desert. Fleeing masses overcame geographical boundaries that once kept Ebola contained. Its reach had little limitations, although its effects were varying. Seventy to eight percent of those who captured it died quickly, because Ebola's communicability was a 100%. Once infected, a victim could expect to die in a matter of days. Most did die quickly, drowning on their own blood as it began to seep from every orifice. These would die gasping in agony until the very end.

Some did recover, suffering only an acute fever that dissipated after a few days. Unfortunately, these were few in number. In the end, Ebola reached the Canadian borders as well as the Mexican borders and found itself new victims in two different ends of the continent. It was highly likely that someone could have formulated a vaccine if there had been anyone to give a damn.

Two years after Ebola had escaped, its last victim was claimed. Yet its toll on the human race was harsh. The populations of the North and South American Continents had dwindled to a third of what it once was.

If there was any consolation to be found in this calamity, it was the fact that its survivors were left with a deeper appreciation of life and survival. Most were appreciative of the second chance where so many dead had none. Small communities began to emerge, some good, some violent and some there were communities at all, but small urban centres where people simply lived. Some areas had less than that. The numerous nuclear reactors across the nation, robbed of its power supply had reached critical and the following meltdowns destroyed almost as effectively as Ebola Zaire, if not more. Its radiated dead, bleaching their bones in the lethal nuclear winter.

In South America, men who were used to taking control by force and violence, found themselves the new

leaders of the second dark age. Large plantations across the lush, green continent were used to harvest food crops for the first time in almost a hundred years. Its drug overlords finding out that food was an even more profitable opiate than cocaine or heroine.

Across the ocean, all was silent.

In Europe, the catastrophe had effected the continentals just as badly as it had done in the Americas. However, Ebola Zaire did not reach its shores and thus, they fared a little better. Accustomed to disaster in the wake of three world wars conducted on their home soil, Europeans knew how to handle difficult times. When the Pulse had come and gone, they had taken a deep breath, clenched their fists and readied themselves to repair the damage. City states were formed in Europe where there was talk of trading, but these were largely rumour.

In the Middle East, the Arabs and the Israelis returned to their bedouin pasts. The lack of western dollars for their oil had crippled them as surely as their vanished technology. However, the denizens of the Middle Eastern desert sands were a hardy people and it did not take them long to recuperate. For the first time in hundreds of years, the Bedouin caravans travelled the desert again. Camels had replaced cars and the oases became the new cities.

Others did not fare so well. In China, the burdens of its massive population sounded a death knell in the famine that followed. With the destruction of modern transport, the mysterious oriental nation found itself unable to feed its people. Food supplies that normally came from foreign shores ceased to exist. To survive in the modern world China had sacrificed its agricultural past would now die for it. Meanwhile its neighbour, India, has guarded its borders, protecting their vast rice fields from Chinese raiders.

In Oceania, Australia and New Zealand, both self sufficient countries in all its vital necessities, moved quickly to protect its borders. Having the foresight to protect itself from the Pulse, it did not descent utterly into chaos and some semblance of civilised society remained. Although, not enough to help their wounded neighbours. Its waters were soon mined, its leaders perceptive enough to prevent the massive influxes of refugees from entering its shores.

In the midst of all the destruction and suffering, no one asked the question.

How did it all begin?

Most no longer cared, it was too late to assign blame or ask for retribution. Some did remember, some who remembered the last time they watched a television set and recalled a curious drama unfolded before them, prior to the end. They would have remembered a man and a rescue. They would also remember an American President on the brink of plunging the world into another war. They would have seen a President who'd slipped over the edge of sanity as he chose to sacrifice his daughter to the madness of his meaningless cause.

They would remember the man who made the final decision. A man who never cared about decisions until faced with this particular moment and found the world in his hand, and it was his choice to save it or let it die. Whether he was a saviour or a murderer, will be for the history makers to decide, if such things are ever recorded again, for he himself, knew not which he was.

Nor would he have cared.

What he did know, was he had looked at the world in his hands and seen a ten thousand years of civilisation dissolving to a moment, where a president was willing to sacrifice his child in his quest for endless greed and power. He saw it in that one instance, that humanity had forgotten himself, mired in the filth of powerful men like this. It occurred to him that perhaps it was time to remember who they were again.

To remember why the human race had been what it was.

Sometimes, when technology and ideology eclipsed the decent heart of what was right and wrong, it became necessary to shut it all off. And after he had done that, after the Pulse took its place in history, if such things are ever recorded again, when the world slipped into the silence of child prior to its first cry from the womb, Snake Plissken's thoughts were of one thing.

Welcome back to the human race.

## CHAPTER ONE

This was the noblest Roman of them all,

All the conspiracies save only he Did that they did in envy of great Caesar

He only in general honest thought,

And common good to all made one of them

His life was gentle and the elements

So mixed in him that nature might stand up

And say to all the world, "This was a man."

William Shakespeare

I

The night was deadly silent.

The road it overlooked, seemed even more silent.

There was a time when this road was a centre of activity. It an artery that pumped life with holiday makers, truck drivers and just plain ordinary folk. They all converged together in a community of travellers moving from one place to another, journeying in a seemingly endless cycle. In those days, the highway was seldom dark. There would always be light in one shape or form, to illuminate its bitumen surface for all those who travelled upon the road. Sometimes the lights would come from headlights. Other times, from campervans parked on the side of the road, truck stops along the way or even windblown dust, sparkling from the glow of moving vehicles. There was always the presence of the living then. Those days were ancient, neither were they steeped in a lifetime away. There were some that still remembered those days even now, when this road was a main highway across the Great Rockies, taking travellers from Washington State to the Canadas.

Most of those travellers might as well be dead. Well, most of them were anyway.

The only things that remembered the glorious past with any longevity were the tall, green redwoods that flanked the winding passageway of tar and rock. In the darkness, their majesty seemed more imposing than awesome. Like an ever looming black tide threatening to overtake that last remnant of the past. In some ways, it was almost poetic. For centuries' man had plowed his way through this land in one way or another, raping the land for all he was able to take from it. Now man was almost as rare as the trees and the forests he almost destroyed.

Once, a traveller could see the lights of the great city of Seattle. Its urban light would illuminate the skies as brightly as a thousand stars as one cast their gaze to the East, above the peak of the tallest conifers. Tonight, like very night since the Pulse, that magical glow was replaced by a blackness that seem to blind all things to its blanket thickness. The nights now, were of prevailing and unyielding silences, of dark nights where life was completely still. It should have been the nights that people could dream of better times with its peace and serenity, instead its resounded desolation and emptiness which felt cold and

unsettling.

There was a time, not so long ago when he fit comfortably into the night, when its darkness and isolation did little to effect him. He was a man accustomed to all the dark and vile things the night had to offer. Most of his life had been spent on the edge, riding the periphery between chaos and insanity. Moments like these used to symbolise the rare periods of calm in his life. Back then, silence and stillness used to mean the interlude from one set of circumstances to another. Often those circumstances were none of his doing and his life, often a roller coaster ride, never allowed him to catch his breath before throwing him head long into another situation.

Now these interludes never seemed to end. Throughout the years, he had learnt to accept the loneliness and solitude in the manner in which he chose to live his life. In the past, he cared for little for anything or anyone, believing the only cause he should be passionate about was his won survival. There was however one exception. After it, everywhere he looked from that day on, saw the consequences of that one exception staring back at him with an accusing eye. There were people who reminded him of his actions, some who even pointed fingers of blame at him, though they seldom lived long enough to enjoy the satisfaction of their self righteous arrogance.

It was never wise to get on Snake Plissken's bad side.

The engines of the Harley Davidson Chopper he found abandoned in some nameless town, further back in his travels, roared loudly as it moved down the winding highway. In the silence of the night, the drone sounded unearthly and out of place. Weaving through the darkness on this open and forgotten highway, it stuck in his mind that he could not recall the last time he had seen another human being. It was nearly a week since he had seen anything resembling a modestly populated town or even a group of people. He supposed he could see people if he chose to take a route through the cities, but these days it was best to avoid any previously large metropolitan area. Local warlords with delusions of grandeur kept their savagery poised to maintain their new found power. The few cities he had visited had become pits of primal savagery where survival was decided by the weapons of the victor.

Then he had heard about Sanctuary.

Snake still wondered if his quest to find it was a fool's errand. He didn't know whether it existed in reality, or there would be a place for someone like him in a place like that. The rumours he heard spoken about it, painted a picture about a place governed by decent people who had managed to avoid the warlord trap so many other places had fallen prey. It was a community where everyone did they best they could, getting by in the wreck of the world.

Snake liked the sound of that.

Perhaps he was getting old. When he looked into a mirror, he knew he didn't look old, just worn. An observer would see a man in his late thirties, with dark brown shoulder length hair worn tousled, with an eye patch covering one of two ice cold blue eyes. He was ruggedly handsome, sporting a perennial day's grown on his jaw with finely chiselled features. Often wearing black leather, Snake Plissken was the stuff of notorious legend and the way he lived his life had made him the stuff of myths. Most people he met had an idea who he was, a few even knew about what he did, most however chose to keep their distance which suited him just fine. He had enough enemies without having to look out for them past every corner.

The Canadian border was about a day's travelling away and Snake didn't need to travel that far. The Harley was the only thing on the road and had been for the last hundred miles, so Snake could push the cycle at top speeds with little fear of anything getting in his way. There was still enough gas in his tank to take him all the way to Bellingham, which was just as well because he didn't intend to stop tonight. He didn't know much about this area and saw little reason to look around.

If there was one thing Snake had learned well in the last couple of years, it was the wisdom in selecting a good place to bunk down at nights. With the supplies he had on his cycle, he was a tasty target to a

someone who had less. Nowadays, that category included most of the surviving population. It had taken him two years to get this far up the country and now that he had a destination in mind, he was determined to get there alive.

The day after the Pulse had been an interesting one for Snake. The President of the United States had demanded his head on a platter, even though the rest of the country was beginning its long descent into hell and resources were served better elsewhere. With a moment of passing curiosity, Snake wondered briefly what happened to the man. He had disappeared into the woodwork of hysteria and left the city far behind. Occasionally he had come across local law enforcement who actually believe there was a justice system left to bring him into and often died in the attempt. This was early on though, when most of the population had yet to realise the magnitude of the changes to come. They still believed there would be a world left for things like trials and prisons to matter any more. In some ways, it was almost ironic, considering his history.

Seventeen years ago, Snake Plissken had been arrested for armed robbery at the Federal Repository, the details of which he could barely recount as important any more. The only thing he did remember of that incident was his best friend Taylor had been shot dead. Snake had stood by and let it happen, unable to do anything to stop it. For the crime, Snake was sentenced to life imprisonment in New York State Penitentiary. While he didn't look forward to his sentence, Snake enjoyed a certain reputation that would have protected him in the instance he actually arrived on the island. Besides he knew how to bide his time and escape when the moment was at hand.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how one looked at it. Fate chose to throw an unexpected card into the game with the crash of Airforce One into the prison. Snake found himself before Bob Hauke, the supreme commander of the United State Police force who offered him a deal. At first, Snake couldn't believe his good luck. Hauke was going to give him a glider to fly into New York City and retrieve the President who was being held hostage there. Snake had never any intention of going through with the plan. He had given up any loyalty to the god and country long before this. Agreeing only because he intended to steal the plane and make good another Snake Plissken escape.

His underestimation of Bob Hauke was one of the few mistakes he never quite got over. Who knew the bastard was so sneaky, for a cop? Under the guise of vitamin supplement or some bullshit story like that, Snake allowed himself to be injected by a doctor on the premises. Not until after the shots were administered, did Hauke triumphantly tell him that he had been injected with explosive pellets that would detonate in 24 hours. And the clock was ticking. The maelstrom that followed became a part of the Snake Plissken legend.

Within a space of twenty-four hours, he entered the maximum security prison and found a world of degenerates and thugs. Street gangs had become the only law in a decaying city of lost souls. It was a place where women and gasoline were traded and used as the ultimate form of currency. It was a place Snake had barely made it out alive. He did what he had ordered to do, bringing the President out of there alive and acquiring the information so necessary for the end of the war raging at the time.

After that, there were Presidential pardons, job offers and all kinds of media attention after that. He took advantage of some of it, made a few bucks on the side. His persona and dark brooding manner made him a legend and there were people who always wanted to shake hand with a legend. Someone even wanted to make a movie but thankfully, by then he had more than enough of his fill of the high life and decided it was time to leave.

When he was far enough away from it all, far away from the cameras and Bob Hauke. Snake wandered into some out of the place bar in the middle of nowhere, to have himself a beer. Sitting down in the darkness of the place, lost in anonymity, he drank a toast to those who didn't quite make it out of New York. The unsung heroes whom he would somehow managed to survive. The story of his life.

Though he was pretty mad at Harold Helman, or Brain as he was called in New York, Snake thought wit a sad smile, there was a time Snake considered him a buddy. Watching him die just minutes away from

freedom had hurt Snake when he believed it was impossible for anything to hurt him again. At the time there was little opportunity for Snake to express grief, especially with the explosive capsules inside him reaching detonation. However, he had few friends in his life, seeing Brain died was as hard as any other.

Then there was Maggie.

Maggie who was Brain's girl. Maggie, whom he had not forgotten since the day he met her and likely to remember until the day he died. Maggie had been a gift from the Duke of New York, the self named ruler of the prison. Until Brain's death, the beautiful and somewhat earthy woman became his constant companion during his tenure in New York. Something always touched Snake's jaded soul whenever he thought about her. While they had shared nothing together or never could have, his thoughts of late had been about her. Especially during those last moments of her life, when she had seen Brain's broken body die with her dreams of their life outside the prison. He had the impression that it was Maggie's drive and intellect that made Brain as important as he was in New York. Snake wondered if the asshole knew it or not just how much she did love him. Maggie had loved him enough to believe that any life beyond the walls of New York wasn't worth living without it. Even a life of freedom. Snake wondered what it was like to have a woman care that much for him.

There were other players as well. Cabbie, the fading old taxi driver who still drove the streets looking for fares and the girl he is spoken to in a gutted out coffee shop in the heart of the ruined city. None of them had made it out alive. Meeting him had assured their deaths. Snake spent most of the night in that bar, in the middle of nowhere, downing beers and toasting them all, knowing that it was cold comfort in the light of day. People rarely stayed in his life for too long and Snake wished that was different too. He had obtained used to losing people a long time ago, especially after Leningrad. Nearly everyone he had ever called a friend had died there. Forty-eight men whom he would share more than most people did in a lifetime had died in that last mission. Snake knew every one of them, knew their names, where they had come from. He had awoken in those EVAC hospital days later, with one eye useless. Taylor, his best friend had been at his bedside and told him that the others were all dead and the mission had been a ruse. Forty-eight men who were his friend had died for nothing.

So Snake Plissken the war hero came home.

What was left of home any way. He came home to find strangers living in his house, a brand new family invading the Plissken home. He would discover that his parents were dead, killed in a hostage shout at some local restaurant. The cops had botched the negotiations and that resulted in his parents being blown away by some two bit hood with too much artillery. After their deaths, the family home had been confiscated by the state and sold. So much for a homecoming.

Their deaths had been the last straw. He had a uniform, a bad eye, two purple hearts left from a lifetime of service and the deaths of too many people on his conscience. It drove Snake over the edge of what people perceived as normal. After that he did not give a fuck about anything any more. Least of all the authorities or the governments who had done this thing to him in the first place. Being a war hero in a war America, didn't win, didn't make him a hero either.

Now the world outside was no better than New York or Los Angeles. It did not take people long to revert to baser instincts and take up past savageries thinly hidden under the veneer of civility. The disintegration was almost as complete as if those people had been criminal or moral degenerates. It only reinforced Snake's notion that there were no good people left, just those who could hide it better.

He travelled up the west coast for the last two years, keeping Canada in mind as a possible destination. With Ebola Zaire running loose around the country, Snake thought it would be wise staying away from populated areas thus reducing his chances of contracting the disease. Unfortunately there was no real safe place any where from a virus like Ebola and Snake Plissken contracted it almost a year ago. Despite his precautions, he had inadvertently entered a town in the midst of an outbreak. Even though he had vacated the area promptly, he was unable to escape the disease.

For days Snake Plissken thought he was going to die. He found himself a deserted gas station and collapsed there, convinced he was finally done for. There was a moment he had considered ending it with a bullet, sparing himself the agony to come. Strangely enough, he felt neither rage or defiance at the dying to come, accepting that he had been living on borrowed time for some years now as it was. However, the desire in him to live was too strong to enable him to depart mortality that way and Snake decided to fight until the very last minute.

After days of dehydration and delirium, after the fever had burned him alive inside out, Snake miraculously started feeling better. A week after it began, Snake found he was able to stand up and actually keep food down. Somehow, he had managed to become one of those lucky few who contracted Ebola Zaire and recovered with the only mildest of symptoms. Surviving that ordeal was a watershed moment in his life and decided his present course of action.

Realising how close he would come to dying and how his survival was a second chance, Snake decided he was not going to waste it. He was going to find himself a place where he could just live, without danger of some asshole trying to kill him or cut deals. Snake saw that goal in the Canadian mountains where he could disappear in the good clean air, without people and lots of solitude.

It was not that he did not want human companionship, but the years after the Pulse had not been kind. There was always someone out there who wanted to kill him on sight, or steal his boots or some other thing he had. Snake wanted to live where he didn't have to watch his back all the time, although that had become second nature with him. Occasionally he stopped in a town, shared a night or two with a woman who was willing. There were always some who was eager to accommodate him. He could have stayed long enough to forge bonds he supposed, but usually the women he came across were more enamoured by the legend than they were of him and his thoughts would inevitably return to Maggie.

He never did have much luck with women.

When he was in the military, he paid for most of them and the last time he had anything resembling a relationship was probably in high school. After he came home from the war and the subsequent event that followed, his interaction with the opposite sex was fleeting. Truth was, Snake didn't want an easy lay or a woman who'd look at him and see no difference between him and her last lover. Nor did he want someone who was more interested in the Snake Plissken legend than she was of him.

He wanted someone like Maggie.

Maggie was a lady, even in New York. He often thought about her, because he felt that they were kindred spirits somehow. Maggie was like him, a survivor. Doing what was necessary, with whatever was at hand with a no nonsense attitude that impressed Snake. He would never see it in any other female since. There was Taslima, a good looking and exotic beauty he met in Los Angeles, who made a pass at him in a big way after he had saved her life. If he had not been so pressed for time, he might have been able to get to know her before she died in his arms, less than an hour later.

Christ Plissken, you're getting sentimental.

That thought ran through his mind more than once as he sped down the darkened highway. There were no longer any cars on the road, so his complete attention the road was not really necessary. Besides, it did good to be able to reflect on things, especially since there was little else to see or do on a motorcycle as he continued onward to Sanctuary.

If it even existed.

The man who told him about Sanctuary to begin with, was pretty convinced that the place existed. Heh ad died soon after their encounter, but what he told Snake was worth the journey. After all, Vancouver Island was in Canada and Snake was heading in that general direction. A detour would not be too much of an inconvenience considering that there wasn't anything pressing in his future that he had to hurry. If the man



was on the level about Sanctuary, then it was worth a few days of his time.

According to Garrick, Sanctuary was managed by a group of ordinary people who had somehow escaped the descent into anarchy. They had built an organised society from the ruins, following the Pulse and Ebola Zaire. Garrick who possessed an old style valve transmitter radio which was almost ancient in its use of valves instead of integrated circuits had somehow escaped the Pulse. He received a transmission from someone on the island. The discovery was more of a fluke than an actual directed broadcast and that Garrick had been contacted at all was just plain luck. He did however learn enough to leave the safety of his Portland home and start towards Sanctuary, where he crossed Snake's path.

His claims for Sanctuary seemed a little too good to be true and Snake was dubious that it was the Utopia it was meant to be. However, the fact that no warlord or power monger was killing people at a whim did make it attractive. Although he doubted everything was as harmonious as it sounded, Snake was led to believe that it was a place he could hang for a while before moving on. A more permanent arrangement would depend on what he found when he actually arrived there.

Putting down roots was likely a knee jerk reaction to almost dying of Ebola those months ago. However there were also other reasons that Snake was looking for a place where he could live his life without fear of anyone or anyone of him. He certainly wasn't as young as he used to be and the crushed dreams and hopes of his youth didn't sting as much as he used. He certainly wasn't as angry at everything as he was before and after awhile one comes to accept that things are the way they are. He'd lived his entire life saying fuck off to anyone who ever tried to cross him. It wasn't an unpleasant life. There were good times, but both bad times were more often the case. He'd spent years dodging bullets, making deals and trying to escape from one place to another, fighting causes he never chose to fight. When he detonated the Pulse, one of the reasons was because it was the ultimate act of escapism, to screw those who'd tried to screw him and make sure they'd never be in a position to do it again.

Some could say it was overkill

Snake didn't think so. Besides, he rarely did things in halves. His actions despite the magnitude of its repercussions were not only to teach the assholes a lesson but also to satisfy his sense of justice. Ever since New York, justice was something he saw very little of and Snake didn't think he was the only one who missed its presence. When he detonated the Pulse, he wanted a little justice for Maggie, Brain and all those others who had died underfoot of men with power. Even Utopia, the President's misguided daughter had searched for the same things. She had actually believed turning over the Pulse to someone like Cuervo Jones would even out the balance.

Snake hoped, with uncharacteristic sincerity, wherever she was, she had found a little peace of her own.

He wasn't afraid to admit that perhaps he was getting a little mellow in his age. It certainly didn't show. He still moved through life with an almost disinterested view of everything and a look of indifference which gave him an edge. On occasion, he even enjoyed surprising people with his depth. He knew he had surprised Utopia when he released her in the end. No, Snake Plissken was still Snake Plissken. A hard edged, dangerous son of a bitch who didn't give a shit about much except himself.

Unless he felt like it.

Maybe he wanted to see what Sanctuary was like, more out of curiosity than anything else. There wasn't much in him that still had faith in anything, but if for one instance he could see detonating the Pulse wasn't a waste of time for the human race, then the detour would be well worth it. After so many years alone, seeing what had happened after that fateful decision, he needed to convince himself that it wasn't all a big mistake. Even if it was, there wasn't much he could do about it anyway. Fortunately, conscience was not something Snake had trouble dealing with.

Either way, he wanted to kick back for awhile and relax. After all, everyone needed a vacation now and then.

Even Snake Plissken.

## CHAPTER TWO

### I

He crossed into Washington County in the small hours of morning.

The sun started to make its usual appearance over the fringes of the Rocky Mountains when Snake Plissken was less than an hour away from the Canadian border. Fortunately, the rest of his journey would not take him across the great dividing range that separated the continental United States and Canada. In fact, he would make his entrance into Canadian territories, by way of the sea and small town called Bellingham on the coast.

Once upon a time, he had dreamed of flying to Canada in a stolen Gulf Fire glider. However, travelling through the splendid forests that obscured the States and Canadian boundaries, it seemed so pointless now. Even though he couldn't see them, he could imagine the abandoned immigration and custom check points that were once heavily guarded by both. Like everything else to do with the old ways, that too was forgotten, serving as relics of a bygone age.

The irony of it didn't escape him when Snake Plissken drove past the abandoned gas stations, truck stops and neglected streets signs indicative of a major road way, all faded and in ruin. It was a sad reminder to what was now gone. Snake ignored the nostalgia he felt as he moved past these things, choosing to focus his attention on getting to Bellingham, the heart of Whatcom country, Washington.

He could smell the slight tinge of sea air, intermingling with the fragrance of pine cones and resin. Even if he couldn't see the ocean, he knew it was just beyond the cover of the tall, red conifers densely populating this part of the countryside. He didn't have to far go and expected to reach Bellingham in the next hour or so. There was still no sign of anyone on the road still, although human presence more evident now, by several tell tale signs. He had passed by several homes that looked inhabited and cared for with smoke rising steadily out of their chimney stacks. Occasionally a beacon of light would call out to him through the dissipating darkness.

All of it was comforting in its own way with an aura of peace that always impressed him about this area. He could also understand why everyone chose to stay indoors. It was a cold morning and even though he was well insulated within his long, thick leather coat and flame retardant clothes, he could still feel the cold wind biting in places.

His plans were simple, pending no new situation arose when he reached the town of Bellingham. He was no stranger to Bellingham, having been here almost a lifetime ago. It was during the days when he was still a serving officer in the United States Army. Snake and his best friend Taylor, had taken leave in the coastal tourist town. Taylor was from Bellingham, born and bred. When they had first met, this place was all the bastard could talk about.

Bellingham was like Taylor. Peaceful and sedate. It was the type of place where one could go fishing, see bears and all that nature crap that Snake despised so much when he was younger. He had never been a nature lover, lusting after the excitement of the cities and the adventures he could find beyond his home town. When he was still in that game, Snake had thought trees and mountains were put down for cover and not much else. Christ, he had been an asshole in those days.

Youngest man to be decorated by the President, Snake almost laughed in disgust.

From what he remembered about Bellingham, it was a coastal town with an active tourist industry that depended entirely on its national parkland. There was also a scattering of resort islands off the coast and of course, regular passageway to Vancouver Island. Even though Snake doubted the existence of boating services still in operation around Bellingham now, those boats should still be there. Snake had every

intention of liberating one for himself.

He reached Bellingham shortly after that. The last leg of his journey saw the highway winding alongside the jagged edge of the coast and Snake was treated to some spectacular scenery as he neared the town. Below him, the wind lashed at the cliff face, creating froth as angry waves smashed against rock. The scent of brine and fish were stronger now, wafting on the molecules of cold air.

Despite the fact the sun was shining clearly in the blue morning sky, when Snake finally drove into Bellingham, it still felt damp and miserable. The winter months at this time of the year make everything look bleak and desperate. If there was any consolation to the awful weather, it was the fact that at least it wasn't foggy as hell, which it was notoriously for doing in this part of the country.

The town was very middle America, even though it was a coastal fishing village in Snake's opinion. It was one of those places, with one library and a local museum chronicling the first settlers and celebrated a holiday for a historical even important only to them. As Snake approached it, he could see the abandoned boats, floating across the shore line and wharf where the main fishing and cruise industry used to centre. Most of these were useless. Obsolete because of the electronic circuitry within their outboard motors.

Snake paid close attention to this as he took the main road into town. There were obvious signs of the Pulse effects on the town, cars remain motionless, covered in dirt and dust after they were pushed to the side of the road. These cars were all in their prime, sleek examples of modern automotive engineering and totally useless, as everyone seventh grader was aware now, because of their electronic circuits. The fact that the cars were pushed aside was a good sign however, some one had tried to clear the road. This indicated to Snake that the locals did attempt to rebuild some aspects of their town.

The roar of his cycle tore through town as he made his way towards the wharf. People were starting to emerge from various places. Most of the shops and houses looked deserted, but others were well maintained and the smoke rising out of its chimneys gave away the population of this sleep town. Like this, it did not look any different from any other quiet country town scattered across the American country side.

A man appeared with a shot gun in his hands. Snake decided to continue onwards nevertheless, choosing to see what the man intended before taking appropriate actions. The man was middle aged, whose family Snake noticed were cowering through the windows of the house he was trying to guard. Suddenly Snake's suspicion was disarmed somewhat, because he knew what the man was trying to do.

Pulling the cycle to a halt, Snake moved carefully, showing the man he meant no harm. Snake pulled alongside the man who had not raised his gun to fire, but held it primed in case he made any sudden moves. Snake didn't really believe that there was any real trouble, guessing that man was more probably more afraid of him than anything else. He looked like he had a family to protect and Snake couldn't begrudge him that.

"Easy," Snake replied once the cycle had come to a halt next to the man. Snake brushed aside his long coat because it didn't hurt to show the man that he was just as well armed. A glint of steel from the semi automatic hand gun in its holster around his thigh, was more than enough to convince the man he could protect himself if necessary. "Easy, I'm just passing through. I'm looking for a boat."

At that, the man relaxed visibly and loosened his grip on the twelve gauge. Glancing back at his family, he put their anxious faces to rest with a quick wave. The man was in his forties, with hard lined hands and face, which told Snake right away he was a fisherman. Dark greying hair and brown eyes looked at him with obvious relief even though Snake thought he was a little too trusting to take Snake on his word.

"Sorry about that," he apologised, gesturing to shot gun. "Can't be too careful these days. A lot strange people move through here. Some are okay, some aren't. Man's got to be careful of his family, you know?"

"Yeah," Snake shrugged looking around. A few other people had emerged from their homes. Most of them

looked at Snake with a mixture curiosity and caution, but their suspicion had withered considerably since Snake had made his peace overtures. They were a motley looking bunch, no different from any other than he'd come across in his travels.

"Name's Isaac Ross," The man introduced himself, extending a hand. "You're heading to Sanctuary?"

Snake rose a brow at the mention of the name. "You know it?"

Behind Isaac his wife, a rather dowdy looking woman dressed heavily in flannel and boots, made her appearance with a rosy cheeked boy of ten. She walked quietly next to her husband with her gaze fixed firmly on Snake. Obviously finding him a little difficult to rust.

"Yeah sure," Isaac continued, oblivious to his wife's arrival. "Some of em come down here now and then to get supplies and stuff. Invited me and the family to join em a few times, but we're pretty happy here. Most of the time its peaceful and my family has been here for generations. Too much blood to walk away from."

Snake looked around the place and wondered why anyone would remain in this deserted and forgotten place. He couldn't see how any one could have a sentimental attachment to a set of abandoned buildings, just because their family had lived here once. The people looked as bleak as the rest of the town, all earing dour faces as they carried shot guns to protect this patch on earth. Earth, no one wanted. Not intending to waste to much time with the locals and impatient to get a move on, Snake steered the conversation back to his immediate requirements.

"So is there a boat around here I can use?"

They're all down the wharf." The man pointed to the water. "If you can get one going, its all yours." Isaac quickly answered, looking visibly pleased that Snake intended to move on soon. Obviously, the town were wary of all strangers and were inclined to help those passing through to be on their way as quickly as possible. Just being here brought back memories unpleasantly associated with Taylor. Snake didn't want to linger to much in the home town of his dead best friend.

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Isaac Ross was right.

There were a number of boats that were more than sea worthy if they could just get going. According to the nautical map that Snake managed to find on board one of them, he saw the trip to Vancouver Island would take little less than a couple of hours. Unfortunately, Isaac had no idea just where Sanctuary was located on the island. Snake decided he would approach it by the southern tip and work his way up the island by land.

Besides, he was not good with boats. He knew that all forms of locomotive transportation employed some basic mechanical principles that could be applied to all. Snake's expertise was mostly with planes, gliders and helicopters, he had very little experience with naval vessels. However, he was still able to find himself an almost ancient, weather beaten and rusted out tug boat. It used a simple diesel motor that was still operational and quite appreciative of some maintenance.

Within hours of finding it, Snake had managed to take a part the motor and then reconstruct it to a state where it was possible to run and make the tug partially sea worthy. He spent a few hours of work on it, making it ready to sail and ensuring that every thing was up to scratch. It impressed him that he still maintained most of his skills. It seemed like the only thing that was in constant use these days, were his weapons skills.

Once the tug was ready, it was called the Sea Witch, Snake said his goodbye, thanking Isaac Ross for the supplies the man was generous enough to provide him with. He had the feeling Isaac was grateful to see

him go as Snake was of leaving Bellingham far behind. Snake could hardly berate him for that, knowing that on first sight, his personal appearance could give cause for concern especially to those who had some idea of his reputation.

After loading his cycle onto the deck of the boat, Snake went to the controls and started guiding the Sea Witch out of Bellingham's seldom used harbour. The midday sun had began its descent even though it was hard to tell the difference. Heavy cloud cover kept the day pretty grey and bleak and not even the noon day sun could penetrate the thick blanket of cumulous clouds covering everything.

Despite the weather, the wind was strong enough to be manageable and while the seas were choppy, did very little to hinder his journey across the ocean to Vancouver Island. He had no difficulty weaving though the small islands that littered the way to Vancouver Island even though it was years since he'd made a sea going voyage anywhere. During the war, he'd always been airlifted to the target and since the central hub of the Soviet government was deep in the heart of Asia, there was little use of naval travel.

Still Snake wanted to get there before it could get too dark. Isaac had warned him about drifting boats that were still out there on the water, abandoned when the Pulse rendered them powerless without their motors. With no power whatsoever, most people had opted to abandon ship, so many of these vessels were still out here, with no marking buoys to warn anyone of the danger they represented until a collision was eminent.

Snake Plissken hated the idea of coming all this way just to drown.

The journey to Vancouver Island did not take as long as he anticipated and the time seem to pass quicker, the further it moved into the day. By evening, Snake had begun to sight the craggy, rock shore of the island. The sun had begun to sink into the horizon and the blanket of dark following, promised a pitch black night, since he could not see the sun. Snake wanted to be well out of its reach before that darkness made its arrival. Turning the boat towards the shoreline, he skirted the edges of the island, searching for a suitable place to dock.

Vancouver Island was the largest land mass in the area aside from the continent itself. The smaller islands that he had come across were nothing in comparison to it. A very healthy population was cable of surviving within its tall coniferous forests, mountains and lakes. Once a popular outdoor camping location, it was famous for its trout filled lakes, plentiful forests and large tracts of land perfect for arable farming. It was therefore quite conceivable, than an intelligent mind could sustain several thousand people by making use of these natural assets. He wondered if that was how Sanctuary came to be.

An hour into the dark, Snake found at last, a lone jetty in a deserted part of the forests. He let out a sigh of relief, not liking to be on the boat any longer than necessary. The night had descended in all its entirety and the horizon was as black as anything. He looked beyond the bow of the ship and saw nothing except that impregnable black canvas. Steering the craft gently, the boat drifted towards the wooden jetty, with small waves slapping against the faded hull. It floated forward without sound once Snake had cut the engine and let it move forward on its own momentum.

The boat rolled gently forward, reaching its destination with a slight bump when it hit the wood of the jetty. In the waters around the wharf, Snake could see the silhouette of other vessels, floating stationery. It was too dark for him to tell if they were sea going or not. As it was, there was just barely enough light for him to see a few meters ahead and he was one used to moving around at night. Fortunately, Snake had brought the necessary equipment to offload most of his gear including his motor cycle.

Once he was on shore with his belongings, Snake climbed on to his cycle and off into the night.

II

He didn't need to ride very far.

Less than a mile actually. Snake arrived in the darkened streets of Victoria city, the largest city and capital of Vancouver Island. As Snake pulled the cycle to a halt, he saw a city that hadn't escaped the paranoia that ran rampant elsewhere in the world, after the Pulse. The buildings were clearly in a state of disrepair, looking no different from New York actually. There was garbage on the roads, smashed and stripped cars on the sides of road, graffiti covering the walls of most buildings and every indication that this was an urban jungle. It certainly didn't look like Sanctuary. It also struck Snake that there weren't any people about. While he accepted that it was dark and people probably felt safer indoors, especially when there was little light outside, but there was always some trace of a life. A cat running across the street and some mice scurrying in dark corners was all the life that Snake could see. As the engines of his bike slowed to a low rumble, Snake found himself in a street that looked like once was a busy neighbourhood. Not any more however. The abandoned shops and homes were slipping further into dereliction with each passing moment.

Once again, it reminded him of New York City and that sent an uncharacteristic thrill down his spine. The intersection was deserted, with cars upturned and some were even smashed out of the way, the indentations and impact marks having scrapped their path to the pavements. At this moment, Snake was starting to question this whole idea of Sanctuary's existence and wondered why he had been gullible enough to believe in some half assed fantasy. He sat astride the chopper for a few minutes trying to decide what he ought to do next.

The most sensible thing would be to find someone and ask them what he needed to know, but looking around at the deserted street, made that a little difficult. He wondered at the lack of lights of any kind. This was unusual because while he could understand the absence of electric lights, he had not been any place where they didn't employ use of some alternate form of fuel. Even if it was kerosene, wood or oil. Despite any amount of devastation, there was always that one fundamental characteristic. Where was everybody, he wondered. There was always people around, even if they were hiding in the darkness. Some were even psychotics and down right crazy, but at least they were there.

After reflecting a few minutes, his attention was captured by a scurrying rat across a garbage strewn floor. Snapping to attention, Snake tensed and saw a running child moving through the night. The child had been trying to avoid the headlights of his motor cycle, but was unable to prevent himself from being seen. He froze as it ran in front of Snake, staring at him for an instance like a mesmerised deer caught in the headlight of some car. Snake regarded the child for a second, making no moves to or from him. The child was a little boy wearing thick heavy clothes, all too big for him and cut crudely to fit, with grime covering his face.

"Please don't tell." He pleaded at Snake.

"Don't tell what?" Snake asked disinterested.

The child didn't wait around to elaborate, choosing to scamper away into a nearby building. Snake was tempted to follow but he had his own concerns and it didn't look like the kid wanted company any way. He supposed he would have to go in at some point though, especially if there were people in there. He needed answers.

Snake was about to shut his engines down when he heard the unmistakable roar of car approaching fast. Loud voices, rowdy with rancour and too much booze, sailed above the load roar of a clapped out motor. These voices put Snake on guard immediately. Resting his hand gently against his gun, Snake waited coolly as the headlights of the vehicle sped towards him.

The car came to a screeching halt once the beam of light fell on him. It was occupied by at least three men who were heavily armed and looked like street thugs. Snake didn't see any reason to get hostile just yet, even though he was poised to react at a moments notice. If all possible Snake wanted to get some answers. Like where the hell Sanctuary was supposed to be and if it did not exist, which son of a bitch to kill for sending him on a wild goose chase.

"Who the fuck are you?" The first man demanded. A Latino dressed in a mixture of whatever was available, mostly fatigues and civvies. The most impressive thing about him however, was the weapon he was carrying.

"Hey," the second man suddenly exclaimed in excitement, before Snake could respond. The man stared hard at Snake for a second, with recognition quickly flooding into his blue eyes. "I know this guy, its Snake Plissken."

"Snake Plissken?" The third one declared and by now Snake had almost ignored paying any attention to what he looked like and more concerned on how he was going to deal with them. "He's dead isn't he?"

"I thought he was taller." The Latino retorted, never taking his eyes off Snake's face. "You Plissken?"

Snake ignored the question. "Is this place Sanctuary?" He asked doubtfully.

The question inspired the three to start laughing hard for a few seconds, a reaction which did little to improve Snake's ever worsening patience.

"Sanctuary?" The Latino spoke after regaining his composure. "Pal you're in the wrong place for everything. In fact, I think the boss would like to talk to you." His features immediately hardened as he raised his gun at Snake. The others followed suit immediately. "Get off the bike."

Snake did nothing of the kind.

Suddenly, a can skittered across the road. Its impact on the granite road caught all three's attention with surprise. They swung around instinctively, giving Snake the opportunity to react. That window of chance was all he needed and Snake used it most effectively. Going for his gun, he fired both guns, cutting all three down before they had a chance to return fire. All three went down in the jeep they were standing on within seconds. They jerked around unceremoniously, uttering short cries as bullets tore through their chests before collapsing on the seats in a bloody mess.

Snake cursed under his breath, angered by the fact that he didn't get a chance to question them about Sanctuary. Their responses to his question previously was more confusing than ever. They said he was in the wrong place. If so where was Sanctuary on Vancouver Island? Deciding it would do no good to get madder, Snake sat back on his cycle and pulled out a cigarette. He was about to light it when he paused a moment and looked into the darkness ahead.

"Come on out." He said smoothly.

For a second, there was no response. Then after a brief pause, the child he had seen before emerged from the shadowy alley where he had hidden away during Snake's exchange with the three goons. He walked towards Snake gingerly, having decided the stranger would not harm him and was impressed by how well he had handled the three men before. The boy cringed a bit at the sight of the dead bodies and kept moving onward, forcing himself not to look as he walked past the jeep. He was no more than ten years old, Snake decided.

He stopped in front of Snake, saying nothing. Snake could tell he was scared, even though he was trying his level best to hide it. Despite this, Snake found himself offering the boy a faint smile of reassurance. "Your timing was okay." Snake replied. "Thanks."

"Are you really Snake Plissken?" He asked with a hushed voice.

Snake nodded. "Yeah I am. What's your name?"

"Aaron." He answered. "I used to read about you. Did you really rescue the President of America?"

That was a subject that Snake really did not want to get into, especially with a ten year old. "Its a little

past your bed time isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said with a bashful smile. "I gotta get to my dad. You better come to."

"Why?" Snake asked disinterested.

"Cos you killed the Englishman's men! He'll be mad at you for sure. You gotta to come with me and my dad. We're going to Sanctuary too."

"So its real?" Snake asked, motioning the kid forward.

"Yeah," Aaron said enthusiastically climbing onto the back of the bike, where Snake had instructed him to do so. "Its not here though. My dad says its up west."

"So what's this place?" Snake asked, ramming his foot down on the pedal and bringing the bike to life under both of them.

"This place belongs to the Englishman," Aaron responded. "This is the Zone."

## CHAPTER THREE

### I

Sanctuary did exist.

Snake learned this while he and Aaron travelled through the ill lit catacombs of Victoria City, or the Zone as it was known nowadays. Aaron knew his way around, having lived most of his life here. He was a good guide, knowing from experience after months of hiding, which routes were best to take when attempting to keep under the notice of the Zone's masters. Snake still couldn't believe his luck. He had come to this island in the hopes of finding some peace and quiet, after the string of violence situations he had found himself. Now it looked as if he had just walked freely into exactly the same circumstances. After killing those three thugs earlier in the night, Aaron had assured him that he would surely want retribution. If Snake could shoot someone for the mistake, he would have.

The Englishman, as Aaron explained it, was the complete master of the Zone. Everything and everyone in this territory were subject to the main's will. If the Englishman said you had to die, then there were people who saw to it that happened. Aaron and his family had escaped the camps and had been hiding out in abandoned part of the city until they could get in touch with the Underground who would smuggle them to Sanctuary. Most of the Zone's inhabitants lived out their lives in designated area that had to do with the type of work they were required to preform. Aaron's family were designated clan up units. They were required to clean up the city street, removing everything from corpses to damaged vehicles. It was hard work and their cooperation was enforced by the Englishman's foot soldiers and the weapons they carried.

Beyond that, the boy didn't know much else and assured Snake that his father would be able to answer his questions. Snake hoped this was the case, because he was pretty mad as hell about being caught in this situation, especially when this was all he had been trying to avoid. Not that he was afraid of the Englishman or anything. It was just that Snake had seen enough individuals like the Zone's petty dictator to know that they were all the same. These were scumbags who used force and guns to place themselves on top, subjugating those who were too afraid to fight back and using those who wanted nothing else but to fight. Assholes like these were often astonished by people who could fight back.

Like he could.

Snake did however, learn that Sanctuary was on the other side of Vancouver Island. Judging from Aaron's description of events, the Englishman was forced into some sort of territorial agreement with the leaders of Sanctuary. Aaron didn't know much after that, but it was easy enough for Snake to tell a few things. The Englishman and all the others like him did not take orders or agree to any kind of treaty unless there



was some serious power to be reckoned with. Those who ran Sanctuary must have been a force of its own, if the Englishman was forced to obey treaty stipulations.

Aaron took Snake through a maze of side streets and dark alleys. Snake had to admit he was impressed by the child's versatility and that he could make any discernible difference between one darkened crevice from another. Snake was an expert at urban infiltration and combat, found this terrain to be quiet comfortable, despite the danger. Shadows and black corners did not frighten him and most of the time, he felt more at ease in the night than any other place. From New York to LA, he'd been chosen for those missions for those very same abilities, that and his desire to survive at any costs.

After the Pulse, he supposed such skills would be a rudimentary survival skill of the new generation borne out of the rubble.

Finally, they arrived at any area that looked less hostile, if such a thing was possible. There were small fires burning and lanterns lit across the blocks, illuminating dirty windows in myriad of frosty lights. The bulbs of the street lamps were replaced by hanging lanterns, burning on kerosene lighting up the street as best it could. The place had an unearthly quality about it, reminding Snake of a darkened Victorian street, in the heart of London's East End.

There were people here, however. Children were playing games on the grey sidewalk, dressed in a patchwork of ragged clothes, with faces grimy and dirty, while old men warmed their hands over fires made in large bins. They passed bottles of booze around the circle, taking tasty swigs before passing it along. This looked so much like war torn Russia, it was frightening. He had seen similar scenes before, after a town had been ravished by a battle. This looked less savage but awfully similar.

At the sound of the Chopper's engines, people looked up and stared at his headlights like frightened animals. Within seconds, they had scurried away into their homes and their hiding places like frightened roaches. Snake saw no offence at that. The men with technology in this place were usually working for the Englishman, why shouldn't they be afraid of him. At Aaron's directions, he drove the motor bike to a kerb, bringing it halt in front of a derelict building on the corner. It was in worse shape than the rest, with holes in its walls and burnt out on the top floor.

Aaron looked at the deserted place and then turned to Snake. "It's okay Snake, they're just scared."

"Doesn't mean shit to me." Snake mumbled under his breath, switching off the bike's engines and studying the surrounding area carefully. He didn't like it. Too many places for someone to keep a good eye on you without being seen. Not to mention the layout of the street made it difficult to escape in case of an ambush. He didn't like the idea of what Aaron deemed as safe.

"Come on." The boy urged, hurrying up the steps of the building. "We gotta be inside. We can't be out, there's a curfew."

Snake said nothing, but his displeasure was apparent by the unmistakable frown on his face. As it was, he didn't know why he was following this kid. The smarter thing to do would be to get the hell out of here before anything else happened. He still had a boat out there no one knew about and there was no reason why he couldn't find Sanctuary, now that he knew where its general location was. Either way, avoiding the Englishman was a good idea he should be following.

Entering the dimly lit building, Snake kept Aaron in view as the kid ran up the filthy corridor. There were people hurrying indoors at the sight of him and that made him uncomfortable. He liked keeping a low profile and hated it when he was the focus of so much attention. It seemed as if everyone knew he was here.

The corridor was filthy, with wall paper peeling of the brick, bits of plaster on the rotting carpeted hallway and ugly smudges of what Snake was sure was human waste and blood on the walls. There was the smell of dank moisture, urine and mould thick in the air and Snake took care not to touch anything. Aaron

turned down a flight of stairs that descended into the basement level. As Snake followed him down there, he found that the basement was worse off than the corridor, if such a thing was humanly possible. Now Snake was straining to see in the darkness, although he kept Aaron in his line of sight. Just in case the little shit was leading him into some kind of trap. Snake kept his hand on his holster, making sure he was capable of making a quick draw if necessary. A handgun would do in a pinch, but Snake could feel the slight pressure of steel resting against his ribcage. The automatic machine gun he wore in a body belt was fully loaded with multiple clips hidden in strategic parts of Snake's clothes.

Call him a fucking boy scout.

"Aaron!" A male voice cried out as Snake reached the bottom of the stairs. A sudden crack over his neck took Snake by complete surprise. The pain stunned him for a second as he reeled, but a second was all that he needed to recover. Instinctively, Snake could tell where his attacker was coming from and allowed his reflexes to take hold. Grabbing the man's arm before another blow connected, Snake rammed his elbow into the man's chest and felt bone. He heard a loud crunch as the man buckled over. In the background, he heard a woman's scream.

"Snake no!" He heard Aaron scream as he went for his gun.

He paused long enough to see his attacker on the floor, with the woman running to his side. Aaron was standing in front both of them, trying to use his small body as a shield. Even in the darkness, Snake could see the boy staring at him wide-eyed with terror. "This is my dad Snake!" He turned to the man, who was gasping for air, trying to recover from Snake's blow to his chest. "Dad, this is Snake Plissken, he brought me home!"

The woman glared at him suspiciously. Her face told a story in itself of harsh living, starvation and desperation. It told the story for Aaron's entire family. "You had a gun!" She declared. "We thought you came to take us back." Her voice was a shrill noise, but it was on the verge of cracking as was her composure. She turned back to her husband and helped him to his feet. The man recovered slightly, trying to maintain his dignity as he rose to meet Snake's gaze.

Snake holstered his gun, knowing he wouldn't need it. Staring into the man's eyes, unflinching, it was obvious that Aaron's father was afraid of him. Eying him with both fear and caution, taking particular notice of the holster and his gun. Snake said nothing, allowing the man to speak first.

"I'm sorry," the man apologised, handing Snake a hand in gesture of friendship. "When you came here with a gun. I thought you were going to take us back. I just reacted."

"Its all right," Snake replied, although he didn't return the handshake. "I brought your kid here before I head out."

At the mention of escape, the man's eyes widened with life. "You're leaving the Zone?" He exclaimed.

"Yeah," Snake replied, knowing immediately where this was going. He supposed he didn't have to take them, but it was a big boat and he needed some answers as well. "Talk to me about Sanctuary and may be we can make a deal."

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It was too dangerous for them to move at night.

At night, the Englishman had imposed a curfew that was enforced by his soldiers who drove around in their cars armed with guns, ready to shoot. This was mainly to keep better control of the masses, so they would be easily retrievable if required. This part of town was reserved for the untouchables the Englishman could not use for his workforce. They were mostly old people, orphan children, the retarded and disabled or anyone that could not be put to work in the camps.

Jonah Stone and his family were resident of Vancouver Island all their lives. Before the Pulse, he had been an electrical engineer by trade and it was this expertise that had become such a liability now. The Englishman maintained a tight control over the skilled professional and artisans by abducting their families and forcing them to work for the family's future safety. It was a situation Jonah was not about to submit to.

Sanctuary was in actuality, Della City.

Della City was a smaller city than Victoria, or the Zone as it was now known. It had managed to recover from the Pulse faster than the capital. Despite the ensuing carnage of paranoia and savagery that overtook most of the cities, someone rose up to take control of the situation. Not only consolidating the remaining law enforcement in the area but bringing some semblance of order back to the city. Jonah did not know specific details about what took place in Della City, his information coming mostly from third hand reports and rumours. Such rumours told of how Della City still had power. Before the Pulse, Della's main source of power had come from the large hydro-electrical plant located at Della Falls. Sanctuary had used its engineers and skilled tradesmen to activate the plant again. Before the Zone was born, numerous people had fled from Victoria to Della as the violence grew.

In Victoria, there was no smooth transition. As utilities and the law broke down, the anarchy gave rise to vicious street gangs who were running rampant killing anyone who wouldn't wear their gang colours. Local law enforcement was unable to stem the rising tide until some had either chosen to join or were killed in the onslaught. The head of anyone wearing a badge soon became trophies for the gangs. People fled into the hills and remained there, fearful of dying in the crossfire.

When Ebola Zaire came to Vancouver Island, so did a new kind of death.

Since there was little global communication, most of the cities and towns that were struck by Ebola had no idea of what it was at first. Ebola's symptoms were disturbingly similar to influenza, disarming people from the notion that they were carrying a lethal virus. However, once the first case made its appearance, the death toll began to soar with frightening speed. People from the mainland flocking to the city in search of food and loved ones lost after the Pulse, brought Ebola to Vancouver Island. With little organisation and no central power in the city, the disease was left to run unchecked through the streets. Soon gang members were executing anyone showing symptoms of the virus, not realising that these could range from haemorrhaging to a slight cold. Before long, the gangs were killing just about anyone they damn well felt like it.

The disease ran its course after several months with the death of its last victim.

Slowly, shocked survivors began to pick up the pieces. The Skulls, one of the smaller gangs had elected itself a voracious new leader whose name was unknown and liked to be called simply as the Englishman. Under his leadership, the Skulls rose to power and took control of the city. His success centring mainly on the notion that he had a plan and was absolutely ruthless in his implementation of it. Despite his brutal and savage methods, his strategy was flawless and his armed thugs herded people together and started restoring a new kind of order.

It was unknown what effects the virus had on Della City.

Six months before, the Englishman had finally decided that Sanctuary as most of the people were tried to escape there called it, was a threat to his power. As long as it existed, it was a beacon of hope for everyone the Englishman wanted to subjugate. Shortly after another large batch of people had made a successful escape to Sanctuary, the Englishman led the first raid towards Della in an attempt to capture its leaders and its prosperity.

He was not successful and was forced back to the Zone in a humiliating defeat. It seemed Sanctuary knew how to protect itself as well.

The Englishman didn't give up so easily, sending Skulls into the opposing territories on several occasions, always trying to win some foothold. The last incursion saw the total annihilation of the invading force, except for one survivor, who was kept alive specifically to bring the Englishman a statement of demand.

Under the treaty the Englishman was forced to sign, both cities mapped out their territorial boundaries, with the negotiations taking place at a neutral site. Sanctuary refused outright to prohibit people from entering their territories but would do nothing to encourage them either. Its leaders stipulated that violation of the treaty would be nothing short of an act of war and Sanctuary would retaliate in kind. As much as the Englishman wanted Sanctuary, he had to concede his bands of thugs and street gangs were no match for the well-organised group that defended Sanctuary.

For now, it was a fragile peace.

## II

Even though Snake was uncomfortable at travelling by day, Jonah assured him it would be simpler than trying to move around at night. With the curfew imposed by the Skulls, they would be noticed immediately if they were seen outside. Snake however, was doubtful of this notion and despite his better judgement, agreed with Jonah's recommendation, seeing the man knew this place better than he did. He didn't know why he was still with the Stone family. While the information provided by Jonah was interesting regarding the politics of Vancouver Island, it was hardly necessary for Snake to make his escape. If anything, the presence of family would only serve to slow him down.

Yet despite all his reservations, he found himself leaving the building the next day, stepping out into daylight. By day, the street was no less redeeming than it was at night, except one could only see it better and the added clarity only added to Snake's displeasure. They emerged onto the sidewalk and Snake was glad to see the bike still where he left it at least. Even though Jonah had assured him that the family had their own transport to Snake's boat. He didn't like the idea of relying to much on this man to get him out of a tight spot. Whatever Jonah Stone might have been in a previous life, to Snake Plissken he was just an amateur.

"I managed to get this thing going." Jonah declared proudly as he led Snake to an alley beside the building. "It's not much, but will get us to your boat." An old Dodge truck was hiding behind a dumpster, occupied by a drunken old lady snoring away with a bottle of booze clutched in her frozen hands. The tarnished red vehicle looked like something out of an old farm yard and barely fit to travel. Snake kept that observation himself even though he was dubious about Jonah's ability to get it moving.

"Follow me then." Snake replied coolly, deciding that it was way past time that they were leaving. He walked out of the alley, towards his bike. Glancing back over his shoulder long enough to see Jonah bundling his family into the vehicle.

The engine of the bike roared to life as Snake brought his foot down on the starter, its healthy rumble echoing through the quiet street. A few people stuck their heads out of windows to see what the noise was about, but chose to retreat once they took a good look and Snake and specifically the guns he was carrying. Behind him, the old Dodge clanked to life at the same time, puffing out a steady stream of dark smoke from the exhaust and from under the hood. Its engine was decidedly healthy and sounded like an old man having an emphysema attack after smoking the cigarette he wasn't supposed to have.

Snake shook his head in disgust, once again rebuking himself for becoming embroiled in this whole sorry mess in the first place. This was none of his concern and he was placing himself in unnecessary risk by taking on the responsibility of Jonah and his family. However, knowing it did nothing to change things and the sooner he got back to the coast the better.

They had started to move off, when Snake noticed it.

It was something he hadn't realised before because of his preoccupation with his current dilemma. The old

men who were huddled around the garbage stove were gone, so were the children and all other signs of life. This place was lively at last night and Snake found it odd that would be so deserted by day, especially since there was no curfew. People were staying indoors for a reason. He could see people staring out their windows, their faces frightened. At first Snake thought it was him, but suddenly it occurred to him that something else was doing it.

"Shit." He cursed softly, realising the grievous mistake.

Almost on cue, before he and Jonah had reached the other end of the street, cars that had been likely waiting for them all morning, screeched out of nowhere, barricading all possible exits.

Safe, sure." Fucking amateur, Snake thought to himself as he saw at least four cars, two were jeeps and two were sedans. Those who occupied the cars were a motley lot, distinguishable by the weapons they carried and the skull insignia on their clothes. Snake's eyes scanned the area and found more cause for annoyance. It was a typical city block flanked on both sides with buildings, with few alleys in between and perfect ambush territory.

"Get off the bike!" The only woman in the group, shouted from the lead car. She was a sultry beauty, clad in leather, with dark mahogany hair and deep blue eyes. Eyes that were icy cold and harder than any killers. The supreme confidence in her face indicated that she expected Snake to give up without a fight, since they had boxed him in.

Snake held his ground, undecided on whether he should abandon the bike and make a run for it, even though the odds were against him. Even with his automatic, he counted at least twelve of them and not even if he did get most of their number, he wouldn't get them all. Finally, he realised that he didn't have much of a choice even if it was a big mistake.

Meanwhile, Jonah Stone in the Dodge was watching with rising fear as some of the men in one car started approaching his truck. Panic more than anything forced him to act. Slamming his foot on the accelerator, the Dodge leapt forward lethargically, barrelling head on into the two men ahead. A short scream from one was followed by both rolling over the windscreen and disappearing in a blur. In the rear view mirror, Jonah saw their bodies hit the ground hard. His wife had started screaming as his son huddle closer to him from fright.

Snake looked up to see Jonah's truck on the move, as did everyone else. Taking advantage of the situation, he went for his gun. Suddenly he heard the loud crack of a gunshot somewhere in the distance and felt an exquisite burst of pain in his chest. He glanced down in time to see blood and flesh erupt from his chest, before the force of it sent him to his knees. Everything suddenly moved faster after that. He could feel the searing pain, feel the grinding of teeth as he tried to bear it. He tried to keep himself from falling, but no amount of will could have kept him upright. Unconsciously, he knew the shout came from behind. These assholes were smarter than he had given them credit for. They had staked out the street and position snipers on the roofs just in case Snake had tried to make a run for it.

Weapons fire had broken out in the confusion, mostly directed at Jonah's truck. Lifting his head, Snake saw Jonah's truck slamming into another vehicle hard, sending it clear across the road, before it came to a halt at the base of a building. Snake took a deep breath, trying to force himself to his feet, but the strength wouldn't come to him. His pain was vivid and, even though it was now thready and ragged in its expression.

The Skulls were firing at the passenger cabin of the truck, bullets shattering the already damaged windscreen. There was a flash of clarity where Snake saw Jonah take one in the head, blood and brain matter erupting on the windscreen and windows. The man slumped forward, his head still pooling blood as it rolled down the glass. Snake winced slightly seeing that. Jonah was a good man, even if he had been an asshole. The pickup slowed to a halt a few meters later and the Skulls descended on it like a pack of wolves.

Through the haze of pain, he saw Aaron and his mother forced from the car and cursed that he was no help to them, or himself for that matter. The woman was harder to coerce, since she was sobbing hysterically at her husband's dead body. Snake caught sight of Aaron's vacant look. He saw the blood and flesh on the boy's clothes and knew with uncharacteristic sadness that he had seen that expression a long time ago, on another son's face.

"Get the to processing, Jimenez." A voice spoke near him. It belonged to the woman who had spoken before. "The boss wants to talk to this one."

"Sure thing, Miranda." Another voice responded.

Snake could barely move, but he knew he had to. It was almost impossible. He knew he was bleeding to death, he could see his own blood pooling before him, could taste it against his lips. Snake knew he had taken a chest wound and any unnecessary movement could kill him. However, he could not remain here either. His thoughts came to a sudden halt when he felt hands around his arms, pulling him to his feet. Movement was agony, but they forced him upright.

"That damn Jones," the woman called Miranda cursed slightly, examining the wound on his chest. "He was only supposed to wing you Mr Plissken."

Snake didn't answer, glaring into her beautiful face with whatever defiance he could muster.

"We'll I don't suppose it matters anyway." She sighed turning away from him. "As long as you're alive when the boss decides to kill you."

## CHAPTER FOUR

I

Four...five...

Still alive.

Just barely though, just barely.

Snake didn't notice much during the trip through the Zone, towards the Englishman's central den, except that it was a bumpy ride and he felt each jolt with sliver of pain in his chest. The woman Miranda had wrapped a makeshift bandage around his chest to stem the flow of blood. To some extent it worked, but mostly it was trying to cork a dam with a needle. Snake still felt gushes of blood each time he took a deep breath and it was becoming considerably harder to breathe. Despite his attempt to maintain a cool demeanour, Snake knew he had to get to a doctor fast, or he wouldn't survive the day, let alone the next few hours. Even though death had become a way of life with him, he wasn't eager to meet it after surviving New York and Los Angeles. Besides, he hated to think he'd go without taking some of these bastards with him.

"So this is Snake Plissken huh?" Snake heard the man next to him say.

"The one and only." Miranda answered from the other side.

"He doesn't look so tough." He retorted derisively.

Snake reacted to that remark by going for the man's throat, despite the pain. Deciding the pain was worth the effort of wiping that smug of the assholes' face. Lashing out, Snake had his hands around the man's throat, applying enough pressure to make him cry out.

"Tough enough for you, asshole." Snake retorted, speaking through a strained voice. The man was more of a kid really, loud mouth and too cocky for his own good. His frightened eyes showed Snake just how

much he was suitably humbled even though he tried to be defiant. His pale skin had broken into a sweat and Snake's reputation showed in his terrified eyes.

The sudden click sounding behind his ear, was a sound Snake was very familiar with. The cool metal nudged him back and Snake glanced over long enough to see Miranda holding his own gun to his head. Letting go of the man, Snake fell down heavily into the seat, fresh pain coursing through him causing him to wince slightly. He probably shouldn't have exerted himself as much and expected to be stopped from doing any real harm. Still it was worth it.

"You fuck!" The boy snapped with renewed confidence, posturing himself now that he had recovered. He held his gun to Snake's throat, cursing furiously.

"Calm down kid." Miranda instructed giving Snake a sarcastic look. "Mr Plissken was just making a point."

"Yeah right," Kid responded, giving Snake's chest a calculated look. "He's going to be dead soon any way."

As much as Snake hated to admit it, he tended to agree with that estimation. The convertible finally arrived at its destination, coming to a halt at the kerb in front of Victoria City's council hall. It was big ostentatious building, with doomed ceilings, Corinthian columns, statues and stained glass windows, all defaced and gratified. It was just the kind of place a would be dictator would choose as his base of operations. Looking at the place, told Snake Plissken a lot about the Englishman.

They dragged him out of the car and forced him up the large steps. Miranda walked ahead as always. From her manner, Snake guessed she was one of the Englishman higher ranking lieutenants. As they continued up the steps, Snake saw all the statues had been damaged. Specifically, the heads had been decapitated and smashed to hide who it was really in commemoration to. In garish letters spray painted across the large and once polished, oak doors that was the entrance to the building, were the words 'End Zone'.

It was so typical Snake thought. All these warlord types with their delusions of grandeur and misinformed notions of their own importance. They almost always tried to make people forget that in the real world, they were common scum who used to give local law enforcement a good laugh now and then. The Englishman was shaping up to be no different. Like the Duke and Cuervo Jones before him, they always cited some higher cause, like freedom or rights deserved to all men, yet they used guns to subjugate the weak.

The Englishman would not doubt say he was bringing order to the city. Snake could almost hear it now. That killing Jonah Stone and others like him was a necessary evil. Snake didn't know Stone or even cared that much about him for that matter, but Snake remembered Aaron's face most vividly as he was led away, covered in his father's blood and brains. Snake had seen his eyes. He knew that kind of anger almost intimately. He knew how it felt to see everything that ever mattered, just disappear and always because of someone else's' fucking cause.

I'm sorry about your parents Mr Plissken, these things just happen.

He realised he was drifting in an out of consciousness, because places were coming and going in flashes. One moment, he thought he was staring at Taylor, young and naive looking like the day they'd met at boot camp. Not like later, after the ear and bullets had torn him a part. He didn't remember Taylor ever wearing glasses though. Another moment later, he was passing by more thugs, more guns, books and statues, carpets and hallways rushed past him, dimly lit by lanterns. Women were walking around, following men like lap dogs, dressed in skin tight outfits, leaving nothing to the imagination. The perceptions swirling around his head were becoming more difficult to ascertain.

The words 'brain asphyxia' was starting to repeat itself in his mind.

Suddenly, it all came to a stop, with him hitting the floor with a new place. The room stopped spinning, there was sunlight bearing down on him. Snake started to recover a little, the sudden stop adjusting his equilibrium somewhat. Although not by much. He was dying slowly and he knew it. They'd taken his weapons away so he couldn't even hasten the process even if he wanted to. Snake felt carpet against his cheek and a silence that seemed enforced in comparison to the cacophony outside.

Snake rose to his feet slowly, determined that he would not meet his end on his knees. Each movement was pain. Standing up helped a little, allowing the conundrum of visual images and sounds to find some focus. For the first time, Snake got a better look at his surroundings. He was in a large room, with a glass roof that allowed the sunlight to illuminate the pews that were laid out in a semi-circle around a wooden pedestal and lowered floor. There were only a few people present. One of them was Miranda and the other was the Kid. There were others at the multiple entrances of the room but these were armed sentries.

A man emerged from out of the light and he stood matching Snake's height, his ash coloured hair tied neatly with a strip of leather cord. His face was hard, almost feral in its intensity, with high cheekbones and harder eyes and lips that hid perfect teeth. In those green eyes, Snake saw a killer. The kind of killer he'd faced in a thousand situations like this. Someone who'd spent most of his life being a killer and perfecting it to an art.

Wearing a loose flowing shirt, dark pants and high riding boots, he almost looked like something out of a movie set. He walked to Miranda, took hold of her fiercely and pressed his lips against hers hard. Her nails dug into his back and from her reaction, Snake realised that theirs was more than just a professional gang relationship. Miranda was the Englishman's main squeeze.

"I knew I could count on you my dear." The Englishman spoke, his voice was like grating glass before turning to him. "Snake Plissken in the flesh."

"Not much of it unfortunately," Miranda remarked eyeing Snake disparagingly. "Jones did more than wing him."

The Englishman walked up to him and studied the wound that was slowly killing him with nothing more than a passing interest. "That's alright," he answered Miranda. "I just need him for a few minutes."

"Get on with it." Snake finally spoke, growing impatient with all this posturing and Christs knows what else this little god had in mind for him.

The Englishman rose a brow at Snake's sudden remark. His face curled up into a smile that was anything but friendly. "Your reputation precedes you Mr Plissken, I'm kind of surprised that you're still alive. Rumour had it that you were dead."

"So I heard."

"Since you're not dead and you're on my island. I take it you had a reason for making the trip here from main land. What may I inquire that is?"

"He was helping some civvy take off with his family," Kid offered. "Probably heading for Sanctuary."

At the mention of Sanctuary, the Englishman's features darkened for a second before the expression of calm returned again. He looked at Snake with surprise, even though Snake didn't miss the look on his face. "You must be mistaken," he said sarcastically. "This here is the man who brought us the Pulse. He is not a man known for his good deeds, even though I must admit, I should thank you for making us gods with a new kingdom. Still there was that famous rescue wasn't there? I some how doubt Snake Plissken would be finding haven with a bunch of peace loving fuckers I intend to shortly despatch. I find that most difficult to believe."

Snake heard the laughter all around.



It was becoming harder to concentrate so Snake knew he was getting worse. He heard footsteps walking around him, moving towards Miranda's direction and Snake ran his hand over his face, trying to focus himself. He tried to run around to see where the Englishman had gone, when suddenly he heard the man's voice in front of him.

"I have plans for Sanctuary Snake," he said casually. "In less than a month, it will become a part of the Zone and I'll have that bitch who runs it. When I bring her people to their goddamn knees in chains, she'll hear their screaming from my bedroom when I'm fucking her!"

Snake almost smiled. Almost, but he had something better in mind.

"So you're telling me you got your ass kicked by a woman."

The bullet slammed into his side even before he had a chance to finish speaking. Hot pain flared from ruined flesh as the bullet tore through his muscle above his hip. The force of it threw him backwards and Snake hit the floor hard. This time, he didn't have the strength left to get up. Even though he was still conscious, Snake was aware that this was probably it. He was going to die.

Shit.

"Get rid of this trash." He heard the Englishman say, as he stood over Snake with Miranda's gun in his hand. "He's staining my floor."

II

There was a loud splash and a sensation of falling.

Water swirled all around him. It entered his mouth, stung at his wounds and even seeped through the protective eye patch to reach his useless eye. Snake didn't know where he was for a moment, knowing only that he was just thrown into a body of water. The icy cold water shocked him into coherence, because he remembered little after being shot the second time.

Seeing the direction of the bubbles prompted Snake to follow them and thankfully, the air escaping from his nose and mouth gave him the added buoyancy he needed to break the surface. He could see nothing except the bubbles because the water was not only murky but also dark. He needed only to rise a few meters before he found himself breaking the surface. Taking greedy gulps of air, he kicked to stay afloat and knew he couldn't do that for long. His chest and side were numbed by the cold water, which was probably the only consolation in this whole miserable situation.

He was at the junction of some kind of underground sewer. Small pin pricks of light indicated the manhole cover in the ceiling above, where he had been thrown in. The smell hit him almost as severely as the cold. Snake could smell foul water, waste and other things he didn't care to name. He saw a ledge in the distance, probably an access way for maintenance staff. Though covered in slime and other refuse, Snake could make out the thin line of an edge in the darkness.

Slowly, he swam towards it, moving his arms as carefully as possible so that he would not agitate his wounds any further. He was exhausted and movement was difficult. His weapons were gone and he had no idea where he was. That he wasn't dead yet surprised Snake more than anything else. Despite all this, he was as mad as hell and wanted revenge so badly that he was willing to survive just to kill that son of a bitch, the Englishman.

Reaching the ledge, he let his weight rest on the concrete surface, pushing the garbage out of his face. He coughed up blood and spat the awful metallic tasting bile from his mouth. He knew he was starting to slip into a bad way because he could no longer feel anything but overwhelming numbness. He had lost a great deal of blood and was fighting the urge to lapse into sleep. He didn't know much about medicine but he knew that was dangerous. With the cold and the loss of blood, he was probably slipping into shock.

What a place to die.

All of a sudden, Snake heard the shrill squealing of vermin, followed by soft scampering sounds. He raised his heavy head and tried to see from which direction the sound had come. It was difficult to see. Each junction looked like the other and the sound had been soft. Snake's survival training had allowed him to pick it up where it would have been largely ignored by anyone else. However, in this state, he was not much good for anything else.

The squeal disappeared into the darkness but was soon followed by footsteps walking against the concrete floor. Snake could make out sounds of garbage being crushed underfoot as the person made his approach. Snake wondered what new threat this was, because he was certainly in no shape to deal with it.

Still he had to try.

Mustering every ounce of reserve strength he had left, Snake Plissken dragged himself out of the water. His wet clothes added extra weight and it was an effort just to slid his bulk over the concrete ledge. Fortunately, his flame retardant clothes did not absorb much water which was some consolation. Allowing his black coat to slide off, relieved much of the weight on Snake's body. The cold however was considerable and it started biting into his skin immediately.

Using the nearby wall as support, Snake moved into the shadows, listening with concentration. The footsteps were coming from the junction opposite him. Chances were, the stranger had not seen him climb out of the water. Moving awkwardly into position, Snake stood at the corner of the wall and waited.

The footsteps were definitely coming straight for him and their pace indicated the person was under some urgency to reach him. Snake had no idea whether this person was a threat or not, but under his present circumstances he was a mad as hell and it didn't mean shit to him any more.

Holding the breath tight and moving into that frame of mind that made him unbeatable at times, Snake Plissken waited for the quarry to approach. The person walked straight past him, allowing Snake a large enough window of opportunity to strike. The stranger paused at the edge, looking into the junction and was beginning to turn when he felt Snake's arm tightening around his throat in one fast jerk.

"Come to finish me off?" Snake demanded, trying to keep the strain out of his voice. He fumbled in the man's clothes and found a gun which he took. "What's the matter? Your boss shaky about his shot?"

"No!" The man managed to gasp. "I came here to help you!"

Snake released him, shoving him forward as he levelled the gun and took aim. The stranger stopped himself from falling into the water. He was wearing an old green army jacket and jeans, Snake observed as he turned around with his hands raised in the air, pleading surrender.

As he turned, Snake saw that he was a young man in his early twenties. With the little light there was in the room, Snake was able to make his features out. Sandy blond hair, fine chiselled features and blue eyes which looked innocent and naive. For a minute Snake simply stared because this kid looked familiar. Snake searched his memory for a match and suddenly it was there in front of him.

"Taylor?"

No, it was impossible.

Taylor was dead. Snake Plissken had seen him die about seventeen years ago. They had tried to rob the Federal Repository. Everything had come and gone smoothly, he and Taylor escaped with the loot and made it as far as San Francisco before they were tracked down. It was that crime which had him sentenced to life imprisonment at the New York State Penitentiary. The crime where he had seen them cut his best friend in half in front of him. He still remembered the look on Taylor's face as the bullets riddled h

is body, when he realised the dying to come. Snake had frozen at that moment, unable to say anything, unable to do anything. Not even caring when the cops came and took him away. All he saw was that rising puddle of crimson.

This couldn't be Taylor. Taylor was dead and this man was years younger and he wore glasses. Snake and Taylor were the same age but the resemblance between this boy and his best friend was eerie. Could it be his eyes? He'd lost a lot of blood, could he be seeing things?

"No, Snake, " the young man spoke. He even sounded like Taylor. "It's me Tim, remember? We met when you came home with my brother once."

Tim.

Yes, Snake did remember. Taylor had a kid brother. A little runt of a thing that spent most of the time buried in his books. "Timothy?" Snake managed to whisper, recalling what Taylor's mother had called the kid.

"Yeah," He smiled pleased that Snake remembered him, even after all this years. "That's me."

Snake leaned back against the wall, letting it support his weight because he could barely stand. The gun remained pointed though. It had been a long time since those days and even if Snake did know him, he wasn't about to trust him yet.

Taylor looked at him with concern, estimating just how badly Snake had been wounded and realising with far more clarity than Snake gave him credit, that if those wounds were not tended to quickly, we would die. "Snake," he explained, "when I saw them bringing you through the End Zone, I knew they were going to kill you. I waited until after I heard the Englishman shoot and then followed Miranda close enough to see where they dumped you. I came as soon as it was clear."

It felt like he was telling the truth, Snake thought, mainly because the Taylor he knew was never any good about lying over anything to him. Still this was not Taylor, even though the family resemblance was very strong. However, he had to face the reality of his situation, he did not have a choice to be overly selective of whose help he took. He either trusted Tim now or he'd die where he was standing, far sooner than if the kid pulled the trigger himself.

"If this is a set up, Taylor's brother or not, I'll kill you." Snake warned, holstering the weapon at last.

Tim let out a sigh. "Same old Snake," he smiled coming towards him. "Trusting soul aren't you?"

"I've been hurt before." Snake remarked as Taylor took his arm and slung it around his own shoulder for support.

"I'll be fine on my own." Snake said uncomfortably as they started walking up the way Taylor had come.

"Snake, you've been hurt bad. Trust me, I do have a plan for getting out here."

"That'll be a first since I got here." Snake retorted, deciding after a moment that he was too weak to argue further. Besides, despite his reluctance to admit it, using Taylor's support did make walking a great deal easier. "Where are we going?"

"To Sanctuary Snake," the young man replied. "To Sanctuary."

## CHAPTER FIVE

I

He smelled disinfectant.

Sharp and acrid, it brought to mind definitive images of things clinical and sterile. Even in the darkness, that one smell was more telling than anything that could be represented by a visual image. It immediately associated itself with things like bright white lights and nurse running up and down aisles in pristine white clothes as they stuck thermometers down your throats and needles up your ass. Disinfectant made him think of words like hygiene, radiology and Doctor Kildare.

It made him think of hospitals.

Which was precisely where Snake Plissken found himself when he woke up.

He opened his eyes and found himself staring at a white ceiling above the bed whose sheets he was tucked comfortably in. For a moment, it all swirled in on him, consciousness that is. Once the room stopped spinning, he was able to focus a little more clearly on where he was. Snake tried to remember his last memory before waking up to find himself here. Most prevalent in his mind were the sounds of gunshots. They seemed to tear through the fabric of all conscious and unconscious memory inside his head. He remembered the pain of bullets tearing through his skin most clearly and his blood pulsing out of his body in red rivulets and the white hot agony that followed sharply behind.

Instinctively, he looked under the covers of the clean sheets covering his body and examined his chest. Where he recalled seeing discoloured and broken flesh, there was now a clean white bandage wrapped around his chest. The same thing applied to the wound on his side. The pain was still there but he was familiar enough with the sensation to know that he had been given some drugs to cope with it. The IV next to his bed pumped nutrients into his veins. As he scanned the room ahead, he knew without question that he was in a hospital room of some kind.

The last thing he recalled clearly was struggling through the darkness of the sewers under Taylor's guidance and there was some mention of Sanctuary. He had not paid much attention at the time at what Taylor had actually said, being more interested in actually getting there. He had let Taylor lead him through the maze of tunnels under the Zone. Some time later, they emerged into the night. The last conscious thought Snake could recall was that of a car and collapsing into the back seat where he was mercifully allowed to rest.

Now that he was feeling better, Snake sat up slowly in his bed. He tried not to aggravate his injuries more than he needed to. On the opposing wall was a window and beyond its glass was a spectacular view of trees and a well-kept lawn. It was a bright, sunny day outside and it seemed far removed from any place to be found in the Zone. Snake could hear voices beyond his room but these voices were soft and marked with the discipline one associated with a hospital environment. His clothes and boots, he noticed, were freshly laundered and folded neatly on a nearby arm chair at the corner of the room. He ran his hand over his face and realised, to his disgust, that someone had decided to give him a shave as well.

This must be Sanctuary.

Suddenly, he heard a soft sigh on the other side of his bed and Snake looked over and saw a sleeping figure curled up in a chair. She shifted half asleep, flicking a strand of luxuriously sheeny auburn coloured hair from her face. Snake simply stared for a moment. She was, in his recent experience, the most beautiful woman, he had seen in a long time. With slightly tanned skin and soft, pouty lips, she was dressed in a plain t-shirt, figure hugging jeans and a pair of soft sneakers. She was also wearing a white doctor's coat and the stethoscope that hung around her neck, completed the ensemble.

She shifted again, trying to make herself more comfortable in her chair. This was no easy feat considering the chair was not very accommodating. He watched her for a moment, curious by her presence in his room but remaining silent because he was enjoying taking in the site of her. Despite the smell of disinfectant in the room, he could make out the barest whiff of her perfume. It was soft and lingering scent, probably floral he decided. Women loved that kind of stuff. She was at least a decade younger than she was, certainly not more than thirty. Snake studies the soft lines of her face, the length of her smooth neck, moving down to the sensuous curves of her breasts. It had been a long time since he had seen a

woman like this. What he and men like him normally referred to as a 'class act'.

Her eyes fluttered open and Snake found himself at the receiving end of a stare from her full, green eyes. She saw up quickly, realising that he was awake and embarrassed that she had been caught like this. Trying to maintain some air of dignity, she stood up quickly and winced under her breath when her lethargic muscles refused to cooperate. Her build, Snake decided was small and petite. She was not very tall but she looked as if she worked out.

"Good morning." She spoke first, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as she straightened her clothes and ran her fingers through her wavy red hair. "How do you feel Mr Plissken?"

"Better." He answered still staring at her. "How long have I been here?"

"Almost a week." She said automatically. "Taylor brought you in last Wednesday."

"I was out for a week?" Snake exclaimed. He could not believe he had lost nearly seven days without knowing it. He must have been in bad shape.

She saw the expression on his face and gathered immediately what he was thinking. "Yes," she nodded gravely. "You're lucky to be alive. The bullet hit your lung and collapsed it." Her voice switched to its physician professionalism because she wanted to make certain he did not underestimate the severity of his injuries. "It missed your heart by a fraction. If Taylor had not brought you to us, we would be referring to you in the past tense, Mr Plissken."

"Call me Snake." He said lying back into the pillows.

"She smiled at that but chose to continue with her diagnosis of his condition. "I got you on the table as soon as you arrived. You had massive blood loss, shock and severe thoracic trauma. The other injury on your side is just a flesh wound. The bullet passed through there without hitting any of the vital organs. You're lucky I was a chest cutter."

"So you are surgeon?" He inquired. There were doctors and then there were surgeons.

"You can call me Kate." She replied. "Now lie back, I need to check your bandages and see if its time for another dressing."

Snake eased back into his pillows and watched her move the sheets aside, exposing his chest. She examined the bandages carefully before her hand slid across his stomach to inspect the other wound. As it was, no blood had seeped through the present dressing that pleased her. Leaning over him, Snake could smell the sweet fragrance of her hair and basked in it for a while. Her feminine scent leapt out at him and he took a deep breath of her, enjoying the closeness.

"Be gentle with me." He remarked.

Kate stood upright at that. A hint of amusement in her eyes as her gaze met his. For a moment, it looked as if she might have been blushing but it was hard to tell on her tanned skin and Snake was no expert.

"You're not what I expected Mr Plissken.. I mean Snake."

"Compared to what?" He asked, deciding to keep his mind of more primitive instincts. He began to look around to see if there were any of his cigarette in the room.

"Let's face it, your reputation is infamous." She pointed out. "Since you've been here, I've had people constantly on my back wanting to know if you're going to pull through or not. You're quite a celebrity. Actually I thought you'd be taller."

"The same could be said about you." Snake scowled.

"Touche." She smiled. "Are you hungry?"

"A little," he admitted. He had not eaten since before this whole thing began and he could feel the faint stirring of a stomach unhappy at being fed from an IV bottle.

"I'll get Judy to bring you some breakfast." She nodded before moving to the foot of his bed where his chart was. "What were you doing in Vancouver Island, Snake?" The tone of her voice indicated that her interest was more than curiosity.

"I came here to find Sanctuary." Snake answered. "Some guy at Tacoma said it was a pretty good place to be. Unfortunately, he had a bad set of direction."

Her eyes softened at that and the jagged edged of suspicion withered away for something else. Snake was almost certain it was relief. "So you came to Sanctuary and walked straight into the Zone." She let out a sigh. "I wish we could do something about that. A lot of people hear about Sanctuary through rumours or third hand reports. Many of them try coming here and end up with that bastard on the other side of the Territory.

"Yeah," Snake agreed since he had walked into that same predicament. Once again, the Englishman's face flashed in memory. His face and the bullets that nearly killed Snake Plissken. "How long do I have to be in here?"

"At least a week." Kate answered firmly, indicating that she would tolerate no argument from him on this matter. She guessed accurately that Snake Plissken was not a man who would agree to a lengthy convalescence but he was not invulnerable and she was not about to treat him as such. "Then we'll see. You've had a pretty rough ride. You need to rest and recover. No matter how invincible you think you are, you have stitches that need time to hold firm and heal. Tear them em and I'll have you sedated until they do. Are we clear on this?"

"Crystal." He replied with no doubt that she would carry out her threat if she believed he was harming himself. "Anybody got a cigarette around here?"

"I do in fact," Kate remarked tapping the top pocket of her coat where a pack was hidden within. "Unfortunately, you are not having one. You have a chest wound and for some odd reason, I have this doctor thing about letting you poison it for the moment. You're going to have to try gum until then."

"A cigarette is not going to kill me." He retorted because he wanted one badly. "Baby."

She bristled at being called that. "Not in my hospital." She said to him with ice in her voice. "When you are discharged, I'll light you one myself but not until then."

Snake let out a sigh of resignation, realising it would not be wise to anger her when she was the most incredible looking female he had ever seen. Even though he did not like doctors at the best of times, he had a feeling there was more to her than met the eyes. Then again, he could also be thinking with another part of his anatomy. "Okay, just no needles. I don't like them." He stated seriously.

Kate smiled, finding it very hard to dislike him despite his abrasive manner. Still, she was starting to understand enough about him to know that the Snake Plissken legend was mostly about image. He hid everything under that cool exterior and masculine bravado. "You're a tough guy. You can handle it. I'll try to be gentle."

His eye sparked with mischief. "Is that a promise."

Kate laughed not missing the obvious pass. Well, he was a man after all. "I guess you are getting better." She began walking towards the door.

"Why were you asleep in here?" He asked before she had a chance to leave.

She had forgotten all about that. "You're the first person I've performed surgery on for quite some time. I just wanted to make sure no complications arose. You're my only star patient you know."

"That's flattering."

She gave him a look and then left.

## II

From the middle aged Inuit nurse named Judy, Snake learnt that his doctor's name was Kate Ellison. When Judy served him breakfast that morning, Snake had never thought he would admit that the aroma of bacon and eggs could be so satisfying. Since he was the only patient in intensive care at the moment, she was able to spend a bit of time with him. Not that he wanted it but Judy was more than happy to answer any questions he had about Sanctuary. Snake also believed she was somewhat enamoured by Snake Plissken's celebrity. As he had nothing to do but listen, he allowed her to continue since she was witness to most things that took place in Sanctuary almost from the beginning.

It had almost all to do with Kate.

When the Pulse had been detonated, Kate was just another resident at Della City County Hospital. She and half a dozen doctors were on duty when the electro magnetic pulse set off by Snake Plissken changed the face of the world as they knew it. Initially, there was nothing about her that distinguished her any other doctor or person who became trapped by its circumstance. Kate's main concern at the time was to deal with the massive casualties that were coming off the streets. Injuries ranged from car accidents, fires, electrocutions, subway's derailment and car accidents. There was no way to accurately track any of it.

The politics that followed soon after saw the disintegration of law and order and its replacement heralded its birth by an alarming death toll as paranoia and fear set in. Anarchy had turned people into savages, submitting to their most violent impulses under the justification that the survival of the fittest had to prevail. By this time, Kate, as if so many others had turned the hospital into the last bastion of sanity left in a disintegrating world. They found that she was a natural leader. People saw her ability to make quick decisions and were drawn to her whenever they needed answers.

They remained huddled in the safety of the hospital of weeks, using it to protect them from the madness raging beyond its door. However, after a while, with so many flocking to it for safety, Kate and the fledging Inner Circle was forced to admit that they needed to expand their space. By this time, Della City had succumbed to the worst possible chaos with the city descending rapidly into outright violence. Mass shootings, looting's and rapes were becoming the norm. Seeing that made Kate and her companions aware of what they were up against. There could be no safety anywhere if this kind of carnage were allowed to continue. Realising that someone had to do something, Kate and her Inner Circle went out in search of the law, if it still existed.

Avoiding gangs and thugs who were running rampant throughout the city, Kate gathered all the remaining RAMP officers still alive and brought them back to hospital. Some were badly injured, having struggled to stave off the violence rampaging through the city. Most were simply reeling from the sudden shift in the order of things. They were disorganised and confused, unable to cope without a chain of command to direct their efforts to attack the current crisis. Kate nursed these men back to health and with a growing band of followers, emerged to reclaim the city.

Most people welcomed the return to some form of law and order. Most were more than willing to follow the lead of someone strong enough to take control of the situation. Kate Ellison seemed to be that person. With the consolidation of law and order, Della City began to return to some semblance of normalcy. It took time. People died on both sides but Kate and others like her, learnt how to use guns. They learnt how to protect themselves and organise campaigns as effectively as commanders going to battle. The reclamation of Della City progressed like a war with battle lines drawn and territories to gain.

Kate had understood one other thing. In order to bring law and order, it required the cooperation of everyone including the thugs who were causing much of the violence. Protected by the RMCP, she approached the criminal element and offered them a place in the new society she was trying to rebuild. These were angry, aggressive people, unafraid to do the deeds most flinched at, she believed. There was no reason to keep them out of everything. Instead, she asked for their involvement and showed them sympathy and respect when she did it. Her arguments to them that there was a new dawn to be built and they were needed to make it work, appealed to those who had been considered outcasts in the age before. A surprising number chose to accept her proposal.

After that, it was easy enough to get things going again. The first order of business was to gather all engineers and tradesmen together and devise a method of returning power to their beleaguered city. Just because the Pulse had destroyed much of their technology did not mean that all of it was useless. There were ways to build a circuit board, etching methods that could be employed to replace electronic methods. It was no easy task but people were organised to make a start. It was a difficult process and often with disappointing results in the beginning but eventually power was restored in a limited fashion. Hospitals were soon running and schools were open.

Shortly after this, Ebola arrived.

The appearance of disease in Della City, coincided with the massive influx of refugees fleeing from Victoria City and the Englishman's power struggles. Reports received from the city told the residents of Della of all kinds of atrocities, massacres, rapes and shootings. No one in Della could turn these people away and one of these carried Ebola. It did not take long for the first sign of the outbreak. Once the symptoms were diagnosed, Kate did not waste time by allowing panic or hysteria to get loose in her city. The infected were quickly rounded up and kept in a sealed environment observing strict quarantine procedures. Unfortunately, no amount of quarantine could protect anyone totally from Ebola Zaire. Kate and the other doctors were forced to treat patients in tight containment suits. Even with precautions, nearly two thirds of the population of Della City was wiped out.

Once the crisis was over, there was nothing left to do but clean up and move on. The dead were mourned and buried. Their absence marked by the scores of empty homes, the deserted school yards and the quiet streets all across the city. Those who remained went on as always, trying to make do. Fortunately, more people began arriving from Victoria City, usually after perilous escapes. Soon, they called Della City, Sanctuary. The name stayed and Della City was forgotten because Sanctuary was their home now.

The war with the Englishman followed soon after.

It was not a war as such. Although enough blood had been shed on both sides to warrant such a claim. Angered by all the people fleeing his authority, the Englishmen sent his lieutenants to Sanctuary to demand the expulsion of all escapees from its territory and return them to the Zone. Kate, with the full support of the Circle, flatly refused. Having heard the horror stories from those who had escaped the Zone, she would not allow anyone to return to a reality of mass detentions, wholesale murder and enforced slavery. Such horror was too much for the Sanctuary Circle to capitulate to one man's demands to turn a blind eye.

Despite their idealism however, they had to be realistic. Kate knew that the Englishman had an arsenal of his own. He had street gangs to enforce his will. Even though it offended her sensibilities, Sanctuary did not have the strength to go after the Englishman in his own territory. She did however suspect that her refusal to comply to his demands would put Sanctuary at threat. Dealing with thugs and hoodlums had taught her a few things. She knew enough to recognise that the man was a genuine threat. Secretly, the Inner Circle instigated several expeditions to the main land, in particular to America where weapons were easily obtainable. Travelling in large trawlers, they were able to retrieve quite an arsenal of their own. After several supply runs were made, Sanctuary was more than ready to take on the Englishman.

The first raids took place soon after Sanctuary had refused his demands. Sanctuary was able to repel them easily. It became a requirement for almost everyone to learn the use of a gun. Kate herself included.



When the attack finally came in force, the Englishman received an unpleasant surprise. The actual battle was fought in the thick forests separating the two territories. Using gorilla tactic that they made us as they went, Sanctuary was able to force Englishman back.

Humiliated, the warlord returned home. Shortly after, Kate offered the Englishman a treaty of non aggression, defining their territories in which they had to remain. Stung and angry, the Englishman had little choice but to comply.

Kate knew their troubles with the Englishman were far from over. In Sanctuary, they lived with the knowledge that the Englishman would not be satisfied until they were all dead. More than anyone else, Kate was aware of how much of the Englishman's hatred was directed at her. Not only was she a woman but she had beaten him at his own game and his rage was murderous. She understood that his desire to victory would be fuelled by a personal vendetta and the only way to end it with any finality was to kill him. Neither she nor the Circle was prepared to do that just yet.

The peace between the Zone and Sanctuary was one balanced on a knife's edge. In Sanctuary, everyone was perfectly aware of how tenuous that balance was. Each time they took in more refugees, they knew they were opening themselves to Zone's wrath. Yet there was no way they could turn a blind eye to these people's desperation.

Beyond that, what else could they do?

## CHAPTER SIX

### I

Damn, he needed a cigarette.

He had spent most of the time in this hospital bed dying for one, flipping through the old magazines, staring longingly at the glossy Virginia Slims advertisements and wanting to get out of this asylum as quickly as possible. He gave the latter idea up the first time he tried to stand up on his own. Despite how well he believed he felt, the pain that cut through him sharply, reminded Snake that most of it was a mask made of pain killers and anaesthetic not quite worn off yet. Fortunately, this discovery was made in the privacy of his own room, so he was able to struggle back into the bed without anyone being the wiser. It had been a long time since all he was required to do was rest, so finally he chose to make the best of a lousy situation and just enjoy it.

Judy who was the day nurse, often came by and checked on him. She would change his dressing whenever it required it and gave Snake an opportunity to see how badly he had been hit. The bullet hole in his chest was replaced by a thin line of discoloured tissue, with angry red welts where the skin was broken. He had to admire the neatness of the stitches across his skin and wondered how long it would take to heal. To her credit, Snake had to admit, Doctor Ellison did nice work

Taylor dropped by that evening and in the light of day, Snake saw the resemblance to his best friend was very uncanny. Little Timothy had all his dead brother's features, from the wide blue eyed look of the boy next door, to the unassuming manner in which he carried himself. The Taylor Snake knew however, wore his hair long and sported a goatee, which he could never keep from becoming a beard. His brother however, wore his hair at shoulder length, with a fringe that kept getting into his bespectacled eye. Seeing him made Snake remember how old he was getting and how much he had missed his best friend.

"Hi Snake," Taylor announced upon his arrival. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," Snake nodded in response. "I owe you one."

"It was nothing." The younger man said uncomfortably, pulling up a chair. "You would have done the same."

"I don't suppose you got a cigarette?" Snake asked hopefully.

"Sorry." Taylor looked apologetic. "Don't smoke."

Snake scowled unhappily. "What were you doing up in the Zone?" Snake felt compelled to ask, since conversation was going to have to do in place of a smoke.

"I gather intelligence." Taylor replied, unafraid of hiding it from Snake. He knew Snake Plissken by reputation and through the few times when Snake accompanied his brother Rob to their home town of Bellingham. Snake Plissken was many things, but he was not a man who sold out friends. "I hang around the Zone picking up information about the Englishman and anything worth reporting back. That's my job around here."

"You could get your ass shot off." Snake pointed out.

"Yeah," he smiled bashfully. "Someone's got to do it and I'm not the only one around who does it. There are a lot of our people hanging around the Zone, listening into the news."

Snake remembered something. Moments before the Englishman had slammed another bullet into him, the bastard had been boasting about Sanctuary. How pretty soon he was going to finish them off and how he was going to have Kate when it was all over. That seemed to indicate that the son of a bitch had a plan in mind to make this happen. "I think you ought to be listening closer."

He looked at Snake with bewilderment.

"Before he put one into me," Snake answered, "he seemed pretty sure that he'd have this place wrapped up very soon. Sounds to me like the man has got a plan and if you have no idea what that is, you're in a lot more trouble than you know."

Taylor's expression hardened and now the young man looked back at him with eyes that were grave and focused. He looked very much like his older brother at that moment and Snake wondered if those traits included his best friend's steel. Of course, the kid was no coward. Doing spook work was no easy thing. The risks were large enough, not to mention the consequences to himself if they should ever catch him. In nothing else, Snake had to admire him for that.

"Are you sure about this?" Taylor asked quietly.

Snake's answer was a look.

"Shit," he cursed lightly. "I've been hearing rumours." Then after a moment, recanted that statement. "No, not rumours, more like whisper really. Something under the surface that no one wants to talk about. I thought it was the usual you know, everyone is shit scared in the Zone. Still," he paused a moment and lapsed into thought. "I should get back as soon as I can."

Snake rose a brow at that. "Back?"

"Yeah Snake," Taylor stared at him with an unassuming smile. "I'm a nobody to the Englishman, hardly someone whose movements are watched closely. I move in and out all the time and he doesn't know me enough to miss my presence."

Snake didn't share his optimism or his blase attitude to it all. Still, he had no right to say anything about it either. Even though he felt owed something to Taylor's kid brother and to the fact that the boy saved his life, Timothy was an adult now and required no interference from anyone regarding his destiny. Even Snake Plissken's. Despite all this, Snake did feel indebted to Taylor for saving his life and felt inclined to return the favour. Seeing him had reminded Snake about how it had been watching his best friend die and Snake would hate it if it happen to Taylor's younger brother.

"So how long have you here?" I thought you and your folks were living in Bellingham." Snake asked, deciding a change of subject was required. After Taylor had died, Snake had lost contact with the family, mainly because he was moving from one situation to another. He was curious however, at how young Timothy had come to be here.

"That's right," the young man nodded in response. "I was at Berkeley when the Pulse hit," he spoke with no trace of any knowledge that it was Snake who had set off the electro-magnetic wave that had changed all their lives. Snake felt some relief at that. "I was finishing my degree in Computer Engineering." For a moment, Taylor paused as if remembering that past life was a painful effort. His eyes glazed over at the loss of what his life could have been instead of what it was now. The sadness was profound. "It took me a few months to get back. Things were crazy then, you remember? Martial law, Ebola, Christ knows what else. I got across travelling on horses, boats and even steam engines, you name it." He chuckled softly, but his laugh was hollow.

"They were gone when I got back." He said quietly.

Snake had expected just as much, but said nothing, allowing Taylor to continue.

"The people who were still around in Bellingham told me that Ebola got them and their bodies were put to the torch by the town doctors." Snake saw grief in Taylor's eyes, almost as fresh as his own once was, whenever he thought about his mother and father. "I stayed in town for awhile," Taylor continued. "I didn't know what else to do really. One day, Evans and some of the others came around for supplies and asked me if I'd like to come back with them. I thought why not, there was nothing for me around there any way."

"I'm sorry," Snake answered, unable to think of anything else to say. A part of him felt responsible. Despite the years and the moral justification he used to make himself feel better for what he had done, he still had difficulty facing people like Taylor and others like him. When Snake Plissken had detonated the Pulse, it was for many reasons. Initially, it was the ultimate form of revenge Snake could inflict on those in power who had used him one time too many. Later however, he knew he did for other reasons too. Like the fact that the rest of the world would not have tolerated the President of the United States holding them to ransom and the war which would result made Leningrad look like a church picnic. No matter how much he detested everything about the States, he couldn't imagine an American run by a foreign power.

He had believed it was time to turn things off.

People had become so fucked up that they didn't even care about what happened beyond their petty lives. Most were too stupid to realise what was happening because they were too hooked into their cable televisions, their flashy BMWs and their information super highway, commercial Coca Cola and Hollywoods inspired dream world. Too stupid to realise that the men appointed to run it all were doing unspeakable things. Snake had honestly believed the Pulse was a necessary step because the human race could not progress otherwise.

Still, how does one explain that to someone like Taylor. A high minded principle was going to be very cold comfort after the loss of an entire family or a loved one. He didn't doubt that people who knew believed he was responsible for the loss of more lives than any man in history. Not simply because he had turn things on, but because it resulted in the carnage that followed in the wake of the riots and Ebola Zaire.

"Hey Snake," Taylor replied, having no idea what battle Snake was having with his conscience. "Shit happens man. It was just lousy luck, but its over now. I mean I've gotten used to them being gone and life in Sanctuary's pretty good. I've got a girl, I've got friends and I even have a job." His optimism made Snake feel even worse. "Life goes on as they say. Now that you're here, you can see what I mean. Besides, no one kicks ass like you do."

"Right," Snake said sceptically, feeling none too invincible. "A girl huh?" He looked at Taylor. "Last time I saw you, you weren't old enough to shave."

"Well that was a while ago, Old Man."

"Very funny." He retorted. "Its not the age, its mileage." Snake said coolly. Taylor's manner really was like his late best friend, especially in his ability to put Snake at ease. Now that Snake remembered it, his friendship with Taylor's older brother thrived because of their opposing personalities. He always seemed to be able to calm Snake down when Snake was too angry to think straight.

God, Snake missed him.

"So I hear Kate's your doctor?" Taylor inquired.

"Yeah." Snake replied, unable to keep the momentary reflection from his voice at the mention of her name. "I met her."

The kid didn't miss the reaction, no matter how slight it was. Timothy Taylor remembered Snake Plissken well in his youth. Despite the fact that Snake had seen him as a kid, Taylor had been in awe of his big brother's best friend. In college, he followed Snake's adventures closely and knew that there was never any mention of his being connected to any woman, despite all the media hype that followed the New York rescue and later the debacle in Cleveland. Taylor knew enough about the man to know what his brother thought so much about.

"She's something isn't she?" Taylor replied.

Snake was not about to let the kid in on any more than he was already privy to. Especially when it came to Kate Ellison, although the truth be known, there was nothing to let him in on any way. At the moment, Snake found her incredibly attractive and that put her in no different position than any other woman he'd known before.

Sure Snake, tell yourself that long enough and you might believe it.

"If you say so."

"Relax Snake," Taylor remarked seeing the man tense up at the mention of her name. Kate must have really had an effect on Snake Plissken, Taylor decided. He wondered how the undisputed though unofficial leader of Sanctuary would have thought about that if she knew. He supposed if anyone could win Kate Ellison it would have to be someone like Snake. "Every guy has thought about her at one time or another, she has that kind of effect on men."

"Not me." Snake said firmly. The little voice inside of him spoke when he said that.

Liar.

II

Snake didn't see Kate until later that evening.

He'd spent hours talking about nothing much with Taylor, beating him at poker and getting the dirt on how things were at Sanctuary. More than ever, Snake wished that there were still television stations left. The boredom was beyond belief and if he didn't feel so damn weak from his wounds, he would have been out of here already. Unfortunately, he did feel weak and that left Snake with little choice but to stay put. He'd read all the magazines and old newspapers in the place and he was still itching for a cigarette. In fact, when she had walked in to his room, Snake had decided that he was going to get dressed and leave, damn the stitches.

Kate walked in looking weary and tired, however he noticed she was packing a six pack of bottled beer which she put on his table. "How are you doing?" She asked quietly, as she examined his chart at the foot of the bed.

"I'm not doing much." He declared. "You look tired though," he observed.

"I'm always tired." She dead panned as she studied his medical chart. "Well you look okay on paper." She said approving of what she saw there. Replacing the chart back on its hook, Kate went to the visitor's chairs and sat down before breaking open the plastic holding the six pack together. "You're well enough to have one of these." She answered handing him a bottle.

Snake took it from her and was mildly pleased to feel its icy coolness against his hands. These days, cold beers were a luxury item with the absence of electricity. He did note however that the beers had been resealed, so it was a pretty fair guess that the contents were from a recent still and not the original product. Nevertheless, he wasn't complaining. It would do for now in place of a cigarette. "What's the occasion?" He inquired.

Kate smiled wearily, her tired gaze resting on the view outside the window. "No occasion. We've been busy today, a new batch of people came across the border today. I didn't have a chance to stop by earlier to see how you were. So, you're my last stop before I head home."

Snake snapped the top of the bottle, allowing fermenting gases to escape with a soft hiss. Pressing it against his lips, he took a long, deep taste. Even though it tasted different, it was none the less as satisfying as the real thing. It almost replaced his craving for a cigarette. Almost.

"You bring all your last stops beer?"

"No, I thought you'd be climbing the walls without a cigarette." She retorted, dropping her gaze on him for the first time. "I'm still not letting you have one, but I guessed you needed to take the edge of." With that she took a sip from her bottle.

Snake could have thought of better ways to take the edge of, but chose to keep those kinds of thoughts to himself for now. "I still want a cigarette," Snake replied and then added, "baby."

"I am not your baby." She said haughtily, although she didn't sound offended at all. "Although I can't understand why you haven't pissed me off by calling me that."

"Its my charm." He admitted, his lips curling into the faintest trace of a smile.

"I doubt that." She answered even though she was chuckling a little. "So why do they call you Snake? Is it because of the tattoo?"

Snake realised she would have seen the famous tattoo when he was under the table and ignored the question. "So you run this place?"

Her mood changed considerably and she sat straight in the chair, obviously uncomfortable about the title. "You've been talking to Judy." Kate answered, her voice taut.

"She has a lot to say."

"That figures." She said sarcastically. "Look, things were going to hell. I said what needed saying. That doesn't make me Joan of Arc. I am a doctor, that's all I ever wanted to be. I wish people would stop looking to me for all the answers! There are a lot more people I couldn't help then the ones I did and I'm sure they'd disagree with my supposed heroics!"

"Don't mean shit to me," Snake said coolly, unaffected by her outburst. "I just asked."

She calmed down after that, feeling a little silly over her reaction. "Sorry," she said meekly. "It just gets to me sometimes. I mean the way people look at me, always thinking I have the solution to all their problems, which most of the time I don't. I stumbled into this like everyone else here, I mean I don't even carry a gun. Two years ago, I wouldn't have known anything about planning and strategy and yet when the

shit hits the fan, they look at me to come up with a brilliant idea to save the day. I mean people look at me and think I'm some kind of role model. Do I look like a fucking role model?"

Her response amused Snake more than anything, although he was somewhat surprised to find that his interest in her plight was genuine. He supposed it couldn't be easy being what she was, especially if it was as she had said, just dumb luck. "Not really. Although the talk I hear, is most men think of scoring with you."

She stopped short at the remark and looked at him, adequately diffused. Without saying anything further, she started laughing which was a sound that made him smile. After a moment, she composed herself and looked at him again. "You're not what I expected, you know." The warmth in her voice was genuine.

"What did you expect?" He asked, a brow raised in anticipation of what she would say.

"I don't know." She answered him honestly. "When Taylor brought you here, I was sort of worried. Your reputation precedes you. I thought you would be the kind of man who'd be more comfortable in the Zone than you would be here. I mean we're not much in Sanctuary, just a lot of everyday people trying to get by. Let's face it, you're larger than life. I mean we don't have many famous outlaws in the mix, so I don't know whether you being here was a good idea or not. Although most people are excited that you're here. I've had kids asking me if I'm really treating Snake Plissken. I just wasn't sure how we were going to handle you."

It was a fair statement and an honest one, although a sixth sense told him her reservations were slightly abated. "And now?"

"I feel the same way." She looked him straight in the eye when she said this. "But I now think there's more to Snake Plissken than just what's been said. I mean, why would you come to Sanctuary in the first place?"

"Peace and quiet." Snake answered without hesitation and getting as close to the truth as he was comfortable with at this point. "Comes a time when a man's got to put this feet up and think. This sounded like the place do it. Didn't know it was going to be such a bitch getting here though."

Turning her gaze away, Kate looked up at the ceiling. "We could use your help here." She spoke, her voice had dropped to a soft whisper. "Most people haven't thought further than you being here, but I can tell you, I've thought about it. You were a soldier once. Someone whose actually been in a war. No one here has that kind of knowledge. If you stayed, we could use your help."

"Truth is," he admitted, "I haven't decided anything. I'm not known for my civic duties." Snake was reluctant to get too involved with anything here, not just yet anyway.

"Oh really?" She looked at him. "What would it take for Snake Plissken to care?"

There was a hint of sarcasm in her voice, but under the circumstances, he could understand the sentiment. Subconsciously, he believed she'd gone out on a limb by asking for assistance. Snake had a feeling she wasn't prone to making such offers lightly, or to being so direct with someone like him. Her directness was a refreshing change in comparison to the assholes he dealt with in the past and Snake knew that if he had an awful failing, it was a great difficulty in saying no to women in distress. Especially one that looked Kate Ellison.

"I don't know." Snake answered finally. "I never came across the situation."

"Well there's no pressure." She said, knowing that any kind of commitment from him was a big step and one didn't rush men like Snake Plissken. That he had come this far to Sanctuary was a good sign and she didn't want to scare him off with demands of more than he was capable of just yet. "That's not what we're about. I mean we've got every kind here, farmers, fisherman, doctors, builders, cops and crooks. Even if you decide to go, which I hope you do not. You're always welcome back. Just as long as you share a beer

with me now and then." She grinned, toasting her bottle at him.

Snake shared the gesture. "Sounds to me like you need the company."

"Maybe," she looked at him mischievously, "I just can't resist that Plissken charm."

"I do that to all my women." Snake replied, staring into her face and wanting very much to know then, what it was like to touch those lips, to feel the heat of her under him as he ran his hands through her lustrous hair and feel that exotic skin. She was everything Snake looked for in a woman and despite his cool demeanour, he couldn't remain immune to the feelings he felt whenever he looked at her.

"Believe it baby." He said huskily, his eyes meeting hers with suggestion.

She broke the gaze first, swallowing hard as she rose to her feet suddenly. Snake smiled under his breath knowing for certain that she felt something more than just curiosity about him. However, the moment was too new and too soon for both of them to pursue it. Not that he was in any condition to do anything about it anyway. He found it hard to believe that she was not attached in any way to anyone and unpardonable thoughts ran through his mind of what he would do with her, if given the chance.

"You need your rest." Kate replied, clearly flustered and shaken by the intensity of her feelings. She started moving towards the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll be waiting."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### I

After more than a week in the hospital, Snake Plissken was more than ready to leave. Even though he was less than fully recovered, with aches and pains that reminded him constantly of his wounds, he was determined to escape the sterile environment one way or another. Declining the customary departing wheelchair ride, he chose to leave under the power of his own feet. He had more than enough of convalescing and the words, 'get some rest' now left a bitter taste in his mouth each time he heard it. His doctor, Kate Ellison had been less than pleased at this premature release and had been compelled to do so only because Snake had threatened to walk out of there if she didn't. Finally, she found little choice but to release him before he drove the entire hospital staff crazy.

Since discharging him from hospital meant releasing him into the Sanctuary committee, the Inner Circle had appointed her his chaperone during his first formative days in the town. Even though Kate felt Taylor would have been more suitable to the task, it was not possible since the young man had since returned to his espionage duties in the Zone. Still, it was not a task she disliked since she had gotten to know him quite well during the week he had spent under her care. They had spent most of the time talking, well mostly it was Kate that did most of it while he quietly listened. In the end, Snake probably knew more about her while Kate knew next to nothing about him.

As Snake walked along side her, down the clinical white corridor of the hospital, he showed no outward sign of his injuries. In his dark clothes, he was an imposing figure and Kate could understand how he had come by his fearsome reputation. She stole furtive glances sideways at him as they made their way out of the private wing of the hospital and it was easy then, to understand why his persona tended to strike people as enigmatic.

She knew he was in his late thirties. To his credit, he still wore the body of someone in his twenties. Snake certainly looked fit enough. While she had seen most of him during the operation, it was a different thing to see Snake upright, working his muscles the way they were meant to be. His shoulder length brown hair had neither a streak of grey in it or promised any to come. It was necessary for her to look under his eye patch when he was brought in, so she knew from first hand experience that it looked no different from the

other eye. Professionally, she believed he still retained sight in the damaged eye, but the toxicity of the injury made it impossible to remain exposed for very long. Even his face seemed youthful, despite the five o'clock shadow he always wore and the cool, distracted manner in which he viewed everything.

Despite herself, she was unable to deny the growing attraction she was feeling towards him. Even though Kate was fighting it all the way, she knew eventually she would succumb to its power. He was in essence the ultimate romantic hero, mysterious and dark. Kate didn't need to know him for any great length of time to be aware that he guarded his feelings as fiercely as he guarded his existence. However, after spending most of the week with him during his recovery, Kate knew enough.

There was more to Snake Plissken than most people dreamed possible.

"How are you feeling?" She inquired as she reached lift which would take them to the ground floor. Kate still felt some reservation at discharging him so early, even if he did seem to be a good healer. Unfortunately, Snake had made it plain that he wasn't going to stay either way. Thus, she discharged him with the reasoning that at least then he would voluntarily allow her to look in on him to ensure his wounds recovered properly. Besides, he hardly seemed the type to pay much heed to doctors advice.

"I'm okay." Snake replied, even though he felt a little stiff under his black T-shirt. Still, he wasn't about to tell her that though. Knowing her as he did now, Kate would probably want to stick another needle into him or something. "Where to now?" He asked instead, shifting the conversation away from this health.

"Well," she frowned, undeceived by his tactics. "I'll give you a grand tour of the place if you like, providing you can tolerate my company for a whole afternoon." Kate smiled. "I'll show you around town, get you a place to stay while you're here."

"A place to stay?" Snake looked at her.

"Yeah," she nodded, wondering why he found that so strange. "Since the Pulse and especially after Ebola, we have a lot of houses around here that are unoccupied and fully furnished. After new people started arriving, we decided to let them have a pick of the places available. What they choose, they're stuck with. Half the town is still empty, so there are some nice places to choose."

"I haven't decided to stay." He pointed out.

"You still have to sleep somewhere."

He couldn't argue with that he supposed. After all, hadn't Snake come here for just this reason? To find a bit of peace and quiet, at least for awhile? Snake didn't mind the idea of finding a place where he could kick back for awhile and a place with adequate solitude would suit him just fine. Who knows, maybe if he did like it, Snake might stay a little longer. "Okay," he agreed finally.

Besides, at the very least, he'd have the company of a very tasty guide.

Today he noted, Kate was not wearing the customary jeans and T-shirt she wore during her duty hours. Even though Snake made no mention of his approval in her choice of attire, Snake was pleased at what she was wearing. Kate unaware of his scrutiny, was wearing a thin cotton dress to suit the warm weather outside. It hung off her shoulders, accentuating the curves of her body. Snake glanced at her occasionally, enjoying the way her body moved as she walked alongside him.

For winter, it was a nice warm day outside. They emerged into the sunlight and the skies were clear without a hint of grey. The vibrant colours of morning leapt out at him with contrasting colours of bright green and sky blue. It was certainly a change after seeing nothing but hospital white the past week. While the temperature was cool in comparison with the Californian temperatures he had been used to, Snake could still feel a tickle of warmth against his skin.



Beyond the hospital building, Snake could see Sanctuary City below him. The town was no bustling metropolis by any means, but it was extensive and spread out over a large enough area to once be a home to several hundred thousand people. According to Kate, the population of Sanctuary barely passed a few thousand now. The Ebola virus had cut their numbers as brutally as it had done elsewhere. Sanctuary had only managed to recover better.

The County Hospital sat on top of a hill, flanked by some smaller buildings which once housed more specialised medical services such as optomology and physiotherapy. It was green all the way down the hill until it met up with a four lane road that lead straight into the heart of town. There were people about today, hospital staff moving across the park like courtyard, along with gardeners who worked the greenery in the surrounding grounds.

"Not bad." He remarked, unashamed to hide his admiration. After the past two years, these place was so normal that it seemed almost unreal. He began to understand why Jonah Stone and his family had been willing to risk everything to get here from the Zone.

"Cynic." Kate retorted, taking the lead as she walked towards the half empty car park. "I've got the use of a car today." She explained. "Most of the time we tend to use motor bikes and bicycles to move around. We have a gasoline source, but we've got to conserve as much as we can."

The car she was referring to, was a 1954 Studebaker convertible. Despite its vintage, it looked to have recently undergone some restoration and its maroon colour shone with the glint of a new polish. The top was down on the car, revealing a polished wood dashboard, looking very much like the day it rolled off the production line.

"We've had to dig up every old car we could find. This is one the motor pool guys manage to restore. It probably looks better than it runs." She answered climbing into the driver's seat. "I'd like an Italian car myself, but I've never seen one that could survive the conversion."

Snake said nothing, choosing instead to take a moment to look the Studebaker over, mostly because he was curious as to its make and model. After a while, he climbed into the passenger seat, content to let her do the driving.

The wind picked up as they drove out of the hospital premises, becoming a strong breeze. The air was warming up as the noon day sun rose higher in the sky and Snake eased back into the vinyl seats, savouring the ride and the quiet of the moment. The instances like this were usually rare when he could take a moment for himself during the interludes from dangerous situation to another. When such moments arrived, Snake knew well enough to savour them for as long as it lasted. He needed one more thing to make it perfect....

Without looking at him, Kate could hear the man rummaging through the compartments of the car. "Cigarettes are in the glove box." She responded, a faint smile on her lips as she glanced at him with mischief.

Snake said nothing, but reached inside the compartment and found a fresh pack of some unknown Canadian brand. Better than nothing, he supposed. Lighting up for the first time in a few days (unknown to her, he had helped himself to one of the staff's cigarettes during his stay in hospital), Snake was as close as he could get to pure contentment.

"Happy now?" She said sarcastically.

"Just keep driving." He retorted, his lips curling slightly into a sort of smile.

Kate chuckled softly, keeping her eyes focussed on the ahead. Snake allowed himself to relax, savouring his cigarette and the view. The wind had carried the scent of her perfume through the air, so he could smell her through the cigarette smoke. It was a nice mixture. Her hair was blowing in the wind, giving her

a wild tousled look that was great to look at. Snake tried to remember the last time he had taken a ride in a car with the top down on a nice day with a beautiful woman.

It irked him slightly when he could not.

As they started to penetrate the outskirts of the town, Sanctuary or Della as it was once called, looked like any mid western settlement. The architectural design of the city was mostly colonial so there was a lot of brick to be seen, especially in the older buildings. The newer homes that skimmed along the coast were mostly stilted, giving them a panoramic view of Della Falls, the majestic cascade that provided Sanctuary most of its electrical power.

"One of those is mine." Kate remarked noticing his gaze on them.

Snake had to admit that it was a nice area and he could understand people would like to live here. It was remote and far enough away from town to enjoy a good deal of privacy. Considering what he knew of Kate, he could guess why she chose this area as her home. There was a lot of forest and vegetation to hide the houses, so he doubted she had any difficulty with intruders on her privacy.

"Not bad." He commented. If he was to stay here, he wouldn't mind something like this himself. Something secluded where no asshole could intrude on him without Snake having a pretty good idea he was coming. In some ways, it was very defensible. Not the kind of place where someone could sneak up on him without notice. Snake liked that idea a lot.

Kate saw his prolonged interest as they drove past the area. "There are still some empty houses around here." She added. "Not many people want to be too far away from town now that we don't have cars too much. People who lived out here want privacy, so neighbourly visits are few. Being the people person that you are, you might find that uncomfortable."

Snake gave her a look.

Kate smiled back innocently. "Come on," she put her foot down on the accelerator and speeded up. "There's a free one, just up the road from here."

Snake didn't say anything in protest. Truth be known, little of it interested him. However, she had said he needed to choose a place for himself during his visit here so curiosity got the better of him, to know what it looked like. As they drove down the gravel road, they occasionally saw people on bicycles, who waved at them as they drove past. For a moment, it reminded him of another place like this, almost a lifetime in his past. During the days when he lived in a place like this, with a family to care for. Snake blinked, shaking those thoughts out of his mind like a bad dream. He didn't want to think of his parents, didn't want to remember that they were gone. It was an open wound he'd never been able to heal, one he'd used to keep himself in an almost perpetual state of homicidal rage.

I'm sorry Lt Plissken, these things happen.

"You still with me Snake?" Kate's voice broke through his reverie.

Snake turned to see her looking at him with concern. The car had come to a stop in a new place and he had hardly noticed. They were at a new place, at the foot of a stilted house and judging from its location, the furthest one out. It sat propped on a point, giving half the house and incredible view of the ocean and the surrounding landscape.

"Still here." Snake said shortly, climbing out of the car.

II

They had to walk up a decent flight of stairs to reach the back porch. Aside from the front driveway, the house was surrounded by tall conifers and a variety of shrubbery that made it difficult for anyone to see

into the premises, from the road. The house was laid out so that the only way to get in would be through the back since the front of the house hung partially over the edge of the cliff face. It was constructed with a mixture of timber and modern building materials and had a somewhat rustic feel to it.

"There should be keys under the mat." Kate said stepping onto the back porch. She went on to explain that after Sanctuary's Ebola crisis, numerous homes were left vacant and one of the least preferred jobs at the time, was cleaning out these houses. Mainly because many people hadn't quite made it to the hospital and their dead and diseased corpses still remained where they had fallen. When the influx of refugees into Sanctuary had started gaining momentum, a cleaning detail had gone to all the vacant houses and made them suitable for new inhabitants.

The keys sat neatly under the rubber mat in front of the porch's back door. Opening the door, they both stepped inside and found themselves in the kitchen. The air inside was stale and it was in bad need or airing out. However, it was a modern kitchen, furnished in pine with all the necessary appliances and utensils needed to make it functional. Snake looked around casually, not really concerned with what it looked like inside, as long as it had a bed and four walls.

Moving through the house, he discovered it to be a three bedroom home, with the master bed overlooking an ocean view through a large picture window. The walls, on the side of the house facing the ocean was constructed mainly of one way glass, allowing the owner to have lots of light and a spectacular view while maintaining his privacy. It was fully furnished, Kate said, containing linen and other domestic things which she deemed important but he really didn't give a shit about.

"What do you think?" She inquired after they had seen everything a short time later.

"It will do." Snake answered, lighting up another cigarette.

"Okay," Kate nodded tossing him the keys, which he caught easily with one hand. "Try to contain your enthusiasm. It isn't pretty when you gush."

Snake's look tendered his response.

"Well," she sighed trying to remember the procedure in this instance. She didn't normally deal with the orientation of new arrivals at Sanctuary, but knew there was some methodology to it. "Well have to find Ben Erikson. He's our Electrical Foreman. He'll hook power up to this place. There are no real rationing rules, just the usual 'turn it off when you're not using it' you know? I don't think he'll be able to do it today though because of where this place is. So," she took a deep breath as she continued, "you'll have to stay at my place tonight."

Snake stared at her with a meaningful glance. "You might take advantage of me." He said with a straight face.

Kate rolled her eyes. "Don't flatter yourself." She remarked walking past him, becoming used to his mild flirtations by now. "We better get going if we're going to find him today."

Snake followed her out unable to keep a faint smile off his face.

Women were winsome things, he had decided long ago. They danced around their feelings with that infamous female logic that could sometimes be as sharp as any knife, but could also miss the barn by a country mile. When he was in college, the women he had known were more concerned with their future careers than anything else. After the military and especially the medal, the women Snake Plissken had met were more interested in seeing him as a prized to be had. Although his notoriety made him more attractive to them, remembering some of the women in his past. That nameless girl in the Chock Full of Nuts in New York, who had offered herself in return for escape. Brain Helman's little sister, the Crab whom he encountered at Cleveland and of course, Taslima. Beautiful, exotic looking Taslima, whose biggest mistake was probably meeting him. Since then, there had been many of them and yet they had meant little to him

but as a object of lust for a nights distraction.

Kate Ellison was another thing all together. Women like her didn't enjoy being objects. They took their passions very seriously, attempted to control them if they could and ignored them when they couldn't. No woman had been able to move him as much as this in a long time. In the week he had spent in hospital, she came by almost every day to check on his progress and because he was certain, she felt something for him too. In some insane way, they had connected in a manner Snake had never believed possible.

Usually, it didn't take him long to make his move. His confidence in his reputation and cool demeanour often did most of the work for him. However, Snake was perceptive enough to know that such arbitrary moves would not work on someone like Kate. Half the fun with her would be the chase and even then, he wasn't sure what the outcome would be. If winning her over was what he really wanted because women like Kate did not go for one night stands or a

few hours of sex over a cheap bottle of whisky. If anything made him pause and think for a moment, it was words like commitment, relationship and worse yet;

Love.

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Unlike the Zone, Sanctuary's central hub was not a former city hall or any other building of importance. As a matter of fact, the Inner Circle normally conducted their meetings in a place called the Slice, a small diner in the middle of town. City hall, Kate explained was now used as an Orientation centre for incoming refugees from the Zone or the mainland. They remained there until they were able to establish their futures in Sanctuary's wider community.

As Snake and Kate emerged from the convertible, Snake saw a town with open stores, teenagers hanging out on the corners or sitting on the kerb, watching passers by, while having a smoke. Middle aged women peddled by on their bicycles while local kids played ball in the nearby park. With its tree lined roads and human activity, it almost seemed like the Pulse never existed. Snake wondered if he had stepped into a time machine and emerged in a scene played out from the past of a simpler time than the one that moulded him into what he was.

The residents of Sanctuary were equally intrigued by him. The children in particular, gawked at them as he and Kate walked by them at an obsolete video store. Even the adults slowed down as they walked or drove by to have a look at him. Everyone found a reason to pause and stare at him. Well at least they did, until Snake scowled back at them. His low profile manner didn't like the attention.

"Relax Snake." Kate replied as they reached the doors to the diner called the Island Slice. The Slice was a brightly decorated diner with a tropical island motif, which is was not, having a large island and a palm tree painted on its glass windows. Inside was Bermuda type table cloth on the tables and the aroma of hot coffee wafting in the air with what Snake was certain was apple pie. Appropriate he thought, even if it was a little too precious.

The lunch time crowd was in so Snake was given a chance to look at a more diverse selection of Sanctuary's residents. Judging from initial glances, they came from every possible avenue of life. There were fishermen in flannel clothes, a couple of guys Snake recognised immediately as bikers, some wearing American service tattoos, thick jeans and long hair. He'd seen a few motorcycles out there and though fleetingly of the Chopper he'd lost in the Zone. There were also ordinary people, blended together in a curious mixture of every ethnic variation. They all looked up at his arrival, some with suspicion, others with awe and some with curiosity.

Ignoring their stares, he followed Kate deeper into the room. An amply endowed waitress with the name tag Sherrie, smiled as he brushed past her. Snake took a moment to admire her fiery red hair and the body under the too tight uniform. He wondered if she got paid working the tables.

Kate paused at the table situated at the far end of the room, which seemed intentionally secluded. A group of people sat around it, minding cups of coffee and such, as well as a stack of paper. "Hi people." She greeted.

A chorus of greeting sounded from the group, made up of four women and seven men.

"This is Snake Plissken." She introduced.

Like they didn't already know, he thought silently to himself. Snake said little, choosing to respond with a quick nod of his head. He didn't pay much attention to the introduction but showed enough interest to make them believe he was listening. If it was necessary for him to remember later on, he would work something out.

"We're working on the idea of positioning sentry posts along the border." The tall, black man at the head of the table declared, more to Kate than him. "I thought it would help if we had some advance warning before the Zoners decide to hit." Snake recalled his name was Duke Washington and tried hard not to associate him with the self appointed king of New York City from his jaded past.

"Its a good idea." Kate agreed. "How far along the border."

"We're working that out right now." Jennifer Lopez replied. Jennifer looked about Kate's age but was much plainer looking. She eyed Snake suspiciously and her dislike was obvious. "You're the expert Mr Plissken, what do you think?"

All eyes at the table turned to him and Kate was about to intervene when Snake responded to what clearly was a challenge. He glanced at the map on the table and noted the points marked for sentry position. "I think you better be prepared to lose a lot of sentries."

"How's that?" Came the reply from an older man, after the gasps of surprise had died down. The man sort of reminded Snake of Bob Hauke and that wasn't good. Like him, the man called Tristan Evans was sharp featured and had dark, piercing eyes. Cop eyes.

Snake lit himself a cigarette before he spoke, leaving everyone to wait for him to answer. Kate, he noticed, was more amused than anything else. Exchanging a glance with her, he turned to the others again. "People in the Zone don't give a fuck about your treaty. They're just bidding their time. When they break it, they'll come over in force and kill anyone in their way, including your sentries. The Zoners aren't stupid, they're not going to allow sentries time to get back here and warn you."

Washington let out a large exhale. Lopez turned away and the others shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. Only Evans held Snake's gaze and right away Snake knew that if Kate was gone, this man could step into her place quite easily as Sanctuary's unofficial leader. Finally, the man spoke. "He's right. We've met them ourselves. The Englishman has got crazies on his payroll. He'll just cut our people down and move on."

Looking up at Snake, Evans added. "You're pretty good war hero. Do you have any better suggestions about what we ought to do?"

"Maybe." Snake replied.

This made them look at him again.

"Let me look at the map." Snake asked.

Ben Erikson who was Snake's age and looked like a poster boy Marine recruit, with blond hair and blue eyes unfolded the map in front of Snake. Flattening it out on the table before showing the area which constitutes the border between the Zone and Sanctuary.

Snake examined it for a minute and then realised how green these people were. The closest any of them

had ever probably come to any type of military service, was likely to be the cop and cop didn't fight wars, nor did they have any idea how to. Suddenly, Snake realised why Kate had said that they needed someone like him. "The border runs through some pretty thick forests and hills. Use the natural obstacles. The Zoners are mostly urban, they like their cars too much so they aren't likely to come through the forests. A patrol would do you better than actual sentry posts. Where there are roads, post sentries under cover. If the border is breached, they'll at least get out alive to warn you."

"Not bad." Evans said after a moment, while the others considered his suggestions more carefully. "You're a useful guy to have around, war hero."

"So they say."

"Are you sticking around?" Duke asked.

"I don't know." Snake said truthfully. "Lets just say I'm passing through for the moment."

"Pity." Evans remarked. "You could show us civvies a thing or two."

Snake stared into his eyes. "I still might."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### I

They left the diner an hour later.

Kate said little as they walked out of the diner and her silence was unusual. He was certain she'd have some comment to make after he had spent the last hour giving the Inner Circle alternate ideas to tackle their plans to post sentry guards at their territorial borders. He hadn't intended to become that involved, but the more they got into discussing the subject, the more Snake found he was able to help.

It had been a long time since he'd actively been involved in planning strategy within a group, not since the war and Leningrad. Despite his detached attitude towards the whole thing, he couldn't help feel the same excitement that he always had when a good plan was coming together with good ideas. Even more so, when they took so much stock everything he said.

The more he thought about it, he realised Kate hadn't said much during the hour either. In fact, she had spent most of the hour sitting back and letting things proceed on their own. They were halfway down the street and she still hadn't spoken, even though her expression indicated that she was in deep thought. She didn't look upset or anything, just meaningful and Snake was curious to know what she had on her mind. Still if offended his cool demeanour to have to ask her. It might give her the mistaken impression that he cared.

"You're quiet." He asked finally.

"Why did you do that?" She asked, looking at him seriously.

"Do what?" He asked innocently, getting the feeling he would need a cigarette for this subject.

"I didn't think you wanted to involve yourself with us."

"I didn't." He answered shortly, knowing exactly what she was referring to despite her offhanded inquires. "They asked me."

"Sure." Kate nodded looking ahead again. For a moment, it looked to her like he could have been another one of the people who lived their lives in Sanctuary. Except in reality, he felt nothing for them and that angered her. In some ways it would have been so much simpler if he would just let down his guard and let

them show him they were worth knowing. On some level, Kate knew Snake wanted to be apart of the whole, even though he showed every outward signs of denial.

He was what he was she supposed. A man who lived his entire life travelling at break neck speed, always heading for catastrophe. Yet, always managing to survive, by barely the skin of his teeth. In the past few days, she had started to care for him more than she would like to admit. However, caring for Snake Plissken was about as foolhardy as one could possibly get. She knew this and told herself repeatedly that it was a very bad idea to begin with. Snake Plissken came with a notorious reputation, well known even in Canada. Before he Pulse, he was someone she'd read about in the newspapers or glanced at in passing curiosity in newspapers. Never did she have to look at him as a real person, or have cause to wonder why he did what he did.

The Pulse changed a lot of things and now it seemed she found him face to face in her life. He who was a criminal, war hero and a mercenary for hire, not to mention an occasional national hero. Why did she feel like she had some claim on him? Why did he matter so much to her?

"Where to now?" He asked trying to break the uncomfortable silence . He was perfectly aware she was pissed off about something, although what that was, he couldn't guess. Besides, who could figure women out any way?

"I thought we'd walk around town a bit. You need to know where to get supplies, food, beer, that sort of thing." Kate answered. "There are a couple of stores around here. We don't use money because food is rationed and things like cigarette and alcohol are specialty items. You get what's available."

"From stores?" Snake looked at her.

"Yeah," she smiled bashfully, casting her gaze at a shop front directly ahead. Its wares were obvious from the smells drifting from the trucks parked alongside of it. The odour of fish and brine wafted across the street for a short distance. Men in thick rubber gloves and fishing boots helped to unload plastic crates before disappearing into the establishment.

Along the street, there were other similar stores. In some essence it was like any busy shop row, except these were ration stops and no money exchanged hands. They existed because of the community's need for some semblance of continuity from their past lives and because trade was conducted under the principle of an exchange of services.

As Kate explained it as they walked on, everyone in town did their part. Even the street tough bikers he had seen earlier, performed a function. Snake found it amusing to imagine what part they could play in a society like. Surprisingly enough, Kate was soon to inform him that they were responsible for Sanctuary's vehicle pool. They often travelled around the area searching for all kind of vehicle, restoring and maintaining it after deciding if it was salvageable or not. The gangs that had run rampant over the area once, were now appointed street custodians and they constituted the bulk of Sanctuary's armed forces and law enforcers.

Snake enjoyed spending the day with her, even though he wasn't about to admit it, he was also impressed with Sanctuary and what they had managed to built here. He had seen more experience leaders do worse than this and if anything, Sanctuary ought to put them to shame. Snake even had to admit, he would have been sorry if this place had fallen to the Englishman and become the nightmare that was currently the Zone. Something inside of him liked the notion of kids being able to play in the grass - unafraid of anything and having a good time.

The sun had started to set in the horizon as the afternoon progressed and he was surprised how quickly the day had gone. Kate was good company and he found she wasn't fickle like most women although some traits were just genetic and she like them all, had her moments. He even started to look less like a circus act to the rest of Sanctuary's residents who no longer gawked or stared as hard as they used to. Which was a relief.

He was however, starting to wear down a little however, the stiffness in his side increasing to genuine discomfort but it wasn't something he couldn't endure for awhile at least. Either way, his pain didn't escape Kate and being a doctor, she reacted immediately.

"Hell, I'm sorry Snake." Kate replied as she saw him swear slightly under his breath. "Come on, we'll head back to my place. I'll even cook for you."

"I'm sick enough." He looked at her with mischief in his eyes.

"Remarks like that will not get you invited to dinner." She said good naturedly, slipping an arm under to support. Snake didn't really need her assistance, but he wasn't about to complain. He liked how she felt against his and was pleasantly surprised that she didn't mind taking such liberties with him. Like her, he was aware of something happening between them, something that reeked uncomfortably of permanence and the kind of warmth that Snake Plissken found completely out of his depth.

"Hello Kate." A man greeted them. Snake had noticed him earlier, crossing the street towards their direction but lost track when Kate started talking to him. The man was slightly taller than him, with thick blond hair, stocky build, probably once a football player of whatever was the favourite Canadian past time. Certainly some kind of physical contact sport because his nose looked broken several times at least. His green eyes focused on Snake even though he was addressing Kate.

This guy was trouble, Snake's instincts told him immediately.

"Hello Jack." She answered and Snake picked up instantly on the tension in her voice. Something was up between these two, he decided.

"Jack, this is Snake Plissken." Kate wasted no time in introducing them.

"I guessed." Jack replied curtly, not hiding his hostility at all. When he finally cast his gaze at Snake, it was more of a glare than anything else.

Snake chose only to nod in acknowledgment. Secretly, he shifted into the stance he always took when he met people who could be dangerous. Good ol' Jack was quickly slipping into that category. Snake stared back at the man with icy eyes, poised to react appropriately if it became suddenly necessary. He noticed also, that Kate's hold around him had changed from mere support to something more intimate. Her fingers had coiled through his and her body pressed up closer against him. No genius was required to know that Jack was an unwanted suitor. Snake found the idea amusing and played her game for awhile. Besides he could see the mounting anger in Jack's face and he kind of enjoyed it. As it was, Jack's jealousy was more than obvious without her having to exacerbate the situation any.

"Snake is staying with me until tomorrow." Kate continued speaking. "At least until Erik hooks up power to his place."

Jack nodded slowly, his jaw tightening and his entire body fighting the restraint of his control. "I see," he replied coolly. "You're quite a celebrity Snake Plissken. I've been hearing all kinds of stories all day about you. Are even half of them true?"

Snake looked at him without expression, not needing to acknowledge the half assed attempt at an insult Jack was trying to deliver him. Why did he need to say anything when Kate's rubbing up against him was more effective than any words he could come up with. There was no mistaking the intimacy she was trying to portray and this grid iron steroid ape was starting to fall prey to its implications.

"I don't know," Snake answered after awhile. "I haven't heard them."

"Oh come on," Jack snorted, barely able to keep civil, but throwing down an unseen gauntlet. "The hero that rescued the US president from certain death in New York City? Not to mention the war hero of



Leningrad, even though all you tough guys couldn't beat the Russians at anything. Still I guess they had to give you a medal for something."

Snake wondered if this goon had any idea of what he was playing with. In his past, Snake Plissken had killed men for less than this. The only reason he hadn't yet done it, was because this was Sanctuary and he had no gun. Besides, this guy was an asshole and he didn't annoy Snake enough to warrant wasting his time on this wannabe.

"Jack," Kate interrupted quickly, before the big idiot did something he couldn't take back. As much as she thought about Snake, she was not blind to what he had been and really, still was. He was a killer and it was only god's sense of twisted irony that Snake had a glimmer of conscience, which was enough to make his actions heroic at times. All she knew about Jack was that once, he was a nobody and after a Pulse, being an engineer made him somebody. But not somebody enough to take on a man like Snake Plissken.

"Jack," she said again, snapping both men out of their testosterone filled aggressions. "It's nice seeing you, I'll catch up with you later." With that, she started to pull Snake away.

"If you touch her," Jack managed to say as they were moving away.

Snake glanced over his shoulder and said with a half smile. "I'll be sure to let you know first."

That did it.

Jack barrelled past Kate as he knocked Snake to the ground.

In his weakened condition, Snake was unable to keep the mountain of a man from slamming him hard against the concrete floor. In the distance, he heard Kate screaming to stop, but the next thing he felt was a blow connecting to his jaw. Snake's reaction after this was swift. He was taken momentarily off guard, for not long enough for Jack to keep his advantage. Rolling hard, he threw Jack off easily and swung one fist into the man's face, followed by another in a quick succession of reactive punches. Jack made some half hearted attempt to fight back, but it never quite came. Snake Plissken was too good to let an amateur take him with one lucky punch.

The only reason Jack walked away with his life was because Snake stopped when he felt Kate's hand on his shoulder, pulling him away. His feelings about her were still an unknown, but he knew one thing without doubt, she'd never understand if he killed this stupid son of a bitch in front of her. No matter how much he may have deserved it. Snake turned and saw the fear in her eyes, mostly borne from the realisation that it was her that they were fighting over. Yet, that fear was quickly approaching the possibility that Snake Plissken was really some kind of murdering psychopath.

That wasn't something he was willing to let her believe.

Snake looked down and saw a pathetic nonentity scrambling for some measure of dignity as Snake backed away from him, leaving him with his life and a few reminders never to cross him again. Whatever posturing the man had displayed previously was gone, it lay with the man whose face was covered in blood, but whose injury was more fatal to his pride. Inwardly Snake knew he wasn't going to remain beaten for long, Jack was one of those people who would recover and then want revenge.

Blood was gushing from Jack's shattered nose and a small crowd had gathered around, watching the commotion with a mixture of concern and excitement over the break of every day routine. Snake was well aware of how this looked, what they would be thinking about him, but right now, he really didn't give a shit. His ribs throbbed painfully and he wanted to be somewhere secluded where he could nurse his injuries away from prying eyes.

"Get up Jack," Kate ordered unsympathetically. She was astonished and disgusted by both of them. Although she knew Jack was lucky to be alive. People didn't pick fights with Snake Plissken and live.

Jack seemed dazed for a moment, holding his nose as rivulets of blood ran down his hand as he held his nose. Snake allowed himself a little smile of satisfaction as he walked away from the scene. Jack didn't seem eager to speak or down play his defeat in the fight, allowing Kate to take charge of the situation. Kate however, seemed more embarrassed than any thing else.

"Alice," Kate called out, recognising a familiar face in the crowd. Alice was an older woman in her forties who had heart trouble and thus travelled around with a car. "Will you please take Jack to the hospital. Dr Vinh is on duty, he'll take care of this."

"Sure thing." Alice said amiably, sympathising with her dilemma, casting an unfathomable glance at Snake before turning back to Kate. For an instant, both women acknowledged each other secretly before Alice turned to the matter at hand. Snake wondered what that was all about. He could read people well, but sometimes women could be a complete mystery when they chose to be secretive.

"Come on Jack," Alice helped Jack to his feet, before leading him through the crowd. "I think you've learnt your lesson about catching a tiger by the tail." She gave Snake a smile, which he returned with a slight curl at the corner of his lips, as she moved past with Jack.

The throb in his side had started to fade slightly, even though he believed he had injured himself again. He could feel a gush of fluid and knew that he was bleeding, he just hope he didn't bust any stitches. He didn't relish going back to the hospital again, especially since he'd just gotten out today. Perhaps picking a fight hadn't been the wisest thing to do, even if Jack had asked for it. Still, Snake was a patient man, revenge could have come later. Some of his best moments of vengeance in life, took place after he had time to think about it.

After Jack had left and Snake had moved away from the crowd, the audience began to dissipate now that the momentary excitement was over. As Kate and Snake began walking back to her car, the last of the stragglers disappeared into the tapestry of the street once more.

"Alice has got a car." Kate explained, "he'll be okay. It wasn't anything serious."

Snake saw anger in her eyes but he guessed it was aimed more at herself than at him. She hadn't expected her little game to go as far as it did, but now that it was all said and done, she couldn't deny it wasn't her fault to begin with. He responded by taking a moment to light himself another cigarette. Funny, it always seemed like he never quite had the chance to finish one. The last lay somewhere on the ground, probably still burning despite Jack knocking it out of his mouth.

"How can you be so calm?" She declared, riled by his indifference.

Snake took a breath of his cigarette and then looked at her. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Of course not!" She declared. "Why on earth would I want to mean to beat themselves silly over me?"

"Cause you wanted to get rid of at least one of them." Snake looked at her innocently.

Kate let out a held breath, unable to refute that. "Let's have a look at you." She mumbled. They had reached the car and Snake was leaning against it for support.

There was momentary alarm on her face as she saw this, because he rarely used anything for support. The physician in her surfaced quickly, to take control. Standing against him, she pulled up his singlet to make a quick examination. Snake was surprised that he allowed to do so without resistance. But then, hadn't that been the case seen they'd met? She examined the wound on his side and he closed his eyes, feeling her fingers trace their delicate tips across his chest and then his side.

He tried not to enjoy her fingers against him, her breath across his bare skin as she studied broken flesh. He wondered if she enjoyed the sensation of his body under her hands as much as he enjoyed her touching

him. He could smell the fragrance of her hair and tried to overcome to need to touch her in a way that would leave no doubt of how he felt. Sheer willpower enforced by years of mastery and calm, kept him from doing so. God, he wanted her though. He wanted to feel her thighs around his, his gingers digging into that cascade of lustrous hair, he wanted to taste her erect nipples in his mouth and hear her scream his name in sheer ecstasy when he started to fuck her.

"You're weeping a little here." She remarked, breaking through his reverie, completely oblivious to the thoughts running through his mind. "I'll need to change the dressing, but we can do that at my place. I just know how much you love hospitals."

## II

"What was that all about?" He inquired hours later, over a bottle of wine and an eaten dinner. They were in the living room of her place, having finished dinner an hour before and had moved to the lounge room with the bottle of wine. They had sat around drinking, feeling so casual that it almost seemed like they were old friends reminiscing. He lay relaxing in an enveloping arm chair, while she rested outstretched on the sofa, one hand propping her head as she sipped her wine and looked at him.

It was the closest thing Snake could remember in recent years to sharing an evening with a woman, since before the service. He lit a smoke, draped one leg over the thick arm rest and relaxed. He couldn't even remember when he ate Italian last and bemused over her ability to cook it among the other things she was capable of. Outside, the skies bathed the woods and the river in a blanket of indigo from its bright moon, high in the sky. The twilight kept them sealed within the confines of the three bedroom Spanish styled home. The days events seemed so far away as they gazed through the large window and saw the scenery beyond.

"Nothing I had any control over," she said unhappily, knowing instantly he was referring to Jack. To think she had been the reason for a fist fight was mortifying. She had not meant any real harm to be the outcome, just the hope that Jack might understand that she had no desire to pursue any kind of relationship with him. Jack had just proved again, he was not so easily deterred.

"Jack has this idea we have a relationship." She snorted with something akin to disgust. "He was one of the original residents of this city and during the Ebola crisis, we got close. Close in the sense that we worked together in the hospital, share a lot of meal together while doing the same dirty work. Later, I had dinner with him a couple of times. It was all very innocent and I didn't suspect there was any more to it than that. Out of the blue, he just comes out and proposes! What could I do but say no. Now I can seem to get rid of him."

"I guessed." Snake remarked.

His calm annoyed her. "Does anything ever get to you?" She asked sarcastically.

"Not yet." "You're lucky." She whispered.

"So, Jack thinks you're his squeeze." Snake declared.

"Nicely put." She took another sip of wine, as if she needed it to answer this question.

Between the two of them, they had nearly downed the entire contents of the carafe. Snake was still rather sober, if not a little more relaxed than he normally was. Compared to some of the things he'd had to drink in his life time. This was tame. However, Kate was not a heavy drinker and her speech started to slur a little and she occasionally lapsed into girlish giggles. He kept his eyes on her, enjoying the view of her thigh, since her dress was hiked up high enough to afford him an eyeful, watching the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed and the manner in which her mouth moved sensuously whenever she sipped.

"Actually," she continued. "He was a nice guy when he thought there was something between us, although

I must admit, most people think he's a bit of an asshole."

"Wonder why?" He mused sarcastically, finding such a claim an easy thing to believe. Jack seemed like one of those assholes he used to know, all talk and not much else. Jack was definitely all talk.

"People could say the same about you." Kate pointed out.

"They don't." He said casually. "At least not twice." A cold half smile escaped his lips and he saw her shudder slightly.

"Is that how you handle everything? With violence?" She asked. "Ever think about just working it out?"

"Not what I do, baby." He replied meeting her gaze. "Its a waste of time anyway. Most of them always try to fuck with me."

"I wish I had your outlook." Kate admitted. "I don't think I could just do that to people and move on. You find it so easy."

It wasn't easy, Snake didn't want to say. He didn't enjoy killing, but things had a way of happening. Especially to him, which usually required him taking drastic action to free himself. Snake Plissken wasn't a murderer, most of the time, he killed in self defence, but people only heard the body count, not the circumstances.

Sure, he had a reputation.

He denied none of it. In the early days, he killed and he'd done everything possible to thumb his nose at the establishment in vengeance for Leningrad and his parents. Snake was very aware of the course his life had taken, he had been aware of it from the very first. He apologised for none of it, nor did he waste time with regrets. Some times in the dark of his sleep, he thought about the people who had died and left him behind. Their loss deepened the conviction of his life.

Snake saw her staring at him meaningfully. His eyes travelled down her face and to her neck, moving delicately against her cleavage. She blushed, he was sure, but did nothing to stop him. Instead, she moved towards him, slowly and full of hesitation. The moment she was in arms reach, he pulled her close to him, completing the journey. Her eyes told him everything he needed to know as he pulled her down to him. Snake wanted to make love to her just once, not only for himself, but because she wanted it just as much.

Suddenly, his mouth was on hers. His hands taking her face and bringing her lips closer to his, if such a thing was possible. He could feel her hands pressing down against his chest, taking care to avoid his wounds. A soft grunt escaped her, almost animalistic in her desire, as she relished the feel of taut, firm muscle against her palms. Snake was almost undone by that sound, pulling her down on his mouth hard, until he could hear her heart pounding in tandem with his. The sound filled the world.

Her mouth opened under him like some sensuous flower, allowing his tongue to probe past her lips, touching her teeth before dancing around her tongue. His hands moved to her dress, almost tearing open the buttons that hid her breasts from him. Her bronzed body before him, bare and ready to the touch almost undid his control. His hands engulfed both round breasts, his fingers finding her nipples with hard caresses. He let his mouth slide down her neck, holding her shoulders carefully, as he drew a wet line down her cleavage with his tongue. His anticipation having risen at the feel of her erect nipples rubbing against his black t-shirt. Her skin was sweet, much sweeter than he'd imagined it to be. All of her was much better than he imagined. Her scent, her taste and her touch brought out in him a passion for her he'd never believed existed.

As his mouth took one hard rosebud nipple in his teeth, Snake heard Kate moan slowly. A sated groan that sneaked past her throat, as she pressed her breast against his. His urgency was starting to rise. God, he wanted to fuck her so much.....

"No!" She moved away from under him.

For a moment, he wasn't sure what happened. She stood upright, staring at him like a frightened teenager, her magnificent breasts glistening from his saliva still wet on her nipples. She covered herself immediately, an expression of intense shame and confusion written in her face.

"I'm sorry Snake," she whispered. "I want you so much it hurts," she looked at him almost to the point of tears. "But I can't let you make love to me because after that I won't be able to stand you being gone. I won't be able to let you go."

With that, she turned on her heels and disappeared into a bedroom, slamming the door shut behind. Snake stared after her, astonished and aching that she was gone. He was almost tempted to go after her and finish what they had started. He was so hard he could barely think. She had brought him to such a state of heightened desire that he couldn't even remember when he was aroused as much.

Yet in the silence that followed, as the soreness of pent up sexual tension started throbbing at him, the pain brought some clarity to mind. Part of him was furious that she walked out of him. He hadn't felt this ridiculous since he was a teenager and he was not about to solve his problem the way he did when he was fifteen. Why did women have to place so much importance on one physical act?

Because, a voice inside him answered it almost immediately; he might not be able to let her go either.

## CHAPTER NINE

### I

He saw very little of Kate after that incident.

Snake felt disappointment every time he thought of it, remembering what she felt like, how she had reacted to him and how she'd made him feel. The soft cries of pleasure, the fingers that started to claw at his back and the sheer desperation in her need for him. Yet despite all the emotional churning, Snake was forced to admit she had done the best thing for both of them, even it was painful. Because as much as he liked Sanctuary, he didn't know whether he would stay or not. His plans didn't involve much beyond finding a place to bunk down for a while, away from bullets flying at him and would be demi-gods trying to use his head as a rally cry for their causes. He knew what she wanted from him and nothing could shake Snake Plissken's resolve more than that desire.

She wanted him to stay for good. To give it all up for a woman and an idea. It had been too long since any of those things held any sway for him. After Leningrad and what awaited him when he returned home, the person he was once, died when he learned everything he had fought a war for, was gone. Whomever he had been, that stranger whose parents took pictures of him before the high school prom, who drove him on campus when he went to college, who stood there proudly when they pinned that fucking medal on him, that person was dead. In the ruin of that life, Snake Plissken was born. Snake Plissken who allowed nothing to touch him.

Until now.

She was touching him. She had invaded the fortress of his inner self and made him feel things again. Snake didn't know whether to be happy or to put a bullet through her for doing this to him. In three days, she had done this and he was bewildered by the power she had over him. When he almost made love to her, it had felt so right. All his life, he'd scoffed at the notion of there being someone for everyone. Yet every moment he spent with Kate shook the foundations of that belief with subtle tremors. In defiance, he refused to believe such a thing was possible.

Thus he did what he'd always did when he felt the slightest feelings that might trouble him. He found a drinking buddy and got completely wasted until he didn't give a fuck about anything any more. Certainly

no damn woman.

Snake didn't stay long after she felt. He lifted her keys and drove himself to his new home (for awhile at least). Even if it was pitch dark with no power, Snake had slept in worse and lot less comfortable than this. Even as he lay in bed, far away from Kate, he spent a better part of the night, trying to forget how she felt against him, how she had writhed at his touch and how close they had come to unfathomless pleasure.

That part was hard to get over.

Nevertheless, he stayed out of her way after than and it was a mutual course for Kate as well. Both gave each other a wide berth over the next few weeks. As she promised, there was power hooked to the house in a matter of hours. In the meantime, Snake traded the car for another motor cycle, courtesy of the local bikers, who were more than happy to provide Snake with another Chopper, replacing the one he'd lost in the Zone. After that, Snake had spent most of the time riding around the Sanctuary territories, playing tourist. There was not much to see beyond the great forests and the spectacular coast line, since the land was mostly undeveloped. Still, it was the peace and quiet he had sought for so long.

Despite his solitude, Snake often found himself with company, sometimes pleasant, other times not. Tristan Evans had dropped by on occasion, asking him gingerly for advice about Sanctuary's security concerns. His view point of security came from his experience as a policeman, but he like most Canadians had little military experience. The war with Russian had been an American effort and Snake was the only person around with any true combat experience. Evan's question were often made for supposed hypothetical situations even though Evans was slowly working towards, asking Snake what he wanted directly. In some ways, he reminded Snake of Bob Hauke, although Evans was not devious about his thoughts and his opinions. The man had come out and declared he considered Snake a criminal but was forced to admit that for everyone, there had to be a time when bygones had to bygones. The Pulse had rewritten all their histories, given them a blank page to start a new. Despite his reservations, even Snake Plissken deserved that chance.

While Snake didn't think much about being given a new page or a new start, he did respect the man's honesty and with that in mind, forged a fragile understanding of each other's boundaries.

Most of the time, he hung out with the leader of the biker group, Querto. Querto, a crazy Mexican who'd been in the war and often sounded like he'd gotten a whiff of too much biologic used by the Soviets, had sort of found himself here after the Pulse. Querto had a way with mechanical things, automobiles in particular, not to mention that he and his compadres were the kind of men who knew how to handle themselves by living on the edge. Kate had made them an offer of a place they could call home, because as she put it, Sanctuary would never be entirely safe without its predators to defend it.

"I like her style." Querto declared, just after swallowing a mouthful of the rot gut he made in his own distillery. Snake had learned that almost everyone had an alcohol still of their own somewhere.

Snake said nothing, leaving that particular subject well alone. He couldn't even remember what time it was, except that it was late and he didn't give a fuck about it anyway. They were all splayed out in what passed for Querto's office, after a long drinking session which started half an hour after he had come to the lot for some gas and didn't show any signs of ending real soon. The rest of Querto's men ran the lot for the duration and others like Red and Crow had just joined the party some short hours ago. Querto kept himself in a constant state of inebriation by brewing his own. The taste of which was barely a notch above the metho drunk by wino's, had a kick to it, once you got over the taste.

Querto lived in a decent type above ground garage pad, converted from police officer or something. The Mexican loved the irony of it. It was the central hub of what used to be Della's City's police impound lot. Here, Querto and his men got drunk, screwed women in wild orgies and threw up next morning with massive hangovers. Occasionally however, they would make recovery runs, where they drove through the area, looking for cars that were salvageable after the Pulse was done with them. These vehicles were usually brought back to the lot, where Querto would make them serviceable for the residents of Sanctuary.

Essentially all terrestrial vehicles, came under Querto's ministrations.

"Not a bad piece of ass either." This came from Querto's number two, Crow, a reedy looking man with dirty long blond hair and was in sore need of a bath, since he always managed to look like shit. "I'd do it in a minute." He remarked taking a swig from his bottle.

"No way man," declared Red, called so because that's what he like to pop whenever he could get his hands on it. Unfortunately, that meant that Red was constantly depressed or suffering from a Red induced hangover. "I'll bet she's a dyke."

"Nah!" Querto replied throwing a day old, half eaten sandwich at the gaunt looking man, with his greying hair and beard. Red was in his forties, hiding his eyes behind sunglasses all the time, no matter if it was night or day. Snake was starting to believe that exposing Red to direct sunlight would probably overload his sensory powers and blind him.

"She's no dyke," Querto spoke in defence of the lady's sexuality. "She's got class man, besides just because she don't give you none after you went up to her and asked for it in the back of a Plymouth with a joint, don't mean she's a dyke. Hell I don't even let you use my bathroom."

These provoke a series of drunken guffaws from all around the room for a few minutes. Snake even joined in on the laughter. "She's all woman." He managed to remark, once there was a break in the laughing and the room had quietened down again.

Querto looked a him suspiciously.

"You talking from experience man?"

Snake's split second hesitation in responding was all that Querto needed to jump to conclusions, even though in this instance it was one leap that proved to be correct. Before Snake could sum up and adequate response, Querto was already riding on the high with the knowledge.

"Alright Snake!" He exclaimed and the others looked at him with interest. "Did you fuck her my man?"

Snake winced at the remark, wishing he had shut up. How was it, he could remain absolutely imperceptible to most people about his inner most thoughts, except her? Christ, he was getting softer already. The way he was going, she was going to get him killed. "No I didn't, " Snake said firmly, wanting no mistake to made about this. Things were bad enough with Kate hearing through the grape vine that she had been the subject of locker room bragging.

"Bullshit." Red retorted. "You got the signs man."

"The signs?" Snake looked at him dangerously. There were signs now?

"Come on." Querto urged serious in his quest to learn more about this tasty morsel of information. "There isn't a guy in this room who hasn't thought about doing that babe at one time or another. You're Snake Plissken man, if anyone can get that woman, its you. So come on Snake, you can trust us, did you do her or what?"

Snake shifted uncomfortably in his seat, knowing all the attention was focused on him. He wondered what Kate would think if she knew she was the subject of such speculation. "We got close." He remarked finally, hoping this was not a mistake. Besides, he needed these guys to tell him he was crazy, that she was just another chick, good to fuck and not much else.

"Did you see skin?" Crow leaned forward, licking his lips in anticipation. "Fuck, I'd give anything to get my hands on that set of titties."

Querto rolled his eyes and took another swig. "Ol' Jack Travis is gonna be pissed."

"Travis," Snake snorted, "I met him."

"Yeah it was pretty much around town, that you wiped the street clean with him. You score a lot of points in town by doing that. That is not a popular guy." Red retorted derisively, "Guy's a serious asshole."

"So what happened?" Querto returned to the subject at hand, much to Snake's rising annoyance. "You and the lady together now?" He inquired further and Snake was starting to get seriously pissed of with it all. He had wanted to get paralytic with booze that he would not be reminded of her, not so that his sex life would become the topic of a forum.

"No." He retorted, giving Querto a look that said clearly, that he had said all he was going to on that matter and it would be wise to leave it alone.

If only Querto were that intelligent. Instead the Mexican looked at him and added, "You could do worse you know."

Snake didn't see how. "It's already worse."

II

The next morning, while he was sitting on the steps of his back porch, nursing the worse hangover he could remember in recent memory, Snake Plissken made a new acquaintance. The man who walked through his back yard was at least six foot five. Snake had thought Slag, the manic wrestler he had killed in New York was big. This guy towered over Slag easily and didn't wear his bulk in flab but taut, strong muscle. Snake supposed he could have objected to the giant trespassing, but Snake was not in the mood for a fight. Especially with a walking redwood who was just passing through.

When he was close enough to see the man's face, Snake saw him to be a native American. The man dressed in jeans and a red lumberjack shirt, his long black hair tied neatly in a thong. He carried no weapon to speak of, disarming Snake's suspicion a little, although in Snake's opinion, this man could easily kill with his hands.

The man regarded him for a moment as he passed by, then paused a moment. He looked at Snake a little closely and then started walking towards him. Snake said and did nothing, merely choosing to hold position to see what this guy wanted. He wished he had a gun on him, but that's something he hadn't got around to acquiring yet. Since there was little need of it in Sanctuary's. Still, Snake Plissken didn't need weapons to kill either.

"You're Snake Plissken." The man remarked, with a deep resonating voice.

"What's it to you?" Snake responded coolly.

"I thought you'd be taller."

"Compared to what?" Snake let his eyes measure man's height close up.

"You're right," he nodded. "They call me the Chief." He extended his hand forward.

Snake paused a moment, regarding the man a little closer himself. Then he met the Chief outstretched hand. "Whose they?"

"Everyone."

"Is that your name?"

"My real name is Sprinting Gazelle," he replied reluctantly and Snake decided he wasn't joking.



"I'll call you Chief."

The man threw his head back and laughed shortly, diffusing the tension immediately and Snake decided he could get to like the Chief. "You live around here?" He asked.

"Yeah," the man nodded. "Two miles that way." The Chief pointed towards the direction of the woods. "With my wife and son. What about you Snake? Are you living around here too?"

"For a while anyway." Snake answered him honestly.

"Then you won't mind if I take a short cut now and then?" The Chief looked at him.

"No I don't mind." Snake replied. "Just keep the dog off my lawn."

Snake saw a lot of the Chief after that day. He learned the Chief and his wife grew produce on their land, being a part of Sanctuary's Primary Producers. Even though he was a full blooded Cherokee Indian, the Chief had lived all his life on Vancouver Island with his family. Before he Pulse, he had been the local Forest Ranger and not much changed for him with the loss of their technology. In some ways, the Chief and his family were better equip to deal with he Pulse than anyone else.

Occasionally, Snake would meet Mira, the Chief's wife as she walked by with their son Joey. She was a stunning woman with long hair that hung at her waist with strong arms holding the supplies she was returning home with. Once, Snake had woken up to find a pie seated on his back porch with a polite thank you note for allowing them passage. The gesture was touching. However, it was mostly the Chief that dropped by with his own jug of home brew to share with Snake. This usually meant a whole day drinking fest where they would be throwing up before too long. After which the Chief would disappear into the woods again. Sometimes, they would even go fishing although Snake disliked it no less now than he did when he went with his father a lifetime ago. Yet, he accompanied the Chief, enjoying the sun on his face while he breathed in the ocean from a boat, being reminded of simpler times.

Life in Sanctuary was laid back all in all. To Snake, it was like living in a small country town, hours from the real world. It seemed so remove from all the anarchy beyond the shores of the continent and even closer in the Zone. Snake's presence here was becoming commonplace with the locals, who were used to seeing him now. He'd achieved a kind of celebrity status where people knew well enough not to intrude and speak about his exploits from a far.

He had however, run into Jack a couple of times, but the man was wise enough to leave him unprovoked. Certainly, Snake had made no mistake in his intentions, should Jack decide to cross swords with him again. Snake Plissken was not above killing him if Jack should ever desire a rematch.

Fortunately, Jack Travis was wise enough to stay well away from Snake, which was just as well.

As the days moved on, Snake became less of a notoriety among Sanctuary's residents. People began to become accustomed to his arrival in town and with the exception of a few gang kids who tried their hand at taking him on, well Snake Plissken knew how to handle them too.

Occasionally he'd get kids who gawked at him, their heads all filled with stories about that fucking New York escape and the legendary cult status that it had given him. Snake disliked it intensely, so when the kids came up and asked him about it, his answers were short and evasive. Most took it as part of his legendary demeanour. That someone like Plissken was supposed to act that way.

The truth if they had known it, or if Snake had bothered to tell them, would probably surprise them. Snake just didn't like to talk about it.

He didn't come into town all that often either way. Snake had come here to find peace and quiet, not to get sociable. Besides, other than drinking his brains out with Querto and his bunch and sometimes having

dinner with the Chief and his family, that was about as much company as he needed. Of course the one person he really wanted to see, he was smart enough to leave well alone.

Christ Plissken, you have it bad, Snake thought lying in his bed one night. His nights were filled of her, especially when he needed to feel another body next to him and became disgusted with himself when he wasn't satisfied with anyone else but Kate. He'd actually succumbed to the offers made by Sherrie, a waitress at the Slice. On occasion, Snake had gone there for a meal when he was in town getting gas or something. Sherrie was a shapely young woman with fiery red hair and deep green eyes. He'd been with enough women to know when one wanted him. Sherrie was no exception and Snake had accepted her flirtations.

He slept with her, enjoyed their love making for what it was; a one night stand and when he left the next morning, they both knew it was for the last time. Sherrie merely nodded as Snake said he'd call her, even though both of them knew he wouldn't. She had been interesting, but even at the height of the night's passion, it paled in comparison to those few minutes with Kate.

There was no way he could explain his crazy, mixed up feelings for her. No way he could understand why he cared so much about a woman he barely saw any more except in passing.

There was a word for what he was feeling.

However Snake Plissken hadn't travelled far enough to be able to acknowledge what that was yet.

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Else where Jack Travis was seething.

Every time he saw Snake Plissken riding down the road in that souped up bike of his, it was all the man could do from getting a gun and killing the bastard. Big bad Snake Plissken, who had captured Sanctuary's attention by condescending to grace them with his presence. Why was Jack the only one who could see the danger?

Didn't they remember anything? This guy was a criminal, a no good, low life thug who had been a rampaging psychopath who went on a murdering spree whenever he was let loose upon an unsuspecting public. Sure he rescued the president years ago, but only because they were going to throw in New York's Penitentiary as well. His only motivation had been for himself, no one else. Yet no one in town seemed to remember that.

All week Jack heard little else.

He heard the guys at work, at the oil refinery, talking about Plissken and what'd he done during the war. Not giving a damn when Jack walked into the room, his face all taped up from where that one eyed bastard had hit him. At the refinery, Jack and his team were responsible for the replenishment of Sanctuary's gasoline supply. That was an achievement worth talking about. It was no easy thing to create a working system where plastics could be reconverted into a crude gasoline. People should be calling him a hero, not Snake fucking Plissken.

He heard similar talk in the stores. Women gossiping about what a striking man Snake Plissken was, while teenage girls tittered in their little groups. He saw teenagers trading Snake Plissken stories they'd heard from their parents while children were role playing the son of a bitch. Everywhere Jack Travis turned, it seemed like someone else was saying what a great guy Snake Plissken was...

After awhile, he heard them stop talking in front of him at work, and the subject of Snake Plissken was not to be mentioned in front of Jack Travis. Yet, Jack was certain of the sniggers and derisive jibes behind his back. He knew what they were saying even if he never actually heard it.

Jack's pissed, cause Snake Plissken stole his woman.

Jack had seen Kate tonight. He'd walked past the Slice on his way to Ray's Bar on the other side of town. She was sitting there in the Slice with the rest of the Circle, making their great plans, ruling them like the queen of the roost. As beautiful and perfect as ever, with not a thought in her head to the pain she had caused him. As he stared at her through the glass, he just got angrier and decided to keep walking.

By midnight, most of Ray's crowds, working stiff like himself had started heading home. Jack knew he was suitably drunk and didn't look forward to walking home, which was on the other side of town. He stared into his glass of cold beer, watching the sediments rise and float amongst the white foam, (Ray's brewing process had yet to be refined) getting madder at both Kate and that son of a bitch, Plissken.

God he wanted to kill that bastard. Then he realised, he wanted to kill Kate even more.

Why shouldn't he? He thought drinking down the glasses contents in one gulp.

"Gimme another one, Ray." He said loudly at Ray over the counter. Ray looked up at him wearily, pausing for a moment from the glass he was polishing to put away. Around them, people were starting to stagger out the door in greater numbers. A waitress was sweeping up the cigarette butts and food from the floor, while another was wiping down the Formica tables and chairs.

"Its getting late Jack." Ray, a short, fat man who'd made this bar his retirement after a lifetime in the service as a cook.

"One more!" Jack growled dangerously.

Ray shook his head and turned away to fill the order. Let the bastard drink himself to death, Ray thought, then I can throw his ass out.

Jack glared at Ray as the man turned towards the beer taps. Just someone else whose taking their piece out of Jack Travis. Just like that bitch. He was good enough for her before wasn't he? Good enough to take her to dinner, give her some manly support when she was tired of being the queen. He had liked being there for her. People looked up to him, knowing he was her man. Christ knows, it was hard enough trying to get her return the favour.

Good enough to be a friend, but not enough to be a lover, he snorted. That's what she thought of him. When he thought about the times he'd tried to get her in the sack and how firmly she crossed her legs, the frigid cunt, Jack worked himself into a murderous rage. He'd even asked her to marry him and what had she said?

"I'm flattered," she began thinking that it would make him feel any better when she turned him down. " But I just don't feel that way about you."

Did she feel that way about Plissken? Jack saw how she looked at Plissken, more importantly, saw how she was dressed for the bastard. Oh, she wanted Snake Plissken to fuck her alright. Jack Travis wasn't blind, he could see what she wanted from the great war hero. He'd even fought for Plissken for her and lost. Did that even matter to her? No, she got that bitch Alice to take him to the hospital to get fixed up, while she went off with Plissken. Probably couldn't wait to get her mouth around his cock.

He downed his last beer when he made a decision.

She'll get her own. I'll take her somewhere and show her what its like to have a real man and if Plissken gets in the way?

Well, Jack Travis smiled to himself, I'll take care of him too.

## CHAPTER TEN

### I

Snake walked into the Slice that afternoon for lunch.

He had been in Sanctuary for almost three weeks now and was slowly becoming accustomed to the peaceful, winding pace of Sanctuary life. It had been such a long time since Snake had spent days lazing around with no agenda in sight, that he might even have confessed to being content.

He even had a routine which he really found amusing in a novel kind of way. The Slice, he learnt was not a bad place to eat and Snake made it a point to have lunch in the diner when he came into town for supplies or gas. Even his appearance in town was common place now while his celebrity status had dissipated to a point where he was now considered one of Sanctuary's more eclectic personalities. Most didn't stop to stare any more. It could even be said that they were as used to him as he was to them.

The Slice was busy today.

Snake was actually quite surprised that he was able to tell that it was busier than normal in the Slice at all. He immediately thought of the Inner Circle and realised the group must be taking a meeting. The diner was almost filled up to capacity as Snake walked in, which indicated it must have been an important meeting if the town had shown up for it. On his way to a booth, he grabbed a copy of the Sentinel, a community paper that was printed every few weeks. Probably when there was enough news to warrant one he supposed. Sliding into a booth at the far end of the diner, away from the occupied ones, Snake sat back scanning through the paper. The Sentinel's contents were mainly titbits and gossip about the locals. There were also snippets of the crops in harvest, apparently tomatoes and apples were in good season and someone named Fredrikson was trying to get a television station going. It was an attempt he supposed, at a return to some semblance of a normal life for everyone, to cling to the routine of that previous existence. Even if it was a newspaper that came up every so often.

Snake looked around and saw the table occupied by the Inner Circle to be vacant, seems most of the esteemed crowd had yet to arrive, although the waitress Sherrie was currently setting things up for their arrival? Would Kathryn be here? He wondered instinctively. As soon as the thought had flashed through his mind, Snake immediately swore under his breath. He felt ridiculous, not to mention like some asshole for behaving like a kid, hoping that he'd catch a glimpse of her. Disgusted, he shook the thought out of his head and tried to return his attention to the Sentinel's contents once again.

Still the unmistakable buzz of something was in the air. Something beyond just a normal town meeting. For a moment he wished he kept abreast of the local gossip just out of curiosity. He knew how to read people and there was definitely something going on. He looked around and saw people were lingering purposefully at their tables, almost in silent expectation. Snake recognised some of the faces, although he was not here long enough to be able to attach names to them.

"Hey Snake." A new voice greeted.

Snake looked up and was greeted by Sherrie who'd finished work on the Inner Circle's table. After their one night stand, Snake had forged an uneasy friendship with the gorgeous red head, finding her a better friend than she would be a lover. Her pleasant smile often mirrored her personality. Sherrie had often regarded the failure of their sexual relationship as what she termed as 'conflicting star signs'. Sherrie was into astrology and often claimed he had badly aligned planets which explained why he had such a turbulent life. Snake believed none of it of course, but she seemed to overcome his cool, abrupt personality enough to make Snake look forward to seeing her whenever he was here for lunch.

"Hi." Snake shortly. He liked Sherrie, even if she was a little too cheery for his liking. It was odd how he suddenly had all these people in his life. He never went out of his way before to get to know anyone and Sherrie seemed to be the latest in the new acquaintances he was making.

"In town for supplies huh?" She inquired, as he scanned through the chalk board on the opposite wall, displaying the daily specials, which was usually what was in harvest at the time. Today, it was potato and leek soup, a combination that was light enough for him to try. Snake mused momentarily where all the potato and leek farmers in town were. He knew the Chief's main produce was tomatoes.

"Yeah," he nodded. "I'll have the special."

"Okay," Sherrie answered scribbling it down on the pad. "Its been crazy today." She remarked. "Feels like everyone's here today. Poor Cookie is going crazy trying to fill the orders." Snake glanced at the kitchen and saw a rotund Native sweating profusely while he ran circles trying to keep up with the enormous custom.

"What's going on?" He asked gesturing to the packed room with a slight nod of his head. "Looks like the whole town is here."

"There's some kind of emergency meeting." Sherrie replied and it was the first time Snake noticed that there was some apprehension in her face. Emergency meetings must be rare and probably took place when there was some crisis at hand. Snake wondered what kind of situation had arisen now.

Suddenly, Sherrie's name was called out from someone in the diner and the young woman stuck her order pad into her uniform before hurrying off. "Talk to you later Snake." She sang out as she said before disappearing into the busy luncheon crowd.

Snake didn't react to her departure but chose to occupy his time reading the Sentinel. Although he did have a passing curiosity as to what the emergency meeting was about. Was the Englishman finally starting to make good the threat he made to Snake weeks ago? Was this his plan to invade Sanctuary territories? He was still reading the paper, letting his attention waver his immediate environment and didn't notice a familiar figure approach his table.

"Hello Snake."

Snake looked up and found himself looking up at Kathryn.

For a moment, he wasn't sure whether he was happy to see her or not, even though a while ago, he'd been looking around like a teenager trying to catch her out in the crowd. Now that he heard the sound of her voice and had her standing before him in the flesh again, he looked upon her sudden return into his life with a certain amount of suspicion. She looked radiant as ever thought, still wearing that same cotton dress that clung to her body, reminding him why he was so attracted to her.

Snake said nothing at first, keeping his gaze on Kathryn as he folded up the paper and dropped it on the table again. While he did enjoy seeing her, he was unable to forget what happened between them that night or how she had avoided him after. They needed to talk about it, especially since she had ran off like a terrified teenager. She sat down meekly, as if she had something on her mind and was summing up the courage to say it. Even after she had seated herself, she shifted nervously unable to get comfortable under the light of his scrutinising glare. The awkwardness between them was as thick as tension and for a while they just looked at each other not knowing what to say.

Snake wondered why she here if it was so damn uncomfortable for her to be in the same room with him.

Was she finally ready to talk about that night? It was undeniable that something was happening between them and that night it had reached an apogee, even Snake wasn't blind to that. The question he supposed, was what they would do with this crazy relationship. Relationship, he snorted. They didn't have a relationship of any kind because she had run out on him.

"I haven't seen you around." She spoke finally deciding there was no point wasting time or trying to stall what was on her mind.

"I've been around." He said shortly, his eyes staring at her like sharp instruments. Despite his attempt to sound indifferent to it all, Snake felt more emotion than he would liked to have admitted.

"So Tristan tells me." Kathryn answered, wondering if this had been such a good idea in the first place. She had something to tell him and had been trying to work up the courage to do so for weeks now. When she'd walked in a moment ago and seen him, she'd decided not to put it off any longer. Maybe she was insane, exposing herself to hurt. However at least then there would be some finality to it all, instead of this blanket uncertainty that kept her awake at night. Yet, doing it was no simple matter, now that she was in front of him.

"I'm sorry about the other night," she replied, finally raising her eyes to meet his. Snake's expression did not change, except now he seemed to look even more imperceptible than ever. "I didn't mean to run off like that, but you got to admit things were going to fast for comfort."

"I like fast." Snake answered.

Kathryn took a deep breath, he was making this any easier. Did he feel anything for her or was she wrong? Was it all her imagination? That night it had been so hard to break away because Kathryn sensed Snake's feelings for her was more than just sexual. That he had felt something deeper for her.

"I wasn't ready to cross that line." She declared, even though she didn't sound very convincing. "It was a mistake."

"Didn't feel that way to me." He retorted, lighting himself a cigarette in complete indifference. "Matter of fact, it felt to me like you were enjoying crossing that line." Snake leaned a little closer to her, "I heard you baby, I heard how much you wanted it. If you had stayed, we would have gone for a hell of a ride and all this other shit you think is so important wouldn't mean a whole lot."

His simplistic attitude angered her. Why was he being so difficult? Didn't he know how hard this was for her? "You just know everything don't you?" She snapped. "Nothing is that simple Plissken, nothing."

"I know enough," he looked at her hard. "I know enough to work out a few things. I catch on fast. That night, you wanted it as much as I did. You were almost begging me for it. You've been wanting it since I got here and I was happy to oblige. Half way through you got scared and ran like a rabbit."

Her expression hardened at the insult. Why did she bother? All he cared about was fucking her, not the implications of what happened after. He only cared about the sex. Sometimes, he could be so typically male. "Yeah Snake," she glared at him. "I wanted it but I also wanted a few other things. Things I can't get with Snake Plissken, the great war hero okay? You may be great in bed, but I want more than just letting you fuck me and before disappearing in the sunset. I am not some thing you can use for the duration of your stay like some hotel gift. I don't care who you think you are."

"Bullshit." He said firmly. "You know that would never have happened. If you had then we wouldn't even be having this conversation. That night baby, you didn't want the war hero or the legend or whatever you want to fucking call me. You didn't even want Jack Travis. You wanted me and I could have given you what you needed. After that," he added with a trace of something that could have been hurt, "I might have surprised you."

Kathryn closed her eyes, "we're not right." She whispered. "We're all wrong, don't you see?"

"Maybe," he said ruefully. "But we'll never know now will we?"

Yes, she had been a fool, not because she had ran, but because she hadn't given him the benefit of the doubt. Snake Plissken was all about taking chances and she had to take a chance with him, that's the only way anything was going to work. Since that night, there wasn't a moment when she hadn't lay in bed envisioning every second of those heated moments. The potency of his touch was almost masterful and

she wanted to become lost in his presence. However, any man who could do that to her in such a short time, scared the hell out of Kathryn and that was the honest truth. What would happen if he were to leave? She hadn't imagined him to be anything like what he was. In the past, he'd been one of those icons of pop culture, comfortable and distant. All those years, seeing him in magazines, TV, wanted posters and god knows what else, was lousy preparation for this moment. Yet, when she tasted him in her mouth, when she felt his hand touch her body and swallow her soul comfortably into his, it had never felt more right.

"I did want you." She said looking him straight in the eye. "I wanted you. The guy who fought Jack Travis for me, who looked down my dress whenever I was driving, who knew bullshit for what it was. I didn't care about the legend the Snake Plissken who saved a President, who once robbed a bank or even the guy who set off the Pulse."

Snake looked at her sharply.

Everything she said after that was a blur, unheard and indistinguishable. For a moment Snake thought he was mistaken, that he hadn't heard her say what he thought she did. However, he was rarely that fortunate.

She knew about the Pulse.

Kathryn stopped talking when she saw the sudden shift in his eyes. For a moment she wondered what she had said that had changed the mood in his face so radically. However it hit her soon enough and when it did, she cursed herself for doing so. Until now, it had been her own little secret she had told no one, and never meant to. Now it was too late though, he

knew and the look in his eyes, told her how devastating her discovery was to him.

For a moment, he said nothing. Unable to do much other than take it in. After he had gathered his composure, even though to Kathryn he wore an expression of stone behind the glare of his dark eyes. "Let's take it outside." He said icily, standing up first and walking out of the booth without even looking at her.

In that instance, everything he had wanted for himself in Sanctuary had started to disappear, the life he might have had. The peace and quiet, the friends he had made and even the future he considered building was leaving him far behind as it dissolved into nothingness. Snake hadn't wanted anyone here to know about his part in the Pulse. Especially Kathryn. Her knowledge was one he could not bear. It reached inside of him and made it impossible to stomach.

He led her to a quiet corner outside the Slice, well away from everyone's prying eyes and listening ears. Once they were alone, he turned to her again. He could see the fear in her eyes, the fact that she had revealed what she had known. With a flash of insight, Snake suddenly realised that she had known for a long time. Probably from the beginning. She knew all along and hadn't told anyone. Why?

"How long have you known?" He asked her.

Kathryn took a deep breath and decided to face up to the mess she had created out of this whole situation. "Since the first time you arrived." She said defeated. "I saw you on television when you came back from LA, I saw what that lunatic was about to do, how he was going to declare war in the name of his insane moral vision. I knew what you did was the only thing left to do Snake." She pleaded with him to believe that. "I don't blame you, I almost understand why you did it."

He could barely look at her and his words seemed to slide off his back like water. For two years he had been running with this on his conscience and to a certain extent he regretted nothing, but he couldn't explain why her knowing was like an open wound. It forced Snake Plissken to look into himself like he had never done before. For the first time in too long, he started speaking of things from the heart,

revealing a part of himself, no one had privy.

"I didn't have a choice you know."

Suddenly Kathryn came forward, sliding her arms around his body and holding him close to her chest, letting her head rest against his shoulder. The intimacy of it didn't escape him and he found it strangely fulfilling to let her hold him like that. For a while, everything seemed far away.

"People don't remember things any more Snake." Kathryn whispered in a voice that made him understand why people looked up to her, why Querto and others like him respected her. Why they would die for her. At that moment, Snake almost felt that way himself.

"People look at what it was like before the Pulse and they can only see the good times. They miss the movies, television, fast food and hotted up cars. Most don't even remember what it was like at the end. The edge of war we were about to fall into. I don't know whether we would have been better or not for the Pulse, I'll never know, but I don't blame you Snake. If it matters any."

It did matter quite a lot.

He turned around slowly and felt her arms slid around his back, savouring the closeness they were now sharing. For Snake Plissken, it was time to tell someone, just once, of another thought that crossed his mind that night. One that he never thought he'd reveal to anyone because of its sheer magnitude. "If I had let him use the Pulse that night, he would have probably kept on using it you know, not just to keep the invasion from happening, but to invade himself. There would be no way the Soviets let it go that easily. Think about it, would you let a man like that with the power he had in his hands, blackmail the world into line? They would have nuked us and we would have nuked them and everyone would have been fucked."

Kathryn nodded, taking in what he said. In truth it mattered little. The Pulse was a deed done, one that was irrefutable and unchangeable. What was the point of arguing into exhaustion something that could not be changed. She knew inside of him there was a man who had courage and conviction, buried under years of loss and almost homicidal rage. "You've spent years moving around trying to find a place for yourself in this world you created for us. Can't you see? You make sense here."

Snake stepped away from her at that. There was still resistance left to fight that notion. Was this all she cared about? Sanctuary? Did his staying here just have to do with her cause. "I don't make sense anywhere and I don't give a shit about this place."

It was a lie and they both knew it.

"We need you!" She declared in exasperation. Why was it so hard to admit that he wanted to stay? As much as Sanctuary needed Snake Plissken, Snake needed it even more. What was it about him that made it so damn hard to admit? "We need you because you're Snake Plissken! This is the world you created Snake!" She looked at him hard, trying to make him understand, trying to keep from passing over a threshold that could never be undone once the crossing was made. "You created it when you set the Pulse off! Did you think your responsibility ended with just that? It doesn't end with you walking away. Not one of us can do what needs to be done here Snake, just you. We need you to protect us!"

"We need?" He stared her down critically. "This isn't all about Sanctuary. He started to walk back towards her. "Come on baby, I'm no asshole. You want me to stay but it ain't just because of this little paradise you got going here. Don't tell me what my responsibilities are, cause I know better than you think. If you got your own reasons for me staying, say so instead of jerking me around with this patriotic crap."

She swallowed hard, knowing at last that it had come down to this. To what she wanted, not for Sanctuary or what was the practical thing to do, but for herself. Deep down in the recesses of that place she barely looked and often thought dead. That same place which for a moment came alive that night when he had almost taken her body and soul. "Alright," she nodded defiantly. "I need you okay? You're right, I don't



want the hero and I don't want Jack Travis. I want you. I wanted you and I need you to stay."

Snake merely responded "why?"

Kathryn closed her eyes. Did he understand nothing? Everything in his life, someone had always offered it to him in return for something else. Why should she be any different from those who had come before her? "Why?" She almost laughed softly, but it was no laughing matter. "I don't want a thing from you." She said angrily. "because I'm pretty sure I'm in love with you."

There, she had said it.

She said it because he gave her no choice but to say it. Kathryn found herself painted into an invisible corner, never feeling more exposed in her entire life. She never wanted him to know that, because she swore she'd never make him stay unwillingly. Yet, looking into his eyes now filled with the knowledge that she'd exposed his secret, Kathryn was almost certain that he would run again if she didn't give him something to stay for. Whether that something was her, she had no idea.

Snake merely stared at her for a while, unable to believe that she had actually said it to his face. Oh yeah, he had some idea of her feelings for him. He played a hunch that she cared more than she admitted. To some degree Snake had felt enough of that same emotion himself for both of them. Yet hearing it out loud astonished him because he looked into her eyes and knew that she was telling the truth. He had never had a woman make such a declaration to him, not one like Kathryn, whose world was so far removed from his. Kathryn was a lady and yet she wasn't a Park Avenue bitch with fancy clothes and a snooty attitude. She knew what he was and that didn't matter to her. It didn't matter what he had been before, to her Snake Plissken was just the guy she was in love with, nothing more.

Once it sunk in, a part of him felt elated while another part was stunned. Once upon a time, he had wondered what it would be like to have a woman love him as much as Maggie loved Brain, in those few moments after he had died. Now, he saw that same look in Kathryn's eyes and knew in no uncertain terms, that feeling was for him. Knowing that suddenly made Snake's black and white existence cloudy and left him unsure. Now that he knew for sure she loved him, what now?

They were both aware that they had crossed some unseen barrier, seldom noticed until it was left far behind. Snake looked at her, realising with each second just how true her words had been. She loved him and no matter what happened after today, that would not change. He was perceptive enough to see that his future was not going to be what he had imagine previously. His life was never going to be simple again.

Shit, things were going to get very complicated.

Anything he was going to say was suddenly cut short by a sudden, loud screech in front of them. A rider on a motor cycle had skidded against the hard tar, screeching across the granite surface before crashing into a stack of dustbins. Kathryn hurried past him to investigate and after a few seconds he followed her. As they approached, Snake saw clearly visible bullet holes all over the motor cycle, as well as the tarnish metal under the shredded paint.

Snake also recognised the rider was Taylor.

II

The day had started out rather well for Taylor actually.

It was daylight when he finished co-ordinating a large convoy of trucks that were due to leave the Zone that very night for Sanctuary. He had intended to join them and help them across the border. The underground network which carried out most of these operations were professionals who knew how to keep a low profile and Taylor had stayed well away from the Englishman to keep any suspicion of him.

The moment he stepped out onto the streets, they had him surrounded. Miranda, the Englishman's main squeeze had come for him with her men, personally which indicated to Taylor the kind of trouble he was in. In the Englishman's court, Taylor was like a court buffoon, a passer-by who listened closely but said little and always tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Thus when she sought him out in particular, Taylor had a feeling he was in deep shit and sinking fast.

He had attempted to feign ignorance when they claimed he was a spy working for the other side, however, it was very clear very quickly, that they knew exactly what it was he was doing in the Zone. The questions they asked were specific and they were willing to use any means necessary to get the information they required. Taylor could smell the smoke rising out of the fires they had set to the tenements occupied by the Underground. He only hoped the network managed to escape before it was too late.

His greatest fear however, was that they would learn about the escaping convoy scheduled that night. There were almost a hundred families on those trucks, occupied with children and guarded by parents who would fight to the death, every last one of them before falling into the Englishman's clutches.

Taylor didn't want to let that happen despite Miranda's interrogation. Miranda however, was no fool. She knew they couldn't kill Taylor yet because the Englishman would have their heads even hers, if she let a spy die without telling any of his secrets. Instead she had set her men to work on Taylor, with their knives and their fists.

The beatings followed shortly after his capture.

Taylor took the worse of it in silence, trying to blank out the pain that was screaming out in protest from every part of his body. He could feel blood everywhere, in the eye he could not longer see past the pulpy flesh, the arm he knew was broken and deeper cuts all over his face. He had wondered momentarily where his glasses were before he remembered Miranda had crushed them underfoot with one leather boot. The sadomasochistic bitch that she was. It was a good pair of glasses too.

By the early morning, Taylor knew they were becoming impatient with their lack of progress and they would soon kill him. He knew he didn't want to die even though he had come to expect that this was a possibility in his chosen vocation for Sanctuary. Finally, in a desperate plan borne out of agony and the reality that he would soon break, Taylor told them he would

show them the Underground hideout.

Miranda didn't argue with his claim and foolishly led him outside with her men. Taylor didn't know how he escaped but he did. Perhaps it seemed to them that he was half dead and wouldn't put up a fight which allowed them to slacken their attention. Whatever the reason, Taylor didn't complain. He broke free and found a motorcycle. In his escape he heard gun fire and he thought he might have been shot, but the haze of the journey back had forced him to focus on his pain instead of the cause.

"I thought you could take care of yourself?" Snake retorted when he went to Taylor and found him thankfully still alive.

"So did I." Taylor mumbled as he made out Kathryn leaning next to him and soon felt her hands on his bruised and bloody skin.

Kathryn's examination was quick and after a moment, she looked up at Snake. "He's been beaten within an inch of his life." She said barely able to conceal her rage. "I feel broken ribs, an arm I think and possibly some fracturing of the skull. We've got to get him to the hospital."

"We need a car." Snake pointed out.

"I got one." Kathryn replied tossing the keys from her pocket at him.

Evans had emerged from the diner with some other people. They approached the scene with questions and the usual commotion. Kathryn and Snake tried to ignore the bulk of their questions, except for Evans who was the only one who asked answerable questions. Still they were unable to answer him because they knew as much as he did at the moment.

"Come on," Snake helped Taylor to his feet. "Can you walk?" Kathryn helped him on the other side while she examined Taylor's broken fingers.

"I don't know." Taylor said with a half smile on his blood streaked face. "Didn't we do this already?"

"No," Snake retorted. "This is the second act." He looked in the direction of Kathryn's car, which was another convertible and was grateful this time. It would be easier to put Taylor into the back seat.

"What happened to you?" Evans demanded. "I thought your cover was safe."

"I thought so too," Taylor spoke, forcing himself to stay conscious because he had important information to impart. Lives depended on it, "But they knew who I was, they knew my name. They knew I had a brother who died and that he was a friend of Snake Plissken's. They also knew I saved Snake." Taylor glanced briefly at Snake. "They knew all the right questions to ask me."

Suddenly Snake saw Kathryn and Evans exchanging glances which spoke volumes to him. Somehow, this was not a surprise to them. Which brought Snake to the question, what was today's emergency meeting about anyway? "That's enough," Kathryn said to Evans. "He's slipping into shock and we can't waste anymore time. He needs a hospital now."

"Wait!" Taylor shouted with all the strength he could muster, "there's a convoy coming in tonight, across the border. If they've made me, they might have made the Underground too. If they're discovered it will be a running fire fight all across the border. If we're not there at the border, you know the Englishman will violate the border to get those people back. We've got to be there waiting. They were supposed to leave tonight."

"You got enough from him!" Snake said abruptly.

"Evans," Kathryn looked at the former Mountie, "you get our people sorted out for tonight. Snake and I are taking Taylor to the hospital. I'll co-ordinate things up there and contact you shortly. Evan's nodded and hurried back into the diner.

"Let's go." She looked at Snake and for a moment, their eyes met as something undisclosed past between them. They had been discussing things of great importance before all this had happened and looked like those matters would have to wait for now. Snake met her gaze, knowing they had much to resolve between them.

This was not over yet baby, Snake thought, not by a long shot.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### I

Snake lingered around the hospital even though Kate disappeared with Taylor once they passed through the front doors. Even though Taylor was unconscious most of the trip there, neither Kate nor Snake picked up their interrupted conversation subsequent to his arrival. Instead, they drove there in silence and only spoke of things that were incidental, knowing it was all an attempt to talk about what mattered.

Snake didn't know what to do. He thought sitting around the hospital waiting room while Taylor was being tended to would help him figure something out, it didn't. The more he thought about it, the more complicated it got. What did he need Kate Ellison for? Sure, okay, she was a lady, drop dead gorgeous and probably incredible in bed, but she didn't fit into his life. Snake Plissken was not the kind of man to be tied

down, he didn't put down roots and he didn't think she was the kind to leave all this behind just for him. Even if she did think she was in love with him.

Now here's the sixty four million dollar question Snake, he told himself, already gone through a pack of cigarettes, how do you feel about her?

It was something he wasn't ready to answer, because once he did, then he would have no illusions about just how soft he had become. Sanctuary was like that, it made people weak because everybody was so civilised. The thing was, the world was not like that any more. In fact, it hadn't been like this in quite some time. Snake Plissken was borne out of an era where death and murder were common place. He had fought wars, then governments and finally society itself because he was the creation of their corruption.

The America he had come from was an America where Superman and what he stood for was a myth. Truth, justice and the American way were words that disappeared the further the nation slipped into its urban decay. Ideals were tarnished, cops didn't protect neighbourhoods any more, they became soldiers to keep what was left from slipping further into the slime. There were no decent neighbourhoods, just pockets of civilisation struggling against the dregs. Even America's heroes were not what they used to be. Its soldiers were tired and its medal meant less. Snake Plissken looked in the mirror at times and wondered why anyone had ever considered him a war hero. With his bad eye and disillusionment, he was what remained after the golden age heroes had died.

He was the exhausted veteran, battered and uncompromising.

To become a part of Sanctuary would mean more than just being tied down, it would require feeling hope again and that was something Snake Plissken had little faith in. Hope was obsolete, just as religion and all those other feelings that made people believe everyone was good, deep down. Snake had little use for those feelings. Most people were assholes, those who thought themselves civilised, just hid it better. To survive in the jungle with the rest of the animals, Snake had to become one, tougher and angrier than the rest. That was his edge.

But she loves you.

Knowing that, somehow made it impossible to walk away. And it was going to get him killed.

He looked up from the waiting room to see the hospital alive with activity. The long corridor in front of him was filled with nurses running back and forth, packing medical equipment into boxes. Surgical instruments were being packed away neatly with medicines and all the necessary implements, Snake was certain, would be used for emergency medical treatment. With a flash of insight, he remembered when he had seen such preparation last.

He was in a hospital, somewhere on the edge of the European border. There had been heavy fighting, the Soviets were advancing fast. Ten miles away, troops were fighting for his life. He was being patched up for a shoulder wound, nothing serious but enough to warrant the attention. Ambulances were few so the doctors chose to go to the front to treat the troops. There was the same kinetic atmosphere, with people moving back and forth, faces filled with grim determination of the work to be done.

He looked at them moving back and forth across the floor and knew that it was the same feeling here as well. He saw the Vietnamese doctor, Vihn ordering the nurses about supervising the movement of equipment required for the enterprise, while orderlies were packing stretchers and mobile surgery equipment. Snake walked through the hurrying staff as they worked quickly and went towards Vihn. Doctor Vihn was an elderly man in his fifties. He was a small Asian with white hair and hid his eyes behind steel rimmed glasses.

"Mr Plissken, we are very busy here. Perhaps you should join Mr Evans group." He replied, before turning to Judy, the Inuit nurse and barked some instructions at her.

"What's going on?" Snake inquired.

"According to Kate, there is a large convoy coming possibly under fire. Taylor told her there were many children in those trucks. We are despatching our mobile medical unit to the border, in case the casualties are many."

"You have a mobile medical unit?" Snake looked around at the doctors and nurses running about to their orders and common cause and couldn't help feel a little impressed.

"We formed one when the Englishman first tried to attack us. I suggested the idea to Kate and she agreed that it was best since we were fighting a guerrilla war and we expected our casualties to be heavy." Vinh replied. "Now if you will excuse me Mr Plissken, I have work to do." With that, he hurried away down another corridor as Snake saw portable stretchers whizz past him, being carried by orderlies.

They seemed to know what they were doing and Snake didn't think he could help them very much by his presence. Even though he wanted to stay and see how Taylor was doing, Vinh was probably right, he would do better tracking down Evans if he wanted to help out. Besides, it was the most action Snake had seen since he arrived here and he sort of missed it a little. Either way, it was a good way to find out how all this soft living had affected him.

"Snake!" He suddenly heard Kate call.

She had just emerged from a treatment room at the far end of the corridor and Snake walked quickly to meet her. "How's he doing?" Snake asked, when he reached her.

"He's okay." She nodded, gesturing at the tiny window on the door. Through it Snake could see Taylor resting comfortably, his wounds cleaned and a young brunette sitting at his bedside, in silent deliberation.

"Who's the girl?" He inquired.

"That's Rachel."

Snake remembered Taylor telling him about the young woman when Snake had been in the same shape weeks ago. Rachel was one of the news people who worked on the Sentinel. She had heard about his condition through the diner and come here at first opportunity.

"He's pretty banged up, but he'll be okay. Just needs a lot of rest."

"Good," Snake nodded, noticing she had trouble meeting his eyes. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to go to meet the convoy with Vinh and our medical unit." She answered as she started walking down the corridor towards the elevator. "If Taylor is right and the Zone knows those people are leaving, chances are a lot of them are going to be hurt before they make it to the border."

"Assuming they get to leave at all." Snake pointed out as they reached the lift and entered its doors.

Kate nodded slowly, not liking to entertain that possibility but also having to admit that such an outcome might be true. "I suppose." She answered. "But we got to try I guess."

Suddenly, he reached for the stop button on the lift and pressed it. The lift came to a halt with a sudden jolt. Kate looked at him in question and notice Snake took a step closer towards her. "We have unfinished business." He remarked.

"No we don't." She said firmly, looking at him directly. He was inches away from her now and she was unable to deny his closeness affected her. "I said everything I had to," she answered, her voice softer. "Now its your turn."

He didn't speak, choosing only to lean closer to her until his mouth was pressed firmly against hers. He heard her whimper slightly, as his tongue snaked past her teeth, touching hers. He was impossible to resist and Kate found herself pushed against the cold steel wall, but caring nothing of it except his demanding mouth, kissing her hard while his hand slid under her dress feeling the soft flesh of her thigh.

"Snake," she managed to whisper, dizzy by his touch as her awareness heightened to almost feverish state. "We don't have time for this."

"You want me to stop," he said huskily.

Closing her eyes, forcing herself to speak, she pushed him gently away. "Yes, I do."

Disappointed, he drew away but this time he didn't seem to mind as much. This time he knew she had other concerns on her mind, none of which had nothing to do with the shit she thought so important. Touching her this time, Snake knew if the circumstances were different, he would be well on his way to making love to her now. She had shed some inhibitions about their relationship at least. He ran his fingers through his dark hair as he pressed the button and the lift started moving again. "Next time, I won't be so accommodating."

She almost smiled, but held it. "Neither will I."

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Snake left Kate shortly after. She had things to do and he would be of more use to Evans and his group then he would be with her. Besides, he didn't relish being stuck with a bunch of doctors for the bulk of the day, even if Kate was one of those. He took the car back to the diner and left it there with the keys in the ignition.

There were almost thirty men in the town square, Snake recognised Querto and Red in the mix, as well as Washington, Erikson and even the big Chief. Evans seemed to be supervising things and most of the men were centred around a truck in the middle of the road. As Snake took his cycle towards the crowd, his arrival was noticed by Evans who had wondered what Snake Plissken would

do in this instance.

"We're meant to hold position until the convoy arrives." Evans said standing on top of the truck addressing the men. "Taylor's information indicates the convoy will be coming through Beggar's Canyon, taking the old camping trail. We will not fire on any Zoners until they open fire first. If there is a treaty to be violated, it will not be done by us."

Suddenly Snake Plissken made his appearance. Swaggering through the crowd with almost invincible arrogance, Evans couldn't help but smile faintly as he saw the man approach. No speech he could have made or any pep talk he might have devised could be more effective than Snake's sudden arrival. Snake walked up to where Evans was on the truck, aware that all eyes were on him.

He looked at Evans with that same noncommittal look he always gave everyone, before reaching into the back pockets of his fatigue pants and produced himself a cigarette. Evans waited patiently, wondering if the notorious war hero had any idea what kind of a morale booster he was. Snake Plissken was a hero to many of the men here and that was something Sanctuary seriously lacked. Like Kate, he had wanted Plissken to stay, even though he suspected that Kate's reasons might have been a little more of a personal nature. Still, that wasn't bad either. There was no better reason for a man to put down roots than the love of a woman like her. No one spoke as he came forward, all wondering what Snake would do.

"Where do I sign up for this little action?" Snake asked casually.

"Help yourself to a gun." Evans gestured to the tray of the truck where he was standing. Around him were

an assortment of weapons, brought out of the armoury from the Police Building in town. Snake smiled faintly as he reached in and helped himself to a set of handguns and the appropriate ammunition. Sliding them into the holster around his waist, Snake then grabbed himself a pretty nasty automatic, rapid fire machine gun.

"Incidentally," he said looking up at Evans while loading a magazine into the gun. "If you're going to wait for them in the Canyon, then I'd suggest you get some snipers on that ridge. I understand its ambush terrain."

"Thanks." Evans replied, pleased that Snake was making the effort and also because the advice was sound. "Any ideas?"

"Hey Querto," Snake said without looking at the crowd. "Can you still nail a Ruskie at 1000 metres in lousy weather?"

"I don't know Snake," Querto remarked. "Its been a while, but I can give it a good try."

"Anyone else who can do that kind of shooting, now would be the time." Evans spoke up, now that he knew where Snake was going with this. A few voices spoke up and very soon a dozen men had formed a sniper team who would wait at the ridge that sat on the border, waiting for the convoy. Evans climbed down the truck after he had ordered the men to get their weapons.

"Thanks for the help." Evans said as he found Snake moving towards his bike. "You're better than a recruitment poster you know."

Snake felt uncomfortable at that. He didn't mean to be looked upon as some kind of hero, but something Kate had said earlier had gotten to him. He did have some measure of responsibility to these people and even if he wasn't about to plunge wholly into some kind of commitment, he could at least help them out a little. Besides, he was starting to get a little bored and a little target practice keeping the skills intact was never a bad idea.

"I'm just keeping busy." Snake retorted.

"Sure." Evans replied, wearing an expression of smug superiority that drove Snake crazy. For a minute, Snake almost regretted being so magnanimous.

"Alright Plissken!" He heard Crow shout somewhere in the background, "I want to see your ass in action!"

"I hope he means in combat." Evans replied before turning towards his jeep.

## II

Beggar's Canyon was a hundred and fifty miles from Sanctuary. It was a terrain between was surrounded by thick redwoods and craggy hills the closer they reached the border separating Sanctuary from the Zone. Snake made the trip on his motor cycle even though he could have ridden on the one of the trucks and pick ups that were heading towards the rendezvous point. Ahead of him, he could see the medical trucks ahead and wondered which one Kate was riding. He hadn't seen her seen their exchange at the hospital but he looked forward to continuing their conversation after all this was over.

At least she wasn't still in that denial thing.

He didn't have much experience with women, well not in the relationship sense anyway but he knew no denial was a good thing. In the past his sole experiences with women hadn't extended much beyond a night's encounter or past the kind that expected to be paid the next morning. Kate was the first woman he ever thought of staying with for any longer than that.

Shaking thoughts of her out of his head, Snake focused on the mission ahead. In some ways, he had join

Evans because he wanted to get back into action again, but also because he wanted to give the Englishman some payback for the bullets he had taken from the bastard. Snake hadn't forgotten the incident that brought him to Sanctuary almost dead. Neither could he forget the Englishman's threat. Snake knew men like the Zone's leaders and despite the lack of action so far, Snake was certain that the Englishman's threat was no idle one. Whether they wanted to admit it or not, Sanctuary's tenuous existence with the Zone could not go on indefinitely. The Englishman was not satisfied with allowing Sanctuary to exist and eventually he would come for them. If he hadn't done already. Further more, Snake was dubious whether or not Sanctuary could successfully defend itself.

The problem with Sanctuary and its residents Snake decided and this included Kate, was they were too civilised. Unlike the people in the Zone. The Englishman kept his army strong by keeping them mean and hungry. Snake knew how hard it was to fight crazies like that, because he lived in that world. The people in Sanctuary had been comfortable for so long that they had forgotten what it was like to get down in the dirt and fight dirty. In that instance, he could understand why Kate wanted him to stay. She was aware of Sanctuary's deficiencies and knew that someone with Snake Plissken's edge could be invaluable to them.

Snake wasn't sure if he was ready to make that kind of commitment. The last time he had trained anyone or been apart of anything was during his time in the Service. At the memory, he remembered briefly, the men under his command in Leningrad and then that memory slipped into the unpleasantness of realising that all those men were dead. He and Taylor were the only ones who walked out of that mission alive and put Snake Plissken on the road to where he was now.

Anyway, according to Taylor, the convoy should be arriving at sometime during midnight. However, it was daylight out when they had left town but Snake could see the sun starting to set in the horizon. The temperatures were starting to plunge again as it usually did at this time of the day. As Snake drove through the cooling winds, he was glad he wore his long leather coat. He looked into the hills and saw the jagged terrain covered in tangerine coloured trees, which was a stark contrast against the amber sky. It would be dark soon.

A pick up honked loudly as it overtook him on the road and Snake saw the driver to be Querto and his group. Red stuck his head out of the window as they moved past the Chopper.

"Hey Snake!" Red cried out.

Snake shifted his eyes momentarily towards the man, which was adequate enough for an acknowledgment. Crazy drunken bastard, Snake thought to himself as the vehicle moved in front of him. Red was still half way out of the passenger window.

"Let's kick some Limey ass!" Red laughed taking a swig from a bottle being passed around the front cabin.

Snake jammed the accelerator and the motor cycle sped up, catching the pick up easily as Snake pulled the chopper alongside it.

"Want a drink man!" Red shouted, brandishing the bottle close up. Snake ignored the offer, reaching for one of the guns in his holster. He looked in the cabin and saw Querto getting pretty tanked up. Much to tanked up for a guy whose job when they got to the rendezvous, was a sniper. The radio was blaring out loud, playing ancient Rolling Stones. Snake unhooked the flap of the holster, his eyes still fixed on the road before pulling out the gun and needed a quick glance to get a decent aim.

"What you doing Snake?" Red cried out, his voice slurred and barely coherent.

Snake didn't speak, his response being one shot from the 45 calibre weapon he was holding. The bottle shattered in Red's hand, raining rotgut and glass over the tar road. Red fell back. Red fell back on to the seat and Snake allowed himself a faint smile as he accelerated forward and got in front of the pick up. Even over the roar of his engines, he could hear Querto's hysterical laugh as he drove by.



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Beggar's Canyon was a stark contrast to the greenery barely a mile away. The path that twisted through the hard rocky terrain was barely visible to even Snake Plissken's trained eye and the rendezvous point was on a plateau at the top of the ridge. From that point, they were afforded a bird's eye view of the canyon and would have a vantage point over anyone who tried to come through.

It was dark by the time they reached the canyon, with sun disappearing fast into the tree line in the distance. By now the temperatures had dropped well below what was comfortable. Snake remembered weather like this in Leningrad, fortunately this was not that bitter. It was quiet out there, with little sound except for the animals who were scurrying into their hiding places at sudden human invasion.

Snake walked towards Evans who was coordinating the snipers. Snake wondered how Red was doing. Querto was all business now, showing no visible signs of his past intoxication.

"So what's the op?" He heard someone say in the darkness and Snake saw it was Crow.

"We were waiting for you actually." Evans replied and Snake saw that Evans was actually serious about letting him run this whole thing. For a moment Snake was going to say fuck you and leave, but then he glanced sideways and saw the medical unit being set up in a safe distance from where the shooting would be. Even in this light, he could see Kate.

Shit. It was starting already. She was going to get him killed, he just fucking knew it.

Snake looked down at the ground, knowing the men before him were waiting for his response. He looked up at them. By now, all of the group was standing before him in anticipation of his leadership. Even Evans was looking to him in the same way, with a hint of expectation at what he would do. Evans believed he was a criminal, a psychopathic murderer who'd escaped justice because of the Pulse.

This was the moment, Plissken. Snake thought silently to himself. Time to make or break, time to make some hard decisions....

"Alright," Snake Plissken looked up finally, "This is what we're gonna do.."

Fuck, she was really going to get him killed.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I

Time.

There seemed a lot of it in the darkness. The moon above them illuminated the canyon below, while they held their breath in silent anticipation. The temperature had dropped to a few degrees above freezing and most had to fight the desire to move in order to warm up. With the benefit of the moonlight, it was easy to see everything below them with some measure of clarity. This was an advantage and a disadvantage in some sense. They were as visible as their quarry.

It had been a long time since Snake Plissken had to plan an ambush like this. Not since Leningrad and the people under his command in those days were trained professionals, not like this motley collection. Very few of them had any established weapons training. The majority were ordinary folk, blue collar workers who had always relied on local law enforcement and soldiers to protect them. As well as this, the men who made up the bulk of the Englishman's army were street thugs, kept mean and hungry so they'd always have an edge.

Still when it was all said and done, there was no use worrying about things he could not change. They had asked for leadership and he had given it. The rest would take care of itself.

Over the ridge at a safe distance away, Kate and her group of doctors waited with equal anticipation. He knew that the worst case scenario would be a fire fight and the chances of it were high since Taylor's espionage activities in the Zone was discovered. Snake had been wondering about that. Since arriving at Sanctuary, he had come to learn a few things about way Sanctuary regarded its security. Sure, someone on the inside had given Taylor away, that much was certain. However, not many people knew his relationship with Taylor. Whatever his reputation might have been, he knew of no media record of his friendship with the older Taylor, who was killed at the Federal Repository prior to his New York rescue of the President. That kind of information came from someone who knew Taylor personally and that worried Snake a great deal.

The Englishman had said that he intended to have Sanctuary within thirty days. Did he mean to accomplish it with the help of someone inside?

Snake shook the thought out of his head, knowing that this was not the time to think about such things. He lit a cigarette, taking the smoke into his mouth with a contemplative gaze as he sat behind the cover of some rocks. Next to him Evans was looking dead ahead, staring into the night in tense concentration.

"What was the meeting about?" Snake asked, just to pass the time.

Evans looked at him in puzzlement, before the light of understanding struck him. "That's right," he remarked. "In all the confusion we never got a chance to deal with that."

"So?" Snake stared at him.

"Jack Travis." Evans responded. "He's disappeared. No one has seen him in two days."

At the mention of the name, Snake tensed. He remembered the exchange between Travis and himself, weeks ago. He remembered the hate in the man's eyes during those few occasions Snake had come across him. Suddenly, Snake didn't feel very happy about this situation. As much as Travis might hate him, Snake felt inclined to believe his anger towards Kate would be greater. Maybe even enough for him to harm her.

"This is too much of a coincidence." Snake said simply.

"Yeah," Evans agreed, indicating he had given the matter some thought already. "I know."

Instinctively, Snake looked at the ridge, to where Kate was currently waiting. She was pretty good at taking care of herself and he shouldn't really be worried, but the fact of the matter, was he still did. Christ Plissken, Snake thought to himself with disgust, the lady knew how to take care of herself well before his arrival. Isn't that what he loved about her in the first place?

Suddenly Snake Plissken realised what he said. Did he actually use that word?

Before he could ponder the further implications of what had just happened, the silence was shattered by a new sound. All thoughts about his confusing personal life were shunted aside as he recognised the new sound instantly for what it was. Around him, his companions had yet to pick it up. Hardly surprising of course since Snake had trained himself to detect such things.

"I hear gun fire." Snake spoke up.

Immediately Evans looked up at him and hurried next to Snake. "Are you sure?" He asked staring into the darkness, trying to focus on the sound. "I don't hear anything."

"Wait for it." Snake responded coolly.

The gunfire approached like a whisper, carried on the waves of a rolling breeze. It tickled the ears as it started to rise in momentum. Very soon, they were all hearing it.

"Tell everyone to hold position." Evans spoke into the old valve walkie talkie.

Snake moved to the edge of the canyon, ensuring that he could not be seen. Even at this light, he could see Querto huddled behind parapet on the canyon's eroded surface. The Mexican was using a nub of rock to rest the rifle as he took careful aim. Around the canyon, there were several other snipers taking position. Beggars Canyon was technically Sanctuary territory. Once the Zoners crossed into it in pursuit of the refugees, they would be in violation of the treaty.

"Remember," Snake heard Evans say, "we do not fire until they have crossed into the canyon."

Snake saw the headlights' first, approaching at rapid speed as the set moved over uneven terrain. It was the first of numerous such headlights flooding the canyon and Snake lowered himself to gain more cover.

"Tell everyone to stay out of the light." Snake told Evans.

The first vehicle that entered the canyon was a truck. It was followed by several others that were just as riddle with bullets. Fortunately their trailers were made of steel and afforded the people huddled within some protection. However, not all the trucks had such good protection. Others had back trays that were little more than canvas and the shredded material were more than an indicator of how much it had endured during the trip.

The smaller vehicles were definitely the Zoners. Fast moving and voracious like wolverines, it appeared that they had dogged the escapees all the way from Victoria city and Taylor's worst fears were concerned. Even as they approached, Snake could see the shattered windscreens, the blood on some doors and the bullet ridden paint work where high calibre ammunition had torn at it.

"May be we ought to let them know we are out here." Evans replied seeing the size of the Zone force. Snake could understand his apprehension. He counted almost a dozen vehicles, with Zoners hanging out an each window firing blindly into the dark.

"Maybe." Snake responded. "You got any ideas?"

"Not one," Evan replied. "Except maybe standing up and announcing it to them."

Snake looked at him for a moment, considering. "Maybe you ought to do just that."

Evans stared at him for a moment, wondering if this was another example of Snake's sardonic humour. However, Snake's insinuation suddenly dawned on Evans who shook his head in understanding. "Might get my ass shot off."

"Probably will." Snake retorted, the darkness hiding his smile.

Evans gave him a dirty look and started towards his jeep parked a short distance away. Snake turned his attention back to the trucks below. The vehicles had definitely crossed the threshold separating Zone and Sanctuary borders. The escapees had made it and it didn't seem as if the Zoners were giving up. As Taylor had once again predicted, the Zoners were going to violate the treaty to ensure the return of their escaped citizens.

Snake pulled out his own walkie talkie, hearing it cackle in his jacket.

"Are they here?" He heard a familiar voice on the other end.

"They've just crossed the border baby." He smiled faintly at the sound of her voice.

"Is it as bad as we thought?" She inquired, referring to Taylor's prediction.

Snake nodded, watching the vehicles sent dust in the air, illuminating the canyon with headlights and

gunfire. "Its worse."

"Snake," he heard her say softly. "Be careful."

Snake looked into the walkie talkie and almost smiled. It had been a long time since anyone had said those words to him with so much feeling attached. "I can take care of myself baby." He replied, with his voice reduced a husky tone reserved only for her.

Evans chose to return at that moment and Snake had to cut the conversation short. The man was carrying marking flares, made from phosphorous and manganese that promised a blinding light when used. Snake tucked the walkie talkie into his coat and stood up to hear Evans plan.

"When they come into this way, I'm going to drop the flares." Evans replied.

"Your people are going to be exposed down there," Snake pointed out but then added after a moment thought. "Which may not be so bad." He replied. "Maybe seeing what they're up against might make them think twice."

"Yeah," Evans agreed. "Maybe long enough to decide its not worth it."

Snake didn't need to speak to show his feelings regarding that possibility. No, the Zoners weren't going to quit nor where there going to be frightened away by flares. He knew people like this all his life. They were like wolves, with more aggression pumping through their veins than good sense. They would stop, size up the enemy and decide simply out of bold defiance that no one was going to tell them what to do and start firing. Snake had seen it too many times before.

Snake thought a moment. He had an idea. "Maybe they'll be easier convince if we had a little surprise for them."

## II

Ten minutes had passed since they first sighted the Zoners.

The enemy had passed into Sanctuary Territory, almost reaching the half way point in the canyon. Snake remained out of sight allowing Evans to take the lead. Whether tipping their hand to let the Zoners know they were out here worked in their favour or not, didn't matter. It was a diversionary tactic, no more. Even as the shooting became a loud cacophony of deafening sound, further amplified as the Zoners moved closer towards them, the Sanctuary force was moving silently in darkness, their movements an exercise in stealth. Snake had to give them some credit, there were not as green as he thought. While they didn't know much about military tactic, they had common sense and some times that was more valuable than anything else.

Knowing how to shoot someone's ass off was no good if you couldn't keep yourself alive.

Meanwhile Evans was nervous.

He had climbed down the side out the canyon into the narrow passage way that cut between the rock. Flanking him were two walls of rock, easier to climb down than up, making him feel boxed in and anxious. Evans was no coward. He was used to the terrain and he was used to the action, years in the RCMP had prepared him for that. Still, he wasn't as young as he used to be and he did fear dying. Evans believed that was much he could do in this life and he wasn't afraid to admit that things frightened him, unlike his younger companion in all this, Snake Plissken.

Sometimes Evans admired Snake's ability to keep it all inside.

He could see the headlights bearing down on him now. The first truck was approaching fast. Its headlights illuminated the passageway behind him for some distance and he could see the men stationed in their

positions quickly regaining cover in the remaining darkness. It was going to get a whole lot brighter, Evans thought as he looked down at the flares. Lighting one, the magnesium ignited with white hot fury, forcing Evans to look away. The brilliant white light illuminated the narrow canyon until it almost seemed like daylight.

Forcing himself to face forward, away from the hot glare of the flare, Evans began waving the flare above his head, leaving a rainbow trail through the indigo of night. The vehicles in front of him showed no signs of slowing down and Evans looked up at where Snake was positioned. To his annoyance, Evans couldn't see him. Then again, that was Snake Plissken's talent, the ability to go unnoticed.

Dust and grains of dirt were flying in the air now, as the increased velocity of the vehicles created small tornadoes under their wheels. Evans felt the sting of hard pebbles against his skin and kept himself from leaping to safety. He kept one hand on the side arm tucked neatly in the belt of his jeans while waving the flare still.

Hundred meters and closing...

Soon it was fifty and showed no signs of stopping. Did they even see him? Evans hoped so, because he would hate to open fire to get their attention. In the darkness, he could see the others in the canyon floor with him become nervous. God, he hoped they kept their heads, it was too soon for them to give the game away.

Fifty meters and closing..

Evans heard sudden squeals, disc pads lock into place, screeching against protesting wheels. More dirt and grit was kicked up into the air as the velocity of the convoy began to slow down. The gun fire ceased just as abruptly and Evans released a sigh of relief knowing that his beacon had reached someone at last.

It took a few seconds for someone to emerge from the cabin of the first truck. It was an old Mack truck looking as if it had driven up from another century and in truth probably was. It's once red paint was pitted and riddled with bullet holes and the fine mustard coloured dust that covered most of the local terrain. The man who emerged from the cabin was bloody and clearly distressed. In the distance, they could hear the Zoners closing in on them and there wasn't much time to act.

"Please.." The desperation showed in his wide blue eyes. "We need help. Is this Sanctuary?"

He was clearly hit. Evans could see blood oozing from a shoulder wound and knew the man needed medical attention quickly. In fact, Evans wouldn't be wrong in venturing a guess that there were many of these escapees would need such help. Taylor's worst case scenario had been realised.

"This is Sanctuary," Evans said quickly, walking towards him. "We don't have much time. It sounds like you've got company coming. Get back into your truck and keep going down this ravine." Evans looked towards a darkened corner and shouted. "Esteban! Get out here!"

Esteban hurried out from where he was hiding. A small Latino, whose normal vocation in Sanctuary was as a fisherman, emerged with his Uzi in hand and reached Evans seconds later.

"Esteban, go with them. Show these people where the medics are."

"Sure Tristan." Esteban nodded and turned to the man who looked decidedly happier now that he knew help was coming.

The two men ran back to the truck and Evans stepped aside as the sounds of the running engine fired with increased power as they started to roll forward. The entire exchange had taken only a few minutes but it was enough to allow the Zoners to catch up with the convoy. By the time the Mack had driven past him, leading the other refugee trucks to safety, the Zoner vehicles were barely a hundred meters away and

closing. Even though they were no longer firing, Evans knew nothing was for certain.

"Plissken." Evans spoke into the walkie talkie once the refugee trucks were well away. He had dropped the flare on the ground now, seeing no reason to bring any more attention to himself than necessary, besides he had a feeling the Zoners knew he was already here. "Plissken can you read me."

"I hear you." Came Snake's glacial voice through the receiver.

"They're making final approach." Evans replied, trying not to sound apprehensive, even though he was a little scared. "Any last minute instructions?" He asked hopefully, may be the great war hero would tell him to get his butt out of there instead of sitting here like a freshly painted

target.

"Not really. Just don't get your ass shot off."

Evans glared upwards, hoping Plissken could see his expression. "I'll try not to."

"Don't worry," Snake said after a moment. "Querto's got you covered."

Somehow that didn't instil a great deal of confidence in him, but it was better than nothing, Evans supposed. The headlights fell on him at that moment and Evans squinted slightly, even though the illumination from the flares had neutralised most of its sharp brilliance. This time he did pull out his sidearm as he tucked away the walkie talkie.

The vehicle was a 1967 Rambler Rebel. Its light azure paint work had been replaced with a garish red which seemed to have been painted on with a brush and not a good job at that. It came to a stop a few meters away from Evans, its windows and windscreens were tinted black so it was hard to see inside. Behind it, other similar vehicles came to a stop. They were a collection of all terrain vehicles or normal cars adapted to travel the rocky ground. Evans saw convertibles, jeeps and range rovers, all modified to be extremely serviceable in all terrain's as well as painted into strong dark colours which looked sinister. It was part of the image, Evans guessed.

Evans had never seen her before, but when Miranda stepped out of the vehicle, he knew instantly who she was. Over the years since Sanctuary had come into contact with the Zone, the stories of this woman's savagery almost rivalled that of her master and lover, the Englishman. She was not clad in leather as she was infamous for, instead on this night, she wore thick furs and designer clothes no doubt lifted from some abandoned store. She looked like a character from a James Bond novel of old.

"This is Sanctuary territory." Evans replied as soon as she was in ear shot. "You are trespassing."

She paused a few feet from him, her eyes running up the length and breadth of him as a cat does before tearing the canary apart with sharpened claws. Looking at her sent a shudder of ice down Evan's spine. She was almost glacial in her demeanour. She'd even make Plissken nervous, Evans thought.

"We are in pursuit of our citizens." She said simply, obviously unaccustomed to giving explanations for any thing.

"Not on Sanctuary territory." Evans reaffirmed. "Unless you want to be responsible for violating the treaty."

"I would think that in the interests of peaceful cooperation, you'd be willing to assist us." Miranda replied, her dark eyes staring through him as he was made of glass.

"We have our own laws in Sanctuary," Evans said slowly, ready to run if things became dangerous. "Just as you do in the Zone. Our laws demand that we give Sanctuary to whomever asks for it. Your citizens have asked for it. Once that was done, the decision was out of our hands."

Her expression hardened. "We are not leaving here without them. Either you give them to us, or we will take them by force. I don't think you are ready to fight another war in any case."

"Maybe no." He retorted. "But we're more than ready to handle any aggressive action you make."

"We'll see." She said coolly before pulling out her gun and promptly shooting him in the chest.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### I

Snake saw Evans go down with one shot to the chest just before everything went to hell.

Pandemonium broke out before the man had even hit the ground. Firing exploded, shattering the razor edge tension of the situation. A hail of bullets tore forward, giving Miranda scant time to get out of the way. The Englishman's mistress barely missed being torn apart as she ran for cover behind the Rambler. Meanwhile, Snake saw the pool of blood forming around Evans as the man struggled to get out of the line of fire. At the moment, people were so involved shooting at each other that it had occurred to no one that Evans was still alive.

Snake had no illusions just how badly the former cop was hit. The men positioned in the canyon earlier were doing most of the firing, catching the Zoners in a bout of fierce fire. As of yet, the snipers had yet to reveal themselves, because Snake had ordered everyone to hold their fire when he had seen Evans shot. Snake cursed softly, angry that he had allowed Evans to make himself a target. He had honestly believed that Miranda wouldn't be foolish enough to make a try for the former cop in such a blatant fashion. Snake Plissken would not be underestimating that bitch ever again. Even if it meant killing her himself.

The situation below was rapidly deteriorating in a disorganised free for all and Snake didn't like that at all.

Already, Miranda had organised the Zoners to create a blockade with their vehicles, allowing no one to get behind them. At this point, she was unaware at the possibility of snipers, assuming that Evans must have only brought out a small force to do no more than offer her a show of strength. She probably assumed the Sanctuary group weren't smart enough to take such measures. For now, that was an advantage he did not want to relinquish.

What they needed was a plan.

Even though they already had one before the firefight broke out, a quick revision was in order so that they could get Evans out alive. At the moment, no one was too concerned about Evans and Snake could see the man struggling to move despite the commotion around him. Despite himself, Snake couldn't stomach the idea of leaving Evans there, especially when Kate was over the ridge with a whole mess of doctors who could save him before it was too late. For an instant, Snake wondered what the hell was happening to his self important attitude. Why did he give a damn about these people? He couldn't answer that, nor did he have too much time to ponder the question.

He thought quickly, taking a few minutes to look over the situation to access the best course of action. The boys below were holding their own pretty well. However, Evans didn't have much time. Having taken a chest wound only recently himself, Snake knew just how critical the man's condition really was. After what happened to Taylor, he was suddenly unwilling to let the Englishman win by allowing Evans to die as well.

"Querto." Snake spoke into the walkie talkie. "Come in."

"What's the op man?" Querto's voice responded immediately. When the man wasn't half drunk or stoned out of his mind, Querto was alright and trust worthy enough to as he was told without asking too many questions. Snake had found Querto to be pretty reliable actually. Much to Querto's own surprise.

"I'm going after Evans." Snake replied before he could change his mind and come to his senses. "When you see me down there, cover me. Make sure nobody fires until then."

"No prob man." Querto answered. "Better make it soon, those guys down there will be needing the help soon."

Snake couldn't disagree with that. However, at the moment it was a stalemate, with one group neither side having the advantage. "Don't worry, they'll get theirs." He mumbled under his breath. After he had taken care of Evans, Snake intended to give Miranda some payback. Running over the plateau for a short distance, Snake climbed onto his bike and slammed his foot on the kick starter before the engine roared to life under him. Fortunately, the sound of gunfire drowned out of the revving of bike as it sped off into the night.

"Kate!" Snake barked into the walkie talkie, adjusting the device to her frequency with one hand, driving with the other. He was greeted by static at first, as the wind rushed past him.

"Snake?" Her voice was taut, indicating her impatience at being contacted. "What is it? I'm pretty busy down here."

"Evans is hit." Snake retorted ignoring her annoyance. "Get someone to meet at the entrance to the canyon with a jeep, we're going to have bring him to you."

There was a slight pause as Snake waited for her to answer. She was thinking and that made Snake Plissken for some reason. "Okay, I'll meet you there."

"Wait a minute," Snake retorted, "that's not necessary. There's a lot of firing going on out there. Its dangerous." Why the hell did she have to make this so fucking complicated?

"We don't have time to argue. I'll meet you there." Kate answered before the line went dead, obviously not hearing a single word he had said.

Snake glared at the walkie talkie for a brief second, shaking his head in frustration. All the women in the world and the one he finally got attached to, was the one that seemed bent on giving him as much trouble as possible. However, even as he thought that, Snake found himself admiring her dedication. In the short time since she'd been in his life, Snake had come to know enough about Kate to realise that there was nothing she took more seriously then her Hippocratic oath.

Shit.

Women, can't live with them, can't kill them.

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On approach to the mouth of the canyon, Snake could see the silhouette of the jeep parked against the side of the road. The sound of gun fire echoed loudly through the passage way carved between the rocks. In the darkness between, the explosion of guns and bullets looked like fireflies in the distance. It was almost perversely beautiful the things that could take on an aura of beauty even in the night, especially from a far.

She was waiting impatiently for him. He could tell that much when he pulled his cycle to a halt. At the moment, she was checking the contents of her medical bag. He hoped she didn't intend to do any field surgery. His plan had been merely to get Evans out of the firing range to the mobile medical set up, where Kate could tend to his wounds in safety. There was a gun tucked in her jeans.

"Can you handle that?" He inquired glancing at the weapon.

"Not really," she looked at him uncomfortably. "They just insist I carry one. I can shoot the thing but I've



never actually shot anyone, thank god."

Typical, Snake thought. "Just don't shoot your ass off." He retorted.

Kate gave him a look. "Although I wouldn't mind starting with you."

"We'll play hard later, baby." He said with a faint smile and Kate groaned.

"How will we get to him?" She asked instead.

"Let me worry about that." Snake instructed climbing off the bike and sitting next to her. "You just do the driving."

Kate threw him a dirty glance and started the jeep suddenly, sending him flying back into the seat as the vehicle moved forward. It would take a few minutes to reach the fighting and he could see the tension in her face. Fighting in any shape or form really disturbed her. Judging from the traces of blood splattered over her clothing, Snake gathered, she had been hard at work with the people who had escaped.

"How bad is he?" She asked.

"He took one to the chest. Almost dead centre." Snake replied. "He's alive but barely."

"Damn." She whispered softly. The concern in her eyes was more than just professional, Snake noticed. However it was not hard to understand why this was. Tristan Evans had been one of the men Kate had saved in the founding days of Sanctuary. It was Evans who became the force representing law and order to many. Without him, Sanctuary might have never been. He was one of Kate's oldest friends.

They reached the fighting quickly enough. From where Snake was, he could see Sanctuary citizens firing at the Zoners who were returning fire with as much savagery. There were casualties on both sides, the dead strewn the ground like fresh uncovered graves, their blood spilling on the uneven surface. Snake emerged from the jeep first, gesturing Kate to follow him as they skimmed the walls of the cliff to reach the others.

Snake had both guns drawn, making sure he shielded her from the bullets flying through the air. Although Kate seemed smart enough to take care of herself. Snake noted in passing interest, that she carried a gun in one hand while her medical bag rested in the other. There was fear in her eyes, but she held it firm, trying not to let it get the better of her. Snake wished she was anywhere but here. This was no place for a class act like Kate Ellison. Shaking the disruptive thoughts out of his head, he remembered that it was time to spring their little surprise on the Zoners.

Washington was the first person he sighted.

Duke was in the middle of reloading his weapon. He could see others scattered around the place, some still firing at the enemy, some like Washington, reloading their guns. There were so many spent cartridges on the ground it disappeared into the sand and blended into the landscape. It was almost obscene how well it fitted there.

"Querto." Snake spoke into the walkie talkie once more. "Querto, are you listening?"

"Gotcha Snake," Querto's thick accent replied. "We're primed man."

"Good," he answered, walking towards the front of the fighting. "Keep listening."

Snake strode alongside Duke. The huge black man looked up at him, beads of perspiration running down his ebony skin even though it was cold outside. It wasn't temperature that was spooking Duke, Snake guessed accurately. Kate's attention was focused on Evans who had crawled to a dark corner. She could tell because of the trail of blood following the wounded man. She sucked in her breath at the sight of it,

because that red trail was thick and viscous, telling her just how much blood had drained from Evans' body.

"Jesus Christ!" Duke exclaimed upon seeing Snake's appearance. "Where the fuck have you guys been? We're running out of ammo here!"

"Calm down Duke." Kate snapped before the man had a chance to say anything further. "Tristan is still alive out there! Snake came to get me."

At that, Duke seemed to quietened down at her intervention and at the memory of Evans lying out there on the ground, bleeding his life away while they were engaged in their contained war.

"What are you going to do?" Duke looked at Snake.

"I'm going to go get him." Snake remarked walking past the man towards the thick of the gun fire. Pausing a moment, he looked at Kate. "You stay here."

Beyond the nub of rock where Duke had hidden was a sheer wall, smooth for most part, except in places where the others had taken cover. Snake looked up, he could see the dark silhouettes of Querto and the other snipers on the top waiting for his word. Snake pulled out his gun, took a deep breath and waited. There was no pause in the gun fire, if anything, it was more frantic

than ever.

"Compadre." Snake said into the walkie talkie. "Kick ass."

The sniper fire rained down on the Zoners as soon as the words escaped his lips. Suddenly, the roar of gunfire loud before, in an instant became deafening. Snake scurried forward as the Zoners disoriented by the new direction of attack, tried to regain their bearings. He ran forward quickly, keeping his head down as he passed the others and emerged at the fore front of the fighting. He could see Miranda shouting orders at the remaining Zoners, who were totally unprepared for the new threat. As of yet, no one had noticed him making his way towards Evans.

It was easy enough to find Evans. There was clear trail of blood where the man had dragged himself across the ground away from further any danger. Snake moved cautiously, knowing just how vulnerable he was out here in the open, with the headlights trained on him like road kill waiting to happen. At the moment, he was unnoticed, but their shock wouldn't last forever. Sooner or later they would turn their attention back to the front.

He found Evans a few minutes later, broken and bleeding. Hiding in the darkness like a wounded animal, terrified of the hunter. Snake helped him up, seeing blood gush out of damaged arteries as Evans became upright.

"About time." Evans managed to croak. "I thought you said you'd cover me."

"I did." Snake answered, hooking his arm under Evans' and pulling him to his feet. The man groaned in pain as he was lifted upwards. His legs uncoiled like a snake, falling heavily against the ground as Snake got a better grip of him. Evans was almost a dead weight and Snake suddenly had a new appreciation of his own rescue at Taylor's hands. He looked in the direction of the Zoners, still unbalanced by the sniper fire. However, despite the surprise, they were quickly recovering. He had to move fast.

"Work with me." Snake told Evans, even though the man was in no condition to do very much. Snake could feel the blood running down the leather of his coat in thick rivulets. Drops of it followed them as they moved across the terrain, amidst the bullets and shouting. He could see Duke staring at him, too afraid to do much in the instance he alerted the Zoners to Snake's stealthy return. Snake couldn't see Kate and let out a small sigh of relief, knowing for once, she had done as she was told.

There was a god after all.

"Almost there." Snake answered as they moved across the rock. It took almost all his strength to carry Evans forward. The man was bigger than he was and age had given him the extra weight, but Snake shut himself from all the trivialities of the situation and concentrated on getting him to safety. He hadn't continued more than a few feet when a bullet whizzed past him. Snake whirled around, knowing instantly that bullet was no stray fire. Someone was shooting at him.

The Kid smirked at him as he took aim again.

Snake vaguely remembered some snot nosed kid in the car with him and Miranda that day in the Zone. He remembered that he didn't like the little shit very much. Not that it would matter very much, because it looked like the kid was going to kill him where he stood. Shit. Is anyone ever going to get any payback. Snake decided to go out fighting and went for his gun.

He never had the chance to shoot.

The bullet that slammed in the Kid's forehead effectively blew the back of his head out. Brain matter and blood exploded in a spray of red and pulp. The look of surprise on his forehead followed his ultimate collapse against the hood of the car he was hiding behind. An expanding pool of crimson formed on the dark blue surface of the vehicle.

The shot had come from behind him. Snake turned around and saw Duke standing in the shadows. Kate was next to him now and she shouted at him. "Come on Snake, move it!"

Snake shook his head once again.

Once again he thought:

Women, can't live with them, can't kill them.

II

Snake watched Kate drive into the darkness with Evans once he and Duke had placed the man there. The fighting had not abated one bit even though the snipers had given them a decided advantage. Still, Snake didn't want Miranda and her group to get too comfortable with their positions, neither did he want them to hold out indefinitely. Duke and the others were looking to him to break the deadlock, now that Evans was out of commission. It didn't escape him that people were radioing him for instructions neither was the fact that Duke seemed to let him take the lead.

With great reluctance, Snake began to see what Kate was talking about when she declared they needed him this morning. So much had happened since this morning. Sooner or later, Snake would have to deal with this.

"They're going to hole up." Snake said to Duke.

"Looks that way." Duke replied. "They have gotta be running out of ammo soon." The man looked at the direction of the fighting, unable to hide the revulsion at the dead bodies lying in the dirt from both sides. "We soon will be."

Snake got the impression that he was expected to do something. "Assholes like this carry a lot of heat on them." He explained. "Each man would have as much ammo as they can carry on themselves. We're going to have to break their line of defence."

"How?" Duke asked sceptically.

Snake turned to the fighting for a moment, contemplating his action in a long pause of reflection. One of

the things that ran through his mind was why he was bothering to risk his neck for these people at all. Snake Plissken was no fucking Samaritan! Since when did he put his neck on the line for anyone but himself? The more Snake tried to debate the situation, the more confusing it got. Still, he had to know whether he had lost his edge and a part of him wanted to make that bitch Miranda and that fuck the Englishman pay for what they had done to him. He had killed for less before.

Snake looked at Duke. "I need a car."

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This was going down bad.

Miranda thought this fleetingly as the windscreen shattered near her. Glass shards rained all over the dash, spilling out on to the hood of the car and along the sides. She shielded her eyes as she cringed deeper into the seats of the car. Next to her, Jimenez was lying limp in the seat, an expanding stain on the carpet from where his blood had dribbled in thick, viscous drops after a sniper's bullet had blown his face apart. She didn't like Jimenez, didn't give a shit that he was dead or alive, but the fact that he had been killed by these Sanctuary fuckers had really pissed her off. The Zone was her people and the Sanctuaries as she called them, had to pay for hurting her people. They had to pay hard. Looking through the frosted glass of the window, she stuck her arm through and fired at the snipers on the top of the ridge. She couldn't see anyone in particular but aimed at the direction of the fire that had killed Jimenez.

She let out a few rounds and then looked at the others with her. Miranda saw a few bodies out on the ground, some were people she worked with closely, others were thugs she didn't give a damn about. Just some of the fodder that was meant to die during this job. She and the boss had planned it well but she hadn't believed the Sanctuaries would be this organised. They never were before. Previously their attacks had been rough, almost crude. That Ellison bitch was a doctor, she knew nothing about fighting. They had expected resistance, but not on this scale. Not with snipers positioned in perfect ambush country. Her underestimation of the Sanctuaries was going to cost them dearly.

Snake Plissken.

The thought came out of her mind before any logic could lead her to it. That sonafobitch Plissken had done this. He'd organised them. Their information about Plissken's activities in Sanctuary didn't cover that. If she got out of this alive, there was going to be hell to pay, especially from the fuck who gave them their intelligence. Plissken was a hard man to beat in any case, Miranda decided. Miranda was well aware of the man's reputation before the Pulse. If Snake Plissken had a personal stake in Sanctuary, then the boss was going to have to reconsider their strategy.

It had been simple before his intervention because that Ellison bitch was just a doctor, she knew nothing about being hungry, knew nothing about climbing into the dirt to fight. However, Miranda had to give her credit for giving Plissken a reason to throw his lot in with the Sanctuaries. She never figured Kate Ellison for someone who would have fucked Snake Plissken for what she wanted. It galled Miranda to no end how furious the Englishman was when he heard that piece of news. What was it about that bitch? It seemed as if she was on everyone's wish list.

Suddenly the firing stopped.

Miranda snapped to attention, wondering what happened. She peered out of the window and saw everything was still. Her confusion was mirrored in her companions who were starting to emerge from their hiding places. Were the Sanctuaries going to try and talk? Somehow Miranda was doubtful. She opened the door to the car and crept out. There was no noise, no gunfire, no sounds of any kind of life. The magnesium flares had died out long ago, so the only illumination in the canyon came from their headlights, most of which had started to dim because of near dead batteries.

"What's going on?" She heard someone asked.

"Stay where you are!" She cried out. Miranda looked up at the ridges of the canyons. There was no movement there either. Something was wrong. She didn't like this.

For about ten minutes, they stood there. Not knowing whether to leave or not. Could they have just left? The Sanctuaries had what they wanted, the escapees had made it through. Perhaps they decided an extended firefight wasn't worth it. All these possible scenarios ran through her head but she couldn't force herself to believe it. As the minutes rolled by, the others became more nervous. Miranda could see Crazy Jake starting to become more agitated and she realised that all of them were getting that way.

A sound broke the silence. No, not broke, more like whispered into it. The sound of cracking gravel could be heard in the distance and Miranda looked around, trying to decide where it was coming from. With the diminished illumination, it was hard to see very far into the night. It was a familiar sound but Miranda couldn't quite place it. She was starting to get rattled and it annoyed her. Once again she thought to herself;

This operation was going bad.

The Camero rolled forward into the sphere of the headlights. Miranda saw the barest hint of someone standing in the tray before the snipers above opened fire again. Most of her men had little time to get under cover before they were cut down where they stood. Miranda dove for cover through the open door of the car nearest to her. She put her head down as the windscreen shattered above her head, raining glass over her.

Almost as suddenly as the firing had begun, it felt silent again. Except this time the silence was laced in the sounds of her men, dying outside the car. Miranda swore in anger, furious at the trap she had allowed herself to fall into. She heard the sounds of running feet, many of them, coming towards hers and the other cars. They were coming! Miranda scrambled to her feet to get out when suddenly, she heard the cocking of a high calibre weapon in front of her beyond the door. Miranda looked up.

"Its been a long time baby." Snake Plissken said to her.

Miranda glanced around long enough to see the Sanctuaries descending on her wounded men like a pack of hungry wolves, knowing with rage that the operation was over and she was a prisoner. "Nice job Snake." She replied, trying to maintain her cool. "Your plan?"

"You catch on quick." Snake retorted. "Now get out of the car baby."

"So you can shoot me?" Miranda glared at him defiantly.

"If I was going to kill you, we wouldn't be talking."

Staring into the glacial expression on his face told Miranda he wasn't lying. Trying to maintain some dignity, she climbed out of the truck and stood upright in front of him. "Are you going to kill us?" Miranda demanded.

"I'd like nothing better than killing you baby," Snake looked at her hard. "You've hurt some friends of mine, but it ain't up to me. You're going back to the Zone."

Snake saw the flicker of hope in her eyes, once the realisation she was going to live became more real to her. It disappeared quickly to be replaced by triumph and her smirk angered him to no end, but he restrained his anger and decided to take a little latitude for himself. "Strip." He said casually.

Miranda's eyes flew open. "You're joking."

"You heard me, strip." Snake repeated himself, trying not to enjoy her reaction too much. "Take it all off." He let his eyes run up the length of her with a hint of suggestion.

"No." She replied defiantly.

Snake cocked the gun in her face, unwavering and with enough expression in his eyes to show her that he was barely controlling his rage. It was more than a warning that she shouldn't push her luck. He was just waiting for an excuse to shoot her. With her lips quivering, she began to undo the first button on her jacket.

"When you see your boss," Snake remarked, taking a step towards her and flicking a strand of dark hair from her face. "Tell him that I'm not finished with him yet."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

Kate watched the water slapping against her skin as she washed her hands. The blood came off easily, she wished it was so mentally as well. By now, the fresh clean water had turned an unhealthy red in the steel wash basin. She couldn't remember how long she had been standing up but she knew it was most of the night. In the same tent, there were other doctors and nurses around her who was just as exhausted as she was. After tonight, she looked forward to a good nights sleep. She had seen far too much blood for one day.

Taylor had been right. It had been a running gun fight for the escapees from the Zone to their journey to Sanctuary. There were no deaths thankfully, but the injuries were severe. At least half the people who emerged from the convoy had sustained gun shot wounds and most of these were women and children. The sounds of their moans and cries left a vivid impression of pain in her memory that was hard to shake. It had taken a strong stomach for all the Sanctuary doctors to treat these poor unfortunates.

Kate had spent at least two hours on the table with Tristan alone. In the end, she had managed to save his life. There was a while on the operating table when she wasn't so sure she would but Kate refused to give up on Tristan because he was fighting just as hard as she was to keep him alive. It was fortunate that she had a chance to wet her feet with her surgical skills after operating on Snake because it prepared her for Evans. His chest had been a mangled mess of flesh where bullets had torn through. It had taken a long time to weave through the tangled pulp of blood, bone and organs to remove the bullets and set things right. She knew she should not have spent so much time on one patient, but Tristan Evans was more than just another patient.

He was her friend.

"Some night." Judy said approaching her holding two cups of steaming coffee.

"I'm glad its over," she sighed wearily as she wiped her hands on a towel. Around her, the last of the patients were being loaded into the jeeps and vans. Orderlies were starting to load the equipment for return to the hospitals and the tents were starting to come down. Soon this place would be a deserted patch of earth in the middle of nowhere again. With no remnants of the work conducted here tonight.

"Yeah." Judy sighed, handing her a cup for which Kate was eternally grateful. "I'm glad Tristan made it." The nurse remarked. "You did some excellent work doctor."

Kate smiled despite herself and her weariness. "I did, didn't I." She was proud of the fact that Evans still lived. "I didn't think I could save him, but I had some good help and it was a group effort." She replied giving Judy a slight squeeze on her shoulder.

"Are all the patients loaded up?" Kate inquired after taking a sip of the coffee. It tasted wonderful but it did little to perk up her sprits.

"Yes." Judy nodded. "The doctors are starting to leave. You should go home too Kate, you look

exhausted."

She felt it. "I've felt better."

"Can I give you a ride?" Snake asked coming up from behind without her noticing him. Judy let out a knowing smile as Snake joined them. He looked just as tired but was doing a better job than she was of hiding it. Judy's expression filled her with mild annoyance, Kate wondered momentarily if the entire town had some idea about the nature of their relationship. Despite her acceptance of her feelings towards Snake Plissken, she was still uncomfortable about so many being privy to her personal life.

"Is it all wrapped up out there Snake?" Judy inquired.

"Pretty much." Snake answered standing alongside Kate. "Duke and Querto just sent Miranda and the Zoners back home with a warning about violating treaties." At that Snake allowed himself and uncharacteristic smile as he lit himself a cigarette. Like Kate needed coffee, he needed that satisfying drag.

"You're looking pretty pleased with yourself." Kate noticed knowing there was more to that faint smile than he let on..

"Its nothing." Snake replied, besides she would hear about it soon enough any way. Still the look on Miranda's face when she climbed into the truck buck naked was enough to bring a smile to his jaded features. It was not much of a revenge, but it would do until Snake could arrange something a little more permanent.

"Well," Judy sighed trying to stifle a yawn. "Doctor Vihn has offered me a ride home with him, so I'll see you tomorrow Kate. Bye Snake." With that, she walked out of the emptying tent.

Kate watched her go and waited until she was out of earshot before turning to Snake. "Judy and Vihn have been together for about six months now and they still think its a big secret." She giggled slightly.

"Come on," Snake said gesturing towards the door. "I'll give you a ride home."

Kate linked her arm around his and rested her head against his shoulder, suddenly needing his warmth after the day they had had. It was felt good to have his strength to lean on and Kate was becoming accustomed to the way she felt about him. Snake did not seem to mind having someone care for him either, even though it seemed he would rather have root canal surgery admit it.

Snake had driven his cycle to the site after the last of the clean up had been completed. Most of the night, he had been giving orders to Duke and Querto because he seemed to be the only one that could now that Evans was out of the picture. He started wondering if this is how it had begun for Kate in the beginning. Was it simply the matter of giving directions because no one had any answers of their own?

Once again, he was faced with questions about what he was going to do. Yeah he wanted to stay here, it was quiet, no asshole was shooting at him and then there was Kate. She was impossible to walk away from and she loved him. He always wanted a woman to feel that way about him and every time he walked into the room, he could see the strength of that feeling in her eyes. Another part of him wanted to protect her, to keep her safe from all those who would harm her and that was the part that made him nervous.

Shit, she was going to get him killed.

II

Hours later, Kate found herself staring at Snake Plissken. Her emerald eyes, round and full basked in the sight of him. They had driven back to her place, where they had shared a quiet dinner and talked into the night. Although they did not touch on the subject of their relationship, Kate found that he had an informed view of most things. It surprised her because he gave people the impression that not much mattered to

him. Kate also noticed that he did not try to make any cheap moves to get her into bed even though she would have welcome such advances. It was impossible to not want him but Kate liked to take things slow. Her initial reservations about him had faded away and she was no longer as frightened about the legend and more interested in the man. Nevertheless, she had left him to sleep on her sofa because he was as tired as she was.

She had showered, slept awhile but could not remain asleep for too long knowing he was just outside her bedroom door and with so many things left unsaid. Kate stood by the doorway watching him sleep. He who was Snake Plissken. Adventurer, criminal, considered saviour of the world by some, destroyer by others. Whomever he was or was thought to be, when she looked at him now, he seemed nothing more than a man and it was the man she loved.

She had never felt this way about anyone. Kate could be glacial when she wanted to be but when it came to Plissken, she felt only tenderness and concern about his intense loneliness. In some ways, he was kindred spirit. Trapped by the isolation of circumstances. When it came to relationships, Kate always relished being in control. Things were no different now. However, there was something to be said about meeting an equal who could match her wit for wit and be the strong one for a change. Unlike the other night, she felt none of the reservation when she pulled away from Snake. Kate knew most of it was motivated by panic. She was frightened by the intensity of her feelings. Now that she was more accustomed to it, it was not the terrible monster she had imagined it to be.

She wore sapphire lace, a relic from days gone by under her white shirt. When women were meant to be feminine, delicate things, not the hardy stuff of these troubled times. Yet she still tried to be that delicate woman, knowing part of the reason for his own feelings was the image of her he held in his mind. She wanted to be that image for him, the kind of woman who would love him unconditionally for what he was, not the stuff of legend he was meant to be.

"You're going to just stand there?" A voice suddenly spoke, almost a whisper but nonetheless riveting.

He was awake.

Kate smiled faintly at his question. "What do you want me to do?"

Snake gaze moved over her body slowly, with predatory deliberation. "Come here."

Kate walked towards him, carried by a wave of desire that swept away her reservations and inhibitions. She was unafraid because this was more than just some heated coupling between two people to be forgotten the next day. When she gave herself to him, it would be a complete offering. She loved him and that was all that mattered. Snake sat up and Kate saw that he slept naked. A stray thought almost made her smile, but she suppressed it. A thought about how all that separated them was one, thin cotton sheet.

Snake said nothing as he wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her against him. Just the touch of him, warmed her. Snake sat up straight so he could look into her face and meet her eyes. It surprised her, the sensitivity she saw in his face. In that second, she saw the depth of his feeling for her. Snake saw the future in her green eyes and for the first time, it did not frighten him either. "You are beautiful," he said softly and knew that he meant it. His hands slid up her smooth back.

Kate basked at his touch. For a few moments, Snake's hands glided over her body, feeling if she was really here or some dream he was having. Kate allowed her own hands to explore him, sometimes trembling at the touch of the scars on his skin, of the pain inflicted during that other life.

When it began, it began savagely. For weeks now, they had been holding back for all kinds of stupid reasons. Fear, insecurity and a thousand different things that in the here and now, seemed so unimportant. This was their moment and it defined tomorrow and every day that would come after this night. The spoken words that meant he would belong to someone frightened Snake Plissken to no end and that ate away at him. She knew that he was determined to prove that he was worth loving and she worth staying



for even if he could not say it.

His hand on her hair, Snake forced her mouth on his and kissed her with jarring intensity. No sooner than she had time to breathe, she felt his tongue slid past her teeth, searching for hers. Her shirt was soon discarded and she felt his hands pulled at her bra, unhooking the clasp with surprising deftness. In the back of her mind, she wondered where he had learn to do that so fast.

Once the claps were undone, he flung it aside, oblivious to where it went. Her breasts now freed, stood before him bare and magnificent. Her nipples stood hard and erect, her arousal obvious. His hands found them quickly enough and he massaged them hard, using all fingers as he kneaded into soft flesh. He never felt more satisfied over being able to touch her finally and Snake relished the moment.

Kate raised her neck, allowing his mouth to move down her neck. He tasted the flesh that hungrily, she could almost feel teeth. The pain heightened her awareness and made her gasp, forcing her nails into his back. She a surge of desire within her when she felt the taut, hard muscles under her palms.

He moved her around so that he was be on top of her when they fell on the sofa. She took his full weight without any complaint, still dizzy from the feel of his mouth and his wonderful hands. Suddenly, she felt hip lips disappear and from the pit of her stomach felt and emptiness that was desperate for more. Kate looked into his face and saw the animal hunger in his eyes. Like a demon unleashed. For a moment, there was almost a smile on his lips but then he fell down hungrily on her breasts and all other thoughts were pushed from her mind.

He nursed on her like a child full of need, sucking her nipples past his teeth and swirling his tongue around her erect flesh. She had begun groaning and her thighs slipped past his waists to encircled him with their warmth. Suddenly one hand left her breast, sliding past her stomach to the lace of her briefs. Snake's fingers glided over her hair, poised and ready to touch her swelling, erect centre. She arched her back languidly as she felt fingers spreading open her folds and massaging the tender flesh with expert control.

He looked at her for an instance as she moaned softly. A smile lit his face and barely hid the mischief she saw there. With one quick movement, her briefs were off and his hands lay on either side of her thighs. Moving downwards, he pushed them open. Kate stared at the ceiling, knowing with certainty what he intended. She closed her eyes, wondering if she could bear it.

When his mouth lowered, she let out a gasp of pure pleasure. His tongue teased her with gentle licks. The stubble on his chin caressed her outer folds, causing her to groan louder and with more abandon. She felt his tongue probing her slowly, pushing its way up her into the deepest crevices of her sex. Her legs wrapped themselves around his back now, even though she was completely unaware of it.

His hands were holding her hips, forcing her to stay still even though she was writhing in pure ecstasy. He started sucking on her, pulling the tiny node of flesh into his mouth with hard suction. Her soft, wild moans were telling him that she was enjoying this too much to bear him stopping. In his mind, it was just the way he liked it. Snake had wanted to do this to her for so long now that he was going to enjoy every minute of it.

He darted his tongue out and found her inner passage, with fast, long strokes and then slowly until she was crying out incoherent. He relished the sounds of her moaning and incoherent pleas not to stop. He could feel the tension in her body and taste helpless restraint in the salt of her flesh. Suddenly, Kate jerked hard, her body arched in taut pleasure as she uttered a loud cry of ecstasy as she overflowed on the wave of her orgasm.

Just the taste of her hardened Snake where he was. He could feel the tightening of his loins and realised how much he needed her.

When she had recovered enough, Kate made Snake sit up. Her expression revealed the afterglow of her shattering orgasm. He wondered what she intended and was content to let her take control for while.

"Your turn." She looked at him with smile Kate wanted to pleasure him as wonderfully as he had pleased her.

Without a further word, she lifted the shaft of his erect manhood, so his head was almost touching her lips. She breathed gently against it first, watching his eye cloud over with the first sensations. Then she ran her tongue over him, allowing her warmth breath to caress him. His thigh muscles jerked slightly, inciting her to continue further. When the wet heat of enclosed him, he almost thought that he had died and gone to heaven. Kate glanced upwards and saw the restraint in his face but his eyes showed different. He was aroused beyond reason.

Eventually she had all of him in her mouth, sucking had and kneading at the same time. He stood up, with a jerk, holding her hair tighter now as his hips began thrusting forward. He was a big man and she felt him reaching down her throat as he started thrusting forward with mounting urgency. Strangely enough, she could take all of him and that contributed to his excitement. It pleased her that she could surprise him. She closed her eyes, not wanting to think of anything but his pleasure.

After a few minutes, she felt him explode. His warmth shooting down her throat, coinciding with a sudden but satiated groan.

God, it had been a long time. It had been too long since he had felt this kind of release. He was astonished by how hard she had made him orgasm. He stood there, trembling and weakened as she cleaned him off. He felt the delightful sensations as he did this and felt himself started to harden again. It had been a long time he had made love to a woman with such passion and his energy was a fountain far from empty.

This time Snake withdrew from her mouth and pulled her to feet him. He stared into her face and saw the smile on her lips. Kate thought of what making love to him was going to be like. How she craved a man to take control of her body like this without thought or reservation except to the pleasure to be had.

He kissed her mouth, making her ease back onto the carpeted floor as his tongue slid down her throat. Kate's hands ran over his back and through his hair, her body feeling wonderful under him. Snake watched her hair splay out and the anticipation in her eyes. With confidence, Snake knew if he chose to make love to her all night, she would gratefully let him. He knew of men who dreamed of subduing such a woman and counted himself lucky that she had allowed him not only her body but her heart.

He slid in between her legs, relishing the warm of her white thighs around his waist. Kate looked at him, her eyes burning and at that moment he knew just how much she loved him. He knew she wanted to say it as much as he wanted to hear it.

"Do you love me?" He whispered in her ear. .

She met his gaze and returned a beatific smile at him. "I love you."

Snake smiled, a trophy on his lips as he pulled her against him hard, impaling her with the full length of his hardness. Kate cried out softly when he penetrated her. Yet it was not pain she cried out for. He rammed into her with all the force it could muster, until his full length was buried inside her throbbing folds and he could enter no more. He ground his teeth from crying out himself, from becoming overwhelmed by her inner folds, grabbing and teasing him as he started to thrust into her.

Snake did not think making love to her could get any better than it already had. Sliding into her was the most incredible sensation he had ever felt and Snake looked into her face and saw the same emotions. He treated her as he had never done for any woman. Each stroke into her was pure pleasure. Snake became so hard that he was almost sorry for the muscles inside her and what they were enduring. He rammed harder, feeling her thighs tighten around his waist. She was so tight, he could barely breathe and yet, he pounded her harder. Until she was biting down on a knuckle for the force of him. He started to grunt softly, but as the constant rhythm of his manhood tore through her wet, oh so wet folds, he started gasping himself or else he would have exploded.

Her resolve disappeared hearing his gasp. Her moans and incoherent pleas began to come forward unabated and uncaring of anything except for the man that was giving her the sex of her life. "Snake! Oh god Snake!!" She groaned loudly.

Hearing her voice in his ears brought Snake Plissken over the edge. With an exhausted, almost guttural groan of pleasure, he let himself go. "Oh fuck! Oh baby, fuck!" Hot fluid shot into the deepest folds of her. Snake felt his entire life and soul escape as he released himself after long last. Her body under him tensed and then shuddered, nails sank deeper into his back and he felt warmth that was more than just him squeezing out the last of drop of his seed into her. The bones in his body disappeared and he lay against her breasts, their bodies glistening despite the cool of the night.

For a long while, neither of them spoke. Time seemed to have frozen. Yet the smell of their sex was heavy in the air.

"I love you Snake," she whispered softly and then added. "I'll love you always, even if you go.

He did not look at her. "I know." He answered, holding her in his arms as his hand stroked her hair.

Despite everything that happened tonight, even after he had made love to her like he'd never done to any woman, even though she seemed physically made for him, Snake could not bring himself to say the only thing she wanted to hear him say. Something inside him just could not say it.

Something inside Snake Plissken could not even admit it.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### I

Kate woke up the next morning, feeling strangely invigorated.

She found it initially disorientating to find another human being sharing her bed but the moment faded when the memory of the previous night returned to her. She almost wondered if it was a dream, that this wonderful feeling of contentment was nothing but a product of an overactive imagination. For the first time in too long, things were no longer as murky as they had been before. After last night, Kate was no longer confused about anything.

Not when she remembered that Snake Plissken was still here, that last night they had shared something that was too intimate to describe. They had spent half the night making love, enjoying each other after all their inhibitions and reservations were finally brushed aside. She had looked into his eyes and saw the depth of feeling there and even if she didn't hear Snake say it, she knew how much he cared. It was more than Kate had ever expected of him. After they were spent and sated, he simply held her in his arms, allowing her to drift away in contentment, on the gossamer wings of slumber.

Kate rolled onto her back, feeling Snake's arms still draped over her waist. They had spent the rest of the night in this way and Kate never felt more in love with him, when she remembered that. He was still asleep and she saw no reason to wake him. Removing his arm gently, Kate slipped out of her bed and padded over to the shower. Inside the tile cubicle, the warm water on her skin washed away the residue of their lovemaking. She noted the pinkish discolouration of finger and bite marks on parts of her body. A part of her was less than surprised at this. They had been more than vigorous about their sex.

She stepped out of the shower and noted through the window, that it was a warm day outside. After the last night's icy temperature, that surprised her somewhat. However, that was the way it was this far north, especially now that it was edging towards spring. The wall clock indicated the time to be somewhere after eleven and with annoyance she realised that she was late for her scheduled rounds. However, truth be known, after last night's dealings with the Zoners, no one would fault her for some tardiness.

Kate got dressed quietly, slipping on a pair of jeans and loose white shirt which was her normal attire when she did hospital rounds. There would be full ward today with the Zone escapees taking up most of the beds. Vinh would probably organised a duty roster with the doctors who hadn't accompanied the medical unit last night, but she felt she ought to at least make an appearance and she wanted to see how Evans was doing. She remained secure with the knowledge that if there was anything wrong, Vinh would have contacted her by now. Even if telephones were no longer in use, the short wave radios had replaced them would have been more than adequate for the task. That still meant Kate wanted to check on Tristan's progress by seeing him for herself.

When she was ready to leave, she walked quietly to the bed and saw Snake was still asleep. After last night, she didn't blame him for being so worn out. She was aware that he had taken charge of the operation after Tristan had been hit. Duke had told her that Snake had directed most of their strategy against the Zoners and thanks to him, their casualties were kept to a minimum. In truth, Snake had been every thing she knew he could be here and it felt good that he had proved her right.

After all that, the man deserved his sleep.

Sitting next to him on the bed, Kate planted a long, lingering kiss on his lips. Snake stirred a moment and then looked her in the eye with rapid alertness. It impressed her how quickly he regained his faculties, even out of sleep. Then again, he was used to living on the edge and expecting trouble at a moment's notice.

"Good morning." She smiled.

Snake yawned and started to move. Kate gestured at him to remain still. "You stay in bed, I've got to make my rounds at the hospital, but I shouldn't be too long."

Snake coiled an arm around her and pulled her to him. Their mouths met in a series of warm, passionate kisses. After a moment, Kate pulled away and Snake sighed in mild disappointment.

"I had to find me a working woman." He remarked, lying back on the bed.

"You're just lucky I guess." Kate retorted, with a slight chuckle. "Keep the spot warm for me." She glanced at the rumpled space next to him on the bed. "I'll be back soon."

"Whatever you say baby." He smiled faintly.

Kate laughed and hurried out of the room. After a moment, Snake heard the door slam close and her footsteps moving further away from the porch. Snake eased back into the bed, still feeling slightly exhausted after last night's activities. He could still smell her perfume on the sheets and Snake couldn't help but miss her absence, even if it was for a little while. He looked around her bedroom and saw little bits of memorabilia from her past. Stuffed animals, pictures and trinkets which he noted with bemusement.

God, he felt good though.

He thought about their love making hours before. She had been an exciting lover who was unafraid to give herself to him completely and yet defiant enough to add more than a spark to their pleasure. Snake couldn't believe how incredible her body had been and how perfectly moulded it was to suit his. Their physical pleasure had almost transcended into a spiritual bond that even now he felt. Snake buried his face into the pillow where she had slept and he could smell her in the crisp linen sheets.

Talk about satisfaction.

He closed his eyes and thought about her, allowing the images to swirl around him as he felt the drowsiness creep back into his eyelids. He was tired after everything that had happened in the last 24 hours, but it was a weariness that he was pleased to have. Snake hadn't felt more alive in years and he

allowed himself to drift into the sleep of the truly contented.

Besides, Snake thought in one final moment of clarity before the sleep overcame him.

He had to rest up before she got back.

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It was a beautiful day outside.

Or at least it seemed that way to Kate anyway. Instead of taking Snake's motorcycle, which she could never drive anyway, she chose to make the trip to the hospital on her ten speed mountain bike. As the wind blew at her skin and the sun shone brightly over her head, she felt exhilarated and high on how great she felt. A part of her wondered if it was just the sex but Kate knew better, she was in love and it was a giddy feeling which left little room for self recrimination or reproach.

For the first time since Snake's arrival, things were so clear. Whatever would happen tomorrow, would happen. Since she started looking at the here and now, her life had become less complicated. Tomorrow would take care of itself, she decided. She waved past the Chief as she turned around the bend which would take her to the main road into town. The big man returned the gesture by waving back at her before he took one of his short cuts off the main road, into the woods.

It was a good day for a bicycle ride and Kate's route was scenic to say the least. Not many of Sanctuary's residents chose to live out here because it was some distance from town. Most of the area was underdeveloped, with tall conifer trees flanking the road. Occasionally there would be a house and one could almost hear the rushing of Della Falls in the far distance. Since the reduction of cars and other urban noises, it was easier to hear the cascade.

Kate had left the Chief almost a mile behind her when she heard the sounds of engines behind her on the road. Glancing at the mirror, she saw the reflection of a dark coloured van which she didn't recognise. The windows had caught the glare of the sun, so she was unable to see who the driver was. Having lived in this area for some time, she thought she knew most of the people living here. The van belonged to someone she did not recognise.

Probably someone new, Kate decided and kept peddling.

It didn't take very long for the vehicle to catch up with her and Kate moved over to the side of the road, to allow it enough room to move past. They had reached a long stretch of road, leaving the last house for some miles behind her. Once again, she glanced into her mirror to catch a glimpse of the driver but the sun's reflection kept his or her identity concealed.

Suddenly without warning, the vehicle sped up considerably. Kate could tell the sudden leap of speed at the intensity of the revving engines. In the mirror, she saw the van raced up to her and Kate began peddling towards the grass, deciding to give this person a wide berth as they drove past. However as she tried to move off the road, the vehicle's engines roared louder and streaked towards her.

By now, Kate was starting to feel some measure of alarm. There was no way she could outrun the van on her power of her own legs. It started to occur to her that this person might actually be trying to harm her in some way, but that thought was obscured by remnants of reason. She had little time to debate this as the van moved quickly to her back wheel. Kate was peddling for dear life now, knowing that she was running out of breath and all it would take to push her to her limit was another push of the van's accelerator.

That happened less than a second after the thought had appeared in her mind.

The initial jolt almost sent her off the road and it was by sheer luck that she didn't lose control completely. The cycle weaved dangerously across the road as Kate struggled to maintain control. Dirt and dust blew at

her from under the van's wheels. Tiny grains entered her mouth and eyes, making it hard to see.

"What the hell are you doing!" She shouted angrily, still reasoning that this was someone's idea of a joke. The loud roar of the van's engines was the only response.

The van was barely inches away from her back wheel when it advanced forward again. This time there was no gentle nudge against the rubber, instead it was a sharp thrust forward. There was no way she could recover after a push from a vehicle possessing a 150 horse power engine. The cycle almost flew forward and Kate careened off the road, barely able to remain upright as the cycle skidded when it crossed over the bitumen to the grass.

She knew she was falling, felt herself in the air, catching her knee on the handle bars and remembering vaguely the position to assume to avoid breaking her neck on impact. It was too long since she remembered how to do that and when she hit the ground, she had saved her neck but her back ached when her head smacked the grass hard.

After that only a few things remained clear. One was the sight of her bicycle on the grass, its front wheel spinning while the back seemed out of shape. Her eyes followed the spokes as they moved around, a reflection of her own dizziness. Kate lay on her stomach, aches and pains stabbing at her from so many different places. In the distance she thought she heard a car door slam. A few seconds had past by, the spinning didn't stop but the sounds of footsteps against the grass became the point of focus instead. They got closer very quickly and she made a vague attempt to try and turn around, to see who it was.

Suddenly, she felt a hand grab her hair, yanking her neck up fiercely. The pressure against her head made her cry out and the pain returned some measure of clarity to her. Kate tried to struggle as she felt a knee slam into her back, forcing her body down while her neck strained to avoid serious injury as her attacker held onto her hair tight.

"We're going for a little ride, bitch." A voice spoke and it was a familiar.

She opened her mouth to speak when a piece of rag was thrust under her nose roughly. The smell hit her sharply, causing Kate to turn her head instinctively. She recognised the acrid smell as the gloved hand brought the rag up against her face, pressing hard against her mouth and nostrils, so that Kate had little choice but to breathe it in. She struggled hard for a moment, trying to scream but rendered mute by the rag against her lips. Her eyes tried to catch out her assailant but that to was impossible. He had her and he wasn't about to let her go. Finally she was forced to gasp for air, despite her attempts not to and the moment it entered her lungs, Kate knew what it was.

Ether.

II

The first thing that entered his mind when he woke up, was the time.

What time was it?

He remembered drifting off to sleep again after Kate had left him. He vaguely recalled glancing at the wall clock and noting that it was sometime after eight thirty. Now as he looked at it again, he was surprised to see that it was almost two thirty. Kate had mentioned going to the hospital to check on her patients before coming home. It made him wonder if checking up on them actually took seven hours. At moments like these, he wished telephones still worked because he could then call her at the hospital and find out what was keeping her.

Snake Plissken wondered if he was being a touch too possessive. The lady did after all, have a life of her own before he showed up and if anything she was devoted. Still, she was annoyingly precise about something's, even if she was female. He lay there on the sheets, wondering if there was a need for concern

and found that the only way to satisfy his curiosity was to find out for himself. If she was still at the hospital then Snake guessed he knew her well enough to know, she'd appreciate the ride home. He hadn't even begun to entertain the notion of what would happen if she wasn't there.

He walked outside after getting dressed and made his way to her study, where she kept the old short wave radio. In Sanctuary, that was the only way to communicate since the demise of any kind of telephone system after the Pulse. The device in question was immaculately kept, taking a place of honour on a fine oak desk. Women, he mused. Couldn't keep the dust buster away from anything. The frequencies were listed neatly on paper next to the radio, like emergency numbers that used to be kept near telephones. The parallels were amusing.

It took him a few minutes to get in touch with the hospital. It had been years since he had even seen something remotely like this. In the last five years, old technology had been the only thing that kept the human race from completely slipping into a new dark age. There were people about who knew how to make new circuit boards and the like, but building something like an integrated circuit was another thing entirely. A smart engineer could probably build one without the fancy machines of the late 20th and 21st century. However, it would require remembering etching techniques that were born out of the 1950's and there were very few engineers who retained that kind of knowledge.

When a voice finally came through the speaker, Snake recognised it as Judy's. He let out a sigh of relief, because at least she was someone he knew and wouldn't give him any crap for asking after Kate.

"Judy, is the Doc there?" He inquired.

Judy recognised his voice. "Hello Snake." She answered without a trace of apprehension or alarm in her voice. Snake's suspicions abated slightly at her breezy manner. "Is Kate coming in?" She asked.

Snake looked up.

That nagging feeling gnawing at the back of his mind was starting to wear grooves in his head. She never showed up. Someone how Snake found that impossible. He may not have known Kate for a very long time but he was confident in at least a few things about her. She was a great doctor, one whose dedication to her patients was rare. She would not have simply forgotten to show up. Even so, where had she gone? Snake glanced out the window. It was

starting to touch the late afternoon and he now wished he hadn't slept so much. "She isn't there?"

"No." Judy replied quizzically. "Was she meant to come in?"

Snake felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach that had gone away. He saw her almost seven hours ago. Seven hours was a long time. Too long for her to simply disappear without telling anyone, least of all him. Seven hours head start, Snake kept thinking. "I'll talk to you later." He said abruptly and allowed the transmission to end.

Was he over reacting? For all he knew, she could walk through the door with a perfectly rational explanation for where she had been. Snake gave himself the benefit of realising that he was probably overreacting and the thought that he might have, galled him to no end. He never over reacted about anything, usually and now look at him.

Worrying about a woman like a lovesick teenager.

Why should she tell him her whereabouts from moment to moment? Snake had no claim on her even if they shared the last night together. With a twinge of guilt, Snake remembered that he couldn't even tell her how he felt, even though she needed to hear it. After that, Snake shouldn't expect anything from her. Maybe she just went away to think. Maybe it was just that simple.

Except instinct told him, she would have said something.

He relied on his instincts more than any other sense. Snake's instincts had kept him alive through a lot of tough times and even more years. Every fibre of his being told him something was wrong. When he put aside all the crap running through his head, like the implications of their new relationship or the weakness he thought he was displaying because of it, Snake was

still left with his instincts. Inside the crucible of his mind, he had burnt away the irrelevancies and was left with a pure truth.

His instincts told Snake Plissken to get off his ass and go find Kate Ellison before it was too late.

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Snake drove into town first.

He took the cycle straight towards the Slice, hoping perhaps she got held up by an unexpected meeting Inner Circle meeting. This was not an obscure possibility, because the Circle met on almost a daily basis even if the attendance of its members were few in number. Snake pulled the bike into the Slice's parking lot and his eyes scanned the area for a glimpse of Kate's mountain bike. He noticed that was missing when he left her house and he knew she wouldn't have been able to get into town any other way.

Walking into the diner, he saw the lunch time crowd starting to dissipate. The waitresses were clearing the tables and Sherrie came to greet him as he made his way to the Circle's table.

"Hey Sugar." She smiled. "You're a big hero today." She declared.

Snake looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Well Duke Washington told us all about it." Sherrie gushed. "How you saved Tristan Evans and then showed everyone what to do to fight the Zoners off."

Great, Snake groaned inwardly, he didn't need to be called a hero again. Nothing good ever came out of such a title. "Nice." Snake frowned. "Have you seen Kate at all today?" He chose to ask her instead. Sherrie worked the morning shift, so if Kate had come into the Slice, she would have known about it. Besides, Sherrie was the eyes and ears of the Slice. There wasn't much that happened in this diner that slipped her notice.

"No." Sherrie shook her head. "We thought she'd be with you. Since you two are a thing now."

"A thing?" Snake asked. Did everyone in this town know that he and Kate had spent the night together? Secrets must be the most valuable commodity in Sanctuary, Snake thought with irritation.

"Everybody knows about you and Kate Snake." Sherrie continued, adding to his ire. "Sanctuary is a small place. Not much happens around here without everyone knowing."

Snake wasn't in the mood for this. "So you haven't seen her?" He decided to get back to the point.

"No." Sherrie said bewildered by the obvious hostility in his voice. "What's wrong?"

Other than this bad feeling that something had happened to Kate and by the fact that no one has seen her in the past seven hours, nothing was wrong, Snake wanted to say. "She's missing." He said resuming his journey to the Inner Circle's table.

"She hasn't been here all day." Sherrie remarked matching his strides.

Snake arrived at the table to see Duke and Ben Erikson at the table.



"Hi Snake." Duke grinned. "Sit down, grab a cup of coffee with us." Obviously, surviving last night's skirmish with the Zoners had left the man in a good mood.

"Have either of you seen the Doc today?" Snake asked instead, his alarm rising with each person he met who didn't see Kate today. Suspicions were starting to form in Snake's mind. Ugly little notions that seeded themselves in the back of his mind were taking on a life of its own.

"Not me." Ben replied first. "I thought she would be at the hospital, seeing after Tristan."

"She left this morning to go there," Snake retorted, "but Judy told me she never arrived."

"Are you saying no one's seen Kate since this morning?" Sherrie exclaimed in shock. "How is that possible?"

The fear dawning in all their eyes was nothing new to Snake. He had been thinking it ever since he had spoken to Judy less than an hour ago. Snake turned away from them. His gaze passing the residual diners in the Slice and even beyond the serene calmness of Sanctuary City outside the glass doors and windows. There was no peace for him, not now. Not after he had realised the truth.

Kate had never made it into town.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### I

Snake Plissken had a hunch.

He left the Slice absolutely certain that Kate had never reached town limits. Climbing on his motorcycle, he headed for home, leaving the Inner Circle to their debates on what should be done. Most of them were still in denial, believing Kate would turn up and make them look foolish for being so concerned. Snake was not that optimistic, remaining long enough to realise that they would be no help to him or Kate. When he had finally walked away, the Inner Circle seemed to be quickly descending into disarray. Without either Kate or Evans telling them what to do, they were like lost children with no direction. He supposed he could have used given them some leadership but at the moment, Snake was in no mood for that. There was also this terrible premonition that told Snake Plissken that this time the ball was firmly in his court.

At least he didn't have to dribble for points in ten seconds or be shot.

By the time Duke Washington had finally begun to understand that Kate's disappearance was genuine and began discussing the idea of sending out search parties, Snake's patience had finally reached his limits. At that moment, he chose to make a quick exit before he spoke his mind and called them all a bunch of fucking morons. Christ, however did they manage without Evans and Kate?

At first, when he walked out of the diner, Snake was at a loss over what to do. Snake had a rough idea where she might be taken to and he hoped it hadn't come to that already. Because of the time frame, it troubled him a great deal that she had been missing since eight thirty this morning. By now, she could be well and truly beyond Sanctuary's reach or worse yet, she could be nowhere at all. Instinct told Snake that she was still alive and he forced himself to keep any other possibilities out of his mind as he spent a few minutes on the cycle, trying to think of a definitive course of action.

Finally he came to a decision.

Even though it was a cold trail, it was the only one he had. He had to trace back her journey by the route Kate had taken when she had left the house this morning. If she was still in Sanctuary, he had a chance of getting to her while she still lived. If not, then Snake knew he'd find her dead body in the Zone.

Once that decision was made, Snake's progress was rapid. Coming up with a plan had given him some

purpose and Snake took full advantage of that. Driving up the road which took him back the way he had come to town, Snake tried to think of what route Kate would have taken to get to work this morning. He didn't think it would be any different from the one he was traversing now. Her being on a bicycle had given him something to work with. He knew she would have stayed on the roads instead of taking short cuts. Bicycle wheels would have found grass and ditches to untenable thus, she would have avoided hilly or uneven terrain by taking the easiest possible.

Within minutes, Snake was on the deserted stretch of road which led from her place to town. If Kate had been kidnapped or ambushed before she had reached town, then this would have been the place where it would have happened. It was still less than twenty minutes away from Sanctuary city and once one crossed over the large hill that housed the settlement, they would have been fully visible to the homes on the outskirts as they came down the steep incline. Prior to that, the road before that hill was protected by tall conifers and kept secluded by the lack of houses. It stood as the halfway point between the city outskirts and the small neighbourhood that sat on the cliffs of Della Falls.

Snake slowed the motorcycle to a crawl as he travelled down tarred roadway, his eyes scanning past the bitumen and at the terrain carefully. He knew what he was looking for, could almost predict its presence with utter certainty, it was just a matter of finding the spot. As he looked around the place, he knew inwardly, this was where it had happened. A gut instinct told Snake to ignore the serene beauty of the place and not to be misled by its deceiving calm. This was where she had been taken. Snake could feel the saturation of violence in the air while whispers of terrible omens were spoken in the rustle of wind through the tall, striking trees.

God, he hoped she was still alive.

Despite everything, Snake knew he had to entertain that possibility at some point. While logic and reason told him to believe she was still alive, Snake knew life was seldom that simple. At the moment, all Snake had to cling to was the memory of the Englishman's anger. The bastard wanted to gloat and he wanted to make Kate suffer for the humiliation she had caused him. The man wanted her alive long enough to see Sanctuary under his control. This did not mean however that one trigger happy asshole wouldn't be able to kill her on route to the Zone. While he could not say he knew Kate like he knew himself, Snake knew she was capable of taking care of herself to a point. Yet, what would she do if someone intended her harm, did Kate know how to protect herself? He remembered her saying once she had never harmed another human being in her life, was that because she didn't know how?

Shit, why did she have to be a doctor?

He had not driven very far when he saw the skid marks on the bitumen. Black, crusted stains of oil and rubber were hardening in the sun's heat. Immediately, he pulled the Chopper to the side of the road and dismounted. Around him, the silence after the drone of his engines had died was overpowering. The atmosphere had become decidedly unsettling and Snake knew it had more to do with his mood more than anything else. In the distance, he could hear birds chirping and he imagined their songs were screams of desperation to tell what they had seen.

Snake crossed the tar, pausing in the middle of the road long enough to examine the skid marks on the bitumen. The softness of the rubber and grease told him the tracks were fresh, made in the last day or so. However, it was a warm day and the heat of the bitumen could have easily melted and residual remains from days before. Still, it was something. Snake noticed that the marks curved towards the left of the road and he followed the trail, reaching the other side.

Once he crossed over, there was no more doubt in his mind regarding Kate's fate.

The mountain bike which he had come to know as hers lay in an untidy heap, the sun still glistening off its chrome finish where it had come to rest after it had been forced off the road. He saw the abrupt end of the rubber remains and knew that the bike had come to an abrupt stop, its brakes locking so hard that the cycle had flipped over. Snake forced himself forward, keeping all thoughts of fear or despair out of his

mind. Concentrate Plissken, Snake told himself.

The back wheel of the bike was misshapen as if something very large had struck it fast, confirming Snake's partial hypothesis. He could imagine the events as they transpired this morning. After she had left him, Kate had been cycling up this road, unaware of anything amiss. They probably waited all night for her, he guessed and decided to take her after she left the house. It wasn't difficult to follow her at a safe distance if they knew her habits. Once she had come down this road, there was nothing holding them back. Someone had come up behind her and hit her once or maybe twice and forced her off the road. She had been thrown of the bike when it braked suddenly, and she crashed onto the grass.

Snake could see broken blades of grass, some crushed while others were clearly results of indentation left by footprints. It disturbed Snake that he could only see the footprints of one person, but then he was no expert. At least there was no blood. This however meant nothing but Snake took his breaks where he could and allowed himself some cause for hope. They may have taken her, but the certainly didn't draw any blood.

What he did notice however, was a piece of rag lying close by. It certainly didn't look like anything she was wearing and he'd never seen it on the bike. Snake reached for it and immediately smelled the acrid residue remaining. Turning his head away sharply, Snake had to blink a moment to shake off the effects of it. The rag was almost saturated with the stuff and while its alcohol base had evaporated, he could feel its coolness against his skin. He felt a few seconds of wooziness where his stomach leapt out of his throat before he got a handle on it. Once he had composed himself, Snake threw the rag away, realising that he didn't need to examine any further.

Snake knew ether when he smelled it.

So, whomever had taken Kate wanted her alive. They had ran her off the road here, which would have no doubt disorientated her or at least knock the wind out of her long enough for them to use the ether. Knowing Kate, she would have fought hard and they needed her docile.

Needed her docile and quiet for awhile. It came to him in a flash of insight.

She was not in Sanctuary any more.

They wanted her sedated so that she would be a trouble free passenger when they took her to the Zone. With clarity, Snake now knew everything. Even the who.

Jack Travis.

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Strange things were happening at the hospital today.

Julius Vinh had been a Sanctuary doctor for almost a year now. He'd seen numerous refugees come in and out the hospital and to a certain extent, he could admit to having some feel for the type of people they were. Most were frightened families, cowering and subdued, grateful to be alive in a saner place. They all bore that humbled look and while it was disconcerting for him to see when he knew that humbled look so well himself. He remembered how it was when he was a child and he had come here from Vietnam, seeing that desolation of his parents face, knowing that they had left everything they knew for a better place, yet still frightened of the new frontier.

The refugees that came from the Zone had always been like that. The new group that arrived the night before were no different. The women wore faces of unease, their senses still unaccustomed to their new circumstances and wary of everyone. The children were less restrained although there were always a few who wore looks of such age that it sadden Vinh to think what could have driven their childhood away so utterly.

Yet something about them didn't feel right.

Vinh couldn't put his finger on what that it was that felt out of place. There was no doubt that they weren't honest about their intentions to come here, not judging by the level of wounds received by some. However, Vinh sensed the mood was different, a line of tension that ran thick through the group that seemed concurrent with something happening now, not just residual effects of their dramatic escape from the Zone.

He walked up and down the ward all morning, trying to work out what was different. They remained in their beds some of them, vaguely distant and giving him all the correct answers to his question, but none of them could dispel this feeling of uneasiness. Neither did it help that Kate was now known to be missing. It disturbed a lot of people in Sanctuary that not only was Kate gone, but Tristan Evans was still in critical condition only a few doors down.

He entered C Ward again, to check on the least critical patients. Most of the refugees in this ward required nothing more than observation for the night. They were made up of mainly women and children, all in sore need of sustenance and a good night's sleep without the fear of someone sneaking up on them in the darkness. He glanced at one child in particular, who sat on a chair next to his mother's bed, staring emptily into the window at the sunlight outside. The boy's mother was asleep and Vinh wondered if the father had made it to Sanctuary too.

No sooner than he had thought about that question, a tall, burly looking man entered through the door. Like most of the refugees, he seemed as bedraggled as the rest, although Vinh knew looks were deceiving. A lot of the men who had arrived last night, though worn and weary after their journey were in good health. No marked diseases or debilitating injuries. However, this was not that unusual. Many male refugees were forced to work in labour camps, while women and children hid underground most of the time.

The man stared at him as Vinh walked past, his hostility apparent. Once again, the doctor felt that strange uneasiness and wished there was someone around who could tell him that his fears were unfounded, but unfortunately there was not. Most of the staff could see little past the injuries and the circumstances of these unfortunates.

Vinh kept walking trying not to pay any attention to the man and his family as he walked past, although he still spied at them from the corner of his eye. The man, satisfied that Vinh was no longer watching, moved the boy out of his chair gruffly and there was an instance when father and son exchange glances. It was a look laced in neither family affection or even like. The boy hurried out of his father's view, hurrying out of the ward as the man took his place next to the woman in the bed. She turned away at her husband's arrival.

Obviously not all escaping families were happy ones.

The boy streaked past him, running into the corridor as far away from his father as he could get. Vinh emerged in the corridor and saw the boy had disappeared.

II

Snake entered Taylor's room an hour shortly after he left the site where he found Kate's broken bicycle. He had slipped into the hospital largely unnoticed because it was still quite chaotic due to the sudden arrival of the refugees from last night's skirmish. While not all of them had sustained injuries, due to the appalling conditions in the Zone, Sanctuary doctors wanted them examined nonetheless.

Snake hadn't been into see Tristan Evans yet, although there was little point in doing so because Evans was more than likely still under. One didn't recover from those kinds of injuries overnight. If he made it through the week, Snake would be pleasantly surprised. As he thought about it, he wondered if Taylor was in any better shape.

That question was answered quickly enough when he walked into Taylor's room. Taylor sat up in his bed when Snake entered, his movements laced with care. No wonder, Snake decided. No one could have recovered from the beating Taylor endured in twenty four hours. Even now, his youthful face was marked from the Zoner's fist, with ugly, pulpish bruises scattered over his skin.

"Have you found her?" Taylor asked immediately. News travelled fast through Sanctuary and he had heard about Kate's disappearance from one of the nurses. Most people were fearing the worst and Taylor was no different to any of them, in this situation.

"No." Snake said simply, pulling up a chair and sitting down heavily.

"I heard they were talking about search parties." Taylor replied, leaning into his pillow with a heavy sigh, disappointed at the lack of good news.

The loss on his face was a growing epidemic that Snake was seeing everywhere. Even though the Sanctuaries were trying to keep a stiff upper lip, the loss of Kate and Tristan balancing on the brink of death had shaken them considerably. He kept the news of his discovery to himself, knowing that it would probably make things worse.

"Its too late." Snake remarked.

Taylor's eyes widened and Snake's response made him sit up immediately. "What do you mean?"

"She's not here any more." Snake reached into his back pocket for a cigarette and found it annoying for a moment when he hesitated, hearing Kate's voice in his head about smoking in her hospital.

Taylor said nothing for a few seconds, taking in what Snake had said. "She's in the Zone isn't she?"

Snake Plissken nodded slowly. Somehow another person realising it, made the nightmare of it more tangible and real. When he was on the highway, it was all supposition and theory but now, there was none of that. Snake felt something deep inside of him that wanted to scream and kick and slip into a murderous frenzy because of this. The saner part of him was shocked, reminding the rest of Snake Plissken that she was just another woman, no different than any that had breezed into his life over the years. Why was he so concerned? Wasn't the most important thing to Snake Plissken, Snake Plissken? What did it matter if she died, he had gotten laid. Beyond that, he shouldn't give a fuck about anything else.

Yeah, he shouldn't have but he did.

"Is she dead?" Taylor's voice cut through this conflicting emotions.

"No." Snake answered honestly, remembering what the Englishman had said to him about what he would do once he had Kate Ellison in his hands. Still, there was worse things than her just being dead and his stomach hollowed just thinking about the possibilities. "He wants her alive."

Snake's stared at Taylor's eyes until the light of comprehension filled the young man's face. "Aw Jesus..." Taylor closed his eyes and turned away to hide his disgust. "You don't think.."

Snake's stony expression was answer enough.

"We've got to get her back." Taylor retorted. "We've got to do something!" Taylor proceeded to get out of bed.

"You're in not shape to do anything." Snake said firmly. "I'll do it."

Taylor was visibly shocked by Snake's response and quickly responded. "You can't do this alone. They'll be expecting someone to go after her. Its crazy!" Yet as Taylor looked into Snake's darkened eyes, cold

and unrevealing, it occurred to him with sudden clarity that Snake meant it. As much as Taylor admired Snake, he had no illusions as to the man's reputation. He did believe that Snake cared for his dead brother, but beyond that it was obvious Snake had little value for human life. That he could place his own life in so much danger for Kate was surprising. "Snake, you don't have to do this."

"Like hell I do," Snake retorted standing up slowly. "Like I didn't have stay here, like I didn't have show you guys how to help those people last night, since I've gotten here, looks like I've doing stuff I just didn't have to do. Who are we kidding? I didn't have to get fucking involved in anything but it looks like I am."

Snake walked to the window and stared outside, at the sun that was starting to disappear behind the hills. He supposed he knew it would come down to this eventually, that in the end he would have to make a choice for something. To stand by and let her die, to get on his bike and roll out of here without a care in the world, except his own skin. Or he could go after her, he could admit just how much she meant to him, put his life on the line for her and take a gamble with the chance of a future with Kate. It was almost inevitable that it was going to go down this way.

Taylor nodded slowly. "What I've been hearing about you and Kate, is it true?"

Snake glanced over his shoulder at Taylor, no longer having the energy to deny anything to anyone. It seems like the entire town knew he was doing Kate Ellison before he did. "True enough." Damn, Snake thought, hospital or not, he needed a cigarette and proceeded to light one before he could continue on. "That's why I've got to be the one to go into the Zone."

"She's still alive Snake." Taylor said trying to be of comfort, now that he knew Snake's feelings on the matter. To himself and Sanctuary, it was their leader they had lost. How sobering it was for them to remember that their leader was also a human being. Who would have thought, Taylor mused to himself, Kate Ellison and Snake Plissken. Then again, both of them seemed like a force of nature unto themselves, each reacting to one another like a catalyst. Even he could see how right they were for each other.

"I know she's alive." Snake turned on him. "Seeing her alive is how I'm going to get her out. If I see her as anything else, then I'm no good to her." It was the first trace of emotion Snake allowed himself to feel. It was like spark that fuelled him on for the night ahead.

"When are you going?"

"When I'm ready." He answered looking away again. "I know how I to get in quiet."

Suddenly, the quiet was broken by a running child across the door way. The boy moved past only a moment, but Snake caught enough of a glimpse to recognise him. He walked past Taylor's bed and went through the doorway, staring after the child as he disappeared up the corridor.

"What is it Snake?" Taylor inquired, curious by Snake's reaction.

Snake stared at the corridor for a moment, even though the boy was long gone, before he turned back to Taylor. "I know that kid." He replied taking a deep breath of his cigarette and blowing smoke into the corridor.

"Looks like one the people that came through from the Zone last night." Taylor offered. "Are you sure you know him?"

"Yeah," Snake nodded, knowing that he didn't make a mistake. "His name is Aaron I think." Snake replied, recalling the incident clearly even if the names were fuzzy. "I saw his father take one in the head when they were trying to get out. Glad he made it anyway." Snake paused remembering what lay ahead and returning to the frame of mind he had been in prior to the interruption.

"I got to go." He said turning back to Taylor. "See you around kid."

It was that simple for him, Taylor thought to himself. A simple obligatory goodbye even though he was going off to fight a one man war on his own. Christ, he was an arrogant bastard. "Stay alive Snake," Taylor replied finally. "Stay alive."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### I

Jesus, her head hurt.

Her mouth tasted like cotton and her throat felt dry. She tried to rub her forehead and discovered with sudden alarm that she couldn't. Kate Ellison was aware of voices, of muffled sounds in the distance but she had yet to open her eyes and see where she was. Her memories chose to return at that point, the cauldron of swirling images sharpening to her last clear memory and the acrid smell that clung heavily to her skin.

Ether.

In the back recesses of her mind, she remembered her last conscious thought had been of that particularly substance, just before someone drugged her with it. Kate tried to speak, but the words came out of her throat as a muffled groan. For some reason she had difficulty focusing her thoughts and everything seemed sluggish and far away. The physician in her knew the cause of course, she was still under the influence of the drug and its eventual deterioration from her system was still some time away.

Even though she knew what had happened to her, knew why her mind was a rapidly sharpening and blurring shadows, Kate was aware that she was helpless at this moment. Her body would not cooperate with her mind in this state and coupled with her rising fear and anxiety, pushed her deeper into near uselessness.

"I think she's awake." One voice seemed to boom over the others.

A moment passed and Kate felt arms dragging her up to an upright position. Even though her head was swimming, she was able to discern that she was in an unfamiliar place and the voices around her were that of strangers. At this point, she became aware that her legs were bound too and in a daze, she wondered when that had happened.

A hand grabbed her face under her chin roughly and the unpleasantness of the action allowed her to look her captor in the face. Kate's eyes widened at the sight of him and even though she was half drugged with the effects of ether, her mind snapped to attention enough to realise how much trouble she was in.

Christ, she thought, I'm in the Zone.

"Welcome to the Zone." The Englishman's voice ripped through the air like the crack of a whip.

Kate looked up, trying hard to focus and mildly grateful that the drugs had made her somewhat numb to her situation, even though she retained enough sense to know the predicament before her. The Englishman was leaning down in front of her, making certain that she knew who he was and how much power he had over her now.

"She seems a little out of sorts doesn't she?" He laughed, looking over his shoulder. There was a chorus of laughter that followed that remark which enabled her to focus on them instead. Kate blinked hard and saw herself in a large room that looked a lot like the inside of a library or some important looking building. She saw numerous faces, most she did not know except one in particular. It was the only face that wasn't laughing.

Jack Travis sat there in the corner, next to a window glaring at her. Her heart sank seeing him there, knowing now how she had come to be here and who had brought her here against her will.

Jack, Jack, at the very least, we were still friends. How could you do this?

The Englishman dug his fingers deeper into his skin so that she would look into his face again. "I've waited a long time for this Kate," he smiled, his mouth showing perfect teeth that looked mostly predatory.

Kate said nothing, partially numbed by the residual effects of the ether and also because she knew that it was probably best if she did not speak at this time. In his eyes, she saw the murderous rage and the hatred that burned deeply for her. With sudden clarity of mind, Kate knew at that moment, she would be lucky if she was granted a quick death at the hands of this animal.

"Nothing to say? He laughed, standing up and dragging her face with him so she had no choice but to follow.

In the corner of her eye, she saw Jack flinch at the action. He seemed to have trouble dealing with the Englishman's treatment of her. While the others seemed genuinely amused and gloated derisive remarks and calls at her, Jack seemed removed from their company. This hardly surprised Kate. No doubt the fool had no idea what it would be like when he chose to switch sides or what he would be losing in turn for his vengeance.

"I'm surprised at your silence," the Englishman continued, enjoying the position of power he now had. "The last time you were in my company, you weren't so shy."

Kate glared at him instead of saying what she wanted to in retaliation. He was going to harm her, of that she had no doubt and to the fact that she would be unable to do nothing to stop him frighten her further, however, she wasn't going to goad him into it.

"Never mind," he said moving closer to her ear. "Soon you'll scream, but first I have something to take care of first."

At that he let go of her and in her condition, Kate fell straight unto the floor with a heavy thud. Fortunately, she fell on a sitting position and took a few moments to recover amidst the laughing of the Englishman's entourage. After a moment, she looked up again, sufficiently focused on the changing events before her. The Englishman walked away from her, towards the centre of the room, almost like a maestro about to begin a performance.

"Jack.". The Englishman said to the once Sanctuary engineer. "Come forward."

Jack glanced at the others around him and found all their eyes on him, their laughing coming to a sudden stop. The silence unnerved him. The man leapt off the ledge he was sitting on and took a few tentative steps forward. Even though he tried to look ahead, he did steal a glance at Kate as he walked past, although he couldn't meet her eyes.

The sequence of events moving past Kate lead her to have a clear understanding of what was going to happen.

Jack, you poor stupid bastard.

"You've been a great help to us Jack," the lord of the Zone declared, staring at Jack hard.

Jack flinched uncomfortably under the man's scrutiny, but found his voice enough to speak. "It has been beneficial for both parties."

"Yes," the Englishman remarked thoughtfully. "It has been. You're quite an exceptional specimen Jack Travis. The ability to shed your loyalty for Sanctuary at a moment's notice and deliver into my hands not only their leader, but very shortly Sanctuary itself. I admire your wonderful sense of duplicity."

"I did it for the deal we made." Jack retorted, deciding that this was the time to remind the Englishman of



this fact. "When you're finished with her, she belongs to me." He gestured at Kate.

The Englishman glanced over his shoulder at Kate with a sinister gleam in his eyes and then switched back to Jack. "I haven't forgotten that Jack." He smiled. "However, it is fair to let you know that I have altered our agreement." He walked towards Kate and kneeled over her. Kate forced herself not to look at him, concentrating on the steady stream of emotions running across Jack Travis' face. Only now, he was beginning to suspect what she already knew.

He ran her fingers through her dark hair and held it to his face. Taking a deep breath of the scent, he looked up at Jack. "I'm afraid I've grown too attached to her Jack. I intend to keep her for my own." Then he turned to her and looked at Kate with an intention that sent a sliver of terror through her when she realised its meaning. "We're going to get to know each other very well."

Her horror was similarly shared by Jack. "We had a deal! She was mine!" He started to come towards Kate and the Englishman. The Englishman rose quickly to his feet, unperturbed by Jack's outburst and nodded at Miranda who had been slowly making her way behind Jack. Jack hadn't taken more than a few steps when he uttered a single, short scream. His body tightened in a spasm of pain as Miranda stepped back, the gleaming blade in her hand dripping with Jack Travis' blood.

The physician in Kate forced her to move, but she got no more than standing up clumsily when she saw Jack collapse, the knife would oozing blood as he fell flat on his face. Kate had no doubt from the entry point of Miranda's blade that he was dead. She closed her eyes to absorb the pain, to force the terrible emotions of dismay in seeing him die. Oh, she knew he was a fool who had betrayed her and doomed not only himself, but her as well but Kate felt similarly to blame, seeing him dead now.

I should have thought more for you Jack. I'm sorry, I didn't.

"Nicely done my dear." The Englishman said moving behind Kate once again. "Remove this fucker from my sight." He then glanced at Kate with a faint smile. His hand slid around her waist and his touch made her move away instinctively. "I have other things to attend to."

Miranda paused a moment. A flicker of emotion ran across her face and Kate was unable to miss the look of pure hatred that was directed at her from Miranda. However, that moment allowed Miranda no more than a moment before she and the other hugs resumed the task of removing Jack's corpse out of the room.

At this, the Englishman nodded at the others and they too filed out of the room, leaving him and Kate alone. Ariel took a deep breath, steeled herself for what would be and kept repeating to herself that survival should be all that mattered. As she watched him swagger forward, his eyes full of burning hatred, hip lips wet with the insatiable desire for revenge, she kept repeating those words to herself with almost fanatical obsession.

Kate was still saying that when he started tearing into her body.

## II

Once he arrived at the decision that he was going after Kate, Snake Plissken knew exactly what he had to do to begin. There was little time to waste and upon leaving the hospital, he drove directly to Querto's impound lot which also housed Sanctuary's armoury. He had no definitive plan in his mind as of yet, except for the fact that it would take a few hours to get to Sanctuary and Snake wanted to be there by the time the sun went down.

Despite the dangers lurking in the darkness of the Zone, Snake was more than familiar with moving around the dismal urban centre after two past experiences in similar situations. Someone had once said he knew how to get in quiet. Snake had to reluctantly admit that was true. However this time it was going to be different. This time the choice to go in was entirely his and it had little to do with a time bomb ticking away inside of him, threatening to end his life at a moments notice.

This time it was much worse.

Querto and his men were well into their afternoon binge when Snake arrived. He could smell the noxious fumes of Querto's home brew heavy in the air as he walked into the man's apartment above the garages. There were various assortments of female clothing scattered about the room and it appeared to Snake, that he wasn't the only one who didn't sleep alone last night. Querto had probably no idea of what had happened today.

Snake walked over an unconscious Red, trying to miss stepping on the beer bottles and the plates of half eaten food that had been there since Christ knows when. Somewhere amongst the litter, Snake caught a glimpse of Crow who was asleep on the floor just as intoxicated. He spied a half naked blond, lying next to him. After the raid last night, these boys had certainly gotten toasted, Snake decided. He chose not to rouse them because he needed little from them. It was Querto that Snake had come to see.

The man himself was also half asleep and looked nowhere near waking up. Snake didn't have time to cajole him out of his slumber and reached promptly for a half filled bottle of beer next to the man's bed. Querto lay there snoring, with a Latin beauty Snake knew around town as Esmerelda in his arms. It was all very precious until Snake proceeded to empty the bottle's contents into Querto's face.

Querto's reaction took a few seconds to emerge. When it did, the man began sputtering and shaking his head in defiance of the liquid dribbling down his face and into his nose. He swore in an incomprehensible string of Mexicali profanities before sitting up abruptly and staring at Snake in shock and rising anger.

"What the fuck you doing man?" He nearly shouted, forgetting all his inhibitions about the Snake Plissken legend.

"Kate's gone." Snake said simply, knowing that would be enough to dispel any unnecessary posturing.

It took a moment for it to register in Querto's mind, through the haze of alcohol and whatever else the man had imbibed the night before. "Gone?"

"She's in the Zone." Snake said before adding, "Travis." There was little need to explain further.

Querto wiped the beer from his face and stood shakily from his feet. "That bastard."

"Yeah," Snake retorted softly. "I need a few things and I don't have a lot of time."

Querto stared back at Snake realising in a flash of insight, what the man had intended. "You're going in? Alone?" He declared incredulously, any remnants of his previous drunken state completely driven away now.

"I've done it before."

Querto couldn't argue with him there. "Me and the guys will come with you."

"No." Snake shook his head. "I work alone and they'll be expecting a rescue attempt any way."

However, Querto was not so easily convinced. "One man or a dozen ain't gonna make that much difference."

"It will to me." Snake retorted with enough of an edge in his voice to prove that he was done arguing on this particular subject. "Besides," Snake added a moment later, knowing that his determination to go alone had offended Querto a bit, even though the Mexican would never admit it out loud. "You and the guys should stay here and keep an eye out. I got a bad feeling something's happening in this town."

"Like what?" Querto inquired, not quite believing him.

"Something." Snake mused, thinking about the events that had taken place in the last twenty four hours. "Too much is happening, too quickly."

After a moment, Querto began to see it too. Snake was right. Since Taylor made his dramatic return to town, they'd learnt of a traitor which coincided very conveniently with the disappearance of Jack Travis and now the kidnapping of Kate Ellison. Suddenly it seemed things were on the move. Snake had spoken about the Englishman's attempt to take Sanctuary City and the sudden momentum of events could not be a coincidence. This was the beginning of a larger plan.

Querto let out a deep breath. "Okay Snake, what do you need from me?"

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Miranda lit a cigarette, trying to keep her mind on the work she was required to do. Tomorrow was an important day, one that everyone in the Zone had been working towards for so long. It was too important for her to screw it up with her misguided and passionate feelings for her boss. Tomorrow, they would finally show the Sanctuaries who ran island and she would be at her masters side revelling in their destruction with total relish.

All it took was one stupid asshole to make the whole thing work.

Jack Travis had come to them out of nowhere, declaring that he was ready to make a deal with the Englishman in exchange for Kate Ellison. The plans were already on the way for the taking of Sanctuary, but Jacks cooperation was fortuitous. The intelligence he provided them with was invaluable, even to his betrayal of Taylor, one of Sanctuary's own intelligence operative in the Zone. All of it served to cement the plan that had been thought out months ahead.

However, right now all that was the furthest thing from Miranda's mind. She had set Emilio and Carson to get their people ready to move up even though she should have done it herself. As reliable as those two men were, they were unfortunately stupid and couldn't be expected to handle anything out of the ordinary. Yet, Miranda found herself here anyway, standing outside the Sanctum like a jealous school girl while the Englishman gave the full treatment to Kate Ellison.

Not that Ellison was up to enjoying it anyway. At least that was what the cries Miranda was hearing, led her to believe.

There were other people in the hallway, listening to the sounds emanating from the room. Miranda looked up showing a dispassionate mask that allowed nothing to permeate through it. Despite her dislike for Ellison and the Sanctuaries, there was something deep inside of her that blanched at the sound of the woman screaming in agony as the Englishman did his worst. Miranda didn't need to see inside the room to know what was going on. The screams and the sounds of fists slapping hard against skin was more graphic than any picture Miranda could have witnessed herself.

Miranda glanced at the others. The women looked vacant and defeated, no trace of anything left that could be called esteem in their eyes. Ellison would look like that soon. The men that owned them wore sneering expressions, some were cheering their master on as he defiled the leader of the Sanctuaries. Miranda's concern over the Englishman's behaviour was over two things. Ellison was not a killer, she was a doctor. Someone who had never been pushed very far and this was certainly pushing. She certainly had the ability to fight back. No one who could unite a snivelling bunch of whiners to fight the Zone would take this kind of humiliation well. Miranda feared what would happen if the doctor was forced to cross that line. Kate Ellison was not a killer, not yet anyway, but that could change. Some thing else bothered Miranda and this was the concern that occupied her the most.

Plissken would be coming.

This had not occurred to the Englishman yet. In fact, she doubted if anyone even thought about the

possibility. Men around here believed women were commodities. Miranda understood that and she had learnt to live with it. She had become the Englishman's woman by playing it smart, by being all that he wanted her to be. In exchange for her obedience, she gained some measure of independence.

Women like Ellison didn't tolerate submission under any circumstances and if Travis was right, if Ellison and Plissken were lovers, that changed things considerably. Miranda knew women like Ellison, they didn't believe in just hopping in the sack with the first man that treated them nice. Plissken's relationship with Ellison was more than sexual and if there was some depth of emotion between them, then it was almost a certainty that he would be coming for her.

And when he found what the Englishman had done, Miranda hoped that all the guns in the Zone was going to be able to keep Plissken from tearing out the Englishman's heart.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### I

The sun was starting to set in the distance by the time Snake Plissken made the final preparations for his journey into the Zone. It had taken much more time than he had anticipated to do what he had to this, even with Querto's assistance. Still despite the lateness of the evening, things were still moving according to his schedule. In the past few hours, Snake had developed a certain admiration for the Mexican as they worked together throughout most of the day on Snake's mode of transport into the Zone.

He had needed an advantage.

It was almost a foregone conclusion that the Englishman would know he was coming, especially if his intelligence came from that son of a bitch, Travis. During the months he had been driving through Sanctuary territory, Snake had remembered seeing an old airstrip one afternoon. As there had been no international airport in Vancouver Island, the bulk of air travel from the mainland had been conducted by small twin engine planes. The planes Snake saw abandoned on the tarmac were of this type. The airport itself, like everything else in the place had long since been deserted. After the pulse, most of these planes, though intact and largely in good condition, were incapable of flying, because of their destroyed electric's.

When he had been exploring the place, it was almost by pure chance that Snake Plissken had happened across a forgotten hangar on the far side of the runway. Mainly out of curiosity, Snake had chose to look inside and find himself a genuine museum piece. Inside the dilapidated hangar, under a canvas sheet covered in decades of dust, Snake found himself a tarnished, corroded World War 2 bomber. A Mosquito, if Snake's flight training served him correct. Technically, it was still intact, left in the hangar and completely forgotten. Following that day, Snake had spent several afternoons working on it, mending the mix of stainless steel and plywood wings. To him, it was like fixing up a vintage automobile. While he had never entertained any real intention of taking the Mosquito up, what started out as leisurely tinkering had soon become a labour of love.

"That's it man." Querto remarked, sliding the panel back that hid the Rolls Royce engine on the left wing. "We've done all we can. If she don't fly now, she ain't never going to."

Snake had to agree with that, although he wasn't about to say so. "It'll be alright." Snake said instead, loading the last of his gear into the passenger seat of the Mosquito's cockpit. At the moment, he didn't want to think of all the things that could go wrong because he was driven with fierce determination to get to the Zone one way or another. Had he driven, he would have to enter the Zone using conventional routes which he didn't doubt were heavily guarded by the Englishman's people. He needed an element of surprise if he was going to reach Kate. This Mosquito, outdated as it was, moved fast and could glide when it was required would give him a very large advantage.

Querto looked at Snake, now that all the repairs and modifications were done and there was nothing to keep the man from remaining here. "I still think you shouldn't go alone." Querto remarked, making a last

ditch effort to convince the man to accept his help. The Mexican was clearly uncomfortable at letting a friend embark on such a hazardous mission alone. His genuine concern impressed Snake. Also, strangely enough, Snake noticed Querto's thick Mexican accent completely disappeared.

"This isn't up for discussion." Snake retorted climbing up the ladder of the craft. He didn't have time to deal with this again, despite the fact that Querto's concern was for his well being. "Something is happening in this place." He stared Querto hard for a moment so he wouldn't be misunderstood. "I don't know what it is yet, but its coming and with Evans down, the Circle wouldn't know shit from shovel. They'll be so busy carrying out a motion for an action to fucking move to react, that by the time they move their asses, everyone will be dead. Sorry, compadre, but it looks like you're it."

Querto frowned unhappily, switching to his dumb Latino act again. "I don't like no responsibility man." He retorted. "I follow orders I don't know how to give them."

"You'll learn fast." Snake said continuing into the cockpit. "Now shut up and help me take off."

Querto stepped backward, knowing by his tone that this was all the discussion Snake Plissken was going to tolerate on this issue. Snake pulled the canopy over him and snapped it shut. The Mosquito was fully fuelled, carrying enough fuel for a trip to the Zone and back again to Sanctuary. The controls were antique but Snake was an experienced pilot, even though he hadn't logged any flight time for almost two years. Still, he knew enough to take the Mosquito off the ground. Flicking switches and everything necessary for the take off procedure, he made sure Querto was a safe distance before he revved the engines.

The twin engines reacted with an uncertain spurt of power. Snake expected this of course. The Mosquito should have been left in that old hangar collecting dust. Restoring physically was one thing, but making it capable of flying was another matter entirely. Despite his need to get to the Zone fast, Snake's reservations about the capability of the Mosquito still remained at the back of his mind, like a pregnant drop of water ready to fall. However, these were desperate times and he couldn't let that worry him now. As long as it could reach the sky, Snake was confident at handling whatever happened after. Snake tried the starter again and this time was rewarded with a healthier roar from the engines. The blades of the propeller began spinning so fast that they soon became impossible to distinguish.

He looked through the cockpit window to see Querto giving him a thumbs up, indicating nothing was smoking or burning yet. Snake nodded at him and the Mexican hurried under the plane for a few seconds before emerging again, having removed the chocks from the wheels. The Mosquito lurched forward uncomfortably as Snake directed it off the tarmac towards the runaway. It rumbled across the asphalt like a child taking its first, tentative steps. However, as it progressed, Snake noticed it accelerating gradually. Once it reached the runway, the plane picked up speed considerably. It moved along the darkening runway, like an eaglet finding its wing, surrounded by night as electricity was too precious to waste on something as obscure as runaway lights. Not that it mattered, there was still light out despite the rapidly setting sun in the distance.

Within a matter of a few minutes, the plane had reached enough speed that it lifted clumsily off the runway. Snake added more thrust and gave the Mosquito enough power to soar into the clouds. The plan shuddered as it ascended into the sky and Snake had a moment of doubt when he wondered if this was such a good idea after all. However, as the plane began to level off, it steadied considerably and allayed Snake's misgivings.

As Snake Plissken directed the Mosquito towards the mountains, he kept focussed on one thought.

Stay alive for me baby, stay alive.

\*\*\*\*\*

I'maliveI'maliveI'maliveI'malive.....

She kept saying that to herself while she was lying in a pool of her own blood and vomit. She was fully recovered from the effects of the ether now, so Kate was spared nothing. She felt the pain where he had hit her repeatedly, the agony as he penetrated her body and defiled it with his stink. Each time Kate thought of his leering face over hers as he began pounding into her, each stroke filled with hatred and vengeance, it made her retch all over again.

Of course he raped her.

What else could he do to her that would redeem his injured pride to his men? Kill her? No, that was too easy, Kate thought as she felt more blood in her mouth. She could sense a split lip even though she feared looking at her reflection in the mirror. The Englishman had wanted to show them all that she was nothing but a woman, to be used at his leisure and discarded as any other thing he commanded. Kate had curled up in a ball after he had finally finished with her, swaggering in triumph and gloating in satisfaction. He had left her there, seemingly broken and reeking of semen and urine. She tried to control her desire to throw up but knew it was a futile gesture. She could feel the bile rising up in her throat.

Rolling onto her stomach to vomit, she coughed up more blood from her broken mouth and lips. Finally, Kate looked, opening one blood swelled eye to see if she were truly alone. She was. There was no one else in the room because the Englishman didn't think she was capable of anything after what he had done to her. He was, suitably convinced that she was beaten into submission with little or no fight left. She spotted her jeans in the corner where he had flung it. Kate took a deep breath, steadying herself for she had to do next. She had to forget what he had done to her, had to put in the back of her mind.

Stopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopit

She forced her eyes shut and willed the images of him away. She had to live, she had to survive! In his gloating lust, the Englishman had told her what he had planned for Sanctuary and that alone forced her to move from her rooted spot. The danger to their lives intensified her will to get on her feet. She had to warn them! Standing up slowly, her body ached as she started to rise. The sharp throbbing in her abdomen had abated no less and she knew there was probably some tearing. She tried to think of her injuries as clinical as possibility, detaching it from the rape itself. While she knew she needed treatment, she was also aware that she was not critically injured.

Slowly, she found the rest of her clothes, scattered around the floor near her. Her white shirt was blood soaked, but she couldn't help that. Slipping on her jeans proved more difficult. Her pelvis ached terribly and she wished more than anything that she could have a bath so she could get his smell off her skin or a sedative so she wouldn't have to smell it. Unfortunately, neither were readily available right now, so she would have to bear it.

Once dressed, Kate took tentative steps forward. The first step was agonising. Kate had to pause and let herself become used to the pain. Beads of sweat ran down her forehead even though the room was cold. The second step was easier, but not by much. Kate knew her survival depended on her getting out of the building as soon as possible. While she hadn't even thought about the specifics of her escape, she knew that it had to be now or never.

Kate walked across the floor of the Englishman's chambers and noticed the sentries were gone. They must be his personal bodyguard, she decided. The steps from the floor of the chamber to the main entrance was arduous but eventually she made it. Despite her injuries, Kate was starting to become accustomed to the pain and was now capable of overcoming it. Making her way to the large oak door, she noticed that the door swung into the room.

Good, she thought. It gave her some kind of a plan.

It was a gamble she knew, but at the moment, Kate had little choice. Snake Plissken had once told her that the simplest escapes were often the least complicated. See an opening and go for it. Thinking of him gave her some strength. Thank Christ he would be in Sanctuary when the Englishman made his advance

towards Sanctuary. With Tristian in the hospital, Snake would have been the only one would be able to cope with trouble when the Englishman's plan came into being. Taking a deep breath, she pressed her ears against the door and listened closely.

There wasn't that much noise actually. In fact, it sounded that there weren't many people outside at all. Kate wondered about this. Suddenly, she heard the loud booming voice of the Englishman. For a moment, cold terror struck her heart and she froze where she was. Quickly, logic set in and she calmed down enough to analyse the situation. Looking at the chamber again, she realised his voice was all around. It permeated throughout the chamber. It took her a further few more seconds to understand that his voice was emanating from beyond the large open windows of the chamber. Kate hurried towards it, finding her adrenalin was pushing her body to cooperate with her wishes.

Reaching the window a few seconds later, she peered out being careful not to be seen by anyone outside. It was already nightfall. Time didn't deceive her then, she thought fleetingly. He did work on her for several hours. Kate shook her head, telling herself she didn't want to think about that and concentrated on what was happening outside. If it was night then she didn't have much time, a matter of hours actually.

Even though it was dark outside, the square in front of the building was brightly lit with lanterns and torches being carried by the Englishman's thugs. The crowded courtyard, bright lights and the pedestal like stance of the Englishman added a twisted carnival feel to the atmosphere. At the top of the steps leading to the entrance of the building, stood the Englishman, addressing the hundreds assembled like a general commanding his troops.

His troops were mostly thugs, killers and the scum that always made up the worst of the human race. These were the kinds of people who were nothing before the Pulse and only found respect when led by someone like the Englishman. Almost all of them were armed to the teeth with high powered machine guns and artillery.

It looked like almost all the Zoners were assembled in the courtyard. Every square inch of space was occupied by a body. The sheer number of them was enough to frighten Kate to no end. In the past, Sanctuary had defended itself from the Zone because they defended the Zone's incursions into their territory by skirmish runs. However, seeing the number of Zoners now, Kate realised Sanctuary could never survive a full frontal assault by the Zone. The Englishman was speaking through an old valve megaphone, using batteries, to the crowds. This accounted for why there were so few people in the building.

"....will have victory!" The Englishman continued in his speech. "No more can the wicked at Sanctuary deny us food, electricity and medicines! We will take back all they have stolen! For so long have they persecuted us for our way of life, starving us and pouring aggression upon aggression upon us who have always been hunted. Before the Pulse and after!"

Kate couldn't believe the unbelievable garbage the man was spouting out and she was even more astonished by the gullibility of the crowds that believed him. Propaganda, Kate realised, was how the Englishman kept his people loyal, exploiting their age old belief that they were the oppressed minority. What a joke, she thought to herself. Finally, Kate decided she had heard enough, knowing exactly what her nemesis was doing outside. The Englishman was rallying his people, making them fervent with murderous rage so that they could go out and slaughter her friends for some imagined insult.

Not if I have anything to do with it.

Listening to the Englishman's tirade had rekindled Kate's fire. It made her furious that this son of a bitch could concoct such garbage against innocent people who never meant him any harm until provoked. Her steps quickly became strides as she hurried up the door. She had to know if anyone was outside guarding this room. Kate hoped that there was just one sentry. She might be able to deal with one person but any more was a gamble. Looking around, she saw a marble bust of some forgotten dignitary. Picking it up, Kate guessed the weight to be adequate for what she intended. It had been sitting on a similar marble

pedestal with Corinthian design. With one swift kick, she topped the marble column over, allowing it to smash the floor with a shattering sound. At that, she took cover at the side of the doorway, pressing her ears closely to the wall to hear the eminent footsteps.

These came barely a second later. The door swung open and Kate steadied herself as a body moved through the opening. Without giving her time to think better of it, Kate brought the marble bust down on the man's head. He had barely time to utter a cry as marble impacted on his skull with a sickening crunch. She had hit him on the back of the head for maximum effect and as he crumpled to the floor and she dropped the bust, covered in hair and blood, Kate knew he was no longer a threat.

Despite herself, after putting down the bust, Kate felt for a pulse. He was out cold but still alive. Stop wasting time! Kate thought, scolding herself for her misguided sympathy before liberated the man's automatic rifle from around his shoulders. A small pool of blood had begun to ooze out of his wound, a darkened patch of pulpy matter where she had struck him. Kate told herself not to care. This oriental man in his army fatigues and his tattoos would do no such thing for her.

Kate peered outside the hallway and saw no one was around. The carpeted corridor was devoid of life and the candles that lit the place revealed unmoving shadows. Slinging the gun strap around her shoulders, she emerged into the dimly lit hall way. Outside, she could still here the Englishman's speech and knew this was the best time to move, while everyone's attention was focussed on the debacle outside. She ran her fingers through her hair, as if it would give her some strength to do what it took to stay alive.

Got to stop thinking like a doctor girl, Kate whispered to herself as she moved up the corridor. Was this why Snake is the way he is?

Thinking about Snake made her feel a little better. It also reminded her why she had to live. Kate wanted to feel Snake's touch again, she wanted him to touch and make her forget the obscenity she had gone through today.

Pleasedon'thurtmenotthatwayhowcouldyouwhywhyyhwywhwy

The images were too strong sometimes, they came into her mind, cutting through her resolve like a knife. The power of it was still too raw and fresh in her mind to completely push them aside. Kate paused, leaning against the nearby wall to compose herself as the disgust subsided from her stomach and the bile slithered down her throat again. She wanted to cry but knew she couldn't.

Please don't come apart doc, Kate whispered to herself as tear came down her face, please hold together so we can get out of here alive before he does it to me again.

II

Less than two hours later, Snake saw the lights of Victoria City below him.

The Zone was a patchwork of myriad lights that lit up the ground. Unfortunately, since Snake could not afford to be seen by the inhabitants of the Zone just yet, he had to shut the engines of the Mosquito off and let it come in for a silent landing. He knew roughly where he could land. He remembered the deserted stretch of road on the outskirts of the Zone near the jetty where he had first touched the shores of Vancouver Island. It was with a hint of irony that Snake thought how much had changed since then. How simple things had been prior to that arrival. He had come to Vancouver Island to escape the violence of his life, to rest and retire.

Except things never quite worked out that way.

Perhaps it was necessary for him to fight to gain his peace. Maybe it wasn't a simple matter of deciding that he was going to retire after the life he had led. There was a lot of blood on his hands. Some were warranted but some were not. Over the years, Snake Plissken had lived a questionable life which he wasn't



ashamed off but maybe to get the good life, one had to earn it.

Like he was doing now. As he directed the plane towards that deserted road, Snake realised that this was the first time he had done anything for himself. In the past, everyone had pulled his strings, made him a pawn in the chess game of their causes, had he ever really put his life on the line for something he truly believed in? In a cause that was solely for himself and no other reason?

No, Snake Plissken had never done that.

So he was going to make one more escape, kill one more would be dictator and save the world and everything else that went with it, not because someone had planted a capsule in his neck or because a twenty four hour virus was going to kill him. He was going to do it because the only woman he ever cared about was in trouble and as corny as it sounded, Snake Plissken couldn't imagine life without her.

The Mosquito glided neatly into position as Snake brought the plane towards the road for landing. There no lights below him but thanks to the illumination of the full moon above, Snake could just make out the white lines separating the lanes on the deserted road. The Mosquito had performed well, giving Snake little trouble throughout the hour and a half long journey. Hopefully, it would do just as well when they finally left the Zone.

The plane shuddered a bit as it touched the ground, jolting Snake slightly in his seat in the cockpit. He swore lightly under his breath and held the nose firm, pulling back the throttle as it began to decrease its velocity on the ground. It travelled some distance on the road before its deceleration finally reached its apex and the Mosquito came to a halt.

Outside the cockpit, all was quiet. There were no settlements this far out of the Victoria city, Snake remembered. Hopefully that meant he would be assured of his secret arrival for a while at least. There were no houses except for that lonely road and the wooden pier in the distance where to his surprise, his boat still remained. He could see the silhouette of the Sea Witch in the darkness, still waiting for him to return.

It was good to know that if the Mosquito couldn't perform that he had an alternate way of getting out of the Zone.

Snake pulled the cockpit open and reached to the back passenger seat where he had dumped his equipment prior to the flight. He felt exposed unarmed and Snake wanted to rectify that as soon as possible. He reached into the duffle bag and found the dual set of chrome plated 45' calibre automatic hand guns he had sighted in Sanctuary's armory. Snake had always had a soft spot for carrying hand guns in his holster and time had done little to change him. Making sure that the pistols were loaded, he tucked them snugly into the holsters on each flank.

There were other things too, he loved gadgets. It was one of the positive results that came out of the New York escape. Snake had learnt that as excessive as they could some times be, it was the little accessories that had saved his life. There hadn't been many such things available at Sanctuary, but enough for Snake's use. He found a decent sized Bowie with its sheath which he slipped into his boot, a few propellant steel spears that ejected from a wristband he was now wearing on his left hand and a few gas pellets that fitted comfortably into his pocket. Finally, he helped picked up the high powered automatic rifle and all the extra ammunition he needed contained on the utility belt which he slipped around his waist.

Snake climbed out of the cockpit and step onto the bitumen paved road. Up ahead he could see the lights of the city and started towards it.

He had to hurry, he had a feeling he didn't have much time.

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That she had made it all the way down the stairs and to the back exit was more luck than she had believed possible. Kate had crept through the place, hiding in the shadows each time she heard the barest hint of a sound. The Englishman's voice boomed through the building as his tirade became more fevered. Kate had started to ignore most of what he was saying since the bulk of it was propaganda garbage anyway. It made her sick thinking about how much deception went into his supposed rule of the Zone.

Reaching the exit, she saw fires lit at the back in small bonfires with a few stray people who hadn't gone to the Englishman's little pep rally sitting around them. These however, did not look like the Englishman's thugs. They huddled together like frightened rabbits, some were children and women. Their eyes haunted Kate for some reason as they stared into the fire mesmerised by something, yet remaining vacant and empty.

Not all the people in the Zone are like the Englishman and Miranda, Doc.

Kate stepped out knowing she took a risk at being seen, but instinct told her that these people held loyalties to no one save themselves. Looking around, she saw someone's old navy blue service jacket on the floor. It had patches and tears which explained why it was discarded. Kate slipped it on, wrinkling her nose at the musty smell but deciding she had no choice to be picky. It fitted her well, with enough length in the collar to partially hide her face. Kate took a deep breath and stepped out boldly, with the gun in front of her.

There was only one section of unbroken fence line which emptied into the back lands of a series of derelict buildings which would do well for cover once she left here. However Kate would have to walk to it unnoticed to reach its moderate safety. She emerged into the night air, engendering little interest from the people around the bonfires. Kate could still hear the Englishman behind her, although his voice was becoming distant, the faster she walked away from the building. There were other people in the distance, but most of their attention was placed elsewhere and it was dark at this end of the building. Besides, they could only see a dark figure walking across the grass with a gun. Around here, that couldn't be anything out of the ordinary.

She had to walk past one of the bonfires, it couldn't be helped. Kate strode forward boldly, keeping her eyes forward like she was just another one of the Englishman's goons, ensuring there was enough swagger in her walk to convince anyone of it. A woman glanced at her as she passed. Kate noticed that she pulled her young daughter against her protectively as Kate passed. The child had a severe case of malnutrition and Kate had to fight to hide her disgust and her physicians instincts.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" She barked.

The woman averted her eyes quickly, staring back at the flames. Her husband spoke quickly, trying to diffuse the situation. "I'm sorry, she didn't mean anything. "

Kate didn't say anything, grunting an obscenity as it was probably expected and then kept on walking towards the buildings.

No questions followed.

She was safe, for now.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### I

Things happened at night.

Things were happening tonight in Sanctuary.

Querto was stone cold sober. After Snake had left for the Zone, the Mexican found he had little taste for

beer or anything else. He sent Esmerelda home and dumped a bucket on Red and Crow who were not too happy at being roused to abruptly from the arms of their women. He wanted them completely sober for the rest of the night. Snake Plissken had left Sanctuary believing some unforeseen threat was looming over them and Querto trusted Snake's instinct more than he trusted anything else in life.

This was natural of course.

During the war, Snake Plissken's reputation as a military man was impeccable. He was the head of one of the best crack teams in the European theatre of the war. Before the medal that changed Snake Plissken's life forever, the Lieutenant was one of the most respected officers in the core. Even the general infantry spoke of him in hushed tones. Later on, as new travelled down the military grapevine, Querto learnt about the catastrophe that destroyed Snake's team and left the man without the use of an eye. While he could not recount the specifics of the mission, he was aware that it was due to bad intelligence from the spooks. The loss of so many good men would have been a difficult thing to bear. Most would have gone insane with rage but Snake was different. He used his rage to become a legend.

Thus for Querto, if Snake Plissken said something was wrong, then something was wrong.

As the men sobered up around him and poured more coffee down their throats then was entirely decent, Querto tried to think of from where the trouble might arise. It hurt his head thinking about such things so deeply. Life was a lot less complicated before he met Snake. That son of a bitch had away of ordering him about that made Querto feel he was back in the service. To his utter disgust, Querto also realised that his conditioning to obey an officer was far too strong to ignore the man. So now, he paced the floor of his house like a caged animal trying to find a way out of a trap. What would Snake do in his place? Snake had a way of cutting to the heart of a problem by seeing the whole picture. Trouble was, where did this picture begin? Suddenly it hit Querto.

Taylor!

Taylor's name appeared inside Querto's head like a flash of insight. It was the first truly logical deduction he had made all day. Perhaps if he spoke to Taylor, he would have some idea of what was coming. After all, this had all began when Taylor returned to Sanctuary. Taylor had the most contact with the Zoners since he had warned Sanctuary about the convoy. Taylor must have had some inside information that might be unimportant in the scheme of things but vital if one looked at it a different way. Querto knew he was grasping at straws but it was the first solid idea he had come up with all day. He stood up deciding that he was going to the hospital to talk to Taylor. Not only was it a place to start but it would give him something to do instead of driving himself crazy waiting for the unknown to happen.

"I'm going to the hospital." He announced purposefully with more confidence than he had felt in months as he walked towards the door.

"What's at the hospital?" Crow asked. He looked surprisingly normal when he was not half stoned or drunk. The man had showered for the first time in god knows how long so his customary vapid pallor had taken on a decidedly healthier shade. Querto wondered if this was a good thing or not.

"Taylor," Querto grunted. "I wanna talk to him."

"You think he knows something?" He inquired, running a hand through his unruly blond hair.

"I don't know." The Mexican answered honestly. "Gotta do something man. Time's short."

"Yeah I know." Crow mumbled before looking up at Querto again. "I'll come with you."

"Okay." Querto replied, mildly surprised at how different Crow looked when he was back in the land of living. They had been friends for a long time and Querto had never seen this kind of resolve or clarity in him since the days when they were soldiers fighting the good fight in the last war.

Whether or not Crow noticed Querto's musings, he certainly did not show it as he looked around the dishevelled room trying to remember where he had left the guns they had used during the skirmish the night before. He spied them on the other side of the room where he and the others had discarded their weapons prior to their late night orgy with Esmerelda and the girls.

Crow strode over to the two automatics and picked them up before returning to Querto. Taking the rifle from Crow, Querto quickly checked to see how much ammunition was left in the chamber and was pleased to see Crow pocketing a few spare cartridges. "Just to be safe." Crow declared even though they knew it was for more than just that.

They drove to the hospital in Querto's truck with neither man speaking much. Both were preoccupied by the same terrible feeling of dread that promised all kinds of danger in the night. Even though none voiced their hidden thoughts, the texture of it was essentially the same. Querto and Crow had become accustomed to their lives in Sanctuary. Sure on occasion it was dead boring and although people like Snake Plissken brought some added spice to the mix, in essence they liked the peace and quiet. In the past, theirs were lives led on lonely open roads and sometimes on the battlefields of war on foreign soil. This was the first place that either had felt truly at home and would mourn if it was lost.

The streets of Sanctuary was quite at this time of night, with a few lights scattered across the main street. There were people out tonight but not many. A few here and there, leaving the Slice or simply taking an evening stroll throughout the town. The teenagers hung around the pavement on the main street, smoking cigarettes and staying out later because they could. Generally, it was just another night in Sanctuary, no different from any before today and definitely normal.

It did not take long for them to reach the hospital. There were not many cars in the hospital car park that was also nothing unusual. It was after all, close to ten o'clock in the evening and other than the evening shift there was not many hospital staff still remaining. Querto did not think Taylor would mind them dropping in despite the hour, considering the nature of the visit. Besides, Querto knew Taylor personally and the kid was okay. Any way, most people were unaware of the mood shared by himself and his men and Snake had told Querto that he did speak to Taylor of his fears especially with the defection of Jack Travis.

Querto had never been to the hospital before even though he knew where it was. There had never really been any real reason for him to come here. As he emerged from the truck with Crow, he shuddered at the permeating silence of place. Part of the reason, he stayed away from it was because as a rule, he generally disliked hospital. Even though it was a place of healing, Querto never could feel comfortable in one. Hospitals conjured up images of amputations, scalpels and blood of which Querto had been seen too much of in the last war. Even now, the smell of antiseptic and disinfectant was too sterile for him. White walls and tiles coupled with the clinical atmosphere made him tense. Querto did not like being tense.

The two men walked through the main doors of the building and noticed that the white corridor leading to the reception area and beyond were empty. In fact, everything was as it should have been except there weren't any people around, neither staff nor patients. Querto expected to see sick people hobbling around the halls as there should be in any hospital. He exchanged glances with Crow who was also growing uncomfortable at the absence of life.

"Where is everyone?"

"I don't know." Querto replied shaking his head before motioning the man to keep his voice down.

Both of them instinctively slowed their pace towards the reception desk, approaching it with caution as they came to the intersection of corridors. As far as their eyes could see down the white walled passage way, there was that same disturbing emptiness but only this time, there were definite signs of violence. In several areas of the walls leading to the southern wing lift, there holes in the brick from what Querto was certain was shotgun fire. Tiny pellets had torn through the concrete and dented the smooth walls of the lifts. He exchanged a knowing glance with Crow whose hand had reached for the rifle slung around his

shoulders. He was glad he had resisted the notion to leave it in Querto's truck when they had first arrived.

Querto walked towards the reception desk while Crow stood behind him, giving him cover in case anything unexpected turned up. Querto, like Crow was a pessimist. He always expected the worse. In the past, that kind of thinking had saved their lives more than once. Crow was not about to question it now. Like Querto, he assumed a nurse should have been on duty at reception but no such person was in sight. As he moved around the desk, he felt the soft, slick slap of his boots against a wet floor. Except the liquid did not have the texture of water...

Querto looked down and saw that he was standing in a puddle of blood.

"Jesus." He exclaimed going for his gun.

"What?" Crow shouted. He was already tense but was now fully alert as he raised his gun in reaction to Querto's sudden movement.

Querto did not answer as Crow started towards him. However, it did not take him long to see the puddle of drying, viscous blood on the white tiled floor. He continued around the desk, trying to find the source of the grisly fluid and in doing so, found the young woman.

Querto had seen her around town once or twice but never knew her name. She lay on the floor, eyes staring into the ceiling she could no longer see with her throat open to the world.

## II

Two hours before, Nurse Carolyn Keene had been sitting at the reception desk completely unaware that by the end of the night, she would be dead. Certainly there was nothing out of the ordinary to indicate that she was destined to be the victim of any impending violence. Sure, there were more patients than normal but Doctor Vinh had mentioned in passing that most of these people were here for observation. There were a few critical cases, Tristan Evans being the one that came to mind and a number of gunshot wounds victims following the skirmish from the night before.

Elsewhere Timothy Taylor had ventured out of his hospital room for the first time since his admission the day before. Even though he was still rather fragile, Taylor had taken the trip in a wheelchair with Doctor Vinh to accompany him to ensure that he did not over exert himself. Taylor had wanted to see how Evans was faring and Vinh did not have the heart to say no to that request. In Sanctuary, people created deep bonds of friendship. Tristan Evans had been a friend to Taylor when the boy first arrived in Sanctuary after the death of his parents on the mainland.

The new refugees from the Zone were given free run of the hospital, Taylor noticed as Vinh wheeled him towards the ICU ward where Tristan was currently residing. He remembered what Snake had said prior to his departure and thanks to the grapevine, Taylor was certain that everyone knew that Snake Plissken was on his way to the Zone. While the reports declared that most of the Inner Circle was angry that Snake would make such a rescue attempt alone, Taylor got the impression that they were also relieved. Not one of them would have any idea on how to go about setting up a rescue plan without Tristan Evans or Kate Ellison for that matter.

"Do you think he will get her back?" Vinh asked as they headed towards the nearest lift.

"If anyone can, it will be Snake." Taylor retorted. "He's an old hand at this kind of operation."

"He should have had help." Vinh pointed out.

Taylor could not agree. "I know," he remarked looking over his shoulder so he could meet Vinh's eyes. "You gotta understand Plissken though, he has to be the most arrogant, swaggering son of a bitch to ever walk the planet but he's earned the right to be that way with his successes."

Vinh could understand. A lifetime ago, his native country had done the same thing to him. His parents had fled with their lives because of oppressors who had title to go with their guns. The bullies never changed, only the circumstances. Suddenly, he looked at the little boy he had seen earlier, wandering around the halls, still wearing that empty look in his eyes. He stared at Vinh and Taylor for a moment, almost as if he had something to say and then thought better of it.

"Hi." Taylor smiled at him reassuringly. "Aaron, isn't it?"

The boy nodded slowly.

"How are you doing Aaron." Taylor extended a hand forward. "My name is Timothy."

Aaron was about to speak when suddenly a loud voice broke through the calm of the moment and took the opportunity away.

"Hey!"

Both Vinh and Taylor looked up at the same time to see the same burly man that Vinh had seen earlier that day. Aaron seemed to freeze in his tracks. "I told you to stop wandering around the place." The man strode up to him and grabbed the boy roughly by the shoulders with one hand while the other moved to strike him with a mean backhand.

"Its all right!" Taylor exclaimed, stopping him before it got any further than just a move. "He wasn't bothering us."

The man scowled at Taylor for a moment and then calmed down considerably. "Boy's got to learn discipline," he barked before turning to Aaron again. "Come on. Your momma's looking for you." At that, he hauled Aaron away from the two men with more strength than was necessary. Taylor was tempted to interceded but knew he was in little condition to do anything against that bastard.

"Women sure do make some lousy choices." He muttered unhappily as he watched them disappear down the corridor.

Vinh looked down at him. "Why do you say that?"

"Well," Taylor shrugged. "You would think that after the kid watched his father get blown away in front of him that his mother would had a little more sense than to take up with that asshole."

"You must be mistaken." Vinh remarked. "That is the boy's father."

Taylor looked at him sharply. "Snake told me that he met the boy in the Zone and that he saw his father get killed before they were all captured by the Englishman."

By now Vinh was clearly troubled. "No that's not possible." The doctor replied shaking his head. He remembered the night before when they had taken tally of the names and number of people who had come off the convoy. That brute had clearly indicated that Aaron was his son and that Aaron's mother was his wife. However, as Vinh began to think about it further, he had to admit that there was something oddly detached about the boy's attitude towards his 'father'.

Taylor was staring at him hard. "Doc, you gotta to be sure about this."

But Vinh was not sure, not now. Even as Taylor was speaking, cogs were starting to spin inside his mind. "I am sure about it." He said after a moment and looked up at Taylor. "I know I am."

Taylor let out a deep breath. "How many families?"

"At least thirty to forty." Vinh answered automatically. "Some were just stragglers who latched on to the

main group. They're mostly men. "By now, both men were almost certainly coming to the same conclusion with their suspicions. "And they weren't search." Vinh spoke, anticipating Taylor's next question.

"We could be wrong." The young man spoke after a moment.

"We're not." Vinh answered.

"We need to tell the Circle." Taylor replied. "Where do we keep the radio here?"

However, Vinh was already ahead of him, pushing his wheel chair hard against the lift. Taylor started thinking as they made their way to the ground floor of the hospital. If the Englishman wanted to take Sanctuary, wouldn't it be wiser to send an advance party ahead to disrupt and neutralise the enemy first?

With a stab of clarity, Taylor realised how intricate the Englishman had been in his planning. They had used him! That's why they had made a half assed attempt at interrogation that was more for his benefit than theirs. They knew about the network and had set their trap for Sanctuary. It was nothing more than good luck that saw Jack Travis defecting to the Zone and using Taylor to make the convoy's acceptance into Sanctuary more credible.

The lift doors opened just as a high pitched scream echoed throughout the ground floor of the hospital. Taylor stood up from the wheel chair. He was not that injured that he could not stand on his own two feet or make a good run if the adrenalin was pumping. He and Vinh hurried forward, noticing that the corridor was strangely empty. As they hurried up the tiled passage way, they heard the sounds of smashing glass.

It was Vinh who saw Carolyn first.

She was on her knees behind the counter, not quite dead yet but not far off. She was starting to lose consciousness as her precious blood spurted from the severed arteries of her throats. The blood had almost soaked her white uniform as she crawled forward in a desperate attempt to find help. The man who did this to her were in the room behind the counter.

"Carolyn!" Vinh cried out as she looked at him with glazed eyes rapidly losing her battle for life. Her blood was a pool under her body.

"Doc!" Taylor hissed, seeing the scene but more concerned with the men who were at this time smashing to pieces the radio in the small room behind the reception desk.

However, it was too late. They emerged from the room and instance later, carrying guns that they had likely smuggled in among their belongs. They should have been searched, Taylor thought fleetingly. The first man was Aaron's father, who more than likely realised that it was time bring forward their plans after his altercation with them.

"Doc! Get down!" Taylor shouted as the man raised his gun to fire.

Vinh barely had time to move before the gun went off, hitting the floor hard as he leapt out of the line of fire, with more agility usually credited to a man of his vintage. He landed on the floor near Taylor and scrambled to his feet just as the assailant took another shot. This time, the blast impacted on a nearby wall and both Taylor and Vinh were making rapid strides towards the lift again. Taylor ducked as another shot went off, the pellets leaving their mark on the steel wall of the lift doors. Vinh reached the button first, slamming his palm against it to make the door slid open. Both men dived inside and Taylor pressed the button to shut the doors again, even as he heard the familiar click of a shotgun being primed.

"Close it! Close it!" Vinh shouted and Taylor slammed his fist hard against the clear plastic button. The door moved forward as they heard the blast of another shot followed by footsteps rapidly making their way towards them. The doors came to a close just as the man and his companion paused outside to fire their weapons again.

The lift lurched up and Taylor let out a sigh of relief at their narrow escape.

"I think we are in a lot of trouble." He looked at Vinh stating the obvious.

Vinh straightened the glasses on his nose. "Question is, what are we going to do about it?"

Neither of them knew.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

## I

The mood in the Zone was almost festive, Snake Plissken discovered as soon as he had come into reasonable distance of Victoria City. There were men driving towards the centre of town with almost feverish excitement. As he walked through the city, hidden in the shadows from the roads illuminated with a succession of gas lamps and burning torches, Snake was disturbed by all the activity he was witnessing. He counted more than fifty in the procession of motorcycles and cars heading towards the inner city. Probably on their way to the End Zone, he guessed. The scene reaffirmed his suspicions that something was happening on Vancouver Island tonight.

Snake made it to the city in good time. So far, his arrival had remained largely unnoticed. It was more than likely that the bulk of the Zoners' attention would be focussed on what planned for Sanctuary tonight. Even if they were expecting him to make a rescue attempt, Snake gambled they would concentrate their manpower on guarding the borders that separated Sanctuary from the Zone. He doubted many would have expected him to enter the city by air. It had been the main reason Snake used the Mosquito instead of a car. Whether he was expected or not, Snake nevertheless chose to stay out of sigh. Places like this had its own grapevine and news often travelled fast.

He travelled across the city on the roof tops. Snake knew he would be seen by less people this way and the extra altitude gave him a vantage point. It would prove difficult for anyone to sneak up on him like this. It proved to his benefit since Snake was able to observe the proceedings in the Zone tonight without being seen himself. The Englishman's thugs were out in force and on their way to Sanctuary. Their boldness made Snake wonder what kind of advantage had given the Englishman so much confidence. He hoped Querto could handle things in Sanctuary when the shit hit the fan because Snake had only one thought in his mind now and that was Kate.

Reaching the edge of the rooftop he was on, Snake looked down and saw a fire escape that seemed shaky but reliable. Unfortunately he did not have much of choice since that appeared to be the only way down. As he wanted to avoid people, using the stairs that went down through the building was out of the question. Snake stared at the landscape below. From this height, it did not seem so bad. It was a clear night and the lanterns and bonfires burning high in the Zone tonight seemed like sacrificial pyres in homage to the coming battle. After a moment, he climbed onto the ladder and tested it with his weight. Despite its corroded and tarnished appearance, the ladder was stronger than it looked and Snake descended quickly.

It took him a few minutes to make his way to the fire escape from the ladder. From above it had been difficult to see in the dark corners of the steel frame but now that he had reached the first juncture of escape, Snake began to see the warm bodies huddled in discreet shadows. He winced slightly at this, wanting to keep his presence here anonymous for as long as possible. Still, Snake suspected that they were likely to be derelicts and such and probably would not have that much interest in him anyway. Besides, men carrying guns in the Zone were to be left alone at all costs.

Some did look up as Snake passed by most reacted to him as matter of passing interest, just as he believed. After a few minutes when he was gone, they would not give a damn any more. This was obvious as most of them were little more than collections of rags and noxious odours, some of which smelt oddly like booze and urine. It took him a few minutes to reach the latter which led to the ground and when he did, Snake climbed down quickly. He touched the ground of a dark alley with little incident.

The alley was well out of sight from the main street, although the sounds of cars and people cheering were strangely absent from this part of town. There was something about the place that unsettled him for some reason because it was so devoid of life. As he stood there reflecting on this, he heard the clattering of garbage bins from a corner, almost blacked out by shadows. Immediately, he went for the guns in his holster, deciding to take no chances. Snake moved forward quietly, reluctant to resume his journey to the

Englishman until he was sure it was safe to turn his back. Logic told him it was likely to be a stray animal of some sort but Snake did not believe in relying on the obvious.

As he drew closure, he listened closely trying to find sounds that might indicate life. After a moment, he heard the soft groaning sounds that were definitely make and Snake came to realise what he stumbled upon. Seeing no reason to break up the little tryst or interrupt for that matter, Snake turned his back and started walking away confident that he was in no mortal danger. He headed towards the length of uneven and broken flesh that separate the alley from the opposite building.

"Hey, you're Snake Plissken!" A voice called out, shattering the stillness of the night.

Shit. Snake cursed under his breath and reached for his gun even though he did not believe he was in mortal danger. Turning around slowly, he heard the clatter of bins as the speaker emerged from his hiding place. Even before he turned around, Snake knew there were two of them. To his surprise, he found himself staring at two teenagers. A boy and a girl who did not look far beyond sixteen years of age. They were both dressed in a gaudy assortment of clothe and looked malnourished. Fortunately, they were not emblazoned in gang colours which were the trademark of the Englishman's people.

"What do you want?" Snake asked. Apparently, not all the inhabitants of the Zone were either the Englishman's thugs or the interned of his camps. Taylor had said that there were a lot of fringe groups living on the edge of Zone society, who stayed out of sight to keep from falling under the Englishman's notice. These two were more than likely to be scavengers who escaped the camps to live like rats on the street.

"You don't want to keep going in that direction Snake." The boy pointed out nervously, obviously now reconsidering the entire notion of bring themselves to his attention in the first place. He was a dark youth, with curly black hair and cherubic features that reminded Snake of someone he used to know in the service. The girl was pretty, with a sultry kind of beauty that would be very attractive when she had some years behind her. They stared at him with a mixture of awe and fear. It was not an uncommon thing for them.

"What's in there?" Snake looked at the area the boy was referring to. Once again, that ominous feeling Snake had felt when he was looking down on it from the rooftops, emerged. On the ground, it seemed no less eerie, except that it seemed much more decrepit than most other parts of the Zone. Unlike other roads in the Zone, which were in some state of sanitation, the roads into this area were covered with trash, upturned vehicles while the buildings looked neglected and some of them were completely burnt out. There were no signs of life in them and it reminded him of places in he had seen in New York. There was no light here, no lanterns that hung, no graffiti that covered the walls of the buildings. Every window however, was smashed, every door broken in and anything that could be destroyed was and remained shattered on the ground where it had fallen, collecting dust. After the festive atmosphere Snake had seen throughout most of the Zone tonight, this place looked like a black hole in which nothing seemed to penetrate. Its menace was like a foul stench.

"The Berserkers." The boy explained and the darkness on his face was more than just the lack of light. "They're a gang but not like the Zoners. They're crazies. That building there," he pointed at the block beyond the mesh fence line. "That used to be the asylum. After the pulse, the crazies sort of stayed in there. There is a understanding that everyone leaves them alone. They don't come out of their turf and no one goes in either."

Snake did not doubt that. "You're here."

"That's cause we're on this side of the gate. That's like the boundary. They don't cross it and they kill anyone who does. Berserkers don't come out of their turf and they hate visitors."

"Thanks." Snake replied and decided to avoid them all together. He started looking for an alternate route around Berserker territory.

"You really are Snake Plissken aren't ya?" The girl asked again since Snake never really answered the question.

Snake threw a scowl over his shoulder at her and started walking away. He had no patience with curious teenagers and he had just too much ground to cover. Shit, finding an alternate route was going to take time and he did not know the terrain very well. He had a rough idea where the End Zone was but his navigation sense was relying on an A to Z approach to go in a straight line. He had studied the maps of the area and selected the fastest route to the Englishman's domain before he left Sanctuary.

Snake paused a moment staring into the darkness. The two teens were still there, staring after him. "How many blocks across is their turf?" Snake asked not looking at the boy.

"At least five blocks," he replied quickly, as if this whole incident was something thrilling to tell other teenagers. "But you don't want to go in there Snake," He reiterated. "They're real crazy people, people who go in there don't always die straight off, I heard stories that the Berserkers eat them!" He called as Snake started walking up to the fence.

Fucking great, Snake thought as the boy's voice fell father back into the distance. That's all he needed, a run in with psychopathic cannibals. Five blocks, he thought. Snake stopped at the gate and stared through its corroded meshing. There were no signs of the so called Berserkers anywhere in sight but that did not mean they were not there. He stared up the road that moved in between the locks and he could see how much ground he had to cover. There were way to many shadows and corners for these Berserkers to hide and he did not look forward to being served as a hot lunch.

But he had no choice.

Time was a commodity he had very little of. The time taken to find another way around was more than he was willing to waste. Like it or not, this would have to be the way in. Snake took a deep breath and unslung the automatic shotgun hanging around his shoulder and passed through the fence. Nothing out of the ordinary took place as Snake made his way along the kerb. He heard nothing but the sound of his boots on the sidewalk. He had chosen to ignore the back streets behind the buildings and take the direct route through Berserker territory. At least, if he had to run for it, he would have a fair idea of where he had to go.

Still no sign of the Berserkers, Snake thought. He was too cynical to believe in luck and Snake kept his eyes trained for every sound. As of yet, there were no sounds of life, everything seemed to be as dead as it looked but something was alive here. Snake could almost bet his life on this. For the moment though, he was not about to pursue to any lengths how right he was.

He made it all the way into the heart of Berserker territory when suddenly, a loud banging sound shattered the fragile security of his journey. Snake primed his gun and looked around sharply to where the sound had come from. Yet there was no way to define accurately, from where it had originated. As the relentless pounding continued, Snake started to recognise that its rhythm, if it could be called that was steady like war drums. War drums sounding to summon its people to the fore.

He was right.

Things started to come alive at that moment. Snake could hear sounds of movement in the darkness. He could see the flurry of shapes moving through the night. Glass was breaking somewhere, windows were being smashed and doors were slamming in the darkness. Crunching noises like footsteps on things already broken began cackling sporadically around him. Snake could see dark figures moving along the roof tops and hear them under the bitumen road. In the distance, he could hear the manhole covers scraping against the tar.

They were coming.

At the realisation, Snake broke into a jog, deciding he did not want to meet any of the Berserkers unless he could help it. Up ahead, he could see the last two blocks getting closer as he ran faster. The shadows were starting to emerge on the street while the pounding grew louder until it filled the air. Snake tried to distance himself from the sound, concentrating on getting across Berserker turf alive.

The Berserkers appeared on the street. Snake paused, undecided whether he should go through them or tried to make a run for it. However, their sheer numbers changed that idea drastically. Snake could easily spot twenty of them. Some were in close proximity, others were far enough away so that there was little time to deal with them. Most were on their way to a building from which came the strongest concentration of the noise. The drums were a summons of some sort. They were not expecting him. If so, he might be able to get out of Berserker turf before all of them discovered him trespassing.

Unfortunately, they saw him and began approaching. The Berserkers were male and female, covered in an assortment of coverings, some genuine clothes while others were rags used crudely for the purpose. It was hard to see their faces, not simply because of the darkness but because most of their faces were covered in either filth or dirt. With long unkempt hair, they looked more like specimens from a prehistoric age. Snake saw no formidable weapons among them, except maybe clubs, sticks and whatever they could pick up.

The closest one to him made grunting noises as they started to surround Snake. He knew he could not let them get any closer than this. Cocking the shot gun, he fired one shot into the air, hoping that this would not frighten them away. The Berserkers did not seem very smart, just extremely violent. The sound eclipsed the pounding, forcing the Berserker near Snake to withdraw momentarily. Snake could not tell whether it was male or female, seeing only its size and the teeth that flashed into an angry snarl at the sound of the gunshot.

Even the pounding had stopped. All the Berserkers in the street stopped where they were focussed on Snake. Suddenly, Snake began to reconsider the whole idea of opening fire. Apparently, his warning shot had done nothing but alert the others to him. No more time for subtlety, Snake decided and slung his rifle. The Berserker saw its opportunity and let out a guttural howl. The others leapt at Snake.

Snake was thrown by a large, fetid body full of flaying hands and gnashing teeth. He kicked it off and fired point blank wit his hand guns. Snake was a good shot, he did not need to aim again. The Berserkers fell backwards, trailing blood and brain matter. Snake barely had time to see him fall when he felt teeth sinking into his shoulder and biting down hard. He cried out, momentarily startled by the pain. In an instant, he grabbed the attacker's head and swung it away, firing into its face as it went spinning.

The one who snarled at him made his attack and Snake saw it closer than he would have liked. It was a male dressed in a pair of filthy jeans and nothing else. Snake fired at him, aiming carefully and stopping his advance any further. With his path cleared, at least for a few more feet, Snake made a run for it. The Snarler lay dead as Snake jumped over him and heard the gibberish of grunts and words that made up the Berserkers language echoing behind him.

More of them were starting to appear now. Like roaches emerging from the shadows of the night foraging, the Berserkers climbed out of windows and doors, they crawled out of manhole and from vents. All looked savage and very much insane. His shoulder stung when he unslung his automatic rifle and started firing in rapid succession, clearing himself a path through the human bodies. They fell easily because they were creatures of instinct, acting with emotion more than brains. That made things simpler for Snake.

He glanced over his shoulder and was a little shaken by the large number of Berserkers who were in pursuit of him. The night air was filled with the sounds of their howling and it sent shivers down his spine knowing that those feral sounds were coming from creatures once human. He shook such thoughts out of his head as he slapped another clip into his gun, cursing profusely because the momentary pause of fire had given some Berserkers enough ground to try and jump him.

Snake knew if they brought him down, he would be done for. He looked up from his gun just in time to see a body flying at him, teeth and inch long nails flying at him. Those nails sank into his face, raking skin and

trailing blood as Snake slammed the body aside with one swing. The Berserker hit the ground hard but recovered quickly, springing to its feet and rushing at him again. This time Snake did not let it get any further. One careful shot ended that particular threat. Only after the Berserker had fallen back, blood gushing from a ruined chest, did Snake realise it was a woman.

It got to him and he did not know why. In the past, in wars and other places, he had killed many of both sexes but it always been a matter of defence. This was no real murderer, just some deranged lunatic who was abandoned like all these others who were left to fend for themselves after the Pulse. Snake shook the thought out his head. He did not have time for this and the threat was far from over. There was little time to moralise when there were Berserkers coming at him in greater numbers.

Suddenly, he felt himself forced to the ground, a sharp pain stung at his shin. Snake fell forward, recovering long enough to roll, despite the pain. Looking up, he saw enough to realise that one of the Berserkers had the smarts to try and kneecap him. His rifle lay a few feet away from him but not close enough to reach before the Berserkers were on him. Snake clambered onto his knees and let both hand guns loose upon the crazies closing in on him. The bullets tore into them with loud blasts, sending them flying backwards from the force of the high calibre impact. Snake holstered one gun and made a grab for his rifle. He could not afford to be without it.

Getting back on his feet was hard. His knee throbbed painfully as he started to run again, deciding he was not going to stop until he got well past the boundary that defined Berserkers turf from the rest of the Zone. They were like ant, appearing out of nowhere and Snake began laying a continuous flow of rapid fire, to keep up with them.

One more block to go.

That last hundred feet became torturous as Snake lumbered across the bitumen, jumping over a rolling trash can. Leaping across it and then landing again, sent shock waves through his bones and Snake wondered how badly he was hurt. However, the thought was momentary as Snake passed the trees, hearing the howling behind him grow louder and louder.

They knew he was reaching the boundary too.

This gave Snake added incentive to run faster, forcing him forward while he ground his teeth at the pain that was tearing away at him. The boundary loomed closer as he passed the last block, still firing. Empty casings skittered across the ground while bodies fell around him. Finally, he reached the other side of the block and the howling grew louder. Another fence was ahead of him and Snake leapt up to the mesh, climbing harder despite the boots he was wearing. Snake pulled himself over the top of the fence and fell onto the soft grass on the other side.

The Berserkers after him did the same. They leapt onto the mesh, hanging off the fence as they shook it and snarled at him like animals through the bars of their cage. Snake scrambled backwards, watching them howl and scream but not moving any further to the top of the fence or trying to overcome it. It was a chilling sight, seeing humans beings clinging to the side of the fence like animals in a sideshow, savage and primeval. They rattled the fence like monkeys, gnashing their teeth and howling at him in an unintelligible string of words.

Snake rose to his feet deciding he did not want to see any more and grateful at just being alive. He wiped the blood that was running down his cheeks and winched at the pain. However, it was his leg that bothered him most. The sharp pain had dulled to a low throbbing as he moved further away from the fence. The Berserkers had started to drop off now, realising that he was beyond their reach. No one was happier about this than Snake himself. He watched them slowly withdraw, moving back the way they came and resuming their journey towards.

The loud clanging sound had resumed and Snake watched momentarily fascinated by the Berserkers, who moved down the street like they were being summoned by sirens song.

Time to keep going, Snake told himself and picked up his gun. Turning to leave, he took no more than a few steps when suddenly he heard another sound that stopped him dead in his tracks. A piercing cry for help that tore through the sounds of the drums and through the fading violence of the moment. The creatures reacted little to this but Snake froze where he stood.

It was Kate.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I

At the time, going underground had been a good idea.

Kate believed that instead of remaining above ground where she could be seen by anyone, climbing into the darkness of the sewers would make good her escape without attracting undue attention. After she had left the End Zone and walked out of its grounds during the Englishman's fevered speech, Kate disappeared into an alley and remained there until she could decide what to do next.

All the vehicles she saw on the road that night were on their way to the End Zone. Kate knew she had to return to Sanctuary before sunrise the next day. She had to warn them of what the Englishman was planning, if it was not already too late. In the alley, she had stayed for a while, recouping her strength and living in fear of the moment when they would discover her escape. Her terror was near paralyzing and it refused to go away no matter how much she tried to subdue it. After her experience with the Englishman, Kate knew it was understandable with one exception. Her ordeal was far from over.

Finally, she emerged from her hiding place in between the trash cans and vermin. She was still thinking of the best way to put some distance between herself and this place. It was purely chance that allowed her to see the half opened manhole in the silhouette of the night. At first, the thought of going into that darkness repelled her to no end. If there was one thing she detested, it was dark, enclosed place. Unfortunately, her terror of what horror lay below was nothing in comparison of what would await her if she fell into the hands of Englishman again.

Taking a deep breath, Kate lowered herself into the abyss.

It took a great effort to slide the manhole cover above her head. For a few minutes, she stared at the sky longingly and feared burying herself beneath the ground with rock and metal. However, fate had a curious way of hurdling her down its path. No sooner than she had lowered herself through the opening, she heard a cacophony of voices that smashed the thoughts of her present fears.

"She's escaped!" Kate heard someone shout in the distance. The idea that they knew she had escaped struck cold fear into her heart and prompted her to slide the grate above her head. When the dim light was blanketed and all she could see of the night sky were tiny pinpricks of starlight through the holes in the cover, it took all her strength not to climb out screaming.

They're after you

A tiny voice took command of her senses and adjusted her equilibrium somewhat. Trembling hard, Kate continued the journey downward, conscious of every sound and every smell she experienced as she slipped further and further into the darkness below her. She was scared and unafraid to admit it.

Finally, she reached all the way down and touched the slimy, wet floor. The rungs had come to an end on the side wall of a maintenance walkway. She looked around slowly, clutching her rifle for dear life. There was almost no light in the sewer and it was near impossible to see anything clearly. Whatever illumination penetrated from above bounced off the murky water, creating shimmering reflections against the grime covered walls. It made her uneasy because the moving shimmers confused her and left her unable to determine the difference between them and what was actually alive down here.

It took a while for her to adjust to the darkness. Kate started to see a little better although there really was not much to look at except for tunnels running off in four different directions, meeting at the junction she was now standing. The walls were dark with waste and grime and the water was murky with unidentifiable things floating on the surface among the dead insects and other refuse.

In the nearby distance, she heard high pitched squeals she knew instantly were sewer rats and cringed. There were cockroaches running along the walkway along with the rats and the smell in the place was enough to make her gag. However, Kate knew she was wasting time. She had to get moving. She tried to remember which direction she had been travelling above ground and tried to superimpose that information on her course now.

Kate moved slowly at first, forcing herself not to be overcome by this place. She had always hated, narrow, dark enclosures mainly because as a child she had been trapped inside a closet for more than an hour before her parents found her. She had not been tall enough to reach the light switch and all she remembered of that incident was the unyielding darkness and that she was trapped. Kate reminded herself repeatedly that she could climb out of this place whenever she wished to. It just was not safe for her to do so at the moment.

After about an hour of walking in one direction and moving from one smell to another, Kate became confident of one fact; she was lost. It had been ages since she had heard or seen any rats and the refuse floating along this juncture of the sewer seemed worse than ever. Human waste was most prevalent and it increasingly difficult to keep herself from retching or gagging. Unfortunately, she had little choice but to continue walking since it had been some time since she had sighted any ladder leading to the surface that was undamaged.

At least she could be comforted in knowing that she was becoming accustomed to being down here. Her fear had subsided somewhat to an underlying disgust and anticipation for when she would finally be able to emerge from this filthy hell. Lost or not, she knew that she was far away from where she had been as she had been careful not to turn corners and keep her course in one direction only. It was the only way she was able to keep track of her bearings and even if she was lost, she was confident that she put some distance between herself and the End Zone.

Sucking her breath in for the hundredth time, she reached another intersection of tunnels and decided to keep going the way she had. Kate was annoyed by her lack of ground but since the concrete was both wet and covered with muck, it was slippery and difficult to traverse without falling over. Moving forward again, she noticed a peculiar odour that seemed to stand out from the stench to which she had become accustomed to already. Kate paused trying to remember why it smelt so familiar. Suddenly, it hit her. When she had been doing her internship at Della City County Hospital, she had been summoned to the morgue to assist the medical examiner who was conducting an autopsy. The body that had been in a lake for almost 50 hours.

This place smelled the same.

Although the thought disgusted and frightened her at the same time, Kate was realistic. The Zone was hardly law abiding and people died in great numbers here, often through violent means. With the Englishman and his trigger happy goons running around the place, it would not be anything out of the ordinary to find the corpses of his victims around here. Especially, in this remote and forgotten place.

As of yet, she could not see the body in question and decided that it was more than time for her to emerge and see whereabouts she was. Kate's plan did not extend beyond finding herself a car at this moment and speeding back to Sanctuary. She wondered if they were looking for her in Sanctuary and then thought of Snake. Despite her fears for her home, she knew that Snake's presence at Sanctuary was the biggest advantage they had right now. With Tristan in hospital, Snake would have been more than capable of handling things should she not arrive in time to warn them.

Suddenly, she heard a splash.

Kate looked up sharply, her hands reaching for her gun. Looking around, she tried to see further up the tunnel and saw little movement. While she saw nothing yet, she could still hear something thought. There were no ripples on the surface of the water other than the refuse already floating there. Yet the sounds did not stop. Some were far away and some were close. They varied in their distance and Kate heard both splashing and footsteps. Kate started to panic.

Had they found her?

The tunnels were like resonance chambers amplifying the noises as they approached but still gave no clue as to which direction they were coming from. Kate started to run, unable to think of what else to do. She ran searching for a set of rungs so she could climb out of here. Her sneakers on the wet, slick concrete made her lose her balance and she felt herself fall backwards, straight into the murky water with a loud splash.

The water was not very deep, coming up to her armpits. The stench was overpowering and Kate stood up quickly, wiping unmentionable things from her face. With a sudden start, she realised she no longer had her gun and frantically started flaying her hands through the water in a desperate attempt to retrieve it. Suddenly, her hands hit something hard that was narrow and tubular in its shape. Grabbing it firmly, she pulled it up.

As a doctor, she identified it immediately. It was the ulna of a human skeleton.

Kate uttered a startled cry and released it but she had pulled enough to free corpse from its watery grave. The half rotting and skeletal body rose to the surface, forcing her to stagger backwards in a mad bid to reach the ledge where she could climb out. As she waded through the muck, she felt other deposits on the floor and kicked it away as she returned to the walkway. Only after she had pulled herself over the ledge and onto the concrete again, did she realise that those 'deposits' were more bodies. They rose to the surface, their skins stripped of flesh in places and decomposing rapidly.

Kate stood up and listened closely. The sounds were getting closer and there were voices too but these were not the voices of anything she could understand. Kate could make out words but they were obscured amongst the screeches and h owls. She could not understand what was happening except they were getting closer Kate found herself pressed up against the wall, reacting to every sound that echoed down the tunnels. Finally, the fear became too much for her and she started running for dear life, no longer caring in what direction she was going.

Finally, she reached another junction of tunnels and the ladder that led to the surface seemed intact and capable of taking her weight. Kate ran to it quickly, deciding she was not going to remain here any longer and would take her chances above ground. The howling was becoming louder and its intensity indicated that it was fast approaching her. The physician in her could not forget what she had noticed when she had seen those skeletons. Nearly all the bones were denuded. This was a disturbing trait that usually indicated gnawing and the bite marks were far too small to be caused by rats. Something down here was feasting on human bodies and she did not intend to find out what that was.

She reached the rungs and started climbing, not looking back but unable to ignore the footsteps that were very close now. They were so close that if she were to glance over her shoulder, she would have seen them. Kate had made it half way when she looked down and saw the dark shapes appearing behind her. Their faces were feral but clearly human. They were howling at her.

She let out a short scream and climbed faster when suddenly a hand closed around her ankle and pulled her down with superhuman strength. Her grip on the rung was lost and she slipped down a few feet before she could regain her hold. The others had also grabbed onto her and she could feel their hands on her body, dragging her down even further. Kate kicked hard to get free, connecting with one of them and sending them backwards into the water. She heard a splash as she tried to resume her way up the ladder.

This time however, more than one hand pulled at her and she battled fiercely to make it to top of the



ladder, she knew several of them were still clinging to her. Kate's palms started to slip as the pain dug in. She tried kicking but they were overwhelming her by numbers.

"No!" She screamed in desperation as she saw her fingers starting to slip and knowing this time there would be no recovery. Their howling grew louder, more fevered as they saw they were close to acquiring their prey.

Inevitably, she lost her grip as she knew she would and plunged into the darkness below screaming.

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What the hell was she doing here?

This was what was running through his mind as Snake Plissken tried to think of what to do? It was Kate who had cried for help. Snake was certain of this. He knew it was her voice and even if there was a shred of doubt in his mind, he could not afford not to see for himself. By now all the Berserkers were gone from the fence and were making their way towards a building in the centre of the block. That strange drum beat had not ceased and the Berserkers were thus compelled to obey its call. The building was right in the heart of their territory. Snake paced back and forth for a few minutes, unable to decide how to proceed. He had just made it out barely alive himself. How could he get to her before they killed both Kate and himself?

Finally Snake realised he had no time to contemplate this in depth. There were being summoned by that incessant pounding and for now their attention was no longer focussed on him. The Berserkers were in the distance now and Snake knew he did not have much time. She had stopped crying out and that disturbed him even further. Studying the surround area closely, Snake decided that the best way in would be over the roof tops. The nearest buildings were less than a hundred yards away beyond the fence. Like the other buildings, there was a fire escape running through the length of it. Apparently, the Canadians were more rigid about fire safety codes than the States. It was shrouded by trees and concealed the fire escape to some degree with its leafy branches. That did not provide much cover but at the moment, it would have to do. Snake took a deep breath and started reloading his rifle with the spare magazines he had brought with him on the utility belt around his waist.

Still on this side of the fence, Snake jogged quickly to the point where he would re-enter Berserker territory. The pounding had stopped but the drum beat had been replaced by howling so loud that it drowned out all other sound. They must have all congregated at the same point, Snake thought and he was struck with the idea that Kate might be the centre of all their attention.

Jesus, this was worse than trying to rescue her from the Englishman, Snake swore. Looking around and ensuring there were no more Berserkers in sight, Snake climbed over the fence quickly. Leaping onto the ground on the other side of the fence, he wasted no time and sprinted towards the fire escape, so that he could get under the cover of the trees next to it. He arrived there with little incident and it was hard to believe that a few minutes before he had been in a life and death struggle in this very place. However, Snake was a cynic to the end and he was not about to let belief detract him from the fact that if they saw him, both he and Kate would be dead.

It did not take long to climb up the fire escape and Snake moved stealthily through the darkness. Snake avoided being seen through the windows as he scaled the side of the building. There seemed to be no signs of life anywhere but he could hear the Berserkers in their gathering, the sounds of their howling and manic screams echoing into the darkness with sinister intent. It was hard to believe that those guttural sounds belonged to human beings.

Snake reached the top of the building. He stepped onto the roof with his weapon drawn but no Berserkers were there either. Their absence made him uneasy but Snake continued forward nevertheless. Suddenly, he heard Kate cry out again, only this time it was a high pitch scream. Her shriek tore through the voices of insane, full of raw terror. The fear in that scream prompted him to move faster and Snake was running harder towards it, now that he knew where it was from.

He reached the edge of the roof top, made a running start and leapt onto the roof of the next building. He landed on the other side, positioning himself so that his body rolled easily before he got to his feet and started again. The Berserker sounds were close now and Snake knew his destination was less than a building away. As he reached the edge of the building he was currently on, Snake jumped again, dropping several feet down onto the new roof.

There was a large skylight on this particular roof and through it, Snake could see amber light emanating from it. As he approached, he could see the flickering dance of light against the glass. The screaming was almost deafening now and Snake tried not to let that sound reach him. He knew it was Kate that was screaming and hoped the worst had not transpired. The building seemed to be the central hub of Berserker activity. The drum beat had come from here and the summons led all the Berserker into the walls below him. Snake wondered what was going on tonight? Did they have some part to play in the Englishman's plans for the Zone? Somehow, Snake doubted it. Gingerly, he walked to the skylight and looked down and the proceeding below.

He saw Kate immediately and she was still alive down there but not for long. The Berserkers were about to cook her alive.

## II

Kate did not remember much after they closed in on her. Her last memory had ended with her head hitting against the concrete floor. When she had come to, Kate found herself inside a dark room. When she stood, she noticed that the floor and walls felt strange. They were almost soft to the touch. Kate rose to her feet and began walking to the door. When she took a step, she felt her feet sink into the floor as if she was walking on foam. Through the darkness, she could only see a small window on the only door into the room. There were no windows or vents, there was even furniture.

It took a moment but it came to her where she was.

A padded room. Immediately, she thought of a mental asylum. Her suspicions were confirmed when she pressed her face against the filthy window and looked outside. She saw a corridor of similar type room. Kate thought about shouting and trying to break the door down but then thought better of it. These rooms were made to withstand the most violent rages of the human mind, she would be wasting her time and energy. Also, she was not entirely certain she wanted to bring herself to the attention of her captors so soon.

Kate turned away from the door, wondering if things could get any worse. With a touch of humour, she thought of how well the night before had been. Kate found some comfort in remembering Snake's caresses the night before and how wonderful they made each other feel. God, she wanted to be with him just once more or even to see him one last time if she was going to die. That was an impossible wish she knew because Snake was where she needed him to be right now, at Sanctuary, standing up for the friends who were now family to her. They needed to be protected when the Englishman and his army of killers attacked.

Suddenly, a loud clanging started to fill the air. Even through the thick walls of the room, she could hear that relentless pounding. Kate went to the small window on her door again and peered through it once more. The corridor was still dark and empty, devoid of all life. Yet she could hear their voices beyond that place in the form of howls and screams. The noises grew louder and louder, sending Kate to the back of the room to escape it. She tried to close her ears and block it out of her mind but found that it would not go away.

These people are all mental patients!

It came to her in a flash of insight and she realised how much sense it made once she had stumbled upon that discovery. After the Pulse, the hospital staff must have abandoned them here. These poor troubled minds were robbed of care or any of their medication. They must have formed some type of subculture

because this was the only world they knew could accept them as they were. They were uncontrolled and totally insane. Kate doubted that the Englishman would have troubled himself with their welfare and left well alone. If so, how did they manage to survive for two years with food or supplies? She could hear many of them outside and there were not enough rats in all the sewers to feed them all.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps coming up the hall way and Kate wished there was some light so that she could see. The door swung open and all she could see were dark, shadowy figures that looked barely human. There was where to run to inside the small confines of the padded cell and within seconds, they were dragging her out of the room. They made no attempt to speak to her although Kate struggled hard to break free.

When escape proved fruitless, she attempted to reason with them. "I can help you!" She declared. "I am a doctor!"

However that did little to stir them. Both of her captors were male, that much Kate could tell, even though it was difficult for them to observe them closely for all the darkness. Their eyes must have obviously become accustomed to the dark, she guessed because the corridors through which she was being led had no lamps or any kind of illumination. Although she could not see them, she could certainly smell the filth on their bodies. Her attempts to get any conversation were met with silence and an occasional snarl so Kate gave up altogether.

While they did not speak, the other Berserkers were certainly more vocal. She could hear their voices amidst the loud pounding of what seemed like a drum. Her fear mounting, Kate made another attempt to get away but her guards ended her resistance with a vicious snarl. Either way, Kate doubted that she could break free. Their grip on her arm was vise like and she knew how much strength the deranged were capable of possessing.

She was dragged up a flight of stairs. Her fear was rising steadily because of the unreality of her situation. Kidnapped by crazed mental patients, being dragged off to some kind of ritual. If she was not here going through all of it, Kate would have found this entire situation to be funny. Finally they arrived at the top of the staircase to a door from behind which both the noises and the drum beat was being emanating. As she neared, they blended together like a of the tortured aria from a nightmarish opera.

They threw her to the floor when they entered the room. Bathed in the same indigo darkness, Kate looked up to see the stars through the skylight allowing the night sky to shine through. It was the only trace of sanity in the room. In a past life, it might have been a recreation room as such because of its size and she could see up turned tables and chairs strewn about the room and the remnants of what used to be a ping pong table. There were hundred of bodies forced into the space around her. In the far corner, she saw one of the figures slamming their fist continuously against a steel drum, with almost rapturous delight.

As Kate scrambled to her feet, she felt arms slam into her back. She cried out in pain as she fell back on the floor, her back flaring in pain. Before she had time to react any further, arms grabbed her hands and forced them over her head. Despite her frantic struggle, they manage to maintain their hold as the feeling of helplessness and terror surfaced another memory. One that was even darker than this an infinitely more terrifying.

Pleasedon'tpleasedon'tleavemealoneleavemealonepleasedon'thurtme pleasedon'tdothis!!!

Something inside her snapped. She could not let them touch her. Not again. She dropped to her knees and started scrambling away, surprising them enough to break free for a few seconds. Unfortunately the brief taste of freedom was only fleeting because Kate felt their hands dig into her skin as she was yanked savagely backwards, while other arms pummelled into her for her resistance. Fists smashed against her body and she felt the snap of a rib. They had her arms outstretched above her head and she screamed in blind panic. Kate was kicking hard at everything even as they started binding her wrists. She was almost savage herself when she felt the hard coarse material scrape against her skin. In the moonlight, she gained enough sense to see that they had tied her up with a fire hose.

One of them threw the other end of the hose over a beam than ran across the length of the ceiling. Terrified as she was, she was now at a loss to understand what they were preparing her for. Kate felt herself being pulled up as the tension bit into wrist when one of the crazies started hoisting her off the floor. Her arms began protesting immediately in pain as she was raised high off the floor until her feet were dangling beneath her like a limp doll.

She had not been raised more than a few feet off the floor when suddenly her ascent halted abruptly. They started to close in around her, creating a circle as they surrounded her as if she were the centre piece in some stage production. Suddenly, she noticed they were all carrying pieces of wood in their hands and one of them held her steady since she was swinging unceremoniously about.

As they began to pile the wood beneath her feet, Kate knew immediately what they were doing. She looked below and saw the collection of kindling grow as more and more of them stacked wood that resembled pieces of furniture, clattering from the wall and even paper to add to the motley collection. She did not know at what point all these different images became a conscious thought or when she began screaming.

All she did know was that they intended for her to be the sacrifice on a burning altar.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

### I

Snake watched them stack the wood until Kate higher and higher until the mound was almost touching her feet. It took no great feat of genius to know what they had planned for them and Snake knew he did not have much time. It only took one match to set the whole thing on fire. If anything, these Berserkers had become quite adept at cooking their meals. It would seem that Kate herself had come to the same conclusion regarding her fate because she was screaming hysterically in pure terror.

The Berserkers hoisted her higher in order to pile more wood beneath her, until there was almost several metres of air between her and the floor. She dangled precariously, swinging from side to side as she struggled to get free. Snake could see the pain in her face as her arms were strained beyond breaking point as her weight pulled her down. The Berserkers paid little to her comfort or her panic. Their concern extended little beyond the howling ritual they were all practising. There was something primeval and ceremonial about the whole exercise. Snake was reminded of those old movies where the natives would chant in the same manner, like a prose to accompany the beat of the drum.

Unfortunately, the chant usually preceded a ritual sacrifice.

The Berserkers who were stacking bits of wood and kindling under her had stepped aside and another figure entered the semi-circle around Kate. She was dressed in what appeared to be a nurse's uniform. The white dress was stained with pieces of colourful rag tied in places to make it seem more festive and important, Snake observed. The figure was a large woman. From his angle, he could not see her face clearly. However he did notice her hair was white and her manner indicated that she was just as feral and savage as the others. She stood in front of the forming pyre and raised her arms to address the crowd. To his surprise, they actually quietened down and listened to her.

"Its time for our medicine!" She cried out. Her voice was loud and carried throughout the building. There was an intensity about her voice that sent a cold shiver down Snake's spine. It sounded so normal after all the howling he had heard but when she spoke, her words exuded nothing but madness. It was frightening. "This here is an offering from the gods with the white coats!" She announced pointing to Kate. "They gave her to us because she is the medicine to feed our bellies! We got to pray to the gods in the white coats and sing to them. Let Nurse Sally light the way."

Nurse Sally or whatever she called herself, reached into her clothes and produced a small metallic object that glimmered under the moonlight. The question of what it might be was answered when she flipped the

lid open and clicked at it. Time seemed to freeze as the flame illuminated the room with its sinister light. Whatever calm or semblance of control Kate still maintained snapped with that sudden spark. She let out a high pitched scream that cut through the air as she jerked on the end of the hose like a marionette puppet. Nurse Sally gazed up at Kate dispassionately. Her eyes saw Kate but did not really see a human being. "Its time for you to heal us! It time for our medicine!"

At that she picked up a piece of kindling from the pyre and held it to the lighter, it captured a flame in a matter of seconds. Triumphantly, she held the burning wood above her head for all to see. The Berserkers started screaming and cheering, their eyes feverish with blood lust and dementia.

"Oh my god!" Snake heard Kate cry out as Nurse Sally turned back to her with the burning torch in hand, preparing to light the pyre. Her screams turned into mindless shrieks of terror as Nurse Sally lowered the torch and the fire quickly burned into the rest of the wood.

Snake shook her screams from his mind because he had to act fast. He thought quickly of the best way to reach her. At the moment, Kate was dangling several metres over the fire. He could see the sweat forming over her white skin. While she was safe from the fire for the moment any way, this would not last with the Berserkers renewing their labour to pile on more wood on the burning pyre. Snake had no idea whether they intended to lower her into it or built the fire high enough to reach her. Snake had a feeling it was the former.

There was no way he could simply barge in there and start firing. They would swarm on him in an instant and he would be so busy fighting them off that he would not have time to get to her before the fire did. Snake took a deep breath, looking around the roof top as the desperation of the situation filtered to him. Suddenly, his eyes caught sight of something that was enough to send the wheels of thought in motion inside his head. Snake reached for his utility belt and grabbed the grenade projectiles he had brought with him. He had been saving these for any encounters with the Englishman, however the game plan had changed drastically and he had to improvise.

Running to the edge of the rooftop, he looked down at his intended target. His view was of the street in front of the building. A number of derelict cars that had were lying in overturned positions after coming to an abrupt halt when the Pulse had detonated years ago. The ravages of the electromagnetic pulse had trapped these lifeless hulks where they were, making them useless to everyone until this moment. Snake knew it was a gamble to assume that some of these forgotten vehicles still had any gasoline inside their tanks but he had little choice at the moment. Since this was Berserker territory, the Englishman and his people would have been unable to siphon away the precious commodity and it did not appear that the Berserkers were interested in fuel. Snake quickly loaded his gun with the grenade projectiles. He had chosen this particular weapon for that very purpose. It could be used as an automatic rifle with the added extras of a grenade launcher built in.

He took aim carefully hoping this would prove to be the distraction that he needed it to be. Snake had only a handful of these projectiles so he could not afford to waste any of them. He seemed to recall being better equip the last time he had to do one of these rescues. Depressing the trigger, the projectile exploded out of the chamber, trailing gasses and fury as it sailed across the air and struck an old Chevy lying on its side. The force of the detonation sent the car rolling towards the sidewalk before exploding in a fiery eruption that sent jets of fire in all directions. Shards of metal and glass rained down on the sidewalk and the road, igniting the litter that had accumulated after years of neglect. The roar of the explosion brought an abrupt end to the Berserkers chanting and that incessant drum beat.

By the time, Snake took a second aim and finally a third, the front of the building was a glow with the amber light of fire. Multiple explosions shattered the stillness of the air as the fire quickly metamorphosized into something not even Snake had anticipated. A small breeze that had previously gone unnoticed, now fanned the flames into something more formidable that was consuming everything in its path. After watching his handy work for a second or two, Snake ran back to the skylight and peered through the glass to take stock of his efforts to date.

Below him, things had transpired as he had anticipated. The Berserkers were running out of the room to see what was the source of the commotion. Only a handful remained with Kate, even though it was obvious they were unsettled by not knowing what was happening outside. The pyre was blazing now, with embers of bright orange floating around the room and escaping through one shattered window pane on the skylight. Thick dark smoke was billowing from it and Snake could see Ariel coughing hard as the fumes rose all around her. Her alabaster skin was now covered in soot and he could see her struggling to remain conscious. She was slowly being suffocated since the thicker the smoke, the less oxygen she was getting. If he did not hurry, she would die of smoke inhalation long before the flames reached her.

He braced himself and took a deep breath. Snake jumped through the glass, feet first, shattering the window as he went through it. Shards of glass stung his skin as he went down but he ignored it. Fortunately, the bulk of it rained down on the Berserkers instead of Kate although he did not doubt that a few stray shards would inevitably find its way to her. He hoped she would not be cut too badly. Snake landed on the beam from which she was hanging, carefully avoiding a fall straight into the fire. Immediately, the smoke enveloped him. He wondered at what point these Berserkers would realise that the fire they were building would exceed even their expectations and choke them too since all that smoke had only one tiny outlet for escape.

The Berserkers screeched loudly as they tried to understand what was happening. Fortunately, the thick smoke hid his presence shortly.

Leaping to the floor, he missed the fire by several feet and rolled across the surface before coming to an abrupt halt. Tiny pieces of glass cut him here and there but Snake hardly felt it. He was riding high on a fit of adrenalin induced bravado. Once the Berserkers saw him however, all hell broke loose. They started running towards him, pouncing with their teeth bared and nails prepared to tear. Snake cocked his rifle and let the bullets fly, making sure his back was to Kate. Most of them died in the first few minutes as they rushed towards him blindly, with little thought and acting on pure insane savagery and encountering a hail of bullets from his gun instead. Another jumped at him and Snake was thrown to the floor. The Berserker's fingers dug into his skin as Snake fought flaying arms and snarling teeth.

He threw his fist forward and Snake heard bone crunch as he connected with the lunatic's jaw. With an equally coordinated move, Snake threw the Berserker off him and straight into the fire. The creature screamed as he rolled over the pyre, covered in flames. Snake saw Nurse Sally watching in savage fury. Once their eyes met, she hissed at him and started running. Only she was not coming at him. She reached the hose that was holding Kate airborne and started loosening the end that was tied to a wooden post. Her fingers began loosening the knots and Snake knew he would not reach her in time. All he could do was allow his own instincts to take hold as his rifle flew up and sent one bullet into her face. She let out a fanatical scream as she heard the chamber explode. A scream that was cut short when her head exploded like a ripe melon over the floor. Blood, bone and grey matter splattered over the hose.

With the revered Nurse Sally dead, the room was momentarily Berserker free or at least until the Berserkers in street became wise to what was happening. No sense in taking chances though, Snake rose to his feet and hurried to the main doors. Slamming it shut, he did his best to barricade it. Pulling a large sofa across the entrance, Snake pushed it as hard against the door as he could. In the background, he no longer heard Kate coughing hard and that alarmed him slightly, prompting him to work faster. As he barricaded the other entrances to the room, save the fire exit, he saw ironically enough that there was a fire extinguisher in the room. He grabbed it off its hook and hoped it still worked despite the years and hurried back to Kate.

He looked up and saw that she was no longer conscious. She needed to breathe fresh air Snake thought as he aimed the nozzle of the extinguisher at the burning pyre. The frothy white jet escaped the nozzle immediately and subdued the flames with surprising ease and speed. Within a few seconds, short of the extinguisher running out of its contents, the fire had died out completely. As the hiss of the extinguisher began to die down, Snake could hear the thundering of multiple footsteps coming from below. The Berserkers were coming back and he did not want to be around when they found their precious Nurse Sally

dead.

Snake hurried to the column and winced slightly at the sight of Sally's flesh and blood covering the hose. It was a good thing he was wearing gloves. He continued what she had started, loosening the knots before lowering Kate down slowly.

Kate's head hung down limply as she landed on the froth that had killed the fire. Her face was covered with soot and dirt, intermingling with the sweat on her body from the heat before. He knew she was still alive because he could see the rise and fall of her chest. Now that the fire was gone, her lungs were taking over instinctively, taking greedy gulps of fresh air. As she felt the cold froth bubbling against her skin, Snake saw her coming around a little. Snake hurried to her and decided that revival could wait for now. He loosened the knots around her wrist and noticed skin rubbed raw by the course material. Once she was free of it, Snake picked her up and carried her out of the room back onto the roof.

II

When they reached the rooftop again, Snake put Kate down on the floor before he went to barricade the door to the roof as well. There was not much he could really do except to jam the lock with one of the poles once used to hold up television antennas. It would hold for a while but Snake was not optimistic it would sustain under constant bombardment from the likes of the Berserkers. He was planning to be out of Berserker territory before the Berserker got to this point.

Kate was disorientated. She had taken large breaths of thick smoke and needed time to recover. She was half conscious now but still dazed. Snake hurried to the edge of the building and saw the Berserkers below were preoccupied by the fires raging out of control through their territory. Most were starting to fan out from the building, in search of a safe place to hide. Unfortunately, Snake discovered some were starting to enter the building again. He knew that their reaction to Nurse Sally's death would drive them into an ever bloodier frenzy.

Snake and Kate had to get out of here and they had to do it now.

Come on Doc," he leaned over her and took her chin in his hand. He could not make it out of here with Kate in this condition. For both their sakes, she needed to be on her feet. "Talk to me baby."

"Don't call me that." She mumbled before opening her eyes slowly. As her eyes took in the sight of him, Snake saw that she was visibly shocked. "Snake?" She blinked, wondering if this was a hallucination she was having while being roasted alive.

"Yeah," He said unable to stifle a faint smile at her awareness of him. "Its me. Come on baby, you need to get on your feet. We've got to get out of here now. We're not out of this yet."

As if the illustrate the point, the screaming and howling resumed. The feral noises emanated from the skylight and the rage in those voices was unmistakable. Snake presumed they had just found Nurse Sally. Kate's eyes averted sharply to the direction of the sound and she looked up at him as her own blood started pumping.

"They'll be coming for us." He answered.

She nodded quickly and made an attempt to stand. She was still a little dazed but understood the urgency of the situation. She would deal with her equilibrium as they put some distance between themselves and this place. "They thought I was an offering from the gods with white coats." She remarked quietly as she rose to her feet. "Considering I am one of those with white coats, you could almost consider it funny." Although nothing about what almost happened to her seemed humorous.

Snake took in the sight of her, unable to hide the fact that her survival meant more to him than he could ever imagine. She looked up at him and for a brief second, the Berserkers, the Englishman and the Zone

were all forgotten. As their arms wrapped around each other, their lips met in a passionate kiss. Both were grateful for the precious few seconds.

God it felt so good to hold her again, Snake thought to himself. Even if the time for it was completely inappropriate. Snake did not care. Kate was alive and that was all that mattered. Only when the Berserkers started pounding at the barricade in the stairway beyond the door, were they prompted into making tracks to escape. Pulling away from her, Snake took her hand. "Let's get out of here." He glanced at the door and the pounding that could be heard behind it. "We'll have to make a run for it."

"Lead the way." Now that Snake was here, Kate felt a little braver.

They ran towards the fire escape. Snake was limping a little because of the injury to his knees and everything else he had put the damaged join through since then. Kate was tempted to look at it although now was hardly the time. Below them, the fires were raging out of control. As they climbed down the ladder that led down to the street, both of them got a full view of the rampaging flames. Years of refuse and debris accumulated on these streets, from one disaster to another had become the perfect fodder for the flames that were now consuming everything in sight.

"What are you doing here?" Kate asked him as they hurried down the steel grating.

Snake gave her a look. "Take a wild guess."

She did not speak for a moment. "Thank you Snake." She said softly. "I did not expect you to."

For some reason that stung him but he could not deny that she had every reason to believe that of him. After all, he had never given any reason to believe any different. Even after he had made love to her. "I got used to having you around." He responded.

Despite herself, Kate smiled as she reached another turn of the steel walkway. It was probably the closest he would ever come to saying he loved her but Kate was not about to complain. For Snake, his being here was a big enough indication of his feelings for her. "We have got to get back to Sanctuary." She replied instead.

"That's the plan baby." Snake said in a deadpan as they reached the ladder that dropped to the ground. Kate went down first and waited until they were both on the grass before she spoke any further. Snake's knee was throbbing as he hit the ground. The shock waves of pain travelled up his leg as he landed. He winced slightly as he motioned her to head for the fence. They had about a hundred yards to get across before they reached the fence and even from where he was, he could see the Berserkers trying to gain shelter from the fire. Snake did not doubt that their attention could be easily distracted from that purpose by their need to baser instinct.

"We need to get to that fence." Snake pointed out as he started jogging towards it.

Kate followed suit. Matching him stride for stride even though she was much smaller than him. Behind them, the sky was bright orange as the fire engulfed another building. Kate glanced behind her to see the trees they had just cleared burst into flames as the dry leaves beneath it offered the fire more fodder for the burning. The screech of Berserkers could be heard everywhere like trapped animals as the blaze widened. The breeze blowing tonight was turning this fire into a raging inferno.

Suddenly a body leapt out of the darkness and downed Snake with one movement.

"Snake!" Kate screamed as she saw them rolling across the ground. Snake threw the man off easily and reached for his gun before the Berserker could attack again. One shot sent the man backwards and Snake turned to her.

"Run!" He ordered sharply.



She did so without question and was relieved to see him behind her when she looked over her shoulder. Other Berserkers were chasing them now, the few that were in the lead were screaming and calling to the others for help. They began to turn their attention from the fire and towards the intruders who had caused the blaze in the first instance. Kate was very away that she had almost become a meal to them and she wanted to be away from here at all costs.

Snake was limping slightly as they reached the fence and with the running start they had on the Berserkers, leapt onto the steel mesh fence and scaled it quickly. Both fell to the ground clumsily with Kate recovering first to keep running. Snake however, was still on the grass, breathing heavily and nursing his injured knee.

"Come on!" She urged.

"Its clear." Snake assured her gesturing towards the fence. Kate turned and saw the Berserkers pressed up against the fence, shaking it in protest and screeching like animals in a cage but making no further advance over it.

"What's wrong with them?" She asked staring at the scene with a mixture of fascination and horror.

"Not their turf." Snake explained as he looked at the Berserkers and wondered if they would remain within their territorial boundaries even if it meant being burnt alive in the fire. It was a question Snake did not want to be present at when it was finally addressed. Rising slowly to his feet, he turned to Kate, completely ignoring the roar of the fire and screeching of the Berserkers who were rattling the fence in outrage and futility. "We've got to keep moving."

"No argument from me." She answered although her attention still focussed on the Berserkers. As they moved away from that place, Kate suddenly caught sight of something on the side walk of one darkened street. "Give me a minute?" She asked and walked up ahead. Snake followed her without question although he wondered what she was up to. Kate crossed the street and came to a tarnished faucet on the side of a building. She tried to twist the handle but rust held it in place defiantly.

"I'll do it." He offered walking past her. Snake placed his hand on the corroded tap while Kate stepped back and allowed him to continue. He twisted it in a clockwise position and felt something give. Water began to seep in small rivulets before he stepped away and allowed a gusher of dark rusty water to escape. After a few seconds, the dirty brown water had become clear with a reasonable force behind it.

"All yours." Snake offered as he stepped back and sat down on the side walk, away from the flow of the runoff.

Kate bent down and started washing her soot covered face with clean water. She let it run down her neck and wet her hands so that she could run her fingers through her hair. After everything she had been through today, it was a shower she really wanted. However, this would do for now. At least, she could no longer smell the stench of the Englishman on her body. Once she had cleaned the dirt from her hands, she twisted the faucet close and returned to Snake. The air was chilly with the water on her skin but she did not care. It actually felt quite invigorating.

Now that she was cleaned up, Snake noticed the bruises on her face. He saw how badly swollen one eye was and the marks against her lips and especially the bruises to her neck. "Are you okay?" He asked for the first time.

Kate did not look at him. "I'll live." She answered and for the first time all day, actually believed it.

However, at that moment Snake knew precisely what had happened. He showed little response that he was aware of what the Englishman had done, other than a tightening of his jaw. Although now that he knew, he could see other bruises on her arms, the bite marks on her neck and scratches on her skin in various places. It took all his control not to say anything and she did not want appear to want to talk about

it anyway.

I swear I'll kill him.

"You look like hell," he managed to say calmly through his rage.

"I'll be okay." She replied letting out a deep breath. "I just need to get the hell out of here." She said it with such conviction that it only served to confirm Snake's suspicions.

"We're on our way." He nodded.

In the distance, he could see cars still speeding towards the End Zone. Obviously, the festive atmosphere had not dissipated nor did the Zoners give any concern as to what was taking place in Berserker territory. "There is something happening tonight." He pointed out as he stared at the cars disappearing into the darkness with cheering voices echoing from inside them.

"I know." She retorted staring into the sky. She remembered what the Englishman's plan was and why it was so imperative that they wasted no time in leaving here. "Those people we let into Sanctuary were actually the Englishman's people. They knew we wouldn't search escapees from the Zone. Every one of the men are armed and if we don't get back there to warn the others, there won't be a Sanctuary left by the time we get there."

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

I

"Is that any better?" She asked looking up at him.

Snake stood up shakily and tested his knee. Although it still throbbed painfully, it was not aching as it was before. At least now he could take a running step without having to grit his teeth from the pain. Kate had refused to let him go any further until she examined his injured knee and after raiding an abandoned sport store, emerged with enough materials to ease the swelling for the moment.

"Not bad." He admitted, taking another step forward. "You're good to have around."

"I've been told that." She smiled seeming in better spirits now. Snake was glad. After her ordeal, it would be reasonable to assume she would be emotionally distraught but Kate just proved to him again that she was tougher than she looked. She left the remaining items on the park bench where she had been working on him and rose to her feet. "Now what?"

Snake looked around and surveyed the terrain. Fortunately, Berserker terrain was on the edge of town and most of the Englishman's people were located in the centre of Victoria City. Tonight in particular, their attention would be focussed on the coming attack on Sanctuary. The Englishman was wasting no time as Kate related what she had seen before to her capture by the Berserkers. The warlord was bringing every available thug to Sanctuary for its conquest. Snake guessed he had become a little smarter after his last dance with the inhabitants of Della City. He was taking no chances nor was he underestimating his enemy again. None of this bode well for Sanctuary.

The only chance they had was to get back to Della City as quickly as possible and prepare for the attack. Snake knew that Kate wanted to get to a CB so that she could warn them of the coming danger but at the moment that notion was remote. Snake and Kate had one thing to their advantage and that was the Mosquito that was waiting for them at the docks of the Vancouver Island. With the plane, they could make it back to Sanctuary in ample time ahead of the Englishman's attack force and prepare some kind of defence.

"We head out of here as fast as we can." Snake replied. There was only one direction to go and that was ahead. Unfortunately, they had no choice but to take the long way back since Berserker territory was now

an inferno. Even as he said that, he could see the amber glow that lit the night sky behind them. Snake's short cut through it had taken almost an hour of his advance to the End Zone but that route was lost to them now.

What they needed, he decided reluctantly, was wheels.

However, he was not prepared to spend too much time searching for a car or a bike. If they were going to acquire a vehicle, it would have to be on route. "That way." He gestured towards a park directly in front of them. It seemed peaceful enough but Snake did not voice that looks could be deceiving. After discovering that a seemingly harmless block of buildings had turned out to be the home of cannibalistic asylum patients, Snake guessed that anything was up for grabs in this place.

"Let's move." Snake answered as he started across the street.

Kate followed him closely, not wanting him out of her sight for even a moment. She was still quite astonished that he had come all this way for her. Although it doubled her concern over Sanctuary's welfare, it was nice enough to know he cared enough to risk everything to save her life.

As they moved across the uncertain terrain, Kate noticed that he was watching everything. Snake's eyes moved across the landscape like a high precision camera. Outwardly, the area seemed calm enough if one ignored the raging fire only a few blocks behind them. She could still hear the distant sounds of screeches and howling in the distance and a part of her could not feel anger towards the Berserkers. It was not their fault that they were so savage. They needed treatment to maintain some semblance of civilisation and without it, could do nothing but resort to the impulses of their deranged mind.

There were signs of life on the road although this appeared as nothing more than moving shadows and noises in the dark. Snake did not doubt they were being watched by the denizens of these grim, city blocks. There were dim lights from lanterns emanating from some windows. Occasionally, Kate would catch sight of frightened face disappearing into the darkness after she saw them.

They reached the other side of the road and stepped on the grass turf that rolled into the large park ahead. In the moonlight, Snake could see the faint silhouette of park benches, decrepit and rusted swings and slides in the forgotten playground. These shapes made him cautious despite how harmless in nature they may seem. Even though this was the most direct path back to his plane, he saw danger behind every bush and ever tree.

He walked cautiously, disturbed by the silence. He would have assumed that this would be someone's turf. The Zone seemed to be cut up into slices of territory by one group or another. While, there was the possibility he might have been paranoid in assuming they were invading someone's exclusive territory, Snake had an instinct he was not wrong.

"Stay close." He whispered softly as they moved past the playground. If not for the moonlight and the fire from the Berserker territory, they would have been enveloped in pitch black darkness.

At that, Kate took a step closer to him. While she saw nothing out of the ordinary, she did not doubt his word when he made such orders. "Do you think there is something here?" She asked just as quietly.

Snake did not answer but was keeping an eye out for anything strange. They were coming up to a paved area where the statue overlooking the park was standing. He saw Kate shudder as they approached it, mainly because in all its darkness, the monument seemed more ominous than inspirational.

Kate found herself staying very close to Snake as they moved under the looming figure, past the pond. She could see the moonlight bouncing off its simmering surface as they moved by. It was overgrown with reeds and other vegetation and the croaking of frogs broke through the silence of the night.

"There's the road." Snake replied staring at a thin vein of concrete in the distance. From this distance, he

could see the luminous green sign that indicated that they were on the right track out of town.

"Thank god," she answered. "This place is spooky."

While he questioned her use of the word 'spooky' to describe this place, he supposed that was one way of putting it. He considered it too uneven for his liking. Uneven ground gave the enemy too many places to hide. Even now, he was not certain that they were completely safe. After being in New York and then Los Angeles, Snake had learnt one thing to perfection. There were crazies behind every darkened corner.

They had just emerge from beneath the shadow of the statue when someone jumped out behind Kate and locked an arm around her neck. Kate neither had time to react or utter a scream as she felt someone's arms pressed up hard against her throat.

"Don't do it man!" The youth declared, brandishing a long blade against her throat.

Snake's gun was already out of its holster and he was aiming carefully. He did this while the other members of this kid's group surrounded him. As they fanned out, Snake saw that most of them were not out of their adolescence, not that it made any difference to the threat they posed. They were all wearing red bandannas on their foreheads, obviously gang colours and were armed only with knives. Obviously, these were fledgling thugs.

"What do you want?" Snake asked simply, ignoring the fearful look on Kate's face. Now Snake wished he had given her a gun. He knew she did not like using them but decided when they got out of this current predicament, he would really have to insist upon it.

"This is our turf." The boy said arrogantly. "You cross over it and you need to pay the toll or I cut up the lady." At that, the others behind him laughed and Snake wondered how long since any of these kids started shaving. They were not really worth his time or effort under normal circumstances but they did have Kate and that brought a whole new light to the situation.

Snake showed no reaction. "What's the toll?" He asked.

"Whatever you got fucker." The kid sneered.

"How about you let the lady go and I let you live." Snake offered.

The entire group burst into laughter and even Kate was starting to look at him sceptically. Suddenly one of them came up to Snake to take a closer look. He was of African descent with dreadlocks hanging over his face so that one could only see his eyes and mouth in this light. "I know you." He said out loud. "Hey Ray! I know this guy!"

Here it comes, Snake thought to himself.

"This is Snake Plissken!" Dreadlock announced. "You're him right? You're Snake Plissken."

"I thought Snake Plissken was dead." Someone else remarked.

"No, no, he ain't dead." Dreadlock insisted. "That's him."

Snake could not tell what kind of effect this new was having on the group but judging from the expression on Ray's face, it was not good. In fact, his grip on Kate seemed to get tighter and the blade was pressed up against her neck. While he could not see blood as of yet, Snake knew all it would take was a flick of his wrist and the kid would slice Kate's throat open.

"You're a big man Snake." Ray grinned and Snake saw Kate wince as he held the blade closer to her neck. She did not seem as scared now and Snake's calm told her that he had a handle on the situation. "Maybe if we cap you, the Englishman will finally let us be one of his boys."

The others in the group shouted out their approval of the plan by coming closer. Snake watched them out of the corner of his eye and then faced Ray again. "If you're going to play games with grownups, you ought to be prepared." With that he depressed the trigger of his gun and the bullet slammed into the centre of Ray's forehead. Grey matter exploded from the back of his skull and Kate dropped to her knees as he went down.

Before the other's had a chance to react, Snake unholstered his other hand gun and fired above the heads of the others. The sound of gunfire frightened some away but the a few chose to remain. Among these, Snake noticed was Dreadlock.

"You mother!" He screamed and came running at Snake with a six inch blade drawn. Kate reached for a base ball bat dropped by the thugs who had fled. Before Snake could fire, she dropped the young man with savage blow to the shin. Snake heard bone crunch as Dreadlock went down screaming in agony. Snake fired at the others who were coming at him. He aimed carefully, not wanting to waste any more time here than necessary. Gun fire might attract the attention of someone who would really be trouble.

An Asian was the first to break minimum safe distance and Snake fired with both guns blazing. In a matter of seconds, they all went down, bloody from a dozen wounds. He had not liked killing any of them because they were kids who did not know better and their education had come too late. They fell down around him, a pile of dead bodies, leaving him standing in the wake of their deaths with guns smoking.

"You bastard!" He heard Dreadlock shout amidst the pain of his broken leg.

Kate stumbled to her feet and hurried to him. "Dumb stupid kids." She grimaced, angered by the waste of life. She knew he had no choice. This was no longer a simple world with no easy answers. "Are you okay?"

Snake nodded. "Better than them." He said abruptly and turned to Dreadlock. He strode forward and yanked the boy up by his collar so that Snake could meet his enraged eyes. "We need a car." Snake said simply.

"Fuck you." He spat.

Snake glanced away for a moment before his arm shot out and hand gripped Dreadlock's damaged knee before twisting it slightly. The young man uttered a cry of pain and Kate flinched at Snake's methods but was not about to question it. After what she had been through with the Englishman, she knew Snake was being gentle. If he really intended to torture the boy, Kate did not doubt he could do it more effectively than this.

"We need wheels." Snake repeated, making certain that Dreadlock understood his predicament. "Now."

"Fuck you, you bastard!" The boy shouted defiantly. Snake withdrew his weapon until Dreadlock was staring down the barrel of his gun with no mistaken intention as to his fate if he did not answer correctly.

"I wouldn't push him." Kate warned. "He hasn't had a cigarette all day."

Snake reacted enough to give her a look before turning his steely eyes back on the young man. The kid was starting to understand that he was no longer dealing with the swaggering members of his gang. This was Snake Plissken and this was serious. Ray's bloodied corpse in the distance was proof of that.

"Wheels." Snake repeated and cocked the gun in his face. "Now."

"I... don't have no car man." He stammered finally. "Just a bike."

Snake lowered the gun slightly, just enough to edge out of Dreadlock's face. "What kind of a bike."

"Just a motorcycle!" He said nervously.

Snake smiled faintly.

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Within twenty minutes, Dreadlock had painfully lead them to the garage at an abandoned gas station. Snake had to help him there since the young man was unable to move but in his condition, Snake doubted that he was in any condition to offer a threat. Snake could not help admire the precision of Kate's aim with a base ball bat. He supposed being a doctor gave one the knowledge of the best place to disable a person.

"There it is." Dreadlock said as they put him down on a nearby workbench. Snake went to inspect the row of motorcycles in the garage. It was a motley collection but nevertheless adequate for their needs. Apparently this gas station was the gang headquarters and Snake watched carefully for any returning members. However, it appeared that after their encounter with him, most had decided to scatter for the night or so Dreadlock explained.

Snake picked the one most likely not to collapse at the first rev and that cycle was some Japanese model that he would discard happily once he and Kate arrived where they were going. While he gave the bike a once over, he noticed Kate had rolled up the boy's trouser leg and examining the broken bone she had given him.

"Clean snap." She remarked. "However, that's an iffy diagnoses without an X-Ray."

"You a doctor?" Dreadlock asked. "I don't want you touching my leg if you ain't no doctor."

"I am a doctor." Kate replied, looking for something to make a splint. "If I wasn't, I would have broken your knee cap instead of an easily repairable shin bone."

"Thanks." He said sarcastically but knew that she was trying to help at least. "I don't remember seeing you in the Zone." He remarked.

"You got a name kid?" Kate asked.

"They call me HiTea." He said wincing as she tied a piece of wood to his leg with some rags she had found.

"Nice to meet you HiTea." Kate answered. "You shake down everyone going through that park?"

"Yeah." He replied, watching what she was doing intently. "We've got to live."

Kate did not want to show how saddened she was by that answer. He was no more than eighteen years old at best and the boy who had almost killed her, seemed younger. She hated the Englishman even more at this moment then when he had raped her. "If you want to live better, come see me in Sanctuary. I know people there." She said quietly, securing the splint against his leg hard.

He uttered a soft cry and then looked up at her. "You're from Sanctuary?"

"Yes." Kate nodded. "We're going to use your bike to get back there."

Snake wished she had not told him that but Kate's compassion looked as if it might have reached some part of the kid. Still, there was no point in taking chances. "You tell anybody that and I'll make that limp permanent." Snake remarked as he started wheeling the bike from its space.

"You with the Sanctuaries Snake?" HiTea seemed to ask. "I thought a tough dude like you would sure to be with the Skulls."

"Name's Plissken to you kid." Snake retorted and then added. "I don't like assholes." At that, he looked over at Kate. "We've got to get moving Doc."

Kate met his gaze and nodded. She turned back to HiTea and checked his splint once more. "Stay off the foot for at least six weeks and put the splint back after you shower or whatever it is you do for hygiene around here."

He nodded slowly. "You'd really help me if I went to Sanctuary?" He looked at her with a surprised look on his face.

"Yeah, HiTea." Kate smiled. "I would."

Snake pulled the door to the garage open a little wider and then strode back to the bike. Kate was already there and she waited until he mounted it before she slid on the back behind him. As she slipped her arms around his waist, Snake wondered when was the last time he had a woman on the back of a motorcycle with him. He could answer that quickly enough.

Too long.

"You ready?" He asked simply.

"As I ever will be." Kate remarked. She was not that fond of motorcycles but knew she was going to have get used to them, since they seemed to be Snake's favourite fond of transport.

With that, Snake brought his foot down on the pedal and the engine roared to life before settling into a slight stutter that sent fine smoke out of its unpolished chrome exhaust. Snake turned to HiTea as they were leaving and made a final remark.

"Stay out of trouble or next time you'll get hurt somewhere that won't be fixed after six weeks."

II

Things were definitely happening in Sanctuary tonight.

Somehow Taylor and Vihn had managed to make it back to the top floor of the hospital but that did not alter their predicament any better. There were men with guns in the building and they would soon be searching for both the doctor and patient, when they learnt of the encounter at reception. No doubt, they had destroyed the radio to maintain their anonymity and Taylor and Vihn's chance discovery while they were in the process of doing it had made the situation very bad.

Both men had left the lift and taken the fire stairs to the to the roof above the building. Once there, Taylor barricaded the door behind them to ensure that no one would be able to follow them in a hurry. While Taylor was still aching from his injuries, he found that the adrenalin coursing through his veins had taken some edge of the pain. His concern now mostly centred with how they would deal with the men, Taylor was almost certain, were Zoners.

Vihn seemed shaken and Taylor could hardly blame him. Vihn had not seen action in quite some time. It was one thing carrying out battlefield surgery but quite another to actually become apart of the combat. His age did not help either and Taylor wondered if the best solution would be to simply leave Vihn here out of the line of fire.

"What are we going to do?" Vihn asked softly.

"We've got to get to town." Taylor replied. Rubbing his hands together. Now he wished he something more than a robe and pyjamas on. It was icy cold at that time of the night and with vapour of warm air escaping their mouth whenever they spoke. "We've go to tell the Circle."

"I cannot believe that they would use children like that." Vihn said astonished.

"I don't think they had to do much persuading." Taylor remarked, steadying his steel frame glasses on his

nose. "Most people would be so glad to get to Sanctuary, I don't think they cared too much how they arrived."

"That's crazy." The doctor shook his head.

"You haven't been to the Zone." Taylor answered. "Look, we can't stay here." He rose to his feet and hurried to the edge of the roof. Della City seemed oblivious to the danger it was in as Taylor looked down at it. Myriad lights scattered the town limits and he could just imagine the warm fires around which most people were huddled on a night like this. Suddenly, he noticed a set of headlights making its way up the winding road that led to the hospital from town. While Taylor could not make out whose vehicle it was, he knew an opportunity when he saw one. He looked at the walls of the four storey building and saw that it had a fire escape. Taylor thanked god for stringent Canadian fire safety laws that demanded that every building especially a hospital have one instead of the more lax legislation of the United States.

He hurried back to Vihn as the vehicle rounded the last corner before it would enter the hospital parking lot. "Someone's coming." Taylor announced.

"Who?" Vihn asked rising to his feet to follow Taylor who had started towards the fire escape.

"I don't know." He replied. "I can't see from here but that's how we are getting back to town."

"What about the others in the hospital." Vihn declared. "We can't just leave them."

"We're going to have to." Taylor said abruptly. They ran along the edge of the building when all of sudden both men jumped at the sound of a shotgun blast. Tiny holes appeared in the roof of the barred roof top door. Both men stared at the door for a second when they heard the familiar click of the shotgun being pumped to fire again.

"Move!" Taylor shouted and jumped over the side, landing on the steel grating below. His shoulder ached as he impacted but he managed to recover quickly enough. Vihn scrambled clumsily over the site, with less agility just as the second short completely blasted the door open.

They raced down the steel walk way, not pausing to look behind them to see who was following. As it was, they had a slim chance at making it to the ground before getting blasted to pieces by the Zoner on the roof top. Taylor bit down hard as he descended down the steps, sometimes skipping a few on his way down. They were almost half way down when another blast ricocheted off the steel surface of the fire escape. Taylor glanced upwards long enough to see that their attacker was Aaron's supposed father.

"JUMP!" Taylor ordered Vihn as they reached the end of the fire escape and found themselves looking down at a ladder they did not have the time to pull out or climb. It was a fair drop but nothing they would not survive. Vihn looked down at it uncertainly and Taylor knew he did not have the nerve. Taking a deep breath, the young man showed him roughly over the edge before going over himself. As he let go, he felt hot sparks bite into his skin as more bullets slammed into the cast iron frame.

Vihn was scrambling to get on his feet when Taylor pulled him up by the arm and started running. This time he did look up and saw that Aaron's father was making his way down the fire escape as well with two other men in pursuit. Both of them raced across the grass as they made their way to the parking lot. The vehicle that he had seen earlier was now parked and its occupants were already inside the building. Taylor realised recognised it as belonging to Querto, the guys in charge of the motor pool and occasional drinking companion to Snake Plissken.

"Get to that truck!" Taylor ordered Vihn because it looked like the older man was not going to be able to keep going at this pace. Vihn did not argue as Taylor hurried through the main entrance of the building. Just as he burst through the doors, he saw Querto and another man standing over the dead body of Nurse Keen.



"Taylor!" Querto declared, running towards him once sighted.

"We've got to get out of here!" Taylor replied not wasting any time and started out the door again.

"What's happening?" Querto demanded to know.

"No time to explain right now!" He retorted. "There are Zoners coming down the fire escape and they're pretty pissed. So let's go!"

Deciding that perhaps the younger man was right, Querto and Crow started following him. As they emerged out the door, Taylor heard the blast from a shotgun and saw Vihn collapsing in the middle of the carpark as he tried to reach Querto's truck. Crow reacted immediately, letting loose a hail of bullets at the two Zoners. Neither had expected their quarry to be armed and were taken by surprise as they were cut down by the M-16.

"Damn." Taylor hissed as he ran towards Vihn. However, as he neared the Asian doctor, Taylor knew it was too late. He could see the ruined flesh of the man's back through the shredded clothes of his doctor's coat now stained in crimson red in contrast to its white fabric. Vihn's eyes were staring into nothingness when Taylor finally reached him. Although the young man wanted to remove the body from its unceremonious place in the middle of the parking lot, he knew that if he wasted any more time than necessary, Vihn's would be the one of the first of many bodies.

"Come on man," Querto urged gently. "We've got to get out of here and then you call tell us what the fuck is going on."

Taylor nodded blindly as he was led towards Querto's truck. However, he had a rough idea what was happening already. The Englishman would not make such a bold move against Sanctuary unless he had something big on the horizon and he knew what that meant. Snake was right, something was going on and it was more than a few thugs taking over a hospital.

It was more and Taylor had a feeling they had only hours to learn how just how much more.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

### I

Less than an hour after they had made their encounter with HiTea, Snake and Kate were airborne.

Kate had been more than astonished that Snake had managed to find a plane, let alone repair one enough to make it fly. He had to admit he was proud with the work he had done with the Mosquito and even more appreciative that it had been left unaccosted when he had entered the Zone. However, they had returned to the secluded spot by the docks where he had left the plane and found it intact. If Snake believed in god, he would be making thanks to the powers that be because they simply had no time to get back to Della City by boat.

"How long until we get there?" Kate asked as she flew over the city and towards the mountains.

"An hour, may be more." Snake answered. He did not add that this was a very old plane and unforeseen technical difficulties may arise at a moment's notice. When he had rebuilt the plane, Snake had taken it on as more than a hobby to past the time. Until Kate was taken, he had never entertained any notions of taking into flight. Still, despite the decades behind it, Snake had to admit the Mosquito was doing quite well. If there was still a Sanctuary left after tomorrow, he would consider doing some serious work on it.

An hour.

Kate tried not to seem anxious because his idea for a getaway from Victoria City had been nothing less than a feat of genius. She remembered the new reports saying that he had been a pilot or something of the

like but she had never paid it much notice. Literature on Snake Plissken tended to centre around his career after his military service, in particular the New York escape. There was some memory of a his flying a glider or something into the city but she never paid much attention to the detail of it.

She looked over the horizon and saw the sky was still dark. Dawn could not be more than a few hours away, she estimated. The Englishman had not made much of an effort to recapture her but that too was understandable. He had his revenge on her and his people had already infiltrated Sanctuary. She tried not to think of what havoc they were causing in her hospital or how many had died because of it. His whole plan was based on his advance force creating as much disruption in Sanctuary so as to distract everyone from the real attack coming from the border.

All it required to circumvent this whole plan was one simple warning, if they could get there early enough.

"Look." Snake pointed down below.

Kate pressed her face against the glass and saw the ground below them. In the darkness, a small stream of lights were moving eastward towards the mountains. The convoy was slow but Kate knew what it was as well as Snake did.

"That's him isn't it?" She asked. "That's the Englishman."

"Yeah." He answered.

Kate eased back into the seat, feeling her stomach knot up in tension. Everything she cared about and had built the last two years was in Sanctuary. Sanctuary was the semblance of a sane life in what seemed to be the only normal place left anywhere in the world. While it was easy to think that it was only her sweat that had made it what it was, Kate knew it was a group effort. Without the cooperation of everyone in Sanctuary, it would not have become what it was now and she had to rely on the fact that they could take care of themselves without her.

"You okay?" Snake asked suddenly.

Kate looked up somewhat surprised by the question. After he had found her, Snake's attention seemed geared on getting them out of the Zone. There had been little talk about what had happened to her since the morning she left him. Now, they had an hour at least to talk before they reached Sanctuary and dealt with the crisis there. "I'm fine." However, she knew that it was a lie. She did not feel fine. No matter how much she had convinced herself to be strong, there was still someone who had barely had time to recover from her ordeals of the past 24 hours.

And Snake knew it too.

"I know he hurt you." Snake said quietly.

Hearing him say that made her want to cry but Kate stifled the urge. "It could be worse," she said trying to sound optimistic although she felt nothing of the sort. "He could have killed me."

"He's going to wish he had." Snake replied with calm intensity in his voice that for a moment, it frightened her.

"Do what you must but I don't want to lose you." She answered.

She could not see his face because he was seated in the front cabin and their speech was relayed through the burst of static on the archaic two way radio he had installed. However, she saw his shoulders rise slightly as if he were taking a deep breath. "Its been a long time for me Kate." He began. "I haven't cared much about anything in years but I do care about you. I can't make you any promises but I'll be around for awhile."

She blinked hearing that because him saying that did mean a lot to her. She knew with certainty that he loved her. It was just the man's own emotional baggage that kept him from saying it. What he did say spoke volumes when one realised that this was Snake Plissken had become apart of his own legend for so long that it was hard to separate the myth from the man. Perhaps, if they did survive the day, they could make a start at least.

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Taylor, Querto and Crow wasted no time once they learnt what was taking place in the hospital. The three men sped away from the building into the heart of town knowing that there was little time to waste. Taylor had guessed that this infiltration into Sanctuary was a part of a larger plan. The Englishman was no fool. He would not waste men or ammunition by entering Sanctuary like this. Realistically, even he had to know that they were more than capable of protecting themselves from such a situation that made Taylor wonder at the reason for such an action.

They were almost to town when it suddenly hit him.

"They're coming." He said with a start.

Querto's head jerked rapidly to face him before averting his gaze back to the road again. "What do you mean, they're coming?"

"The Zoners." Taylor retorted. "That's why these guys are here now. They're trying to distract us so that they can march in to Sanctuary while we're dealing with those assholes at the hospital."

"A sneak attack." Crow nodded in understanding. "That's means they could be on their way into the territory."

"If they're not already here." Taylor reaffirmed.

"Aw shit!" Querto exclaimed. With that, he jammed his foot against the pedal and the truck lunged forward with the added power. Both Crow and Taylor grabbed onto their seats. "So what we do now?"

"There's a hurricane siren at the town centre." He answered quickly. "We've got to get to it and get everybody down here. Drop me off and you guys get some help and get to the armoury. If the Zoners are smart and good ol' Jack Travis has been giving them information, chances are they'll try to destroy our weapons before the Englishman gets here."

"Okay," Querto nodded, agreeing with that assessment. "That sounds about right man." He turned to Crow. "We'll go get the boys and we'll make sure none of those assholes gets within ten feet of the place."

"Cool." Taylor answered and nestled back for the ride. As perilous as things were, tonight was going to be one hell of a ride.

## II

The Mosquito came in for a landing on the abandoned strip of runaway. Fortunately, they had made the trip back to Sanctuary without any engine trouble or bad luck that might have slowed them down. The plane landed smoothly, as well as any aircraft of this vintage could and he was grateful that they had landed in one piece when the engines finally shut down. At the hangar, he could still see the welcome sight of his motorcycle parked against the side of the building. After having to drive that Japanese piece of crap, he was grateful for a decent machine again.

Snake slid the canopy open and jumped out of the plan quickly before helping Kate climb out it. She had been very quiet for most of the way back and he gathered that she was coming to grips with not only the danger Sanctuary was in but also their future together. For himself, Snake had chosen to let things ride. Whatever happened would happen. If it did not work out, well there was nothing to stop him from getting

on his bike and going the way he came. If did, well that was another can of worms entirely. Either the way, Snake Plissken did not intend to break a sweat about anything. He had brought her back to Sanctuary safely and he guessed after this, she would not have any doubts as to his feelings about her.

Snake Plissken did not have to tell a woman he loved her for him to show it.

"What's the fastest way to get everyone together in this town?" Snake asked as they started across the tarmac towards the hangar.

Kate thought quickly. "There is a hurricane warning siren at the town centre. We don't often use it but it's loud and you can hear it for miles."

"That'll do baby." He said abruptly and flashed her a faint smile when she gave him a look.

They reached the Harley and Snake climbed on. While she nestled herself in behind him, Snake fumbled through the leather pockets on the side of the bike and found himself a pack of cigarettes. After everything, he had been through in the last few hours. He definitely needed one. "You ready?" He asked her as she slid her arms around him again.

"Let's go."

Snake slammed his foot against the pedal and was rewarded by a powerful roar from the Harley's well-machined engines. Querto did fine work, Snake thought as he revved the engine and angled the bike towards the road. It was still dark in Sanctuary but dawn was coming up quickly. As they drove forward, he could see the faint tinges of amber starting to appear in the sky. The coming sunrise did not escape Kate's attention either, he could feel the tension in her grip of him.

There was no traffic on the road and Snake was able to drive down the empty highway at top speed. Through the rush of wind blowing in his ears and the revs of the engine, Snake suddenly heard a loud, sharp noise that cut through even that tumultuous sound. For a moment, he tried to place what that was and could not. It sounded almost like a fire engine siren except this one did not seem to be coming from any particular direction but was emanating from above.

"What is that?" Snake asked looking over his shoulder.

Kate had heard it too and despite the rumble of the motorcycle's engines, she had identified it immediately. "That's it!" She shouted over the sound of the rushing air. "That's the Emergency Siren. It's coming from the Town Centre!"

Kate did not have to tell him where that was. Snake had been in Sanctuary long enough to know his way around the place. As he approached the town, Snake noticed other vehicles making their way towards Sanctuary, summoned by the loud whining siren. Della City was slowly coming to life as Snake turned into the street that would lead them to the heart of the town. People were starting to emerge from everywhere. They came out of their houses, they came driving up in cars and bicycles.

By the time, they entered the Town Centre, most of Sanctuary seemed mobilised by the electronic call that was screaming in the air. As they neared the building that used to be the town hall, people were starting to gather at the steps. Kate explained that this was the standard procedure when the siren was sounded. Tristan had wanted to devise a fast way of getting everyone together in case of an emergency, particularly in the aftermath of the first Zoner raids.

Snake ploughed the bike straight through the group forming at the steps of the town hall. He could see Taylor at the top of the stairs and the kid looked like the person who had sounded the alarm. As the motorcycle moved towards the building, people stepped aside and allowed them through. Those who knew of Kate's abduction were pointing out and making declarations of surprise at her return, particularly when they knew it was Snake Plissken who had gone to the Zone to retrieve her. Snake started to hear people

cheering his name and Kate seemed somewhat embarrassed by all the attention.

They pulled the bike to a halt in front of sidewalk amidst the inhabitants of Sanctuary who were pleased to see Kate back with them safe and unharmed, well relatively so anyway. Snake found all this attention somewhat annoying and made his way towards Taylor who was hurrying down the steps to greet him.

"I knew you'd do it!" Taylor grinned and patted Snake on the back.

Snake shrugged off the attention, knowing that the Sanctuaries had bigger things to deal with at the moment rather than their return from the Zone. "What's going on?" He inquired, seeing the people gathering in the area. He had a rough idea that they had discovered the Zoners planted in the hospital and was glad that he they had come back so fortuitously.

"There are Zoners in the hospital." Taylor answered quickly, glad that Snake was now here. He did not like playing leader although he had to admit to himself, he had not done a bad job. However, if what he suspected was true, it was a good thing that Snake had come back at this time.

"I know." He nodded slightly, lighting another cigarette for themselves. "You better dust off the guns, they're coming."

"I thought so." Taylor replied. "I knew it couldn't be as simple as it looked. They killed Vihn you know."

Snake frowned. The doctor was okay and he knew Kate was not going to be happy about the loss. At that thought, he looked over his shoulder and saw her coming towards him. Kate fought her way through the people below and met Taylor in a hug as they approached.

"You okay Doc?" He grinned.

"I'm better." She said unable to hide her pleasure at being home. "Now, what's happening?"

"The Zoners have taken the hospital." Taylor explained quickly. "I've got Querto getting his hands on all the guns we've got and to protect the armoury. If the Englishman is coming then they're not going to stay confined to the hospital. They'll be going for our ammo."

"Good thinking." Kate agreed with his assessment. "Unfortunately, our problems are worse than that. He's half way here with as many thugs as he can assemble."

At this news, there were uncertain murmuring in the crowd and a ripple of fear moved through the town like wildfire. These were ordinary folk most of the time. They were unprepared to deal with the Englishman's people. He kept the men under his control savage for a very good reason, in order to use them against people like the Sanctuaries.

"It ain't as bad as it sounds." Snake found himself speaking to the crowd and suddenly felt like he was back in the service again, trying to rally the men under his command just before they stepped out onto the line to get their heads blown off. "They think they have the element of surprise which they don't." He turned back to Kate and met her gaze. "We do this right and we can hold them off before they even get to town."

"What about the men in town already?" Someone yelled and Snake saw that it was Duke Washington. He and the rest of the Circle were making their way towards Kate. Their relief at seeing her returned to them was more than obvious and for once they were not hassling him about the interest he was taking in Sanctuary's welfare. Just as well, Snake thought. He would deal with that consequence and how it looked to everyone later.

"Leave 'em where they are." Snake offered. "If they're still in the hospital, get some men up there and seal it off. Make sure they're cut off from the rest of their asshole friends."

"Snake, there are people in the hospital." Kate spoke up concerned about her hospital and also the friends who were undoubtedly trapped up there. "Tristan and Judy to name a few."

Snake met her eyes with a taut expression. "Just remember that." Snake replied. "They are few and the rest of you are a lot. You deal with one situation at a time and right now, the Englishman is the bigger problem."

"He's right." Duke agreed with Snake that surprised the younger man to no end. "Tristan would be the first to say it Kate."

Kate bit down on her lip not liking to sacrifice friends but Snake was right, if they did not save Sanctuary then they would all die, not just the people in the hospital. "All right," she nodded finally. "We do as Snake says."

She looked up at him and at that moment, she knew it had been difficult for him to come so far in his rigid manner. It was a sobering thing to know that by his actions, he had proclaimed his love for her without saying a word. "Help us." She said softly so that none of the others could hear this private exchange.

Snake nodded slightly. There was almost a hint of her smile but it would not do for the Snake Plissken image to be tarnished by such a display. Instead, he faced the Sanctuaries again. "We're going to need anyone who can shoot. If you can't, go home and lock your doors until its over. Those of us who are going to be doing the shooting don't want to have to worry about strays."

How had he come to this? Snake Plissken wanted to ask himself. This was never in the cards for him. He had come to Sanctuary for a little rest from all the shit he had been put through over the past years. One fight after another, one crazy asshole after another who had this dumb idea that he was fit to run the world. In the two years since the Pulse, Snake Plissken had seen them all and he had killed most of them. It was not supposed to go down like this. All Snake wanted to do was disappear.

It never occurred to him that he could care. After so many years not giving shit about anything in the world except his own skin, Snake had thought he was immune to whatever sentimentality could throw at him. Yet this place, with its lunch time specials and its stills in every home and the plain old fashion idea of live and let live reached him in a way nothing had been able to since he came from Leningrad minus the use of an eye or any conscience.

It mattered to him what happened to these people even though it near impossible to admit and then there was Kate.

Kate who looked at him and just saw him. Not the legend or the criminal, just him. She did not give a rat's ass that years ago he had saved the President of the United States from a maximum state penitentiary or tried rob the Federal reserve. In fact, she cared little for what he was in the past or what he had done to live with the rage of so much tragedy. Kate did not care that he was the one who had set off the Pulse nor did she concern herself with the fact that he had never been able to fit in anywhere. The Pulse gave everyone a fresh start, she had once said. A chance to start again and try to make the pieces fit this time around.

Even for him.

This place had been tugging at him since he stepped in Sanctuary. He thought of his drinking binges with Querto and the morning ritual where they all threw up after too much moonshine the night before. He thought about the Chief and his family and how he liked to go fishing with the big Indian and finding pie on his doorstep left by Mira during some mornings. He liked his lunches at the Slice where Sherrie tried her usual come on and he gave her a tip instead of taking the pass. Christ, he was getting soft.

Somewhere along the line, Snake Plissken had actually found some place that needed someone like him. They respected him here for what he was and valued what he knew. They just wanted to live as he had

wanted to once and as he stood facing these faces right now, he saw their fear. Yet, despite that, they were determined to do whatever he asked because they knew he could save them and because they believed in him. They actually had faith in him. Knowing that moved him more than he liked and Snake found himself feeling something he had not experienced in too long.

The need for a future.

"Alright." He took a deep breath. He did not know what tomorrow was going to be like or whether or not he was going to be alive to experience it. He was still the lean and hungry son of a bitch he had always been but for once, it was actually going to do some good other than keeping his sorry ass alive. "We're going to go out to the Border and wait. We'll send a dozen guys to the hospital and try to get those people out." He looked at Kate and saw that she was relieved at the suggestion. Like the others, she was afraid too.

Snake saw the bruises on her lovely white skin and the determination in her face as she held her inner demons reined for the moment. He knew what the Englishman had done to her and for that hurt Snake was going to make the bastard wish he had died in his momma's belly. The rage he felt for that insult to the one being in the universe that meant more to him than his life was a fire that would not be satiated until he held the Englishman's heart in his hand.

Right before he ate it.

"The rest of you, we'll meet the Zoners when they get here and maybe we'll give them a little surprise." He said offering them a faint smile before he lit himself a cigarette.

Things were about to get a whole lot warmer now that Snake Plissken was back.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

### I

He came home after Leningrad.

There was not much left of him but like a sailor lost at sea, he returned to the only things he knew. In a blur, he left the cab and allowed the rain outside soak him in a matter of seconds. There were thoughts in his mind about what they would think of him. He had glanced at a mirror a couple of times in the VA hospital and knew it would not be unreasonable to assume that they might mistake him for someone else.

In many ways he was someone else.

Bitter, angry and disillusioned in everything except what remained in that four bedroom brick house that had been home to that other person, to the man who had been Lieutenant Plissken, war hero. He left the cab behind him and stood there in the rain, watching it all disappear in one strip of yellow tape. He remembered looking out through one good eye as if he was a thousand miles away.

Words that said government confiscation travelled the path of yellow plastic, running past his eye as it moved around the house. He remembered running forward then, busting the door down and finding everything inside it gone, including the man and woman who had been his parents. For a moment, he stood there in the middle of the empty living room, with the wall paper yellowing in a way that would have mortified the woman had she been present. He looked for the man's favourite chair, the one the man had sat in the day he told them he was going to the service and saw that it too was gone.

"You know yourself son," the man had smiled in that way that made him feel safe from the moment he understood that this man was his father. "You'll make us proud."

He clenched his fists as that moment, feeling the burning anger starting to bubble inside him like bile snaking up his throat. He walked through the house like an ill wind, tearing through each room and finding

nothing that would give him answers. Government confiscation. What the fuck did that mean? He recalled thinking.

There was a knock at that moment and a faceless entity wearing a bland blue suit and an equally bland tie had let itself in since he had not bothered to shut the door. The visitor was some sort of bureaucrat. After being in the service for so long, he knew the obvious signs of such an organism. He heard a name given in introduction but he ignored it. It was answers he wanted.

"I am sorry Lt Plissken," the suit said to him. "They were killed almost eight months ago. We tried notifying you but it appears that you had been undertaking some classified military work and were uncontactable."

He somehow managed to ask how it had happened.

"Its tragic really," the suit continued, appalling in its attempts to be sympathetic. Its words were a blur of terms like hostage situation, Feds who got sloppy, stray gunfire and last ditch efforts. The suit paused a moment, letting it sink into him as if any amount of time could ever make this acceptable, before carefully adding. "The estate was left in limbo for six months and as you did not come forward to claim possession, the usual government mandates kicked into place and everything was seized and then sold off."

He stood there watching images flash at him from the empty walls. He remembered fixing the roof of the garage with his father. His mother dusting off lint on his tux during his junior high school prom. She had picked the corsage he gave to Lisa Davis and probably led indirectly to his getting laid that night for the first time. He remembered being driven to his college dorm and the Thanksgiving dinners to which he looked forward to coming home.

All gone. Like his eye, his men and now his life. They were all that kept him bound to what he had been, kept him secure on the edge of darkness.

The suit died that day and it became the first. After that, Lt Plissken became someone else who gratefully plunged over the periphery and never did stop falling....

"Snake!" Kate called out.

Snake looked up sharply, unaware that he had fallen into thought so deeply. They were in Querto's truck, racing down the highway towards the border. Outside, the sun had already started to make its appearance over the horizon. They had no real estimation of how far the Englishman was away but at the moment, what time they did have had to be enough. Querto's truck led the way for all the other assortment of vehicles presently racing away from Della City. The Sanctuary's had produced a convoy themselves and were now braced for their inevitable meeting with the Zoners.

"You thinking of a plan man?" Querto asked.

"Something like that." Snake remarked evasively.

"I hope its a good one." The Mexican pointed out. "Dawn is coming up real fast."

"It'll be alright." Snake said simply.

Kate looked at him oddly. "You okay?" She asked uncertain why she felt the need to but feeling that she should.

Snake swallowed. His throat had become dry and he wondered what had made him take that undesired trip down memory lane. "Peachy." He retorted and hoped she knew well enough to leave alone. Fortunately, she questioned him no further.

After Querto had returned to the group with all the available weapons, Crow had taken some men and



returned to the hospital. Taylor had volunteered to join him that was just as well, Snake felt. The kid was still pretty banged up after being worked over by the Zoners prior to his escape from the Zone. While Snake knew he did not want to be out of the action, Taylor had the smarts to know when his body was not going to let him keep going the way he had been. In all truth, Snake was glad that he was going up to the hospital. He had a good head on his shoulders, Snake decided, sort of like his older brother. He could keep Crow in line and keep that juiced up bastard from getting any civvies killed.

Civvies, Snake snorted. Now that's a word he had not used in years, not since the service. Snake shook off the reference and concentrated on what Kate was saying.

"The patrols haven't sighted anything yet." Kate told him. She was holding a two way radio that was Sanctuary's equivalent of a telephone.

"They'll be here soon enough." Snake retorted. "They were halfway over the mountain when we saw them." He pointed out to her.

Reluctantly, Kate was forced to agree. "I want to keep the fighting out of town if we can." Kate said staring at the road ahead.

Snake and Querto both exchanged a glance because they could not make that kind of a promise. While Snake had displayed usual swaggering arrogance in front of the crowd, the reality of the situation had to be faced. Victoria City was a large place and the Zoners out matched them in men and savagery. If they were going to save Sanctuary, they had to play real dirty to do it and debate the morality of it little.

"It ain't gonna be that simple Ms Kate." Querto said what Snake would not. "The Englishman's a real tough hombre. He's more prepared for this than we are."

Kate took a deep breath. "I don't care how fucking prepared he is. When we get out there, I want everything that wears Zone colours dead."

The venom in her voice as she said that made them both give her a look. Kate offered them an embarrassed smile and shrugged. "Its the only way to be sure right?"

"Close enough." Snake replied facing the road again. "Close enough."

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It was sunrise in Sanctuary.

The sun peaked over the horizon and started making its descent up the morning sky. Jean Paul and Deakin peered over the rocky outcrop at the valley below. Since the news had been given to them a short time ago that a large attack force was coming from the Zone, patrols had been mobilised all over the mountains. At this moment, they were at least four patrols keeping watch on the border that separated the Zone and Sanctuary. All were making their observations from strategic locations all over the tree covered terrain. There was only one major road leading across the mountains and if the Englishman followed his usual practice, he would be coming through it. It was fortunate the Zoners were urbanites and disliked venturing off the known tracks. With hundred of acres of trees and uneven terrain, the mountain separating the territories was not to be taken lightly.

So far however, the patrols yet to see anything out of the ordinary but that could change easily.

Jean Paul lit a cigarette and found it difficult to keep from shaking. It was warmer in Della City but high up in the mountains, the air became icy. For a Canadian province, Vancouver Island was warmer than most parts of the country. A warm breeze coming from across the ocean heated the island to a pleasant temperate climate. While he was cold, Jean Paul knew he was lucky to make the Island his home. He hated the cold weather. Unfortunately today, he wished he could say that his trembling was just the cold

alone but he knew better.

After taking his first deep puff, he felt the smoke warm him and he began to relax a little. "You heard about the hospital?" Deakin said in perfect French.

"I did." Jean Paul answered. "They say one of the doctors is dead."

"I think its the Asian." Deakin commented staring into the green cloak of trees covering the mountain before him.

"I knew him." Jean Paul nodded. "When I was working the boats, he fixed my arm once."

Whatever Deakin was going to say was lost forever by a burst of static over the two way radio snuggled inside Jean Paul's parka. Deakin quickly grabbed his gun while Jean Paul retrieved the device. After fumbling with the zipper of the parka and trying to grip it with gloved finger, Jean Paul finally held the radio's speaker to his lips. "This is Echo 1, what is happening?"

"Its them!" Someone declared loudly and Jean Paul was forced to move the radio from his ears. Through the frantic string of words spoken by Echo 1, Jean Paul could only make out a few words. Suddenly, from the air around him boomed with a new noise only this did not come from the radio.

"Jean!" Deakin shouted. His partner's eyes were focussed on the valley below. While neither of them could see any signs of Zoners or any fast moving vehicles, they could certainly hear what it was. Gunfire and a lot of it.

"That's not the main road!" Jean exclaimed in surprise. They had been keeping their attention focussed on the main highway over the mountain that they had not kept an eye on much else.

"Its the old hiking trail." Deakin answered realising it as well. "Jack Travis must have told them about it."

The hiking trail was a beaten down dirt road used mostly be sightseers in the days before the Pulse. Since the patrols had come into existence, the sentries had been using the trail as a boundary marker. While it was not common knowledge among most residents of Sanctuary, Jack Travis had occasionally pulled sentry duty and would have been aware of the trail.

The gunfire stopped suddenly and Jean Paul remembered his radio. "Echo 1, please respond! Claudette, talk to us!"

The familiar voice of the British Columbian woman did not return and in its place was the static made colder by the silence that followed the cessation of gunfire.

Jean Paul had a feeling that it was too late for Claudette. He just hoped it was not too late for all of them.

## II

The convoy pulled up to the side of the road the moment the news had reached them. It was always assumed that the Englishman would break the treaty by taking the most direct route through the territories. According to Kate and all the other members of the Inner Circle, that is how the Englishman usually made his attacks. Snake should have guessed that these amateurs had no idea what they were dealing with and should not have underestimate the asshole.

"Shooting was too good for that bastard Travis." Querto declared as he and Snake studied the map Kate had spread out over the hood of his truck. "I would like to have shown him some serious pain."

Snake ignored Querto's rambling and concentrated on the map in front of them. Behind them, all the other cars had come to a halt and he could see the Chief walking up to them from the corner of his eye. "Calm down." Snake said tautly. "The Englishman may be an asshole but he ain't dumb."

"If he's taking the trail, then we've come all this way for nothing." Kate replied with just as more concern in her voice as Querto's rambling. "We've got to get back down the mountain and get to the other side."

"What's going on Snake?" The Chief asked upon approach. He overshadowed them easily and the twelve gauge hanging of his back looked like a pop gun in comparison to his size.

"They've blind sided us." Snake answered. "They're taking another way in." His eyes followed the path that Kate had shown him as the hiking trail. Snake tried to see if there was any way to head the Zoners off before they reached Sanctuary. He caught of a small dark icon on the yellowed paper and tried to look for a key that would tell him what it was.

"What's this?" He decided it was simpler just to ask.

"The old Patterson lumber plant." The Chief answered. "Its been abandoned for years. Nothing there but squirrels and birds."

"It sits straight in the middle of the hiking trail." Snake remarked. Possibilities started to fill his head and some sort of strategy began to form. He studied the distances and calculated the time differential in his head. It would be close if that but if they could make it there, then they might have a chance. After a moment, he looked up at them. "There."

"What?" Kate stared.

"Tell everybody to head to the lumber mill. We'll meet the Zoners up there." He stated firmly.

"Are you sure about this man?" Querto asked dubiously. "Can we waste the time going back down the mountain?"

"We're not going down the mountain. We're going through it." With that Snake slipped into the driver's seat and looked up at Querto. "Get in the truck compadre, I'm driving now."

Kate climbed in without question and slid up to him as Querto reluctantly slipped into Snake's old spot. "Better get into your wagon Chief," Snake replied. "You don't want to miss the party."

The big Cherokee hurried back to the vehicle when Snake turned to Kate. "Tell the others to follow me and try to keep up."

Kate nodded simply and spoke into the radio. "Duke, pass it along. Follow us. We're going to the Patterson lumber mill. We're going to head the Zoners off there."

A crackle of static preceded a response. "We're right behind you." Duke's deep tones responded.

Snake did not respond but revved up the truck's engines. As the large engine sputtered to life beneath the hood, Snake slammed his foot on the accelerated and launched it into motion. It continued only a few metres ahead before Snake swung the steering wheel hard to his left and forced the old General Motors special over the asphalt onto the grass. The other cars followed suit and very soon they were all moving over the uneven terrain of grass and trees. Fortunately, most trees were spaced well enough for their vehicles to fit through even though it was a terribly bumpy ride.

"I think I'm going to be sick!" Querto shouted as he was bounced up and down the seat like a basketball being dribbled to death.

"Wind the window down." Snake retorted ignoring the Mexican's discomfort.

After twenty minutes of hard travel across the side of the mountain, they reached the Patterson lumber plant. According to the patrols who were now following the progress of the Zoners as they advanced towards Sanctuary, the invaders were less than a short hour away from plant. While it was scarce time. It

did give the Sanctuary force some time to prepare for their arrival.

Snake Plissken was going to give them a reception to end all receptions.

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The Englishman whose name we shall never be told was having a great day.

They were making good time across the mountain and he estimated they would be in Sanctuary by noon. So far, the only opposition they seemed to have come across was one patrol in the woods but Miranda and his people had taken care of that quite easily. Thanks to the now extinct traitor, Jack Travis, he had a good layout of how to reach Della City before the Sanctuary were even wise to him crossing the border. They were probably up to their necks in shit by now, he thought with relish. The advance party has instructions to create as much chaos as possible before their arrival and he hoped they still left a town intact when they arrived. He hated to think that he was not going to be able to have some fun too.

He sat in his garishly painted four wheel drive, watching the uneven ground before them rise and fall with yet another hill or barred by another tree. He swore secretly that when Sanctuary's territories were his, he was going to burn the entire forest down in a victory dance to rival that of V-Day.

"What's up ahead?" He asked Miranda who was driving.

"If Travis was correct, a lumber plant." Miranda replied calmly.

While he was optimistic, she was not. Miranda remained silent about her reservations but they existed nonetheless. The gnawing feeling that had been steadily increasing had begun the moment they had learnt that Kate Ellison had escape from the End Zone. The Englishman had not seemed too concerned about her fate. After all, she was in unfamiliar territory and the Zone's inhabitants knew better than to give her any assistance. Yet Miranda could not help think that Snake Plissken might have aided in her rescue.

She had heard reports from some people saying they had seen a plane in the sky but these were the words of half drunk winos and degenerates that made up the underworld of Zone hierarchy. Not to mention that as the Englishman's chief lieutenant, she had been busy with preparations for this attack.

"I wish we had found Kate Ellison before we left." Miranda finally spoke.

The Englishman who was chewing insistently on a toothpick averted his eyes and met her gaze briefly. "I told you before, she's still roaming around the Zone trying to find help. When we're done here, I guarantee you can go back and find her for me."

Miranda stiffened at the suggestion. "Then what?" She asked through gritted teeth. She could not deny feeling jealousy as his fascination with the leader of the Sanctuaries. He remembered how pleased he had been with himself after torturing Kate Ellison for hours.

"Then maybe I put a nice chain around her neck and have tied to my bed." He laughed loudly.

"What about Plissken?" Miranda asked frowning. She did not want to share the Englishman with Kate Ellison, even if the latter was an unwilling partner.

The Englishman's face darkened. His eyes became glints of ice as thoughts of Snake Plissken entered his mind. "I'm going to have that fuck mounted on my trophy wall." He said unable to conceal the hatred in his voice. "Snake Plissken is nothing like Sanctuary is soon going to be nothing. I'm going to own this island if I have to kill everyone in that fucking town to do it."

Miranda said nothing but even she could sense the fear in his voice. He was so passionate about the man for very good reason. His hatred for Snake was personal and so it should be.

After what he had done to Kate Ellison, Miranda knew that Snake Plissken thought the same way.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

### I

The Patterson lumber plant had opened in the early 1990's. In the boom time of the new century, it had done exceedingly well and provided much needed work for prospectors on their way to the Klondike in search of bigger dreams. It prospered for most part of the 20th century unencumbered by wars, economic crises and political upheaval. In the mid eighties there had been a slight murmur from small conservation groups about the evils of wood chipping and the eminent extinction of the rainforests if current logging practices continued. Armstrong Patterson who owned the company paid it little attention. After all, most of these group were made up of ex-hippie college kids and rebellious teenagers.

By the time the century was drawing to a close, things had changed significantly. An environmentally aware world was starting to understand the dangers of deforestation and lumber mills such as the Patterson plant were being seen a threat to the planet. The end came after a long and bitter struggle of ideologically opposing factions where one was fighting for the future while the other struggled to keep the old ways alive. The battle ground had been this lumber plant. Although the war had become an uneasy stalemate, the plant was nevertheless closed and Armstrong Patterson moved his interest elsewhere, preferably to a less volatile industry.

Snake Plissken knew nothing about Patterson or what the lumber plant had meant to the frontier towns in the days of the gold rush. All he saw, was an old grey building, becoming more decrepit with time and now about to be blown to hell in the fight that was coming. In the hour that they had been here, the Sanctuaries had been hard at work. At the moment, Kate was setting up a first aid centre in the back of one of the larger trucks. While she had none of the equipment she would have liked, Snake knew she was skilled enough to make do with what was available.

In the meantime, Querto had dispersed with another group into the hills flanking the trail. He could see them hiding in the woods but his was a trained eye used to seeing more than what appeared to be obvious. An amateur would have no idea until they were ready to blow his head off. Those were one of the surprises he had in store for the Englishman and he hoped it would be enough. The Zoners weren't here yet but their one hour was well spent. There was a road leading to the town from this point but it too had been sealed off. A number of fallen trees had created quite an effective blockade.

Snake pulled up a chair in one of the abandoned offices and put his leg up on the dust covered desk. A large automatic machine gun plus pump action shot gun sat across it next to the two way radio that occasionally apprised him of the situation. He found it strangely disconcerting that they were all reporting to him and he was forced to remember the last time he had men under his command. Snake hoped this worked out better than that did. He only had one good eye left and he was not about to lose it.

In the quiet of this room, the situation seemed much clearer and he was able keep things in perspective. What the fuck are you doing here Snake? He asked himself. If you were smart, you'd be on your bike now on your way back to the States not sitting here waiting to knock some sense into another asshole who thinks he's king of the world. Christ, he was getting old and sentimental and he was still right about one thing.

She really was going to get him killed.

If she were just any woman, it would be simple enough but it she wasn't. She was Kate. He wondered momentarily if her full name was Katherine and then realised she had not asked him what his was since that first time. Did he know the moment he looked into those green eyes that she was the one?

Jesus, listen to you Snake. She was the one? You sound like some love sick teenager.

Snake sat up and decided to leave thoughts about Kate well alone. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the last cigarette in the pack. He glanced out the window and studied the compound with its rusty machinery forgotten after almost twenty years of disuse. Suddenly, he heard the two way radio signal an incoming response with an annoying burst of static. He crossed over the room in a two long strides and reached for the radio on the desk.

"Plissken." He said simply.

"I see them man." Querto's voice cackled into the room. He sounded even more Latino when his voice was transmitted. "They'll be on you in about ten minutes."

Snake absorbed this information easily enough. "How many?"

"At least eight trucks and some smaller rides." Querto answered. "I think they got a small army."

Snake said nothing to that effect. "Have they seen you?"

"Not yet, we're holding position until your signal like you said."

"Just remember that." He replied and terminated the transmission. Replacing the radio into the folds of his long coat, Snake checked the two hand guns nestled previously in his holster. Both were fully loaded and he had extra clips hidden in various part of his clothes for both the hand guns and the automatic on the desk. Better to be safe than sorry.

Once Snake had checked his arsenal, he made his way out of the room and towards the main entrance of the plant. Even as he spoke, he knew that alternate routes out of this area were being blockaded. The Englishman had come with nothing but trucks which meant that he needed some kind of trail to continue forward or backward. By now the trail that he had used to enter Sanctuary territory was being sealed off by the patrols who had reported their presence.

Snake could hear the increasing rumble of old diesel engines in the distance and as he looked at the road from which the convoy of Zoners would come, he saw a cloud of dust starting to form from their engines. The ground rumbled softly as the large vehicles approached and Snake pushed his coat behind the holster around his waist and kept his hands firmly on the smooth butt of each gun. They were meant to be lured in and at the moment he was the bait that the Englishman could not resist.

Kate had not liked this part of the plan and had objected very strenuously to it. At that moment, he was struck by the similarities between her and Maggie, Brain's girlfriend or squeeze as Cabbie had called her. Snake was not about to call Kate his squeeze because he did want be on the receiving end of the right hook he was likely to get from her if he did. However, Kate was far stronger than Maggie ever was and he finally knew what it was like to have any woman love him that much. It made him more determine to get his pound of flesh from the Englishman and Snake did not mean that figuratively.

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Snake lit the last cigarette in the pack before crushing it in his fist and tossing it away. The sun was definitely up and ironically it was going to be a nice, sunny day. Figures, Snake thought to himself as he waited patiently at front entrance of the plant. He had chosen this location for a good reason. The tree line was less than a hundred yards away and the building behind him could give him ample cover if he needed it.

He just had to get them close enough to let the explosive do most of the work.

A four wheel drive was in the lead of the procession and instinctively, Snake knew that it was the Englishman's car even though the sun reflecting off its windscreen hid the identity of the driver. The Duke of New York, Cuervo Jones and now this guy, there were all the same. So damn predictable. As it neared,

Snake saw that the four wheel drive was a genuine Jeep. He didn't think they made those any more since Hyundai bought out American Motors and tried to turn the icon into a comfortable small sedan.

The Jeep closed the distance between them and then stopped abruptly. Snake showed no outward signs of reaction except to lower his fingers already poised over the butt of his hand guns. He gathered that the Englishman recognised him. A moment passed where even the birds in the trees seemed to show more signs of life than the convoy before him. Obviously, the Englishman was trying to figure things out before he came out of his safe vehicle to face Snake.

However, it was only a temporary stay. After a moment, the Englishman emerged from the vehicle. Miranda emerged with him. He gestured at his men to remain in the trucks which Snake guessed to be a safety measure. He was going to release his dogs until he was sure what was ahead of him. Snake hadn't given the Englishman that much brains but than these would be warlords were extremely predictable.

"Snake Plissken." The Englishman said walking towards him with a smile on his face. The man was smartly dressed even though he was meant to be slaughtering innocents today. He wore some bastardisation of a mounties uniform with scraps of gold braid and medals of every assortment to define him as some great military leader.

To Snake, he just looked like an asshole.

"In the flesh." Snake replied.

"I thought you were dead." The Englishman retorted.

Snake did not respond but raised on hand to his mouth and tossed away the cigarette that was almost down the filter. "I just keep coming back don't I?"

"Let's just waste him and be done with it." Miranda hissed from her position behind him.

"Nice to see you dressed baby." Snake replied.

"Fuck you, Snake." She spat angrily, remembering the humiliation of their last meeting. God, she hated this arrogant bastard. Miranda wanted to kill him badly but was powerless against the leash held by her master who apparently wanted that pleasure for himself.

"You're not my type." He retorted and turned back to the Englishman. "It seems that you're a little lost. The Zone's back that way."

The Englishman laughed. "You still have a sense of humour," the man grinned. "I like that about you." After a moment he let out a sigh. "I don't want to kill you Snake."

"That's nice to know." Snake said shortly.

"I think that you're on the wrong side. The Zone is the place for a man like you and I could always use the talent. I mean, what do these Sanctuaries have that the Zone doesn't?"

"You." Snake answered.

"True," The Englishman nodded unperturbed by Snake's answer nor did he miss a beat in his prepare speech. "However, I do have a certain female I've been told has sparked your interest."

"Really?" He said unsurprised that the man had no idea that Kate was already in Sanctuary, not scratching around the Zone trying to escape his thugs.

"You know she's in the Zone Snake," The Englishman continued. "Join me and I'll have delivered her to you on a leash, ready for every night's pleasure." Then he looked up at Snake with a sinister expression in

his eyes. "I've had a taste of her Snake, she's worth the breaking in."

Snake's expression revealed nothing. "Don't call me Snake. The name is Plissken." With that he pulled out a small, oblong box that had been sitting in his top pocket for most of the exchange. He pressed the red button in the centre of it and allowed the explosives to do the work.

The first explosion took sent the jeep flying into the air. It flipped over its rear and smashed against the hard ground, shattering the windshield and spraying glass in all directions. The Englishman spun around in time to see the jeep's gas tank ignite with an explosion that consumed the vehicle completely. It had scarcely begun to burn when the other explosions followed.

In the hour that they had left to them, Snake had planted C4 charges across the track and wired them to detonate off one single transmitter box. He knew the Englishman would bring his convoy this way and it was one sure fire method of evening up the odds a little. The Englishman and Miranda stood paralysed for a moment as trucks began exploding in front of them in uneven succession. Some of the Zoners had started to jump out before the charges could get them and once they hit the ground away from the exploding trucks, Snake reached for the radio inside his coat.

"Now." He declared and started running forward towards the Englishman. As Querto's people started making their presence known to the Zoners from their hiding places in the trees, Snake saw the Englishman starting to recover from the collapse of his full proof plan. There were still many Zoners to contend with but the explosions and Querto's snipers were keeping them in disarray and confusion.

Trucks were quickly turning into twisted hulk of burning metal as the C4 charges did their worst. The steel behemoths were flipped on their sides and on to their backs like the tossed toys of a bored child before descending into a fiery inferno of flames. The air became thick with smoke and burning gasoline and the Zoners scrambled for the safety of the tree line only to be confronted with a new threat. A hail of bullets emerging from the hidden spaces between the leaves and branches of the forest. Had they taken the main road into Sanctuary, it would have been harder to dispatch them. However, Jack Travis had unknowingly given them an advantage when he sold his secrets to the Englishman.

It was Miranda who remembered that Snake was still in front of them and the bullets that came at him emerged from her weapon. Snake ran back into the building for cover as a magazine from the automatic rifle she carried slammed holes into the gyprock wall. He dove beneath an old sofa for cover and heard her boots crunching against the gravel as she ran after him. Snake wondered where the Englishman was but had little time to ponder the issue when more bullets struck the wall above his head, sending bit of plaster down at him.

"Come on out you one eyed bastard!" She screamed.

Now she was getting nasty. He shook the debris off him and rose to his feet. While he did not like fighting with a woman, Miranda did not seem to tax his conscience too much. Snake emerged from behind the sofa when he heard the familiar click of an empty magazine falling on the floor. Not giving her time to reload, he pulled out his gun and aimed carefully, firing only once a second later.

Sparks flew at Miranda as the bullet struck the steel of her gun and ricochet in the other direction. In surprise, she fell down on the ground and dropped the gun she was carrying. It fell out of range and she tried to make a dash for it when she heard Snake prime his own weapon for another shot. Miranda froze where she was but her eyes still searched for the gun she had dropped. When she looked up at him, her eyes were filled with venomous rage and Snake wondered if she was just delaying him to give the Englishman time to escape.

"I wouldn't." He warned her as she was still debating whether or not she ought to go for it.

"Fuck you." She snarled angrily. "I'm going to kill you."



"Not if I kill you first." Snake retorted smoothly. He approached her stealthily and reached for the weapon at her feet. No sense giving her any more temptation than was necessary. Outside, the plant building, Snake could still hear rifle fire and wondered how Querto was doing. Once he finished up with Miranda, there would be ample time to find out. "Get up." He told her.

Suddenly, Miranda hand shot out and she threw a fist full of plaster at him. As Snake moved to shield his eyes, he felt her boot slam into his knee. Whether or not she knew he had been injured there did not matter, the pain flared up his leg immediately. Snake staggered backwards, trying to regain his balance when he saw her coming at him with another flying kick.

He side stepped the crippling blow and grabbed her leg with one easy movement before yanking back hard. With her other foot pulled from beneath her, Miranda hit the floor hard. Whether or not she felt pain from the fall was unknown because she recovered quickly enough and tried to slam her foot into his groin. This time, he grabbed her foot and dropped in time to smash his elbow in the crook behind her knee. He heard bone snap as his joint connected with hers and she let out a sharp scream.

"You bastard!" She cried as he stepped away from her.

Snake ignored her because he saw some of the Zoners coming towards the plant building for cover. The scene outside was a war zone. There were bodies covering the grassy edge of the trail and fires raging hard from the hulking frames of burning trucks. Guns were still being fired in shot bursts with no signs of abating any time soon. Most of the Zoners were forced to take cover behind the flaming wrecks of their vehicle.

For the moment, Miranda was forgotten as Snake cocked both hand guns and ran to the front entrance so that he could get a clear shot. There were at least five of them and the assholes were running so fast that did not even see what they were running from could be as bad as what they were running to. Snake let loose a murderous hails of bullets as the men approached. They could not react beyond reaching for their guns but Snake was too fast for them. He loved the fast draw and after years of practical usage, he was damn good at it. Firing in rapid succession, he saw the lethal projectiles of his gun slam into the Zoners with perfect efficiency. A few of them had managed to get as far as the door way but most died where they fell.

Taking a deep breath, he surveyed the situation outside and knew he could waste no further time with Miranda. The Englishman was out there somewhere and Snake had a score to settle with him. Beyond the door way was a war zone. While Snake could not see Querto and his men for the trees, he had to assume that casualties were mounting on both sides. The bodies of Zoners covered the ground outside with the mangled mess of their burning trucks and vehicles. The Sanctuaries were not taking any prisoners, he decided.

It was about time they learned the rules of the game.

Suddenly, he became aware that Miranda was not where he had left her and Snake turned sharply back to the room. He took a step forward, his fingers still poised over the trigger of the gun searching for her inside the small place. Scanning the area quickly, he saw no movement but he knew she was still here. The injury he had given had robbed any chance she had of making a quick or silent escape. Dropping his gaze to where she had dropped her gun, Snake cursed under his breath when he realised, much to his chagrin that the weapon was gone. As he took a careful step forward, he swore again at allowing himself to fall prey to the same old weakness that almost always nearly got him killed. Where did a tough son of bitch like him get off being chivalrous in this fucking day and age?

If she were a man, she would be dead already.

If Kate was here, she call him sexist. Snake however, would not have been that kind. A fucking idiot was a more accurate description. He had little time to ponder this when suddenly a bullet whizzed past his ear and slammed into the plaster behind him, creating another hole in the already fragile wall. Snake ran

sideways, barely outrunning a whole stream of bullets before he finally hit the floor.

Instead of jumping to his feet immediately, Snake remained on the floor getting sprayed with plaster as she kept firing at everything in sight. Lamps were getting shattered, windows and dusty picture frames with yellow photograph on the wall were given the full destructive treatment.

Snake knew the tactic well. She was trying to draw him out. Unfortunately, he had played this game much longer than she had and he was better at it. He let her continue, watching her strained movements on the floor through the chairs and the table legs. Snake knew he had hurt her for she was limping hard. Her steps were awkward and clumsy and it was easy to track her.

"Come on out Snake." He heard her voice at the eye of a gunfire storm. She had stopped long enough to let herself be heard. "Come on out an play."

Her confidence was beyond description, Snake thought to himself but did not respond.

"I saw him do it to her Snake." Miranda spoke again, obviously trying a new tact. "He fucked her good!"

Snake jaw tightened but he did nothing else. They said patience was a valued asset. In Miranda's case, it was going to be lethal. He held the glass paperweight in his hand. It was one of those cheap things you bought a discount stores but it had the virtue of being round and heavy. Snake waited as Miranda stumbled forward, searching for him in the row of office furniture in the room. While she had no idea where he was, Snake knew precisely where Miranda was.

"When I kill you, I'm going to take your head back to him. I'll have it mounted on his wall so your Kate can see your face when he is fucking her every night!"

Snake rolled his eyes at her attempts to goad him into acting although each word made him renewed his desire to deliver the Englishman a very painful death. When she was directly opposite him in the next aisle, when all that separated them was a large L shaped desk, he threw the paper weight at her. The object skittered past her and Miranda reacted predictably, following the noisy trail by firing her gun. Papers flew up as bullets tore through wood and sent splinters in all directions.

Miranda emerged from the aisle and followed the route of the decoy paper weight. It took her a second to realise it was a trick and another make a ninety degree turn.

"I don't play games, baby." Snake said standing upright, with both guns aimed at her.

For a moment, she simply stared at him. There was fear in her wide blue eyes but he could also see the calculation in them. She was like an animal trying to decided if she should attack. Her teeth were bared as she contemplated her next move while staring down the barrel of his guns. Snake was almost tempted to speak then because in all honestly, no man ever felt good about putting a bullet into a woman, whatever the provocation. However, when he saw her eyes narrow in thin slits of sinister rage, when those blue irises descended into total black, he knew it was pointless. She pulled her gun up to fire, uttering incomprehensible words that could have been a cry of futile rage before he pulled the trigger.

The bullets that tore through her torso, made her dance like a marionette under the ministrations of a novice puppeteer. Each jerk of her body sent a thin spurt of blood in all directions. It took only a second for those projectiles to shred her form but it seemed more like minutes before she finally went down. Miranda crumpled to the floor when the puppeteer finally cut the threads of her dance. Snake took a step towards the dead woman when the performance was done.

Her blue eyes were closed and in death, he noted that she was a beautiful woman. In another time, she might have been no different from Kate. Her gloved hand still clutched the gun that had brought her to such a violent end. Snake let out a heavy sign as he saw her blood begin to pool under her, creating an expanding blanket of dark beneath her ruined form. He did not know if it was the first time he had killed a

woman. It was so hard to tell when cops were hidden under their uniforms. He might have done that in the past but he could not say for certain. Miranda was the first however, he had killed faced to face. He did not like how it felt. Yet as he thought about what she had said moments before as she tried to force him to play her game, Snake decided something.

He could live with it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

I

It was not supposed to be like this.

As he ran towards his men, watching them spread out in disarray, the Englishman wondered how his best laid plans could have come to such a spectacular end. He did not even know where Miranda had gone. One minute she had been at his side facing that bastard Plissken and the next even she had disappeared. He ran back to the carnage of burning metal and rapidly falling bodies to realise very quickly that the Sanctuaries had planned their attack well.

The trail leading towards down sat in between two high embankments on either side, covered with thick vegetation. When he had brought his men through this passage at the direction of Jack Travis, he had believed he was playing it smart. The main road across the mountains was usually the place where the border patrols focused their guard. This alternate route was not often used and ensured secrecy at least until they arrived in town. How had they been warned?

It dawned on him what Miranda had said.

Impossible as it was, Kate Ellison had managed to get back to Sanctuary. He now understood why Snake Plissken seemed so unimpressed when he had boasted that the bitch was still in the Zone. As the realisation took root in his head, the Englishman had another epiphany. She was here somewhere. He looked around the place, trying to see past the scene of his men being ruthless cut down from the snipers in the trees. He had to give the Sanctuaries credit. They had picked their ambush sight well. The bodies of Zoners were starting to cover the ground so completely, it was hard to see the grass through them.

Plissken had done this. Plissken had brought them together to launch an attack like. The Englishman had been no fool when he planned this offensive against the Sanctuaries. It was one of the reasons why he had instructed Miranda to kill Tristan Evans during the skirmish when they planted their people in Sanctuary. A short time before that, he had been contacted by Jack Travis who wanted to betray Sanctuary to get Kate Ellison for himself. Travis had been so certain that Snake Plissken did not give enough of a damn to involve himself in their wars. The Englishman had to confess to believing that himself. Plissken's reputation was notorious. He gave little care about king and country. The infamous escape from New York had been an outright trade for a pardon while the LA escape had been a trade for life and the world knew how he reacted when they screwed with him. The Englishman had been confident that without Kate Ellison or Tristan Evans, Sanctuary would be defenceless.

Who would have guessed that Snake Plissken would develop some feeling for the spineless wimps?

This was not over he thought in a mili-second. Not by a long shot. Sure, his men were dying or dead but that did not mean anything. He could get back to the Zone and start planning again. There were hundred of men in the Zone who were grateful to escape the camps and he knew how to reward his people and keep them hungry. This was a setback not a complete defeat. However, he made one conscious decision as he turned from the battle scene and scanned the area for an escape route.

He was going back to the Zone alone.

He pulled out the guns in his coat and started firing as he ran along the side of the plant. As he side

stepped machinery and old, rotting logs, he heard the gunshot inside the building and even barely dodged a series of bullets tearing through the wall behind him. The Englishman looked through the window and saw Miranda seconds before she faced Snake Plissken. For a moment, he was mesmerised by the scene as his trusted lieutenant faced the one eyed bastard. Snake had the drop on her and was waiting to see if she would desist. The Englishman could have told him not to waste his time. He and Miranda went back to the days before the Pulse and she had been a crazy bitch then. He felt no true sorrow when he saw her draw and forced Plissken into firing. All that ran through him as he saw her go down was a hint of regret at the loss of a minion, as a general regrets when a soldier under his command die. Miranda would have understood.

When she had gone down, the Englishman continued. The bullets from the sniper fire could not reach him because he was well protected by the building and it allowed him to scale up the embankment in safety. He climbed up the grassy hill quickly, fired on by the rage created by the destruction of this particular dream. However, he still had purpose within moment, he had made it to the top.

A sniper had been firing into the thick of the bodies when the Englishman appeared and the young man barely had time to turn around before a bullet slammed into the back of his head. What had been his face splattered all across the log behind which he was hiding. The Englishman snorted at the death and decided that was the first of many.

Kate Ellison was here somewhere and he was going to find her.

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Kate was working hard less than a mile away from the fighting. With the five people with her, she found herself the top of a conveyor belt where broken bodies were being brought to her for quick repair. Despite the success of their plan, the Zoners were still large in numbers and had managed to launch enough of a defence start sending the casualties rates soaring.

She wished she had her medical bag or something that would be more serviceable than the crude tools she was forced to work with now. There had been little time beyond running into the pharmaceutical store in town and taking with her whatever was available. The bulk of medicines were stored in the hospital because such things were more precious these days than gold.

Kate wiped the sweat of her brow trying not to worry about Snake or her friends. She could heard the screams and the sound of gun fire erupting through the air with frightening regularity. Even though she knew at this point there were only sounds to her, she could not help thinking of the deaths at the end of each bullet.

"Hold him down Sandra!" Kate cried out.

The young man lying on the floor of the truck was called Dennis. She had seen him around town. He was one of the workers at the hydro-electric plant at Della Falls. Dennis was not more than twenty five and at the moment, Kate was covered in his blood while he sobbed incoherently from the pain in his stomach. A pain caused by a bullet with a full metal jacket that had turned his insides into jelly. There was very little Kate could do for him out here in the back of this truck that was one step up from treating him on the floor. She had little supplies or equipment to even attempt the removal of the fragment from his stomach and no way to give him any hope that he might live out the day.

Kate struggled to wet the white swab in her hand with ether. At the moment, the only thing she could do was to sedate him. This was no easy thing to do because he was traumatised by what was happening and was near hysterical. Sandra, a young girl really of Innuite descent was struggling to calm him down so that Kate could administer the ether.

"I'm trying!" The girl replied, finally deciding to grab Dennis's flaying hands and pin them down to the floor.

"Help me!" Dennis was crying. "Its hurts!"

"I know it does," Kate said trying not to let any of this get to her. It was hard to keep her professional detachment in the light of such agony. "Please, try to stay calm!"

She felt ridiculous uttering those words. Finally, he had been restrained long enough for Kate to press the cloth over his mouth and after a few seconds, he was forced to take strained breaths through the material. By the time he had taken a good lungful of it, Kate started to see his eyes cloud over and knew the ether was starting to take effect. His struggles became weaker and finally, he slackened.

"Thank god." She whispered softly.

"Kate!" Someone else called. "We've got another serious one here!"

She whirled around and saw Anton and Terry carrying another injured person into the makeshift medical compound they had created in a clearing not far from the fighting. Kate turned to Sandra, "when he finally goes under, try and stop the bleeding." She showed the girl where to concentrate her effort on staunching the blood before climbing off the truck to meet the newest casualty.

They were all around her, at least dozens of them. Their bodies were broken and bleeding. Some injured badly, others not so critical but they all needed her. She scrambled towards the two men and saw that the newest arrival was Red, one of Querto's men. Someone had managed to wrap a bandage around his head but Kate knew the moment she examined his dilated pupils it was too late. The blood soaked cloth hid the injury of a head wound that was beyond treatment.

Kate wanted to cry. These people were more than just patients, they were her friends and she felt helpless to do anything to prevent their slaughter. Stepping back from Anton and Terry, she shook her head in anguished gesture of defeat. "I can't save him."

Their faces fell in shared grief because Sanctuary was a family and when one of them died, especially like this, it struck at the very heart of them. "You did your best." Anton said.

Kate was about to answer him when she heard another bullet in her ear, except she could feel this one moving past her cheek. Anton's chest exploded in front of her, his blood slapping hard against the parka he was wearing. Within moments, his blue coat had become red with blood and Kate felt it splatter against her skin. She let out a horrified scream and then noticed she was not the only one. Glancing up at Sandra, she saw the girl staring at her direction in terror.

Kate swung around and found herself facing the Englishman.

"I knew if I looked hard enough I'd find you." He said approaching her.

His gun was aimed at all of them and Kate saw Terry taking a step towards him. "Terry, stay where you are!" She ordered knowing that the Englishman would not hesitate to kill any of them if properly motivated. Terry was a hot headed Catholic who got into more fights than she cared to count but this time, good sense prevailed, he remained where he was.

Watching him come closer was like a nightmare that Kate prayed she never relive again. Each step made her want to bolt in the opposite direction like a terrified child. Each time he got closer to her, Kate remembered the day before. She remembered his face above hers, his fists against her skin and the feel of him when he...

She blinked hard, forcing herself not to go down that path even though she was mortally frightened. Her throat was dry and she could not even speak. His face revealed his rage and his anger. She wondered how he had managed to get here and realised that he had run and left his people to die. Disgust rose up her stomach like a bile stench because he was such a pathetic coward.

"I underestimated you." He said coolly although his calm features were barely hiding the rage he wanted to vent on her. "I didn't think you'd get out of the Zone. I won't make the same mistake again."

Kate was too frightened to speak but somehow she pushed the words out of her mouth. "Take a car and get the hell out of here. No one will stop you."

He offered her an icy glare and smiled coldly, "I always intended to, Kate." He retorted. The Englishman was only inches away from her and the barrel of his gun was moving past her cheek. Once she was within reach, he locked his arm around her neck and pulled her against him, the gun aiming at the others present. This action was too much for Terry who reacted by rushing forward a few steps.

"Terry! No!" Kate tried to warn him but it was too late.

The boom from the gun near her ear almost deafened her as she saw Terry collapsing to the ground through a world of ringing. The bullet had blown the back of his head off and he was dead before he even touched the dirt. In the background, she heard Sandra cry out in horror and her other nurse, Janine was frozen to the spot by the side of a patient.

"You didn't have to do that!" Kate shouted through the tears of watching another friend die needlessly.

"Shut up!" The Englishman ordered as he started moving towards the jeep parked a short distance away.

Unwillingly, Kate was forced to go with him as his fingers dug into her shoulder and forced her to the vehicle. As much as she wanted to act, she knew she could not. Kate did not want to provoke him into killing Sandra and Janine as ruthlessly as he had murdered Terry and Anton.

"Stay where you are and no one gets hurt!" He warned and ushered her into the jeep.

Kate climbed in slowly, watching him closely and knowing that if she got into the jeep he would drive straight back to the Zone with her in it. Once there, she would return to that nightmare from which she was never willing to relive again. His attention shifted slightly when he climbed into the vehicle and Kate saw her chance. Kicking her foot out, her sneaker landed on the soft tissue of his wrist and caused him to lose grip of the gun. It fell to the ground as she kicked again.

"RUN!" Kate screamed at Janine and Sandra. Both women needed no further prompting and bolted towards the woods as soon as the words had passed her lips.

The Englishman turned to her with blood murder in his eyes, he had not retrieved his gun yet and grabbed the leg she had kicked him with and pulled it towards him. She fell back on the front passenger seat as she was dragged to him, kicking and screaming. Her other foot connected with his chest and she heard him cry out in pain before she lost her balance and fell out of the jeep on the ground. Kate wasted no time flipping over and scrambling to safety.

"You bitch!" He heard him scream but she did not care.

Suddenly, she felt his hand around her ankle, preventing her from going forward any further. Kate yanked her foot back viciously and managed to stumble to her feet. She looked at the brush where Sandra and Janine had found safety and tried to make a run for it when all of sudden she felt the wind knocked out of her as she was thrown to the ground again. She felt on her side and felt her hip scream in pain as her pelvic bone grounded against dirt. She felt his filthy arms around her body and suddenly powerful memories returned to her in vivid technicolour that snapped all reason inside of her.

"Take your hands off me you bastard!" She screamed, sinking all nails into his face as he approached. She raked back her surgeon's hands and made certain flesh came with her. She heard him cry out in pain and saw the blood on her fingers as she started kicking at him furiously. She did not know where she was hitting him as long as he did not put his hands on her again.

"I'm going to kill you!" He snarled and swung wide. The blow slammed into the side of her face with such force that Kate fell backwards without much resistance. Her head hit the ground hard and for a moment, she felt her vision blur and the world had started spinning uncontrollably. Kate was aware of his hand on her shoulders, pulling her up roughly towards the jeep again. Somehow, he had also managed to retrieve his gun again. She saw the jeep approaching through a haze of pain throbbing through her head before he shoved her into the seat again.

"That's better, lovely Kate." He replied as he climbed into the seat and twisted the ignition, bringing the vehicle roaring to life. "We'll be in the Zone soon and there will be plenty of time for rough games."

Like before, Kate was in little condition to protest.

## II

The would be destruction of the Sanctuary was somewhat a moot point at the moment. As Snake reached Querto and his men on top of the ridge where the fighting was still raging furiously, he could see the Zoners numbers had been savagely cut in the last hour. There were so many bodies below them that it was almost impossible to see anything else. Approaching Querto, Snake could see the small heap of spent casings beneath his weapon indicative of everyone who had been firing down below. After he had despatched Miranda, Snake had looked around the building for the Englishman but it appeared the Zoners' leader had chosen to make himself scarce, leaving his unfortunate men to deal with the situation.

"How's it going, compadre?" Snake asked through the gunfire.

"We've got them pinned down there." Querto replied, wiping the sweat of his brow. "They're not going anywhere. Nice going my man." He grinned. "You led them straight in."

"I can't find the Englishman." Snake said unhappy that the man might be still free. "If we got him, it would bring an end to things quick."

"I didn't see come this way." Querto answered. "If I had, I would have put one right there." He gestured to his forehead. "and saved you the trouble."

"You're a compassionate soul, amigo." Snake remarked. "Got a cigarette?"

Querto fumbled through his green army jacket and found a packet of rolled cigarette in one of its oversized pockets. "Never leave home without it." He handed it to Snake.

Snake was about to light the cigarette when suddenly, he saw two women burst out of the trees. They looked pretty frightened and both Querto and Snake approached them quickly. Since it was common knowledge now that Snake and Kate were together, Sandra came towards him first. "Snake, you've got to go help Kate. He's got her!"

"Who's got who?" Querto declared.

Janine who was a little older and calmer quickly explained. "I think it was the Englishman, I can't be sure if that was him but he killed Anton and Terry and he took Kate with him! I think he's going back to the Zone!"

Snake almost swore out loud but managed to hold his anger in. "Keys." He demanded turning to Querto.

Querto immediately reached into his pocket and tossed Snake the keys to his truck. "I'll come with you." He offered.

"I'll be fine." Snake said abruptly. "I work better alone."

Snake dashed through the shrubs to the area where their vehicles had been stored. He should have known

the Englishman might have guessed how they had found out about the Zoners attack. There could only be one conceivable of that happening and that all hinged on Kate Ellison escaped from the Zone. It did not take a leap of genius for the Englishman to work out that if such a thing were true then Kate would not be far from the fighting.

He reached Querto's truck among the small motor pool of cars, bikes and trucks on the turn off to the main highway. He jumped in quickly and switched on the ignition before he was rewarded with the loud revs of Querto's souped up truck. The Mexican had worked hard on the pick-up, refitting it with all sort of accessories that normally did not fit in its original designer's concept. Snake swung the steering wheel hard and jammed his foot on the accelerator.

The truck lurched forward as Snake pushed the pedal all the way down. The engine soared immediately to meet the challenge of maximum speed and its wheels kicked up a cloud of dust in anticipation. Snake moved forward in a loud screech against the gravelly ground. The truck scaled the length of the road quickly before merging with the dark strip of bitumen that signalled its entry into the highway.

Snake did not need any clairvoyance to know what direction to take. The Englishman as he had always thought, was incredibly predictable. With defeat in sight and having his prize of Kate Ellison, Snake knew there was only one place the asshole would go and that was back to the Zone. Snake was going to send him back there all right but he not going alone.

His body parts were going to accompany him.

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The wind was rushing in her ears when Kate was lucid enough to know what was happening. She had been lying across the passenger dazed after the Englishman had punched her and though her head still throbbed, she had enough clarity of mind to know that she could not remain motionless for too much longer. Kate peeked at him through her heavy eye lids, pretending she was not quite awake yet. The Englishman seemed to take little notice of her and his eyes were fixed on the road.

If he reached the Zone with her as his prisoner, it was over for her.

She had to hope that Janine and Sandra had gotten away safe and had alerted someone to her predicament. Against hope, she prayed that someone would be Snake. He had rescued her once against all odds, it was too much to expect that he could be in time again. Taking a silent breath, she knew that this time, it would be up to her alone. Kate steadied herself and knew that the only way to proceed was to stop the jeep from continuing onwards by any means necessary....

She sat up suddenly, giving him no time to react because he had been so intent on getting back to the Zone that all his attention was focused on driving. The gun had been on his lap and with bravery she did not know she possessed, Kate grabbed it and threw it out of the vehicle. The weapon discharged upon landing and was then swept away by a sea of dark asphalt.

"You bitch!" The Englishman cursed and struck her across the jaw.

Kate fell back into her seat, tasting blood in her mouth. However, this time she ignored her intense fear of him and sat back up again, this time directing her attack on the steering wheel. She grabbed the steer through his arms and yanked towards her violently. The jeep reacted as expected, swerving so sharply that the Englishman's side of the vehicle actually left the road for an instant.

"Stop it!" He shouted furiously, trying to regain control of the vehicle. "You'll kill us both!"

"I can live with that!" She retorted and pulled directional control from him again. The jeep made another sharp swerve, its tyres grabbing the tarred surface with a loud screech. They were still moving at top speed except now they were off the road. The jeep started shuddering as it travelled over the uneven terrain and



Kate saw they had slowed down a little on the irregular surface.

They were still wrestling for control of the steering wheel until Kate yanked the steer one final time and put the jeep in the path of an oncoming tree. The Englishman's eyes darted to the front and saw what was coming, forgetting Kate all together. There was less than a few seconds before impact and Kate decided it was time to jump since his attention was far more focused on regaining control of the vehicle to avoid collision. She rolled out of the seat over the side of the jeep and landed hard on the grassy surface. Her shoulder flared in pain as she hit the hard ground and for a few seconds, its intensity left her unable to comprehend anything else.

Only when she heard the large explosion only metres from where she was, did Kate look up and saw the jeep and the tree it had struck at high speed erupt into a fiery conflagration that consumed them both. The explosion send earth and shrapnel in all directions and Kate felt some of it cut into her skin. As her senses returned to her more clearly, she realised something else.

She could not see the Englishman inside the burning wreck.

At that realisation, she forced herself to her feet. Kate had no more managed that when he leapt out at her, throwing her back to the ground again.

"You think its that easy you stupid bitch!" He shouted enraged. There was a smear of blood across his face from a deep but and in his state, he looked almost insane. He grabbed her by her shirt and slapped hard across the cheek. "You think its that easy to kill me?"

Kate tasted blood in her mouth but her days where she was going to let this animal hurt her were done. He was straddling over her body as his fists were flying at her like a man frenzied. Kate felt repeated blows on the side of her head before the situation became to similar to another once before and all reason left her. With strength she never knew she possessed, she twisted her body hard and managed to throw him off her torso. Quickly, she got to her feet and swung her foot into his ribs.

"DON'T YOU EVER TOUCH ME AGAIN!" She screamed furiously, emphasising each work as she heard his rib crack. Kate heard him shout in pain but she was beyond caring and swung again.

He rolled out of the way and stood up before she had a chance to attack him again. The utter insanity in his eyes caused her to pause. The blood from the wound on his forehead had turned half his face red and he looked like a participant in some ancient primitive ritual. "I'm going to kill you Kate." He said through his teeth. "I'm going to kill you even if I don't get back to the Zone."

Kate saw the murderous anger in his eyes and knew she was no match for him. He overpowered her easily and she could not rely on luck to keep saving his skin. With blood running down her nose, Kate turned on her heels and do the only thing she could think to save herself.

Run. Run for her life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

I

Snake had not been driving for more than a few minutes when he saw the sudden fireball that appeared over the tree line of Douglas Firs before it turned into a cloud of dark smoke. Considering what was happening in Sanctuary at this moment, such a sight though spectacular was hardly surprising.

Except he had left the fighting behind him.

Instinctively, he knew that it was Kate and the Englishman. Kate was no fool. She would have realised that returning to the Zone with the Englishman was as good as death and decided to stop him by any means necessary. Snake just hoped she did not get herself killed in the process. He pressed down harder

on the accelerator of Querto's truck. The truck grunted its protests as it surged forward, moving way faster than its designers or Querto for that matter, originally intended.

He continued along the highway, a man driven, determined that Kate was not going to be sacrificed for the Englishman's wounded pride. When he came around a bend of the highway, his eyes immediately caught sight of black tyre marks veering off the road in a precarious route. Without even thinking, Snake adjusted the wheel to follow those marks to their conclusion.

The conclusion was not far away. A few hundred metres off the cleared terrain, the vehicle had met a fiery end when it smashed head first into a large cedar tree in the front row of the tree line. Snake tried not to jump to conclusions as he saw that twisted wreck of metal and glass. He pulled the pick up to a stop and climbed out of it quickly in order to investigate.

The heat from the fire was intense and he observed, spreading. The cedar tree the vehicle had crashed into was soaked with gasoline and other flammable liquids, causing it to go up like tinder. Snake hoped the space between the next tree would be enough to keep the fire at bay. On top of everything else, Sanctuary's residents did not need a forest fire to contend with. Snake tried to see if there was anyone in the front seats of the doomed jeep and was unsatisfied when he could see nothing through the orange blaze. He had to believe Kate was not in there or else he would never be any good to her if she was still alive.

"I'm going to kill you KATE!"

Snake turned around immediately. His eyes scanned the rest of the area, trying to locate where the sound was coming from. It was hard to pinpoint the direction of the voice because the roar of the fire distorted the sound. He was sure that had been the Englishman making the threat and if so, Kate was definitely alive. Although, if he did not get to her soon, the Englishman might turn that threat into a reality.

"I'm going to take your head back to the Zone!" Snake heard another cry and closed in on it immediately.

They were in the thickness of the forest and judging from the clarity of the Englishman's voice now that Snake was listening in closely. They were not far ahead. Without wasting any time, Snake started running forward, giving the fire and ample berth as he penetrated the wall of trees. If Kate had run in here by choice than she was starting to get smarter about keeping herself alive. To the Englishman who was unaccustomed to heavily forested terrain, the sight of so many trees converged into one small point would have been disorientating. Snake however had been in Russia for more years than he could count. Not all his military service was spent in Leningrad. Some of his tour had left him in the heart of the Ukraine where there was nothing but trees and he had learnt enough from his time there to successfully navigate through anything similar.

As he ran forward, he could see the edge of the mountains starting to appear in the distance. The fresh green of conifer treetops peeked at him from the valley below. He did not realise how high up there were until then. It was a drop of at least several hundred metres to the ground and Snake could feel the icy cold in the air even though it was a sunny day. British Columbia was definitely not California he thought absently.

"You can't run forever Kate!" Snake heard the Englishman shout again. This time the voice was considerably nearer and he hastened his pace.

"I'm going to rip your heart out!" The Zoner screamed and Snake tightened his jaw with one singular thought in mind.

Not if I rip yours out first.

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Kate did not know how much farther she could keep going. Thanks to his shouting obscenities and posturing threats at her, she knew exactly how far behind he was. Unfortunately, this information gave her little advantage. After nearly twenty hours without sleep or food and more injuries than she could count, Kate was exhausted. The only thing pushing her forward was adrenalin and her fear of the Englishman.

She had been moving blindly through the trees trying to lose him but he was relentless, half driven by rage and an overpowering need to wreak vengeance. Her skin was stinging in pain as cuts acquired by overhanging branches and sharp twigs were bathed in her sweat as she ran. Kate felt her legs starting to falter and the realisation drew an anguished cry of frustration from her. Her hip was screaming out in pain and she wondered how much longer she could keep ahead of him.

Kate was so focused on where he was that she almost did not see where she was going. She was almost over the edge when she realised where she was. She skidded to the ground as she saw the trees in the valley below and understood that she had almost run off the side of a cliff. Kate felt gravel tearing at her jeans as she hit the floor. Breathing hard, she felt the terror of the near accident subside before she remembered that she still had a greater problem to deal with. Rolling over and scrambling to her feet, Kate hoped she could make it back into the forest before the Englishman could catch up to her.

She had taken no more than a few steps ahead when he appeared. As if an animal trapped by the headlights of an oncoming vehicle, she froze. He slowed down, breathing hard as he took tentative steps towards her, wearing that sinister leer promising plenty of harm. "You are spirited Kate," he said panting. "I'll give you that."

Kate did not wait to hear any more than that when her senses returned and she bolted forward, hoping to get past him before he could think to react. The Englishman was ready however and downed her in one swift tackle. Both of them slammed down on the sparsely grass covered ground hard with the Englishman on top of her. The weight of him on her drove her into a frenzy and she rolled over, hoping to throw him off her body. However, he had grabbed her flailing arms and was staying where he was no matter what he did.

"You're going to die Kate!" He snarled before he noticed that just a few feet away, he was staring at the tops of tall conifers in the valley below. "Stop moving or you'll take us over the edge!"

"I would rather go taking you with me!" She shouted and tried to force him off towards the drop.

"You bitch!" He stopped her with a vicious blow to her cheek. Kate clutched her face in pain and looked up at him as he lowered his face to hers. "I'll kill you Kate but not before I give something else to remember me." His hand slid to the button of her jeans and with horror, she realised what he intended to do.

Kate stopped struggling and looked him in the eye. "If you put anything inside of me that's yours, I swear to god I'll kill you myself." With that, she dug her teeth into the hand that was holding on of his wrists and bit down hard, determined to taste blood. She heard him howl in rage as he pulled his hand back and swore profanely, all thoughts of his previous intent forced from his mind. He swatted her again and while she was momentarily dazed from this newest blow, Kate suddenly felt his fingers around her throat tightening.

"I don't think I'll waste my time Kate." He replied. "Sanctuary can wait. I'll have it sooner or later. Whatever I decided to do, you won't be around to see it!"

She could not breathe. His grip around her throat was forcing all air out of her lungs. She was too tired to pry his fingers from her throat as could only manage to kick wildly as he strangled her.

"Isn't this nice?"

Kate's eyes widened at the voice. She knew it instantly. As did the Englishman because he immediately

relaxed his grip on her and Kate was able to turn around and see Snake Plissken standing before them.

"Snake!" She cried. It was more an exclamation of relief that he was here finally than anything else.

"I don't catch on too quick these days but that ain't no way to treat a lady." He replied, aiming his guns directly at the Englishman's head and the Zoner knew it. "Get up." Snake said coldly.

Slowly, the Englishman rose to his feet, shifting his gaze between Kate and Snake, glaring at them with equal hatred. "You are getting old Snake." The Englishman spoke, unable to resist the opportunity to poster. "You're getting old and soft. The Snake Plissken I knew was a tough son of a bitch, the man who killed the Duke of New York and blew Cleveland to hell, not this pussy whipped asshole." At that, he turned back to Kate. "I mean I know its been a long time for you Snake but really, having tasted the goods, she's not that good." At that, he turned to Kate and threw a sharp fist square into her face. The force of the blow sent Kate backwards, over the edge of the cliff.

"Kate!" Snake managed to say as he saw her go over the edge. She screamed as she fell and he when the scream stopped abruptly, Snake knew something else as he ran forward, she had not fallen all the way down yet. If she had, he would have heard her all the way down the cliff face.

Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, the Englishman lunged at Snake and both men went down. One of his guns fell out of reach but Snake still had a firm grip on the other one. The Englishman forced that hand against the ground, trying to keep Snake from firing. Snake Plissken did not have time for this. Kate might still be alive and whatever chance she had left would not last indefinitely. He slammed his fist into the Englishman's rib, not knowing that the man had already sustained some cracked ribs because of Kate. He weakened instantly and Snake threw him off easily.

He smashed the steel of the gun into the side of the Englishman's jaw and heard more bones shatter under the impact as blood started to froth from the man's mouth. Snake stepped back and got to his feet in time to deliver a heavy boot into the man's face as he tried to get up. The Englishman fell back on the ground again, obviously outmatched when he had to fight with an equal or better. Blood was streaming from his mouth and Snake saw the jagged edge of broken teeth.

"SNAKE!" He heard Kate scream. "HELP ME!"

Snake did not show how welcome that terrified cry was. With his gun still aimed on the highly disorientated Englishman, Snake walked towards the edge and glanced down. Kate was still alive. She had fallen over the edge and had grabbed onto a small projection of rock with one hand. Judging by the strain in her face, Snake knew she could not hold on for long.

"You can die with your bitch!" Snake suddenly heard the Englishman exclaim. The man had a sudden renewal of strength and had taken advantage of Snake's distraction with Kate to retrieve one of his guns. Snake turned around in time to see the man pick up the weapon and preparing to fire. Without even thinking, Snake shot his arm out and fired without even requiring to take aim. Both guns went off at the same time and he was forced to jump out of the way as the bullets whizzed past him. Snake fell on the ground and rolled onto his knees to fire again. However, it was unnecessary. The first bullet had caught the Englishman in the centre of the forehead. The leader of the Zone had fallen backwards, an enlarging pool of blood forming a crown around his head.

Snake offered him a dispassionate look and said softly. "The name is Plissken."

He heard Kate crying out and remembered that this was far from over. Snake practically dove to the edge from which she was hanging to precariously. Inching as far over the craggy end as he could, Snake looked down and saw Kate hanging on for dear life. "Calm down." He said to her as he slowly extended his hand.

"Calm down!" She shouted hysterically. "Are you out of you fucking mind!"

Obviously, she was not that far out of it, Snake decided. "Take my hand." He ordered simply.

She nodded slowly and tried to force her arm towards him but could not manage anything more than brushing his finger tips. "I can't!" She said in frustration. Tears coming down her cheeks, creating alabaster streaks on her dirt covered skin.

"Come on Doc." He urged, trying to inch further forward without losing balance himself. He needed enough leverage to pull her up. "You can do it."

His calm infuriated her but she tried again nevertheless. Upper body strength was never a concern in the past and she strained forward, biting down on her teeth as she forced her hands to stretch forward as much as she could. Once again, she could only touch his fingers and not much further than that. "I can't Snake!" She broke down in frustration feeling the hand holding onto the rock starting to slip. She could not bear to look down because she knew doing that would unhinge her and she would let go.

Snake took a deep breath. She had to make it. He could not bear to see her fall and watch her face as death claimed her. He would live with the regret of her loss and live with the image of her dying in his dreams for the rest of his life. Snake Plissken may have been one tough son of a bitch but he was not tough enough to endure that. Snake looked down at her and said softly. "Kate, I love you."

She met his gaze, surprised that he made the admission. After a second, she was able to respond. "Now? You wait until now to tell me this?"

Snake almost smiled but he held it. "Trust me Kate." He nodded. "You can reach my hand. Do it for me baby, do it for me cause I'm going to be here awhile and I don't want be if you're not."

Kate swallowed trying not to let his words overwhelm her. She was a survivor. She could do this. Bracing herself, she strained once again, further than before. Her arms felt as if they were being pulled out of her sockets but she knew she had to make it. She had to make it or else she was going to die. Katherine Ellison did not want to die just yet. She closed her eyes from the strain and suddenly felt her palm slap against the muscle of his forearm.

Snake grabbed onto her wrist and dragged her back towards the top of the cliff with every ounce of strength he could muster. Her weight threatened to drag him back with her but somehow he had managed to hold his ground. Once her chest had made it over the edge, it became easier to pull her backward. After a few minutes of strained pulling on his part and Kate pushing herself up with whatever foothold she could find, they both collapsed next to each other exhausted.

Snake rose to his feet first and helped Kate up. He saw that she was crying and her face was a mess of bruises and scratches. She was trying to remain strong and he had to give her credit for that despite what she had just been put through. When he offered her his arm, she did not refuse and buried her face in his chest as she sobbed. Snake said nothing, offered no words of comfort because he simply did not know what to say. He did not even understand his crazy feeling from this tempestuous red head who suddenly brought some kind of meaning to his life when he thought that he was beyond that kind of help.

What Snake Plissken did know was that Kate Ellison wanted to be held.

So he did.

II

The fighting was almost over when Snake and Kate returned to Querto. With the loss of both the Englishman and Miranda, the Zoners had dissolved into just another group of mindless thugs who began to quarrel amongst themselves at whose orders to take. It became a matter of simply moping up those who had not been killed by the sniper fire and later, negotiating safe passage back to the Zone for those who still wanted to leave with their skins intact.

Generally, Snake had the impression that the grandiose plans of the Englishman to unite the territories were over. Of course, there were always would be demi-gods to take their place and no one had any idea what was going on in the other cities around Vancouver Island, such as Sooke and Nanaimo. However, that was a bridge that did not need to be immediately crossed until necessary. After forcing the Zoners trapped at the Patterson Lumber Plant into an unconditional surrender, some of Sanctuary's enforcer drove most of the group back to the boundary between the territories and released them. There was enough blood shed in one day and Snake believed that the Sanctuaries stomachs could handle no more of it being spilt.

Not all of the Zoners were released however, some were taken into the heart of Della City. The Englishman had not lied, they would see Della City today, just not the way they imagined. It was at Snake's suggestion that these few stragglers were taken to the hospital where Crow and Taylor were still trying to deal with group that had kept the hospital under siege. When they arrived, the main parking lot near the hospital entrance looked like a war zone. A lot of fire had been exchanged and Kate was horrified by what had happened to her hospital.

The siege was brought to an end when the Zoners they had captured were forced into speaking to their comrades in the hospital. After it was explained that the attack had not only failed but the Englishman was dead, the Zoners in the hospital chose to lay down their arms for the same terms offered the others. Safe passage back to the Zone. It did not take long for them to evacuate the hospital and within the hour, these men were placed in a truck and driven to the border as before.

Fortunately, the casualties had been kept to a minimum. Most of the patients were the refugees from the Zone. Kate had opted not to send them back because there were many who had genuinely come to Sanctuary to seek a new life. Those who wanted to stay in the Zone were allowed to after some careful screening. Tristan Evans was still alive. He had been in intensive care and the Zoners had not bothered with the patients once Crow and Taylor arrived and kept them trapped on hospital grounds. Some equipment had been damaged but they could be replaced. Much of the damage had been confined to the lower floors of the hospital and except for Nurse Keen and another orderly, no one else had been killed. Kate took the responsibility of telling Judy that Doctor Vihn was dead and no amount of comfort could erase the pain of that loss.

Sanctuary itself remained unharmed by the conflict. Within a day or so, the patrols were back on the job and hospital staff were working tirelessly to clean up the damage left in the wake of the siege. Taylor had returned to his hospital bed for some convalescing and staff there were running double shifts as they tended to all the wounded from the fighting. Snake and Querto made plans to hit the American mainland in the next few weeks to do a supply run. After all this, their armoury did not look as healthy as before and it was not wise to underestimate the Zoners. Snake did not believe in taking chances with those assholes. People in Sanctuary no longer looked at him with any kind of hostility or caution but considered him to be one of its most eclectic citizens.

Kate worked at the hospital, putting more time than everyone else and running herself ragged. Snake did not have a chance to see her for a few days but decided to give her some space. After what the Englishman had put her through in the Zone, Snake decided she could use the interlude. As it was, he was trying to sort out his feelings for her, especially in light of his admission on the cliff top.

A part of him was still reluctant to admit that he considered this place a home, even after everything he had risked for Kate and Sanctuary. He realised that it was not necessary for him to make any declarations because as long as he hung around, the action would speak louder than any unspoken words. Besides, there was nothing to stop him from getting on his bike and moving on, the only difference was, he had some place to come back to and someone would be waiting for him.

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A week later, Snake went to the hospital to give Taylor a lift home after the kid was discharged. Considering that the young man had saved his life once, Snake felt it was some way to returning the

favour and also he wanted to see Kate. Although, getting himself to admit that would be easier than injecting himself with the Plutoxin virus. He still could not believe he said he had loved her but now that she knew, he was curious to see what her reaction would be other than her charming exclamation after her initial surprise. During the times Snake had seen Kate this past week, she had not made any mention of it although he did notice she was a lot warmer towards him.

When he stepped onto the floor of the hospital ward, the first person he saw was Kate. She came up to him looking considerably better than a week ago. The bruises on her skin still remained but they had faded somewhat and she seemed much brighter. For women like Kate, work was a tonic no medicine could match, Snake supposed. She came up to him and planted a firm kiss on his lips.

"Long time no see." She smiled at him radiantly.

"I've been busy." He replied coolly.

Kate rolled her eyes knowing that was not the reason for his absence. After all these weeks, Snake Plissken could still surprise her. Kate knew that he had stayed her way to give her time to recover from her experience with the Englishman and she was grateful for it. However, seeing him now made her realise just how much she missed him and she was not afraid to say it. "I missed you."

He showed no reaction but did not seem as serious as he often did. "I grow on people."

Kate laughed. "Its your charm." She retorted before she wrapped an arm around him and was mildly pleased when he returned the favour.

"Are you okay?" He asked. This time he was serious.

"I am now." Kate nodded. "I was a bit screwed up for a few days but I'm okay. I'll get through it."

"Good." Snake answered. He was pleased that she was coming to grips with their relationship and her ordeal. For the first time, this relationship thing did not promise to be a disaster as most of his previous ones had been. (What previous ones?). "I'm giving Taylor a lift home." He spoke moving to another subject. This mushy stuff made him uncomfortable. He knew how she felt and so did she, there need not be anything else said.

"I think he's ready to go." Kate answered. "Although, Tristan is up and about. He'd like to see you."

Snake had forgotten to ask how Tristan Evans was doing. The former cop had been hanging by a thread for several days after his meeting with Miranda and in all the excitement after the Zoner attack, Snake had not asked Kate if the man would live or die. "How is he?"

"He's not going to be leaving for awhile." Kate replied, leading him to a door at the far end of the corridor. "But he's going to make it."

"He's tough." Snake admitted.

"Snake!" Taylor greeted coming out of another door. The young man was dressed and looked like he was more than ready to leave the confinement of the hospital. "Thanks for coming to get me. Rachel's busy at the paper today. She's running the show with Paul in the hospital." Paul Moreau was the editor of Sanctuary's newspaper and during the attack with the Zoners, had joined in the fighting. The man had taken an injury to his shoulder and was convalescing in these walls as they spoke.

"Fine." Snake answered shortly. "I'm going to see how Evans is doing."

"I heard his going to be okay." Taylor glanced at Kate. "Right?"

"I'll let him out of my sight in a couple of weeks." Kate replied. "Although my nursing staff wants me to

sedate him for most of it." She joked just as they walked into Evan's room.

"I don't like hospitals." Tristan Evans said in defence.

Evans was sitting up in bed, going through one of the magazines on his lap. Judging from the expression on his face, Snake gathered he did not make a good patient. For that matter, neither did Snake. "How you doing old man?" Snake asked pausing at the edge of the bed while Kate took a look at Evan's chart. The old man seemed weak but possessed too much crotchety spirit to show it or tolerate it for that matter. He had tubes sticking out of his arms and an IV bottle that remained on guard over his bed.

"Not as good as you, war hero." Evans said with a smile. "I've been hearing all sorts of crap about you. Is any of it true?"

Christ, this guy reminded him of Bob Hauke. Snake could no longer decide whether this was a good thing or not. "Depends on who you hear it from."

"Don't you just love this tough guy banter?" Taylor said to Kate with a grin on his face.

"Watch it punk." Evans said to Taylor with an expression of mock caution. "I'm still keeping an eye on you." Then he shifted his gaze to Snake. "Especially you Plissken."

At that moment, he sounded very much like the cop he used to be. Even if Snake could not imagine him in Mountie's outfit riding a horse. "I might be around for a while." Snake paused and gave Kate a knowing look. "I like the quiet."

"Things do not stay quiet around you for long Snake." Taylor retorted.

"True." Kate nodded. "But then even Sanctuary can get a little dull."

"I like dull," Evans replied. "I would not appreciate it you make it otherwise, Plissken."

Snake saw Kate rolling her eyes, with an expression that declared she was washing her hands off both of them while Taylor merely listened for more of their repertoire. He knew Evans was not serious and he gave Snake a look that somewhat startled the younger man had he cared to show it. At that moment, Snake was forced to remember why he liked Hauke and now Evans, even though both men were pains in the asses. They reminded him of that man in his favourite chair that Snake Plissken often thought about when his defences were down or when he was dreaming.

Snake looked at Evans and reached for the pack of cigarettes in his long coat.

"Not in my hospital." Kate warned.

With a sigh, he handed them back to her and met Evan's gaze. "Call me Snake."

THE END