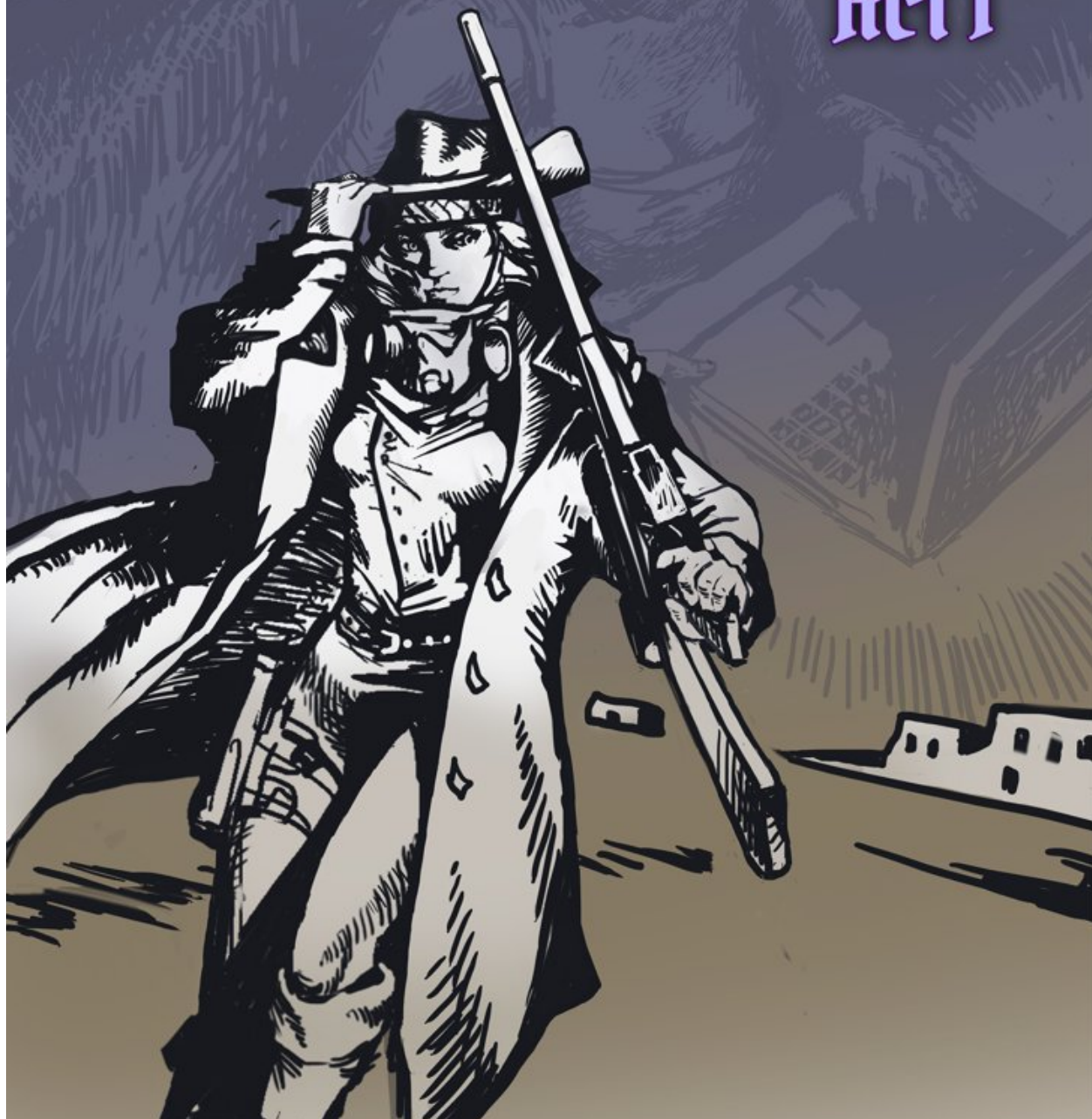


IVAN BONARI

Adventurers

Act I



Thank you so much for checking out the sample chapter!

It means a lot to me. If you'd like to dive deeper into the story, the full version is available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DY64TQGN>

1. The Saloon

Take it easy, cowboy!

"Flat Tire is the best place for your rest this side of the Wastelands!" read the sign proudly, shimmering with soft neon light. The saloon was in a huge two-story building with wooden columns and steel bars on the windows. It can be said that the majority of the local population was fed at the expense of the Tire and, without exaggeration, the entire town budget depended on its performance. No customers - no money, no money - nothing to eat, and besides, there is nothing to pay the raiders' families.

Of course, even after receiving the tribute, these brave people would periodically stage demonstrative raids on Sivil: taking girls, killing men, and draining the most valuable substance in the world - gasoline. But they always stayed within the bounds of decency, acting carefully and even humanely.

Three whole weeks have passed since the last such visit, the situation has calmed down, and 'tourists' have flocked to the town. Some were searching for oil fields, some were looting settlements destroyed after the War, but there were also those who believed in stories of the Green Paradise in the Center of the Wastelands.

Such individuals were the most welcome guests at the Tire. They always carried substantial reserves of money, which they were happy to spend on drinks, cards, or rendezvous with local ladies of a highly respected profession. However, if a regular Paradise seeker doesn't manage to spend all of his or her gold on the above-mentioned pleasures, the bandits on duty hiding at the entrance will be happy to help with this difficult task.

That evening, more than a dozen vehicles of various shapes and sizes were parked in the lot behind the saloon. There were trucks, heavily armored SUVs, and even a few desert buggies. A stern looking guard with a multi-shot carbine in his hand tirelessly monitored the safety of the equipment. Of course, that look was a little cloudy after a small drink of firewater, but there were good reasons for it: fear, boredom, and seductive music coming from the windows of the Flat Tire mixed with drunken laughter and flirtatious female squeals.

The security guard once again sighed sadly and was about to sip from a bottle of cheap brown moonshine, but at that moment another desert conqueror drove into the parking lot. Well, what other citizen would drive around civilized places in a frame buggy?

The driver placed his iron horse next to its brothers and slowly crawled between two steel pipes. The guard's trained eye immediately rated the guest a solid eight out of ten on the coolness scale. He was very proud of the visitor recognition system he had invented, but at the same time he never told anyone how it worked.

As the numbers formed in his half-drunk brain, the stranger pulled out a small shoulder bag and an impressively large rifle with a telescopic sight, after which approached the guard post lightly. He managed to remove his helmet and place a wide-brimmed brown leather hat on his head, decorated with two rounds secured with a small strap. The dusty travel cloak completely hid the stranger's body and the top of his high lace-up boots. The visitor wore heavy gloves on his hands, and his face was hidden under a black scarf pulled up to his cold, steel-colored eyes.

"Parking is two dollars per day..."

"What is your name?" the driver put his hand in his pocket and took out some coins.

"Billy..." the guard hesitated a bit, because usually no one was interested in his name.

"Listen carefully, Billy," the speaker said in a rather high and hoarse voice. "If everything is okay with my buggy in twenty-four hours, I'll give you the same amount, but if not..."

"Don't worry," the guard interrupted, looking at the money and thinking. *"If you can take it, you, show-off! I've been threatened with more than that, and the next morning they all were out only in their pants."*

The visitor nodded, and the dollars went to Billy, who accepted them with the greatest care and concern. The entrance to the saloon was on the other side, and the stranger had to walk in a circle to find himself in front of the sign. At that time, the doors opened, releasing the flying body of a half-naked man, who managed to shout something like "I'll win back" before landing in the dust. Two bouncers appeared in the doorway: they smiled kindly and even bowed slightly to the newcomer, inviting him to quickly enter their hospitable establishment. There was no need to persuade anyone, and after a few seconds the visitor stood in a wide corridor: on the left was a small counter and a book with the names of the guests, on the right was a huge cage with drawers and an old grandmother sitting in a rocking chair with a knitting in her hands.

"Sorry, this has to stay," one of the guards pointed at the rifle. "Only handguns and knives are allowed."

The stranger nodded silently and walked over to the barred window. The old woman put aside her knitting needles with a ball of thread and rose from her seat, muttering something to herself. With difficulty she took the heavy rifle and placed it in a box with the number two painted on the door, after which she gave the visitor a round badge.

"Don't forget to write your name in the book," the guard said, and after the deed was done, he added. "Is there anything else? I need to check you."

"Then check," the stranger replied, pulling off her bandana to reveal a completely feminine face and a lock of blonde hair peeking out from under her collar. Her voice was no longer hoarse, so now it was completely impossible to mistake it for a man's.

The girl grinned and opened the clasps of her cloak, revealing a holster with an automatic pistol strapped to her right hip and a sheath with a kukri hanging from her left. The guard glanced at her figure, chuckled with satisfaction, and, it seemed, never looked for anything else.

"A woman with guns," his partner said drawlingly. "This is the first time I've seen this, usually mam'zelles prefer skirts and corsets."

The smile immediately disappeared from the visitor's face, and in an instant she was standing next to the talkative bouncer.

"Seems to me it's a lot easier to get male attention that way," the snatched knife rested its tip against the guard's groin, freezing and trying not to breathe.

"I beg your pardon," the first one interrupted. "Everything is fine, please come in."

The girl put down the knife and kicked open the inner doors of the saloon. The common room was bright and noisy: in one corner, a group of serious men silently downed glass after glass; in the other, a few enthusiastically played cards, periodically grabbing their opponents by the collar. Someone was joking awkwardly, holding rosy-cheeked young ladies dressed up on their knees, and someone was dancing in the middle of the room, next to a small orchestra consisting of a violinist, a pianist, and a man with a guitar (the latter was mercilessly out of tune). Two men were punching each other in the face, and not far from them several people were kicking a poor guy who was lying down. In general, everything was quiet, peaceful, and very civilized.

As the doors stopped swinging and froze, one of the guards looked at the guest book. There was: "Martha. Bounty hunter."

"Battle madam. I wonder if she will demand girls for herself?"

The question remained unanswered because his partner was still looking at his pants and the girl hadn't heard. As she entered the hall, some of the guests who had not had time to drink themselves into unconsciousness immediately turned their heads toward the doors. The spectacle was a little wild for them, and many did not miss the opportunity to drink a glass to dispel the obsession, who for some reason was not in a hurry to leave, but just walked proudly to the bar, trying not to pay attention to the perplexed looks of the visitors.

"What does the beautiful lady want?" asked the bartender, trying to hold back his chuckle.

The men sitting nearby laughed, choking on their beers, and one, a particularly jovial one, leaned over to the girl and hugged her shoulders.

"I would like to know if you have seen this man?" with one hand Martha took a leaflet from her inside pocket, and with the other she grabbed the pestering man by the beard

and pulled him down, causing him to very unsuccessfully approach the narrow tabletop with his nose. "So what?"

The bartender stopped wiping another beer mug and looked carefully at the poster. It was printed with a photograph of a man with a scar from his left eyebrow to his nose, a week's growth of stubble, and frowning brown eyes. He had short, dark, slightly curly hair and wore a black leather jacket and matching pants. He held a sawed-off shotgun, and behind him was an armored pickup truck with a machine gun mount on the back. The inscription at the top of the sheet read: "Wanted! Only alive!" The bottom part, which usually contained the name and amount of the reward, was torn off.

"No, I've never seen him," the bartender replied after a long pause. "Feel free to ask the visitors, but it's unlikely that anyone will answer you. This guy is clearly not from around here."

The girl looked carefully at her interlocutor's face and frowned. Her neighbor had already slid under the counter with a broken nose, leaving a long trail of blood, and the other men suddenly returned to their business, no longer paying attention to Martha. She put the crumpled leaflet back in her pocket and took off her hat.

"Then pour me a beer and tell me who I can play a game or two with."

"Over there at that table," the bartender nodded toward the stairs to the second floor. "They play small but honest."

"Honestly, this is good," the girl smiled slightly and picked up a cup of frothy drink. "But I am interested in little bets... a little."

"Then you should go to Three-Eyed George, his table is in that corner, but if you find yourself without money, don't be offended. Although you can always settle this matter on the street if you have a weapon that is not just for decoration," the interlocutor grinned, revealing an incomplete row of teeth.

Martha tossed a few dimes on the counter and walked toward the group. Much to her chagrin, no one was found to have a third eye, and two of them had only one.

"Can I join you?" the girl asked, and without waiting for an answer, sat down on an empty chair.

"Of course, honey," the player sitting across from her purred. "What do you want to bet?"

He kept his only eye on the huntress, rubbing his thin, hairy arms nervously. The man was an unpleasant subject with prominent cheekbones and gray skin. Another to his right snickered in disgust and adjusted the bandage covering his left eye socket. He, too, was not distinguished by his aesthetic appearance and looked like two drops of water to the first player, except that his sideburns were dark red. The third in the company was a 'tired' young man. His black hat slid down over his eyes, and he buried his nose in a glass of burgundy liquid, completely unaware of the reality around him.

"First of all, I'd like to know who I'm playing with," the huntress asked politely.

"I am Three-Eyed George, the red one is my brother Louis, and this not very sober gentleman is," he pointed to the one sitting on the left. "Mr. Vigo. I hope we're done with the obligatory welcome and can get on with the betting, miss?"

"Martha."

It seems that the one-eyed brunette sitting across from her was the boss at this table.

"I'll bet you five hundred dollars, we'll play together, if you win, they're yours, if not, tell me everything you know about the person I'm interested in."

"This is not really an information desk at all. What makes you so sure we have something to share?"

The huntress took a folded piece of paper out of her pocket, and the whole company stared at the photo of the wanted man. The brothers immediately became quiet, not even trying to pretend not to recognize him, and Mr. Vigo lifted the brim of his hat with his finger and hiccupped.

"Well, judging by your faces, I'm right. Everybody knows something, but nobody says a word," the poster has returned to its rightful place. "Are we ready to go?"

"Hmm, a lot of money, and it's unlikely you'll win," George said thoughtfully, scratching his stubble. "What do you think, Louis?"

"Come on, but we have a rule: my brother and I always play together," the redhead replied.

"I... I...want too," Mr. Vigo said with great difficulty.

"Do you have anything left?" Three-Eyed asked, patting the man on the shoulder. "Didn't you say you blew every cent you had?"

"Be... calm... I'll find it," he reached into his vest pocket, sighed sadly and pulled out a small bunch of keys with a skull-shaped keychain. "Here... the car... on... Eek! Parking lot."

"That's different!" rejoiced the red-haired man. "Deal! If we win, we take the car and five hundred from the lady, and if not, the information is yours and two hundred dollars from me personally. Is everyone happy with this arrangement?"

"Quite," replied the girl, watching as Mr. Vigo, trying to nod in agreement, knocked his precious glass to the floor. "What do we play? Poker, blackjack?"

"Poker, double," Three-Eyed grinned. "The rules are new, but very interesting. Need I remind you?"

"No, thank you," Martha looked at her forced ally again and sighed resignedly. "Combinations are made up of the total amount from cards held by both players, but they are not allowed to communicate with each other."

"That's right!" George took a new sealed deck of cards from his pocket and handed it to the girl with a wink. "So you won't feel like accusing us of cheating. Deal the cards, miss."

It is worth noting that since the bets and other nuances were agreed upon in advance, this wonderful game lost its most interesting part, namely the psychological struggle,

attempts to deceive the opponent and bluffing. Players only need to receive five cards, do an exchange and make a call. Martha tore the film and, after carefully checking the deck, distributed the required number of these colored pictures to everyone. She held a queen of hearts, a jack and a ten, as well as a five of diamonds and of spade.. *"Is it realistic to get a nine and an eight, and what if this drunk has them? Or leave a pair and replace the three remaining cards?"* the huntress thought, looking at her very calm opponents.

The brothers each dropped one, but Martha decided to take a chance and get rid of her fives. Rash and reckless, having prepared in advance to part with money and information.

"Mr. Vigo?" said the red-haired Louis. "What do you have?"

"Blackjack!" the dozing man lifted his chin.

"What?" asked Three-Eyed. "Exchange, Mr. Vigo, need something?"

"Ah... no..." he shook his head wearily.

The girl chuckled in surprise, but remained silent, handing out the required number of cards to each. The Jack of Spades and, lo and behold, the Nine of Hearts were added to her hand. She could only hope that her partner had the eight needed to make a straight flush.

"Oooh," Mr. Vigo whispered as he finally saw his cards.

"Time to open," Three-Eyed grinned, placing three sevens on the table: a spade, a heart, and a club, as well as a four of diamonds and a two of spades. "Set!"

"Don't rush, brother," Louis interrupted, revealing the seven of diamonds, the three missing fours, and the ace of clubs. "Together, two fours! That's it, lady, now it's your turn!"

"Fuck..." Martha cursed and threw her cards.

"Oh, is it proper for dear ladies to express themselves like that?" Three-Eyed laughed. "What about your partner?"

Mr. Vigo winked sarcastically at the huntress and tried to sit up straighter in his chair, but nothing came of it.

"As I understand it, this gentleman is part of your scheme and he is working exclusively against me?" Martha clarified, unfastening her holster.

"No, no, no." Louis smiled conciliatorily and raised his hands. "Everything is fair, we knew each other the first night, and Mr. Vigo managed to lose a hundred dollars to us."

Hearing his name, the man sneezed and dropped his cards on the table. One of them was face down: it turned out to be the eight of hearts, which his partner was missing for the desired combination. However, in order to beat the brothers, it was necessary to collect at least another four. The drunken gambler sighed, George swore dirty, and Louis tugged hard at his sideburns.

"Eh, that's why... I have bad luck in love," Mr. Vigo put the keys in his pocket and took out a small wallet in which to keep his allotted winnings.

"Royal flush... It can't be! King, ace, queen and ten of spades..." said the girl. "And my jack is just in the nick of time!"

"He cheated!" the redhead jumped out of his seat.

"You're talking about a person who can't even string a few words together," Martha said. "You lose. Give me two hundred and I'm waiting for the promised information."

"Fuck you!" Three-Eyed growled and lowered his hand under the table.

There was a bang and the player fell out of his chair, clutching his shot leg. The huntress slowly rose from her seat and held the men at gunpoint. The saloon's visitors looked back lazily at the noise, but seeing that nothing unusual had happened, they immediately returned to their more interesting pursuits. No one wanted to get involved in a fight between the players.

"Han shot first," Mr. Vigo commented.

"Gentlemen, this is not good. A gambling debt is a debt of honor," Martha said.

"Crazy bitch!" Louie shouted. "You won't know anything! Everyone in the surrounding lands would rather die than talk about Max!"

The girl smiled, and the red-haired man, realizing that he had blurted out too much, turned slightly pale, so to speak, for a person with gray skin. At that moment, Mr. Vigo swayed to his feet and approached Three-Eyed, who lay groaning on the floor. Bending down, he pulled from his pocket a pair of gold records, worth a hundred dollars each, and several cards hidden there for use as replacements during the game.

"Cheaters," said the tipsy gentleman and, straightening up, he punched Louis, who was standing next to him, in the jaw, causing it to crack deliciously and sending its owner flying into a nearby closet.

The girl chuckled meaningfully, returned the pistol to its holster, and examined her new partner very carefully. He turned out to be a rather tall man of average build. And though there was nothing memorable about his appearance, it seemed to Martha that their paths had once crossed. Mr. Vigo turned, his green eyes clear and alert, and there was no trace of intoxication.

"Let's get out of here," he pointed to the exit.

"Who are you to command?" the girl was justifiably indignant when she heard the next man's order and lowered her hand back into the holster. "Want to lie down next to him?"

"I do not envy you..." the player muttered very quietly.

"I'm not going anywhere without information!"

"Well, then get ready for a mess. These one-eyed men have a third brother, and half a minute ago he ran out that door for help."

Martha turned her head in the direction indicated, only momentarily losing sight of her interlocutor. That was enough for him to approach the girl, grab her right wrist, and take the gun. Reflexively, she tried to free herself, and when that failed, she kicked the man under the knee.

"That's my trick," the enemy lifted his leg and easily blocked the blow. "Vince won't forgive me!"

"What?"

"I'm the first to know what you look like," Mr. Vigo smiled, uncovering Martha's wrist and nodding at her watch. "Helga, right?"

"Arthur? Why didn't I recognize your voice and appearance? Have you lied about brothers?" the girl took her weapon.

"Which brothers? Ah," the man waved his hand. "No, it's true. The cavalry will soon arrive: gunshots and screams await us."

"Great, then I guess I'll take your advice. Let's get out of here as soon as possible, but first I want to get my rifle back."

The couple hurried to the exit, where a large, bandit-looking man stood with a shotgun in his hand. He aimed right at Arthur.

"Sorry, may I ask you to stay for a while and make up for the damage you caused to our establishment. The locker you broke was worth five dollars."

"Of course," Mr. Vigo fumbled in his pockets and pulled out a coin of the required denomination. "Here you are."

"Thank you. Have a nice evening," the guard took the payment and stepped aside to clear the doorway.

"Goodbye."

In the corridor, Helga put her number in the window of the cage and stamped her feet nervously, watching the movements of the old wardrobe attendant, which she thought were too slow.

"I thought there was going to be a shooting," she said. "This guy looked menacing."

"C'mon! Such a nice man, I have never met a guard like him before," Arthur replied calmly. "Besides, I don't have a gun."

"What? Is it possible to live in this world without guns?" the girl finally received her rifle, the size of which made her companion nod in agreement.

"It's unlikely, but that's not what I meant," it was his turn to receive the things handed over earlier.

"By the way, I hope to hear a detailed story about what the hell is going on here."

"I'm afraid they won't let us have a quiet talk now."

Mr. Vigo accepted from the old woman a belt with two old-fashioned, but very large, long-barreled revolvers and a worn leather sheath containing a real bastard sword.

"What is this?" Martha raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"This time, no one will say that the warrior does not have a sword! And for some reason, revolvers were classified as heavy guns and were not allowed inside."

"What a useful weapon..."

Arthur fastened his belt and pulled on the cloak granny had helpfully given him. But if his wardrobe of black jeans, white shirt, vest, lace-up military boots, and cowboy hat

looked natural, the sword scabbard hanging from his belt was too much, even for a member of the raider's family.

The young people walked out and immediately stopped to stare at the group of armed individuals standing across the street. One of them, very reminiscent of the one-eyed brothers, was actively gesticulating and nodding at Arthur and Helga, accompanied by juicy curses.

"So they were the ones who hurt George and Louis?" the big thug asked, cocking his double-barrel shotgun.

"Three-Eyed was the first to reach for the gun after losing, after he cheated!" the girl shouted. "We won fairly!"

"Exactly!" Mr. Vigo confirmed, stepped on the card that had fallen out of his pocket, and then whispered to his companion, "Do you have a car?"

"A double buggy in the parking lot behind the saloon," Helga replied quietly. "How about your keys?"

"To the barn..."

"What the hell are you talking about?" the big man shouted again.

"Gentlemen," the huntress addressed the crowd. "Since you're still not shooting at us, you obviously want something. Money? How many?"

"In vain," Arthur commented.

The bandits' faces became smooth and took on a blissful expression. What else could they do, since the victims themselves are offering to empty their pockets? Three-Eyed's brother rubbed his chin in satisfaction as he mentally calculated the required amount of compensation for the physical and moral damage caused to his relatives. Of course, no one wanted to let the impudent ones live, but taking voluntary donations from the losers before carrying out the execution is much more pleasant than rummaging through corpses and getting your hands dirty with blood.

"Two thousand bucks and your cars!" said one of the thugs, without waiting for the decision of his accomplices.

"Fair!" the rest of the gang supported him. "Also we want to have some fun with that chick!"

The men laughed and patted each other on the back. Martha, her face red with rage, glared at them, wondering in her mind what methods of killing would be most appropriate for such a situation. Arthur used his index finger to bend the edge of the small pouch strapped across his chest and curiously examined its contents. Judging by the crazy smile on the young man's face, the result of the audit was extremely pleasant.

"Deal!" he shouted at the robbers, then whispered a few words to Helga, nodding at a huge rusted billboard sticking out of the ground nearby.

"Are you crazy!" the girl was outraged, but it was too late.

"Here's the money!" said Mr. Vigo, pulling the pin and throwing a grenade into the crowd. "Here's the girl!"

As the thugs watched in fascination at the unexpected actions of their victim, Martha quickly jumped for cover and prepared to fire her rifle. When the second grenade went on its final flight, Arthur joined the huntress, taking out a revolver, but instead of sitting down next to her, he only persistently pulled her by the shoulder.

"Run to the car! They are training!"

Fortunately, the bandits did not have this information, but their instinct for self-preservation was good. The men ran quickly in all directions, the backs of their heads and other parts of their bodies peeking out from behind all sorts of barrels, crates, and other debris scattered about. By the time Three-Eyed's brother realized that the grenades were lying quietly in the middle of the street with no intention of exploding, Arthur and Helga were running full speed toward the parking lot.

"We've been fucked! Get them!" uttered a classic phrase that heralded a chase, and the whole gang rushed forward, at first reluctantly, then quite boldly.

The huntress's buggy was in the same place it had been left. Safe and sound. The girl threw a few of the promised coins into the guard's post, though of course the required day had not yet passed. Billy immediately took the money and, judging the situation correctly, hid in his shelter.

When the first pursuers appeared around the corner, Martha was already placed in the driver's seat, turning the key in the ignition, and Arthur, recklessly straightening up to his full height, took aim at the bandits.

If the power of a long-barreled revolver matched even slightly the volume of its shot, it was truly a formidable weapon. By the time the engine obediently started, he had managed to free the entire drum. As a result, two of bandits were lying in the crumbs of the torn wall, and the rest of their mates were huddled modestly behind the building, shooting indiscriminately but very angrily at the perpetrators with their pistols outstretched. Without hesitation, Arthur jumped into the passenger seat and Helga stepped on the gas. With a high, hysterical noise, the bright and light buggy screeched its rear wheels and raced to the edge of the town.

Only after she had driven a considerable distance away from Sivil did the girl slow down slightly, giving her the opportunity to hear not only the engine, which apparently had no muffler, but also her companion's voice.

"Where to go?" the huntress shouted, turning around slightly.

"How much fuel do you have?"

"Full tank! Fortunately, I filled up before visiting this unfortunate establishment!"

"Great! Then slow down! I need to check the map!" Arthur replied and immediately fell silent, catching a handful of sand in his mouth.

The vehicle stopped and the friends climbed out of their seats, wiping their faces and shaking off the layer of dust that had accumulated on their clothes. Night had long since fallen over the Wastelands, the air was growing colder, and somewhere in the distance

a mutant coyote howled with a meowing voice. Arthur sat down near the searchlight and took out a map folded many times as well as an old compass.

"A little further to the north there should be an abandoned raiders' camp. We can hide there."

"Not only did we have to leave the town because of you, but now we have to drag ourselves deeper into the Wastelands!" Helga was indignant. "I only have two dry rations left and one bottle of water."

"You have conspired to blame me for all your troubles! By the way, it was not I who shot poor Mr George".

"Your poor mister was the first to reach for the gun!" the girl replied.

"Right, and you wounded a very respected gentleman in Sivil, the leader of a gang and an excellent marksman. His accomplices are not forgiving such things."

"Apparently he's not that great?" Helga grinned. "Ok. There's no point in talking about it now, but you still have something to tell me. Remember?"

"It's a long story," Mr. Vigo waved it off. "Now we are in the Wastelands, without a roof over our heads, and a sandstorm could cover us at any moment. We're going to the raiders' camp!"

"What if the owners are at home? It is unlikely that they will be happy with the guests..."

"You're wrong," Arthur smiled. "Buggy, weapons and about three hundred and thirty pounds of fresh meat. They will love it."

The girl looked at her companion with an unhappy expression.

"Do you think I weigh that much?"

"Well, it has begun," the man rolled his eyes tragically and raised his hands to the sky.

"What did you say about Vince?" Martha asked after a short pause.

"Oh, are you interested?" Arthur grinned. "In general, he has to be somewhere in this world, just like the rest of the members of our party. But I don't really know where to look for them... This time I didn't get any letters... Only..."

"This time? Was there another one?" interrupted the girl.

"Yeah. When you were visiting your parents."

"It seems like very little time has passed, but I've been traveling these desert lands for an entire year, catching criminals. Or maybe this is just a dream inspired by playing with you."

"Longer than usual?" Mr. Vigo asked and continued without waiting for an answer. "Last time the adventure took two years, and when I woke up, only one night had passed in our world."

"If you don't stop talking in riddles and unfinished sentences, I'll hit you! Stop being mysterious!"

"We entered the world of the game. We spent two years there. We woke up. It was fun. We decided to repeat! Are you happy? Let's go, otherwise I can give you the details by tomorrow morning."

"Yeah," Helga grumbled. "And I am a teacher of Russian language and literature."

"Seriously?"

"No!" the girl took her full-face helmet and a respirator for Arthur out of the small trunk, then sat down in the driver's seat.

"Maybe I can drive?"

"Don't trust a woman driver?"

"A monkey with a grenade and..."

"In case you forgot, half an hour ago..." Martha began.

"It's a terrible sexist joke, I agree," said Mr. Vigo obediently, sitting down behind her and putting on a respirator.

He barely had time to buckle up before the high-spirited buggy broke into a gallop, kicking up dry sand with its wheels. So even though the huntress was driving much slower, looking carefully into the night and trying not to hit any random cobblestones, it seemed as if she was getting the maximum out of the vehicle due to the powerful roar of the engine.

"Have you thought about installing a muffler?" Arthur shouted, forgetting that his mouth was covered by a mask.

"What?"

"Muffler!"

"A! It goes faster without it!" the girl replied.

"This is exactly how my friends motivated the absence of this part on their bikes! They didn't have brakes either!" said the unfortunate passenger, but he was not heard.

For a while, he tried to ignore the discomfort and take a nap, but that idea led nowhere. He also quickly got tired of looking at the surrounding landscapes, which were not very diverse, so when Arthur became really sad, a small glowing dot appeared from behind, and then several more of its companions. He patted the girl on the shoulder and pointed in that direction. Martha stopped her vehicle and picked up a rifle. The sight had night vision, which she used.

"Those are for us," the huntress concluded. "A motorcycle and two cars are most likely following the tracks; they don't look like raiders, though I could be wrong, the distance is still too far."

"Did we really offend the boys in Sivil so much that they decided to go deeper into the Wastelands?"

"The seat can be turned back, it will be more comfortable to shoot, if your guns are good for something other than damaging walls," Martha said.

"My babies are good at many things!" Arthur declared proudly, drawing his revolvers. "But I'm a really bad shooter."

"Yours..."

"Dante and Alighieri," the handle of one was dark and the other was light.

"This is one person... Have you thought of a name for the sword? You are probably blonde at heart, and if you wash a layer of dust off your cloak, it will turn red."

"It's a shame to be offended by such a comparison," Arthur replied with a smile on his face.

"Okay, get behind the wheel," Helga relented, loosening the restraints on the passenger seat and turning it one hundred and eighty degrees.

Her companion did not force himself to beg and somehow pulled the girl's helmet onto his head. She fastened her seatbelt and picked up the rifle. The roar of the engines grew louder, indicating that the pursuit was getting closer, and the buggy began to pick up speed, even as the distance to the chasers continued to shrink.

The huntress took aim and began to seize the moment to shoot, but since the vehicle was constantly shaking, she was unable to do anything for a long time. But when a thin woman's finger pressed the trigger, there was a loud bang, the bolt moved forward and the bullet case flew into the darkness. One of the lights danced merrily from side to side, then jerked down and went out.

"The biker is done!" reported the girl.

Arthur finally got used to controlling the stubborn vehicle and began to drive much more smoothly, managing not to slow down. Two more shots rang out a few seconds apart, this time Helga aiming for the front wheel of one of the cars. It twitched and wiggled a little, straightening its position. The huntress cursed and, no longer standing on ceremony, fired the next two bullets directly into the engine. This had the desired effect: the pursuers began to lose speed rapidly until they finally froze, trying to climb the next sand dune.

"Yeah! Not much left!"

The powerful rifle the girl used had one significant drawback - small ammunition: the clip held only five rounds. It was time to reload, and when the new one was almost in place, the last remaining vehicle opened fire. They worked in long bursts, but it seemed that their shooter was far inferior to Helga in the ability to aim on the move. Sand fountains rose around the buggy without harming the driver or passenger. Unfortunately, the huntress managed to drop the spare clip, and she didn't have a third one.

The chasing transport, equipped with a powerful compressor, accelerated sharply, and the bandit sticking out of the window pulled the trigger again. Arthur jerked the wheel to the left and slammed on the brakes, letting the enemies pass in front of him, then pulled out a revolver and threw it to Helga.

"Turn me around!" she shouted, "Then drive!"

The order was carried out very quickly, and they began to move away from the clumsy car, making a circle. However, the maneuver had little effect: the agile but less powerful buggy quickly lost the advantage it had gained. There were two bangs, the enemy's radiator shattered to pieces, but the pursuers did not give up so easily and continued the race despite the smoke pouring from under the hood.

"They're approaching! Once more!"

Arthur turned the steering wheel to the left again and, with difficulty, kept the car from tipping over and returned to its original course. The mates drove past the driver's door to hide from the enemy. So when the hunteress felt comfortable shooting again, she released the entire remaining drum into the wheel of the SUV. The rubber was torn to shreds.

"What a kickback," Helga said quietly, returning the revolver to its owner.

Mr. Vigo continued to drive at full speed. Both were silent. Half an hour later, their luck changed: the buggy's own wheel could not withstand the overload and burst with a loud bang. They shook, the huntress who had managed to unhook the belt flying in one direction and Arthur with the vehicle in the other.

The sand barely softened the fall, and it was hard to group, hugging the rifle, but the girl still managed to get up. The buggy was lying on its right side, sadly spinning its front wheels. There were traces of oil and gasoline around it. Leaning on her weapon, Helga somehow hobbled to the scene of the accident. The driver layed nearby: there was nothing over him now except the sky—the lofty sky, not clear, but still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds slowly creeping across it.

"How is it I haven't seen this lofty sky before?" he said, trying to free himself. "It was awesome! We need to do it again someday!"

"Who am I messing with?" the huntress said, helping her 'partner' out.

"Let's find the others. It will be even more fun!" Arthur replied, checking the integrity of his bones.

"Come on, don't threaten me! What do we do now? There is no transport, little food, we are in the Wastelands! How far is it to the camp?"

"Not far," the young man waved his hand to the side. "We have arrived."

Three hundred feet away from them was a rather chaotic jumble of strange buildings. They were assembled from old scrap metal and filled almost to the middle with sand. Some doors were open, but there was no light anywhere, although a small windmill, indicating the presence of a generator, was still turning near the largest 'house'.

The mates gathered their things and went to the best preserved building. They spent a few minutes shoveling sand away from the entrance and finally found themselves inside. Arthur illuminated the corners of the hut and saw nothing dangerous: a few metal boxes and a pile of rags in the middle - that were all.

"Not luxury, but not bad," he concluded. "We probably shouldn't turn on the lights."

"Do you think we're still being followed and can be seen from a distance?"

"I just don't want to ruin the romantic atmosphere."

"Hmmm..."

"And to see this place in its true state. Who knows what they have done to it."

"That makes sense," the girl felt around on the floor with her foot, found a small spot free of garbage, threw her cloak there and sat down on it. "Can we now make a hysteria about the lack of food and a vehicle?"

"Go ahead," Arthur followed her example and began loading the revolvers.

"It's too late, and I don't feel like it anymore," Helga said after some thought. "What have you been doing all this time? We came into this world at the same moment, as I understand it."

"I was looking for someone from the party. Along the way, I worked as a cheater, a bouncer in a brothel, a security guard for oil and trade caravans, and even hunted criminals for whom there was a reward." Mr. Vigo began the story wearily. "Then I lost almost all my money and my car, and without wheels, as you know, there's nothing to do in the Wastelands and its outskirts. I had to lead a sedentary life, fortunately sometimes someone would agree to give me a ride to another town. Anyway, two days ago I ended up in Sivil."

"Why exactly there and how do you know about this camp?"

"It was a strange announcement on the radio. "Wanted: a dumb warrior who likes coffee and metal. If you hear this, go to Sivil. Will wait. Mister S." I also won the abandoned raiders' map from a suspicious guy, and when you think about it, it was kind of too easy..."

"Doubtful," Helga said, inserting cartridges into an empty clip. "There are too many people like that!"

"Say, you don't drink coffee, do you?" Arthur suddenly asked.

"Well, yes, I prefer tea. So what?"

"Coffee doesn't exist in this world, that's what. So, I'm the only one! Also don't forget metal, either."

"Then why run into bandits? We should sit in the town and wait quietly instead of hiding in the desert!" the girl was indignant and seemed like she had forgotten Mr. George's shot leg.

"You know..." the interlocutor grinned. "Such things happen to me as a matter of course."

"I don't doubt it. One evening in your company caused me more trouble than the whole of last year."

"Talent," Arthur explained proudly. "Say, where did you get the ad for Max's capture? I've never seen this before. Bobby, Carlo, Dave Linsk, Derek Tailer, Robert Falck - these are the usual targets of the manhunt. Dead or alive, that's all."

"I was hunting members of the Navaro family, a small group of raiders in the south, nothing interesting, they even despised human flesh. The order for them was given three years ago. I arrived in a small village to meet with the client, and he informed me that the contract had long since been canceled. A young man came to them, cleaned out the family's hideout, and didn't even take the money. My colleagues don't act like that, so I

asked him to describe this hunter. The old man gave me this piece of paper, and on it was our Max, only a piece with the name and the amount was torn off."

"The noble sir is in his repertoire," Arthur smiled. "He always kept our crazy company in balance. When was that?"

"Ten months ago. The order was completed a year earlier, and this announcement is even older. Every drunk knows about it, but stubbornly refuses to share information."

"Afraid?"

"But why, if Max is so good and helps everyone?"

"When have such actions been appreciated in any of the worlds?" Mr. Vigo objected, lying down on his cloak and throwing his hands behind his head. "Let's go to sleep, there are still four hours until dawn, we'll think about it in the morning."

The huntress did not argue, and hugging her rifle, she settled down for the night. A strong wind blew outside, raising clouds of sand and moving the unlocked doors of neighboring buildings. They creaked disgustingly and banged against the doorposts. Even the coyotes, the usual inhabitants of the Wastelands, hid in their holes and stopped howling. The girl shuddered at every strange sound, but Arthur slept in the most carefree way, breathing regularly and paying no attention to anything.

When the sun began to shine into the barn through a large number of cracks, Helga, sleep-deprived and with a heavy head, rose on her elbows. Contrary to all expectations, the hut was quite clean: there were no traces of blood or other human fluids, and the pile of rags in the middle turned out to be just a pile of rags. Unfortunately, her companion disappeared somewhere, leaving his cloak and sheath with a sword on the ground.

"Restless," the girl grumbled as she stood up.

She went to the door and was about to grab the handle when she heard the sound of an engine. Clear and loud, it indicated the proximity of the transport.

"Come out, I know you are there!" cried the voice from outside. "I will count to three and then blow up the barn!"

There was no other way. Helga sighed and opened the door. The bright light blinded her, but she could make out several human silhouettes standing on the top of the dune. Suddenly, there was the familiar roar of one of Mr. Vigo's monstrous revolvers firing.

Thank you so much for checking out the sample chapter!

It means a lot to me. If you'd like to dive deeper into the story, the full version is available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DY64TQGN>