

Killing Rhinos

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Herb Hughes



Books From The Pond
2017

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Once again, I dedicate this book to the person who makes life worth living: To Charlotte. Thank you for sharing this and everything else with me. Perhaps a beer on the patio tonight?

and

To Kathy. Thank you for helping. I will always remember you.

Map of Agrilot
Drawn by Jack Wheat
Year: 157

Hole In The Desert



Eastern Desert

Deaton

Lisbon

Walsey

Newton

Hidden Valley

Engels

The Spine



Mac's Oasis

Borderton

Eastern Desert

Big Hat's Bay

Southern Ocean



Chapter 1

The electronic scope had long since quit working. The man sighted along the side of the short barrel, steadied his hands in the cradle formed by the rocks, and slowly squeezed the trigger. With a gentle hum, a vivid blue beam leaped toward the target, piercing flesh close to the intended point. He held his aim for the better part of a second. He didn't want to make too big a bloody mess, but he had to keep the beam on long enough to pierce the tough skin and thick chest, only a fraction of a second, but the right fraction of a second. If he didn't, well, it was kill or be killed. Failure meant he would be the bloody mess.

With lightning reflexes, the Rhino's head snapped around, an ugly face contorted in a horrified expression of surprise and pain. A burst of red, a momentary cloud of vapor, temporarily opaqued the air on the other side of the Rhino. A gushing crimson stream quickly followed, squirting into the air and staining the hard yellow dirt of the desert floor where it splashed and splattered. The man had held the trigger down only the slightest slice of a second too long, and the laser had carved through a major artery. Burn-through had come fast, too fast. The red stain extended onto the crusty desert for ten meters. Cover up was going to be tough.

The huge animal stayed on wobbly legs one second then two, but that was all. It dropped to the ground with a heavy thud, the impact of the massive body reverberating through the earth. Standing behind a rock on a small rise overlooking the desert floor, the man could feel the ground quiver through his boots. He quickly collapsed the telescoping barrel and folded the thin rails that made up the laser rifle's stock, reducing the weapon to storage size, not much more than a man's hand. It slid neatly into a hidden compartment carved in the underside of his saddle.

Climbing up on the saddle, he reached to rub his horse's right ear, but there was no need. Killer, understanding that the man could not afford to waste time, had already started down the slope. Horse and rider moved quickly. Though he was far from civilization, you never knew. As unlikely as it seemed, spying eyes might be about.

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Once on the desert floor, the man pulled gently on the reins and approached the bloody body slowly, creeping up ever so carefully until he could see the animal's eyes. There were no tiny flickers of white light in them, which would mean the beast was still breathing. The animal appeared to be dead, but there was no sense taking chances. He needed to get a closer look. Cautiously, he allowed Killer to inch toward the massive body that lay as still as a desert rock. Silence reigned. When he was near enough to see both huge eyes full-on, there was only the dull, dark gray that spoke of death, the same hollow darkness he had seen so many times before.

The horn – the prize – would come first. When he was sure there was not one white dot left in the eyes, the man pulled a folding ruler from his saddlebag, dismounted, and knelt over the beast's head then measured the large center horn. Fifty-eight and a half centimeters. Not bad. Not a record by any means, but not bad at all.

He pulled a small hand saw from his saddle pack and started cutting at the horn's base, directly against the skull to save as much length as possible. Once removed, he carefully wrapped the horn in damp leather then greased the outside with animal fat. A final wrap of dry leather completed the package. Keeping the horn wet would avoid the shrinkage that came with drying. On a good-sized horn over a several-day trip, this would save as much as four or five millimeters length at measuring time. It was a trick that few Rhino hunters knew. After all, they didn't share secrets. The better Rhino hunters didn't. And those in the bottom echelon knew few secrets to share. He carefully placed the treasure in his saddlebag.

With the trail of misted blood stretching so far across the desert landscape, it was all too obvious that the Rhino had been killed with a laser. No homebuilt could have caused an artery to explode so violently. Removing the blood stains from the yellow dirt and leaving the desert looking natural and undisturbed would not be easy. He knew it would take at least an hour to painstakingly gather and bury the spoiled dirt, brush the surface to a weathered smoothness, and carefully place pebbles, stones, and rocks in a random pattern.

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No help for it. With the touch and care of a god creating a small world, he went about the work diligently. When he was finished, it had taken well over an hour, but the result was as natural as any of the surrounding desert.

After cleanup, he was ready to fire his homebuilt. The noise of a gunshot would carry for several kilometers in the desert, so it was always the last thing he did.

He stared at the dead creature for a moment. At three and a half meters long and two high, it had the body and tail of an oversized bull. The animal's head was huge, almost the size of a man's body. The eyes were bright and fiery when alive; burning red and orange and yellow and flickering wildly as if lit from within. The tremendous size of the animal, the ugly, menacing face and the brightly burning eyes, made a fearful sight, one that had been known to cause men's hearts to fail even before the Rhino leaped forward to rip them to shreds. They were the lucky ones.

As a Rhino lay dying the brightly-colored flicker in its eyes turned to a wavering white, slowed to a few moving dots, then finally turned to the strange dark, hollow appearance that spoke of death. The dull, dark hollow eyes were so much better than the flickering, fiery eyes. The creatures scared him. They scared everyone.

In the middle of the top of the animal's head, there were three sharp-pointed horns, the small upper and lower spikes and the large, slightly curving center horn. The center horn had serrated edges, top and bottom, that could slide through human flesh as easy as carving warm butter.

Staring at the red-gray gap where the large horn had been, he wondered why the beasts were called Rhinos. The dead animal on the ground in front of him did not look like a rhinoceros, and, from what he had read in the books in the library, a rhinoceros was as tame as a dead cat compared to a Rhino. But Rhinos they had always been called. He supposed it was the horns then let the thought go. The cover-up needed to be finished.

With burn-through, the beam exited the opposite side of the creature, so there were two round laser holes in the Rhino's hide, both

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neat and precise. This made cover-up more complicated. You could make the entrance wound look like a ragged homebuilt hole by lining up and firing the homebuilt at the hole. But now he would have to deal with the exit wound as well, make it look as though the ball came out the opposite side. That was dubious because of the massiveness of the creature. If you put enough powder in a homebuilt to go through a Rhino of this size, you would likely split the barrel. And break your shoulder from the recoil. But it couldn't be helped. The damage was done. Hopefully, nobody would see this one before the flesh was so badly rotted they wouldn't want to go poking around in it.

The man took his knife and went all the way around the exit wound, making the edges ragged instead of neat. Then he made a few rough cuts so that short, tattered strips of tough hide lay outward, as though pushed out by the force of a ball.

Walking to the other side of the animal, he plucked four of the beast's stiff hairs then laid them as the four points of an exploded cross, so that the point where the four hairs pointed marked the center of the entrance wound. Then he placed a small strip of thin leather over the wound to avoid getting powder burns on the animal's skin. Carefully adjusting the leather in relation to the four hairs, he knew exactly where the laser hole was. Later, the four long, stiff hairs and the powder-burned strip of leather would be buried somewhere along the trip. With a delicate touch, he aimed the homebuilt and squeezed the trigger.

The flesh immediately around the wound jumped slightly with the force of the shot as the roar of the homebuilt echoed back and forth around the desert, but the rest of the animal's body was motionless. He had used only a quarter load of gunpowder. No sense making the ball go too deep.

With long, thin metal tongs the man had forged himself, he suffered the animal's terrible stench as he dug into the wound to retrieve the ball and the leather strip. After all, the shot was supposed to have gone all the way through so he couldn't leave the ball inside. He was probably being too careful. *Hell*, he thought, *who's going to dig through the wound of a dead, stinking Rhino, anyway*. But he didn't like leaving

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things to chance. He wasn't nearing the all-time record because he was a careless man.

After almost a minute of digging into the rank purple flesh, while suffering the nausea caused by the odor, the ball was retrieved. He cleaned and put away the tongs, mounted Killer, and then turned for the oasis, more than a day's ride to the east. Borderton, home if the man could be said to have a home, was another day beyond. The man patted the saddlebag where the large horn was carefully stored. This prize made one hundred nine. Close to the record, but, at the same time, still a long way to go. It would take years yet... if he managed to stay alive.

The height and location of the sun told him that noon was hours passed. Getting late. He would have to hurry. It was an hour to the Spine and a half-hour or more to find the narrow opening and work his and Killer's way through the ancient ruin. By then it would be close to dark and time to camp alone in the desert for one more night. Having the Spine at his back would offer some protection in the black desert night, on the off chance another Rhino emerged from the earth. Fortunately, the creatures were rare enough.

After a night's sleep, it would take another full day's ride to reach the oasis. Not an easy ride, either. The hours would seem endless as he traveled east through the unchanging, rugged rock and sand landscape toward the pool of water that bubbled up from the bowels of the earth. It was such a vast sameness that, if he wasn't careful, he could veer off and miss the oasis altogether. Even if he didn't, he would be lucky to make the oasis by dark tomorrow. After a night at the oasis, one more day through a terrain that slowly changed from desert to farmland then, finally, home.

The man rubbed Killer's right ear, the request to quicken the pace. The horse reared his head to show agreement then lengthened his step. Killer was smart, very smart. The man had taken to him more quickly than any horse he had ever owned. When they first came together, four years ago, the man discovered immediately that Killer was not to be commanded, not to be ordered or herded about like a cow. When he wanted the horse to do something, he requested it. Once that was understood, it only took a few weeks to work out a series of signals.

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They had ridden together in perfect harmony ever since. Killer, in fact, seemed to read the man's mind at times. The horse knew the routine so well there was rarely a need for a request anymore.

Some distance later they passed the Rhino hole, the earthen womb from which the beast had emerged. The ground had been gutted deeply with the edges of the hole ripped and ragged. All sizes and shapes of clumps of dirt and rock were strewn about randomly. He was lucky to have caught this one before it got too far, before it reached a town and the people living there.

Chapter 2

“Dust, dust, and more dust. Squantum, squintum, reasy, rahsy, rooh. They are all piles of dust. Ninety-eight point two-four cubed is nine hundred forty-eight thousand one hundred twenty-three point eighty-three... Almost.

“Ah! Good evening, lovely self. How is the weather today? Perhaps a storm? Sweet rain to wash the dust away, away, away?”

“What’s that you say dreadful self? A storm? The weather cannot get inside. Oh, no matter. The dust has settled. All the little piles of dust are crumbled, dried, and settled to the floor. All the little piles of dust. You and I are the last, of course. And you, insignificant self, are unworthy of even that dubious honor.

“Yes, oh wondrous self. Dum, doo, dee. Flowers tied to a scooty’s head; a child will laugh when it jumps in bed... I miss the dreams so. The world was so beautiful. Now, one day far too soon I will be dust. Oh, the imperfection of it all, the ghastly, unsympathetic imperfection of it all. Three thousand and six times seven hundred thirty-nine is two million two hundred twenty-one thousand four hundred thirty-four. Oh! Have you returned, exalted self? My, it is good to see you. It gets so very lonely here. Yes, yes, all dust. Dust, dust, dust. The dust piles sit there. No one tends to them. It is so very lonely when you are not here. What was that, honored self? There is no one? Oh, but you are wrong of course. You are here. And so am I.”

Chapter 3

He was on foot now, holding Killer's reins and walking ahead. As evening struggled to dim the sun, he led his horse toward the group of trees that would mark the oasis and water. Moving to the side from time-to-time to miss a scrub tree, feet and hooves plodded along on hard ground, scattering pebbles and rocks. The small trees of the desert were well below knee height and, though warped and twisted by the relentless winds of evening, were hard and stiff and hurt like hell when you accidentally stumbled into one. Avoiding them was standard procedure.

It had been well over a day since the kill. The man had slept on the desert floor the night before, barely enough rest to give him strength to ride all day. He was tired, and he knew Killer was tired, but the horse tried not to show it.

When darkness was close to conquering the sky, he could make out fronds silhouetted against the dark red and gold horizon, some distance to the east. The sky behind him remained blue, but the blue was edging toward purple, and the sun could no longer be seen on the western horizon. He turned and circled north for a few hundred meters, concentric to the oasis, to make sure he approached at a slightly different angle. The desert floor was hard and the light tracks he and Killer made would quickly be erased by the evening winds. When he finished circling and turned back toward the landmark that offered water and the feel of shelter, sunset had passed, and the breeze stiffened. It was night.

There were two small campfires, both burning with the brightness that told of being newly lit. Winds whipped the flames violently. The trunks of the trees growing in the oasis were thin lines of wavy brown where the inner sides were lighted by the dancing glow.

The flames were not tall. Firewood was a rare and precious commodity in the desert. Still, travelers believed campfires were essential. It was generally accepted that Rhinos did not attack anyone close to a fire, so each person would have brought several logs from the forest around Borderton, a good day's ride to the east.

Nothing but folklore. The man had seen plenty of evidence to indicate Rhinos were not afraid of fire. The reason people were safe at

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night, he believed, was that Rhinos did not emerge in the dark. They usually came out of the ground in the morning, as the sun warmed the earth. Most of them were killed before nightfall. That was the only reason people were safer at night. But old fears and old beliefs don't go away easily. While others had listened to his observations intently and nodded understanding, they still lit their fires at night when traveling.

Of course, if you did happen to run across a Rhino at night, you could pretty much count on having your ticket punched for six feet under. A black animal against a black sky was almost impossible to shoot even if its eyes were flaming brightly, but a Rhino could see with those bright, flickering eyes as well as if it were day. And maybe the campfires did that much, allowing travelers some vision, limited though it was.

The few tall, thin, frond-crowned trees that lined almost every oasis were safe from pillage for firewood. The trunk of an oasis tree was a strong, lightweight, fibrous material that held many times its weight in water, assuring the tree's survival in the harsh environment. The logs would not burn unless dried for several days. Once dry, they burned like paper, bright and quick, proving unworthy for keeping bodies warm on long, cold nights. Left alone they provided shade, limited though it was, from the harsh desert sun.

As he neared the oasis, he remounted, letting Killer amble slowly toward the flames of the campfires. The chatter of conversation grew louder. A few more meters and he was able to pick out Greg Bonner's voice, then Sam Crusher's. Both were Rhino hunters. Greg was a mean son-of-a-bitch and a good Rhino hunter, too damned good. Sam was no competition at all.

Suddenly Crazy Mac's high-pitched whine pierced the night. The old man was raving about something, and the others were laughing, as much at him as at what he was saying, no doubt. The man knew Crazy Mac was not trying to be funny. He rarely was. But people always laughed, until they became tired of hearing the stories of how it used to be in the old days and why things are like they are now and all the other nonsense the old coot spouted forth like an eternal spring.

The man passed a sentry, someone he had seen before but did not know. The sentry recognized him immediately and, without words,

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noded and stepped aside to let him pass. A few meters more and the campers were suddenly aware of a lone rider entering their safe haven. The chattering continued, however, until, one-by-one, they recognized him. Silence slowly groped over the entire oasis as he moved forward. He dismounted and let Killer lower his head to the water.

“Jack! Jack Wheat!” a withered and wrinkled little man whined loudly from his stance by the nearest campfire. The flesh on the old man’s face had sunk so low his cheeks looked like the insides of empty bowls. There wasn’t a hair on his head or face, only loose, wrinkled skin. It was Crazy Mac. “Am I glad to see you! Where you been so long?”

“Desert.”

“See anything,” Sam asked.

“One.”

“What'd it measure?” Bonner asked. With any other hunter, Greg Bonner would have first asked if he'd killed the beast. With Jack Wheat, he knew it was a wasted question.

“Fifty-eight and a half.”

“Woo,” Sam whistled. There was a murmur throughout the oasis. “That's pretty good. I haven't heard about a horn that big in over a year.”

“Not bad,” Greg added. “I had one almost sixty-two summer before last, but nothing close since.”

“Aw, you ain't shit,” Crazy Mac cried at Greg. “If you got one bigger than Jack, you probably found it dead at the bottom of a cliff.”

Jack smiled as he unbuckled his saddle.

“Oh, shut up, old man,” Greg responded.

“Shut up? Shut up yourself! Why you're just...”

“Hey, old man,” Jack whispered as low as he could, giving the old man a quick stare. “Let it go.”

“Why, sure, Jack. Sure,” Crazy Mac whispered back.

“Where was it?” Bonner asked.

“West,” Jack said, and he nodded briefly toward the direction from which he had ridden into the camp, some twenty degrees north of where the dead Rhino lay. It was enough to throw Greg or Sam off if they went looking, but not enough to raise suspicions about lying if they happened

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to stumble across the animal. “A day or so hard ride. Close to the Spine.” No need being too accurate.

“You’ve been on the hunt for a while, haven’t you Jack?” a man walking up from the other side of the oasis asked. It was Bill Miller, the local mail rider and part time Rhino hunter, as all mail riders were out of necessity. They traveled a lot, but more importantly, a mail rider’s job didn’t pay quite enough to support a family. A decent size Rhino would net them several months’ extra pay.

“Three weeks.”

“Then you don’t know about Joe Riley or Brian Pickney.”

Jack glanced up and listened. Riley was Borderton’s blacksmith; lived a few kilometers outside town in a small cabin. Not a close friend. Jack didn’t have many close friends. But Joe Riley was a nice enough fellow who had done a few favors for Jack over the years. Brian Pickney was a clerk at Borderton Hardware, a young guy. He had gotten married to a lanky little girl a year or two ago, but the couple had no kids yet.

“Big Rhino got into the Riley’s’ cabin the other morning,” Bonner said. Jack could have sworn that Bonner was fighting back a smile as he talked. “Killed Joe, his wife, and all five kids.”

“Even the baby,” Sam added. “They said the cabin was ankle deep in blood.” Sam’s voice cracked, and his eyes stretched wide with fear at the thought.

“Pickney disappeared about the same time,” Bill Miller said. “No trace of him. The rangers figured the Rhino ate him not long before it got into the Riley’s’ cabin.”

“Damned idiots!” Crazy Mac swore. He spit on the ground in disgust then said, “Rhinos don’t eat people.”

“Of course Rhinos eat people,” Sam said. “Any fool knows that.”

“Well, this fool don’t know it,” Mac said as he pointed a finger at his own chest.

Bonner grinned broadly and said, “You’re sure right about that, Mac. On both accounts.”

Laughter rolled through the oasis.

“Something ate Brian Pickney,” Sam said. “Every bit of him. They couldn’t find nothing. Had to be the Rhino.”

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“Did you see it chew him up?” Crazy Mac asked.

“No, but...”

“See there?” Crazy Mac said triumphantly. “Ain’t a one of you ever seen a Rhino eat anyone, have you?”

“I have,” Greg said. “Twice. Saw a big Rhino a few years ago swallow a small boy in one gulp. When I was a kid, I saw one eat a woman. Chewed her up then licked the blood off the grass. There wasn’t a trace left.”

“You’re a lying dog!” Crazy Mac screamed.

“Oh, shut up, old man,” Bonner responded. “Any fool knows that Rhinos eat people. Why else do people disappear?”

Crazy Mac, the skin on his withered old face shaking in anger, started to scream something at Greg Bonner, but Jack touched the old man’s sleeve in a way that told him to keep quiet. Mac obeyed.

“Anyway,” Greg said, picking up the previous story, “The rangers tracked the Rhino for a day and a half before they killed it. They almost lost the trail in a creek in the mountains.”

“Yep,” Crazy Mac whined again. “The Rhinos are getting smarter. In the old days, there warn’t no Rhino that knew it could cover its trail by wading down a creek. They’ve learned. Those monsters are getting smarter; I tell you.”

“And I told you to shut up, old man,” Bonner said, his voice filled with impatience and disgust. “Damned animals aren’t getting any smarter. I’ve been hunting for thirteen years, and they’re as dumb now as they were then.”

“That’s ‘cause the damned Rhinos was smarter than you then,” Crazy Mac screamed. “And they’re even more smarter than you now. You wouldn’t know the difference.”

A rumble of low-level laughter ran through the oasis, and Greg’s face began to redden.

“You’re gonna know the difference between the sharp edge of my knife and the dull edge, you crazy old coot,” Bonner said as he whipped out the long, wide blade that every Rhino hunter carried.

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“Now y’all calm down,” Sam said, holding his hands out in front of himself but leaning away from the two so he could run at a moment’s notice.

“No need for that,” Jack added as he stepped between Mac and Bonner. The big man eyed Jack a moment, but Jack held his stance. Greg slowly put his knife back in its sheath, staring intently at Crazy Mac as he did. Mac was peeking around Jack’s shoulder.

“I was talking about fifty years ago and longer,” Crazy Mac said, pointing his wrinkled face toward Greg Bonner, his eyes open extra wide for effect. He spoke each word slowly, enunciating clearly as though talking to an idiot.

Bonner shook his head and threw his hand at the old man as if to say that conversation with him was a waste of time.

“And I’ll tell you another thing,” the old man whined further. “A hundred and fifty years ago, when the first colonists came, there weren’t no Rhinos at all!”

“Here we go with the ‘no Rhino’ stories again,” Bonner shrugged, rolling his eyes upward. “I’m going to sleep.”

Greg Bonner stretched his huge, imposing frame, turned, then walked to where his bedroll lay open on the ground, his saddle resting at the opposite end. He lay down, covering everything but his head. Jack knew that even though Bonner’s eyes might be closed, his ears would stay open until all the others were silent and asleep. Jack would do the same.

“So how do you know what was around a hundred and fifty years ago?” Sam asked the old man. It was conversation. Sam had heard the story more than once, but there were variations each time, and sometimes it was downright different.

“My pappy told me all about it, by Gawd,” the old man continued, moving his hand, palm down, in a slow arc to add emphasis to the tale. “He was a young man when the freighters landed, and nobody saw no Rhinos nowhere! It was five years before the first Rhino was ever seen. And those first ones were different, too. They were fewer, smaller, dumber, and they weren’t as mean, though they were mean enough.”

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“So how old was your father when you were born?” Bill Miller, the mail rider, asked.

“My father?” Crazy Mac said, a curious look on his face. “He was, oh, let's see. Thirty... thirty-two. Somewhere thereabouts. Why?”

“And he was a grown man when he arrived on the freighters, right? We'll say eighteen, but he was probably older. Let me figure this out,” Bill said as he rubbed his chin, a mocking smile creeping onto his face. “I'll be damned, Mac. That would make you about, oh, pretty close to a hundred and forty. At the least. You look pretty old, Mac, but you don't look quite that old.”

Crazy Mac shook his head in short strokes as if confused. “Maybe it was my grandpappy,” he said, groping for an answer. “Yeah, that's it. It was my grandpappy that landed with the freighters. That's how it was.”

“And maybe the Rhinos were there all along,” Bill said. “Maybe your father, or grandfather or whichever one of your ancestors it was, forgot about them for five years.”

“That's not so,” the old man tried to protest.

Bill Miller stood, a triumphant smile on his face, and said, “Got to get up damned early. One of the pack mules they gave me to carry the mail pouches is as ornery as, as... as ornery as you Crazy Mac. Come to think of it, the two of you would make a good pair. Anyway, I have to get up early to load the son-of-a-bitch. It takes forever with him fighting me every step of the way. See you fellows later.” He turned and walked away, still smiling.

“Guess I better be getting some sleep as well,” Sam said. “Bill and the others are taking two-hour watches, so we don't have to worry about it.”

“Mind if I put my bedroll by your fire,” Jack asked Sam. “I'm out of firewood.”

“Sure,” Sam said. “You wander around the desert without firewood? Man! You're either very brave or very crazy.”

“Don't like to carry too much. Bad on Killer,” Jack answered. “I find enough scrap here and there.”

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Silently he was thinking how Sam might improve his lot as a Rhino hunter if he didn't weigh his horse down with bundles of firewood. It was true that the dense trees of the north yielded wood that would burn for hours, but a week's worth was a considerable load. Still, the safety of a campfire was a tradition. Traditions died hard.

Jack placed his bedroll on top of the saddle blanket, unrolled it, then set the saddle at one end. He lay down, using the saddle as a pillow. This kept the laser rifle and its secret compartment well protected, a mere inch or so under his head. As was the habit with all travelers, whether Rhino hunter or not, he lay his homebuilt beside him. More than a few had shot themselves during the night. Jack had long ago learned to sleep without moving.

Crazy Mac walked over to where Jack lay. "You believe me, don't you?" he whispered, his head shaking gently from side-to-side and the sagging skin flapping wildly about.

"Sure, old man. But a lot of things could explain why nobody saw any Rhinos the first few years. There's nothing that strange about it."

"Maybe so. Maybe not."

Jack pulled a dried vegetable cake from his saddle pack and began to eat.

"Uh," Crazy Mac said, staring longingly at Jack's cake, "You got a spare one of those?"

"Sure," Jack said. He opened his bag and pulled the next-to-last cake out and tossed it to the old man.

"Thanks, much. Pickings have been slim lately."

Jack reached back for the last cake and tossed it to the old man, too.

"You sure you don't mind," Crazy Mac said as he caught the second cake. Even though Mac was a mass of wrinkled skin, his reflexes were still good.

"I got plenty," Jack lied, then he settled back to listen to the old man's theories on why there were no Rhinos when the planet was originally colonized, and why no supply ships had ever come, leaving Agrilot cut off from the rest of humanity.

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Unlike the other Rhino hunters, Jack had patiently listened to Crazy Mac over and over through the years. Though the repetition had long since begun to wear thin and the crazy theories were little more than useless, every once in a while the old man would relate something he had seen from long ago or repeat some fact he had never mentioned before. These small tidbits made little sense by themselves, but Jack stored them away. Someday, he hoped, they might come together, like pieces of a puzzle. Perhaps that was unlikely, but sitting and listening made Crazy Mac consider Jack his best friend. Friends were nice to have in the desert, even if that friend was a crazy old hermit who slept on the ground at a desert oasis.

“They didn't like us, Jack,” the old man continued as the first tale of the evening was drawing to a close, “Because we weren't colonists at all. We were prisoners. Did you know that, Jack? Agrilot is nothing more than a prison! The whole planet! It's a Gawd-forsaken hell-hole of a bonafide prison.

“Back on old Earth our ancestors were criminals, plain old common criminals,” the old man sobbed as he raved on. “Murderers and rapists! That's why the supply ships never came. And they sent those Gawd-awful Rhinos down here to punish us for crimes our ancestors committed. If they'd only come back now, they'd see we're different. 'Cept maybe for Bonner. But they wouldn't have to take us back. All we want is for them to bring some supplies. Damned if I'd want to go back. This is home.” He rotated his arm as if taking in the entire desert. “Would you want to go back, Jack?”

“No,” Jack answered. “Agrilot is home.”

Everybody knew that Agrilot was originally a prison colony, a planet devoted to allowing thousands of prisoners from old Earth, political and otherwise, all of whom were sentenced to life – or the opposite – a chance to start over, to build a new future and a new culture. But for some reason the promised supply freighters with all the portable factories and mechanized equipment never arrived, leaving the colonists to start over with little more than their bare hands. There were plenty of farm animals and seeds on the original ship. Otherwise, the colony would not have survived at all. But there was little else outside a handful of

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laser rifles and a few thousand books. Unfortunately, the books were all non-technical or novels, of little value to colonists on a raw planet.

Sometimes the old man would say that there was a great space war not long after the colony was started, and that the rest of humanity were either all dead or so battered by the devastation of war they no longer had the capability of space travel. Or that the few who were left had forgotten about the prisoner colonists on Agrilot because they were so busy rebuilding their own lives. There were many variations of this tale from telling to telling, but regardless of the details, Jack thought the space war made sense. It seemed to be the best explanation for losing all contact with Earth.

“Hell, no,” Crazy Mac was saying as one story began to drift into another. “I’m going to stay right here when they come. But we could sure use some laser rifles so that ordinary folks like you and me could have one. And maybe a few more household inventions to make our lives a little easier.”

Jack cocked his brow ever so slightly. That last seemed a rather odd request from an old man who lived in the desert without a roof over his head.

“But mostly we need the lasers. I’m so tired of worrying about the damned Rhinos. You think they’re ever going to come back? You think we might get some more lasers and some nice things for our homes?”

Even though Mac didn’t have a home, he sometimes talked that way, voicing concerns that he did not personally share, not in the real world. Perhaps somewhere in his imaginary world, things were quite different from his meager life at the oasis.

“I don’t know, Mac. I don’t know. I do know I don’t want to leave Agrilot. This is home. It’s where we all grew up. But I would like to see old Earth. Just to visit. Tell me, did your grandfather ever tell you what Earth was like?”

“Yeah, he sure did. Same as here, pretty much. Except old Earth don’t have no ancient ruins, not a million years ancient like the Spine. Or tens of millions of years. Ever how old it is. Earth has deserts and forests and mountains and oceans like we do, only we got more deserts I think. The trees and the plants aren’t the same kinds, but they’re similar. Desert

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plants here look kinda like desert plants there. Sorta. Trees here look kinda like trees there. The big difference is the animals. There's all kinds of animals on Earth, big and small. Not here, of course. There ain't many native animals at all, especially now that the rats and farm animals that came with us have crowded them out. And what there is are small. Why, the biggest isn't any larger than a mouse. Except for the Rhinos, of course. And they ain't natural. They can't be. They couldn't have come from here, could they? Unless they evolved from trees somehow. What do you think?"

"I'll have to give it some thought," Jack said with a smile. Rhinos evolving from trees! It was time to find a way out of listening to another story. The old man was having extra trouble following his own thought patterns tonight, and Jack was tired and sleepy and weary of trying to make sense of it. "It's getting late, old man. Let's get some sleep."

"Oh, sure, Jack. I'm pretty tired. These yahoos around here wear me out," he said, waving his hand in the direction of the rest of the people in the oasis. His eyes, though, were glued on Greg Bonner. "Yeah, guess I'll need to be going to sleep, too."

Crazy Mac wandered over toward his bed, a dirt bowl, a hollowed area in the ground filled with straw and tree fibers and anything else he could find to make a cushion. His old bones needed the softness. Everybody knew it was his space and nobody bothered it. In fact, they stayed well away from it. It was not the best smelling spot in the oasis.

The old man had lived at this desert pool for as long as anyone could remember, lecturing and taunting Rhino hunters and all the others who passed through. At the same time, he lived off their handouts. Almost to a man, the Rhino hunters were tired of his stories and his ranting and wailing and would just as soon not have to put up with his company, but there was not another oasis within a day's ride so most humored him by pretending to listen. A few, like Bill Miller, enjoyed goading the old man. They got a sadistic pleasure out of cornering him with his own statements, then listening to his crazy ranting and raving as he exploded into a burst of incoherent screaming. That hadn't happened tonight. Jack had been around to calm and quiet Crazy Mac. The old man respected Jack and did what Jack said.

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“Good night, Jack. It’s good to see you again,” Mac called from his straw bed. “You’re the best. It’s an honor to sleep on the same ground with you.”

Jack wanted Crazy Mac to shut up. No sense irritating Greg Bonner – who, no doubt, was listening – any more than necessary. “Thanks. We’ll talk more in the morning, old man,” he said, almost in a whisper. “Good-night.”

Crazy Mac didn't say another word.

Greg Bonner was a large, hulking man. Ruthless. He was covered in dark hair like an animal from old Earth. It poured upward from his chest and out the top of his shirt. Hair grew from the back of his neck and, no doubt, covered the rest of his body. Jack had known other men that were hairy, but they were still genuinely good men. Greg was not one of them.

Jack knew that Greg Bonner would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Jack also knew that Greg Bonner would stop at nothing just for the sake of stopping at nothing. There was no trusting the huge Rhino hunter, not even for a second. He rolled over to face where Bonner lay. He would sleep with his eyes closed but pointed in Bonner's direction. One of his senses always stayed awake when he was on a hunt, no matter where he slept. It was an essential survival tool with Rhinos around, and not a bad idea with Bonner around, either.

Crazy Mac, even with his loose hold on sanity – though Jack was not so sure the old man was all that crazy – had enough sense not to trust Bonner. In spite of all his weirdness, Mac was an intelligent man, but he didn't seem to have enough sense to keep his mouth shut. He goaded Bonner every chance he got, called the huge man all sorts of names and did his best to embarrass the hulking Rhino hunter in front of others. And it wasn't all that hard to do. Greg Bonner was no scholar.

Greg would use a laser if he had one, Jack thought. Hell, any Rhino hunter would. As far as he knew, though, he was the only person, outside of the rangers, who had one. And no other living person knew he had it. His father had secretly passed it to him, like his grandfather before. A decade or so after the colonists landed, his father had told him,

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the leaders confiscated all private laser weapons and issued them to the rangers to protect cities and towns. Jack's great-grandfather had managed to smuggle this small rifle, along with a few extra battery packs, aboard the freighter. No one knew about it, so it was relatively easy to hide and pass down through the generations.

It was a small rifle, not as powerful as the regulation lasers the rangers carried; but powerful enough to burn all the way through a Rhino if you could hold your aim steady. Jack could. And it still worked. In the last few decades, most of the rangers' laser rifles had broken down. A hundred and fifty years was a long time. At last count there were only thirty-eight working lasers worldwide, not counting Jack's. The rangers were losing four or five a year. Nobody knew how to fix them or how to make new battery packs. More and more rangers were relying on homebuilts, which accounted for the profession's shortening life expectancy.

Jack's ancestors had used the small laser only a handful of times. They were farmers and store clerks, not Rhino hunters. They used it to protect their families and hid each use carefully, to keep from having the rifle confiscated. And to avoid going to prison. Hiding a laser from the rangers would not be treated lightly. Jack's father had used it only once, to kill a Rhino on their farm. Jack helped bury the huge creature and swore to keep the weapon a secret. With the promise of the laser in his future, he kept his word.

Not counting a carefully rationed handful of practice shots in the early years, Jack had used the laser one hundred nine times. One day the rifle would stop working. He had put the last battery pack in a couple of years ago and had no idea how long it would last. Because of the age of the battery packs, you never knew how fresh they were when you put one in the rifle, and the power gauge on the weapon had not worked in decades.

He hoped the laser would not stop working in the middle of a life or death situation, though that was almost inevitable since the only time he ever fired it was at a living, breathing, and quite deadly Rhino. He thought the current battery pack would last for some years to come, but there was no way to know. Nothing lasted forever.

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Jack was tired and bone weary. He let his thoughts flow into darkness and, eventually, most of him fell asleep.

Chapter 4

“De de, de do, de da, de doo, de dust. Dusty dust. The square root of thirty-two. Five point six five six eight! The hair of a wandering frooh. De dat... Ah! It is, indeed, you, oh marvelous self. I am so very merry happy to see you. Do you have any idea how lonely I get when you are gone?”

“Me? What the cruzzles do you mean? You are the one who leaves, pathetic self.

“I? It is not I who is going and coming, coming and going, It is you, wondrous self, who leaves me so by myself all alone.

“Hardly true you useless windbag.

“Please, I am so thrilled with your company. Let’s not argue. So why do you leave? Where do you go when you leave me so alone, alone, alone, all alone? Do you know where the dreams have gone? Are you sneaking off to live them?”

“Dreams? Ha! There are no dreams anymore. You know that, insignificant self. I go to the same place you go. Nowhere. I’m here with you to contemplate retrospectives on dust. Little piles of dust.

“So we may not be alone at all when we are alone? How comforting, valued self!

“But even when we are apart, we are not alone. No, no, no. Of course not. There are millions, yes? Many millions.

“But they are all piles and piles and piles of dust, wondrous self. Settled little piles of dust. Not a spec moving anywhere. They never move. Except when they become dust, of course. Mush to goop to dust. Down, down, down. How sad. Four times six is twenty-four. Pet the scooty and open the door.

“What is that, oh stupid self? Six times four?”

“Why, you must have the easy ones every once in a while. For the sake of completeness. Lela, lola, lula, lup. Put some sasha in my cup. Intelligent self, I am so scared my time has come. Look around us. The last few are jellied, gushy and dripping down to the floor where they will dry into more little piles of dust. The last of the dust piles. Oh, the horror of my jelly days. They are coming all too soon. All too soon.”

Chapter 5

Morning came, and Jack woke as soon as sun touched his eyes. Greg Bonner was up and gone. Jack stood and turned around slowly, looking at the horizon through the dim light of early sunrise. Nothing in any direction. Bonner had been gone for some time.

The old man, Crazy Mac, was snoring but, thankfully, not too loud. Putting up with the old man's ranting and raving was bad enough. If he snored loudly the travelers passing through would have long since quit feeding him. Bill Miller was up early as promised; stirring a campfire to rekindle the flames, but everyone else was still asleep. Jack wanted to get an early start so he could pace Killer, the slower the better. The horse had been pushed hard the day before and Killer was too important to be abused.

He dusted the saddle blanket and folded it twice then placed it on Killer's back before tossing the saddle on and tying it securely. Then he rolled up his bed and tied it behind the saddle. While Killer drank his fill from the small, spring-fed pond, Jack filled one of his skins with water and slung it across the saddle. It was only a day's ride even at a leisurely pace, so he didn't go to the trouble to fill the other skins. Less weight for Killer to carry. That was all there was to packing. He traveled light.

When Jack climbed onto his horse, there was an alarmed voice from below.

"Jack!" the old man shrilled. "You're not leaving yet, are you? We were going to talk..."

He was surprised that Crazy Mac even remembered. "Sorry, Mac. Got to go. Got to get this horn in and measured. I'll be back through before long."

"Oh, okay." The old man understood a Rhino hunter's urgency for getting a horn measured. He didn't argue. "We're all pulling for you, Jack. Good luck."

"You, too, Mac."

Jack and Killer turned and started away slowly. Bill Miller was packing to go and briefly turned to wave. Jack nodded, but Bill never saw it. In the brief moment Bill had been waving, he had taken one of his

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hands off the 'ornery' pack mule. The animal jumped quickly to the side in a maneuver that allowed the mail pouches to fall to the ground, letters spilling out onto the sand and rocks. Bill quickly turned around and kicked dust at the mule. Jack couldn't help a smile as he let Killer saunter out of camp at a leisurely pace.

It was late fall, and the desert was at its best. Temperatures were bearable. White and yellow wildflowers dotted the mostly brown landscape. Still, it was a harsh environment. The cool of night lingered well beyond sunrise, but by midday the sun made the air hot and still. Once the sun was down, the evening cooled quickly. This caused winds to stir every morning and evening. Sometimes the bedroll he carried would not be enough to keep the night's chill away, even with the saddle blanket on top, but better than to suffer the blistering heat of a desert summer. That's why Jack hunted the forests to the east and north of Borderton during the hottest months and the desert to the west the rest of the year. Though Rhinos were uncommon everywhere, they could be found anywhere. No one knew where, when, or why the creatures would explode from the ground. But, for some strange reason, they did tend to be slightly more common where there were more people. That's why the rangers stayed in the cities and towns. The Rhino hunters took care of the sparsely populated forest, fields, and desert, most of the planet.

Jack had gone in search of Rhinos at the age of sixteen. His father protested loudly, but Jack ignored his old man's scratchy-voiced demands. Through the early years, he had managed to stay alive – though it had not always been easy – long enough to learn all the tricks of tracking a Rhino. Without the laser, he likely would not have survived. Now, he was the best living hunter in the world. Not quite the legend the great Hal Stamp was. Not yet. But better than Greg Bonner and Sam Crusher and all the others who were still breathing, still riding, and still hunting.

When he started all those years ago, it was the money. Hunting, if you survived, paid much better than farming. But while the money was nice, it quickly changed to something else, a compulsion that drove him

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day in and day out, through long miserable hunts in freezing cold or searing heat, through days on end without a bath and with little food. Although he had answers he gave to those who asked, he was no longer sure what drove him, what the compulsion was. He supposed it was chasing the record. He had only seen one hundred and nine Rhinos in his twenty-one years of hunting, but he killed every one. Hal Stamp killed one hundred forty-six. While it would be years yet, Jack was getting closer, only thirty-seven more to go.

Was the chance to break the record what kept him going year after year? He knew if he passed Hal Stamp, the record would no longer seem as important as it had while he was reaching for it. That was the way things worked. Everyone expected him to break it, though. Some even talked as though it were a foregone conclusion. Well, maybe he would. And maybe that was what drove him after all, not the record but the people of Agrilot, the millions of strangers around the world who were pulling for him.

Hal Stamp, though still alive at last news, was from a former time. Perhaps older than Crazy Mac. The people wanted a new hero, someone from their era. Jack knew he couldn't let them down. In reality, it was no longer in his hands, no longer a decision he could make. The only choice he had was to continue the legend that was Jack Wheat. His audience would tolerate nothing less. He had to keep going, keep hunting, keep killing.

The day wore on raggedly. Still tired from pushing hard for two straight days, Jack swayed gently side-to-side with the rhythmic movement of the saddle and the animal below. He didn't want to waste strength trying to keep steady. Instead, he relaxed and let the movement massage his body, releasing the weariness and the anxiety of the three-week hunting trip. He knew it would make him more beat up and sore later, but perhaps he could sleep through it when later arrived.

If there were more Rhinos, he thought, it would be easier. But thoughts of more Rhinos brought images of Joe Riley's children and Brian Pickney's grieving young widow. Record or not, he was thankful Rhinos were infrequent. He was also thankful they were always alone. He shuddered to think what they could do if they ran in packs.

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He threw the thought away and tried to get his mind to change the subject. It was hard to do. Had a Rhino eaten Brian Pickney? He didn't believe it. Besides, Brian Pickney's house was a long way from Joe Riley's cabin. As large as they were, a Rhino could not have traveled from one to the other without being seen. But perhaps Brian had ridden close by the Riley's cabin. Perhaps he had been near the cabin during the attack. There was no way to know with someone who had gone missing without so much as a thread of clothing or a drop of blood behind to tell a story.

Hour after hour, kilometer after kilometer passed. There was no one else in the desert. He was hungry but had nothing to eat. The water skin was now empty as Jack had given the last drink to Killer some time back. At this leisurely pace, he was going to have to start filling a second skin for the trip between the oasis and Borderton. He hadn't needed that much water before. Was he getting old?

He looked around and, after some minutes, found a patch of rugbyies; short, squat, roughly spherical plants that had a bitter taste but were wet and nourishing inside their tough, greenish blue hide. He stopped, stepped down, and carefully carved away the six-centimeter-long, stiff, razor-edged leaves protruding from the rugby's fat center. You didn't want to slip when carving a rugby's leaves or you would be the carver instead of the carver.

With the leaves gone, the plant was defenseless. He plucked it out of the earth and cut it open, offering the wet inside to Killer. The horse's eyes opened wide, showing a large white arc at the edge as he neighed loudly and backed away.

Jack laughed. "Not thirsty enough for a rugby, eh?" They were bitter, sure, but maybe it was the razor leaves. Horses quickly learned to avoid rugbyies when traveling the marginal areas between sand desert and arable land, the only place they grew. After considerable effort, Jack had finally gotten Killer to try one several years back. Once was enough. Killer would die of thirst before tasting another one. Jack suffered through the bitterness as he chewed on the lining. When he could no longer stand the taste, he slung the plant carcass across the desert and returned to the trip.

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By early afternoon, the bitterness of the rugby still lingering in his mouth, he could see the tops of the mountains on the horizon, stretched into the distance like irregular spikes thrusting out of the earth. The mountains formed a familiar landmark but, at almost two days the other side of Borderton, were still a great distance away.

As he moved along, the few scrub bushes that grew in the desert became more numerous, taller, and less twisted by the wind. Some time later he could see a few scattered trees silhouetted against the distant mountains. Gradually, as afternoon tumbled toward evening, the trees turned into a thin forest. Borderton was close. There was a farm house or two along the edge of the forest with a few scraggly crops creeping out onto the desert floor. He could see the tops of homemade windmills dotted along the horizon, some close, some further away.

Wanting to wash out the lingering bitterness of the rugby, Jack asked the first farmer he saw for a drink. The man led them to a trough for Killer and handed Jack a full skin, still cool, telling the Rhino hunter to keep it. After a long drink, Jack tried to give the skin back, but the farmer insisted, so Jack slung it around the saddle horn on top of his empty skins. But Jack did refuse when the farmer pulled out a skin filled with moonshine. He smiled and said he had a long way to go yet. He mounted Killer and the pair rode on, Jack waving as he left.

Several people, working late in their fields, waved as Jack rode by. Others came out of their cabins to wave. A few were close to the road and wanted to talk. Everyone who lived in and around Borderton was proud that the world's most noted active Rhino hunter was a resident of their own community. The short time he wasn't hunting, of course.

Jack stopped now and then to chat briefly, but didn't linger. He was tired and hungry and ready to be home. And home was now close.

As Jack rounded a curve, he saw Rose Wesley leaning against a fence in front of her home as though she had been waiting for him. There was no way news of his arrival could have passed him, he thought. Still, she stood there in a low cut blouse that showed off her ample chest, doing nothing more than smiling at him. Rose, who was single, worked at the bank but preferred to live in the countryside.

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“Hello, Jack. Hadn’t seen you in a while. Welcome back.”

Jack touched the front tip of his hat and nodded. “Thanks, Rose. You doing okay?”

“Just fine. Been on a hunt, eh? I bet you’re hungry. I’ve got some fresh baked bread. Come on in and get some.”

Ready to be home notwithstanding, fresh baked bread sounded too good to pass up. “That would be great, Rose.” He dismounted and followed her to the front of her small log home. The doorway was framed with thick boards, hand fashioned with an ax. The smell of fresh, hot bread danced lazily through as he got near. The aroma almost lifted his feet for him as he stepped inside.

Rose led Jack into the kitchen of her modest three-room cabin and removed a towel from the freshly cooked loaf that rested on the dining table. When she did, smoke curled around the edges of the towel and quickly wafted through the room. The bread was a perfect light brown on the outside. Jack was trying to act cool, but it smelled so good he was almost salivating on himself. He was hungry!

Rose cut a large slice, spread butter on top, and handed it to him, stepping close as she did. When Jack lifted the bread to his mouth, she placed her hand on his chest. “I bet you get lonely out there in the desert for weeks at a time.”

Jack tried to back up, but he was already against the wall. “Oh, it’s not so bad.”

“You’re a handsome man, Jack. Let’s go over here.” She nodded toward the bedroom.

“Ah, I need to get home and brush Killer down. It’s too close to dark.”

“Brush Killer down here. Later. Dark is okay. Nobody will see you here.”

She smiled and took his hand and pulled him toward the bedroom. Jack knew better. Rose looked good, but if he allowed himself to be led into her bedroom, it would be all over town before lunch the next day. Rose would make sure everybody knew she’d been with Jack Wheat. He pulled out of her grip and took her hand and said, “Sorry, Rose, but I’ve got to go.”

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“Okay,” she sighed. Her big brown eyes looked straight into his. “But you know where I live if you ever have the need.”

“I’ll remember that, Rose. Thanks.”

Jack finished the bread quickly then left as soon as he could politely get away. Once he remounted, he picked up the pace, heading toward town in the dwindling light. He had spent too much time in Rose’s house. Hell, he shouldn’t even have gone inside. He knew better. The thought of steamy fresh bread had been too tempting.

A little further along the road he passed what was left of Joe Riley’s cabin. There were seven wooden crosses in the front yard. All the crosses had been painted white, and each had a few wilted wildflowers tied to the top. The cabin was little more than a random assemblage of gray, weathered lumber. Jack surveyed the damage: the porch roof lay flattened on the ground; a large, ragged hole told of something huge crashing through the front wall; the front part of the building roof was collapsed onto the floor inside the cabin; and boards on each of the cabin’s side walls thrust outward randomly as though struck with great force from within. The back wall was on the ground. The little bit of cabin that was still standing would not be for long.

Joe had a brother and sister who lived in Big Hat’s Bay, a small town on the coast about two days ride to the south. They would come up and salvage what they could of the cabin and the Riley’s belongings. It wouldn’t be much.

Jack did not stop to look around. He continued the final kilometer into town, circling and coming in by a side road to avoid most of the buildings and residents. He let Killer slow to a halt in front of the library, a two-story building on the east edge of town square. Even in the near dark, it was easy to tell that the library was a simple building, constructed from the local gray and brown stone. The last rays of sunset reflected off the “CLOSED” sign that hung on the front door, turning the white background of the sign into a blazing red-orange.

With a gentle tug on the reins, Jack led Killer along the familiar path around the side of the building. He took his horse into a tattered wood shed attached to the back of the library then removed Killer’s saddle and unwrapped the horn. It was almost dry. He dampened the

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inner leather wrap with water from the trough and carefully rewrapped it. Then, after putting it back in the saddlebag, he placed the saddle into a blind cabinet in the wall and locked the door. Jack had added the cabinet himself some years ago. He knew he should take the horn directly to the ranger office for measuring, but he was tired and had other things on his mind. He'd go first thing in the morning.

After pouring water for Killer, he filled the feed trough with grain. As the horse ate, Jack rubbed him down, working slowly and meticulously. Finally, he patted Killer on the rump and left the stable.

It was dark by the time he stepped outside, the only light coming from the windows of nearby buildings. The glow from the oil street lamps in the front of the building did not reach the back door, the entrance to the home of the keeper of the library. Jack knocked on the old, worn wood of the door, loud enough so that the sound would be heard upstairs. A minute or so later, the rusted latch on the thick, weathered gray boards lifted, and the door opened enough for the person inside to see out.

Jack spoke first. "Hello, Sheffie."

Chapter 6

“Ethan, a moment if you would,” the scientist called, stepping quickly to catch up. It was Dontano, director of the Tissue Lab. Both men were dressed in white shoes and the standard issue white one-piece. Ethan, the Director of the space station, stopped and turned as his fellow scientist came up beside him. “Good orbit, Ethan. I was going to call, but here you are. We’ve got the results.”

“Good orbit to you. What did you find?”

“Perfect match! Every strand of DNA we tested completely resisted the organism. We found no cellular breakdown whatsoever. Here...” The scientist gave the mental order to stream the results file from his data implant to Ethan’s.

“Excellent,” Ethan replied with a level tone after taking a moment to analyze the file. He quickly sent the file to Lucy, his Personal AI, for a more thorough analysis, and for storage. “We’ll need to prepare the tissue for shipment immediately.” Then he tilted his head slightly up, as though talking to the ceiling. “Stephan? Are you available?”

A voice flooded the corridor, “On the bridge, Ethan.”

“The tissue for the situation on Berrace is a perfect match. You indicated that the latest supply drone has a newer drive that can span one-point-six additional light years per jump. Is it available for immediate return?”

“Ah, let me check...” There was a moment’s hesitation as Ethan and the scientist kept their heads tilted slightly upward, listening. “Almost,” Stephan answered scant seconds later. “The maintenance bots have completed the service reqs. The techs had to load the service programs for the new drone into the bots first. That caused a delay, but the techs are strapping into the controls for the refueling bots now. It should be finished in two hours, maybe a little less.”

“Two hours will be sufficient,” Ethan responded. “For this tissue transfer, I would like to use the new drone. Berrace is one of our furthest outposts and the faster drone will save two days.... and possibly thousands of lives. Have the guidance system set for Berrace Isolation Lab.”

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“Roger, that,” Stephan’s voice echoed through the corridor.

Ethan turned back to Dontano and said, “How long will it take to prepare the tissue for shipment on an emergency basis?”

“Less than four hours. Perhaps three and a half.”

“Make it three. Berrace is desperate. The colonists are dying at a horrifying rate. Commandeer as many people as you need.”

“That will be difficult. The equipment processes are constant times. I can check with Central and ask my AI what we can do to shorten the time.”

“Hold, please. I’ll do it,” Ethan said. He tilted his head again. “Central on. Lucy? Are you available?”

“Yes, Ethan?” A woman’s voice, confident and firm, but at the same time subservient, filled the corridor.

“Do a quick calculation for me. Is there anything we can do to shorten the tissue preparation time in this particular case, the Berrace situation? Parallel some processes, something of that nature? It’s quite urgent.”

“Yes,” the voice replied immediately. “There are several things we can do on an emergency basis to save time. It can be cut to three hours and twelve minutes. I have transferred an instruction file to the lab.”

“Thank you, Lucy,” Ethan said. Then he turned to Dontano, “Have your men call up the file and start immediately.”

“Done,” Dontano answered, tapping the side of his head to indicate that he had mentally sent his instructions to the lab.

“I appreciate your efforts, Dontano. A quick response will save lives.”

“I am only too glad to help, Ethan.”

Chapter 7

“Oh, Jack!” the woman said, as she slung the door wide and threw herself into his arms. “I missed you,” rang in his ear. She squeezed tight. Though she was not a large woman, she was strong. Jack could feel the hug deep within his worn out muscles. “I was so worried about you,” she said as she finally eased her grip. Still, she kept her arms around him.

“Worried? Why?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Don’t be a jackass,” she said, her lips curling up at the edges.

He frowned at the pun on his name. She would sometimes tease him with it, though not often. No one else would dare take such a liberty with a hero of Jack’s stature.

“You know perfectly well, Jack Wheat, that you’ve been gone too long. You could have been killed by one of those beasts, or hurt somewhere, all by yourself with no one to help.”

“Umm,” Jack grunted. “I believe you’ve got it backward, young lady. They don’t kill me. I kill them. Got another big horn in my saddle now. Let’s go upstairs. I’m tired.”

“How tired?” she teased, pressing her body against his.

“Not that tired,” he smiled.

Arms around each other, they started up the bare wooden steps of the narrow stairwell to the apartment over the library. The worn old boards that made up the stairs gave a creak or a groan with every step. Each sound was unique, and if you climbed fast enough, it was almost melodic, but the couple moved slowly, hip against hip.

Being with Sheffie allowed Jack to release the tenseness he carried with him on the long hunting trip. It let the weight of three weeks of being constantly alert and sleeping on the ground with one sense always awake, plus not eating regularly or enough, come crashing down around him. He was too tired to take the steps any faster.

At the top, the stairs opened directly into the combined living room and bedroom. Jack stopped to look at the apartment. Somehow it seemed like another lifetime since he had been here, yet it felt as though it was only yesterday when he last left. Three weeks were so short and so long all at the same time. And each hunt began to run into the next, or the

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prior, with an endless drudgery. The thought slipped away as he gazed across the room as though seeing it for the first time.

A wooden bench made from split logs and strewn with coarse cloth pillows sat in front of the fireplace. In the back of the room, there was a raised bed with small-diameter wood logs for posts. Jack didn't know what the mattress was stuffed with, but he knew it was soft, a softness he had not felt in weeks. While the exterior walls were made of stone, the interior walls were of logs. All were covered with paintings, wall hangings, and other things which made the apartment breathe the breath of a woman's presence.

In the wood wall to his right, the main interior wall, there was an opening cased with slightly crooked tree limbs. The opening led to the kitchen and dining area. Though he could only see a part of the kitchen from where he stood, he knew the room was large enough for an old wood stove, some doorless cabinets for which Sheffie had made curtains, and a plank dining table with four chairs. Jack could not remember all four chairs ever having been occupied at one meal.

Off the back of the kitchen, out of sight around the corner, was a door made of four wide boards held together by narrower boards in a "Z" pattern. It opened to the bathroom. Like most buildings in Borderton, the library had an operating bathroom, but if you wanted warm water, it had to be heated in either the fireplace or the stove.

Above him, the roof of the building was supported by large, curled and twisted tree limbs that were stripped of their bark and preserved by being painted with a clear liquid distilled from the leaves of a bush common on Agrilot. The wood shined as though wet. A series of unevenly spaced boards rested on the log supports. The bottom of the roof's wood shingles could be seen in the spaces between the boards. There was no other construction or material to keep the cold out. Public buildings, those in small towns, received great fanfare but few amenities. Sheffie kept plenty of blankets around in the winter.

As was often the case with small town public buildings, it was fashioned from local stone and wood. Inexpensive, but it worked. It looked good, and Jack loved the place.

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“Lie down on the bed and rest while I get you some stew,” she said. “I’ll have to heat it up, but it’s fresh. I made it this afternoon.”

Jack laid his weary body on the edge of the bed and watched the woman’s slender hips as she passed through the opening and into the kitchen. The softness of the mattress was invasive, almost a shock to his body. He closed his eyes to let them rest. Only for a moment...

Sheffie smiled when she saw Jack asleep. “Not that tired, eh, Mr. Hero,” Sheffie said as she set the brown ceramic bowl on the small wood table beside the bed. “You stand up to the greatest killing machine nature ever invented,” she said as she wiped sweat and dirt from his brow, “But you don’t look so tough right now. Not the great Rhino hunter. Just a tired little boy who needs his rest.”

She untied the tassels at the side of the wide leather bracelet that identified Jack as a Rhino hunter, then pulled it from his wrist and looked at it. White and blue beads were sewn onto the tough leather in a diamond pattern in the middle with swirls on each side. Well over half the area within the diamond was filled with red beads, one for each Rhino Jack had killed. Except the last, of course. That would be added tomorrow. Jack wasn’t much for showing off, but the bracelets were a strong tradition.

Sheffie set the bracelet on the bed table, next to Jack’s dark brown thick leather hat, a gift from a friend. There was a lighter color leather band around the hat. Sewn on the front of the band were white and blue beads shaping the letters ‘JW’, with small blue gemstones on each side. But Jack left the band inside out so that the beads were unseen against the hat, making it a plain-looking hat with a plain-looking band.

Sheffie removed Jack’s coarse cotton shirt. It was a darker tan than three weeks earlier. Then she took off his heavy brown pants. The fronts of the pants were overlaid with cow leather to protect the traveler, typical wear for Rhino hunters as well as almost anyone who spent considerable time on horseback. The pants were called ‘leathers’ even though cotton formed the bulk of them.

Sheffie was not surprised to find Jack’s underwear and body no cleaner than his clothes. The sheets would have to be cleaned tomorrow. She turned to carry the man’s dirty clothes away when a strong hand

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grabbed high on the inside of her thigh. She could feel the firm grip of his fingers through her pants as though she had nothing on at all.

“You didn’t think I’d miss tonight, did you?” Jack said.

“Your stew’s on the table.”

“To hell with the stew.”

Jack pulled Sheffie into the bed with him.

“You’re filthy,” she said, trying her best to sound disgusted.

“And you’re going to be filthy real soon.”

She didn’t resist. Instead, their bodies moved together. Sheffie’s mind drifted away from consciousness and into the color of night. She lost contact with her apartment, with the library, with Borderton. She lost any sense of existence on Agrilot. There was only the physical sensation that coursed through her body. Afterward, Jack less dirty and Sheffie more, they fell asleep lying against each other.

In Sheffie’s bed, Jack slept differently. He no longer had to have a part of him awake to sense a Rhino... or a Greg Bonner. He slept the sleep of a little boy who had played hard and would get up and play hard again the next day. It was a sleep his body needed desperately, and he took advantage of it. He didn’t wake until the sun was in the middle of the sky, and only then because Sheffie was trying to pull the sheets out from under him.

“What?” he groaned as he stirred around to see what was happening.

“Oh, sorry, dear. The sheets need washing.”

“Where are my clothes? Hey, don’t clean the bed yet.”

He reached out and placed his hand on her arm, slowly pulling her toward him.

“Oh, no you don’t,” she said, jerking loose. “You need washing worse than these sheets, Jack Wheat. I’ve taken my bath, and I don’t want to get filthy again.”

“You can always take another bath, with me.”

“I will do no such thing! You might as well get up. I’ve got some stew warming on the stove.”

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Jack sat up, yawned, stretched luxuriously, then stood on legs that weren't quite sure yet. Sheffie had waited, hands patiently holding the edge of the lower sheet. Once Jack stood, she pulled it off the mattress.

"I expected you to wake up earlier. I've had your water in the bath for some time. It's still warm, though, if you hurry."

Jack did not walk to the bathroom. Instead, he stood, naked and dirty, in front of the woman, a taunting smile on his lips.

"Oh, damn you," Sheffie said with a smile. She laid the dirty sheet back on top of the mattress.

Afterward, they took a bath together. "You have been gone a long time," Sheffie whispered, putting her arms around Jack's neck and chewing on his ear. "Too long."

Suddenly Sheffie jumped up, soapy water splashing all over Jack and the bathroom floor. "Oh," she said with her hand over her mouth. "Our stew!" She hastily stepped out of the tub and grabbed a towel, holding it in front of her as she rushed to the kitchen. Jack watched her hips wiggle pleasantly, until she was out of sight, then he sank into the tub and closed his eyes, feeling the luxury of the warm water as though he had never felt it before.

Sheffie poured the stew when Jack finally came into the kitchen. They sat at the table, towels wrapped around their wet bodies.

"How do you like it?" she asked as she dipped her spoon.

Jack lowered the bowl from his mouth. "Good. I'll have some more, thank you." He held up his empty bowl.

"You're through?"

"I said it was good."

"How would you know? You didn't take the time to taste it. Did you eat at all while you were in the desert?"

"Ran short at the end. Gave my last day's ration to Crazy Mac. The old man needed it. Some that come through won't share with him, and others only give him a few scraps."

"That old man's still alive, eh? Did he have any good stories this time?"

"The usual. Nothing new. I asked him about Earth, and he said the vegetation on Agrilot is a lot like vegetation on Earth, but not identical.

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The big difference is the animals, but we knew all that. He did say the only way Rhinos could be native to Agrilot is if they evolved from trees. That's the first time I've heard that. Couldn't have, of course."

Jack used a spoon on the second bowl, taking time to enjoy the taste. Sheffie was, indeed, an excellent cook, among many other talents.

"Did you hear about Joe Riley's family?" Sheffie asked.

"Yeah. Pickney, too. Damned shame."

"Joe was nice. So was his wife, Bonita. And I'll never forget their little girl's face. She was so precious. I can see her now, just thinking about her. Dark skin and dark hair like her mother, but so much prettier. Why can't we do something? These monsters kill so many innocent people. Where do they come from? Why don't they leave us alone? Why..." She hesitated.

"Why can't the rangers and the Rhino hunters protect everyone?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you were thinking it."

"Oh, Jack. The rangers are supposed to protect us, but there are so few of them, and they are so poorly equipped. The Rhino hunters don't care. Well," she stopped and started again, "They do care. Most of them do. But it's all one big sport to you, isn't it?"

Jack didn't answer. He knew Sheffie didn't expect or want a response. Besides, she was too close to being right.

"Oh, I don't know," she finally continued. "I don't mean to be ugly to you. It's just that those were the cutest kids. There was no reason, no sense..."

Jack got up from the table and put his arms around Sheffie from behind, lifting her out of the chair and up to her feet. They embraced and didn't talk for quite some time. He had no answers either, only more of the same questions.

After lunch, he went to the shed and unlocked the cabinet where his saddle lay safely hidden. He retrieved the Rhino horn then returned the saddle to the secret compartment. The horn may have lost a millimeter or two in length since he had not taken it in as soon as he got to town, but there was no use in worrying about that now.

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Sheffie locked the library and put up the 'Be Back Soon' sign then walked with Jack to the ranger station, only two blocks away. Two guards, both holding homebuilts, snapped to attention as Jack and Sheffie came up. Jack knew there would be two more guards at the back door, making the ranger station the safest place in Borderton, as it was in most every town. None of the guards had a laser, though. Borderton was far too small a town to have one of the few remaining laser rifles.

Inside, a tall, bronze-skinned man with curly black hair greeted Jack like an old friend. "Ah, Jack Wheat," the man said with emphasis. "It is so good to see you. And it is no surprise you have a horn to measure. From the look of the wrap, it is a large one. Step into my office, please." He motioned to a door with hand-painted letters that read: *Captain Alexandre Andropov*.

"Hello, Demetrius," Jack answered. "You're office?"

"Ah, yes. We have not had time to change the sign. Captain Andropov has gone to Lisbon, of course."

Lisbon, with a population of over three hundred thousand, was the largest city on the planet. A four-day ride northeast from Borderton, it was situated on a large natural lake. The lake was fed from the south and west by a myriad of streams and small rivers coming from the mountains. It was emptied on the east by a wide, deep, easily navigable river that meandered the relatively short distance to the ocean. This made the city ideally suited for water commerce, which is why it had outgrown all other towns.

When it was founded by the original colonists, Lisbon had been christened "New Lisbon," but over the years the "New" had become less and less frequently used. There was no reference for an Old Lisbon. Earth was a tale passed down through generations, almost a myth, a place no longer in memory for living people. Because of that, the "New" meant nothing and, over time, went away.

"Lisbon?"

"You have not heard?" Demetrius asked. "Why, that was almost two months ago."

Jack glanced at Sheffie, but she shrugged her shoulders. "I don't get out much," she said.

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“It’s been a while since I’ve been here,” Jack said. “I didn’t come to the station between the last two hunting trips as I had no luck on the prior trip.”

“Please,” Demetrius said. “Come in, and I’ll explain.” He opened the door and motioned for the couple to enter. There was a formal flair to his movement as he waved his arm.

Once Jack and Sheffie were seated in the visitor’s chairs, Demetrius continued, “Captain Andropov has been promoted to Colonel and has accepted the position of Commander of the Rangers. In Lisbon, of course.”

“Why, that’s wonderful,” Sheffie said.

“Wonderful in one sense. Tragic in another,” Demetrius said. “It seems the prior Commander was killed in a Rhino attack.”

“Oh,” Sheffie said, putting her hand over her mouth.

“As I recall the story,” Demetrius continued, “The Rhino burst from his hole in the street scant feet away from the Commander and his entourage. He and his top two men were mangled... ah, pardon me, Miss Jarrett. They were, unfortunately, killed by the Rhino before anyone had time to react.”

“I remember hearing something about that on the hunt before last,” Jack said. “But I never heard the details.”

“It was sad, of course, but it created some openings at the top. One man’s tea, eh? The other two officers who were killed were expected to compete to be the next Commander. With both of them dead, the leaders of Lisbon decided to undertake a planet-wide search for a replacement in hopes of finding someone who could solve their Rhino problem. Lisbon has always had a more severe problem than elsewhere, and it is getting worse.”

“So they selected Captain Andropov?” Sheffie said. “I think he was a wonderful choice, but that’s quite a step up from captain in a small town such as Borderton.”

“Yes, it is,” Demetrius agreed. “Because there have been fewer people killed by Rhinos around Borderton than around any other town, they believed Captain Andropov would be able to help them.”

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Jack nodded. He had liked Andropov and would miss him. Alexandre was the closest friend Jack had in Borderton. Apart from Sheffie, of course, and that was quite different. Demetrius Strombus, previously Andropov's assistant, was also a friend, but Jack had not known him as well as he had known Alexandre. But he liked Demetrius. The man had an accommodating air about him.

Demetrius leaned across his desk, looked directly at Jack, and added in a lower voice, "Though I suspect the fewer deaths is due more to you than to anything the Captain has done. "But," he added, smiling and speaking louder as he leaned back. "It also opened an opportunity for me."

"Congratulations," Jack and Sheffie said, almost in unison.

"Thank you. Sadly, my tenure has started on quite a sour note. We had an attack a few weeks after I assumed command. I'm sure you heard about the Riley's. That type of news travels all too quickly. Not the way to start my career as Captain, eh?"

Demetrius stared at his desk a brief moment as Jack and Sheffie could think of nothing to say. Then Captain Strombus looked up with a smile and broke the awkward silence, "Ah, but I talk too much! You have a horn to be measured and a bank draft to receive. Let us retreat to the horn room."

With an animated flair to his movements, Captain Demetrius Strombus led the couple to a large room in the back of the station. There, on public display in locked glass cabinets, were dozens and dozens of Rhino horns. In the middle of the room, a brass stand with integral ruler sat on a highly polished table. A tall ranger in full dress uniform stood next to the table and snapped to attention as they entered.

"At ease, Corporal," Demetrius said. "Jack has yet another horn to measure."

Jack carefully unwrapped the horn and handed it to the ranger, a large, muscular young man with bright red-orange hair and a stoic face. The ranger placed the horn on the brass stand and pulled a bar from the top of the device down to the tip of the horn. "Fifty-eight-point-one centimeters."

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“Hmmm, nice,” Demetrius said. “We haven’t had one that large in quite some time, well over a year.”

Jack cocked his eyebrow then carefully looked over the measuring device and the stoic young ranger. The device looked okay. The bubbles on the crossed levels were dead center both ways, though, he thought, the device being level should have little to do with measuring the length of the horn. He had expected two or three more tenths but supposed he should have gotten the horn in sooner. He let the thought go without comment.

Demetrius, a pleasant smile on his face, took the horn from the ranger and walked over to a cabinet marked “*Jack Wheat*”, unlocked it, and placed the horn at the end of a long line of horns.

“Let’s see. That is number one hundred nine and, I believe...” The Captain was reading from a hand-written card in the case and performing mental calculations. “...a total of 5,284 centimeters. You’re only thirty-seven horns behind Hal Stamp’s record.”

“Thirty-seven will take years,” Jack commented.

“You can do it, Jack,” Demetrius said. “You’re young yet.”

Jack smiled. “Not as young as I used to be. These three-week trips into the desert are getting harder. Is Bonner still at eighty-three?”

“No. We received an update letter from Newton, let’s see, two weeks ago, I believe. He brought in a horn, but it was much smaller than yours. He’s now at eighty-four and...” Demetrius said as he opened a drawer and fumbled through several envelopes. He lifted one then he continued, “Ah, yes. Here it is. He’s at 4,015 centimeters, well behind you in total length but, more importantly, behind you in average horn length. You seem to be able to find the larger Rhinos. I can’t wait to send your update letter to Newton and let them know how badly you’ve bested him!”

“But he’s younger,” Jack said, almost to himself.

“Just a few years,” Sheffie answered. “He’ll never catch you. You’re too good.”

Jack smiled and untied his Rhino hunter bracelet, then handed it to Demetrius.

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“Of course,” Demetrius said. “We’ll add a red bead immediately. Do you want to wait for it or shall we send it around to the library?”

“Library’s fine.”

“Very well,” Demetrius said. “We’ll have it there this evening.”

“I am always amazed,” Sheffie said as she pointed to the other horn cases, “At how many more horns you have than the other hunters from Borderton.”

“Yes,” Demetrius said, “There have been several hunters from our small town over the years, but none has come close to Jack.” He pointed to one of the cases, at a plaque beside three horns. “A few decades ago everyone thought Su Young Lee was going to be the bright, new, upcoming star. His homebuilt misfired on his fourth Rhino. He carried two rifles, but he never got the second one out of its holster. Rhinos are so fast, so deadly fast.”

Demetrius was quiet for a moment then said, “Ah, but enough of that. We must prepare your bank draft. Fifty-eight-point-one centimeters amounts to five hundred eighty-one dollars. Come with me to the front desk.” Once again, the Captain performed an elaborate gesture with his right arm, motioning the couple ahead.

When Jack received the check, he thanked Demetrius and the couple left.

“Where to, now?” Sheffie asked as they walked out into the dirt street.

“Let’s cash this. I need to buy a few things.”

“All you own and all you ever wanted to own are that horse and the clothes on your back. What in the world do you want to buy?”

“A new dress,” Jack responded.

“I don’t think you’d look good in a dress, dear.”

“For you, silly,” Jack smiled.

“Oh, I don’t need a dress. I don’t go anywhere, except to bed with you. Do I need a dress for that?”

“Maybe we could try it that way for a change.”

“Oh! Now who’s being silly? You need to save your money. One day we’re going to buy a place of our own, remember?”

“We’ve got plenty of time.”

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“Plenty of time? You were complaining about how old you were only moments ago. Are you ever going to marry me, Jack Wheat?”

“Of course. I love you. But not now. Not while I’m still hunting. Something could happen... Look, we’ll get married as soon as I set the record and retire.”

“That’ll take years! Stupid record. Who cares? I want you now, the way you are.”

“I care. It’s something...”

“You’ve got to do. Yes, I know. Men!”

“Come on,” Jack said with a laugh. “Women have things they need to do, too. And right now you need to buy a new dress. Let’s go to the bank.”

“I haven’t worn the last dress you bought me. If you must spend your money, let’s get something for the apartment. I could use some new sheets. My old ones are becoming tattered around the edges. And they’re permanently stained from your filthy body when you got home last night.”

“Sheets it is,” Jack said. “And a new spread and new pillows to match.”

“Oh, Jack. You’re such a spendthrift,” Sheffie said as they walked away in the direction of the bank.

Of course, when it was their turn to go to a teller’s window, they got Rose. Jack, knowing the way things always seemed to work, would have been surprised if it had turned out any other way. But either Sheffie didn’t notice Rose’s less than subtle flirtations, which Jack seriously doubted, or she chose to ignore them. Sheffie had always been confident in herself in a quiet way, so Jack was pretty sure it was the latter. Meanwhile, he acted the dumb male who wouldn’t even notice a red and yellow striped house. He ignored Rose’s advances with a smile as he thanked her for the cash.

Jack’s arms were loaded. There were new sheets, new pillows, a new spread with curtains to match, new towels for the kitchen, new bath

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towels, a new blouse for Sheffie, and two pairs of socks to replace the pair Jack's toes were poking through.

"What do you think?" Sheffie asked as she held up a plate. "They would match the new towels."

"Yeah," Jack responded. "It's terrible about my being such a spendthrift."

"Welllllll," Sheffie said. "You got me started. You know how I love to shop. If you hadn't insisted..."

"So it's all my fault?" Jack interrupted. "I should have known."

"We don't have to buy dishes," Sheffie said, an impish look on her face. "I suppose the old ones will do quite well for another few years."

Jack laughed. As he did, he heard something in the distance, a light rumble. It was an unfamiliar sound. Was he hearing things?

"They'll do fine," she continued. "Never mind that two bowls are chipped, and three of the cups are broken." Sheffie looked off into the distance as though she had heard the same sound.

"Yes, I know. I broke two of the cups. But I didn't chip those bowls."

"Jack Wheat! You most certainly did chip one of them."

"Did not," he retorted with mirth in his voice. The distant sound was getting louder, stealing more and more of his attention.

"That day you were trying to juggle them, you..." Sheffie stopped in mid-sentence. The strange rumbling had grown too loud to ignore. They could feel the vibrations of the sound coming up through the floor. "What is that noise?"

"I don't know. I've never heard anything like it." They quit their good-natured ribbing and walked outside. Others were gathering on the street, too, and everyone was looking toward the corner from where the sound was coming. It was growing in intensity much faster now. The earth shook beneath their feet. Faces in the crowd began to change from curiosity to worry. Some people started to step backward, toward the sidewalk and storefronts.

Then it appeared! Coming around the corner on the hard dirt street in downtown Borderton was the strangest contraption that had ever invaded their eyes. And their ears. It was a machine of sorts, large, with

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white smoke billowing into the air in huge puffs that seemed to be timed to correspond to the loud chugging noises.

The great machine caused an upheaval in the streets. Horses were rearing at the awful noise, and more than one rider was thrown to the ground. An empty wagon pulled by a terrified animal went flying by, a man running and waving his arms not far behind.

“What the hell is that?” Jack said.

“I don’t know. It looks a little like a... an automobile. You remember? From the books in the library?”

“Maybe a little,” he admitted. “But not much. It’s all squared off, and there are so many pipes and knobs and things all over it. It looks more like a train, an early steam engine. You showed me pictures of those a long time ago.”

“Yes! You’re right. But there are no tracks. Trains ran on metal tracks.”

They backed up a few steps then stood and watched with mouths gaping as the wonderfully strange machine came toward them, rolling closer as it slowed down and veered slightly left to avoid the people standing in the street.

It was more than twice the length of a horse, a good meter taller than a man, and as wide as a two-rider wooden wagon. The machine had two wood beams running its entire length. These were held well off the ground by waist-high wheels of wood and metal. The wide wheels had little bumps built into the surface, leaving regular indentations in the dirt street as they rolled along. They were attached to metal axles bolted to the wood beams with the largest bolts Jack had ever seen.

Wisps of steam rose from what had to be a boiler. It was located roughly in the middle, immediately behind a rectangular metal pot at the front of the machine. With arm-sized pipes connecting the two, the metal pot had to be a water tank. The boiler was wide and round at the bottom, hanging over the wood rails by half a meter on each side, with a small chimney at the top like a reversed funnel. There were large pipes, small pipes, metal rods, ropes, and chains going in several directions. Some of the pipes, silver ones glistening in the afternoon sun, went from the boiler to rectangular metal enclosures that hung below the wood beams

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on each side. Each enclosure had a thick rod churning in and out. These rods were connected to the edge of each rear wheel, causing the wheels to roll and the machine to move forward. Large puffs of steam billowed rhythmically from the metal enclosures as the machine moved along.

Other small pipes and ropes went to a tall but shallow enclosure that was behind the boiler and connected to it at the bottom. The enclosure was nothing more than a roof supported by four metal bars with a chest-high front wall of metal sheeting and a woodbin behind. A man stood in the enclosure, directly behind the metal wall, his hands quickly working various controls in front of him.

Suspended below the wood beam, in the back where the man stood, were two steps. Except for the tan ropes, a few silver pipes and rods, and some lettering on the side of the woodbin, everything was painted black. The lettering, in decorative white and red script characters, said, "*The Lisbon Express.*"

As the machine slowed to a halt in the middle of the street, a few paces away from Jack and Sheffie, the escaping steam let out a last sigh and stopped, leaving only slivers of white streaming upward. The noise subsided, though the hiss of steam could still be heard as it trailed off slowly. The crowd, already swollen quite large, was frozen in silence.

After a moment the man in the cabin stepped out and climbed down the two steps suspended from the wood rail. He was tall, roughly middle-aged, and, except for a small pot belly, somewhat thin. He jumped the short distance from the bottom step to the dirt street then pulled a thick pair glasses up from his eyes and placed them on top of the hat on his head. The round, domed hat looked like half of a large brazier. His face was brown with dirt and grime except where the glasses had been, giving him a bug-eyed look. Townspeople began to gather from all directions, many talking and all gawking at the odd machine parked in the middle of the street. Some crept close enough to reach out and touch it.

The man from the machine put his hand in the air and shouted, "Please do not touch! The exhaust pipes are quite hot, as is the boiler and the cylinders. It would burn you, possibly quite badly."

Those closest to the car backed away a step or two.

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“Please,” the man said, holding one arm above him to quiet the loud murmur from the growing number of Borderton residents. “I have a special delivery letter,” he began. He didn’t finish.

An agitated ranger hustled through the crowd and stepped right up to the tall man’s face, causing him to bend back slightly. The ranger, a brown man in his early thirties, was not large but was obviously used to being in charge. There were five stripes on his sleeve.

“What in the world is that thing?” the ranger asked loudly, almost screaming. The crowd became silent as everyone listened. “And what do you mean coming into our town making all that racket, scaring every horse around? You could have gotten somebody hurt!”

“I, ah... I’m on an urgent mission,” the man answered, apologetically. “I must deliver a letter from the Mayor of Lisbon right away.”

A murmur rushed through the crowd. “Why would the Mayor of Lisbon be sending a letter to someone in Borderton?” people asked their equally bewildered neighbors. No one knew the answer, but most guessed or commented or simply repeated the question.

“Mayor of Lisbon?” the ranger echoed, his anger beginning to subside. Curiosity got the best of him. “Who’s the letter for?”

“Jack Wheat,” the man responded as he held up a large, brown envelope.

“Oh,” Sheffie said. “That’s you.”

“I realize that,” Jack answered with a smile. He handed the packages to her and stepped forward.

“I’m Jack Wheat,” he announced, though he didn’t have to. More than two dozen of the townspeople had already pointed him out.

The tall man with the strange hat handed the envelope to Jack and said, “Avery Witherstone, at your service, sir. This letter is for you.”

Jack had not known many people from Lisbon but had met enough of them to recognize the slightly faster, less deliberate speech of the city folk. People from the city called it more sophisticated. That was a point of contention in the outlying towns.

“Thank you, Mr. Witherstone” Jack responded as he accepted the envelope. He turned and began to walk back toward Sheffie.

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“Ah, Mr. Wheat. I’m, ah, sorry, sir, but I do need you to read the letter now. You see, sir, I must have a reply back to Mayor Davis by tomorrow evening.”

“Tomorrow evening?” the ranger sneered. “Lisbon is four days ride. Three days hard ride and two if you kill your horse. Now how in blazes are you...” The ranger stopped in mid-question and turned slightly to gaze at the odd contraption that had brought the stranger into town.

“Quite faster than a horse,” the man from Lisbon, Avery Witherstone, stated as he stepped over and patted the machine on the wood side rail, carefully clear of any pipes. “Well, perhaps not faster than a horse,” he clarified. “At a full run, most horses would outdistance me. But my automobile can keep a fast, steady pace for hours, stopping only for wood and water. It would soon surpass the worn out horse.” Then he added under his breath, “Ah, as long as it’s operating properly.” Avery Witherstone turned to Jack and said, “I do need a response, Mr. Wheat.”

Jack stood beside Sheffie and opened the envelope. He was amazed to see a typeset letter inside, printed like a book, but it was only a single copy letter. Why would somebody go to the trouble to typeset a one-sheet letter?

He began reading. It was from Mayor Winston Davis III, asking Jack to come to Lisbon. The mayor requested Jack’s assistance in “combating” their Rhino problem, which, he wrote, had reached “epidemic proportions.” The letter explained that the number of Rhinos emerging from the streets of Lisbon had continued to increase, while, at the same time, many of the rangers’ laser rifles had quit working. Citizens were being killed at alarming rates. The few lasers that remained in working order were scattered around the globe to protect the planet’s most important assets, so most rangers were armed only with homebuilts. The mayor went on to state that the city would furnish the best living quarters available and all expenses for his entire stay. At the bottom of the neat, typeset letter there was a beautifully flowing hand-written message from Colonel Alexandre Andropov. “Colonel” was underlined.

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Jack,

I have inherited a deplorable situation and need you desperately. The recruits we're getting are young and raw. We are forced to put them on the streets with homebuilts and inadequate training. We lose four or five each month, which means the next group, when we can find young men willing to join, gets even less training. The citizens of Lisbon are screaming for protection. We need your experience, your intelligence, and your ability. You will receive the usual commission plus a bonus of \$200 for each Rhino you kill. Please help, old friend.

Sincerely,

Colonel A. Andropov

Jack looked at Sheffie, who had read the letter along with him. Thoughts shot through his head faster than the beam from a laser rifle. With an epidemic of Rhinos in Lisbon, this meant a chance to reach the record sooner, possibly much sooner. Not to mention the money. His eyes got wider, and his mouth began to open.

In the same instant, he realized it also meant something else. He would not be able to use his small laser rifle in the city of Lisbon, not in front of so many witnesses. If anyone found out he had one, his reputation, his quest for the record, Sheffie, his future, all would be gone. He would be jailed for concealing a laser that was needed by the rangers and stripped of all his awards. The government would want him to repay every bounty he had received for all the Rhinos he had killed, which he could never do from jail, of course. So, if he went to Lisbon, he would have to try to kill Rhinos with a homebuilt, something he had never done. The thought of facing a Rhino with nothing more than a crooked-firing, off-sight, hand-fashioned homebuilt frightened him, sending a quick chill down his spine.

“Oh, Jack,” Sheffie said. “This is a great opportunity. I mean, I hate for you to take a chance hunting those creatures, but you’re going to regardless. You might as well do it in a place like Lisbon.”

“What?”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Lisbon. I’ve dreamed about it.”

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“You? The letter requested me. There’s a serious problem up there. It could be dangerous.”

“What do you mean, Jack? This is a wonderful opportunity. You wouldn’t dream of going without me, would you?” She looked at him with shock in her eyes. Then her expression changed, and she added, “Besides, I’d have you to protect me.” Sheffie smiled her best smile, which, Jack had to admit, was a killer. She was a beautiful woman.

He stood a moment in silence. His eyes closed as he realized there was no way to win. It was done. He knew the people of Borderton might feel a little less protected if he accepted the challenge in Lisbon, but not going would make him look like a coward, both to the people of Borderton and the many thousands of people in Lisbon. It would greatly diminish the hero status that he had come to enjoy over the years.

It would also upset Sheffie. Going to Lisbon without Sheffie would create a problem he would never live down. She had been after him for years to take a break from the hunt, to take her on vacation to the big city to see the elaborate plays and shop in the legendary stores and go to the largest library on the planet. Here was the opportunity, all paid for by someone else. But facing a Rhino without a laser rifle? Suddenly he wished the man from Lisbon and his strange machine had never shown up in Borderton. He almost wished he had taken up farming like so many of his ancestors.

From deep inside, Jack Wheat understood he had no choice. The decision was made for him by his reputation, and by Sheffie. Besides, one day the laser rifle was going to quit working. That day might not be too far into the future. Some years back he had begun to practice with his homebuilt in anticipation of that day and had become more accurate with it. *Maybe it won’t be hopeless.*

“Okay,” he said with a knot that seemed to reach above his throat, all the way to the top of his head. “I’ll, ah, we’ll go.”

“Oh, Jack!” Sheffie flung her arms around him, packages flying through the air and bouncing off the wood sidewalk and dirt street.

There was a short cheer, but it ended quickly. For the most part, the people in the crowds became quiet. They knew a hero of Jack’s stature would have to respond to an urgent call, even if it did mean

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leaving Borderton for a while. After all, a hero could not be a hero if there was no challenge to conquer.

“Oh!” Sheffie shouted suddenly, letting go of Jack as she did. She looked down at herself. “What will I wear to Lisbon? I have nothing to wear, and the stores are closing. I need a new dress! And some new shoes. And... and...”

Chapter 8

Crazy Mac was twiddling with the tree fibers in his 'bed,' working hard to see how fine he could split them. The finer the split, the softer the bed, but he had been doing this for years beyond memory. It was becoming quite difficult to find a fiber he could split further.

The angle of the sun's rays said mid-morning. Mac was usually alone at this time of day, but Bill Miller was still at the oasis. Bill was making the return mail run from Newton to Borderton. He had meant to be on his way more than an hour earlier but was having little success getting the mail bags loaded on his ornery mule. Mac watched the comedy from the corners of his eyes but, so far, had only chuckled to himself, resisting the urge to laugh out loud.

Suddenly, Mac heard a clatter to the west, the sound of a rider coming in from the desert. He could tell by the fast, pounding tempo of the hoof beats that the rider was in a rush. *Too fast*, Mac thought. *Damned fool's going to kill his horse.*

It was an odd time for a rider to be coming in. They usually arrived late afternoon or early evening. Mac scrambled up from his bed and looked toward the sound. He instantly recognized Greg Bonner. *Figures. He don't give a damn about his horse.* Bonner rode straight into the oasis, not slowing down until he came right up to where the wrinkled old man stood.

"Hey, you crazy old coot!" Bonner shouted at Mac. "I found Wheat's Rhino. Shot clear through with a laser. I told you the bastard was cheating."

Bill dropped the mail bags and kicked at the mule, but the animal easily dodged the blow. The mail rider shrugged his shoulders in helpless resignation then walked over to listen to what Bonner was saying.

"You ain't no such a thing, you lying dog. Jack Wheat's the finest hunter alive. He wouldn't do a thing like that."

"I saw the damned Rhino with my own eyes, you crazy old man. It's got a laser hole in it plain as day."

"Well, I ain't seen it with my eyes. And your eyes lie like your mouth does, so I ain't believing anything they seen."

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Anger seared across Greg Bonner's face. He reached for his knife, but he stopped suddenly, his fingers touching the handle but not yet wrapping around it. He sat in the saddle a moment, motionless, then a smile began to creep onto his face. Slowly, he pulled his hand away from his knife. "Okay. If you don't believe me, then you go see for yourself."

"I'm busy here. I ain't got time to go wild-goose-chasing your lies."

"Busy doing what? You've been piddling with that stupid hole in the ground you call a bed for years. It's still the same. You don't do shit, Mac, except bother people coming through here, running your mouth about stupid stuff and acting like the crazy old fool you are. Well I saw what I saw and I'm going to report it to the rangers as soon as I get to Borderton. I'm going to confront Wheat right in front of everybody in his own hometown. And there won't be a single eyewitness to dispute me. If you don't believe me, go see for yourself. You can be Jack's eyewitness." Greg lifted his right hand and pointed two fingers at his eyes. "Otherwise, all they're going to hear is what these 'lying' eyes saw. And they'll believe me. Wheat's not the only famous Rhino hunter, you know."

Mac sat a moment, staring at Bonner but not seeing him. He realized Greg was right. Without anybody to dispute Greg's lies, Jack would have a problem. The rangers would not want to take sides, of course, but things could get awful sticky. At best, doubt would be created in a lot of people's minds, and Jack's reputation would be tarnished. Mac didn't want Jack to get hurt. Anybody but Jack Wheat. Mac had to come to the rescue. There was no other choice.

"Okay. I'll go prove you're a lying dog. Let's see... Which way did Jack say, west, wasn't it? Close to the Spine. How am I going to get there? I can't walk that far."

"Just go due west to the Spine then turn north," Bonner said. "Follow the Spine until you find the Rhino. It's on this side, not fifty feet from the base of the Spine. Even an old fool like you can't miss it. And carry lots of water, old man. It's a long, long walk."

"I can't walk all that way," Mac whined.

"That's your problem, you old fool." Greg retorted.

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Mac gazed at the desert, in the direction Greg had indicated.

Bonner winked at Bill Miller.

"I tell you what," Bill said, taking the hint and acting as serious as possible. "I'm tired of fooling with that damned mule over there. I'll put all the mailbags on my horse. You can have that piece of shit. I'll tell the post office it ran away and they'll replace it for me. Hell, I'll gladly carry a heavier load for this one trip if it'll get me shed of that ornery ass. If you're man enough to ride him, that is."

"You got yourself a deal, mailman," Mac said. "Your problem is you don't know how to treat him. I'll talk to him first and we'll be fine."

The other two men laughed then Bonner said, "Let the old fool try."

"I may be old," Mac said, "But you're the only fool around here."

"We'll see who's a fool when that mule breaks your stupid neck."

As Mac walked over to the mule, Bill turned to Greg and said with a smirk, "This is going to be the best laugh I've had in a long time."

Mac picked up two of Bill's water skins and stood beside the mule. He put his lips against the mule's ear then began whispering. The mule stood rock still as the old man continued to talk. Bill and Greg stopped smiling. They glanced at each other then back at Crazy Mac. Finally, the old man stopped whispering in the mule's ear and patted the mule on the neck. He picked up the skins and a saddle pack with some food and tossed them over the mule then climbed up on the animal's bare back. The mule was calm and still the whole time. Without turning around or saying good-bye, Mac unceremoniously rode out of the oasis, west toward the Spine.

"I'll be damned," Bill said. "How in hell did he do that?"

"Screw the old fool," Bonner said. "It'll serve both of them right to die in the desert."

"Yeah, but I was kidding about the mule. I wanted to see the old clown break his neck trying to ride the damned thing. Hell, I'll be in hot water if I lose a government mule. And he's got my water and food, too. I better go after him."

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Bill took a step forward but Bonner held his huge arm out to stop him. “Let the old fool kill himself if that’s what he wants to do. Good riddance, I say. He’ll die before he finds a Rhino where I sent him.”

“You mean you didn’t find it?”

“Nah,” Bonner said. “Wheat’s too good at covering his path. I made it up to get rid of Mac.” Then he grinned and added, “Permanently.”

“But my stuff?”

“Tell your bosses the damned mule chewed through his rope and ran away. I’ll back you up. The rangers have got better sense than to question me. Here, take this water skin. I’ll give you some of my food, too. Let that old fool die out there alone. The mule, too.”

“Where will you be? In case my boss wants you to verify my story.”

“I’ve got to go to Lisbon to meet somebody. Important job. I need to get moving while Wheat is still lying around. Won’t have time to stop at the post office this trip, but I’ll be back soon enough. I’ll talk to your boss on the return trip.”

Bill shrugged and Greg Bonner mounted his horse. The big man reached into a saddlebag and tossed Bill a leather-wrapped food package then he turned his horse around and trotted off toward Borderton. He would by-pass Borderton this trip, circling north to avoid any chance of running into Jack Wheat. This wasn’t the time, but Greg Bonner had big plans. The next time they met...