

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

He often volunteered to be the lookout. The other guards handed over watchtower duty eagerly to the town's second-in-command, thinking their boss was doing them a favour, as no one enjoyed standing at the top of the wall staring out at the dustbowl with its few scraggly trees and dilapidated houses in the distance. It was boring. Gennero encouraged their misconceptions.

He pulled his handkerchief up over his mouth as he surveyed the landscape. He never spoke to anyone of the beauty he found in the desolate landscape or the way its barren simplicity intrigued him. Everyone heard the stories from those who worked as traders, who bragged of their encounters with feral beasts, cannibals, radiation, and numerous other threats. Gennero thought it was all bullshit invented to drive up the price of whatever they were bartering, but what *was* beyond the distant mountains?

His mother had told him stories about what the world had been like before the collapse of civilization, now thirty-five-years in the past, but the older she grew, the more she forgot. In her final months, she refused to speak of her life before or how the land had once flourished with trees and freshwater. As she lay dying, Gennero asked for one last story, but instead, she had licked dry lips and told him to forget about that, rasping out his favorite myth as child, the one where Coyote creates the Milky Way. Perhaps it was one final attempt to protect him, to keep him from leaving the relative safety of the town. Mayor Church had the same idea, but for different reasons. He forbade anyone from “waxing nostalgic” on the pre-war days, claiming it was bad for progress. Gennero knew stonewalling when he saw it but never spoke out, as he had witnessed and participated in what Church had his guards do to those who disrespected his wishes.

He almost missed the stranger's approach from the southwest. Nine times out of ten, the visitor was a lone man, either a mercenary looking for work or a downtrodden survivor of an attack looking for safety. As a child, he'd seen a steady stream of stragglers arrive in town. Some, if they were desperate enough, had stayed. Most pushed on to find something better than a few blocks surrounded by a small wall once it was made apparent Church's hospitality was dependent on their ability to contribute to the town. Church hadn't always been so cold, so demanding – he used to solicit opinions and welcome change. Gennero often debated with himself whether the old Church had been the façade or whether power had indeed corrupted him. Or maybe the stresses of life in the wasteland had turned him into the rock-hard bastard he was now. Church's pride was like the wall, a constant in Gennero's life. He often marked time by its height. Now it was over two stories, built of salvaged materials from other towns where raiders or illness had left only ransacked buildings.

The new stranger walked with haughty, fearless pride, carrying a large backpack without seeming to strain under its weight. Only when the figure approached did Gennero realize the truth — a woman. Her feet were tucked into scuffed hiking boots. She wore a long trench coat that hung open, unbuttoned to reveal two holsters on her belt, one empty. Her thighs and what he could see of her legs were long and powerful, presumably from walking. She was draped in myriad weaponry; the gun, two knife hilts sticking out from each boot, a police baton hanging off her backpack, and a shotgun resting on her shoulder as either a warning or a statement.

“Straggler approaching,” Gennero called down to two passing guards, indicating with his head they should flank the gate itself, as they left it open during the day. More than once, Gennero and his men had to take down rampaging maniacs who wandered into the town with the intent of murdering as many people as they could. Most of these people spoke of cleansing the Earth or didn’t speak coherently at all, merely laughed or hollered gibberish as they attacked.

This woman seemed to possess her mental faculties as she paused before entering and surveyed the town. She glanced up at him briefly, then headed inside.

Gennero climbed down from the guard post, nodding at one of his subordinates to take his place up top. He quickly made his way to the town hall.

As Gennero entered the room at the top of the building, Churchill said, “She’s a killer.” He was staring out the only non-broken window in his office. The older man gestured at the marketplace as he spoke. “Look at the way she walks, the way she struts: not like a whore but like someone who truly believes that if you challenge her, she will be all too happy to kill you. A woman like that will have no morals. A woman like that ...” He scratched at the growing impetigo on his chin. The scab had been oozing a substance the colour of earwax for the last two weeks.

Gennero resisted the urge to scratch his own face; he’d developed a phantom itch that began every time Churchill picked at his infection. To resist doing so, he shrugged. “The wasteland is no place for the weak. Want me to run her out of town?”

This was par for the course in terms of Churchill’s usual preference. If he decided the stranger wasn’t going to contribute to the ever-slipping economy, Gennero would dispatch a quick word to them, a careful gesture with his handgun, occasionally a bludgeoning by his fellow guards. He wanted to avoid doing the latter to a woman who wasn’t causing trouble; his mother would have been appalled. Granted, she would have been downright horrified by most of the things Gennero had done in service for Churchill, but he’d never hurt a woman who wasn’t attacking him first. Or anyone, if Churchill hadn’t specifically ordered it.

“Oh no.” Churchill opened his eyes wide, pretending to be shocked, “Bring her in here – give her some refreshment. If you think she’s not going to start opening fire, bring her to me. Let her keep her weapons as a show of good faith. I might have a job for her.”

“Uh, no problem, boss.” This was new. While Churchill was hardly a benevolent leader, he rarely kept his thoughts from Gennero, preferring to outline his plans so his second could execute them with precision.

When Gennero left the room, Churchill was staring out the window at the woman again, his face pensive.

“Get her?” Gennero muttered as he stomped down the stairs of the dilapidated building, his heavy step sending up puffs of dirt and dust. A tradesperson of sorts was milling around the main floor, fixing missing sections of the wall with rotten wood that would barely do the job. The building, as with all in their town, was decrepit, a shameful husk of its former self, with no running water and no electric light; they used the generators to power more important buildings like the bakery and water purification system. No one knew how to fix anything properly, it seemed, so most of the inhabitants didn’t even try unless Churchill ordered them to. And Gennero’s skills lay in areas not within the sphere of construction. He frowned at the disarray. If Gennero ran the town, he would fix things properly, even putting time and money into learning how to do so. But he didn’t run the settlement, Churchill did, and despite being slovenly and

lacking compassion, he was a strong leader, keeping the town alive for decades amidst numerous external threats.

Gennero got stuck with the job of confronting the woman because he was the best Church had. He was thirty-four years old, had only ever lived in this post-war town. He had spent twenty of those years doing everything Churchill asked of him in order to get on the man's good side. He'd worked his ass off to make himself indispensable, initially to protect his mother, and now, well, he kept doing so because there wasn't much else he could do other than leave, which was probably suicide. Then again, the woman was wandering the wastes on her own. Gennero sighed heavily and ran a finger down the ripple of a scar that made a hard but handsome face menacing. He didn't like to think about how he got the injury, but he found that touching it often calmed him, as it reminded him of what he could survive.

The woman was milling about in front of Churchill's few shops, peering in at tanned leather boots and wilted produce. Gennero approached her, hand on his gun belt to assure her that he was packing ammunition. She wore dark sunglasses, as did most travelers of the wastes. Her arsenal, paired with the hard line of her mouth, ensured that no one bothered or overcharged her. She was Caucasian and looked to be in her early thirties, though exact age was often a mystery with the pervasive dry heat, blowing wind, and harsh conditions bearing down on her skin. Gennero hid his curiosity with a practiced mask of authority, stopping to stand a few feet from where she was kneeling and inspecting some less-than-fresh salted "beef." She rose to her feet when she sensed him standing near, her head coming almost level with his when she was at full height, making her 5'10 or thereabouts. She removed her sunglasses and stared right into his eyes; her expression was one-part curiosity to nine parts suspicion.

"Church wishes to see you," Gennero said, "If you'll come with me."

"Who?" the woman asked and peered at him. He could feel her sizing him up as if she expected a fight. He wasn't surprised that she had a Southern accent – a lot of people in the town had been refugees from former Georgia and Louisiana.

Gennero pointed to the sign above the town's entranceway a hundred feet back. "Church is the mayor of our town. It's named after him."

Her scoff was like a bullet fired through a silencer. "How modest."

There was disdain in her eyes, which Gennero took in reference to the town itself, annoying him. Many times, he'd referred to his town as a shit-hole but that didn't mean strangers could look down on it. It had scraped by for thirty-five years, unlike many places and most people.

He swallowed his irritation. The woman resisted commenting further, though she gave him a dark, feral smile, showing teeth.

The woman walked beside Gennero with her shoulders held back to state she was following him of her own volition. He respected her attempt to keep control, preferring to be a liaison instead of an armed escort. He opened the door and held it for her, as he did for everyone. He ignored the raised eyebrow she bestowed on him. Her eyes darted to the four main exits on the main floor. *Smart*, Gennero acknowledged.

He opened the door to a downward staircase and gestured, but she froze and planted her feet.

"No. I've been in too many unpleasant basements over the years."

"It's not the basement," he paused, "It's above ground – the back of the building opens to a verandah. Old people said they used to host weddings there."

The woman sniffed, her furrowed brow softening. He took it she believed him as she stomped down the steps. She rested her hand inside her trench coat. *Shit, she probably lost someone in a basement. Maybe there's a locket or some other memento in her pocket.* Gennero wondered whether she had lost a parent, a child, a partner.

Gennero led her into their nicest room with the biggest window, overlooking the verandah. They had burned the small arboretum for heat long ago, so now there was only a collection of stumps in front of the wall. He chose the room, not for the view, but because the couch was untouched by decay. Last year, one of the scouts found it in a large cardboard box in the backroom of a furniture store. Sitting down, the woman bounced slightly, obviously enjoying the plush cushions. She did not remove her brown leather gloves.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, as though he hadn't just escorted her here armed with a pistol. Perhaps, in another life, they would have met in a waiting room, at the doctor's office or the dentist. He would have admired her long legs and she his shoulders (he had been told by several of Churchill's sex workers that his shoulders were his best attribute). But he wasn't here to ogle a woman who would probably not respond positively to a well-intentioned compliment. He wished he were better at making idle chit-chat.

“I'm just passing through,” she said, “I need some supplies, and I was hoping for a place to sleep tonight that wasn't the dirt.”

“Really,” Gennero replied flatly. Had he viewed himself through her eyes, he would have seen a brooding disposition made more so by the bags under his eyes and high cheekbones that emphasized the gauntness of his skin. His mouth was small and set in a hard line with a defined jaw. His race was equal parts Nordic and Native American, and the wasteland had made his skin weathered before his time. He would have been surprised to note that despite the scar, the woman considered him rather attractive and that she considered this a good thing regarding a possible escape, as men who were too good-looking were often arrogant. Their over-confidence led them to make stupid mistakes.

“Yep,” she finally replied, crossing one knee over the other. “I'm heading north. It's been a long journey so far.”

“How long?” Gennero asked, leaning forward slightly.

“About two years,” she said. She stared at him for a long moment. Gennero kept his face as devoid of emotion as he could – something he had perfected over years of interrogating Churchill's captives.

“What's up north?” he asked.

“A legend,” she said with a shrug. “Either it will be there, or it won't. If so, I'll stay there, if not, maybe I'll come back down south, maybe find somewhere to shack up for good. We'll see.”

“I take it you can read?”

“What is this, a job interview?”

“Kind of.” Gennero attempted to smile. The corners of his mouth rose slightly, then they fell back down again as if he decided half-way through the action that smiling wasn't worth the effort. Or that smiling was something he tried not to do that often.

“You can read, right?” he reiterated the question.

“Yes, I can read!”

Gennero wasn't sure why he wanted to know. He replied with an equally curt, “good.”

“Do you do this for all newcomers? Let them sit on your couch and ask them all these questions?”

“No.” Gennero tried to hide his own ignorance of the situation but worried she saw right through him. “Most of the time, they only get a word to beat it by morning.”

“Why the special treatment for me?”

“Church wants to see you.”

“Oh,” she said, leaning back into the couch. “It’s because I’m a woman, right? I bet this town hasn’t seen any female fighters in a while, not since the slavers left. I mean, business must be slow since the slavers stopped using this town as a stopover to do a bit of trading?”

The hostility in her voice, but more so her accurate take on the village’s situation, made Gennero’s eyes widen slightly. The woman let her face fall into an aloof stare and rearranged herself, so her right boot was resting on her left knee. The slight heel was stained brownish red as if she had been standing in blood. She cocked her head to the side and stared at Gennero. He felt her consideration, her assessing gaze. For the first time in a long while, he found he cared to give a good impression, not merely a tough one. He took his time replying, choosing his words wisely.

“Very perceptive. But frankly, I have no idea why Church wants to speak with you.”

The woman pursed her lips as if in great concentration.

“Is that a single or double-action revolver?” she asked, gesturing to his weapon.

“Double.” Gennero took it out of its sheath but did not hand it over. “I found it under the seat of an abandoned car over five years ago. This baby has saved my life many times.”

“Would you like to buy another one? I’ll give you another double-action for eight or so books.”

“I never sell my books.” Gennero frowned, annoyed she would think he would trade his most precious items; it was only as he spoke that he realized she couldn’t possibly know the affinity he had for novels. The woman shrugged as if she didn’t care. For a few minutes, she inspected her boots and Gennero pretended to look at the space beside the woman’s head. In truth, he was admiring her long, dirty-blond hair that glinted in the sunlight that drifted through the broken window. Her pale brown eyes matched the dust outside. She had an aquiline facial structure, but her perpetual frown and a less-than-adequate diet turned the features from delicate to hawk-like. Her lips were full and slightly pouted on the bottom as if she had a slight underbite. There was a thin layer of dust on her skin, though Gennero assumed he sported a similar coating of the wastelands on him but had ceased to notice given the pervasiveness of the dust, even indoors.

“What’s your name?” The woman broke the silence.

“Gennero is my last name and what I go by.”

“I’m Delia.”

Gennero and Delia were sizing each other up in silence again when the door opened, and a young girl walked in carrying a tray of water and biscuits. She kept her head lowered until she reached the table, where she set the tray down and nodded politely at Gennero. She almost choked when she saw that the newcomer everyone was twittering about was indeed a tall, attractive woman, though she did spot a nasty scar on her forehead.

Delia nodded thanks to the girl and picked up a glass of water, letting it moisten her lips before she let it flow into her mouth. She balanced it on her knees, half-full, though Gennero was sure she was only stopping herself from gulping it down out of some sense of pride. The girl, Megan, was still staring at Delia with a mixture of fear and awe. She continued to do so until Gennero cleared his throat. Megan nodded again and left quickly, closing the door behind her.

“Slaves?” Delia asked, sipping her water again. Gennero drained his water in one gulp.

“No one here is a slave anymore. We were partnered with one of the major slaver routes to the east, but some morally sound men killed the slavers and freed the slaves. Church said that if someone came to free them, they would be allowed to go. If no one came, they could stay here and work for room and board.”

“Smart plan,” Delia said, but her distaste with his story was palpable.

Gennero wasn't proud of it either, but he had been a child when the slaves had been a normal part of life. He had often overheard the women in the brothel, where he'd lived as a kid, complaining about how they'd agreed to take a pay cut from Church simply so he wouldn't sell them. Now that the slavers were gone, the sex workers were free to say no to work if they were ill or tired, and the other women would share their food and water. In response to their tight bond, Church split the brothel into three houses five years ago to keep them from staging a coup, despite how much Gennero subtly tried to convince him there was no way they would even try, as they had no weapons. There was a male brothel as well, but those who worked in it were guards or citizens looking to make extra money, where the female sex workers, for the most part, were selected by Church as teenagers and had no say in their vocation. They made next to no money and were not allowed to retire.

Delia finished her water while Gennero wrestled with his town's history. Delia continued the conversation. “Most of the slaves probably were without family or friends, right? No one came for them.”

“Look, I don't control the town, and I was barely out of my teens then. What was I supposed to do? Start an uprising? Get my mother and I tossed out?”

He regretted mentioning his mother.

“Doing nothing to stop an atrocity, some would say, is just as bad as doing it.”

She couldn't want to debate philosophy — she was just messing with him. Did she think she was funny, or was she trying to rile him up? She didn't seem like the type to joke around, so it was likely the latter.

Gennero sighed heavily. “The slaves have long since become citizens, and now I watch out for myself and for Church, because he pays me well. Judge me all you want.”

“How does he pay you?”

“With whatever I need.”

“Those girls I saw in the building next door, and the one who gave us the food ... are they all simply serving maids? I didn't see any women in your guards?”

“There are two, but they are on night shift this week. Why? What's it to you?”

“Nothing,” Delia replied, her eyes falsely innocent of any accusation, “I was just wondering what kind of a place this Churchill is and who this man, Church, is.” She raised an eyebrow mockingly. “You said he named the town after himself?”

Gennero took a moment to tamper a scowl. “Yes, he did, alright? Churchill is his last name, but we all call him Church. And *Churchill* is a place of business. Women here do what they must to eat, and men do the same – people cook, hunt, clean, run shops, scavenge for supplies, defend. If someone does something that really impresses Church, he may give that person a gift to do with whatever he wants.”

“Reeaaallyyy,” Delia elongated the syllables in the word, “interesting. I would consider being a slave rather different than being a whore, but maybe I just come from a place with a different definition of the word.”

Gennero's neck grew hot. “Maybe you should keep your mouth shut about that when you talk to Church. Or he's liable to make a slave out of you.”

“Oh, really?” The woman laughed, though it was a forced laugh, fueled by malice and sarcasm. He was struck by the belief that this woman had never laughed at anything pleasant in her life, that she only knew laughter as a form of attack. This saddened him. His mother, despite her situation, had managed to laugh occasionally. He quickly put aside the memory of her face. Delia lifted her long legs and placed her feet up on the table.

“I wouldn’t do that in his presence either,” Gennero snapped, though the indignation masked a warning. “Or he’s liable to cut your fucking feet off.”

“And I reckon I’ll cut his fucking head off.”

Gennero began to stand; Delia rose so quickly that she was on her feet before him. She put her face right up to his. The man and woman sized each other up as players used to on the now-extinct sports field, or, more aptly, like dogs ready to fight.

The door opened; Megan reentered the room. Gennero stepped back from Delia and felt her eyes look him up and down. Megan stood beside him, quietly, waiting. She was more subdued than when she had been gawking at Delia, and Gennero hoped it wasn’t because Eric in the kitchen had harassed her again. Gennero made a mental note to have words with the man later, as he had overheard Eric bragging to the other cooks that Megan had the best ass of all the serving girls. Megan’s father, the only dentist, paid Church a heavy stipend to keep the pretty girl from the brothel, but that didn’t stop some of the men from giving her unwanted attention.

“Please tell Church that his meeting today will be on time, Megan.” He nodded politely, hoping she remembered that phrase was Gennero’s code to prep Church for arrival. The girl nodded back and left, taking the tray of empty glasses but leaving the untouched biscuits.

“OK, let’s go,” he said, approaching Delia. He moved to take her arm to lead her, forgetting she wasn’t a captive and received a quick jab to the muscle between his elbow and armpit in response. He shook his wrist to ward off his jarred nerve.

“I’m not one to be dragged about!”

The rage in her eyes gave Gennero pause – not that he was frightened, but this woman was an erupting volcano of anger and itching for a fight. He wasn’t going to give it to her. “Are you going to come or not?”

“Oh, I’ll go with you,” Delia said, “but not as a prisoner.”

Delia scanned for exits as she followed Gennero up the stairs to the highest level of the building. It made sense this Church person worked there, as it was tactically advantageous from a siege point of view.

They entered a large room, and on the far side of it, looking out one of the two windows was a man small in stature. She waited for him to turn around, to speak. When he didn’t, she took the opportunity to inspect her surroundings.

It was the opposite of what she expected. In her experience, leaders liked to show off with possessions or at least more luxurious living quarters. Still, Church’s office was shabbily maintained, the desk loaded with piles of yellowed paper. It did have a window with a full sheet of glass, which was perhaps the best they could do in terms of luxury. The paint had faded to a dull ochre, and the pine wainscoting that wrapped the lower half of the room was starting to warp. Thick cracks ran floor-to-ceiling in three locations on the east wall. The only piece of furniture Delia found worthwhile was a glass display case on the back wall which housed a sniper rifle. This model was accurate to almost 2 kilometers and weighed less than 10lbs without the magazine. It had been on the market for only three weeks before the collapse of civilization. Delia had seen the same model back in Savannah when she was seventeen, during one of the

town's many skirmishes against Vernonburg. She had been given a short-range position on one of the Georgian manor houses with a Family thug, who had touted the same model of sniper rifle Church had. Delia had only been able to see the bodies crumple to the dust because she had been using binoculars. She recalled the guard's satisfied smirk when she capped the scope after the successful defense, of which she had claimed all but two of the kills. As much as Delia hated the Family and what they had done to her aunt and her hometown, she had been impressed with the weapon.

She forced herself not to stare at the gun, but it was too late, as she felt Gennero's eyes on her from where he stood, six feet behind her. She should have been more careful in showing what she coveted. She set her bag down at her feet, within easy reach, undoing a clasp on the top compartment casually as she did so. She set the shotgun beside it.

Gennero had been witness to this "make them wait" strategy before. In fact, Church had imparted advice to Gennero when he had first started working for him on this method. He claimed that making your guests wait was a way to show you were in control of the situation. Gennero had to resist rolling his eyes when Church left his spot by the glassless window. The intact window was behind his desk and faced the main street, but the other was open to the rooftop of another building and the dirty alley below. Someone was sobbing outside, which was likely what Church had been looking at while he tried to make Delia squirm.

The man who had named a town after himself was white, well-fed, and bearded with neatly trimmed gray curls. He was in his late sixties. His tattered brown suit had been patched at the elbows and stitched at the shoulder, fraying at the cuffs. He had a nasty infection on his chin Delia tried to avoid staring at. She gave Gennero credit if he had to work with this guy all day and not spend most of it vomiting.

"Ah, good, good," Church said, "You've brought the mercenary. In good spirits, I hope. Gennero isn't much of a talker, but hopefully he tried?"

Delia hid her surprise at this, as she found Gennero quite talkative. *Maybe he doesn't talk to his boss? Then why talk to me?*

"Thank you for the water," she said simply, "I'm not a merc."

"No?" Church asked, "Not with that horrid company a few days west?"

"No, I come from the south."

"You do have a quaint accent. In the old days, I would have called you a southern belle." Church smiled.

Delia wished she could see Gennero's face; his reaction might have betrayed what would happen next. Delia slid her left hand into her pocket in what she hoped was a casual action, wherein she slowly let her fist close over her second most-prized possession.

"I do hope you'll decide to stay here with us." Church gestured in a regal way at his hovel. "You'll have the best room, all the serving girls you desire, and be privy to all the best food and water available."

Delia considered staying for a few months – she had worked as a guard before, so she could be a mercenary if Church's jobs weren't entirely repugnant. Gennero seemed like a decent-enough man who wouldn't be bad to work with, but she didn't want to get close to anyone, to settle in some small town. She had to carry on.

"Thank you, but no. I'm going north."

“But I’ve offered you the best choice a woman in this day and age could ever expect!” Church exclaimed, “You don’t honestly think that you’re going to go on as some sort of warrior woman, or ... whatever you are? It’s best to settle down now, make some money in the most profitable profession, and have a well-endowed retirement.”

Something clicked in Delia’s brain.

“Wait, wait, wait... you weren’t asking me to be a bodyguard or a merc ...” The veneer she used to encase her rage cracked. She trembled with its intensity and clenched her fist to stop her hand from shaking.

“Well, no,” Church laughed lightly as if his words were somehow a compliment, “a woman of your ... assets... should not be thrown into the heat of battle; that’s for a deformed and ugly woman! You would be the star in my House of Pleasures! You would have all the comforts for little work! A woman like you should be used to that kind of treatment, traveling the wasteland. Might as well do it here for money. I generously let the women keep 15% of their earnings, which they can spend on clothes or whatever else you ladies enjoy.”

His comments triggered painful experiences, memories she fought to repress. She wrestled with her emotions, for her anger had led to poor decisions before, but here, today, with this disgusting man saying that all she’d suffered only made her a commodity to him, her rage intensified into wrath.

“You ugly son of a bitch. If you think for one minute that I’m going to be part of your, your ... *collection*, you have another thing coming! You can take your ‘offer’ and fuck off!”

“It wasn’t an offer.”

Delia heard the creak of opening doors followed by footsteps. Without even turning to see who or what had arrived, she dipped, shoving her hand into the unclasped pocket on the top of her backpack. She brought up the 9mm revolver in her right hand to find she was facing five men holding guns of their own; they had come out of hidden doors in the wainscoting on the east side of the room. Gennero’s face was grim as he pulled his gun from his holster. He didn’t aim it at her but had it ready at his side.

“Wonderful,” Delia said, “a bunch of pathetic losers. What, you guys can’t find someone that will give it to you for free?”

Church moved from his position behind her and stood to the left of the line facing her.

“Come along now. Don’t make us ruin your merchandise.”

Delia took a second to wonder whether there was another way out of this mess, but no, she wanted to hurt these guys. She cocked the gun with her right thumb, left hand at her side.

“Shoot her in the legs or arms if she doesn’t comply,” Church said, “put the gun down, um ... woman.”

“Delia,” Gennero said slowly, “her name is Delia.”

“Yes, Delia, put the gun down, and you can still have all the terms we spoke of. No hard feelings.”

“Fuck you and the horse you rode in on.” Delia scoffed. She fired two shots in succession, hitting the nearest goon in the throat and Gennero in the shoulder, knocking him backwards.

As she fired, Delia splayed her left palm open. Pale blue light cascaded over her. Bullets hit the blue light and fell to the ground, useless. The tip of her revolver’s barrel was just out of the blue light. She killed three with headshots and the fourth through the chest. She spun to turn the gun on the unarmed Church. She fired, heard a dull click. As she reached for her other gun, Church ran to the right and launched himself out the open window. Delia raced after him,

reloading. She leaned out quickly and took a shot at his gray-haired head. He narrowly avoided the bullet as he rolled behind the chimney on the roof he had landed on. Her shield deactivated with a sizzle like water hitting hot oil, leaving a metallic stench of ozone. Church's arm was sticking out from behind the bricks, but she decided not to waste bullets for a flesh wound. She needed to escape before he climbed down and rallied his troops.

Gennero was the only guard still alive and stared at Delia from across the room. All the other bullets had been hollow points, which expanded on impact. Gennero had been hit with a regular wadcutter, which had left him with a smaller, non-lethal wound. He had dropped his gun to slap his hand over the hole. While he didn't have any religious beliefs, he hoped he'd meet his mother somewhere in the ether, and she'd forgive him for her life in Churchill and for the things he had done. Blood leaked between his fingers, but he knew if he so much as tried to stand, Delia would probably kill him. She might kill him anyway, as she probably didn't think he hadn't been aware his boss had been planning to force her to be a sex worker. Had he known, would he have treated her differently, he wondered? Yes, he supposed he would have just told her to leave or let her make the choice for herself. Especially as Church's take from the sex workers wasn't exactly equitable.

As the pain in his shoulder intensified, Gennero no longer had the concentration to contemplate his past actions. Delia was frowning at Gennero, still considering him with a pair of angry brown eyes. She took a few steps backward, eyes still on him, and used her elbow to smash the glass on the display case. She took the rifle, slung it over her shoulder, opened the drawers below the display and threw all the ammo she found into her bag. She paused to take six 9mm rounds out of her pocket and load them into her revolver. As she proceeded past the corpses to the stairs, Gennero reached out with a bloody hand.

Delia looked down at Gennero, put the revolver to his head, and paused to assess him. There was no fear in his eyes, only something she thought was resignation, perhaps regret.

"Bang," she whispered. She took the revolver from his head, unfired, and left the building. The other people in the building, having heard the shots, had vanished. No one stopped her as she exited the gates.

Church was pissed. He was more than pissed. Gennero had never witnessed his boss send out guards to kill those who escaped or angered him. What happened in town was solved in town, or not at all. But this case was different. The woman had killed five of his best, wounded his very best, given Church a literal and figurative headache, stolen his prized weapon, had some pre-war tech that Church wanted for himself, and, on top of all that, had insulted him. Gennero knew Church was old-fashioned in the worst way; he was convinced it was a woman's place to be submissive. No woman, in his opinion, even in the mid-21st century, should be allowed to live as Delia did. He had grilled Gennero on all the woman had said to him before the firefight and had snorted when he mentioned she was travelling north.

"She's probably seeking that city where people say the plane goes," Church muttered as he rifled through papers unnecessarily. Every few weeks, an old biplane flew over the town. Several times Gennero had used the sniper rifle to look at it, and a few years ago, they had launched a flare, but to no avail. After the failure with the flare, Church claimed the plane was an old A.I. drone running on autopilot until it ran out of fuel. Gennero never brought up the fact that it had been flying for nearly ten years. Guards and citizens often murmured about rumours of a city, a functioning city, in the north east, where Pennsylvania or even New York used to be.

Some said the city was in Canada. But whether Delia was making the trek to the fabled metropolis was of no consideration to Church; he wanted her back in his clutches.

“Gennero, you good to go?” Church asked, now re-organizing trinkets on his desk, which was what he always did when he was angry.

Gennero grunted as he injected his wound with a cauterizing agent. Church had generously given him the last vial of the pre-war medicine to use on his shoulder; it would start working in the next hour and slowly knit the hole closed in a couple of days. If he didn’t let anything rub against it or rip it open, it would heal with almost no scar. It still throbbed, but already he could move his left shoulder without too much pain. At least he was right-handed, thank the universe. And, also thankfully, they had a passable medic who had cleansed the wound first.

“Are you sure you don’t want a whole contingent of men?” Church asked, his voice subdued, almost paternal. He looked at Gennero with fondness, though it was the affection one felt towards a favoured possession. Gennero knew Church feared that if the townspeople got word of how low the guard count was after Delia’s handiwork, they would start to mutter, and muttering would lead to talking, and talking would lead to him being dragged out of his office and executed in the street by a mob.

“No,” he replied, “I don’t need anyone else. I’ll send someone to the bar to scout for insurgent discussions.”

“You can deal with that when you return. Bring her back, remember.” Church began pushing broken glass from the display case onto the floor with a book.

“Who’re you going to give her to?”

“Everyone,” Church muttered, “and after that, she’s going to pay with her life.”

Gennero frowned at the thought of that happening to any woman, even the woman who had shot him.

“Give her to me,” he said, trying to shield her from the worst of Church’s punishment, “only me.”

Church paused in his arrangements and looked up at Gennero, confused, and more than curious, “I can’t let you kill her behind closed doors ...” Church nibbled on a hangnail, “I think I’ll resurrect the feral dog pit. We’ll get a bikini for her, no weapons. That’ll keep everyone in line. After you have your fun.” He smiled. “Yeah, you can do whatever you want first. Just don’t kill her.” He turned to stare out the window.

Gennero scowled at Church’s back and snapped a fresh magazine into his handgun. *Why was he still working for this man?* Church used to accept his nickname with a grin, used to take Gennero aside and tell him stories of the olden days, used to ask Gennero if he was getting laid. He had always been a ruthless and arrogant man, but as the years had progressed, as crises after crises had arisen in the town, Church’s methods had grown increasingly dictatorial. Church stank of fear, even when he was ordering an interrogation. The older man had hardened over the years — as the crops were less bountiful, as the buildings continued to crumble — but his recent betrayal, one Gennero tried not to think about, had opened Gennero’s eyes to the man his mother had always warned him would surface one day. At least Gennero was now being given a few days to himself, to think. He hoped that Delia would find a way to hide her trail, and he’d have to return empty-handed.