

SHE'S OUT THERE SOMEWHERE

-A PROLOGUE-

Ivory sat alone at the bar. Not really alone, though—other patrons populated both sides, mostly ragged men whose leers she could feel even with her violet eyes closed. She honestly didn't care for the drink, the color *or* the taste. She couldn't even remember what it was, just something off the back bar that she pointed at upon sitting down. She kept telling herself she didn't drink anymore, but it was becoming more of a lie every day. Besides, it made her feel normal, and that was what she wanted right now.

As nauseating classical music scratched out of unseen speakers, her thoughts fell back to her daughter. *Her* daughter, *my* daughter; the concept was becoming alien, guiltily so, but it was true. Every safe chance she got, she would tune in to the Stereo, hoping a clue to her doings, her whereabouts, would permeate the chatter. Had she changed her name? If so, surely it was for security's sake—plenty of people were changing their names these days—but it would no doubt be an act of distancing as well. Who wouldn't, after what happened? The name of Swynsen, a man's though it had been, was nonetheless made infamous by a woman's actions.

A motion of the bartender's hand pulled her out of the past. “You gonna want another one, miss?”

She managed a worn-out smile. So many people thought she looked younger than she was, an enviable trait indeed if anybody besides passing strangers were to remark upon it. “That should do for now,” she said.

He smirked and took her glass. “Y'know, we don't get a whole lot of women in here. Least none as respectable-lookin' as you.”

She countered his smirk in kind. “Can't imagine why.”

Either oblivious or indifferent to the edge in her voice, the bartender moved to wash out the glass in a rusted sink. “There was one young lady in here, couple days ago—not for long, though, seein' as she was underage and all. But the minute she walked in, it was like the whole mood changed, you know? Heh, in fact—”

Her head snapped up from its slouch. “What did she look like?”

The bartender seemed taken aback by the suddenness of the question. “Well, shoot, I'm no security camera. But let's see... blonde, 'bout medium-height, big pair 'a sunglasses...”

“Forget it.” Hopes were already fading in her mind like dying lights. Her daughter was like her: black hair, no taste for extravagant fashions—and tall.

She looked out the fractured window, to the jaundiced fields and setting sun beyond. It was time to move on, if not because of the approaching night then because of the cigarette smoke and TV propaganda that were starting to suffocate her thoughts. “Thanks,” she said softly, tossing a handful of Kupons on the counter, leaving with as few answers as when she entered.

Outside, solitary at the curb, was the motorcycle. She never felt like it was truly hers, but it did what it needed to. Popping her jacket collar down once more, she touched the back of her neck, where the tattoo of a baby tiger innocently rested. She'd gotten it a few months before giving birth, on the spur of something her father once told her: “When your mom was carrying you,” he said, “You'd kick around so much that she said the baby was going to be like a little tiger: adorable, but too much to handle.”

It gave her a strange comfort. Taking a deep breath, she mounted the seat and sped off down the vacant and dusty highway, a violent roar fading in her wake.

The ride had already put thirty minutes and countless ash dunes behind her when something began to fade into focus in the distance. A box, a building... no, some kind of store. Carefully, she adjusted the zoom on her goggles, and her heart skipped a beat: it was Armstraung's gas station, a shell of its former self aside this stretch of nothingness. It felt just like yesterday when she'd last passed it by, but there was no doubt now that her travels had somehow brought her back. Anyone else might have cursed their sense of direction and resolved to keep a closer eye on the map, but the truth was, she wanted to be here again.

When she was close enough to read the burnt-out neon signs on the crumbling brick walls, she pulled in to a stop at the closest pump. She checked the gas gauge's needle: dead vertical. Not that she had any illusions of being able to get fuel so easily; a woman on the road in this part of the city would be lucky if she didn't have to sell *herself* for a full tank. But of course she wasn't here for the gasoline.

As she walked towards the door, a gust of wind swept beneath the station's canopy, dislodging a bleached newspaper stuck in the husk of a display shelf. As it tumbled aimlessly across the dirt, she snatched it up and examined the front page. It was a copy of the *Analashin Times*, the headline proclaiming “Slain Incorporate Officer Remembered.” When she saw the picture, a proud man in a business suit bedecked with medals, she dropped the paper like it was poisonous.

A bell rang overhead as she crossed the threshold, the jingle reverberating off the dark and dirty walls of the abandoned mini-mart. There were signs of more looting—no surprise, considering the location—but... yes, it was still there. In the very back corner by the magazine rack, glowing in silence like a wintertime lamp, rested the jukebox.

She approached it, almost dreamlike, as she remembered when she would bring Victoria (yes, that was her name. Whatever she called herself now, that was her name) here when stopping for groceries, on the return from work. The little girl would push her fingers up against the warm glass and plastic, looking up with awe as the record lazily spun out rowdy, scratchy tunes.

“Wow,” she once exclaimed, “how do they fit all those songs in there, mommy?”

And mommy shook her head, because she knew that she, too, wasn't old enough to explain it. “I guess they just work really hard, honey.”

It was a memory she was powerless to revisit, but in the present, a shuffling sound arose from behind her. Immediately, she pulled out her pistol and spun around to see a man in the storefront, clad in a clerk's uniform and pointing a rifle at her. Her heart sunk when she recognized who it was, but as if it could have been anyone else.

“Really, Mike?”

The scrawny, unshaven man kept his gun raised as he stepped out from behind the counter. “Why do you keep coming back, Ivory?”

She held her aim in return. “Did you know it was me, or is this how you greet all customers these days?”

“Just a tip,” Mike replied, taking a step forward. “If you plan on ending up on a wanted list, it wouldn't hurt to get rid of...” He tapped the back of his neck. “...Any identifying markers. It's going to take more than a pair of fancy contact lenses to throw off the Feds.”

“It was her favorite color,” she muttered. “*Is* her favorite color. You don't have to do this, Mike.”

She could see his hands tighten on the stock. “No, *last* time was when I didn't have to, and the time before that. But you can't keep coming in here with a bounty on your head and expect service with a smile, especially when I've got a wife to support along with myself.”

She glanced at the counter. “She's behind there, isn't she,” she said, motioning with a tilt of the pistol. “*Helen?*”

A frightened-looking woman with disheveled brown hair rose into view, hands weakly raised. “Please don't shoot me,” she whimpered.

“I didn't come here to shoot anybody. In fact, you *know* why I'm here, both of you. I'd think you'd be honored I'm the only one who still cares about this place, except for the rats and street vagrants.”

“But Ivory, you killed a man!” Helen cried out. “You... killed your husband!”

The words sent a flash of rage through her, and she whipped her arm back and fired a round into

the floor. The shot seemed to shake the entire building as Helen screamed and Mike drew his rifle closer and wrapped a finger around the trigger.

“And you don't think I felt anything?” she screamed. “I thought I loved him, but he broke every promise he made! He turned into one of *them*! And he was going to do the same thing to her! *I just never got a chance to explain before she disappeared!*”

Mike's arms trembled. “A lot of people are turning into '*them*'”, he replied. “But that's just the way it is! You don't know how lucky you are that you're still alive, especially as a Revo.”

She felt her body relax slightly, the initial anger giving way to deeper emotion. “I never said I was a Revo. Victoria's a better Revo than I'll ever be, I'm sure of that. But if that's what I have to become to find her, then fine.” She realized one of her eyes was tearing up, and she told herself it was from the shock of the blast, but she'd spent too many bullets before now to believe that.

Then, in spite of everything, she laughed quietly, and the fury dissipated completely. “So that's how we're going to solve this, then? With weapons and politics? I figured hiding out in here would change your perspective, but maybe I gave you too much credit.”

There was tense silence. Mike's eyes darted between her and his wife. Finally, he released a pained sigh and placed the rifle on the counter, barrel to his hip. “Go,” he mumbled.

It wasn't the resolution she'd been hoping for, but it would have to do. Slowly, she holstered the gun and made her way back to the door. As she placed her fingers on the handle, Mike spoke. “Hey, I... hear there's some runaway camps down yonder.” He pointed out to the horizon. “Might be a good place to look.”

She reached to flip up her collar, but swept two fingers over her neck instead. “Sure.”

Her eye was still tearing up as she left the hollow store and remounted the motorcycle, but she wiped it away with a single sleeve. No matter where she went, she was sure to meet trouble, so there was no sense crying about it now. As she revved up the engine and brought down her goggles, she set her sights on the west. “Time to skip a little off-track,” she said, and tore away from the road towards a blinding violet sunset, her face as unreadable as a scratched record.