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Kurtis Clark

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Wandering the Badlands

By Kurtis Clark

From outside my hiding place, I can hear the townspeople rustling around looking for me.

“Where is that brat?!”

“Find him!”

“Don’t let him get away.”

Ha! Do they think they can catch me? I have been doing this for years! They even call me Dead Eye Bandit!

“Runaround! Get your ass out here now!”

...

I adjust my headset and drown out the surrounding noises with indie and alternative rock. I start up my Sky Board and burst out from under the food stall, spilling it onto the ground,. “It’s Dead Eye! And you’ll never catch me!”

The townspeople jerk their heads toward me and start their muffled screaming. While they start running after me, I swing around, laughing at their attempts to catch a sky board on foot. When I turn around, what confronts me is the town guard, all on their boards. My laughing comes to a halt and my face is stuck in an awkward position. The guards glare at me and bolt forward to catch me. Ah, crap.

I twist my board sharp and take off down a side street. Two of the guards chase after me from behind while another appears on the other end of the street shortly after I pass halfway. I am blocked in. I ride to the side of a building and lower my power output to hover just a few inches above the ground. Grabbing the top right of my board I press its underside to the wall and active my grav-locks and jerk up the wall to the roof. Let’s see you chase me now, stupid guards . . .

The guards rev up their engines and soar up to the roof. Oh, the woes of being poor. I want a board that can actually fly, too. Well, depression time is over,



gotta run. Swiping, ducking and twisting, I maneuver through the roof top clutter and clothes. Swinging around a corner, I run into a thick cloth that unbalances me for a second before I remove it from my face. I look down at the article in my hands. Oh, this is a nice jacket. I put it on and continue my escape.

Bursting forth from the roofs, I land in a circular way to diffuse the force and check my surroundings. I am on the main street headed to the town edge, good. Behind me the three guards impact the ground, kicking up a large cloud of dust. Two more show up from the side alleys. Grrr, they sure are persistent. Kicking up my own dust, I rush for the gate. I need to find a way to lose these guys. I look around desperately when I see something that piques my interest—the town gate.

With all five guards hot on my tail, I rush forward. About a hundred feet from the town gate, which is nothing more than two composite poles with a sign hanging in between. I squat down on my board and un-holster my prized twin high mass energy revolvers, aligning my targeting lasers on the chains supporting the sign. With a quick shot of each revolver, the sign falls and I duck low so it will miss me.

Missing my back by just a foot, the sign falls behind me impacting the ground, where it rebounds into two of the guards chests’ knocking them down and

(Continued on page 29)

sending their boards haywire—one of which knocks into another guard's board knocking him for a loop. But it's not over yet. I swing around and continue to fly backwards. I raise my revolvers and fire on the two poles. It takes several shots for each, but I get them off in time and the two poles collapse down. One hits the board of a guard and he ends up kissing the ground, but the final pursuer evades. Fortunately though, after having all his comrades' incapacitated he stops the pursuit and I escape into the horizon. Oh yeah, I am awesome.

The town's folk gather up to help the guards when the sheriff arrives. He picks up the seared and shattered sign chain and then looks at the broken poles, "it is a pity that boy ended up like that, he is by far the most annoying petty thief around here, but he is definitely one of the best shots I have ever seen. Dead Eye huh? Little Runaround has dreams," the sheriff looks down and shakes his head, "I fear the day when people actually start calling him that."

After a few hours of riding I finally see my home. A circle of transport and mining craft. I belong to a nomadic group of surface miners, rather than looking for precious metals we never go deeper than a few thousand meters and look for water and minerals along with some other more practical metals like iron or copper to sell to the towns. It is hard work and it doesn't bring in much money and doesn't provide a very comfortable life . . . yea I don't like being a miner. It is one of the reasons I took to being a bandit of sorts. The other reasons would be for my family, as just a low tier mining family we don't have much income. So I go to town and "find" some small necessities. I don't take anything major, nothing someone would go out of their way to retrieve. Mainly just some small energy cells, food, and the similar stuff that normal people have plenty of. My father and older sister, if two years is considered older, always gets on me but I bring in almost half of the families supplies and income. It isn't much but I was able to get me my own board, albeit a crappy one, but a working one all the same, as well as my prided rail revolvers. Although neither would be considered a necessity, I chalk it up under tools of the trade.

Arriving at the camp I notice that the usual banter of the people on break has a bit of tension in it.

"Did you hear? The Three Faced Demon has appeared around here."

"Do you think it has anything to do with that scientist in town?"

"Dang that Demon, I remember when he was still the Predatory Dragon, nothing more than a thorn in our sides, but now . . ."

The Three Faced Demon? The monster that destroyed a kingdom, a name that is known all through the Badlands and Kingdoms alike. Someday the name Dead Eye will be just as widely known as a great bandit!

Reaching home I blast into the room announcing my great success today, "Rachelle! George! Father! Come take a look, I got a great haul today! I got . . .

Looking around I can see Rachelle, my older sister, downcast and George, my younger brother, balling against her. Rachelle looks up at me, "Rachelle, what's wrong?"

She looks down again "Randy, dad's dead."

My mind goes blank. Dad is dead? My dad? The dad that always yelled at me? The dad that scolded me for everything I have ever done? The dad that ridiculed my dreams? . . . the dad that tucked me in at night, the dad that bandaged me up when I got hurt, the dad with tear stains from worry after I didn't come home at night, the dad that did everything he could for his family, the dad that did his damndest to put me on the right track, the dad that loved us more than himself? That dad, my dad, he died?

After several moments I look to my sister who is there sitting silent, "How? Rachelle, how did dad die?"

Rachelle seems choked up, I can understand, "The mining rig had a malfunction and when dad was assisting the mechanic the rig started up, they both were . . ."

It doesn't seem she can say it, "I understand."

She looks at me with worry in her eyes, "Randy, we are being kicked out of the convoy."

Instantly rage fills me, "What! What do you mean we are being kicked out!? Where are we supposed to go? How do they think we will survive?"

Rachelle looks away helplessly, "you know the rules, if you can't work you can't stay."

I don't even know what I am saying anymore, the words just come, "they can't just kick us out! W-What if I took on dad's job? Then we would be able to—"

"Randy!" Rachelle seems, distressed, "you are barely fifteen and next month I'll be seventeen, the jobs we can do are almost non-existent! And then what about George, he is only six! There is no way we can take care of him by ourselves like that!"

Gritting my teeth, I ask, "Then what are we supposed to do?"

"Remember before mom died, she would sometimes talk to someone on Atomic Link for a few hours?"

I don't follow, "Yeah, so?"

Rachelle sighs, "The mining leader already talked to me, and it seems mom had some relatives in a nearby kingdom, he called them and they agreed to take us in until we are old enough to take care of ourselves. We will need to leave by some-time tomorrow."

"That . . ."

"It is a little far, but there is nothing we can do, come on, we need to get ready."

"That damn Runaround brat, shooting up our gate."

In the nearby town the guards and town's engineers are busy fixing the gate

(Continued on page 30)

(Continued from page 29)

when a large group of armed men show up. The one with the most fancy equipment and surrounded by escorts comes forward, "hey, is there a scientist staying in this town by any chance?"

The town guard steps forward nervously, "Sorry. good sir, but our small village doesn't have any scientist staying here."

The man looks at the smiling guard and pulls out a gun and places it to his head. The guard pulls back but is too late and the man shoots him in the head. The surrounding people immediately begin fleeing. The man looks to the men behind him and screams out to them, "HE IS HERE SOMEWHERE! FIND HIM. BRING HIM TO ME! Alive! Do what you want with the town!"

At that point the men behind the man go crazy with cheers and the slaughter began. The people of the town fought back yes, but they were just way too out-matched. These bandits were very well equipped and had a very large force.

It did not take long for the scientist to be found and dragged to the man. The scientist looks up to the man, asking, "Marquise the 'Bandit Lord', what are you doing here?"

Marquise smirks then looks down on the collapsed scientist, "Hodd, you know exactly why I am here. Where is the Bridge Drive?"

Hodd starts laughing. "I don't know where you heard about it, but you are too late. Some kid called Runaround stole my jacket already, that is where it was hidden. I was about to go reclaim it when you arrived!" Marquise looks at one of the men returning from the town, the man shakes his head. "Well, Hodd, that is unfortunate."

Hodd looks viciously at Marquise, "Ha ha ha, MARQUISE, you will NEVER get the drive!" Hodd lowers his voice to a quiet mumble "it is not something for mortal men to use."

Marquise looks at the injured scientist disdainfully, then raises his gun to Hodd's chest and fires, shooting directly in his heart. Marquise turns around and starts walking off, "Runaround? That kid from the mining nomads?" he looks to one of the men following him, and the man responds to his look, "We should arrive tomorrow afternoon."

Marquise continues walking away from the burning village, "Good." The next day the mining nomads of the area vanished just like a nearby town the previous day, but it was too late; Randy had already left.

Several hours after the Bandit Lord had left the town, Hodd—thought to be dead—begins to climb to his feet. Removing his shirt, he reveals a thin body armor



30

and a small dent with a bullet lodged in it. Hodd digs out the bullet, and the armor begins to repair itself.

Walking up to a rock pile a kilometer from town, Hodd reaches into a hole and flips a switch, causing one of the rocks to distort and unveil a metallic container within. Hodd picks up the container and turns to the direction of the mining nomads, "Sorry ,kid, but Marquise can't get ahold of this."

From behind him, another small group of people show up. Riding a sky board ,their leader moves forward, removing his helmet, "Dr. Hodd?"

Hodd looks at the young man, "The Predatory Dragon, I presume? Or should I call you the Thee Faced Demon now?"

Looking at the doctor, the young man replies, "Reiter is fine. When we saw the smoke, we rushed here. It is a good thing you are okay. wW are here to escort you to the central cities."

Hodd looks to the smoking town with complicated feelings. "What of the bandits?"

Reiter replies simply, "A small issue."

Early morning, before the sun has even risen. I already have everything packed on a hover pallet connected to my board. Rachele and George are both sitting atop the pallet. The leader of their nomad tribe had come to see us off,

(Continued on page 31)

"Randy, Rachele, I am sorry about you father. Please take this. It isn't much but may it help on your journey . . . I wish you could stay, but the rules are very clear."

I look at the leader with a bit of anger for kicking us out but understanding that he has no choice. "We know, old man. Thanks for the money."

Rachele looks at the sleeping George, then to the old man. "Goodbye, Leader. Thank you for taking care of us for so long."

With our simple good-byes, we three siblings set off to the horizon.

After a few hours I turn the board and start heading away from the town. Rachele looks over to me questioningly, "Randy, why are we heading away from town?" Then she notices the coat I have on. She lowers her voice and glares at me, "Randy, where did you get that coat?"

I scratch my head and give a wry smile, "Well, you know yesterday morning when I left to the town?"

Rachele clenches her teeth and eyes, "You didn't."

"In my defense, I didn't know that dad would . . . yeah . . . sorry. We'll stop at the next town; we should be there in a few days. We have plenty of supplies until then."

A few days later we reach the next town, Sword's Edge, named this way because it was originally a garrison position for an ongoing war between two kingdoms. Well, that was a long time ago, and now it is a relatively peaceful place. Using the money from our old Leader, I purchase a cheap room for us to sleep in. it will only be one night, but there is only the border town left, and it is only a couple days away. Then we can hire a transport ship to take us the rest of the way.

While in the town we travel to the market place to stock back up on supplies. Rachele is talking to one of the stall owners about some food preserves when I hear some strange news from a nearby lunch table. "You guys hear about the Bandit Lord going on a rampage in the text town, what was it called?"

"Oh, you mean Waypoint? I also heard that he slaughtered a nearby nomad group of miners. If you ask me, I think he may be looking . . ."

George must have seen my expression because he asks me, "Rand, are you ok?"

At this I snap out of my astonishment. I am just glad George is too young to understand what those people just said. I don't know why, but I have a very foreboding feeling. While I take George out of earshot, "Rachele, hurry up resupplying. I have a bad feeling. I'm taking George back to the room."

She looks at me confused, but replies, "Fine."

While on the way back, I hear some commotion from the market behind me but I don't pay close attention to it. In places like this a commotion is quite common, especially in the market areas. Besides, the town guards start over almost immediately.

In front of the notice board, George stops and stares at it for a second. I

look at him: "George, come on." Rather than following me, he turns and asks, "Rand, the town's people called you 'Runaround,' right?"

I am a bit annoyed: "It's Dead Eye. Now come on."

George looks back one more time, then follows, "Okay."

After several steps I stop. Why would George ask what people call me? "Hey George, why do you ask?"

George turns and points to the notice board. My stomach drops and my heart nearly stops. On the board is a wanted sign. My wanted sign. It reads "Wanted: Runaround Randy, Alive. \$10,000. Posted by Bandit Lord Marquise."

Usually I would be happy. For a bandit, having a wanted poster is like a badge of honor. But this amount? And who posted it. The Bandit Lord, the one who is said to have destroyed Waypoint. That was the town I was just at. Then the nomads. That must have been my tribe. There were no other tribes around. That guy said he was looking for something . . . was that something, me? But why? I was always so careful. I never stole anything that would warrant a bounty. Hell, in just a month I could re-enter the same town and no one would care, so why? Wait, if the Bandit Lord attacked the nomad tribe then . . . Rachele!

"Crap! George, come on! Whatever happens, stay by my side!" I grab George's hand and start off toward the market where I had left Rachele. Crap! Now that I think of it, the commotion earlier was near there! I need to hurry!

George and I fight our way to the stall where we last saw Rachele. She isn't there. Instead there are several town guards. This is bad. I can feel the blood drain from my face.

George looks at me, seeming to understand something is wrong, "Where is sister?"

I look down to George, "She must be at the room, let's go look, ok?"

George seems doubtful, he must see the worry on my face.

We make it back to our room and the door is open. I can hear movement inside. George tries to go in thinking it must be sister, he seems relieved, but I stop him and cover his mouth. There is more than one person inside. He looks up to me and I instruct him in a whis-



per, "Here is some money, go down stairs and order a juice for us ok?"

George looks to the room, "but what about sister?"

I look him in the eye, "go get her one too ok? I'll bring her down in a minute, alright?"

George looks at me questioningly, "Okay."

Gratefully he goes down stairs. Now, the hard part. I unclick one of my holsters ready for a quick draw while I remove the other holster and hide the revolver in my sleeve after adjusting the grip to fit. I walk into the room.

"Oh, you must be young Randy, it is nice to finally meet you."

Inside the room there are two men, one sitting in a chair and another with a knife to my sister's throat who was sitting next to the man. There was a gun on the table next to the man's hand. They both had a symbol on their clothes that I remember, it is the same one that was on my wanted poster. These men are a part of the Bandit Lord's group.

The sitting man resumes speaking, "So where is little George, isn't he with you?" The man is smiling but it seems very menacing.

"Let go of my sister."

The man stops smiling, "Oh? Straight to the point I see. No time for small talk is it? Well then if you want us to release her then drop your weapons and stand facing the wall."

I do as instructed and remove the revolver from my leg. When the man sees the weapon on the floor he interrogates, "You are known to use twin revolvers, where is the other one?"

With as straight a face as I can manage, I reply, "I had to sell it for travelling funds." The man seems to buy my lie and stands up and takes a couple of steps and looks me over.

"Very well. Kill the girl." The man with a knife moves. Crap! I panic and swing around and point my arm to him, but before I can fully move my arm the man standing in front of me grabs my wrist and smile, "lying brat, you really think I bought that?" I can tell I am pale. That is how little blood is in my face. My mind is blank and yet in chaos at the same time. "Now brat, watch as your sister is drained of blood!" the man is laughing while I can see my sister is in disbelief, and completely petrified.

The man behind her begins to press the knife to her throat, and I can see a



single drop of blood. At this moment all noise vanishes for me, the shuffling of foot steps, the laughing of the man, every noise just fades away. It is almost like time has slowed, everything is in slow motion. I can't even see the man grabbing my arm, nor my sister, just the man with the knife, specifically the magic cross. The intersection of where his eye line meets his nose. This is the magic cross. Even though my wrist is restrained I can still move the revolver inside my sleeve slightly. But I cannot aim it at all. Yet I can see where it is pointed. It feels more like I am pointing my finger than my gun. I squeeze the trigger. I don't even think about what I am doing, I can't, my mind is totally a peace. Not blank, but at peace, no excess thought, just one goal, one purpose, kill. So I squeeze the trigger. I can see it, the bullet, it is nothing more than a streak, but I can see it. I watch it. As it flies through the air. As it approaches the man. As it enters his skin. As it exits the other side of his skull. When the bullet hits the back of the room time begins to return to normal. My vision widens. I can hear again. The man is no longer laughing, Rachele is breathing heavily and grabs her neck. The man I shot hits the floor, nothing more than a pile of meat. The man grabbing me looks at me in disbelief. Then looks down at his side, there is blood staining his clothes. My revolver is sideways pointed at him. When did I shoot him? He falls down on his knees, then collapses to the floor. The light of his eyes have disappeared.

Rachele, holding her neck comes up to me holding the gun I dropped. She grabs the one in my hand, "Randy! Come on! We need to leave! Randy! Now!"

Huh? Leave? What about our room? I need my gun. Huh? Why does Rachele have my gun? Who is that on the ground? People are screaming. Did something happen?

"Randy, where is George?!"

George? My little brother, where is George? Huh? Rachele, where are we going? Wait, why can't I speak. What did I want to say? It feels important. There's George, he has juices. Rachele? What about the juices? Are we just leaving them? That's a waste of money. Why are we leaving? Rachele that's my board. You usually ride on the pallet, not the other way around. Wait, why am I on the pallet? Rachele you are going too fast. Are we leaving town? Where are we going? I hope its worm. I am cold. My hands keep shaking so I must be cold. Several kilometers outside the town Sword's Edge by the border to the nearby kingdom, Marquise the Bandit Lord is sitting inside his house construct talking on an atomic link. On the other end is a man dressed in the same uniform the rest of his group has on.

"My Lord, the three kids have gotten away, we found the two scouts that were holding them dead on the floor of their room. We believe they have fled in you direction. Like we thought, they must be running to the kingdom."

Marquise leans back in his chair. "Well, that is unfortunate, my good man. Would you please burn down that dismal hotel?"

The man on the other end bows slightly, "Yes, lord."

Marquise shuts off the link and enters the front of the construct where several attendants and assistants await along with the commanders of his group. Marquise takes a seat in a large lavish chair facing the others, "it seems as though young Runaround has eluded our grasp once again, but it seems his luck is now in short supply. Like I thought, he must want to sell the Bridge Drive to the kingdom. Sadly he will never make it there. Although if he finds out we are waiting for him here he may run." Marquise ponders for a bit before looking to one of his commanders, "Greg, take a unit with you and take the sister and brother. They will make good hostages if Rudy has hidden the drive somewhere."

One of the men present bows respectfully, "yes lord, I shall return in five hours." After replying he turns and steps out of the room to leave.

After Greg left a young man enters the room and bows respectfully as well, "my lord, a small squad of Centralists has been sighted heading this way; they will arrive seven hours from now. It is reported that the scientist Hodd is with them."

We are currently sitting in a crevice outside of town. Rachelle is preparing some food and George is playing in a small cave. He doesn't even understand what is going on. It is nothing more than an adventure for him. Sadly for me, shortly after we left town I finally understood what had happened. It hit me like a wall, no more like five. I killed a person. Not just one either, but two. I shot human beings. I had never even shot at someone before, and I just shot two men dead. I can see the second man's face when I close my eyes. I don't even know when I shot him. I can't even pick up my revolvers anymore. Every time I pick them up I can remember, no more than remember, I fully feel the sensation of when I shot the first man. The heat of the gun's grip, the image of the bullet piercing through his head, the slight recoil.

That is what is the most scary, when I shot him, what I felt was the recoil. That was all I felt, recoil. I had no hesitation, no indecision. I just shot him, I did not even think about it. It was so easy, just pull the trigger and someone dies. Someone's life vanishes, just like that. This feeling, this sensation of killing, of ending the life of another . . . how can people stand it? It is scary, so, so scary.

I don't want it, none of it. Never again. Please, just no more. Just make his face go away! Please, I have had enough. I am sorry, I don't even know your name yet I, I . . . please don't look at me like that, please, just leave me alone.

Rachelle hands me a small plate of basic food preserves that she was able to grab before leaving town, "I am sorry."



I look up from my plate, "why should you be sorry, you didn't do anything, I'm the one that . . ."

Rachelle places her hand atop mine on my knee, "I am supposed to be the older sister," she looks to George, "I am supposed to take care of you two," turning back to me she avoids eye contact and just looks to the ground. I can see some drops of liquid fall from her hidden face, "but I couldn't do anything! Nothing, I was totally helpless. I am supposed to protect you but in the end you saved me!" she removes her hand and sits back without revealing her face, "I am the eldest, but was just so scared, it was so scary. I thought I was going to die. I-I thought they were going to kill you, and George, too. Even though I knew what they would do, I just, I couldn't move. No matter how much I tried, how much I willed myself, I was just too scared." She looks up at me in the eye, her face is stained in tears, "then you saved me, you saved us. Please remember, no matter what happened you saved us. When I couldn't do anything, when I had almost given up, it was you who saved us. No matter what you did, you saved mine and George's life, just remember that." Rachelle tries to present a smile, it is not a very good one. It is obvious how scared she is.

I do understand what she is saying, though. I didn't just kill them in cold blood, I did it to save Rachelle. Even though I understand, I just . . . I killed them. I ended their lives. And I didn't even think about it. I just did it.

While eating the food in front of us, I can see a cloud of dust in the distance. I can recognize what makes this kind of cloud: "Sky Boards . . ." and more than one.

Rachelle looks up to me, "What?"

The boards are coming in from behind her. There is no one around here that has such a number of boards that would be coming in this direction except . . . this is not good. I throw the plate in my hands on the ground spilling its contents all over the dirt and rock as I snap onto my feet. "Rachelle!" she jumps at my sudden actions, "take George and get back to town!"

"Randy, what's . . ."

"Rachelle, NOW!"

She looks around as she stumbles up and sees the dust cloud behind her, she looks surprised and terrified at the same time, "Y-y-Yes! George! Let's go!"

"Sis?" George is confused but Rachelle grabs his arm and pulls him up, causing him to spill his food. He seems dejected, all innocence, I want to preserve his. Rachelle looks at me with complicated feelings, she wants me to come with them. I really do want to.

I look her in the eye, "They are after me. I will draw them off and meet up later."

"But—"

"Rachelle! Remember, who is the best boardsman in our entire tribe? Who is the best shot? Who is the best at running away? I will be fine." Tears start down

(Continued on page 34)

(Continued from page 33)

her face again but she doesn't just say anything, instead she just give me a hug. I tried to sound resolute but, even I could tell how unsure I am. It must be glaringly obvious to Rachelle, she could always see right through me.

I watch as the two crawl out from the rocks where we were sheltered. I really hope this won't be the last I see of them, at least with this they should be safe. If the Bandit Lord gets me he should not need them anymore. Although I do not plan on going quietly or easily. I grab ahold of my revolvers, those images flash once again. My stomach churns and I feel as if I may puke. I choke down the feelings and shoot out on my board. I turn to the side and kick up as much dust as I can. With this my pursuers should know the direction I am headed.

It doesn't take long before the group of boarders reach me. There are nine of them in a diamond formation with a man that seems to be their leader in the center. He is probably in his mid-thirties and has a clean shaven face with relatively neatly fixed hair. Probably only messed up from the wind. He looks more like a military commander than a bandit. Yet he wears the emblem of the Bandit Lord and those that surround him are, well, staple bandits. Scruffy, unshaven, bulky and with worn clothes, even if their uniforms are essentially the same.

I raise one of the revolvers to one of their point men, the closest to me. Looking through the sights I center on him. I can feel that sensation, like the gun is a part of me. I know exactly where it is pointed even without looking. As I prepare to fire images flash in my head. The images of those two in town. Of their eyes as they lost their lives. Of my gun firing. Of my bullet entering his skull. Of the man kneeling before me. At these images, my hand just freezes. My finger won't move. I strain, and strain. Yet it remains solid. I can't shoot. I can't pull the trigger. I can't kill them .

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No! I must! If I don't, I can't let them capture me that easily. Not just for me, but for Rachelle and George too! I promised them I would meet them at the town. So I must fire! Fire! Shoot! FIRE! Pull The Damn TRIGGER!

I can feel the trigger finally move, it goes smoothly. Almost like there is no resistance. With a 'click' my revolver cylinder cycles, the energy cartridge flashes a bright light, the energy is condensed, then converted to mass, the mass is forced down and out of the barrel. Hurtling toward the group of bandits the bullet closes in on them at astonishing speeds. The mass approaches its intended target, it flashes by, missing the man and impacts the ground a distance away. Huh?

Upon my shot the formation scatters. I missed? I try again. I pull the trigger, no freezing this time. The trigger is pulled with little resistance. This time I aimed for a different person. Directly at their chest. The bullet impacts the ground again. I look with my eyes, my gun is pointed at the man, but what I feel, is it pointed at the ground. No matter how hard I try, no matter how I adjust my aim. It appears to be directly pointed at the target, but I can feel where the bullet will head, toward the ground. They are deploying their shields and are maneuvering but the bullet is not

being diverted, nor is it being dodged, the bullet is going in a straight line, I just. I can't seem to point the gun right. I can't point it at them.

Even then, I can at least still shoot. I may not be able to hit them, but they don't know that. I can just keep firing while I flee . . . wait. Where are they going? I am over here. Over there is, no . . . No they are after me, so why! Why are they headed toward Rachelle and George? I-I must stop them. I begin to fire. Non-stop. Faster than I have ever shot before. Yet, yet why won't any hit! Please, let them hit. Hit! Why? Why won't they hit! I charge directly at them, three of them split off and come after me. They open fire on me. Their bullets scrape and scratch at me. They do not get a solid hit on me even once. Although I am unable to hit them either, there is one evident difference. I *can't* hit them whereas it seems they very purposefully *won't* hit me. No! This can't be happening! Please don't let this happen! The others are closing in on Rachelle, she is just on foot and they are on Sky Boards, there is no way she could out run them even if she was at a full run, and now she is even dragging George with her. I want to go, I want to help them. Pick them up and flee. I know it would be useless but, it is better than doing nothing. Yet I can't even do that! These three won't let me anywhere near them, besides I am already too far away from them. It is way too far, but for some reason I can see Rachelle's face clear as day. Through the dust, through the dirt, through the barriers of distance I can see her as clearly as if she were just a meter in front of me, rather than the several hundred meters apart we are. And plastered all over it is fear. Fear for life, fear for her future, fear for George in her hand, fear for me so far away, fear for what is to come. It is unbearable, I don't want to see her like that. She does not deserve this. I am sorry. I am sorry. I don't know what I have done but they have nothing to do with it! So please, leave them alone! Just leave them alone!

I am forced to just watch as the bandits surround my siblings. I am becoming frantic. I fire and fire and fire. But the bullets just won't hit. I have never really been religious but if there really is a god, please hear my please. I don't care what happens to me, but please, please help them. I don't know what I did but they have done nothing. Please save them. Please, I can do nothing. From the revolver in my left hand I can feel a warmth. Something is happening! Have you heard my prayers!? I don't know what will happen but I raise the revolver towards the group surrounding Rachelle and George. I pull the trigger placing what hope I have left in it. In front of my eyes a bright flash appears, turning my whole world white. From the white shadows appear, they pass by my face and a slight pain surges from where they hit. I can feel a warm liquid running down my face. When the white fades I can see my hand. Or what's left of it. My revolver is in pieces and has shredded my arm and hand, I can no longer feel them. My revolver had overloaded and then, exploded. I look to where I was aiming, I can see the bandits carrying a knocked-out Rachelle and George away. God? What sin have I done?

The three surrounding me break off, and I hear a clank sound by my feet. When I look I see a concussion grenade just a half meter from me. With a blast of

(Continued on page 35)

wind my vision goes black. My head hurts. I sit up while grabbing the back of my head. Where am I? Uhg, what happened? My hand . . . ?! my, my hand.

"Rachelle what . . ."

I twist around only to see a note tied to a pole beside me.

If you want your siblings back, bring the bridge drive to the encampment outside of town. Otherwise your precious sister will become ours and for your little brother, well we have no need for a brat. You have ten hours.

"Rachelle . . . George . . . what have I done?"

As I hold the note the events before I blacked out come flooding over me. I look at my remaining revolver. Then back to the note. "Bridge Drive? What the hell is that?" I through the note in frustration, "DAMNIT! What the hell am I supposed to do now!?"

I can't use my left hand anymore. Worse than that I can't even shoot them. I have to do something. I can't just leave them, or can I? NO! What am I thinking? Just leave them and say they got killed on the journey? It's easily believable. What am I thinking? They are my siblings, my family. The only ones that I have left. More than that they are the only ones left that care for me. How can I just abandon them? But, what can I do? The city guard won't help me. They have an army of hundreds. I can't even shoot them. How can I save them? The only thing I have is my revolver and it is now useless. I have nothing, I am powerless, weak. I don't even have what they want, I don't even know what it is. Even if I have nothing I must at least try right? I look down at the remaining revolver in my hand. For the longest time this has been my most prized possession. My most prized skill. Now it is worthless. It could not protect the only thing I had left. So what good is it? But it is all I have. If that is the case, I can at least try, no I must regain my skill. I must be able to shoot again. I must be able to hit my targets again. It will still be hopeless, but even if by the smallest margin, I must stack my empty deck. Even if it is just one card. And this is the only card I have, I don't even have my board anymore, damaged beyond repair by the grenade. It has been two hours since they took them. It will take three hours to get there. I can't wait until the deadline, but I have time.

I stack up several rocks in the shape of a human silhouette. Standing a good ways away, I take aim at the figure. Imposing the image of the person who took Rachelle onto the figure I squeeze the trigger. A cloud of dust sprouts to the side of the figure. My left hand is useless, even after I bandaged it with what wraps I could salvage, so I am stuck firing the revolver one handed. That has never been an impediment to me before but now . . . no that is not why I can't hit. I just can't resolve myself to kill. It is one thing to say, but it is another to pull the trigger.

I take aim once again. I can feel the gun, it is just the same as before, like the gun is a part of me. Also just like last time I can tell it won't hit. I readjust my aim, dead center. I ease the trigger back, and another puff of dust. I check my sights and they are pointed away from the target. I take a deep breath and try again with the

same results.

After the fifth shot, I lower my gun. This is not working. I can feel the gun yet when I point it, I can see those two. I can see the light leaving their eyes, the disbelief and the unwillingness plastered on their faces. I stand there for a moment, I do not know how long, it felt like hours but at the same time just a few seconds. I look at the figure and then down at my revolver. I can feel it. As if I am feeling my fingers or arms. I raise my gun up to the sky and lower it toward the figure. I fire and miss once again.

I sigh without moving my gun, I turn to look at the horizon. An indigo sun dyes the brown rocky ground a deep turquoise hue. I close my eyes, I can feel the grip, rough and cold. From it images float, nothing but death. I can see the room where I shot those two men. They stand there looking at me, haunting me. In front of one of them is Rachelle, she looks so scared. Is it because of them or . . . me? Rachelle, don't make that face, you should be smiling, happy. You have always taken care of me and George, you of everyone I know deserves to be happy the most. Behind her that man is standing there. Not the one I shot but the faceless figure of the Bandit Lord. It was you, you people are the ones that took he smile. I swear, if it is the last thing I do, I will bring back her smile. I will make sure she has her happy ending. To do that you are in the way, you need to go away. I Will make you go away . . .

The grip is no longer rough and cold. It is comfortable, warm. The ghosts of those long dead no longer seep from it, but now they are the images of those I need, must, protect. All my memories and feeling of both Rachelle and George. From when I was a baby and Rachelle sat by my crib, when she nursed me when I scrapped my knee falling off my first Sky Board. When George was born, when he crawl off and no one could find him. Then we would see Rachelle walking back with him in her arms. When Mom died and we all cried ourselves to sleep on the couch. How she would return with rough and almost bloody hands from work so we could afford to have a nice dinner for my birthday. How me and George would sit and play for hours. How imposing Rachelle could be when she scolded me for steeling and how cute George was when he screamed "bad!" at me. How bright their faces were when they smiled. How tender they were when they were worried. They have been sad, they have been angry, they have been happy. They have felt and been through so much, but the one thing I don't want them to be is scared. I will not let them be scared, and for those that make them scared, they can just go away. And if they don't, I will make them.

With my eyes still closed, I move my revolver. I can tell where it is pointed without looking. I squeeze the trigger with a smooth fluid motion. With a click the cylinder cycles and the energy is compressed to mass. With a flash and a bang the mass is ejected from the barrel. It speeds through the air and with a crunch it impacts. I open my eyes and look. There are cracks and a large hole in the head of the silhouette. I point the gun again and fire it once again. There is no need to aim. Once

(Continued on page 36)

in the neck, another in the heart, two through each lung and one severing the Aorta. There is no more hesitation. No more remorse. I know what I must do and I can finally accept it. I no longer fear killing my opponent, I just fear what it is that I have become and what I will turn into from here on. I have been here for two hours, it is time to go.

After finding my resolve to do what I had to do, I began my long walk toward the encampment. I had no expectations of actually winning, or even surviving.



Yet I couldn't let myself run away. What kind of low life piece of shit would I be if I at the least didn't try? I do not want to die, and I may end up just running away in the end, but it is not my goal to fight the Bandit Lord's group. It is to save Rachele and George. To do that I have no intention of bursting through the front door. I have come early for that reason. I will sneak up to the side. I have covered my jacket in dirt to match the surroundings. I will move slowly on the ground. Using my disguised binoculars I can tell when the enemy is looking, if I stay still I just look like a lump of dirt from a distance.

When I get close to the outskirts, I will have to be more careful. Using my slightly recalibrated revolver, I can snipe off the guards. If I do this correctly, I can do it without anyone finding out. After, I will sneak into the base and jump from cover to cover, killing as needed and then hiding the bodies. When I find Rachele and George, I will release them. I have some blankets for them like my jacket. We will then sneak out in the same fashion as I got in. When far enough away, we will head back to town and repair my board and get as far away as possible.

Well, that was the plan anyway, but when I arrived in view shot of the encampment what met my eyes is not what I expected. My mind is blank, I just stand there looking unsure of what to do. I expected a walled off area or maybe a series of tent constructs. Rather than that what met my eyes are many constructs yes, but unusually they are either burnt down or are being burnt down. There are even several that have been evidently blown up.

This does not look good. I begin to rush toward the encampment in a panic. I completely forget my plan. As I run it hits me. What I am fearing above all else. The stench. A smell that sends my mind into chaos and panic. The stench of death. Of blood. Of corpses. In my panic a noise floats over to me. A scream, no screams. More than one. Not just screams either, gunshots, roars, the sounds of combat. There are still people alive.

The chaos of my mind clears, but I am still unable to think or grasp the situation. All I know is if there are still people left, I must go there. I don't know why, maybe I hope that Rachele and George are with them. That they escaped this carnage. That they are not just corpses in a burning building. So I run. Not in a calm manner, but in desperation. I continuously trip, stumble and fall. I don't even think I am breathing properly. I don't even think I remember how. All I know is I must go there. Must go see. Must know what happened. Rachele, George, please be safe.

As I arrive at the edges of the massacre, the stench intensifies. It is almost unbearable. There are bodies everywhere. Torn, mangled, burned, filled with holes. They had died in horrendous ways. What kind of monster could have done this? This is not the work of a mere man. I couldn't be, this viciousness, this brutality. Only a monster could do something like this.

At the back of the gallery of corpses, I see a man that I did not want to see, that I prayed would not be here. It is the man that took Rachele and George, or at least what is left of him. His face is half gone, his arm is charred so black that it is breaking apart, his leg is about three feet away. He is nothing more than overcooked meat now, but him being here means that Rachele and George, they are here too.

The sounds of combat have stopped. I must hurry. I fumble through the charred wreckages of the constructs to the place where the sounds were coming from. When I reach there I see him. A man, standing there with another in his hand. He is standing on a Sky Board, one that I have never seen before. The man he is holding has his neck in an awkward angle as he is dangled from the side of the board. He has blood flowing from his mouth. The man tosses the corpse to the ground where many other corpses lay.

This man he, he killed everyone. They are all dead. Rachele, George . . . this man, did he kill you, too? "Rachele . . . George." There is nothing in my head. Not just blank but empty. Totally empty. No memories are flooding in. no thoughts are sprouting. Just, nothing. I can no longer even talk right, "ah, ah, ahhhh,

(Continued on page 37)

AHHHHHHHHH!"

I scream, I don't know why, I just scream. This man he, killed Rachelle, he killed George! I, I . . . I will destroy him! I don't care who he is! I don't care what he is doing! He will Die! I will KILL Him!

"RAHHHHH!!!!!" I scream once again and charge the man. He looks at me. It is like he is looking at an insect. I will show him! I move my revolver, I already know it will hit. Right at his head. I fire the gun and side step. My face goes into shock. I missed? Can I still not hit a person?! Even this bastard! This bastard that killed my family! All that I had left! I refuse it! I refuse to believe that I cannot hit this man of all people!

I fire again and aim directly for the gap in his armor to pierce his heart. Again I miss! The man's face changes, he seems surprised. Bastard, is he looking down on me? Has he realized I can't hit him? One more, just one shot! I slide to a stop and hold my gun as steady as I can. Time seems to slow. My breathing becomes loud. I can feel where the gun is pointed. But I still aim. This shot must hit! I cannot forgive this man! I must kill him! Him of all people, he must die!

I pull the trigger, the firing sequence cycles. I can see the bullet leave the barrel. It is headed straight for the man's throat. There is no way he will dodge or for it to miss. It is a bull's-eye! Huh? The bullet misses. It hits the building behind him. But what surprises me more is why it misses. The bullet, it—it curves. In mid-air, it just changes direction away from the man. He is smiling. How? How is this possible?!

I try shooting more times and every time the bullets move. The man is just standing there, grinning! I try a ricochet shot and it still misses. I try shooting the board but again it moves! Why? Why can't it hit him! He is laughing now! Damnit!

Wait, when I fired on his board the bullet didn't move as much. It is fine when shooting at the side of the board. But what about the top? It has a lot larger surface area, no, the top is armored on boards. Shooting it would do nothing. The bottom, on the other hand, if I can hit one of the turbine axis or a blade, I may be able to destabilize it.

I take aim. This is by far the most difficult shot I have ever tried. I squeeze slightly but with force. The bullet fires and the man's face changes. He seems genuinely surprised. But at the same time he moves. He changes the position of the board, so my shot misses.

"Boy, you truly are quite interesting!" the man bursts out, laughing.

He shoots forward at me. I can't even react. He grabs my face and, in a grand summersault with his board, he throws me against a wall. From a distance another group approaches. They are wearing the same armor as the man. More of his comrades. I can't even kill this one man! How can I fight more of them?

"Reiter! What is taking so long?" one of the group calls out to the man.

"Just having a little fun with an interesting guy!" says the man, Reiter, istill laughing.

Reiter then turns to me on the wall unable to move, "Boy, you are quite good, even able to find a weakness like that in my deflection shielding. But you shouldn't be so quick to go to your death, there are people waiting for you."

At those words two figures emerge from the group, a boy and a girl, "Randy!"

I look upon them with indescribable feelings, "Rachelle, George."

They come up to me with an older male, who chastises me. "Kid, you should try to be better at protecting your brother and sister. They may end up getting caught in the cross fire next time."

Rachelle and George are kneeling besides me unsure of what to do. The man kneels down as well and pulls me head first to the ground. The two beside me gasp as the man removes my jacket, I can't even resist him.

"Don't worry, he'll be fine, just some temporary paralysis from the shock of the impact." The man pulls me back up against the wall, "By the way, boy, this is my favorite jacket. You really shouldn't steal. You never know what you'll get, and what it'll get you mixed up into."

The man stands back up and with a call from his group he returns to them and they leave. After an hour or so I can move again so Rachelle, George and I make our way back to town. We stay there for a day to recuperate, heal and repair my board, then set off for our relatives for the last time. Two days later we arrive at our destination. It wasn't until later that I learned who it was that I encountered that day. The Three Faced Demon, a true monster famed for single handedly destroying an entire kingdom. It is also said that the people that have fought him and survived could be counted on one's fingers, and I, Runaround Randy, am one of them, and I even have more than one finger under my belt, but well, all in good time.

