

**Days after discovery of life on Europa**

Dust rises over a jagged ridge. Hooves thunder across the scrub brush-dotted desert as two riders do their best to drive the animals toward a ravine and a corral. The men emerge behind the herd whistling and hooting. The animals stream past a gate. Some 20 horses follow the line of the fence and are agitated when they reach the far end. They turn back. Before the frenzied animals can bolt a rider slides off his saddle and runs to close the gate. His legs are stiff but he is quick enough. The gate slams closed. The single sorrel mustang rears up making a shrill protest. Michael's friend, Gus laughs at his startled friend who retreats at a gallop. Gus can plainly see these beautiful creatures have not lived in the wild for more than a day or two. As the dust settles, Michael slaps his Western hat on a pant leg and wipes his forehead. He tosses a canteen to Gus.

"What's the plan for 'em?" Gus asks and then guzzles from the canteen.

"If I had any sense I would take 'em down to the glue factory."

"Sound like your dad."

Michael's head bobs and he encourages more commentary beckoning the way a prize fighter would. "Go ahead. Tell me again why I need to face things."

"How much work do these animals make for their owners. You seriously think you have time for one?" Michael doesn't reply. "So why are you rounding up what looks like to me some guy's very expensive hobby?"

"Some things are not so easily explained."

"I suppose not. I bet if we had a scanner we might find all of these animals have ID chips. So, why are they here?"

Michael stares back with a narrow eye.

"Now *you* sound like my dad." Michael releases a heavy sigh. "As soon as I get 'em fat, they go back."

Gus shakes his head.

"Do I have to worry about getting fired over this?"

Michael lets the question hang in the air. He leads his mount back to the stable. Gus follows with his horse he is told is half Belgian, a monster of a horse for a monster-size man. The men take down the saddles and pick up brushes. Michael is vigorously brushing his horse, a black Arabian.

"Working that brush pretty hard."

"Can we drop it?"

"This was a stunt to give him ulcers, wasn't it?" Gus looks at Michael evenly.

"If anyone deserves it, it would be him."

"Look. You need to get over this. Back at training, we knew there would be fighting. There was a lot of stress and that meant something had to snap. None of us wanted to put in the extra work if we were caught. Still, guys took a swing at one another. Point is people settled things that needed to get settled."

"Your point?"

"Knock him on his ass."

“Busting a few knuckles going to fix things are they? My uncle did that. Regretted it. He said he had never hit a drunk before that day. My dad is a full-time drunk. Only time he puts down a bottle is to tinker on rockets. And it’s been a long time since he rolled up his sleeves.”

The muscles in Michael’s jaw are tight but he begins to relax. Gus is not satisfied with the answer.

“That the uncle who went missing?”

Michael is mute on that subject, too. He leads his horse back to a pen. He closes the gate. Then he slams his fist into the wooden wall.

“He could’ve done something. He has the power, but he lets his cronies do what they want. And, they are not finished taking from the Apache.”

“So this is about politics?”

“Politics? This is about people’s lives. It’s about respect for land. No one needs these mines anymore. But they keep coming back to take more. Now they want to take reservation land again.”

“You’ve got money. So, why don’t you do it?”

“Tried that. I even helped them protest. Neil let me think he was going to help me. It was a ruse. A Senate bill never left committee. An insider told me my dad had lobbyists on payroll, but they were working against the Apache. He was married to an Apache. But he never respected our people.”

“Quit. Leave the company and don’t look back. There are places left where you won’t find the Turner name.”

“When I signed up to fly, I lived in a trailer next to the hangar where he worked on his jets. As soon as I could I got

a place of my own in the canyon so I could get out of his face. I do this so I can fly and nothing else.”

“You don’t have a problem taking his money.”

Michael looks across the huge back of the half Belgian to the large man. “I’ll clobber him the first chance I get.” He walks out to inspect the string of twenty and nods toward his vintage pickup truck. “First things first. They’ll need to eat.”

The men head down the road. Michael is still stewing about his dad. “You asked about my uncle. He was arrested not far from here. I was arrested, too, along with half the tribe. They didn’t have room for all of us at the county jail. Some were taken to other jails. Three days later, we were all released. But my uncle was never seen again.”

“You or your dad looked into it, I suppose and learned what?”

A tire runs over a sharp rock and they suddenly are jerked onto the shoulder. The vintage International rolls on the flopping tire and then finally comes to a stop. The men leave the vehicle and find the passenger side front is flat. Gus only knows of blowouts from old movies.

“Let me guess. Pneumatic tires?”

“Yeah, they blow out. I knew I should’ve replaced that spare.”

“You don’t have a spare?”

“I was getting around to it.” Michael smiles and seems proud of his mistake. “Damn. Must have bumped my mobile. Your phone work?”

“That half Belgian of yours took care of my phone. I won’t walk right for a month, either.”

“Well, don’t gain any weight. I don’t have anything bigger and I’m not buying a plow horse.”

“Keep talking funny man.”

They hoof it to a long driveway from the two-lane highway. Gus complains about the heat again and dehydration.

“An investigator looked for months. Mortuaries. Hospitals. A lot of dive bars and hangouts. Spent several weeks asking around logging camps and mines, anywhere they might be raping the land. Even the places my uncle would take me as a kid. Never found him.”

“Had to be hard on you.”

“Yeah, he’s the only real father in my life. Strange things happen in this place they call Arizona.”

When they arrive at a roadside diner named “Joe’s,” a lone woman is talking with the owner who is urging her to call a friend. Joe picks up his phone and then he notices Michael and Gus.

Gus: “Can we use your phone, Joe?”

“Haven’t any of you young folks heard of mobile phones? Hey, ask these guys. The not-so-tall one is Michael Turner. They own planes.”

Michael moves toward the counter. He catches her eye. She dips the corner of her dark glasses.

“What my crusty friend here means is we can have a hovercraft up here in minutes. Joe means well.”

The woman removes her eyewear and turns her stunning eyes to Michael. The sunglasses and shoes are his first clues. She is definitely not from these parts.

“My car broke down.”

No. The woman is definitely not from rural Arizona. She has a subtle English accent, which likely throws people off. He would learn she is from Las Cruces where she spoke the local Mexican dialect as well as English before moving with family to Surrey in the United Kingdom.

“Breakdown? You must be driving some junker like mine? But we can get you where you need to go.” Michael looks to Gus, who nods. “We’ll have some help here in minutes.”

“I was sightseeing on the back roads. The warning light must have failed. I came around a curve in the hills. Almost ran over a herd of sheep. When I tried starting it again, well, it was dead. The shepherd brought me here. Nice Indian fellow, but he abandoned me as soon as I stepped out of his truck.”

“Where are you headed?”

“I’m on my way back to San Francisco.”

“Then you are in luck.”

He nods to Gus who is dialing the phone.

“One of our puddle jumpers will come up. I have to ride into San Jose tomorrow. Come along. We’ll get you to San Francisco.”

“I insist on paying you. But, uh, what about the rental?”

“I’m sorry. We have a strict policy about accepting money from stranded motorists. The rental company will send a

truck after it. Gus can help you with that. Meanwhile, you can grab something to slake your thirst. But skip the food.”

The owner gives him a sidelong glance and tosses a towel over his shoulder as he watches the trio take a seat at a table near a jukebox.

“My name is Sharon Emanuel.” She thrusts out a hand. Michael smiles and notices that her left hand has no ring on it. She is wearing earrings that look like some he has seen advertised in Santa Fe. He smiles. She has good taste.

Sharon glances at their muscled arms. All that climbing can be good for a man.

“This is Gus Christianson, climbing partner and sometimes quiet rider. I’m Michael as you know. We work in Fort Huachuka, for the Turner Corporation. Glad to meet your acquaintance. My friend and I were doing some weekend riding.”

“I’ve heard of him.”

Gus grunts looking up from a menu and extends a big hand, which she shakes.

“Only truckers stop here,” Gus notes. “She’s very lucky running into us.”

The three sip ice tea. Gus wolfs down two of the diner’s specialty, barbecued rabbit. They are amused as the sandwiches disappear in two bites. The hovercraft arrives as he finishes. The turbines scream as the craft throws dust and sand at the diner windows. They leave after paying and are about to board when two more aircraft arrive. The new arrivals have insignia on the side – the marking for the sheriff’s department.

A deputy wearing a badge on his belt hops out and calls out to Michael. Two more deputies arrive behind him with handcuffs.

“Have the pilot shut down the engine!”

Michael: “Looks like we’ll be taking a detour.”

Michael signals the pilot and the whining engines begin a shutdown. Sharon suppresses an urge to laugh. Michael catches her expression.

“What?”

“I’m supposed to say what do you mean ‘we, white man’?”

Michael is impressed she is keeping her sense of humor. He smiles at her joke. But he senses he might not talk his way out of this jam. The deputies approach and are about to cuff Michael and Gus.

“You’re here about the horses. Short story: It’s just a misunderstanding. I’m Michael Turner and my friend over there is Gus. The animals belong to my dad.”

“I know who you are. We got the signal from the herd. Only reason those signals sound is when there has been a theft.”

“Has to be a mistake. We have them rounded up. Our next move was to send for some trailers to ride ‘em back to the fort.”

“You can explain all that at your hearing.”

Sharon calls out: “Wait!”

Sharon moves between them and offers another explanation. “He’s right. I’m a guest at the fort,” she says doing her best not to reveal her accent. “I was there with



Neil Turner when he asked to take the horses for a romp. You're not going to arrest them, are you? Technically, these horses are his."

"Nice try. We spoke to Neil Turner. He wants whoever has the horses locked up. We're not interested in you, mam. Please step aside."

A deputy cuffs Michael and they search him for weapons. Gus, meanwhile, warns a deputy that the cuffs are unlikely to fit. The deputy persists, but Gus is right. The handcuffs are too small. Finally, they find a zip tie and tie the big man. They motion the two men toward their aircraft.

A Turner Corporation car arrives.

"Call my dad," Michael calls out. "Have us bailed out."

Joe Brien leaves the diner and watches the three aircraft lift off.

"Good news! Got a guy who will feed your ... Oh, sorry. I thought you were Gus and Michael."

He looks in the direction of the hovercraft. "Is that them?"

Sharon recognizes the cook's face.

"Sorry, I'm on the phone here."

"You're up to something. I saw you get off a bus. I have to warn you I'll be talking to them again."

The car window closes and the driverless vehicle moves down the road.

The cook calls after her and finally shakes his head and retreats to the diner.

The cell door at the Gila County jail slams and a latch engages. With keys dangling from his hip, the sheriff's deputy walks off toward the entry door leaving Michael in the dim enclosure.

"Hey, you can clear this up with one phone call!"

Michael turns to look at the cell. There are only two narrow slats that emit narrow beams of light about 12 feet above his head. The rest of the cell is unlit. If there is someone here, they prefer the dark.

"They make this place for King Kong? Anybody home?"

There is only silence. Michael wanders a few feet. "Hey! Can you turn up the lights in here?" His voice echoes off a far wall.

The cell is bare, too, except for a toilet seat and sink. He decides to sit on the floor with his back to the cell door. What seems like hours passes.

He can hear the sound of wings flapping nearby. He looks overhead but sees nothing. Then he hears many wings flapping.

"Hey! There's a bird trapped in here!"

He begins to wonder if there are any guards still in the building. Michael wanders toward the back where it is darkest. A bird swoops from the high ceiling toward his head brushing his arms as Michael protects his face like a fighter. Then there are more. Frantically, Michael fights off the winged assailants that fly at his head.

The desperation in his voice can be heard in the cavernous lockup, but no one comes. His screams echo in the empty enclosure. Blood drips from his arms. Michael sees that the birds flying at him are owls. *Where the hell did they come*

*from?* Michael could keep ducking and bobbing like a prize fighter but not forever. Eventually, he drops to the floor and covers his head. He can feel stabs from the large birds when they land on his back. He howls as a beak digs deep into his thigh. He rolls toward two of the large birds and grabs one by its leg. The animal makes him regret it immediately. The beak cleaves a finger and more birds come after his face.

It dawns him that he is in a fight for his life. He places his back to the wall and kicks. He makes contact and kicks again. His adrenaline has taken over and he is not thinking anymore. The smell of blood drives the birds to frenzy. He repeatedly screams but there is no sign of help on the way. His screams become whimpers. In minutes they have stripped off skin and muscle from his legs. His legs are useless though he feebly thrashes with his hands that fall to his sides. He loses consciousness as the birds keep tearing at him.

Michael awakes and screams again when he feels big hands pull him up by the armpits.

“Snap out of it! Jeezus! What happened?”

Michael is still swiping at birds when he is on his feet. Gus shakes him but his face is full of terror. Gus suddenly does not recognize the man in lockup. Gus has seen men lose it in the heat of battle. Gus slaps him and the man keeps ranting.

“My legs!”

Gus calls out: “I need help in here!”

Michael breathes noisily and is sobbing. “They cut me.”

“Hold on partner. I’ll get help.”

Gus calls again. He can’t find anything to make noise with. Then he sees the sink. The porcelain shatters against the

bars sending up a racket that Gus figures will be enough. But to make sure, he grabs the plumbing and wrenches it loose. Finally, two deputies arrive.

Gus explains that Michael must have gotten some bad drink or something. Water is gushing from a ruptured pipe. The deputies first want to know about the damage. One of them becomes angry. "What the hell happened here?"

"You know who this is? You guys better get someone here in a hurry if you want to keep those badges."

A deputy speaks into a device. Gus is not satisfied until they call for the jail's medical team.

He turns to Michael who must have watched the big man tear apart the place. As if a light has turned on, he is suddenly calm and coherent. Michael asks about the hole in the wall as he eyes the damage and mess. "You redecorating?"

"The woman we met two days ago, Sharon rode back to the fort and plead your case to your dad. They're coming. Probably outside already."

"Days? How long have I been here?"

"Let's have you do some walking."

"I think I hit my head."

Two medical technicians arrive.

"Gus, get me out of here."

"Deputy?"

The deputy has his hands on his belt. "If he's okay, you can both pick up your things and go. The paper is coming through now."

Michael is examined and the pair is released. Neil Turner is standing with Sharon at the end of a long hallway. Michael approaches his father and slams his fist into the man's jaw. Neil sprawls onto the floor and remains motionless.