

CHAPTER 2
GUNS A HIMBO

Guitar chords ripped through the air and caught Redd's attention. In the five days he'd been in Shrine, the coyote hadn't heard anyone play guitar. He knew, long before he saw him, that he was an outsider.

The sky was just beginning to fade with dawn. He found the origin of the guitar chords sitting on the stone fountain in the courtyard: he was a cougar with bronze fur, somewhat older than himself, with handsome features and a turquoise scarf quite similar to the gunslinger's.

"*Buenos días*" he greeted.

Redd just nodded. The cougar continued to sing, and the coyote noticed that roses bloomed at his feet, as if awakened by his song. He asked:

"You must be my partner, right?"

"Allan Diego Caldwell Sánchez, at your service."

Redd let out an indistinguishable snort. He preferred to work alone, but Cobbey had notified him that they had decided to contact some more... *options* due to the uncertainty surrounding him. "Just in case". The gunslinger wasn't going to argue over nonsense: whether his partner was brave or stupid enough to get involved, it was his business. He wasn't going to babysit or watch his back. It was Scorchland's law: everyone was on their own.

The desert was no place for roses. It would be a great pity if The Scorchs claimed another soul. Redd didn't like to think about that.

Cobbey provided them with food, weaponry, and young roadrunners. There was a long journey ahead and no time to waste. Caldwell and Redd had already departed by the time the sun bathed the Earth with its scorching heat.

With the birds' galloping, their occasional screeches, and the wind on their faces, Shrine was soon left behind. At noon they saw in the distance an eroded red mountain, the first one before entering Badlands County, where the dust never settles. A desolate place with no shelter to protect yourself. Redd felt his roadrunner's heavy breathing and felt sorry for the bird, but if they didn't reach safe ground by dusk, no one would come out alive.

After an arduous day of uninterrupted travel, the pair took refuge in a small cave on the side of a hill chain. They removed the weight of the birds and gave them their well-deserved water, and then let them rest. Even Redd, who used to spend nights as a lookout, felt dizzy and saw spots in his vision: the symptoms of sun disease.

"I'll take the first shift," Caldwell said, offering him a canteen.

Redd accepted it. The world swayed gently, and the pain paralyzed his legs, it was too hot; until the gunslinger took a few swigs of the refreshing water of strange taste and gradually regained common sense. He realized he was sweating.

"Do you feel better?"

Redd nodded.

"You've underestimated the desert, partner. You almost fainted, but you were right. We either crossed or we didn't. You're tough, I can see it."

"What is this?" asked the coyote returning the canteen.

"A remedy for sun disease." The cougar replied, drinking a good swig. "I thought it would be useful."

"Thank you," Redd said.

Caldwell shrugged and began to build a small bonfire.

"Can I ask you something?"

Redd stared at him but did not answer.

"How does it feel to have those eyes?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Even after a day of travel and with the sun on our faces, you managed to find this place in the distance. Right now, they seem to shine."

The flame fanned and illuminated Redd's unfriendly face.

"It was just a question, partner, nothing more. " Caldwell continued. " It's not something you see every day."

"Like your roses?"

The cougar smiled with his bright teeth.

"Now we're talking. Sometimes they grow, sometimes they don't. They come and go at their will, I don't understand it but I'm not complaining either, after all, we all like a spark of mystery in life, right?"

A gust of icy wind stirred the campfire and fanned it. Night was already falling in the Badlands.

"I also don't know how to explain it," Redd said after a while "I've always had this... *clarity*. I've never had trouble seeing in the dark or spotting things others miss. It just is as it is."

"I hear you," Caldwell replied.

Yes, you do, the coyote thought. None said anything afterward, so the gunslinger wrapped himself in his scarf and lie at the bottom of the cave. It was almost involuntary. Redd was used to being alone, resigned perhaps. Good company was a luxury during the Revolution. However, before falling asleep, he couldn't help but think that he had met someone like him.

Important note: This chapter took me more than I thought and finally came to a sudden writer's block I couldn't shake off. So I'm going to leave it unfinished because, let's get real, not a lot of people read my stories (which is not bad, I love doing this and bringing characters to life for no reason). If I finish the rest of the chapter, I'll update it.

I still have the intetion of writing the other two chapters to finish part I. But I'll leave it there. This story is too long and it would be too much time and work for characters that are not even mine. It appears no one reads this, but I want to thank you dear reader, past or future, for getting interested and reading. Even if I never knew it.