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and the
Steel Wolf Renegades"
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Captain Jack Bowie and the Steel Wolf Renegades

Sean T. M. Stiennon

Captain Jack Bowie accelerated his bike to fifty, making the engine growl louder and the dust fly harder from his wheels as they ground at the dry grass. The breeze also intensified, helping to wipe away the sweat that covered his bronzed skin. His Rough Riders accelerated to match his speed, and Bowie heard someone—Abe, he thought—let out a whoop. The open plains stretched before them, glowing beneath the light of the Texas sun.

The war against New America had been going on for twenty years now, on and off. Bowie hadn't been old enough to vote when the split had happened, when Red and Blue had gone their separate ways with plenty of venom on both sides over the election of '32, but he had been a soldier all his adult life. Now, hostilities with the Blushies had caught fire after almost a year of quiet, and there was a jamming field laid down all over northern Texas that stopped most long-range communications. Just about every bike squadron in the Texas Regular Army was out patrolling, and the border forts were on the alert. There were also rumors of Renegades in the area, bands of lawless men who didn't care for anything but their own ideas of justice, which generally involved murdering Blushies. Bowie kept his eyes open for any sign of either enemy.

Suddenly, something flashed at Bowie's eyes on the plain ahead, to the left of a broad hill. Something metal besides the Rough Rider motorcycles was out in the desert. Another group of Texas Regular Army bikers out on patrol, some unmapped hermitage, or something more sinister?

He spoke into his radio—no good trying to shout his orders.

"See that flash? Move towards it, y'all. B, swing far left and go around from that direction. A, on me, please. C, would you hang back a mile or so? All of you, get your guns out and be ready to fire them. Greg, Dick, you unpack your launchers and load gas shells. If there's trouble, sirs, conk out the ones causing it."



Affirmatives came in from the squad leaders and the heavy weapons men. Keeping one hand on the steering bars of his motorcycle, Bowie shifted his helmet down to cover his eyes a little more. He had lived in Texas all his life, and this light was too bright for even him. He couldn't tell how far off his target was—light like this could set steel miles away flashing.

He cranked his speed up to fifty-five, then sixty. Best not to give 'em too much warning if they weren't friendly.

His and his regiment's engines grumbled, but they could handle it for a little while, even if the Rough Riders' bikes were in need of some repairs, which they'd get next time they went down to Amarillo.

A little less than a third of Bowie's men peeled off to the side and accelerated slightly to get ahead of the main group. Bowie's radio growled, and he heard the voice of his squad A lieutenant saying, "Cap'n, you think it could be Blushie scouts? Or a tank column?"

"Naw. Blushie tanks are too grimy to shine, and that thing over there isn't movin' anyway. If it's scouts, well, Blushies do most of their scoutin' by helicopter, so it'll be a crashed one. If they have decided to give bikes a try, I hardly think they can outride the Rough Riders."

"Right, Cap'n, thank you."

As they moved closer, Bowie could hear guns cocking. Other outfits might have started shooting the air by now, but the Rough Riders were too well-trained for that. They'd save their bullets for Blushie game.

Bowie could make out a distinctive shape now, and it was no armored column. Right now, it looked like a heap of metal, possibly a shelter. No bullets were flying yet, although the regiment's dust was visible for miles around.

A minute later, Bowie saw what it was: A helicopter wreck. Just one copter, as far as he could tell, that had probably taken a hit in its aft and been forced to make a crash landing. Closer, and he could see that it was a Crow-class Blushie stealth copter. The Blushies had been jamming the area for days, and this explained that nicely. Trying to sneak something through, or was it a survey expedition, and this copter was just one of many? And who had shot it, anyway—one of the border fortresses?

The Secession War had been going on for five years now, and it had gotten to the point when a few border raids, some aircraft attacks, and some gunfire along the borders didn't make anything more than a small, middle-page article in the big papers. The Blue and Red sides still hated each other as much as ever, and although as far as most folks knew there weren't any big invasion plans, killing was a part of the daily routine for men on both sides.

Bowie ground his bike to a halt and dismounted a hundred yards away, unclipping his rifle as he did so. There was also a .50 caliber revolver in a holster on his right thigh and a Texas monster Bowie knife strapped at the base of his spine. His toothpicks, a nice little pair of stickers with six inch blades, were down in his boots. The other boys in the Rough Riders had similar gear, though some of them didn't have the same fondness for a good knife. The heavy weapons boys were hanging back with their artillery, C squadron was back half a mile, and B was out to the west on a blank stretch of searing grassland. That left Bowie and thirty or so men to advance towards the downed chopper, checking their ammunition chambers.

They moved slowly, watching for any signs of living things. Even if no man was alive, this would be a prime rattler stake-out. The copter had skidded across the rocky ground for a few hundred yards, and a fair portion of the underbelly was gone, leaving a nice shaded nook for anything or anyone around to take advantage of it.

Bowie fired a shot into the ground when he was thirty feet away. The sound echoed across the open country. "If anyone's in there," he shouted, "you better get your hides out, sirs, or I'll have my boys unpin a few things you won't be wantin' down your hole."

There was silence for a few seconds. Bowie was about to have Jeb chuck a tear gas bomb when a voice with a strong New American accent called out, "All right, we're coming! We're unarmed, so don't fire!"

"Right. Make it quick, please," called Bowie. "If you need medicine, we've got enough aid kits for the lot of you."

The first head to emerge from beneath the chopper's wreck was sandy-blond and worn long in the styles common in New York City, the

Blushie capitol. A blue uniformed body followed, until a man a couple inches under six feet appeared on the desert plain. He stood, blinking, and holding a hand in front of his eyes. The patches on his one-piece uniform showed that he was a pilot of some sort. "Don't shoot!" he rasped, voice dry from lack of water. "The colonel's coming out."

Four men followed. One was another air-force man, three were New American Infantry soldiers: Two lieutenants and a colonel. The last one was a tall man with a fine sheaf of dark hair and a short beard that had probably been trimmed only a couple days ago. His eyes were a bright blue, and he couldn't have been much over thirty. Bowie could imagine him as the darling of Yorker parties.

His sidearm holster was empty, and his uniform was tight enough to show if he had any other weapons. Still, Bowie ordered a couple men to search them all. One of the other soldiers had been carrying a five-inch dagger. The Rough Rider who had found it pocketed it with a chuckle.

"You're the officer in charge of these men?" said the colonel to Bowie.

"That's right, sir. Captain Jack Bowie of the Texas Regular Army, at your service. You'll be taken as prisoners of war to Dallas, where you'll be treated well enough. Names, please?"

"Colonel Shawn Sanders of the New American Infantry Corps, number F-70-896-771-B."

"Just the name, please. No bar codes necessary," said Bowie.

"Shawn Sanders, then," said the man, smiling slightly.

The other four gave their names and ranks, but not their labels. The boys at the POW camps could get those down later if they wanted to.

"You ever been hogtied before, sir?" he asked Sanders.

"No."

"Well, it'll be a learnin' experience. Go ahead, boys," he said, nodding to a few of his men who had unpacked ropes.

Sanders nodded, looking perturbed. "Is there any chance of an exchange, Captain?"

"Just call me Bowie, and no, your boys aren't too keen on those. They prefer to torture any Texas Alliance men they can get."

Sanders frowned, his face flushing red. "That's not true, Captain Bowie."

"Isn't it? What about that man you sent back with his fingers and toes gone?"

Sanders clenched his teeth, and his fists curled for a moment. Then he seemed to relax a little. "Perhaps there have been isolated instances."

"Right. Instances. Get 'em tied up and on the bikes, men—it'll take us at least one night to get to the airstrip, and long-range communications are no good with this jammin'."

Sanders waved his hands in a distance-keeping gesture as Bowie's ropers came forward. "Wait a minute. Is it really necessary to tie us? We're unarmed, and I'll give you my word that neither I nor my men will attempt escape."

"Blushie oaths, eh? You know they're dang near proverbial around here?"

Sanders lowered his hands, and the ropers stopped, glancing towards Bowie. "I didn't," said Sanders, "but I can assure you that my promises don't fit your proverb."

"So...you're promising me your promise is good? That doesn't sound much better to me. Better get a gag as well, boys," said Bowie.

"This is insane!" yelled Sanders, holding up his hands again. "Don't you have handcuffs?"

Bowie sighed, reached up a hand to press his helmet further down on his head, and said, "All right, if you insist, I've got a few questions I'd like answered besides name, rank, and bar code. You answer 'em, you can ride sittin' straight up. You don't answer 'em, you get roped. Now: What's your mission, who shot you down, and why did you stay with your wreck?"

Sanders thought it over for a moment, pressing his lips together. His men kept their eyes on him and the Rough Riders flicked their eyes between him and Bowie.

"I can't answer the first question, and the answers I give to the other two might not be to your satisfaction."

"Go on, please. I'll decide about the ropes when I've heard 'em."

"We were hit by anti-aircraft fire a hundred miles north of here, near the Texas-New Mexico border, a little after dawn, but we managed to preform some evasive maneuvers and crash land here. We stayed with our wreck because we thought being taken as POWs was better than dying of thirst in the desert."

"Thank you. What kind of AA fire?"

"There wasn't any military installation or fortress, I know that much. It was a small gun emplacement in the shadow of a mesa."

Bowie removed his helmet, sighing. He brushed a hand through his hair, and found it greasy—how long had it been since his last bath, anyway?

"Renegades," he growled. "It had to be those scum."

"What?" asked Sanders, frowning. He seemed to like frowning.

"Renegades. Gangs of armed men who live in secret camps along the borders of the Texas Alliance and make raids on Blushie holdings. You've heard of the Illinois Slaughterhouse, haven't you? Well, that wasn't done by the Texan kind—the Texan kind are worse."

"No...I, I know what they are. But I thought they were your allies."

Bowie was tempted to unsheathe his knife to give what he was going to say some thrust, but he decided otherwise. "You damn Blushies think we'd join up with them? With robbin', murderin' hogs like them Renegades?"

Sanders said nothing. Bowie sighed. "Never mind, sir. Just remember that Renegades, from sea to shining sea, are no friends of the Texas Alliance."

"Acknowledged," said Sanders. "Now, are we going to be tied...?"

"Naw. But if any of your men try and escape, I'll shoot him and rope the rest of you. Do we have a deal, sir?"

Sanders and his men nodded—a little too quickly for Bowie's taste. But he couldn't afford to linger. The Renegades would be after their prey, and they were known to attack TA forces in their thirst for Blushie blood.



Bowie's Rough Riders almost had to draw straws to decide who would be saddled with the Blushies, but a few brave boys who owed demerits stepped forward, and Bowie promised them each a bar of soap and a shower when they were back at barracks.

B and C squadrons rejoined with A, and Bowie set off on a southern course, towards the airstrip fifty miles out from Amarillo, where he could send his POWs off toward the camps at Dallas on the next transport plane.

There were only a few hours of daylight left, and Bowie had to cut his brigade's speed to forty miles an hour—the bikes needed repairs, and the fast speeds earlier in the day had strained them.

They made camp early. Driving after dark was dangerous business even in the plains, where a man could go over a rock and snap his neck without realizing it until he woke up in Heaven—or Hell, as the case may be. Bowie's preacher had always told him that he was saved, but sometimes he had his doubts, even if he didn't think he was enough of a coyote for the bad place.

The Rough Riders preferred to light real fires when they could, but without fuel, and with the dry grass just waiting to catch fire, they had to make do with portable heat lamps—five men apiece, each of them with a self-heating ration pack and a bottle of nutrient water which Bowie thought tasted like dog piss. The Blushies were scattered among them and given some of the spare rations and water, only they didn't get any of the whiskey and cigarettes which were passed around after the meal, and the Rough Riders always kept pistols trained on their ribs.

Bowie ate with his three squad captains: Grant Hashmel for A, Abraham Ronson for B, and Alonzo Tortilla for C. Sanders was there too, without even a pair of handcuffs. Colonels weren't so precious that Bowie couldn't afford to shoot him if he tried to escape—ranks were mighty inflated in New America.

They ate and drank their rations quickly, and afterwards Bowie's lieutenants swigged from their hip flasks and lit cigarettes. Bowie himself preferred a good pipe—more flavor—and as he was stuffing it, he noticed Sanders grimacing and reaching a hand up to plug his mouth.

"What's wrong, sir?" Bowie asked, leaving his pipe unlit for a moment.

Sanders swallowed. "Smoking's banned in New America. Don't you realize the cancer risks?"

Grant Hashmel snorted. "We ain't in Blushie country, in case you didn't know. And in these parts, we ain't afraid of a little smoke."

He blew a cloud of the stuff towards Sanders, and the colonel flinched. Bowie growled. "That's enough. Just enjoy your smoke, Grant."

Then he said to Sanders, "I haven't got cancer yet, and one night with a little smoke in your lungs isn't going to hurt you, whatever your doctor might say."

Sanders frowned. "It's still not healthy."

Bowie shrugged. "Better a few less happy years than a few more miserable ones."

"You'll be reading your Bibles next, I suppose."

"I do carry a Bible," said Bowie, "but I'm not planning to thump it at you, as you Blushies would say, nor do I aim to baptize you with the next bottle of clean water I find. I'll direct you to a good preacher if you want one, but I've never been good at that kind of stuff myself."

Sanders smiled faintly. "Thanks. And I'm not planning to try and start an orgy once I get to the camp—I doubt my wife would like that."

Bowie nodded. "Much obliged. Got a wife, do you? Children?"

Sanders hesitated. Bowie grunted. "I don't want to get their location out of you and go kidnap them, if that's what you're wondering. I'll go first: I've never had a wife nor any children, but I've got a mean pair of god-sons who'll be able to out-wrestle me in a couple years."

Sanders smiled a little wider. "All right. Two girls, one boy."

Bowie raised his eyebrows. "Three? I thought most Blushies had a boy and a girl, no more."

"My wife and I decided otherwise. And we've got another coming."

Bowie grimaced. Now, he almost hated to have this man locked up. Maybe they could get an exchange put together—Lucky Laz was in Madison POW camp, wasn't he? He was a fellow captain, if Bowie recalled correctly, and a Blushie colonel for a TA captain was fair enough.

Something flashed, off in the darkness of the desert. Bowie looked up and to his left, and he saw what looked like a star turned bright orange and hurtling towards him. No, it was a flare. It hit the dirt a few yards away from Bowie's lamp and lay there, glowing. A message flare. Tarantulas and scorpions didn't tend to use those, so he guessed it must be one of his fellow captains giving a report, though he hadn't heard nor seen any other motorcycle regiments for a few days.

Bowie got the message cylinder himself and tucked the heatless glowrod flare into his pocket. He returned to his officers and unrolled the message inside the cylinder. Bowie read it aloud.

"Dear Texas Regular Army forces:

I know you've taken several Blushie prisoners today. They are ours. We won't let you take them back to your prisoner hotels, where they'll be treated like software magnates and practically rewarded for their slime.

They deserve justice, and we aim to give it to them. We're approaching your camp as your read this. Hand them over and drive away, and we'll do you no harm. I warn you not to fight—we have generous patronage, and I have over two hundred men with the best equipment money can get.

Signed, Zechariah Hatcher, leader of the Steel Wolf Justice Brigade."

Bowie's lieutenants were silent for a moment. They could already hear the sounds of motors growling far across the plain. "What do we do, sir?" said Grant Hashmel. "Surrender? I've heard of the Steel Wolves, Cap'n—some say there's a tech king in Houston who gives millions to any Renegades with grit. Their bikes must be better than ours—I don't think we could outrun them, sir."

Hashmel eyed Sanders nervously. Bowie shook his head and stood. He realized that he had never gotten around to lighting his pipe, so he dumped the tobacco back into its pouch and stored it. "Get the boys together, please. We ride in five minutes."

"But Cap'n—they won't be inclined to be nice to us, if we don't do like they say," said Abe. "It's only five Blushies, anyhow."

"They'll torture 'em to death, and I don't intend to tell the general that I left five POWs to that because my men and I were too yellow to do anything else. Let's move along now, please."

Sanders was taking it like a soldier, but Bowie could see the fear beneath his expression. "Don't you worry, sir. We'll be at the airstrip base and safe behind its cannons before dawn, unless there's enough rocks in our path to choke a whale. Now get up, please, and you'll ride behind the same man you did before."

Bowie's Rough Riders were trained to break camp in three minutes, and this time it was less. All ninety-seven men were mounted, engines purring, before the Steel Wolves bothered to turn their headlights on. Bowie raised his hand, and they began accelerating across the grassy plain, kicking up dust towards the clear sky, bright with stars.



The Renegades figured out what was going on almost immediately, even though Bowie had left several of the heat lamps behind to try and give himself a few minutes of distance before the Wolves knew what was up.

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No luck. Gunshots started cracking, the sounds going far in the open air. Bowie leaned down to his radio. "Squads, split up like a pack of

coyotes with a grizzly chasin' 'em. A with me, and Colonel Sanders as well. B, split off to the west, and C, head away off to the east—we'll meet up later. I wouldn't suggest ridin' close together, sirs. Keep your men apart, and those Wolves won't be able to shoot you any better than a pack of mosquitoes."

"Yes, Cap'n," came the replies from his lieutenants.

"And keep your headlights off—better to go over a rock in the darkness than to make yourself a shootin' range target. Decide for yourselves whether to lay coverin' fire, but I wouldn't recommend it. It'd only make 'em madder."

Despite his urging against it, Bowie was powerfully tempted to unholster his revolver and see if his marksmanship was as good as he hoped it was. A quick .50 caliber round in the chest was a more merciful end for the Renegades than any they'd offer to prisoners.

Bowie clicked his radio to a channel that included all of squad A and spoke into it, "All right, Sanders? Not too rough for you, I hope?"

"I'm managing, Bowie, I'm managing," came the response after a moment.

Bowie noticed that the "Captain" had been dropped. He didn't mind particularly, but it was odd.

Then there was a scream that could be heard even above the roar of the bike engines, and Bowie turned to see one of his men drop. The soldier didn't have time to brake before he died, and his bike kept going as his body went back over the tailpipe. Bowie's eyes went back to his own driving. There was nothing he could do for the man—he was dead. Rough Riders who were only wounded clutched their handlebars until Death himself had to cut their fingers away with his scythe.

"Spread out! Spread out!" shouted Bowie into his radio. "Go as fast as you can without shaking your bikes apart."

To illustrate, he yawed to the left and kicked his speed up another 5 mph.

"Grant, Abe, Alonzo, how are you coming along?" he said, switching the channel back to his squad leaders only.

Abe of B squadron answered, "All right, Cap'n—but three of my men are down. Those Wolves can shoot, and they can ride too—I'd think they're using machine guns, from the sound of it."

"Just hold on, sir. We'll be at the airstrip in a few hours at this rate."

Then Alonzo's voice said, "Pardon me, Captain, but a pack of Renegades has broken off from the main crowd, and they're coming after us. Orders, please?"

"Keep runnin'. Once they get too close for anything else, use grenades and bullets to keep them off you. Basically, Alonzo, do whatever you need to keep from bein' captured. I'd prefer you didn't engage them."

"Right, Cap'n."

Now, the nearest Rough Rider was twenty feet away from Bowie. Bullets were flying from the Steel Wolves, but they weren't having much luck so far at hitting anything.

Bowie's men rode on, eating up the miles between them and the airstrip.



It wasn't long before Alonzo and his C squad were gone far to the west, out of radio contact. B was a mile away to the east, but they were being pursued by more or less the same Wolf pack that was after Bowie and his A squadron. A few men had been hit, but the Wolf fire had died down. They were gaining, foot by foot, and were finally saving their bullets for when they wouldn't be wasted.

Bowie's radio fizzed, and Sanders' voice said, "Bowie, look ahead."

Bowie looked, and didn't see anything. "What is it, Colonel?" he asked.

"Isn't that dust?"

Bowie blinked. It had looked like a bank of clouds on the horizon, but now he saw that it was indeed plains dust, kicked up by another motorcycle squadron riding towards him. Another Texan regiment, or more Renegades?

They were still too far away for radio contact, what with the jamming the Blushies were laying across all of northern Texas. Bowie was starting to fervently hope that his preacher was right about his going to Heaven.

The new group turned on their headlights, lighting the horizon afire, and opened up on Bowie's squad. One man dropped within the first few seconds.

"Evade, boys!" roared Bowie into his general comm. "Keep moving! We'll break through 'em."

"If you don't mind my saying so," said Grant Hashmel of A squadron over the radio, "that dog won't hunt. I suggest, sir, we leave the Blushies behind with a signal flare to mark 'em and let the Renegades have 'em. Better a few lost prisoners than all our men dead, isn't it?"

For a moment, Bowie considering trying to find Grant in the dark and chucking something hard at him. "You can stay behind and explain your feelin's to the Renegades if you're so inclined, sir, but we're keepin' our prisoners. Say that to me again and I'll be forced to demote you."

Bowie regretted his harshness almost as soon as the words left his mouth—Grant always meant well—but his suggestion was crookeder than a dog's hind leg. Bowie would put his revolver to his head and squeeze the trigger before he left the prisoners behind to the Renegade brands and knives. Some folks said they had special prisons set up in hidden places all across the Texas Alliance, where Blushies were tortured and killed over an unimaginable period.

Bowie's radio crackled—but it wasn't any of his officers, and the accent was New Mexican. "Captain Bowie, this is General Zechariah Hatcher. This is your last chance to surrender yourselves. You and your men will be

allowed to go free, without bikes or weapons, and we will take the Blue demons for the administration of justice. Otherwise, y'all will be killed."

Bowie was tempted to shoot the speaker, but that wouldn't do any good. Instead, he pulled his revolver, a bulky gun with eight chambers, all of which contained .50 caliber bullets.

"Grant," he said into his radio, "Pass along the order to open fire. Grenades, heavy weapons, small arms—everythin' we've got. Don't shoot to confuse—tell 'em to kill as many Renegades as they can."

"Aye, Cap'n, if you're sure about it."

"I am, sir," said Bowie.

Then he opened a channel to all his men and said, "These are lawless coyotes who hate the Texas Alliance as much as they do any Blushie ever born. Give 'em Hell."

Then he lowered his revolver and fired the first shot. He could tell by the light of the Renegade's own headlamps that it hit.

He heard a whoop sound out from one of his men, and soon it was joined by another. Bowie fired again and let out his own call. Soon, it grew into a thunderous rebel yell that echoed far across the plains, punctuated by the thunder of gunfire. Steel Wolves dropped and explosions blossomed as Bowie's men plugged grenades into them using the launchers on their bikes.

"Drop a few bombs behind and accelerate to attack speed!" roared Bowie, snapping away two cartridges in quick succession. Bullets flew between the two sides, and men dropped—more Wolves than Rough Riders, thank God.

"Lights on, boys!" shouted Bowie.

Light flared, and the oncoming Renegades were blinded. They were a ragged looking posse, with their leather jackets dirty and tattered. Most had helmets or some kind of skullcap on their head. All of them had weapons—surprisingly good ones, given the shape of their other possessions. And their bikes were excellent, even if they weren't in great repair.

Bowie shot two of them, emptying his revolver, then clapped both hands down on his handlebars to steer between them. A bullet cracked past his ear as he slid past the first two, then he found one coming towards him with a machete held back to slash at his chest. Bowie's namesake knife, as trusty a hunk of steel as ever was sharpened, was in his hand within a second. The blades met, steel rang, and then Bowie ducked and the two bikes roared past each other. Bowie kept going, but glanced over his shoulder to see if the machete man was inclined to chase him.

That turned out to be a mistake. Bowie felt a sharp jolt, and suddenly he was in the air, just barely managing to keep a grip on his knife. Stars swirled before his eyes for a moment before he thought to roll himself up for the impact.

He felt it a moment later. It started as an unimaginably sharp pain in at the base of his spine, then spread to all of him as he rolled. Until after he stopped, he could only hope that a stray bike didn't hit him.

He found his was able to stand and forced himself up. Pain was everywhere, and he suspected that the hard ground had cracked his pelvis, but he could stand, and his knife was still in his hand.

His eyes saw only chaos—roaring bikes, thundering guns, dust and darkness and head lights and stars. Then he heard something grind to a halt off to his left, and he turned to see a pistol muzzle aiming at him. He

lurched to one side, dodging, and threw his Bowie knife with a skill he had cultivated since his boyhood. It hit point-first in the Renegade's chest and dropped him. Bowie stumbled forward, recovered his knife, and looked for the dead man's gun. It couldn't have gotten far, could it?

His search was cut short when the Renegade with the machete came staggering out of the chaos, his left side smashed to bloody pulp and his arm hanging limp. Had one of Bowie's men got him? The chopping blade was still with him, in his right hand. He and Bowie, two wounded bulls going at each other—it seemed like a good match-up.

Bowie didn't risk his knife with another throw—if he lost it, his throat would probably be opened in seconds. The bloody Renegade swung, and Bowie blocked with his knife. The impact made dark stars pulse in front of his eyes, and he staggered back, boots tearing at the dry grass. The Renegade grinned—he didn't seem to notice the pain at all. "Not feeling so high now, eh, Captain?" he rasped, swinging his machete again. The blow almost took Bowie's arm off, but he caught it on the tip of his knife and flipped it away. If only he could reach the six-inch toothpicks down his boots—then this Renegade wouldn't be grinning.

Bowie couldn't get past the machete—its reach was too long. Again, he considered throwing his knife, and again decided that without it nothing would keep him alive. Maybe he could keep fighting long enough for the Renegade to die from the massive wounds on his side—probably taken in a nasty fall only seconds ago—but the man didn't seem to feel any pain. Either Bowie would be chopped up, or some other Renegade would see them fighting and empty a few cartridges into him.

A heavy blow from the machete landed on the blunt edge of his knife, hard enough to knock it out of his hand. Bowie stumbled backward, body still throbbing from his fall. With a demonic grin, the Renegade advanced, closing with him. Then Bowie's heel struck something, and he felt himself falling. The impact slammed his bones, and for a moment he felt like he was already dead. He opened his eyes again, and there was the machete, hovering inches above his neck. "Where's your mercy got you now?" shouted the Renegade as he raised the blade for a stroke that Bowie knew he wouldn't be able to avoid.

But the blow never landed—first the Renegade was standing on both feet, and then a splatter of hot liquid struck Bowie in the face, and his attacker was tilting. The Renegade struck the ground and lay still, machete hitting the earth harmlessly.

Bowie scrambled to his feet, doing his best to ignore the pain that hammered through him. The first thing he saw was Shawn Sanders of the New American Army, mounted alone on a Rough Rider bike, with a gun protruding from his forearm. In his clouded state, it took Bowie a few seconds to realize what it was: A cybernetic implant. He had heard about them before. In the great labs of Madison, the Blushies had concocted systems that plugged right into a man's brain and could support everything from telephones to guns to chainsaws. It was still horrifically expensive, and heavily restricted, but some military officers were said to have them. Apparently, Sanders was one of those.

The Blushie colonel gunned his engine and drove up next to him. "Bowie! Get on!"

He reached down a hand, and Bowie took it and allowed Sanders to help him to his feet. He wasn't sure quite how he did it, but he managed to get his throbbing pelvis onto the bike behind Sanders and cling there as the Blushie colonel accelerated away from the melee. Bowie saw that other Rough Riders had apparently managed to do the same thing—they were racing away across the plains now, still making for the airstrip. Bowie leaned towards the radio and spoke into it. "All Rough Riders, this is Captain Bowie. I'm alive and I've got the colonel. Try to get free and drive off wherever you can. We'll reform at the airstrip."

Then, with both arms wrapped tightly around Sanders' waist, he gave in to unconsciousness.



He awoke in a sickbed, in his own room, with four gray walls surrounding him. Apparently, they had thought his rank merited private quarters. What surprised him was seeing Sanders at his bedside, without a guard.

"Good morning, Bowie," said the colonel.

"What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be on your way to Dallas?" growled Bowie. He felt like a piece of husked corn all over.

"My flight leaves in fifteen minutes, but they let me visit you when I requested it, since I saved your life. I'm glad you woke up when you did."

"Hm. That's right, isn't it? Thank you doesn't quite say it, but I'm as grateful as a dog with his own steak. You're a good man, Sanders. Whatever happens in this war, you should remember that."

Bowie was surprised to see a grimace on the colonel's face. "That's not as true as I'd like to be. I've come to give you something."

Bowie was about to ask for more details when a panel of flesh on Sanders' left arm began to rise up, showing metal beneath. "Not a bullet, I hope?" asked Bowie.

"No. That's in my right arm. The left arm is a storage chamber."

The hatch lifted all the way, and Sanders reached into it. His hand came up with three metal cylinders, all not much larger than Bowie's pinkie. There was a simple label on each one. Sanders picked one and held it up to Bowie's eyes. He read two words: "Smallpox QF6."

"That was my mission," said Sanders, wearily. "To take this to Dallas and release it. This is a new strain of smallpox, grown from the samples of the original disease that we've been keeping since it was isolated. Our scientists claim that QF6 is the most destructive disease since the Black Death."

Bowie's throat was suddenly as dry as a horned lizard's back. "Wouldn't spies have been better?"

"The Texan borders are heavily guarded, and all air travelers and immigrants, wherever they come from, are put through scans that would have easily found my implants. But my government believed that, as POWs, we wouldn't be scanned that thoroughly before I had a chance to release the smallpox among your military. From Dallas, it would have been carried all across the Texas Alliance. We had intended to fake a crash landing, actually, a few miles outside this airstrip, under cover of the jamming that my military has been laying down—those Renegades just made it real, and forced us to be less picky about our stop."

"Hmm...that's why you didn't shoot me the first chance you got, eh? And why y'all stayed with your wreck? You *wanted* to be picked up?"

"That's right. Within a year or two, the modified smallpox would have killed millions, and the Texas Alliance would have been shattered. In the meantime, my government has been producing vaccines for some time, and all New Americans would have them administered."

"So...hm...why not go through with your plan? Why give the disease to me? And what do you want me to do with these?"

"I didn't go through with the plan because I realized that I wouldn't be killing the bloodthirsty slime we hear about on TV up in New America. I'd be killing real men every bit as good as any in my country—and not just them, but women and children. Like I said yesterday, I had always thought the Renegades—whose brutality is legendary where I live—were your allies, funded by your government. But I saw firsthand that they were as much your enemies as ours, and that you'd give your own life instead of turning a few POWs over to them. For that, I'm giving you the smallpox. Do with it whatever you think best."

He put the cylinders in Bowie's hand. It was chilling to be holding the death of millions, innocuous-looking as empty bullet cases.

Sanders left then, saying he was going to declare his cybernetic implants to the guards, and Bowie stowed the smallpox QF6 under the edge of his pillow until he could get the nuclear reactor which refueled the planes using the airstrip. It was better destroyed—that was what Sanders had expected him to do, and neither Blushies nor Texans should be subjected to such a holocaust. Bowie honestly didn't think his government would use in much better than the New Americans had.

He'd have to visit Sanders in the POW camp, maybe bring him some cigars, or a pipe and some tobacco. He'd learn to like them if he tried them enough.

With that thought, Bowie lay back and starting waiting for his bruises and cracked pelvis to heal.



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Illustration: "Captain Jack Bowie: Texas Regular Army"
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E. J. Mickels is formally trained in art, with studies in Drawing, Illustration, and Graphic Design. This is his first contribution to *The Sword Review*.



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