

SCArboys

# SCARBOROUGH

by A.J. SMEE



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To my mother and father, who always said I should write.

&

To Pauli, my best reader.



SCArboys



# Prologue



KUNTRYVE HAD LEARNED to rely less on the chase.

Older and slower now, a rounder man by nature, speed was no longer his greatest strength. Plus, losing his eye had hindered his depth perception and ability to navigate fast-moving objects, which always moved quicker than usual for him. Despite his large frame, he learned to make himself invisible. He had learned some patience—to wait in hiding. This was how he mastered the hunt.

He waited. On the outskirts of another town, impoverished buildings and houses crumbling in the absence of men, there was the chance he would find his catch.

It was just after noon, and the breezeless air hung dead heavy. Bearing the searing heat, Kuntryve stood as a fixture in the shadows of the broken building, the remnants of a perforated roof affording the only solace of shade under the punishing sun.



The windows had long been removed or broken, hanging jagged in their frames like teeth in small gaping mouths. This side of town was forgotten completely, a perfect place never to be found. For Kuntryve, it was just another place in the wasteland they called Old Mexico.

He removed his black hat, marred and weathered from the sun, stained with salt rings, and wiped the moisture from his brow before flicking the beads to the earth. The meteors of sweat droplets cratered the fine dust. Kuntryve spat out a dollop of grit. He pressed on each one of his nostrils and blew forcefully—two explosions, hard and short. Sweat rolled under his eyepatch, and he scratched the hard leather fold with one of his soiled fingernails. The scraping sound reverberated through his head. Putting his fingers over the soft skin of the hollow socket still made him queasy, even after all of these years.

The information he received had been reliable, for he saw what he was waiting for.

*Keep yourself still. That's the skill.*

His single eye tracked the motion of his target—a small-framed girl of nine or ten years. She moved under the shadows, from one building to another, directly toward him. She ducked in and out with a stealth of familiarity. Kuntryve watched her carefully from behind the wall. All he needed was to get close, for when he got his hands on them, they never escaped. His nerves buzzed, and he forced down his excitement as the small girl approached. A slight grin crossed his face. He saw she carried a relic of some sort, focused on its protection.

*A fateful error in these days.*

Kuntryve could not believe his luck when she crossed to his side of the street.

*Patience. She's coming.*

He pumped the heel of his foot in rapid sequence, and his breath quickened.

*Control it.*

The sound of her steps shuffling over the old cement and her high-pitched voice hummed a tune under her breath, unsuspecting and oblivious.

*I'm the spider. She's the prey. Another child away.*

She stepped onto the broken curb and ducked into the shade of the building where Kuntryve waited behind the doorless frame. He emerged and pounced on the wide-eyed girl and saw her pupils dilate with fear. The girl jolted in an evasive step. Too late. He lunged and wrapped his calloused hand around her arm and squeezed fiercely as he flipped her face down and pinned her to the dusty road in a single, swift movement, kneeling the weight of his body into the center of her back. The suffocating weight pressed the air from her chest until her spinal column crunched. She let out a gasp, her empty lungs unable to push out a sound, unable to cry out.

*Silence.*

Kuntryve felt his power over the small child. How easy it would be to crush her, to break her like a dried twig. He fought these urges.

*To be done with them altogether. Not what the Master wants.*

He pulled a strip of cloth from his jacket and tied her wrists behind her back before releasing his weight to wrap her mouth, drawing a second knot tightly behind her head.

“Rest at ease. The Master will be pleased,” he said aloud, smiling at the terrified girl.

Kuntryve lifted her over his shoulder, clutching her legs



tight under his arm so she could not kick. He crouched, picked up his dusty bowler hat from the ground and smacked it against his thigh to shake off the dust. Straightening it over his hairless head, Kuntryve stepped into the sweltering sun to return with his catch.



# 1

*Herein lies a reverent history, annotations of the events over the last half of the twenty-first century that led to the Great Conflict, along with the considerations of the many individuals who painstakingly sought the truth, often subjecting themselves to physical dangers to obtain their information. They have applied their pen to the paper like blood to the earth so that the survival of this manuscript be guarded for all peoples to come yet guarded against those who cast doubt over its legitimacy, for the continuation of our civilized memory is only as good as the preservation of its history.*

***-the prolegomenon to “The Histories,” page LXVII***



OF ALL THE EMOTIONS and sensory information Nestor Hardy had experienced that night, he most remembered the silence, intense and suffocating in its completeness, and blacker than the morning darkness he now sat in. The ranch had been his home for his entire life, yet tonight was the first time the silence consumed him like this. The stillness gave way to delicate sounds he had never observed in such detail—the background chorus of insects, the push of the slight breeze, the dry creaking of the wooden planks. He even thought that he heard the hooked leg of a fly as it landed on his aunt’s forehead, and then its quick beat of wings as it settled, attracted to the subtle smells of decomposition that had already begun to emanate from her lifeless skin. He stared down hard. She was a corpse, dead for hours. The color in her face had waned to pale yellow, and he could not break the trance. Nor did he dare touch the body.

He sat cemented on his stool, not noticing time or its passing, but his eyes were now dry, and the swelling around them diminished. Outside, the sun was rising in a blackish-blue hue. In the light entering the windows of the ranch house, he saw his Aunt Faralle more clearly. An indelible image of her lying on the mattress burdened him with the minutia of its detail—the locked jaw and the stiffness of her limbs like tree branches, the wax expression on her face, the thin slits of her eyes that feigned a conscious gaze. Nestor remained still and thought many thoughts as he stared at the body stretched over the small bed, for there were many things that pressed on his fifteen-year-old mind.

*Too much thinking. Time to move. Outside.*

When he finally finished digging out the shallow grave he had started days before, he returned to the ranch house and prepared his aunt. He wrapped her tightly in the sheet she lay on, tying the ends inside each other so the pressure tucked her limbs firmly together, and then he pulled the body from the bed and laid it horizontal on a wooden plank. He hoisted the plank, hooked his arm around the body, and pulled. He walked backward across the floor of the large room toward the door, then down the few steps to the dusty earth. He dragged it across the length of the garden and up toward the spring where the large desert oak had rooted itself. The edge of the board cut into the ground and scored a deep line in its path, throwing up dust like smoke. Nestor sweated profusely with the work. When he finally arrived at the hole, the exertion had relieved him from some of his sorrow, a distraction from the sadness clouding his heart.

“Here, you will lie forever with this great tree,” he spoke.

Holding back his tears, he sucked in the dry air until he felt it pinch his lungs and took a final look at the mummified profile of his aunt. The bulge on her abdomen called his attention, and he stared intently one last time before burying it forever under the earth. That cancerous stone terrorized him, morphed from her insides as it grew in a round mass. Even now, he thought it might burst through the taut skin of his aunt’s emaciated body and pursue him like a demon. He feared that pernicious lump that had distorted and consumed her.

The burial demanded little ceremony. Nestor laid a few of his aunt’s belongings over her chest: two worn knitting needles, a crude figurine that he had made for her years ago, a letter he had written that no one would ever read. These were the details he held close to his heart and those that fostered the memories. *Get on with it.* He heaved his weight into the shovel time and again, ignoring the burning muscles that begged for rest, heaping scoops of loose dirt onto the body until it disappeared.

Once he had finished, Nestor returned to the ranch house, comfortably tucked under the bluff and slightly hidden by the low growing pines around the spring, and he sat in the silence of the main room. Thirst beckoned him, and he drank down two cups of water, chewing on the heavy taste of minerals that stuck to the back of his tongue. Then he softened a portion of dried potato powder, adding water until it grew into a pasty white goo, and scraped the fine needles from a cactus leaf to lay over the potato mash. The bland flavors were lost in the ritual of eating, going through a motion as a diversion to the new reality he tried to make sense of. The nourishment of his body was an obligation, but nothing more.

After eating, the tasks needed to seal up the house forced



his feet to move. It buffered the loneliness too. He was wedged in the immediacy of a paradox, for while he knew there was nothing left for him here, he felt the need to secure and prepare the house, as his aunt would have desired. He anticipated a long absence.

Before the sun burned off the coolness of the morning, Nestor put his things together for the walk to the ruins to get materials. Though not an arduous or long walk, he never left unprepared, stuffing his tote bag with a couple of lengths of rope, water for a day—more than he needed, but always better to be safe—and a variety of dried foods. He put his head down and walked along the foot trail through the pines and into the open plain that rolled up into the highlands.

The skeleton of an abandoned house appeared on the ridge, its insides stripped and gutted. The resource was nearly exhausted, but it did not matter, as it had served its purpose many times over. Picked apart over the years for anything useful, the majority of the old house had been appropriated for use at the ranch. It had given all it could. Now, he would use the last of the boards to cover the windows of the ranch and seal it off. If someone were to stumble upon it, they would take what they wanted anyways. But what were the chances of someone finding the ranch? Nobody knew it was here. Years ago, some men had appeared, and his aunt had dealt with them superbly. “I know how to get into the hearts of men,” she said afterward. But no one had come since. Were there even people left out there at all?

Nestor knew there were.

Though he could not pinpoint what it was, he saw something different in the ruin as he approached—perhaps some missing pieces or something slightly out of position since the last visit.

He had an uneasy feeling someone had visited, though it could be merely his imagination. He was not sure, for his mind was replete with distractions, preoccupied with the newest uncertainties of his life and the inevitable prospect of his departure. He pulled the last of the planks from the frame and tethered them together with the rope. The boards were deceptively light despite their length.

The afternoon heat peaked, and it became too hot to travel. Even the hum of the insects and wild bees had shrunk in the heat. He drank shallow gulps of water and waited for the sun to wane and the temperature to drop. But it was the stab of discomfort in the back of his head that worried him. He tried to ignore the slight twinge, for he’d felt it before—the same subtle pain that had nagged him for the last year. He was aware of what it meant.

The scent of scorched vegetation saturated the air. When the pine trees eventually cast longer shadows, Nestor gathered the boards to return. He rolled up rags to buffer the weight on his collarbone and hoisted the boards to his shoulder. He’d always been thin, but recently he’d felt his shoulders broadening and muscles thickening around his bones. He was impressed at the weight he could bear. The walk back would be swift. Balancing the weight of the boards with his stride, he walked in steady rhythm through the afternoon haze. Orange dust lifted around his feet in small clouds, like swarms of tiny insects that puffed up around his shoes. He wiped away the chocolate sweat that ran down the line of his jawbone. As he walked, he picked his way to the familiar landmarks—the contour of the trail hidden under sparse vegetation, scars in the countryside where plants could not lay roots.

*No water to give. The earth will take it back.*

He moved swiftly, his senses alert, as his aunt had instructed him. Her stories reminded him to remain aware, as she knew that the secrecy of their homestead was their only protection.

“Is there still fighting?” Nestor had asked his aunt. “Is it still dangerous?”

“I don’t know,” she’d said. “But I know what men are capable of.”

“It’s been years since the Great Conflict. Perhaps it’s better.”

“Perhaps it’s not. The only option is to survive. And survival abides by no laws.” Nestor remembered how she had paused for a second to soften the hardness of her thoughts, to buffer the truths she knew. “Perhaps people occupy themselves with simpler things now.”

*I will discover these answers myself.*

The pain in his neck migrated upwards. He switched shoulders with the boards, yet the discomfort remained. A heat rose through his head and tingled the roots of his hair, settling into a definitive spot behind his ear. He wanted to convince himself it was something else, but denial did not abate the all too familiar ailment that had become a part of his life. He heard his aunt’s voice whispering echoes in the back of his mind again. “*There is nothing I can do,*” she said. “*You must find help.*”

He rested in the shade of a juniper tree, removed his water container, and drank deeply. From the bottom of his pack, he pulled out a mixture of crushed nuts, dried flowers, and herbs and placed them into his mouth in succession, chewing the bitter mixture followed by a large gulp of water. Had his aunt been here, she would have soaked rags from their cool spring water and pressed the herbal leaves tight against his head; he would have closed his eyes and slept in the shade of the canyon wall;

he would have let the calming sounds of the ranch lull away the pain. But he was on his own now. Alone.

Throwing his head back, he massaged his temples and waited. *Not so intense this time*, he hoped. *I can make it home*. He was not far from the ranch, maybe an hour or so. Yet, as the pain mounted, the distance felt further. The radial pain intensified and centered behind his left eye; the throbbing pounded incessantly.

*Not good.*

Waiting was useless; he knew what was coming.

He abandoned the boards and lowered his head and pushed forward toward the ranch. His thoughts fragmented and his vision blurred. The shapes on the landscape degraded into shady profiles on his periphery. The possibility of losing his way occurred to him, a blind boy moving on intuition and instinct. *I can hear the hens calling me now. I can hear my aunt beckon.* As he saw the familiar contours of the ranch come into sight, the pain of his headache turned his vision to darkness.

Nestor awoke in the night. His eyes adjusted and focused until the world stopped to let him in. Only then did he recognize his room. With a vague recollection of making his way back to the house, he listened attentively to the silence before stirring in his bed. He thought he’d heard the sound of his aunt’s bare feet slap over the wooden floor in the adjacent room, and for a moment, he thought that she might still be there, as she had always been, waiting for him to awaken. He imagined her silhouette appear in the doorway. The soft light from the solar lamp she held in her hand illuminated the lines on her cheek, the youthful face that he wanted to remember. He could choose his memories now.



“How did you find me?” Nestor asked. His tone was incredulous.

“You were lucky this time.” Her ghost ignored his question.

Nestor asked the only thing on his mind. “You knew that it would happen, didn’t you? I don’t remember anything but the pain.”

“It has gotten worse,” she said firmly. The scratch in her voice cut to the truth, and Nestor let it sink in.

“Why is this happening to me?”

“I don’t know, Nestor. The doctors always said this day would come. This is why you must find them.”

“I’ve never left the ranch, yet you expect me to go to the city and find a doctor who only exists in stories?” Nestor replied. “All you’ve ever told me are the terrible tales about what’s out there, and now you want me to walk straight into it?”

“I have given you everything I can. This is not a choice. Find the man named Dr. Pleck,” she said, her only instruction.

Nestor had heard the details of his story many times before—the military defense complex, the doctors, the death of his mother he’d never know, the escape to the ranch. The doctors had placed Nestor in Anne Faralle’s hands, assured that his best chance for survival was linked to the spirit of this small, aging woman. And she received him those fifteen years ago, an infant not of her own blood, to raise him with the same iron conviction that filled her heart. All of it was without consequence now, except for that singular and essential name of Dr. Pleck, the man who had named him, the man who had said to find him when the time arrived.

He knew something was wrong with his head, but the uncertainty made it worse. The headaches had forced a change,

albeit unwilling, now prying him from the only life he’d ever known. The abruptness weighed on Nestor, and the reality of leaving the ranch settled uneasily in his gut. He felt a flash of anxiety and apprehension and flat-out fear. *I am only fifteen*, he said to himself. *And I have no one in this world.*

His aunt had never underrated danger or uncertainty. The sanctuary of the ranch and his protection from the world had dissolved before his eyes. The only certainty now was that he would abandon his home. There was nothing more to keep him here if he wanted to live.