Olivia Volarich

Storytelling Sample

Premise: In a post-apocalyptic world, where scavenging raw materials from the earth is a means to surviving, two contract rangers investigate a curious dig site.

The morning breeze had just the right amount of cold. The sigh of the air, crisp and cool, gently played across her face while the sun pressed down on her back and neck. Rev scanned down the tree line. Her view was choice atop this great pine. The thick branches were more than strong enough to support her weight, and the needles provided decent coverage. She strained her eyes to glimpse the faint ribbon of smoke rising up between the trees about three miles downhill. She couldn’t make out much, and silently cursed herself for leaving the long gun with its scope down below with Sila.

Rev turned and began her descent. Deftly picking each hand and foothold, as she made her way down the thick trunk. The morning drenched the surrounding trees and woody hills in golden light, but there was just a hint of chill in the air. The season was beginning to turn, and though there would be many more hot days before the cold set in, the pressure to reach the rocky shores of the Gorge began to grow in her subconscious.

Hovering for a moment before dismounting the last limb, she came to the ground without a sound. The pine needles underfoot padded her steps moving forward. She saw a faint glimmer of metal through the trees and began to pick her way towards a clearing near the edge of the cliff. Through the trees she spied a cloaked figure with a long gun slung across her back. As she moved in, a gust of wind tugged at her target’s hood, revealing a flowing plait of golden hair. She slowly crept forward from the trees, without making a sound, right up to the ranger in front of her. She reached out her hand to grasp the hood of the green patterned cowl—

“You really ought to practice your stalking on someone else. I can hear you.” Sila’s words rung out in the silence. She turned in a flash and grabbed her younger sister’s wrist.

“How did you hear me? I was completely silent!” Rev yanked her arm away and moved closer to the edge of the cliff. They both gazed down the ridge, looking for any signs of life, movement, any kind of a pulse.

“I told you, I can hear you” Sila said, and activated her oculense. The metal exo-skeletal armor each ranger wore was fitted with Old World tech, and the oculense was by far the most uncomfortable. The lenses unfolded from the transformative vertebrae and bent over her face and eyes.

Rev scowled at her sister who often attributed her sheer, dumb-luck in the field to the ever-bending magnetism of the universe. She was certain Sila would tell her next that she could feel the magnetic pulses coming from her steps, from her heartbeat. *My sister, the human sonograph*, she grinned to herself. When they were children, she used to claim that a freckle on her forearm could tell time.

“What could you tell from your vantage? I circled the area and found some useful herbs and a couple mushrooms.” Sila closed her lens and pulled back her cowl. Her long blond hair spilled from her scarf as the wind snapped her cloak. The sunlight shining down on her head turned her into a vision of gold and dazzling greens. Looking upon her sister’s face was like staring at the sun. Tan skin with bright blue eyes, and small pointy features: she was the epitome of Old and New World beauty. All the years they spent ranging, and there were no lines in her sister’s face, even after her training as a healer.

“From what I could tell, the smoke doesn’t look like smoke from a fire. Almost like condensation from a hot spring or something. But it was fanning out in a weird pattern, like someone was trying to make smoke signals.” Sila furrowed her brow, handed over the long gun, and slung her pack over shoulders.

“What?” Rev could tell she was irritated now.

“I don’t like it. Not one bit. Last night we saw those colored lights pluming up from the trees down there, and now this smoke? You honestly think we should go check this out?”

“I mean maybe it is nothing. Maybe someone is down there and could be willing to trade. Maybe there are supplies we can salvage. We won’t know unless we check it out.”

Sila turned, “whatever you say, but for all we know, it could be a charging station, and then we’ll surely be dead. You’re taking the lead on this, and if things go south, I will be the first to say, ‘I told you so’.” And with that she jumped from the ledge.

Rev watched her clamber down the outcrops and tried not to roll her eyes. She picked up the rest of her gear, slung the Long Boy across her back, and with a quick mental prep, stepped off the edge, pick in hand, and grinded down to the next landing.

The two fell into stride. They crossed over the opal waters of the valley on a fallen tree, scrambled up a steep rock face, and jumped across to a thick limb of another pine. From here it would be easy to use the natural pathways the trees created with their entwined arms. The distant sound of flowing water echoed through the valley as they moved among the greens and browns of the forest. Every now and then a faint creak or rustle accented their steps.

Finally, they reached the small clearing. Rev perched and peered down through the needles. The friction from the strap of the long gun on her shoulder was making her hot, and her back ached from its weight. Drops of sweat tickled the back of her neck and streamed into her eyes. It was times like these when she wished she could still just travel light, missing the feeling of her bow on her back. How she missed their sweet little dune buggy, the Gecko. The vehicle long trashed, had sadly been squashed by a falling boulder during their last trek across the East Desert.

A jay whistle snapped her attention back to the task at hand. Following the call, she locked eyes with Sila a few yards away. She motioned “Ready to shadow. Green light. Go.” Rev anchored her pack to the tree trunk. She motioned with two fingers for Sila to watch and circle to the opposite side of the clearing and began picking her way around and down.

She moved silently, gliding along the trees, descending gracefully. Now closer to the clearing, she could see a huge mound of earth and a pit with a crack at the bottom, digging tools strewn about. The strange smoke billowed weakly from the crack in the earth. It looked as though it were dissipating. She reached the ground and ducked behind a shaggy bush tangled with vines and waited. Nothing but the flutter of bird wings and an occasional crack of dead leaves stirred the air. Carefully, she left her hiding place, and moved out into the open.

*Someone had been digging for something*. She inched forward and began to move around the mound of earth but froze. A man’s body lay face down, clutching a pickaxe in one hand. A pool of blood collected at his abdomen. Rev took a tentative side-step around the body and stooped to examine the crude camp next to the dig site. The sun was high overhead by now and cast bright rivets of light through the branches. Out of the corner of her eye something in the needles caught a faint glimmer of light.

Rev knelt and picked up what looked like a shard of glass. *Maybe a crystal of some type?* The frosty purple surface was offset by veins of ice blue color. *Strange* she thought and rolled the piece into her open palm. It was icy cold to touch and emitted a faint glow. At first, she assumed the sun was just catching the light perfectly, but now, holding it up close, it seemed to gleam and pulsate as if it were…alive. She squinted at the shard. *Hmm Sila has spoken of the power of natural minerals and crystals. But that knowledge has been lost for ages. Maybe she’ll know if—*

A loud crack echoed through the trees, sending birds into the sky and smaller creatures scampering through the underbrush. Then, she heard their voices: a pack of scalpers approached the clearing. Their arc formation blocked her from retreating, and if she attempted scrambling back up a tree they would surely spot her. Rev vaulted over the tablerock acting as the third wall to the shelter and withdrew into the shadows. *Little help this darkness will be*, she thought. Her heart jumped to her throat as soon as her eyes adjusted. Another body. This one a young woman. Certainly, younger than herself. Her left shin bent at a sickening angle, with a bone poking through her fine, milky skin. *What happened here*? She inched around the dead girl.

“We’ve been tracking these scrappers for four days now, and they bloody think they can out-run us?” a glassed-out ginger wheezed to his mate. From her hiding place, Rev could just make out the man carrying a dinosaur of a carbine rifle. He opened his mouth and let out a bark of a laugh revealing rotting teeth.

“Oh ho! Looks like these’ns thought they found’em sumfin’…”, the fattest of the group remarked. He squatted and spat into the crack in the earth.

Rev tried to take a quick count of the men circling the camp. *Two, five, seven—*

“Hey! Someone go clear that shack. We found the old man; his daughter can’t be far. Do not kill her until we’ve questioned her!”

Rev slid her knife from its leather sheath. *Looks like this is going to get messy.* She crouched low into the deepest part of the shadow, behind the cover of the tablerock. The skinny ginger came teetering through the opening of the shack. He stepped into the darkness, and in one fluid motion, Rev rose up behind him, covered his mouth, and slit his throat. She tipped his limp body into the opposite corner of the shack. Crouching again, her pulse quickened when she realized she had trapped herself in the now crammed shack, and there were at least seven scalpers still poking around the dig site.

She scanned the area looking for an exit point, until a loud crash emitted from the western side of the camp.

“What the hell was that?” one screamed.

“You two, with me!” The largest of the crew beckoned to the two-standing guard. This one was the only man in the group to have an exosuit, and updated rifle.

She glanced over to the dig site and saw two more preoccupied with the tools and dead man. Without wasting another second, she crept out over the tablerock and backed around the shack. She turned to face the perimeter of the woods and nearly bumped into a scalper sitting guard on a tree stump. *MOTHER of GOD!* The man only saw so much as the glimmer of her knife as life left him in a faint sigh. He slumped forward. The blood on her hands was making her fingers sticky.

“Oi! What do you think you’re doing? Hey! Over here! Here! Here!”

The scalper standing guard to the east came running at her. She charged at him, full speed, and freed him of his rifle. Dodging his fist, she pulled his shoulder down, and countered with a knee to his gut. Just as she moved to strike again, she was barreled over by two others and flung to the ground. The fat scalper wound-up and kicked her in the stomach. All the air left her body. Gasping, she rolled over and drove her knife into his meaty calf. She twisted the blade. The man howled in pain as she crawled away, choking and sputtering until being lifted off her feet. The giant who carried her by the back of her shirt flung her over to where the others had gathered.

Rev struggled to her knees and looked up at her captors. She was greeted with a swift punch to the face.

“Dirty Ranger!”

Another kick, this time to her side, knocking her over into the pine needles that covered the forest floor. She coughed and gasped, tasting the blood draining from her nose to the back of her throat. The smell of pine was oddly comforting considering all the needles sticking to the side of her face.

“Ay. Back off Finch,” the man in the exosuit said. He had a long mane of black hair and skin the color of tanned cowhide.

“She killed Caruthers and Longy!”

“Shut up. Go check the perimeter.”

Rev looked up at the one they called Finch. She spat the blood on the ground, and smiled up at him, baring all her gleaming teeth smattered with blood. He lunged at her, and with an ear-splitting BANG, their leader shot him. The smile left her face. *What did I get myself into? What did these poor scrappers find? What did* we *find?*