

BOOK 1 IN THE COPPERBANK TRILOGY

# RIO CYBORG



CAROL BAKER  
AND TERRY WILLEY

# ADVANCE READER PRAISE

This was a fun book. A classic western story with science fiction flavor... it was entertaining and I am interested in reading the next one.



This book really surprised me - the book is a very enjoyable read with relatable characters and a positive, uplifting plot. At about 230 pages of prose it took 3 days of casual reading to get through. Since I wasn't familiar with either author, I was also surprised at how well the book was written, with clear motivations, enough context and back-story to make things interesting, and a fulfilling ending.

The book reads more like a lighthearted Louis L'Amour western, with a bit of Firefly thrown in, than it does a science fiction novel. The SciFi provides some input as to why the various cyborg characters have the skills they do with cybernetic enhancements boosting strength and the senses. It also explains that they are considered inferior to unaugmented humans through discrimination and a lack of basic human rights (why many become outlaws I guess, scrabbling to survive) - these cyborgs were sent to planets to establish settlements and do much of the hard work prior to human settlers being shipped in as colonists. In general most of the cowhands and law enforcement characters are 'borg.

I delighted in the story and had fun in the reading.

It is a fun read that combines two genres for an interesting and novel story. It's NOT "O K Corral with Ray guns" but a genuine Western with advanced tech. The storyline plays well and is very realistic. I could easily see several well-known actors portraying Zestrum. Fun challenge: see how many western movie and series Character names you can spot.

The story is well-developed, following a renowned but soft-spoken cyborg colonization-engineer as he arrives in Copperbank after a job offer, neatly foils a highway robbery on his way in, gets quietly drawn into local struggles around water distribution and the rich rancher controlling most of it, meets the local boarding house proprietor, helps out the local Sheriff, and generally lays a foundation for what could be an entertaining series of sequels to follow. If the authors do continue the series, I'll very likely pick 'em up.



This is a fun, quick-paced story with a bit of a sci-fi twist in a setting that I found mostly reads as western. There were times when reading that I nearly forgot the sci-fi components of the book's world and felt completely immersed in its western flavor, though the cyborg body modifications and anti-cyborg prejudice lent fresh material to action sequences, generated thematically useful conflict, and allowed the story to feel fresh even as it leaned into common western tropes for many of its key plot elements.

Most of the plot will not be greatly surprising to anyone with even a passing familiarity with westerns, but the authors satisfyingly tied up all of the key loose ends while leaving enough juicy threads dangling to leave me excited for the next two books in a planned trilogy... if you enjoy sci-fi or westerns, settle in for some pleasant and fun literary comfort food.

Rio Cyborg is a little sci-fi, a little old west. This is the first book of a trilogy and I am looking forward to reading the second and third book!

The characters are likable and well-rounded in description, at least the good guys are likeable. The bad guys are not so nice.

This is a fun and easy read. If you like westerns, you will like this. There are little eggs of information that will hopefully expand the world in the future installments- such as a teletype from 1880 next to a 1920's typewriter. I would love to see how this world was devised and explore who/how this society was put together. I hope Baker and Willey give us more information.



Action...action.....action...can't wait for book 2....hopefully the Etcheverry's get what they deserve. Seems as though little Johnny has taken a turn for the better. And sounds like Zestrum and Jessica may have a future. Can't wait to find out what happens next. My dad watched a lot of westerns when I was a kid and before he died I watched a lot of the re-runs with him, he would have loved this book.



If a western and a sci fi story had a baby, with a diesel punk godfather lurking around ...

The plot of Rio Cyborg is basically the western; the setting is the science fiction. And the title is a clear allusion to the movie Rio Bravo, which contributes a lot of obvious elements to the plot ... like pretty much most of it. But it was a good movie and it's fun to see it reimaged.

It's a very quick read, more like a pilot to what is obviously intended as a series. The cyborg protagonist is interesting with a somewhat mysterious background that this book doesn't really delve into. I initially expected a gunslinger character, but what

little we've been shown so far doesn't go in that direction. That's a good thing, less cliché.

There's a town of colorful characters and the start of a romance. The world-building is intriguing, though minimal in this first book.

All in all, I'd say this is a rather light bit of summer fare that manages to be more engaging than I anticipated.



Interesting twist on the Western genre. The lead character is a cyborg on a colonized planet. He becomes involved in a local feud over water rights. Several secondary characters who hopefully will be built up in future books. His landlady at the boarding house whom he starts an affair with. Another cyborg living at the boarding house who has his eye on the local school teacher. And of course all of the protagonists.



The story reads as a light western with some oddities thrown in, it has its cowboys and cowborgs, gunfights and love interests. Many of the minor characters have names taken out of old western movies and tv shows, although that is as far as the similarity goes. The book is a light and enjoyable read.

**BOOK 1 IN THE COPPERBANK TRILOGY**

# **RIO CYBORG**

**BY**

**CAROL BAKER AND TERRY WILLEY**



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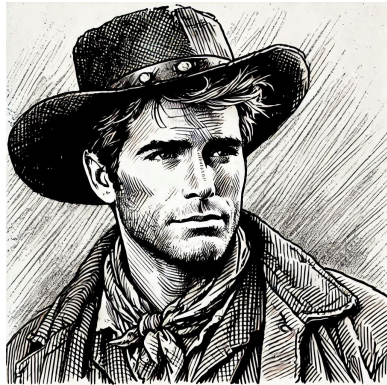
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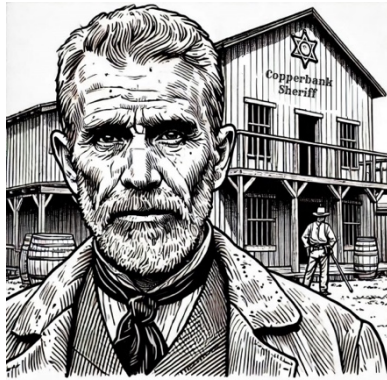
# CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Zestrum (Tom) Doniphon** – cyborg mercenary, former engineer/landscaper for the Consortium, a good man with a bad reputation who seeks peace after Emancipation. He comes to Copperbank for a job offer as ranch hand and finds a water war instead.



## THE LAW

**Sheriff Mitch Bodie** – Zestrum’s old friend, sheriff of Copperbank. He considers himself token law enforcement in this territory but maintains law and order the best way he can. He’s an older cyborg who’s sustained injuries and acquired wisdom in his long career.



**Deputy Ethan Edwards** – a Vestal addicted cyborg attempting to hold onto his sanity and his job as deputy. Once a good man with solid morals, he’s slipped in the past decade.



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**Deputy Puzzle** – the old timer cyborg, he has a gammy leg but is feisty as hell. Good with a rifle, better with a verbal barb.



**Louisiana Hannigan** – a gunslinging cyborg, gambler, smartass but reliable. He worked security on the Eastern Seaboard, but his origins are mysterious.



## THE ENTERTAINMENT

**Doug McConnell** – owner of the popular casino showroom bar, the Dual Majesty Saloon. He works closely with the Etcheverry clan and has a personal interest in Angie.



**Victoria Barkley** – a beautiful cyborg songbird. She is the featured performer at the Dual Majesty, singer, dancer, and high-class saloon employee.



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## COLTON HOUSE

**Jessica Colton** – owner of the Colton House boardinghouse, Zestrum's landlady. She's a widow who's lost her entire family and figured she'd remain single. Zestrum's arrival changes her mind.



## THE RANCHERS

**Claude Etcheverry** – a prosperous landowner who has dammed the river running through his property so he can charge exorbitant prices to townsfolk for water. He dominates the Badlands like a foul fog.



## RIO CYBORG

**Chris Etcheverry** – Claude's oldest son, 30. He likes to gamble, whore, and fight. He's constantly in trouble and bailed out by his family influence.



**Angie Etcheverry** – Claude's daughter, 25, de facto lady of the house. She carries on the tradition of putting the family interests above all else.





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**Gabriel Etcheverry** – Claude’s son, 20. A passive-aggressive bully that commits his dirty deeds in a subtle, hard to prove manner.



**Johnny Etcheverry** – Claude’s hothead son, 14, who has always been a pain in the ass to everyone. He becomes fixated on Zestrum as an adversary—and mentor.





## RIO CYBORG

**Gerald Nowlin** – a wealthy landowner who owns the Easterbrook Ranch. He intends to build an aqueduct to water his spread.



**Aaliyah Nowlin** – Gerald's wife. An expert in raising Blanken Ox, she's frequently on the range with the ranch hands tending the cattle.

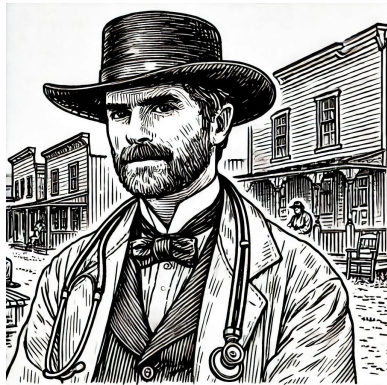


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**Rachel Nowlin** – their daughter, 26, a formidable partner managing the ranch. She oversees the chicken coop and sells eggs to the markets and neighbors.



**Doc Hartman** – the local doctor who treats humans and cyborgs but is not an expert in all cyborg tech. He's a good general practitioner and a mediocre surgeon. He views his job as stabilizing surgery patients so they can be transported to a specialist.





# CHAPTER 1 – THE HIGHWAYBOY

Zestrum would have thought the covered wagon had merely broken down in the middle of the road if not for the man aiming a gun at a couple in the road.

He sighed. *Humans.*

Often he forgot he was more human than machine. Of course, most humans considered him more machine than human—once they figured out there were improvements under that dark hair and rugged good looks.

With his enhanced auditory modifications, he heard the conversation from half a mile away as he approached the wagon on horseback.

“Give me that box,” said a male voice—a young voice.

“Put down the gun.”

“Toss it down.”

“It’ll break.”

“Toss it down!”

He heard a wooden box striking the dirt highway and something breaking. A quiet sob.

“Take it and go.”

“What else you got in the wagon?”

“Nothing of value. All the money’s in the box.”

“Move back. Put your hands up.”

Zestrum steered his horse through the shadows of the eucalyptus trees lining the highway. The trees were a nice windbreak; a splash of green in an otherwise beige landscape; and a cool respite from the fierce Blanken 9 sun, more penetrating

than the sunlight of Earth. His horse Shiloh was shod with muffle iron, so his hoof beats faded noiselessly into the quiet morning.

A quick enhanced scan of the area revealed a horse tied in the shade of the trees off the shoulder of the highway. No doubt the thief's getaway transit.

Zestrum halted behind the wagon and dropped to the ground, hearing the rummaging within the canvas cover as the thief tossed things around, shattering more property.

The couple stood in the middle of the road, watching helplessly as the bandit grew increasingly violent with their belongings. The man wore simple jeans, shirt, and hat. The woman wore a faded green dress and straw bonnet. Homesteaders, from the looks of them.

First the man, then the woman, noticed Zestrum. Zestrum placed a finger to his lips to order silence, then gestured them away from the wagon. They quickly retreated to the line of eucalyptus trees on the other side of the highway.

Zestrum crept to the front of the wagon and gauged the interloper's next move. Footsteps stomped around in the bed, then toward the front. A minute later the thief climbed over the bench, his back toward Zestrum, his attention fixed on the couple in the shade. Seeing they'd moved, he faltered, then stood his full height to glare at them.

He was a kid, not more than 14, dressed in expensive dusty denim jeans, linen shirt, and leather vest. He had an expensive hat, too, and a Ginwalt pistol in his gun belt. More firepower than a 14-year-old needed.

"That's it? That's all you got?" The kid pointed at the wrecked box in the road.

The box was polished mahogany trimmed in pearl, carved with intricate designs, the kind of chest a woman stored her precious mementoes in.

"That's all the money," said the man.

The kid hopped down and pulled the gun. "Looks like I'll have to search you. You first, mister, then the lady."

The woman clung to the man, terrified.

The man wrapped the woman protectively in his arms. "You got no call to do that."

"You settlers always hide your money where you think nobody will look." The kid strode boldly toward them, brandishing the fancy gun.

He was halfway across the highway when Zestrum caught up to him from behind. Zestrum pushed him forward and the kid flopped face-first into the road, losing the weapon. Zestrum kicked the gun out of reach and planted his boot in the kid's back, pinning him to the ground.

"Hey!" was all he got out before Zestrum levered his weight to shove the brat's face into the dirt so he sputtered and gasped for breath.

The man and woman watched the takedown with a combination of fear and gratitude.

"You folks might want to move along," Zestrum said.

The woman darted to the wagon and climbed onto the bench.

The man stowed the broken box in the boot, sat beside the woman, and snatched up the reins. "Thanks, mister." In the next minute, the team of horses was moving at a rapid clip.

Zestrum immobilized the squirming cursing delinquent until the wagon was well underway. He considered his options.

The kid was obviously experienced at robbing folks—he showed no remorse in confronting the couple; he forced them to damage their own property in his demand for valuables; and he threatened violence to terrorize them. Typical punk.

He was a teenager, but some teenagers were hard-core felons. This one was well-dressed, so he either came from money or was successful at thieving.

In any case, he needed a lesson in humility.

"You treated those folks poorly. I'm not talking about the robbin', I'm talking about your manners." Zestrum pressed on his back until he was flailing. "Don't move." He lifted his foot and the kid scrambled to get up. He kicked his ass, flattening him on the ground again. "Don't move."

The kid lay still, fuming. "You're gonna be sorry!"

“Only if I have to give you another lesson.” Zestrum whistled and Shiloh trotted to him. He uncoiled a length of rope from the saddle and proceeded to tie the kid’s ankles together.

“Hey!” Again the kid scrambled to rise.

Zestrum lifted his bound feet, knocking him onto his chest and forearms. A series of catastrophic curses tumbled out of the kid’s mouth.

Zestrum shook his head. “Bad manners and a foul mouth. This is just the kinda thing that gets you tied up and left somewhere.”

He tightened the knots, then flipped the kid onto his back and swiftly tied the other end of the rope around his wrists. The kid attempted to sock him and earned an elbow to the chin. Dazed, the kid watched in horror as Zestrum tied his wrists to his knees with about a dozen elaborate knots.

Zestrum fetched the horse tied under the trees and led him over. He noticed the fine black leather saddle and bridle with beautiful hand-carved tooling and silver decoration.

“What are you doing with my horse?”

“What do you think I’m doing with your horse?” Zestrum found a nice length of rope on the saddle and used that to secure more knots around the kid’s knees and ankles.

“What are you doing? Let me go!” On and on. It was amusing more than anything else. Demanding to be released like he had any power in this situation.

“My pa is going to *kill* you! *Kill* you!”

Zestrum tethered the kid’s horse to Shiloh with a lead rope.

The kid stopped struggling, watching with open rage. “You can’t take my horse! That’s a felony!”

“So’s robbin’ people, but here we are.”

He glowered and struggled against the ropes, flopping onto his side and churning up dust.

“That’ll tighten the knots.” Zestrum scooped up the Ginwalt and tucked it into his saddlebag.

“That’s my gun!”

“That makes two felonies for me and one for you. You’re falling behind.” Zestrum mounted his horse.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Don’t wanna know.” He clicked his tongue and Shiloh started down the highway with the kid’s horse in tow. With his enhanced hearing, he enjoyed the curses for a good ten minutes before the shrieking voice faded in the bright sunlight.

\* \* \*

Six miles on he came upon his destination, the town of Copperbank. As with most settlements in the Badlands, there was a large cemetery on the outskirts of the incorporated city, a church on a hill, and then the city proper. This municipality was laid out in a nice grid pattern, straight streets, five blocks wide, six long, with businesses and residences mixed throughout.

The highway connected directly to Main Street, the major thoroughfare through the center of town. There was the general store and a saloon opposite each other. On the next block the sheriff’s office was between the barber and the post office. On the following block stood the courthouse and other government offices. In the Civic Square a big round clock kept time.

Outside the post office, Zestrum tied the horses to the hitching post. He removed the lead rope from the kid’s horse and tucked the confiscated gun in the saddlebag. Once the kid untangled the ropes from his wrists—an easy job—he’d have to untangle the complicated knots around his knees and ankles—a much more challenging chore. He might be at it half the day. Then he’d have to walk to town.

That thought made Zestrum smile.

Inside the post office, he waited his turn to speak to the postmaster about a message left for him from one Claude Etcheverry.

“What’s the name?” said the postmaster.

“Zestrum Doniphon.”

The postmaster’s eyes widened in recognition as he involuntarily took a step back. He checked his wall of box slots. He plucked out an envelope and handed it over. “Mr. Zestrum Doniphon.”

“Thanks.”



"Any message in return?"

"I'll deliver it myself. Is there a hotel round here you recommend?"

"There's the Gem on Fourth Street. The Sapphire on Regent. The Opal on Seventh. Then there's Colton House on Regent and Sixth. It's a little nicer."

"A *lot* nicer," said the woman in line awaiting service. "The Widow Colton is a good housekeeper. Runs a clean house."

Zestrum tipped his hat to her. "Thanks, ma'am. I do like a clean house." And to the postmaster. "Thanks." He crossed the lobby, opened the envelope, and read the note. Instructions where to meet with the man who wanted to hire him.

Better to get that done now.

He stepped into the street and approached Shiloh. From outside he could hear the postmaster whisper to the woman: "That's *the* Zestrum Doniphon."

"Mister!"

He froze for an instant, his hand automatically seeking his weapon until he identified the man who'd been driving the wagon on the highway. He relaxed his hand.

The man hurried to him and stopped at a respectful distance. "I saw you pass by and I come to thank you again. My wife—she was damn scared—and I won't lie, I was too."

"It was no trouble."

"That kid popped out from nowhere and scared the hell out of us. We're damn lucky you came along. And damn grateful."

"I'm glad I could help out."

"You gotta let us repay you somehow." He pulled paper money from his pocket.

Zestrum shook his head. "Once a man stopped and helped me. I'm just paying it forward. Someday you'll help somebody."

The man pocketed the money. "I'm mighty obliged. What's your name, sir?" He reached out a hand.

"Doniphon." He shook the man's hand.

"Thanks, Mr. Doniphon. I'm Will Benjamin. And I won't forget what you done for us."

“Take care.” Although he was thinking, *Most folks don’t have much of a memory*. Zestrum mounted up and steered Shiloh to the north.

\* \* \*

Zestrum rode the seven miles to the Etcheverry ranch, noting the industry going on throughout the property. Farming, fishing in the reservoir above the dam in the river, and cattle in grassy meadows. Lush grass and flowers.

And around a hundred Blanken Ox in a security field.

Blanken Ox were one of the few native species that were exempted from the planetary sterilization program. They were larger than the biggest earth ox and their meat was savory. They had to be pastured behind electrified steel bars as the males could walk right through barbed wire and when provoked, walk through the wall of a house.

One of the things that provoked them was pasturing them behind electrified steel fences.

And that was just the males. The females were even angrier and tougher.

At the homestead there were a dozen cowbogs, some cleaning the place, some working the cattle, a few standing around looking hostile. All armed to the teeth and watching him with suspicion. One in particular looked familiar, someone Zestrum encountered on the coast at the start of the landscaping years ago.

Half of these hired folk wore apparel more suitable for gunplay than ranch work. Their weapons looked more appropriate for enforcers than wranglers. There was the occasional military issue Variable Cartridge Pacifier (VCP), a particularly nasty weapon that was illegal outside of combat.

That was a bad ome for peaceful employment on this range.

One of the women was built for speed, which was not as much fun as it sounds. Her mods improved her reaction time and quickness. She’d tire quickly, but for a few minutes she could be the deadliest borg in the group.

Zestrum hoped she didn’t have Deadeye. And that he’d never have to square off against her.

Zestrum dismounted and declined to tie up Shiloh. The horse was smart enough not to wander.

One of the cowbogs was staring at him. "Hey, are you. . .?"  
"Probably not."

The cowborg turned to another hand and whispered. "That's *the* Zestrum Doniphon!"

A woman wearing buckskin trousers, a linen blouse, and a cowboy hat noticed him. She looked like she could chop up a man with her eyes. "Can I help you, mister?"

He held up the invitation. "I'm here to see Claude Etcheverry."

"And you are?"

"Zestrum Doniphon."

Her expression changed from mistrust to hospitality. "Welcome to the Etcheverry Ranch, Mr. Doniphon. My father tells me you're the kind of man we need around here."

"Looks like you've got plenty of folks like me already." He glanced round at the cowbogs, then looked at her.

She smirked. "We can always use a better one. I'm Angie Etcheverry." She extended a hand and shook firmly.

Her self-confidence impressed him. His keen eye judged she wasn't much over 25, but she was *de facto* lady of the house.

"Come in." She ushered him into a fine ranch house and directed him to a large salon. She provided a glass of cold water, then went to fetch the patriarch.

Zestrum noticed a bunch of framed photographs on the mantel, obviously family pictures of the patriarch, his daughter, his sons—and the hothead kid from the highway. *Damn.*

"Mr. Doniphon?"

He turned as the rancher entered the room.

"Claude Etcheverry." He was a barrel-chested man, middle-aged, tough as nails, and accustomed to getting his way. They shook hands. Claude was appraising Zestrum from the get-go. "Thanks for coming all the way out here to talk."

"Well, it's not every day a man is offered such good pay for ranch work."

Claude weighed Zestrum equating himself with a human. "Or a cyborg."

He acknowledged that with a cynical smile. At least the prejudice was on the table. He indicated the photos. "This your family?"

"Yes. My boys. My daughter. My wife. My parents." He pointed out the pictures.

"I think I've met one of your boys." Zestrum gestured at the kid.

"Johnny? Where was that?"

"Mr. Etcheverry, we might as well get this over with before I waste your time. On the road into town I came upon your boy robbin' some folks."

Etcheverry frowned at the unwelcome news. "What did you do?"

"I tied him up some, took his horse and gun, and left him."

Etcheverry took a breath. "What'd you do with his horse and gun?"

"They're waiting for him at the post office. After he walks to town."

"I see."

"I figured the boy needed a lesson in manners. If you don't want to hire me after tellin' you this, that's fine, I wouldn't want to work for you anyway."

After a beat, Etcheverry broke out laughing. "Sit down."

They sat, Etcheverry in a large armchair, Zestrum on the couch.

"The reason I contacted you is I'm looking for some strong borgs to work for me."

"Looked like you found some."

"I need more. And someone of your reputation. . . well, I'd like to have you on board."

Zestrum wasn't sure he liked carrying that kind of reputation. People seemed to think he went looking for trouble.

"The ranch is five hundred acres. We're developing property, expanding operations. That's gonna take hard work. A lot of hard

## RIO CYBORG

work. Can't have too many men. We've been here 32 years and expect to stay."

"You arrived pre-Colonization?"

"Let's say I like having a head start on establishing commerce in a new place." He smiled. "I came with my father when he came over. He put everything he had into this stake. I intend to make it flourish. Now that the railway's running, the possibilities are as wide open as the Interior."

"What exactly is the work?"

"Ranch work, mostly. Repairs around the place. Mending fences, wrangling cattle, breaking horses, the usual. And perimeter defense."

That caught his ear. "For five hundred acres?"

"That's why I need men."

"Looks like an army."

"I need 'em. Protecting the ranch. The family. The operation. I'm not gonna sugarcoat the situation. We've had some incidents. People encroaching on our property. Stealing our water. Shooting our men. Part of the reason I'm hiring on cyborgs is because they're durable and sustainable."

"Expendable."

Etcheverry pursed his lips. "Well. That's the nature of any risky business venture, isn't it? I can promise a decent decommission and commensurate retaliation." He leaned forward. "I always even the score with those who cross me."

"My policy as well."

Etcheverry's harsh gaze did not waver. "I think we understand each other." He opened a desk drawer and extracted a form. "I believe it's best to get things in writing." He offered the form. "It's a simple agreement, outlining duties, pay, and rewards."

"Rewards?" Zestrum took the paper and glanced at the fine print.

"All my men receive bonuses when the ranch profits. And rewards for loyal service." He watched as the cyborg perused the contract, in no hurry to accept the offer. "I realize you may want to review terms before you sign on."

"I do." He looked at Etcheverry. "I'll have to think about it."

"Of course." He handed over a red coin. "In the meantime, have one on me at the saloon."

Zestrum studied the red coin. "What's this?"

"I do business with Doug McConnell, the man who owns the Dual Majesty in town. I get a discount on services. Take a room. Take a lady. This coin will give you a free night. For both."

Zestrum considered the incentive. *That* had never been part of a job offer before.

Etcheverry smiled gregariously. "Just a sample of rewards available to my employees. Get back to me in two or three days. And until then. . . enjoy!"

## CHAPTER 2 – OLD FRIENDS, NEW FRIENDS

Zestrum left Shiloh at the hitching post outside Colton House, a square two-story building with a cool shady front porch six steps up from the wooden sidewalk. There was a nice span of lawn on either side. Windows at ground level peeked out from a basement. He unhooked the satchel from the saddle.

At a public hotel, he would have simply walked in but this was a private residence converted to a bed and board. He knocked on the frame of the outer screen door.

The inner wooden door opened and he found himself looking through the screen at a curvy woman with her brunette hair tied down under a bandana. She wore a green checked dress and sturdy boots.

Zestrum pulled off his hat.

Her eyes scanned him head to toe to face, then she ran a hand over her bound hair—for her, an automatic reaction to a tall handsome man. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Ms. Colton, proprietor of Colton House?”

“I am. And you are?” She assessed him with keen perception.

His clothes were not new, but not threadbare or stained, just dusty from the road. His hair looked to have been combed but was damp and awry from wearing a hat all day in the sun.

“Zestrum Doniphon. I’m looking for a room to rent. Postmaster recommended your place.”

“Won’t you come inside?” She pushed aside the screen door and he entered the house.

Inside, the air was cooler, with a flow-through breeze from the windows at the front and sides of the house. A staircase in the main entry led upstairs. There was a big front parlor at the left and a smaller parlor on the right, more doors further down, with one wide door at the end of the hall leading into the back of the house.

He stood acclimating to the interior light.

He must have passed her assessment because she said, "I have a room available. How long will you be staying?"

"A week."

The prospect of a week's rent appealed to her. Her eyes wandered over him, taking in his physique and level of trail grime. She had remarkable gray eyes. "I can provide accommodations for a week."

"Are meals included?"

"Breakfast and dinner. Lunch is on your own. Most folks aren't here through the day." She started to take his satchel but he indicated with a look that he would carry it. His chivalry impressed her favorably.

She led him up the stairs and down a narrow corridor past five doors on each side. "The bathroom is here." She pointed at a door with a "Washroom" sign, then continued to the end of the hall. She stepped inside a bedroom with a window overlooking the street.

He set the satchel on the little table and perused the room. Small, but neat and clean, and a bed with a real mattress, a luxury he hadn't had in a while.

"The room has a basin for washing, but the bathroom has a sink and a tub. There are towels in the cabinet." She pointed at the cabinet under the basin.

"That would be welcome, ma'am." He knew he smelled of road and days of travel.

"Breakfast is at seven am. Dinner at six pm. The dining room is right behind the front parlor."

"What do I owe you for the week ahead?"

"One hundred five."

He extracted bills from his wallet and handed over payment.



## RIO CYBORG

She tucked the money into a pocket and studied him. "Anything else I can do for you, Mr. Doniphon?"

He smiled pleasantly. "Right now a warm bath and a soft bed are kinda preoccupying most of my thinkin'."

For a moment she stood still, her gaze intent on his, then she departed and shut the door.

He quickly searched the room to satisfy himself that there were no surveillance equipment or traps. A force of habit and matter of survival. He unrolled his bedroll on the bed and placed his few toiletries on the sink in the tiny adjoining washroom.

He decided to clean up before casing the town to find out what was what. He wanted to know all the players before he agreed to take the job.

\* \* \*

First place to go was the sheriff's office, to check what the wanted posters said. The combination sheriff's office and jailhouse was on Main Street, sandwiched between the laundry and the gunsmith. Around the businesses were shops and private homes.

On the porch outside the entrance, he scanned the posters nailed to the front wall. There were human and cyborg criminals, wanted for burglary, rustling, assault, and homicide.

Cyborgs were supposed to be better than that. *Human helpers, the Consortium always insisted in their promotional materials, designed to assist Colonization in a new world.*

And after the Colonization, they were cut loose to fend on their own.

He entered the office to inspect the posters on the inside wall. At a desk, a man in dusty rawhide clothes slumped face down on the blotter, asleep. Zestrum smelled whiskey. He was irritated to find law enforcement inebriated so early in the day.

Then again, each man faced his demons in his own way.

More posters showed more criminals—many robberies and burglaries. There was a lot of crime around here. Expected in the Badlands. There must have been more than this drunken deputy to assist the sheriff. If not. . . no wonder there was so much crime around here.

He deliberately banged a chair to wake the deputy—to no effect. He smirked. He glanced past the interior door and saw four large, barred cells, all empty. So nobody in custody. Zestrum circled the outer office, curious. Three desks, a locked rack of rifles, a locked trunk of ammo. No windows, only the front door with a peephole cover, and a door to a closet at the side.

The front door slammed open, making him tense for conflict—until he recognized the hothead he left stranded on the road.

Johnny Etcheverry was filthy, overheated, streaked with muck from his long walk, and hopping mad. His anger magnified when he saw Zestrum. “What the hell are *you* doing here?”

Zestrum considered whether to continue the smackdown he started on the road. “Didn’t we already have this discussion about manners, boy?”

Johnny fumed. “When my pa finds out what you did, you’ll be sorry you messed with me!” He slammed a fist on the desk beside the deputy’s head. “Wake up, Edwards! I need to file a complaint!”

The deputy didn’t rouse.

Johnny hauled back to kick the man—until Zestrum took a menacing step toward him. He cowered, intimidated. He puffed up when the cyborg didn’t move again. “You stole my horse!”

“Left him tied up outside the post office.”

He blustered at that. “You stole my gun.”

“Left it in the saddlebag.”

Deprived of his allegations of theft, he snorted. “You beat me up.”

“If I’d have beat you up, you wouldn’t be awake yet.”

His face registered worry, then he covered with anger. “You touch me again, you’ll be damn sorry, borg!”

The door opened and Sheriff Mitch Bodie arrived.

Johnny instantly turned on him. “This borg ambushed me on the road! I want to prefer charges.”

Bodie closed the door and looked at Zestrum. “Doniphon.”

## RIO CYBORG

“Bodie.” Zestrum touched the brim of his hat. He was surprised to see his old friend and wondered if he was as worn out on the inside as he appeared on the outside.

Johnny gaped at them. “You *know* him?”

“From way back.” Bodie hung his hat on a hook behind the desk. His clothes were grubby and frayed. He was older and thicker than last time Zestrum had seen him, and he was slightly stooped at the shoulders.

Johnny wheeled on him. “This borg robbed me in the middle of the day on the public highway. I want him arrested.”

Bodie nailed him with a steely eye. “What were you doing when he robbed you?”

Johnny faltered on that simple question. “Errands.”

“Tell him about the couple you were robbing at gunpoint,” Zestrum said. “I saw their wagon down by the general store. They probably swore out a complaint on you by now.”

The kid’s eyes widened with anxiety.

Bodie regarded Johnny with speculation. “You were out harassing folks again?”

Johnny sneered. “I was running errands for my pa. Pa’s business.” He pointed at Zestrum. “This *assborg* stole my horse and my gun. That’s a crime. Arrest him!”

“I don’t take orders from you, boy.” Bodie sounded weary. “And I saw your horse outside the post office five minutes ago. Why don’t you fetch him and get on home?”

“Pa isn’t going to like how you disregarded me.”

“Then your pa can come in and swear out a complaint on your behalf. Now get out of here before I arrest you for making false claims and committing highway robbery.”

“You can’t talk to me like that.”

“Run along and finish your errands.” Bodie mustered the glower of a warrior cyborg.

Johnny scoffed openly and slammed the door on his way out.

Bodie looked at Zestrum. “Looks like you made an enemy.”

“And in less than half a day.” Zestrum grinned and shook hands with the sheriff. “Nice to see a friend.”

"Nice to see you, too, Doniphon. You better watch your back." He jerked a thumb toward the departed kid. "He's a little shit. His Pa's even worse. What happened?"

"He was terrorizing a couple driving a wagon toward town. Threatening the woman with bodily harm. I persuaded him to leave them be."

He bestowed a mordant look. "Still trying to correct the humans?"

"Somebody's got to keep them in line." He gestured at the office. "Looks like that's you in this territory."

He sighed heavily, glanced at the intoxicated deputy, then shuffled papers out from under the man's hand. "They put me here because I've outlived my usefulness. Token law enforcement."

Zestrum sat in a chair. "Tell me more."

Bodie knew this was no idle question. "You know the Etcheverry clan?"

"We've met."

"Claude Etcheverry owns five hundred acres of land. He fancies himself king of his kingdom. Anybody gets in his way gets removed."

"Who's in his way right now?"

"There's six families got sizeable spreads. The most vocal is Gerald Nowlin. Things were pretty quiet till last year when Etcheverry dammed up the river and cut off most of the water."

"I thought there were laws against that."

"There are. Don't mean Etcheverry cares."

"How does the town exist without water?"

"He sells water to the city 'cause he likes the benefits of a nearby town. But everybody else gets gouged."

"So he's hoping to starve out the competition."

"That's about it. Man's got five hundred acres and he wants more. Can you imagine one man tending that much land?"

"He had a dozen hands at his house. How many others are out doing perimeter defense?"

Bodie regarded him with proficiency. "You talked to him already?"

## RIO CYBORG

“Earlier today. He made the job sound reasonable enough. Ranch work with security and rewards.”

“You came to Copperbank for the job?”

“He invited me, but the offer sounded off. He bestowed two days to consider.”

“You walked into a range war, Doniphon. Be careful who you side with.”

“I’d rather not side with anybody.”

He jutted his thumb toward the door. “That runt is just a sample of what his other kids are like. Be damn careful if you turn him down.”

Zestrum scowled. “Well. I came because the pay was so good. But there’s always a catch, isn’t there?”

“Just about always.”

He lowered his chin. “So you know, I paid in advance for a week at Colton House.”

“And after that week?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. Maybe I’ll look up some of those fellas on the posters out front.”

“As long as they don’t get you first.”

“I said maybe. I never have enjoyed bounty hunting.”

“So you might be looking for a job.”

He heard an underlying note in the old man’s voice. “I might be.”

Bodie glanced again at his deputy. “I could have an opening. If you were interested.”

“I might be.”

“Work’s hard. But to make up for it, the pay’s lousy.”

He smiled. “Old joke.”

“I’m an old borg. Perks are tiny. Nothing like a red coin at the Majesty.”

“Well, I’m set for the week. After that, I am open to suggestion.”

The sleeping man stirred, sat up, and blinked. “Bodie.” He squinted at Zestrum. “Who are you?”

“This is an old friend of mine,” Bodie said. “Tom Doniphon.”

“Zestrum.” He offered a hand to Ethan.

“Edwards.” Ethan tried to make his grip firm. “Deputy Ethan Edwards.” He peered at Bodie with bloodshot eyes. “Am I still a deputy, Bodie?”

“You are,” said Bodie. “Why don’t you do rounds?”

“Sure thing, boss.” Edwards staggered to his feet, found his hat, and departed on shaky legs.

Bodie watched him go with regret. “He was a good man once. Before the whiskey and the Vestal.”

Vestal was the drug of choice for most cyborgs seeking euphoria or amnesia. Zestrum figured the deputy had his reasons for using. “How reliable is he now? That’s what counts.”

“He does desk work while I’m out.”

“Who else is on board?”

“Puzzle. He works evenings while I have dinner. He’s a testy old codger, but reliable. Good with a rifle.”

“Sounds like you could use fresh blood.”

“Could I ever. Man, if you’re in the market for work, I could use you.”

“Give me a day or two to ease out of the deal with Etcheverry.”

“Sure thing. That’s gotta be done delicately.”

“Delicate is my middle name.”