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Boonie

Written by

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One

The Silver Men

JD sat on a tuft of sawgrass and watched the smoke rise over the remains of the old shack. From time to time some piece of grey, bleached wood cracked in the heat as a new, orange fireworm crept over it. JD watched all day 'til there was nothin' left 'cept a pile of hot ash and that small twist of smoke. Then he watched the purple sun sink through the chemical haze and the dark shadows stretch out from the red hills. He watched until the whole Dry Marsh was dark.

When night wrapped around him JD tucked his hands under his armpits, stared at the heap of ash that had once been home and set to figurin' what to do next.

He sighed a deep sigh. He couldn't have known what was going to happen. Why, just that morning, same as every morning when the temperature got too high to stay

in bed, he'd dressed in his dungarees and shirt, pulled on his cracked leather boots, tied his leggings up to his knees, put his old cap in his pocket and shuffled into the big room to see if Pa had left anything to eat. Pa was pretty good at getting stuff to eat and JD found two or three twisted roots and some crickets laid out on the box by the stove. He picked up one of the crickets, took its head between his finger and thumb, snapped it off and put the body and legs into his mouth, crunching them into small pieces. JD liked crickets; they tasted good.

When Ma had been around, JD remembered, she'd boil all the grub together in a big pan which made everything taste the same but, while he preferred his crickets raw, it was tough chewing uncooked roots. But now Ma was gone and Pa had no time for cooking. He was out from dawn 'til dusk hunting over the Dry Marsh, scraping and digging for things to eat. He never got back to the shack 'til after dark except once, way back when he'd come in before noon with the biggest insect JD had ever seen. He said he'd found it buried in the wet green. Ma said it was called a crab. JD thought it looked like something from another time. Ma put the crab straight into the pan and boiled it up right then and there without waiting for supper time and when it was done they'd all three sat on the floor and pulled bits off it, cracking the shell with rocks and sucking out the meat. When Pa said it was like Yule in the old

times, Ma had winked at him and reached down a glass jar from the top of the dresser. She and Pa swigged from that jar 'til it was all gone and they were laid out flat on the floor. Little JD took the empty jar out of his Ma's hand to see if he could get some of the golden fluid for himself but it was quite dry. All he could do was sniff at the heady fumes. It was just like the smell you got if you found one of the old petrol cars abandoned someplace.

But Ma was gone and now Pa was gone too. When the Silver Men came last they'd found him half-buried out back. Pa always buried up when the vibrations came. He'd scrape out a spot near some sawgrass, lie in it and cover himself with dirt. He had a hollow stem to breathe through, but JD could always tell where he was by the hump in the ground and the different colour dirt where he'd dug it. The Silver Men knew that too. A while back, when two or three of them had done what they came for in the shack, they took Ma out to where Pa was hiding and did it a couple of times more right next to where he was buried, just so's he could hear. Then they put their silver suits back on, replaced their helmets and took off. When they'd gone JD made himself scarce while Ma and Pa fought in the dust.

After dark JD crept back into the shack, crawled into bed and lay with his face in the sacks hoping everything would be OK by morning. But next morning Ma was gone. Pa said she'd gone to the City.

The next time the vibrations came Pa was away digging so JD ran inside, opened up the dresser in the big room and climbed in. He lifted up the loose floorboards and squeezed through the hole underneath, just like Pa had showed him, and lay quiet under the shack.

He heard the Silver Men come in. He heard their heavy boots clumping on the boards above his head. He heard them call and when they saw that Ma wasn't there he heard them cuss and throw things around. They kicked over the stove and it shook the floorboards right over where he lay, making him cower down.

Then they went out back to find Pa. It took them a while but with their jet-packs and all they could cover ground fast. They brought him back to the shack and hit him with things that whistled and cut the air. They hit him a lot but Pa never made a sound. He didn't cry out or nothin' though what they were doing must have hurt like hell. JD guessed that the Silver Men were drinking too because he could smell that smell again just like the time of the crab. He reckoned they must have had a real big jarful too because the fumes that came down through the cracks in the floorboards were so thick and heavy they made him dizzy.

At last the shouting died down and JD heard the Silver Men leave the shack. He hoped they'd start their machines quick so's he could get out and go to Pa; see if he was OK.

But JD was having trouble breathing. Sweet, sickly fumes poured like treacle into the narrow space where he lay, filling his lungs and making his eyes sting. But JD kept still, listening, hoping and praying the Silver Men would go quick.

After a while it got real quiet but just when JD thought they might have gone he heard a click. Then one of the Silver Men shouted, there was a big flash and a brilliant orange and blue fireball, swirling and roaring like a dragon, ripped through the cracks in the boards.

JD fell flat to the ground and straight away his back began to burn and his head grew real hot. The hairs on his arms shrivelled into tiny black spirals and his skin began to scorch. He whimpered and tried to crawl away but hot smoke coiled and swirled through that shallow space under the shack, seeking him out, burning his eyes and filling his nose and throat.

He headed for the back of the shack where he knew there was a gap in the boards by the step. Gasping and choking on the hot, grey fog he wriggled and elbowed his way across the dirt. His hair was on fire, his arms were burned and bleeding but he struggled on, digging his fingers into the rough ground, grabbing at it, scratching at it, pulling himself towards that little opening. The flames roared and burned above him, stealing the air, making him keep his mouth close to the dirt, desperate for breath. The

heat was so intense it boiled the strength from his limbs, sucking it out until at last he fell flat, spread out, gasping, his chest heaving fit to bust. It was no good, he could go no further. He could only lie still now and wait for the hungry flames to burn him right up where he lay. Lifting one arm, JD tried to push away the blanket of hot smoke that was wrapping itself around him. But his knuckles struck something hard and, raising up his streaming eyes, he saw a patch of light above his head. For a moment the smoke thinned and JD saw he was right under that gap by the back step. With one last frenzied effort he pushed his hands into the hole and, gripping the edge, hauled himself up, forcing his head and shoulders into the air outside. Bit by bit he squeezed through until he fell in a heap by the back step.

JD struggled to his feet and, bent low, he half-scrambled, half-ran to the nearest hollow where he dropped, panting and choking, behind a hump of sawgrass. He pushed his burning face into the dirt and beat at his hair to put out the flames, while all the while the blazing shack roared and crackled and the air vibrated and buzzed from the Silver Men's machines.

JD pressed his thin body against the ground and covered his ears. At any moment those Silver Men would take off and fly right overhead. Then they would surely see him, they must see him. He pushed himself as flat as he could

and stuck his head into the sawgrass which cut and stung the raw flesh on his face. The jet-packs revved up and one by one the Silver Men took off. In a matter of moments they would see him stretched out in his shallow hideaway and would swoop down and carry him off for sure.

JD started to sob.

Two

The Old Road

When JD dared take his hands away from his ears all he could hear was the cracking of the burning wood and the whoosh as the old shack fell into the flames. He could still feel the vibrations but they were receding fast, and through the cloud of dust and ash that the jet-packs had kicked up he saw just four little black dots away in the west.

When he was sure the Silver Men had gone, JD sat up and he didn't move from that spot all day nor right through the night. He just sat watching the smoke and thinking.

Next day he set off along the Old Road. All through that night he'd never once thought about the Old Road but somehow when morning came he just stood up, turned his back on the pile of ash that had once been home and walked towards it. When he reached it he hadn't paused

neither; he just turned west and strode off. Just like he'd been meant to.

JD knew that in the old times the petrol cars had run on that road but now the concrete slabs were cracked and uneven, lifted to crazy angles by the heat. Sharp yellow grass grew in the gaps and JD had to walk along the dirt path by the edge to save from falling down or having to jump from slab to slab.

He didn't see a single shack all day. From time to time there were square patches of concrete where brick shacks had been, their edges red and yellow like broken teeth. Wires and pipes had been cut off short and shards of white china lay around but everything else was long gone.

He walked all day, even in the hot hours, sucking at his tongue, trying to create spit the way Pa had shown him. His skin, scorched and weeping, hurt bad and he walked bent and twisted like an old man but he knew he had to carry on.

He made sure to stay near the road where the track was as flat and easy as it could be, while all around the scrub stretched away, a mournful desert of red dust, undefined, undulating its way to the horizon. By nightfall he was sore and hungry and began to meander away from the Old Road and into the Scrubland, seeking out the crickets he could hear chirruping in the tussocks. He caught two and ate them quick while they still had some moisture, leaving their heads on. Pa said you could get a lick from the brains.

When darkness finally closed in JD lay down where he stopped, put his head on his hands, tucked his knees up to his chest and shut his eyes. With one ear close to the ground he reckoned he'd hear any vibrations if they came.

But sleep did not come easy. JD turned over and put his face into the crook of his arm, trying to shut out the lightning flashes that crackled orange and blue across the sky. All that night he tossed and turned; the heat never let up and he could still taste smoke. Whenever he could shut out his thoughts long enough to drift towards slumber he would hear a cry in the distance or feel a shudder through the dirt and would start, images of Silver Men like livid flames flashing before his eyes.

Well before dawn he gave up trying to sleep and sat up, stretched his neck, straightened his back and looked around. The air was still and dark, the sky a deep angry red except for a faint semicircle of yellow light fading into the west horizon. JD had seen that light before but never so clear. Before sun-up on some days back at the shack he'd seen that same dirty yellow smudge staining the sky. He'd never mentioned it to Pa and Pa had never said anything about it to JD, but when Ma went off and JD had asked Pa where she'd gone, Pa had stared at that yellow light when he said she must have gone to the City. He never said no more but some mornings JD had seen him

clenching and unclenching his fists, staring at the yellow glow, anger and hurt etched on his face.

But Pa was gone now and JD knew he had to get on. The Blue Star was fading and soon the sun would rise and sear the ground into another day of furnace heat.

Sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, JD sucked his swollen tongue and wiggled it behind his teeth but no saliva came. His lips were dry and cracked and under the rim of caked red dust he could feel slivers of skin peeling away. He sucked air in through his teeth, trying to cool his mouth but that was no good neither. Even before sun-up it was just too hot and his arms and hands, scorched and red from the fire, seemed even hotter than the rest of him. He took off his old cap and a cloud of burned hair fell into his lap.

JD looked around. Away to his left, set against the scrub and sand hills, he saw a tree silhouetted against the sky; a wizened, bent thing with broken branches. He'd seen trees before, even standing ones. Way back Pa had taken him to see one. They'd walked north all one morning beyond the Dry Marsh to an old river bed near to where the nuclear power plant had been. They'd found the tree clinging to a high bank, one splintered branch pointing back like a warning. They sat down under that tree, father and son, and Pa had told JD a story about the old times when trees were high and straight and hung with soft green leaves

which you could eat. He told JD of a time when small critters flew among the trees and water fell out of the sky. JD loved it when Pa told him those stories even though he knew they were made up. No one could imagine any such thing in real life.

JD sighed out loud, wrapped his arms tight around his knees and studied this new tree while he remembered that time with Pa. Then he snapped out of his memory and sat up straight. His sharp eyes had detected a movement near the tree and his heart began to pound. Someone was there. The trunk looked like it was wide at the bottom and narrow high up, but when JD concentrated he could see there was a figure hunched at the base of the tree, its head leaning forward. That head wore a broad round hat and from time to time that hat would nod. JD touched his own ragged cap with a finger and wondered what it would be like to own a nice, shady hat like that.

He watched carefully. JD was scared of strangers but was getting so desperate for water he set to wondering if the man by the tree might have something to drink. He watched and thought about water until at last he summoned up his courage and began to creep towards the tree. He stayed low, skirting the sand hills and keeping in the hollows, his eyes fixed on the man, ready to freeze or run if he should turn around.

When he was just a few paces away, right up close behind

the tree, he dropped into a shallow dip and waited a while, keeping low and listening. Then he crawled forward and peered over the rim of the hollow. He was right; there was a man by the tree and he was old, older than Pa, and wore a long coat made of some light stuff. It too was old and had tears all over it. The man's legs and feet were wrapped in layers of paper, tied around with strands of plaited grass, criss-crossed up to his knees. His arms were thin and bent, and his elbows rested on his knees, which were drawn up close to his chest. A mane of grey hair poured out from under his hat and hung straight down his back. JD could see he had a grey muzzle too but the rest of his face was hidden in the shadows. JD was so close he could hear the man breathing; he made a kind of whistling sound as he breathed in, followed by a gurgle and a grunt when he breathed out. It sounded like the old guy was sleeping.

Lying quietly in his hole, JD searched for any sign the man might have something to drink. He scanned the hunched figure from the top of his hat to the tips of his toes, hoping to see the bulge of a water bottle in the thin dustcoat. Then he spotted something. Leaning against the tree was a sort of a bag, an old satchel made out of something soft. There was a bulge at one end and a split where it had dried in the sun and through the crack JD could make out something metallic. Something grey, dull and tubular – just the kind of thing a man might keep a drink in.

JD edged closer. He winced at the pain from the burns on his arms but he kept on going, crawling out of his hole, staying flat to the dirt, using his elbows to squirm towards the bag, all the time flicking his eyes between the sleeping man's face and that dull, metal tube. As he crawled a plan formed in his mind. When the time was right he'd dart forward, grab the bag and run as hard as he could, away across the scrub before the old man knew what was happening. JD ran his swollen tongue across his dry lips, tried to swallow and thought about water.

He crept closer and closer until, about midway between the dip and the tree, he began to raise himself up. He needed to be sure nothing would give him away, a dry twig, a stone that might click against another. But it was all clear; just a fine layer of red dust covered the ground between him and that precious tube. JD licked his dry lips again; he could almost taste that cool, sweet water. One more step and he'd be close enough. He gathered himself for the final spring, drew a quiet breath and lifted his hands clear of the dust, ready to catapult himself forward, grab that bag and run. It was now or never.

'You touch that bag, son, and I'll snap you like a twig.' The voice sounded like it came from the sky; like the growl of distant thunder.

Three

Godrum

JD sat back on his haunches, dropped his head and tried to look innocent. He ran his fingers in the dust, pretending not to be interested in the man or his bag, but when he was sure the old guy wasn't looking he shot another glance at that inviting bulge. He was sure there was a drink in that bag and as he conjured up thoughts of cool fresh water his tongue grew bigger and drier in his mouth. Once more he tried to lick his sun-cracked lips but it was no good. What could he do? There was no Pa to give him a bit of spit in his mouth, no Ma to let him put his tongue on the old piece of glass she kept in the dark cupboard, just an old man and a tree. He had to get a drink from someplace and still wondered if it might be worth the chance. Sure, the old guy knew he was there but JD reckoned he could still grab the bag and make off before getting caught. He tensed;

he was young and the man was old, he was sure he could do it.

'You come around here, boy, where I can see you,' the voiced rumbled again. It was as if he'd read JD's mind.

JD stood up and shuffled forward. The old guy's head was down, his face still hidden in the shadow of that hat. As he sidled past JD shot a quick look under the wide brim and saw two sharp, golden eyes trained on him like weapons. Two tiny slits beneath bushy grey brows, focused right on him, daring him to make one false move just so's he could carry out his threat. JD shuddered.

But he's old, JD repeated to himself; he cain't be as quick as me. He knew his chances were slim but he was so thirsty, he'd do anything for a drink, even risk being snapped like a twig. That terrible thirst was putting thoughts in his mind he knew his Ma would have beaten out of him.

But just then JD saw something that made him stop. Something so scary it drove all other thoughts from his mind. Beneath the intense eyes and the big hooked nose, curved and sharp like a raven's beak, the old man's mouth zigzagged across his face in a jagged line. JD stared. The pale lips had been sewn together with strong leather bands, each stitch crossed over the next, straining the skin tight across the bones, drawing down his cheeks and pulling his chin up from his neck. JD was horrified and fascinated at the same time but there was worse to come.

Beneath the man's chin where the skin was pulled up and stretched by the stitches, half-hidden by a long piece of cloth tied in a loose knot JD saw something so dreadful it made him feel sick. Beneath the man's grey stubbled chin was a livid, red hole shaped like a cross. It was cut deep, the edges just flaps of loose skin and from it a small white tube ran down and disappeared inside the man's clothes.

'You circle round to where I can see you, boy,' the man said, his chest heaving, his words pushed out from the hole in his neck on a belch of air. 'Don't you try to run. If you do I'll catch you, break off your arms and drink your blood.' The man gave a dry rasping chuckle which rose from someplace deep inside him, making the loose skin flap in and out of the dark, red hole.

How did he say that, JD thought, staring at the stitches which held the man's mouth closed, trying to figure out how you could speak through a hole in your neck. And it wasn't just how he spoke, it was what he said. JD had never heard anybody say such things. Would he really snap him like a twig or pull his arms off? He was almost sure he wouldn't but just in case, JD did as he was told, shuffling around until he was straight in front of the man.

'That's fine. Just fine,' the man croaked. 'Now, you just sit down there where I can see you plain.'

JD sank down, sat in the dust and crossed his legs.

The old man grunted and, raising his head, he looked straight at JD, his bright eyes scanning him from the fire-blackened curls to the pointed tips of the worn old boots that Ma had sewed.

'What's your name, boy?' the man said at last.

JD coughed to clear the dust. 'JD,' he said, but his voice caught in his dry throat so he tried again. 'My name's JD,' he said, louder.

'JD, eh? And what does JD stand for?'

'It don't stand for nothin'. It's just JD.'

'It has to stand for somethin',' the old man belched, his deep burbling voice rising a tone or two. 'What do your Ma and Pa call you?'

JD shrugged. 'They call me JD, or used to. Ma went off and Pa got burned up in the shack.'

The man sniffed. 'So, young JD, why do you want to steal an old man's things? You tell me that.'

'I'm dry,' JD said without shame. 'I ain't had nothin' for more'n a day 'cept a few crickets and I'm real dry.'

'You're dry so you figure it's OK to rob some old guy then leave him to die out here in the scrub. That it?'

JD shrugged his bony shoulders. 'I didn't mean no harm,' he said, looking at his feet. 'I just want a drink.' His thirst was so strong it was overpowering his fear and at last he summoned up enough courage to ask the question he knew he shouldn't.

'Have you got a drink in that bag?' he said, pointing to the old satchel.

'Might have,' the man drawled. 'But if I have, you give me one good reason why I should share it with a thieving Boonie kid who ain't worth a spit.'

'I just want a drink, Mister. I ain't had a taste for two days,' JD said, searching the craggy face. 'I don't want to hurt no one. I just need a drink,' he whined, dropping his head again and looking at his feet.

JD heard the man move and tucked his head into his chest. He was sure something bad was going to happen but he was too scared and too tired to run. If the man with the sewed-up face was going to grab him there wasn't much he could do about it now. He just hoped he wasn't going to pull his arms off, but just in case he tucked his elbows close into his sides and crossed his bunched-up hands tight under his chin.

He heard the bones in the man's knees crack as he stood up, and the sound of his feet shuffling through the dust towards him. JD bowed his head real low, making himself as small as he could, hoping for the best but fearing the worst. He began to whimper.

'Here, Boonie. You take this.'

JD looked up, keeping his head low and peeking through his brows.

The man held a grey, metal tube in one hand and a

screw cap in the other. He offered JD the screw cap and cautiously the boy unclasped his hands, reached up and took it from the long, bony fingers. The metal was cool against his fingertips and JD's heart leapt. Gently, he lowered that screw cap until he could see into it; it was full of clear water and in that moment the whole world beyond JD's fingertips disappeared. The only thing that existed was that small container and its glistening circle of water. There was no scrub, no hills and no valleys, no sawgrass, no sun, no old man and no tree. The whole world was in that precious, metal cap.

JD looked at the screw cap for a moment before gently tipping it up and letting the priceless fluid touch his dry, cracked lips. It was heaven. At once JD's lips seemed to shrink back into place and he worked them together until every part was soft and moist. Then he took a tiny sip, the way Pa had taught him, and let it run over his tongue, wetting it, shrinking it before letting the sweet water run down the sides so he could get the full, beautiful flavour. JD looked up at the man and creased his face into a grin and to his surprise the man smiled back, his dry old cheeks rising, his slit eyes sparkling.

'Take it easy, son,' the old man belched quietly. 'Make that last.'

JD wanted to thank the man properly, to explain what it felt like to take a drink after more than two days, but

that could wait. Right now the water was all that mattered. In three tiny sips he wetted his tongue, his teeth and gums. He held the water in his mouth and swilled it all around until finally, reluctant to let it go, he swallowed. A cool rivulet washed its way through the dust in his throat.

JD followed this slow, careful ritual another couple of times until the cap was empty. Then he ran his tongue around the inside, seeking out every last, hidden drop until finally he tipped his head back, lifted the metal cap and shook it, hoping that maybe one tiny droplet might be lurking someplace and would fall, cool and refreshing into his open mouth. But it really was all gone and he offered the cap back to the old man, who screwed it onto the tube before shuffling away to his tree where he flopped onto the ground, leaning once more against the twisted trunk.

'Thanks,' JD said once the old guy had settled. 'Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.'

The man's tortured face creased into what passed for his smile once more. 'That's OK, son,' he growled. Then, pausing for a moment, heaving his chest upwards and noisily drawing air in through his big nose, he said: 'You got good manners for a kid. Where you from?'

'I live in the Dry Marsh, back there,' JD said, pointing east.

The old man nodded. 'And your Ma and Pa are gone, you say?'

'Yep. Ma's gone anyways. Pa got burned up like I said.'

'So you did. So you did,' the old guy said like he was thinking of something. 'So where are you going? You lookin' for your Ma?'

JD blinked. It was like something inside him had woken up. 'How can I?' he said. 'She's gone off. Pa said.'

'She must have gone someplace. Did your Pa say where she'd gone?'

JD shrugged. 'To the City,' he said.

The old man gave a grunt. 'They all go to the City in the end.' Then after a while he added: 'If your Ma's there you'd better get yourself off there too. No place for a little kid on his own, not out here in the Scrubland.'

'But I don't know where the City is,' JD said quietly. The whole truth was that he didn't even know what a City was but he didn't like to say that.

'And you say your Pa got burned up. How'd that happen?'

JD had to search his thoughts. He'd hidden away what had happened back at the shack but by screwing up his eyes and clenching his fists JD managed to call some of it to mind. He told the man how the Silver Men had come and how they'd beaten Pa and set fire to the shack. He told him of the other times too, when they'd caught Ma and stripped her off and done those things to her, but it all came out in a jumble, a bit of one story mixed in with scraps of others.

He wanted to tell it like a proper story, like Pa could; starting at the beginning and working through to the end, but it just wouldn't come out that way. He told whichever part of the story came to him at the time, squeezing them out of his memory and letting them escape through his lips. The man nodded as JD stumbled on. He seemed to understand.

When at last he'd managed to say all the things that had been holed up in his head JD began to sob quietly. He felt empty. At first, letting the story loose, sharing it with the old man had made losing his Pa and his home a bit easier but now it was gone and weren't his no more, he felt real sad. The nightmares that had haunted his mind, the visions of flames, the heat and the burning, the Silver Men overhead, all those things that JD had somehow hoped were only a dream, had become true in the telling.

The old man didn't speak until JD's sobs had died away.

'How are old are you, son? Do you know?'

JD looked up. 'I'm thirteen,' he said, swallowing away his tears.

The man studied JD intensely from his old sack cap to his home-sewn boots until, after a long while he said, 'Yep. Reckon you would be too. Thirteen for sure.' Then he stared down at JD and raised a bushy eyebrow like he'd had an idea.

'Can you figure up to thirteen?'

'I sure can,' JD announced. 'One, two, three, four . . .'

'OK. OK. I believe you,' the old man said, holding up one hand. 'That's good for a kid,' he said, almost to himself. 'Real good for a Boonie kid. Who learned you that?'

'My Pa. He was real good at figurin'. He could go on figurin' all day if he wanted.'

The old man nodded, but talking about Pa reminded JD of the Silver Men again. 'Have you ever seen those Silver Men?' he asked. 'The ones that came to our shack?'

'Sure. I might not have seen your particular Silver Men but I seen plenty of others. Why, when I was in the City I seen loads of 'em. Even spoke to some of 'em.'

'Why do they come and do those things to Ma and why'd they burn my Pa up?' JD asked, screwing up his face so's he wouldn't start crying again.

'They're just huntin'.'

JD couldn't believe what the man said at first. Pa used to say he was going hunting when he set off in the mornings to find bugs and roots to eat. It was hard to imagine those Silver Men were just looking for something to eat.

'But what are they huntin' for?' JD said, trying to get his thoughts to match the pictures in his head.

'They're just huntin' for a good time,' the man croaked. 'They just do it for fun.'

'But why?' JD asked. 'How is it fun to burn people up in their shacks?'

'Don't ask me,' the old guy belched. 'But that's why

they do it. That and because they can. They're Leaders, you're Boonies. They got the right.'

'Why do you say that and what's Boonies?' JD found himself getting angry. 'You even said I was a Boonie kid. I don't know what that means.'

A sort of rumbling cough came from someplace under the old man's chin. It sounded like a laugh and it made JD look up and stare straight back at the man. He didn't like being laughed at. But as he studied the twisted skin which creased and pulled at the ugly stitches across the old guy's face JD's hurt drained away. He could see it wasn't a real laugh, it was just a noise.

'You don't know much, do you, kid?' the old man sighed. 'I call you a Boonie 'cos that's what you are. Everyone who lives out here away from the City is a Boonie. There are even some Boonies inside the City but if they come from out here in the Scrubland they're still Boonies. I'm a Boonie now although I wasn't before, and you're a Boonie for sure. We're all Boonies.'

'I still don't know what you're talkin' about,' JD snapped.

The old man sighed a low gurgling sigh. 'Look, son,' he said, drawing in a great breath and holding it, preparing for another long belch of words. 'I guess your Ma and Pa never told you nothin' so it ain't strictly your fault. But if you're going to make it either out here or in there, you gotta know some things.'

The old man looked hard at JD as if he was trying to make up his mind about something and after what seemed like an awful long time he nodded his great head and grunted. Then he leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees and propped his chin in his hands.

'OK, son? Now you sit back and listen up and I'll tell you some of the things your Ma and Pa should have told you way back.'

'Wait. Why do you keep callin' me *son*?' JD interrupted before the man could begin. 'My name's JD.'

'OK, OK. Master JD, I promise I won't call you *son* no more. Now, you ready to listen?' The glinting eyes fixed on JD and JD stared back and nodded.

'Good. As you might have gathered, talkin' ain't that easy for me.' The man tapped the stitches on his lips. 'So if I'm going to tell you all this stuff I don't want no more interruptions. OK?'

'No. I ain't ready yet,' JD said. He was eager to hear what this strange old man with the sewed-up mouth had to say but there was one more thing he needed to know. 'I told you my name but you ain't told me yours. That's rude,' he said. JD wanted things right.

The old man stared down at the pale, thin little boy sitting in the dust at his feet and drew in a deep breath, sucking air noisily into his nose and swallowing it.

'OK. You're right again, JD, and that's the truth. My name's Godrum. Now then, if you'll just hold your peace and stop your interruptin', I'll tell you some things about the kinda world you've just walked into.'