

# DINOSAUR CARNAGE



by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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The Flashback/Dinosaur  
Apocalypse Cycle

## WAYNE KYLE SPITZER

*Flashback*

(re-printed in *Dinosaur Apocalypse*)

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## Flashback Dawn

(re-printed in *Dinosaur Apocalypse*)

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## Tales from the Flashback

(re-printed as *Dinosaur Rampage*)

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## Flashback Twilight

(serialized as *A Dinosaur is a Man's Best Friend*;

re-printed as *The Complete Ank & Williams*,  
*Dinosaur War, Paladins*)

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*A Reign of Thunder*

(serialized as *Heat Wave*)

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*A Survivor's Guide to the  
Dinosaur Apocalypse*

(re-printed as *Dinosaur Carnage*)

## Elegy

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O *kay, easy does it. Just nock your arrow—easy, easy, it's going to click—now put it in the rest ...*

I looked at the allosaur as it fed, there in the slim shadow of the Mirage's entry arch, in the shimmering heat of Lost Vegas, and drew back the string—finding my anchor (which was just under my right ear), aligning the peephole with my sights.

*Easy, easy ...*

I stabilized the grip between my thumb and forefinger, sighting the area between the arms, the claws of which were covered in gore.

*Great Spirit, thank you for sharing with me your glorious nature and abundant wildlife—*

There was a *thwish* as a I released the arrow.

*Grant me always wisdom and respect in its pursuit—*

Which struck the taupe-colored animal with a dull thump, causing it to rear up like a stallion, baying and squealing, barking at the sky.

*And keep me ever humble in the harvest—*

I nocked and released two more bolts, embedding them into its chest, into its great, beating heart.

*So that I may be worthy of my place on this earth. Amen.*

And it fell, the fast-acting microraptor venom locking its jaw, paralyzing its limbs, so that it squirmed briefly upon its belly before solidifying like stone (as though it had gazed upon Medusa herself) and lay still, at which Kesabe leapt from the palm bushes and bound toward it, barking and wagging his tail, and I followed, grateful for the meat yet distressed by the loss of the arrows—which I knew would never be recovered—and overall preoccupied enough that I didn't even notice the girl standing just beyond the kill—until she yelped once, taking me in, and bolted out of sight down S. Las Vegas Blvd; after which I heard a small engine sputter to life and begin to rev.

"Sic, Kesabe!" I barked, for she was the first person we'd seen since San Diego—but the Dutch Shepherd was already on it, leaping over the allosaur's tail and sprinting after her even as I shouldered the compound bow and fetched Blucifer, whom I mounted quickly, gracelessly, before cracking the reins and giving chase.

And then there we were, she on her motor scooter (which sputtered and whined and left a trail of oily blue smoke) while we pursued, weaving between empty cars, maneuvering around stalled buses, racing down the Strip past Harrah's and Caesar's and the rows of transplanted palm trees—all the way to Planet Hollywood and a wide set of stairs (which she attempted to navigate but failed); all the way until Kesabe fell upon her like a threshing machine and I at last trotted to a halt, calling him off.

Fortunately, she hadn't been hurt, at least not seriously: she had a few nicks from Kesabe's teeth—a given—along with some minor cuts and bruises, but that was it. She was, however, pinned beneath her scooter; a circumstance she could do virtually nothing about—considering Kesabe's close proximity.

"Bastard!" she cursed—her voice full of venom—and spat at me. "What do you want?"

I recoiled as though slapped in the face, as though her small voice were instead the loudest thing in the world (which, at that time and place, now that I think about it, it *was*). And then the silence reasserted itself, as total and sublime as anything since Death Valley—only worse, for I now had something to compare it to—and because I was a man, and alone, with no rules to govern me, and because I'd heard nothing but death birds since the Cleveland National Forest, I decided I would not just slake my curiosity and let her go (who she was, where she was from, what did she know) but that in fact I would keep her, as a bound prisoner if necessary. In part this was to protect her, for she wouldn't last long with no weapons and no guile, but mainly it was for myself. Because, having heard her voice once, I intended to keep hearing it.

I *needed* to keep hearing it.



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BY THE TIME I'D ESTABLISHED a camp in the covered breezeway of the Luxor obelisk—"Cleopatra's Needle" it was called, at least according to a bronze placard on its wall—and bound her hands and feet, the sun had set and a slight rain had started to fall; something I fully welcomed after so much time in the desert. As to whether the girl welcomed it also, who could say. For even though I set her near the opening (as well as the fire) and provided her my own bedroll to sit on, she only continued to glare—probably due to us eating in front of her; for I had decided, though you might think it cruel, that I would starve her into speaking, if necessary. Which, of course, she finally did—speak, that is—although only after a considerable time, saying, hoarsely, yet clearly, assertively, "Is this some kind of torture? I mean, don't you have to feed prisoners before killing them? Isn't that what the Geneva Convention says?"

I looked at her through the flames, saying nothing, even as Kesabe snarled.

At length I carved a piece of meat from the spit and dropped it on a paper plate, which I carried around to her—but didn't hand over. Instead, I knelt and sliced off a single bite-sized morsel—then held it close to her nose.

"Trade," I said, matter-of-factly. "One bite per something about you. It can be your name. Where you're from. How you've survived ... Just talk."

She started to protest but hesitated, searching my eyes, trying to judge intent. At last she said, "So what's with the war paint?"

I stood and began to walk away.

"Wait a minute—wait a minute—jeez, so we don't go there—fine. My name is ... it's Essie, all right? Essie McIntyre. I'm from Spokane."

I paused, looking over my shoulder. "Where?"

"Spokane. It—it's a city. In Washington."

"... D.C.?"

"State. Washington *State*."

I returned and crouched near her again. “Okay. So ... how’d you get to be here?”

She didn’t say anything—only opened her mouth wide.

“It—it’s got an aftertaste ... just so you know.” I fed her the piece of allosaur.

She chewed it up eagerly, voraciously—before pausing, making a face.

“It’s the game,” I said. “You have to get used to it.”

“It’s not that. It’s just ...” She swallowed slowly, tentatively. “I had alligator once, in New Orleans—this, this reminds me of that. Only heavier, oilier. With an acrid aftertaste.”

“That’s the predator in it ... at least that’s what they say.” I cut her off another piece. “Would—would you like some more?”

“Yes, I think so, please. It’s not terrible.”

I fed her the piece from the end of my knife.

“What, what was the question?” She finished chewing and swallowed. “Oh, yes. How did I come to be here. Well, that’s just it—” She paused suddenly and tilted her head. “Can I ask you something?”

I must have looked confused.

“Just one,” she said, and tried to smile. “What is your name?”

There was a pregnant pause as I thought about it. It seemed only fair. “Satanta,” I said, and cut her another piece. “Satanta—the Last.”

“Satanta, the Last,” she repeated, and shrugged. “Okay. Thanks. Guess I figured you weren’t a Brad.” She opened her mouth wide, waiting for the next morsel, but relented when I shook my head. “Right. So—how I came to be here. Well, see, that’s the conundrum, isn’t it? Because the fact is—I *don’t know*.”

I squinted, unsure how to take that. “What do you mean?”

“Again, I’m sure I don’t know. Only that ... I was at a stoplight—in Spokane—watching a stormfront roll in, when the news starting talking about, well, power outages, mostly, but also that people were going missing—I mean, not just one or two, say, over the course of weeks or even

days, but, *dozens* of people, maybe hundreds, all at once, as though they'd never even existed. And I was just sort of wrapping my head around that, or trying to, when I noticed there were ... lights in the clouds. Shapes. Things that were above me at that point and seeming almost to ... to be looking down at me. To be targeting me. Me—on my little motor scooter—somewhere in the Spokane Valley.” She laughed. “And the next thing I knew I was here,” She indicated the Strip. “Scooter and all—just sort of dumped over on my side at Circus, Circus, and feeling ... almost as though I'd been tasked with something. As though there was something I was supposed to do. Though what it was I couldn't remember—and still can't, no matter how hard I try.”

I'm afraid I just looked at her. What was there to say, exactly? That what she had described was impossible? That even though most the world's population had vanished and the dinosaurs had returned—an impossibility itself, but something we had accepted—her blacking out in one place and waking up in another was ridiculous?

“You should eat,” I said, offering her more meat. “No more questions.”

She pulled the flesh off the fork with her teeth and chewed, her eyes never leaving mine. “I have some,” she said, talking around her food, “Questions, that is. Like, what the hell brought *you* here? And where do you get off on kidnapping me?”

I paused, knife in hand, as the fire crackled and popped.

“I—I came to sift ashes,” I said—quietly, obliquely—but did not elaborate.

“You came ... to sift ashes,” she said, and nodded once, twice. “Okay. I'll play. Why not. And these ashes are here, in Las Vegas?”

“In the suburbs, yes. On Canosa Avenue. It—it's all so foggy. I haven't been back for a very long time. But I'll know the way once I find the gas station.”

“The gas station.”

I nodded. “The one on the corner. The RGB. If it's still there.”

"I see. And—and what do you plan to do with me?"

I looked at her in the firelight—at her auburn hair, which blazed in the fire's glow, and her green eyes, which caught the light and glimmered. "It is my wish that I should continue hearing your voice," I said.

She peered at me intensely, glimmeringly, as though she'd won some sort of victory. "Is that so?" Then she laughed, brusquely, boorishly, and held up her bound wrists. "Well, then. I guess you better start cutting, Chief. Wouldn't you say?"

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"YOU'RE A REAL ASSHOLE, Satanta. Just so we're clear."

I turned around and looked up, shielding my eyes from the sun, and saw her glaring at me from Blucifer's saddle (to which I'd bound her with zip ties), before jerking the rein, tugging them after me.

"And here I thought you were different—if only for a minute," she continued. "*Boy*, was I wrong!"

"And I thought you were—how did you say it? On a speech strike," I said.

"I am," she snapped. "I just needed to say that one thing. Again."

We *clip-clopped* up S. Las Vegas Blvd, past the fairgrounds and a gaudy strip mall called the Bonanza, saying nothing, during which I found myself gazing at the sky lights—our ubiquitous friends since the Flashback—and noting how angry they seemed today, how inflamed; and noting, too, that Kesabe had not circled back in some time (for it was his tradition to run far ahead), a fact which was beginning to trouble me.

That's when I heard the strange sound: a kind of forlorn mewing, like the note of a horn being drug out too long, coming from just around the corner, just beyond the liquor store—and paused, holding up my hand.

"What? What's going on?"

I waved her into silence, dropping the rein, then hustled to the edge of the building—where, after peeking around the corner, I saw a juvenile

sauropod of the Diplodocus family (meaning it was the size of a typical school bus) collapsed in the middle of the street—its right front leg stuck in a manhole.

“What is it? What do you see?”

I looked from the sauropod to the corner of a nearby building, where something had moved, then across the street to an overgrown alley. *Yes*, I thought. *There. And there. Between the tattoo parlor and the marijuana dispensary ...*

“Allosaurs,” I said, gravely. “An entire pack of them. In desert camouflage. They—they’ve got something trapped.”

“Omigod. It—it’s not your dog, is it?”

I returned and picked up the rein, began leading Blucifer forward, into the intersection. “No.”

“Wait ... what are you—”

“We’re going through,” I said.

“But what if those things—”

“They don’t care about us; they want the bigger game. *For now*. Just hold on.”

The horse’s hooves went *clip-clop, clip-clop* as we passed, the bluish-gray sauropod coming into full view ...

A moment later she said, “It—it’s stuck. In the manhole. Do you see that?”

I eyed the predators warily, continuing to lead. “There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“But she’ll be helpless against—”

“*That is the way of it*,” I insisted. “The way of the—”

“Look, would you stop with the Indian clap-trap? I’m not even sure—”

There was a *thwomp* as the allosaur by the building leapt into the road—not by us but about fifty feet away, near the sauropod.

“Jesus, can’t you do *anything*? What about your bow?”

"And risk bringing them down on us?" I intensified our pace, sprinting toward the Stratosphere. "No!"

And then they were coming—the allosaurs from across the street—passing so close we could smell the meat on their breath; closing in on the frightened herbivore ... until we passed the scene completely and sought refuge in a nearby gas station (its storefront had long since collapsed) and gathered there trembling as the sauropod cried out—for it wouldn't be long now until they fell upon her.

"Jesus," said Essie, listening. "What a world."

"Yes," I said, remembering. "My father used to say it had a demonic sublime; every tree and every rock, every animal, including man, down to the lowest insect." I listened as the sauropod moaned, seeming already to give up, to resign its fate. "And yet."

"What do you mean?"

"What?"

"You said, 'and yet.' What did you mean?"

I unshouldered the compound bow—rubbing my aching deltoid, stretching my arm. "Nothing. It's just that ... maybe it doesn't have to be this way."

When she didn't respond I looked at her—found her already looking at me: calmly, meditatively, her eyes seeming to glimmer. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"I mean ... that I could end it. Her confusion and terror. That I—could prevent her from suffering." I looked at the bow and the dark, poisoned bolts attached to it. "That it's in my hands to do so."

"A mercy killing, then. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," I said.

She seemed to think about it. "Well, you know, you'd have to expose yourself first—in order to take the shot. And there's always the risk they might turn on you. Is that—is that a risk you're willing to take? And if so ... why? How would it benefit you—or us?"

I stared at her, confused by the change. “Look, just a minute ago you were—”

“Just a minute ago I was participating,” she said, sounding cold, analytical. “Now I’m observing. And I’ll ask you again ... why? What could it possibly change?”

I gripped my bow and thought about that, wondering what had come over her, and why her eyes seemed to dance, to shine—as though they’d been illuminated from within.

At last I said, “Jesus. Maybe because we’re still human?”

And then I was moving: stepping over the overgrown rubble, hurrying around the nearby buildings; dropping to one knee near the allosaurs where I sighted the mewing diplodocus and released two arrows, one after the other, into the soft tissue of her eye orbit, killing her instantly—after which the predators fell upon her like wolves, snarling and clawing, opening her like a bag of sausage, tearing out her throat ... as I walked back to the station and was greeted by Kesabe, barking and licking my hand. As I looked at Essie and found her returned to normal, seeming almost not to know what had happened.

As she indicated the orange Union 76 sign and said, in her usual tone of voice, “So would this happen to be it? Your gas station?”

After which I looked around in a daze—recognizing the soda fountain (now an antique) with the American bald eagle on top; recognizing the wooden Indian which stood by the door—and knowing, at last, that I had found my way home.

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“IT—IT’S NOT WHAT I expected,” said Essie over my shoulder, as Blucifer whinnied and Kesabe pissed on the nearest tree; as the overgrown rancher sat—its nearly flat roof baking in the sun ... its slat fence partially collapsed.

“It’s not a teepee; if that’s what you mean,” I said, and dismounted.

"I didn't expect a *teepee*," said Essie, as I helped her down. "It's just that—it's so *white*. Like Wally and the Beav are gonna come running out any minute."

"My father didn't believe in reservations," I said, leading Blucifer to a bush, abandoning the reins. "He thought they were museums full of defeated people; just so many relics, withering in the sun. He wouldn't even take us there to visit our grandparents; they had to come to us."

"That must have sucked."

"No, actually—it really didn't," I gripped the doorknob and paused, wondering if I was really up to it; if I was fully prepared for what I might find. "It taught us—my brother and I—to see ourselves as individuals, not a collective—and a defeated one at that. Maybe that's why neither of us wound up pickled in Thunderbird."

I twisted the knob and eased the door open, watching sunlight spill across the floor, then stepped in slowly, cautiously. "He didn't buy the idea that land could be any sort of birthright, said living things had always competed for resources and always would, and that, change being the only constant, to deny that was to deny the fundamental nature of reality."

I paused in front of a framed picture of my mother, touching it gently, tracing a finger through the dust. "He always said, 'Should I apologize for winning your mother from a white man?'"

I laughed a little, and so did Essie.

"No, of course not," he'd say. "Because that's what nature does, it *competes*. It competes."

I stared at the picture, hoping it had been painless for them and that they had just vanished like so many others. Hoping they had gone together.

"Well, that explains that," said Essie. She had leaned in and was examining my face.

I must have looked confused.

"Your war paint," she said. "It's red and white."



And I had to laugh; because she was exactly right, even though I had never thought about it—had never even considered it, at least not consciously—after which, feeling cavalier, I said, “My real name is Steve, by the way. At least, that’s what my mother used to call me.”

She paused, looking at me with something like pity. “Steve.”

“Yeah. It—it means victor—”

“I’m gonna stick with Satanta. If you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” I said, and shrugged. “I prefer it. More apocalyptic.”

And then we moved on, picking our way through the overgrown house (liberating a stack of photo albums along the way as well as my mother’s Polaroid camera), after which we came to my old bedroom—the roof of which had collapsed so that the palm trees were visible outside—and sat on the bed.

“You had a beautiful life,” said Essie at length— perusing the photos, turning the pages. “You were very lucky.”

“I know,” I said.

“Not everyone is.”

“I know that, too.”

I peeled the plastic coating from one of the sheets and removed a picture, staring at it in the late afternoon sun, in the burnt ocher wash of what photographers called the Golden Hour. “That was us—my entire family—at Disneyland; in Anaheim—must have been about ’78 or ’79. I can tell by the hair.”

She leaned close to examine it, her own hair tickling my cheek. “Hard to believe that’s you. *Mercy*. You had prettier locks than I did. So did your brother.”

I rubbed the Polaroid between my thumb and forefinger, slowly, absently. “All dust,” I said quietly. “Everything in the picture, both the red and the white.” I laid back on the bed, feeling suddenly tired.

“Nonsense,” she said—and, to my astonishment, laid down next me. “You seem alive enough to me.”

And then she began to doze—or so it seemed to me—and it was just myself and the queer lights: which glowed all of a color and showed nothing of their usual chaotic rhythms, but only looked down on us softly, ambiently, like Christmas lights hung from the very firmaments; serene.

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IF NOT FOR HER HAVING taken off her over-shirt during the night, we would never have found her—for it was only after giving it to Kesabe and having him sniff it that the Dutch Shepherd was able to track her: a trail which had led straight to the gas station and the allosaurs from the day before—not to mention Essie herself; who stood trembling yet defiant amongst the ruins and seemed almost to be goading the animals on, daring them to attack.

“Essie! Good God, Essie!” I shouted, fighting the reins, as Blucifer—panicked by the predators—leapt and circled and whinnied, kicking up dust. “What have you done?”

“Oh, don’t you see? We had no right! No right at all!”

I dismounted quickly—having wrested Blucifer into submission only briefly, for he snorted and charged away even as I found my footing—unshouldering my bow as fast as I could, nocking a bolt. “Back up into the store, dammit; do it, now! *Why, for God’s sake?*”

But she only held her ground—even as the sky strobed and flashed and the clouds roiled with thunder—her feet planted firmly; her arms held wide. “But don’t you see it? *Oh, how can you not see it?* Look into my eyes, Satanta. Look into my eyes and tell me you don’t understand ...”

I sighted the animal nearest her and released an arrow, *Thwish!*—which struck the beast in its eye and dropped it, instantly, even as Kesabe barked and snarled and the others seemed to zero in on me.

“Look at me, Satanta. Slay ... *me*. Because *they* are in me, now, fully manifest. They—who have caused all the suffering. They, the very archi-

tects of the Flashback. And I want them to *feel* it. Oh, can't you understand? I want them feel what it is they have wrought!"

I caught a fleeting glimpse of her before the remaining allosaurs attacked: saw the eyes like a fire in the sky and the fallow skin shot through with green—until the animals charged and I loosed another bolt, dropping one as it ran, and yet leaving two, both of which would have fallen on me if Kesabe hadn't leapt into the fray like a pointy-eared threshing machine, barking and biting, scratching and snarling, peeling the predator away, as the other bit for my neck and I dodged, leaping onto its back; then stabbed it with an arrow again and again, hanging on as it leapt and bucked, groping for its eyes (which I would have gouged out had it not fallen), thanking the Great Spirit as it shuddered and died.

And yet I'd barely had time to climb off it when I heard Essie scream—not from the store's rubble but high above it, in the sky—where a pterodactyl wheeled like a kite in the sun even while gripping her like a ragdoll and beaking her as if with a sword—that is until it too was attacked by another, bigger bird—at which I snatched up my bow and nocked my last arrow, aiming into the flail of talons and wings, and shot the first bird clean through its skull.

And then it was over, or nearly so, as the thing fluttered down and dropped her; at which I ran to her and cradled her in my arms even as the bird next to us thrashed and died.

"They felt it," she gasped, "I know they did. They felt it through me."

"*Shhh*," I said, "Save your strength. We have to get you—"

"They thought they could just see through my eyes—that they could observe us that way, study us ..." She coughed violently—shudderingly—hacking up blood. "But what they didn't know was that they'd *feel* through me too. Feel it all, Satanta ..." She groped for my hand and found it, began to squeeze. "The pain ... the terror. But also the compassion. The mercy. Like the kind you showed the herbivore. The kind—" She seized up suddenly as though her insides were being torn apart. "The kind you showed me. That—that we showed each other. And for the briefest of

moments ... they understood. Go—go north, okay? You'll find people there, good people. I know—because *they* know. Our watchers. Our destroyers. I have been in their minds. Go north. But first ... first help your ...

And she died.

I closed her eyes. And that's when it hit me how quiet it was, and that I could no longer hear Kesabe barking—that indeed, I could no longer hear him at all.



MY GRANDFATHER ONCE said, in response to my father, “We all live on reservations, some of us just don’t know it yet.” And though I didn’t understand that then, I was pretty sure—as I stood over my friends’ graves and watched the house go up in flames—that I did now; for he’d been talking about our limitations and the fact of our own mortality (trying to tell me, I think, as I got ready to leave for Los Angeles more than 30 years ago, that if I were going there to escape I was in for a disappointment). All I know for certain is that as I stood there over the crude markers—one for Essie and one for Kesabe—I felt smaller and less significant than ever before (and I’d felt pretty small and insignificant since the Flashback), to the point that I questioned going on at all, north or otherwise. But then Blucifer showed up with a familiar snort and whinny—where he’d gone I didn’t know, nor did I ask—after which, feeding him what remained of the oats in my pocket, I decided we would head back to the coast and follow it north, for maybe there *were* people there, ‘good people,’ as Essie had said, and if that were true, then, truly, anything was possible.

Even so I hesitated—even after mounting and slinging the bow across my back (for I hoped to find arrows before leaving the city entirely), thinking on Essie, whom I had come to love even though I’d known her only for a short time, and on my friend, Kesabe (whom I’d named ‘Kemosabe’ but had shortened to ‘Kesabe’) ... a dog who had just been

a dog but thought he was a wolf; and who—as evidenced by his final act—sometimes was, sometimes was.

*Like you, maybe?* I wondered, and laughed. *Satanta the Last—come Steve?* And yet wasn't it at least partially true? For the Flashback made of you only what you already were—however veiled that may have been in the world before.

And then I snapped the reins and we went, Blucifer and I—back toward the coast and the passage north. Back to the winding trail, which, like all winding trails, went everywhere and nowhere at once.

**B**ecause the windows were bulletproof, it all had to come out through the main entrance, and that included the grand piano in the Entrance Hall—which we wheeled recklessly against the doorframe before upending it with a huff and shoving it down the stairs, where it sounded briefly, chaotically, as it impacted each step. By then I was leaning on one side of the door while Fiona leaned on the other, looking on: at our friends as they started busting up the instrument below with bats and feet and sledgehammers, but also at the overgrown North Lawn of the White House and its spitting, crackling bonfire; at the tricked out Hondas and Toyotas as they continued pouring onto the field and bringing more—more beer kegs and more gasoline, more children of the Flashback, more us.

“Look at it, big sister,” I said, finding her already staring at me in the flickering semi-dark, “It’s like poetry, I swear.”

“Green Room,” she answered calmly, seeming almost to smolder. “And stop calling me that.”

My eyes flicked up and down her body—something they’d been doing a lot of lately—but I don’t think she noticed. Of course she was right; a lot had changed since our first burn—not the least of which was my voice—and calling her that no longer seemed appropriate. She, too, had changed—becoming less like a big sister (or even a mother) and more like an equal, even if, at 19, she still had a good 4 years on me.

“Okay, babe,” I said, winking at her. I kicked the pedestal and candelabra next to me over with a resounding crash. “So let’s do it.”

And we went to work, Fiona pulling down the pictures and the red and green curtains while I took my bat to the china cabinet—smashing the glass as though it were a thin layer of ice, sending shards of it flying, bludgeoning the green plates and gold leafed vases like piñatas, like the shattered skulls of imagined enemies, until 243 years of history lay a glistening wreck at my feet—just so much broken detritus to be burned

with the rest; just so much dust and memory to be erased and finally forgotten. At which I looked at Fiona and she looked back, smiling, her teeth large and slightly crooked, carnivorous—because it was a pleasure to burn, an ecstasy to burn.

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BY THE TIME WE REJOINED the party, the bonfire was licking at the boughs of the maple trees and the staging had been erected for Calvin's speech—staging he was already ascending, gripping the rungs with one hand while holding a rolled up document—or documents—in the other, the firelight reflecting off his glasses.

"So what's he going to talk about?" I asked Fiona, heaving one of the two chairs I'd brought onto the fire—its red upholstery going up like dry paper, creating plumes of black smoke.

"How should I know? He's barely said two words to me since North Carolina." She pitched the framed pictures she was carrying—one of a dude she'd called Jimmy Carter—onto the roaring heap. "Look, Leif. I know he's something of a hero to you ... but you don't know him like I do. And I'm telling you, his heart's no longer in this. The Burning. It hasn't been since Georgia. At least."

I threw the other chair onto the pyre. "But it was his idea in the first place—wasn't it? Isn't that what you said—"

"I've said a lot of things," she snapped, and used her whole body to throw the second picture. "People change, Leif. At least some do. Others just get old."

I paused, thinking about that. Had something happened between them, like a fight? What did that mean, 'Others just get old?'

"Okay, wild children, listen up!" cried Calvin from the top of the platform—and waved the rolled up documents to get everyone's attention. "Hear, hear! You're having *way* too much fun."

It took a minute but eventually the car stereos and loose chatter diminished and the silence reasserted itself—or nearly so, for the fire continued to crack and to pop and to roar like a veritable furnace.

“But then, why else would God have invented adolescence—if not to have fun?”

Hoots and cheers, whistles and applause.

“And that we have had. From Austin to Baton Rouge and Jackson to Montgomery, from Atlanta to Raleigh and Norfolk to Richmond ... to come at last to Washington, and the seat of Old Power itself. To come at last to the very pinnacle of what we set out to do—which was to loot and burn every vestige of what had come before; every deed and every ban-knote, every binding contract and article of law, and to cede them back to whatever chaos must ultimately rule our lives.”

He looked out over us, his friends, his people, and seemed to reflect. “And yet I wonder—what remains of the old world and the old laws to douse and burn? I mean, besides these ...” He lifted the rolled papers above his head, inciting raucous applause. “These relics of a bygone age—which Leif and Fiona have so brazenly liberated? Well, I tell you, there is one thing—but we’ll save that for later, when they return ...”

I looked at Fiona and she looked back. Were we going back to the Archives?

“For now, let us commend these, one U.S. Constitution and one Declaration of Independence, to the fires of a New World—a world as young and savage and beautiful as we are, for it has yet to see even its 30<sup>th</sup> month, just as we have yet to see our 30<sup>th</sup> year. And afterward, afterward, I’ll have a special announcement. Right now it’s time to party; and to dance on the grave of that which is old and dead—and which never served us anyway. *Salud!*”

“*Salud!*” echoed the crowd, raising their plastic cups.

And then he was unfurling the documents and dropping them into the fire, which hissed and popped and seemed almost alive, and Fiona and I were shoving our way through the crowd—both of us, I think,



wondering where we were being sent, and more importantly, what this 'special announcement' might be.

• • • •

"BABE," SAID CALVIN, descending the ladder, and I looked away as he and Fiona embraced (briefly), I'm not sure why.

"Got another job for you two—if you're up to it."

"If we're up to it," said Fiona, and laughed, at which there was an awkward silence I didn't understand. "I know: You want us to take a group of bad apples and put down the Norsemen. Am I right?"

The Norsemen were the older group who's territory we'd violated in order to access the White House and National Mall—and who were bound to cause us trouble if we didn't leave soon.

"Wrong. I want you to go to the National Museum and liberate the Star-Spangled Banner—the flag, not the song—and bring it here to be burned."

Fiona shot me a glance. "He's a vandal, Leif, not a fighter."

"I'm not a killer, if that's what you mean," he retorted, then turned away and watched the fire, hands on his hips. "Nor will I let any of us be. I mean, if I've said it once I'll say it again: this isn't about bloodshed. It's not even about rebellion. It's more about ..." He paused—as though saying anything else could only lead to regret.

"I thought it was about nothing," said Fiona, softly. "That that was its beauty—it was wildness for the sake of wildness. Passion for the sake of passion. Isn't that what you said?" She laughed with surprising bitterness. "Different context, I guess."

"It was about filling the nothing," he said, still facing away. "And letting go. Until ... But then—you haven't had to think about any of that ... have you? No one's made you king."

"And cue the Messiah Complex," fumed Fiona, which I took as my cue to leave; to give them space—to let them hash it out, whatever it was—after which I wandered over to one of the kegs and filled a

cup, reckoning that next to a roaring fire wasn't the best place to keep beer—because it tasted like piss, literally. Nor did I stop at one but downed three in rapid succession, wondering what Calvin had meant by 'filling the nothing' and 'letting go,' and about being king—not to mention starting a sentence with 'until' ... but never finishing it.

And I guess I must have stood there for a while, because I distinctly recall watching the same group of teens—their arms laden with destruction—moving back and forth between the fire and the White House—the fucking White House!—to the point that I began feeling shitty about what we'd done; and even a little sick to my stomach. But then Fiona returned jingling Calvin's keys and we were firing up his Mustang convertible, and the next thing I remember she was piloting us down 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW past buildings with Doric columns (now choked in prehistoric ivy) and a pair of grazing stegosaurus and at least one giant millipede; all the way to Constitution Avenue and the National Museum; which I took special note of only because I was trying not to look at her body—something she noticed, I'm sure, but didn't seem to mind—because she just glanced at me beneath the blood red sky and smiled—toothily. Carnivorously.

• • • •

IT WAS THE SORT OF thing you had to actually *see*; up close, personal—as up close and personal as the glass would allow, anyway—to fully appreciate; to fully understand that this was *it*, the flag that inspired the national anthem, the actual Fort McHenry garrison flag, a thing more than 40 feet high and maybe 30 feet long, laying at an angle in a climate-controlled black room, or a room that *had* been climate-controlled, until the Flashback, until the lights had gone out from Anchorage to Miami.

"Oh, say can you see," I sang, moving my flashlight over the material, which was tattered and torn, "By the dawn's early light ..."

I grinned and trailed off, letting the silence take control, letting the room buzz, and we just stood there.

“What so proudly we hailed,” sang Fiona at length, her voice cracking a little, “at the twilight’s last gleaming.” She took a breath in the dark. “Whose broad stripes and bright stars ... through the perilous fight ... O’er the ramparts we watched—were so gallantly streaming...”

Then, together: “And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night ... that our flag was still there.” We both took a breath. “Oh, say does that star-spangled *ba-anner* yet wave ... o’er the *land* of the free ... and the *home* ... of the ... brave.”

And again there was a silence, as perfect and deep as anything I’d ever experienced, either then or since.

“Fuck,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Fiona. “Fuck.”

I looked at the sparse starfield illuminated in her beam.

“They’re all gone,” I said, and lowered my flashlight. “Everyone who ever touched this. Those who first sowed it; those who stood in its shadow. Those who built this building to preserve it—all gone.”

“Yeah,” whispered Fiona. “It’s just us.”

“I don’t know, big sis—I mean ‘babe.’ But do you ever wonder if—like, we’re doing the right thing?”

“No.”

“Okay. Well. Why is that, exactly?”

“Because there is no right thing. I mean, maybe there was ... before the universe just—went bugfuck. Before everyone just vanished. But now? What’s right and what’s wrong, Leif? I mean, what could possibly make any difference—one way or the other?”

“I don’t know. It just seems that, like—”

“You’re sounding like Calvin; don’t go there. Because, I’m telling you, he’s not who you think he is. Not anymore. He’s—”

“Evolving?”

“Aging. Just aging. There’s a difference.”

“It’s going to happen,” I said. “We can’t stay teenagers for—”

“Can’t we?” She shook her head. “Maybe you don’t see yourself ... but I do. See you, that is. And let me tell you—*you’re a fire.*” She touched my hand where it gripped the sledgehammer. “And fires need to keep moving, keep consuming,” She raised my arm gently, assuredly, until I dropped my flashlight completely and took the hammer in both hands. “... or they burn out.”

And then I swung, harder than I ever had before, harder even than when I’d destroyed the china hutch, punching a white crater into the glass as big my head, causing cracks to spread out in rings, like a contagion, I thought, or a cancer, until I swung again and the head of the hammer smashed clean through, enough so that I had to fight to pull it back out, after which Fiona joined in and we smashed through the glass together, not all at once but blow after blow, until the bitter shards lay all around us and we fell to the flag’s faded cloth, kissing and groping each other with abandon, unfastening and working off each other’s clothes, fucking like it was the end of the world, which of course it was—consuming each other like paper in fire.

• • • •

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that I was driving too fast; I was 15 and had just gotten laid. Add to that my inexperience—and a spike strip laid across the road—and, well, you probably have some idea how we ended up in the fountain of the Ronald Reagan Building with Old Glory folded up and sticking out of the trunk. All I know for certain is that we were both injured, Fiona seriously—to the extent that the blood from her head had fouled her left eye and she couldn’t stop shaking; which is how I noticed the figures approaching us from behind (I saw them in the rearview mirror when I removed Calvin’s doo-rag, to stop her bleeding).

“Fiona, listen—we—we gotta get out of here. Can you walk?”

“What is it?” she asked, weakly, deliriously, looking around like a blind person (which I suppose she was), bleeding profusely.

I squinted at the figures—there were more of them now—saw long beards and jackboots; rifles, riot gear, motorcycle helmets to which horns had been attached.

“Norsemen,” I said. “Lots of them. Hold on.”

I threw open my door and went around, noticing how exposed we were, how exposed the entrance to the building was.

“I’m going to put you across my back, okay? Just hang on.”

“Okay.”

“Here we go—”

And then I heaved her across my back and we went, hustling up 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW even as the Norsemen opened fire and the pavement sparked all around us—all the way to something called the M.I.M. Museum, the door of which I kicked in awkwardly before carrying Fiona up a flight of steps and laying her before a giant mural, after which I collapsed against the nearby wall—the window of which promptly exploded.

“Fuck!” I cursed, lying flat on my stomach, then crawled through the glass to Fiona where I shielded her lithe body with my own.

“It’s okay, we’re okay,” I said quickly, even as she started to hyperventilate. “We’re fine. They don’t know we’re not armed—they don’t know we’re not armed. They’re not going to come in. Not yet.”

I wrapped her in my arms and held her tight, even as the other windows were blown out and glass rained down. And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it was over; at least for the moment—after which I lifted my head, slowly, cautiously, and listened.

Nothing. A squawk of a pterodactyl, maybe, way off in the distance.

“Leif?” managed Fiona, groggily. “Are you there?”

I squeezed her tightly, stunned that she couldn’t feel it. “*Shh-shhh*,” I said, stroking her hair, which was matted with blood, kissing her forehead.

At last a voice called, “We just want the girl. Give us the girl; vacate the House and the Mall, and we’re done here. All right?”

I held Fiona close trying to still her trembling—realizing, in the process, that I was trembling myself. “*Shhh*—it’s okay,” I said, finding her hand, enveloping it in my own. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“*Aww*, you’re sweet,” she said, her voice faint, papery. “But it’s not. It never has been. You know that. Even before the Flashback.”

“*Shhh*,” I repeated, and diverted my eyes to the mural, which depicted, in stark black and white, seemingly all the atrocities human beings had ever committed—most of which I was unfamiliar with, the Holocaust and Hiroshima being obvious exceptions.

“They’re right, you know,” she said, softly, having followed my gaze. “The lights in the clouds. The shapes ... in that beautiful borealis, that came with the Flashback. They’re right about us.”

But I only stared at the painting, at the depictions of medieval torture and Mayan beheadings, at the lifeless, flattened cities and mounds of emaciated corpses, like driftwood; at the piles of skulls and perfect, white tombstones extending forever.

“... Right to have—how would they say it? To have ‘cancelled’ us.” She laughed a little, which became a series of jagged coughs. “And Calvin ... Calvin is wrong. About you. About me. About everyone.”

She shifted her head slightly, looking at the whole mural. “We ... we were *meant* to burn.”

I angled my head to look at her; at the dark, smoldering eyes, the large, slightly mis-aligned teeth, even as she exhaled in a long, rattling breath, and just shrunk—like a bag with all the air sucked out; like a marionette lowered to the floor in an unrecognizable heap. After which I pressed my cheek to her own and just stayed that way, although for how long I couldn’t possibly say. All I know is that I was ‘awakened’ by gunshots, by the *crack-crack* of small arms, followed by screaming; screaming and the instantly recognizable growls of dinosaurs—big ones, by the sound of it—which itself gave way to silence ... at which I knew, with a mixture of relief and anger (because it was too late for Fiona anyway), that the Norsemen were no more.

• • • •

BY THE TIME I'D WALKED all the way back to the White House and the North Lawn—carrying Fiona's body on my shoulders—Calvin's announcement was well underway, although it came to an abrupt halt when I appeared near the scaffold and laid her at its feet; after which there were gasps followed by a hushed silence—that is, save for the ubiquitous crackling of the fire.

When at last Calvin spoke, he did so as someone who had already resigned himself to the harsh reality of her death, asking only if she had suffered, to which I responded, “No,” and then inviting me to join him on the platform, which I did, climbing the rungs and taking his offered hand until we stood together over the crowd and the roaring pyre and he had turned to address his audience again.

“And so it goes,” he said, simply, giving the moment time to breathe, allowing everyone to catch their breath, until someone unexpectedly shouted, “How did she die?” —at which he turned to me, humbly, impotently, I thought, and indicated I should step forward; which I did, stepping to the very edge of the platform and looking down at the flames and the upturned faces, liking the way it felt, liking the way it made my blood race and seemed to snap everything into focus, liking the sense of power and purpose.

“Norsemen,” I said, bluntly, after which, having been a student of Calvin since before puberty, meaning I'd idolized him and observed him carefully in the hopes that I might one day be like him, I let the moment breathe—until, finally, I added, “They laid a trap ... and we blundered into it. And then they issued an ultimatum: Leave now. Leave, or die.”

“Fuck them!” barked someone almost immediately, and was quickly joined by others—all of whom felt that retaliation should be swift as it was lethal.

“We outnumber them five to one! I say we do it now, while it's dark, and we have the element of surprise!”

At which Calvin quickly tugged me back and we changed places, so that I was standing behind him as he said, “Now wait just a minute, gang, just hold that line of thought. Because, see, the thing is, we *are* in their territory. All right? They warned us and we— well, we rightfully ignored them, because, as you say,” He pointed at one of the teenagers, “We outnumbered them. By about five to one, as you say. But that’s because we—we had a *job* to do. We had to come here and ... and burn what remained of the Old World, the old ways. But the Burning is done, don’t you understand? We’ve done what we set out to do, we’ve burned it *fucking all!*”

He looked left and right quickly, as though to fan the flames—taking them all in, seeking to build momentum. When no one spoke up he said, “And that’s why I think it’s time to ... to consider a new way. A new paradigm, as they say. A new, well, a new purpose. A way—”

“Our purpose is to burn!” shouted someone near the front, an expression which was met with cheers and sustained applause, and at least one horse whistle.

“Yes! Yes, it is!” Calvin shouted back, and hastened to add, “And so you have! So you have. And so very, very brightly, I might add. But there comes a time when ... when Time itself—begins to *mutate*. When your mind and your body begin to change, to *evolve*.”

“It’s called getting old!” someone shouted, and was met by laughter.

“It’s also called adapting; just bending ever so slightly so that instead of blowing you over the wind becomes an *ally*, a source of energy, and a renewable one at that. What I’m saying is ... the Burn is over. That the fields have been thoroughly cleansed and prepped. And that it’s time to ... to build again. It’s time to re-learn farming, irrigation, how to brew beer, for God’s sake! Because the keg—the keg eventually runs out. And that’s because what we’re doing here isn’t sustainable. It—it never was. *But*. But. You wanted a leader ... and somehow you found me. And so it was up to me in those first dark days to lift you up and to bolster your spirits, to channel your energy, to keep you busy and just get you through it.” He



sounded fatherly, patriarchal. “To help you let go of what was—and will never be again.”

He turned toward me suddenly, I don’t know why. “So ... no. There will be no retaliation. Not against the Norsemen, nor any other group. And there will be no more destruction.” And then he held out his hand—I’m still not sure why—and I just looked at it; wondering if he knew, somehow—if he had intuited it. That Fiona and I had lain together; that I was beginning to doubt his wisdom and his leadership, just as she had. That’s when I noticed his hand was shaking slightly, as I had seen the hands of the very old and infirm do, and when I looked to his face I could see it—the age, the wear and tear, the lines just beginning to form around his eyes and his mouth, the hint of darkness just above his cheeks. But then he shook his hand as though urging me to take it and I did—grasping it firmly, assuredly—and we pulled each other into an embrace, a right bear hug, slapping each other on the back, seeming to acknowledge what we had in common, which, I was beginning to suspect, was a penchant for leadership. And Fiona.

But then I lifted my gaze over his shoulder—following the billowing embers, as I recall—and saw that great and terrible borealis in the sky and the dark shapes within it; saw the lights which shifted and bled in and out of each other and the alien colors which were not colors at all as we knew them but rather facets of some strange and inconceivable prism, and knew, even before I looked, that I would see those same colors in the eyes of the children below—the lost children, the children of the Flashback—just as I had seen them in the eyes of the dinosaurs which now ruled the earth. And more, that if I were to look, I’d see them in my own. And that’s when I slid the shard of glass out of my back pocket (the one I’d kept as a keepsake after making love to Fiona) and, clasping it in both hands—so that it cut me deep before anyone else—drove it into Calvin’s lower back.

At which Time stopped. It didn’t mutate; it didn’t evolve and transform—it just stopped; for I, and I alone, had stopped it. And then I was

jerking Calvin against me, violently, brutally, again and again, sinking the shard deep into his flesh, using it to impale his spine, until he began coughing up blood—which gurgled darkly in the twilight and for the briefest of moments made one giant bubble—before releasing him completely and letting him fall backward into the fire, where he impacted like a fresh log, causing embers to explode upward, and began screaming—hideously, obscenely. Briefly.

“*Salud!*” cried everyone below at once, raising their fists in solidarity, even as I looked at the sky yet again and considered what I saw there, and what I had seen of myself; as I considered what I had seen in the M.I.M. Museum and in Fiona’s dying eyes.

*You wanted a fresh start*, I said to them, the lights, the shapes *within* the lights. *You wanted to cleanse away the old. Let us help you.*

And then I looked at my friends, at my people, my *tribe*, seeing the Flashback in their eyes and knowing, at last, that this was its final expression; that we were meant to burn and to be burned, to end everything we’d ever touched; to end it all and to finally end ourselves. To just walk into the fire and close the book for good. To fertilize the fields for whatever was to come next.

To burn and to burn brightly.

To burn and to be burned, briefly.

## Urban Decay

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Each of us, I think, had to understand it on our own terms—the totality of the desolation, the speed at which the old world had fallen away. Each of us, I think, had something of an epiphany looking down at it.

For me, it was seeing the helicopter's shadow slink wraith-like over the hulk-jammed freeways and overgrown downtown intersections, realizing that shadow was the only thing—the only *human* thing—moving in any direction. For Sam it may have been the aircraft carrier—the *USS Nimitz*, Roman had said—run aground between Pike Street Market and the big Ferris wheel (and presumably straight into the State Route 99 tunnel). Leastwise that's what she was looking at as she gasped audibly and the helicopter swung north by north-east, over what would have been Belltown, toward the Space Needle.

"You gotta see this," said Roman, his voice sounding generic, condensed, tinny over the headsets. "Anyone here ever seen an eagle's nest? In the wild, I mean?"

Lazaro hmphed. "I've scaled a 200-foot Douglas fir and touched one. Does that count?"

Nigel sneered—you could actually *hear* it, even from the front. "Ya, mon. But only in your dreams."

Roman nodded at Lazaro. "Yeah? Was it big?" He sounded jocular, condescending. "How big was it, you think?"

"I don't know. About four feet," said Lazaro. He seemed annoyed—even hurt. "What's it matter?"

"I was just wondering how it compared to, say, that, at five o'clock."

We all saw it at once as the helicopter leaned and I was pressed against Sam: a nest the size of one of those above-ground pools—the kind someone like Lazaro might have had before the Flashback—built up around the Needle's radio tower and comprised of what appeared to be mud and fallen timber.

"Jesus, it's everywhere," whispered Sam, her face and chesnut-brown hair—which smelled of honeysuckle and gunpowder—reflected in the glass. "They—they're blue, *teal*. Like robins' eggs." She shook her head pensively, meditatively. "I wouldn't have thought that."

"Where's mamma bird?" said Lazaro.

"That's a good question," muttered Roman. He made a complete circuit of the Needle before leaving its orbit completely and heading back in the direction we'd come. "Nor are we sticking around to find out." His voice became suddenly focused. "Okay. I'm going to fly low between the buildings—because you can bet we're being watched. So, don't freak out. The idea is to shield our location from prying eyes for as long as possible—or at least until the chopper's up and everyone is clear. Got it?"

Check. Downtown Seattle was not a safe place, especially in the business district, and not just because there were pterodactyls roosting in the skyscrapers. For one, it bordered on territory controlled by the Skidders, a ruthless gang which operated out of Doc Maynard's Public House and Underground Tour in Pioneer Square. It also shared a border with New Beijing and a group called the Gang of Four. Neither, Roman had assured us, were to be trifled with, and both were known to make frequent excursions into the no-man's land of the business district. Throw in roving packs of velociraptors, which were also territorial, or the occasional tyrannosaurid, or even an herbivore with the Flashback in its eyes, and you had a situation which needed to be gotten into and gotten out of quickly.

And *quietly*.

"Just *stay in range*," I said, checking the switch of my walkie-talkie, making certain it was on. "Or it'll be a shitshow all over again."

It was a cheap remark—no one had been closer to Chives than Roman—and one I regretted immediately. "No," he said, and crossed himself. "It won't. Trust me. Anything bigger than an alley cat—you're going to know it. We'll get you inside, I promise."

"It's not getting inside I'm worried about. It's getting *out* with what we came for."

He looked at me with those damned earnest eyes—something I would have preferred he didn't do, especially while thundering between skyscrapers—and smiled. "We'll do that, too. Now lock and load, Jamie. All of you. We're almost there."

• • • •

"SEE THAT COURTYARD just east of the library? That's our landing zone," said Roman, slowing us to a near hover, beginning to lower altitude.

I watched as the helicopter's shadow grew on the wild, waving grass.

"Again: when you hit dirt I want you to go immediately to the street—5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, right there, and follow it south-west. Stay close to the buildings, they'll give you some cover. Get ready."

"From predators?" asked Joan, our mechanic, her voice full of doubt. It was her first time out of the compound with us.

"From *people*," said Roman. "They've been known to snipe from the towers." We touched down with a slight bounce—tall grass lashing at the windows. "Remember, right on Marion ... then all the way to 1<sup>st</sup>—to the Exchange Building. You can't miss it: there's a Starbucks across the street with a—"

Joan balked. "There must be a hundred—"

"... with a gutted triceratops in its window." He looked at her over his shoulder, then at each of us individually. "It's—it's probably been picked clean by now." He swallowed as though he'd said too much, then straightened suddenly and nodded once. "Everyone just—stay sharp, okay? Good luck."

And then we were moving, piling out of the hatch and into the prop-wash, scrambling for the street, as the Bell 206 climbed—the sound of its rotors thundering, reverberating off the buildings, the grass dancing.

"Other side of the intersection, that condo," I said, "let's go."

We double-timed across the pavement—or what was left of it—to where a concrete overhang offered some measure of cover.

“Hold up,” said Nigel. He dropped to his knees and began assembling his weapon—a commercial weed trimmer outfitted with a 10” saw blade—as Lazaro hovered above him.

“Yeah, hold up. Nigel saw some grass he wants to trim,” said Lazaro.

Nigel primed the trimmer but didn’t start it. “I didn’t hear you complain when this opened the belly of that Barney—you know the one that had you pinned? Or did you forget about that?”

“And covered me with its guts,” said Lazaro. He pumped his shotgun briskly. “You were too close. Charlene would have taken you both.”

“That so, mon? Like it took Chives?”

I glanced at Lazaro and saw him bunching a fist. “Stand down, Lazaro ... I said stand down! Now!” I looked at the others quickly, hoping to quell any unrest. “We all know precisely what happened to Chives ... and there ain’t nothing—I mean nothing—that is going to change that. Ever.” I made eye contact with Nigel as he stood. “He couldn’t be left that way. Period. Now let’s move—Lazaro, take point. Nigel, bring up the rear. Let’s go.”

And we went, hustling down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue even as the sky grumbled and it began to spit rain—all the way to Marion Street, at which we turned right ... and were promptly greeted by a hail of gunfire.

• • • •

AT FIRST IT HAD SEEMED like a miracle, the fact that there was an underground garage opening right there and that we’d all managed to get into it before anybody was hit—at least until the metal gate came rattling down and we realized our attackers hadn’t so much targeted us as *herded* us directly into a trap.

“Drop ‘em, now!” came a voice, even as we spun in its direction and raised our weapons—and quickly realized there was nothing to shoot

at. Nothing visible, at any rate. What there was, however, were tiny red dots—on our foreheads, over our hearts.

“You see them. Good,” said the voice, just as cool as iced tea—the perfect accompaniment to the clatter of shifting firearms. “And now you’re going to bend down ... slowly ... and lay all your weapons at your feet. All right? *Nooo* one has to get hurt. Just do as I say ... and then we can have a nice conversation. About who you are, for example. And where you’re from. And what you’re doing being dropped off by a helicopter in the middle of disputed territory. Our territory. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, and nodded at the others—and at Lazaro twice; we’d been in this situation before and he always wanted to play chicken.

Slowly everyone did it—the red dots never wavering, the rain starting to rattle against the gate.

“Is that a *weed* wacker?” said the voice, and was followed by laughter. “Damn.”

I heard the tapping of what turned out to be an axe head against concrete before I realized he’d stepped into a shaft of gray light. “Don’t let their laughter get to you—people used to laugh at us too.”

We watched, paralyzed, as the bearded silhouette seemed to yawn and stretch. “What can I say? All this rain—it makes me sleepy. I’ll tell you, I could really go for a Flat White about now. Two ristretto espresso shots, some whole milk steamed to perfection, a little ephemeral latte art right in the center. Sounds good, doesn’t it?” He cocked his head in the near perfect silence. “No? What you want then, a bronson? At this hour? A good, earthy black IPA, perhaps? I could go for that. Something with a nice malty backbone—good for the old ticker.” He laughed, seeming to think about it. “I know. Too conventional, right?” He shook his head. “Momma always said: she said, ‘Atticus, all your taste is in your mouth.’”

There was a thin chuckle and a few clanks of the axe. “Kind of mean, don’t you think? Anyway. That’s what she said.”

He began walking toward us—slowly, deliberately—dragging the handle, dragging its blade along the pavement.

“Look,” I said. “We didn’t come here looking for any ...”

“Any what?” He stopped about four feet in front of me, close enough at last for us to have a good look at him, and what we saw seemed utterly incongruous with what Roman had told us—except, of course, for the multitude of tattoos (mostly triangles), and even more so the washboarded scar, which ran from somewhere on his scalp and through an eye (over which one lens of his dark, plastic-framed glasses had been painted black) clear to his left shoulder. That much, at least, fit. What didn’t fit was the slicked-back pompadour and long, full, meticulously-trimmed beard—Jesus, there was even product in it—nor, for that matter, the flannel lumberjack shirt and skinny jeans, not to mention the Converse sneakers. What didn’t fit, as the similarly attired men holding laser-guided rifles emerged from behind overgrown automobiles and support columns, was that the feared and formidable Skidders were, when exposed to the light of day (and not to put too fine a point on it), *hipsters*.

“Well doesn’t this just take the cake,” said Lazaro, and spit.

“I take it we aren’t what you expected,” said Atticus. He leaned on the axe as though it were a cane. “I must say, neither are you.” His good eye, which was a pale, piercing blue, dropped to our weapons. “You came well-armed. What are those—M4s? Not exactly an easy thing to come by—since Big Green fled the scene.” He raised his chin and cocked his head, studying us. “And that helicopter. I mean, *damn*. What did you do? Raid a small airport? Got a pilot, even.”

He began pacing, slowly, methodically. “That’s better than a doctor. So, to summarize: You got a helicopter. You got military-issue rifles. You got, well, plumbing—I mean, you’re clean, all of you. You even got ...” He stopped dead in his tracks, dead in front of Sam. “You even got—a girl!” He screwed up his face suddenly and leaned back, staring at Joan, who glowered at him. “Make that plural. Sorry. It’s just that ...” He looked Sam up and down. “It isn’t always this easy to tell—”

“Look, what do you want?” I snapped.



Atticus reared his head back as though he'd been wounded. "Jesus! Tone. I was just going to say how important it is for the fairer sex to be represented in any post-apocalyptic scenario. You know, women." He leaned close to me, I have no idea why. "My boys call them tassels—fuck if I know. Something out of Williamsburg, I suppose. Like putting crayons in your beard, or whatever." He stepped back to address us all. "All of which is just my way of saying—you have a home. A base. A place to hang your hat. And because of that, I've only got two questions." He hefted the axe suddenly and decisively—before switching it to his other hand and touching it to the ground. "Where? And why, since you have your own turf, would you come prancing onto ours—a crime punishable by death? I mean, just, holy bugfuck. It had to be for something good, right?"

"What's it matter if you're just going to kill us anyway?" protested Lazaro. "You said it yourself: 'a crime punishable by death.' So why should we tell you anything?"

"Because information is currency," said Atticus flatly. He added quickly: "One I might just accept in exchange for your lives. Along with your guns, of course. And maybe the girl. It really all depends on the quality of your—"

But I'd stopped listening: focusing instead on the darkness behind him, behind his men. Because something had moved there. Something amongst the cars.

Several somethings.

"The pharmacy," I interrupted quickly, almost breathlessly, "the one on Madison Street. B-Bartell Drugs. That's—that's where we were going." I looked sidelong at Sam as sweat beaded along my brow. "We were going to Bartell Drugs—for prenatal vitamins. I'm sorry, Sam."

"That's very interesting," said Atticus, matter-of-factly. "But considering we're on Marion I'd say you overshot the mark."

I stared at Sam intensely, trying to communicate in secret, trying to communicate with my eyes alone. "We—couldn't get to it from there.

There were raptors between us and it; at least, that's what I think they were. They—they were in some kind of utility tunnel, which was dark. I'm the only one who saw them. The others—they, they had to take my word. We we're looping around the building to bypass the tunnel when you opened fire." Sam faced forward again and squinted, her expression a mask, her composure unwavering. That's when *I* knew *she* knew.

"As for the guns—take them," I said, trying not to look into the dark. "Just let us get the supplements. Please."

I looked to find Atticus staring at me, his head at an angle, his mouth hanging open. Then he guffawed—once, twice—and paced away, raising the axe head as he did so, slapping the flat of its blade against his palm. "*Man*. You are one *noble* fuck. *All of you*. And here I thought you were just a bunch of hardened, cutthroat survivors—come to take a slice of our purloined pie, no doubt." He stopped suddenly and turned around. "You, with the wire-frame glasses. Raptor-spotter. What's your name, son?"

I glanced at Sam on one side and Nigel on the other.

"Jamie," I said, and looked at my shoes. "Jamie Klein."

"Jamie," he repeated, and approached to within a few feet. "Jamie Klein." He pinched the axe between his knees as he began to swing and stretch his arms. "Damn. That suits you, you know? I mean, you seem like a nice guy. A real mensch. Are you Jewish?"

I shook my head.

"No. Well, it's not important. What is important is that we establish a baseline. Something that, well, will get me the truth—when I ask a simple, goddamn question. So I'm going to ask you one more time, before I give the word. Where is your base-camp? And why—you need to think about this, you might even say your life depends on it—have you come to Pioneer Square?"

"I told you," I said. "We needed medicine and supplements for—"

"The girl," he said, and took a step back—even as two of his men (who weren't training rifles) grabbed Sam by the upper arms and forced her to the pavement.

"Sorry about this, troops—I really am. But I did say it: You needed to think about this one. Carefully." He took up the axe and tapped its head on the pavement. "I mean, you don't get to be the Big Dog without keeping your word, right?" He raised the hatchet slowly, confidently, the leather of his half gloves crinkling. "And believe me when I say: When it comes to south Seattle, we *are* the Big Dog ..."

That's when something leapt up in the darkness and my eyes darted to the blur—in time to see a blue and red velociraptor pounce the farthest Skidder back: its sickle-foot claws latching firmly into his abdomen, its fore-talons gripping his broad, flanneled shoulders, its jaws closing about his head. And then all was screaming and gunfire—which lit up the garage like the fourth of July and thundered, cracking, off its walls—as I piledrived Atticus and wrested the axe from him; as everyone scrambled for their weapons and the raptors pounced upon more Skidders.

"Lazaro!" I remember yelling—knowing his shotgun could blow the gate, knowing he'd opened locked doors with it before—before a man screamed nearby and I looked: and saw his attacker biting off the top of his head—just opening it like a watermelon, taking everything but his long, full beard.

And then there was a shotgun blast and we were falling back, still firing at the velociraptors, still firing into Atticus' men—lighting up everything and everyone as we ducked beneath the gate and burst into the rain. As we hustled down Marion Street with Roman thundering above us and the screams of the Skidders still echoing in our heads.

Toward the Exchange Building and a gutted triceratops in the window of a Starbucks. Toward the research and development lab of Roman's former employer ... and something we knew only as Gargantua.

SOMEONE NEEDED TO SAY something, anything. The danger in silence was that, post-Flashback, one inevitably heard the emptiness, the melancholy: the sound of the world just breathing in and out, dreaming. So I said: “For her, the Flashback is over”—hoping it would break the spell of her liquefied eyes and deeply sunken sockets, the pale, wispy hair, the fuzzy white fungus in her nostrils and mouth. Hoping, I suppose, that it would drown out the Nothing—if only for a moment.

“No more power lunches for this babysan,” said Lazaro, and spat. He kicked the spilt attaché case at the base of the cycad, where her feet should have been, and paper and cash swirled. “Here one minute—melded with a tree the next. Shit sucks.”

Sam stepped closer, examining where the woman’s face merged with the tree. “Initial Flashback, you think? Or an aftershock?”

I watched the rain—which had lessened to a drizzle—dribble down the corpse’s face and neck. “I don’t know, she seems pretty well preserved. Could have been an aftershock.”

“Probably suffocated,” said Nigel. “Tree manifested and her lungs couldn’t expand. Jesus. What a horrible way to go.”

I looked at Joan who was white as a ghost. “You all right?”

“Yeah. It’s just that ...” She shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

She jumped as our walkie-talkies squawked; it sure looked like something to me. “Go ahead, Sea One,” I said. “What’s your twenty?”

I looked to see the Bell 206 arching over Elliott Bay.

“Just west of you—monitoring pack movements near the Colman ferry terminal. Carnotaurus, by the looks of it. I take it you’re at the Exchange?”

“Affirmative—and awaiting instructions.”

“Through the double doors, left at the first hall, all the way to the end. Austin Dynamics and Land Systems. They’ll be a secure door—you’ll have to blow it. And hurry, because there are predators of the human variety on the move in Pioneer Square.”

I peered at the sky, at what Roman called the Mesozoic Borealis, watching the colors bleed in and out of each other, watching them shift and change shape. “Yeah, ah, about that. Requesting alternative escape route—Over. We have had contact with Skidders. I repeat, we have had contact with them. We—they’re all dead. Over.”

But there was nothing, just the sound of the helicopter.

At last Roman said, “That’s unfortunate. But it doesn’t change a thing. Escape route is still 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue through Pioneer Square to Edgar Martinez Drive—then I-90 to Issaquah. Do you copy?”

That’s when I saw it: *him*, the kid, dirty-faced and wild-eyed, his hair like an unkempt mane, listening to us from the nearby stairwell—like the feral boy in *The Road Warrior*, I swear.

“Hey!” I shouted, drawing the attention of the others, “Hey, kid! Hold up!”

But he was already gone—climbing from the well at its opposite end, bolting up the shattered sidewalk like a gazelle. Weaving right at 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue—where he vanished into the primordial mist.

• • • •

“JESUS,” SAID LAZARO, before the overheads had even finished flickering on. “I mean ... Who was this thing even built for, Godzilla?”

I stared at the vehicle, which was the length of a small yacht, say, 50 feet. “Well, not to put too fine a point on it, it was built for *us*. Or whoever survived whatever apocalypse Dannon had dreamed up.”

I approached the rover and slid my hand up one of the tires—which was taller than I was, by about a foot. “Welcome to the world of big tech billionaires and their passion projects.” The rubber felt stiff, unyielding, like polished wood. “His was to build a fully self-contained armored expedition vehicle—a kind of mini-Noah’s Ark—something that could not only sustain life but go about exploring what was left of the world—if and when the shit ever hit the fan.”

I circled the big rig while gazing up at its slanted cab and wide, black grill, its array of lights, its giant push and roll bars. The thing was like a van-version of the Cybertruck but on fucking steroids. “Reckon he was like Mr. Musk—in need of a challenge, but also a moral imperative to justify it. For him that was this apocalypse he saw coming.” I paused to examine the roof turret and what appeared to be a .50-caliber machine gun. “A virus, maybe. Or a war. Dinosaurs probably weren’t in his game plan.”

“Looks they were getting ready to test it,” said Sam. “Look.”

I looked to where a massive steel ramp (we’d descended stairs to get to the production floor) ended at an equally massive door. “Good. Looks like this might be easier than we—”

There was a rattle of weapons followed by Lazaro shouting, “Stop! Get on the ground!” —and I hurried to see what the commotion was; at which instant I saw a man in a blue shop-coat standing by a huge sphere and holding what looked like a small, olive-colored ball over his head—a ball with a ring attached, through which he’d looped a trembling finger.

“He’s got a bomb!” I shouted—but resisted raising my rifle. “Everyone just chill! Okay?”

No one did—chill, that is—but no one fired either, and a moment or two passed in silence.

At last the man said, “See this big tank here, this round monstrosity?” He indicated the white metal container next to him, which was taller even than he was. “That would be propylene gas—enough to level this entire floor, maybe the building itself. See this?” He nodded at the olive-colored ball. “That’s your standard military-issue hand grenade, courtesy of the kids who were stationed here before they *and* the city fell. See those?” He nodded at some handles and hoses near the floor. “Those are the valves I loosened as you were making your way here. If you don’t smell it yet, you will. It’s strong. Now. Any questions?”

“Only one,” I said, and pushed up my glasses. “What do you want?”

He shifted his footing as though preparing for a long standoff. "I want you to lower your weapons," he said, and wiggled his fingers near the pin—keeping himself on his toes. "Lower them and kick them toward me, all of you. Then we'll talk."

Nobody said anything.

At last I set down my rifle and motioned for the others to do the same. "Do it," I said, and slowly raised my arms. "You too, Lazaro. *Let's go.*"

The weapons clattered as they were placed on the floor and punted toward him.

He lowered his arms cautiously. "There, see? We're still capable of it—rational thought. It hasn't gone the way of the dinosaur." He laughed at that, but kept the grenade close to his chest. "Yet."

He looked at our weapons as though running calculations through his head. "There's Neanderthals roaming the streets, did you know that? Real ones—not supporters of President Tucker." He paused, seeming to size us all up. "Remember them? With their little red hats and faces all puffed in rage?" He chuckled. "Fell off the flat earth, I guess. No, these are genuine *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*—right beside modern man and triceratops; right beside honkers from the Jurassic and Cretaceous and Triassic. Just sort of one big medley—like Time itself was put in a blender, or a concrete mixer, or a cream separator, and churned."

He seemed to relax a little and even lowered the grenade.

"I'm Ewan, by the way. Ewan Homes. I—I was *Gargantua's* chief engineer. Before life put us all in the blender."

"Jamie," I said. "Jamie Klein. This is Sam." I indicated the others. "That's Lazaro, Nigel, and Joan. We—we're from Issa—"

"Jamie, don't," interrupted Sam.

"It's all right," I said—and meant it. I trusted him; I don't know why. "We're from Issaquah. Got a camp there in what used to be a drive-in theater; it's got walls, vegetable gardens, some chickens and goats—there's even some generators, if you want to watch a movie. The thing

is—Ewan—it's not overcrowded. And what I'm going to suggest just now is that—"

"Nothing leaves this facility," he snapped—simply, with finality. "That includes me." He raised the grenade tentatively and reached for the pin—then hesitated, his eyes searching mine, or seeming to. "No ... no, I don't hear it. It's not there." He lowered the olive-colored explosive slowly, tentatively. "The guile of the predator, the cunning of the fox. It's not there. You speak ... earnestly."

I let down my arms carefully, incrementally, maintaining eye contact. "I speak as someone who has sought *Gargantua* while not knowing it had a guardian, a sentinel, which is yourself, or at least how you see yourself. I speak as someone who has faced the Big Empty alone just as you have—and knows it is not for lack of bread that a man dies, but lack of purpose, and that you have found yours in the guarding of this machine, this vehicle—a vehicle that, for whatever reason, you cannot even drive yourself, or you would have done so already. And I'll offer you another way—Ewan, chief engineer at Austin Dynamics and Land Systems, whose budget was 8.5 million per fiscal year and who's assistant was named Roman Daystrom, your best friend—if you'll just turn off that fucking gas."

• • • •

BY THE TIME I'D REINTRODUCED Roman and Ewan via radio, and the former had convinced the latter to not only come with us but to let someone other than himself drive *Gargantua* (Ewan, we were told, was blind as a bat), and Nigel had escorted the engineer to his quarters so he could retrieve some of his effects, the clock on the wall of the shop read half past one—more than enough time for the Skidders to have organized some type of counter-strike; a fact that weighed heavily on my mind as the women and I began gathering up specs and schematics and Lazaro paced the room impatiently.



“What the hell’s taking them so long? You heard Roman—carnotaurus, heading this way. Oh, I forgot. Nigel’s on Jamaican Time.”

“They have been gone awhile,” said Sam. “Maybe we should—”

“It’s no good splitting us up,” I said. “There’s no telling how quickly we might have to leave. Nigel’s got it—everyone just chill.” I looked at Lazaro. “Can you give us a hand with these? They’re going to be heavy.”

“Why the hell are we carting them along, then?” He snatched up one of the boxes with a huff and headed for *Gargantua*. “Or him, for that matter? Dude is definitely a few sandwiches short of a picnic.”

“You going to fix this thing when it—” began Joan, but Lazaro was already up the ramp.

We continued working in silence.

At length Sam said, “Who was he, you think? That kid?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Just a kid. Probably been on his own since the Flashback, who knows?” I heaped some manuals into a box—which created a cloud of dust. “He gave me a start, that’s for sure. I didn’t really get a good look at him.”

“I did ...” She paused as though visualizing him. “He had bones around his neck, did you know that? Or teeth—like, really big ones. He’d strung them together as a sort of necklace. Isn’t that odd, you think?”

Our faces were close as I stopped to reflect. “I don’t know. Is it? Maybe he’s extracting them from dead Barney’s, like trophies. I confess, my first thought was that he’d gone feral. And yet ... He was wearing contemporary clothes, I remember that. Puffy coat, jeans, tennis shoes. I mean, he wasn’t like Mowgli or anything.”

She looked at me and started to grin. “I didn’t think he was like *Mowgli* ...”

“All right! Drop your cocks and grab your socks,” belted Lazaro—from the top of the ramp. “They’re back.”

I looked to see Nigel and Ewan entering the shop from the left, the latter seeming like an utterly new man—his hair no longer mussed; his clothes no longer a catastrophic mess.

“Apologies, apologies, a thousand apologies,” he said, before pausing to admire *Gargantua*. “But a maiden voyage such as this requires a fresh change of clothes.” He looked on a moment longer and then dropped to one knee—began ruffling through his overpacked bags. “Ah, yes, here it is. It’s—I opened it with Nigel.” He withdrew a corked bottle—which glinted darkly in the light from a high window. “*Voilà!* One of eight bottles of Dom Perignon Rose champagne, Vintage 1959, served in Persepolis in 1971 by the then-Shaw of Iran.”

He looked at us with a face flushed with excitement, and we looked back.

“To—to celebrate the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire ... by Cyrus the Great.” Disappointment stole over his face like a shadow. “It’s—it’s to break over the bow, as it were. To christen *Gargantua*.” Nobody said anything. “Yeah—well. Waste of liquor, anyway. Especially when I’ve got so much celebrating to do. I’ll, ah—I’ll just get the door. Over there.”

He moved up the ramp toward the garage door.

That’s when I thought of Lazaro’s admonition, I don’t know why: *You heard Roman—carnotauruses, heading this way.*

“Wait, Ewan,” I said.

But he was already there, triggering the great door with his fist, turning to look at us as it rattled upward, pulling the cork from the champagne. “Life is for the living,” he said, and toasted us with the bottle. “And this stuff ...” He poured champagne into his mouth and down the sides, soaking his clean, white shirt, splattering the floor with foam. “This is for howl—”

But then the door was open and they were there, the carnotauruses, and one closed its jaws about his scalp while another laid wide his abdomen (and another took up his legs) so that, howling, he was opened like a pizza being groped by eager hands. And then they themselves howled and piled over his body, and all we could do was to run—every-

one save Nigel, who had his trimmer, which he started with a sputter—because our weapons were already in the rover.

• • • •

WOULD WE HAVE MADE it to the truck if Nigel hadn't done what he did? I don't know—maybe. But I doubt it. The fact is these carnosaurs were *moving*—faster than I'd ever seen them move before—and had cut the distance between us in half before I heard the revving of Nigel's trimmer and saw him sweeping it across a dinosaur's belly, opening it like a can of spaghetti.

"Someone start the truck!" he shouted, his voice raw, animalistic, "I'll hold them off as long as I can!"

I scrambled up the stairs after Sam and Joan but before Lazaro. "Joan, this is your gig," I said, before essentially falling through a portal into the cockpit. "Get us out of here."

But she just stood there, looking around the deck and the crush of dials and switches; looking as if the vehicle itself might swallow her at any moment. "No ... No, I'm sorry. But I can't ... I just ..."

I indicated the co-pilot's seat. "Sam."

She buckled into her harness as I took the driver's seat and did the same, hoping that what Roman had told me was true—that *Gargantua* could pilot herself—and hoping, too, that I could remember the test protocol he'd so wisely insisted I study.

"Gargantua, this is Jamie—and I'm going to be your test driver today." I looked out the massive, slanted windshield to where Nigel had thrust his trimmer's saw-head into the mouth of a carnotaurus, only horizontally, after which he leveraged the shaft brutally—and popped off the top of the thing's head. "We are go for power on. I repeat: We are go for power on. Initiate protocol."

I watched as blood geysered from the beast's lower mandible—even as nothing seemed to happen with the vehicle.

"Gargantua. Initiate protocol."

"I got a bad feeling about this," said Sam, even as the creatures closed in around Nigel, and Lazaro opened fire from the ramp. "I mean, if you could just bounce in here and say 'go' then it obviously—"

"Clearance is Delta-Delta—*Dawn*," I said rapidly, recalling the code words Roman had insisted I memorize, recalling how well he'd prepared me should something happen to Joan, as the consoles lit up like Christmas trees and the screens flickered to blue life; as the rover's hybrid engines hummed and whirred and pulsed, powerfully. "Issaquah via I-90, *go!*"

And then we were moving, smoothly, robustly (after an initial lurch), as one of the screens showed the stairs beginning to retract and Nigel rushed onto them—where he was assisted by Lazaro—as we clanked onto the ramp and powered up its traction-metal and finally burst onto the street.

"Sea One, this is Away Team Alpha, we are on our way!"

I looked up through the cockpit's huge windshield in time to see the Bell 206 thundering overhead—zooming toward Pioneer Square and the headquarters of the Skidders; zooming toward Edgar Martinez Drive and I-90 and *home*. "Do you copy?"

"Copy you loud and clear, Away Team Alpha," said Roman at last, euphorically, and laughed. "Congratulations."

I looked over my shoulder as Nigel and Lazaro joined us on the bridge, then forward again through the tinted windshield—where the streetlights were passing dangerously close to the roof. "Everybody hang on, we could run out of clearance fast."

There was a *frap-frap-frap* as the twigs of trees started colliding with us. That's when I first noticed it: him, her—a lone figure—walking out into the middle of the road, stopping between us and Pioneer Square. Turning to face us as I instinctively hit the brakes.

"Auto-pilot disengaged," said a voice—Majel Barrett's from *Star Trek*, I swear; some geek's idea of a joke.

"Is that who I think—" Sam started to say but then trailed off.

I peered through the angled glass, which was bullet-proof, I presumed, I mean it was *thick*, as the truck ground to a stop and the figure came into focus—beard, flannel, and all.

It was Atticus.

“Well, well,” said Lazaro, sardonically. “Slippery motherfucker, isn’t he?” He added: “What’s that?”

I looked to where another figure had entered the street to join him, a smaller figure, wearing a puffy black coat and blue jeans, whose hair was wild and unkempt. A figure who wore a necklace of large teeth around his neck—T. rex teeth, by the looks of it—and smiled gap-toothed as Atticus ruffled his hair.

The kid. The feral boy. Mowgli, whatever.

But that wasn’t all, for there were others now too—not Skidders, there were no beards or flannel or Converse shoes—just people: men, women and children, most of them disheveled, who walked out single-file and formed a living fence across the road— even as another group (visible on one of the monitors) did the same behind us. And it was at precisely that instant that I glimpsed the first of the red dots—which were fleeting, erratic, sometimes holding on a person’s head, sometimes roaming—and realized just how much trouble we were in. How trapped we’d become.

• • • •

TIME HAD STOPPED—not because of any Flashback or roiling time-storm or strange, vague lights in the sky, or because fully three quarters of the human population had vanished without a trace (and been replaced with prehistoric flora and fauna), but because we’d been outsmarted, pure and simple. And now all we could do was watch, as the rows of people in front of us and behind began to lay themselves on the ground and another brought Atticus a megaphone—which he lifted to his mouth while steadying himself with his ax and directed at the rover’s cab.

“Well, just check ... this ... out! Damn!” He acted as though he might slap his knees. “*Gargantua One*.’ What do you know? I mean, what will they think of next?”

The feral kid appeared to laugh as the wind gusted suddenly and the branches of the trees swayed.

“Those are *some* prenatal vitamins, I must say. I can see now why you thought this was important enough to risk your lives. Not to mention kill or allowed to be killed some of my best men.”

My mind raced. Time. We needed time. I searched the banks of switches and readouts for a means of communication and found a toggle marked ‘loudspeaker,’ which I flipped.

“I seem to recall you were about to chop off Sam’s head,” I said, hoping it would keep him jabbering for at least a minute.

“And snip such a fine tassel?” He laughed. “Not on this watch, Midtown. You need to learn to recognize bullshit when you see it—”

I switched off the loudspeaker. “We need ideas—fast.”

“For what?” said Nigel. “You can see all the red dots. He’s got us in a hopeless situation, tactically.”

“That’s *bullshit*, man,” snapped Lazaro. “There’s a machine gun on top of this thing.”

“And what are you going to shoot at? The air? They’re hidden in the buildings all around. You’ll be lucky to get in a burst before—”

“He’s right,” I said. “It’s no good. Those people aren’t just human barriers—they’re hostages. We start fooling around with that gun ... and they’re toast.” I keyed the mic of my radio. “Sea One, this is Away Team Alpha. Come back.”

Atticus continued: “... gangland theatrics. How else was I going to get you to talk? I knew you were after *some* kind of kale ...”

Our radios squawked. “Go ahead.”

“Listen, Roman, quickly: We are surrounded by Skidders and need technical data regarding *Gargantua*—defense mechanisms, weapons systems, whatever you got. And we need it fast.”

He responded almost instantly. “Where is Ewan, *asleep?*”

I started to speak but hesitated, wondering if I should tell him now or later; if I should disrupt his focus. “He ... he’s passed out in the back. He was ... he was pretty drunk.”

But there was no response and we listened to Atticus as we waited; luckily for us, the motherfucker liked to talk.

“... and consider yourselves lucky you didn’t run into, say, Antifa. Don’t laugh—those little fuckers are hard. Like a bunch of Viet Cong running around in black pajamas. Saw them go up against a militia once—might have been White Out, I’m not sure ...”

“Okay, listen up,” came Roman at last, his voice full of urgency. “The gun up top can be operated from inside as well as out, you just have to use the joystick, which is on the right side of the driver’s seat. There should be a pair of sighting goggles also, hanging above, which are slaved to the .50-cal—you’ll use these to acquire targets. Just hit ‘auto’ on the joystick and you’ll be golden. There’s also smoke dispensers mounted on both sides of the vehicle, the switch is right above you, but I don’t advise using them—they’re too effective and you’ll be blinded for several minutes. At least. Other than that the vehicle was designed primarily for exploration, so I don’t know what—can I provide any sort of air cover? Prop-wash, for example?”

“Negative, I repeat, negative. It’s too tight in here. Just stand by.”

Atticus, meanwhile, was still going on: “... ever seen a pack of allosaurs take down a diplodocus? That’s what this was like. Just hit and run, hit and run, until the big dumb bastards collapsed from their own weight. Now they’re dead—and a bunch of skinny anarchists have AR-15s ...”

I peered at the old buildings through the trees and at the darkened windows, many of them without glass. If it had been even slightly foggy or misty—as it had been earlier—we might have traced the beams right back—

My heart must have skipped a beat, I'm sure of it. *Jesus*, I thought. *Could it be that simple?*

"What is it?" asked Sam, sounding concerned.

I reached for the goggles and slowly slid them on, then gripped the joystick cautiously. "See that switch right there? The illuminated blue one?" She nodded warily, her face pale. "That's the smoke dispensers. When I give the word I want you to flip it, okay? Don't be scared."

"What are you doing?" snapped Lazaro, with a clear edge to his voice. "Sandahl, what is he doing?"

"I'm getting ready to target those snipers," I said, and pressed the 'auto' switch, making sure to keep my head perfectly still lest the machine gun swivel and alert Atticus. "Nigel, get ready on the loudspeaker. On my word only I want you to order those people to get up and get clear. Make sure they understand—we are coming through. There can be no confusion. Lazaro, I want you to open the side door—but do not lower the ramp—and take a position; at my word you'll use my M4 to clear targets on the *right* side of the truck only, understand? I'll take care of the left and then swing around to help you."

I waited for him to acknowledge and when he didn't I snapped, "Do you understand? We don't have time for this."

"Yes, I understand!"

"Good. Now—Joan. Where are you, girl?"

She stirred in the seat behind me. "I'm—I'm sorry, Jaime. I'm so sorry. But I—"

"You don't have to be," I said. "I know it's cramped in here. And I'm sorry I didn't listen to you when you tried to tell me about ... your condition. But you're going to make it, all right? We all are. Just buckle up and hold tight, and try to focus on what's outside. Just like you did in the helicopter— okay? You got this."

"I got this," she repeated, and exhaled sharply.

Atticus, meanwhile, had been counting down. "Three ... two ... *one*." He sighed and lowered the megaphone—then lifted it to his mouth



again. "The problem with you, Jaime, is that you just—don't—listen. Now I just explained to you what was going to happen if I reached 'one' and you hadn't come out, and *goddamned* if you didn't come out. So. What's going to happen now is that we're going to kill one of these people for every 30 seconds you remain inside the vehicle—starting immediately." He directed the bullhorn at the upper floors of one of the buildings. "Hershel? You awake up there?"

"Get ready," I said.

"I'm awake," came a voice, though it was impossible to tell exactly where from.

"*Fine*," said Atticus. "Hershel, in 30 seconds, I want you to place your site on the head of ... that little girl, right there." He gestured at a storefront on our right side—Simply Seattle. "Green coat, last one on the end, right next to the display window. Copy that there, Chief?"

The man didn't hesitate. "Twenty-nine! 28! 27 ..."

I toggled the loudspeaker myself. "We're coming out," I said, suddenly, and glanced at Sam. "We're trying to figure out how."

There was a silence as Atticus seemed to think about this.

At last he said, "Well, how complicated could it be? Just open the door. Hershel, keep counting ..."

"Twenty-three, 22, 21 ..."

"It's not that simple," I hurried to say, "It's, like, pressurized or something." To the others I said, "On my mark, okay? Get ready."

"We're at 18 seconds and counting, James," said Atticus. "Best clean your glasses and get with it."

"Seventeen, 16, 15 ..."

"Okay! Okay. We're depressurizing. Right ... *now*."

And then Sam was toggling the smoke as I gripped the joystick tightly and Nigel took over the loudspeaker and Lazaro opened the side door, after which we cursed loudly and bent to our tasks, and, together, threw wide the gates of Hell.

IT STARTED, INNOCUOUSLY enough, with the *thump, thump, thump* of the smoke grenades, which launched at an angle from both sides of the cab and bounced off the overhanging tree branches—as well as breaking at least one nearby window—before falling to the pavement and bursting into clouds of gray smoke. Nor did anything happen immediately—almost as if everyone outside were in a state of shock. But then the smoke began to rise, obscuring everything, and illuminating too the beams of the lasers—which lengthened as I tracked them and led straight to the top floors of Doc Maynard's Public House—at which I depressed the 'fire' button and lit them up; even as Lazaro opened fire on the other side and feedback whined from the loudspeakers.

"Move—if you would live," shouted Nigel. "Get up and run, all of you! We're advancing."

But we'd spent our surprise and what Skidders remained in the windows rallied, opening fire indiscriminately, shooting blindly into the smoke, as their muzzles flashed like Xs and we continued to cut them down; as Nigel repeated his directive and my foot hovered over the gas. "Are they clear yet, Sam? Are they out of the way?"

I continued to fire even as bullets impacted against the windshield and side window, cracking them in rings, leaving huge craters.

"I don't know, I think so," she said. "They're scrambling, I saw that much."

"Then we're going," I said. "Nigel, give them a final warning."

"But how can you drive with the windows smashed?" protested Sam—even as more rounds impacted the glass. "How can—"

"Engage the auto-pilot!" I shouted, aiming at what appeared to be the last holdout, holding down the 'fire' button, feeling the cab vibrate and shake.

"But I don't know—"

"Got it," blurted Joan—having rallied herself, or so it seemed.

And then the engines were humming, pulsing—winding up like great turbines, moving us forward into the mists.

"We're all clear!" shouted Lazaro. "It's Issaquah or bust!"

And with that we emerged from the clouds; to see what could only be Atticus himself running down 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, his unbuttoned flannel shirt flying out behind him, his Converse sneakers pounding the pavement. The feral kid, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen.

"Jesus, does he even know we're coming?" asked Sam.

"No," I said, squinting between the cracks. "We're on electric."

"Good," said Lazaro. "Run the fucker over."

I tapped the gas pedal, to take it out of auto-pilot, having found a spot through which I could see clearly. "I'm reverting to manual," I said, having no intention of running him down like a dog.

But nothing seemed to happen; we just continued moving forward—picking up speed—until trees were blowing past on one side and buildings were blurring past on the other.

"It'll go around," said Joan. "The sensors haven't picked him up yet, that's all."

But I wasn't so sure as the gap between us closed rapidly—so rapidly I could see his buttocks pumping beneath the skinny jeans and his keys dancing wildly at his hip. And then he disappeared beneath the rig with a pronounced *thump* and the cab jolted, bouncing once, and I glanced at the rear-view monitor in time to see a skid of dark blood and bone and guts extending out behind us almost indefinitely.

"Okay ... so I thought I was better," said Joan, still staring at the screen—her face green as a ghost. "But I'm not." Her cheeks puffed suddenly as though she might vomit. "We need to pull over, I think. Like, *now*."

"Okay. I'll try," I said, and tapped the gas pedal.

But this time, control reverted back to me—as it was supposed to do—and as we passed Jackson Street I began looking for a place to pull over, because it was finished, I knew. We were safe.

We'd survived the Dinosaur Apocalypse. Again.

• • • •

BY THE TIME WE DID pull over—or rather, ground to a halt in the middle of the street—rain was starting to speckle the windshield (or what was left of it) and the sky had darkened, none of which prevented Joan from leaping onto her seat the moment we stopped and grabbing the handle of one of the ceiling hatches.

“Is that a good idea?” I asked, as she turned the handle and pushed the hatch open. “We haven’t even had a look around yet—”

But she had already burst through the opening and was gasping for air, sucking it into her lungs in great, shuddering gulps, exhaling as though she’d been holding her breath for a lifetime. “I—I don’t care,” she rasped, as though she were collapsing from exhaustion. “Couldn’t ... couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t—do it a second longer.”

“What’s wrong with her?” asked Lazaro.

“She’s fine,” I said, breathing in the fresh air myself, feeling relieved, almost euphoric. “Little bit of claustrophobia, that’s all. Take all the time you need, Joan. We’re done with this now. We’re all done.”

Everybody seemed to relax in their seats, exhaling, stretching their muscles. It was the first real rest we’d had since leaving the drive-in that morning.

“Well, would you look at that,” said Lazaro at last, peering out his window, and laughed.

I followed his gaze to where a black awning with white letters read COWGIRLS INC – AMERICAN SALOON.

“Never heard of it,” I said, and winked at Sam.

“I could go for a drink or five about now,” said Joan, and laid her head on her arms.

“I could go for one of those waitresses dancing on the bar and shaking her ass in my face,” said Lazaro.

“Ewan had the right idea,” sighed Joan, and shifted her weight. “With that bottle of champagne, I mean.” She fell silent for a moment as though remembering. “What was he saying when ... when ...”

I thought back on it, on that awful moment when the carnotaures had torn him limb from limb. “He was in the middle of saying ‘howl,’ I think,” I said, and slumped against my window. “That the champagne was for howling, not busting over *Gargantua*, to christen it. I think he’d been alone so long that he’d died a little, or even a lot. We’d given him hope. A reason to howl at the moon, or something.”

Nobody said anything as the clouds rumbled overhead and the rain grew heavier, drizzling around the ringed cracks in the windshield, trickling down Joan’s coveralls.

“I want to dance in the rain,” said Sam, softly.

“We want you to too,” said Lazaro.

“*Aaoooh!*” crooned Joan, and when I looked she’d stood straight again and spread her arms at the sky.

“*Aaoooh!*” responded Lazaro, almost as though he were drunk.

And then Nigel joined in, followed by Sam, and finally myself, and there we all were, howling at the sky like a bunch of damn lunatics, beating our chests for having survived another day—spreading our fiery, Phoenix wings in defiance of what we’d done and still had to do and what had become of the world.

And it was on the tip of my tongue to suggest we actually go in and have a drink—or five—when Joan’s body seized up like a vice and her voice became muffled, at which I squinted through Lazaro’s window and saw the lower body of the tyrannosaur (or whatever it was), and realized its head would have been exactly where she was—and that the new sound I was hearing, which was a garbled sound, an obscene sound, was that of Joan screaming; whimpering; suffocating no doubt in the monstrous animal’s palette, before it jerked its head and she was yanked clean from the hatch. Before the great and terrible animal stepped back and began shaking her like a ragdoll, even though she was surely dead already, hurling her against the pavement with a sickening *smack*, pinning her there with its tri-clawed foot; which is when I stepped on the gas—but not before seeing her come apart like mozzarella—and drove away as fast as I could.

After which we drove the rest of the way home in silence and tried not to think of all the blood splattered around the hatch and pooled like thick, dark wine in her seat. After which we kept our heads down and our eyes alert, all the way to Issaquah and the drive-in we called home. All the way until we greeted Roman at the heli-pad with open arms and walked together, through the cool shadows of the carports, to our respective campers and trailers and RVs.

The End

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review so that others make discover it also. *Thank you!*





