

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO THE DI-  
NOSAUR APOCALYPSE (7)

“‘Dog’ is a Palindrome”

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer



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The Flashback/Dinosaur  
Apocalypse Cycle

*Flashback*

(re-printed in *Dinosaur Apocalypse*)



## Flashback Dawn

(re-printed in *Dinosaur Apocalypse*)



## Tales from the Flashback

(re-printed as *Dinosaur Rampage*)



## Flashback Twilight

(serialized as *A Dinosaur is a Man's Best Friend*;  
re-printed as *The Complete Ank & Williams*,  
*Dinosaur War, Paladins*)

*A Reign of Thunder*

(serialized as *Heat Wave*)

*A Survivor's Guide to the  
Dinosaur Apocalypse*

(Collected as *Dinosaur Carnage*)

IN THE MOVIES THEY call it a “smash cut”—when the scene shifts so suddenly and abruptly that the viewer is knocked off balance, if only for an instant. That’s what it was like when Puck attacked the nanotyrannosaurs—which we hadn’t even known were there—smashing the silence into a thousand pieces as the animals burst into the clearing thrashing and gnashing their teeth and one of the predators broke off in pursuit of the man with the knife—the man who, only an instant before, had been holding the weapon to Lisa’s neck.

Not that I knew it was Puck yet. That wouldn’t come until after the mini-tyrannosaur had bitten off the man’s head and shoulders (and swallowed them whole) and returned to the fray; after which I snatched my pistol up from the ground and tried to find an opening—mortified that I might accidentally shoot my own dog—and, finding it, squeezed the trigger.

*Krack!*

I fired twice more.

*Krack! Krack!*

And then the nanotyrannosaurs were down (but not before one of them had shaken Puck like a ragdoll and launched him into a nearby tree) and we were running toward him. Toward my dog who had gone missing during the Flashback and whom we had long since presumed dead. Toward the broken bundle of fur that had somehow found us and saved our lives.

“Puck!” I cried, trying to rouse him. “Come on, Boy. Wake up.”

“Omigod. Omigod, Nick. Is he—?”

I crouched over him and felt his belly—which was bloated and distended, like that of a starving person—with my gloved hand.

“No. No—he’s breathing. But shallow. Like he’s in a coma.” I looked around the clearing, at the dead tyrannosaurs and the dead man missing his head and shoulders, and at the *deadfall*, which was scattered everywhere, like rubbish. “It’s going to take time. But look, there’s firewood.

And that brook can't be far—not at the rate we've been moving. I say we camp here."

Lisa fidgeted about nervously. "Here? How is that a good idea?"

"I don't know what else," I said. "We can't move him. He could have a broken neck, or internal bleeding—I mean, who knows. Besides, Nano-Ts are territorial. Which means the apex predators of this entire area are likely right here, just as dead as that man with the knife." I squinted at the animal that had killed him. "I hope it choked on it."

I was referring, of course, to my golden dog whistle, which the man had taken from me and put around his own neck when it became evident that we had nothing else of value.

"My God, Nick, but we're in the middle of nowhere. What if they hunt in packs and not pairs? That would mean there's still—"

"I'm not leaving him like this, okay?" I shot her a glance and she recoiled noticeably. Then, seeing how the harshness in my voice had disturbed her, I took a deep breath—and tried again. "Just, help me with the camp, okay? I can sit with him while you sleep. All right? I'll stay up and keep watch. If he doesn't wake by morning—I'll take care of it myself."

She looked at me as though she were about to cry. "I didn't say we should leave him, Nick. I— It's just that ...". Her eyes welled up suddenly and she batted away the tears. "Oh, fuck it all."

And she wandered off—to gather sticks for the fire, ostensibly, but really to avoid saying the only thing left to be said. Which was that in a world where the vanished outnumbered the living by something like 3 to 1—the "Big Empty," the old man at the filling station had called it—a world without civilization or creature comfort or compassion, which had regressed to the Stone Age and beyond—yea, even to primordia itself—in *that* world, what could it possibly matter?

I paused as the wind picked up and rattled the leaves. Well, what could it? What was it worth amongst so much human suffering, so much grief and loss? One animal's life. One mixed-breed dog.

I looked at Puck who lay motionless but breathing in the lengthening shadow of the tree.

Just a dog.

And then I did something I had sworn to never again do; something I had promised Lisa I would resist—did it knowing full well what consequence might come in a world populated by ghosts; by disappeared souls; by a few scattered survivors living every minute and every hour—every waking moment—in something like Hell.

I slipped off one of my gloves and laid a trembling hand on Puck's head.

After which, noting the itching sensation in my palms and fingertips, I let the golden eyes open—crustily, sleepily—one after the other, like blinking boils. And I began to *see*.



THEY'D APPEARED SHORTLY before the Flashback—that strange system of storms which had caused so many millions to disappear and that had brought the terrible lizards; that cataclysm which had remapped Time itself—opening one by one over a period of weeks, itching and burning like white phosphorous. I suppose in time we would have sought medical help (although it is difficult to credit, even now, after witnessing the Flashback and its impossibilities firsthand, what could have resulted from that); but, as it turned out, Time was something we had not owned and never would—for it was owned exclusively by them: the masters of the lights in the sky. The architects of the storm.

None of which mattered during the Great Collapse, for by then we'd become like everyone else, struggling merely to survive, and the strange eyes—as inexplicable as they were—had, with the help of a pair of thick gloves, been almost forgotten. Nor, in truth, was this particularly difficult; the eyes, once covered, tended to close their lids and scab over.

All of which was just as well—because I hadn't been able to see through them anyway. At least, not until I touched the dying girl in Seat-



tle—an incident I shall not speak of except to say, that—for a period of time—I saw all her yesterdays and all her hardships; all her life condensed up to that very moment, and more, I saw, for the briefest of instants, what had come *after*—which had been a thing of such raw beauty and terror it had nearly driven me mad. Indeed, I *would* have been mad had Lisa not been there to pull me away—nor, for that matter, had the ghosts of the Flashback—millions upon millions of them, pressing down on me from every corner and from every nook and cranny of the world—not driven me to distraction.

Suffice it to say that had been the last time—the last time I had allowed them any free reign: to see, to feel, to live vicariously through the lived experiences of others. After that, the gloves had stayed on. Stayed on as we trekked from Seattle through Tacoma and across the Olympic Peninsula to Aberdeen, where we had hoped to find Lisa's parents, but found only a house with a collapsed roof and a protoceratops nest in its kitchen. So, too, had we lost Puck, who had chased a turkey-like creature into the ruins of a T.J. Maxx in Olympia and never come out, even though a search revealed no other egress but the shattered front doors—which left us no choice but to assume he had vanished in some aftershock of the Flashback.

And now here we were, somewhere between Hoquiam and Ocean City, travelling through the forest instead of following the road because the road was rife with bandits and outliers (one of whom must have spied us through the trees before getting the jump on us shortly after the brook), and no closer to hope than we had been before—indeed, further from it than ever, and with three less bullets in the gun. Worse, another would have to be used to put Puck down in the event he didn't wake up; something which seemed increasingly likely as the eyes in my hand perceived only a mottled fog and Lisa could be heard approaching us through the scrub.

"You're a fool, Nick Callahan. A fool. But I suppose you already knew that."

I allowed my hand to drop before plunking down in the fir needles and just staring into space. “There was nothing. I saw nothing. It—it was like he didn’t even exist.”

She sat down next to me and exhaled, tiredly.

“He’s an animal—what did you expect?” She picked up my glove and offered it to me, but I didn’t take it. “You said it yourself; it’s like they see memories. The eyes. I don’t imagine a dog has a particularly long one. Do you?”

I sighed. All I knew for certain was that I felt numb and more than a little tired. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I expected. Or what I was looking for. An incident, maybe. Some kind of clue.”

She laid her head on my shoulder and stared at nothing, same as me. “What kind? A clue to what?”

“That’s just it—I don’t know. A clue to what might wake him up, I guess. Something I could say. Something that was important to him.”

“His butt was important to him,” she said. “A source of endless fascination.”

I had to smile.

That’s when it happened. That’s when he yelped, ever so slightly, and his paw twitched.

I looked at Lisa and she looked back. And then my hand was on him and we were running—Puck and I—down cobblestone lanes lined with streetlamps and through pools of foggy light; through tides of rusted Maple leaves, which leapt and swirled as we passed.

“What is it?” I heard Lisa say, her voice growing smaller, more distant. “What do you see?”

I turned to look at Puck as we ran and saw his tongue loll and his eyes shift—as though he wanted to look behind himself—behind us—but didn’t dare.

“Fear,” I said. “Confusion.” An image entered my mind of a dug passage beneath the rear wall of the T.J. Maxx; of the turkey-like thing crawling through it with Puck hot on its heels. “He escaped from be-

neath the wall and now he's lost somewhere in the fog. And he's terrified ... but of what I don't know. It's almost like—wait a minute. Wait a minute." I looked behind him—having heard something huffing and snorting—and saw a fully-grown theropod dinosaur (colored orange and black, like a Gila monster) bounding after us in the dark, gaining rapidly. "There's something coming—some kind of predator. An allosaur, I think. Whatever it is, it's closing, and I mean fast."

"Oh, my God. Nick. Can't you do anything? H-hello? Nick?"

"Lisa!"

But she was already gone, lost amidst the vision and the ghostly white noise of the dead; constrained to some other time and place—erased from my present condition completely.



UNDERSTAND THIS. WHILE there are several dog breeds known to climb trees—the New Guinea Singing Dog; the Louisiana Catahoula; the Treeing Walker Coonhound, and the Jack Russell Terrier (I know this because I have since read up on it), the Miniature American Shepherd, which is what Puck mostly resembled, is, most emphatically, *not* known for such behavior. So, you can imagine my fear and consternation when Puck veered for the nearest Maple tree and attacked it like it was a set of monkey bars—even as the allosaurus collided with it directly beneath him and proceeded to do the same, or tried to. Even now I'm in awe of the pluck and determination he showed that day—to seemingly defy gravity in such an impossible way and to dash up the tree's trunk like that, and then to hold onto the lowest branch in such an unshakable manner—it was truly a sight to behold. Especially when the allosaur began to leap and lunge and to snap at him and he briefly lost a pawhold; before his hindlimbs kicked in and propelled him the rest of the way—into the tree's bowl and a relative amount of safety; into a position from which he could run along one of the branches onto the roof of the

nearest house ... but didn't, as he needed to give the allosaur a piece of his mind.

Which he did, barking and yapping and snarling, even as I watched from below like Johnny Smith in *The Dead Zone*—I even had the collar of my peacoat turned up—standing next to the allosaur but in virtually no danger; inhabiting the scene while somehow remaining apart. Like a ghost.

That's when the other allosaurs showed up—at least one of them passing right through me—and began to triangulate the tree, at which Puck *did* run along one of the branches to the house—but hesitated before jumping from the eave; it was, after all, a long way down, even for a man. And that is where he remained—as the predators moved from the tree to the house and effectively surrounded it—after which there was little he could do but to sit on his haunches and try to wait them out.

Which, eventually, he did, although by this time the moon—which was visible through a part in the clouds—was directly overhead, and even I, a ghost, had the sense that several hours had passed. That's when he retraced his steps to the tree, and, after many false starts, skidded partially down its trunk before leaping the rest of the way to the ground.

"Good dog," I said, and attempted to pet him, "Smart dog ..."

But my hand just passed through him and he didn't notice me at all, just sniffed about the ground as he walked in tight circles and finally trotted away. Back up the lane toward the little strip mall and the T.J. Maxx; back through the gloom which was slowly starting to lift.

It was then that the scene changed and I was standing outside the store, standing where I had stood not 24 hours ago, blowing on that dog whistle; where I'd finally admitted to myself that he was either out of range or had been taken by the Flashback. Puck was there, just sitting on his haunches. I knelt in front of him and studied his face. Studied the patch of black fur around one eye and the eyes themselves, as deep and brown as any person's. Saw the doubt and desperation and the confusion

and the *complexity*. And I saw something else, something I can only call, for lack of a better term, his humanity.

The wind gusted and trash skittered across the empty lot.

And yet there was something more—something deeper—wasn't there? Something just beyond my perception. And this was something—which was *not* human. A thing which, now that I've had time to understand it, was as pure and ephemeral as light itself.

In short, a thing utterly without guile or self. Perfect. Irreducible. Uncreated.

And then Puck barked, causing me to jump, and the moment was past, and I came out of it to the sound of a campfire crackling and Lisa shaking and cursing me awake, after which she said, with a clear tremor in her voice, "There's more of them out there. More Nano-Ts. *We have to go, Nick. Now.*"



I LOOKED AT THE CORPSES of the first Nano-Ts, which were being picked over by compies, the small but deadly predators which always accompanied a kill, then deeper into the dark, where I detected no movement. "How do you know? I don't hear anything ... just the compies."

"I did hear them," she said, and picked up a stick. "Two of them, at least, calling from different directions. They're triangulating us. We have to go, Nick. We have to go right now." She looked at Puck, her face half-painted in firelight. "I'm sorry."

I looked at him too—at the patch of black and his closed eyes, at his paws which had been bloodied by the tree's rough branches. "I—I can't. I'm sorry. Because ... there's something in there. Something I need to see. The eyes—Puck—there's something they want to show me. Something I need to understand."

I approached her suddenly and gripped her arm. "Something that might save us all—*but I need more time!*"

That's when we heard it—both of us—the unmistakable bark of a nanotyrannosaur, which was quickly answered by another, closer. Right at the tree line.

She cursed and jerked away. "Tell them!"

I looked at Puck and then back at her, then back to Puck ... when I noticed the revolver laying in the grass. "Ocean City—it's not that far." I rushed forward and snatched up the gun. "There's still two bullets. Take it."

She froze, looking at my extended arm, then into my eyes, which she searched. "You bastard ..." She welled up suddenly and intensely. "You *fucking bastard*."

I shook the gun. "*Goddammit, Lisa*. Take it."

She reached up slowly and took it.

"I will meet you in Ocean City. I'm ... I'm just going to try this one last time—okay? If it doesn't work ... I'll leave him. I promise."

"No—you won't." She smiled like a crazy person. "Because they're going to come in here and *rip you to shreds* ..."

"You don't know that. The fire will keep them away. The smell of their dead buddies ..."

She swiped at her cheeks and sniffed loudly. Then she moved toward the opposite tree line, the one facing the road—and paused. She turned around. "You're a fool, Nick Callahan. A fool. But I suppose you already know that."

"Get out of here," I said.

And she went.

I rushed over to Puck and dropped to my knees.

"Okay, buddy. You need to show me what you got, and show me fast, all right?" I placed my hand on his head and squeezed slightly. "You remember Dad. He used to take you fishing—like, every Sunday. Remember that? Well, he used to say that to understand a man you had to walk a mile in his shoes. That, to open a man's heart, you had to know something about his journey; about what made him tick. So ... I'm walking in

your shoes. I'm walking in them right now. And what I need to know is ... what will wake you up, okay? I need you to show me. Show me, Puck. Be a good dog one last time. Come on, buddy. Let it go."

And then I closed my lids and let my hand take over—let the golden eyes re-open and peer through Time itself. Let them read Puck's yesterday as the compies chittered and the Nano-Ts barked, coordinating their attack; as Lisa made her way to Ocean City and the lost souls of the Flashback began to cry and howl their laments.



THE TRAIL HAD GONE cold. I could see it in his eyes as he trotted to a halt at the edge of Highway 109 and sniffed at the air, his white coat blowing.

*Come on, boy, I thought, beginning to worry. I was standing by a green and white road sign which read: OCEAN CITY—22 MILES. You can do it. Don't give up on us.*

He sat on his haunches and looked around, panting. At the abandoned motor home Lisa and I had dozed in only a few hours before; at the cracked and potholed highway which had been overrun with prehistoric lichen.

*Come on, buddy. Go sniff up that RV—it'll put you back on the trail. Just get up and get moving. Because that man with the knife is probably watching us—Lisa and I—right now. So are the Nano-Ts, like they are in the present. And we're never going to make it without you.*

Then, like a miracle, he was up again—his tail wagging furiously, his ears twitching puckishly—investigating the Coachman, tearing off toward Ocean City. Barking and yelping, which rode the wind like an echo.

I opened my eyes—*my eyes*, not the alien things in my hands—and saw the branches shaking deep in the dark. They were on the move again—the Nano-Ts—closer even than before. They were getting ready to strike; to do what they did best, which was to rend and kill. I shut my

lids and refocused, feeling as though Time had fast forwarded, as though it had leapt ahead.

*Show me, I thought. Show me now, or forever hold your peace. Show me or see us all join the choir of the damned!*

And that's when it happened: that's when I saw it, the moment that had changed—still would change—everything. That moment Puck had skidded to a stop after surpassing our location and begun to cock his head, and to tilt it quizzically; to look from the road to the tree line and sniff at the briny air—to bolt into the woods like a maniac and, apprehending the situation quickly and accurately, to attack the Nano-Ts.

For that was the moment the man with the knife had tested the dog whistle. The instant in which he had placed it to his lips and blown once, hard and long, and that he had grinned his rotten-toothed grin and said, “Now kick that gun over here, nice and easy. Come on, now. Nobody wants to see Missy here all cut up like Sharon Tate.”

Indeed, it was the moment that had led to our rescue and to Puck being in a coma; and to him being in limbo, like the victims of the Flash-back and its great and terrible Vanishing, trapped in Time, caught between worlds. A place I knew I could never have left him, not if it had cost me everything I had.

*Which it may have, I thought, as I came up out of the trance and looked at the dead beast that had killed the knifeman—for I knew what I had to do—and also through the firs, beyond which Lisa had disappeared. It may have.*

Then I was up; I was on my feet—snatching the man's knife from the forest floor, falling on the carcass like a jackal—scattering the compies in a flurry.

Drawing the blade across its belly so that its innards exploded out like writhing red snakes.

“Hold on, Puck,” I shouted, as I waded into its guts. “You're going to like this! Going to jump right to attention, I guarantee it ...”



I slashed and slashed—clearing away the bowels, cutting away viscera—even as the compies returned, leaping and scurrying. “Hold on, buddy! We got this—”

And they descended on me, or rather ascended me, scurrying up my legs and back, piling up on my shoulders, attacking my face as I located the stomach and cut it open and began feeling around. “*Abh—abhh ...!*”

I collapsed amidst the guts and gruel, batting at my face, at their little beaks and talons, even as the firs shook and I realized I could *smell* them—the Nano-Ts—hovering in the black between trees, getting ready to pounce.

I pulled one of the compies off and wrung its neck before climbing back up and reaching into the T’s stomach again, after which I felt something unusual, something round and smooth, and withdrew it quickly—only to realize it was one of the knifeman’s eyeballs.

“Jesus!” I cursed, and dropped it—even as the compies swarmed over me like mutated sewer rats, like blood-sucking bats, causing me to fall into the viscera again and to roll up like a fetus, to cry out in anguish—knowing, at last, that it was truly over; that there would be no escape for us this time, neither Puck or I, and wondering what Lisa would do now that she was all by herself—and how she would survive—wondering if she would always hate me for the decisions I’d made and for my bullheadedness, and for a thousand other—

“Goddamnit, Nick, find the fucking whistle—I got this!”

I swiped the blood from my eyes and looked at her—saw her stomping and stabbing compies as though she were a mad woman, as though she were fighting in the trenches of France. She knew. She had figured it out herself. Woman’s intuition, perhaps, who knew?

And then I was up and reaching into the thing’s stomach, desperately feeling around, praying that the stuff that felt like macaroni and cheese wasn’t the knifeman’s brains—and yet knowing it was—finding the golden whistle suddenly and unexpectedly and placing it in my mouth.

Where I blew on it as hard as I could, sending a frequency only Puck could hear pulsating through the air.

After which, like gray ghosts, the Nano-Ts began to emerge—slowly, cautiously, not pouncing suddenly as I'd expected, but surrounding us in a loose but ever-tightening circle. Corraling us.

"I'm sorry," I said, as the Alpha bull approached the corpses one at a time and sniffed them carefully, thoroughly. "You should have gone to Ocean City."

She looked at me in the dark, the fire having long gone out. "And live ... I suppose," she said. She smiled wanly. "For what?"

And then something moved and we turned to look at it, and it was Puck, standing on all fours and just as awake as could be.

Puck. Who growled at the dinosaurs threateningly even as he crept forward like a puma and finally paused between us—facing off with the bear-sized predators resolutely, glowering at them without fear or hesitation.

The wind blew, and the trees swayed. The Alpha bull sniffed at the air. My heart thudded in my chest even as it looked at the corpses and then back to Puck. Then it did it again.

And then it swung its great head away and turned, its massive bulk pivoting smoothly, gracefully, and glided back into the trees, after which the others began to peel away and follow—until they were gone, all of them, and we were alone.

Just us and Puck, who was still covered in the predators' blood. Just us and a shepherd mutt—ostensibly an American Miniature—who had been on one helluva journey, but was home now.

A mutt who licked our faces as we surrounded him and looked at us with such seasoned calm and selflessness that I was both spellbound and awed, as though I were in the presence of something at once human and more than human—something which was the epitome of love and faithfulness—something perfect, something divine. Something which came up the same thing no matter which way you turned it.

“Dog” is a palindrome.



end.

The Flashback will continue in the next installment of *A Survivor's Guide to the Dinosaur Apocalypse ...*

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