

# ESCAPE FROM SEATTLE



by  
Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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The Flashback/Dinosaur  
Apocalypse Cycle

## WAYNE KYLE SPITZER

*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, The Lost Country*)

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, flannelled 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 Skid-

ders 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—carnotauruses, 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 carnotaures, 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—everyone 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 carnotaures 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 carnotaure, 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 con-

dition. 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 *goddamn*ed 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 carnotaurus-es 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 win-

dow 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.



end

## HOW IT BEGAN.

It happened *pow*, like that. One minute he'd been blasting through the Arizona desert and listening to Martha and the Vandellas sing "Heat Wave" on the Mustang's AM radio, and the next he was pulling over, rumbling to a stop on the shoulder of State Route 87 and idling in place as the good-looking hitchhiker jogged to catch up with him.

"Man, am I glad to see you," she panted, opening the door—then froze, suddenly, examining the cab, peering into the backseat. "No body parts in that cooler? No murder weapons?"

"Only these," He held up his hands. "Registered as deadly weapons in fifty states. *And* Puerto Rico."

"Is that so?" She laughed, appearing relieved, then climbed in and shut the door. "So where you headed, Deadly Hands?"

"New Mexico. Albuquerque."

"That'll do." She took one of his hands and examined it. "Nah, these are too pretty." She traced his fingers, studying them. "A dentist's, maybe. Or a lab technician." When he didn't say anything, she added: "No? Something creative, then. Nebulous. An artist, maybe. Or a photographer."

He shifted in his seat uncomfortably, unsure whether he was getting creeped out by her touch and directness—or a hard-on. He glanced her up and down quickly: the slender figure, the long, dark hair—the brown eyes like a doe in heat. Definitely a hard-on. "Look, I—"

"*A writer*, I think," she said, suddenly, and let go of his hand. "Ha! Am I warm?"

He opened his mouth to speak but closed it immediately, seeing only Heller and the office at 123 Wilshire Blvd—the cheap suit, the shit-eating grin—his hard-on withering like a prune in September.

"No," he said at last, gripping the gearshift, pushing in the clutch. "You're cold. Cold as fucking Pluto."

And then they were moving, crossing the rumble strip and picking up speed, the engine growling, leaping up, the sweltering sun beating

down, as she looked at him, curiously, quizzically, and he tried to ignore her. As the mercury in the little thermometer on the dash topped 90 degrees—and kept climbing.



“SO WHAT’S YOUR STORY?” she asked, shouting over the wind and the radio, which was too loud, too tinny. He turned it down.

“My story?” He laughed. “I’m not the one who was hitchhiking through the Sonoran Desert.”

She smiled self-deprecatingly. “Yeah, there is that.” She hung her head back so that her dark hair billowed out the window. “I was at an artist’s colony—the Desert Muse.” She smiled again, bitterly, it seemed. “Or the Desert Ruse, as I call it. Ever heard of it?”

He shook his head.

“Yeah, well, it’s where a bunch of grad students hang out with their professors for a week and study the fine arts. You know, like how to out-snark the other pimply kids ... or fuck your professor.”

He glanced at her sidelong, raising an eyebrow.

“Okay, so maybe not fuck him. But definitely give him something to think about. You know, like when he’s handing out teaching internships.”

He nodded slowly, exaggeratedly. “Ah.”

“Ah. So I just bugged out. I didn’t want to play anymore. And now I’m heading home. Back to Miami.”

He drove, listening, the wind buffeting his hair, which was graying at the temples. She couldn’t have been more than, say, what? Twenty-five? Twenty-six? “Yeah? And?”

“And that’s all you get. At least until I know something about you. Your name, for instance.”

He accelerated, he wasn’t sure why, focusing on the road. “Cooper,” he said, finally. “Cooper Black. But, please, call me ‘Coup’—everyone does.”

“Cooper—Coup. *Black?* Cooper Black? Like the font?”

“Just like the font.”

“Well, that’s different.” She fell silent for a moment, watching the scenery pass. “I’m Tess, by the way. Tess Baker.” She added, “Please. Go on.”

Cooper only exhaled. “No, no, no, *that’s it*. I was just coming back from L.A. when I saw you with your thumb out.” He turned the radio back up but got only static. “That’s really all there is to it. Just a guy on a road trip.”

Neither said anything as the radials droned and the radio hissed.

“I think you went there for a reason ... and it didn’t go so well. That’s what I think.” She waited as he fiddled with the dial. “Can’t find your channel there, Coup?”

“No, Doctor Laura, I can’t, actually. Can’t seem to find much of anything. And I went there, if you must know, because I’d sold a book to Roman House and the editor I was working with had a heart attack—he just keeled, okay? So I had to meet this new asshole, who couldn’t stand me *or* the book, and who cancelled the entire project. And then ...”

He looked at her and found her arching an eyebrow quizzically.

“Then I hit him. All right? Right in the old kisser. And then I turned his desk over and threw his banker’s light, you know, the kind with the faux gold plating and green glass shade—”

She nodded impatiently.

“—right through the window. And then I ran like a rabbit, straight to my car and out of L.A., after which I passed this really good-looking hitchhiker who peppered me with questions until I started going bugfuck. Okay? All right? You happy?”

“I like a man who can open up,” she said.

“*I’m not opening up*. I’m trying to—”

And then they heard it, the whir of a siren, after which he looked through his rear-view mirror and she out the back window to see a

brown and white State Patrol vehicle following them dangerously close, its windshield reflecting the sun like knives and its red and blue lights flashing, telling them to pull over.

"It's just not my fucking day," he marveled, still looking in the mirror, even as Tess placed a hand on his leg—close to his crotch, he noticed—and said: "But it could be, Coup. It still could be." —before her eyes expanded like saucers and she shrieked, shouting, "Look out!"

And he looked ahead in time to see a brown blur, a large mouse, he thought, or a kitten, which had been scurrying across the road, vanish beneath the filthy hood.



IT ALL HAPPENED SO quickly that it wasn't even clear, at least at first, *what* had happened, other than he'd slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the creature and caused the police car to ram them from behind—like a wrecking ball, it seemed, knocking them forward.

And then there they were, stalled at the side of the road in front of a partially accordioned police car (while parked over an almost certainly dead cat, possibly a rodent) and feeling their necks; even as Coup glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw the officer storming toward them—his service weapon drawn.

"Oh, not good," said Tess, shrinking down in her seat, as Cooper held up his hands and offered assurances. "It's okay—everything's going to be fine. There's nothing to—"

*"Get out of the car and get on the ground! Now!"*

"Jesus," said Coup.

"Yeah. Shouldn't he at least be asking us if we're all right?"

*"Do it!"*

They did it, easing open their doors and hurrying to get on the ground, putting their hands behind their backs, making of themselves nice little arrestable bundles.

"Look, Officer, I can explain every ..."

“Shut up! Shut up and stay on the ground! Don’t move!”

They didn’t move—but stayed precisely as they were, their hearts pounding, their blood racing, as the cop keyed his mic:

“530 to Dispatch, request back-up at State Route 87 and 19, collision with civilian vehicle, possible DUI. Over.”

“Possible DUI?” Coup craned his neck to look at him. “Where in the hell did you get—”

“Shut up and stay on the ground! Keep your hands behind your back!” And into his mic: “530 to Dispatch, did you copy? Over.”

But there was nothing, no reply whatsoever, just static—like the Mustang’s AM radio. Coup craned his neck again, this time in the opposite direction: And no vehicles, either. Come to think of it, there’d been nothing since he’d picked up the girl, not even so much as a semi, always so ubiquitous.

He strained to peer skyward, the sun stabbing at his eyes. And no air traffic. No contrails to fuel the conspiracy theorists—nothing. Just a pale, blue dome, without even a cloud.

He froze as gravel crunched beneath the cop’s shoes, half expecting a boot on his neck, but quickly realized the man was moving away from him, not toward him, back toward his car.

“I’m scared, Coup,” said Tess, her voice sounding small, distant. “I’m really scared.”

“I know,” he said, the sweat pouring down his forehead, stinging his eyes. “I am too. But it’ll be all right. Just, you know, chill, as they say. He’s called for back-up. That’s a good thing.”

“Witnesses,” she said. “Maybe a commanding officer.”

“Exactly. Just hang tight. I know it’s hot.”

“I’ll be okay.” She added: “Thanks, Coup.”

He grunted. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Just—thanks. For being here. For looking out for me. Like a big brother, almost. Or a fa—”

“*Shht*, he’s coming,” he said—suddenly, urgently.

The world just sat, silently.

"But I don't hear any—"

"Sorry, false alarm. Must have been my own foot, or something."

And then they waited.



HOW MUCH TIME PASSED would have been difficult to say: maybe it was only a few minutes—say, ten or fifteen—and maybe it was a half hour; regardless, when they at last climbed to their feet and walked to the officer's car, they found him nowhere in sight. He had, quite simply, just vanished without a trace.

"But ... that's impossible," said Tess, shielding her eyes, scanning the horizon. "He couldn't possibly have walked that far—could he?"

Coup appeared troubled as he stood next to her and did likewise. "It's possible ... but it sure as hell ain't likely." He looked at the patrol car, the door of which still hung open, and his eyes seized upon the shotgun—which glinted between the seats like black gold. "Maybe someone picked him up. But why would he leave in the first place? And why would he leave *that* just sitting there for anyone to take?"

He looked to where the keys hung from the ignition. "Not to mention the car itself?"

"There's no footprints," said Tess, examining the ground. She looked up at him as though she felt suddenly ill. "Nothing leading away. Just ours and his walking to and from ..." She paused, her lower lip trembling. "How is that possible, Coup? And not just him but—where is everybody else? Where are the other cars? How in ..."

And then she just *broke* suddenly and rushed into his arms, and they remained like that for several minutes, during which time he scanned the sky, and, to his deep relief, spied a passenger jet arching glimmeringly across the sky, its contrail just as white and reassuring as angel dust.



"Look, there, see," He released her abruptly and spun her around. "We're not in the Twilight Zone, after all. Hey, yo, Freedom Bird! We're down here!" He waved his arms back and forth. "Give us a lift! Albuquerque or bust!"

Yet there was something odd about the plane's trajectory he hadn't initially noticed—or had he? For it truly was *arching*, which is to say it wasn't crossing the sky so much as it was ... falling from it. Yes, yes, he could see now that was true, as he disengaged from Tess and paced through the scrub, tracking the jet as it curved gracefully in the sun—to finally plummet straight into the far hills, where it vanished like a specter in a plume of fiery smoke.

And then he was gripping the shotgun and trying to wrest it from its rack; but, finding it locked, had to search the car for a key: upon which, realizing there were none that would fit, he located a small button just beneath the seat and depressed it—freeing the weapon.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Tess as she tailed him back to the Mustang, but he ignored her until they were again seated inside, after which he turned to her and said, briskly, "Maybe it is and maybe it isn't, but I'm doing it, okay?"

And it was on the tip of her lips to respond when they heard the sound: a kind of muffled whimper—something between a chirp and a meow—coming from outside. Coming from beneath the car.

"Oh my God, Coup. The cat ..."

"It was a *rat*, I think."

"Whatever it is; it's ... still alive. Listen."

And he did listen—and quickly determined that, whatever it was, it was either in great pain or scared out of its wits.

And then they were both scrambling, out of the car and into the heat and glare, and what they saw next was something neither of them would forget—for it was both portent and prelude to everything which lie ahead.



IT WAS TWO THINGS ABOVE all else: adorable and almost dead. It was also attached to the top of the tire like a vise (where it had taken refuge after the near collision), its little claws dug into the rubber like a cat's and its dark eyes regarding them fearfully—and yet somehow bravely. Still, it was not a cat (or a kitten) in spite of its claws, nor was it a mouse, however over-sized. What it was, quite simply, was something unknown; although what Coup thought it resembled most was a mon-goose, albeit clearly still in its infant stage. Nor did it seem to be dangerous, as Tess found out when she touched it against Coup's advice and it merely licked her fingers—or tried to—its sandpapery tongue just as dry as the dead.

"It's this heat," she said, finally, stroking its neck and back. "It's seriously dehydrated." She looked at Coup. "Whatever it is, I don't think it has very long."

"It needs water," he said. "And it needs it fast."

He stood and looked into the backseat; at the cooler he'd picked up from Walmart before heading out to L.A. "And we gotta bring his temperature down. Can you move him, you think?"

"I think so, yes. If he'll let go of the tire."

Coup took a spare shirt from the back and shook it out, then opened the cooler and laid it inside. "Most the ice is still good; we'll lay him in here." He picked a Styrofoam cup off the floor. "And see if we can't get him to drink something."

And then, having managed a few sips and been laid in the chest—it had taken both of them to disengage it from the tire—the thing seemed to sleep; as they pulled away from the shoulder and back onto the road (although where they should go was another question entirely) and decided to name it "Rikki-Tik"—after Kipling's famous mongoose.

They hadn't traveled far, however, when they encountered more evidence that something wasn't right—with the road, with the traffic (or lack thereof), with *the world*.

"What's that?" asked Tess as something glinted about a mile ahead, something blue and crumpled, torn, smashed.

"What's what?" he said, and then noticed it: a blue and chrome thing turned over on its side in the middle of the road, a ruined and battered thing. A car.

"Jesus," he said, letting off the gas.

"Mary and Joseph," added Tess. "Christ. Do you think anyone could have ..." She paused, squinting. "Coups, tell me that isn't what I think it is."

But he was seeing it too, and knew that what was splashed down the car's door was *exactly* what she thought it was.

"It's blood, all right." He geared down and brought them slowly alongside the hulk, where he put it in park and inhaled, deeply. He did not, however, shut off the engine.

"Please, God, be empty," said Tess. "I'm not ready for this shit."

Coups sighed. "Why don't you ... check on our friend or something. I'll have a look."

"Okay."

But he'd barely begun to open his door when a wrinkled hand appeared suddenly, waveringly, amidst the wreckage—and gripped its glass-covered dash. After which Coups reiterated calmly, gently: "Tess, check on our friend." —and climbed out.



TO COUPS'S ASTONISHMENT, the man—who couldn't have been less than ninety years old—had suffered only minor cuts and abrasions; although his wife, he said, had been killed (which was weird, to say the least, since he was the only one in the car). Beyond that, though, he hadn't had much to say—nor did Coups blame him—as they rumbled from the scene and continued east; indeed, he seemed to still be in state of shock. One thing, however, was woefully clear, and that was that at

his age (and level of dementia) he shouldn't have been driving in the first place.

"Maybe she was thrown clear," said Tess as she buckled him in next to the ice chest, her tight Levi shorts merely inches from Coup's head. "It was obviously a horrific accident; although it is strange that there was no other car. Could they have had a blowout, you think?"

"The short answer is 'no,'" said Coup matter-of-factly. "That car's tires were good. As for being thrown clear—no way. I searched the entire area. There was nothing. Not unless the coyotes carried her away."

"Well, there you—"

"The coyotes didn't carry her away, Tess."

"Look, I don't know," she protested as she helped the man dig out his wallet—it was fat and had been causing him discomfort, was her guess.

All of which went out the window when he removed a picture from it and handed it to her: a picture of himself and his wife when they were much, much younger—or so she'd presumed, at least until she saw the timestamp in the lower right corner of the frame. A timestamp which read: October 15, 2017.

"*This is nuts*," said Coup, looking at it, before handing it back. "All of this is just stark-raving ..."

But he never finished the sentence, for they were approaching another vehicle, three other vehicles, to be precise, all of which were ditched at the side of the road as though their drivers had simply fallen asleep.

"They're empty, every single one," whispered Tess as they passed the vehicles at a virtual crawl. "Just like the cop car. Just like this guy's wife. It's almost as if—"

"Don't say it," said Coup.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"We don't know that yet—"

"It's like they just disappeared! Just *poof!* Gone!"

"Tess—"

"Goddamn it, Coup! Lying to ourselves about it isn't going to—"

"Some of them did," said the old man suddenly, rendering them speechless, even as Tess turned around and Coup looked into the rear-view mirror. "Vanished just like ghosts, like they'd never existed at all. I know because I saw it with my own eyes. But that's not what happened to my wife."

They just looked at him, nobody saying anything. It was, in a sense, as if he'd been reborn—still as old as Methuselah but suddenly alert and aware; enough so that he'd become acutely aware of his condition and surroundings and seemed to be entranced by the sight of his own liver-spotted hand, which he studied as though it wasn't his at all but a total stranger's.

At last he said, "No. No. Because you see, some disappeared. And some, well, I guess some have or will end up like me. But my wife ..." He paused, looking first at Coup and then at Tess, his eyes ancient, haunted, possessed almost. "My wife was *eaten*."

After which they faced forward again and didn't say anything for a long time, not until they passed the green and white sign indicating food and gas via the next exit, at which they looked at each other and nodded at almost the same instant, then touched hands as if to brace themselves for what they might find there.

It was called the Border Rendezvous and as best Coup could figure it, it was a Union 76 gas station on crack. What else was there to make of a place with a giant Mexican bandit named “Benito the Bandido” standing over its drive—his legs bowed absurdly and his hands gripping the titular sign— or boasting in its other signage of being home to the world famous Dingo Dog (“Have a Dingo, Gringo!”) and the “largest indoor reptile exhibit in the U.S.?”

“Jesus,” said Tess as they drove between the statue’s gargantuan legs, “Where were the P.C. Police when they built this?”

“Just a gleam in someone’s eye,” said Coup, maneuvering the Mustang around a lengthy pump island (which was more befitting an actual truck stop than a glorified gas station/food mart). “Probably one of those professors at the Desert Ruse.” He added: “Don’t knock it. They’ll be cold water and air-conditioning. Not to mention a big TV.”

She looked at him, struck by his mentioning of the Desert Ruse. He *listened*. She wasn’t used to that. “Yeah, but ...” She looked at the building’s front windows doubtfully. “Will there be a signal?”

“That,” he said, as they rumbled up to those windows and stopped, “is the 64-thousand dollar question.” He shut off the engine and exhaled. “Okay. I’ll take our furry friend if you can assist Mr.—?”

“Becker,” said the old man. “Henry Becker. And I don’t need a nurse to get out of a car, thank you. I was thirty-four just an hour ago.”

Tess looked at Cooper but he just shrugged. One didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

They all got out, Coup fetching the ice chest while Tess walked behind Becker, her arms at the ready, and they went into the store, where they were greeted immediately by a cacophony of voices—and saw a large group gathered in front of the counter.

“Any one of you a doctor?” someone snapped, having turned at the sound of door chimes—a large black man with a shiny head and long gray beard (a trucker, maybe, or a biker, although Coup hadn’t noticed

any bikes out front). “Or do you have any medicine? Prescription meds, opioids, muscle relaxers ...”

The three of them just froze.

“Speak up!”

“No, nothing,” said Coup—he couldn’t help but notice that Tess had gripped his arm instinctively— and added, “What is it? What’s going on?”

There was a sound like liquid splattering the floor and a woman in a red dress turned around, cupping her mouth. “Oh my God. Can’t someone just kill it?”

“Now, wait a minute—”

“She’s right, you know. Who has a gun?” said the big man—adding, when no one responded, “Come on! This has got to end!”

*An animal, thought Coup. Someone’s animal is dying—probably from this heat. Jesus.*

It was on the tip of his lips to say he did, in the car, when someone beat him to it; a wiry little man in a cowboy hat and wife-beater (who had also turned at the chimes), who said, plaintively, “I have one.”

“Jesus, Coup, look,” said Tess, nodding toward the ceiling, toward the massive flat screen mounted above and behind the counter, and he nearly leapt with joy when he saw that it was not in fact broadcasting static but actual imagery—or at least the CNN logo, which filled the screen—and that someone was talking: Anderson Cooper, perhaps, although it was difficult to say over the commotion at the counter. Coup caught only “extreme weather ranging from sudden heat waves to flash ice-storms all across the country” before hearing another splattering of liquid and the people at the counter gasp, after which a single shot rang out and he jumped.

And then it was over—whatever it was—and the animal, whatever it had been, was dead, surely, and Tess ran to him and collided with his shoulder even as the room returned to some kind of normalcy and the voice on the TV continued: “... the fact is we just don’t know. *I don’t*

know. I don't know where my family is or if they're safe. I don't know if we have a President—or if he's simply vanished. I don't know where our first responders are, or our law enforcement, to say nothing of the military, or why so many of our friends and loved ones have disappeared. All I know is—”

And then static broke across the screen like a gunshot—pow, like *that*—and their connection to the rest of the world was lost; and the room fell silent, or nearly so, for a woman sitting at one of the booths was sobbing and the static continued to hiss.

That's when Coup first noticed it, the blood which was so dark as to be almost black, spreading from the small gap beneath the counter, pooling around people's shoes—and set down the ice chest, embracing Tess briefly before moving toward the gathering and peering over the fixture himself.

Where he saw something so strange and terrible, so grotesque, that his mind could not at first accept it: a thing not only without analog to the natural world (at least insofar as he understood it) but which seemed a purposeful mockery. A thing, in short, which was neither man nor animal, and yet, somehow, a tangle of both.

A thing from which he shielded a little girl as she inexplicably tried to join him and whose dead, randomly placed eyes—two of them small, blue, human, two others as large and slit-pupiled as any serpent's—gazed emptily into space.



HAD COUP ANTICIPATED how unbearable the silence would become he wouldn't have sought out the remote and silenced the TV, nor encouraged Tess to take Rikki-Tik to the restroom and clean him up.

And yet, Christ, what was there to say? They were strangers, all of them—even he and Tess were strangers—who among them even knew the other's name, much less anything about what was going on or what the thing lying behind the counter was? When at last he spoke he did



so quietly, almost reverentially, offering only his name and where he'd been heading, hoping the others gathered around the counter would follow suit—which, after a moment, they did, slowly, hesitantly.

"Rory Holmes," said the big man, "long-haul trucker, enroute to Los Angeles from Laredo, when—when all this happened."

"Elliott Giles," said the wiry guy in the wife-beater, "disabled veteran. Not any war, just—just the service. Enroute to Phoenix from Las Cruces." He paused, his lower lip trembling. "I—I only did what had to be done."

"You're good. You're all good, man," said Rory, clapping him on the back, startling him. "You done right."

The introductions continued:

"Long Nguyen. Civil engineer. Atlanta to San Diego."

"Ashley May. Phoenix from Cedar City. Utah."

"Cameron Reeves. Ah—" The twenty-something year-old hesitated. "Immigration activist enroute to the new wall at El Paso." He paused, appearing self-conscious. "From Washington. That's my group." He indicated a trio of young people near the booths.

"D.C.?" asked Rory.

"State," said Cameron. "Seattle."

"Ah. The Great White North."

"Sure. I guess."

"Carson Bates," blurted a heavyset man abruptly, squaring his beefy shoulders. "Carrot-topped farmer cum crop-duster; and all around daredevil." He glanced at Cameron and tweaked his MAGA hat. "And a proud supporter of President Donald J. Tucker."

"You don't say," said Coup. The hat alone was pretty hard to ignore. Cameron just shrugged.

That left only two in the immediate group who hadn't spoken; the attractive woman in the red dress (who seemed to have recovered) and a young man of Native American heritage who introduced himself only as "Johnny—from Tucson."

"Kate Patel," said the woman at length, "CEO, Desert Smoke Vapors. Enroute to L.A. from Austin." Her voice lowered slightly. "And about to get underway again."

"It's your apocalypse," said Coup. "And a warm welcome to all."

And yet the silence reasserted itself as they watched the tangle of flesh cool and bleed; its eight limbs stiffening like driftwood and its eyes staring in four different directions, its chaos of muscle and bone settling, until, spying a nametag amidst the riot of fabric and tissue, Coup said, "It's the clerk. He or she—has been *combined* with something. Like a lizard. Or a crocodile. Look,"

He pointed to where a partial human face had emerged from the mangle, its mouth stretched in a hideous grimace, its right cheek morphed like clay, its gray flesh blending seamlessly back into the beast—the monitor lizard. The crocodile, whatever.

"Right there, at the animal's neck. See it?"

"Like they were baked together in a fucking microwave," said Rory.

"Or melted—like nachos." said Elliott.

"More like fused," said Long. "Blended to form a single entity ... a single amalgamate."

"Like Brundlefly," whispered Ashley.

Coup hadn't quite caught that.

She blushed a little self-consciously. "Like *The Fly*. You know, that movie from the '80s, with Jeff Goldblum."

Everyone just looked at her.

"The remake—of the original black and white. Jesus. *The Fly*."

"I *know* the movie," said Coup. "But what's—"

"When the guy who built the transportation pod gets drunk and tests it on himself, and the fly gets caught in the matrix ..."

"... and they get fused together." He looked down at the thing, at the four human limbs and the four reptilian ones, at the four dead eyes all pointed in different directions. "Jesus ... But what could—"

"That's not all," said Long.

He went around the counter and approached the corpse—his shoes squelching in the blood and gruel—then hitched up his pants and knelt. “This foot here, for example—”

“Don’t touch it!” said Ashley.

He paused, fingertips hovering.

“She’s right, you know,” said Rory. “Who knows what that thing might be carrying.”

He traced the scales, his finger suspended just above them. “See this? Kind of like a big bird’s talon, isn’t it? Not much like a lizard—more like an ostrich, or an emu. But what’s really curious is this, right here.” He indicated a single scythe-like claw, about three inches in length, and curved like a scimitar. “Because it’s retractable, see?” He laughed slightly. “Like your cat’s. And it’s sickled-shaped. Which means—”

“Look, ah, Bill Nye,” interrupted Carson, shouldering past Coup, displacing him with his bulk. “Is there a point to any of this? Or are you just showing off your American education?”

Coup raised an eyebrow.

“Well, yes, there is,” said Long. He appeared vaguely stupefied. “The point is: no animal like this currently exists.”

Carson just looked at him—like a big, dopey John Candy—appearing amused. “It’s not? Well, what is it, then?” He looked at the others as if for support. “Is it Mothra?” He laughed.

“Whatever it is, we can’t just leave it here,” said Elliott.

Coup looked outside, at the landscaped berm on the south end of the lot. “We’ll bury it there, by the water—”

“Look, you guys can do whatever you want,” Kate interrupted, “but I’m not touching that thing.” Her keys rattled as she removed them from her purse. “Besides, I’ve got a board meeting to attend.” She moved toward the doors. “Apocalypse or no apocalypse.”

“Now wait a—” Rory began.

“Are you—” said Elliott.

"Is that really a good idea?" asked Coup, which at last caused her to turn around.

"I don't know, is it?" she said, and slung the purse over her shoulder. "Why don't you ask *him*?" She indicated Long. "He seems to know everything."

"He's right," said Rory. "It's not a good idea."

"It's the only idea," she snapped determinedly. She patted her purse warningly. "And don't even *think* about ..."

But they were no longer looking at her—gazing instead at something which had swooped into view outside, something which seemed for an instant almost to hover—its muscles and ligaments twitching, making a thousand adjustments, its stretched membranes undulating, its talons outstretched—before it smashed against the glass like some great, dark kite (cracking it three different ways) and hit the ground violently, scrambling and flapping, leaping and taking wing again, disappearing from sight. All of which happened so fast that the woman in the red dress, having leapt away suddenly, didn't appear to have even seen it, much less identified it, and only said, finally, "What was that?" And then laughed. "Are we under attack by wild turkeys, for fuck's sake?"

And then the incident was over and the only sounds were those of the commercial refrigerators humming and the fountain drink regulators hissing, and no one said anything, even when Tess burst back into the room and said, breathlessly, "Jesus, what's going on?"

"In Bumfuck, Arizona?" said Kate acidly. "Nothing. Kate is leaving, that's what's going on. Ta-ta. Let me know when it's time for the reunion."

And yet this time she was answered, and by an unexpected voice, a voice as strong and confident as any thirty-four-year-old. A voice which belonged to the old-young man himself, Henry Becker.

"You want to leave, young lady? Go right ahead," he said, approaching her, each step small, cautious, carefully considered. "But know this.

Denial has its limits. And in this case, that limit is exactly where those doors stand.” He closed to within a few feet of her before she touched her purse and said, “That’s close enough.” —causing him to take a step back. He continued: “It might be closer than that, considering these ... things ... can appear out of nowhere.” He turned and indicated the amalgamate. “That poor bastard, for example. His only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Because there’s something you need to understand, Miss—”

“Patel,”

“Miss Patel. And that is that for every person gone to this—this phenomena—and you must have seen the empty cars ... something else has, shall we say, *arrived*.”

She seemed to hesitate, her eyes blinking, her attitude faltering.

“And one of these things, Miss Patel, is outside now. Probably on the roof. We—we saw it, you understand, while you were turned around. But it was aiming for you. And it is only because of those thin doors that you are still here.”

She looked at him passively, almost intimately—as though he’d reached her; as though she were about to change her mind. And then the moment was gone and she was shoving through the doors, letting in the sweltering heat, reminding everyone of what lie just beyond the glass, striding for her car while her red dress flowed freely behind.

“Jesus, we can’t just—” Coup started to say, and lurched forward—but was restrained by Tess, even as Kate made it to her car and opened the door, tossing in her purse, then turned toward the store and shrugged nonchalantly—before gripping her elbow and flipping everyone off.

“See? Big girl panties,” said Tess, and Coup could have just kissed her—when there was a huge, black blur at the corner of his eye and someone gasped; and he turned to see that Kate was gone—just *gone*. He blinked and she was there again, dangling from the flying thing’s

talons, folding as it lighted upon the orange Union '76 ball; offering up her intestines as it thrust its long, thin beak into her long, thin body.

And then Tess was screaming and he was trying to calm her—as yet another great kite swooped in and lighted upon a streetlight; and still another after that, lighting upon a utility pole; and still one more, which glided in like a jet until its talons touched down in the middle of the lot and it ran on them briefly before dropping to all fours and crawling the rest of the way to the windows.

“Jesus, they’re everywhere,” said Rory, moving to within several feet of the glass. He looked at the creature on the ground as it stared in at them. “Like seagulls after breadcrumbs.”

“And we’re the breadcrumbs,” said Tess.

She watched as yet more arrived and a commotion broke out atop the '76 sign, where a larger bird attacked the smaller one and wrested its prey away (part of it, anyway) before beating its wings and soaring off—strewing body parts, causing those on the ground to scramble and to squabble amongst themselves.

“It’s an outright feeding frenzy,” said Elliott, stepping up next to Coup. He looked at the creature on the other side of the window even as it was joined by a multitude of others. “Jesus. Look at their eyes.”

But Coup had already noticed—that strange glow that wasn’t really a glow; that backlit fogginess, as though they were blind or perhaps even rabid.

“Like zombies,” said Rory. “Like flying fucking voodoo zombies.” He twisted his body, staring at the sky. “And what the hell is that?”

Coup followed his gaze to where a borealis shimmered like iridescent curtains: its colors shifting and blending, creating hues he’d never before seen (and which hurt his mind), its scale unimaginable. “It’s like the whole world’s gone crazy.”

“Worse,” said Henry, and steadied himself against a fixture, “we’re trapped. If not before than certainly now.” He looked outside to where

more and more birds were arriving, crowding the lot like flies, making a sea of gray. “They know there’s food here.”

Coup watched as a ripple moved through that sea—as though the birds had heard something. As though something had spooked them. “What’s that?” he said.

And then everything just exploded—as the birds scattered and took flight and what seemed like stones rattled the glass and foodstuffs began bursting and it became apparent that what they were hearing was gunfire. As everyone hit the floor and the room was pocked by bullets, and Coup blanketed Tess’ body with his own.

As he looked over his shoulder and saw the M1 Abrams tank jouncing into the lot, its machine gun flashing and its exhaust ports belching black smoke—its great, flat turret rotating, pointing directly at them.

The truth of it was, Tess wasn't sure what to make of the three members of the tank crew—Sargent First Class “Bo” Briggs, Corporals Yousef and Malone—other than they'd clearly been traumatized by the loss of their gunner, a man they'd called “Quiet Cal,” (“he was so quiet, every time he opened his mouth a moth flew out”) —who'd been killed by one of the flying creatures only hours before. All she knew for certain was that they were young men from Fort Huachuca who'd been separated from their platoon—although how this had happened remained unclear—and who, lacking communications, had been “operating independently” since near the outset of the heat wave, about three hours ago now. And she knew this: which was that they would have killed everyone in the store had Coup not ran out in front of them like a lunatic, shouting and waving his arms (when no one else had even budged). Coup! The goofy, arguably hot writer. The 40-something year-old bad boy. Her hero.

She looked at him now where he was gathered with the others and smiled, even as by some fluke he saw her and winked back. Relax, he seemed to be saying—or was she projecting? Relax, I got this. And she tried to, she really did, wandering along the big windows (which were riddled with bullet holes) and staring out at the dark and the storm, which was as torrential as it had been sudden, wondering how her mother and father and little brother were doing in Miami, and praying they hadn't—no. No, she wouldn't consider that. They were fine, she was sure of it. After all, who was to say this had even happened there? Who was to say it had happened anywhere but right here in Bumfuck, Arizona? But she already knew the answer to that: Anderson Cooper. Anderson Cooper and CNN—in New York.

She slowed, peering through the rain and water running down the glass, noticing something strange amongst the gas pumps—some kind of jib, poking between them like a knife. It was funny, because she hadn't noticed it earlier—like a black pennant pinned to space itself—its single light showing red, blinking, before lightning flashed



and it turned—it, the animal, the thing in the rain—as others just like it turned also, skewing their heads like Egyptian dancers, seeming to focus on her.

*“Aaabhh ...!”* she blurted, backing away—it wasn’t a scream and it wasn’t quite speech—backing into Coup (who’d come to check on her), nearly knocking him over. “There’s something out there—!” She gripped his shoulders in icy desperation. “An entire pack of some-things. Like—like featherless emus, with *fucking alligator heads*. Just look,”

He squeezed her shoulders and gently moved her aside, peering out the window, peering into the rain. “I don’t see anything,” he said, even as the others joined them, crowding around the glass. “Just a bunch of gas pumps ... and some vehicles.” He stiffened suddenly. “Wait. There is something. Lights—”

“That’s them! That’s their eyes,” said Tess—as Ashley stepped forward to calm her. “They, like, glow or something. Like that borealis in the sky. They’re right there, Coup!”

“No ...” he said, in a kind of drawl, “No, these are flashing. Some of them are headlights—I’m sure of it. There, behind the electrical pylons—coming closer. Look,”

She looked, no longer seeing the—*well, let’s have out with it*, she thought, *the dinosaurs*, and saw instead a line of what indeed appeared to be headlamps—preceded by flashing blue lights—winding along a road she hadn’t even known was there, coming toward them through the rain.

“Might be the cavalry,” said Elliott, sounding excited—a notion that was quickly dashed when the modest number of vehicles became clear: two police motorcycles followed by a black limousine and a sport-utility vehicle, also black—followed by one more cycle.

“I’ll be goddamned,” said Rory. “But that’s a motorcade. Like the kind you see in the local parade.”

“Regular Apocalypse Day Cavalcade,” said Coup.

"Jesus, the President," blurted Carson. "He was golfing at Rancho Loreto—did you know that? It was all over the news today. I mean, just before—"

"No way," said the tank commander—Bo. "It's too small, for one." He wiped the glass, which was beginning to fog. "The Presidential motorcade numbers, I don't know, like, forty vehicles, at least, most of them specialty rigs. Look, there's not even a decoy."

"Maybe it's been disappeared," said Ashley.

"Yeah, like those drivers on State Route 87," said Elliott.

And then the vehicles were there, they were pulling up under the huge pump canopy, and the flags on the limo's fenders proceeded to droop—but not before it had become obvious what they were: the flag of the United States of America and the Presidential Seal—at which Rory could only shake his head, saying, "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"But there's more," said Tess, yanking away from Ashley, locking eyes with everyone who was close. "Because it looks like they're going to fuel up. And whether you believe me or not—I'm telling you: *there's something out there*. Several somethings, as I said."

"Jesus, we've got to warn them," said Elliott, even as Coup shoved against the door—and found it to be jammed.

"What the fuck is this?" he snapped, pushing repeatedly.

Rory tried it too. "It was that pterodactyl. Look, the whole bar's bent ..."

"Let me see," said Long, squeezing in, even as Bo unshouldered his rifle—and seemed to look for his men.

"Roof access," he snapped, appearing to locate them. "Find it."

"Shouldn't we be, I don't know, jumping up and down or something? Trying to get their attention?" asked Ashley, and started waving her arms.

Tess slapped them down. "The President's entourage? No!"

"It'll just draw them out—unprepared," said Rory, watching Bo and his men double-time around the counter—seeing them pause over the body of the clerk-thing.

"Jesus," one of them said—the loader, if Tess recalled. Malone.

"Holy shit."

"Come on. Move it," said Bo.

They moved it, disappearing into the back, pounding up stairs.

"Someone's out," said Elliott, and when Tess looked she saw two men in dark suits standing at the pump, one of them working the console while the other looked on. And she saw something else: two creatures (she supposed they were what they called velociraptors) taking position behind the next pump isle—crouching there like black panthers, waiting like jackals.

"Oh, no," she said.

Another darted past as she watched, almost invisible amidst the rain—then another, and another. "My God, they're going to ambush them," she said.

Several people gasped as they followed her gaze.

"Not if we can get this door," said Coup. He grunted, applying pressure, as Long fiddled with the mechanism.

The men at the console, meanwhile, had given up—and were now striding toward the store.

"No, no, no," pleaded Ashley. "Just get back in your car ..."

"Come on," growled Coup, fighting the door.

"Y'all make it to the roof, or what?" bellowed Rory.

But there was no answer as the agents rapidly approached and the door suddenly gave way—causing the men to freeze and to reach into their suit coats, prompting them to draw their weapons.

Coup wasted no time. "Get back in the car!" he shouted, leaning into the downpour. "Jesus, they're right there!" —at which instant the men took a defensive stance and pointed their revolvers, yelling at him

to get down, down on the ground, “All of you, get on the ground! Now!”

—and they did, yelling and gesturing, trying to warn them; as the raptors darted forward and the soldiers opened fire from the roof—lighting up the lot. As the agents spun around and did the same—only much, much too late.



EVEN THROUGH THE RAIN, the lethal nature of the attack was clear; as one of the beasts launched feet-first at the nearest agent—its tail whipping frenziedly, its fore-claws splayed—and knocked him to the ground: pinning him there like a moth on cork, filleting him so that his entrails burst forth and steamed. The second man was luckier, so much so that he was able to turn around and begin firing even as they backed him toward the window, his pistol bucking and flashing, going *ca-crack, ca-crack*, its shells flying and clinking off the asphalt, until he was close enough to Coup and Rory that they were able to grab him and pull him into the store—which they’d barely managed to do before the pursuing raptors skidded into the glass and began thrashing about.

And then, bedlam—as more raptors descended and more men in suits opened fire (as well as the state troopers, one of whom was instantly pounced upon and swept from his bike); and the limo began to move: accelerating away from the gas pumps, swooping alongside the store, where its doors were opened even as the agent they’d rescued shoved wide the entry, and a largish man in a suit was hustled into the building—although not before a raptor’s jaws darted for his head and an agent dove between them, pushing him down, and was promptly decapitated. And then it was over, or nearly so, as the surviving raptors fled and the surviving Secret Service agents—both of them, as well as a State Trooper—followed the President into the store. Until the only sounds were several women sobbing and the hum of the refrigerators; and it wasn’t until things had settled considerably that Tess realized the

old-young man—Henry—was no longer in the building. That he was, quite simply, just gone.

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THE ONLY THING HE KNEW for certain was: he wanted to be with her—with Amal—his wife. And if that meant suffering the same fate, well, he'd decided he was prepared for that. Decided it as he unbarred the exit and walked unprotected into the Sonoran Desert. Reconfirmed it as he gained State Route 87 and began heading west, heading *back*. Toward the crushed Toyota Camry and the blood on its door. Toward the last place he had ever seen his wife alive.

For it was over, this much he knew; and if he hadn't known it before, the slaughter of the Secret Service agents and Troopers had surely convinced him. The world, such as it was, for he'd never been an optimist, had—how had Stephen King put it?—*moved on*. He knew this just as sure as he knew he had no interest in living without Amal—much less as an old man who could barely walk; who's back ached with each step and who's lungs felt papery and thin; and who's eyes were failing not just rapidly but *exponentially*—who couldn't even hear!

No. No, he would drink of her presence (or the ghost of it) one last time in the crushed car at the side of the road—the car they had bought as a wedding present to themselves in 1997 and in which they'd made love as twenty-year-old elopers and which had always run like a dream no matter what because it was a *Toyota* and that used to mean something—and then dash the cup to the ground; having no more answers—to Life, to where the socks went in the fucking dryer, to this, this *flashback*—than he'd had as a boy in Tacoma, Washington—and not caring. For he wanted to see his wife again—that was really the long and the short of it. And maybe, just maybe, there was a place where he could still do that. At which point a shadow fell over him and something snorted in the rain (which was lessening) and he looked up—to

see the same animal that had killed his wife looming high above (for its markings were distinct: a U-shape above its eyes and two black circles, like a cobra). —and he smiled. Because he knew they'd be together soon.



“WE’RE GOING TO GET to the bottom of this, all of it, believe me,” the President was saying, gesturing as he spoke—his large frame swaying slightly—just like on TV. “And we’re going to win it. It might take time ... but we’re going to win it. Believe me. We always win.”

He paused for a moment as the lead Secret Service agent—Halverson was his name, Agent Halverson—handed him a cup of water. “For one, we’ve got something the animals don’t have. Which is our incredible men and women of law enforcement.” He gestured at the surviving State Trooper and then at the soldiers. “Not to mention our armed forces, some of whom are with us right now.” Everyone clapped—albeit briefly. “It’s hard. So hard. What has happened is so terrible. So many people have disappeared—while others have fallen victim to these—these animals. People are saying they’re dinosaurs. I don’t know. I think they’re dinosaurs. And they’re horrible, so horrible. They’re eating people alive. I’ve seen this, and I’ve sort of witnessed it—in fact, in two cases I have actually witnessed it.”

He continued as Coup and Tess exchanged nervous glances. “You know it’s funny because they say—the scientists—they say human beings and dinosaurs didn’t exist at the same time. And yet here we are ... right? Here we are. We’re existing at the same time. That I can tell you. But we’re going to take care of it. We’re going to make America safe again.” He paused and took a drink of water, appearing conflicted. “Some people are saying, or they were before the TVs went out, some people were saying, not everyone, just some people, they were saying this hasn’t happened anywhere else. That it’s only happening here—in the U.S.” He shrugged as if he couldn’t possibly know. “Not Mexico.

Not China. Not Puerto Rico. Just us. We're the only ones who have, how'd they say it? Flashed back. That's just what I heard. I don't know if it's true. I don't think it is, to be perfectly honest."

Tess glanced at the soldiers, who were whispering amongst themselves.

"Even if it is, I'm a big believer in a little thing called *fluctuation*," He emphasized the word with his thumbs and forefingers, "—just like with the markets. Or with co-called climate change. You cannot just have a standard. You cannot just say that we have a blanket standard all over the world ... you can't have a blanket standard. You may say ... it sounds nice to say, 'I have a blanket standard; here's what it is' ... But you know ... it won't be a blanket standard."

Tess looked at Coup—who just looked back and shrugged.

"What I'm telling you is, this is temporary. Okay? Believe me. I may not be a scientist but I can tell you that. It's temporary. In the meantime we got the best armed forces and police responders in the world keeping us safe. These guys, right here," He indicated the soldiers. "Aren't they great? Great guys."

"But, sir?" Elliott appeared starstruck as he stepped forward. "I mean, Mr. President. Isn't it true that CNN was reporting that most of our military had simply disappeared? How do you account for that?"

"Fake news," said Tucker, and pointed at Carson, who had taken off his MAGA hat and raised his hand. "You. Your hat was fine, by the way."

Laughter.

"Sir, I just wanted to know what you intend to do next; and what your thoughts are on the situation right here. Right now. We've got dead needing to be buried, for one—or at least moved to where those things can't, well, you know, scavenge off—"

"Like the head laying against the limo's front tire," said Rory.

They all glanced out the windows—and at the little girl standing in front of them, who was looking out at the thing. She must have saw their reflections because she turned to face them as they watched.

“It keeps staring at me,” she said—prompting Tess to hurry toward her, cajoling her, before quickly ushering her away.

Everyone just looked at each other. “I’ll, ah—I’ll sit down and take your answer,” said Carson.

“Horrible,” said Tucker. “Just horrible. So sad. He was an amazing agent. And, you know—an incredible man. Just an incredible man. First-class. I—what was his name, Joe?”

“Miller, sir,” said Halverson. “Lieutenant Dan Miller.”

“Miller,” said Tucker. “Make sure he gets a Medal of Honor, okay? Can you do that? I’ll do it. I probably will do it. Maybe. Definitely. But, you know, as for what’s next ... well, for one, we’ve got these bodies—as the gentleman said. So many. So many. And we’ve got to clean them up. And, you know, pay our respects. I must tell you it’s not going to be easy. It will probably be dangerous. But. We have to. We have to.”

Tess sighed quietly—his manner of speaking was starting to grate—even as Coup leaned close.

“Ever get the feeling it’s going to be a long apocalypse?” he said.

“Mr. President? If I may?” —Long, the civil engineer.

“Go,” said Tucker.

“Well, I can’t help but to notice we’ve got this beer cooler, right here—that’s separate from the rest of the refrigeration. Why don’t we use it? To store the bodies, I mean?”

Tucker seemed to think about it, rocking back and forth on his heels, his chin angled imperiously. “Possibly. Possibly. What does everyone else think?”

No one said anything. At last Bo said, “I think, Mr. President, that it’s getting late—and that everyone’s getting tired. Including, if I may, sir, *you*.”



Tucker just looked at him, his lips pursed, his expression intense—like a puffy-eyed Bald Eagle after a bender, thought Tess. “I don’t sleep much,” he said.

That’s when they heard it: the long, warbling cry (but with an edge; a rattling muscularity, like a cross between a coyote and a lion; something *big*), which echoed along the plain and was just as soon answered—by something even bigger. Or at least bigger-sounding.

“That was nice,” said Tess, leaning into Coup; and then she was falling over as he stood abruptly and addressed the group.

“Okay, it’s sleepy-time, for everyone—except, of course, for a night-watch, which will consist of one soldier and one civilian.” He paused, as though he was unsure who had been talking. Everyone just looked at him. “I mean ... there should be one person experienced with weapons awake and alert at all times, right? They all stand guard at once—and we’re out our best assets the next day. Am I right?”

Tucker raised his eyebrows. Most the others muttered some form of approval.

At last the President said, “I didn’t catch your name.”

Coup hesitated. He had to hand it to the man—he knew how to intimidate a person.

“Cooper,” he said. “Cooper Black. Friends call me Coup.”

Tucker squinted as though he hadn’t quite heard him, then glanced at Halverson. “Black? Cooper *Black*?”

“Yes, sir.”

Tucker continued to squint.

“Like the font, sir.”

Tucker nodded slowly, gravely. “Well,” He turned back to Coup. “I tell ya, Coup, you have some talent.” He looked at everyone else. “Coup is very smart, very high-energy, and we need that. Whatever it is, I’d let Coup handle it. This is peanuts for Coup! Okay. You’re hired. You and one soldier. You got the red-eye. Stay awake and keep us safe.”

And then he left the room, Halverson scrambling after him—although where he was going in the Border Rendezvous' limited confines was anyone's guess.

Coup dreamed: of angry, orange sunlight and piano music and road markings which disappeared beneath the Mustang's dirty hood; of driving alone along State Route 87—which vanished in the distance like a Möbius Strip undone and laid flat—and the sun sinking below a dark horizon. Nor did the dream remain static but promptly moved on, as Henry Becker had moved on, as the world had moved on, for a hitchhiker had appeared at the side of the road: one who was not Tess, as had been the case in real life, but rather a kind of zombie; an animate corpse; a thing who's head had borne a horrific wound and who's intestines were being held in by its free hand (for its other was busy thumbing a ride).

A thing which gave up its enigma as Coup pulled alongside and opened the passenger door; for it was none other than Henry Becker himself—alone, mortally wounded, but appearing oddly chipper, oddly spry, as he opened the hatch and climbed in—swinging it shut behind him, holding in his guts.

“Hey,” he said, as his entrails shifted and squelched, threatening to squeeze out between his fingers, threatening to fill the car with 28-feet of membrane.

“Hey,” said Coup. He reached into the cooler in back, twisting in his seat, and handed him a can of soda. “Since I’m obviously dreaming ... you must be dehydrated. Diet Pepsi?”

“No, thanks.” He reached up and pulled down the sun visor, examining himself in the mirror. “It didn’t exactly swallow me whole, did it? Jesus. Look at these teeth marks.”

“Look, Henry,”

“No. I do the talking. I’ve got things to tell you.” He paused, fingering the hole in his head, which was about three inches in diameter. “This one, right here,” He swished his finger around the cavity. “*That* hurt.”

“Dammit, Henry ...”

"I told you ..." He came up with a piece of brain tissue and paused to examine it, then rolled it—like a booger—between his thumb and forefinger. "One of its canines—it got my eye." He discarded it out the window. "I guess they're all canines in the mouth of a T. Rex, eh?" Blood gurgled from the corners of his mouth. "*Amirite?*"

"Madness," muttered Coup, and focused on the road, wondering when he'd fallen asleep—and if the others were still on guard. Wondering if Tess, who had fallen asleep by the jukebox and whom he'd covered with a "Survival Blanket"—otherwise known as a *blanket*—which the Rendezvous had been marketing to preppers and other rural types, was okay.

"I've come to tell you what you need to do in order to survive, and for the others to survive," said Henry, and mercifully faced forward. "What you need to *be*. For the Flashback is not—and has never been—a natural phenomenon. Nor is it, at least in the strictest sense, a supernatural one. That's the first thing you need to know. The second is that the clock—which is to say, time-space itself—*has been broken*."

He turned to face Coup—who couldn't help but to notice he could see utility poles passing *through* his head—as if for emphasis. "*The clock has been broken*, Mr. Black. It has been replaced with something else; a new clock, one whose arms move both forward and back—and whose numbers count in the quadrillions, and beyond. Imagine it: A clock with an infinity of arms, some racing around its dial in a blur while others have slowed to a snail's crawl, or even stopped." He hesitated, looking out the window. "On second thought, don't. The conundrum will just piss you off."

He faced forward again.

"And the third is that while not of the natural world, and not, strictly, supernatural, the Flashback is—nonetheless—*eschatological*. And it is by its hardships and uncertainties that you will be—"

He paused as though he found it suddenly difficult to talk, and not just because his throat had been torn out, which hadn't stopped

him before. That's when Coup became aware of the red-orange sunlight shining in his face like a fire—Becker's, not his own; impossible, of course—causing him to break out in a sweat, forcing him to squint and to turn away.

And yet he continued: "The mighty must be laid low, Mr. Black. And the meek, the small, the defenseless, brought up. Mark it well. For that is all I am allowed to ... All I am allowed ... Indeed it is more than—" And he just froze, like a victim of Medusa turning to stone, his skin cracking and fracturing, flaking away, his eye seeming to dry out and become concave, until he whispered, haltingly, gravely, "I hope—I hope I shall still see her," and became like sunbaked basalt or a chaotic fall of cooled lava; no longer a man but an eidolon of stone; just a pillar with arms and legs, as Coup looked at the setting sun and saw not just the sun but the *God's Eye* of his youth; and felt as though it were watching him, judging him, preparing punishments—not just for him but for the entire world.



THE FIRST THING HE saw as he struggled up from sleep was the President's profile, which, in the dark, reminded him of Alfred Hitchcock's—only wearing a toupee; the front of which stabbed forward like a kind of blonde horn or uncertain phallus, while the back, duck tailed and wispy, seemed to offer ballast. It surprised him how unkempt the whole affair was; how *long*, as if he belonged to another decade entirely, another era, and had been "Flash-forwarded"—no less than the dinosaurs—into both the New Millennium and the Presidency.

Mostly, however, Coup was just relieved to find someone alert; for the other night watchers, to a man (Sargent Bo, Cameron the activist, Johnny From Tucson) and one woman (the little girl's mother, Abbie) were all slumped in their chairs; and the store was silent (or nearly so, for there was something smoky emanating from the jukebox which he immediately recognized as the music from his dream). Tucker, mean-

while, had pulled a chair up next to Coup at the end of the row—right in front of the window, where Tess had placed Ricky-Tik's makeshift bed—and was just sort of perched there, his hands held below his waist and between his legs, fingertips and thumbs touching, the space in between forming a triangle, as he peered into the fog (which had rolled in about 10:40 and showed no signs of abating) and seemed to, well, smolder.

"You're fired," he said, as Coup wiped the sleep from his eyes, and smiled, his demeanor softening. He was drinking a Diet Coke. "You know, if I really were firing you, I'd tell you what a great job you were doing, how fantastic you are, and how you could do better someplace else." He finished the Coke and sat it at his feet, after which Coup glanced at the man's shoes (polished, black oxfords which appeared to have lifts in the heels, which was curious because he was already quite tall) and saw several empty Diet Coke bottles lined up in a row.

"If somebody steals, that's different, but generally speaking, you want to let them down as lightly as possible. It's not a very pleasant thing. Firing. I don't like firing people, to be perfectly honest."

It was on the tip of Coup's tongue to suggest that he seemed to enjoy it on TV when Tucker continued: "I like the phrase, don't get me wrong. I mean, there's no arguing with it. There is no anything. There is no beating around the bush. 'You're fired' is a very strong term. Every time I walk outside, somebody says it, and the funny thing is, everybody thinks I'm hearing it for the first time. 'You're fired!' I get it literally a hundred times a day. Little kids come up to me and say, 'Mr. Tucker, you're fired' and then run away laughing. It's become a mania. YOU'RE FIRED hats and T-shirts. It's a beautiful phrase. It's harsh, it's ugly, it's mean, but it's concise and it gets the job done."

"Yeah, well." Coup had no idea what to say. "Whatever works, right?" He diverted his eyes to the sleeping marsupial, which had begun twitching and squeaking, as though it were dreaming. "What do you suppose a little guy like that dreams about?"

Tucker gave no indication of having heard him. "You have to be able to sell it, whatever it is. I've learned some hard lessons—hard lessons, believe me. One of them was when I kept losing to Pat Buchanan—in 2000. Can you believe that? Pat Buchanan. He was a Hitler lover, let me tell you. I guess he's an anti-Semite. He doesn't like the blacks, doesn't like the gays. It's just incredible that anybody could embrace this guy. And yet there he was, out-polling me, and not just once but many, many times. And that's because he had this really staunch right wacko vote ... what? What is it?"

"Nothing—it's just that ..." Coup leaned forward and put his finger in Ricky-Tik's water, swished it around. "It's tepid." He looked at Tucker. "He hasn't touched it since we got here."

Tucker just looked at him. "What are you, it's mother? So get one of the gals to come look—"

"I'm going to put some in his mouth. A couple swallows." He stood and moved toward the drink dispenser. "Just—hold the thought. Please, Mr. President."

There was an audible sigh. At last Tucker said: "Where's the ice? Do we have ice?"

"Over here, Mr. President."

Tucker joined him at the fountains (as Coup removed two cups from the dispenser and handed him one), then proceeded to hover—to loom, really; he was a big man—as the writer filled his own with water. When he didn't move even after Coup had started to head back the younger man just looked at him.

"You're, ah—you're kidding me, right?"

And then he walked back, took the President's cup, pushed it against the little bar, and filled it with ice.

By the time Tucker got around to the Wall—as Coup had somehow known he would—Ricky-Tik had perked up considerably; enough so that the rodent-like animal had begun to move tentatively

about his box, and even, even, to whine a little—perhaps the surest sign yet that he was returning to the land of the living.

Tucker, meanwhile, had continued carrying on; so much so that it had become clear to Coup that the man had not only taken the Flash-back extremely hard, but—and this was the chilling aspect—*personally*; as though the tragedy of the phenomenon was not so much that it had effected millions of people but that it had—temporarily, in his view—frustrated his Presidency. At which Coup—having never been a fan—couldn't help but to laugh. For even against the Apocalypse itself, Donald J. Tucker had found a way to make it about himself.

Still he continued: "The wall was necessary. It was necessary, okay? Look, we had to. We had to. People say the money could have been better spent—that it didn't need the spikes, say, or the gangway for the guards, or the mote. But I play into people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. In the case of my wall, it *is* the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular—I mean, have you seen it? Beautiful. Beautiful. Wouldn't you say, Coup?"

Coup looked around as people started to wake up. "Well, I—I guess as far as walls go—it's a monster, that's for sure. Makes for some great shade. About 50-billion dollars' worth."

Nobody said anything.

"I take it you don't agree," said the President.

"I'd say your instinct on that is flawless," said Coup. He looked the man squarely in the face. "As always."

Tucker just looked back—his large eyes puffy and purple, his brow furrowed. It was pretty clear that he wasn't used to being challenged—on anything. "What's not coming through anymore, Coup?"

Abbie yawned and tried to intervene woozily. "Has anyone eaten anything? I'm starving ..."



"No, no, no. What's not coming through anymore?"

Coup pinched the bridge of his nose, already tired with the conversation. "Look, how about we just leave it—"

"Murderers, Coup. Drug runners. Human traffickers. *Bing bing, bong bong, bing bing.* You name it. Rapists ..."

"Murderers and rapists ..."

"Well, someone was doing the raping, Coup! I mean, somebody was doing it. Who was doing the raping? Who was doing the raping?"

"Jesus, I was doing raping, can we drop it, si?" said Johnny from Tuscan, and stood, leaving the group.

Tucker and Coup looked at each other as Briggs straightened in his chair.

"Going to I.D. him, Chief?" said Coup, his eyes still locked with the President.

And then something thumped against the window and everyone jumped, and when they all focused on it they saw an enormous tri-clawed hand pressed open-palmed against the glass; a hand which moved downward as they watched so that the tips of its claws scraped like fingernails on a chalkboard. Then it was gone, retreating into the gloom—within which Coup saw a massive shape shift and move forward, even as another massive shape crossed opposite it, so that it was clear to him that whatever had touched the window was not alone.

*It's here,* said a voice in Coup's ear—Henry, for all the world, and added: *The thing that killed my wife ... and me, too. It—and one other. But they are not—*

"Yousef, Malone!" shouted Bo, gripping his rifle. "Get your gear and meet me on the roof. Come on, double-time it!"

And they did, even as the State Trooper and the other Secret Service agent—who's name Coup hadn't caught—took up positions near the doors. Halverson, meanwhile, emerged from behind the counter and promptly escorted the President away. Not back, *away.*

"Motherfuckers are *big*," said Rory, peering into the fog, pressing against the glass. "Whatever they are."

"Everybody get back," said Coup, extending an arm. "Get back! The lights are off—there's no reason for them to even know we're here."

"They're gonna to know when those soldiers open fire," said Rory, backing away.

"Tess!" shouted Coup, for she was waking up near the juke-box—which was near the counter and thus the roof access. "Tell those men to hold their fire."

"Belay that order," said Halverson, reemerging from the back. "The commander in chief wants an immediate response." He paused a little breathlessly. "His explanation—not that one is needed—was that the integrity of the windows must be preserved at all costs." He looked at Tess, who had paused at the edge of the counter. "Is that understood?"

She glanced at Coup hesitantly, who seemed to acquiesce, grudgingly, then back to Halverson. Then she nodded once and proceeded toward the rood access.

"Everybody take cover," said Rory, taking cover himself behind a rack of sunglasses. "And try not to move."

At which everybody took cover and tried not to move, including Ricky-Tik himself, who rolled into a tight little ball as if he too had heeded the big, black man's directive, causing those close enough to see to laugh nervously.

A moment later an enormous head swung out of the gloom, like a great, dark dagger, and paused parallel to the glass, its white-on-white pupil constricting, seeming to focus, its cobra-like hood inflating. It was quickly nudged aside by another, this one even bigger, which floated over Ricky-Tik's box like a ghost.

"Jesus," said Coup. "It's fucking Nag and Nagaina."

"*Shbt*," cursed Rory. "Nobody move or say anything."

Everyone watched as the head lowered and seemed to sniff at the glass, its visible eye blinking, its breath fogging the pane.

"It sees us," said Ashley. "Oh, sweet Jesus. It knows we're here."

*"Where are those soldiers?"* hissed Carson.

"No!" said Long quickly. He shuffled up next to Coup. "Tell them to hold their fire."

Coup looked at him confusedly. "Who am I, fucking MacArthur? You heard Halverson. Besides, they're going to open fire any—"

"They're not after us and they don't see us," said Long breathlessly. "They couldn't care less about us. What they're attracted to is ... that animal."

Coup move to speak but hesitated, turning to look at Ricky-Tik, as well as the great carnivore that was sniffing at him, inspecting him. "Holy shit. Do you think ..."

"I think there's a relationship between them that we can't possibly know about, is what I think," said Long. "All I know is, well, just look at them."

Coup continued to do so, noticing for the first time that the little marsupial was growling—growling threateningly even while curled up in his little ball.

"He seems to know just what to do. Which is to play possum," he said.

"Something we might want to mimic," said Long. "At least until we understand the situation. I mean, what if they're ... I don't know. Natural enemies? If that were the case then these predators might be instinctually driven to eliminate him before he can grow into a threat. Does that make sense?"

Coup looked from him to the hooded dinosaur, then down to Ricky-Tik. "It's the only thing that does, actually."

"Okay, so?" —Carson. In his fucking MAGA hat. "Let's push the little fucker out the door, then."

Coup looked at him incredulously. "And give them their first whiff of Brute aftershave and Pumpkin Spice perfume and Human Hors d'Oeuvres? Perfect."

“No, he’s right,” said Long. “We give them the marsupial ... and I think they’ll go away. At least for now.”

At that Carson struggled to his feet and quickly shuffled away, even as Coup and Long continued to look at each other.

“Maybe the best thing,” said Coup at last, “*is* to let the military handle it.”

“Against animals that size? And with limited ammunition?” Long *brmpled*. “Good luck keeping those windows intact. Not once those things are pissed, or in their death throes.”

Coup looked after Carson. “Where do you think that fat ass went?”

Long grinned. “Are you kidding? He went to tell King Tuck—”

And then he jumped, they both did, for there had been another impact—from the carnivore brushing against the window—as well as a *crack, ki-crack, crack!* which they quickly realized was the glass beginning to break.

It was funny, thought Coup, how fast things could change—how an already tense situation could go from bad to worse, often with the addition of just a single element: in this case, the soldiers' firing of a flare and his own spotting of the young woman in one of the creatures' oddly human hands—a live woman. One who was battered and bloody, to be sure, and who's clothes were shredded to the point of nudity, but who was, undoubtedly, horrifyingly, *alive*.

Alive; and screaming.

"Jesus," he said, "They may not see her. We've got to warn—"

"I'm on it," said Cameron, and sprinted for the stairs.

Halverson blocked him. "Uh, no. That's a negative." He touched the breast of his suit jacket over his weapon—softly, briefly. "They've got their orders. And they're not blind, otherwise they would have opened fire already."

"Now wait just a—" Coup protested.

"Yeah, I mean, what it's hurt to tell them?" said Rory. "Jesus! There's a woman out there!"

"Get him out here," said the State Trooper, referring to the President. "Now."

There was another *thump* and another *ki-crack* as the animal outside brushed its head against the glass.

"Do it, Halverson," said the other agent. "This glass isn't going to hold for—"

"It's gonna hold just fine," said Tucker, emerging from the back, placing his hands on the counter. (He did *not*, however, circle around it to join them.) "Because as soon as my boys get an opening, they're going to open fire." Carson appeared behind him as he looked at Coup directly. "Yes, I've been informed. And I hate to break it to ya, Coup," He pointed at Ricky-Tik's makeshift bed. "But *that* thing is going out the door. And it's going to go out—right now."

Everyone just stood there—it wasn't exactly the type of thing you wanted to root for—and looked at each other. For one—at least if the

soldiers didn't shoot—it meant sending the things away while still in possession of the woman.

Those things roared as everybody looked on, one seeming to answer the other, vibrating the glass.

At last Abbie said, “*Look*, if it's between my daughter and that—that *thing*, than I'm with the President, clearly.” She looked around the room, shaken almost to tears. “Well, for fuck's sake! Isn't everybody?”

“We—we are,” said one of the girls in Cameron's group—the activists. “We're ... we're really scared.”

“Me too,” said Elliott. “I'm with the President, that is.” He lowered his eyes as the woman's screams penetrated the glass. “Can't say I feel too good about it, though.” He looked at Rory as if for affirmation, but the big, black man only shook his head.

“No way, man. No way. That girl's still alive.”

“She's not going to be *alive* for long,” said Tucker, jerking his head in anger, gesturing with a fist and index finger. “But it feels good to think so, doesn't it? Doesn't it? Typical Liberal thinking, folks, right there! Fortunately—for all of us—I'm still in charge. I am the President, you know. *I won*. And I'm ordering that animal put out. *Now*, Mr. Halverson.”

Long stepped forward. “You put that animal out ... and you'll waft our scent straight into their nostrils. *They don't know we're here*—okay? Why shouldn't we keep it that way?”

Tucker moved to speak, flushed with anger, then paused, reconsidering. He lifted his chin imperiously. “Okay. Okay, I've listened. And I don't do that very often—just ask the fake news. All right. All right, fine. So you heard the man.” He glanced at Coup as if for spite. “Mr. Halverson—shoot that thing.”

And everything just stopped, all eyes turning toward the agent, who took out his gun and pointed it at Ricky-Tik—then cocked its hammer, slowly, steadily, making the sound of a ratchet handle.

"This is grotesque!" shouted Rory, looking at Coup for support—but finding him distant, detached. "Speak up, man!"

But Coup only swayed, feeling as though the room were spinning. *I've come to tell you what you need to do*, Henry was saying—as though he were being replayed in his mind; as though he had been looped like a tape recording. *What you need to be ... in order to survive.*

He steadied himself and looked at Tucker, whom he saw in an instant of clarity as a man driven by invisible forces, a man who would do anything—virtually anything—to win; and then down at Ricky-Tik.

*What you need to be ...*

And then he was moving, acting—knocking Halverson's gun hand away, scooping up the marsupial which hissed and protested but did not bite him, turning to face the others as he cradled it.

"And now," he said, breathing heavily, "we're going to just sit here and do nothing. And hope those soldiers, Bo and his men—hope they not only see her, but can find an opening." He looked at the President. "Unless, of course, you want to have me executed?"

And then the soldiers did open fire, lighting up the gloom like some kind of discotheque, causing the beasts to jump and thrash about—and the one to drop its prey—before they spun rapidly and beat a retreat; yelping like whipped dogs, their long, dark tails whipping.



"THE GIRL," SAID RORY, "Go!"

"Now wait a min—" began Halverson, but it was too late, the big man had already thrown open the door and piled out, followed by Elliott and Cameron, who had returned from the back of the store. Coup, meanwhile, seeing that they had the situation in hand, quickly hustled around the counter—cradling the creature—where he stepped over the clerk-thing even while disregarding Tucker and pushed the door to the storage area open, on the floor of which he placed the animal before snatching the key labelled 'STORAGE' from the rack and locking the

room tight. Then he hurried back to the front of the store, tossing the key slightly and catching it as he passed the President—saying ‘Fuck you’ without actually saying a word.

“Halverson!” barked Tucker after a moment’s hesitation. “Stop that man. And secure that fucking door!”

But Coup had already burst through it, preceded by Long, both of whom quickly joined the others in gathering around the girl and forming a human shield—after which Rory lifted her in his arms and hustled toward the store even as the ground began to shake and raptors descended out of nowhere, leaping from the gloom like kangaroos, locking jaws about Elliott’s and Cameron’s heads, causing Elliott’s gun to discharge. Nor was that the worst of it, for when Rory and the girl reached the door they found that it had, indeed—and unbelievably—been locked.

“Rory!” shouted Coup as the concrete split apart and something exploded in the distance—something massive, like an atom bomb. “My car!”

And then the soldiers opened fire and the raptors scattered—at least one of them dropping, kicking the air—but they didn’t scatter far, taking refuge instead behind gas pumps and vehicles, which were visible now, if only vaguely, not because the fog had lifted but because whatever had exploded had lit the mists orange and red, like Hell.

“Move it!” barked Coup, holding the driver’s door, as Long piled into the backseat and Rory lifted the girl in—before going around to the passenger side and getting in himself.

“Holy shit!” said Long, craning to look out the back, and when Coup saw what he was looking at through the rearview mirror his heart nearly stopped; indeed, he had to turn and peer out his window to make sure he wasn’t imagining things.

Nor was he—for a great column of fire, or at least molten lava, had appeared amidst the gloom, the kind you might see spewing from a volcano in Hawaii ... only right there, about 10 miles away, where Patago-



nia would have been. It was joined by another as he watched, this one further away, and one more still, which may have been as far as Tuscan.

"My God, it's like the whole world has flashed back—to primordia," said Coup. "There's just no way this can only be happening here."

"And yet we have to entertain the possibility that it is," said Long. "That, as they say, would be the good news. That there may be safety just across the border."

"Come on!" blurted Rory. "There can't be no one time on this side and a different time on the other. Talk sense!"

"So what's the bad news?" asked Coup.

Long was looking out the rear window. "The bad news is ..." He turned to face Coup again. "That lava is starting to flow. And based on what I know of the geology of this area—we're in a valley, you understand—it's gonna flow this direction."

Coup just looked at him, then turned to look at Rory. At last he locked eyes with Long again. "What does that mean? And how long do we have?"

"Assuming it's basaltic lava, which is the most common, and taking into account the steep slope of the land, I'd say we have about a half-hour, tops."

Coup looked at the darkened store. "And we're locked out ... not to mention in a kind of civil war."

"Locked out and without a weapon between us," said Rory.

At which point the proverbial light bulb went off in Coup's head and he remembered the shotgun, which was in the back and on the floor—at the girl's feet. And he remembered something else; something that, if they could pull it off, might turn the tide against both the President and the dinosaurs.



TESS NOTICED THE CHANGE the instant she exited the restroom (where she'd vomited profusely from stress and fear): the dis-

tant red fountains, the hellish light—the fact that Coup was no longer in the room. That *several people* were no longer in the room.

“What—what’s happening?” she said, watching the volcanoes erupt, “And where’s Coup?” She looked around, scanning everyone’s faces, including the President’s, who only stared back at her, showing no signs of emotion.

At last Ashley stepped forward and said, “They—they’re outside. In the Mustang. They—they went out to get someone ... and were attacked. Elliott and Cameron were killed instantly.”

“Oh, *my* ...” said Tess, covering her mouth. She moved toward the windows. “Are the others all right? Why haven’t they come back in?” She tried to see into the car but it was impossible in the murky red gloom. “Jesus, we’ve got to get to them.” She glanced at the volcanoes and the glowing rivers of lava. “And then get the hell out of ...”

That’s when she felt it—the weight of everyone’s eyes; pressing down upon her, suffocating her, as though everyone was in on some funny secret—everyone but her. She turned around.

“Don’t we?” She looked around at everyone. “What the hell’s wrong with everybody? Say something!”

At last Tucker said, “Look, it’s a rough situation, no question about it. But what separates winners from losers is how a person reacts ... and how we’ve reacted is to secure that door until the guys up top can snipe those animals. Shouldn’t be long now, actually. Like I said, they’re great guys.”

Tess simply looked at him slack-jawed. “You’re planning on just leaving them there. While those volcanoes erupt. Because you think—”

“I’m planning on keeping that door secured, yes,” said Tucker, “until our boys can pick off the remaining—” He looked at Halverson. “What are they, again?”

“Velociraptors, sir. ‘Raptor’ for short. Like ‘Bird of Prey.’”

“What?”

“Raptors, sir. Like *Jurassic Park*.”

"I haven't seen that. I hear it's good, a lot of people say it's good. I don't know if that's true or not; but it's what a lot of people say. But yes, Miss—I didn't catch your name—that door is going to stay—"

"There isn't going to be a door when that lava gets here!"

"*There's going to be a door* because that lava is going to *cool*—okay?" He leaned against the counter—his Presidential podium—as though he were exasperated. "I mean, that's what lava does—it cools. It cools and eventually stops. Halverson and I have already discussed it." He turned to address everyone, not just Tess. "Now I know some of you—Crazy Coup, I bet, for sure—have probably thought, 'Why don't we just make a run for it?'" He raised his arms as if to repeat the sentiment: "*Why?*" "For the border, I mean. After all, it's right there, isn't it? It's right there. We're practically sitting on it. But I'm not going to do that. And, as your Commander in Chief, I'm not going to let you do it, either." He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, adjusted his tie. "For one, Americans don't run. That's just not what made us great. It sure as hell aint what made us great *again*, that I can tell you. We may withdraw on occasion, as I directed us to in Syria, but we don't run, and we sure as hell don't crawl hat in hand to some shithole like Mexico—especially when they're no more capable of dealing with this than is the greatest nation on earth—I mean, am I right, folks?"

And to Tess' utter astonishment, people began to clap—Carson, of course, but also Ashley and Abbie and Cameron's activist friends, not to mention the State Trooper and the two Secret Service agents.

"It's true. It's true. Let me hear it if you think I'm right!"

And they did, continuing to clap and to nod their heads, saying 'Right on' and slapping each other on the back, pumping their fists. During which time Tess met eyes with the good-looking dark-skinned kid—he couldn't have been more than 19—Johnny, from Tuscan, and knew, based on his expression (and the fact that he wasn't clapping), that he was the only sane person left.

And then they were moving, both of them, toward each other and toward the door, making a beeline as everyone clapped and the volcanoes spewed molten rock; as several shadows flitted across the window, like kites, like pterodactyls, after which the soldiers on the roof promptly opened fire.

“Oh, and Miss,” said Tucker, halting on a dime, turning to Tess and Johnny. “It’s only fair to tell you that if you take one more step toward that door ... I’ll have you shot.”



EVERYTHING STOPPED: Tess and Johnny in their places; the clapping hands of Carson and the others; Tucker’s Man of the People revival speech—all of it—at least until Halverson came to his senses and pointed his gun at them—at Tess and Johnny; after which he was quickly emulated by the other agent and even the State Trooper, although the latter, to his credit, seemed to have done it on mere instinct, and just as quickly lowered his weapon.

“Appreciate the applause, folks, I really do. But I don’t want applause. I want toughness and vigilance. Because while you were applauding look what almost got away.” He raised his chin imperiously, as though he no longer even needed to hide his worse nature. “They could be a buddy movie, don’t you think? Nasty Woman and Bad Taco. Aw, don’t look so upset, N.W. Over your life, you’ve been called a lot worse. Isn’t that right? Wouldn’t you say?”

Laughter—and again, not just from those whom Tess would have expected (Carson; the other Secret Service agent; Halverson) but from the *women*, from Ashley and Abbie and the blue and green-haired activist girls. As though their very minds had flashed back along with the rest of the world; as though they’d nothing left but their lizard brains; all critical thinking vanquished, all rational thought discarded.

And who was to say? Wasn’t it at least possible that a phenomenon that could turn back time (or, as in Henry’s case, push it forward)

might also affect people's minds? That even now they might be regressing to an earlier epoch—an earlier species?

"Look, I—" the State Trooper started to say, his eyes moist and distant, as though he were waking from a dream, "I don't want to be a part of this, okay?"

"That's fine," said the President. "We've—we've got the situation well in hand. Just keep your gun down—okay? Can you do that for me? I hate to say this, but, well, you look ill, frankly. Why don't you go on back and take a—"

And Tess bolted, followed immediately by Johnny—both of them scrambling for the door, both of them rapidly closing the gap, even as Halverson squeezed off a shot and hit Johnny in the back and the State Trooper aimed his weapon—not at Johnny but at Halverson—and was shot himself by the other agent.

Nor did the other agent survive, for he was shot in turn by the trooper as the cop slid down the wall, leaving a smear of blood. And it might have been over then—considering Tess had knelt to help Johnny—had Bo not burst into the room from the stairs and promptly raised his rifle: jerking it back and forth between the dying men quickly before settling on Halverson himself and barking, "Freeze! Drop it!"

But Halverson did *not* drop it; and in the blink of an eye the two men had faced off, even as blood spread from the trooper's and agent's corpses and the ground started to shake and palm-like cycad trees appeared out of nowhere, blending and entwining with coolers and store fixtures, standing floor to ceiling, turning the room into an indoor jungle.

A jungle in which Tess thought she saw—for the briefest of moments—not modern people disagreeing but hair-covered hominids, ape-like brutes, missing links—clashing as though one had invaded the other's territory on the prehistoric steppes of Arizona.

Killing each other without even a hint of compassion—as they had more than 3 million years ago.

It had never occurred to Tess that a tank was a kind of dinosaur, too—all thunder and fury and noise and weight—at least until one came rumbling toward the store's front windows, haphazardly, drunkenly, rolling right over a Toyota Prius before its great canon struck the glass and shattered it inward and its leviathan tracks crunched through metal and glass. Then Halverson fired—Bo having been temporarily distracted by the sight of his own tank barreling toward him—and the sergeant fell, dropping his rifle, struck in his left arm. And finally the tank ground to a halt, its hatch clanging open to reveal Coup, who said, apologetically, “That was an accident. Sorry.” After which Halverson pointed his pistol and quickly froze; for Rory had appeared in the other hatch—and trained the shotgun on him.

“Don’t lock us out again, *Halverson*,” said Coup. He changed tack abruptly. “Okay, listen up. The plan is to drive this thing straight through that border wall—into Mexico—where we have reason to believe we’ll be safe.” He glanced over his shoulder at the lava, as well as looking out for Nag and Nagaina. “But we’re a little rushed; so, if you’ll all be so kind as to just climb on board, we’ll get this show on the—”

“What is the meaning of this?” asked Tucker, regaining his composure (having hurriedly ducked behind the counter). “I didn’t give the order to evacuate. Halverson, I want those men taken down from there. Now.”

“There’s no time for this!” shouted Tess, still kneeling over Johnny. “He needs medical attention—and I mean now. It didn’t penetrate his chest or abdominal cavity, thank god,” She glanced at Halverson accusatorily, “But he’s bleeding internally and needs a hospital. If there’s a chance—”

“That there’s one in Mexico? There isn’t,” said Tucker, dismissing the possibility. “That I can promise you. Raw sewage in gutters, maybe. But not a—”

And there was a gunshot—*crack*, like that—which made everyone jump (and caused Rory to lurch forward in the gunner’s hatch, his

shoulder bleeding), even as Halverson re-trained his pistol on Coup and moved to fire again—until there was another *crack* and his head fell open ... for he'd been shot himself by Briggs, who had drawn his sidearm and was supporting himself against the wall of the stairwell.

"Jesus," said Tucker, looking down at the corpse, watching the blood and brains start to flow. "You *murdered* him. You just ... shot him down in cold blood."

"I neutralized an enemy," said the sergeant, and looked him straight in the eye. "Just like I'll neutralize you ... if you don't sit down and shut up." He added coldly: "Consider it an armed coup."

At last he turned to Cooper and said, "I can drive that tank ... if someone can get me to it. And I can show you how to operate that 50-cal." He glanced out the hole in the front of the store. "But we need to hurry—it's no good against magma."

And everyone just launched into action, *pow*, like that, as though there'd been no disagreement at all, moving toward the tank rapidly (and yet orderly), gathering up and helping those who were wounded, lifting them onto the top of the turret even as Tucker slipped away and Carson followed after him. Moreover, they were successful, not only in replacing Long with Bo in the driver's seat—although not before he was able to instruct Coup on the use of the 50-caliber machine gun—but also in fitting everyone in and on the tank, for a total of 12 people.

And indeed, they just might have made it (at least without further casualties) had Nag and Nagaina not suddenly returned—bursting through what was left of the storefront like prehistoric wrecking balls, thrashing their great, dark tails, picking off two of the activists immediately—before descending upon them all like a reign of thunder.



NOR IS IT LIKELY ANY of them would have survived—certainly not those outside the tank—if not for the same fluke of the Flashback

which had led to Henry's advanced age; although in this case, it wasn't centered around a person but an animal—the very same creature Tess and Coup had rescued from the desert (and which Long had called a marsupial lion) —which sprang from the back room as the walls collapsed and faced off with the tyrannosaur-like dinosaurs boldly, having grown to full adulthood (and more, for it was the nature of the Flash-back to render things large) so that it bore more in common with a Bengal tiger—or even a bear—than a mere rodent.

And then they were circling each other, the dinosaurs hissing and fainting as Ricky-Tik did the same, even as the tank backed out of the rubble and changed direction—heading for the Mexican border (which was only a few miles away), rumbling toward the spikes and moats of the Great Wall of America.

Nor had Long been correct in his estimation of the lava's travel time, for it was there already, piling red and black at the edge of the parking lot, toppling Benito the Bandido with a crash, sending up smoke and embers as it rolled over the landscaping. And yet it was worse than that, for when Tess looked away from the circling animals she saw that some of the lava had already passed them—passed them via two narrow, fast-flowing channels—which, due to the shape of the land, had circumnavigated the store completely and flown together once again, only this time against a wide natural berm so that its course was altered completely and now blocked their path.

"Jesus, do you think he sees that?" she asked Coup (who was manning the 50-caliber next to her), having to shout over the engine. "What if he doesn't—"

"I don't think it will be a problem," he hollered, "so long as we keep moving." But his words belied the concern on his face, which told Tess he was worried about the same thing as she—that if they didn't or couldn't keep moving the tank would surely sink under its own weight.

And that is precisely what happened—but not before they'd made it almost all the way across, so that they were able to jump—even the



wounded; even the little girl—to safety across the lava, and continue on foot. For the wall was clearly visible now, and what's more, there were people on top of it, people who could render help—who could lower a ladder, maybe, or a rope, anything. None of which changed the fact that the main magma front was still coming, and fast—so fast that Tess wasn't sure if they could outrun it, especially with their wounded in tow.

And that's when she saw something she would never forget, three somethings, actually, one no more incredible than the next. The first was that the marsupial lion had engaged with the much-larger theropods in a full-on melee, right there between the store and the gas pumps—an entire row of which were wiped out as she watched with just the swish of a tail. The second was the enormous fireball that resulted, which all but flattened the station and rose curling upon itself like a mushroom cloud, hiding the animals from view (if indeed they survived at all). And the third was the President's black limo (Cadillac One, she knew it was called, or "The Beast") barreling toward them across the desert—its tinted windows glinting, its fender flags on fire, and driven, it seemed likely (considering most everyone else was dead), by the President himself.

"Well that's something you don't see every day," she said, and looked at Coup, who only shrugged.

"When you gotta go, you gotta go," he said. "He went."

"But don't you see?" said Abbie, barely able to control her excitement. "That thing's big enough to hold all of us." She started jumping up and down and waving her arms, enthusiastically. "Hey! Over here! D.C. or bust!"

And, save for Tess and Coup, as well as Long, Rory and Bo (all of whom had had their fill of Donald J. Tucker) the others promptly joined in, hooting and hollering excitedly, hitching their thumbs, acting as though they were saved even though the wall was still at least half a mile away and the main wave of lava was coming fast—fast enough

that it could be seen in the distance preceded by the two dinosaurs, which were running to escape it.

But the Presidential limo did not slow down, not before the berm and the river of lava, which was to be expected if he (they, assuming Carson was with him) wanted to get across, on bare rims, if necessary—nor after, and it didn't take his fan club long to realize that their President had left them for dead, nor that the dinosaurs were rapidly closing and that behind them was a fast-moving wall of molten rock.

And then they were running, only Tess and Coup and Long both-ering to help the wounded, and they'd gotten to within about thirty yards of the wall when the earth broke open like a loaf of bread and swallowed the front of Tucker's car whole; leaving it angled like a rocket, steaming like a manhole cover, from which the two men emerged battered and bloody and quickly scrambled for the wall—waving their arms, crying for help—even as a Mexican soldier shouted down to them to stop and fired when they refused, hitting the President in the leg and the arm, dropping him like a sack of rocks. After which two men could be heard arguing in Spanish and there were more gunshots, followed by a body tumbling end over end into the moat and splashing, until at last a new voice shouted, "*Es seguro!* It is safe! Please, come on ahead—but hurry! *Prisa! Prisa!*"

And they hurried, even as ropes and floatation devices were lowered and at least one ladder—which Coup used, after helping everyone else get across, to transport Johnny, climbing rapidly as the wounded man clung to his back. Until, finally, they'd squeezed through the spikes and gained the gangway—all of them—where Coup and Tess and Long began hollering for Tucker and Carson (who had entered the moat) to do the same.

Which, of course, is what they were trying to do—Carson helping Tucker—in spite of the President's wounds making it nearly impossible; nor were the large men (one with debilitating bone spurs) particularly suited for such work; indeed, Carson was consistently pushed

down as he tried to help his floundering hero. Until at last the flamboyant rancher could be seen no more and it was only Tucker, reaching for a rope with his good arm; trying to stay afloat in the moat which had been his own idea; facing the wall which had been built to his own specifications. "One of the greatest achievements in human history," he'd said at the time of its completion, "The Eighth Wonder of the World ..."

—until Nag and Nagaina descended without warning and without pity and the one bit him about the head and shoulders while the other clamped its jaws about his legs—and they *backed away from each other*; the result being that he was torn in half like mozzarella cheese: his muscles and ligaments stretching and breaking, his liver and gallbladder and spleen twisting and bursting, exploding; his intestines piling out of him like worms, like snakes, floating upon the bloody water, spreading out like questing tentacles, his blood which was so dark as to be almost black gurgling and bubbling up from his mouth, running from his nose, during which he screamed, gargling, "*Enjoy the fucking shit-hole! Enjoy the fucking shit-hole!*" and was gone, carried away by Nag and Nagaina even as the lava began to slow and cool and Tess turned away, clawing at her eyes—as Coup grabbed her and held her, trying to comfort her, trying to tell her it was going to be all right, and Ricky-Tik, far in the distance, ascended to the top of the wreckage with a pterodactyl in his mouth and dropped it—howling at the sun which was like an angry god, roaring victoriously, triumphantly.



AS IT TURNED OUT, IT *was* safe in Mexico; or at least that was the view from their cage, which they'd been languishing in now for several days. Still, there was plenty of room, in part because "Johnny" (who was in reality a Mexican national named Miguel Francisco) had already been processed and released. Nor was the food bad—indeed, some of it was quite good—or the water contaminated; in fact, considering the

sheer number of refugees they'd had to deal with, Coup was amazed at the Mexican response. And yet it was a curious thing to live as a prisoner—however benign one's jailer—one of those things a person couldn't really understand until it happened to them personally; until the big, metal door swung shut and there you were, alone. Nor had Tess's presence completely mitigated this, although what he would have done without her was anyone's question.

She came to him then and they looked out at the processing center together, something they'd done a lot of over the last several days—each wondering what the future held; and each wondering if they were truly safe. When at last she spoke she did so quietly, almost reverentially.

"You were smiling in your sleep last night, did you know that? It was a look of sheer bliss. I thought maybe you were getting lucky."

He grinned a little at that, but didn't respond, at least not right away. At length he said, "I got lucky the day I saw you hitchhiking. But, no, no, it was something quite different. I dreamed I saw Henry Becker, and that he was young again, and with his wife. Isn't that weird? Her name was Amal." He turned to look at her, thoughtfully, dreamily. "I knew that in the same way I knew you, even before I knew you. In the same way I knew Bo and his men—God bless them—were A.W.O.L. I just ... knew it, somehow. I—I can't explain it."

"Don't try," she said, and leaned close, kissing him. "If the Flashback has taught us anything, it's that none of that matters. What matters is right here. Right now. I had a dream myself, you know ..."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. That first night in the processing center. When we were spooning beneath that burlap blanket."

"I wanted to do a lot more than spoon."

"I know, I know. So did I. And it got me thinking, about all the little babies of the Flashback, and how many will be born approximately nine months from now, when the conceptions of men and women

huddled together in fright, in the dark, with only each other for protection, all come into the world at once. And I thought, isn't that nice? That something so wonderful could come from something so bad. That ... there was a reason we felt such a need to protect Ricky-Tik, we just didn't know it yet. There might even have been a reason why Tucker was so filled with hate; though an awful reason, I suppose, because it implies he was born to die—but how would we have made it down from that wall if he hadn't been there, if he hadn't, I don't know, sacrificed himself, in a sense? Though unwillingly. Because surely those monsters would have—”

“That's called a eucatastrophe,” said Coup, and smiled, shaking his head. “I used to use them in my writing. You ever read *The Lord of the Rings*?”

She grinned as though he were being silly. “Of course ...”

“Well, Gollum's a eucatastrophe, kept alive so he can die, essentially, and thus save the others. Leastwise that's how I've always interpreted it.” He laughed, still shaking his head. “Stick with me, by the way, and that's as good as it gets. Useless writer facts.”

“That and changing your adult diapers down the road?”

“At my 48 to your twentysomething? At best,” he said.

Then she put her arm around him and said, simply, “Tomorrow is not promised.”

“Yeah,” he said, looking out at the camp. “Amen to that.”

And neither of them noticed, not yet, anyway, that someone from their group was missing. That the activist girl had, unbeknownst to anyone, simply vanished without a trace. Nor, for that matter, that a tiny dinosaur, one that was no larger than a duck, had appeared in the cage across from them—where it was foraging through the refugees food even as they slept.

end.

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