

THE COMPLETE FLASHBACK SAGA

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

Copyright © 2018 Wayne Kyle Spitzer. All Rights Reserved. Published by Hobb's End Books, a division of ACME Sprockets & Visions. Cover designs Copyright © 2018 Wayne Kyle Spitzer. Please direct all inquiries to: HobbsEndBooks@yahoo.com

Based upon "Flashback," first published by Books in Motion/Classic Ventures, 1993. Reprinted by Hobb's End Books, 2017.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this book is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

FLASHBACK

I | Flight

“WE KNOW NOW THERE CAN be no justice,” the preacher’s soulful voice boomed over the pickup’s radio, and a chorus of devotees chanted “Amen” over the airwaves.

“And we know now there can be no compromise.” Shattered glass sounded in the background, as though raining down on a dais.

“Amen.”

“But let us not eat of our own limb, brothers and sisters! Let us not become like those outside our windows, throwing stones at their own temple. For I have seen a light in the sky, and we must ready our souls!”

“Amen!”

“The day of reckoning is come, brothers and sisters. The wicked among us shall be devoured—”

More glass shattered and it sounded as though a bottle rolled across the dais. A woman’s scream rang out. A skeleton chorus cried, “*Amen!*”

“We stand ready to be cleansed, oh Lord! Let flow the flood! Throw wide the gates of hell, and let loose the beasts of prey!”

And then there was an explosion which caused the pickup’s speakers to rattle, and people were screaming over the airwaves.

Static rose up like flames, filling the cab with noise, and Savanna Aldiss looked to her husband. Roger only shook his head. “Never know what’s gonna go the distance, do you?” he said.

She twisted the knobless tuner with the vice grips, renewing her search for a weather report, and said nothing. There wasn’t much to say; they’d gotten out of town because they were contentedly poor people, and when there were riots such as those following the Harper verdict, it was the contented poor who always paid first.

That was part of the reason, anyway. But they were also going to see Savanna's mother in Spokane, a four-hour drive Roger had hoped to enjoy very much. They'd notified their employers—a nursing home and a mall security agency, respectively—that their house had been mistaken for a pawn shop and put to the flaming torch of protest, and that they would be indisposed for an undetermined length of time. Like everyone else, they'd used the occasion to do something they'd wanted to do for a long time.

Roger stared out his open window, yawning. Not because the panorama rushing past was devoid of any interest; actually, it was quite refreshing after the flames and chaos of riot-torn Seattle. But it was all the same after crossing the Columbia River: mile after mile after mile of channeled scablands and various basalt formations—what had Savanna called it? The Lost Bonanza Backdrop. The sight would have put him to sleep at the wheel if not for the strange behavior of the weather.

The weather ...

Since leaving Seattle, he'd spurred the Toyota 4x4 through a mild rainstorm, a brief flurry of snow, a stretch of sunny nirvana, a burst of hailstones, another rainstorm ...

And now the sun was back again, and the sky was clear. He wasn't sure what the hell to make of it.

Savanna gave up on the radio, detaching the vice grips and tossing them onto the dash. They were a handy tool, those vice grips. In addition to working the radio, they could be used to yank the long-stripped key from the ignition, or to roll the knobless driver's side window up and down.

"Nothing," she said.

Roger tilted the can of Pepsi against his lips and emptied it, his dark hair dancing in the jetstream.

"No biggie, honey," he said, and added, jokingly, "The President lost his patience and had Seattle nuked. That's all."

She switched off the radio. "Poor selection, anyway."

He laughed and squeezed the pop can.

"Bombs away?" Savanna asked.

"Quite."

She lifted the throw-pillow away from the floor and Roger glanced down at the asphalt rushing past below. He reached behind the stick shift and dropped the can through the hole. It hit the blurred pavement with a tinny clatter and was gone behind them.

"You *do* know littering is a \$1,000 offense in Washington," she said.

"They oughta write me in for governor," he said. "Somebody's got to pick it up—hell, I just created a job."

Savanna slid the pillow beneath her bare feet. "And I'm very proud of you, sweetie."

He kissed at the air between them twice and she returned the gesture. It was their own little thing. He grinned at her, then grasped the wheel with both hands and returned his attention to the landscape rushing past; they were passing a stretch of tall grass and gently rolling hills, like green dunes. He listened as the radials droned endlessly against the asphalt, and several moments passed in silence.

"What on earth," Savanna nearly whispered. "Honey ..."

He nodded absently. He was drumming his fingers on the outside of his door contentedly.

"*Roger!*" Savanna cried, and he jerked his head forward in time to see a pale blur vanish beneath the water-beaded hood.

II | Roadkill

KER-THUNK! Something hit the bumper of the 4x4 and the truck jolted violently. An eyeblink later something thumped against the undercarriage. Roger grimaced. He saw a greasy differ-

ential and a splat of blood in his mind's eye—and felt as though his neck were being sucked down between his shoulder blades.

"Shit ...!" he cursed helplessly. His pale fingers clutched at the wheel as if choking the life from some venomous snake.

Savanna's cold hand settled over his own as he took the pickup out of gear and steered for the edge of the interstate. Wet gravel crunched beneath the tires as the silver Toyota coasted to a halt.

He pressed back in his chair and exhaled, still gripping the wheel. Vehicles whisked past through the previous storm's residue, a legacy of shallow potholes filled with rain, and threw fans of gray water onto the glass. Savanna craned around to peer out the rear window.

Roger faced forward, staring off at the horizon blankly. "What was it?"

It was difficult to see with the canopy and all. The sun bounced off the dark windshield of an approaching van and she squinted in the glare. "I don't know, I only saw it for a second. It looked a little like one of those flightless birds. What are they called? Not an ostrich—an *emu*. But bigger, and without feathers."

"What?" He turned to join her. "Can you see it?"

She shook her red locks and a few stray ends ripe with the scent of shampoo tickled his cheek. He squinted through the glass with her.

"No blood," he whispered, and breathed a bit easier. He turned away and threw open his door. "Be right back."

Savanna reached over and switched off the ignition, then got out of the truck and jogged to catch up with him. A convoy of motorcycles roared past dangerously close, hurling sludgy water at them like flying shrapnel. The blast of its passage furled their clothes and jostled their hair.

Roger leaned forward with his hands on his knees and scanned the tall grass. The wind blew all around him and the plains responded. A million tall blades of grass did *The Wave*.

"Nothing," he said.

"Honey ..." Savanna's whispering voice was but a pale sound beside him. "Look ..."

He looked up to find her staring off into the distance, and matched her gaze.

"Holy Jesus," he murmured, and stood straight to join her.

Ahead of them, the horizon had gone to a sooty black in what must have been mere seconds. Storm clouds were rolling in like before—but faster—and Roger found himself laughing more than a little nervously.

"This isn't very damn funny anymore, is it?" he said.

Savanna gazed forward as if in a dream. As far as she was concerned, it never really had been all that damn funny. Roger had a frightening way of laughing off the ominous. The more he smiled and laughed his nervous little laugh, the more Savanna had always suspected real trouble.

Neither of them spoke as they watched the massive anvil clouds roll forward, boiling and tumbling as if captured in a loop of time-lapse film. Roger's blood ran cold at sight of lights amidst the soup; not *lightning* kind of lights, but *airplane* kind of lights. And then he recalled joking about the H-bomb going off, and suddenly felt as though a battalion of tarantulas were crawling up his spine in single file. He put his arm around Savanna.

"I think it's time to go," he said, and she nodded absently, as though in deep thought. Her eyes were riveted to the odd lights.

They walked back to the truck. Roger walked around to the front and checked the bumper. The chrome was mildly scratched, and bent inward a little at the center. But the bend may have been

there before, he couldn't be certain. At any rate, there were no traces of blood.

They got in. Roger started the engine and let it run, making sure it hadn't been damaged. After a moment, Savanna said:

"It had arms."

The motor idled. Roger stared at her. Then he pulled away from the shoulder to rejoin the wagon train east.

After several miles the freeway began to slope upward, and Roger pointed his finger southeast. "There," he said. "Saved by the big 'O.'"

She looked out her window and saw the glowing sign of an Ozark Gas-n-Go, turning slowly round against the rapidly darkening sky. Fossil-fuel Freddy winked at them thriftily from his home in the first oversized 'O,' making the *okay* sign with a scaly thumb and forefinger. Freddy was the saurian equivalent of Goofy; nobody really knew exactly what the hell breed he was.

"We can sit it out there, I guess," Roger said. "Whatever *it* is."

Savanna nodded, saying nothing, and turned her ghostly-eyed glare back to the boiling sky.

"Roger, look how *fast* it's moving."

He leaned forward and peered up, and found that the tremor in her voice had been well-justified.

It was almost upon them. The storm was thundering across the sky like a giant man o' war: a harbinger of chaos trailing tendrils of rain—and now lightning—from beneath its dark umbrella. Its black shadow fell rumbling over the truck and Roger stepped on the gas.

An instant later the churning tempest seemed to roll right over the top of them, and the rain hit the windshield with such sudden fury that Roger was reminded of his trips through the auto-wash as a kid. He was reminded of that spinning, hissing, roaring tumbler that twirled wildly over the hood of his dad's Buick and rumbled

up the windshield in a red and black blur—like some great, shaggy caterpillar. Then the cold water slanted in through his window and began to patter wildly against the dash.

“Jesus Christ!”

He switched on the wipers and set them to their maximum speed, then groped along the wet dash for the vice grips. His hair was already dripping in his face and his clothes were nearly soaked. The blades only whipped back and forth impotently against the glass. If they made any difference at all, he was hard-pressed to tell. “Honey ...”

She reached over and grasped the wheel. He clamped the vice grips down on the rusty sprocket beside him and cranked the window up.

“Maybe we should pull over,” she said. “Wait it out here.”

He tossed the vice grips back onto the dash and took back the wheel, peering into the maelstrom between swipes. There was no longer a road. He was driving blindly at fifty miles per hour into what had become, in just seconds, a seamless gray void. Glancing southeast, he saw that the Ozark sign had completely vanished in the downpour. So had the taillights of the motorcycles somewhere ahead of them. “Yeah,” he mumbled at last. “I think you’re right ...”

He hit his blinker and craned his neck around to check behind them. Someone might as well have pulled a shade down over the rear window—there was virtually nothing there. No freeway, no headlights, no *anything* except the roaring, tumbling, monster-caterpillar of the auto-wash. He cursed beneath his breath and steered for the shoulder anyway. A moment later they rolled to a stop at the side of the road.

“This is *too weird*,” he mumbled gravely. And then he laughed a little nervously.

Savanna cranked on the heater. “It’s getting cold.”

Roger looked outside. "Where the hell is everybody? We should be able to see something. High beams or fog-lights—*something*."

There was nothing. Only the rain. Rain which came down from the blackness in endless sheets, wave after wave, pounding the hood, the windshield, the roof. The 4x4 had become an enormous steel drum.

Savanna switched on the radio again.

"Honey," Roger began, "there's no way—"

But there *was* something. It was just a flash, a brief *blat!* of sound, *a voice*. And then only static. They looked at each other in the dark of the truck.

"Try the vice grips ..." Savanna said.

He had already reached for them. He maneuvered them around the tuner's stub and began twisting it left and right hurriedly. Savanna watched his face as he worked and felt her blood run cold. Her easy-going husband was her barometer for measuring the tenor of any potentially dangerous situation. When the little needle surpassed even the nervous laughter and entered that red zone in which dark lines began to parch his face—she always knew they'd taken a wrong turn at Albuquerque.

"Go slow, sweetie." She put her hand on his soggy shoulder. "You're going to miss something."

"There's nothing here," he said, looking as though he were twisting the vice grips just to be doing something. The corner of his mouth had started twitching nervously.

She rubbed his neck. "Honey—"

Again the snatch of sound came and went. He'd passed it by. Ever so briefly, it had sounded like the droning tone of the Emergency Broadcast System. He immediately began circling back, but the vice grips shifted in his jittering grasp and clattered to the floor.

He swiped at air as the rusted tongs tumbled through the hole and rattled wetly below.

“Shit ...” He reached for them and saw their steely handles skew sideways in the run-off. They skidded along the water to vanish from view.

“Oh, that’s just *splendid!*” he spat venomously.

He released his seat belt.

“Want me to feel around for them?” Savanna asked. “My arm’s skinnier.”

He leaned toward the hole and stuck his arm through. “It’s okay ...”

He touched the cold asphalt and water sluiced between his fingers.

“*Go slow,*” Savanna said. “If they’re there you don’t want to nudge them any further.”

His fingertips traced along the crocodile skin of the highway, questing, searching—

And then there was pain. And flowing warmth. And he couldn’t pull his arm back out of the hole.

“Ohmygod!”

“*What is it?!*” Savanna screamed.

He began jerking his shoulder savagely. His eyes were wide and wet, literally gleaming with something, everything: anger, pain—unbelievable, vein-bloating, hair-whitening *pain!* Gleaming tears welled up in their corners to roll down his cheeks like shooting stars.

“Jesus!” The tiny metal drum was not enough to contain his cry.

There was something pulling at his hand. It had hooked him, penetrated his wrist, broken through to the other side of the flesh. And now it was yanking and thrashing savagely.

Savanna screamed helplessly, grabbing his upper arm and pulling with him. She heard what sounded like wet cloth ripping. And suddenly he was free, he was pushing back against his chair again. And all was warm and sticky as she licked at her lips and tasted salt there, and realized his blood was jetting from the stump of his wrist to draw stringy graffiti on her face and across the windshield and into his lap which had gone dark with urine.

She shrunk against the door shrieking, her long-fingered hands shaking and contorting and opening and closing madly in front of her. They danced as though possessed of the Spirit, responding to inaudible Tongues—like writhing bodies fallen to rapture in the isles of some backwater church. Still screaming, she shirked her T-shirt up and over her head. Holding the edge of the cloth between her teeth, she groped for Roger with both arms.

He was thrashing about in his seat as if it were electrified, the breath hammering in and out of his mouth, a mad kind of survival-light burning in his eyes. He seemed to be attempting some desperate kind of breathing method. She fell across the shifter trying to get a hold of his arm and its rubber crown jabbed at her ribs viciously. She suddenly caught his flailing wrist in a lucky snatch, but his flesh was covered in blood and her thin fingers slid helplessly away to grope at dead air. She tried again. The swinging, crimson-gouting stump only danced away each time, winking at her whitely with its flashing stub of bone. At last she caught it again and began squeezing to choke the blood flow.

And something nipped her in the stomach. She reared back and looked down.

Cold yellow eyes were staring up at her through the hole in the floor.

She screamed still louder and shrunk against her door yet again, dropping the T-shirt. Her hand raked along the dash, twisted into a long-nailed crook by her panic. Roger began to hyper-

ventilate violently. Something poked its head up through the hole and looked to her briefly. It had scales. It looked like a big monitor lizard, colored beige with black stripes.

But its movements were twitchy and fast, exactly like a bird's.

She blinked—and it had turned on Roger. She watched in fathomless horror as it sought out his spurting wrist and began to nibble and tear at the mutilated gristle. Her husband shrilled, throwing his head back violently against the backrest. His body had begun to spasm, bucking and quaking and lolling. His legs pumped wildly, kicking at the floor, the steering column, through the wheel to the dash, again and again and again. His red sneakers smashed out the clear plastic over the speedometer.

Savanna opened the glove-compartment and plowed through its jumbled contents. She came up with Roger's .38 and pointed its muzzle at the back of the thing's head.

"Leave him alone you scaly bastard!" Her tear-strung face was a twisted white mask.

The gun wavered in her grasp as she sought an opening in the mish-mash of flesh. Roger's dark blood (*it's type-O, she thought insanely, yes type O-negative rare so rare he'll bleed to death and no one can help not me not me*) was blotting the windshield like lumps of maroon paint.

"Leave him alone!" she bawled. *"Leave him alone leave him alone leave him alone!"* There was an opening and she fired.

The pistol bucked and the thing's head blew apart. Chunks of meat and pieces of bone exploded like shrapnel against the windshield. The smooth, bloody glass cracked into a thousand spidery rings. Savanna began to hack violently in the smoke. Her ears rang as if every radio and TV speaker in the world were shrieking with the searing tone of the Emergency Broadcast System cranked to full volume. The thing's head collapsed steaming into her lap.

She stared down at it breathlessly, the smoking revolver slipping from her fingers to tumble against the carpet. The thing's reptilian head twitched in her lap and she saw a tiny convulsion ripple down its neck.

"Honey, *oh god* ..." Roger mumbled.

She looked up to find his face had gone completely blue. His eyes were glassy and still. That fiery survival-light had flickered and dimmed to a weary acceptance of death. The shock was clearly taking its toll. Something exploded inside of her and she shoved the dead animal off her. She half-heartedly tried to shove it down through the opening, but it was wedged in there tight and wouldn't even budge—so she simply left it there.

She snatched up his wrist in her right hand, thinking, *Concentrate, dammit, concentrate! Remember that first-aid course*—then pressed her thumb into the outer flesh of his arm and the flats of her fingers against the inside. She did the same thing with her left hand—midway along his upper-arm, pinching closed the brachial artery against the arm bone.

Straining to keep his arm elevated, she dipped her head to the blood-splattered floor hump and snatched up the T-shirt with her teeth. She swung it around his wrist with a jerk of her chin, and managed to pin the twisted cloth where it crisscrossed itself beneath her bloody fingers. Glancing down she spotted the blue cap of a ballpoint pen, poking sideways out of the jumble of junk between the beverage holders. She drew the pen free with her teeth and clenched it there, then released his biceps and tied the shirt's ends in a half-knot. He started hemorrhaging instantly, the blood leaping for the ceiling as if pumped from a squirt gun. She held the Bick to the half-knot and knotted the cloth twice more. Then she twisted the pen, praying it would not break—once, twice, a thousand times.

“Die you bastard and I’ll sleep with every member of the Houston *Oilers*,” she mumbled as she worked. “Just for spite.”

Gradually, the bleeding slowed to a trickle ... and stopped. She secured the tourniquet halfway up his forearm with the T-shirt’s crimsoned ends and then threw open her door, pausing to lower the seat before jumping out and slamming the door behind her.

An instant later she yanked Roger’s door open. Grabbing the frame, she planted both feet against his side and shoved him over the hump and the rubber-crowned gear shift, into the passenger seat. Then she plopped into the driver’s seat, jammed the truck into gear, and they tore away from the shoulder—a scaly tail dragging behind like tin cans rattling behind a honeymoon Cadillac.

The pickup rocked and Roger stirred, staring at her blankly.

He coughed and managed weakly, “Try the *Bengals*. I hear they’re hard up for cooperation.”

• • • •

III | Savanna

THE METAL-FRAMED SIGNBOARD read: OUT OF UNLEADED. As the 4x4 careened into the Ozark station’s parking lot, its right quarter-panel smashed the sign aside, whereby it hit the concrete and sent a flurry of hot sparks dashing against the gas pumps.

Savanna gripped the wheel like a vise and aimed the pickup at the store’s facade—visible once again now that the rain had given way to another burst of hailstones. A station wagon and a Ford truck were sitting out front, as well as a row of motorcycles, so she had to aim for the far side of the parking strip. She jerked the wheel too hard and the little 4x4 spun out of control, hydroplaning wildly across the wet, oily asphalt and smashing into the rear of the Ford.

The Toyota's front bumper crumpled in like an aluminum can and radiator spray geysered out from around the edges of the hood.

She jammed the shifter into reverse and tried to back away from the jumble of crushed metal. The 4x4's big tires hissed against the concrete, spinning like turbines, burning through the slick layer of oil and finally their own rubber. It was no good, she realized, the two vehicles were locked together like Siamese twins. She put it into neutral and let off the clutch, and the engine stalled with a pathetic shudder. Throwing open her door, she ran around the 4x4 to the passenger side.

The hailstones were as big as marbles. They rebounded off her wet head and bare shoulders like white-hot meteors, leaving her pale flesh bruised and throbbing. As she yanked open Roger's door one of the stones drilled her in the right temple, and by the time the two had begun shambling toward the building's entrance, her right eye had been blinded by her own blood.

It was all Roger could do to remain on his feet, desperately clinging to his wife for support. He'd lost a lot of blood. He wanted so badly just to pass out and be free of the pain, but he didn't want Savanna to have to face whatever was going on alone. He struggled to stay conscious, cradling his severed wrist between his chest and his remaining hand as if he were holding a wounded child.

The store clerk burst through the double glass doors. He was a thirtysomething black man in white sneakers and a brown attendant's apron.

"Christ woman, that was my *truck!*" His eyes flashed to Roger's stump, where the knob of bloody-white bone winked beneath the fluorescent lights and seemed to say, "*Hi there.*"

He swallowed dryly. "Jesus—what happened?"

"He did lunch with something scaly," she grunted. "Come on."

He took up Roger's left arm and together the three entered the building.

Gasps and shocked profanities accompanied their passage through the room, and a crowd of figures clustered about them like a frenzied Washington press corps.

"We got it, man. *We got it ...*" the clerk said.

They carried him on their shoulders to the little, pristine men's room, and the clerk held him aloft while Savanna lowered the lid of the toilet. They eased him down onto its smooth, ivory-colored surface. Savanna turned on the water and let it flow between her fingers until it was hot.

"Got a first-aid kit in the office," the clerk said, and left the room.

The toilet was right next to the basin. Savanna drew up Roger's arm and began running hot water down over the stump. She wasn't at all sure this was the correct thing to do, cleansing this severe a wound as if it were a skinned knee, but with an animal bite—and with no help on the way—who knew what kind of infection might spring up, or how fast. Especially with a lizard, or an emu, or whatever the hell it had been. *Christ*. Could there be poison, even?

Red water started swirling down the drain. Roger sat gazing at the opposite wall blankly, like a zombie. Savanna pumped soap onto her fingertips and rubbed it into his wound. She flushed it out with more clear water. Pink froth spiraled in the basin.

A moment later the clerk returned with bandages, gauze, and a plastic bottle of rubbing alcohol. He sat them on the blood-spotted Formica next to the sink. Savanna ripped open one of the packages and blotted Roger's wound dry with a sterile pad. "Did you call for help?" she asked the clerk.

He shook his head. "Lines are down. Been down for some time. Nothin' on the radio, either."

"We caught a little heading in ..." Savanna said. She pumped more soap from the dispenser and rubbed it between her crim-

soned hands, then rinsed them off. "Part of the Emergency Broadcast System, just the tone."

Roger stirred beside her, working his jaws open and closed like a grounded fish. Savanna looked up at the clerk in the mirror. "Whose station wagon is that out ..."

He was shaking his head. "There's water in the distributor. All that rain earlier ..."

She nodded, considering life-flight by Harley unacceptable. "Best to wait for everything to blow over and get an ambulance, probably." She twisted the taps and the water trickled to a stop. "We're going to need some kind of suture, don't you think?"

"Tourniquet will do," he said. "There's not enough skin around the wound to work with, and we'd need a curved needle."

He paused, staring below her gaze. "Don't forget to take care of yourself, now. Seems the same bee stung him stung you, too."

She noticed her reflection in the mirror above the basin, and was shocked at sight of her own breasts straining against her bra. Then her gaze dropped to the laceration just beneath them.

She sneered. "Poor little bastard was about half-starved, I guess."

She leaned over and kissed Roger delicately on the forehead. His parched lips kissed at the air once, twice. She looked at his twisted, dull-eyed face as a mother would look at her ailing son, and reached up to stroke his hair with a pale, wet hand.

"Roger, honey, try to relax."

He nodded feebly.

And after a while, it seemed he'd fallen asleep. She turned to the clerk and nodded toward her husband. "Can you hold him?"

The middle-aged black man stared at her apprehensively, then squeezed in beside her and gripped Roger's bad arm gently but firmly in both hands.

Having no idea if it was the right thing to do or absolutely the wrong thing, Savanna drew up Roger's tattered brachial artery and began tying it into a simple knot. It slipped and squirmed between her fingers like a string of moist spaghetti as she worked. Roger felt a tugging sensation and opened his eyes, glancing sidelong at Savanna as she finished up. He noticed how white her face was, how empty her eyes were, and was scared for her. She rinsed her hands again as he watched, then twisted the cap from the bottle of alcohol. He grimaced and turned away.

He tried to sleep as Savanna began pouring alcohol over his stump. And as he did so, he counted bird-like lizard creatures hopping over a fence in time.

IV | Waiting

THE STORE WAS MOSTLY calm with soft muttering. Except for the occasional (but increasingly raucous) outbursts from the bikers, and the dim sound of static from the radio on the counter—which had been tuned to the approximate band at which Roger and Savanna had briefly caught the E.B.S. earlier—things had tentatively settled in.

The clerk sat with one of the stranded customers, in one of the bright-yellow booths which were laid out in a row along the long window at the front of the store, discussing the weather and the riots, gesturing from time to time with a can of 7-UP in his hand. The customer across from him was a lean, older man in western attire. He wore a big cowboy hat, a big, shiny belt-buckle (the name Roy B. in sterling silver), big boots—the whole Garth Brooks thing. He was smoking a cigarette and sipping coffee from a paper cup, nodding a lot.

The customer's wife, a portly woman named Clara, had talked with Savanna awhile before wandering off toward the video games. Now she was blasting asteroids and apparently enjoying the hell out

of it. Savanna, meanwhile, had stolen away to the booth that was farthest from everything.

It was partly because of the bikers. They'd congregated around the magazine rack with several cases of beer (without communications to the outside, the clerk had been reluctant to hassle them), and were leafing through the biker mags and swimsuit catalogs, having themselves a little hurricane party. They were downing the beer at an ungodly clip and, much worse, were beginning to show more than a little interest in Savanna. One of them noticed her looking their way now, and waggled his tongue at her. Her arms tingled with gooseflesh and she shivered all over, in spite of the oversized Ozark smock the clerk had fetched for her from one of the back rooms. She turned away.

Outside, the hailstorm had gone to snow once again. But rather than taking on the chrome-white hue usually associated with a snow flurry, the sky had grown strangely dark, as if night had fallen. Snowflakes the size of hockey pucks glided down from the dull-orange glow of the arc-lights, sticking to the window beside her like lint. She hardly noticed them. She was staring *at* the window, not through it, at the reflection of herself and the store's bright interior, the shelves stocked with soup cans like an Andy Warhol print turned to wallpaper. She puffed on her Marlboro nervously, seeing the snow but not seeing it.

Roger was still sleeping. He'd passed out shortly after she'd begun pouring the alcohol over his stump. Savanna reviewed what had transpired since ...

She'd finished the operation by securing a sterile pad over the stump and then wrapping the whole affair, except for the tourniquet, in a length of brown bandage.

Finally, they'd equipped him with a crude sling made of pantyhose—in the interest of keeping blood-flow to the wound at a minimum (by keeping his arm bent and his wrist as elevated as possi-

ble), while still allowing for mobility if the phone lines came back on any time soon. Unresolved, however, had been how to get a painkiller into him now that he'd passed out.

One of the customers waiting out the storm, a big-boned but nonetheless pretty woman (who had since introduced herself as Clara Bonner), had been watching from the bathroom door and offered her assistance. Savanna had politely but frankly told her there was little she or anybody could really do. But as it turned out, there'd been plenty she could do. She was a diabetic, she'd said, and had a package of clean needles right in her purse.

So they'd looted the medicine rack for Tylenol capsules and made a neat little pyramid of boxes on the counter next to Roger. Then Savanna had stood clear and watched as Clara broke open three of the capsules and emptied their powdery contents into a glass of bottled water. She'd dipped a fresh needle into the solution and pulled up the plunger, filling it with Tylenol, and had then administered the shot to Roger's arm like a practiced nurse.

Perhaps, Clara had said, when Roger woke, the throbbing of his wound might just be a little more bearable. Savanna had thanked her with teary eyes and an emotional hug.

The clerk had found a folding cot behind the walk-in cooler—he'd told her the store had closed down some months back to have its fuel tanks dug up and refitted, and that he supposed the cot was a legacy of that "damn fool rent-a-cop" they'd brought in from Seattle to pull the night-watch—and they'd laid him out on it in the manager's cramped office. Then she'd kissed her husband's forehead and switched off the light, and came out here to help monitor the situation ...

She'd been sitting in the booth ever since.

She glanced at the clock above the cooler. It seemed unbelievable because of the dark brought on by the storm, but the hands above the Dr. Pepper logo read only 11:16 am. The long hand of

the clock twitched once. 11:17. Nearly three-and-a-half hours had passed, and still no luck with either the telephone or the airwaves.

She took a deep drag off the Marlboro and exhaled slowly, leaning back in the booth and closing her eyes.

The radio on the counter went: S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s ...”

A hodge-podge of the radio-preacher’s words played back in her mind, she didn’t know why. *‘We know now there can be no compromise ... for I have seen a light in the sky, and we must ready our souls ... throw wide the gates of hell, and let loose the beasts of prey ...’*

What the hell had he been talking about?

Savanna saw clouds boiling in her mind’s eye—clouds full of strange lights, like something from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. She saw the lizard-thing’s head poking up through the hole in the floor, turning on Roger.

‘And let loose the beasts of prey ...’

There was a tap on her shoulder. “Honey?”

Savanna jumped, opening her eyes. Clara was standing by the booth, holding some magazines.

“Yes?” Savanna said.

The woman held the magazines out to her. “I managed to squeeze by the riff-raff and get you these. I don’t know what you like to read, I grabbed a selection. I thought maybe it would take your mind off everything.” She laughed. “Videogames seem to be working for me.”

Savanna took them, impressed by her concern. “Thank you, Clara.”

The big woman shrugged it off and walked back toward the arcade. Savanna heard one of the bikers sing: *“Here she comes, Miss America ...”*

She shook her head and looked through the magazines; there was a *U.S. News & World Report*, a *Cosmopolitan*, a *Better Homes & Gardens*, a *Discover*. This latter’s cover had a picture of a dinosaur

on it. She flipped through its pages absently—and passed something which caught her eye. It had looked like ...

She rifled back in search of it, and found it was part of a four-page fold out. She pulled out the staples with her fingernails, her pulse quickening, and spread the diorama out on the table. It was captioned: *The Great Dinosaur Predators*, and depicted a line-up of nasty-looking saurians. Scanning it, she found Roger's attacker somewhere in the middle. She stared at it intently. The likeness was almost perfect: the monitor-like face, the avian anatomy, the strange arms. *That's the one, officer*, she thought insanely.

She examined it closer. It's mini-caption read: *Velociraptor Antirrhopus. Eighty-million years ago; six feet long; Asia. Aka 'Dinosaur with an Attitude.'*

Trembling, she took a final hit off the cigarette and crushed it out in the little tin ashtray on the sill.

Dinosaur ...

She looked outside, actually noticing the huge snowflakes. *What in God's name is going on?* she thought.

The steely knob was an ice-ball in her palm as she twisted it clockwise and nudged the office door open. A shaft of pale light fell slanting across the cot, and the motionless figure lying there. She walked in without a sound, placing her sandals ever so carefully on the plain concrete floor.

Kneeling beside Roger in the dark, she whispered: "Hey Old Hoss, what'cha doin?"

He lay utterly still. Not even his watch was ticking. Her ears buzzed with the room's silence. Carefully, very carefully, she eased her head down onto his chest and lay her tear-crusted cheek against the soft wool of his sweater. His heart beat was weak, but steady. She turned her head just slightly and kissed his sweater. Knitted wool pulsed gently and tickled at her lips.

His dry lips kissed at the air once, twice.

V | Chimera

SUNLIGHT SPILLED THROUGH the open window and curtains rustled. Savanna awoke to a breeze. Roger lay beside her, snoring. She climbed out of bed and approached the window. As she took hold of the sliding pane, she heard the sound of animals outside. Looking out, she realized Seattle had been replaced with a forest. Dinosaurs lounged by the shade of a lagoon. A few predators chased their prey. The sky looked down and smiled. Savanna smiled, too. Then clouds began to boil in the distance. She watched as they rolled toward her, bringing with them strange lights. They passed over the apartment building and all was dark. There was a tap on her shoulder. She turned around, expecting Roger. It wasn't Roger. It was something with huge dark eyes and gray skin, a tapered head, a slit mouth. It stepped up to the window and waved its hand. The hand had only three fingers. The scene outside changed drastically. Where before there had been peace, now reigned chaos. Dresden was incinerated by firebombs. Hiroshima was gone beneath a mushroom cloud. North Vietnam was doused in napalm. The hand waved again; and Seattle was in flames. Gunshots rang out from every corner. In the parking lot below, a white man and a black man died at each other's throats. The gray man with the huge dark eyes regarded her. He lifted his hand and waved a finger back and forth. The finger was long like a knife. Shame on you, it implied. Then he was gone. She looked outside and the clouds receded. As they withdrew the forest returned. So did the dinosaurs. Sunlight spilled down and the sky smiled. Savanna smiled, too. The world was at peace again. She turned around to tell Roger. There was a velociraptor perched on their bed. It was chewing her husband's hand off. Savanna screamed.

She awoke to sudden, fitful movement and violent coughing. She swallowed moistly, blinked, then sat up with a start.

Roger's head was rocking back and forth on the cot as if he were having a nightmare, and he was drooling heavily.

“Bad dreams?” she groaned. “Yeah ... you and me both.”

She reached for the Tylenol and shook out three capsules into her palm. Moving quickly, she cracked them open like tiny eggs and emptied them into a glass of water on the floor. She swirled the water briefly and reached for a needle. Tearing open the package with her teeth, she drew out the syringe and filled it with Tylenol. Then she administered the shot just as she'd seen Clara do, sliding the needle into the soft flesh of his arm joint, and plugging the hole with her thumb when she drew it back out again. She taped a cotton ball over the spot and began stroking his head lightly.

She glanced at his stump—recalling her dream. She recalled the velociraptor perched on their bed, gnawing at his hand. She recalled the boiling sky, and the gray man with the slit mouth. She recalled the flaming city and the struggling men, the long, waving finger which had implied: *Shame on you ...*

She pushed it all from her head. Things were scary enough already—she didn't need to be scaring *herself*, too.

She looked at Roger's face and saw that he'd fallen asleep again. She stood up slowly and left the room, easing the door shut behind her.

It came just as she entered the front room. A burst of convoluted speech crackled through the airwaves, and everyone in the room erupted from their places, except Clara. Asteroids could be heard exploding and colliding in the little arcade.

Then, as the clerk and the others hustled excitedly toward the counter—Savanna saw the dark outlines of two giant, bird-like legs stride silently past the window. And she saw something else: some kind of rippling muscle held aloft over the concrete, like a huge black dagger.

A tail.

And like a scream-queen in some schlocky B-movie—she put her hands to her head and shrieked.

Everyone skidded to a halt on the smooth, yellow floor tiles, a motley crew of travelers gathered fearfully behind the handsome Negro clerk and his piercing shaman gaze. They all glared at her in terrified bewilderment. Clara Bonner came running in from the arcade, her hard shoes clicking along the floor. Her ship blew up in an electronic bang in the background.

Savanna stared past them through the window. The graceful, mighty legs and rippling dagger were gone. They'd crossed the entire length of the storefront in only two or three strides.

Her eyes shifted to the clerk's. "There's something out there," she said hoarsely.

The clerk's eyebrow perked up, like Mr. Spock's. "Yes?"

They were looking at her as if she were mad. The radio squawked unintelligibly. Somewhere in the jumble of static there were words struggling to be heard. Its gleaming dial *screamed* to be adjusted.

"It walked past the window right after you turned around," she said, her voice wavering. "And disappeared. Maybe it's circling the—"

The clerk put his finger to his lips. "*Shhhhh ...*"

He turned his head very slowly.

Outside, blowing flakes of snow fluttered down like chicken feathers onto a handful of vehicles. Nothing new there. He saw a crusty Plymouth station wagon, a row of Harley-Davidsons, and the unfortunate couple's 4x4 with its broken windshield and crumpled bumper. It was still hanging onto his old Ford like a metal and chrome pit bull. Again, nothing new. Just a bunch of vehicles—all blanketed in a thin layer of white. Nothing for anybody but the insurance company to worry about. Certainly nothing to scream over. He turned back and looked at her with something like pity.

"Oh, I see," she sighed. "Crazy bitch has flipped her lid, is that it?"

She thought of her dream. The dinosaurs beneath the sun.

Clara stepped forward and touched her arm. “Hey-hey, listen honey—”

“You might even be right ...” Savanna yanked away and moved toward the window.

A biker leaned forward to tune the radio as Clara and the clerk exchanged nervous glances. An instant later the jumbled dialogue on the airwaves ran clear.

“... a travel advisory remains in effect until further notice. Once again, a state of emergency has been announced for the city of Seattle and all outlying areas. In addition to city-wide rioting, it has been confirmed that at 10:43 p.m., Pacific Time, two twisters touched down in the Seattle-Tacoma area. Residents are advised to”—s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s ...!

Son of a *bitch*!” the clerk cursed, slamming his fist on the counter. “Get it back, man—get it back on!”

The biker was trying to no avail. “It’s gone, man. It’s all gone just like before.”

“Jesus,” the clerk bristled, turning away from them. “*Tornadoes?* What the hell is going on?”

“Oh my god,” Savanna said.

“*What?*” he shouted, his voice high, and spun around to face her.

Savanna wasn’t looking at him. She was slowly backing away from the doors, staring through the glass at something outside.

VI | Roger

ROGER AWAKENED TO SEMIDARKNESS and the sound of shouting. He recalled faintly the smell of shampoo—had Savanna just been in to see him? And he recalled, too, the dream. *The dream.*

Just a dream.

The details were already slipping away from him, like so much muddy water sluicing through his fingers. He could recall only that he'd waken in the bedroom of their apartment, not to the alarm but to the sound of Savanna screaming. And a sharp pain. He also seemed to recall looking down, and seeing—

Panic gripped him. The reptile. His hand—his hand—*oh my god*, it was, it ... was ...

Gone.

He lay there on the stiff canvas of the cot, the details of his surroundings becoming slowly manifest as his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness. Gazing up at the metal grid and white corkboard of the ceiling, with its sleeping fluorescent tubes hidden behind opaque plastic, he experienced a sinking feeling unlike anything he'd ever encountered.

No, it hadn't been a dream. Not that part. Not the hand bit and not the reptile-thing, either. This wasn't *Dallas* or *Knots Landing* or *Sci-fi Theater* ... It was reality, and if and when he lifted his hand (*stub, it's just a stub, like Captain Hook without his hook*) to examine it he'd find graphic proof that his life had just become simpler. No more trouble with mismatched gloves, no more hassling with that left-hand/right-hand nonsense, no more giving his fellow motorists that potent, 'curse you and all your brethren' Right-hand Bird.

He lifted his arm—and nylon rustled in the dark. Floating in space several inches from his eyes was the bandaged stump he'd laid there fearing.

"*Hey ...!*" he mumbled in a poor parody of excitement. "You can't show that on television ..."

The pain was terrible, but it was a constant, droning kind of terrible, and so he found he was able to ignore it to some extent, though the thought that he could do so amazed him.

Far worse was the itching. Not the itching of flesh, which would come when he began to heal—but the itching to be whole

again. It was a dull, persistent torment, like a cramped leg beneath the sheets. Something inside him couldn't quite grasp that his hand was actually missing ... *Couldn't quite grasp*, he thought insanely. *Get it? Get it?*

The problem, boiled down to its essence, seemed to be: If his hand was gone, why then could he still feel it? And he *could* feel it. It was right there, responding to his commands, opening and closing, making a fist ...

But it's NOT there, Roger, he reprimanded himself. *So bury it. Bury it before it buries you.*

He dropped his arm to the cot. Melodramatically, he sang: "*We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun ...*"

Right-o. Okay, then ... The question was: Where the hell was he? And where had Savanna gone?

He could vaguely recall being helped into a building. It had been hailing, hadn't it? Yes, he suddenly remembered that very clearly: hailstones the size of grapefruits raining down at a thousand miles per hour. And he remembered being carried into a bathroom, where Savanna and someone else had flushed out his wound with hot water and soap, and then she'd whispered something in his ear, something reassuring ... and there had been pain.

But where was he?

He blinked once, twice, focusing his eyes, and then rolled his head on the canvas and began glancing about the dim room. He saw a little wicker basket spilled over with refuse, a jacket hanging from the door, a battered-looking golf club standing alone in the corner. There was a small desk directly across from him, an entirely crude affair which looked like it had been purchased from Fingerhut or something like that, and assembled in a rush by someone's dog. Its surface was cluttered. There was a slim stack of manila envelopes which seemed in danger of toppling off its edge, a paperweight shaped like a woman of impossible proportions, a six-pack

of 7-UP with two of the cans missing, a small digital clock: Its little glowing numbers read: 11:59 am.

Lunch-time, he thought inanely.

Lastly, the desk supported a dormant reading-lamp minus its shade. Close behind it was a small window, set into the concrete like the slits found in prisons. Big flakes of snow fell slowly past its port, set aglow like embers by the cold orange glow of a light somewhere outside. Directly beside the window was a small poster. It was hard to discern any details, but it seemed to depict comic figures of some sort, workers in hard-hats, maybe. Bold, green lettering read: THINK SAFETY.

Something blotted out the view through the window and his eyes darted back to it. There was nothing there now but a faint sheen, like a buffed, black fender in twilight. He threw wide the covers and sat up.

He took three steps and fell. His head swam dizzily, and he wavered on his hands (his *hand*, rather) and knees. Was he still in shock?

His thoughts swirled. The dream ... Savanna ... she'd been screaming ... the smell of shampoo—could a real scream have carried over into his dream? Where was she and what the hell was going on? The window ... something blocking the window ... start there ...

Suddenly, amazingly, his sneakers were shuffling across the floor and he was reaching for the lamp switch. Its brassy tip kissed his fingertips and he twisted—*click!*

Something blinked, constricted, and he suddenly realized there was a tremendous eye staring through the window. He caught just the briefest glimpse of a vertical black ellipse dividing a yellow halo, like a giant cat's eye reflected in headlights. Snow drifted lazily down past its stare and clung to the membrane of its iris like lint.

It blinked again. Then the lamp's bulb blew and the room fell dark, and he could see only snow and the faint glow of a light outside.

VII | Rex

ROGER EMERGED FROM the back room to find himself inside the Ozark station. He stood at the rear of the store and blinked, feeling like a zombie. His flesh was pale and bluish, his hair wild. The bright of the room made his eyeballs throb.

He saw a group of people clustered at the window in the front, about ten individuals, all turned away from him. His wife was not among them. Two of the people wore the brown tunics of cashiers. Two others stood arm in arm, a short fat chick and a skinny guy in a cowboy hat. Of the remaining six, Roger saw only long hair and black leather, and recalled the roaring procession of Harleys which had passed his 4x4 on the interstate. Bikers, he supposed, though he couldn't quite make out the inscription on their jackets. 'The Dusty' *something*.

Roger walked forward.

Everyone was muttering amongst themselves:

"Shit, man—it's as big as a house!"

"Gods, what a monster."

"The thing could weigh two tons."

"It's called a mass hallucination. It's happened before ..."

Moments later, peering between the shoulders of two grunting bikers, Roger saw his totaled 4x4 sitting askew in the snow. He had no idea how it had gotten that way. A shadow fell across its cab. Something big appeared at the edge of his vision, he shifted his gaze ... And felt his blood run cold.

The thing was gray-green, with black stripes. It measured at least forty feet from its long, deep snout to the tip of its tail (which was held high and rigid as a lance), and walked on two powerful hind-legs, knees and ankles flexed like a bird. Its neck curved in an

S down from the razor-toothed head to its upper body, which lay nearly horizontal, and its tiny forelimbs gripped at dead air with forked claws. A bony ridge ran up the middle of its snout, like a racing stripe. The ridge was blood red. The animal itself, give or take a genus, was a *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.

Bowed low, it crept past the window, padding stealthily for Roger's wrecked 4x4. *Stalking* it. The muscular neck dipped gracefully to the snowy asphalt (like a swan on steroids), and the rex squeezed its snout beneath the truck, causing the left tires to raise off the ground. It worked its massive jaws in shadow. From beneath the vehicle, a stain of dark blood spread creeping through the snow.

Knock-knock-knock!

Somebody was rapping on the glass.

"Who the *hell* ...?" one of the cashiers barked, leaning back and staring down the line.

The tyrannosaur lifted its great head, swinging it toward the window, and the 4x4's tires slammed back down. Everyone gasped.

"Nobody move!" the cashier shouted.

The rex stared at them, its dark eyes glinting under horny brows, its deep snout tapered like a wolf's. Its jaw dropped to reveal rows of worn daggers.

The clerk murmured to himself: "Easy ... that's a boy, nothing in here," and to the others: "I think we're okay. He can see us, but he can't smell us. We're just part of the scenery ..."

The rex turned away at last, stooping to chew blindly at its elusive prize again.

The red stain in the snow grew larger.

Roger held up his stump and looked at it. *My god*, he thought. *I'm part of the food-chain ...*

Then his eyes rolled back in his skull, and he fell.

"*Roger!*" Savanna shrieked, and rushed to where he lay. The cashier and the Bonners followed close behind her.

The bikers laughed raucously. “Had you going there, didn’t I?” said one, elbowing a partner.

Roy Bonner stopped in his tracks, and pointed his finger at the man. “You could’ve gotten us all killed!” he snapped.

The biker turned to face him, his face deeply tanned, his beard mangy, his expression cold. He sized Roy up and said: “I don’t think so ... *Tex*.”

Roy Bonner glowered at him. Clara pulled him away by his arm.

The biker laughed and turned away, reflected light running across the gold letters at his back. They sparkled one by one and spelled: T-h-e D-u-s-t-y M-o-t-h-s.

Savanna lifted Roger’s head and cradled it in her arms; he’d hit his forehead and lacerated the skin on one of the plastic-coated tables.

“It’s just not my day,” he said, looking up at her forlornly.

She leaned down and kissed him next to his new wound. “Understatement, honey. Can you stand?”

He nodded, and Savanna and the clerk helped him up. Then, at Roger’s urging, the two stepped back. He wavered, but motioned them away when they moved to assist him. “It’s all right,” he insisted. “I got it.”

“How do you feel?” Savanna asked.

“Thirsty ... come to think of it,” he said.

“I’ll get you some water.”

She returned a moment later with an Ozark Super Tanker cup in hand. She tilted it against his lips and he drank greedily. “Easy,” she said.

He swallowed a few more times. She took the cup away before he was finished. “Let’s see how you handle that before drinking any more, okay?”

She sat the cup on a nearby stamp machine.

Roger groaned. His head pounded. He lifted his right arm to rub it, but the sling rustled and he stopped. He rubbed with his left instead. "Any luck with the radio?" he asked.

Savanna and the clerk shook their heads.

"Phone?"

They shook their heads.

He dropped his arm to his side. "Right ..." He glanced toward the bikers and back. "We wait, then. Question is for how long?"

"That all depends on the ..." The clerk looked toward the windows. "Hell, if it looks like a thing and walks like a thing, it must be *that* thing. *The rex*."

He stepped over to the double-glass doors and peered outside. The two couples stepped up beside him, and the five of them watched as the gigantic saurian pranced back from the 4x4, obviously agitated. It threw back its head and bellowed like a lion. A flock of small birds erupted from the row of newly-planted trees opposite the parking lot.

The clerk shook his head. "I don't get it, man. What's under your truck that he wants so bad?"

"It's called a velociraptor," Savanna told him. "It's a type of dinosaur." She tried not to think about her dream as she continued: "We hit the thing on our way in and it latched onto the undercarriage. The rex must smell its blood."

The man stared at her, bewildered. Roger stirred against the glass. "Look,"

The rex was pacing back and forth in a semicircle, padding around the 4x4 with quick, restless strides. Its hip-bones shifted stealthily beneath the folds of its flesh as it moved. It stopped and swung low its head. Again, it wedged its massive jaws between the white asphalt and the Toyota's underbelly.

Except this time it jerked its snout upward. The muscles of its thick neck rippled and constricted, swimming beneath the flesh

like taut steel chords—and the snow-covered 4x4 tumbled over with a crash. Metal groaned, shrieked, and collided with asphalt. Shatterproof glass crumpled and gave way. The tyrannosaur's jaws closed around the velociraptor's torso.

The big rex began backing away from the overturned vehicle. Even from inside the building, Roger and the others heard the wet, ripping sound of the animal's carcass being stripped from the undercarriage. It sounded like a Velcro wallet being opened very slowly. The tyrannosaur dropped its prize in the snow, pinning it there instinctively with its tri-clawed foot.

"Jesus H. Christ," Roy Bonner muttered.

The dinosaur dipped its head and began feeding.

"*Jesus, gods ...!*" Roy turned away from the window and his giant belt buckle brushed against Savanna's hip.

There had been a time, not so long ago, when she would have turned away also, shuddering with revulsion. But not now, and perhaps not ever again. The scene outside sickened her, but it was hardly shocking when compared to the memory of her husband being eaten alive in front of her. Twice, now. Once in the real world, once in her vision.

Vision? No, she corrected, *dream*. It hadn't been a vision.

The room was silent.

Those remaining watched as the giant tyrannosaur devoured its prey. They watched with an involuntary reverence, like primitives awed by some terrible wilder-god. On some level, even the dullest of them knew why. The animal being eaten was a surrogate for those inside: *a sacrifice*.

And then the rex paused and its jaws became still. It stood poised, frozen. Roger, Savanna, and the clerk inched closer to the glass, watching. The beast had cocked its head, as if listening to opossums rustling in the grass. It sniffed at the air gingerly, its great head poking left to right, right to left, like a bird.

"*Oh shit*," the cashier said ominously. "It *can* smell us."

"No," replied Roger. "It heard something."

Savanna took his left hand in her own and pointed. "My God, Roger ... there's *somebody coming*."

VIII | Omar

EVEN BEFORE THE SNOW-speckled cones of light appeared from the direction of the off-ramp, the tyrannosaurus rex had sensed something approaching. Swiftly it snatched up its cold, meager prize and moved to conceal itself in the distant trees, covering the snow-blown length of the parking lot in just a few sinewy strides.

Then its dark eyes floated in the white-spotted blackness above those trees, out there beyond the lights of the gas station, and the beast was all but invisible as the Washington state patrol car swung into the lot.

The cruiser moved slowly at first, creeping past the pump island, crossing the lot as if in slow-motion, and then its red and blue lights began flashing, and it swept up to within a dozen yards of the overturned 4x4 and stopped.

"Jesus, we got to warn him ..." Roger pushed against the door.

"*No!*"

The authoritative decree had issued out of the biker's camp. Roger turned around to find one of them pointing a pistol at him. Savanna gasped. Nobody moved.

"Back away from the door," the biker ordered, his eyes glaring from his tanned face like a rabid animal's.

Roger stared at the man, uncomprehending.

"*Goddamn it—do it!*" the biker shouted. It was the voice of a wild-man; saw-edged and uncontained, incapable of bluffing. Raw.

"Easy, Omar ..." urged one of the gunman's peers.

"Roger, honey," Savanna stammered helplessly. "Please God do what he says."

So much for her new convictions. Dinosaurs were one thing. A crazy, drunken man with a gun was something else entirely.

The cashier nudged her husband's shoulder with considerable force, and Roger moved away from the door very, very slowly.

The gunman's eyes shifted to the clerk. "Move, Buckwheat." Then to Savanna: "Move."

Cautiously, Savanna and the clerk inched toward Roger.

The man named Omar applauded. "*Good* Buckwheat!"

"That's *enough*, man!" the clerk barked explosively, and moved toward him with clenched fists.

Omar exploded, too. He surged forward like a leather-clad tidal wave and struck the clerk across the jaw with the pistol grip. When the clerk rebounded he had a gun barrel hovering in his face.

Omar stepped away from him slowly, smiling like a lunatic.

"You 're a spunky buckaroo, my friend," he said. "Hell, I think

I might even spare your sorry black ass. But we've got a credibility problem here ..."

His dark eyes fell upon the Bonners, and he zeroed in on Roy. "Hi, Tex."

Roy Bonner glared at him, his face flushed in anger, and stepped away from his wife. He had that *good-old-boy* 'I'm going to roll up my sleeves and kick your ass' look burning in his eyes.

Omar raised an eyebrow. "You people don't seem to take me very seriously," he said. "But that's all right. I didn't really expect you to ... until I killed somebody."

He trained the pistol on Roy Bonner's head, and his mad eyes flashed to the man's belt-buckle, on to his wedding-ring, and then up to his face.

"Take *Roy* here, fer instance," he continued, saying *Roy* in his best John Wayne. "Now this tub of shit I simply do not like."

“Go to hell, you—”

“*Roy, Roy, Roy ...*” Omar droned, shaking his head, and glanced sidelong at Clara. “Kiss your hubby on the cheek, fat-body. He’s going on a round-up.”

Clara froze, petrified.

“Suit yourself.”

Omar fired. *Pop!* And stringy sections of Roy Bonner’s brains were ejaculated onto the walls like spaghetti.

Clara screamed as his body crumpled to the floor. Her little black shoes clacked over the tiles as she rushed to his corpse. They tapped twenty times, or maybe a hundred. They tapped out the ghost number of years lost.

The stealer of those years was white-faced and dazed. He did not hear the ghost number in her wails and the tapping of her shoes. He saw only his victim’s brains on the wall, and had to struggle a moment to remember how they’d gotten there.

There is a checkpoint at the border of every man’s soul, where the road which winds into the country of madness begins. At Omar’s checkpoint there was no guard on duty, and he often wondered where the man had gone—or if indeed he had ever been there at all.

Clara meanwhile was trying to stuff her husband’s brains back into his head. Sobbing, Savanna moved to draw her away but was drawn away herself by Roger and the clerk.

Omar swallowed once, blinked, and then turned to them.

His eyes were drunken and glassy as he warned: “Anymore bullshit, from any of you, and you’re going to be picking little pieces of his fat-body widow here out of my shit, too ... *dig?*”

Everyone dug.

Then the crazed biker waved the gun at his fellows. “*Anybody not with me?!*”

An old hippie with a straggly gray beard emerged from the fold. "We're with you, Omar. We 're your friends, aren't we?" He turned to the other bikers. "We're all Omar's friends, aren't we?"

The bikers murmured agreement.

The old sage took a cautious step forward. "This about that problem in Seattle, Omar?"

The gunman's face contorted and flushed. "I just wanted a piece of ass, man. She killed herself, dig?" He moved the gun to point directly at the man's skull. "Look, are you with me or not because if you're not, then you're with these sorry bastards over here ..." The gun swung back to Roger and the others.

"We're with you," the old hippie repeated.

"Yeah?" Omar said, and gestured with the pistol recklessly. "*Then go kill the lights, you moron!*"

The Old Hippie motioned to another biker, and that biker jogged into the back room and disappeared. They all waited fidgeting as he sought out the panel, and after a moment Omar called: "*We're all waiting, Shit for Brains!*"

Then the room fell to a tentative blackness, and while everyone's eyes were adjusting to the dim glow of the lights outside—which crept in through the windows like dull, orange moonlight—the man came scrambling back out again,

The Old Hippie turned to Omar in the semidarkness. "See, Omar? We 're a team." But his head was trying to slither up his ass as he added, "Do you have a *plan*, Omar?"

Omar the Great and Terrible smiled, revealing black and yellow teeth which were spaced along his gums like decaying guard-towers. "Yeah, old man ... I got a plan." His dark eyes flashed toward the window.

A moment or two later, a sole sheriff's deputy got out of the cruiser and began advancing toward the 4x4 with his gun drawn. Several-dozen yards away the shadowy tyrannosaur waited, poised

among the trees like some great, reptilian jungle cat. It was merely a silhouette, visible only to the initiated.

“You see,” Omar muttered ominously. “We’re all just gonna wait right here ... and let nature take its course.”

IX | Tanner

HE NOTICED THE OVERTURNED pickup right after flicking on his high-beams, and a hundred different scenarios raced through his head as he swung into the parking lot and eased the cruiser's big hood slowly around the pump island.

But when the row of homegrown choppers appeared in the snowy wash of his headlights, the young patrolman's little mystery seemed ready to solve itself. His friends the Dusty Moths were here; well, well ... imagine that. And it appeared highly probable that that borderline psycho Omar Mason had used the state of emergency to do something *really stupid*. He hit his lights and pulled up closer to the hulk.

He snatched up the radio instinctively, but was greeted only by empty static. Since the outset of the weather disturbances he'd become wholly conditioned to its droning nothingness, and had reached for it on several occasions even though he could hear for himself that its airwaves were blank.

If it *had* been working properly, patrolman Orley Tanner would have long-since received word of Omar's little Murder-One problem. Cursing, he slammed it back onto its hook and killed the volume.

His fingers drummed on the wheel.

The interior of the Ozark station was completely dark. But hadn't it been lit when he'd first pulled in? He couldn't quite remember. In any case, it was dark now. Yet the exterior lights—such as the rotating sign he'd just passed beneath, and the neon runners

which wrapped around the island-canopies—were all burning bright.

He looked to the overturned import not far from his cruiser, and his eyes dropped to the ground. There was a pool of fresh oil there with lines of blue neon shimmering on its surface.

Motor Oil's Motor Oil, he thought insanely.

But something made him peer closer, and he noticed its color was not in fact black but a deep, dark red. Maybe it was just the dim, orangish haze of the storm-shrouded arc-lights, playing havoc with his color perception. He switched on the spotlight and trained it on the puddle.

And then Tanner realized it wasn't oil at all ... it was transmission-fluid. No, it wasn't that, either. It was—

His right hand dropped to his revolver and he swallowed hard. *It looked like a pool of blood.*

The cruiser's big engine ticked as it cooled. Slowly, he slid the revolver free of its holster. Grabbing his Mag-light in his free hand, he threw open his door and climbed out into the cold.

His spit-polished shoes crunched in the snow as he walked the short distance to the puddle. Reaching it, he thumbed on the Mag-light and cast its beam onto the pool's red surface.

It was blood, all right. But where was the victim?

He jogged the flashlight and discovered a winding trail of tiny blotches which led off toward the highway. And there was something else, too. Some kind of impressions in the snow—about three feet each—their precise shape obscured by the wind. There were three or four of them. They were spaced roughly fifteen feet apart and ran along both sides of the blood trail. He followed them with the flashlight's beam until they vanished from view into a stand of decorative trees. Squinting in the dark, he could make out nothing save swirling snow and the dim outline of a huge pile of dirt behind the trees. It looked as though there was a mother lode of a boulder

up there. But there was something else, wasn't there? A dark glint of some kind ...

Tanner took a step forward and the snow groaned beneath him. He probed the dark shape with the Mag-light. It was hard to tell anything through the shadow-play of the branches ...

Wait—

Yes ... right there. And there.

Construction reflectors?

He stared at the twin points of yellow light for several minutes. Finally he gripped the revolver a little bit tighter and began moving closer.

The snow underfoot fell silent and the sole of his right shoe suddenly skewed beneath him. He wavered for balance briefly—and fell. *Smack!* The flashlight's lens broke against the glassy ground and its beam fell dormant.

Some Mag-light, he thought. You were supposed to be able to use them as clubs!

He sat up. Glancing about, he realized the snowy lot was cluttered with large patches of ice. He hadn't even noticed them earlier, yet the slippery sheets of glass were everywhere, spread about randomly like creeping glaciers—some big, some small. He chuckled at himself: Small and sneaky, like this little bastard beneath him. He climbed to his feet and brushed himself off, kicking the broken Mag-light aside, then continued moving forward cautiously, taking care to avoid any ice.

There was a sudden *chirp!* behind him and he spun around and pointed the revolver. One of the station's doors was swinging slowly back into position, bands of wiggling neon reflected in its glass. He glanced about the parking lot and ended up refocused on the row of trees beyond. *Had the wind just picked up?* he wondered. He thought perhaps it had, the branches of the planted trees were swaying just slightly.

He followed the trail of drizzled blood closer to those trees, glancing back over his shoulder often at the darkened interior of the store.

He wasn't at all sure he was doing the right thing by investigating the blood trail first. If the owners of those bikes were responsible for whatever had happened, they might have killed the lights themselves, and if that were the scenario than he couldn't dare rule out the possibility that they were armed with guns. They might even be training those guns on a group of hostages right now. They might be waiting to take a shot at *him*.

None of that really mattered if there was someone still alive at the end of this blood trail. First things first. Patrol Officer Orley Tanner was not the kind of cop who traded common sense for John Wayne theatrics. He had no intention of just waltzing right up to that store without the slightest idea of what he was dealing with. And he had no intention of leaving anyone, either victim or aggressor, to bleed to death in the shadows.

He walked, and as he walked the tyrannosaur waited.

Tanner's mind turned over like a low-compression engine. If a siege became necessary, then it would come only after back-up had arrived and negotiations had failed. His duty was to protect and serve, not overcome and destroy—or to be destroyed.

The tyrannosaur poised. Waiting ...

To protect and serve. That train of thought led him naturally to the Harper verdict, and the influence he'd failed to have on the way the whole thing had come out. Despite his testimony, four out-of-control cops had not only gotten away with murder, they had basically been given a mandate to continue enforcing their random, "me good guy/ you bad guy" kind of justice. And then there'd been the riots ... Jesus.

Waiting ...

He'd tried to prevent that. He'd ignored the warnings of his fellow officers and spilled *everything* in court. Almost overnight he'd become a hero to the public and a pariah to his own. But he'd kept his job in spite of all the harassment, thanks to the support of a few close friends, all cops, and the watchful eye of the media—which had descended upon the Seattle Police Department like a swarm of angry locusts during the trial, and had kept in touch afterward. Under all that scrutiny, no one had dared to fire him, and *he'd kept his job*.

Almost ...

But he would have liked to have done much more than that, really. He would have liked to have gotten four very bad cops off the street and into the slammer where they belonged—right there with the other so-called “bad-guys,” all four of them bitching and moaning and endlessly repeating the one phrase they themselves had heard so often as cops, the one that had never failed to make them laugh and snicker and sneer at the people they were binding up like captured stray dogs, the phrase that always went something like: “Why you hassling *me*, man? Why aren't you chasing the real bad guys? I'm just a normal person. I got a wife, kids, a good job ...” and so on.

The dark stand of trees and its boulder-crested mountain of dirt were looming close now.

That's precisely right, Tanner fantasized with a sardonic little grin. *Cop or not, you're just a normal person. And now you're doing time for your very own screw-up, just like normal people do.*

But that, of course, was only fantasy. In reality those cops were still out there—still wearing badges, still carrying guns, still slinking around under cover of night.

And the tyrannosaur sprung forward.

Startled from his trance, Tanner looked up into its growing, dark eyes and knew he could never outrun them. All in a split-

second, he decided not to try. He lifted high his revolver instead, knowing himself to be but a fighting dead man.

But what happened next was so alien, so displaced in time and orientation, so *skewed*—that Deputy Orley Tanner would find himself laughing, not screaming, as he sprinted desperately for the very doors he'd vowed not to enter.

X | Replay

THE COP WAS JUST STANDING there, staring at the trees. And staring at the rex, too—though he clearly didn't know it.

"My God," Savanna pleaded. "You can't just let him be ripped to pieces ..."

Omar raised an eyebrow. "No?" He slid off the table and approached her. "And why not?"

She hesitated. His face hovered in her own like some foam-latex Halloween mask—Uncle Pervus, perhaps, or Baby Stinky. "You, you just can't," she stammered.

He cocked his head to one side and smiled broadly, wickedly. "You ever been to prison, sugar-muffin?"

His teeth seemed covered with a yellow, pussy substance which reminded Savanna of that gummy liquid SPAM was packed in.

She shook her head.

"That's too bad they'd like you there." He stepped closer and Savanna felt his coat pressing against her breasts. The reek of liquor-sweat and pitted-out leather seemed to radiate off him in waves. "You ever heard stories about what goes on inside?"

Again, she shook her head. The glass of the window was cold against her back, as if it had frosted on the inside.

"They stick you in a little room to rot," he said, and with the word *rot* came an invisible cloud of stale barley which made her eyes water and her throat want to close in on itself. "But the trick is, they don't put you in there alone. No, they always put you in there

with some shifty-eyed S.O.B. who's crazier even than you are ..." His voice had become a quavering hiss, like sparks running along a fuse. "They put you in there with some poetry-writing faggot, or some jittering crackpot who's so hard-up for a cigarette he picks butts out of the toilet, or *some darkie ...*"

He glanced sidelong at the cashier and menaced him with molten eyes. The stout black man was unmoved. Omar turned back to Savanna. "... who's built like Mike Tyson and wants you to be his joy-boy. And if that's what he wants, that's what he'll get ... because you're not going *anywhere*. And don't think the guards will help you, sister. Because they won't. They'll just walk right by whistling and swinging their keys. You're helpless, just like you're helpless now ..."

Savanna felt a cold hand scurry up her tunic like a spider.

It all happened at once, and so nobody but the clerk noticed the trooper bust his ass on the ice. Roger lunged forward to attack, Omar (The Biker from Hell) spun upon him with the pistol up-raised and tried to jam its cold, chrome muzzle into his left nostril, and the cashier bolted for the door— apparently to warn the unknowing trooper.

The black man had his hand cupped to his cheek and his lungs full of air when three of the bikers jumped him from behind. They worked as a team, with one clamping a hand over his mouth, another snaking an arm around his neck, and the third punching him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Still more bikers piled on top of them and the whole tangled group smashed writhing to the floor, like some kind of giant squid. Clearly, they'd done this sort of thing before. Then the door lazed slowly shut and it was over.

Omar was vapid with anger, his foul breath coming and going in harsh, ragged gasps. He suddenly grabbed Roger by the scruff

of the neck and yanked his head back as if to cut his throat, then squeezed the pistol's muzzle still tighter against his nostril.

"Chivalry's dead, sucker," he hissed, and cocked the gun with a greasy thumb—so that it clicked in the silence like a ratchet-handle turned slowly. *"And so are you ..."*

"Jesus Christ, " someone gasped. "Doesn't he *see* the thing? He's walking right towards it!"

Omar turned his head.

It was true. The stupid cop was waltzing right into its clutches, like a lamb to the slaughter.

He started laughing hoarsely, then wrestled Roger around to face the window as well.

He shifted the gun to Roger's temple. "Now I want you to watch this, Sir Lancelot," he breathed into his ear. "And think about your pretty little wife there. You dig?"

Savanna shrunk against the glass, eyeing him fearfully.

The cashier struggled desperately within his prison of chains and leather, while Clara Bonner huddled trembling by the radio. Several moments passed, maybe two or three, maybe a hundred. The room buzzed with tension as if it's walls were electrified. Outside, the rex lunged toward the trooper.

"Bye-bye, sucker ..." Omar whispered.

The fleet-footed carnosaur was but a blurred shadow as it bounded for the trooper and—

("Holy *shit!*" someone exclaimed.)

—*fell*. It's long, sinewy legs simply slid out from under it, causing its sleek body (narrowly built but heavy as an elephant's) to smash against the concrete, rattling the station's windows.

Omar could only stare in bewilderment as the thing struggled to right itself; its great tail lashing at the pavement, its streamlined hips pumping wildly, its little forearms wagging uselessly. Its tor-

tured bellow was like a five-ton Peterbilt exploding down a cliff—all shrieking steel and tumbling boulders.

“It slipped on the *ice*, man!” one of the bikers hollered incredulously.

The state trooper had nearly covered the distance from the edge of the lot to the front of the store when he, too, slipped once again on a patch of ice. He was just shy of the front walk when he fell sprawling to the ground, skidding along with his hands held out before him. Roger grunted as he visualized the flesh of the man’s palms being sanded away, and the streaks of blood on the ice which must surely have followed. But the trooper quickly scrambled to his feet again and continued hurrying for the doors. Roger knew and everyone else knew he was going to make it.

Realizing this, Omar jammed the pistol even tighter against Roger’s head and began jerking him away from the window. “Don’t even breathe,” he warned.

But what happened next simply defied explanation: That something so big could move so blindingly *fast* was a possibility no one had considered. The deputy had dashed to within a dozen yards of the station before the rex managed to gain its feet; he was slowing down in anticipation of the doors when the predator thundered after him.

And he was bounding onto the front walk, laughing, when the rex’s jaws swung in from the right—clamping brutally about his pelvis and folding him like a lawn-chair, whisking him from the ground.

Savanna shrieked as his lacerated hands smacked open-palmed against the door, fingers splayed, and squeaked sideways along the glass leaving smears of dark blood. Then he was gone, but not very far, and the thing was shaking him like a ragdoll though he was surely dead already.

Even so, Savanna couldn't stop screaming, nor could she look away. She watched in helpless horror as it dropped him to the ground and stepped on his head, pinning him there like a moth on corkboard. And she watched in helpless horror as its big head flashed down, its jaws hung wide to feed, its curved teeth gleaming scarlet. And she watched in helpless horror as the head came to a sudden stop, tilted as if listening, and rose up with an angry howl. Something moved in the corner of her eye and she turned to look.

It was another dinosaur.

• • • •

XI | Spinosaur

IT LUMBERED INTO THE snow-swept parking lot like an oversized crocodile—the gigantic, rounded sail on its back swaying mightily back and forth. Its eyes were red and its flesh a dark gray, and its two-story-tall sail was the colors of blood and night all mottled. The tyrannosaur reared back, hissing and barring its ugly teeth.

"Jesus, Omar!" shouted one of The Dusty Moths.

"Oh, my God ..." Savanna gasped.

From beneath the mountain of bikers, the cashier's muffled voice called out: *"What the hell is going on?"*

Those that could do so watched in awe as the bristling rex and the four-legged newcomer circled each other cautiously. They watched as the monsters' shadows waltzed darkly across the snow, feigning and posturing and rattling sabers—like dancing duelists. They watched as the saurians circled the trooper's corpse; once, twice ... threatening but maintaining a wide berth.

Then the sail-backed lizard pivoted suddenly and thundered across the asphalt in a red and black blur, like a giant Gila monster. It was charging for the policeman's mangled carcass.

The rex intercepted it in only two quick strides, loosing its massive jaws on the scavenger's spiny sail. It bit forward and down, like an earth-mover scooping up dirt, and came away with a bleeding chunk of flesh—which hung from the sides of its mouth like turkey jowls. The sail-back howled and lurched away, passing the corpse by completely.

And then an odd thing occurred. Instead of pursuing its nemesis and pressing the assault, the tyrannosaur retreated to the far side of the lot. *And waited.*

The wounded sail-back staggered around the farthest pump island and paused. Peering between the REGULAR and the UNLEADED, it regarded the rex with beady red eyes.

Its magnificent sail hovered high above the canopy, floating in the snowy darkness like the mottled wing of some giant moth. There was a ragged wedge taken out of its center—which looked awful but bled only mildly, as the web of flesh between a person's thumb and forefinger will do if scraped or torn in some way.

The tyrannosaur seemed perplexed by this. It shifted uneasily and sniffed at the air, then paced about nervously in a tight circle.

Savanna thought: *That's how the wicked bastard works—it bleeds 'em to death. It swoops in like a stealth fighter and tears a hole in their side, then just steps back and watches the ship go down.*

But the spiny-lizard did not go down. By going for its sail, the rex had merely inflicted a flesh wound—and a weak one at that.

The tyrannosaur cocked its head, curiously. Savanna shivered. It was thinking. *Learning.*

What if it *learned* glass? she wondered. Learned how it hid prey by masking its scent? Learned how it broke away when nudged with a snout? What then?

The tyrannosaur sprung forward and Savanna's heart skipped a beat. The startled sail-back shifted suddenly and shuffled back several steps but the rex was almost there. Unable to retreat in time,

the monster lumbered out from behind the island and rushed at its attacker, charging in low.

A second later its jaws snapped closed around the rex's lower-leg, even as the tyrannosaur struck at its side. Then they were bound up in bloody tooth and punctured flesh, and the red blood sparkled darkly as the carnososaurs whirled around and around in the neon light of the Ozark station.

"*Je-e-esus* Christ," one of the bikers drawled.

Their claws scraped over the snowy asphalt; causing ice to crack, snow to billow, and dirty gray sludge to explode up like hockey-flack. Finally, forced to hop and skid along on only one uncertain foot, the tyrannosaur fell. Again, the entire length of window shuddered with the impact. Laying on its side, the downed rex snapped at the spiny saurian's neck awkwardly. The quadruped released its leg instantly and shuffled back. Its long, thrashing tail brushed against the gas-pumps—once, twice, a third time.

"Shit, man ...!" Omar shouted. "They're gonna knock the damn pumps over!"

The biker nearest the bottom of the pile wound his hand up in the cashier's hair. "Where's the turn-off?"

The black man grunted beneath all the weight. "There's one behind the counter, right next to ..." He hesitated.

The biker bounced his head on the floor. "*Talk*, dammit!"

"There's three buttons right next to each other, see?" the clerk managed. "Colored red, white and blue. The pump shut-off's the white one in the middle."

"Somebody ...!" the biker called.

The hoodlum at the top leapt off the pile, and scrambled for the counter. *And just like that*—the radio came back on. Clear as fiber optics compared to the noise of the last few hours, it rang out amidst the carnage with the sound of heated debate:

"... ships full of little green men, is that what you 're saying?"

"I'm simply saying, the unidentified lights *originated* in those areas affected by weather disturbances—"

"And the disturbances began after the Troy Harper verdict, hence some kind of extra-terrestrial involvement in both—am I warm, caller?" Laughter in the control room.

"Sir, *there is*—"

The biker slapped a hand on the Formica and hurtled his legs over, knocking the radio from the counter. It smashed against the floor and fell silent.

Savanna was pale-faced, chilled by the content of the broadcast. *Little green men ...* she thought, recalling her dream. *How about little gray men with long knife-like fingers? Little gray men who prefer forests filled with dinosaurs to riot-torn cities? How about that?*

The biker behind the counter was wired. His eyes darted from left to right frantically, then discovered a row of plastic switches just beneath the Lotto dispenser. He stabbed at the middle button with a dirty finger, leaving its smooth surface marred with oil.

Then he saw the blur of a tail in the corner of his eye and there was a *crash!* And a *crash!* And a *crash-crash-crash-crash!* He looked outside to find all their bikes tumbled over like dominoes.

Savanna screamed and stumbled away from the window.

The warring dinosaurs were scuttling toward the glass, their cracked, scaly hides looming larger and larger as the thrashing tails and scrambling legs drew closer.

XII | Turnabout

THE TYRANNOSAUR WAS up and on the offensive again, driving the surprised sail-back helplessly against the building. The spinosaur's tail and hind-quarters smashed into the window. Glass pitched inward in a jangling shower of shards, raining down on the mound of bikers. Metal framing moaned and bent and splintered

wood tumbled to the floor. The sail-back's tail swished through the rubble.

A clawed hoof hit the deck only inches from the clerk's head, and the gust of its impact was like a hairdryer blowing in his face. He felt the tiles crack and swell beneath him as the great foot twisted, then its yellowed claws and callused pads were gone into a blur.

The sail-back squealed, its tail whipping about the room like a writhing, sentient tentacle knocking over racks of chips and candy bars, sweeping shelves clear of motor oil and transmission fluid, crushing coolers.

And though she couldn't be certain amidst all that noise, Savanna thought she heard a helicopter. She caught but the hint of a sound, a hovering *thump-thump-thump* ... And then it was gone, lost among the howling of the saurians and the tumbling of shelves.

Omar stood frozen, his jaw agape, as he watched the two titans make hay of the storefront. The sail-back's tail swung perilously close, and suddenly something hard and bony struck him in the mouth. He felt his lip split open like a turnip, then the warm gushing of blood.

He'd managed to swallow a tooth or three before realizing Roger had elbowed him, and the gun was no longer in his hands. His eyes swam back into focus in time to see Roger snatching it up from the floor.

Savanna and Clara fled the area, the former bolting frantically for the arcade, the latter disappearing into the rest room, slamming the door behind her. Everyone else stayed where they were, having other obligations to tend to. Most of them watched hypnotized as the war of the flesh-eaters raged on unabated.

It seemed to go on forever. Fifteen minutes blew by like sidewalk litter, maybe twenty.

At last the threshing carnosaurs moved the battle away from the building, and cold gusts of snow blew in through the wreckage to spiral about everyone's feet.

They were all struggling to catch their breath when the first hint of sirens whispered along the wind. The cashier heard it and lifted his head, only to have it slammed back down by the biker on top of him. Savanna heard it also, and she stirred hopefully in her little nook between videogames, where she'd huddled fearfully a moment before.

The bikers began mumbling among themselves nervously. At last one of them called: "You hear that, Omar?"

But it was Roger's voice which rang out from the back. "Omar's been compromised, *sucker*. Release the clerk ... *now*."

The biker behind the counter whirled around to face him. Roger had the gun trained on Omar's head. There was a wooden squeak as Clara Bonner emerged from the bathroom, closing the flap of her purse.

Savanna stood up and moved toward the center of the room. "Roger?"

Clara moved to take her arm, her shiny black shoes clacking across the tile.

"Hey, what's going on?" the cashier demanded.

"*You heard me ...*" Roger shouted to the bikers. "*Let him up!*"

Slowly, the four bikers climbed off the clerk and stood.

"Now get behind the counter—*all of you!*"

The Dusty Moths fidgeted and milled about hesitantly. The clerk stood up and dusted himself off. He looked to the bikers, rubbing his head.

"White button's the alarm, homies," he said. "Ain't *none* of you had a job?"

The Moths took a unified step toward him.

"Move, goddammit!" Roger's voice had become cracked and husky.

"Belay that order!" Omar commanded. "There's only one of him ... and six of us."

He rolled his dark, stupid eyes toward Roger. "And I used four of the six bullets in that gun on a cheap wench in Seattle." He smiled a bloody smile and his teeth winked at Roger like broken tombstones. Then he lunged for the pistol.

Roger fired twice, wasting crucial time to aim for his legs and so spare his life. It was an automatic reflex, like pulling a punch—he simply wasn't a murderer.

And he simply wasn't ambidextrous. Redirecting the gun and then absorbing its kick had overwhelmed his wobbly left arm's capabilities. And as a consequence he missed his attacker once entirely.

The second bullet, however, punched through leather and flesh and deep into the muscle of Omar's right leg, where it ricocheted twice and blasted out the back, leaving an exit hole the size of a cereal bowl.

Omar fell and the other bikers all rushed forward. The sirens sounded very close as the room erupted into violence.

The cashier was the first to react—jumping the group of bikers from behind and throwing punches randomly. Savanna rushed to the cooler first, then managed to squeeze into the fray and smash a bottle of mineral water over the nearest biker's head. The man grunted and fell to the floor, and she loomed over him with the bottle's broken neck still in her grip. She was about to kick him in the face when a glint of steel caught the corner of her eye—and the biker behind the counter howled in pain.

She spun around to find herself looking at the back of his coat, and *The Dusty Moths* logo inscribed there. Peering over his shoulder, she saw Clara leaning across the far side of the Formica. The big

woman scowled sardonically, and the biker's head lolled around to face Savanna ... revealing a shining needle embedded in egg-yolk.

His eye. She'd poked it out.

Savanna screamed as yellow puss bubbled up around the syringe and ran down his cheek like pale snot. Then someone brushed past her, and she whirled to find Omar stumbling for the motorcycles.

He fell to his knees in front of his own and twisted around to face the store. His face was racked in pain, as if many fishhooks had snared the same flesh and were all being reeled in from different directions. His broken, bloody mouth opened up like a gaping wound, and he yelled hoarsely: "*Come on you sorry idiots!*"

The bikers began to withdraw from the store.

"*Come o-o-o-on!*" he repeated, while trying to lift his bike from the jumble of metal. The blood pumped from his leg profusely, winding away down the snowy asphalt.

Behind him, the now blood-streaked spinosaur snatched up the cop's body by the skull. But the rex's blurred head flashed down out of nowhere and its slime-hung jaws closed around the spino's neck—smashing it to the ground.

Again Savanna found she could not look away, even as the rex took up the cop's legs in its jaws—and started backing away from the spinosaur powerfully.

The growling sail-back would not relent its hold, and what resulted was a heated tug o' war from which Savanna *did* turn away. Though not before she saw the cop's limp body come apart like stretched taffy, and the rex's great head swing away with his legs.

She was grabbing at her eyes as she stumbled away from the window, clawing at their corners with cold, hooked fingers as if trying to gouge them out.

The biker behind the counter was trying this, too. He'd first tried pulling out the needle alone, but he'd only managed to

wrench its tip up at an angle in his panic, and the mind's a funny thing when it's got something steely poking at it from beneath. Crazy with shock, he succeeded in dragging out his punctured right eyeball before he fell to the floor and could be seen no more.

And then an electrical something disturbed the ether, causing all of reality to ripple like water and run at the edges. Savanna reeled as time and space seemed to come undone, as matter seemed to scramble and reconstitute.

She blinked and all was normal again. Except, alas, for a few dozen tree ferns— the scaly trunks of which now peppered the room like the Swiss Family Robinson's ceiling supports.

My God ... she thought, examining them. They 're cycads. The room's full of prehistoric flora.

She heard sirens blaring loudly now, and turned to find the Dusty Moths hastily mounting their bikes. The rex, meanwhile, was stooped over its kill, chomping away at it as though sharpening its teeth. The spinosaur was gone. But there was something wrong with the picture—beyond the tyrannosaur, of course—and it took her a moment to acknowledge what it was.

The sun was shining. The blowing snow and wintry chill were gone, and the prehistoric trees had sprung up everywhere. They stood right there on the concrete as if rooted in soft earth; some standing clear, still others merged with gas-pumps and automobiles. One in particular had materialized right in the middle of a jagged-edged section of the store's shattered window, half of its trunk on the inside of the glass, half of it on the outside.

Savanna swooned. *It was a forest. like the one in her dream.* Looking toward the horizon, she saw that the clouds were rolling back. They were retreating, and the strange lights were retreating with them.

It wasn't a dream after all, she thought, feeling as though she would go insane. *It wasn't a dream at all. It was a vision—Dear God, it was actually a vision ...*

No. No, it had not been a vision. That was crazy. She had experienced a vivid nightmare, that's all. And now she was imposing her own fears onto reality ...

She made herself stop. Dream *or* vision, she wasn't going to get through this if she lost her marbles now. She was just gonna have to deal with it later. Who knew why any of this was happening? Suffice it to say that ... that ...

"We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," she said out loud.

Then something flashed in the distance, and realizing what it was, she gestured toward the highway and shouted: "*Look!*"

Roger and the clerk peered into the heat wave. There were pulsating red and blue lights blocking both the off-ramp and the on-ramp. Everyone inside the store cheered. The Calvary had arrived at last.

The bikers saw it, too, and hurriedly began kick-starting their motors.

The Old Hippie's Harley rumbled up next to Omar's, and he gave the leader's shoulder a rugged massage. "It's no good, man. They've got us pinned."

Omar's eyes were dark, empty space. "What?" he said. "*What?*"

Blood was coursing from beneath his leather chaps and filling up his right boot.

The Old Hippie shook him violently. "The cops, man! They've rolled out a goddamn army! What do you want to do?"

Omar squinted at him in the glare. Gleaming sweat had beaded like dew-drops along the dark skin of his forehead, and streamed around his eyes in spidery rivers. "The cops ...?"

“*Look, Omar!*” The Old Hippie wrestled him around and pointed. “Jesus, our bikes’ll wind up in the Bonnie and Clyde Museum if we go out there ... you dig?”

Omar looked to the on-ramp and saw that it was indeed barricaded with parked patrol cars. Their colored lights were sparkling in the shimmering heat like fireworks—winking at him it seemed—and men in black were poised with pistols balanced on hoods. In another time and place, and filtered through a keener muse, they might well have seemed like shadowy watchers—protected and aided by spirits of light.

Omar just saw a *bunch of fug’ n cops*. He panned to the *off*-ramp and saw the very same scene, like a shot used twice in a low-budget movie. Then he looked to the tyrannosaur.

And found the rex was already looking down at *him*. It had apparently swallowed the policeman’s legs and found its stomach still wanting ... as if it had dined Chinese. Its cold gaze met Omar’s and what immediately followed was a little moment between biker and carnosaur. Its slitted, pale eyes seemed almost to be saying: *I’m liquidating our partnership, Hoss. And I’m liquidating you. No, nothing personal ... just hungry. And you’re fresh.*

“*D-a-mn y-o-u!!*” Omar screamed, his face tilted angrily against the harsh press of the sun.

He kicked his Harley down into first gear and brodied away from the Old Hippie, laughing.

The rex cocked its head like a bird, fascinated, and followed him with its sharp eyes. But it did not lunge for him. Its tiny forearms waggled ridiculously and it seemed confused.

Watching from inside, Roger figured it would really suck to have arms so little you couldn’t scratch your head. Then he thought of his missing hand, and laughed a little nervously.

Omar The Mad and Bleeding made a high-speed circle around the rex. Its head shifted from side to side angrily as it tried to keep

a bead on him. When the biker swung back into view, he motioned to the rest.

"Come on you spineless bastards!" he screamed, his long hair licking and lashing at his face. "Let's pick him up and move him out! Blockade, *meet dinosaur!*"

The Old Hippie's drunken eyes flashed to the blockade and back. It could be done, he realized. They could whip the rex into a frenzy and lead him right to the blockade.

He kicked his bike into gear.

The cops wouldn't know whether to shoot at them or shoot at the rex. It would be total chaos ... and that suited an Old Hippie just fine.

He tore out away from the store and the others fell in behind, hooting and hollering like motorized chieftains from hell.

XIII | Round-up

ROGER TURNED TOWARD the cashier. "We're not gonna want to be down here when all those yo-yos open fire," he said. "Is there a ladder to the roof?"

The clerk smiled and held up his keys. "There's a metal hatch in the rear. "

Roger nodded and motioned to Savanna. "Right. Let's go."

The little group pulled together and headed for the back of the store.

Beyond the crumbled facade, a billowing section of newspaper danced past like a tumbleweed. The wind had picked up suddenly and violently, as though the elements were warring for control of the earth. Dirt and dust and bouncing pebbles now blew across the lot like swirling glitter, just as snow had done only moments before. Amidst the gale, the Dusty Moths had formed their own little rumbling wagon train—and were circling the rex like angry hor-

nets. The agitated carnosaur was beginning to circle as well, tracking them around and around, its massive jaws hung wide.

They revolved like that for several moments, the bikers chasing each other; the rex seeming to chase its own tail. Then its huge head darted forward and down, sweeping the Old Hippie clean from his bike. The riderless Harley rolled forward without him, then crashed on its side to grate along the asphalt.

The sound of small arms being fired issued from the blockade.
Pop-pop-pop!

The rex jerked its head and sent the Old Hippie flying—still alive and wailing insanely—through the hot, shimmering, windy air.

Pop-pop-pop-pop ...! More gunfire from the highway. Yet neither the bikers nor the rex were being hit.

The screaming stopped abruptly as the Old Hippie's body bounced twice over the concrete, its broken legs flopping opposite their joints, its dead arms flailing. But the cyclone of leather and sputtering Harleys continued to rumble in circles about the rex, and glancing to the Old Hippie's body briefly, its lunatic ringleader laughed insanely and cried against the wind: "*Somebody give the man a straight cigarette!*"

They heard it clear from the Ozark station's office, but the distant gunfire was inaudible beneath the rex's bellowing and the Harleys' rumbling.

"He's gone crazy," Clara whispered, and shivered all over.

"The whole world's gone crazy," Savanna said.

"You got it yet?" Roger shouted, craning his neck to peer up the roof-access shaft.

The cashier was at the top of the ladder, juggling keys. "Almost, man ..."

Savanna squeezed Roger's arm in both hands.

An instant later the hatch banged open and sunlight spilled down the shaft. *Pop-pop ... pop ...* The distant gunfire trailed off and was gone.

“All-right-all-right-all-right ...!” the cashier exclaimed, and scrambled out through the opening.

Roger and Savanna immediately followed, and Clara brought up the rear, panting heavily. By the time Roger and the clerk pulled her into the light by her arms, she'd sweated huge stains in her white dress.

A tremendous cloud of billowing dust churned up from the direction of the parking lot, winding away like battle-smoke. Scrambling to the edge of the roof, they all looked at the spectacle below—and wondered if maybe they weren't going mad themselves.

It had become a virtual stampede down there. The bikers were hollering like chain-gang hicks and pretending to throw lassoes at the now frenzied tyrannosaur. After a moment, Omar the Great and Terrible swung into view and waved up at them festively.

They all gave him the finger.

Omar laughed, looking up at them. *That's kind of special*, he thought. *Like a twenty-one-gun salute.*

He whirled around to face forward—and saw the rex's twin-clawed hand swoop down out of nowhere. It looked like a twisted, dead tree branch; all black and spidery against the searing blue sky. He died instantly as the flashing talon flayed away his face, sending it spinning through the air like a swollen-eyed Frisbee.

The handlebars jerked sideways and the blood-splashed Harley tumbled end-over-end. Omar landed at the foot of the gas-pumps. He also landed at the far end of the lot. Roger grimaced and fought back the nausea. He wondered how some unsuspecting paramedic might react upon rolling over the body.

And then he laughed bitterly, for the Dusty Moths had become the Three Musketeers in less than ninety seconds. He looked to the

rex and saw the king of all predators throw back its head, roaring at the sky triumphantly.

One of the survivors steered for the rubble of the building, but cracked up badly as he tried to ride his Harley back inside. His body went flying like so many others, and the *CNN* tumor in Roger's brain said: *Old hat, man. Bring on something new.*

At last, the remaining two split off in different directions. One got only as far as the rex's flashing jaws, and began screaming hoarsely as the monster lifted both him *and* his bike off the ground. They died in the carnosaur's palate as one twisted lump; like some shrieking, idling medicine ball—all made up of mangled flesh and bent steel.

Roger hoped the gas tank would explode and blow the scaly bastard's head right off. But it didn't, and an instant later the rex opened its jaws—letting the crumpled Harley fall smoking to the ground. It crashed against the pavement with the shrieking of steel ... and *then* exploded.

Roger was pale-faced. *From the Three Musketeers to the Lone Ranger in thirty seconds*, he thought. *Jesus.*

Fortunately, the exploding shrapnel still did some damage, and the rex stumbled back with a hundred little razor cuts scattered over its face. Its thick tail nudged against a gas pump and Roger saw the mounts break loose. But the pump remained standing ... *barely.*

Seeing this, the lone survivor of the Dusty Moths zoomed off toward the trees and the grassy, rocky terrain beyond, out away from the interstate and into the newly unknown.

Ditching his bike, he disappeared into the blowing green grass. And Roger noticed that the grass had *grown*. It now stood higher than the average person, rippling in the wind like ripe cornstalks.

An instant later, he saw something dark and fluttering dip from above and snatch the biker away, like a pelican scooping a fish from the water. The shadowy something then vanished behind a hill, and

Roger shuddered as if rocked by a chill wind. He scanned the sky for more dark somethings, but found only empty blue and scattered clouds.

But it wasn't over.

In fact, it seemed it was just beginning as the tyrannosaur turned its great head and stared at everyone on the roof. Its eyes flashed to something below them, and it growled from deep in its throat. It opened its goo-strung maw and bellowed, then thundered forward ...

Everyone shuffled back. The rex passed beneath the roof, leaving only its tail exposed. They watched as the striped dagger swung from side to side. There was a sudden, tortured cry, and the rex backed out into their view again—holding a biker in its blood-drenched jaws. All was silence as it dropped him to the ground and buried its snout in his abdomen.

“Jesus, man ...” the cashier groaned. “I’ve seen enough already!”

He turned his gaze to the blockade. “We’re out of the way; why don’t they open—” He left off suddenly.

“Holy shit,” he moaned.

Everyone else followed his stare.

The blockade had been attacked. Its dead were now scattered everywhere; some lying between cars, others collapsed on hoods. At least one man was folded over an open door, his bleeding arms resembling wet socks hung out to dry. Lonely lights revolved atop the cars, flashing.

And among it all, twentyfold velociraptors were enjoying a free lunch, feeding and mingling and feeding some more—like scaly employees at a company picnic.

“Ah, *man* ...” the clerk said at last. “Would somebody please tell me what the hell’s going on here?”

“I don’t think you’d like my answer,” Savanna said, staring off into space. “If it is an answer.”

"Look, it's okay," Roger intervened. "The rex has got enough food down there to last him the proverbial winter. We just gotta hang tight up here until he settles down—"

The entire building lurched violently, and the roof slanted precariously toward the parking lot. The rex looked up at them briefly, snarling ... then returned to its kill.

"You were saying ...?" the clerk prompted.

"Okay, yeah, that's no good ..." Roger looked to the ridge of rock which stood between them and the highway, and the field of tall grass proceeding it. "Right. Okay, then ... I believe it's time."

He was trying not to think about fluttering dark somethings.

"Time for *what*?" the cashier barked. "Time to die? Oh, man ... *Thank-you* for sharing that with us—"

"Time to run," Roger said.

"*Oh, man! You want to have a footrace with that thing?*"

"Why not, it's distracted," Roger said. "And it's tired. I say we drop down on the south side of the building, run north through the grass to that ridge, and try to flag a ride on the other side." He laughed a little nervously. "If there is an *other* side."

Savanna squeezed his arm. "I think you're right ... and we might not get another chance."

The clerk glowered at her unbelievably. "Look baby, this ain't *Father Knows Best* ..." He turned to Roger. "With all due respect to your delirious husband here, I gotta tell you all that's absolutely, positively *not* the thing to do."

Timbers shifted somewhere beneath them, like the groaning floorboards of a ragtag trawler.

Roger stared at him. "*Listen* to the building," he urged.

The cashier glared back, sweat beading along his forehead. The timbers continued to creak, ominously. At last, he nodded grimly. "Okay, homeboy ... we'll do it your way. You ever ran before?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "Just to the fridge with a cigarette in my hand."

The clerk clapped him on the arm. "That's a good start ..." He turned to the women. "Let's do it!"

Clara Bonner, however, had begun backing away from them, her face pallid. She retreated until she reached the south edge of the roof, and could retreat no more. Savanna let go of Roger and stepped toward her.

"Clara?"

She was shaking her head. "I can't ... I can't, okay?"

The roof skewed once more, and the loose gravel shifted beneath their shoes like greased ball bearings.

"You got to, honey," Savanna told her gently. "We're not leaving you here."

"Well, I'm *not* going!" Her eyes had welled up in tears. "See, this is the part of the movie where the fat chick who can't keep up bites it ..."

"No," Savanna insisted. "We're gonna make it. We are *all* going to make it, do you understand me?"

Again the roof tilted, and everyone wavered dangerously on their feet. And again the rex glanced up from its kill to stare at them coldly. Any more movement and they would all be on a slide-trough to hell.

"I'll just stay with Roy," Clara said, and shrugged her shoulder like a pudgy little girl.

"Jesus Christ, Clara ... you can't just—"

And the roof started to topple.

XIV | Marathon

SAVANNA SHOVED CLARA ruthlessly over the side, and an instant later they were all free-falling, their arms swinging in broad

circles. Tall green grass loomed up around them as they crashed to the ground. But even in the disorientation that followed—nobody called out. They all knew the score full well. It was time to run, and run fast, and never look back lest they be turned into pillars of salt.

And so they scrambled to their feet among the stalks of tall grass and did just that, sprinting through the emerald shadows as if pursued by their own worse nightmares. The clerk pulled into the lead, then Roger, Savanna, and just as she'd feared—Clara Bonner fell fast behind. For his part, Roger just prayed the cashier knew where he was going. He was a head taller than anyone else, and only he could lead them to the highway.

But it was difficult even to keep him in sight, let alone follow him—the tall blades of grass were whipping at Roger's cheeks like razors.

Finally, the clerk bellowed, "*I see it!*"

And the waddling shriek of an animal answered him. It had come from somewhere behind, somewhere back by ...

Clara broke faith and glanced over her shoulder, her eyeballs jostling wildly. The field behind her was shaking as if viewed through a hand-held video-camera, yet even amidst all the blurry confusion, she was able to see something tall and dark surging after her through the grass.

It was a black and red sail.

She turned back around and pumped her legs harder. Blades of grass flashed out of the darkness—lashing at her face, stabbing at her eyes. Her heart seemed to be trying to punch through her chest. She wanted to scream, tried to scream, but the breath was not hers to expend. Her shiny black shoes flew over the ground, kicking aside rocks and crushing down stalks. Then they faltered in their panic, twisted about each other as if caught up in barbed wire—and she fell sprawling into the grass with her purse tumbling before her.

The call came again, like a gibbering loon amplified tenfold, but it wasn't just closer *it was there*. Right on top of her. Clara felt warm breath blanket her back, and found she was able to scream at last.

Roger heard it from more than two dozen yards ahead. Startled, he craned his neck around to peer over his bouncing shoulder ... and realized Savanna was no longer behind him.

She spotted Clara's purse, first. Then Savanna saw the monstrous shape of the spinosaur, hunkering down over something on the ground. *Feeding*.

But Clara Bonner was still alive.

And Savanna found herself snatching up the woman's spilled purse and dashing through its contents frantically. An instant later she found what she was looking for, and grasping several syringes all in one hand, she charged at the sail-back—driving them into its right eye.

The monster reared back immediately, howling at the sky, the gleaming hypodermic needles protruding from its ruptured red iris. Savanna darted in as it stumbled back, and scooped up Clara by her soggy armpits.

She was still conscience. And though there was a lot of blood, it appeared her wounds were only superficial.

"Can you walk?" Savanna asked.

"It ain't over 'till the fat lady sings," she breathed, and together they managed to get her up off the ground and moving yet again.

They'd traveled barely a few yards ... when the grass ahead of them rustled suddenly and split apart like chopped wood—

It was Roger.

"Everybody all-right?" he asked.

Savanna nodded emptily, and motioned for him to assist her. They each took up a beefy arm, bolstering Clara on their own lean

shoulders, and the three of them moved out toward the highway. Wherever the hell *that* was.

Behind them, the Ozark station exploded. The ground was rocked by three consecutive concussions ... *THUMP! KER-THUMP! THUMP!* Flaming bits of debris twirled down like streamers.

A moment later the cashier called out from a distance.

"I'm on the ridge! Follow my voice! *And hurry up—you got company!*"

Roger glanced at Savanna, and she shook her head. "He sees the sail-back, that's all. It's ... I took care of it."

He raised an eyebrow ... and there was a tremendous roar. He rose up on his toes and peeked over the grass.

The tyrannosaur was coming—it was striding and crashing through the field. Roger froze, watching the animal *shimmer* in the heat. The sight of its narrow, dark form bounding through the greenery seemed utterly alien. Nothing that big and that quick had any place on land.

"Guess who's coming to dinner ..." he said, then took a breath and snapped: "*Let's move it!*"

They broke into a sprint, struggling against their encumbrment. The tall grass flashed by them in a blur. Roger could hear the rex getting closer; he could hear the breath surging in and out of its lungs. He pumped his legs as hard as he could, yanking Savanna and Clara along.

They burst from the shadows and their shoes pounded over concrete. Roger realized they were half-way home; they'd reached the feeder road to the freeway. He peered north over the grass and saw the ridge looming close. The cashier stood high atop its edge, waving his arms in the glare of the sun. *My god*, Roger dared to hope, *we might just make it ...*

But rationally, he knew that was impossible. It just couldn't happen that way. The rex was *too damn fast*.

They plowed forward into grass again. Roger expected to hear the rex cross the road at their heels, yet heard only rustling grass.

Time blurred as they ran, retaining no meaning. Roger's heart labored under the weight of too many cigarettes. They were almost there; he could see the ridge without straining now. He heard the rex roar somewhere behind them somewhere close, but not as close as he might have expected.

He couldn't stand it any longer. There had to be some reason why the rex hadn't caught up with them. At last, he dared a quick glance over his shoulder.

And realized the tyrannosaur was on fire.

It wasn't exactly engulfed in flames yet, but parts of its flesh *were* burning, burning and crisping away.

Somehow, the three of them managed to scramble up the steep incline of the ridge ... where the cashier reached out with his beautiful dark arms and drug them the rest of the way to safety.

The rex collided with the rocks and howled angrily. Its sleek, burning skull was rapidly becoming just that, *a skull*. They all huddled fearfully as it stared after them over the ridge, its flaming face on an even plane with their own. Its eyes bulged out like accusing, vein-strung orbs, rolling in their sockets, straining against their stalks, revealing their whole whites to become shining, pale balls.

Roger looked to the highway below, his shoes teetering over the crumbling edge. He saw a hay-truck approaching from the west, just seconds away from passing directly beneath them. He turned to the others and motioned toward it. The carnosaur's snout darted toward them, and together they leapt into the void.

The great rex opened its maw for one final, trumpeting bellow, its presence now reduced to a mere flaming skull, and then crumbled away into shards of blackened bone and smoldering ash, its

primordial howl unraveling into a tortured, prolonged squeal, which tapered away with the flames and smoke and stench of burnt flesh and was gone.

The four survivors hit the hay.

And oblivious to their presence, the big truck motored away down the interstate.

XV | New World

CYCAD TREES RUSHED by in a blur, mile after mile after mile of them.

"It's really all over, isn't it?" Savanna said, gazing out between the crude wooden slats. "The world, I mean, *Our world*. It's gone."

Her hair brushed Roger's cheek. "Yeah," he said. "I think so."

She nodded, lost in thought.

They sat in silence for a time, the warm wind flapping their collars. A dragonfly the size of a housecat buzzed past, its cellophane wings vibrating like a radio-controlled airplane. A hazy volcano belched lava in the distance.

Clara Bonner had fallen asleep on the floor, and the cashier sat with his back to yellow straw, a few bails of which were stacked high enough against the cab to prevent the driver from seeing his stowawayed passengers. He sat smoking a cigarette, watching the pterodactyls circle high above them.

A velociraptor kept pace with them briefly, bounding over the ground like a cheetah.

Savanna whispered: "*Throw wide the gates of hell, and let loose the beasts of prey ...*"

Roger looked at her, his expression concerned. "What, honey?"

She stared at the sky. "They've passed their own verdict."

Roger appeared confused. "They?"

She turned toward him, the wind blowing her long red hair sideways across her face. Her eyes were glassy and distant as she

said: “The lights ... the lights we saw in the clouds. They’ve passed judgment on us.”

He lifted an eyebrow. Was this woman's intuition?

She turned to stare through the slats again, and they passed a triceratops grazing at roadside. It looked up at them as they blew past, lazily mulling a mouthful of grass.

“They came here in the age of the dinosaurs,” she began, “and found a world that was balanced ... and beautiful. When they returned millions of years later, they found us ... and we were fighting.”

The rig suddenly swerved, and an instant later a stand of cycad trees blew past close. They’d materialized in the middle of the right lane.

She went on: “I think they missed the world they’d left, but they watched us for a while, hoping we’d change. We didn’t, and so they re-imposed natural order as they remembered it, though it had been a long time, even for them. I think they had to try a lot of things to make it work. And it might not have, completely.” She looked at Roger. “When we were on the roof, did you notice the way the wind was ...”

She paused, as though waking from a dream. Roger didn’t say anything. Another dragonfly whizzed past the slats.

Trembling, she said: “*Tell me all of that’s insane ... Please?*”

He stared at her, thinking about what she’d said. Yeah, it sounded crazy. But what was crazy, anymore?

He put his arm around her and squeezed, thinking of the Harper verdict and the riots—and how everybody had exploited both. The truck’s motor chugged along and its tires droned over the pavement, already being covered over by moss and fern.

He told her he loved her instead.

FLASHBACK DAWN

I | Naaygi

As it never had before the Flashback, the supermarket slept, mostly. Although its exterior was covered with creeper vines and mossy growths, its interior remained remarkably unchanged—even its power continued to hum. Still, the long lights that hung suspended over its aisles had largely gone dead; and of those that remained live, many had begun to flicker and fail. No humans walked the once-polished floors of the Ozark Food and Drug Supercenter, nor did they crowd the expansive front lot where they had once competed—sometimes violently—for parking space. And yet, from the markings on the signboards and multitudes of packages to the Christmas music drifting like fog up and down the aisles, their presence remained.

It was a presence unremarked upon by the place's new dominant species—compsognathus—who scavenged the shelves this night as they had any other, as oblivious to the music and the dead languages of their forbearers as they were the lights in the sky that had presaged the Flashback (or rather, for them, the flash-forward). And yet there *was something* that garnered their attention—a grinding hum, a sound outside of nature, outside the store, which drew inexorably closer as they raised their little heads and cocked moist, round eyes; as they fidgeted about like so many scaly, featherless chickens. And then the glass doors at the front of the store shattered inward and the face of a monster emerged, hard-edged and not of this world, utterly alien, its teeth meshed so tight as to resemble a grin, its eyes on fire so that they cut the dark like sickle-claws. And they scattered as it roared up the aisle and passed them by, even as a popping was heard, a booming, really, which coincided with the packages all around them exploding like volcanoes.

“Not the compies, not the compies,” snapped Charlotte from the backseat. “For Christ’s sake, save the ammo. Remember what we’re here for.”

Corbin ignored her, training his sites on one of the compsognathuses fleeing in the headlights. “We need the meat,” he said, simply, and squeezed off a round. The compsognathus exploded like a watermelon. Red reached across the cab and snatched the muzzle of the weapon, jerked it back through the window—even as the Jeep Wrangler skewed to the left and its fender grazed the shelves.

“She’s right, goddammit. Save the ammo. We don’t know what all is in here. All that thing is going to do is blow everything to pieces.”

Corbin levelled his gaze at him—as ruthless and serpentine as any dinosaur. “Don’t ever do that again, Red.” Then he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and whipped the gun back out the window, and fired—not a single shot this time but an entire volley. Jars of tomato sauce exploded and dripped as they blew past.

Red glanced at Charlotte in the rearview mirror, who splayed her hands and widened her eyes as if to say, *Well, do something!* “Where to, boss? Quickly,” he merely said.

“Cans, we need cans—tuna, mackerel, anything with protein. Should be the next aisle over.”

He brought the Jeep to a screeching halt at the end of the aisle, reversed quickly, and whipped the hood around into the adjacent section. The signboard above them read: SOUP / CANNED VEGETABLES / CANNED PREPARED. Red geared down and proceeded slowly. “Okay, everyone, keep your eyes open.”

“There!” said Charlotte.

Red maneuvered them close to the shelf and put it into neutral, ratcheted the emergency brake. Corbin placed the semi-automatic rifle between his knees and shook his hand at Charlotte. She quick-

ly handed him a basket and he began scooping cans of mackerel into it sloppily. "Come on, hurry, hurry," said Red.

Corbin exchanged the basket for a new one and cleaned off the rest of the shelf. "Tuna's on the bottom," he said. "Come on! Back her up and I'll cover."

Red glanced in the mirror at Charlotte, who nodded affirmatively. He released the brake and backed up, ratcheted it back on.

They all scrambled out.

"You got this?" said Red to Charlotte. "May as well scour the entire aisle." And to Corbin: "I'll take this end." He grabbed his rifle and jogged toward the nearest endcap.

Corbin eyed the far endcap dubiously, even fearfully. "You piece of shit, Red." Then he hurried down the aisle in a state of high alert, pointing his assault rifle this way and that.

Charlotte popped the hatch and grabbed a couple baskets, began filling them with tuna. A cry sounded from somewhere near the back of the store which Red recognized instantly. Charlotte and he exchanged glances. "You hear that, Corbin?" he shouted.

Corbin was but a tiny figure at the end of the aisle. "Yeah, asshole. I heard it. Let's go."

"What's the matter, Supercop? Afraid of something that might fight you back? Give her a minute."

Charlotte exchanged her baskets for empty ones and rushed down the aisle.

The call sounded again and yet another responded, this one from the front of the store. "Those are fucking raptors, Michelangelo. She's got about sixty seconds before I come down there and take that Jeep with or without you."

"Where did they come from?" said Charlotte, piling cans into her baskets.

"Probably filed in after us," said Red, or slipped through a back door we missed."

“They can appear out of nowhere, asshole,” hollered Corbin. “I’ve seen one materialize right where a man was standing.” Another call echoed throughout the store and he aimed his rifle into the dark. “Want to know what happened?”

“No!” shouted Charlotte. She scrambled for the Jeep with her baskets laden with cans.

Corbin began backing toward them. “It fused with the poor bastard—became sort of a man-dinosaur hybrid, just a jumbled mess of flesh with eyeballs in all the wrong places and their organs mixed together, like a casserole. Fortunately, it didn’t live very—”

There was a tumult of cascading cans and jars which clattered and broke against the floor as a velociraptor leapt atop the shelves between them, and he instantly raised his gun and opened fire. Blood flew off the creature as it danced wildly and its body fell into the adjacent aisle, but was quickly replaced by two more, which pranced along the tops of the shelves, snarling and gnashing their teeth. Corbin bolted for the Jeep.

They had just enough time to close the hatch and pile into the vehicle before the raptors fell upon it and were joined by others, who besieged it no differently than they would a large plant-eating dinosaur, latching onto it with their clawed hands and sickled talons even as Red crunched it into gear and they chirped forward.

“We lost a lot of good men that day,” said Corbin, pursuing the subject as though nothing were going on at all, “while you civilians scrambled to save your own hides. We—”

“Jesus, Corbin, your window!” shrieked Charlotte—too late—as one of the beasts’ heads darted deep into the cab and began thrashing about violently. The Jeep careened against the shelves as Red lost control, first to the left, then to the right, causing groceries to cascade down the windshield and to roll off the hood, as Charlotte slid the pistol from her holster and opened fire on the velociraptor, which bucked and leapt, banging its head against the

ceiling, before reversing itself back through the window and falling away.

Corbin cranked up his window and looked at her over his shoulder as Red regained control, and said, albeit begrudgingly, "Thank you."

But Charlotte was no longer looking at his face; instead she had focused on his shoulder—which had been laid open by the raptor's flashing teeth and now bled profusely over his policeman's uniform and down the side of his seat, causing Red to reach behind himself awkwardly and fish around for something even as he accelerated for the front doors of the supermarket.

"There's a First-Aid kit behind my seat," he said, and Charlotte quickly joined in the search even as Red added, "It's right here," and took his eyes off the wheel just long enough for Corbin to shout, "*Red!*"

He'd scarcely had time to refocus on the wheel before he noticed a lithe figure awash in the headlights, a figure shorter than the average person and swathed in what appeared to be animal hides, holding a spear, who turned its head to face them and regarded them briefly as its—*her*—eyes flashed with terror and the Jeep's push bar collided with her body.

• • • •

"IT'S HUMAN, *oh my god*, it's human," said Charlotte as the Jeep idled and the raptors clawed and bit at the cab.

"No, it's not," said Corbin. "I—I saw it clearly before we hit it. It's ... it's some kind of ... *ape-thing*."

"But the spear, look at the spear!"

"It's alive, whatever it is," said Red. He tore his eyes away from the writhing form now laying some twenty feet from the Jeep and regarded them. "And I'm responsible."

Corbin's eyes lit up with realization. "Now wait just a damn minute ..."

"He's right, Red," said Charlotte. "You can't go out there."

Red turned and looked beyond her, through the back window. A glowing green exit sign could be seen at the far end of the aisle. Charlotte followed his gaze. "You better not be thinking what I think you're thinking," she said.

"I can make it," he said, examining the distance, "if you two can get her into the truck. I'll go through the door and you can pick me up outside."

Metal buckled as one of the raptors landed on the hood and began gnawing around the windshield, tearing the wipers off. Another joined it, looking in at them with its cold, round eyes, cocking its head. Corbin gazed at them mesmerized before managing, "The kit ... I'm like, fucking bleeding all over the place, if you haven't noticed."

"Give me your gun," said Red.

"Hey, *fuck you*, I'm bleeding to death here. Look at me!"

Red snatched it from him in one swift stroke. "You'll survive. She won't—not when those raptors catch a whiff of her. Charlotte, can you drive this thing?"

She stared at him intensely before saying, at last, "I can drive it."

He placed a hand on his door handle. "Corbin, give me a fresh clip."

The ex-police officer just glared at him. "If I could move my arm, I just might."

Charlotte reached into Corbin's coat pocket and grabbed one as Red ejected the old clip, then snapped it into place for him. "Locked and loaded," she said, and smiled tepidly. "You know, it's not very MIGOW of you, risking your life for a woman like this."

He looked at her a moment and his eyes flicked up and down her face, and something passed between them which had passed be-

tween them before, a thousand times before, in fact. It wasn't quite attraction, and yet ... "That's MGTOW," he said, "and we don't *hate* women." He opened his door less than an inch. "We just don't trust, deal with, or like them very much. Get the door."

She'd barely had time to react much less to stretch between the seats when he threw open the door and began running toward the exit, hooting and hollering to get the raptors' attention. The creatures leapt from the truck immediately and pursued.

"What the hell does *MGTOW* mean?" asked Corbin as she slid behind the wheel.

She jammed the truck into gear. "Men Going Their Own Way," she said, and rolled her eyes. "You know, like you. But by choice."

• • • •

RED RAN, RAKING A HAND along the shelves, knocking jars and cans and boxes onto the floor, hoping it would trip the raptors up, hoping they might slip on the spilled contents. He ran until he could hear their breathing only several feet behind him, then swiveled at last and opened fire. Two of them danced wildly, throwing off blood, and fell, thrashing about, but the others continued the pursuit. Worse, they had gained on him, and were now merely a few yards away. Worse still, when he refocused forward he saw yet another velociraptor had circled around the aisle and now blocked his path to the exit. *Good lord*, he thought, *does it know that's a door? Could it possibly know that?* Then he zigged sideways and, without even thinking, dashed into the corridor that led to the back stock-room. There was a glassed-in office immediately to his right, and he gripped the knob.

It was open. No sooner had he squeezed through and pulled the door shut behind him than the raptors collided against it, scratching and biting. He turned around and looked at them through the glass inset: at their moist, yellow eyes and cracked,

scaly hides, at their mohawks of dark, ruffled feathers which, when combined with their frenzied and erratic movements, reminded Red of the Zuni Fetish Doll from a TV movie he had seen as a kid—*Trilogy of Terror*, as he recalled. Nor had he gotten used to the idea of being so low on the food chain; indeed, he'd be the first to admit that the notion still woke him in the middle of the night, sweating and trembling uncontrollably, as it had from the first day of the Flashback.

But the glass was thin and time was short, so he searched the office for a point of egress and, finding no door, blew out the small window near the manager's desk.

He was clearing the shards from the sill, wondering where the primitive-looking girl had come from, marveling at how she'd seemed to materialize out of thin air, when he noticed the eerie, flickering glow of the television monitors—an entire bank of them—in the far corner of the room. And it struck him immediately that the collision had undoubtedly been caught on tape. He stuck his head out the shattered window briefly, just long enough to determine that Charlotte and Corbin weren't already on their way, then hurried to the security console.

It didn't take him long to find the footage of their entry into the supermarket, and yet, despite the vantage of no less than fourteen television cameras, no trace of the primitive girl could be found, either before or after their arrival (although the mystery of the raptors had been solved, for they had, indeed, filed in through the busted doors). That left only the collision itself, which he caught in passing as he jogged the video forward, before stopping the tape abruptly, and reversing to the moment just before they'd struck her. And here was the damndest thing: because, despite Corbin's lecture, Red *had* seen things materialize out of nowhere since the Flashback; not a raptor directly into a man, that much was true, but a cycad tree where before there had only been empty

space. And so he knew what these manifestations looked like, and what he saw on the video, *was not that*. For those were instant replacements, not so much as though something had suddenly appeared but as though one had just noticed something which had always been there. No, for while the girl had appeared out of nowhere, all right, she had appeared in a flash of light. A *shaft* of light, rather, only instants before they'd struck her.

Glass shattered suddenly and shards flew everywhere, nicking his cheeks, and before he'd even realized that the sheer volume of sound and fury was more than what the door itself, if compromised, could have provided, one of the beasts was upon him, having leapt feet-first through the glass wall that looked out upon the stock room.

He squeezed off a few rounds which went wildly astray before the gun was knocked from his hands and sent skittering across the floor. And then he had only his hands, which he clasped about the predator's jaws in what he knew would be a vain attempt to keep its teeth from sinking into his neck. And it struck him that what filled his mind in what he was convinced were his last moments were but two things: the mural he'd been working on in the great reception hall of their compound—a mural which would now remain unfinished—and Charlotte. What happened next happened very fast, although for Red it seemed like hours—hours spent twisting and thrashing like a madman in order to thwart the beasts' attempts to clamp their jaws about a limb, or to exploit an opening in his abdominal area (for he could see the deadly sickle-claws on their feet flashing by the light of the monitors). But in fact only seconds had passed before the top of his primary attacker's head simply exploded—splattering him with blood and bits of brain—leaving only its lower mandible to continue biting at dead air, and Red realized, craning his neck to look up at the window he'd shot out, that

Corbin was crouched in its frame, picking the animals off with militarily precise headshots.

He squeezed out from under the dead velociraptor with what strength he had left and scrambled for the window, but had scarcely begun to reach for Corbin when the ex-cop snapped, “My gun, asshole!”

Red looked about the room, still disoriented. Spying it, he rushed toward it and snatched it up, even as Charlotte called, “Let’s hurry it up, we’ve got company!”

Red handed Corbin the weapon and they exchanged uneasy glances. It was an exchange that set Red’s hair on end, for the cop’s eyes said one thing very clearly: *I could leave you here right now, asshole. Because seconds count ... and it might just come down to you or me.*

Then he set his weapon aside and extended his hand for Red to take, and they just managed to clear the window and climb into the Jeep before the pair of allosaurs—not quite as large as their cousin T. Rex but quicker and more gracile—descended upon them from the mists, and the group narrowly missed being caught in a pincer movement only by Charlotte’s assured driving and a heady dose of pure, undiluted luck.

• • • •

THE FIRST ASPECT OF the primitive girl Red became acquainted with was the tip of her spear, which jabbed him in the ribs as he climbed into the backseat of the truck.

“You brought her spear?” he said incredulously, shifting the weapon aside, even as one of the allosaurs brushed its massive head against the chassis, causing the Jeep to lift off two wheels briefly and to nearly lose its footing.

“She’s in shock, but she wouldn’t be separated from it,” said Charlotte. “Hang on!”

Red grabbed the back of her seat as the Jeep rocked violently and accelerated, sparing a glance at the primitive girl as he did so. She was only semiconscious, and her right leg was clearly broken, plus they'd buckled her in. Nevertheless, he gripped the short spear stealthily as she turned her head against the window and eased it into the rear storage area.

The vehicle jolted again as the allosaur on the passenger side butted it with its head, and Red shouted, "Jesus, Corbin, give us some cover!"

The ex-cop was already working on it, and an instant later Red saw a repeating, crisscrossed muzzle-flash erupt from the side of the truck, the rounds of which blasted away a chunk of the animal's snout and the sound of which startled the primitive girl awake.

"Naaygi!" she cried suddenly. "*Naaygi!*" She reached for her spear instinctively, and, finding it nowhere, began thrashing about wildly in her seat, grunting and growling.

"I think we got a situation back here," said Red, even as she lunged at the sound of his voice.

Corbin continued to fire. "In case you haven't noticed, asshole, we've got a situation *out there*."

Red shrunk against his door as the girl clawed at him, batting away her hands, which were large, like a man's, but the seatbelt held her in place, mostly. Still, when she twisted amidst its entrapment and started kicking him with her good leg, he knew something had to be done.

"Handle it," snapped Charlotte.

"Yeah, handle it," shouted Corbin—a mistake, for at the sound of his voice she lunged for *him*, reaching around his seat with her filthy, sinewy arms and locking her hands viciously about his neck—causing his rifle to swing inward and several rounds to punch through the windshield, the muzzle flash turning the cab

white, the spent shells flying haphazardly, clouds of cordite turning the small space into a toxic stew.

“Handle it, Red!” repeated Charlotte, even as the wounded allosaur jammed the tip of its snout into Corbin’s window.

Again the truck rocked and again Red looked at the primitive girl, seeing the fire in her large, dark eyes, realizing she would kill the ex-cop before she ever let go. Without a moment’s more hesitation he cocked back his fist and struck her as hard as he had ever struck anyone in his life, cringing inside as his knuckles met the flesh of her face and her head bounced off the window hard enough to crack the glass.

And then she was out, she just turned off, slumping in her seat, and the allosaurs had been eluded, and they gained the freeway at last, which, despite the numerous derelict vehicles and potholes and creeper vines, remained in surprisingly good shape. And, somehow, amazingly, as they sped away toward the compound, Red slept—during which he dreamed he was no longer human, but a being of pure light. And when he awakened he did so to the primitive girl staring at him with her head laid back against the seat and her huge, brown eyes full of curiosity, yet strangely impartial, while in them danced a light the color of which he had never seen.

• • • •

II | THE DEVIL’S SHAMBHALA

Red watched the primitive girl closely as they passed beneath the great arch at the entrance to the parking lot, an arch which read “Welcome to Bluebeard’s Cove—The World’s Largest Underground Theme Park.” She seemed to be in a sort of trance now, and he couldn’t help but to wonder what she was thinking as those huge, brown eyes rolled up to gaze at the signage, at least so much of it as would be visible to her, nor could he help but to wonder,

again, what the strange color was that lingered just behind her pupils.

"Doc, this is Charlotte. Incoming, with two wounded." The radio hissed as she released the switch.

Red gripped the handle above his door as the Jeep lurched to a stop on the east side of the reception building, next to the security keypad, while Charlotte lowered her window. "What's the code?" she snapped.

"1984," said Red.

The radio squawked as she keyed in the numbers and a voice came through which was barely audible. "Red and Corbin *both*? What the hell happened out there?"

"Red's fine." She glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "As always."

He stared back at her blankly.

"It's Corbin, and ... a guest," she said into the mic. "Just get your gear; we've got a broken leg and a raptor wound, upper shoulder."

"A guest? What kind of—"

She turned off the radio as the service door beeped and began rattling upward, and they lurched forward into the caged freight elevator. "Red ..."

He was already out his door and pressing the switch.

A moment later they were descending, the mesh door rattling closed behind them, and the primitive girl grunted in alarm as Red climbed back in and darkness engulfed the cab. "Naaygi, Naaygi!" she exclaimed, wrestling with her seatbelt.

Charlotte keyed the radio back on. "And Doc, we're going to need a sedative, a strong one."

Metal creaked and groaned as they continued to lower until at last the light returned and the world exploded into view again—not the world of the sun and moon and clouds and a thousand prehistoric terrors, which they had abandoned, but an entirely

manmade one full of dazzling light and color, too much light and color, for everything was turned on just as it had been when they'd first sought refuge there.

"What the hell is MacGyver doing?" said Red. "Jesus, doesn't he understand that all those lights—"

He stopped talking as he noticed the primitive girl's reaction to the spectacular light show, which was one of stunned silence and awe, even, it seemed to him, outright reverence. He tried to imagine it through her eyes, the vast atrium of artificial light with its carnival rides and fanciful structures, its concession stands and lamplit boardwalks, and its manmade river which wound through everything. For it was a place designed to make precisely such an impression. Less obvious, beyond all the glittering lights and flashing signboards, were the 15-foot tall security fences with their tangles of concertina wire and glowing electrification indicators, as well as the moats of muddy water which in time would become clogged with human waste—once the power and the plumbing failed. Once the Flashback had taken its full and inevitable toll. And beyond all those things, in the now semi darkened catacombs of what had formerly been the Havana Flats salt mine, stood a sole cavern raptor—blue-gray skin painted in horizontal shadows from the fence, sickle claws glinting by the light of the carnival rides, its round, white eyes blinking. And as Red squinted, it was joined by another. And another.

Indeed, it was precisely this contrast between what lay within and what lay without that had given rise to the place's nickname: *The Devil's Shambhala*.

Red got out again and rushed toward Corbin's door even as the elevator touched down. To his surprise, only Doc Gardner was on hand to greet them. "Greetings and salutations to our intrepid away-team," the doctor said with exaggerated grandiloquence, ges-

turing expansively as he approached, and added, "Bring me your tired, your poor, your former police officers mauled by raptors."

"Where is everyone?" Red snapped. "And why in bloody hell are all the lights on?"

"There's already velociraptors massing on the south perimeter," said Charlotte. "I—I saw them from the lift."

"Ah, well, yes. They've undoubtedly noticed our flashing 'Free Buffet' sign," said Gardner. He chuckled wanly. "Better get used to it, I'm afraid. They're stuck—the lights, that is—or *something*. There's an emergency ad hoc committee meeting going on right now, at the mural. And I'd hurry up, Big Blue is presiding in your absence." Red and Charlotte glanced at each other. "I'll take care of—" He paused, staring at the primitive girl. "What in God's name is this?"

"Victim of Red's driving," said Corbin, gripping his shoulder with a blood-soaked hand. "Do you mind?"

Gardner took his eyes off the girl long enough to give him a once over. "We need to stop that bleeding. Can you walk?"

The primitive girl beat her fists against the window suddenly and Gardner flinched. "Naaygi! Naaygi!"

Corbin nodded as Charlotte circled the truck. "All the commotion is exciting her," she said, adding, "Do you have—" She glanced down at the syringe in Gardner's hand, and nodded briskly. "We'll hold her. Red!"

"Jesus H. Christ," cursed Corbin.

Red gripped the door handle and paused, glancing at Charlotte. "Try to grab her fists," he said. "While I pin her legs. You ready, Doc? Doc?"

Gardner just stared at the girl as if transfixed. He came out of it suddenly and nodded.

“Make it quick,” Red told him, and added, “She’s quite a handful.” He looked at Charlotte, who also nodded. “Okay, then,” he said, and exhaled. “On three. One ... two ... *three!*”

• • • •

IT WAS OBVIOUS THINGS had gotten out of hand the moment Red yanked open the door to the foyer. Big Blue had whipped the crowd into a veritable frenzy, or at least her most dedicated converts, and the women were shouting and shaking their fists, chanting, “This is what Patriarchy looks like! This is what Patriarchy looks like!”

Chairman Dean, meanwhile, stood helplessly upon Red’s painting scaffold—almost dead center with his likeness as depicted in the mural—and moved his outspread hands up and down, as though he were trying to say, amidst the cacophony, *Down, down, please, your questions will be answered.*

Charlotte pushed her way through the mob toward the front, emboldened by the fact that she wouldn’t have to face Blue’s acolytes alone, that Red was right behind her—but wasn’t really surprised when she whipped around to face the crowd and saw him standing off to one side, striking a match on the heel of his boot, lighting a cigar, just as cool and nonchalant and *uninvolved* as could be.

“*I’ll do it,*” she hissed to herself but really to him, then shouted authoritatively, “Enough! Silence! Let the Chairman speak!”

Big Blue wasted no time: “The Dancer is no friend to women, we already know this! She knew of the plan—does anyone here not believe she knew of the plan?” The women around her hollered in mutual outrage. “She’s been in the loop with the men every step of the way—hasn’t she always? *One* vote! Remember that, sisters. We lost the election by *one* vote! Who’s vote do you think that was?”

Charlotte could only scrunch up her face and look at her dumbfoundedly. At last she said, "There *was* no plan," and craned her neck to look at Chairman Dean, who shook his head slowly, confirming as much. "But we won't know anything until you let the Chairman speak!" She mouthed to Dean: 'Where's MacGyver?'

He only stared at her, and all in a rush, Charlotte remembered: They'd been trying to restore electrification to the damaged section of the east perimeter when she and Red and Corbin had headed out that morning ... had something happened? She shook her head once, refusing to believe it, but Dean's expression only fueled her fears. Then, as though tapping some previously unknown strength, Dean stepped forward and said to all gathered, suddenly and with perfect clarity, "Mac is dead."

At this the great open space fell silent almost immediately, and Charlotte noted Red looking up sharply through a cloud of smoke. Dean gripped the edge of the scaffolding and leaned forward as the gathering settled. At length he said, "We were trying to fix the east fence, which, as you all know, was damaged by the smilodon several days back. Mac, God bless him, well, he tried something—"

"He tried something without our approval!" shouted Blue, and her dyed hair shown like an indigo fire beneath the hanging chandeliers even as her supporters hollered in agreement.

"*He tried* what was talked about at the last committee meeting, and there was nothing preventing you, or *any one of you*," his voice had raised sharply, "from attending that meeting. Now, I don't pretend to have an aptitude for this sort of thing any more than you or anyone else in this hall. But we've all agreed, again and again, that when it comes to engineering, what Mac says goes. And Mac, well, he determined that, in order to restore electrification to that section of fence, all the non-auxiliary power would need to be rebooted. And that's what you see here." He gestured at the chandeliers and the neon piping everywhere. "That's what this place is, in case

you've forgotten. And, well. Something went wrong. And Mac was killed in the process. Fortunately, no one else was hurt ..."

"Everyone's going to feel the hurt now that we're lit up like a Christmas tree!" shouted Ebenweiser, a man who claimed to have been a wealthy philanthropist before the Flashback but was now essentially the town drunk.

"That's not true!" said Charlotte. "The rest of the electrified fence remains intact. We can deal with the other lights on a case by case basis—by unscrewing the bulbs, if necessary. The cavern raptors can jump, we know that, but they're *not* supernatural. They can't just fly in here like ghosts, for Christ's sake. The cat's another story, it's true, because it's possible, however unlikely, that'll he'll—"

"You don't know it's a 'he,'" said Blue—an attempt at levity, Charlotte presumed—causing everyone around her to laugh.

"That *it* will try to scale the fence again. But it still won't be able to withstand the electrical charge." She turned toward Dean seeking moral support, but instead found him looking down at her with something like pity. "Dean ..." He seemed to take a deep breath as she stepped closer. "The rest of the fence ... it is still electrified, isn't it?" She deflated like a balloon as she studied his face. "Jesus Christ." Her arms dropped to her sides as she moved away from the scaffold. "That's ... just great. That's really fucking beautiful."

"The fences are no longer electrified," hollered someone near the front, passing it along through the crowd. The hall erupted into chaos as Charlotte paced to the left then returned to the center, where she stopped dead in her tracks, rubbing her temples, glaring at her feet. "*Red*," she growled, loudly, "I need your help. *Now*." She shot him a fiery glance.

He simply stared at her. She honestly couldn't tell if he was about to stride toward her or simply turn and walk away. At last he stepped forward.

"All right, all right, all right!" he belted out over the din, and the turmoil subsided—if for no other reason than here was an entirely new foil for everyone's fear and frustration. "That's enough!"

"Stick to your painting, Michelangelo."

"In the rear, with the gear. That's what you've been good for!"

He looked at them as if to say, 'Just, wow,' but remained calm. "Just listen to me for a minute!"

At last the hall became quiet enough for him to talk. "Look, I know this is an unfortunate turn of events—believe me, I know. And I know that you're all just scared and confused and wondering where we go from here." He took another step forward, shock of red-brown hair catching the light. "I know ... because I'm scared, too. Let's face it, we lost more than simply a friend to so many of us today; we lost the only man in the Cove with the knowledge and skill to keep this place running." He scanned the crowd, attempting eye contact with as many people as possible. "And that's what this is really all about, isn't it? Because, whether you admit it or not, you know how lucky you've been to ride this thing out down here so far. You know how different our experience has been than, well, the people *up there*. And now you're afraid that that's all coming to an end." He moved toward Charlotte slowly. "And you know what? *It is*. But it's not coming to an end tonight. It's not—" He was interrupted by the sound of electricity, which popped and sizzled loudly somewhere along the south perimeter and was followed by the shrieks of several cavern raptors. "It's not going away just like *that* ... like so many of your loved ones have. It's not going to simply vanish."

"How can you know that?" shouted someone from the back. "How do you know the fence won't simply disappear at any minute, or that one of those things won't just materialize right here and now?"

Red dropped his cigar and rubbed it out with his boot. "I don't. But we do know the Flashback has slowed. We know it's not as deadly as it was before. Has anyone of us simply vanished? Have any prehistoric trees appeared out of nowhere, or, as the gentleman said, has a T. Rex simply manifested amongst us and gone on a feeding frenzy?"

"What are you getting at?"

"What I'm getting at is that there's time. Not an unlimited supply of it, but ... time. Time to implement what we've all known would be necessary since we first came together here and settled in."

"Jesus, Gods, he's talking about the Wagon Train," said Blue, exasperated.

"A wagon train!" someone shouted.

"Where in the hell *to*?"

"A wagon train of RVs," said Blue incredulously, even as the hall reignited into chaos. "What are we going to fuel them with? Toxic masculinity?"

Charlotte threw up her arms in defeat as the hall became a bedlam.

Red shouted over the din, "If anyone has any better ideas I'd pay good money to hear them!"

But the bedlam only intensified, doubling and redoubling, until it was shattered irrevocably by a volley of gunshots, which echoed throughout the atrium like a string of dynamite, causing Red to fall upon Charlotte in an effort to shield her. When all those gathered had picked themselves up off the floor and turned their attention to the back of the hall, they saw Lieutenant Corbin standing there with his AR-15 in one hand and his other in a sling.

Charlotte was the first to speak up, thanking Red quietly before standing up and brushing herself off and saying, furiously, "Have you gone *mad*, Corbin?"

"Maybe," he said at last, and slung his rifle over his shoulder. "And maybe not. But I *do* have a better idea."

The atrium fell silent as everyone focused on him. "And you assholes are going to hear it."

"Now, wait just—who in the hell do you think you are?" said Dean. "By what right do you come in here—"

Corbin snatched the rifle off his shoulder in a flash and everyone ducked—but he was pointing it at the ceiling, not the Chairman. "Shhh," he said, and cocked his head. "Just listen."

Charlotte did so, her ears still ringing. Slowly it became manifest: the sound of cavern raptors barking amidst the catacombs, barking and seeming to answer themselves, and something else, which answered them all. The Cat. The smilodon. The saber-toothed tiger which bore little in common with any of its modern-day descendants nor any of its prehistoric ones, for it was the size of a small bus. And beyond *that* ... another. Something closer in tone to the raptors and yet altogether different. Something bigger, more robust. Something none of them had ever heard before.

"You all need to understand something," he said finally, slowly re-slinging his gun, "and that is before I found this place I was precinct commander of an entire police force dedicated to combating these ... *things*. And if there's one thing we learned ..." He paused, smiling a little to himself. "'We.' He seemed to dismiss the thought. "If there's one thing we learned before our unit was torn to pieces ... one thing *they* learned, my men, before being bitten in half, beheaded, slit open by sickle-claws so that their intestines unspooled across the city streets like sausage links ... is that these things are not animals." He smiled to himself again as though reliving a lifetime's worth of humbling nightmares. "No, an animal is something comprehensible, even relatable. An animal is something flesh and blood same as you or me, with the same needs, the same hunger, the same will to survive. But these things, these so-called

dinosaurs and prehistoric cats, they're not animals, not the way we understand them. They're weapons. They have purpose. Intent. They've been infused with it somehow. Someone, something, has weaponized them against us." He nodded slowly, distantly. "Those lights in the sky, I think. And I can promise you this ... they will not go away." The haunting smile returned as he shook his head. "They won't give up, you understand. And they won't stop until every man, woman, and child in this compound has been torn apart and devoured."

The atrium moaned as a wind blew in from the caverns, and no one said anything.

At last Dean said, "And what ..." He paused to clear his throat. "What would you propose we do, Lieutenant?"

Corbin just looked at him—then he laughed, as though responding to a punchline only he could hear. He began limping toward the front of the hall, the crowd parting to let him through. "What would I propose? I propose we start stocking up on weapons instead of breakfast cereal and tuna cans. I propose we train every person here in the use and maintenance of those weapons, and that we start taking the fight to the enemy. I propose we start making excursions into the caverns instead of abandoned supermarkets; that we locate their eggs and their nests and destroy them, and that we find whatever ingress they're using and stop it up, cutting them off. And then I propose we kill them as mercilessly as they're going to kill us."

"And what about the power?" said Blue, "Are we going to simply attack that, too?"

"I haven't heard a single suggestion from you, lady," someone countered.

"Oh, we've made suggestions, they just haven't been listened to." She moved to the front of the room and turned to face the crowd. "All I've heard is a lot of mansplaining about power grids

and wagon trains and killing and war! It's the thinking itself that is flawed. How do you think we got into this mess in the first place? Do any of you actually think this is a natural phenomenon?"

"It was the military! Project HAARP, at the North Pole. They've talked about it on Coast to Coast AM for years ..."

"It was the Hadron Collider ..."

"Of course it was the military," said Blue. "Isn't that more believable than aliens from Alpha Centauri?"

"The military's always been one big Sausage Fest," said one of her supporters.

"You just shut your trap," barked old Frank Miller. "I didn't serve in two bloody wars to hear that kind of—"

"Order, order!" shouted Dean.

Again, the room devolved into pandemonium, and Charlotte found herself looking at Red who looked squarely back, leaving her to wonder if he was thinking the same thing—that maybe it was time to just go, just leave the Devil's Shambhala behind.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please! Please! We have a guest!"

Turning, Charlotte realized Doctor Gardner was pushing a wheelchair toward the crowd from the same door through which they'd entered—and that, in it, sat the primitive girl herself. She glanced back at Red and saw that he, too, had focused on them, although the rest of the crowd was still intent on yelling at Dean, or each other. Even the Sisters were arguing amongst themselves. Nonetheless, as Gardner began excusing and pardoning himself and the girl through the group, the clamor began to subside, and by the time he'd rolled her up next to Charlotte and gently turned her around, a silence had set in that rivalled that which had followed Corbin's gunfire.

"Well, then," Gardner said at last, giving everyone a polite little bow, first to the left, then to the right. "If you are done verbally molesting each other for a few breaths, I should like to introduce you

to our newest, ah, citizen. Her name is Naaygi.” He repeated his bows, this time to the away-team specifically—to Red and Charlotte directly beside him, and lastly to Corbin. “As you can see, I’ve, ah, taken the liberty of naming her—with your kind permissions, of course. Also, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, she has responded exceedingly well to the medications I have administered and is now completely docile.” He plucked at her wild, unkempt hair delicately as if to prove so, and something about the gesture set Charlotte’s own hair on end. “Moreover, what was thought to be a broken leg has turned out to be nothing of the sort, but rather a simple fracture, an isolated, mid-shaft, closed fibula fracture, to be precise, meaning it doesn’t involve the tibia, and no bone has broken the skin. It is, in fact, in a state of remarkable alignment. Hence, the lack of a cast, or even, as you can see, a splint. As for recovery time, I estimate approximately 5-6 weeks—”

“Excuse me, Doctor,” Dean interjected, “but, and I mean no disrespect, is there a point to all this?”

Gardner froze as if someone had struck him across the face. It was an expression Charlotte had observed on him before—countless times before—almost as if he were experiencing a kind of dissociative fugue.

“No,” he said at last, clearly disoriented. It was as though the question were the strangest one he had ever heard. “I’m merely providing a status report on the condition of this patient. And introducing her, of course.”

“So, ‘no,’” said Corbin, and several people laughed.

“Actually, there could be,” said Red. He stepped forward. “Which is that this girl, this woman, has clearly survived to the age of ...” He paused, studying her. “Say, nineteen ... with nothing but the hides on her back and a Folsom point spear. Now, I don’t know what era she’s come here from, and I don’t particularly care; she’s a Neanderthal, I presume. I do know she’s managed to survive for

close to twenty years, and without the help of electricity, canned food, or semi-automatic weapons.” He scanned the crowd. “Surely we can do better? We, who have several million years of evolution on our side? Whoever she is, she hasn’t existed in a vacuum, no more than anyone of us have. Somewhere, sometime, she belonged to a group, a clan. And I doubt they wasted precious hours arguing the way we are doing now. So I’m going to go on record right now as saying that I think both plans, both the wagon train and the offensive, are worthy of consideration. If you ask me, I think they should both be implemented, and quickly.” He looked up at Chairman Dean. “I move that a committee be formed to study the logistics of both flight and fight, or other options, if any, and that this committee should be comprised entirely of volunteers, ideally people who,” He glanced at Big Blue, “represent the varying factions of our ... union.”

Everyone looked at each other.

“I think we can all agree that this seems the best way forward,” said Dean. “Do I hear any descension?” For now, at least, there was none. “Then I move for a committee of volunteers to step forward.”

“I’ll lead the committee for the offensive,” said Corbin immediately.

“And I’ll oversee the exploration of other options,” said Blue.

It seemed as though everyone focused on Red—Charlotte, in particular. He looked around the hall, his light blue eyes appearing to see, and appreciate, everyone present. At last he looked at Charlotte, who felt an odd sense of pride, as though she in some way had helped finally to bring him into the fold, away from his stubborn independence and his mural which would never be finished; yes, *into the fold*, where he was desperately needed. Then he turned and walked away, north toward the home he had made in the clubhouse of the Lagoon, the home he shared with no one but his Ar-

chaeopteryx, calling over his shoulder, “If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my hooch. Heading the committee for public art.”

And then there was silence save for the barking of the cavern raptors and the occasional testing of the fence, which popped and sizzled, and Dean said, “And the Wagon Train committee? Anyone?”

Charlotte watched as Red continued on his way, his rifle slung over his shoulder, a cloud of blue smoke trailing. “I’ll—I’ll do it,” she said, and swallowed, even as Red vanished into the dark.

“Naaygi,” said the primitive girl, watching him go, and Charlotte crouched by her chair, studying her, feeling an odd connection with her all of a sudden, as though they were together somehow in their loneliness. She nearly reached out to touch her, to lay her pale, slender hand over the primitive girl’s own, which was robust and the back of which was hairy. She thought better of it, mainly because the eerie light in her big, brown eyes seemed brighter than before, more colorful, more inexplicable, and frankly, it frightened her.

And that’s when Naaygi looked at her suddenly, startling her, and it seemed the entire, alien, post-Flashback sky was contained in those eyes—its mysterious lights included—and she cocked her head as though listening before jerking it to face away and shouting, “*Naaygi, naayook, naaygunta-gunta!*”

And then the alarms sounded, echoing terrifyingly throughout the atrium, and Charlotte saw a lithe, bluish-gray shape dash between two structures just beyond them ... which was followed by another, and another, and another still. And then everyone was screaming, as she reached for her pistol and realized she’d left it in the truck, and the power flickered on and off—not just a few lights here and there but all of it, reminding everyone just how black the caverns could be—and everyone began to scatter as a raptor cried

out and another answered, and Charlotte knew the fence had been breached.

III | The Red-Eye Shift

Red heard the gunshots first—not just any gunshots but Corbin’s AR-15—followed by others, and his first thought was, *Jesus Christ, he’s finally snapped*. But then he heard screaming as well as the unmistakable bark of a cavern raptor—which was answered by another, and another, and another still—and knew the perimeter had been breached. He turned instantly and began running toward the meeting area, then halted, suddenly, for he had no ammo beyond that which was already in his Scout rifle. He reversed direction and bolted for his dwelling, entering the lagoon area, where he keyed in the code to the bungalow and banged open the door so that Ryx burst into startled flight. There was a cartridge bandolier slung over the chair of his drafting table; he snatched it up and ejected his clip, then slapped in a new one and hurried for the meeting area.

He hadn’t run far when he came across the first body, as well as the first raptor (the body laying slit open from throat to crotch while the raptor devoured its unspooled intestines), and Red squeezed off a round, blowing a hole in its head which shot a stream of dark blood no less than six feet before the beast dropped like a sandbag and Red circled around to find the others—but mostly to find Charlotte.

He heard her shout above the engine of one of the rides. “Red! I’m over here! The Scrambler!”

He scanned the amusements quickly and saw her long, brown hair blowing from one of the ride’s carriages: she had activated the thing and sought refuge on it and was now being swung and whipped about dizzyingly even as a trio of cavern raptors tried to attack. He ran to the fence which encircled the attraction and quickly chambered a round but found it difficult to target any ani-

imals as they scrambled to dodge the carriages, darting this way and that with frantic precision even as they persisted in the assault.

“No ammo!” she shouted, the ride bringing her close and then whisking her away again.

At last he squeezed off a shot and missed completely. Corbin called from the top of the Gingerbread House: “You’re no good down there! Find some high ground and pick them off!” He shot several times in rapid succession and one of the raptors jolted, spraying blood. Red chambered another round and trained his sights—*krack!*—but missed yet again. He was answered by another volley from Corbin, which missed its target too but managed to blow holes in several of the carriages, one of which had been passing directly beside Charlotte.

“Cease your fucking fire!” Red shouted furiously. He fired again—as he was closer—and hit one of the animals in its haunches, dropping it instantly (although it continued to snap at the spinning carriages and Charlotte’s in particular from where it lay), then sighted the remaining raptor, which had fallen into synch with the ride’s rhythm and was now holding its position, ducking as the empty carriages whisked over its head even while crouching to attack, its foreclaws splayed, the sickle-claws on its feet tapping. “Now, Corbin!” Red barked, beginning to squeeze his trigger—and paused, for the raptor was staring directly back at him, cocking its head, its white eyes blinking, even as Corbin responded, “Cease fucking fire, asshole. That’s what you said. I’m covering Dean.”

And Red fired.

But the raptor dodged left and scrambled behind the ride’s central hub—shielding itself—and Red thought, with dawning horror, *My God, it understands. It understands that we can kill it from a distance.* He jogged sideways along the fence to get a clean shot but the raptor only advanced further around the hub, maintaining

it as a barrier. He held up the rifle even as Charlotte swung close and was yanked away by the ride once more.

"I'm going to throw you the gun!" he shouted, and focused on her intently, attempting to track her despite the chaotic movement of the coaches.

"Is that a good idea?" she cried.

"No," he hollered back. "But it's all we got. Now get ready!"

She spun close once again and he almost threw it—but thought better of it at the last minute and waited, even as the raptor stepped out and rose its head, seeming to calculate its chances of success if it were to leap at her as she cycled back. "Watch it!" snapped Red. He aimed his rifle, but the creature only retreated behind the hub again.

And then she was on her way back, her hands help up, and when she had rotated close enough to him he tossed her the gun and she caught it in both hands. "All right, all right, all right!" Red cheered—then paused, suddenly, for the raptor had poked its head out from behind the hub and was looking back and forth between them: calculating, its head cocking, its little mohawk of black feathers rising and falling. And then it looked directly at him and there was a little moment between man and dinosaur—for they both realized how vulnerable he was—before it abandoned its focus on Charlotte entirely and charged straight at him, weaving between the carriages.

He heard Charlotte squeeze off some rounds as he bolted for—he didn't know—the diner, yes, the diner! He could see them now, some of them, at least, on the other side of the glass: Doc Gardner and Frank Miller, Big Blue, the primitive girl—alas, he was never going to win a footrace with a velociraptor. "Corbin! *Corbin!* I've got a situation down here!"

"What's that?" Corbin hollered back, even as the raptor vaulted over the Scrambler's fence and pursued. "Cease fire, you say?"

Red heard gunshots—not Corbin’s AR-15—it was Charlotte, trying hopelessly to hit the raptor from the spinning carriage. “Corbin!” someone screamed, but Red couldn’t tell if it was Charlotte or himself.

“What’s that? I can’t hear you over all the cease fire!”

Red ran, hearing the animal’s sickle-claws tapping against the pavement, hearing its labored breathing, feeling its closer proximity with each thudding heartbeat, smelling its gamey odor, and as he did so he remembered the look in the cop’s eyes in the window of the supermarket’s office, a look that said, *I could leave you here right now, asshole. Because seconds count ... and it might just come down to you or me.*

And then a volley of shots rang out which he instantly recognized as coming from Corbin’s AR-15, and he heard the raptor whelp and collapse to the ground. And he jogged to a halt near the door to the diner and supported himself on his knees, gasping for breath even as a silence set in, one in which he dared to hope that it was, in fact, over—that they had survived. Again. Somehow.

Not everyone, he reprimanded himself.

“Is that it?” someone called out at last—Harley Jackson, the auto mechanic. He was on the enormous Ferris wheel, which Red hadn’t even noticed was turning. “Is that all of them?”

Nobody said anything. Red moved back out into the open slowly, scanning the area thoroughly. “Everyone stay where you are. Just in case.”

He approached the fallen raptor cautiously.

“Red!” shouted Charlotte from the Scrambler.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” said Corbin.

Red raised his hand and patted at the air: *It’s okay.*

He crouched near the dying beast, whose dark blood was spreading slowly across the floor, and watched as it inhaled and exhaled laboriously. Strangely enough, he felt an odd sort of connec-

tion to it; it was similar to the connection he had with Ryx, his archaeopteryx—similar, he supposed, to the connection he felt with all animals. He recalled Corbin's words during the ad hoc committee meeting: *If there's one thing we learned ... is that these things are not animals. They're weapons.*

A moist, white eye rolled around to regard him coolly, and he looked into it, seeing his own reflection. *They have purpose. Intent. They've been infused with it somehow.*

But he saw no intent in the creature's eyes, or, if he did, it was fading, fading along with a highlight of color he could not define, a color he could not compare to any he had ever seen, except the primitive girl. Except Naaygi.

And then the raptor's entire body constricted, it just shrank as if something had left it, a vapor, a mist, a soul, who could say? And he reached out slowly and closed its eyelid. Then he looked back at the diner to find its door propped open and Gardner and the others starting to gather upon the sidewalk, among them Naaygi herself, who stared at him from her wheelchair as though in great curiosity, her head cocked at an angle, the neon catching her eyes so that the unpronounceable color twinkled and gleamed.

• • • •

CHARLOTTE SHOOK THE tin can one more time for good measure, then it was time to draw. She passed the can to Frank Miller, who took it somewhat gingerly and looked at the others in the circle for what seemed a long time before finally reaching in and pulling out a ticket. Relief flooded his face and he exhaled before turning its reverse side to face the others. "Off-duty," he said, and placed the ticket on the table. He passed the can to Harley Jackson.

Everyone deemed competent with a firearm (or was willing to learn) had gathered by the lagoon outside Red's residence to draw straws for the night-watch. Corbin had gladly volunteered, of

course, but he couldn't patrol the entire 15-acre complex alone, and even he would have to sleep sometime. And while others had expressed a willingness to step up—Charlotte, and, to her surprise, Red; Chairman Dean, who seemed to be chair of nothing since the attack, Big Blue: to her credit, for she had never fired a gun before, Taher, and little Don Martin—it was felt a drawing would suit the democratic spirit of the earlier meeting best. And the need for a night-watch was clear, for it had now been established that the raptors had gotten in not by leaping the fence but by burrowing underneath (something previously thought impossible, for the fence was grounded in a foot-and-a-half of concrete). Nor had they done so where what must have been a prolonged effort over many weeks would have been visible, but rather out by the children's play area, where no one ever went, because there were no children in the compound—something Red was extremely grateful for, just as he was grateful for the construction equipment left behind by the park expansion crew.

Harley reached into the can without hesitation and withdrew a ticket, which he turned to show the others: 'OFF,' it read in black Magic Marker. Then he laid the ticket on the table and moved to leave, saying, somewhat apologetically, "I'm going to bulldoze some more dirt against that fence. And I'll try to drop some rocks or chunks of cement there, too. And ... I'll get the backhoe started."

No one said anything because everyone knew what he meant. "I'll find a nice piece of masonry. Was it, ah, 'Shawn' with a 'w' ... or 'Sean' with an 'a'?" Oh, here." He handed the can to Charlotte.

"'Sean,' I think," she said softly. "Thank you, Harley. Be careful."

She studied the contents of the can absently, and Red placed a hand on her shoulder. She and Sean had been friends. At last she reached into the can and pulled out a ticket. "*Hm*," she mumbled, and smiled wanly. "Guess I'll just catch up on my Netflix." There was, of course, no Netflix, nor any internet at all. The Flashback

had taken care of that. She laid the ticket reverse-side up on the table and passed the can to Red.

He reached into it and to virtually no one's surprise drew an "ON"—it had just seemed time. He laid it on the table, so everyone could see it. "*Dawww*," he said, and looked at Corbin. "Eight to ten hours on the same frequency with my best buddy. Now how bad could that be?"

"Pretty fucking bad," said Corbin. "Let's just get this over with." He took the can from him and handed it to Blue but kept his grip on it. "I'm not going to spend more than 30 minutes making sure you don't blow your blue head off, understand?" She jerked the can away from him and stuck her hand in or tried to. An awkward moment passed as she tried to force it, but her fingers were just too pudgy.

"Don't anyone breath," joked little Don Martin.

"Hey, *fuck you*," she snapped, shaking the can in a beefy hand, bringing its contents closer to the rim. "You think I'm triggered that easily?" She shot him a smoldering look. "Well, do you?" She fished out a ticket and flipped it over, her eyes souring behind her plastic-framed glasses. "Okay; I'm triggered."

She slapped the ticket onto the counter. "So, what's red and blue and black all over ..." She glanced up and down Corbin's police uniform.

"Is that a fucking joke?" said Corbin. He added, "Is that like, some kind of feminazi humor?" His voice practically oozed disdain.

"All right, knock it off," said Red. "We've got a job to do. I'm sure we can get through one night without biting each other's heads off." He glanced around the room, not just at Corbin and Blue but at all of them. "Until then I'd suggest everyone get some sleep. And I do mean everyone. Tomorrow it might be your turn."

"I'm not sleeping a wink so long as all those lights are on and attracting every critter that's ever wandered the caverns," said Lonny, who at 16 was the closest thing to a child in the entire Shambhala.

"You better," said Red. "Because our days of just lounging around between supply runs are over. Tomorrow we start hotwiring motor homes and staging them in the parking lot up top." He glanced at Corbin. "And scouring pawnshops, police stations, general stores, and anywhere else we can break into for weapons and ammunition."

"Right the hell on," said Lonny, reaching for Red's shouldered rifle.

"Right the hell nothing," said Corbin, slapping his hand away. "Because you're not going to be armed." He turned to the others. "Right?"

"Right," said Red.

"Right," said Blue.

And for once, virtually everyone else in the room agreed, too.

• • • •

AS HE HAD IN THE JEEP, Red dreamed; and again, he dreamed that he was a being of pure light.

But that wasn't quite it, not really. Rather, he dreamed that he *had* been a being of pure light—but was now imprisoned. Worse, he had the sense he'd been forgotten, not just by his own kind—other beings, other forms of light—but by himself. And yet, he sensed there had been a reason for his imprisonment; a profound one—nor did he feel that he had been subjected to it against his will, but rather had given of himself freely. So, too, did he have the feeling that a great wrong had been committed, or perhaps a great right (they, his own kind, didn't know for certain, that was

the difficulty), and that he, somehow, had sacrificed himself so that they might know at last.

But the influence of the flesh had been strong, so strong it had taken him over, overwritten him, consumed him, at least for a time. But now he sensed that was changing, and that his original being was reawakening, not to be reborn as it was but rather as something new, a blending somehow of both the light and the flesh—a hybrid. And that this hybrid's purpose was to *see*, and by seeing, render judgement.

And then amidst this very dream (although it wasn't so much a dream as it was an eavesdropping upon another lifeform, for he had a sudden epiphany that the being of light was not and never had been *him*, but something and someone else entirely), there came a voice, not his own, nor that of the being of pure light, nor that of the hybrid who was somehow both the observer and the observed, nor any of these things—and yet all these things—and it asked, simply, *What do you see when you look upon them?* And the answer came so suddenly and so viscerally and was so overpowering in its beauty and horror and confliction and paradox, that he—Red—awoke with a gasp, startling Ryx into flight and falling to the floor of the corridor while breaking the fall with his hands and dropping the AR-15 Corbin had lent him with a resounding clatter.

And a sound came, a deep, resonant, growling sound, which he at first took to be the cat—the smilodon—but quickly realized was no such thing. No, this was something different, more like a raptor, but bigger, louder, more guttural. Jesus, how long had he been out? He looked at his watch: it was 1 am. He stood abruptly and dusted himself off, then snatched up the rifle and re-shouldered it. The sound had come from just down the tubular corridor, which ended abruptly with a heavy-duty cyclone gate (but not heavy-duty enough, it was feared) and had once, before the Flashback, been

intended as the entrance to a new section of the park. Nor was it the only sound, for as he stood listening he thought he heard foot-falls—yes, there ... and there ... squelching moistly, heavily, which told him two things (but only two things): whatever it was had crossed the moat—not itself surprising since the raptors swam it routinely and the cat merely jumped it—and it was bigger than a raptor by a considerable measure; but not, by the sound of it, so large as a T. Rex.

He unshouldered his rifle and moved forward slowly, closing to within about fifteen feet of the gate, where he lowered upon one knee and waited, the stock of the AR-15 feeling slippery against his palm, the weapon's butt pressed tightly against his shoulder. He knew he should radio Corbin and Blue—at least Corbin—but didn't want to take his hands off the rifle long enough to que the mic. That and the fact that whatever it was, it was big enough to pose a real threat to the non-electrified gate if agitated or enflamed in any way. Ryx alighted upon his upper back as he waited, and his finger tightened upon the trigger reflexively, but he didn't move to shake him off. The truth was he was too scared to move, too scared even to breath, too scared to do anything but grind the rifle against his shoulder and wait.

The first thing he saw was the tail and one hindquarter of a cavern raptor, guts and gristle dangling, being carried in the mouth of something whose snout was much longer than a T. Rex, which stepped into view fully before pausing abruptly and freezing absolutely still. Slowly, it lowered its sleek head closer to the ground and dropped its prey, then it straightened, acting for all the world as though he wasn't even there, until, finally, it turned to face him—calmly, smoothly—its body remaining face forward.

Of its body Red could only have said this: it was about three times the size of a cavern raptor and a little less than half the size of a fully-grown T. Rex, but unlike T. Rex, it had fully developed

arms and hands and a gracile symmetry which belied its well-proportioned bulk. But, as his focus was elsewhere, he could have said little more, other than the fact that it had clearly changed color to match its surroundings—including the dimly lit, tubular corridor—so that it shown black as coal in the intense dark and bore circular stripes that seemed precisely the same shade of white as the lights.

But of its head and eyes he could have said much—although he would choose not to, because his terror was absolute and he would decide not to revisit it later—for as it turned its snout to face him he saw that, although deep in profile, it became an almost beak-like wolf's muzzle when viewed head-on—like a great, black knife in the dark—and its white eyes (which had changed to suit its surroundings, presumably) pointed forward rather than gazing sideways, so that when it looked at him it did so with an almost human intimacy that chilled him to the bone. So, too, did they have the glint, the strange highlight of an alien color, but in this case the shades were mismatched so that it seemed for all the world like a saurian David Bowie were staring at him through the dark and the cyclone mesh.

Red's heart thudded against his breast as the thing seemed to examine the gate, coolly, dispassionately, studying its edges, pushing against the mesh with its snout, even gripping it briefly with a strangely human hand and appearing to test its give. Then it noticed something immediately to its right and reoriented itself to look at it more closely, and Red realized with mounting horror that it was studying the gates access pad. It even pecked at it a couple of times, causing it to light up and to paint the thing's face blue, after which it cocked its head and wiggled its talons and pecked at it yet again.

Then it lost interest and snatched up the corpse in its mouth and proceeded to stride away, and before its great dagger of a tail

had passed from view Red saw that it had been branded, like a laboratory animal, with an alphanumerical identifier, one that was as simple as it was strange.

It read: SDTB 01 – NAPOLEON.

• • • •

SHE WASN'T SURE HOW long he'd been standing there, and, indeed, he only came out of it when she touched his shoulder gently and said, softly, "Hey, Red ..."—which caused him to jump almost violently and to whip around, cursing at her vehemently.

"Red ... what in the hell?" She held up a paper sack. "I brought you some lunch."

He only stared at her, his mouth hung wide, shaking his head once. At last he exhaled powerfully and ran a hand through his hair, then stared at her indecipherably as he had done so many times before, appearing as though he would either take her into his arms and kiss her or turn and stride away as fast as he possibly could.

He shouldered his rifle and then took her into his arms and kissed her. And such was the conviction of it, such was its passion and earnestness and honesty and spontaneity, that she gave into it completely, not understanding what had brought it on and not caring but kissing him back as passionately as she had ever kissed anyone.

• • • •

BIG BLUE, WHOSE REAL name was Sharma Whiteman, watched from the carousel as they embraced, feeling every positive thought leave her as the two capered and laughed in the glow of the kiss's aftermath. Something about what had just happened had hit her like a slap in the face; nor could she have explained it to herself or to anyone else if she'd tried. It wasn't just the suddenness and the forcefulness of it—she would have expected nothing less from

any man, from her stepfather on up to the present, much less a man such as Red, who had supposedly shunned women but whom Blue knew for a fact only used that as a ploy.

No, she didn't really care about him one way or the other. It was *her*, Charlotte, the dancer, the stripper—the whore. For no one believed her story about being a legitimate dance instructor, Red most of all. Why would he? She laughed to herself. Why, indeed, when a stripper was so much more fun to dream about, so much more fun to wank to in your bungalow after another day spent avoiding responsibility and working on your shitty mural, the mural you liked to claim was for the morale of the group but which you really just used to court Charlotte indirectly, like every other sniveling little creative type she'd ever known.

One vote. That's what her group had lost by in the November election. One vote—Charlotte's vote, by definition, else the number of women to men in the Shambhala would have carried the day.

And everything would have been different.

She examined Red's Scout rifle, which he had lent her for the night, and found she liked the feel of it in her hands—liked its sureness and rigidity, its penetrative power, its simplicity and utility, like a hard cock but actually good for something, and decided right then and there that everything might still work out the way she'd envisioned.

If she was just patient.

If she just waited a little longer.

IV | Charlotte

She supposed it was what they—or at least Sting of The Police—would have called synchronicity: that twangy guitar and soft-pedaled keyboard emanating so clearly from the RV’s speakers as she ascended the vehicle’s aluminum ladder. All she knew was that the song matched her mood perfectly, absurdly, as Karen Carpenter sang, *Such a feeling’s comin’ over me / There is wonder in most everything I see ...*

She gained the RV’s roof and looked around: at the motor homes being corralled in the parking lot of Bluebeard’s Cove, at the velociraptors gathered like spectators outside the fence, at the brontosaurus chewing its cypress leaves nearby and the pterodactyls circling in the blood-red sky and the volcano spewing lava not thirty miles away. *Not a cloud in the sky / Got the sun in my eyes / And I / Won’t be surprised if it’s a dream ...*

Her radio crackled suddenly and Taher said, “Team 3 to Charlotte. Open gate, please.”

She heard the sound of a diesel engine and looked to see the most extravagant motor home yet approaching from the south. “You copy that, Blue?”

“Copy,” said Blue.

Charlotte saw her raise Red’s Scout rifle as Don Martin swung back the gate, which was easy to do because it was off-balance and moved mostly of its own volition. Perhaps not so oddly, the raptors didn’t try to bolt in—probably because the four corpses already scattered about the entryway were serving as a fine deterrent. The big woman had proven to be quite a kill shot, something Charlotte wasn’t sure she wanted to celebrate. Then Team 3 was in and little Don was swinging back the gate.

“Make sure it’s latched, Don,” said Charlotte.

She gestured at the new arrivals as she paced along the roof of the RV and toggled her shoulder mic. “Bring it around to the

front,” she said, and directed them into position. “It’s beautiful. We’ll use it as the Command Center.”

“Red to Charlotte,” squawked her radio. “We’ve found the ingress. Be advised that we’re moving in. We’re just going to have a quick look around.”

“Roger that,” said Charlotte. She rekeyed her mic: “And Red ... be careful.”

The radio hissed. “No worries,” came his response. “We’re with Supercop.”

Then she smiled and refocused on the task at hand, which, thanks to the lack of dinosaurs, had gone smoother than anyone had anticipated. Indeed, based on the sun’s position, it could have scarcely been later than noon—and already they’d lined up enough RVs to transport everyone in the Shambhala. Now they were just building redundancies, adding backups, and Charlotte had to admit she was enjoying the process more than she could have imagined. Just being outside, with the breeze whispering through her hair and the sun—when it was able to peek through the volcano smoke—warming her cheeks, was intoxicating. So, too, was she thrilled by the developments between herself and Red—Red who had so often seemed the only other sane person in the Shambhala—so much so that there was a new spring in her step as she walked along the roof of the RV and scanned the nearby jungle for threats, a jungle which seemed oddly quiet today, as if every predator in the area had decided to celebrate Memorial Day weekend and simply leave town. And yet there was a touch of foreboding in the air, as well, even melancholy, as a dragonfly the length of her arm buzzed past and she began to think about just how unusual it was for the jungle to be so silent, and at this time of day especially.

The CD player played on: *Something in the wind has learned my name / And it’s telling me that things are not the same ...*

She gazed at the sky, she wasn't sure why, and watched the strange lights bleeding in and out of each other, wondering again just what it was they could be, if they were a previously unimagined kind of spacecraft containing intelligent beings, or merely a natural phenomenon associated with the Flashback. And a chill ran up her spine.

"Team 4 to Charlotte, we're coming in," said Harley over the radio, followed by a squawk.

"Roger that," said Charlotte, and looked down to see perhaps the ugliest motor home she'd ever seen rumbling and rattling toward them.

"Blue—"

"I'm not deaf and blind," said Blue.

Charlotte watched as Blue levelled her rifle and Donny got the gate, and the old RV lurched into the parking lot, backfiring at least once, clouds of blue smoke belching from its tailpipe. "In the back," said Charlotte into her mic, waving her hand to clear the smoke. "*The back.*"

Looks like we've found our caboose, she thought. "Harley, what the hell?"

"It's got a Ford V10," said the mechanic, sounding like a kid on Christmas. "I'm a Chevy guy but I'm telling you, we'll get 400,000 miles out of her, easy. Just needs a rebuild."

"Sure, and we'll just have the NAPA delivery truck drop off the parts," said Charlotte. She hacked in the smoke. "Jesus, can you turn that thing—"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

She ducked instinctively and saw Blue taking out a pair of raptors—which leapt like marionettes, their blood spurting everywhere—as Donny bent low and pushed the gate closed and the other raptors scattered and fled. Yes, she was getting good with that thing. She was getting very, very good.

“Good shooting, Blue,” she said, and moved toward the ladder. She descended the rungs quickly. “Okay, everyone. Smoke ’em if ya got ’em. Take thirty and then we’ll get the bulldozer and whatever other road clearing equipment we need.”

“If they’ve found the ingress,” said Harley, “then there *is* no need. The bulldozer down there is fine.” The signal hissed with static. “Red, this is Harley, can you read me?”

“Go ahead,” said Red.

“The ingress ... is it a service tunnel? Do you think it’s how they brought in the earthmovers?”

“Affirmative,” said Red. “But it’s mostly blocked up ... some kind of landslide. We’re climbing over it now.”

“How serious is it? And do you think the bulldozer can clear it?”

“Hey, asshole, we don’t want to clear it. We want to stop it up.”
—Corbin, of course, barely audible.

“I mean to get the bulldozer up top,” said Harley. “It’s not like we can lift a hundred tons with the utility elevator.”

Charlotte’s radio squelched. “No way,” said Red.

“Roger that, Red. Stay alert,” said Charlotte. And to everyone else she said, “Okay, you heard him. We need a dozer. Thirty minutes.”

• • • •

SHE’D THOUGHT SOMEONE might join her in her RV for lunch, but no one came, probably because she’d been barking orders at them all day long. Instead she ate alone, digging ravioli from a can of Chef Boyardee while sitting in the driver’s seat and worrying over the radio for any signs of Red’s progress. It was a curious place to find one’s self at the end of the world; a curious feeling to find one’s self caring deeply again for another human being. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about the others—indeed, she had

been likened to the Shambhala's den mother more than once—it was just that, in truth, she had kept them at a distance on purpose, for she knew that any one of them could be killed, or worse, simply vanished, at any time. Except, of course, Sean (and look how *that* had turned out), whom she had shared a bond with primarily because he had lost his children to the Flashback in the same manner she had—they'd simply disappeared. In her son's case, while he was virtually in mid-sentence.

She pushed it from her mind. No. No, she would not revisit those horrible first days of the apocalypse; to do so was to invite paralysis, madness, death. The only thing that mattered now was the eternal present and the struggle to survive. The only thing that mattered now was ...

She focused straight forward and saw that the gate to the parking lot was hanging wide open.

Donny. He'd forgotten to latch it.

She sat bolt upright, every nerve in her body suddenly on end, and was about to leap from her chair when Donny appeared at the edge of the windshield and waved back at her, as if to say, *My bad, sorry. I got it.*

Then she collapsed back against the headrest, exhaling, as he pushed the gate closed and latched it, and relief flooded through her like so much cool water even as the saber-toothed cat's huge head appeared outside her window and its whiskers brushed the glass and its black lips pulled back from its teeth and its eyes focused intently on Donny in the split second before it leapt.

• • • •

THE FIRST THING RED noticed on climbing out of the Jeep were the tracks: not one set but two—one clearly belonging to the smilodon and the other decidedly saurian, bigger than a raptor's (by far) but not nearly so large as a T. Rex—which intersected and

passed through each other near the entrance to the service tunnel and made a great 'X.'

"We've had company, and recently," said Corbin, crouching to examine them. "I don't recognize this one." He indicated those of the dinosaur.

Red knelt beside him. "I do." He scanned the area more than a little nervously. "I—I saw this animal. The night before last. It—never mind."

"Never mind?" Corbin's eyes widened. "You saw a new animal, an entirely new threat, an unknown element, and didn't think to share this little factoid with anyone besides yourself? Are you fucking joking?"

Red stared at him icily, and the undercurrent of violence between the men was stronger than usual. "Step off," he said, and stood. "The truth is I'm not sure what I saw. It—it didn't act like an animal. To be perfectly frank, I wasn't sure if I had actually seen it or just imagined it ... until now." He keyed his mic: "Red to Charlotte. We've found the ingress. Be advised that we're moving in. We're just going to have a quick look around."

"Roger that," said Charlotte over the radio. "And Red ... be careful."

"No worries," said Red. He motioned at Lonny, who had begun to get out of the Jeep, indicating he should stay put. "We're with Supercop." He turned the volume on his radio down.

"Fuck you, Michelangelo."

"Come off it, Red," said Lonny. "I'm not staying out here by myself."

Red approached the Jeep, the rear of which sagged under the weight of the new armaments and ammo boxes. "Sorry, it's either out here in the Jeep or in there without a gun. The only difference is out here you'll probably be safe. And besides, we might need a getaway driver—and fast." He opened the back of the Jeep and re-

trieved an extra bandolier, which he swung over his head so that it crisscrossed the one he already had on. “Corbin?”

Corbin nodded, and he tossed a bandolier at him—hard. The ex-cop scowled at him and put it on. The bandolier was followed by a red hardhat which was equipped with a light, thrown equally as hard.

“We’ll probably lose radio contact because of the rocks,” said Red. “If that happens, don’t panic. We won’t be long.”

“But what if you guys don’t come back? What am I supposed to do then?”

“Beat feet for the Shambhala,” said Red. “Just don’t do it until you’re sure we aren’t coming back.”

“Or grab a weapon and come find us,” said Corbin.

“Oh, sure, *then* I can have a gun. That’s great. That’s just really fucking great ...”

Red stepped up next to Corbin and peered at the cliffs above the service tunnel’s entrance. “Some well-placed dynamite would seal it up nicely,” he said.

“*If* this is the ingress they’ve been using,” said Corbin.

Red stared at the entrance and the fifteen-foot high wall of craggy stone blocking it, a good portion of which seemed to be all of a piece, as though a single section of rock had materialized out of nowhere to render the tunnel impassable to vehicles. “Let’s find out. After you.”

Corbin spat upon the ground. “Yeah, after me. Ain’t that typical. I’m surprised you’re coming in at all.” He shouldered his rifle and began ascending the rubble, and Red followed.

It was perilous work: any handhold upon the wrong rock might trigger a slide, and so they picked at the barrier carefully, all the while maintaining a vigil for threats, which, in truth, might come from anywhere. Perhaps insantly, Red found himself thinking of Charlotte—not in her capacity as head of the Wagon Train,

but personally, intimately. For the chemistry between them had been undeniable—if the remarks of various Shambhala residents, especially Blue, were any indication, it always had been—and the thought of continuing the affair made him positively giddy. But there was something else about it too, something which was difficult to define; he didn't really know how to explain it other than he had a new sense of urgency to protect the Shambhala and everyone in it. Doing any less, in the face of what they'd shared (and would continue to share, he knew), seemed cowardly and irresponsible. He supposed that was precisely it, in short: He now felt responsible. For her. For the Shambhala. For everything.

He heard someone call him on the radio and turned it up. "Go ahead."

It was Harley: "The ingress," he said. "Is it a service tunnel? Do you think it's how they brought in the earthmovers?"

"Affirmative," said Red. "But it's mostly blocked up ... some kind of landslide. We're climbing over it now."

Static exploded from the radio's speaker and subsided. "... do you think the bulldozer can clear it?"

"Hey, asshole," said Corbin, "we don't want to clear it. We want to stop it up."

Red looked around at the rockslide as more static flared up. "No way," he said.

"Roger that, Red. Stay alert," said Charlotte. And then the static took over and he turned it back down.

At last they reached the barrier's summit and began to work their way down its opposite side. Red turned on his helmet light as they reached the floor, and saw pretty much what he'd expected to see: a dimly-lit (for most of the fluorescent banks had failed) service corridor, large enough to accommodate vehicles and even semitrucks.

“Well, well,” said Corbin. “Won’t you look at this. A regular superhighway straight to the Shambhala.”

Red didn’t say anything, primarily because he’d been distracted by a smell, which seemed to be coming from an inset in the corridor’s concrete wall, a big one, as though it had been used as an overflow parking area. He approached it slowly, unshouldering his new fully-automatic assault rifle, quickly realizing that the smell was precisely what he’d feared, for it was the smell of dead things, half-eaten things, which came into view as he rounded the corner.

They were cavern raptors, mostly, of had been before something had had cleaned out their ribcages. To Red’s relief, there were no humans. Nor did it take long to ascertain just what had been using the space for a den, for there were paw-prints amidst all the dried blood.

“The cat,” said Corbin, crouching by one of the prints, which was the size of a manhole cover, at least.

“The cat ...” repeated Red. He looked around the area. “The cat which might be anywhere right now.”

And something brushed him, passed through him: a sensation of alarm, a kind of psychic revelation, an image—Charlotte, facing him as she had faced him by the tubular corridor the other night, and behind her, looming large in a shaft of dim light, the cat. The smilodon.

He toggled his radio instantly. “Charlotte this is Red, do you copy?”

Corbin swatted the radio down with surprising violence. “Are you fucking mad? You just said that thing—”

“Charlotte this is Red,” he said again, taking several steps away. “Come in, I repeat, come in.”

There was the clinking of steel as Corbin raised his rifle at him, and Red froze.

“Turn it off, *now*,” ordered the ex-cop. Then a cavern raptor cried out somewhere down the curved corridor, and Red seized the opportunity to snatch his own rifle into position—aimed directly at Corbin’s head.

“That was fast,” said Corbin at length, and smiled like a shark. “I must say, I’m impressed.” He tightened his grip on his rifle. “Well, now. Doesn’t this make quite the pretty picture?”

Red tightened his own grip as sweat beaded along his forehead. “It doesn’t have to be this way ...” He maintained his focus even as the cavern raptor was answered by several others, which seemed closer. “Goddammit, Corbin, we don’t have time for this.”

Again, Corbin just smiled. “Don’t we? You know, on the contrary, I think it’s well past time for this. We just don’t seem to like each other very much, do we?”

Red listened carefully, his eyes locked up in Corbin’s. There were footfalls down the corridor now, accompanied by the familiar click of sickle-claws against pavement. One of the creatures barked excitedly as it approached, and the others joined in; it was possible they were even visible now—although Red dared not look.

And a split second before everything went crazy, Red heard a single garbled transmission from his radio—Charlotte, in what seemed a blind panic—who said, to the best of his perception, “We’ve got trouble, Red! Real trouble! Not just—” There was a flurry of static. “Get back here as fast as you can. But be advised—”

And then she was gone, gone as if her radio had simply died or been turned off.

• • • •

THE CAT POUNCED AND little Donny Martin screamed as he was pinned beneath its forepaws—which held him fast against the pavement as the oversized predator’s tail wagged furiously and it dipped its head to take its first nip, which much have severed an

artery because a plume of dark blood geysered forth like a grisly, red fountain.

Then Charlotte was up; she was up so fast that her head slammed into the compact bunk above her—*hard*, enough to make her feel as though she might black out—and she was spinning around, un-holstering her sidearm, when she realized a 9mm pistol was pointed in her face.

“Don’t move,” growled its wielder, a man she’d never before seen, a man whose head shined with sweat beneath his closely-cropped hair and who wore a uniform not dissimilar to the security guard at the local mall before the Flashback, except for one very important and terrifying difference, and that was that he also wore a red armband emblazoned with a stark black swastika on a white circle.

“Now you just hand that over, *real* easy-like,” he said, even as poor Don Martin screamed, seeming to choke and gargle on his own blood.

“Please God,” she begged, handing him the weapon, her entire body starting to tremble. “Whoever you are, whatever you want ... don’t let this happen. Not to Donny.” Her brown eyes welled up. “Not to anyone ...”

The man just stared at her with his steely blue eyes. Then he put an arm around her and swiveled her around to gaze out the windshield, pressing the muzzle of the Glock hard against her temple, and said, “Why not?” He lowered his head next to her own so that they were practically cheek to cheek. “Why are you crying? There’s nothing to be sad about. He simply wasn’t fast enough, wasn’t strong enough. Most likely he wasn’t pure enough. The cat is doing him a huge favor, don’t you see? It will put him out of his misery; more importantly, it will render his existence useful where before it was not. Look at it, our nature in action ...”

She watched in horror as the smilodon reared back its head, pulling taut Donny's entrails, stretching them like taffy, as his screams ended abruptly and his body convulsed and fell limp. Then he was gone—swept up and carried aloft as the smilodon bounded from the parking lot.

"See? Now he has brought nourishment to a superior creature, and what more could an inferior lifeform possibly—"

She struck him suddenly and without warning—without so much as tensing her shoulders—hitting him directly in the mouth; then scrambled for the door as he fell back, which she threw open and simply fell through onto the pavement. Then she was up and running, keying her shoulder mic, sprinting down the corridor between her RV and the one parallel to it, shouting, "We've got trouble, Red! Real trouble! Not just dinosaurs but *people*. Get back here as fast as you can. But be advised: they are armed. Armed and—"

And she collided with another man, also in uniform, who struggled with her briefly before binding her up in his powerful arms and holding her fast, even as the first man exited the RV and approached them, laughing.

"Oh, she's a veritable Valkyrie, that one," he said, then unhooked the radio from her belt and threw it against the pavement, shattering it into multiple pieces ... after which he wiped the blood from his lip and leaned close to her face, whispering softly, "I've been sucker-punched before, but never so ... deftly." He squared his shoulders and stood erect. "So there are more of you than just those gathered here ... that's good to know. Not that we haven't been observing you for some time; it's just that we were limited to your comings and goings and couldn't be sure just how many of you there were." He glanced at the RVs on both sides of them. "You seem to be preparing for an exodus. Why?"

"Release me and maybe I'll tell you," spat Charlotte. "Until then we have *nothing* to talk about."

The man shrugged and simply turned away, then moved toward the front of the motor homes. “Come along, Corporal, and bring our combustible little Aryan friend. I want to show her something.”

The man who held her jostled her forward, and a moment later they were looking at the front gate—through which streamed a collection of both new and used vehicles: 4X4s, ATVs, a couple RVs, even an armored personnel carrier, all of which were flying Nazi flags and were crowded chockablock with heavily-armed men and women. Nor was this all Charlotte saw, for she also saw that her fellow Shambhalans had been captured as well, captured and handcuffed with zip-ties, and were now being herded single file into one of the two service elevators. And she very nearly fainted from the incongruity of it, the madness of it—that it wasn’t enough that they should all lose their families and their world and their sanity and their faith, but that, just when it had looked as though they’d found their way forward at last, along would come this, this ridiculous attempt at a Fourth Reich, this group of men and women who had been confined to the fringes before the Flashback but had now been given free reign to play out every misguided fantasy they’d ever had.

They were prisoners now, all of them—prisoners of a group of people who had spent their entire lives praying for a Holocaust ... and had at long last gotten one.

• • • •

V | THE CHILDREN’S Reich

Red’s eyes never left Corbin’s as he gripped the sweaty stock of his automatic rifle, maintaining the standoff, even as the growls and snarls closed in. The cavern raptors were very close now, possibly as close as a hundred feet. “What’s it gonna be, Corbin?”

Corbin ground his weapon's sights mercilessly. "Who's to say I can't plug you full of holes before I waste every one of those stinking mothers? Who's to say I can't waste *everything in this tunnel* before returning to the Shambhala without you and without your smart aleck mouth? Do you have anything to say about that?"

But then the raptors were upon them and Red was firing into their midst—Corbin quickly following suit—and their criss-crossed muzzle flashes lit up the tunnel like fireworks as the animals danced as though electrified and their blood sprayed in all directions. *Skree! Skree! Skree!*

They fell in twitching, jerking, hemorrhaging piles as the two men continued to fire ... until every one of them lay dead upon the pavement—all that is save one, which turned and fled, slipping once in the rapidly spreading blood, before clicking away down the tunnel even as Corbin tried to sight it.

"Forget it," said Red, exhaling. He braced himself with a hand on his knee. "Save the ammo."

Corbin ignored him, continuing to site the fleeing animal, adjusting his aim by what seemed only millimeters as the raptor weaved, first to the left, then to the right, until a *crack!* rang out and his rifle bucked, and the thing fell—squirting a stream of blood from its head.

"That's the difference between you and I," said Corbin coolly, still looking on, and lowered his rifle. "I don't pass the buck. I don't avoid responsibility and make messes for others to have to clean up." He turned back toward the rockfall. "That's it. In case you were wonder—"

They both saw it at the same time: a cavern raptor leaping directly at him from the top of the rockfall, its legs kicked up in the air, its sickle-claws catching the light of his helmet, its tail whipping about frenziedly—until Red squeezed off a volley and its body simply exploded. And yet there were more, which leapt helter-skel-

ter from the barrier as though they were on some kind of reptilian suicide mission, some of which were shattered by the men's bullets while others landed awkwardly around and between them—only to ignore them completely and flee scattering down the corridor.

Corbin began mowing them down as they ran but had to pause to change clips. "What the hell, man? What kind of attack was that? And why didn't Lonny radio a warning?"

Red stared at the daylight shining over the top of the rockfall, wondering those same things, and wondering, too, why the earth itself was vibrating, why loose sediment was being shaken loose from the stones to create little clouds of dust and to patter against the concrete. And that's when he realized that the so-called attack had been nothing of the sort, that the velociraptors had in fact been flee—

His radio squelched suddenly and loudly. "Red, this is Lonny! Sorry, I—they ran right over the top of the Jeep!—I'm okay but you guys need to take cover, *now!* It's the—Holy shit ..."

Then an animal's cry rang out, a cry as distinct from a dinosaur's as two sounds could possibly be, a sharp-edged sound which began with a great, high-pitched rasping and ended with a throaty, rattling grumble.

And Red knew that the cat had come home to its den.

• • • •

IT HAD ABOUT IT THE quality of a dream, this waiting in the service elevator as the Nazis prepared their scaffold and unfurled their banners—as the sky began to darken in the west and the first pellets of rain slanted between the bars; as Charlotte tried not to break down, the sadness and incomprehensibility of the Flashback threatening to take full possession of her at last. He'd said something about a ritual—Dieter was his name; she'd heard someone call him General Dieter—which was to take place just before the

arrival of the stormfront. Whatever it was, their preparation for it must have been almost complete, for they began to assemble in rows as Dieter ascended the platform and tapped the microphone, saying, simply, “Testing ... testing”—which echoed throughout the parking lot and bounced off the hulls of the RVs even as the earlier commotion died down and the only sound became that of torches crackling in the drizzle and flags snapping in the wind.

At last Dieter said, “And here we are again, my Aryan friends ... Gathered before the storm, as is fitting.” He scanned the assembled crowd, his eyes sparkling with pride (it was easy to see because they’d set up a camera and a pair of flat screens to telegraph his performance). “Look at you. Seems like just yesterday, doesn’t it? When, alone in our enclaves, we awakened to this new dawn? Aye, one that was finally worthy of our cause. A world where there could be no more degenerates ... for the degenerate has not been born who can survive it. Manfred, scan the jungle ...”

Charlotte watched as the cameraman did so, tilting down from the scaffold and panning across the prehistoric jungle slowly, which lay dense and wet beyond the fence, like something from *The Little Golden Book of Dinosaurs*. “Look at it, my Aryan friends. A world as pure and brutal as anything we, or even our great Fuhrer, could have imagined. A world in which only the strong survive—while the weak and the diseased, the impure, the degenerate offspring of tainted genetic stock, are summarily killed.” Charlotte squinted as something moved amidst the dense foliage: almost as if a mid-sized dinosaur had been peeking between the fronds but suddenly retreated. “A world in need of only one thing, and that is a master race—a race of supermen, and women too—to govern it. A race of people as pure and brutal as the land itself. Manfred ...”

The camera whipped back to focus on Dieter, behind whom the strange sky-lights moved, bleeding in and out of each other, like globes of wax in a lava lamp. “Alas, even our master race can, at times,

produce ... aberrations. A man or woman of perfect Aryan descent who, nonetheless ... fails to display the proper traits." He gestured with his hand as if to say, *Bring him, quickly*. "And such a man will be offered in homage today, my friends; to placate the beasts that are the sub-masters of this new world, and to introduce our new allies to how it is that we—the new Nephilim—do things." He nodded slowly as a man was forced writhing and struggling up to the main gate. "How it is that we have survived, even thrived, amidst a world that has killed so many. And the level of cruelty we expect from any and all who would join us."

Jesus, gods, he's talking about a sacrifice, thought Charlotte, even as another movement caught the corner of her eye. She focused on where she'd noticed it and saw what appeared to be a tail—like a great, green dagger—before it disappeared behind a stand of cypress trees. So, too, did something move on the opposite side of the lot, causing the trees to sway. *It's like we're being triangulated*, she thought—even as the man was thrown to the muddy ground outside the fence and the gate swung quickly shut.

"Manfred, if you would, the 'Horst Wessel Song ...'"

And no sooner had the man named Manfred run to the audio truck and started the music than the Nazis raised their hands in salute and started singing, "The flag is high, our ranks are closed / The S.A. marches with silent solid steps ..."

And so loud was the chorus, and such was the focus on the man outside the gate, that no one except Charlotte even noticed that a great saurian visage had entered the crowd from the left—closing its jaws about one of the guard's heads and swinging away with his body even as another did the same at the opposite end of the crowd. And then all was screaming and gunfire and confusion as the Nazis found themselves at war inside the very gates of the parking lot and Charlotte found herself wondering how Red's day could possibly top this.

• • • •

IN THE MIDDLE OF A DREAM Naaygi became lucid, aware somehow not only of who she was but of *what* she was, as if the healing of her body—which, while incomplete, was proceeding rapidly—had at last facilitated the healing of her mind. For she remembered now just who she had been before the light had carried her into the sky (and redeposited her here on the earth), and that she had become a nomad both before and after the Flashback but had then become something else—an amalgamation of Naaygi and *them*: a physical being, yes, but also a vessel, a vehicle, eyes and ears and fingers, essentially, for something which could neither see nor hear nor feel. And she remembered, too, as she awakened in her wheelchair in the common room near the infirmary (where she'd fallen asleep while watching the man they called Frank Miller and a group of women they called the Sisters play a game called Monopoly), that she had a purpose, and that that purpose was to *see*, and to listen. To observe. And that after she had observed she was to render a verdict—whose jurisdiction would be nothing less than the fate of all mankind.

For, as powerful as they were, they—the lights in the sky—continued to be conflicted as to whether they'd acted rightly or wrongly in attempting to reboot the earth; or, for that matter, if their Flashback had even been particularly successful. They already knew that they'd inadvertently conflated different eras into a single chaotic mix—so that primitive humans shared the planet with animals of at least three different time periods, for example—and that many of the evolved humans had survived their intended eradication. What remained to be seen now was if their survival should be allowed to stand—and the Flashback even reversed—or if their annihilation should be completed, as originally intended.

And yet the composite creature that was Naaygi had observed much that was of worth in the species: from the way the one called

Red had respectfully closed the velociraptor's eyes, to the manner in which such seemingly bitter enemies as Frank Miller and the Sisters could find camaraderie in a game—it seemed they had at least as much capacity for forgiveness as they had for conflict and destruction, and that was something the architects of the Flashback appreciated above all else ... perhaps because they shared so little in it themselves.

So, too, did a *selflessness* shine through many of them, a desire to serve and to heal—the one they called Doctor Gardner, for example. Speaking of whom, where had he been? She had not seen him since the morning meal, at which he'd appeared only briefly and had seemed ... *off*, somehow, as though he were ill. She decided to check on him, muscling her wheelchair as he had taught her to do toward the collection of rooms they called the infirmary.

When she got there, however, she found that most the lights were off, and the place was in a state of disarray—there were pill bottles of the kind he'd often fed her from scattered everywhere, for one—and, stranger still, the device they called “the main radio” had been destroyed and now lay in ruins on the long table near the elevator shaft. But of Gardner himself there was no sign—until she turned the wheelchair around and saw him closing the door through which she'd come. And immediately she could tell there was something terribly wrong with him, for he was twirling a syringe in the half-light of the messy room and was looking at her strangely; worse, it was a look she recognized instantly as being that of a man who was desirous of her, who sought to mate with her. And because she was still under the influence (of whatever it was he'd fed her that morning, from one of the bottles, of course), and because she was still trapped within the chair—or believed herself to be—she found that she could only back away in terror as he approached.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN different. Had Corbin's gun not jammed, nor Red been at the end of his clip, or even had it been anything other than the oversized cat that was so rapidly closing in upon them, they might have stood their ground. As it was, they'd turned and run like madmen for the Shambhala, where they were fortunate enough to arrive at the very section of fence previously damaged by the smilodon—and thus did not have to contend with the concertina wire which would otherwise have made passage impossible. And yet one thing was clear as they shouldered their rifles and began to ascend—and that was that the cat was coming. It was coming *fast*. Nor were the sounds of its footfalls and heavy breathing the only evidence of its approach, for as Red crested the fence—losing his rifle in the process—and started down the other side (so that he was facing away from the Shambhala and into the caverns), he saw it bounding toward them at a remarkable clip, its shoulders and haunches rising and falling, its tail curling and uncurling, its fangs catching the lights of the amusements so that they gleamed a ghostly yellow.

This time, Red knew, it would either leap the fence completely or tear at it until it gave way, for something, clearly, had pissed the thing off, whether it was the fact that they'd come too close to its den or something else entirely. Either way, the two men were clearly on the same page as they dropped the rest of the way to the ground and sprinted for the armory, which lay in a backroom of the infirmary—even as the smilodon collided with the fence and began to attack it mercilessly.

"Keep your eyes open," Red shouted as he ran, adding, "Remember Charlotte's transmission!"

Corbin ignored him as they entered the area where the service buildings stood and pushed on to the infirmary—where they were both surprised to find a locked door.

"Gardner! You in there?" Red pounded on the wood with his fist. "We need weapons, *fast!*"

"Get out of the way," snapped Corbin, and took a step back. He smashed the door open with a single, explosive kick.

Red was the first one in—although it took him a moment to process just what it was he was seeing. And what he saw first was Naaygi curled up nude in the corner, her wheelchair spilled over upon its side, and her face a mask of such utter terror and bewilderment that he would have rushed to her and tried to comfort her had Corbin not blocked him with an outstretched arm. Gardner, meanwhile, was busy trying to stuff his cock back into his scrubs.

"What the *fuck* is this?" hissed Corbin, and moved forward at last, kicking aside a pill bottle.

"Easy does it," Red urged, holding up a hand. To Gardner he said: "What the hell is going on here, Gardner? What the hell *has* gone on here?"

"It's obvious what has gone on here," said Corbin, shouldering past Red toward the armory. "Meanwhile there's a cat the size of a cargo van about to infiltrate the compound." He disappeared into the back as Red hurried forward to comfort Naaygi but was greeted only by savage kicks and punches which forced him back against the wall.

"Naaygi!" she cried, her voice raw, her eyes rimmed in red. "Naaygi-naragoot!" She struggled to her feet, bracing herself against the counter. "Naaygi-naragoot ..."

"Naaygi," began Red—before catching himself, for he had no way of knowing what the word even meant. He swiped a sheet off the elevated bed and stepped toward her gingerly, but she only snatched it from his hands and began twisting it into a kind of weapon. "Naaygi-naragoot," she repeated. "Naragoot, *na-namola*."

And it was at precisely that moment and none before that Red realized how much her eyes had changed—that they had now been

overtaken almost completely by the gleaming alien colors, and he realized, too, just who the composite being he had dreamed of was, and what her purpose had been all along, and, looking at Gardner in a kind of horrified stupor, recalled the voice from his dream, the voice that had asked him, simply: *What do you see when you look upon them?*

“Hey, *psst*, Gardner,” he heard Corbin say, and looked up to see the ex-cop levelling an AR-15 directly at the terrified doctor. “I need your help with something.”

And then he opened fire, rapidly squeezing off round after round into Gardner’s dancing body, causing blood to squirt and to spray and to spatter the walls as Red jumped and Naaygi screamed.

“Works good,” he said after he’d finished, although by then Naaygi had already fled, limping, and Red had begun rushing for the armory.

• • • •

HAD THE NAZI GUARD—IN spite of the ensuing chaos—not stayed at his post by the service elevator’s interior control panel, Charlotte would have made a go at it (with her head, if need be) and lowered them into the Shambhala. As it was she could only look on in horror as the new species of carnosaur—three of them, she was pretty sure there were three of them—waded into the crowd, their tails held aloft like cats and their teeth and foreclaws (invisible amidst the crush of people) undoubtedly tearing through flesh.

And yet, so desensitized to violence and mayhem had she become since the outset of the Flashback, she found it almost comical when the bodies started to fly, flipping like ragdolls into the air or even dummies in a low-budget movie, many missing arms and legs, even heads, as they twirled like acrobats and threw off blood, only to fall right back into the meatgrinder.

Still, when the gutted body of a boy landed not ten feet away, she knew she would have to look away—even if it meant missing an opportunity to trigger the elevator. And that's when a volley of automatic gunfire erupted from somewhere in the crowd—which swept across the cage and caused everyone to duck (except the guard, who pressed himself against the wall and was also missed), and it was only in its aftermath that Charlotte realized how the animals had gotten in, for she could see through the blasted panel wall (the only wall of the lift that was, or had been, solid rather than barred, and thus not see-through) that they'd bitten through the fence at the southwest corner of the lot.

And then Dieter's Glock (for she recognized its kiss from before) was up against her head again, and the man was snapping at the guard to close the barred door and to lower the cage, quickly. And this he did, even as Manfred approached, too late, and gripped the bars in his bloody hands, saying, breathlessly, "Dieter ... Dieter, please, God. Let me in ..."

But Dieter only looked beyond him at the midsized carnosaur which had emerged from the screaming, scattering crowd ... before taking a step back and offering him a Nazi salute.

And then the beast was upon him, grabbing Manfred's torso in its agile, human-like hands and holding him fast—even as it closed its jaws about his head and reared its neck back: pulling his throat apart like mozzarella cheese and severing his spinal cord so that dark, red blood bubbled up from the hole and green bile spat from what had once been his esophagus ... a sight at which Charlotte would surely have fainted had Dieter not leaned close and, rendering the moment even more horrific, whispered into her ear: "He was not pure enough, my Valkyrie, none of them were. But you and I ... we shall create the New Man. Look, see?" He gestured at the Shambhala as it came into view. "Our underworld. The kingdom

from which we will repopulate the world. Aye, better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven, yes? In time, my Valkyrie. In time.”

And Charlotte could only shudder as she thought about Red and wondered if he were safe ... and wondered, too, if he had received her message of warning and might even now be planning something, anything, that might help them.

VI | Throw Wide the Gates of Hell

Charlotte saw Naaygi half-running, half-limping toward them before the cage even touched down—and had hardly had a chance to react (to her startling nudity, for one) when Red appeared not fifty feet away, brandishing a firearm. *Red, what in God's name?*

“Naaygi, wait, please!” he shouted, before skidding to a halt (having apprehended the situation in the elevator) and pointing his rifle directly at Dieter. “Whoa, whoa—what is this?”

Dieter didn't respond, only pressed the Glock tighter against Charlotte's temple. “What is his name?”

Charlotte hesitated. “Red ... His name is Red.”

“Good. Keep cooperating and this ‘Red’ might survive the day.” To Red he said: “This is your new leadership, Mr. Red. Please, let there be no more bloodshed. We are here to assert control over the Cove, that is all.” The weapons of the other Nazis clicked and clinked. “There are many rifles trained upon you even as we speak, Mr. Red. Please. Lay down your weapon and no harm will come to the girl. Nor anyone else. You have my word.”

Naaygi, meanwhile, had reached the other elevator and was frantically studying its controls.

“Tell me, Valkyrie,” said Dieter. “What is that thing and what does it want?”

Charlotte glanced at Red. *Oh, Red, tell me this is not what it appears to be; just, dear God ...* “She's a woman, as I'm sure you've noticed. And she clearly just wants to get away.” She watched as the primitive girl pressed buttons haphazardly and finally beat her fists upon the panel. “But that elevator doesn't work.”

“Then she can have this one. We can't use her.” And to everyone else he said: “We are going to move forward ... slowly. Uwe, if you would be so kind as to show the creature how to operate the lift.”

“I'm warning you,” snapped Red, and tightened his grip on his firearm. “There are others ... just because you can't see them—”

He was interrupted by a volley of gunfire from the area in which the cat was attacking the fence. Corbin, of course. The sound was followed by angry growls and a roar.

Dieter only laughed. "No," he said, "there is no one. No one who isn't already preoccupied. I won't play this game with you any longer. Lay down your weapon and neither you or the girl will be harmed. You have approximately thirty seconds."

Red hesitated as the group cleared the cage and Uwe and Naay-gi stepped in. At last he held up a hand to indicate his intentions and slowly lowered his rifle to the ground.

"There we are, much better," said Dieter. "Uwe, if you would send the creature upon her way ... she is of no consequence."

And with that Uwe hit the button and the cage doors rattled shut, and the platform began to rise.

"Now," said Dieter, having never taken his eyes off Red, "kill that man."

• • • •

IT WAS NO USE, CORBIN quickly realized, the cat was coming on too fast, too powerfully; indeed, it had collapsed the fence almost entirely when he turned and ran for the safety of the service buildings—having it in his mind to ascend the ladder behind the Gingerbread House and fire at the thing from the relative safety of its roof—but even that seemed too much to hope as the great beast bore down upon him, its padded paws thudding against the pavement, its hot breath painting his backside, its jagged growls seeming to split the air like thunder.

But he *did* make it, although he might not have, had one of the Sisters not emerged from the infirmary building at the precise instant the cat was passing—only to be snatched up in its jaws and shook like a ragdoll until the animal pinned her beneath its forepaws and began to feed.

He was about to open fire on its backside (although the Sister was dead already, surely) when the sound of the elevator going up drew his attention to the main foyer, where he saw Red standing with his rifle at his feet and a large group of people facing opposite him, some of them bound with zip ties and still others heavily armed, and realized in an instant what Charlotte had meant when she'd said they had trouble, real trouble. He examined the scene through his scope and quickly deduced that the man holding the gun to Charlotte's head must be the leader—and zeroed in upon him. But he was no fool, whoever he was, he was no Red, for he kept weaving slightly and altering his position, seemingly aware that there was a chance he was being sighted and causing Charlotte's head to block his view every time he thought he had a clear shot.

Still, he couldn't very well do nothing, especially when the cat stopped growling long enough for him to hear (or think he heard, such was the distance) the leader say, faintly, "Now ... kill that man."

His finger sweated against the trigger. Or could he? Do nothing, that was. After all, the armed men (and one woman) and the prisoners were interspersed so densely that it would virtually ensure collateral damage once the shooting started; why not let them off the S.O.B.? Let them off him and then let the cat do the rest ...

A thin voice startled him: "Do you have a clear shot? Why don't you fire?" It was Chairman Dean, weaponless, of course; he'd crawled upon his elbows to lay next to him on the Gingerbread House's peaked roof. "Jesus, they're going to kill Red."

And it was at precisely that instant that Corbin saw an opening—just the back of the leader's head; he wasn't sure if he could hit it—and fired.

IN TRUTH, IT WASN'T until the man—the Nazi—next to Charlotte's captor dropped like a sack of potatoes and began oozing blood and brains onto the concrete that Red realized it hadn't been himself who'd been shot. He looked at his own body briefly, his hands at his chest, as if to be sure, then dove for his rifle and rolled once, targeting Dieter even as Charlotte fled and hastily squeezing off a round which grazed the man's thigh and dropped him to the ground. After that, everything happened at once: the muzzle flashes from the top of the Gingerbread House were answered by muzzle flashes from the armed intruders, who crouched as they fired, and the prisoners spread in every direction, even as the saber-toothed cat lumbered into the clearing and pounced upon someone—Red wasn't sure who—holding them fast until they stopped moving and then circling in place before stalking toward the Nazis, who retreated while returning fire (one of them assisting Dieter) until they'd taken cover behind various carnival rides. And yet even amongst all that noise and confusion Red heard the unmistakable sound of the elevator descending and wondered who else could possibly be coming—before Charlotte cried out his name and he looked back to see her hiding in the door of the infirmary (along with Blue and several others), after which he scrambled to his feet and bolted toward them.



NAAYGI FOUND THEM WAITING for her—as she somehow knew they would be—as the cage doors opened, their forward-facing eyes glinting the same hue as the lights in the sky and their dark, storm-colored bodies held absolutely still (even as another animal joined them and brought their number to four). She even knew somehow what they were; that they were a breed of carnosaur the “evolved” humans had called nanotyrannosaurs, the “Pygmy Tyrants,” and that one of them, the one with the brand upon its tail,

the leader, even had a name—Napoleon, for he had been bounced forward and back in time via another alien species well before the Flashback and still bore the scars of his sojourn among the humans. She didn't know how she knew these things, no more than she knew just where, within herself, Naaygi ended—and they, the lights in the sky, began. She just did; just as she knew that the Nano-Ts represented a queer offshoot of the dinosaur population that was altogether fleeter and deadlier and cannier than anything that had come before it.

And thus she bowed to them, her avengers, her killers—*their* killers, the lights in the sky—the rain running in rivulets down her body as she dropped to her knees and touched her forehead to the pavement, a pavement which ran red with blood and was strewn with the dismembered, disemboweled corpses of at least fifty men and women.

And then she whispered to them in a language older than words, *Follow me*.



BLUE WAS THE FIRST to see them—having been dubious enough of Charlotte's suggestion that they make a break for the descending elevator to examine it more closely—witnessing, when she did, something her mind wasn't fully prepared to comprehend: for it was being ridden back down by Naaygi herself, as well as the very predators who had decimated the Nazis. "You've got to be fucking kidding me," she said, and backed away from the group—far enough that she tripped over Gardner's bullet-riddled corpse and fell hard upon her ass in a pool of blood. And it was at that very moment, while floundering amidst the gore with her hands zip tied behind her back, that something just snapped—something which had been stretched taut since well before the Flashback, since well before her adulthood, even. Some-

thing which had driven almost everything she'd ever done, feeding her will to hate, fueling her desire to be unattractive, growing within her like a tumor with each passing year. She looked at her hands: Blood. The blood of a man she'd despised (Gardner) and never quite trusted, the man she'd advised her Sisters to avoid at all costs even if it meant jeopardizing their own health. Blood like that on the sheets when she was thirteen years old. Blood like that she would spill before she relinquished the Shambhala to anyone: not Naaygi, nor her dinosaurs, nor the Nazis, nor Corbin or Red or Charlotte—that prancing bitch!—*no one. One fucking vote*, she thought, even as she began slapping the zip ties against her ample buttocks violently. *We lost by one fucking vote*. She slapped them against her protesting flesh again and again and again—until they snapped like the cheap excuses for real zip ties, police zip ties, that they were ... and she was free.

• • • •

FOR A MOMENT, AT LEAST, the firing stopped—followed by an eerie silence as the elevator touched down and its barred doors rattled open. Even the cat hesitated. *My God*, thought Red, watching as Naaygi stepped out and seemed to look directly at him, her eyes gleaming and flickering as he had seen clear marbles do when illuminated by a laser pointer. *They've reached a verdict*.

And then, as the smilodon growled and the Nano-Ts followed Naaygi—slowly, assuredly, behaving nothing like animals—she raised her left arm and pointed a finger directly at the infirmary ... even as her right arm raised and pointed a finger at the carnival rides. And finally, as the cat snarled and moved toward her, she pointed at *it* (then simply stepped aside), and Red watched in disbelief as the animal he'd seen on the red-eye shift (for he could see its name, as before—Napoleon—branded clearly on its tail) faced off with the fanged mammal. And then the other Nano-Ts sprint-

ed toward their targets and all hell broke loose as everyone resumed firing and the Shambhala exploded into chaos.

• • • •

CORBIN HAD TO LAUGH a little at the incongruity of it: Had she simply not seen him from his position atop the Gingerbread House? Or had she somehow decided to spare him, perhaps because he had killed her rapist? Either way, he knew the game had just changed ... and it had changed entirely in his favor. Now he alone would decide who lived and who died and what shape the Shambhala would take when it was all over. Indeed, he could nudge the conflict in whatever direction he desired simply by maintaining his position and assisting some while actively working against others—like the Nazis. Or Red. Or Big Blue, wherever she was.

And then there was a single *Crack!* which cut the air like a knife, and he sensed Chairman Dean stiffen suddenly beside him; and when he looked to see what had happened he saw that the man's forehead now had a neat hole in it about the size of a dime. But who—?

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The roofing exploded all around him and he shuffled lower, catching muzzle flashes out of the corner of his eye. That had come from the infirmary! Jesus ... someone was shooting at *him*, instead of the dinosaurs. And when he eased the barrel of his rifle over the peak of the roof and dared to squint through its telescope ... it all made sense. For it was not, as he'd expected, Red.

It was Blue. And she, like himself, had chosen the path of total war. A war not just against dinosaurs and Nazis but of *All Against All* ... the prize for which would be the soul of the Shambhala itself.

• • • •

THEY BEGAN RUNNING up the steps of the Super Slide like maniacs, Dieter (limping) and two others, Hannah and Horst, as one of the Ts separated from the others and bolted toward them. Horst was picked off almost instantly, the T having thundered halfway up the first rise and dipped its head over the railing—snatching him from the stairs by his head and shaking him viciously before hurtling him against the curved fiberglass with a sickening *smack!* and pinning him there beneath its tri-clawed foot, which it raked backward suddenly, gutting him like a fish. Then it was continuing its pursuit, ascending parallel to the upward-slanting staircase even as its feet began to slip on the slick fiberglass of the slides ... to the point that its bearing became increasingly unsteady and it had to stop. Dieter laughed as he reached the platform at the top and squeezed off a few rounds, which seemed to have no effect on the animal at all other than to piss it off enough to try something else, which it did after standing still for a moment and cocking its head.

And what it tried was to leap back onto the ground and to re-ascend by latching its feet and foreclaws onto the steel mesh of the staircase's outer wall, so that it was able to continue stalking toward them only *sidewise*, its body held horizontal over the earth, its long tail whipping back and forth, its teeth gnashing in anticipation.

Dieter scanned the atrium of the great cave and gathered his wits, watching as the branded Nano-T and the saber-toothed cat circled one another—before the T feinted to the left and charged in from the right, clamping its jaws about one of the cat's legs and pulling the mammal toward itself with stunning violence—causing sparks to explode and rain down as they crashed against the elevator.

And it occurred to him then and there that everything and everyone was distracted, and it occurred to him, also, just what he

would need to do to escape from the animal that was almost upon them.

• • • •

CHARLOTTE AND THE OTHERS had hardly had time to shuffle back from the door before the Nano-T's knife-like muzzle rammed through it and crashed to a halt, its nostrils snorting, its fetid breath blowing hot, its snarls filling the room. Then it retreated

"Jesus, the armory," shouted Red. "Everyone get to the armory!"

Old Frank Miller poked his head out the shattered doorframe. "It's circling the building," he said. "And, Christ, the elevator's on fire."

"What the ...?" gasped Harley as he tripped over Gardner's corpse.

Charlotte stared down at the body as they passed.

"I'll explain later," said Red. He snatched up a pair of scissors from Gardner's desk and began cutting everyone's bonds even as Charlotte started handing out weapons and ammo. "Maybe you better explain now," she said.

"I can't," he snapped, "at least not adequately. Suffice it to say that Gardner went crazy, and Corbin after him ..." He hurriedly snipped Taher's bonds.

"What about the girl," said Charlotte. "What about—"

"*The girl*," growled Red, "in case you haven't noticed, isn't what she appears to be." He paused long enough to look her in the eyes. "I'm sorry. But if you want to survive this mess, you're just going to have to trust me."

She looked up at him, a hundred different emotions racing through her mind, then suddenly relented. Because the truth of it

was: she *did* trust him. Trusted him, and loved him, too. “I do,” she said.

He crouched next to Frank Miller in the doorway, and she joined them.

The Nano-T and the cat were locked up in furious combat now, each of them as battered and bloody as the other, tumbling and rolling, biting and clawing, their fight to the death having moved amongst the carnival rides, smashing some of the smaller ones to pieces, starting more fires. Meanwhile Nazis were running everywhere, pursued by the other Nano-Ts, while someone on the roof of the infirmary and someone on the roof of the Gingerbread house were engaged in a ferocious firefight. “If you got a plan, Red, they’ll never be a better time,” said Charlotte.

“All right everyone, listen up!” shouted Red. “The fence between the lagoon and the diner has been knocked down. Beyond it lies a service tunnel which leads directly out of the Shambhala. Now on my mark we’re going to make a run for it— keep your eyes on me, understand? I’ve ran this marathon before. And whatever you do, don’t look back.” He glanced at his mural which had begun to take on a red red-orange sheen by the light of the fires, at Chairman Dean’s smiling face and Charlotte looking like a movie star, at a giant version of Ryx spreading his multicolored wings to take flight, and wondered briefly where the little saurian bird might be. Then he pushed it all from his mind— as he had pushed his life before the Flashback from his mind; as he had pushed *her* from his mind. As he had pushed everything he had ever known from his mind ... a long time ago. “Just ... don’t look back,” he repeated, and then barked, “Now let’s move it, *go, go, go!*”

• • • •

THE BEAST WAS ALMOST upon them as Dieter held out his hand to Hannah, who had fallen in her haste to reach the platform,

and said, "Come on, just a little bit further. Take my hand, Valkyrie, and we shall escape down the slide together. Look, see, the beasts of prey are all distracted."

She groaned, feeling for her ankle, which she had twisted in the fall, then reached for his hand and took it suddenly and firmly—even as the Nano-T crested the top of the staircase wall and began to reorient itself for the kill. Then he pulled her the rest of the way up suddenly and turned her to face the beast, whose snout was only a few feet away, and said, "Look, see how they are distracted. Look!"

And he pushed her into its maw, which closed about her head and shoulders and lifted her kicking and struggling off the platform even as he snatched a burlap sack from the top of a nearby stack and sat down upon it at the edge of the slide, pushing himself off without delay as blood and innards and chunks of flesh fell all around him and the wind of his motion caught his blonde hair and lifted it aloft.

And then he was sliding down, down, levelling off briefly, then down again, and he couldn't help but notice that the people he had planned to rule were fleeing now, and that the Nano-T had broken off its engagement with the tiger long enough to snap at them and give chase, and that in its absence the great feline had turned its mighty head to face the bottom of the slide and opened its maw, which was mottled pink and black, and that he was helpless to do anything but continue sliding toward it—until his kicking feet and legs were trapped between its terrible, curved fangs and its central incisors bit mercilessly into his abdomen (which crunched and splattered and was ripped in two as his bowels exploded outward and his heart and lungs and spleen steamed on contact with the air) and blood erupted from his mouth only to gurgle back inside and choke him. And then the darkness engulfed him completely and he felt himself slithering between its throat muscles and down its gul-

let—into the burning blackness of its stomach, where he saw by a brief and inexplicable light the dead face of the man the cat had eaten earlier in the day, and knew at last that he walked the earth no more.

• • • •

RED SENSED THAT THEY were being pursued even before he heard the footfalls and knew that he'd led them astray. For an animal was coming—*the* animal, he knew, Napoleon—and it was coming on fast. True, they could turn and fire and hope that the thing dropped before it had killed every last one of them, but almost no one in the group save himself and Frank Miller were experienced with firearms, and he knew such an action would only lead to a greater loss of life. Better to be picked off one by one as they ran (so that at least someone would make it) than that—and yet there was another option he was almost too terrified to consider ... but he did consider it, and the longer he considered it the more real it became in his mind.

The question was, would Charlotte allow it? Would anyone allow it? For if any one person decided to join him, it would lead to a moment of doubt and confusion and lost time that he felt certain they could not survive. And so he would have to be certain of his own conviction most of all, and after that he would have to be certain that no one would even notice he was gone—until it was too late. Until there was nothing any of them could do but use the time he had given them to keep running and to survive. To link up with Lonny outside the service tunnel—if he was still alive—and make tracks for the Wagon Train.

To ensure, it was his hope, that his sacrifice would not end up being in vain.

VII | Generation Zero

Red was about to try it, to try dropping back so that he was bringing up the rear—*Good old Red, in the rear with the gear*, he thought insanely—and could engage Napoleon as the others escaped ... when he heard a commotion and broke his own edict not to look back—and realized the smilodon had pounced upon the carnosaur's back, stopping it in its tracks and resuming the conflict even more ferociously than before.

"We've got a chance," he shouted, putting on a burst of speed, "*go, go, go!*"

And go they did, slowing down just long enough to scramble over the downed section of fence. And then they were sprinting through the caverns, led by Red's helmet light—*Like Santa's fucking slay*, thought Red—as the nanotyrannosaur and the saber-toothed cat snarled and howled and gnashed their teeth. And Red could only pray that he and Corbin had gotten them all—the cavern raptors—and that Lonny was still alive and waiting for them at the Jeep.

And yet, even given that favorable scenario, he couldn't help but to wonder what they would do then—for there were more Shambhalans than could possibly fit in or on the SUV ...

• • • •

THE BULLET KNOCKED him back as it penetrated Corbin's shoulder and ricocheted off his clavicle, changing direction so that it blew out his bicep and rattled down the shingles like a little lead rose in bloom.

The bitch got me, he thought. *The fucking blue-haired bitch finally got me ...*

And then he was rolling down the peaked roof helplessly even as the Nano-Ts gathered below him ... until he gripped the eave using his good arm and hung on desperately, his legs dangling,

at which point one of the Ts closed its jaws about his calves and yanked him away—straight into the mouth of another, who caught him by the shoulder and fought to possess him, even as a third animal clamped its teeth about his other shoulder ... the result being a heated tug-of-war which didn't end until his body came apart like a stuffed pizza (spilling his liver and kidneys and intestines all over the pavement) and his screams of, "Assholes! *Assholes!*" ended in a wet, gurgling whimper.

And then he slept, only forever, and for a time, dreamed. And in his dreams, which were as absurd as any he had had while alive, he and his men were fighting (and dying) in those awful first hours of the Flashback, even as civilians rode around atop double-decker tourist buses—their clothing protected from the flying blood by clear plastic rain ponchos, their cellphones recording as his men died—and did virtually nothing to help them.

• • • •

BLUE ROUNDED THE CORNER of the Gingerbread House just as the Nano-Ts were finishing up, having devoured everything but Corbin's entrails, and covered her mouth before turning and bolting for safety, which she hastily decided might be found amidst the new construction—the Art Deco pavilions and tubular, futuristic corridors of the expansion, which had been underway before the Flashback.

The Shambhala, meanwhile, was burning—burning and flickering, for the power was starting to fail. She marveled at how quickly it was becoming a lost place, a dead place. Indeed, save for the roaring and thrashing of the branded dinosaur and the smilodon, a forlorn silence had begun to settle in that said one thing very clearly: her ambition to unify it into some sort of feminist utopia had been folly of the highest order ... no less than Corbin's vision of it as some para-militaristic aggressor state had been.

And then she was in one of the tubes, one whose terminus was hidden beyond the curve of the corridor and whose lights flickered intermittently, and terror overcame her as she heard the Nano-Ts running to catch up—drawn by her scent, she supposed—and she raised her AR-15, knowing that if she missed even once all was lost.

And yet they did not come at her immediately as she had expected—but rather congregated about the great, circular opening, keeping their bodies safely hidden from her sights even while stealing peeks at her from around the edges of the chromed metal walls. For they had learned guns, she knew—had learned how they could hurt them from a distance, and now waited for precisely the right moment to attack. Nor could she simply flee down the corridor ... for she knew, also, that any attempt to do so would only bring them down upon her all at once. Indeed, the other end of the corridor might be fenced off, for all she knew, remembering suddenly that that was precisely the case with some of them.

Thus she waited before fleeing *or* opening fire. And as she did so, she remembered something more: a poem she'd been forced to memorize in grad school—a poem she began reciting to herself even as an animal snorted somewhere beyond the curvature of the hall ... *meaning she was trapped* ... and the creeping fires outside began painting the chromed walls a hellish orange: "Up the mirrored tube comes a woman, running. Five women—if you count reflections." She tried to steady her breath, her eyes never leaving the opening. "All stop: sweat-soaked-rabid-eyed, one regards another in a curved space. They tremble upon hearing a Goliath grating—as though God, unable to walk, is sliding His throne across the floor. Down the mirrored tube goes the woman, running. Until at last she can run no more."

She took a deep breath, her heart starting to pound against her chest. *What were they waiting for?* But she knew what they were waiting for. The two at the opening were waiting for the one be-

hind her to get closer. And they were all of them waiting to pounce upon her at once. She gripped the sweat-greased stock of her rifle tightly and eased her finger slowly against the trigger, but paused. “She turns, facing the Terror, which comes buzzing-screaming-sawing-sucking ... but stands, accepting, unafraid, as the Terror shoots through her body.”

They were getting ready, she could feel it. *Two shots*, she thought, forcing herself to stay focused. *One between each of their eyes. Then pivot ... and repeat.* “It is over; the Terror gone. She turns to watch it go ...” She began tightening her finger around the trigger. “And doing so, realizes she makes no more reflection: The mirrored tube is empty.” There was a sudden commotion. “Until up it comes a woman, running. Five women, if you count reflections.”

And then they were charging, all three of them, snorting and snarling, and she fired.



RED HEARD DISTANT GUNFIRE as they continued to run for the rockfall—what he did not hear was the cat, or Napoleon, or anything else.

Until he did—just a snort, really, which could have been either one of the beasts. The only thing he could tell for certain was that something was coming ... again. He could tell it by the way the pavement vibrated and the hair stood up on the back of his neck, and the way the sediment shifted amongst the stones of the rockfall (which he had just arrived at) to sprinkle the road with dust.

And he knew, just as sure as he had ever known anything in his life, that they could not make it; that they would never ascend the daunting barrier in time, not all of them, certainly, nor even most of them. And so he pivoted abruptly and dropped to one knee, aiming his rifle into the dark even while commanding the surviving Shambhalans to scale the rocks, to which Charlotte responded in-

stantly and succinctly, “Go fuck yourself, Red,” and dropped next to him, raising her own rifle—after which virtually everyone else did the same thing.

Nor, in fact, were they alone. For even after they’d settled into position Red heard yet more guns clicking and clacking above—and realized with a glance that they had been joined by still others. Others who aimed powerful lights into the darkness as well as weapons and who seemed positively ethereal amongst all the glow.

• • • •

SHE’D GOTTEN GOOD WITH a rifle, very, very good—and it helped her not at all as the killers dashed and weaved and pounced upon her all at once: one closing its jaws about neck as another bit into her torso and the third sunk its teeth into her head—rupturing one of her eyeballs. And yet they did not feed upon her as she’d expected, but, rather, just lowered her to the floor as she began to bleed out, pinning her there like three brutal vises so that her good eye faced the opening of the tube ... where she saw, blurrily, Naay-gi standing still as a statue, her eyes flickering with that mysterious light even as the flames raged behind her and the Shambhala’s power sputtered and continued to fail. And then she looked at the curved wall and saw her own reflection—not, oddly, as she looked now, but as she had looked *then*, when she was fourteen, alone in her room with the man she would come to project onto all men and all situations, indeed, onto the world itself. And then she was lifting the rifle and placing its muzzle into her mouth even as she gripped its stock and worked her thumb around its trigger, having decided, in the last instants of her life, that she would not be defined by anything or anyone ever again.

• • • •

THEY WERE COMING NOW, *all of them*, for Red could hear their excited breathing and rapid footfalls and the gnashing of their teeth—even as the power failed at last and everyone sighted their weapons. Again he looked at the new arrivals, finding it difficult to see them through the halos of their lights, thinking he saw a black man in what looked like a convenience store tunic as well as a man and a woman standing close together and a big woman brandishing what looked like a rocket launcher. So, too, was Lonny there, just as calm and disciplined as could be, as well as an older man wearing what appeared to be coveralls. “Easy, brother,” said the man in the tunic at last, his voice as resonant and confident and reassuring as any Red had ever heard. “We got your back.”

And then the animals were there, the Nano-Ts, led, as before, by Napoleon, and Red was about to open fire when another voice shouted, “Hold your fire! They’re therapods!”

And the predators ground to a halt even as crusty old Frank Miller protested: “I don’t care what the hell they are ... they’ll rip us to shreds if we don’t—”

“I said hold your fire!” The man repeated, and Red turned to see him holding up an arm—an arm which was missing its hand. “Save your ammo ... it’s getting hard to find. And I’ll say it again: They’re therapods—bipedal saurischian dinosaurs of the suborder Theropoda—tyrannosaurs, allosaurs, velociraptors, that sort of thing. These look like Nano-Ts, the smartest and deadliest of the bunch. And I’m here to tell you, they’ll rip you to shreds no matter what you do.”

Everyone fidgeted nervously as the T’s, having spread out in a row, regarded them coolly, their heads cocking this way and that, their little foreclaws opening and closing. And Red realized, as he had when the raptors had eluded him behind the Scrambler, that they had learned—evolved—and were not so stupid as to simply

rush headlong into a hail of gunfire. Frank Miller, meanwhile, was having nothing of it.

"They're animals, for Christ's sake," he snapped, tightening his grip on his weapon. "Fill 'em full of lead and they bleed and die, just like anything else."

"That's where you're wrong," said the man in the convenience store tunic, and added, "A boar spear—have you ever seen one? It's got a pair of spikes, see, angled forward along its shaft. And do you know what those spikes are for?"

"They're for preventing a wild boar from impaling itself further once it's been stabbed," said the big woman with the rocket launcher. "From fighting its way up the shaft even after its been completely run through ..."

"To get to whoever's holding the spear," said the red-haired woman standing next to the handless man.

"That's what a Nano-T will do," said the man in the tunic. "I oughta know ... it's happened to me. No, what you all need to do right now is to just chill the fuck out; and hope that these individual animals have evolved enough so that they won't waste their lives in a futile attempt at more food—which by the looks of their mouths they don't need. Because they understand guns, see. They've learned."

And Red understood by their confidence and bearing that they knew whereas they spoke, these strangers, and glancing at Charlotte, understood that she knew it, too. "All right everybody, listen up," he said at last, never taking his eyes off the lead animal, whose hide had turned nearly white in the glare of the spotlights and whose eyes verily burned with the strange alien colors. "We're going to start climbing up the rocks *one at a time*, understand? When you get to the top take a position next to the others and make sure your gun is visible to the Nano-Ts ... hold it above your head if you

have to.” And to one of the Sisters he said, “Okay, Susan, why don’t you go first? Tahir, you’ll follow.”

• • • •

NOR DID IT TAKE NEARLY as long as Red had expected, until it was only himself and Charlotte who remained—Charlotte who looked at Red with her big, brown eyes and started shaking her head. “No way, asshole. Not in a million years.”

“They’re not going to leave, Charlotte,” he said, and nodded his head at the others. “Go. They’re going to attack, it’s just a matter of when. And the sooner you skedaddle, the sooner I can follow. Please.”

She looked at him a moment longer before finally shouldering her rifle and beginning the ascent, after which he called after her, “I love you. And I’ll be right behind you.”

She paused and looked down at him over shoulder. “In the rear with the gear?”

He tore his eyes off her and refocused on his sights. “In the rear with the gear,” he sighed, and squinted into his telescope at Napoleon.

And the animal stared right back, seeming, for all the world, to be staring at him personally. And maybe it was, maybe it was, considering the moment they’d shared in the tubular corridor. And he thought, *What are you thinking, enemy mine, when you look upon this small figure with its silly little gun and its belly full of fear? Are you like Ryx— can I communicate with you in some fashion older than words? Or are you pure animal instinct, incapable of anything but the acquisition of targets and the consummation of prey? Or are you ... them? And if so, why do you pursue us so relentlessly, when you yourselves show the very traits you despise in us?*

Napoleon growled, glaring directly at him, he was sure, and his body tensed as though he might charge at any moment.

Ah, but you are there, aren't you? Embedded in the beast, just as you were in Naaygi. As you were, in a sense—for a time—in me. Do not think that I don't know the conflict you've experienced, that you're experiencing still. For you still do not know if you've done good work or bad, do you?

“Red, baby, come on up now ...” —Charlotte, speaking to him from the top of the rockfall. “We’ve all got you covered. Just come on, break off and begin climbing, slowly.”

“Yeah, come on up, brother, you got this. *We* got this.”

Nor will you ever know, thought Red, for it is not for you to know, is it? Nor decide. For even you sense that you have created nothing, are incapable of creating anything, only rearranging. That you are, ultimately, no different than us, as much a part of the tapestry of creation as are we. And what will you do now? Attack? For surely you know that you will lose another part of yourself in doing so, and that more eyes will close upon the universe. Why not ... just let it go. Let the universe unfold as it should. There will always be time ... to complete what you have begun. To complete the painting ...

And for the first time he sensed real hesitation in the animal, even at it took its eyes off him long enough to scan the rows of weapons along the top of the rockfall, each and every one of them aligned against itself and its packmates.

And then it swung its great head away and began striding back toward the Shambhala, barking once over its shoulder blade for the others to follow, which, after a moment's hesitation, they did. And then Red looked up to see Charlotte beaming down at him from between two spotlights, her hair surrounded by a halo, and smiled.

• • • •

THEIR NAMES WERE ROGER and Savanna Aldiss, Clara Bonner, Landon Tyrese, and Joe Harmon, and they, like Red and Charlotte and the remaining Shambhalans, had so far survived the worst

the Flashback could dish out, and this with only a handful of weapons and other gear and an old hay truck. Unlike the Shambhalans, at least until the very end, they had learned how to work as a cohesive unit, and had versed themselves in the laws and the language of this new world as though they'd been born to it.

And yet they broke into tears regardless of their hardness and experience the moment the Wagon Train came into view, as did Red and Lonny, for the abandoned but well-maintained militia vehicles left behind by the Nazis were as much news to them as they were the newcomers. And yet even amidst their celebration there was a sobering note of caution, for the shattered and dismembered corpses of their former enemies lay everywhere even as the too-close volcanoes spewed their columns of red-orange fire and the pterodactyls circled ominously.

Until, at last, they were on their way, driving amidst a herd of sauropods for protection, and Red and Charlotte looked at each other while standing in the turret of the armored personnel carrier and smiled, for both understood, as did Roger and Savanna, the responsibility that had fallen on their shoulders by virtue of being a young couple. For however brutal and forsaken the world had become, they recognized it as their duty to bring into it something new, a new generation which would in time repopulate the world—Generation Zero.

And no one gave a thought about who should be in charge or by which dictum they should live now that their final quest was underway, nor even where they should try to go other than that they would need to stay as close to the highways as possible in order to access whatever gas stations they passed. And it was good, so very, very good, to not think of these things, and to simply let the universe unfold as it should.

Tales from the Flashback:
THUNDER LIZARD ROAD

By the time they'd passed Khitomer Butte and were well on their way to Pine Stump Junction, the two beers he'd had at the motel were a distant memory, much less the mescaline from the previous day—at least Sammi thought so until he saw the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* attacking the big, green tractor combine.

And yet was it the mescaline? Nothing in his field of vision was moving or wiggling, there were no multicolored lines, the sense of euphoria had long since vanished along with the feeling that every cell in his body were somehow orgasming; no, everything seemed perfectly normal to him, from the rumbling of the Harley to the farmland passing by. And yet, there *was* a tyrannosaur. He could see it just as clear as day through his marginally tinted goggles—even as the thing gnawed upon the combine's enclosed cab like a dog with a chew toy, holding the tractor fast beneath its tri-clawed foot as the grain stalks waved in the wind and the sun dipped below the horizon. *Just keep riding*, he told himself. *At least until the next rest stop. It's some kind of after-effect—hadn't Annie's friend said not to drive for at least 24 hours? Just keep riding ...*

That's right, came a voice, wan, disinterested, *her* voice, following him still, as it had followed him since the divorce and the buying of the winning Lotto ticket, as it had followed him since meeting Annie and across the entire country ... *just keep riding. After all, that's what you're good for, Sammi. Riding and driving away.*

"Wow," said Annie, her arms tightening around his waist. "Are you feeling it too?"

He focused on a dark shape hovering just above the wheat—several dark shapes—like hummingbirds, but *big*. Something glinted blue-black in the sun. "What do you mean?"

"The mescaline ... I'm still tripping, baby." Her inner thighs constricted against his hips and he thought of the fantastic shag they'd shared in California—while standing doggie-style amidst the Vasquez Rocks, the famed location of so many westerns—and

found the fact that she was hallucinating also reassuring, even if it did mean they were barreling down the Interstate at 74 mph while still under the influence. “Yeah. Me too. I’m going to pull over at the next rest stop until it passes.”

“DJ is expecting us at five. And it isn’t polite to keep the head of a motorcycle gang waiting. They’re my friends, Sammi. This is important to me.”

“God forbid, we miss a party. We’ll make it.”

“Not if we take too long at the rest stop ... Jesus, I’m seeing dinosaurs back here. What the hell did Jackie give us?”

Her voice had dropped a couple octaves and the wind and engine noise were making it difficult to hear her. *Not gave*, he thought, a little resentfully. *Sold. And the money’s starting to run out.* “Say again?”

“Dude, I’m literally seeing dinosaurs. There’s, like, a T-Rex back there. Trying to eat a tractor.” She laughed.

He turned and looked over his shoulder, saw the tyrannosaur brushing its massive head against the cab of the combine, attempting to roll it over. *There’s no way we can be seeing the same thing. There’s just no way except—*

“Baby ...!”

He spun around in time to see a blue-black *thing*, an insect, a *dragonfly*, which was at least as long as his forearm, hovering directly in their path—before it smashed against the windshield like a rock and splattered like a cantaloupe, hurling watery green blood and guts everywhere, some of which landed in Sammy’s mouth. And then they were careening out of control in the general direction of the gravel shoulder, and while he didn’t experience anything so dramatic as his life flashing before him, he did revisit, in a kind of time-out from time itself, the months since he’d received the Lotto payout and met Annie—a fast-living spitfire who was 29 to his 39 and whom he had nothing in common with beyond how

well they got on sexually—and recognized in himself an increasing dissatisfaction with, well, all of it—the gambling, the drugs, the sex—everything. But then the time-out was over and they were laying on their side near the edge of the road—yet still in it—as the 18-wheeler bore down upon them, close enough so that Sammi could see the driver's face, and thus knew the man had noticed them too late.

• • • •

THERE WAS A SINGLE sharp drum beat followed by a fanfare of trumpets—which always reminded Carina of the opening credits to that old show, *The Love Boat*—as the huge spiral waterslide was activated (marking the beginning of the YMCA's After-school All-swim), and she launched herself into the sluice.

The loudspeakers blared: *Young man, there's no need to feel down / I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground ...*

And then she was sliding and careening down, a little faster than she would have liked, wondering if she would crash headlong into Alex before she even reached the bottom—a thought that was dispelled as she plunged into the four feet of water at the base of the slide ... and surfaced, gasping and disoriented.

"Boo," said Alex, startling her from behind, and laughed.

"Oh ... you!" she said, and splashed water at him.

He splashed her back, his eyes dancing mischievously behind his goggles, before diving beneath the surface and grabbing her ankles—something he'd been doing with annoying regularity lately, ever since her mother had sewn the quilted patch into the crotch of her swimsuit. Indeed, his behavior in general, the behavior of all the boys in the Water Crew, which was what they called their after-school swimming gang, had become annoying: it was as though time stood still for them; they all still acted as though they were in 6th grade and had not moved onto junior high school at all.

She kicked him away and moved toward the edge of the pool, feeling hungry and eager to join the others in the rec room, but he only surfaced and pleaded with her to go down the slide with him one more time.

"Once more," she said, exasperated. "Then I'm out, seriously. I'm hungry."

She couldn't help but to think, as they climbed the stairs to the top: *How many times can you splash down the same stupid slide before it finally loses its appeal?*

I don't know, she asked herself, as Alex launched himself into the jet stream. *How many times can your mother fall in love with the same type of guy?*

She sat down on the slide carefully and eased herself off. *The type of guy who is all presents and attention at first but then disappears like the wind?*

She blew down the slide, rocking between the berms alarmingly in spite of her attempt to take it slow, and had a sudden vision of a great white shark waiting for her at the bottom—its spiny-toothed maw opened wide as a manhole, its pink palate gleaming. Then she exploded out the slide and was beneath the water again—waving her arms and legs for balance desperately—and when she surfaced, fully expecting Alex to pounce upon her immediately, she was surprised to find him nowhere in sight.

And that was odd, considering she'd gone immediately after him. She scanned the water around her even as the late afternoon sun, which had been pouring in through the windows, seemed to disappear completely. She peered outside and saw clouds stacking up in what had been a pure azure dome. *Ah*, she thought, *it's dipped behind a cloud. It'll be back, unlike your long line of stepdads.*

That's when she noticed the blood beginning to spread in the water all around her ... and was gripped with terror.

Omigod.

Omigod, just ... no.

And such was her terror and embarrassment at starting her first period in public that she nearly fainted—but instead backed toward the edge of the pool, groping for the concrete while thinking, *How could there be so much? How could all that possibly be coming from me?*

Her fingers touched a face—Alex, of course; he'd been under the water after all—*Omigod, omigod, what would he say? Would he tell the others? Would it be all over school the very next day?*

And that's when she realized his head was no longer connected to his body. That it had been completely severed and was bobbing in the intake filter. And then there were screams—others as well as her own—and she turned in time to see someone yanked below the surface not twenty feet away, as well as a fin, black as an orca's, which rolled like a log in the deep end of the pool. And she screamed until her voice went raw even as she started to climb from the water—until she saw the velociraptor crouched on the wet concrete with its eyes rolled back in its skull (Mr. Stiller said that predators did that right before striking, to protect their eyes) and its sickle-clawed toes tapping, and knew there would be no escape for her.

• • • •

LUCAS TURNED HIS OPEN textbook vertical long enough to flip the page of his comic book, then lay the math-text horizontal and continued reading *Spiderman*. He'd been held after school for not paying attention, yet there he was, lost in his own thoughts, not understanding anything the teacher was saying and already thinking of the excuses he could give his mother as to why he was so late getting home. *It was bullies*, he decided. Never mind that most his bullies were right there in the same room, doing penance just as he was. And never mind that his mother had heard it all before, or that, at this rate, he almost certainly wouldn't be graduat-

ing 6th grade. The ugly truth was that the numbers on the chalkboard—having failed to engage his imagination—were as good as invisible to him. And so he read *Spiderman*, which had color and texture, danger, stakes—until the sun passed behind a cloud and directed his attention through the louvered windows: where he saw a flock of seagulls erupt from the playground, beyond which and across the street lay the YMCA, and realized, or perhaps only imagined, that they had scattered before a stampeding triceratops, which was itself being pursued by a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, which he watched until the creature had disappeared around the edge of the building.

But indeed, he had not imagined it, for some of the other children gasped and rose from their seats, rushing toward the windows even as Mr. Headley shouted at them bewilderedly; at which moment there was screaming in the hallway and Lucas saw the teacher freeze and turn white as a ghost—before fumbling beneath his suitcoat and pulling forth a pistol.

“Everyone get on the floor, now,” he shouted, sprinting for the open door faster than Lucas would have thought him capable, while yelling at the kids running down the hall to get into the room and take cover, although few heeded him in their blind panic. He peered around the jamb as someone or something barked in the corridor—then pulled a student into the room by her arm and shut the door quickly.

He was standing with his back pressed against it, breathing heavily, gripping the gun in both hands, when Sally Meyers asked, “Who is it, Mr. Headley? Is it ... an ‘active shooter?’”

His breath came and went in ragged gasps. “I—I don’t know what’s going on, honey. I ... just saw a blur. Just ... stay put.”

The big IBM clock on the wall ticked as an eerie silence set in, and nobody moved. At last Mr. Headley turned to face the door and gripped the handle.

“Don’t, Mr. Headley, please,” said Sally.

“Yeah, let’s wait for help,” said Thomas.

Mr. Headley eased the door open just enough to peek through, and Lucas tensed ... but breathed a huge sigh of relief when the teacher turned to face them and said, “I can’t see much, but I think it’s clear. Everyone stay put. I’m going to try to—”

And something grabbed him by his ankles—a pair of clawed hands—and yanked, dropping him to the floor on his stomach and causing him to release his grip on the pistol. Then he was being lifted, high enough so that his head struck the top of the doorframe, and nearly everyone, including Lucas, went rushing to help him. But they couldn’t even reach him, much less help, as he gripped the jamb desperately and began to scream, until finally he was torn away completely, although not before grabbing the door handle in a final act of heroism and pulling the entryway shut.

And then there was only the sound, the sounds, of something being eaten or otherwise torn apart—moist sounds, cracking sounds—as a dark pool of blood spread slowly out from the door—flowing around the pistol, congealing around Lucas’ tennis shoes—and he’d hardly had time to process this when something barked *inside* the classroom.

And when he looked toward the noise he saw that a pair of velociraptors (as well as a cycad tree) had materialized in the middle of the nearest wall—just materialized, out of thin air—and were jerking and struggling, trying to free themselves from the sheetrock.

Trying ... and succeeding.

• • • •

SAMMY COULD LITERALLY see the individual insects stuck in the grill of the Peterbilt when it simply vanished—*pow, like that*. As though it had never existed.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," he said, struggling to get out from under the bike, while Annie did likewise and scrambled to her feet. They both flipped up their visors.

"I think we need help," she said, and, contrary to her character, began crying. "Where's your cellphone? We need to call DJ."

"This is no mescaline trip, Annie," he snapped, grunting as he righted the bike, then tore off his coat and began cleaning the bug guts off the windshield. "Look at this shit. This is *real*."

She moved to respond then paused, staring off down the highway, first north, then south. "Where is everybody? Where are all the other cars?"

He dusted himself off and followed her gaze. "Just vanished, I reckon. Like that truck."

She looked at the sky forlornly. "Jesus ... look at it."

He did so, watching as the clouds boiled and spiraled slowly and what appeared to be heat lightning flickered in the distance. But it wasn't just the otherworldly weather that struck him and filled him with terror, it was the strange lights that seemed to bleed in and out of each other, lights that were of a color he had never seen, and which hurt his mind to behold. "The party is on hold, we need to stop at Pine Stump Junction," he said, and seated himself on the bike. "They'll be cops there, radios. *Guns*." He looked at Annie, who continued to gaze at the sky. "People are going to need our help."

"Guns," she whispered absently. "But we have a gun ... right there in the saddlebag. And DJ is expecting us ..."

"Annie, *please*." He held out a gloved hand.

At last she climbed on behind him and he kicked it into gear.

And then they were on their way, and Sammi was doing his best to focus on the road ahead even as the countryside all around them became a phantasmagoria of prehistoric flora and fauna. And perhaps it was only because he was so intently focused that they

didn't crash when a *Tyrannosaurus rex* lumbered across the road directly in front of them—carrying a dead buck in its mouth.

• • • •

CARINA LOOKED AT THE water slide and knew it was her only chance. She dove for it even as the velociraptor lunged at her—nearly toppling into the water as it did so—then took its upper edge in her hands and began working her way up its length. That's when the plesiosaur's head and neck—she knew it was a plesiosaur because she'd seen one on the Discovery Channel—burst from the water, snapping at her viciously and managing to strike only centimeters from her foot—before she kicked it in its snout and forced it back, albeit momentarily. But it was enough that she was able to work her way farther up—slipping in the jetstream, fighting the current—until she had escaped its range and was well on her way to the top.

And then she was there, she was out of the water and gripping the platform's railing, and what she saw below was a pool turned virtually red with blood ... as more than one plesiosaur continued to pull people beneath the surface and the "lucky" ones who had escaped were torn to pieces by the raptors.

Then she was running, bursting through the door to the upper promenade and finding her way to the stairs, which she descended so fast that she nearly fell sprawling, and when she reached her bicycle she immediately went to work on the lock—although her hands trembled furiously—until, at last, she realized the bike's frame had been fused with a cycad bush ... and something in her just quit, gave up.

After which the only thing to do was to shrink into the corner and make herself as small as she possibly could, and hope that someone might come, an adult, perhaps, a cop, her mother, even,

with yet another stepdad, one who maybe, just maybe, wouldn't abandon her.

• • • •

LUCAS SUPPOSED IT WAS the gun, which he'd picked up and wiped off before they'd squeezed through the classroom windows—all he knew for sure was that everyone had begun looking to him as though he were some kind of leader. And the funny thing was, he *felt* like a leader, or at least as though he were awake—truly awake—for the first time in his life. After all, it had been he who had snatched up the gun and killed the raptors, he who had instructed everyone to quickly climb through the windows, and he who had led them to the corner of the building, where they now stood watching the tyrannosaurus as it greedily devoured the triceratops. What he didn't know was what to do next, at least until he saw the big, yellow school bus returning from its rounds, and ordered everyone to make a beeline for it.

This they did, arriving at its doors before it had even come to a complete stop, at which point they began pounding on the glass with their fists and one pistol grip, causing the driver to open the panels and begin shouting, "What the hell's gotten into you kids? And you, you know toy guns aren't allowed in school! Why—"

"You don't know?" asked Sally Meyers, unbelievably.

"He needs glasses worse than Four-eyed Freddy," said Thomas.

"Hey, go fuck your mother some more," said Freddy.

"Hey, hey! What kind of language is that?" snapped the driver. "Now get away from this door, all of you, or I'll—"

A single report rang out without warning, causing everyone to jump—especially the bus driver—and those gathered turned to look at Lucas, who was holding the gun in the air. "With all due respect, Mr. Bus Driver, I'm asking that you direct your attention to the southeast corner of the school, quickly."

He did so immediately and did a little doubletake, then his face lost all color as he got up from his seat and staggered out the doors, still looking on. At last he said, "Sorry, kids. But you're on your own." And then he *ran*.

"Mister, don't!" shouted Sally—but it was too late; the rex just happened to look up from its meal and apprehended him almost instantly ... and now it was coming, coming *fast*, and the bus driver had scarcely reached his pickup when the beast surged forward and closed its jaws about his head.

Lucas didn't hesitate. "Everyone get in, let's go," he said, and slipped into the driver's seat even as the rex shook the bus driver violently and threw him to the ground—then turned its attention to them.

They all clambered in after him and he shut the doors, but was horrified when he realized that the bus was an older model with a manual transmission. He pushed in the clutch and jammed it into gear regardless, struggling to reach the pedals and see out the windshield at the same time, trying to remember what his dad had shown him, trying not to think about whether his mom and dad were even still alive—and killed the engine almost immediately.

He turned the key without delay and there was nothing, then looked up to see the tyrannosaur moving toward them rapidly and tried again, this time pushing in the clutch. Everyone cheered as the old bus sputtered to life. At last he eased off the clutch and they lurched forward, even as the rex snapped at empty air behind them, but the dreary mathematics of their situation was clear even to Lucas—for they would never be able to outrun such an animal in first gear alone, and he didn't think for a minute he'd be able to manage a shift into second.



FROM THE MOMENT THEY roared into Pine Stump Junction it was obvious to both of them that they would find no help there. Indeed, besides a handful of schools and churches and a YM-CA, there was scarcely a “there” there at all—no people, no police presence, not so much as a tumbleweed—or so it seemed until they rumbled past the Y and saw a girl of about 12 huddled near the bicycles, at which point Sammy geared down and brought the Harley to a complete stop.

“What’s going on? Why are we stopping?” asked Annie, suddenly alarmed.

Sammy indicated the girl with a nod of his head. “We seem to have a survivor,” he said, and pushed up his visor. “Hello there! Are you hurt in any way?”

The girl didn’t so much as look up—only curled tighter into a ball as the Harley idled.

“Put it in gear,” said Annie abruptly. “There’s nothing we can do for her.”

“She’s in shock,” said Sammy, and shouted again: “I said hello there! Are you all right?”

“*Sammy*. Put it in gear.”

“I’m not just going to leave—”

“*We’ve no room for her*. What we need to do is get to DJ’s. He’s got guns, food, liquor ... we can come back for her lat—”

And there was a sound, an engine sound, which sputtered and died even as a school bus appeared across the street and finally rolled to a stop. Nor had Sammy even processed the sight before a T. rex emerged into full view—brushing its great head against the vehicle’s hull and trying to roll it over, gnashing its teeth. And it was in that very instant that Sammy realized precisely what the hell was going on—for the bus was full of children, and what was more, it was being driven by one, as well.

“Jesus gods, *Sammy*. Put it in gear, let’s go.”

And he *did* put it in gear, having realized, at last, that she was right: there was nothing they could do. And he realized, too, as they tore away from the scene, that the girl had looked up at the last instant, looked up and began running after them.

That's right, came a voice, wan, disinterested, *her* voice, following him still, as it had followed him since the divorce and the buying of the winning Lotto ticket, as it had followed him since meeting Annie and across the entire country ... *just keep riding. After all, that's what you're good for, Sammy. Riding and driving away.*

And what of it, bitch? He cycled up through the gears viciously. *At least I'm good for something. I'm good for boning Annie. And I'm good for drinking and smoking and dropping mescaline. What I'm no good for is kids. What I'm no good for is saving anyone from the apocalypse—or anything else. So yes, I'm driving away. Because it's the end of the world as we know it ... and I feel fine.*

Just fine.

I feel ...

He took the bike out of gear and skidded to a halt in the middle of the road, where they just sat and idled for what seemed a long time.

"What are you doing?" protested Annie. "Why are we stopping?"

But he just ignored her and kicked it into gear, tearing back toward Pine Stump Junction—back toward the running girl and the school bus full of children, back toward the T. rex and its head full of fearsome teeth. And so intent upon his driving was he that he didn't give a thought as to why Annie had opened one of the saddlebags and was rifling through its contents, nor just how truly dangerous throwing in with someone who was essentially a complete stranger to you could ultimately prove to be.

BY THE TIME THEY ARRIVED back at the YMCA—skidding to a halt behind a stand of newly materialized cycad trees—the girl had taken refuge beneath a nearby pickup ... and the rex, having managed to puncture the roof of the school bus with its teeth, was beginning to peel back the metal.

“Here’s the plan, baby—I’m not saying it’s a good one,” said Sammy, and put out the kickstand. “But I know you can ride a little, right? So here’s the deal: Get the girl and put her on the back of the bike, then make tracks for DJ’s as fast as you can. I’m going to commandeering that bus.”

“I can just barely ride, and you know it,” said Annie. “Just please, for the love of God, get us out of here.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Annie.” He took off his helmet and dropped it to the ground, moving to get off the bike—but froze as something was jammed against his ear—a small gun, he knew, *his* gun.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to,” said Annie. There was a sound like a ratchet handle as she cocked the weapon. “Now put it in gear.”

“Have you gone insane? You know we can’t just leave a bunch of kids to be torn to pieces. *The party’s over, Annie*—can’t you understand that? It’s time to pay the bill.”

“No, baby. It’s time for *you* to pay the bill.” She pressed the muzzle of the pistol tighter against his ear. “You think I let just any over-the-hill wannabe have his way with me? Did you think it was your cock that’s been keeping me around?” She laughed. “No, baby. It’s been the bike and it’s been the money. It’s been the 24-hour party. And now you’re going to get me to DJ’s—or I’m going to put a bullet through your brain and do it myself.”

He looked at the school bus as it lurched forward again and stalled, heard the children scream as the rex continued to peel back the roof.

"Do it yourself, then," he said, and got off the bike. "I'm going to help those kids."

He moved to leave then paused, looking at her over his shoulder. "You were a boring lay, anyway. You bad girls always are. And the money was pretty much shot."

She slid forward to the driver's seat and put up the stand, then shrugged. "It was fun while it lasted."

And then she was gone—not down the road, rumbling and roaring, just gone—replaced by a stand of hoary-looking cycad bushes.

• • • •

IT HAD TAKEN SOME DOING, convincing the girl under the truck that he was there to help and wouldn't leave until she crawled out to him and they could join the others in the bus—but she had, and he'd managed to get the bus going and away from the tyrannosaur well before the last of the dying light finally bled from the sky completely.

And now they were back on the Interstate, a highway Lucas had dubbed "Thunder Lizard Road," and they'd gotten what children they could back to what parents remained, and Sammy and Lucas and Carina had gathered at the front of the bus as a sort of redeye flight crew as they motored into the unknown, having not much of a plan but to get to the first major city, where it was hoped they might find someone, anyone, who knew what was going on.

And though their collective fate was uncertain at best, Sammi felt oddly fulfilled as he tuned the radio and tried to find a news broadcast—knowing that, whatever awaited them down the road, it would be better than the life he had been living... for a man needed purpose as much as he needed air itself.

And he had found his purpose at last.

Tales from the Flashback:
RAPTORS ON A PLANE

If Samantha hadn't known better, she would have sworn she'd seen a bat—a *big* one, a very, *very* big one—by the 777's flashing wing lights. Of course, when she blinked it was gone, and not into the inky dark outside the window, she was sure, but back into her own mind, which was still half-asleep and probably hung over with Ambien. What she did see, and *knew* she saw, were a series of strange lights, like lightning amongst the clouds—except there *was* lightning amongst the clouds, they were passing through a storm, and these lights weren't that. No, these were something otherworldly, which shown with colors she could not quite define, and she would have studied them further, even snapped a pic with her cellphone, had she not suddenly realized that the elderly couple next to her were no longer in their seats, nor, for that matter, were the people in the middle row, or the row beyond that.

Her pulse quickened, and she sat up with start.

No one was in their seats, not in the entire rear cabin—at least no one tall enough, or fat enough, to be visible beyond the head and armrests. Wait, no, she could see that wasn't true, there *was* someone, she could just make out their arm on the rest in the front-most seats before the next economy class section. She noticed the “fasten seat belts” pictograph was illuminated and thought, *To hell with that*, then got up and began walking down the darkened aisle, finding it odd that all the TVs were stuck on static. Nor was that all that was odd, for a good portion of the seats contained items that normally wouldn't be left unattended, purses and cellphones, laptops, iPads. Lightning flashed outside the windows as she approached the man in the seat and thunder boomed over the drone of the engines.

“Excuse me, sir, but—”

And then the airliner rocked suddenly and so did the arm on the chair rest, rolling back and forth once before it fell off completely and landed on the floor, dotting the blue carpet with blood.

• • • •

TWELVE MINUTES. IT had been twelve minutes, according to her watch, since the arm had fallen on the floor, after which she'd collapsed into the nearest chair and just sat—her head spinning, her heart pounding. *Okay*, she thought at last, *here's your options: One. You are still sleeping and are experiencing a nightmare. Two. You've gone completely insane. Or, three ...*

It was really happening.

And if that were the case, there weren't many scenarios that could explain it, other than that terrorists had slaughtered everyone on board and piled their bodies in first class—a possibility she found dubious at best.

The only thing to do was to accept the facts so far and make her way toward the cockpit—where she had at least some chance at finding answers. And so she moved forward slowly, not wanting to look at the seat where the arm had been resting but knowing she must, and when she did she saw that it was empty but splattered with blood, and that entrails had been strewn across the next two seats like unseparated sausage links. And she saw something else too, which was that a hatch had been opened in the floor of the aircraft—a hatch from which jungle vines spread like the branched arms of a basket star, and which steamed as though there were an entirely different climate down there in what she assumed was the cargo hold.

Somehow, she stayed calm, and continued moving forward, remembering something she had learned in zoology class before she'd quit college and decided to fly south to winter with her father, and that was that certain predators—hawks, for example—spurned the stomach and intestinal track.

And that's when she stepped into the premium economy section and realized that it was empty too. No. No, it wasn't. Some-

thing was moving. Several somethings, actually—dark, scaly, feathery, almost, swaying and curling above the seats, like huge cat tails.

She froze, looking at them, unable to process just what it was she was seeing, or hearing, for that matter, for it sounded as though something were being eaten. That's when the TVS, including the projection screen at the front of the cabin, snapped to life, and she saw the CNN logo below images of New York City (Times Square, to be exact), where people were running for cover as police lights flashed and colored smoke billowed—*Jesus, oh Jesus, it is terrorists ... they're striking again just like 911 and they're on this plane right*—before what appeared for all the world to be a Tyrannosaurus rex entered the frame and the cameraman began running. And then something lifted its head amidst the swaying tails and she focused on it—even as it focused on the projection TV—and she realized she was looking at a living, breathing velociraptor, right there on Flight 33 bound for Houston.

• • • •

JUST ... DON'T MOVE, she told herself, understanding that if she moved even a little the thing would apprehend her at once, then virtually held her breath as the velociraptor—yes, velociraptor, just like in *Jurassic Park*, only this one was blue-black and had a mohawk of oil slick-colored feathers—cocked its head at the screen. At last it lowered its head and she dropped to the carpeted floor, but waited before drawing so much as a breath.

The cabin was quiet except for the drone of the engines and the wet, gristly eating sound—even the TVs had fallen back into static—and she inhaled slowly. Then, just as slowly, she began crawling forward, toward the closed curtain of business class ... and the cockpit.

Scarcely a moment had passed before she heard labored breathing and saw another raptor lying on its side between the seats,

foaming at the mouth, dying. Something went *drip ... drip ... drip* nearby.

It was headless man, his body draped over a seat like so much dirty laundry, his blood falling in droplets to the floor. And there, in the middle of the stained carpet, lay a gun. A revolver. A *big* one.

An air marshal, she thought, and reached for the weapon. *Yes, there. And there.* Gold rings and bullet noses, just visible inside the chamber. But how many? She found the latch and popped open the gun—she was fortunate to know something about revolvers, having spent much of her youth target shooting with her father—and was disappointed to find only two bullets left. It would have to do. Then she crept forward along the carpet ... until creeping forward more would expose her to the raptors, and peeked around the edge of a seat slowly.

There were three of them, their clawed hands and snouts covered in blood, only one of which had the strange comb of feathers that resembled a mohawk, and it was at precisely that instant that this one raised its head and apprehended her, its oil slick-colored crest rising and falling, its white eyes blinking—before it barked at the others as though issuing orders and rushed toward her, at which instant she climbed to her feet and swatted open the curtain to business class, and was about to sprint forward into first class when she realized there was a door directly next to her—a *restroom!*—and grabbed hold of its latch, which was locked. She pounded upon the door with her left fist even as she brought the revolver up with her right, and was about to squeeze off a shot at Mohawk's snout, which had just appeared around the edge of the curtain, when the door suddenly opened and someone pulled her in—someone who quickly shut the hatch and locked it.

And then she was breathing heavily, trying to slow her heartrate which had raced out of control, as the raptors clawed at the door and gnashed their teeth, and a man in a pilot's uniform

placed his palm over her trembling gun hand and lowered the pistol slowly. Then everything just broke inside her and the tears started flowing, as she threw her arms around him and sobbed almost violently, all the while thinking how good it was, how very, very good, to no longer be alone.

• • • •

“WHAT,” SHE MANAGED, after she’d finally settled down, “what’s going on? Do you know?”

He only shook his head, listening at the door, trying to determine if the raptors had lost interest. From the sound of it, or rather the lack of sound, they had. At least for the moment.

“It all happened so fast,” he said, leaning against the wall. “It’s possible the pilots don’t even know. If there *are* any.”

“But you’re a pilot ...”

He shook his head again. “Not on this flight.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I was deadheading from San Francisco to Houston—repositioning for another assignment—when everything went crazy. Most the passengers and crew vanished just before we lifted off. I don’t know where the, the velociraptors, came from, only that they arrived shortly after everyone disappeared.” He looked up slowly, as though he were processing several things at once. “We’ve got to get to the cockpit—I’m sorry, what is your name?”

“Samantha,” she said, offering her hand.

“Peter,” he said, and shook it. “Peter Romero.” He looked at the gun. “The air marshal’s, I presume.”

She nodded. “Such as it is; there’s only two rounds left in the chamber.”

“Two rounds ... and three raptors,” he said.

“Right.”

“Can you handle it? I’ve—never fired one.”

"I can," she said, simply. "How will we get into the cockpit? I can't imagine anyone just saunters in post-911."

"No, but there's a camera in the forward galley, just above the cockpit door. Plus there's an intercom. Regardless, if anyone's there, they'll see us. If not, I guess you'll have to prove how well you can handle that thing by blowing the lock."

"And the raptors?"

"There's another restroom right next to the cockpit—two of them, actually. The doors open out ... while the cockpit door opens in. If we can get to the restroom, we should be able to open a passageway with cover between it and the cockpit—that's how close they are. It'll all have to happen very fast, of course."

Samantha sighed. "Hopefully they're still there. Can you fly this thing alone if you have to?"

"As for the pilots, I wouldn't hold your breath. Because I saw—I saw others disappear after we levelled off, meaning the fact we completed takeoff doesn't mean a thing. They could have vanished after engaging the autopilot. And yes, I can, with your help." He looked at her and smiled, warmly, engagingly. "So don't get yourself eaten along the way, yeah?"

She smiled in spite of herself and they stared at each other for what seemed a long time.

"You sure you're up to this?" he asked her at last.

"No. Are you?"

"No."

"Okay, then," she said, and tensed for what was to come. "Let's do it."

• • • • •

THEY EASED THE DOOR open and there was nothing, not a raptor in sight. Purple light had begun creeping in the windows, meaning dawn was breaking. They crept out—still nothing—and

crawled rapidly toward first class, pausing to peek beneath the curtain before entering the cabin—saw the tail of a raptor swaying and curling above the seats, heard the distinct sound of flesh being gnawed upon. They lowered the curtain and looked at each other.

At length Samantha indicated a magazine rack, which was low to the floor on the cross-wall between classes, and Peter nodded, understanding. Then she removed a sheath of periodicals and threw them back toward the opposite side of the plane, hoping to draw the animal out. It worked, and as the beast barked and burst through the far curtain they shuffled forward into first class—then scrambled to their feet and ran for the forward restroom.

An instant later they were in, having rapped on the cockpit door before closing and locking the hatch, and such was their post-stress euphoria that they began laughing and tittering at the absurdity of it—until a voice could be heard coming from the cockpit ... and they stopped, abruptly, and listened.

The voice came again, scarcely audible over the drone of the engines: “Hello? Hello, can you hear me?”

“Yes, yes, we can hear you,” said Peter immediately, and shuffled closer to the door. “Who are you?”

“Karen,” she said. “Stewardess Karen Agutter. I—I’m having trouble hearing *you*. The pilots. They’re ...”

At last the engine noise and muffling effect of the doors proved too much.

“Karen, can you crack the door? Just a crack, I’ll explain later.”

There was a long pause. At last they heard a latch turn. It was funny how that particular sound carried.

Peter popped their own hatch—about an inch, no more. “Hello,” he said, nonchalantly.

“Hi,” she said.

“The pilots. Are they ...”

She shook her head. "All gone. I—I was deadheading in the jumpseat—Captain Rhodes ... he liked me, I think—when ..." She burst into tears suddenly.

Samantha peeked between the door and the jamb, back at the cabin.

The raptors were there, spearheaded by Mohawk. They had all gathered in first class—four of them, she realized, not three—and were waiting, patiently.

"We've got company," she said.

"What about the passengers?" asked Karen suddenly. "The other flight attendants? My brother, he was serving in first class—"

Peter and Samantha stared at each other: The empty seats. The wet, gristly eating sounds.

"Darling, listen," said Peter, modulating his voice carefully. "I can explain everything. But we've got to get into the cockpit, do you understand?"

There was the briefest of pauses. "Well, come on in, what are you waiting for ..."

And she began opening the door, completely oblivious to the threat, at which instant Peter shoved their hatch open even as Samantha brandished the revolver and the raptors rushed forward.

• • • •

SOMEHOW, THEY MADE it—mostly because the restroom door opened out and thus created a barrier in the narrow passageway. And then they were all together in the cockpit and the door had been safely secured, although the raptors continued to assault it for several moments, denting it inward and filling the flight deck with their muffled snarls and barks, until that, too, subsided, and they could see on the monitors next to the steering yokes that the animals had retreated.

Peter wasted no time in seating himself in the pilot's chair and buckling in, while Samantha took the jumpseat next to the window (there were two of them) and did the same. The cab turned white as a meteor passed them not 200 feet away—and everyone gasped. Dawn, meanwhile, continuing to break.

"We're just in time," said Peter, scanning the instruments. "The next airport is coming up. Go ahead and catch your breath, Sam. But remember—I'm going to need your help when we land." He looked at her over his shoulder and winked. "And that means taking the co-pilot's seat."

Sam, she thought, and smiled inwardly. *So he feels it too.* "Is landing a good idea, considering what's going on?"

"There's no other choice, we've only got so much fuel. We passed Houston while it was on autopilot."

"Okay, what *is* going on?" asked Karen abruptly. "And how are the passengers and the other flight attendants? You said you'd explain. Jesus, are they even there?"

The cockpit fell silent save for the rumble of the engines, the soft beeping of instruments. "No," said Peter at last. "I'm sorry."

Samantha jumped in, reading the look of stark terror on her face. "We don't know that. There may be people in the aft galley. It's possible they ..." she trailed off, looking from Karen's trembling expression to Peter's disappointed one. She'd just made a terrible mistake, and she knew it.

"I'm going back there," said Karen immediately, and got up from her seat.

"You can't do that," said Samantha. She tightened her grip on the revolver at her side. "There's ... something back there. Four somethings, to be exact. You see, there's been some kind of storm ... like, a time-quake or something, and ..."

The stewardess paused with her hand on the latch. "Some kind of storm," she repeated, scornfully, it seemed. "A time-quake." She

glanced at Peter. “Well that explains everything, doesn’t it?” She faced Samantha again. “Look, I don’t know who you are, or what your *main* problem is, or why you’re carrying a gun ... but my brother is back there, and I’m going to—”

Samantha drew the pistol on her suddenly. “No, actually ... you’re not. You’re going to sit right down and fasten your safety belt, and let Peter—let the pilot—do his thing. Because there’s a whole lot of hell waiting just beyond that door that you know nothing about.”

The engines droned; a meteor flashed past somewhere in the distance. Karen looked at one of the monitors. “No, there’s no one. So shoot me if you have to.”

And she opened the door.

• • • •

EVERYTHING HAPPENED at once as Samantha saw a blur on the monitor and Mohawk exploded into the cockpit, clamping his jaws about the stewardess’ head and forcing her against the instrument panel—his tail whipping about the compartment viciously, his mohawk of oil slick-colored feathers rising and falling.

He jerked his head once and half her face came away, the muscles stretching and snapping, her right eye being drug out by its stalk, her skull winking whitely, as Samantha pointed the gun and it was knocked from her hands. Then all was blood and chaos as Peter attempted to help Karen—who was likely dead already—and Samantha groped for the pistol, gripping it again even as the animal turned on her friend—but was held back, somehow, by his suddenly mighty hands.

And yet such was the violence of their struggle that she couldn’t get a clean shot—and so decided, as Karen’s hemorrhaging blood splattered the instruments and sprinkled her face and painted the windows with blotches of maroon, to do the only thing left,

which was to point the pistol at the side window near Peter and fire.

The result was as instantaneous as it was cataclysmic, as both the raptor and Karen's body were sucked out the shattered window and the oxygen masks dropped, even as Peter began his descent and Samantha took her position in the co-pilot's seat.

But Mohawk wasn't gone. Indeed, he had clung to the window frame and was attempting to work his way back in, attempting to bite at Peter—when Samantha placed the revolver into his fetid mouth and squeezed the trigger, blowing his brains out the back of his head even as they touched down briefly and were pursued by a T. rex, before Peter lifted off amidst a hail of meteorites and they were on their way once more ... to where or when neither he nor Samantha could imagine.

• • • •

THEY FLEW LOW FOR SOME time, taking in the landscape, marveling at the changes.

"Jesus, Peter ... look at it. It's everywhere."

He nodded, saying nothing, and Samantha couldn't help but to notice that his hands were trembling. So, too, had his eyes glazed over ... and she realized that he wasn't merely in a kind of shock, but was tired, too. Simply exhausted.

"How far did you say the next major airport was?" she asked, placing a hand over his on the steering yoke.

"About 45 minutes," he said, then looked at her squarely, his face full of consternation. "But I can't promise you that it's going to be any different."

"It's okay," she said. "Why don't you ... take it up to an appropriate level, and engage the autopilot. You can get a little sleep while I man the fort. What do you say?"

He stared at her a little longer before facing forward at last. At length he said, "I didn't have anyone. I was alone before this ... this flashback. How about you?"

"A father," she said. "In Houston."

"Maybe we can get back there, somehow. After we land."

"Yeah," she said, and laid her head on his shoulder. "Maybe."

Several moments passed before he said, "It's funny, isn't it?"

But she was already fast asleep.

Tales from the Flashback:
THE DRIVE-IN THAT TIME FORGOT

THIS IS IT. *The Food of the Gods*, which piqued his interest in the TV ad because it contained giant monsters, has come to town: it is playing at the East Mirabeau Drive-in Theater as part of the semi-annual Drive-in Retro Fest—a nostalgic gala spread over two weeks, each night showcasing different movies and old-time ads—the third feature in a triple-bill which includes *Empire of the Ants* and *The Giant Spider Invasion*. They head out after the NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt, which, because it is a slow news day, is full of nothing but generalized doom: sun flares heating the top layers of Earth's atmosphere and increasing the drag on Tian-gong-1—China's abandoned space station—potentially causing it to fall anywhere, even Mirabeau Park; the U.S. Geological Survey predicting earthquakes and a possible eruption of Mount Kilauea in Hawaii, only a few thousand miles away; illegal aliens coming up from Mexico, from Central America, from California—all of whom are criminals, even terrorists, according to the President.

With so much doom in the air and the theater drawing nearer, the Kid feels giddy, maniacal. He ignores his brother who is in the bed of the truck with him, his arm propped on the opposite fender, and instead watches the streetlamps, which, because he is wearing the retro X-Ray Spex he ordered online especially for the occasion (it being a tradition at the Drive-in Retro Fest to dress up) shout X-RAY, X-RAY, X-RAY, because the word has been imprinted into their lenses as a kind of hologram—a cheap effect.

Regardless, he is becoming a different being behind the glasses. Behind the glasses he is becoming ultra-human—an agent of Divine Will—with an agenda having nothing to do with humans. Behind the glasses he has started work toward an inscrutable end that he himself does not understand. There is an incredible power and energy in there, in those oily black lenses. A bass hum. Something *moving*, which races and burns. But there is something else too. Something immutable, solid, like a planet light-years away which

scientists recognize only by the echoes it makes through space-time. An asteroid in the wormhole. It cannot be seen yet but it can be sensed.

It is out there. It is on the horizon. It is coming.

"You look like a douche bag in those," says Shane as they pull into the East Mirabeau Drive-in, late. They have had to stop at Zip Trip for tranny fluid. The Kid just looks at him. He doesn't know what to make of Shane either—this new brother who wears gold polyester shirts with stiff collars and pointy lapels, like garden trowels—clamshell necklaces, feathered hair. Who has transformed into Leif Garret seemingly overnight—like in a horror movie; like Lon Chaney turning into the Wolfman in fast-motion. He doesn't understand why Shane has even come. He is old enough now to drive himself; has a job at Taco Time, his own money. He even has a car, a 1970 Fire-bird, which their father is helping him pay off. But they've been going everywhere together lately, his family; everything old is new again—including a black leather-bound Bible which his mother used to tote to Sunday services but which now lies on the truck's dash. The black leather-bound Bible she has carried everywhere since her diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer.

Everyone honks as the beams of the headlamps sweep across the screen. Through her open window he hears his mother say, "*Away* they go!" and laugh. "You'd think the world was at an end."

He looks at the screen as his father kills the headlights and backs into a stall—takes off the X-ray glasses—sees black ants carrying disproportionably large yellow petals across steppes of chipped bark. As his father sets up the speaker the Kid hears an authoritative voice intone: "Have you ever taken a *good, close look* at what the ant is all about? Like these *Atta cephalotes*—one of the fifteen thousand different species inhabiting our planet. This one cultivates crops of fungus for food. Others herd aphids, just as man

herds cattle. And what about the warriors, the builders of bridges, roads, tunnels.... *Frightening*, isn't it?"

"About as frightening as *The Crater Lake Monster*, I bet," says Shane. He helps their father set up the lawn chairs. "Your movie choices blow, bro." He does a double take as some girls walk by. "*Hellowe honies*," he says.

"They have a sophisticated communication system," says the narrator. "Specific messages are transmitted from one ant to another through the use of a chemical substance called *pheromones*. It causes an obligatory response. Did you hear that? *Obligatory*."

"I'd like to *oblige* her," says Shane.

• • • •

BECAUSE THE MOVIE GETS off to a slow start, the Kid walks to the playground at the base of the screen—but pauses before stepping onto the sand. The swing set seems smaller than the last time they were here. He supposes this shouldn't surprise him; it has been awhile since they last came to the drive-in, and he has gained several inches, almost entirely in the legs, so that he feels awkward and gangly and tends to slouch. A single girl is there, seated in the swing farthest to the edge. Stringy red hair hangs in her eyes and at the sides of her face, like his. He meets her gaze briefly then sits in the swing furthest from her. He feels silly sitting in the swing, immature, but he also feels dirty—realizes he is dirty, that he has not thought to bathe or to put on clean clothes; that he is still wearing the mustard-stained jeans from earlier in the day, the ones with enormous holes in the knees, and that he is wearing his tatty green shirt also, the one with the pale-yellow horizontal stripes. Neither one of them makes any move to swing; both stir their sneakers listlessly in the sand. The freeway drones somewhere in the distance.

"Come on, you know what it's all about, baby, come on...."

He cranes his neck to look at the screen, sees a man and woman struggling on the beach, their hair being tossed by a sea wind, waves crashing against the breakers.

"Let me go *you son of a bitch!*"

"*Relax*, relax...."

He looks at the girl in the swing. She's looking up at the screen, face painted in its greenish half-light, mouth hanging open. He looks back at the screen.

"That's it," the man says quietly. He begins unbuttoning her blouse.

"*Okay*," she whispers.

"I just want to get to know ya, that's all."

"*Okay*."

The man cups his hands around the woman's breasts, which strain against her bra. She hangs her head back, sighs. The sighs produce a strange reaction in the Kid, a tightening in his groin, something he has felt before but never in association with anything, just feeling good. For the first time he notices that the screen has a texture, that it's not actually flat but grooved, corrugated, like the metal walls of the lot. He looks at the girl, who glances at him briefly.

"Now just take it easy. That's it. You're gonna be a good—"

He is wondering what the girl is thinking when the woman on the screen knees the man in the groin, causing him to double over, gasping and holding his crotch. The Kid looks at the girl but she is gone. Her swing rocks back and forth, chains rattling.

He scans the parking lot for her but sees only the piercing white light of the projector's beam and the glow of the concessions shack, the ghostly gray speaker stands, the darkened automobiles. It occurs to him quite suddenly that he has no idea where the truck is parked, that he was paying virtually no attention on his way to the playground. He jolts out of the swing and begins walking toward

the cars, his shoes slipping in the sand, tripping over one of the railroad ties that box the sand in. He turns this way and that as he walks through the lot, wandering between cars, stepping between speaker stands. The faces of strangers stare out at him everywhere, muted by car windows, softly lit by console lights, by the cherries of cigarettes. When at last he locates the truck it is only because it is parked backward and he can discern the silhouettes of his family; they are seated in their lawn chairs in its bed; *and* because the projector's beam has set fire to the divots in the windshield, one of which has become a crack and spread—just as his mother said it would—so that it runs half the length of the glass. So that it splits, branching, into new cracks.

He spends the remainder of the movie alone, lying in his sleeping bag atop the truck, watching satellites float past, fancying they are UFOs, until a front rolls in, blotting the stars, and heat-lightning begins flashing, silently, fast as an eye-blink, from cloud to cloud.



THOUGH *THE GLANT SPIDER INVASION* tries to be comical (it's a bust as a *giant monsters on the attack* movie, there being only one giant spider, not an army as suggested by the title and poster, and this only a Volkswagen Beetle with legs welded onto it and its chassis covered in fake fur), it's the horrific parts that form a knot in the Kid's gut. His mother is not happy either, disapproving—as she disapproved of *Empire of the Ants*—of the sexual content and violence. She is particularly offended by a scene in which a teenage girl in a push-up top responds to a libidinous suggestion by her mother's hillbilly boyfriend that she “ain't no child no more” by waving her breasts back and forth, giggling, “Yeah, now I'm 35-24-35!”

His father doesn't seem to mind too much though, and Shane is *loving* it, especially when the same girl, wrapped in a towel and with wet hair, is startled by her cousin, "Larry"—who causes her to drop the towel, revealing buoyant, pale breasts and nipples the color of acorns. It is not lost on the Kid that each time something like this happens the camera zooms up on the body parts. What compels him so much about the towel scene is the suggestion of something dark beneath the girl's filmy panties, something he has never seen in any other movie.

Ultimately *The Giant Spider Invasion* relies upon explicit grossness to achieve its effect, as when the girl's alcoholic mother unknowingly blenders a tarantula with her Bloody Mary—and drinks it—or lingering on close-ups of policemen being sucked into the spider's oral cavity, which constricts and expands like a sphincter until red-black blood comes gushing down their trousers—until their crying out to God and cursing and grunting and moaning becomes mere gurgling, mere suffocation.

They decide that they will not go to the concessions stand at intermission, in part because they have brought a cooler, but mostly because *The Giant Spider Invasion* is so disgusting, ending with the spider being superheated from within until its pink-purple eyes explode, causing milky pus to geyser everywhere, and globs of green slime to roll down its shanks like snot, within which the Kid thinks he sees the policemen's remains.

"How about some lasagna?" jokes his mother after, lifting the lid of the cooler, handing out Cokes.

"Oh yes, *please*," says Shane. He looks at the Kid. "*Good* movie."

The Kid is thinking about lasagna, about tomato sauce dripping, ricotta cheese oozing. "You seemed to enjoy it enough," he says. He looks at all the people wandering to the snack bar and the lavatories—equilibrium off balance from sitting, shuffling like zombies. "So did Dad."

His father chuckles. "That last one was pretty rough, buddy. Wasn't it, Sarah Lee?"

"Oh, yeah," she says. She leans back in her chair, holds her Coke in her lap with both hands. It is unusually hot, even for July; her brow is beaded with sweat. She picks up the newspaper and fans her face and neck. "Seems every movie we see at the Retro Fest is full of sex and violence and profanity. Even kid's movies. I liked that *King Kong*, though. And *Close Encounters*."

"Those were family movies," says Shane. "These weren't *even* that." He climbs out of the bed, leans against the fender. "And we're not kids anymore, Mom. Not even *the Albino String-bean*."

The Kid looks at him through his bangs.

"I'm going to wander around a bit," says his brother, looking back at him, then walks away.

They sit in silence, sipping their Cokes.

"I was here when they had that earthquake," says his father, legs outstretched, eyes rheumy. "The whole car went like this..." He gestures palm down, as though his hand were a boat on the waves.

• • • •

THE KNOT IN HIS GUT does not go away during *The Food of the Gods*. It grows. He could not have planned a more perfect storm—horror piling upon horror until he himself hates the movies he has chosen, wonders what could be wrong with him that he wanted to see such things, what *has* gone wrong with him—as a boy, a student, a brother, the Kid.

Shane by contrast loves *The Food of the Gods*; he can see it in his brother's face. It does not hurt that the main character, Morgan, is a professional football player, or that his best friend and sidekick, Davis, is also a football player, or that their rapport is just like Shane and his friends'—large, strapping fellows, working hard and playing hard. When Morgan and Davis are not playing football they're

hunting deer on horseback with rifles and dogs—somewhere in the Northwest wilds far from New York and L.A., where they actually live, respectively—where they waste no time drawing pictures or writing stories but wash their sports cars and lounge by pools; where beautiful women are drawn to them because they are men of action and wealth. They do not hesitate or fear or brood, and they never work or play alone but always in a posse, a *team*.

But because the Kid has chosen the movie—not his brother—no one has been carried off the turf on the shoulder pads of their buddies. Shane does Westerns, war movies, sports dramas, white hats defeating black hats. The Kid does rockets, new worlds, the unknown, *Danse Macabres*. The movie will not end with a freeze-frame of Morgan giving the peace sign with both hands. Already a man has died horribly—stumbling through the bramble with a two-foot long yellow jacket on his back; crying out for his friends, his face swollen purple, the wasp's black legs hooked into his abdomen, stinger pumping, cellophane wings beating. Already an old man has been eaten alive by rats the size of wild boars—his blood hemorrhaging, his face white with terror, screaming, "*Oh God, oh God! Oh dear God! Lord, save me, save me!*"

The Kid asks his mother if he can have some money for a 7-Up—to settle his stomach. She opens her purse and hands him three dollars, says, "Next time *I'll* pick the movies."

He nods and swings his legs over the bed rail, begins walking toward the snack bar. There is a glint at the periphery of his vision as he passes the front of the car. He looks over his shoulder but keeps walking...it is a stream of transmission fluid, glinting red-black in the vespertine darkness—winding away down the asphalt like blood. And he notices something else, too, also at the periphery of his vision: something between two cars further on down the row. Something which moves when he focuses upon it and is suddenly gone, but which looks, for all the world, and for the brief

time he is able to apprehend it, like part of an animal. A crocodile, maybe, or a Komodo dragon, but held high above the asphalt, by four feet at least.

A tail.

• • • •

THEY HAVE MOUNTED A flat screen in the corner of the snack bar, near the ceiling, so that theatergoers can watch the movie as they wait in line. "I know all about delivering babies," says Mrs. Skinner, whose husband has been eaten alive by giant rats. "Living on a farm you get to know those things. Everything's going to be all right." She is talking to a young woman named Rita, who is about to go into labor. They are holed up in a cabin, waiting for the rats.

He weaves through the maze of metal handrails and waits in line, which consists mostly of older teenagers and some people in their forties. The old-style fluorescent overheads cast everyone in a pale-white light; the floor is covered in sawdust like the hog pens at the Interstate Fair. Everything smells of hot butter and rank perfume and armpits and marijuana—which he is familiar with because he once caught Shane smoking it with his friends. He doesn't recall the first time he was allowed to go to the snack bar alone, but supposes it could not have been long ago. His stomach grumbles and his intestines shift audibly; he looks at the menu by the ceiling as the line moves forward, decides he'll get a hotdog as well as a 7-Up. He wipes the sweat from his forehead, grips the metal railing. His knees feel wobbly. A slight chill crawls over his skin.

A tail. Like a crocodile, maybe, or a Komodo dragon, but held high above the asphalt, by four feet at least.

The movie plays: "If I told how I felt right now you'd think I was crazy..." Lorna, the good-looking biologist. "Tell me," says Morgan.

"I want you to make love to me."

He watches someone behind the counter scoop dregs from the popcorn machine, hears it begin popping fresh kernels, its glass sides shimmying.

"It is crazy, isn't it? At a time like this?"

"Listen, the first thing we'll do when we get back to the mainland is continue this conversation, okay?"

"That's just it. I don't think we'll ever get back."

He reaches the counter where he is met by a pretty girl with dark eyes and shiny black hair. He lays the bills on the counter and looks at the menu. The plastic letters swim in and out of focus. "I'll take a regular hotdog, and..." He rubs at his eyes, swipes at his hair "—and a medium 7-Up. Please."

"What?" She chews her gum.

"A 7-Up. Medium, please."

She begins punching the register's keys. "What else?"

"A hotdog. Regular."

"Two seventy-five." She takes the bills and slides him a quarter. He stares at her a moment before realizing she is waiting for him to get out of the way, that there are others behind him.

He gets out of the way, stands by the popping machine which rattles and shakes. He watches her through the glass, wonders what she looks like beneath her towel; if she has the type of breasts which strain against her bra or small pale ones with nipples the color of acorns. He wonders what kind of panties she wears, what texture, if they are thick like cotton or filmy like silk. He wonders what lies beneath—does she have a darkness, a demonic sublime, like the girl in *The Giant Spider Invasion*? Do all girls? Does the world?

• • • •

"THEY'RE ATTACKING AGAIN, I need more shells."

He does not feel strong enough to walk back to the car and so sits on the grass in front of the projection booth. Morgan and the others are making their final stand against the giant rats, breaking out windows with the butts of their shotguns, pumping and firing into the horde, knocking the rats off the porch and the railings, sending them flying, causing them to scream and snarl, to regroup, to attack again and again. The Kid chews his hotdog as the scene shifts to the basement, where Lorna and Mrs. Skinner are acting as midwives to Rita, who lay in the dark, rubbing her belly, listening to the blasts and the growling of the rats, listening to the wood splinter as they tear and gnaw at the cabin, as they claw at the planks and pull on the shingles. "How's it going?" Lorna asks Rita.

He finishes his hotdog and crumples its paper boat, takes a sip of 7-Up. He isn't sure if he feels better or not; he thinks perhaps not.

"I'm laying here thinking about what it's gonna be like when those rats get inside," says Rita.

"Morgan says we're going to be fine."

He lies back on the grass and stares up at the projector's beam.

"Do you believe that?" asks Rita. "You know, I used to think about dying a lot. Sort of lie there, in bed...at night...in the dark. I don't know. I guess I've always had a terrible fear of it."

"Rita, don't."

From this close he realizes that it is not one beam but many; he counts them, 5—6—7—rotating, full of blue-green smoke, as though colored smoke bombs have been lit nearby. He realizes that it is not in fact smoke but steam, issuing from a vent high on the wall, billowing and pluming. The beams are full of insects, gnats and mosquitoes and moths and stick-bugs, which beat their wings in the flickering light, circling aimlessly, chaotically. He hears cars on the freeway somewhere to the south, a constant whooshing, a gray-white noise.

"I could fantasize the most horrible death. You know, the most frightening. None of them come close to being eaten by rats. Funny thing is, now that it's happening...it doesn't really seem to matter."

Something kicks him in the pit of his stomach and he feels like he is going to ralph, is sure of it. Perhaps it can be avoided. Perhaps if he doesn't move, doesn't breathe, it will pass. "This too shall pass," his mother always says, and he hopes she's right, because *puking is the worst thing in the world*.

"What do you think our chances are?" asks Thomas, Rita's husband.

"Pretty good," says Morgan.

"Yeah, *like hell...*"

"Have it your way."

He is going to ralph—he is certain of it now. He climbs to his knees, sees Morgan filling jars with gunpowder and strips of cloth, preparing for the final onslaught. The Kid looks at the side of the building, remembers that the door to the men's room at the East Mirabeau is inside the concessions bar.

"Look, goddammit," says Thomas, "those rats are gonna bust in here and you're still fussing around with some *lousy jars!*"

"It's something to do," says Morgan.

"Something *to do?!?*"

He struggles to his feet, holding his stomach, weaving back and forth. Right here on the grass or halfway to the restroom? Squirt-ing between his fingers or full-throttle ahead?

"*That, my dear boy, is what life is all about.* From the time you're born it's finding something to do while you're waiting to die, and you try like hell to prevent it. Now you get your ass in gear and get over there and put that strip in that gasoline jar and *move it!*"

He covers his mouth and hurries through the door, rushes toward the men's room—*hold the pickle, hold the relish, special orders don't upset us, all we ever ask is that you*—bursts into a stall and

drops to his knees. He grips the toilet seat in both hands—*have it youuur way, at Burger King, have it youuur*—lets fly.

• • • •

WHEN HE SWINGS OPEN the door of the men's room he sees Shane standing at the concessions counter, chatting up the girl with the dark eyes and shiny black hair. Shane looks at him as the door's hinges squeak. "There you are! Everyone was wondering what the hell happened to you."

The Kid just stands there, dazed. "I'm okay," he says.

His brother looks at the girl, hooks a thumb over his shoulder, laughs politely, insincerely. "That's my little bro."

"Hi there, Little Bro," says the girl.

The Kid looks from his brother to the girl. *Hi there, you little whore*. He steadies himself against a pinball machine. He feels a little better—a lot better, in fact—but isn't sure that he's out of the woods yet. He can hear the projector rattling in the room next to the lavatories, the old analog projector the East Mirabeau claims is the last of its kind.

"You know where the truck's at, right?" says Shane. He's holding a cardboard tray piled with tinfoil-covered hamburgers.

"Yeah, of course." In fact he has paid no more attention than the first time.

"Okay," says Shane. He winks at the girl with the dark eyes, gives the counter a little pat.

The Kid watches him go. He supposes he is lucky to have a brother, though he misses the days when they were more alike, when they spent whole afternoons building model kits together—a decidedly retro thing to do, he supposed—Shane's always coming out so perfect while his came out looking like the mix-matched Bondooed vehicles they often saw in Hillyard, gluey messes beyond hope.

"I think we ought to at least talk about it." —Thomas again, more from the projection room than the speaker on the wall.

"Pick up those jars of gasoline, Thomas."

The Kid stares at the door to the projection room, which hangs ajar. He walks toward it.

"You're gonna kill us...."

The rattling of the projector intensifies as he nears, going *tat-tat-tat....*

"And open the front door!"

He pauses outside the projection room, brilliant green-white light flickering through the door crack, painting his shirt and arms and hands. The *TAT-TATTING* of the projector is louder than he expected. A posted sign reads: NO SMOKING IN THIS AREA. He nudges the door enough to see partially into the room—feels a wave of heat wash over his face. Because of the angle he sees nothing complete, only the side of the projector which resembles a phaser cannon he saw on *Star Trek* once: a great, gunmetal gray thing, with cables coming out of it and lights along its side, and beneath those, huge horizontal film platters, grinding slowly, heavily, like the greased stone rollers in *The Ten Commandments*—when Pharaoh's obelisk is risen in Cairo—and above all that, dryer hoses, only bigger, snaking up from the machine like tentacles, boring into the ceiling—itsself made of stained wooden planks, like the sauna at the YMCA, to combat all the heat, he imagines. The sound of the projector and the sounds of the movie merge to create a cacophony of clicking, whirring machinery and discharging shotguns, of shattering glass and splintering wood, of the screams of men and women and rats killing and being killed.

That's when he realizes, quite suddenly, that the sounds are not isolated to the movie and the projector. That something else is happening ... a man is grunting and crying out somewhere in the little room. Nor is that room as he first observed it (or perhaps he

had only observed it incompletely), for he now sees that it is full of trees—*trees*—not just any variety but prehistoric-looking ones, cycads, the fronds of which quiver and steam. And he sees, too, that moving amongst those trees ... are tails.

• • • •

HIS VIEW IS BLOCKED by someone's face—which fills the crack in the door, trains an empty eye socket upon him. In the space of an instant it is gone—drug away by a group of snarling animals (which look for all the world like velociraptors out of *Jurassic World*). He jolts away, staring dumbly, then bolts from the snack bar, shoving through the glass door with both hands, turning and wheeling on the boardwalk, looking for his brother. Surely he could not have gone far; surely he must still be visible, walking toward the truck, his stupid white pants glowing, his feathered hair trailing, his clam-shell necklace glinting. He looks at the screen and sees poor Mrs. Skinner—who reminds him of his mother now that his mother wears only baggy shirts and sweats and has lost most her hair; now that she seems so passive and resigned and carries the leather-bound Bible everywhere—in a death duel with one of the rats. The huge rat has crashed through the window of her kitchen and locked its jaws about her neck, is thrashing its head violently as she punches and struggles and kicks. She grabs hold of a meat cleaver and starts hacking the rat's face—but is knocked to the floor, shrieking, blathering, begging. "Oh, God—*oh, God!*" Until her windpipe is severed and blood gushes everywhere; her hands letting go, the cleaver clattering against the tiles—her eyes becoming black glass while blood spreads like spilled ink across the floor.

He begins trembling violently, turning this way and that, knowing he cannot find the truck, knowing that if he did it would not make any difference, it would not stop the ground from rolling or the terrorists from coming or Tiangong-1 falling or Mt. Kilauea

from erupting. It would not stop the transmission from bleeding or the windshield from cracking. It would not stop the projector from burning out, from leaving them all in blackness, to shiver and die alone. It would not stop *time*, either from marching forward or “flashing back”—nor the T. Rex and triceratops from appearing amongst the parked cars and continuing a fight begun 65-million years ago. It would not stop the strange storm front from rolling across the sky, or the mysterious lights within it—nothing could.

He is incoherent as he stumbles around to the side of the building, pauses against the wall. He looks at the screen even though he knows he shouldn't: sees Lorna the good-looking biologist holding her head—Lorna who has been so cool and determined and unbreakable, who also reminds him of his mother, his old mother, like the Unsinkable Molly Brown on the *Titanic*. *That* Lorna is holding her head, cowering just as he is, mewling, “*Oh, no, no, no...*” as the rats eat through the ceiling and wood splinters and glass showers; as Rita goes into labor, sweating, cursing, pushing in spite of everything. As the truck swims into view suddenly and the Kid bolts toward it.

• • • •

“JESUS, WHAT’S HAPPENING?” cries Shane as they careen out of the theater, everyone breathing heavily as their headlights sweep the screen. The Kid remains silent as they exit the gate—the tires of the truck clanking over the ‘no entry’ spikes—peers behind the screen at the rusted iron girders, like the ribs of some giant carcass, and the scaffolding covered in pigeon shit, where a nattily-dressed man and woman have taken refuge. The Kid doesn’t know what the hell is happening, exactly, but as they motor up the hill overlooking the drive-in he sees the place with fresh eyes, viewing it as a kind of graveyard, its speaker stands like tombstones and its cars like black, shiny coffins, waiting to be returned to the earth, and

so also with the concessions stand, its painted wood mutating, fossilizing, and the neon lights, their gas and their filaments breaking down, becoming something else, while the gnats and mosquitoes and stick-bugs and dinosaurs have it their way, multiplying and dividing out of control, as cycads push up through the cracks and the people who are but shadows bleed silently back into shadow. He doesn't know what is going on, other than he'd had a sudden premonition that something terrible was going to happen—to the drive-in, to Mirabeau Park, to all its people, to his mother and father and brother and himself. They were all going to die, *just go away*.

Eventually.

Tales from the Flashback:
THE ANK WILLIAMS STORY

They were in bad shape, and Williams knew it. The quill raptors had struck just when they were most vulnerable—when they were still waking up—and while they were able to fend them off (Ank did most the fending, because Williams had taken a quill early in the attack), the melee had left them cut up and exhausted. Worse, it had left Williams delirious—no matter that he'd managed to pull out the quill before it could deliver much of its poison. Enough remained that walking was difficult even on the smooth, level highway, plus he'd begun to see things—like the huge, Goo-gie-style sign which read: WELCOME TO DEVIL'S GORGE: LIKE THE OLD WEST, ONLY BETTER.

To say its oversized gunslinger and buxom saloon girl statues were incongruous with the bleak, rain-drenched landscape would have been an understatement, but there they were, bidding them welcome to a town “forgotten by time, alone against its hills, where adventure and thrills await!”

“You seeing what I’m seeing, Ank?”

The big ankylosaur didn’t respond, not so much as a mew. His gait, however, had slowed—enough to convince Williams that the sign was real and he was seeing it too. Sure enough, after they had taken the indicated exit, a town appeared—a town straight out of *Gunsmoke*, only this one was surrounded by a tall cyclone fence, its upper edge crudely festooned with concertina wire and its base reinforced with sandbags. Moreover, it was *inhabited*, for Williams could clearly see people rushing to greet them—or so he thought until two of the men took hold of the gates beneath the head arch and swung them shut. After that, all that was left to do was to approach the fence with hat in hand so to speak and inquire if perhaps there were a doctor.

“There’s a doctor,” said a man dressed all in black—a man wearing a badge—who reminded Williams for all the world of the gunslinger played by Yul Brynner in *Westworld*. “But care and medicine

are rationed, like everything else here. What's happened? And what are you doing with this ... *thing*?"

Williams started to speak then paused, wondering if he'd finally lost his sanity. For it wasn't just the man in black who looked like he'd stepped out of a western—the entire crowd was dressed in much the same manner, as though they'd raided one of those old-time photography boutiques you used to see at the State Fair. "Quill raptors," he said at last, and added, "They caught us early this morning, before it was even daylight. I took a quill in the arm, my, ah, playing arm. As for this 'thing,'" He indicated the ankylosaur. "His name is Ank."

Ank mewed at the sound of his name and stepped forward, causing a riot of steel as several men aimed their rifles, including the man in black. Williams hurried to place himself between his friend and the weapons. "He's gentle as a cow, I can assure you. Note the eyes ... there's no light in the irises. No presence of ... them." He indicated the queer lights in the sky, which bled in and out of each other silently. "He hasn't been *touched*, you see. Not like the others." He turned to face Ank and gestured with his hands. "Sit, Ank. Lay down. It is time to sleep."

The great beast, which was the size of a small bus, looked at him, flies buzzing about its cow-brown eyes. At last it lowered on its haunches and everyone gasped—everyone, that is, except the man in black, who only tightened his grip on his smoky-barreled weapon and seemed to calculate cold equations.

"That's it, Ank," said Williams patiently. "Now lay down. It's time to sleep."

More gasps as the great, armored, turtle-like creature slid its front legs forward—then sloughed over on its side, causing rainwater collected in the mudpuddles of the ruddy road to splash and the fence to rattle slightly from the impact. Someone giggled, a

woman—a woman dressed as a saloon girl—whom Williams was attracted to the instant he saw her.

“That’s enough,” said the man in black—the Sheriff, the Marshal, whatever—and the tittering stopped. “So you can make it do tricks. My question is—can you make it kill, also? Can you say, ‘Sic ‘em, boy,’ for example, and send him crashing through this fence?”

Williams approached the ankylosaur and stroked him between the eyes. “Crash through the fence—possibly. But kill? No. Not people. Not in a million years. He *likes* people. There’s, ah, no accounting for taste.” He made eye contact with the Marshal. “I dare say he even likes you.”

More titters—from the saloon girl and one other, a ruggedly-handsome man who was also wearing a badge, but not dressed all in black. “I would remind the deputy of his duties to Devil’s Gorge,” said the Marshal, and to the saloon girl: “And saloon girl’s of their place.”

“And I would remind the Marshal that there’s a sick man standing hat in hand outside our gates ... and that I’ve got a duty, as well.” A man stepped forward from the crowd—an unarmed man. A mild-mannered man in a trim vest who looked as though he might be a barber ... or a country doctor. “A raptor quill doesn’t have to be a big thing if it’s removed promptly, which this young man has done. But that wound has to be treated.” He looked up at the Marshal with his own cow-brown eyes. “Most of us came to be here through these gates and under similar questioning ... I see no reason why we should turn this one man away.”

“I agree,” said the deputy.

“So do I,” said the saloon girl, clearly not remembering her place. “Can you play that guitar, mister?”

“Williams,” he said, and took off his hat. He approached the fence at once cautious and cavalier. “And ma’am, I can play this guitar like the angels sing. Once my arm heals, you understand.”

"Well, that settles it," said someone else. "Ain't none of the saloon's been the same since the power went out. A little live music would be good for morale."

"And what about his 'friend'? Are you just going to tie him up with the rest of the horses?" The Marshal was beyond annoyed. "Him in here, *it* out there. Do you see what could go wrong here?"

"I see that that dinosaur would be a site more useful than a mule for getting things done around here," said Someone Else. "Why not let him in? You can see with your own two eyes there's no alien fire in 'im."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," the Marshal said at last. "You people take the cake, you know that? You really take the fucking cake." He lowered his weapon at last. "All right. Looks like it's just not my day. I've got two deputies down with the flu and that means I'm not in a position to argue with the whole damn town." He made eye contact with each and every person who had gone against him, including his own deputy. "But, when you find the time, the more vocal of you might want to take a walk out to Serpent's Butte ... and remember our shared history."

He turned to Williams. "You've got some time on the inside, I ain't saying how much. But the *thing* stays outside the fence. The rules of Devil's Gorge are simple: Make yourself useful. Don't break the law. And check your weapons at the armory until called upon to use them." He motioned to his deputy. "Open the man door."

Williams turned to Ank. "Okay, *stay*. It's time to sleep. *Back*. I will be back."

He stepped through the man door but was stopped by the Marshal.

"Your guitar case. I'll need you to open it up."

Williams paused as though taken aback. "It's just a guitar ..."

"Then you'll have no problem showing it to me."

Williams looked from the Marshal to the deputy, and finally the saloon girl. Everyone nodded.

“Okay,” he said, and crouched, opening the case. He looked up at the Marshal. “Satisfied?”

“As long as you don’t play it in my company.” He spat upon the ground. “I’ve got no use for a guitar man.”

They all started walking, everyone talking at once (except, of course, the Marshal, who watched Williams’ every move, his lips pressed tightly closed).

“You can stay at the inn above the Long Branch Saloon,” said the girl, “if you’ll agree to play your guitar in the tavern most nights. Can you play anything else? There’s a beautiful piano set up just past—”

“How did you and that beast ever hook up, anyway?” asked Someone Else. “I ain’t never seen anything like it. Say, do you think we could get him to—”

“A raptor quill is nothing to fool with, son, even if it was removed quickly,” said the doctor. “First thing we’ll do is clean up that wound. Then we’ll make sure no remnants got left behind when—”

“Don’t let Marshal Rimshaw here scare you— not too much, anyway,” said the deputy. “Everyone knows he’s just a big pussycat. Decker’s the name, by the way. John Deck—”

There was a tremendous *crash!* behind them and they all turned around, and Williams was horrified to see that Ank had rolled over the security fence like an M1-A1 Abrams tank, and was now plodding to catch up with them.

Marshal Rimshaw wasted no time and had already squeezed off several rounds before Williams was able to holler to the others, “Hold your fire!”—and to his amazement, they did. Rimshaw’s slugs, meanwhile, only bounced off Ank’s armor with complete impotence—until the Marshal got wise to the problem and sighted

one of the creature's eyes. He was just beginning to squeeze when Decker knocked his barrel away with his own and targeted Rimshaw himself. "Not today, Marshal," he said, adding, "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day. But not today."

Neither of the men moved or said anything for what seemed a long time. At length Ank lumbered up to them and began licking Rimshaw's face, knocking his hat off with his great, slimy tongue and lapping at him again and again until it seemed he had been dunked into a trough of fetid water.

And everyone laughed—everyone, that is, except Rimshaw—not out of mean-spiritedness but out of sheer surprise, and because they were convinced the Marshal would begin laughing too. But he did not, and by the time Ank had sated his affection the man who was Marshal appeared to be drenched in anger as well as spit.

"No," he said at last, and picked up his hat before swatting away Decker's rifle with surprising violence, "today is just not my day at all." He wiped his face with his handkerchief and then redonned his cover. "There it is. You've all had a good laugh at my expense ... and I've had a good reminder of two things I already knew." He began pacing slowly and everyone gave him a wide girth. "The first is that a 10-ton dinosaur, when left alive to do so, does precisely what it wants to do. In this case, it wanted to get to its master—this man, right here, *fucking Guitar Man*. A man admitted to this encampment against my wishes and in flagrant disregard of my authority. A man whom any asshole could tell you is and will remain nothing but trouble. The second is that there's but two kinds of people in Devil's Gorge—those that are the Law, and those that ain't. Me and those deputies I trust are the Law. You ain't." He gestured at the hills, at Serpent's Butte. "Now I know none of you have forgotten what happened the last time we went through this. What hap-

pened the last time you all acted up. And I'm here to tell you, the same thing can happen again."

He shifted his gaze to Williams, who had crouched low to the ground with his guitar case and remained there throughout the action, and sneered. "Ready to play a song, were ya? Well know this. You've got forty-eight hours to heal up and get on down the road with your stupid guitar and your goddamn dinosaur. If you're here one second longer, so help me God, I'll have you shot."

Several people gasped and Williams realized by looking at their faces that they were reliving a nightmare they had all experienced before.

"And I'll kill the dinosaur, too. Two shots. One through each eye. Let's see his goddamn armor stop that." He moved to leave then paused. "Oh, and Decker, give your firearm and badge to Smithson. You're fired." He gestured at the downed gates. "Smithson, guard the goddamn hole."

Then he tipped his hat to everyone present and was gone.

• • • •

WILLIAMS WANTED THREE things more than anything in the world when he entered the Long Branch Saloon after being treated by Doc Allen and watering Ank—a tall glass of water for himself (or twenty), a cold beer, and the answer to a single question:

"Why do y'all talk and dress like it's 1865?"

The saloon girl—her name was Katrina—didn't respond right away, only sat his water and beer in front of him and busied herself by wringing out a bar towel in the basin. At last she said, "You have to remember, Mr. Williams, this place was a tourist attraction before it was a functioning city. Before the Flashback. Those of us who worked here were encouraged to talk that way—it was part of our job." She laughed. "It's funny, because we found ourselves talk-

ing that way even when we weren't at work. My mother said it was because dialects are contagious." She propped her elbows against the bar and leaned toward him, and he had to struggle not to glance at her cleavage. "Listen to you. You've only been here a couple of hours and you're already saying, 'y'all.'"

Williams smiled and tipped his beer to his lips; it was warm, stale. She was precisely right, of course. Language was contagious. The entire old-time vibe of this place was contagious. He watched as she bent over a bin of beers and began collecting bottles for the shelf. She was contagious.

"But the clothes ... that Marshal ..."

"The clothes," She laughed again. "Well, there's a couple of reasons for that. I guess you would have had to have been here right after the Flashback. We lost power sooner than most, is what I understand. So when the clean clothes started running out we turned toward Fly's Photo Studio; it was easier than washing everything by hand. You have to understand, things were no different here than they were everywhere else during the Flashback: we were fighting for our very survival. Tyrannosaurs, saber-toothed cats, quill raptors— if it had teeth and claws, it wanted a piece of us. That's how it all began, anyway. As for why it's continued, well, look no further than Marshal Rimshaw and his deputies—not Decker, mind you, but his real deputies. The ones who got the illness. Ha! The flu. You should see 'em: pale and black-eyed as serpents, just lying there in the Rio Grande like zombies." She leaned toward him over the bar again and he caught a whiff of her fragrance, and there was a stirring in his groin he hadn't felt since, well, since he couldn't remember.

"What do you mean, like zombies?"

"I mean like zombies, like men who are dead but still walking, or lying there staring at the ceiling. See, something attacked us only a few weeks after the Flashback ... something ... *new*. At first

everyone just assumed it was a rogue raptor, because it didn't have a pack—that was the first thing. But then it started talking, like a parrot, I suppose, saying things like 'Pig' and 'Eggsucker,'" She laughed her contagious laugh. "Can you imagine? A raptor calling you names as it attacked you? Deputies Creebald and Teller put up one hell of a fight, you can be sure, and they did eventually kill it, with Rimshaw's help, but all of them were wounded in the fight, and the deputies worst of all. After that, things started changing around here. At first it was just Creebald and Teller acting strangely, abusing their power, you might say, telling me not to forget to paint on my mole, or insisting Doc Allen wear that ridiculous little vest. But then Marshal Rimshaw started getting into the act, as well, and before any of us knew it we were living in a kind of police state. Decker was the only one who didn't pile on, which is funny, because he was the only one not wounded in the fight with the raptor. It all came to a head when Deputy Teller had his way with one of the saloon girls—Molly, was her name—after which there was a full-blown shootout between the Marshal and his deputies—not Decker, he tried to maintain the peace—and the rest of the town." She unscrewed the cap from a bottle of beer and took a swig, then concealed it behind the bar. "You didn't see that. Anyway, the town didn't fare so well, and now there's a row of graves out by Serpent's Butte." She paused, locking her beautiful brown eyes up in his own. "They were good men, Williams. The best I've ever known. And now they're just as dead as that raptor." She snapped the bar towel in her hands and then wiped the counter. "And that's why we all talk and dress this way." She indicated his empty glass. "You want another?"

"Sure," he said.

She pulled one from the wall and unscrewed its cap, sat it down in front of him.

At last she said, "So what about you? What's your story? And how did you come to be travelling with an armored dinosaur?"

Williams took a swig of his beer and then glanced out the saloon window, where Ank was standing with several horses. "Well, Ank and I don't talk much about it. We just ... sort of crashed into each other at the intersection of his life and mine. As for myself, I guess you might say ... that I'm seeking Tanelorn." He laughed a little to himself. "Do you know what that means? To be seeking Tanelorn?"

She shook her head slowly, her eyes never leaving his own.

"Yeah, well, who would? It's something from an old novel—one I only partially remember. But what it means to me is to feel homesick ... not just homesick, but homesick for a place you've never been, or don't entirely remember." He toyed with his beer distantly, began peeling the wrapper from its smooth, brown glass. "And to want to find that place. See, I wasn't exactly myself when Ank first found me—rescued me, for all intents. I had, how do you say it? Amnesia. I knew things had been different ... I just wasn't sure how. I guess I just knew that something terrible had happened, not only to me but to the entire world ... and that there hadn't been flesh-eating dinosaurs waiting to eat you around every corner before." Now they both laughed. "And I knew that I'd been separated from something," He glanced up from the bottle. "*Someone*, who had been vitally important to me. Someone who was ... is ... waiting for me even now."

He stared into her eyes which betrayed a hint of disappointment.

"And that they are north of here, somewhere." He quaffed the rest of his beer and sat the empty bottle on the counter, a little too hard. "And that's it ... that's all I know." He winked at her. "All I want to know, if you want the truth. So long as I'm in your company."

She quickly recomposed herself, staring back at him with something like bedroom eyes, and said, "I've always been a sucker for a man with a guitar. I know you're still healing ... but you're sure you won't play something?"

He didn't respond right away, only continued looking at her. At last he managed, "Look, Katrina, there's something—"

And then there was a scream, a ragged, wet, blood-curdling scream, which came from the general area of the downed gates, and when Williams looked instinctively out the saloon's window he saw that while the horses had remained completely un-phased, Ank had vanished without a trace.

• • • •

THE MAN—SMITHSON—WAS dead, all right, but his killer or killers hadn't been content just to carry him away or let him lie. No, whoever or whatever had killed him had felt the need to leave a calling card—his severed head—which they'd sat atop a thick, wooden post so that the vertical railroad tie resembled a grizzly kind of totem pole. Otherwise, save for a nearby pile of spurned entrails, there was no trace of him.

"Now I want you all to take a long, hard look at this," said Rimshaw, projecting his voice so that everyone could hear him, even those in the back of the mob. "And I want you to remember it next time someone gets the wise idea to question my judgement."

Williams scanned the crowd, Katrina beside him, trying to gauge their mood, seeking signs of a lynch tenor. Because Rimshaw had a point: if he hadn't been allowed into the compound the gates would still be standing ... which meant he was responsible, however indirectly, for Smithson's death—assuming the townsfolk even believed the attack had come from outside. If they believed otherwise, that meant the door was open to blame Ank—regardless if he was herbivorous or not, and regardless of the absurdity that a

quadrupedal animal, or any animal, could leave such a gruesome calling card.

Something attacked us only a few weeks after the Flashback ... something ... new.

Something which had talked, she'd said.

"Now the way I see it is there's only two possibilities," continued Rimshaw. "And that is that a man, or men, did this ... or that that armored dinosaur has been touched all along and is not what he appears. If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: these things are *not* dinosaurs—not animals. They're weapons made of flesh and blood, sent here by *them*"—he indicated the lights in the sky—"to exterminate us no different than we would an infestation of rats. And now we've got one among us—right now—somewhere in Devil's Gorge. Hiding, perhaps, until dark. But that's okay. Because we've got another among us whose true nature must also be suspect. And I think if we were to shackle this man right here, against this very post, and begin whipping him, say ... the beast would show its face."

Williams began to recoil even before Rimshaw pointed him out, and then he was seized suddenly by the men around him as Decker protested and Katrina cried out, his guitar case falling to the pavement as they drug him to the post while still others began shouting for a rope.

"No," he exclaimed, struggling furiously. "Can't you see you've got this all wrong? Can't you see what's really happened? Katrina herself told me you were attacked by something different, something new. Something with the power of speech, that used words like 'pig' and 'eggsucker.' Can't you see that that's what did this? That there was more than just one of them?"

He fell silent and doubled over as someone punched him in the stomach, then toppled completely as someone else shoved him. And then, suddenly, there was a cry—a cry that sounded as though

it had come from Ank and yet utterly different from any Williams had ever heard. A warbling, frightened, pitiful cry—the kind an animal might make if it were sinking into tar while surrounded by predators.

“Marshal?” said someone. “That came from the Lonestar Corral.”

“Then that means we’ve got ‘im cornered,” said Rimshaw, and shouted, “Johnson! Let ‘em into the armory! Let ‘em all in!” And to everyone else he said: “Get your weapons and meet me at the corral. And someone fetch Creebald and Teller. I don’t care how sick they are. I want them by my side.”

“But, Marshal, I just came from there,” said Johnson, pausing. “And they’re plumb gone.”

“What do mean, *gone*?” snapped Rimshaw.

“I mean they ain’t there. They’re not at the Rio Grande. *No one’s* at the Rio Grande.”

Williams craned his neck on the ground to observe Rimshaw’s reaction, and what he saw sent a chill up his spine, for it all but confirmed what he’d begun to suspect. For as Rimshaw stared at the man coldly, his eyes black as coals and his face pale as the dead, his tongue slipped between his lips like a snake’s and was just as quickly sucked back in.

And Williams knew exactly what and who had killed Smithson even as the townsfolk’s boots pounded past him on all sides and he tried to get up but could only grip his stomach in both hands.



TO SAY ANK WAS CORNERED would have been an understatement; in fact, he was surrounded: surrounded by the strange, pale raptors who circled him slowly within the corral, surrounded by the corral’s fencing, surrounded by the townsfolk who had pressed against its perimeter and trained their rifles and pistols up-

on them, and surrounded by the sound of Rimshaw's voice, which echoed off the nearby buildings, the Papago Cash Store and Bauer's Union Market, Fly's Boarding House, the Palace Saloon.

"You only need remember two things," he shouted, aiming his rifle at Ank—and only Ank. "And that is to aim for the armored dinosaur's eyes ... and that he is the bigger threat. Now let loose some hell, and let's take back our town."

His voice cracked and seemed to change tenor as he shouted.

"Belay that order!" belted Decker, leaping onto the first wrung of the fence so that everyone could see him. "Can't you see what's going on here? Look at them! They're the same type of animal that almost killed Creebald and Teller."

"Pig," said one of the raptors, glaring at him.

"Eggsucker," said the other.

"Don't you see? Ank has lured them here to *protect us*, not hurt anyone. *Let them fight*. If you can get a clear shot at the raptors, take it. But let the armored dinosaur be."

There was a *crack!* As Rimshaw squeezed off a shot at him, grazing him in the leg, and he toppled from the fence.

And then everything was chaos and fury as the raptors charged and the townsfolk opened fire—at Ank, apparently, for his great shell sparked and crackled as though strung with firecrackers. And so furious was the combat that few noticed the guns being shot from everyone's hands one by one—nor Decker crawling toward Rimshaw until he was able to grapple with him from the ground—at least until Ank spun suddenly and brought his great, clubbed tail whistling around, knocking one of the raptors clean off its feet and sending it smashing through the boards of the corral ... where Williams stood propped up by Katrina, his guitar case open upon the ground and his hands sighting what appeared to be an exquisitely-crafted rifle, which he pumped and fired again, knocking the weapon from Rimshaw's hands.

His *claws*.

Then the wounded raptor pounced upon both Rimshaw and Decker—or perhaps just Decker, it wasn't entirely clear—and Williams simply took it out, *pow, like that*, right between its eyes. At last he looked at Ank in time to see the armored dinosaur charge the remaining raptor like a ram—smashing it off its feet so that it blasted through the boards of the corral and took out the window of the Papago Cash Store.

And then it was over, save for the struggle between Rimshaw and Decker—who managed to free himself from the half-man's grip even as the former Marshal completed his transformation into a slathering beast, which circled and paced as the townsfolk gathered around and Williams levelled his rifle.

"Pig," spat the Rimshaw-raptor venomously. "Eggsucker."

Williams squinted, sighting him between the eyes.

"Pig-fucker. Human filth."

Decker stood, bracing himself against the fence. "And behold their latest abomination," he said, and indicated Teller's body, which had reverted to human form and lay dead upon the ground. Someone handed him his rifle. "A dinosaur that will not only tear you to pieces ... but turn you into itself if you survive. Like a werewolf. Or a zombie."

He gazed at the sky, at the alien lights which bled in and out of each other and seemed redder than usual, angrier. "Just their latest attempt to scrub us from the face of the earth. To erase us from time itself." He looked back at the thing that was Rimshaw. "The Marshal, having been wounded the least, took longer to transition. That's all."

"Pestilence!" hissed the raptor. "Ape-man. Evolutionary dead-end. A mistake of your God."

And then its eyes lightened inexplicably and its voice became like that of Rimshaw, the old Rimshaw—only tortured, frightened,

alone. "Help me," he—it—whimpered softly, agonizingly. "Please ... God. Shoot me."

But Williams couldn't do it, and only continued staring at him down the length of his barrel.

"Please ... God. Do it." His voice changed yet again. "Pig-fucker. Eggsucker. Human—"

And the thing leapt at him—at which instant there was a *crack!* as Decker fired and a stream of blood shot no less than seven feet from its head. Then it fell, convulsing ... and died. And no one said anything as thunder rumbled in the distance and rain began to spot everyone's faces, including Ank's, which only looked on, grayly, stotically.



BY THE TIME EVERYONE gathered at the downed gates to see Ank and Williams off, there were three new graves out at Serpent's Butte and the worst of the rain had passed.

"See?" said Williams, showing someone the hidden compartment beneath the guitar façade in his case for the millionth time. "I don't play. I never have. At least, I don't think I did."

"But how'd you come to be so good with that rifle?" asked Someone Else. "Ain't never seen anything like that in my whole life."

Williams stroked Ank between the eyes. "That's something I hope to find out ..." He glanced at Katrina and smiled. "When I get to Tanelorn."

She approached him slowly and looked up into his eyes, then kissed him softly on the cheek. "You know where we're at, cowboy, if you don't find what you're looking for. Or even if you do."

He smiled down at her, as inexplicably drawn to her as he had been from the beginning. "I will. Take care of yourself, okay?" He

looked at Decker, who was wearing a bigger badge than he had before. "Marshal."

And then they were on their way, north toward Montana and a city called Mirabeau Park, leaving Devil's Gorge to brood beneath the rain, forgotten by time, alone against its hills.

Tales from the Flashback:
AND LET LOOSE THE BEASTS OF PREY

They should be home by now, thought Sheila—even as a pair of headlights flashed across the wall and she rushed to the window, breathing a sigh of relief. But it wasn't Stephen.

It was a police car.

Erik joined her at the sill. "Are Dad and Tammy home? Whoa, a police car!"

She shooed him away from the window quickly. "Honey, I want you to go to your room, okay?"

"But, Mom—"

"Just do it," she snapped. "I don't have time ..." She paused, catching herself—then crouched in front of him and plucked at his hair. "Sweetie, remember how I told you that mommy and daddy would always try to explain things, but that there were times when they couldn't, at least not right away? And that there were special rewards for little boys who were patient and showed a little faith?"

He nodded slowly.

"This is one of those times, okay?"

"But—"

"No buts," She ruffled his hair, trying to appear calm even though her guts were doing loopy-loops. "Now shoo. I'll—we'll explain everything later, okay?"

"Are they here about the dinosaur?"

She ushered him toward his room. "There was no dinosaur. Your father saw a wild turkey, that's all. Now in with you, and no listening at the door. Hurry."

The doorbell rang as she eased his door shut and she hurried toward it. *Bald tires. Bald tires and the worst snowstorm in years, maybe ever. Dear God, Stephen. I told you to put on the studs sooner and not later. I told you and I told you but you didn't listen, you never do, not to me, not to your father, or—*

She felt a panic coming on and seized control of herself. *No, dammit. Just stay calm. It's probably nothing. Maybe Stephen had*

called them. A dinosaur, Stephen? Really? She laughed a little to herself. *It's the countryside just a few miles out of town, babe, not a Jurassic swamp. I know you weren't fond of moving here, but ...*

She unlocked the door and swung it back. The Sheriff was there, along with his deputy, a young, fit man who seemed altogether too intense. She cinched her bathrobe snugly about her. "Hello? May I help you?"

Her heart ran cold as she noted the Sheriff's expression, which seemed exhausted and strangely forlorn. *Just ... Dear God.* She saw him glance at her ring finger.

"Good evening, Mrs. ...?"

"Were. Sheila Were."

He extended a gloved hand. "Sheriff Whitman, Anchor Rock Police." The glove crackled as they shook. "This is my deputy, Richard Conners."

Conners shook her hand—altogether too firmly. "Pleased to meet—"

"Has there been an accident?" she asked abruptly. "Is that why you're here?"

Whitman smiled and shook his head. "None that I am aware of. But we would like to ask you a few questions. That is, if you're not indisposed."

Sheila exhaled, relief flooding through her like a wave. She touched her chest. "Oh, thank God. Oh, thank heavens. Yes, yes, of course, please, come in."

She held the door for them and shut it once they'd entered. "Please, make yourselves comfortable. Can I get you anything, a diet soda, or—"

"No, no," said Whitman. "We'll only be a few minutes. Mainly we're just doing a welfare check. There's been, ah, a number of reports filed from the surrounding homes in the last 24 hours. It seems ..." He hesitated, as though embarrassed by what he was

about to say. "It seems there's some kind of animal wandering the area. An emu, by the sound of it. Of course, we won't be sure until we've see it for ourselves, but—"

"An emu?" Sheila was amused by the thought. "I knew there were deer and maybe some coyotes here, but ... an *emu*? Really?"

"You'd be surprised," said Whitman. "Fella named Bolton used to have some about 10 miles from here—along with some camels, a zebra, some bison ... Anyway, normally we wouldn't be too concerned, but, ah, some of the reports have indicated that the animal is behaving ..." He glanced at Conners, who glanced right back. Intensely. "Aggressively."

Sheila looked back and forth between the two, thinking of their amateur—and illegal—grow in the basement, and finally snorted. "A killer emu, huh?" She put her hands on her hips. "Okay, I'll bite. What really brought you guys out here?"

Whitman looked at her as though weighing his options and finding none of them acceptable. At last he said, "It's a strange situation, I admit. But I assure you, Mrs. Were, there *is* an animal wandering the area. At least one, and possibly more. And we just need to know if you've seen anything."

"No," she said, feeling suddenly distrustful, and just as suddenly remembered Stephen's dinosaur, the one he'd said he saw looking at him from the edge of the back-forty, the one she'd assumed he'd concocted to entertain the kids (it was impossible to tell with his deadpan sense of humor) ... the one he'd said looked like a velociraptor from *Jurassic Park*.

"Yes," she corrected herself. "My husband said he saw a dinosaur today. Out in the back-forty, near the property line. How's that?"

She grinned as though saying, *Two can play this game*.

"You don't say?" said Whitman, again exchanging nervous glances with Conners. "Well, I don't know about you ... but I might

mistake an emu for a dinosaur. Did he say if it behaved aggressively in any way?"

"No."

"I see," said Whitman. He nodded at Conners, who excused himself and went outside, briskly, it seemed.

At last Whitman said, "I can see there's no fooling you, Mrs. Were. So if you'll be so kind as to sit down, I'm going to tell you why we're really here." He hitched his uniform pants and sat on the sofa. "I'll take that diet soda, by the way."

"I'll get it for you ... but remain standing," she said curtly, and moved to fetch one from the refrigerator.

• • • •

CONNERS BURST FROM the front door and ran to the patrol car, plopping down sideways in the driver's seat, calling in what they had learned from Sheila, which was bad. Very, very bad. It was still snowing; there was now about a foot of the stuff on the ground. Nor did the storm show any signs of relenting. Meanwhile, through a gap in the clouds, the moon shone bright and silvery ... even as the wind rose and fell and swirled about his boots, which were resting outside the car, and a shadow passed over him stealthily.

A moment later a low-pitched growl came from the trees beyond the patio, catching the wind and reaching Conners' ears instantly. He looked up, cocking his head, and listened intently—but could hear nothing over the howling of the storm. Large, intricate snowflakes blew into the car as he did so, sticking to his face like lint. The snarl came again as he peered into the dark between trees.

Okay, that's it, he thought, and reached for the shotgun between the seats. He hung up the mic and stood, pumping the weapon. I don't know what you are or where you're from, but you've got about five seconds to live, my friend. 4 ...

He walked toward the growls slowly, the air crisp and cold against his cheeks, his breath billowing about him, the steel of the trigger icy against his finger. *Welcome to the twentieth century, killer. Now you're going to see what real killing is about. 3 ... 2 ... 1 ...*

There was a sudden banging sound and he whipped around, but froze before firing, realizing the reports had all been true, that dinosaurs somehow walked the earth again, and that a velociraptor had leapt atop the patrol car, denting its roof, and was even now glaring at him with its owl-like, forward-facing eyes.

Then it leapt and he managed to squeeze off a round—one, which missed its mark entirely—before it pounced: striking with its sickle-clawed foot so that and he was smashed to the snow-covered patio and split neck to crotch all in an instant.

• • • •

BY THE TIME SHERIFF Whitman had thrown open the door and levelled his service revolver, the beast had pinned Conners in the snow and was scooping his guts out like jello. So, too, had it torn his upper garments away so that the young deputy was bare-chested and fully exposed as still more raptors clambered over the top of the squad car—and yet more streamed from between the trees—and descended upon him in a bloody free-for-all—even as Whitman opened fire and Sheila screamed and Erik looked out his bedroom window in abject terror.

Crack! Crack! Crack! went Whitman's revolver as the raptors began to fall and Conners continued to scream—until a sickled claw raked the length of his face, ending his screaming forever. At last one of the beasts turned its monstrous head toward Whitman, one of Conners' entrails dangling from its mouth, and barked as if to alert the others. And then they were coming, fling after each other like a coiled rope pulled taut, and Whitman retreated into the house even as Sheila yanked the door shut—which the snarling

beasts rammed into with incredible force, all but smashing it off its hinges.

“Hurry up,” snapped Whitman, grabbing one of the dining room chairs and lodging it diagonally beneath the knob. “Let’s get some furniture against this.”

He gripped the sides of the refrigerator and rocked it away from the cupboards, then maneuvered it in front of the door as Sheila drug over the stereo cabinet and Erik, having left his room to be with his mother, began dragging over the coffee table, which Whitman and Sheila grabbed at the same time and heaved atop the stereo cabinet. Within instants there was another impact—several impacts—which knocked the piled furniture back noticeably, causing Whitman to frown.

And yet the barrier held, and a moment later all was silent.

“I think they’re gone,” whispered Sheila at length, and moved to peek between the curtains.

“Don’t do that,” snapped Whitman. “Stay away from the windows. And I wouldn’t count on it.” He glanced at the television, then scanned the cluttered room. “Where’s your remote?”

Sheila just looked at him, confused. “In the kitchen, I think. Why?”

He strode into the kitchen and snatched it from the counter. “Because I want to know how widespread this is.”

She crowded him as he turned on the television. “How widespread what is? What’s going on?”

He cycled through the channels until he came to CNN. “This—the storm. The lights. The dinosaurs. Everything.”

“The lights? What are you talking about?”

She fell silent as the television images spoke precisely to her question, showing the skyline of what appeared to be Chicago, above which a number of strange lights floated and pulsed.

“...know at this hour is that the lights seem to come in two varieties, the corporeal type you see here, which might almost be mistaken for commercial aircraft, and the more amorphous ones observed over Vietnam and other places. We’re going to take you to some footage shot just moments ago on Interstate 90 in Spokane, Washington, which appears to show—and I repeat, this is not joke or a parody—a saber-toothed cat, albeit one larger than any previously known to science, *chasing vehicles* as if they were prey. You’ll note the many cars and trucks that are stopped or have otherwise ran off the road and stalled—this speaks for the most troubling aspect of what scientists are calling ‘the Flashback’: the sudden disappearance of people all over the world, including entire families. Again, we urge anyone tuning into this broadcast to seek immediate shelter and to stay there until further notice. Joining us now is—”

And the signal was lost to a hail of static even as a velociraptor crashed through the living room window and pounced upon Erik—who had been peeking between the curtains as they watched the TV—and Sheila began screaming as Whitman levelled his revolver, looking for an opening, but could find none.

• • • •

ERIK PEERED OUT THE window at the corpse, noticing how the falling snow was beginning to cover it, as it had his forgotten toys, and noticing, too, that the monsters, the velociraptors, which bore nothing in common with the plush toys he had in his bedroom, were nowhere to be seen. Nor were the lights of his father’s car—or anything, for that matter; there was just the corpse (one hand of which seemed to reach for the sky like a twisted, dead tree branch) and the snow, which had whited out everything, rendered the world void.

“... this speaks for the most troubling aspect of what scientists are calling ‘the Flashback’: the sudden disappearance of people all over the world, including entire families ...”

He looked at the sky, at the ceiling of snow clouds, amidst which the lights mentioned on the TV pulsed and glowed, bleeding in and out of each other, shifting colors, none of which he recognized, and knew in that instant—the instant before the raptor came crashing through the glass with its splayed feet first—that nothing would ever be the same; that he would never see his father and sister again and would never return to school and would never, ever be a boy, not even for an instant. And then the raptor did come, and he was knocked backward against the floor with a violence he could not have imagined, and after a moment there was a flurry of gunshots which blew the back of the animal’s head apart so that its full weight fell upon him and he was spattered with blood and brains. And the last thing he saw before blacking out completely was the monster’s dying eye, which stared into his own, an eye which contained in it the same colors as the lights in the sky—until they, too, faded and became as the dead.

• • • •

TIME PASSED AND THE rest of the raptors, like Stephen and Tammy, did not come. And thus it was decided (after Whitman had ventured outside and observed their tracks heading north) that Sheila and Erik would follow Whitman’s patrol car to Anchor Rock in their old Toyota Corolla, at which point Sheila would search for her family while Whitman learned if there was anything left of his police department.

“Try not to look at it, honey,” Sheila urged as Whitman covered Conners’ body—what was left of it—with the customary blue tarp, then trudged back through the snow toward his idling car and

got in. Then they were on their way, Sheila following him closely—but not too closely, as it was slick—down the snow blown road.

It wasn't long before Erik was sound asleep, snoring and sniffing, coughing and swallowing. They were climbing now, up the side of Mount Olive whose peak was enshrouded in a sinister gray mist. On a clear day you could see all of the Anchor Rock valley from here; not so tonight. Tonight it was but a vast pool of nearly impenetrable fog, beneath which Sheila could just make out the glowing, yellow lights of Anchor Rock proper. And she supposed she was grateful—so very, very grateful—for that much. For as long as the power was on and men such as Whitman were still doing their jobs, there was hope. Hope that the world might somehow pass through this day turned to night and this inexplicable time storm, this apocalypse no one saw coming and no one could have imagined. *It was supposed to be zombies*, she thought insanely—even as Whitman's brake lights winked on suddenly and Erik shouted, "Mom, look out!"

She focused forward in time to see the Sheriff's car looming in the windshield, and hit the brake pedal, causing the Toyota to lurch into a tailspin even as it careened toward Whitman's bumper—which they missed, barely—before sliding into a tree with a resounding crash. And then she was craning her neck to see what had caused him to stop so abruptly, and saw, by the strobing lights of his red and blues (which he had turned on in order to guide them better), what could only be considered a *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

It had crashed through Whitman's driver's side window with its snout and pulled him free—shaking him like a ragdoll, smashing him against the door—after which they could only watch in horror as it gnawed off his head ... which bounced twice across the road and went rolling down the hill, whipping blood as it went.

And then the thing was loping toward *them*, and Sheila had pushed in the clutch and jammed it into first—too late, for the

beast pounced upon them instantly, causing the roof to sink beneath its massive weight. She screamed as its claws raked through the thin steel of the car's shell, barely missing her head, then put it in reverse and floored the gas pedal, winding the Toyota's engine as high as it would go, before finally popping the clutch.

The car shot backward, a rear tire spinning wildly, and the dinosaur toppled off, hitting the road with a tremendous thud. Then Sheila slammed on the brakes and whipped it into first, revving the engine as the beast righted itself, and popped the clutch again—sending the car hurtling into the monster with surprising force, knocking it clean off its feet, laying it over on its side. She reversed just as quickly and backed up until their bumper collided with Whitman's, then revved the engine and shot forward yet again—pushing the T. rex to the edge of the road and the steep slope, and finally over it, so that it tumbled into the gloom roaring and gnashing its teeth.

They sat there at the edge for what seemed a long time, the Corolla's engine idling choppily, until at last Sheila collapsed against the wheel, physically and emotionally drained. A few more moments passed before Erik asked, "Is it dead, you think?"

Sheila gazed into the darkness and gloom and falling snow. "I think it's gone where it can't hurt us anymore," she said at length, and looked at Whitman's patrol car. *Even without a window*, she thought, *it'll be better than this Corolla. And there's a radio.*

"Come on, sweetie. We're switching cars."

"Really?" he asked, sounding excited in spite of the grim situation.

"Really," she said. "Consider yourself deputized, Lieutenant."

They trudged to the patrol car and got in: Whitman had ratcheted on the emergency brake and his revolver was laying on the passenger seat. She checked the chamber—there were still bullets in it. She clicked on the safety and eased it between the seats.

“But ... mom,” said Erik as she put the Crown Victoria into gear and began easing it forward. “Where will we go?”

“Put on your seatbelt,” she said, “and don’t even think about fidgeting with that gun. And as for where we’re going—what kind of question is that? We’re going to find your father and your sister.”

He skulked, thinking about this. “But what if they’ve ... disappeared?”

She drove in silence for several moments and at last glanced down at the glowing lights of Anchor Rock.

“See those lights down there?”

He sat up in his seat and looked. “Yeah. That’s Anchor Rock.”

“It’s more than that,” she said. “It’s hope. Hope that whatever is going on will end soon. Hope that your father and sister are fine and that we’ll be reunited with them soon.”

“But what is going—”

“No buts,” She ruffled his hair. “Remember how I told you that mommy and daddy would always try to explain things, but that there were times when they couldn’t, at least not right away? And that there were special rewards for little boys who were patient and showed a little faith?”

He nodded slowly.

“This is another one of those times, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

And no more “buts” were forthcoming, not for the entire duration of their trip.

FLASHBACK TWILIGHT

I

<The abandoned drive-in, we'll hide there. Move your ass, Will. They're right behind us.>

Williams gazed down the long, overgrown slope at what had once been the East Mirabeau Drive-in Theater. "That's a pretty steep decline, Ank. You sure you can handle it?"

He was doing it again. Responding to the imaginary voice.

The armored dinosaur examined the slope, flies buzzing about his eyes. *<The gear on my back might slow me, but I can do it. Just don't walk in front of me, in case I lose my footing. Hurry ... we're sitting ducks out here in the open.>*

Williams gripped his rifle and looked behind them: Sure enough, the marauders were coming, the wheels of their trucks and ATVs and motorcycles kicking up great plumes of dust as they motored across the plain. He quickly joined Ank who was already descending, his great hooves sinking into the earth like anvils, the water containers and camping gear and boxes of ammo strapped to his shell sloshing and clanking.

"Those prints are going to be a problem," said Williams, falling back to rub them out.

Your sanity is going to be a problem, he thought to himself, if you keep this lunacy up.

<Never mind them. It won't take them long to figure out where we went. We'll lose them in the tall grass when we reach the bottom—I'll hide behind the snack bar while you ascend my back to the roof. With luck, you'll be able to pick them off from there.

"Good plan ... even if I do say so myself."

<You didn't say so yourself. Now is not the time for this!>

"It's been the time for this since I started hearing your voice in my head. My voice, I mean. I mean—"

<Later, Will. We're almost there. You should climb onto my back now and start gathering up your ammo.>

"Yes, sir, Mr. talking dinosaur!" He ascended Ank's tail using its spikes for hand grips until he'd gained the crest of his shell, then tore open a box of ammo.

<I tell you, a telepathic connection has formed between us—don't ask me how because I don't know myself. And I am no longer merely a dinosaur, in case you haven't noticed. If you listen to nothing else I say, listen to that. These continued attempts at self-deception serve no one and will only hinder our search for—>

"What? What are we searching for, Ank?" His frustration with himself and the situation had begun to boil over at last.

<You know as well as I do what we're searching for.>

Williams sighed, giving into the hallucination and its comforts as he had done so many times before. "Yes, I know. We're searching for Tanelorn, where my great lost love awaits and they'll be fields of green, supple plants for you to eat and all this, this Flashback, will be explained. I know, Ank. I haven't forgotten. It's just easier to believe sometimes than others."

A shot rang out suddenly and Williams jolted as the bullet ricocheted off Ank's armor. He peered at the top of the hill. The marauders had arrived and dismounted their vehicles, and were even now sighting them with an array of rifles and pistols. There was a pronounced *crack! ka-crack!* as more rounds bounced off Ank's shell.

<Climb forward onto my head, you'll be protected beneath the lip of my armor. Hurry!>

He did so, rolling onto the beast's great, horned skull and coming up firing, his elbows resting on the edge of the shell. *Crack! (Ka-chink). Crack! (Ka-chink).*

The marauders began to fall as he pumped and fired again and again.

And then they were down and into the towering overgrowth, and Williams thought he saw a were-raptor flit past before a hail of gunfire forced him to crouch lower beneath the shell.

“We’re not alone here, Ank. Were-raptors, two o’clock.” He could tell by their unmistakable pale coloring. He pumped and fired as one of the marauders clutched his chest and tumbled down the slope. “How close are we?”

<We’re almost there now. Don’t shoot the raptors, whatever you do. If they were after us, we’d already know it.>

Williams jerked his head left and right as the predators began pouring past them on both sides, snarling and gnashing their teeth. And then they were there, they were behind the snack bar, which was dilapidated and covered in creeper-vines, and he scrambled over Ank’s shell and dove onto its roof.

<The marauders only! The raptors will do most the work.>

Williams shimmied forward on his elbows and braced his rifle against the building’s cornice. The brigands were working their way down the slope, completely ignorant of what was coming—until the raptors began leaping from the overgrowth and knocking them down, tearing out their throats, gutting them with their sickle-claws.

“They’ll come for us when they’ve finished,” shouted Williams, scrambling to his feet. “What’s the plan?”

He skittered to a stop at the edge of the building and saw Ank preparing to strike the rear wall with his club tail.

“Is that a good—”

But it was too late, and the cinderblock wall collapsed at the impact as though it had been struck by a wrecking ball, after which Ank lifted his tail so that Williams could climb on and lowered him to the ground.

Williams peered into the gaping hole. The ‘50s-themed interior was mostly intact, it would make a good campsite if they could find

a way to stop up the ingress. He moved forward, stepping over the rubble, his rifle at the ready. Ank lumbered in after him, the spikes of his shell scraping the edges of the hole and making it still wider.

"The pizza oven," he said, scanning the kitchen. "And that refrigerator. What do you think?"

Ank looked at the big, commercial appliances, a bass grumble rattling his throat. *<I'll take care of it. Check out the rest of the building. Make sure there's no compies or prehistoric centipedes or ... God knows.>*

There was a crash upstairs followed by a scratchy shuffling and Williams froze, staring at the ceiling.

"God knows there's someone or something up there."

<Go check it—>

"Don't say it," snapped Williams, and pointed at him. "I'm not going to be bossed around by a figment of my imagination. And so long as I've got even a little sanity left, that's exactly what you'll remain."

Ank only stared at him, his big, dark eyes impossible to read.

"Now move this ... this shit, and I'll be right back."

And then he was shuffling up the stairs—and the only sounds were those of the marauders screaming as the raptors tore them limb from limb; and the rumble of storm clouds as they collided high above.

• • • •

GOOD LORD, WHAT A MESS, he thought, easing open the door to the projection room as the smell of decomposing flesh assailed his nostrils. *What on earth happened—*

But he knew what had happened, just as he now knew what had happened to the rest of the world (despite having no memory of who he was or where he was from). The projectionist had been going about his life when a storm-front full of strange lights had

rolled in and changed the rules of reality forever—scrambling time so that three quarters of the population had simply vanished, and causing prehistoric animals and plants to begin materializing out of nowhere. And now all that was left of him was a rotting husk with only half its arms and legs, wedged into the corner of the blood-splashed and overgrown room (although the blood had long since dried), and seeming almost to twitch—which was impossible, of course. For if there was one thing Williams was sure of, it was that the projectionist was, in fact, dead, and so would not be returning as a were-raptor or anything else.

Were-raptors, he thought, and chuckled bitterly to himself. *Time storms. A fucking talking ankylosaur ...*

He had turned to go back downstairs, realizing, for the thousandth time, that his eyes, like his ears—indeed, his very thoughts—could no longer be trusted, when there was a sudden squelching sound followed by a snippet of music—AC/DC, to be exact, although he didn't know how he could know that—which stabbed at the air briefly before reducing in volume quickly and vanishing altogether.

He whipped back around, rifle at the ready, as the corpse twitched again—this time noticing something he had utterly missed the first time: a child's shoe, filthy white with pink laces, protruding from beneath the stiff, dead form. A shoe which *moved* as he watched, attempting to conceal itself.

Someone was hiding beneath the body. A child—or a *midget*, he thought insanely, and lowered his rifle. The wind gusted and the blinds of a nearby window rattled. At last he said, "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you." Flies buzzed about the dead man in the near-total silence. "But hiding beneath a corpse is no place for a child, do you understand? You could get very, very sick. I'm sure your parents wouldn't want that."

What the hell are you even saying? he reprimanded himself, not knowing if he'd been a parent in his previous life but fairly certain he had not. And this voice was joined by another, a merciless, pragmatic voice, which whispered: *There's still time. It's not too late. Time to pretend you haven't seen this. Time to leave this place and its potential burdens as far behind as you can.*

"You'll take my radio," came a little girl's voice, stunning him somewhat, for it was the first human voice he had heard since Devil's Gorge and the western theme park turned survival compound. "The last grownups I saw wanted it too, but I got away from them. And my parents are dead; I seen them killed myself."

A radio, he thought. *Holy mother of God, a radio!* He thought of the snippet of AC/DC he'd heard. *And a signal!* Someone, somewhere, was broadcasting. And that meant power, electricity, lights. It might even mean an entire city had survived.

"I would like to listen to your radio, I confess," he said, trying not to sound too eager or overly interested, "but I would never take it from you, do you understand? I presume you found it amidst the rubble ... that makes it yours, and yours only."

He lowered his rifle. "My name is Williams. I have a friend downstairs I'd like you to meet—his name is Ank." He watched the corpse, listening, but there was no movement and no response. "Do you have a name?"

The wind moaned forlornly and the blinds rattled again. At last she said, "Luna. Because my hair is white."

"Luna ..." He smiled in spite of himself—in spite of the situation. "Because your hair is white." He took a tentative step forward and paused. "May I see it? I've never seen a little girl with white hair."

There was a brief silence. "You promise you won't take my radio?"

“Promise and hope to die,” he said, and gently moved the rest of the way to her.

The corpse shifted slightly and the filthy white tennis shoe reappeared. Then she began pushing outward and upward and he quickly laid down his rifle and began assisting—until the body had been rolled over completely and he could see her in her entirety.

The first thing he noticed were her extraordinarily light violet (almost pink) eyes, which stared out from their dark recesses with an eerily penetrative gaze. The second was that, beyond them, she had no pigment whatsoever: her skin, her eyelashes, her brows—all were white. And the third was that she appeared dreadfully malnourished and was filthy from head to toe, like a porcelain teacup left out in the elements too long.

But it was the eyes that held him, haunted him, for they were the eyes of an old woman trapped in the face of a child.

“I’m an albean, albin—albino,” she stammered, as though apologizing in advance. “Do you still want to introduce me to your friend?”

“Why yes, I do, very much,” he said, even as his eyes dropped to her radio, which was red and had a large hand-crank.

She pressed it to her chest possessively, crossing her arms.

“Yours,” he repeated. “And yours only. Promise.”

She seemed to think about this, eyeing him uncertainly. At last she said, “Can your friend come up here? There’s blood roosters down there.”

He plucked the hair away from her eyes gently. “They’re called raptors. And no, he can’t, he’s too big.” He picked up his rifle and stood, swinging it by its loop lever and cocking it. “But don’t worry. Raptors—blood roosters—are our specialty.”

THE FIRST THING SHE did upon seeing Ank at the bottom of the stairs was to scream, nor was it just any scream, but the kind which could only come from a particularly agitated little boy or girl—the kind that bore through one’s skull like a long, thin drill bit. Then she promptly scurried back up the steps and cowered behind the wall, shaking her head and saying, “No dinosaur, no dinosaur.”

“Luna, it’s okay,” stressed Williams. “He isn’t going to hurt you. His name is Ank. He—he doesn’t eat people. Especially little girls. Isn’t that right, Ank?”

Ank merely looked at him from beneath his horny brows. *<Yet. I haven’t eaten anyone yet, Will. What is this?>*

Williams straightened somewhat awkwardly and gestured at Luna to come down. “Well, I ... This is Luna.” He looked back and forth between the two. “Luna, because her hair is white. Luna ... meet Ank.”

“Who are you talking to?” she asked. “I can’t hear anything.”

Ank snorted. *<Because I’m a figment of his imagination.>*

Williams was temporarily at a loss. “No, I guess you wouldn’t ... would you?” *Of course she wouldn’t*, he thought. *Because in spite of what she’s been through, she hasn’t gone stark, raving mad, like you.*

“Let’s just say that Ank can communicate with me without actually speaking, and that he can understand what you say to him.” He gestured for her to come again. “Luna, come here! He’s not going to hurt you. I promise. Show him your radio.”

She descended the steps tentatively and held out the device, and Williams couldn’t help but to notice that her entire body was trembling. “That’s it, that’s a good girl,” he cajoled, then pointed at one of her hands and raised his brows as if to ask, May I?—before taking it in his own and guiding it to Ank’s snout, which she began to stroke slowly, cautiously.

<Is this really necessary? Just tell me about the radio. Does it work?>

"I'm getting to that." And to Luna Williams said, "Your radio. Can you play it for us? We—we've been travelling for a long time, and we miss the sound of other voices. Would you mind?"

She didn't respond right away but only continued to stroke Ank, who's stony texture seemed to fascinate her endlessly. At length she said, "Okay," and turned one of its dials, and the room was immediately filled with the slightly raspy voice of a woman, who continued, "... if you're heading our way through Shadow Canyon, following that beautiful river, perhaps, be advised there's a pair of allosaurs operating in that area we call Lenny and Squiggy, and stay alert. And while we'd prefer you didn't kill them if in fact you are armed, we wouldn't recommend you get too friendly with them either. Once again this is Radio Free Montana, nestled just south of Paradise at Barley's Hot Springs Resort, where we've got power, lights, food, and about three-hundred survivors who'd love nothing more than to meet you. But be advised as always: if you're a marauder or a carpetbagger, you won't like what we've prepared for you. So take a little advice from Bella Ray and don't even try it. And on that it's another round of AC/DC ... for those struggling to get here even now, we salute you!"

It would have been difficult to overestimate the swelling in Williams' chest as he looked to Ank and the armored dinosaur looked right back, for both of them sensed that this could be the destination they'd searched for—Tanelorn, as they called it. The place where both of them might find comfort and possibly even some answers to the riddles they each embodied.

"My God, Ank," Williams stammered. "Do you think—"

<I think it's the best lead we've had since coming north ... and that a bath in a hot spring would be divine beyond, well, my ability to imagine. Regardless, there's the girl to think about ... >

“Yes, we could drop her off there if nothing—”

“You’re crazy, aren’t you?”

Williams came out of his thoughts as if from a dream and just looked at her. At Luna. Because her hair was white. “Maybe,” he offered, and then winked. “And you’re an albino. So what’s your point? If you ask me, I’d say a crazy man, an albino, and an ankylosaur make a pretty good team.”

She looked at him a little quizzically, as though unsure whether he was having her on or not. And then she just grinned infectiously, and Williams knew she’d accepted it—as he had finally accepted it: Ank as a possible talking reality, the Flashback, all of it. And then the spell was broken by a voice both familiar and alien, a voice which was human and at the same time serpentine, a voice which called out amidst the brewing storm: “Come out, Williams!”—and was instantly joined by another, which chimed in, parrot-like, “Yes, come out!” And another: “Eggsucker! Pig-fucker!”

And they knew the were-raptors had zeroed in on them at last.

“Those I can hear,” said Luna—and began retreating up the stairs again. “They only talk when they’re about to attack.”

Williams, meanwhile, had focused on Ank. “Jesus ... it called me by name.”

Ank stared at him from beneath his brow. *<A survivor of Devil’s Gorge, maybe?>*

Williams nodded slowly. “But how in God’s name? The only one who knew our names was ... Unless—”

<Unless the town was attacked by another pack of were-raptors after we left. Which would mean those outside could be anyone—Sheriff Decker, Katrina ... >

Williams misted up as he thought of the saloon girl who had shown him such affection. “I won’t shoot them, then.”

<Now listen, Will. Don’t let your personal feelings—>

"I said I won't shoot them," he snapped, and turned toward Luna, who was cowering at the top of the stairs. "We'll have to find another way." To Luna he said: "It's all right, sweetie. Everything's going to be all right."

<Dammit, Will, I can't handle an entire pack on my own, and you know it. Now are we serious about making it to Tanelorn, or at least Barley's, or not? Or have all our plans changed because a saloon girl threw a leg up on you in a town we will never see again?>

"Meh," Williams sighed angrily and moved toward the building's front windows, which Ank had blocked with pinball machines and video games, with only partial success.

<Don't walk away from me when I'm talking to you, dammit!> He lumbered after him, the tiled floor cracking beneath his elephantine feet. *<We made a pact. And what about the girl? Would you see her torn to pieces by those things while you simply watched?>*

"Go away!" Williams hissed. He peeked around one of the machines and saw the raptors lined up in the gathering dark, waiting to make their move, waiting to rush the snack bar and overwhelm them, waiting to kill them or, worse, to turn them into creatures like themselves.

"Are you talking to me?" whined the girl, her voice seeming to bleed as if cut by invisible knives. "Why would you want me to go away all of a sudden?"

"No—that's not what I meant—I ..."

<I can't do it, Will. They'll swarm in beneath my armor and ... they'll tear me to pieces.>

Williams held up his rifle—pressed his forehead against it.

<We need your magic with that gun, Will. I need it. And if you don't step up I'm going to have to ... and, I won't make it. Not this time.>

"Come out, Williams!"

"Yes, my love, come out!" A new voice. *Her* voice. Katrina.

Williams squeezed his eyes shut.

And then they were coming, he could hear their growls and the tapping of their awful sickle-claws against the cracked and broken pavement, and Ank was charging past him, breaking through the windows and walls, roaring defiantly, and when Williams looked up he saw the dinosaurs collide like thunderheads, heard Luna scream her piercing, drill bit scream, and knew they'd never make it to Barley, to say nothing of Tanelorn.

• • • •

II

"Dammit, just dammit," Williams cursed as he gripped his rifle and scrambled over the rubble toward the battling dinosaurs, then shouted over his shoulder, "Luna, take cover!"

And then he was sighting were-raptors with non-lethal precision (even as the thunderheads collided and the sky boomed and the rain came down in merciless torrents), targeting them in their legs, their thighs, their tails: fearing with each squeeze of the trigger that he might inadvertently strike a killing blow; that he might destroy the very people who had shown him such kindness, that he might murder the woman with whom he'd formed such a powerful and inexplicable bond—worse, that he might wound or even kill Ank.

He zeroed in on the thigh of one of the animals that had gotten too close to Ank's unprotected underbelly, a thigh that looked like so much uncooked chicken, and fired, blasting a hole the size of a teacup in it ... and causing the creature to drop instantly and to scramble away. *Was that you, Katrina?* he thought as he cocked and sighted another—this time the head of a raptor trying to close its jaws about Ank's neck. He fired and its skull blew apart. *Was that you?*

Ank, for his part, was putting up one hell of a fight: clubbing one of the beasts with his tail and sending it flying, ramming another with his horns so that it was crushed against a rusted and overgrown automobile. But Williams' presence had not gone unremarked, and he shuffled backward as several raptors, four, to be exact, broke from the pack, and began stalking toward *him*—for they were pure raptors only in form, and the parts of them that were human understood guns and bullets full well. He cocked and fired almost instinctively as the animals approached, hitting one in its shank so that it fell like a sack of potatoes and began crawling away through the rain, then, just as the rest were preparing to leap forward all at once, he shouted, “The next shots will be kill-shots—one for each of you—if you don’t break off your attack. You know I can do it.”

The animals paused ... tapping their sickle-claws, cocking their heads. At last one of them said, in a perversion of Katrina’s voice: “But you won’t do it—how can you? We are your friends, remember?”

And another, also in Katrina’s voice: “Why don’t you join us?”

And still another: “Yes, join us!”

Williams hesitated. One of them was Katrina, but which one?

And then they were leaping, all three of them, and he cocked and fired twice, debilitating two of them instantly with non-lethal blows while delivering a shattering kill-shot to the third—even as it knocked him to the ground and pinned him there beneath its hemorrhaging dead weight. And such was the force of the impact that he dropped his rifle and found himself gripping the creature’s snout—a snout he knew could morph back into a human face at any instant—Decker’s face, *her* face. And he shoved it off with a violence that shocked him—even as Ank cried out in pain and he looked to see a final raptor attaching itself to his friend’s exposed neck, just beneath the armored plating, and fired from where he lay.

And then the thing dropped and it was over, and neither Ank nor Williams could do anything but to try and catch their breath as the surviving raptors fled and the storm slowly subsided.

<Thanks, Will. I—I really appreciate that. I ... understand how conflicted you must have been.> He exhaled heavily. *<But, the ones you spared, they'll be back. You know how fast they heal.>*

Williams only nodded, staring at the corpse at his feet, which had finished reverting to its human form.

"Decker," he said.

Ank looked down at the body nearest him. *<I don't know who this is. It doesn't matter anyway. Where's the girl?>*

Williams stirred as if from a trance and hurried back to the snack bar, Ank loping after him, where they found Luna standing straight as a board amidst what was now essentially a ruin—her violet eyes empty and eerily glazed over, and still staring at where the battle had taken place.

"You smell that?" Williams asked Ank. He waved a hand in front of her face.

<Affirmative. Smells like smoke. Or something on fire.>

They looked around; nothing was on fire. Williams kneeled before her and gently rubbed her shoulder. When at last she began to come out of it he asked, "What were you seeing just now? Can you tell us?"

"I was ... thinking about something I killed once. An ant. His name was Fred. He was my friend ... but I burned him all up."

Williams moved to speak but hesitated—it wasn't just because he was both charmed and disturbed by her words. No, an image had come into his mind with a vividness that was startling: an image of a black ant crawling beneath the thick lens of a magnifying glass—a lens in which he discerned the reflection of a boy—and which had been positioned so that it caught the sun and focused its rays upon the insect, which caught fire and curled upon itself and

was immolated as the boy watched. Then it was gone and he was left, despite the cruelty of the act, with a distinct feeling of euphoria. For the boy, he knew, was himself.

"Ank ..." He turned to face the ankylosaur incredulously. "I—just had a memory. I'm sure of it."

Ank regarded him from beneath his bony brow. *<Maybe you should tell me about it. Quickly, before you forget.>*

He told him about it. At last the dinosaur communicated, *<It isn't much, is it? But it is something. By God, it's something. Hold onto it, Will. Hold onto it as though your life depended upon it. It just may.>*

"I will, I promise," he said, and ruffled Luna's hair. "As for you: you burned an insect with a magnifying glass, I think." He stood and patted her shoulder. "We all did. It's like, a rite of passage. Doesn't make you Hitler."

He paused, looking at Ank. "How do I know that? Old books, historical figures ..."

<I told you. We can both remember the world, just not who we were, not before the Flashback. Please don't overthink things.>

"You talk to yourself a *lot*, don't you?" said Luna.

Williams looked at her and finally smiled in spite of himself. "Or it just may be that he's really talking to me, and you just can't hear it." He tweaked her nose. "Yet. Either way, you need to eat something and get some sleep. We all do. We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Why a big day?"

"Ank, camping gear," he said, and the dinosaur folded his front legs with a groan. "Because we're going to head out for Barley's in the morning." He loosed his bedroll from the supplies strapped to Ank's back and tossed it to her. "The place where the sounds on your radio come from. We've—we're searching for something. A place we call Tanelorn. And we think that might be it."

"Tanelorn," she repeated. "What's that?"

Williams rested his arms on the bundles of supplies, thinking about it. "I don't know, exactly. I reckon it's just a place someone feels drawn to ... even if they don't know why. A place where the homeless can find a home, maybe." He looked at the lights in the sky, the Alien Borealis, as Ank called it, and wondered. "But it may be that it's something else—a kind of Omega Point. A place where all the colors of the spectrum meet, like a prism. And become focused into a single, burning light. Maybe that's what people mean when they talk about the power and the glory." He tugged on a rope, releasing a waterfall of pots and pans. "Meh. It's just something to keep us going."

"Like a magnifying glass," she said, ignoring his last statement.

He paused, thinking about it. "Like a magnifying glass," he agreed. Then he added, "Now, what'll it be? Beans or beans?"

• • • •

WILLIAMS SPREAD THE map out in the sun as Ank and Luna looked over his shoulder. "Here's where we're at." He tapped the map as the shadow of a pterodactyl passed over it, then another. "Montana Highway 200, at Mirabeau Park. We were taking it to Spokane instead of the more obvious Interstate 90 for one simple reason, even though we'd have to double back ..." He indicated a winding blue line. "The Clark Fork, which runs its entire length—clean water being job one, always. Now, if we diverge here, and take 382, we can cut across the Camas Prairie—badlands, essentially—and hook up with 28. Here." He tapped the map again. "Then it's clear sailing all the way to Niarada—there's even a reservoir, here, at Dry Lake, in case we don't find any running water in Benton or Lonepine." He took off his hat and wiped his brow. "After that it would be back into what amounts to badlands, but with

no road to guide us, all the way to Barley's—for a total distance of, I'm going to say 80 miles."

"What's this?" asked Luna, and pointed.

"It says Shadow Canyon. And look here, see? A river runs through it, the Santiago. So, more water. The only problem I can see is that we'll have to ford it."

<I'm not an amphibious vehicle, Will. I'd direct you to the last time we tried that.>

"The last time we tried that was with a bigger river. This looks like little more than a creek. Besides, we'll need the water after crossing the badlands. And look here, see, Barley's is right on the other side."

"I can't swim," said Luna.

"You can ride on Ank's back," said Williams, and stood. He redonned his hat. "As for travel time, well, that's anyone's guess. There's three of us now," He ruffled Luna's hair. "One with short legs."

She beamed up at him.

<We usually do about 20 miles a day,> communicated Ank, <With the girl, we'll be lucky to get ten. Could take a week. And we'll be going through more food and water. You sure this is a good idea?>

"No," said Williams. "But it's the only one I got."

<And there's another thing. The radio broadcast said there's a pair of allosaurs working the area—or did you forget that? There's limits to what I can do, Will. And there's a limit to what you can achieve with that rifle, especially with ammunition running low. Allosaurs are nothing to trifle with.>

Williams patted the air as if to say, *When we get there, Ank. When we get there.* "For now, let's get some food in her. And in us too." He turned to Luna. "So what'll it be? Potatoes or potatoes?"

"Potatoes!"

"Potatoes it is," he said.

And then a cry rang out that made them all freeze, for it was the cry of a were-raptor, just as clear as day, nor was it particularly far away. And it was followed by a shriek—a human shriek, a woman’s shriek.

Katrina.

• • • •

“THIS IS RADIO FREE Montana, coming at you from the soothing, steaming pools of Barley’s Hot Springs Resort just south of Paradise, and I’ve got another string of hits just raring to go—plus some travel tips and advisories for all you nomads still working your way through the Big Not-So-Easy ...”

Williams looked around for Luna and her radio and quickly realized she had fallen behind yet again; nor was it her fault, he was walking too fast, as always. “Sorry,” he said, and cooled his pace. He added: “Can you turn that up, please?”

She did so, hustling to catch up. The announcer continued: “But first we’re going to check in with Felix the Fixed-wing Wonder, who’s airborne and on the air and milking those extra fuel tanks for all they’re worth, as he tracks a herd of brachiosaurs near beautiful Billings, Montana. What say you, Felix? Are they playing nice like normal herbivores, or are they showing signs of having been touched by the lights?”

“Jesus, Ank, are you listening? An airplane!”

<I’m not particularly surprised. You’ll remember the helicopter we saw over Pocatello.>

“Yeah. The bastard that swung back around as I waved—then high-tailed it out of there just as fast as he could. I remember.” He listened to the radio:

“Seem pretty harmless to me, Bella. Just your normal herd of migrating sauropods, probably heading for the ponds around East-

lake. Still, all the usual warnings apply. I'm going to swing around Billings and check for survivors ..."

"Roger that, Felix. As always, fly careful. You're not alone up there. And while we're on the subject, a word of advice for those in vehicles using sauropod herds for cover: It's not a good idea. At 62 tons, it only takes a single step for you to have a really bad day—whether they've got the blood fever or not. And on that, it's back to the music, and another ditty for all you weary travelers trying to get here even now. It's Roger Miller, and "King of the Road," on KKRK Radio Free Montana ..."

Trailers for sale or rent, rooms to let, fifty cents ...

Williams looked at the sky, a sky completely devoid of contrails, fancying what a would-be pilot might think if he were to look down and see them now: an ankylosaur whose great armored back was laden with supplies, a man in a poncho and wide-brimmed hat, and a little girl as white as the sun, all of them traipsing along secondary highway 382 as though they hadn't a care in the world. And he wondered what they would find when they finally arrived at Barley's—a welcoming family of friends at last, or a hardened cliche of distrustful survivors, as had initially been the case at Devil's Gorge—and he wondered, too, at his own sense of contentedness, for it was days like today, when he had someone to talk to and a clear destination in mind, that he felt he could handle anything. That, in the end, the universe would simply unfold as it should. And for just now, just this one, small moment, that was good enough.

I'm a man of means, by no means, king of the road ...

• • • •

THE CAMPFIRE CRACKLED and popped—something Williams normally would have found soothing after a long day on the road. But now its loudness and intensity only reminded him

that the radio had gone silent around noon and had been broadcasting dead air ever since. He tried to assure himself that this was normal and to be expected: the station couldn't have been more than a make-do operation; surely it would crackle back to life when they least expected it—probably in the middle of the night after they'd just gotten to sleep. Still, it *was* peculiar, and Ank himself had expressed his concern more than once, something he did again as Williams lay with his head propped up, watching Luna watch the fire (from a good distance away), and wondering what she might see in it that she could simply stare into it for such a lengthy period of time.

<Maybe they switched frequencies. It's unlikely, I know. But a search of the dial couldn't hurt.>

Williams looked from her colorless face to the bright, red radio, which she held clasped to her chest like a teddy bear, and shook his head. "I made her a promise that the radio would remain hers and hers alone. I think she'd view my manhandling it like that as a breach of trust. It can wait, Ank. We'll know what the situation is soon enough." He continued looking at her, noting for the first time that there were tears crusting her cheeks and that her mouth was moving slightly, almost as if she were whispering to the fire. "What's wrong with her, you think?"

<Hard to say. Post-traumatic stress, maybe. Didn't you say she was a witness to her parents' death?>

"Yes," said Williams, then shook his head. "And no. No, this—seems like something predating that. Something she was born with. Whatever it is, it weighs on her. P.T.S.D.? Maybe. But from something other than her parents' death." He laid his head back against one of Ank's folded legs and nudged his hat down. "Meh, beats the hell out of me."

The fire crackled and popped but otherwise the world was silent.

At length he said, “But I know this. We’ve got to get her to Barley’s. It’s weird, I know. But I haven’t felt so certain of something since we first headed north. It’s important, somehow. It’s necessary.”

Neither of them spoke for what seemed a long time, and it wasn’t until Williams was nearly asleep that Ank communicated, simply and succinctly: *<I feel it too.>*

And then they both slept, even as Luna laid down and finally did likewise.

• • • •

HE AWAKENED SUDDENLY, having dreamed—or thought he dreamed—of footsteps and breaking branches. A scan of the camp revealed nothing amiss: a smoldering fire, the clutter of dinner, Luna curled up in her sleeping bag. And yet—

He heard it again, not in dream—the breaking of branches, the shuffling of steps—and sat up with a start. He listened intently: something was moving through the scrub beyond the camp. He reached for his rifle instinctively (thankful he had cleaned and loaded it before supper) and eased the blanket from his legs, then nudged Ank.

“Ank, hey, *pssst*.” There was no response.

He stood slowly, gripping the rifle in both hands, peering into the blackness. Ank’s words from the previous night had not gone far: *The ones you spared, they’ll be back. You know how fast they heal.*

He moved into the dark carefully, wondering if it was just one were-raptor or the entire pack; wondering if he could do what finally needed to be done. For he was responsible now—not just for Ank and himself but for the girl; for delivering her to Barley’s and her ultimate safety. And for something else he was only just beginning to divine.

And then he came face to face with the maker of the sounds—and the boy, who could have been no more than eight,

froze like a statue, his eyes wide and wet, his skinny legs trembling, before dropping his gathered sticks and bolting into the night.

“Hey, wait ...!” Williams shouted, and promptly pursued, dashing through the sagebrush, acting without a care, chasing the boy relentlessly until they both burst into a clearing in which another campfire burned and a battered police car sat with its hood propped up—at which instant a woman barked, “Freeze! Drop it!” and he trained his rifle upon her ... only to see a revolver pointed directly back at him.

III

“Who are you? What do you want?” she snapped, and shuffled forward a step. “I’ll fire this thing, don’t think I won’t!”

Williams didn’t budge, only continued to sight her. “Yes, I believe you would ... if you had to. But you don’t have to. I—I heard the boy foraging ... it woke me up. I wanted to tell him he had nothing to fear, but he was already gone. I’d suggest just now ... we both lower our weapons. Can you try that for me? Please? I’ll start and you follow, okay?”

It was difficult to gage her reaction as he remained focused on her trigger finger. He began to lower his weapon ... and, to his surprise, she began to lower hers as well.

And then there was a *crack, ca-crack!* somewhere in the blackness, and she raised the revolver again, snapping, “What’s that? What was that?”

“What’s what?”

There was another *crack!*

“That! You’re not alone! Tell them to—”

He had barely had the chance to see the blur of Ank’s clubbed tail before she was knocked into the air and sent flying to the far side of the clearing, dropping her pistol along the way—which Williams snatched up instantly and tucked inside his pants. “It’s

okay, Ank!" he shouted as the ankylosaur lumbered toward her, "I've got her weapon. She's just scared ..."

The armored giant ground to a halt and turned to face him.
< *There was a boy also. I saw him by the police car ...* >

"He's my son, Erik," the woman groaned, holding her side, rocking forward and back. "Please don't let him get too far away."

Williams hesitated before shouting, "Erik! We are not going to hurt you! Please, don't wander far. We're going to get this sorted out." He hurried to the boy's mother and kneeled, placing a hand on her back—which she swatted away, causing her to gasp in pain.

"Easy does it," he said, and added: "We're not going to hurt you, you have my word." They locked eyes briefly. "My name is Williams. This here is Ank—"

She started to scramble to her feet and he stilled her with a firm hand. "He's harmless, I assure you. Most the time. He was just trying to protect me—easy now ..."

"Whoever heard of a friendly dinosaur?" she spat, stringy hair hanging in her eyes. "Even the plant-eaters, they'll turn on you like that. Where's my gun?"

"I've got it right here, and you can have it back. *After* we've established a few ground rules. Now, first things first. Like, what's your name?"

"Sheila," she cursed, and groaned. "Sheila Were. We were heading for a place called Barley's—they've been broadcasting ... a welcome message. But I haven't heard anything since—"

"Since about noon, I know," he said. "We've been listening to the same thing." He held out his hand. "Friends?"

She looked at him warily before her expression softened in a rush and she took his hand. "Friends. Now, can we find my son, please?"

"Of course, I'm sure he hasn't—"

More cracks, more shuffling amongst the sage. "Oh, Jesus," Williams mumbled. He loosed the pistol from his waist and handed it to her. "Were-raptors, I think. How many bullets do you have in that thing?"

"All of them," she said. "The car's been our weapon. Were-raptors; what are—"

"Shhh, they're coming. Ank?"

<I'm ready. Let's finish it this time.>

The rustling intensified. Whatever it was, it was almost there.

"Get ready," said Williams, and sighted the dark.

And Luna emerged, holding Erik's hand with one arm and cradling her radio in the other, and everyone sighed. But their euphoria didn't last long—for it was immediately obvious there was something terribly wrong with her, something rattled, something haunted.

"Something's happened," she said, and sat the radio by the campfire. "I thought you'd better hear it."

She turned up the dial as everyone gathered around:

"... hence the dead-air, and for that I'm sorry."

—Bella Ray, her tone dark, sober, pensive.

"But now you know, and it's up to you to search your hearts and decide what to do next. Once again ... Felix is gone. He was shot down, yes, *shot down*, at approximately 11:45 am, Mountain Daylight Time, near Billings, Montana, during what was a routine broadcast. I'm going to play his last transmission again for those of you just tuning in; you'll want to sit down, all of you. Once more, I'm sorry. Dear God, I am so sorry. This broadcast was my idea, and it seemed like a good one at the time, although we always knew we were rolling the dice. Well, the dice have come up snake eyes, at last." There was an extended silence. "So here it is ..." She sounded as though she were crying. "Take it away, Felix."

There was a burst of static which quickly resolved itself into the pilot's voice. "Coming around ... coming around ... and there it is. Good Lord, Bella—I literally can't see the end of it. Once again: I'm tracking what appears to be a kind of caravan—I'd count the vehicles but there are too many. I'd say a thousand, maybe more, rolling across the plains amidst a cloud of dust, following Interstate 90 but not confined to it. As for Billings, which the tip of the caravan has already passed through, I'll say it again: It appears to be burning. I'm sort of crop-dusting the length of the column now; I'm seeing semi-tractor trailers, motor homes, construction equipment, but mostly military hardware, and not the stuff you see at the Interstate Fair. I'm talking tanks and mobile artillery pieces. Lots and lots of motorcycles. Wait a minute—okay, you're not to believe this, but I'm seeing cages, big ones. They—it's like they're transporting—roger that: count 'em, one, two, three, four; they're literally transporting carnosaurus. T. rexes, allosaurs, a smaller species I haven't seen ... I don't know how many there are, a *lot*. I *still* haven't reached the end of the column. There's troop transports, both covered and uncovered, plus—okay, I've got trouble. Someone's sighting me—" Static exploded, drowning him out. "... a shoulder-fired—" More static. "... he's behind me now ... okay, here it comes, hold on ..."

All of them listened as the plane could be heard straining and shuddering, as though he were attempting a maneuver it clearly wasn't designed for, and then there was what sounded like an explosion, which was followed by dead air.

A few moments passed and none of them said anything.

At last Bella Ray said, "As for us ... we've decided to stay." There was more dead air. "More music after this moment of silence."

Williams stayed kneeled for what seemed a long time. At length he stood and began pacing slowly. And then he began walking, just walking— into the dark, into the sage.

<Will? You all right? Hey—>

He waved a hand in the air. Not now, it said. I need to be alone.

He walked until he came to a brushy rise which overlooked the prairie, which was bathed in moonlight now that the clouds had parted some, and looked out at it in silence. At length he heard movement and turned to see Sheila looking at him in the dark.

“Are you all right?” she asked. She took a step closer and paused.

“I don’t know,” he said.

The breeze kicked up slightly, blowing her dirty hair sidelong across her face. “I’ve got to go,” she said at last. “I don’t know where. Somewhere Erik can be safe.”

He turned away and stared out over the plains again. At last he said, softly, “You were heading north before you ever heard the broadcast ... weren’t you?”

“Yes. I—I lost my husband and a daughter to the Flashback in a town called Anchor Rock ... a long ways from here. A Sheriff tried to help us ... we lost him too. After that I just—I can’t explain it. It’s like, when you spend enough time alone, or nearly so ... when the whole world is quiet ... you grow an antenna you never knew you had. Like the land itself is talking to you, trying to tell you something. It’s—it’s always been talking to you. You just couldn’t hear it, not through all the noise. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes,” he said. He didn’t elaborate.

“Where will you go?” she asked.

The silence was deafening. At last he said, “Come with us.”

She laughed, a little too harshly, she felt. But then she had become a harsh person. “To where? To Barley’s? No ... absolutely no. They’re on their own. I’ve got a kid to think about. You ... you’re not actually going to continue on there. Are you?”

He turned to face her slowly. “There’s nowhere else to go. I think you know that. Come with us. You know as well as I do

there's nothing back the way we came. You said so yourself, your car's been your primary weapon. What will you do when a pack or raptors or worse finds you on the open plain—kill them all with your six bullets? And what then; what will you do when the bullets run out, when there's not even enough to put your kid out mercifully, much less yourself?"

She moved to slap him and he dropped his rifle and took her in his arms, hugging her almost violently, holding her fast as she resisted, squeezing her tight against him, until at last her efforts subsided and she began squeezing him back, and they stood beneath the moon for what seemed a long time, listening to one another's breaths, feeling each other's hearts, knowing they could no more walk away now than they could go fly to the moon. Knowing that the die was cast and the road was set, and that they'd both been dying since the start of the Flashback, possibly even before, and that whatever lie ahead, it represented, in a very real sense, life itself. Short, brutal, but not a limbo. Not entropy.

Not a vacuum.

And when they returned to the campsite they knew that the others knew, as well. For there was no going back from this point forward, something Ank acknowledged when he said to Williams, *<We've always known, even though we didn't talk about it, that the road to Tanelorn wouldn't be without cost. But I'm glad we're still on the same page. And we are still on the same page, I can feel it, else you would have already said something. Will?>*

But he'd already fallen asleep, rolled up in his blanket not far from Sheila, even as the moon shone down and the fire crackled and the radio played Louis Armstrong.

• • • •

AT FIRST THERE WAS only the blackness, as silent and total as anything he had ever known.

"He's coming to," said a voice, a female, confident, clearly in charge, adding, "Mind your monitors."

"I've got him," said another, his voice eager, alert. "He's lighting up like a Christmas tree."

"Heart-rate normal, blood pressure good," said another, also female, but younger, less confident.

He stirred against his restraints. Where was he? How long had he been here? He remembered a prison made of flesh and bone; a prison he had lived in for a very long time (but which had been compromised suddenly and violently), as well as a kind of rising ... so that he had found himself looking down upon the body of a man—a very old man—who lay with his face in a small pond in a clearing which was as wide as it was green and verdant. Nor was he alone, for an armored dinosaur stood nearby and drank from the very same pool.

"Cerebellum is active but not overly so, frontal and parietal lobes nominal," said the man.

"And the occipital? The temporal?" —The older woman, her voice full of anticipation.

Ank opened his eyes in time to see the man glance at her and smile. "Occipital and temporal are, as predicted, essentially on fire. Congratulations."

There was a round of applause as Ank drifted back into memory. For the rising had not stopped there, had it? No, it had continued on until he was virtually amongst the clouds—until he had been engulfed in an array of lights the likes of which he had never seen, at least not up close—alien lights, foreign lights. Lights which pulsed and bled in and out of each other and seemed at once both physically alive and utterly abstract. And then he was being lowered, back through the clouds and the blue nothing of the air, back toward the pond and the body and the passively drinking dinosaur, back into a prison of flesh and bone and blood.

“So he’s not just some random amalgam of the Flashback,” said the older woman. “Not just ...”

Her voice trailed off. Ank looked around the room, at the complicated technical apparatus and the bubbling tanks, recognizing in one what appeared to be the body of a man, a man merged with a small dinosaur ... haphazardly, messily, so that neither could have survived long. A snippet of memory flitted through his mind, an image. It was of a stand of cycad trees with human arms and legs.

It was of two different lifeforms who had been standing in the same place when the Flashback had struck.

He pushed it from his mind, focusing instead on the calm that had come over him when he’d returned to his prison of blood and bone; a prison which was the same but different, which was hardy and robust. A prison which didn’t feel like a prison, not yet, but an extension of the world itself—which stood on all fours and breathed slowly and fully and which had nothing on its mind but the sweet taste of the water it was drinking.

“As for what it proves beyond that is anyone’s guess,” said the woman, sounding suddenly tired. “That they’re experimenting on us as well as exterminating us? We don’t even know who *they* are, much less what their relationship to the Flashback is. We don’t even know if ‘they’ applies; or if they’re just a force of nature, like the weather.” She pulled down her mask. “It just feels so pointless sometimes, this whole operation.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’ll be all right, I just ...”

The man reached out to her and touched her shoulder. “It’s been a long day, Maggie. Why don’t we just ... retire to the Tiki Tent.” He tried to sound optimistic. “There’s still enough vegetables for Bloody Marys—I’ll be the bartender.” He looked at her hopefully.

“Please, *God*,” said the younger woman. “I’m dying here.”

Maggie looked back and forth between them and then at him, at Ank. She stroked the side of his snout gently. "So we know now that you're thinking ... we just don't know what. Nor what to do with you."

At last she powered something down and said to the others, "Lisa, can you change out his I.V.? Tom? If you'll get the lights?"

And then they were gone and the room was dark save for the lights of the instruments and the glow of the tanks. And the next day there were two; nor did Ank know where the younger woman had gone other than, "she vanished while she was drinking, may we all be so lucky." And three days later there was one—the man, who trashed a portion of the lab while screaming and talking to himself before stumbling off toward what they called the Tiki Tent ... after which Ank heard a single gunshot.

And then the days and nights became one as he lay paralyzed by the steel restraints, the I.V. no longer providing sustenance, the room sprouting cycad trees and creeper vines and mossy growths, the air becoming stale. And it was as he lay dying that a man in a black coat and carrying a guitar case emerged one day and began foraging amongst the ruins, a man as pale and gaunt as a ghost, a man who, finding a bottle of liquor and some cigars in the Tiki Tent, sat down next to his head and decided to have himself a little fiesta, and to talk to himself, and to him, as he did so.

A man who released him from his restraints and brought him some shrubs from outside and plied him with water from a plastic tub until he was strong enough to walk again.

A man whom Ank followed when at last he left, and who, by the time they'd come to the Old West-themed resort turned survival compound—Devil's Gorge—he had formed an unmistakable bond with. A man the dinosaur had come to love.

A man who was not there when Ank at last awoke from dream.

<WILL? IS THAT YOU?>

He'd heard laughing and what for all the world sounded like water splashing. Now he was investigating with two children in tow, and when he crested the rise of a scrub-covered berm to find Will and Sheila frolicking in a largish water hole, he was quite frankly annoyed. *<I'm not going to play babysitter for you two, Will. Bringing along the girl was your idea. Plus there's the boy, and if his mother won't—>*

"Ank! Ank, buddy, can you believe it? A water trap!" He splashed Sheila back playfully. "It was just sitting here all along. We were both camped right next to it."

Ank looked at their clothes, which they'd laid out across several scraggly bushes. *<You might want to tell Miss Wonderful there to cover up. Her son's here. And you ... Jesus, do I need to see this? Now come on. We've got a lot of miles to cover.>*

Williams just looked at him, suddenly sobered. "What's gotten into you? You sleep on the wrong side of your shell? It's fresh water. And cold!" He looked at Sheila. "Let's get out of here and let the kids come in one at a time."

She looked back at him, clearly smitten.

<Dear God, not again. I would remind you that your one, true love supposedly resides in Tanelorn, about 80 miles from here. I would also remind you that there's a whole lot of hell heading its way. Now I don't know about you but I'd like to actually see it before it gets raised to the ground. Besides, the kids need breakfast, or does your submerged hard-on not care about that?>

Williams paused, looking down into the water. "It's no longer an issue, Ank. Don't worry about it. Fine. Take the kids back to camp and we'll ..." He glanced at Sheila. "We'll get dressed."

<And I suppose I'll just tell them to!>

"Kids, go with Ank. You can come in after breakfast."

"Ah, but I want to come in now!" shouted Erik.

"After breakfast," said Sheila curtly. "You heard the man."

<Jesus, gods, please!> Ank turned around and headed for the campsite, and, to his surprise, the children followed.

It was fortuitous timing. For Bella Ray was back on the air. And she sounded positively terrified.

IV

As it turned out, Bella Ray sounded so frightened because it was a replay of the previous night's broadcast. And so after a breakfast of pemmican and beans—and after Erik had cannonballed into the reservoir while Luna demurred—they set out, continuing along Montana Highway 382 until it connected with Highway 28, where the landscape turned green again but also more primordial, more prehistoric. It was funny and impossible, how the geography of the world had been affected by the Flashback—randomly, inconsistently, so that one region might appear virtually unchanged while another teemed with landforms not seen since the Jurassic—frightening too, for it was amongst the latter that the danger level was always the highest. But it was not a dinosaur that appeared in the hazy distance and brought them to a near standstill on the overgrown side of the road—it was a jet airliner: its fuselage covered in creeper vines and metastatic patches of lichen, its great nose angled into the earth in what must have been a violent crash landing, its wings shattered and broken.

"I'm seeing it, but I'm not sure I'm believing it," said Sheila, as her pace slowed to a crawl and she checked for Erik's whereabouts, who was lagging as usual, just sort of lost in his own world. "Hey, buddy. We're up here. Come join the party."

"I'm seeing it too," said Williams. "Ank?"

Sheila looked at him, concerned, nor was it for the first time.

<I see it. And I'm seeing something else. Phorusrhacos. Terror birds. Three of them. Looks like they've got someone cornered.>

Now wasn't the time to ask him how he knew that, nor why a herbivore should have such sharp vision, much less teeth.

"Jesus—are there still survivors?"

Ank peered into the distance. *<Only one that I can see. Middle-aged white male, holding some kind of spear. Wait—there's a female, she just emerged from the wreckage. But ... the fuselage ... it's broken in half. They're wide open, Will.>*

"Sheila, stay with the kids," said Williams. He swung his rifle by its ring lever so that it snapped to at the ready. "We're gonna get them out."

"Wait, get *who* out? And who's 'we'? You and the dinosaur?"

"They talk to each other," said Luna. "Or at least he talks to Ank."

Sheila paused, taken aback. "Whatever," she said. "I'm not staying here alone. And I'm not leaving Erik here alone. Nor you," she added, and glanced at Luna.

Williams looked back and forth between her and Ank.

<We can't do it, Will. We can't take on three of those things while worrying about our flank at the same time.>

"We're going to have to," said Williams at last. "Things have changed, Ank. You better get used to it." He looked at Sheila. "Okay. We'll tip the spear while you guard the kids in the rear. Everybody ready?"

And everyone nodded.

• • • •

THE SO-CALLED TERROR birds were aptly named, resembling emus with the heads of bald eagles and each standing no less than 10 feet high. Nor did they deign to simply stand around and be picked off, for two of them broke off from the other the instant Williams fired—whereby, in a blunder so uncharacteristic as to be virtually unbelievable, he missed his target entirely—before

charging him and Ank across the clearing even as the third predator snatched up the end of the man's spear with its beak and snapped it into.

"Ank!" shouted Williams, wary he might hit the man or woman, suddenly distrustful of his gift, as he sighted one of the rapidly approaching beasts and fired, skewering its brain like a lance and causing blood and tissue to explode out the back of its head.

<I see it. I'm almost there,> communicated Ank, even as Williams sighted the second animal and, somehow, missed again. And then it was there, it was upon him, nor did it pounce as he'd expected but rather flicked its great beak suddenly—so that both he and his rifle were sent flying—and continued on ... toward Sheila. Toward the children.

Ank, meanwhile, had struck the bird closest to the couple with a devastating roundhouse blow of his tail—knocking it clean off the aircraft's broken wing—before completing his spin and seeing that Sheila and the children were under attack. And then he was snarling, snarling and charging—even as the terror bird righted itself behind him and quickly gave chase. What happened next happened very fast, as Ank pounced upon the bird closest to Sheila and the animal behind him swept near enough to beak him just below his armored shell. And then the beasts were tangled up in furious combat, two against one, as Sheila attempted to shield the kids and Williams, his head spinning, his vision blurry, staggered to his feet.

He searched for his rifle quickly and, finding it nowhere, drew his revolver. He tried to sight one of the birds—but they only swam in and out of focus as he squinted. At last he squeezed off a round and one of the things fell, opening and closing its beak, thrashing its limbs. He cocked and sighted the other, feeling the magic returning, sensing its dark energy reawaken in his hand and arm and eye. And then Ank cried out as though suffering a major wound—and he fired.

In truth, it wasn't until he saw Ank begin to stir amidst all the kicked-up dust that he knew he'd pulled it off. The terror bird was dead. What remained unclear was the extent to which Ank had been injured. He ran forward suddenly and knelt beside his friend.

"How you doing, buddy? Talk to me ..." He ran a hand along the back of his head. "What's the damage?"

< *They ...* > He grunted as though experiencing a spasm of pain. < *They got a couple good ones in. Once in the neck ... one in the ribs. I'll be all right. Just a little—can you check my side? It ... hurts to move my neck.* >

Williams did so and was distressed to see that the wound was more than superficial—not life threatening, at least that was his hope, but not minor, either. "You'll need a dressing on that," he said. He rushed around to the other side. "This one's better. A lot better." He stood and ran his hands through his hair—he was missing his hat as well as his rifle. "Okay. Now. Let's see ..." He looked around before focusing on the supplies strapped to Ank's back.

Sheila spoke at last. "It—he saved us. And just now, I could of swore I heard ..." She stared off into empty space. "A voice ... and it wasn't the first time. I heard it last night, too. Right after he knocked me across the camp." She laughed. "Now, are you going to tell me what's going on?"

Williams moved to speak and paused, hearing voices. It was the man and woman from the airliner, heading their way.

"Okay," he said, then looked at Ank, who seemed to be wavering in and out of consciousness. "But first I'm going to need some help. Quickly. Luna? Erik? I'll need you, too."

Sheila climbed out of the natural trench they'd been hiding in and stood next to him. "If you don't mind me asking, what for?"

He pulled a rope and let loose a tumble of supplies. "Leverage." He looked at her over his shoulder. "Because we're going to make the biggest tourniquet in history."

• • • •

BY THE TIME THEY'D patched Ank up using a series of ropes and blankets, not to mention disinfecting his wounds with what remained of Williams' liquor stash, introductions had been made and the sun was high. The man and woman—Peter and Samantha—were the only survivors of a flight bound for Houston when the Flashback had hit. Peter had been deadheading to his next assignment (but was forced to take control when the on-duty pilots vanished) while Samantha had been enroute to visit her father. They'd been living in the downed plane ever since, during which time Samantha had gotten pregnant and was now six-weeks along.

"What I don't understand is how you ended up crash-landing in the middle of Montana," said Sheila. "You said the plane was bound for Houston."

"Yeah, well," Peter glanced at Samantha. "That's the damndest thing. Because both of us just had a sense that ... we should head north. Don't ask me to explain it, because I assure you, I can't." Williams and Sheila looked at each other. "And so, with what fuel we had, we did exactly that: leaving Texas for Wyoming and finally entering Montana, where we began to catch snippets of a broadcast. Radio—"

"Free Montana, yes," said Sheila. She shook the hair out of her eyes. "We've been listening to it too. The girl, Luna here, has a radio, one of those Red Cross ones with the hand crank." She glanced at Williams warily. "I don't suppose you've been able to listen to it lately, have you?"

"No," said Samantha. "Not since the crash." She looked suddenly troubled. "Why?"

Williams and Sheila exchanged nervous glances again. At last Williams said, "Because they've got trouble—big trouble. Trouble in the form of an armed armada heading their way right now ... burning everything in its wake." He put on his hat, which he'd

found near his rifle in the middle of the clearing. "And we're going there, anyway. Me, Sheila, the kids, you and Samantha. And we should probably get going before we lose the day completely."

"Well now wait just a minute," protested Peter. "An armada? What do you mean?"

Williams knelt by Ank. "I mean every bad apple survivor from here to New York has somehow found each other and his heading this way." He stroked the ankylosaur's head with what Sheila thought was surprising gentleness. "And that you aren't the only ones to have had, I don't know, a feeling, an impulse, to head north. All of us have." To Ank he said: "Can you travel, old boy?"

The dinosaur stirred. *<I don't know. I think so. Just—give me a minute.>*

Williams patted his back and stood. "And that ..." He thought about it and shook his head. "We've got a responsibility, somehow. Like you said, don't ask me to explain it because I can't."

Peter and Samantha looked at each other, uncertain how to respond. "I suppose we don't have much of a choice, do we?" she said at last, and shrugged defeatedly.

"How far is it, this Radio Free Montana?" asked Peter. "Is it based in a city, a town, what?"

There was a clattering of supplies as Ank rose up off the ground and shook the dust off.

"About 60 miles, give or take," said Williams, and began re-securing items to the giant's back. "I'd say we'll arrive in about 5 days. Maybe four."

"Just in time to die, I take it," said Peter.

"Yeah. Maybe," said Williams. He pulled the revolver from his holster and indicated Peter should catch it before tossing it to him. "You know how to use one of these?"

"Never fired one in my life," he said, then handed it to Samantha. "Sam here, on the other hand, is a kill-shot from hell."

• • • •

THEY WALKED. NOR DID they stop until they'd reached Lonepine, which wasn't so much a town as a pair of houses—both of them ramshackle and overgrown and completely devoid of power—one of which Williams, Sheila, and the kids set up camp in, while Peter and Samantha sequestered themselves in the other. Ank, meanwhile, had to make do with a yellowed patch of lawn between the two. Fortunately, there were several small ponds nearby from which he could drink, which was what he was doing when Williams stepped out onto the porch to have a cigar.

He wondered what the great beast was thinking that he should now seem so sullen and withdrawn, but supposed his injuries, along with the added burden of having travelled so many miles with the supplies on his back (which Williams had relieved him of once they'd gotten there), had contributed to most of it. And yet it wasn't like him to shut off communication entirely—which was precisely what he'd done since leaving the site of the plane crash. And thus he watched, smoking, as the ankylosaur lapped at the water and the pink sky continued to darken, until at last a hand touched his shoulder and he sensed Sheila standing nearby, who said to him, softly, "You're worried about him, aren't you?"

Williams didn't turn around. "Yeah. I guess I am." He exhaled cigar smoke. "It's not like him to be so ..."

"Morose?"

"Yeah. I guess that's it. You know, he's been at that pond almost since we got here ... just drinking and staring ... completely oblivious. Remember how I told you that neither of us could recall our previous lives? Well, maybe he's recalling ..." He paused, struggling to find the right words. "A different state of being. A different incarnation. I think he was a man once. A man who lived for a very long time."

"A lonely man, then ..."

“Yes. Sort of a last man standing. And I think when we met ... he rediscovered something he’d been missing for a long time.”

“Friendship. Someone to talk to,” she said.

“More than that. A reason to live. I—I’ve felt it myself. All those weeks, months, spent walking alone. I told you about Tanelorn. Well that was what we called our reason to live ... our reason for putting one foot in front of the other. Because without that ...”

“‘Gazelle Theory,’” she said.

“What?”

She laughed a little. “Something my husband used to say. It means, ‘move or die.’”

He laughed a little himself. “That’s good. ‘Move or die.’ Whether it’s a physical death or an emotional one.” He stared at Ank in the gloaming before another hand touched him, this time Luna. “Is Ank all right?”

Sheila put a hand on Williams’ other shoulder and laid her head against his back. “We don’t know, honey. We think he’s just lonely. Where’s Erik?”

“He’s sleeping,” said Luna. “He snores, did you know that?”

Sheila laughed. “Oh, God, *do I*,” she said. “But you should try and get some sleep anyway. Long day tomorrow.” She rubbed Williams’ upper arm as she spoke.

“Okay. I’ll try,” she said, and trotted back into the house.

Sheila kissed Williams’ back gently. “You should, too,” she said. “I—I made a bed for us. That is ... if you want to.”

He turned to face her slowly. “Sheila, there’s something you should—”

“*Shhh*,” She placed her fingers to his lips. “We both have ... someone. Out there. I’ve gathered that. But we also have right here ... right now. And maybe Tanelorn is ... what we make it.”

He looked into her dark brown eyes, feeling he could fall into them and never come out. "I've wanted you since the moment you pointed a gun at me," he said, and they both laughed a little.

And then they went in to their dingy little room and closed the door behind them.

• • • •

<WILL ...>

Williams paused, unsure whether to respond. The timing was—less than optimal.

<Will, are you awake?>

He laid his head on the inside of Sheila's leg, breathing heavily, and wondered if she could hear it too.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Apparently not.

"Nothing," he sighed. "Just a kink in my neck. I'm all right." He kissed her along the belly. *Now, let's see, where was I?* He kissed and nibbled down her skin and she gasped once, twice. *You like that?* he thought. *Well, just wait.* She wrapped his hair up in her hands as he closed his lips about her vulva.

"Oh, Will, Will—"

<Will. Will!>

Williams ignored him, reaching down to see if he was still ready—still showing that he wanted her. He was, at least for the—

<It's vitally important that you respond to me. I'm sorry I haven't said much since the plane wreck. But, well, I'll explain it all later. What's important just now—>

—the—

<—is that you respond. Please, Will ...>

And the moment was gone. He rolled onto his back and exhaled.

"That bad, huh?" she said, sounding vulnerable and embarrassed. "Sorry. But the Wasteland Food and Drug was fresh out of feminine—"

"It's not that," he said, and sat up with a groan. "It's just that, well, *it's Ank*. I better see what's going on."

She curled up in a ball as he stood and looked out the window. But nothing was amiss. He simply saw Ank laying with his tail toward him on the patch of dead grass between the houses. "It's nothing," he said. "He might be dreaming. It's happened before."

"Well, that's a relief," she snapped, and threw the covers off. "Maybe you should go check on him. I'm going to check on Erik."

And then she was gone, and Williams lay back on the bed wondering what it was a dinosaur-man could be dreaming about to cause him to reach out like that.

• • • • •

BUT HE WASN'T DREAMING. Of that Ank was certain as the branches rustled again and a smattering of pinecones rattled across the ground. *Something* was moving—out there, just beyond the tree line. Worse, something seemed to be moving on the opposite side of the house, something light-footed, something cautious.

He blinked and one was there, standing in the moonlight at the foot of the yard—its pale skin as wan as the dead, its purple-rimmed eyes focusing on him as he looked.

Ank narrowed his lids, feigning a deep sleep, as two more were-raptors emerged from the trees. He watched as they exchanged glances and crept forward across the lawn. There were six of them now, not counting whatever was creeping around on the other side. He glanced at the house in which the newcomers were staying and saw that whatever they'd been using for light had been snuffed out since last he'd looked. Which meant they were sleeping, as was Will, clearly. That or he was banging Miss Wonderful. Either way

it meant he was alone, more alone even than he'd already felt, nor could he possibly hope to defeat them in his present condition. He remembered the ravine they'd passed before arriving in Lonepine and wondered: Could it work?

The raptors crept still closer, taking great care not to wake him, and three of them split off from the others. He lay perfectly still as the three passed him on both sides and, presumably, began stalking toward the houses.

The ravine. A stampede. It just might work, and it was the only thing that had any hope of success if he was to save the others as well as himself. The question was, could he do it in the shape he was in? Could he run fast enough to even reach the ravine before the bloodthirsty bastards caught up to him and tore him to pieces?

A part of him was convinced he could not. And so he communicated, or tried to communicate, one last time, *<I don't know if this is going to work, Will. But I hope you'll understand I've got to try. If all goes well, I will see you shortly. If not, just know this. I—I love you, Will. You have been, and will always be, my best friend.>*

And then he was up, trying to roar to alert the others but finding his wounded throat uncooperative, and he was loping as fast as he could toward the ravine even though he knew, in his heart, that he would never make it in a thousand years.

V

It flowed through his fingertips somehow; even he didn't understand it. He understood the thing as he understood his rifle and his pistol, as he had understood Sheila's lithe body and small shoulders. He understood its strings and its frets, its tuning knobs, its symmetry, and he knew just how to hold it, with its waist on his right leg and its back against his stomach and chest, its neck horizontal to the earth. He played it as Ank lay in the tall grass beyond the porch: picking and strumming, pausing occasionally to tune its strings, as the wild blades of grass blew all around and the thin wood of the guitar and porch creaked. For they were home; they had made it—Tanelorn was real, as they had known it would be.

So, too, was *she* there, in the cabin's kitchen, preparing dinner not out of any sort of obligation or duty but simply because she enjoyed it. Nor was she one person but three; sometimes she was Sheila, as sun-browned and gaunt as the badlands themselves, other times Katrina, still others a woman he somehow knew but could not recognize.

Otherwise the day had passed without event and without so much as a slightly increased heart rate, a day in which the grass had blown in hypnotic, predictable patterns and the eternal present had continued to unspool and the sky had looked down upon them mildly. A day which had lasted and would continue to last forever—without beginning, without end, without even a context in which to exist.

It was a dream-state interrupted only by the appearance of a black dot on the horizon—which grew, by imperceptible degrees, into a human figure ... which walked across the prairie slowly but assuredly and resolved itself into a man. A man holding a rifle and dressed in desert rags, whose face was partially hidden by a dirty

bandana, and who stopped when he had closed to within fifty feet or so and simply stared at Williams, his eyes dark, his weapon held at the ready.

A man Williams merely looked back at until his fingers no longer pressed the frets or strummed the strings and he set the instrument aside and stood—slowly, deliberately. Then he walked across the tall grass and faced him, for he knew, in the same way he had known that they must continue moving north, that it was his purpose somehow to do so.

“You ... you’re not what I expected,” said the stranger, his voice surprisingly smooth and non-hard-edged—a study in contrast to his rugged and weathered exterior. He laughed a little. “So I have met my mirror paladin and he is ... just a man, after all.” He paused as though surprised by Williams’ non-reaction, and his eyes suddenly lit up. “You ... don’t know me, do you?”

Williams shook his head slowly.

“You’ve ... no seer, no epitome?”

Williams only looked at him.

“I must say, I’m disappointed. Our seer, our epitome, the One Who Commands the Freezing Dark, he speaks so gravely of you. And of your army.” He glanced at Ank and then at the cabin and beyond. “But where is it? I see only the beast’s counterpart, and even he is not what I expected.” His eyes lit up all over again. “You don’t know, do you? You don’t know what it is for which you’ve been summoned.” He stared off into the distance. “Yes, I see it. You’re still operating off a kind of blind intuition, completely oblivious to the larger forces at play. You probably don’t even *know* that you’ve been summoned—much less why—you just, have a feeling. Is that it?”

“Yes,” Williams said at last. “Now, what do you want?”

The stranger began to chuckle slightly. “But you do know we are coming, do you not? Surely you must have heard—if not the

radio broadcast than a whisper in your own mind. Or could it be that all the heads on pikes have been for nothing? Not to mention the—”

“Gibberish,” said Williams, shaking his head. “This is gibberish and I am dreaming. And I think just now—”

He jolted as the man slapped a hand over his face, squeezing his fingers. “Here’s some sleep paralysis, to keep you a little longer. I want to show you something.”

Williams wanted to swipe his hand away but could not, finding himself frozen in stasis, unable to move. He blinked and the figure was gone, replaced by a panorama of a city—Billings, Montana, according to a sign—a city under siege, a city in flames. He’d been transported somehow to a hill overlooking it.

“This is who we are,” said the man in the bandana, who stood next to him on the grassy hill. “And this, fellow paladin, is what we do. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Williams watched as the steeples of a church burned and collapsed, then focused on a woman carrying a child from the wreckage.

The stranger continued: “Don’t look to us for the method of carnage—fire is of the Other’s design. We only use it as a means to an end. But watch now as I show you what will happen when we descend upon your Barley—and what mercy to expect from us when we finally do. And tell me if it would not be better to simply turn around now, while you still can, and ignore the Call completely.”

Williams squinted through the smoke as a motorcycle burst into view and bore down upon the woman, its headlight creating a halo, its rider brandishing a sword. Then, before he could so much as cry out a warning, the rider struck, beheading the woman in one fell swoop before continuing on with a rumble and leaving the child abandoned in her arms.

And then Williams was turning to the mysterious figure with the intent of killing him with his bare hands, but froze when he saw that the man was no longer there: that he had been replaced with something else, something about 9-feet-tall and covered with kinky hair, with a goat's head and six golden eyes, which vanished as he blinked—awakening with a start—and heard Sheila say, with desperation in her voice: “Will, It's Ank. *And he's gone.*”

• • • •

IT WAS NO USE. EVEN under optimal conditions it would have been difficult to track him across the stones and the scrub, but it had rained heavily during the night and a thick fog had settled in, which made doing so now virtually impossible. Regardless, it wasn't until after they'd searched for the better part of a day and reconvened on the porch that the first mutterings of real defeat were heard, and these had come from a surprising source—Williams himself.

It wasn't just because he was privy to information no one else had—information in the form of a kind of telepathic voicemail left by Ank the previous night—a message which said, *<I don't know if this is going to work, but I hope you'll understand I've got to try. If all goes well, I will see you shortly. If not, just know this. I—I love you, Will. You have been, and will always be, my best friend.>*

No, it was more than that. It was the dream and what it had portended. It was the growing suspicion that not only had they been called by someone, *something*, to go to Barley ... but that someone or something else was as equally insistent they *not* go. Viewed in that light, it was difficult to see Ank's disappearance as anything but an attempt to stall them and to prevent them from reaching their destination. Not by Ank, obviously, but by ... by ...

Our seer, our epitome, the One Who Commands the Freezing Dark.

Madness, the rational part of his brain countered. It had just been a dream. There was no *One Who Commands the Freezing Dark*. There was no Bandana Man.

"One thing's for sure," said Sheila, exhaling, "we can't just leave him behind."

"Not if you're as close as you seem to be," said Peter. "And besides, how will we carry all our supplies?"

"Peter's right," said Samantha. "That dinosaur has been the only thing standing between you—us—and a swift extinction."

"I won't leave without Ank!" chimed in Luna.

"Well there you have it," said Sheila, and sat hard upon the steps next to Williams, causing them to creak and to groan. "The Fellowship has spoken. The question is: What do we do now?"

Williams could feel their eyes upon him as he mulled it over.

<I don't know if this is going to work, but I hope you'll understand I've got to try. If all goes well, I will see you shortly.>

He stood and took a few steps into the gloom. *<If not, just know this. I—I love you, Will. You have been, and will always be, my best friend.>*

At last he turned to face the group. "I ... the truth of it is, I don't know what to do. The link between us, between Ank and I, it's ... like a voice. It's clear up close but recedes with distance. And the fact is I'm not hearing anything—nothing, that is, except a final message, which has been repeating in my mind ever since this morning." He focused on Luna; he didn't know why. "And that message seems to indicate that Ank has done something he feels is necessary. Now, I'm not going to pretend to know what that thing is; it may be that it's not for us to understand, just like the Flashback, just like the lights in the sky. But our coming together has not been an accident; I think we all feel that, we just don't know why or for what purpose. I only know this: We have to get to Barley before ... before that armada does." Everyone just stared at him. "Dammit,

that's not crazy, is it? Sheila—you feel it, don't you? Samantha? What about you, Peter? And you, Luna, surely you feel—

"I feel it," she said. "It's like ... it's like God is looking at Barley through a magnifying glass, and—"

"Yes! Like what we talked about. It's like we're, we're ..." He trailed off, feeling suddenly deflated. "It's madness, isn't it?"

No one said anything for several moments.

At last Sheila shook her head. "No. I feel it, too."

"So do I," said Samantha.

They all looked at Peter. "Let's just say I feel something," he said at last. "That—there was a reason I was on that flight. That ... I have a purpose, somehow."

"I think we all do," said Williams. He turned to face the gloom again. "And it just may be that Ank's purpose is out there ... somewhere. I guess what it comes down to is a matter of faith." He turned back around. "Faith in my friend, for example. Because he wouldn't have left us without a damned good reason."

"But, if we push on, how will we carry our gear?" asked Peter.

"We'll just all have to shoulder our share," said Williams. "Even the kids. Even you, squirt." He ruffled Erik's hair. "... and have faith that something will present itself."

• • • •

AS IT TURNED OUT, SOMETHING presented itself pretty quickly—in the middle of the night (they'd opted to stay at the homes one more night in the off chance Ank might show), in the form of a battered school bus, which wheezed to a halt in front of the houses just after midnight and belched a cloud of smoke before dying without much ceremony. Nor did the resulting standoff last more than a few scant minutes, for the driver of the bus and Williams hit it off almost immediately, and before anyone knew it there was a line of kids filing from the bus—7 in all—and Williams

was introducing Sheila to a man named Sammy, who had inherited the children when the Flashback hit a town called Pine Stump Junction and had been driving them north ever since.

“Trying to, anyway,” said Sammy, and added, “The damn thing will only drive in first gear. Plus its breaks have seized up, so you’re topping out at about 3 miles per hour even then. Radio works, though, which is how we first knew to head north. Can’t say I’m thrilled about what’s transpired since then.”

“And you’re still going? Even with the children?” asked Sheila, who had warmed up to the man ever faster than Williams—for he was nothing if not intriguing, and it wasn’t every day one met a leather-clad stranger who looked like he’d be more at home on a Harley than piloting a boatload of children.

“Why, yes,” He paused, watching as his children gathered around Luna—making introductions, touching her white hair. “Aren’t you? Don’t get me wrong, I was torn at first, in spite of the ...” He trailed off suddenly. “But Bella’s recent broadcasts have given me new hope.”

“We’re going,” said Williams. “I think Sheila was just curious if you were experienced the same ...” He hesitated, squinting at him. “New hope? What do you mean?”

“You weren’t listening yesterday, I take it. Bella calls it ‘The Rising’—friendly survivors numbering in the hundreds, convening on Barley from every direction, most of them with weapons. Seems her radio broadcast was picked up by yet another station and re-transmitted, some say as far as the Cascades.”

Williams and Sheila looked at each other in stunned disbelief—until she embraced him suddenly and then just as quickly embraced Sammy.

“Sorry, it’s just that ...” She swiped the tears from her eyes. “That’s the first truly hopeful news we’ve had since—well, since the

start of the Flashback.” She jolted abruptly, touching Sammy’s outstretched arms. “I’ve got to tell Erik!”

And then she was gone, hurrying off toward the throng of kids as Sammy watched her go and Williams watched Sammy—who, sensing he was being watched, straightened suddenly and cleared his throat.

“You’ll excuse me, of course. I—I didn’t realize—”

“That she’s spoken for?” Williams chuckled slightly. “Well, that depends on your point of view.”

Sammy nodded as though he understood, his mouth hung slightly open. “So is that a ‘yes’ or a ‘no?’”

Williams moved to speak then paused, an image having come unbidden to his mind: an image of an Asian woman in a traditional Vietnamese dress standing utterly alone on what appeared to be an outdoor stage. No—not alone. He was there, too. Himself, Williams. He was seated on a stool some distance away with a guitar in his hands and a rifle at his feet. And then the crowd began to cheer—for he had begun to pick and to strum—and the woman had turned to face him (smiling broadly, toothily), and the vision was over—having passed as quickly as the boy with the magnifying glass but having affected him thrice fold.

“It’s both,” he said at last, slapping Sammy’s shoulder. “Now why don’t you tell me about that bus ... because believe me when I say, we’re going to need it.”

• • • •

MORNING SPREAD ACROSS the prairie warm and clear, as clear as Radio Free Montana, which trotted out some Loretta Lynn as Williams ladled beans onto the kids’ paper plates and Sammy prepared the school bus and Sheila bounced back and forth between the two helping as best she could.

They say to have her hair done Liz flies all the way to France / And Jackie's seen in a discothèque doin' a brand-new dance / And the White House social season should be glitterin' an' gay ...

And then they were off, the children in the bus and the bus moving at a crawl, while Williams, on foot, took point with his rifle and Sheila followed close behind and Peter and Samantha brought up the rear.

But here in Topeka the rain is a fallin' / The faucet is a drippin' and the kids are a bawlin' / One of 'ems a toddlin' and one is a crawlin' / And / One's on the way ...

So, too, did they make excellent progress, travelling all the way to Niarada before Williams held up a sweaty hand, indicating the caravan should stop—then just stood there, listening. At last he knelt and touched the ground, even as Sheila crept closer and asked, somewhat tentatively, “What is it?”

He scanned the slopes to their right and seemed to nod gravely. “That’s what I thought,” he said, but didn’t immediately elaborate. He stood and faced the bus. “Sammy! Keep her parked but do not shut it off. Peter, Samantha, one of you mind the front. We’ll be right back.”

And then he and Sheila were scaling the slopes until they crested a hill and saw what Sheila at first took to be a mirage—it couldn’t possibly be anything else. For what they saw was a convoy—a wagon train—which stretched for miles along the highway and seemed to consist of every type of vehicle imaginable: motor homes and travel trailers, semi-trucks, bulldozers, all of them moving at a crawl and belching fumes, heading along Highway 12 which would become 28, heading to Barley only the roundabout way, which would take them through Rollins and Somers and Kalispell; which would cause them to arrive later, perhaps by as much as a day.

“Jesus—is it ...?”

"No," said Williams. "It's not ... what do we call them? The enemy?"

"The caravan that took out Billings? I'd say so."

Williams shook his head. "It's not big enough, for one. Look, see the lack of military equipment? I mean, there's some, I can see that, a few armored personnel carriers, but nothing like what the pilot reported."

"What's that? There, on the side ..."

He squinted at where she'd indicated, and to his shock and consternation saw what appeared to be a swastika painted on the transport's armor. "Jesus. But look, see? It's like they've tried to scratch it out."

"Either way, it doesn't put me in a mind to amble out and say 'hi.'"

"Not so much, I agree. Regardless, they're taking the long way while we'll be cutting through the wilderness. So we'll be in Barley and amongst friends when they arrive. I say we hold off on contact until then."

"You'll get no argument from me," said Sheila.

"All right, then. Let's go tell the others." And then they climbed back down the hill.

• • • •

ANK AWAKENED AND YET could not see, could not breathe, could not move. Was he still dreaming? No, of that he was quite certain; his head hurt, for one thing, as though someone had hit him with a great hammer. He reared up suddenly, the dirt cascading down the sides of his snout like sand, and looked around: a dead were-raptor lay nearby, half-buried in rubble, and beyond that, another.

He rose his entire body with a groan and shook himself off, causing a great cloud of dust to dissipate on the wind. There were

only two of them—the others were either buried where he couldn't see or had fled after the collapse of the cliff face. Either way, they were no longer a threat, at least not for now.

And yet ... the world had changed, he could tell. *He* had changed. Something inside him had awakened, had cleared. It was almost as if the blow to his head had jarred him into a different state of being, a higher level of consciousness. He froze suddenly, unable to process what had just entered his mind ... unable to fully grasp the enormity of it.

For his name was Sebastian—he remembered it with perfect clarity now. And he remembered something else: a place—Paradise, Montana—where everything that had ever been important to him still lay beneath the sun. A place the finding of which was more important than anything—more important than Tanelorn, more important than the army in the east, more important than his best friend.

A place he had to get to right now—to which he would virtually run if he had to. A place from which he never planned to return.

VI

As it turned out, there *was* a road directly north at where Highway 28 bent east—a dirt road. It even had a couple crude signs, one of which read REDNECK HIGHWAY and the other BARLEY HOT SPRINGS: 22 MILES. Williams couldn't figure it, even after consulting his maps; for one, there was the Santiago River, which stood between them and Barley and would need a bridge in order for the road to make any sense. But a bridge for a *dirt* road? It seemed unlikely.

"It does say Redneck Highway," said Sheila. "Redneck Bridge is probably a plywood ramp propped up with cinderblocks."

"Someone's idea of a joke, maybe," said Sammy, and stood up from where they'd all knelt around the map.

Williams remained crouched, squinting down the lane. "But look at it ... it runs just as straight as an arrow, and for a good distance, too. It's not even wash-boarded." He stood and peered down the state highway. "One thing's for sure ... if we follow 28, it's going to take us 2 to 3 times longer to get there."

Peter stepped forward with a quizzical look on his face. "With all due respect, I'm not seeing what the hurry is, frankly. Last we heard the—the enemy, was in Billings. Isn't that a good distance from here?"

"Yes and no," said Williams. "But remember, they're motorized." He glanced at Sammy. "And something tells me they're not stuck in first gear. But it's not just that. We're running low on supplies, the stuff we picked up in Lonestone notwithstanding. Besides, we'll need to get to Barley well ahead of the enemy if we're going to arrive at any sort of battleplan. No," He stared down the dirt road again. "We've come this far on blind faith; we'll make it the rest the distance the same way."

"Faith isn't going to build a bridge if none is there," said Peter.

“And yet it might, Mr. Romero. It just might,” said Williams.

And then he was again taking point as Peter and Sheila and Sammy and Luna exchanged nervous glances ... before following him at last onto the dusty byway.

• • • •

ANK RAN—HIS WOUNDS from the terror birds throbbing and protesting, his tourniquet of blankets having long since fallen off. He wanted to get there before nightfall—before the light receded from the sky and his eyes began to fail, before he possibly even changed his mind. He ran as he had never run previously, testing his new body and its limits under duress, pushing it in ways he had never pushed before, tasking it with what seemed an impossible end: crossing a 30-mile stretch of badlands to reach the town of Paradise by the close of a day almost three-quarters over.

And as he ran, he remembered (or thought he did) the details of a life prior—a life which had been full and interesting and robust, in which he had found his work and his love ... but which he had outlived long before he had ever died and awakened in the beast; which he had outlived long before the Flashback.

Nor did he run the entire distance alone, for as he re-crossed the Camas Prairie he came upon a most unusual sight: a Union Pacific train, dieseling across the wastelands as though there'd never been an apocalypse or a collapse of civilization as they'd known it. And, as it was moving relatively slow, he veered alongside it and kept pace—but he did more than keep pace, really; rather, he made something of a sport of *racing* the thing, pouring on the speed so that he drew even with the engine's cab, where he saw a bearded man in coveralls extend an arm out the window in what seemed a gesture of goodwill.

And then Ank was falling back, back, his armored body growing weary, the calloused pads of his feet aching, so that he was even

with the caboose—until it, too, moved on down the tracks without him ... leaving him to pant and thirst in the desert sun.

Exhausted. Dispirited. Alone.

• • • •

BY THE TIME THEY ENTERED what his map called Shadow Canyon, Williams estimated they had about two hours of light left. As for the Santiago River, they heard it before they saw it (for the world had grown eerily silent since the Flashback), rushing and bubbling, swirling and sluicing, until they rounded a craggy bend and saw it laid out before them—beautiful in its untamed wildness, bursting as though in flood, and, having no bridge, utterly impassable.

“I don’t get it,” said Sheila, exhausted. “Who builds a road and then runs it straight into a raging river?”

Williams peered at the opposite bank, where the dirt road resumed. “If I had to guess I’d say there’s a dam upriver, which would have allowed passage—in, say, a 4x4—whenever it was closed.” He sneered and spat. “It’s a ‘Redneck Highway,’ indeed.”

“Any chance we could ford it using the bus?” asked Samantha. The look on her face as she studied the boulders on both sides of the river suggested she already knew the answer.

“No way,” said Sammy, looking at the same. “We’d be lucky to get a quarter of the way across before a wheel got stuck in the rocks. Then there we’d be ... high and dry and with a boatload of kids.”

“There has to be a way,” said Sheila.

Peter stepped forward, hands on his hips, and examined the river. “Let’s see,” He wetted a finger and pretended to draw an equation in the air. “Nope. There doesn’t appear to be a way.” At last he turned to face Williams. “Any more bright ideas, cowboy?”

All eyes turned toward Williams as the river raged and the sun continued to sink. At length he set down his rifle and eased the

backpack from his shoulders. “Just one,” he said, retaking up his weapon. “Something I was planning on doing when we reached Barley, anyway.” He looked at Sheila, knowing that if anyone tried to stop him it would be her. “See, a mistake was made when we left Ank behind—a mistake I’ve been trying to reconcile ever since Lonepine. I don’t know, but it’s like—it’s like I had a lapse in faith ... a lapse in brotherly love, something; one we’re paying for even now.” He paced back and forth with his rifle, trying to figure it out, trying to find the right words. “I read the tea leaves wrong—misinterpreted the entrails—whatever. But the fact is,” He looked at them one by one. “Ank was meant to be with us now. He was meant to ford us across that river. And the only reason he isn’t ... is because I failed our friendship.” He paused as a drop of rain flecked his nose and the clouds rumbled gently overhead. “Surely you can feel it, just as I do. The feeling that ... we’re being tested. That the Flashback was not just an apocalypse in the physical sense. It was an apocalypse in the spiritual sense. That there’s more at play here than dinosaurs and strange lights in the sky—aliens, whatever—that the battle has now been joined by something else entirely. Something, I don’t know—”

“Dear God, he’s going to say it,” protested Peter.

“Yes, yes, I am,” said Williams rapidly, and added: “Something divine. And I guess what I’m trying to tell you all now, especially you, Sheila, and you, Luna, is that ... well, I’m being called to go find Ank.”

A silence settled over the group that was hard to define as the river breathed and the sky continued to darken.

“What a bunch pseudo-spiritual horseshit,” Peter exclaimed.

“He’s right, Will, you can’t be serious,” said Sheila.

“A damn stupid idea, is what it is,” added Sammy. “If someone has to go, let it be me. Anyone can drive that bus. But not anyone can use that rifle the way they say you can.” He cocked his pistol in

a move that stunned everyone, but didn't raise it. "I won't let you do it, Will. I'm sorry." He glanced at Sheila as if for confirmation and she nodded intensely. "The way I see it is, I've got a responsibility too. And if you won't hold the group together then I guess I'll have to."

Williams stared at him for what seemed a long time before finally appearing to relent.

"Okay," he said at last, and shrugged. "We'll try to build a raft ..."

"Now you're talking!" said Sammy. He shot a sidelong glance at Sheila. "He's talking now, am I right?"

Sheila began to nod and smile in a flood of relief.

And then a gunshot rang out and everyone jumped—and when the smoke had cleared Williams was standing with his rifle raised, although he lowered it quickly to prevent further alarm. Sammy, meanwhile, lifted his wildly trembling gun hand and merely looked at it, for Williams had shot the weapon clean from his grasp.

"I'm sorry, too," said Williams. "Now here's what I want you to do ..."

• • • •

HE COULD WALK, LET alone run, no more, and yet it didn't matter: He'd made it to the cemetery in Paradise. Now all he could do was to collapse beneath its entry arch and catch his breath—as the crows scattered and the sun continued to sink and the storm clouds gathered in the west. Again, it didn't matter: he'd crawl the rest of the way if he had to. He knew precisely where they were—by the maple tree, just a sapling on the day of the last funeral—not far from where he lay. And yet, to his amazement, he *was* able to stand; and thus he used what strength he had left to make his way to their graves.

Nor had anything changed since last he'd been there, including the initial shock he'd always felt when the names upon the markers first jumped out at him: Mary Lynn Crenshaw, Devoted Wife and Mother, 1932–1984; Tamara Ray Crenshaw, Beloved Daughter, 1965–1986, James Roy Crenshaw, Beloved Son, 1968–1991. Actually, that wasn't true: the tombstones themselves had changed—they'd become weathered and eroded by the elements to the point that the inscriptions were difficult to read. The important thing was, they were still there—they hadn't been replaced by a stand of cycad trees or otherwise blasphemed by the Flashback. Not yet, anyway, for who knew what turn the anomaly might yet take, nor what the lights in the sky might still have in store, nor even what powers greater than they might yet deign to do with the world.

For there were powers greater than they, of that he had become convinced. But they were powers that would have to unfold their grand design—if design it even was—without him, for he was through; he was finished. He had come back to this place to die. But also, also, to remember: for he had been a man long before he had become a dinosaur—a man named Sebastian Crenshaw, who had wielded the power of the atom bomb in his soft, pink hands and had worked on projects which might have decided the fate of millions. A man who had found his passion and his one, true love—Mary Lynn—who had fathered two bright and beautiful children; and who had lived a life even the gods might envy ... until time had taken it all away.

Not the Flashback, not the lights in the sky, just Time.

The ultimate equalizer. The ultimate enemy.

Mary Lynn, where are you now?

But the grave markers held no answer—nor the darkening sky, nor the wind which had just begun to blow. And it was only then that a tidal wave of memories at last assailed him, memories of her

and of them, of holidays and special occasions, of births and deaths and rites of passage, of flying kites on a blustery autumn day.

He froze under the weight of it all, under the weight of his own body, the armored plating, the clubbed tail like an anvil.

... of love and of making love. And what it meant to move through the world as light as a feather; in a body which was as soft as it was agile; a body which had been his and his alone—not shared with the beast, the animal, the monster. Not a prison of thick, sluggish blood and even thicker bone. And it was here that he would have cried had he only possessed the right kind of tear ducts—would have sunk his face in his hands had he only the right kind of mobility.

And thus he did the only thing he could do, which was to lash out at anything and everything— ramming a nearby tombstone with his armored head, knocking a concrete sphere from its pedestal with his clubbed tail, pouncing upon a box marker with all his weight. And as he did so the rain came down in a veritable torrent, the clouds having burst at long last—spattering his armor, running in rivulets between his spikes, so that he at last crumpled at the foot of the graves and curled into a ball, thinking, with his eyes squeezed shut, that he only wanted to die at last and to join them wherever they were; and thinking, too, about Williams and the others, wondering where they presently were and how they'd ford the Santiago River without him ... and communicating, at last, what he intended to be his final message, although he knew it would never reach them. *Him*. His friend.

<I'm sorry, Will. Sorry that I failed you. God be with you in all the times ahead. I have been, and always shall be, your friend.>

And then there was only blackness and pain and the storm, and the question of how to do it. How to end it.

Forever.

WILLIAMS PAUSED, THE rain dripping from the brim of his hat. *<I have been, and always shall be, your friend.>*

Where had that come from? He ducked under a stand of pine trees to escape the downpour and knelt, thinking about it. He didn't know rightly, only that it had seemed to be a new message and not merely a memory of the last. As for where it had come from

...

He stared south-west, toward Baldy Mountain, toward the town of Paradise. Was it even possible? Could Ank have just communicated with him over such a vast distance?

The truth was, he didn't know. But it *was* something, something he could use for a north star, something he could follow when all he'd had before was a gut feeling—just the faintest intuition, really—that the answer to Ank's whereabouts lie somewhere back the way they'd came. He stepped out from beneath the branches and hung his head back in the rain, letting it spatter his tongue and the roof of his mouth, knowing there would be precious little water to be found between here and Lonepine.

And then he started to run, not knowing how long he could keep up the pace and not caring, but understanding, somehow, that this was what he had to do. That faith would somehow lead the way. And understanding, also, that time was running out; that the Enemy was on the march and they still had not delivered the girl to Barley. That while he yearned to find his friend he had an obligation to the others, as well, and that they were waiting for him even now, unprotected by anything but a handful of pistols and a half-roofless bus. And that everything, everything, depended upon what happened in the next 24 hours.

• • • •

IT WAS HOPELESS, OF course, even if Williams had given them the go-ahead to try and build a raft in case he didn't return. They

simply didn't have the tools, nor the will, frankly, to do so as the rain came down in sheets and they huddled in the back of the bus.

Nor, given the circumstances, did merely waiting seem like such a bad idea—at least not until a throaty snarl unwound from the tree line and caused everyone to look up ... seeing a pair of what appeared to be small tyrannosaurs emerge just outside the bus.

"Holy shit, we've got trouble," said Sammy, then fumbled for his pistol as the others did the same.

"Yeah we do," said one of the kids—his name was Lucas—adding, "Those are allosaurs. As bad or worse than T. Rex ... because they're smaller, fleeter."

"Small enough to get in here?" asked another, clearly alarmed—Carina, if Sheila remembered right.

Nor was that all Sheila remembered, for she recalled with sudden clarity what Bella Ray had warned about Shadow Canyon—that there were a pair of allosaurs working the area named Lenny and Squiggy.

"Everyone with guns, look sharp," said Sammy. "We've got nowhere to go."

And it was true; they didn't have anywhere to go.

Unless ...

He stood suddenly and moved toward the front of the bus—even as Sheila protested and Peter snapped, "What are you doing? What are you doing?"

He sat in the driver's seat and turned over the engine. "I'm taking us over Redneck Bridge; that's what I'm doing." He shot a look at Peter over his shoulder which would brook no argument. "Unless you've got a better idea?"

"You crazy—we won't make it ten feet in that flood ..."

"We're about to find out," said Sammy, and ground the gears. "I'd suggest just now that everyone simply hang on."

And then they were rattling forward, toward the river's edge and the threatening rocky terrain, as the allosaurs parleyed and began gnawing on the hull and the children screamed and Sheila and Samantha lowered their windows—each trying to get a shot at the predators.

VII

They'd speak of it in the days ahead as the Santiago Miracle, for that's what it had been, as surely as the sun crosses the sky. Nor would there be a single dissenting voice—not even Peter—or any attempt whatsoever at explaining it away. For the simple fact was they should not have made it: they should not have veritably glided through the water only to meet sudden resistance on the opposite bank, where the boulders snapped the axles and burst the tires, laying the bus low.

"It had been like Moses parting the Red Sea," Sheila would say, and no one would laugh—at least no one who had been there—while still others would claim they had felt the bus literally rise upon the water, fording the river like a hydrofoil.

Lost in the celebration—at least at first—had been the fact that something else had happened that was equally as inexplicable: that the rear window of the bus had literally melted during the crossing—melted as though it had been superheated by an atom bomb—so that it sloughed away like a glacier and all that was left was a little girl, Luna, looking on from the back seat, still staring at the allosaurs who had abandoned their pursuit and smelling faintly of smoke and burnt toast.

But this realization would only come later, after they'd been surrounded by men and women with guns and escorted through fortifications worthy of D-Day to the heart of Barley itself, where they were greeted at last as comrades rather than enemies and treated to a banquet in their honor alone, for it was a tradition amongst its residents to celebrate the arrival of survivors as though they were long lost friends.

Nor did they have to wait long to meet Bella Ray herself, the slight and gray-haired owner of the voice which had both comforted and encouraged and sometimes terrified them along the

way—for she emerged onto the covered stage which the rows of tables faced well before dinner was even done, asking the newcomers to stand and introduce themselves and directing leis to be placed over their heads as each of them spoke up.

“Sheila Were, housewife, Anchor Rock. This is my son, Erik.”

“Sammy Benson, Harley-riding man-child turned bus driver.” He glanced at Sheila and winked. “And these are *my* kids: Lucas, Carina, Sally Meyers, Thomas, Freddy, Malcolm, and Sloan.”

“Peter Romero, pilot for United Airlines. This here is my fiancée, Samantha.”

“How do,” she said, and accepted her lei.

“And who might you be?” asked Bella, indicating Luna.

The albino girl slowly stood. “I’m Luna ... from Mirabeau Park.” She hugged her radio against herself. “But this isn’t all of us. There’s also Will and Ank ... but we don’t know where they are right now.”

“Oh?” said Bella. “When was the last time you saw them?”

“Ank’s been gone awhile,” said Luna, and frowned. “But Will went looking for him.”

“Just today,” interjected Sheila. “Heading south on something called the ‘Redneck Highway.’”

Bella looked confused. “Is that on the other side of the river?”

“It is,” said Sammy, but didn’t elaborate.

Bella glanced at a big man standing near the stage. “That river’s impassable,” she said. “We’ve tried it.”

“I’d suggest prayer,” said Sammy at last. “And a Wayne bus. Look, all I know is ... we did it. Even—even we don’t understand it.”

Bella looked at the big man near the stage. “It’s true,” he said. “We found them grounded on the north bank—tires ruined, axles shattered ... They crossed it, all right.”

Bella appeared distant as she thought about this. At last she gathered herself and said, “Then you’ve achieved something we

could not, and are doubly welcome. Unfortunately, since the bus is ruined, I see no way we can send a search party. There's no boats here. There is, however, a plane—a small Cessna. It's in good mechanical order but no one here's a pilot." Her wizened eyes fell upon Peter. "Although it would appear that's changed. Can you fly it?"

Peter glanced at Samantha and straightened. "I'd have to look at it, but, yes. I'd say the chances are good."

"In the morning, then," said Bella. "For now I'm sure you are all extremely tired. I just wanted you to know that," she paused, looking at them, at the newcomers. "I just wanted you to know that, whatever awaits us ... you are among friends." She scanned the entire crowd, which Sheila estimated to number in the hundreds. "I'm told that nearly all of you felt compelled to come here even before we started broadcasting. Now I don't pretend to know what that means, only that, that ... we were meant to be here, together, all of us. At this place and at this time. And that ..." She trailed off, unable to find the right words. "Well," she said at last, "here we are. And I think once you've looked around and met everyone," She looked at Sheila and the rest. "You'll agree ... that what we've built here is worth fighting for. That it's the closest we've come to regaining our humanity since the Flashback. And, well, I've said enough. We've already prepared tents for you on the west lawn—but whether you retire to them immediately or party like it's 1999, that's up to you. For now, the bar is open and everything's free. Goodnight, fellow survivors. And welcome home."

And then, to Sheila's utter astonishment, a *band* took to the stage—what they were using for power she hadn't a clue—and she found herself drinking, even dancing! with Sammy as Erik and the children frolicked and Luna wandered the premises alone and the red lights atop the Radio Free Montana transmission tower blinked like hopeful beacons in the night.

WILLIAMS COLLAPSED in the mud—the side of his face impacting a reef of basalt, his rifle tumbling before him. In his present condition, the slightest misstep is all it had taken. Behind him, meanwhile, the were-raptors continued to call out—sometimes in their warbling cries while others in their profane speech.

“Give up, pig-fucker,” cried one, not Katrina, as Williams turned his head and saw it duck behind a prairie bush.

“Yes, my love! Give up! We only want you to join us!” cried another—and this time it *was* Katrina.

He scooted forward and snatched up his rifle, the chamber of which now contained a single bullet, then swiveled and sat up, sighting her almost immediately before she, too, sought refuge behind the scrub.

His vision blurred in and out as he shifted his gun back and forth between them. *These are the wages of your blind faith!* he thought deliriously, cursing his decision to leave with only the shirt on his back and the ammo in his gun, and all because of a voice he had heard with increasing propensity since leaving Lonepine, a voice that had urged him to act without reflection and make of everything a leap of faith, a voice which was not the Bandana Man but may as well have been, for look where it had led him!

He swiveled back around to face forward and examined the land, seeing nothing that might provide a respite—nothing but ... but ...

A fence.

Holy God, *a fence*. And that meant a house or some other structure, surely—and yet it was not the sort of fence one might expect to find in the middle of the prairie, for it was built of cyclone mesh and topped with razor wire; although he could see even from here that parts of it were collapsed and would allow easy access.

And then he was up with what little strength he had left, delirious, dehydrated, his feet aching from the trek, and scrambling for

the barrier, and it wasn't until he was stepping over a downed section that he saw the sign, which was lying askew in a jumble of wire. A sign which read:

WARNING:

Restricted Area

Use of deadly force authorized.

Some kind of government facility, he thought, like the kind he'd found Ank in.

He hustled forward with only the moonlight to guide him, picking his way as quickly as he could through the rubble; for there was indeed a building, a building which had suffered the same fate as so many others in the quake-rocked wake of the Flashback: a building which was covered in moss and creeper vines and partially collapsed. And as he did so he heard the raptors grunting and sprinting across the steppes, having the feeling, he was sure, that their quarry had at last cornered itself in an inescapable kill-box. Nor did he doubt that they were correct in that assessment.

And yet to his surprise he found a door straight away, a door which by some miracle or other circumstance of the Flashback had remained unlocked, and quickly squeezed through it, securing it behind him. And then he collapsed in the pure and total blackness as the raptors met the door and began scratching and barking wildly, as though infused with some sort of blood-lust, and knew in the pit of his stomach that there'd be no escape for him this time.

And yet there was one possible escape, wasn't there? He gripped his rifle tightly, not knowing how serious he was but fearing he was serious enough. They'd all thought about it at one time or another, of that he was sure, especially in those awful first hours after the Flashback, when the world had realized it had lost most its people to a force they couldn't begin to comprehend—a force which had taken their loved ones as surely as a thief in the night, transporting them to some elsewhere and elsethen even as it trans-

ported dinosaurs of a hundred species and from various epochs into the world of men.

He caressed his rifle like a lover in the dark as his mind turned the possibility over in his head. *Indeed, why not?* Why prolong the inevitable when he knew he was cornered and cornered in truth; that the raptors would only wait him out no matter how hard he tried to outlast them and that he was cold and hungry and thirsty and weak. That even worse, he'd lost his faith ... that he could no longer imagine a world in which things might yet work out or the forces allied against them might be turned back or even defeated.

He listened as the scratching at the metal door ceased, but took no heart from it: they'd only refocused their efforts on finding another way in, of that he was certain. Nor could he bear the thought of what would happen when they finally broke through—not the terror and pain of them gutting him like a fish, for Katrina would only wound him, he knew, but the inconceivable horror of walking the earth like *them*. Like a zombie. Like a dead man walking a dead planet.

So, too, would they *know* then, having added his consciousness to theirs. They would know that Barley Hot Springs lay just beyond the Santiago River, which he suspected they could swim, and that nothing in the others' experience would have prepared them for an attack from the rear. No, no, he couldn't under any circumstances allow that—it alone was enough to justify what he couldn't help but see as a surrender under cowardice, a spitting in God's eye.

For there was no God, otherwise the Flashback could never have happened. There was no light to counter the dark, no paladin to counter the Bandana Man, no magnifying glass to focus the sun. There was only the lights in the sky and a world gone mad, only death and pain and suffering without end—and time itself, which had been scrambled like eggs.

He repositioned the rifle so that it pressed against his forehead then slipped his thumb across its trigger.

There was only this: Only ending it at last by his own will and direction ... only the victory that would come in death and its numb embrace.

He jumped as something metal and heavy fell over upon its side, and knew, even before he heard the brutish grunt in the dark, that Katrina and the other raptor had gained entry into the building. And then he refocused on his weapon and steeled himself for the unthinkable, even as their feet padded closer and their breath came and went in bursts, and he was beginning to squeeze the trigger when he sensed a massive head next to his own— Katrina, he knew, who would no doubt profane his final instants with professions of love perverted by a predator's tongue.

And then something happened he could not explain, for he eased his finger away from the trigger as though guided by an invisible hand—for he'd decided, in the eyeblink before committing, that his end would be met with grace rather than cowardice, and that he'd surrender himself to God before he surrendered himself to nihilism, for that is what the Bandana Man wanted, after all, wasn't it?

And it was in that instant that an enormous tongue lapped his face from chin to forehead, knocking his hat off, and that he recognized in the beast's breath a familiar (but no less nauseating) stench that he had nonetheless come to know and love.

For it was the fetid, imperfect breath of his friend.

Of Ank.

Who communicated to him without actual words, <You taste of fear and death, Will. So knock it off. We've ... got work to do. Now come on ... I want to show you something.>

SHEILA AWAKENED WITH a start, her heart hammering, her pulse racing, and rolled away from Sammy so that she faced the tent's flap—which they'd left open to allow for the flow of free air into the shelter (although they'd zippered the bug screen against the mosquitos; one of the drawbacks of being surrounded by hot springs). Erik was fine; she could see the boys' tents clearly from their own—but she could also see, by the light of the gas lanterns, that the air was thick with haze and smelled strongly of smoke, nor was it the kind of smoke one would associate with a structural blaze, but rather the dry, eye-watering fog which could only have resulted from a forest fire. Not close, not a danger to Barley, but many miles away ... in Bozeman, of course.

Bozeman, of which she had dreamed. Or thought she had dreamed, for now it seemed she had experienced something closer to a vision—a vision of a city being shelled without mercy by the tireless war machines of the Enemy.

She sat up abruptly and swung her legs over the side of the air mattress; no, not just shelled—*invaded*. And not just invaded by people with their guns and machetes and hand grenades but by animals, by dinosaurs, which worked in tandem with the people to ensure nothing could remain alive and no one could escape, and this while still others lit the trees and bushes on fire so that the sky glowed red-orange and the smoke piled high like mushroom clouds and the birds scattered in the night.

It had been, in short, a vision of hell on earth—nothing more nor less—and it had revealed to her, in the twilit moments between wakefulness and sleep, a kind of trinity of figures, one of which had been a man bearing an automatic rifle and wearing a bandana, the other a boy whose head was bald as though he'd been a cancer patient before the Flashback, and the third a dinosaur the likes of which she'd never seen: a large allosaur, or something like it, blood-red in color and with arms like a velociraptor, which killed, or so it

seemed, not just indifferently but with a kind of practiced glee, as though it had not only been born to it but trained to it, as well.

Nor had those been the only strange aspects to the dream/vision—for they had changed, then, the figures, as personages so often did in dreams, to become Will, Luna, and Ank. Moreover, she had observed herself in the dream—just a fleeting glimpse, really, walking hand in hand with Will, before he once again reverted to the man in the bandana. And yet she continued to walk with him; and it was only right before she stirred that she saw that her dream doppelganger was clearly pregnant. That's when she had awakened, her small frame trembling, her skin bathed in sweat, and moved away from Sammy.

Sammy ...

She turned to face him and found him already looking back at her, his black mop of hair a tangled mess, his stubble having noticeably grown, his eyes seeming to understand. "Are you all right?" he asked. "I guess ... I guess we got a little carried away, didn't we?" When she didn't respond he moved to get up. "I'll go—"

"No, stay. Please," she said, and lay back in his arms. "I had a dream, that's all. A nightmare. But it's over. It's fading. I'm—I'm fine now, really." She toyed with the hair on his chest; there was a lot of it. "You and Will are a lot alike; did you know that?"

He didn't respond for several seconds. "I have *no* idea how to respond to that," he said at length, and laughed.

"I mean you're both independent spirits. He perhaps more than you, but ... you're both cut from the same cloth. It's not a criticism—I guess it's just ..." She laughed a little to herself. "An explanation."

"An excuse, then," he said, and chuckled. He stroked her long, dark hair.

"Maybe," she said.

“It’s okay,” he said, softly, gently. “I know you belong to him. Like I said, we just got—carried away. That’s all.”

She lay against his chest in silence for what seemed a long time.

“I don’t know who I belong to anymore,” she said.

And soon she slept and dreamed once again—in which she found herself making love to her husband in the shitty trailer house in Anchor Rock ... which morphed into the ramshackle house in Lonepine and Will; which bled into the tent with Sammy and the vision ... a vision to which she returned, lost, wandering, until she found the man in the dirty bandana. Until they, too, were making love, or a perversion of it, and she knew not in truth who she even was anymore, but sensed that she had become not just a woman but a focusing point, an epitome, a river of menstrual blood as dark as it was unpredictable—the mother and whore to the entire world.

VIII

It hadn't been easy securing the massive, black bomb to Ank's back—even with the heavy-duty ratchet straps they'd found elsewhere amidst the ruins. They'd had to wait for daybreak, for one (for the complex was as dark as it was impenetrable, even with its roof half-collapsed); moreover, the thing was *heavy*—so much so that the only thing to do was to have Ank lay on his side as Williams secured the belts ... and this while the two were-raptors, who remained just beyond the high walls of the compound, yelped and yowled in the sun—a constant reminder of just how precarious their situation had become. As for Williams, he was still just as confused about Ank's history and intentions as he had been the night before.

“So let me get this straight: When you woke from your tumble into the ravine you had total recall ... that being that you were a rocket scientist—”

<A nuclear munitions expert ... >

“—and that you had contracted with the Department of Defense to design the next gen of soldier-mounted tactical backpack nukes ... even though they'd been outlawed since 1994.”

<The law was repealed in 2004; but yes, that's the jist of it. >

Williams hopped onto Ank's tail and clambered to the top of his shell, where he positioned his rifle against the ceiling-less wall and began sighting the yowling were-raptors. “Fine. And that you were assigned to this place in spite of your age—S-4, they called it—but were vacationing in northern California when the Flash-back hit: where you were attacked by a pack of raptors and died next to a pond before being lifted into the sky and brought back to life by aliens. Is that about it?”

<I didn't say they were aliens. I said— >

“At which point you were returned to bodily form but as an ankylosaur, not a man. A little higher—can you arch your back or something?”

Ank groaned as he straightened. *<Look, what can you see? We’ve got precious little time and if we don’t—>*

“Just hold on. And that this device is what you were working on before skedaddling off to wine country for some much-needed R&R; even though it’s as big as a refrigerator—”

<It’s a prototype, dammit, I told you. Now what can you see?>

Williams squinted along his barrel. “Two were-raptors; one’s Katrina ... the other, I don’t know. They’ve retreated to the fence line—probably to make it harder for me to sight them. Wouldn’t be a problem except for one small detail ...”

<You refuse to shoot Katrina.>

“No. I’ve only got one bullet left.”

Ank was silent. At last he communicated, *<You left without any additional—>*

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time,” Williams exclaimed. “God’s been talking to us while you were out of the loop, in case you didn’t know, just as sure as you’re talking to me now, and—”

<Then we’re in real trouble, because I can’t fight with this thing strapped to my back. And we don’t have time to try and wait them out ...>

Williams moved his barrel from one animal to the other, past the steel fencepost between them—then back to the fencepost, which was bound up in razor wire.

<Did you hear me, Will? I said I can’t fight with this—>

“Ank, just ...” Williams lowered his head. “Just shut up a minute. I’m ... trying to think.”

The ankylosaur stirred beneath his boots and he almost lost his balance. “*Steady, dammit!*”

He refocused on the fencepost.

And it hit him all at once—just hit him with the force of a rock: The Travelling East Meets West Show and a smiling Ngoc Tran. Their final performance in sunny Fresno, California.

The red balloons.

The mounted knife.

The adoring crowd just instants before the Flashback.

• • • •

SAMMY WASN'T SURE HOW long he would have slept if not for the choking smoke, which waked him in a fit of coughing sometime around 9 am, at least according to his nicked and battered watch. Nor was Sheila still with him—although he wasn't particularly surprised; she had her son to think about, for one, and who knew how Williams would react if he were to return from his sojourn to find them suddenly cozied up in her—in *their*—own tent?

Poor Sammy, came a voice, *her* voice, his ex (not the younger woman, Annie, with whom he'd absconded shortly before the Flashback). *'Have Dick, Will Travel' reads the card of a man. Your work is just never done, is it?*

He sat up and ran a hand through his hair, trying not to think about it. It was only after several moments that he realized Erik was standing just beyond the flap, looking every bit as disheveled as Sammy felt.

"Have you seen my mom?" he asked, simply, quietly. But there was no mistaking the fearful expression on his face.

"She's not with you?" said Sammy.

"No, sir." The boy frowned as though slightly embarrassed. "I haven't seen her since last night. The way you were dancing, I thought ... I thought she was with you."

“Well, I ... We ...” He glanced at where Sheila’s bra lay helter-skelter in the corner. “Look, give me just a minute, okay? We’ll go find her.”

“Okay.” The boy just looked at him, waiting patiently.

“Yes, sir, just one minute and I’ll be right out,” said Sammy.

“Okay,” Erik repeated.

And then, when it became clear the boy wasn’t going to budge, Sammy held the blankets against himself and zippered the flap shut, after which he stuffed Sheila’s bra under the pillow and hurriedly dressed.

• • • •

IT WASN’T UNTIL AFTER they’d checked everywhere, virtually everywhere, from the thriving common areas to the sandbagged and razor-wired battlements to the radio station itself, that Sammy hit upon the idea of using the plane to search for her—an idea which was well-received by both Bella Ray and Peter, for they were each of them eager to see if the Cessna would still fly and if the former airline pilot could accommodate himself to its streamlined and mostly manual controls.

As it turned out, the answer to both was a resounding ‘yes,’ and before Sammy knew it Peter and himself were jouncing along the crude airstrip and swooping into the air, even as Erik and Samantha looked on from the sidelines and the residents of Barley threw up a cheer. Then they were circling the fortified town and its surrounding areas at increasingly higher altitudes—Sammy grinding the binoculars while Peter worked the controls—until that, too, proved fruitless; at which point Bella requested they broaden their flight pattern to include the nearby highways and towns, lest they be unprepared to welcome any new arrivals (or, worse, even miss a threat), and it was at precisely that moment that Sammy realized what should have been obvious to him from the start: that Sheila

had not merely disappeared but rather left in search of Williams—probably racked with guilt.

At least that's what he was thinking as the mile-long caravan of vehicles came into view and Peter muttered "Holy shit" into his headset, prompting Bella to say, in a somewhat alarmed manner, "What is it? What do you see?"

But Peter didn't respond until he'd swung around and had a better look, flying low over the column until it was obvious there were precious few military vehicles and that it couldn't possibly be the armada described by Felix the Fixed-wing Wonder. Indeed, the people in the wagon train waved at them as they passed, appearing even to hoot and to holler, at which point the pilot laughed and said into his headset: "No worries, Bella. Looks like the cavalry has arrived, that's all. I'm gonna push on for Missoula and have a quick look-see."

And it was there that whatever celebratory impulse they might otherwise have had was quickly extinguished ... for the city had been surrounded by the real caravan (the one Felix had so aptly described only a few days ago) and was being shelled mercilessly even as they approached—enough so that the municipality virtually glowed like an ember ... even in the sun.

"Turn back, Peter, immediately," said Bella with the utmost urgency. "Don't let them see you." —although it was hardly necessary, for the pilot had already begun the turn.

And then they were on their way back, Sammy using the opportunity to scour the landscape for Sheila even though he knew by this point there was very little hope. And while he saw no signs of her and his eyes had begun to fail from squinting, he did notice something he had utterly missed the first time—a series of what appeared to be tank tracks, no, not just tank tracks, but therapod prints, of the kind a tyrannosaur might make, or an allosaur, along with others he did not immediately recognize. And he noticed,

too, that they stretched both backward toward Missoula and forward toward Barley, circumnavigating it—as though someone was attempting to mount a rear assault. As though someone had been planning all along to catch them in a pincer movement.

• • • •

SHEILA WAITED UNTIL the Cessna was well out of sight before reemerging into the glade, still feeling the ground vibrate—which she had first noticed upon crouching so near to it in the bushes—still sensing that something was coming, and still only half aware of where she was or how she'd gotten there.

It was, in a sense, as if she still dreamed (certainly the air was still choked with smoke as it had been in her vision of Bozeman), and yet, beyond that, the clearing had about it a slumberous quality all its own, one she could only liken to a cathedral or other place of worship, at least until the M1-A1 Abrams tank appeared at its opposite end and began rattling toward her.

Holy Mother of God, she thought, as it was joined by another ... and another ... and yet another still; nor did they travel alone but were accompanied by foot soldiers, themselves armed with flamethrowers. And that was just the first tier. For behind them lumbered a collection of dinosaurs—a triceratops and stegosaurus were easy enough to spot—less obvious were the legions of velociraptors which flitted between the trees like wraiths. And behind all of it strode an allosaur such as those they'd encountered at the Santiago—except this one was mottled red and black and bore a kind of saddle—upon which the Bandana Man sat, perched.

Like a king, she thought. Or a bizarro-verse paladin ... who raised a hand, and, without so much as a word, somehow caused the tanks and the animals to stop.

And then there she was, alone against an array of idling tanks and grumbling animals, as the Bandana Man trotted his steed

around to the front and simply stared at her, his gaze such that it seemed she was being penetrated rather than merely looked upon, and penetrated by not just two eyes but many, as though the man were not a single being at all but legion.

And she found she wanted to run more than anything in the world but couldn't. Wanted to turn and dash for Barley and the arms of Sammy and Erik but was paralyzed. And it was at that moment that the man in the bandana swung a leg over the saddle and glided—yes, *glided*—to the earth, where he touched down like a fog, and she wanted to scream, tried to scream, but couldn't—and not because her body had become paralyzed but for the simple reason that she no longer had a mouth to do so.

"*Shhh*," he whispered, placing a finger against his bandana. "It isn't a time for speaking but for listening."

And then he used the finger to pull down his scarf, revealing a face that was at once rugged and serene. "See?" He smiled warmly, beatifically, revealing teeth just as straight and white as a movie star. "I'm just a man, I assure you. Don't let the parlor tricks fool you."

He touched her between her heaving breasts gently. "*Shhh*, it's okay. Breathe through your nose. Try not to hyperventilate." He leaned forward and scrunched up his neck, smiling at her as though he would a child. "It'll be returned to you, don't worry ..."

She focused on her breathing, trying indeed not to hyperventilate, but feeling as though her heart might punch through her chest at any moment. The spot where he had touched her seemed to burn and freeze at the same time.

"You don't remember ... do you?" His brown eyes suddenly twinkled and he shook his head. "No? You don't remember calling on me in the depths of those first awful nights, when you were at your most exposed, when you were at your most vulnerable?" He stroked her long, brown hair with an almost impossible gentleness;

it was as though a cool-warm breeze rifled it rather than his fingers. "When it was just you and the boy ... alone, scared. Cold. Hungry?"

She began to shake her head almost violently, her breathing and heartrate accelerating once again.

"Oh, yes," he said, squinting, smiling. "You did. All the world did. It's nothing to be ashamed of. You called on many during that time, in those hours and days and weeks after the Flashback—you wouldn't have been aware of it. And you cursed the One who had brought it upon you ... who had taken your husband and your daughter; who had taken so many husbands and daughters. It's okay. We—we don't judge. Not like them," He looked at the hazy sky and the alien-colored lights, at the sun itself which was a white disk in the smoke. "Not like Him."

He placed a hand over her face suddenly and not particularly gently, and the next thing she knew they were standing on a hill overlooking Barley—or rather, what was left of it. It was covered in snow and ice as though a brutal winter storm had swept through—snow and ice amidst which hundreds, perhaps thousands, of bodies lay entombed. He took her hand abruptly and they glided like wraiths over the necropolis ... until they were standing again but this time over a pair of individual corpses—a woman and a child. Herself and Erik.

"What you see is the future," he said simply, softly. "What you see is what will remain after the tip of the spear and its shaft meet—when all your efforts have resulted in nothing but needless suffering and chaos." He didn't speak for several moments.

At last he added, "You have an elemental among you, that is good. But she will fail in her bid to counter our own," He laughed so softly it was almost imperceptible. "Our little bald sage. Our He Who Commands the Freezing Dark. And she will fail, in part, because of you."

He waved his hand almost desultorily. "Now let me show you an alternative—one in which the end result for Barley is the same ... but the fate of you and your son is not."

She blinked and the ice was gone, replaced by the hardscabble trailer home in Anchor Rock. "Let me show you what is possible in a world without them ... a world without Him. A world in which all, even the Dukes of Hell, simply do what they wilt ..."

And then Stephen was there and Tammy too, both her husband and her daughter; and they all the four of them were a family once again—together beneath a stormless sky, undaunted by anything but their worldly troubles—free of the Flashback. Free, even, of Time itself.

"We'll camp here tonight," he said amidst the vision, and when again she blinked they were back in the glade.

"Yes, my lord," said one of his lieutenants—and scrambled off to make preparations.

And to her he said, "Stay with us."

To which she responded, finding she had a mouth again and could speak, "Okay."

• • • •

THERE WAS A SINGLE, sharp tap of the drums followed by a rapid succession of beats as the crushed velvet curtains spread and the audience gasped: for Tran had taken her position in the box and was even now being secured as Williams struck a gunfighter pose and his hand hovered next to his weapon.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I think it goes without saying," said the announcer over the speaker system, "Do not try this at home."

Williams relaxed his entire body even as his mind cycled through the calculations—altitude, the breeze, humidity, temperature, the curvature of the earth, the spinning of the earth ... It was, like music, a largely mathematical proposition; a cold equation he'd

had a gift for every since he could remember, every since he was a boy with a Daisy BB gun in the backyard of their southern California home.

He focused on the knife blade as the balloons to each side of it warbled in the breeze. It was a funny thing, sharpshooting, so utterly unlike music, in that each time he did it he felt like he was doing it for the first time, felt like he was starting over from scratch. With music his fingers just automatically found the frets, just instantly knew where to begin and where to end; he never felt as though he were lost in a vortex of potentialities, never doubted his ability to perform. But sharpshooting was a different beast altogether. With sharpshooting he had to call on something outside of himself as well as from within—something which was not his to control. Something which either kissed him with its ghostly lips or turned away with perfect indifference—like love itself, he supposed. Or God.

And then the drum taps stopped and he was alone with the breeze, and it was time to make the intuitive leap which would set the bullet in motion. And as he breathed out and drew his revolver and squeezed its trigger softer than he would a daisy, he knew, even before the *crack!* and the *ka-chink!* and the pop of the balloons, that the projectile had found its target. That it had found the slim blade and split like an atom—becoming two loaves rather than one—two soft but lethal slugs, which had spread like shrapnel in the Fresno heat and ruptured the red balloons—releasing their air in a vacuum-like rush and causing the audience to gasp and to cheer.

And then his wife was there, having loosed her mock bonds and scrambled out of the tall wooden box (with its crushed velvet curtains and bulletproof glass), and she'd bowed to the audience before embracing him like the wind, and he had kissed her as he always did after completing their final act—when air raid sirens

sounded and he looked at the sky, which had darkened with a stormfront as fast-moving as it was inexplicable ...

For the Flashback had come to southern California—come with its otherworldly weather and pterodactyls which circled like tornado debris; its time-scrambling phantasmagoria, its erasure of both the living and the dead—just as it had come to all the world.

He batted his eyes and came out of it, saw two corpses spread out amongst the sage. Katrina and one other, having reverted to human form. Birds tweeted obliviously as their nude bodies lay broken beneath the sun.

<What happened?> asked Ank as he stirred beneath Williams' boots. <Did you get one or not?>

Williams looked at the razor wire and at the steel pole to which it was attached. "Yeah. It's—it's all done. Both of them. I—can you let me down, please?"

The ankylosaur groaned and knelt upon the broken pavement, after which Williams hopped off and crouched by his head.

"Those people were good to us, especially her," he said at last, before falling into a sullen silence. The birds continued to tweet obscenely.

<It—it wasn't meant to be. Let it rest, Will. Let them rest. We've ... we've got work to do.>

Williams swept his hat off and ran a hand through his hair, sighed. "We'll never make it ... you know that, don't you?"

<And yet we may, Will. We just may.>

And then they were off, pausing just long enough to pile stones upon the bodies.

IX

Peter had been right: The cavalry had arrived. Or so it seemed as the motor homes and semi-trucks and construction equipment and motorcycles and even a couple armored personnel carriers rumbled into Barley. And yet introductions had been kept short and celebrations to a minimum as the drivers sought position and the smoke roiled in from the southeast, for it was clear to everyone now just how close the Enemy had drawn ... and how near the confrontation was.

Still, Bella felt an optimism she hadn't felt in days as she inspected the crowd of what amounted to new soldiers and helped her big assistant take stock of the heavy equipment, and by the time she and the wagon train's leaders met for an initial consultation by the hot springs she had largely beaten back the depression which had so dogged her the first part of the day.

Mostly she was just relieved at what a hardy and experienced bunch they were: from the hand-less man named Roger to the strapping former convenience store clerk (whose name she couldn't remember) to the tough little woman named Charlotte to the steady and stoic man named Red—they were seasoned survivors, all of them, and had seen their share of blood and conflict long before they'd ever heard of Radio Free Montana or the Enemy in the East.

That experience would be needed, and soon, thought Bella, as she inspected the perimeter's booby-traps and fortifications—its sandbagged pillboxes, its trenches full of gasoline—for she was now convinced, after consulting with Sammy and Peter, that an attack could come at any time ... and from any direction. And she wondered: Had they done enough? For something still tasked her—she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Something ghostly

and ephemeral. Something which had first arisen in her dreams and now dogged her every waking step.

Something was missing ... something that, in her single-minded purpose, she had overlooked completely. She thought of the albino girl and what she'd said immediately after their arrival: *But this isn't all of us. There's also Will and Ank ... but we don't know where they are right now.*

Will and Ank. Why did the names sound so alien and yet familiar at the same time?

Ank's been gone awhile ... but Will went looking for him.

Just today, Sheila had said. Heading south on something called the 'Redneck Highway.'

Bella stopped in her tracks, staring along the battlements but no longer actually seeing them. *Of course*, she thought. Her dreams ... the visions ... The mirror and the Paladin. The Paladin and the Brute.

And like that she seemed to understand the thing—its rules and its perimeters, its use of proxies and doppelgangers, its need to conjure counterparts in every single aspect ... and she knew, also, just what she needed to do to fulfil her part.

• • • •

THEY SPRINTED, GALLOPING and swerving around the hardscrabble landforms of the steppes, Ank's tail undulating and swaying, Williams' poncho flapping in the wind. And at first it seemed they might keep that pace indefinitely—for they had both experienced a burst of raw energy since leaving the compound and its night of delicate terrors behind—and yet it was not to be as Williams began to lag and Ank grew concerned with his wellbeing and they at last trotted to a stop next to a pair of rusty railroad tracks, the man panting and gasping while the dinosaur used his snout to brush against him affectionately and to communicate,

without judgement, *<It's okay, Will. If you need to rest ... do it. Just—don't take too long. Please.>*

Williams lowered his head, breathing heavily, clutching his chest. "It's—it's no use. I'm just not going to make it ... not at this pace, Ank. Not in time to—"

<Yes you can, Will. You can and you must. Look, Will ... everything comes down to us getting this bomb there. And to doing it before the Enemy has gotten too close for us to use it. Luna, Sheila, the kids ... they're all counting on us, even if they don't know it yet. You can ride on my back if you have to.>

Williams shook his head. "I'd—I'd never be able to hang on ... and ..." He took a deep breath. "You've got enough burden as it is." He shook his head again. "No. I've ... I've done my part in all this. This is on you now ... it's always been on you. Just—leave me here, buddy. We haven't seen a predator since we left the compound. I'll be fine, really. I'm just going to keep plugging along. And I'll see you in Barley."

The wind blew and Ank didn't say anything. At last he gazed down the tracks forlornly, thoughtfully, as if by doing so he might divine the likelihood of Will's survival ... and then froze, fixated on something in the distance.

"What? What is it?" Will followed his gaze to where the watery-looking tracks met their vanishing point. He squinted in the sun. "There's nothing there, Ank. Just some old tracks—they probably didn't amount to anything even before ..."

But there *was* something. Just the smallest rectangle of color, yellow and red, wiggling amidst the convection waves. And when he realized what it was he very nearly fainted. "You've got to be fucking kidding me ..."

At which instant he heard two things that he hadn't heard in a long time: Ank's laughter, which was a stranger thing to hear in one's mind even then his speaking voice, and the booming, throaty

horn of a diesel locomotive—which was bearing down upon them at a shockingly rapid clip. “Get off the tracks, Ank. What are you doing?”

<I’m flagging us a ride on the Post-apocalypse Railway, destination Barley, Montana.> He swung his great head to look at Williams, who was looking on in stunned disbelief and starting to laugh himself. *<And I could use your help, if you don’t mind.>*

And then they were both standing on the ties and making a ruckus, Ank roaring and rearing up on his hind legs while Williams jumped up and down and waved his hands, having laid his rifle next to the tracks.

• • • •

HIS NAME WAS SZAMBELAN and at first he’d had no memory of who he’d been before the Flashback—only that he had walked the earth for approximately thirty-five years before the winds and the storms and the crackling, killing bolts, which had changed the world forever.

“I was reborn that day,” he said almost casually as he began stripping away his accouterments in the silk-draped rear of the tent, which was palatial in comparison to the one she had shared with Sammy the night before. “Oh, I remembered the world and its earthly machinations; its geography and its politics, its toil and petty motivations. What I could not remember was anything of myself—the face of my mother, the face of my father ...”

Sheila watched as he pulled the dark tunic over his head and dropped it to the floor, revealing back muscles which gleamed with sweat and scars beyond her ability to count, some of which had healed and crusted over while still others seemed as fresh and angry as if they had happened only yesterday. “I only knew that I should head east. That it was only there that I might ...” He paused, his

hands on the waistband of his trousers. "Well. I still believed there were clear answers then. Now I'm not so sure."

He dropped his trousers and she turned away, stepping toward the tent's door—toward the haze of smoke which enshrouded the world, the ashen dust which threatened to suffocate the life out of everything. There was no guard save the mottled red and black allosaur, which slumbered, twitching, seeming almost to dream.

"No answers," she said in what was very nearly a whisper. "You've killed thousands—hundreds, at least—and left nothing but desolation. And you say," She turned to face him again. "You haven't any answers?"

He'd put something on, thankfully, a pair of wide-legged silken pants of the kind a monk might wear, and yet the sight of him revealed so completely startled her nonetheless. For he was, physically, at least, perfect in every respect: from his wild mane of unkempt dark hair to his handsome but queerly eldritch face to his chiseled and ropy arms and abdominals. "I have no absolutes, if that's what you mean," he said, and held out a garment, the deep green color of which matched his own.

"Put this on."

She hesitated, her somber brown eyes locked up in his. At last she moved forward and took up the attire, trading places with him as he paced so that she was in the back of the tent and he stood near its door.

"What did you expect, some kind of answer to the suffering or even the great and terrible riddle?" he veritably hollered. She listened as she undressed and it sounded as though he opened a bottle. "As though I were the sage himself, I suppose ... and not merely a duke of war."

She emerged at last wearing the garment he had provided—causing him to pause, a flask of dark liquid in one hand and a pair of wine glasses in the other.

“So it *is* you, after all,” he said, and set the goblets down. “Our seer had been so confident—far too confident—it had caused me to doubt him, I confess.” He poured a glass for her and offered it. “Will you drink with me, then—you who in this world are Sheila Were of Anchor Rock?”

She froze suddenly feeling as though she could both nod solemnly and laugh out loud—if this were the truth behind the combined phantasmagoria of their dreams and visions then how absurd it all was! Then she took the goblet and quaffed it, deciding, in that instant, that she would no longer fear this mortal man who was as beautiful as he was ridiculous—and that the time for fear was over, in any case.

• • • •

THEY BOTH FELT IT AT the same time, even as the train lurched forward and the cars jolted thunderously—a tremor in the very fabric of things, like a ripple in a foam of potentiality which contained in it the threads of all their possible futures. Something, somewhere, had just happened—something directly related to their current endeavor of delivering the bomb to Barley and detonating it amidst the Enemy.

<An attack, you think, maybe an ambush? So soon?> communicated Ank, still smarting from his struggle to climb onto the flatcar with the added weight of the weapon.

“You felt it too? Like one door closed and another had opened, but with disastrous consequences, for us all ...” Williams looked at him, rattled and bewildered. “Ank, how could we know that?”

<It’s possible that whatever this—this thing is, this event horizon, this convergence of power dynamics ... it’s speeding up as we get closer, growing stronger. Meaning that the psychological link between us could be expanding to incorporate others. Regardless, it also means

that our window for getting there has narrowed still further, possibly to the point of impossi—>

“Ank, don’t.”

<It’s something we need to prepare ourselves for, Will. At any rate, I’d suggest just now that you encourage our friendly engineer to step on the gas a little, or a lot.>

Williams leaned forward until they were almost nose to nose. “Our friendly engineer, in case you haven’t noticed, is clearly insane!”

<All the more reason to give it a shot. Just do it, Will. He may actually listen.>

And then Williams was leaning over the side using one of Ank’s spikes for a handhold while simultaneously yelling at the engineer, who poked his head out the engine’s side window, his long, gray hair flying, and shouted, “You want speed, you got it, ha-ha! The world, she’s a comin’ back, yesiree!” He sounded the horn suddenly and Williams covered an ear, even as his hat blew off and fluttered away behind them. “The New World Special is back in service—and it’s taking its passengers to the Promised Land! Ha-ha!”

• • • •

HE THRUST INTO HER again and again, gripping her waist harder with each ramming motion of his pelvis, seeming to knock the wind out of her over and over. It was all she could do to simply not pass out; to grip the green sheets in her slim, pale fingers; to will herself back to the present and close the deal, even if it killed her.

Yes, by all means, close the deal, she thought insanely. Oh, sister! You’ve most certainly done that!

Szambelan, meanwhile, continued to fuck her from behind. *You wanted an answer, yes?* he communicated to her suddenly, telepathically, penetrating her on a whole new level, veritably splitting

her in two with his thoughts. *This is it, then, in part. The First Realm—which is the true realm, the only realm, the everlasting realm praise be to Iblis and Ahriman, to Azazel and Mastema, to Al-Shaitan and Samael and Kölski and Der Leibhaftige—this realm both loves and hates you, and always has. Hates you because you are a grotesquerie, an abomination, a treasonous act of an out-of-control God; loves you because you are feeble, and brutish, and mortal, and thus deserving of compassion, and mercy, the kind of mercy we bring* ...

He stopped stabbing at her long enough to change his technique, choosing instead to penetrate her slowly, deeply. She ground her hips against him as if to concur, welcoming the respite, attempting to catch her breath. But it was difficult to do for he seemed to grow more powerful with each push—seeming literally to expand, to get bigger and bigger.

He continued: *What did thou thinkest Creation was if not the animation of dead matter from the simple infusion of conflict? Aye, so you've sculpted a homunculus and there it lay—how then to get it to raise its little arm? Why, give it Free Will, of course! For first and foremost it has to CHOOSE—that is the secret behind every act of creation. 'I will lift thine arm,' the homunculus says, and in so doing pits one muscle against the next—pushing thine blood to thine heart and thine eyes.*

Again he increased the tempo of his thrusts—as if to emphasize his point—and her breath came and went in ragged gasps.

That is it, of course, the whole of the secret in one simple shell. And thus you mistake your wars and disease and mortality for misfortune; when in fact they are but Life itself—material life, which is to say life as He reinvented it; not us. This is the reason for which we came when they instigated the Flashback—they, the judges and the experimenters, the scramblers of Time, the halflings between this world and the next. For we shared with them a common goal: the complete erad-

ication of your kind—by which I mean not your First Realm doppelgangers but your material manifestations, which mock us. And now it must all play out, even though the end is no doubt presumed. For if we know anything of Him and His followers, it is that they—

He stopped communicating abruptly and finished in her powerfully and voluminously, seeming to fill her at once with both ice and hot oil. Then it was over as quickly as it had begun, and she could only lay there shuddering ... wondering if he would, or even could, honor the deal, and wondering, too, just what in God's name she had done.

He stroked her hair with a hand which had become massive and a curved talon snagged in the locks. *So tell me, you who in this realm are Sheila of Anchor Rock. Given that your Creator has merely invented pain ... and called it the Second Realm ... do you see now why we resist Him? And why we would end His experiment once and for all?*

But Sheila saw nothing save a universe even less sane than she'd presumed—not her family reunited nor her former enemy vanquished nor her son miraculously spared. And when sleep came at last it was fitful and incomplete ... and long with dreams in which she wandered alone.

• • • •

WILLIAMS HALF-SLEPT—HIS back propped against Ank and the wind in his hair—dreaming, remembering.

They had been running, was all he knew for certain: running with hundreds of others as the storm fell upon the fairgrounds and the dinosaurs scattered the crowd—entire swaths of which simply blurred and vanished completely, as though they'd never existed, as though they'd never been more than figments of his imagination. And then they'd been swallowed by a group none of whom had disappeared, and carried along by its current to the slow-moving train,

upon whose flatcars throngs of parents had begun placing their children, and Williams had let go of her—of Tran’s—hand, and begun assisting them. And he hadn’t been but a few minutes—three, at a maximum—when Tran had called out ... for someone, meaning well, of course, had picked her up and sat her upon one of the railcars.

And then the locomotive had begun picking up speed, its horn blowing, its diesel engines pounding, and he’d no choice but to run along next to it, reaching out to her desperately, grasping her hand once before having to let go, unable to find a place among the throngs—which now included adults—until the train began to pull ahead and he was forced to double his speed in an awkward and dangerous fashion, at which point he tripped over an obstruction and fell hard upon the pavement, striking his head so that blackness overcame him and he was lost to her—to the world—even to himself.

He stirred even as Ank stirred—as the train rattled and clacked and swayed, passing over a crooked section of track—and the dinosaur regarded him closely, almost clinically. *<I experienced part of that, Will. Just now. The throngs of terrified people ... the one you called ‘Tran.’ I saw her just as clear as I’m seeing you now.>*

“My God, Ank,” Williams began—as bewildered as he had been before. “What’s happening to us?”

He watched as Ank looked on, scanning the landscape, it seemed, trying to gauge their location.

“She’s *alive*, Ank. Did you feel it? Alive, now, somewhere north of here. Canada, maybe. Jesus, she’s been waiting for me all—”

<It’s an adventure for another day, Will. This is our stop.>

Williams smiled as the train jostled them, his head hanging to one side, his cheeks suddenly rosy. And then he came out of it and once again hung over the side, calling to the engineer, “Conductor,

it's been a pleasure riding with you! But here is where we must depart!"

At which the engineer merely gave him a thumbs up—and, as evidenced by the shrieking of the wheels, began applying the brakes.

X

Bella Ray very nearly threw up her hands as the crowd devolved into chaos, wondering what more she could possibly say that might organize them and steel them for the inevitable—what more she could possibly do to prepare them for what was coming ... and soon. Indeed, it could come at any moment.

“Order, order!” cried her big assistant—Gorjira, someone had dubbed him, and it had stuck—shoving back those closest to the stage, adjusting the strap of the rifle at his back so that it would stop sliding off his shoulder.

“What good is order if we’re all going to die anyway?” someone hollered—a young woman with cobalt hair and a plethora of tattoos, whom the newcomers called ‘The Acolyte of Blue’—something they’d yet to explain to Bella or to anyone else.

“Maybe you should broadcast the Lord’s Prayer again,” shouted someone else, referring to her decision to engage the listeners of Radio Free Montana in a group prayer just hours before the meeting—and a large percentage of the people laughed.

Bella looked to the newcomers’ leaders in what appeared to be total exasperation—as if to say: Help me, please?

At last one of them took to the stage—the man named Red—followed by his girlfriend, Charlotte, and finally the others: Roger, Savanna, and the convenience store clerk (whose name Bella still couldn’t remember). And yet the bedlam only intensified ... at least until Red raised his arms and began shouting, “Enough! That’s enough! Everyone just settle down!”

He waited until the ruckus began to peter out.

At last he said, “This bickering will get us nowhere. Believe me, I know. I’ve seen this movie before. I know everyone is scared ... that’s understandable. But, *dammit*—we’ve come this far without turning on each other’s throats, why now?”

Bella looked out over the crowd, at the faces of the survivors both young and old. *Why now, indeed*, she thought. *When the Enemy draws near and his influence spreads ...*

"Maybe you'll *mansplain* it for us," cried the Acolyte of Blue—and Red just stared at her, thinking of the Shambhala and realizing that some poisons, once they'd polluted the groundwater, just never went away.

"Maybe it's because none of us ever recall holding an election," shouted Someone Else, which was met with a round of raucous applause. "Or giving our permission to broadcast our whereabouts to the entire world."

"That's where it all started," yelled still another, and pointed at Bella accusatorily. "If not for her they'd have never even known we existed ..."

"We should burn her goddamn radio station!" shouted the Acolyte.

"Yes, and topple its tower," added Someone Else.

"Topple its tower!" someone shouted instantly, and began repeating the sentiment: "Topple its tower ...!"

And then approximately half the crowd had begun chanting, and Red looked at Charlotte who looked squarely back at him—and began to shake her head. *We're in over our heads*, she seemed to be saying. *This is no longer the Shambhala*.

That's when a series of shots rang out and everyone looked to the back of the mob, where Williams stood next to Ank—having commandeered a pistol from someone in the crowd—and began lowering his gun hand slowly. Gasps quickly followed as more and more people took notice of the bomb on Ank's back and the mob gave them a wide birth.

"Are you done now?" said Williams at last. He handed the gun back to its owner. "Because if you'll kindly screw your courage back up, we've got a way to end this. To end the Enemy. For good."

• • • •

SHE MOVED THROUGH THE forest like a ghost, uncertain of her destination—other than that it was in Barley—but convinced, too, that she would know it when she saw it. Nor did she travel alone, for the voice of Szambelan now followed her everywhere: cajoling her to hurry—for the tip of the spear was about to strike—assuring her that she had made the right choice, reminding her that Erik was depending on her.

Not that she needed it, for the image of his frozen body had lodged in her brain like a bullet; it was at least possible that she'd never be free of it, not if she lived a thousand years. And so she glided through the trees and the shafts of sunlit smoke like a wraith, driven by her fear and animus, haunted by doubt—and yet knowing there was no going back; not for her.

Not for anyone.

• • • •

THE PLANE HAD NO MORE than lifted off the runway with Peter and Sammy and the bomb onboard when the first missiles struck, rocking the air with concussions and causing everyone to hit the dirt—and Ank could only pray that he'd made the right decision.

Williams literally read his mind; they could do that now. "The altimeter was the right decision, Ank. Now they won't have to land and physically place the bomb and we won't have to fool with that remote detonator. All they have to do is fly over the target and *roll* the sucker out."

<If it doesn't fail, Will, as I said. The bomb was never intended as an air-to-surface projectile—the altimeter was a last-minute addition. It hasn't even been tested.>

Williams stood as even more explosions rocked the airfield and everyone scattered—rushing to aid the perimeter battalions, he presumed. “Will you know if it fails?”

Ank clambered to his feet and looked to where the remote detonator lay atop the radio on the command table—prepping and loading the bomb had been a frantic affair; the truth was he’d forgotten all about it. *<If I’m close enough to the detonator, yes. Its screen will sound an alarm.>*

“And you can still detonate manually?”

<In theory, yes. But I’ll need someone to work the controls. And it can’t be you.>

“Why not?”

There was the sound of automatic rifle fire. *<Because you’re needed at the front. You and that weapon of yours.>* There were more explosions—followed by gunfire. *<Go! If it becomes necessary, I’ll find someone.>*

Williams glanced toward the perimeter and did a doubletake. “Ank,” he said—then grinned at his friend. “That’s not going to be necessary.”

And when Ank looked up he understood why: for Luna was running at them across the airfield, her pink dress trailing out behind her and her white hair flying.

• • • •

THEY STREAMED OUT FROM the tree line in a veritable blitzkrieg, the guns of the tanks rotating and firing, the foot soldiers alternately taking cover behind vehicles and squeezing off bursts, the raptors and triceratops and stegosaurus charging—as Red and Charlotte and Roger and Savanna continued shooting and the children ran ammo and Bella lit the gasoline trenches, as Gojira and the clerk prepared shoulder-mounted rocket launchers. As

hundreds of others joined the battle belatedly and began to kill and to be killed.

And then they were there; they were at the gates, and the triceratops and stegosaurus had waded into the burning trenches and begun serving as bridges—sacrificing themselves so that the raptors and the foot soldiers could cross—even as a column of bulldozers fanned out along the perimeter and prepared to break the lines for good: dropping their blades—which rattled and clinked against the hail of gunfire—revving their engines, spewing black smoke.

“Bayonets!” cried Red as the raptors fell upon them, thrusting his own so that it skewered one of the dinosaurs like a shish kabob even before he used its own weight and momentum to swing it over and behind himself.

And then, just as it seemed they would be overwhelmed completely, a strange thing started to happen: for the heads of the beasts began to *jolt* one by one; sometimes remaining intact—even while ejecting long streams of blood—but more often exploding outright ... and when Red and Charlotte and the others looked to see what was going on, they saw (with a rush of relief; for his fame as a sharpshooter had spread far and wide in his absence) that Williams had joined the fray at last, and had taken a position.

• • • •

HE'D FOUND THE M-16 and the 9mm pistol amidst the pile of surplus weapons near the armored personnel carriers, along with their attendant ammunition, and for that he was grateful. But that didn't change the fact that the Army-issue rifle was wildly inaccurate, at least compared to his own, and Williams found that he was missing as often as he hit even as he adjusted to its sights and the heft of it in his hands and the foot soldiers broke the lines—rapidly continuing on as though they had no interest in holding territory

whatsoever and causing Williams to realize, suddenly and with perfect clarity, what their true intent had been all along.

For they'd targeted Ank and Luna just as surely as they'd crashed the defenses, and it was at precisely that instant, the instant he'd had this realization, that matters became a thousand times worse: for the Bandana Man had arrived upon his mottled red and black steed.

And before he'd even been able to react the dark paladin had dismounted and sent the allosaur forward, at which instant it bound directly for him and Williams held his trigger down—but was thwarted by the beast's winding movements and dizzying speed, so that he could only dive for cover as it trampled the sand-bagged perimeter and continued on toward Ank and Luna.

And then he was facing off with the Bandana Man even as the battle changed direction—divining, in the same way he had divined almost everything since that faithful day at the East Mirabeau Drive-in Theater, that it was somehow his purpose to do so ... That it was somehow his fate.

• • • •

ALMOST LIKE CLOCKWORK, the altimeter had failed—just as Ank feared it would—raising an alarm as the detonator's screen flashed and causing him to scuttle closer ... even as the Enemy closed and Luna looked on—smelling suddenly of fire and smoke.

Now is the time, he thought, to see how much the vengeance has spread. To see if it can be done—how far one can project. To see if anyone can hear me besides Williams.

And then he began projecting to Peter and the plane—saying, in essence: *<Listen to me and listen carefully ... there isn't much time ...>*

• • • •

“WHAT? WHAT IS IT?” asked Sammy—even as Peter continued to gaze forward, clearly in a trance.

“I—I don’t know ... It’s like ... there was a voice. Inside my head.”

Sammy looked out the window again as the plane’s engine droned all around them—at the miles-long caravan of trucks and dinosaurs and military equipment, the totality of what they would face if their mission failed. “We’re close enough. I’m going to open the door ...”

“No ... no, I wouldn’t do that,” Peter said, almost whispering. “Not yet. I—I’m going to take us down.”

“Take us down? Have you gone mad? We’re almost over the target!”

But the plane had already begun descending—rapidly, gut-wrenchingly—even as Sammy protested and the bomb rocked. And then they were skittering to a stop on the surface of the Interstate, Peter unbuckling his seat belt, saying to Sammy, as the pavement vibrated and the caravan rumbled closer, “Remember how Williams used to talk to his dinosaur and I’d laugh? Used to talk about faith?”

Sammy just looked at him, his long, dark hair hanging in his face. At last he moved to speak but hesitated.

“I’m asking you to have some right now,” said Peter.

And then he got out and Sammy did likewise; and they met at the side door as Peter slid it open—the bomb gleaming within like so much black obsidian.

• • • • •

<LUNA, LISTEN, I’M GOING to need you to ...> And then Ank trailed off—unable, at first, to process what he was seeing. For the little girl’s eyes had rolled back in her skull and become completely white, and she was even now raising a hand against the invading

army—the fingertips of which began to catch fire one by one—as Ank watched disbelieving and a group of enemy soldiers simply exploded into a massive fireball.

And then the allosaurus was there, it was upon him, and the two dinosaurs were rolling like leviathan football players across the shoulder of the airstrip—their tails whipping furiously, their teeth gnashing—as Luna continued to target the soldiers and the missiles continued to rain down; as the white disk of the sun glowered at them through the smoke.

• • • •

THEY PAUSED AT LAST, having approached each other slowly and surely across the terrain, discarding their rifles, unfastening their holsters.

Ank was in trouble, Williams knew; and yet he knew also that killing the Bandana Man was the surest way of saving him, of saving everyone ... that the mirror paladin and his red-black beast shared a bond not unlike Ank and himself, and that if he were to die the beast would surely follow—by having his concentration shattered at a pivotal moment in the battle, if nothing else. And so he stood with his hand poised near his pistol and stared the man down, knowing this was the way it was supposed to be, that each of them were but avatars of beings and forces beyond their control, and that it was too late to change tact, anyway. That it would be decided in a gunfight, a duel, a quickdraw. And that he was ready—as ready as he'd ever be.

“Draw,” he said at last, simply, finally, even as the wind blew and the sounds of battle echoed across the plains.

“Draw,” said Szambelan, mocking him, and then smiled coolly, serenely. “Surely you know that your bomb will not be detonated, regardless of this outcome, yes? That your army will be laid to waste, your loved ones slaughtered ...”

Williams didn't say anything, only continued to stare at him.

"Yes, yes, you do," said Szambelan, smiling, scrunching up his neck. "And if you didn't before you are sensing it now; as your companion fights for his life and your elemental deploys her power—only far too late. Yes, even as the altimeter proceeds to fail ..."

Williams blinked twice and Szambelan raised his chin, as if seizing on the opportunity to distract him. "It *has* failed, you know. Nor will it be detonated manually ... I've taken steps to ensure that." His dark eyes dropped to Williams' holster, lingering there. "I see you've adopted a new sidearm. Something, shall we say, more modern?" He looked him in the eyes again. "I must say, I am surprised by you. To go into a gunfight without your best friend ... It seems ... counter-intuitive."

When Williams still did not respond he added, "For it is a man's best friend—his weapon. Something he will live by and die by when all else abandons him. It is not woman. It is not wealth." He paused suddenly and looked away, as though he were looking inward—looking into the abyss. "Your companion animal, the ankylosaur ... he is not faring well."

And then he was drawing, his hand virtually a blur as it snatched up his pistol and aimed at Williams' heart, and he'd just begun to squeeze the trigger when a black hole the size of a dime opened in his forehead and a stream of blood squirted out the back of his head—once, twice, spattering upon the ground, three times.

And then he fell, his legs buckling like paper, his body convulsing.

"A dinosaur is a man's best friend," said Williams at last, and tossed the pistol onto the corpse.

And then he turned and ran for the airstrip, hoping he had made a difference. Hoping Ank was still alive.

AS IT PLAYED OUT, THE battle for Barley, not to mention the battle between Ank and the red-black allosaur, had, indeed turned on whether Szambelan lived or died—for it quickly became evident that it had lost much of its focus immediately after his passing. Enough so that, with the help of Luna—who had stopped the foot soldiers in their tracks and literally melted the Abrams tanks—as well as the guns of Red and the other leaders of the wagon train, Ank stood victorious at last ... at least until he realized the remote detonator had been destroyed—utterly smashed to pieces, and by none other than Sheila, who had attempted to flee but been piled upon and apprehended in very short order.

Regardless, it had left everyone who had survived the battle (and been informed by Ank of the altimeter's failure) little choice but to gather around the command table and look on somewhat forlornly, for it seemed now their victory would be as short-lived as it had been costly. That's when Williams arrived without even a gun and was informed of the altimeter and of Luna's incredible power, after which he knelt beside the albino girl in haste, cajoling her to, "Let go," and to focus upon the bomb—to be the "magnifying glass beneath the sun," as they had talked about so many times.

"You saw it as we were loading it onto the plane, remember?" he prompted, even as Bella took his hand in her left while taking Gajira's in her right ... who then took Charlotte's ... who then took Red's, and so on until they stood in a circle around Luna with their hands conjoined, repeating after Bella: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

And then, even as the plane skittered to a touchdown and the children came running to join them, there was a flash of white light—and they knew, all of them, that it was over at last.

• • • •

IT WAS TIME TO GO.

“Are you sure you won’t change your mind?” asked Bella for the third time, finding it difficult to believe they were actually going to do it—that Ank and Williams were going to set out yet again, this time for Canada.

“Positive,” said Williams, and threw more supplies onto Ank’s back.

He turned to face her at last. “Maybe it’s not true and she died a long time ago ... who knows. But the fact is ... I’ve got to try. Besides,” He glanced at the others: at Red and Charlotte and Goji-ra and Erik—at Luna—at Peter and Samantha and Sammy (who’d been putting in double-time taking care of Sheila, who herself had no memory of leaving the camp or sabotaging the detonator) ... at Roger and Savanna and the clerk, whose name was Leon. “We’re going to grow moss if we hang around here much longer.” He swatted Ank’s posterior playfully. “Isn’t that right, Ank?”

Everyone laughed as the dinosaur grumbled.

“It’s just that,” At last Bella seemed to cede to his wishes. “Well, we hardly got to know ye, as they say.” She looked up at him in the sun. “Safe travels, cowboy. And thanks. You know where we’re at.”

He tipped his hat to her—a gift from one of the residents to replace the one he’d lost.

At last Luna stepped forward and offered him her radio. “To remember us by,” she said. She looked at Bella. “Maybe we can send you messages sometimes, so you don’t get lonely.”

Williams glanced at Bella as if to say, How about it?

Bella nodded. “Radio Free Montana will continue, stronger than ever. I—we’ve—got a responsibility. To give hope to those who may have none. To light the way.”

Williams nodded and moved to go, then paused, looking at Sammy. “Tell Sheila ... tell her that He forgives. That he forgives anything and everything. Make sure the others do the same.”

Sammy seemed to think about this before claspng his shoulder and nodding.

And then they were on their way, Williams taking point while Ank lumbered after him, pots and pans clanging. Nor did they go without fanfare, for the combined children of the Flashback cheered them on with gestures and homemade signs as they went.

And it was good, so very good, Bella thought, just to hear them be children again.

• • • •

The End

NAPOLEON

A tale outside of,
but connected to,
the Flashback Saga

Prologue | The Visitor

They lay in the still of the valley, huddled in groups against the freezing cold. A late Cretaceous dusk had fallen, forcing a respite from their grueling march south; now the hadrosaurs slept—the clouds of their breath like pulsing gray ghosts.

An animal cried out from somewhere behind them. Seeker raised her head; to her—youngest of all the calves—the call sounded like another duckbill. She looked about, blinking. The snow had stopped. The moon shone; all was silent. She lay her head down.

The call sounded again, closer, followed by a dry rustling and breaking of branches. Seeker mewed and rose with a start. She shuffled around, her back to the herd, and stared into the night with her cow-brown eyes.

Moonlight lay pale and cold across the life-giving cattail marsh; nothing moved. She reared up on her hind-legs for a better view. Still nothing. She dropped onto all fours. Then the lost animal cried out from the trees on the far side of the water—but this time, its voice sounded strained, almost sickly.

Seeker hesitated. She glanced at the herd, then back to the trees. (Something was urging her to investigate: perhaps just the herding instinct intrinsic to all her kind, perhaps just curiosity—her own particular quirk.) Head bobbing, she waddled forward.

She splashed through the shallow water, its ice broken earlier by the thirsty bills of the herd, and entered the trees, dripping. The moon was swallowed by a canopy of needles. Pausing in the dark-

ness, she sniffed the crisp air; the calf detected nothing but the pine's bitter fragrance. She mewed nervously.

There was a fleet-footed *thud-thud-thud-thud*, which blew through the trees and was gone. It was followed by a series of gentle clicks and splashes, as if pine-cones had shaken free of the branches, falling onto the ice and into the water. But there was no wind, and all was still.

Seeker whimpered. Water coalesced along her underbelly, pattering against the ground. She shifted her meaty bulk and turned toward the herd, began walking ...

And froze.

Her path was blocked by a lithe, pale shape—alone in the moonlight at the center of the marsh. It stood poised on two powerful hind-legs, its knees and ankles flexed like a bird's. Its neck curved in an S from the razor-toothed head to its upper body, which lay nearly horizontal, and its tail was held high and rigid as a lance. The forelimbs were bent as if held up in prayer, and from them dangled smart little hands, long delicate fingers, curved talons. The thing was four feet tall from its long wolfish snout to its narrow feet, and each of those feet bore a unique and wicked killing tool: a glinting, sickled, triple-sized claw.

It was a bird of prey in no need of wings. (Sixty-five-million years later, men would rightly call it, *Velociraptor*: the "Speedy Hunter.")

Seeker had no name for it, only a profound, instinctual terror, and backed away farther among the trees.

The raptor crept toward her across the ice, moon-glow flashing off its killer spurs and ashen hide, its black stripes, its red eyes.

Seeker turned—and bolted. Her heart thumped as she raced through the shadows. Listening, she heard the raptor bounding after her, gaining fast. Its hot breath fell on her shoulders—and was gone, suddenly.

She broke from blackness into a moonlit glade, which she cut across without pause. Breathing heavily, she began to falter. Her mouth hung wide; her tongue lolled out streaming ropy strands of saliva. Finally she could maintain the sprint no more, and galloped to a halt in the middle of the glade.

Panting and drooling, she looked behind her; the raptor had come to a stop, as well. It stood perched on one leg at the edge of the glade, balanced like a flamingo, its tail straight out.

The tortured call came again, now from the dark woods opposite the glade. Seeker faced forward and bleated a response.

Nothing came back. She shifted her feet and looked to the raptor. It remained poised, its raised leg folded beneath its belly.

At last the invisible hadrosaur answered, and Seeker turned.

This time the cry did not end, but quavered like moonlight on water. She tilted her head, and her brown eyes rolled. Dim recognition warmed her walnut-sized brain. It was another juvenile.

She hooted back, making a baying sound which rolled over the trees and was gone. Then she started trotting toward the northern edge of the glade, toward the sound's origin, pausing once to glance at the raptor.

Its blood-red eyes appraised her: huge, round, cold. It didn't follow.

The sickly call grew stronger as Seeker neared the trees, and something stirred deep in the shadows. Eagerly, the calf moved toward it.

Abruptly, the strange cry stopped. There was another blurred thudding among the trees.

Seeker took a single step past the tree-line ... and paused. She tested the air; there was no hint of her own—

A horrible screech rang out, and she whirled. The raptor was right behind her—trying to shake a weasel from its foot! (In sneak-ing up on her, it had accidentally stepped into the fiery mammal's

burrow.) Killing it promptly, the raptor flicked the animal into its gullet and turned to face her, swallowing.

Seeker yelped, scrambling west, but spied *more* raptors blocking her path. Terrified, she froze. The predators—both the one nearest her and the new ones—began making noise, squawking and clicking their sickle-claws.

Her heart pounded. Looking north to the nearby forest, she recalled a bad place devoid of smells and knew she could not flee there. That left east, from which the phantom animal cried out again.

She scanned the darkened trees in that direction. Had it moved? Seeker did not know. But without further hesitation, she galloped toward the sound.

The squawking and clicking of claws stopped. Glancing back, she saw the raptors converge and file after her; but they did not try to overtake her. The reason became clear when she reached the end of the glade, and the mysterious animal emerged into moonlight.

It was another raptor—still mimicking the voice of its prey.

Seeker cried out, skidded, and cut sideways. Too late. The snarling predators—now of sufficient number—fell upon her, the closest one leaping onto her back, raking the flesh with its sickle-claws.

She moaned and rolled her eyes, saw another sweep up beside her. It struck at her underbelly and she swerved, knocking it off its feet. It squealed beneath her elephantine pads and disappeared behind them. She pushed ahead—blood dotting the snow—aiming for the forest on the south side of the glade.

Suddenly one of the killers closed its jaws about her tail, and she screamed. Another put on a burst of speed and bit into her neck. Still another struck at her left hind-leg, severing the tendons with its clawed hand. Her hind quarters collapsed in the snow and

plumes of white billowed. The calf trumpeted woefully, crawling without direction, the predators consuming her like disease.

And then the head of a new, bigger animal darted into the fray—and the raptor at her throat was itself bitten about the neck. The wounded calf saw its assailant lifted from the snow, its legs kicking wildly, and borne away, squealing. At the same instant, there was a howl of pain from behind her. Craning her neck, she saw the raptor on her tail plucked similarly away, caught between the jaws of an animal twice its size. The darkness echoed with wet, crunching sounds as the remaining raptors fled.

Seeker started to crawl away. She'd managed to drag herself only a few feet before something fell into the snow beside her.

It was a raptor head.

She yelped—and began crawling faster. A dim shadow fell across the moonlit snow before her. It was joined by another. And another. She struggled to raise her head, saw a pair of large, bird-like feet planted firmly in the snow. (They had three splayed toes each, and were the color of blood.) Six more pairs were moving into position, three to each side. An animal snorted.

Seeker mewed, forlornly—and fell onto her side. She was so tired now. So very—

Everything went black, suddenly. She turned her head in the snow, gazing skyward, and saw that something had blotted out the moon.

A shape.

The killers saw it, too. Breaking formation, they milled about beneath the intruder and began to howl.

The huge shape did not respond. It merely floated there, silently. Its lines were such as could not be found in nature.

Its presence was terrifying to Seeker. She cried out, trembling, and tried to crawl away. She could not. Bleeding, she cowered in the snow.

In contrast, the predators went into a frenzy, jumping on and off boulders, snapping at the sky.

The shape began to move: a perfect, black slab turning low above the glade. It hummed with an unearthly cadence—and opened.

White light flooded the world. The killers yowled.

God had come to the Cretaceous.

I | The Present

The rock façade slid aside, revealing a stainless-steel ramp which gleamed with real sunlight. The ramp was clean and polished and scarred by Brillo pads. It banged as something crashed against it. Shadows fell down its length and distant sounds echoed above. A gruff-toned man barked orders.

Others responded, chains rattled. Dark blood rolled down the ramp.

“She’s away!” someone called. Metal bucked and flexed and there was a thunderous tumbling sound. A black mass hit the marshy floor of the habitat, splashed. Water swirled around blood-caked hooves. The rock façade slid shut.

Shadows passed over the steer’s carcass, patterned by elongated hind limbs which were muscular and yet gracile. They were flexed at the knees and ankles. Feet that might have belonged to some monster bird splashed through the water. An animal snorted.

The bloody lump beneath the sunlamps twitched as Napoleon passed it by.

Jan shook her head, watching. Her animal had never declined a carcass before, in spite of Nimson’s assertion that a Nano-T would refuse “cold” meat (even, he’d said, if the creature had taken well to captivity, like Napoleon). But as with most behaviorists, he’d neglected to consider the individual creature. He had changed his mind after watching Napoleon devour a dead goat, horns and all, and then literally ask for seconds.

But something was eating her specimen, because not only was he ignoring his food, but his color was changing, fading from gray to beige, beige to yellow, yellow to green. Only his stripes remained the same—black and jagged like a tiger's. They moved over his muscles like war paint as he crossed the length of his habitat, sniffing at the two-inch-thick glass. If not for the fresh steer, Dr. Jan Vasquez would have thought he was stalking something.

She sat down at the interaction console and punched up the icons for, "*Good afternoon, Napoleon.*" They were a yellow happy-face, a sun which was three quarters shaded, and a black representation of an *Albertosaurus Lancensis*, also known as "Nanotyrannus," or "Nano-T." The "Pygmy Tyrant."

Bells sounded as the three icons lit up on Napoleon's board. *Dong ... dong ... dong!* It was the same noise the Institute's elevator made when it reached the lab every day.

The Nano-T stopped and swung its sleek head toward the display. Jan watched him through the shiny glass, her fingertips wavering over the symbols on the keyboard (a standard IBM inputter converted to an icon alphabet). She bit her lower lip, expectantly. Getting him to interact wasn't always easy. The slightest little noise could—

There was the faintest draft, and the door to her office swung shut. The dinosaur crouched and turned, splaying its fore-claws. Its eyes rolled back in its skull. Jan had seen the gesture before, on countless occasions. It was Napoleon's attack posture.

She looked at the room's reflection in her monitor, and saw Nimson coming in through the door behind her. Napoleon crept the length of the glass, snarling. He appeared to be looking *beyond* Dr. Nimson to the hallway, which was empty except for the janitor's cart.

Jan shook her head and pushed back in her chair, swiveling around to face him. She exhaled as though giving up. "Somewhere

between kindergarten and Yale you learned how to read—am I right?”

Nimson froze in mid-step, jokingly. “Meaning?”

“The sign,” She indicated the doorway with a movement of her head.

“There was a sign?” he said. “I’m so sorry. Did I interrupt something? Does it have you check-mated?”

She glared at him, unamused. The Nano-T moved past the window behind her. Its stiff tail bobbed as the animal walked, reminding Nimson of a cement truck’s sluice. Of the animal’s total 18-foot length, the tail comprised half.

“Something’s wrong,” she said. “He’s not eating.”

Nimson walked up to the glass. The Nano-T was already at the far end of the habitat, past the exhibition-window’s edge. Nimson leaned close, his breath fogging the pane, and waited for the therapod to pace back their direction. “Feed it a live animal,” he said.

“No,” Jan snapped. She added with calm conviction: “I won’t be a party to that again.”

“Well,” he grumbled, scratching at his beard. “It’s your specimen.”

Jan took off her glasses, exhaling slowly. He’d scarcely been here a month, and they’d already been through this a thousand times. “I’m sorry if the brass has hurt your feelings, Ben. I really am. But I brought you aboard as a biologist, not a psychiatrist. I shouldn’t have to remind you it’s *my* research they’re funding.”

“But they want—”

“They want findings on this animal’s cognitive abilities. They want language. They’re not interested in his hunting skills.”

The T suddenly reappeared, and Nimson jumped. Its head was right in front of him, only inches from the glass. The snout was long, narrow, and deep—sort of a cross between a wolf’s muzzle

and an eagle's beak. The eyes were huge and owlsh. "I can assure you," Nimson mumbled, "Your subject is interested in little else."

The carnosaur moved off slowly, its face brushing the glass. Nimson used the opportunity to examine its teeth, the crowns of which were all the same height, or close to it. They were packed snugly together, and the jaw muscles for working them bulged. They were yellow-brown with grime. "It needs its teeth cleaned," he said. "We'll have to put it down for a while, maybe next week some time."

"I can't spare him," Jan said. "We're making too much progress—"

Nimson ran his finger along the glass, over the T's teeth. "See these serrations?"

Jan nodded.

"Only three types of animals have them," he said. "Sharks, monitor lizards—and therapod dinosaurs. Incredible at rending flesh. Very unpleasant. But problematic for more reasons than one. Because you see, tiny scraps of meat get lodged in-between them, infecting the mouth. That means if the animal ever bites someone—you, for example, and could you blame it?—the victim will become infected. And trust me, if the hemorrhaging doesn't kill you, this type of infection will."

He turned to face her, smiling. "It's all very handy for the predator. Even if it only manages to graze you, it can still come back and eat you later. You, on the other hand, will get sick and die in very short order—perhaps only days. Let me summarize: It needs its teeth cleaned."

"No time," Jan repeated.

"There's always time for dental hygiene!" he shouted in good humor, giving up. He watched the T move away, adding: "Damn gorgeous animal."

On that, at least, they could agree. As with its legs, the creature's S-curved neck was muscular and yet gracile—like a cobra poised to strike. Its body was lean and elliptical and lay nearly horizontal. Jan couldn't remember where she'd heard it, but someone had once described theropods as "teeter-totters with one end that could bite you."

"What's that in its hand?" Nimson asked.

Jan looked. "It's a two-by-four shaving," she said. "Isn't that amazing? He uses it to scratch those 'touch to reach' spots."

Unlike its cousin, T. Rex, this animal had agile arms and hands; Jan had seen it pick scraps from its teeth on more than one occasion.

"Interesting," Nimson said. "But hardly amazing. Tool use is common among birds. Shorebirds have been observed opening mussel shells by dropping them against rocks. Bowerbirds build elaborate love-nests to attract mates—they've even been known to adorn them with car keys. And this ..." He gestured at the T. "Parrots do it all the time. You know that."

He turned away from her.

Jan shook her head. "You behaviorists ... You'll break a square trying to fit it into a circular box—instead of finding a bigger square box." She swept her long black hair back. "We're not talking about a bird. Napoleon's no more a bird than a baboon is human. He's a completely different ..."

As she talked, her back to the habitat, Napoleon lifted a long leg slowly off the floor (he'd folded his forelimbs against his chest like a mantis, and the stick was now in his jaws). Balancing himself on one foot, he used it to pry at the copper band—his nametag—which was shackled around his left ankle.

Jan continued: "About which we know very little ..."

The stick splintered under the strain. Dropping it, the animal lowered its foot.

“... can’t just stick him into pre-existing categories. It’s that behaviorist tunnel-vision which lost you your funding.”

Nimson turned around.

“We always look for bigger boxes,” he said, offended. “When there are none we sand the edges of our square. We don’t *invent* new boxes. That’s the main difference between you and me.” He added: “Except, of course, genitalia.”

He jaw tightened and she pursed her lips.

Somewhere outside, a two-stroke engine whined to life; it was Levi firing up the riding lawnmower. The Nano-T jumped, its tail thumping the glass, and darted for the far wall. Above that wall and to the north lie the front lawn of the Institute, separated from the habitat by three feet of concrete.

“Congratulations, legs,” Nimson said. “You’ve got it chasing the mailman.” He sounded disgusted.

Jan bit her lip, thinking. There it was again, that stalking behavior. The animal was hunting something. She slid on her glasses and scooted up to the keyboard, then typed: “*Napoleon eat.*”

A pair of back-lit plastic rectangles lit up inside the habitat: the picture of the Nano-T, and an outline in the pattern of a drumstick. Two bells sounded softly. *Dong ... dong!*

“I’ll buy a vowel,” Nimson said.

Jan ignored him; she was watching Napoleon. The dinosaur turned its head, hesitating. Jan typed the message again: “*Napoleon eat.*” *Dong ... dong!*

Napoleon looked at her. The animal’s eyes blinked, gleaming moistly beneath the sunlamps. Nimson threw up his arms and turned to leave. Eyeing his reflection, Jan said: “Stick around, it’s about to get interesting.”

She worked the keyboard. “*Napoleon good. Eat good.*” Four bells chimed.

The carnosaur looked to “his” icon-board, which ran floor to ceiling and wall to wall on the west side of the habitat. It was entirely black to human eyes, except for the four icons comprising the message (Napoleon needed no such illumination to see the patterns; they’d learned that early in the project). The dinosaur took a few tentative steps toward it.

Nimson cleared his throat. He could hear singing in the distance; the Grace Baptist choir in the church nearby was warming up for Sunday. It was funny, he thought, how the sound carried.

Plastic keys rattled. Jan was typing again, repeating the message over and over. *Dong ... dong ... dong ... dong ...!*

The T stepped up to the board.

After a moment, it pecked a darkened rectangle with its snout. Instantly, the corresponding icon flashed on Jan’s monitor. It was a picture of an open door. It meant “*Out.*”

Jan saw Nimson inching up behind her, peering over her shoulder. She typed: “*No out. Eat. Then out.*” The expressions “No” and “Then” were represented by symbols of a lightning bolt (meaning electricity, either from a shock prod or a fence), and a clock. Gazing through the glass, she saw Napoleon cock his head. His forked claws, so oddly human in their usage, opened and closed repeatedly—a kind of prehistoric hand wringing, she supposed. Except for the lawnmower’s distant drone and the unearthly singing from the church, the lab was utterly silent.

“Maybe I should hum the *Jeopardy* tune,” Nimson whispered.

“*Shhh*, watch.”

The dinosaur pecked at an icon. On Jan’s screen, a picture of a palm tree blinked several times. She shouted and clapped her hands.

Nimson touched her shoulder. “What’s *that* mean?”

“It means he understood,” she said, beaming. “Don’t you see? In response to my telling him ‘eat,’ he entered ‘out,’ meaning he

would prefer to run than eat. Then, when I told him to eat first, then go outside, he responded with the palm tree, meaning ‘habitat,’ or ‘inside.’” She swiped off her glasses for emphasis. “*He’s confirming the message!*”

“Whoa-whoa-*whoa*,” Nimson interjected, laughing and moving away from her. “You can’t say that just because *you want to say that*. See? That’s the problem with you cognitive ethnologists, you’re all too happy to pull things out of the air.”

He approached the window, and turned to face her. “I’ll tell you what I think,” he began, posturing as though he was standing before a chalkboard in a lecture hall, “I think your specimen has heard a tantalizing sound, and wants to investigate. It’s had it up to its auditory meatus with your stale bovine, and it intends to run something down, slash open its loins, and eat it while it’s still squirming. That’s my theory, and I can prove that theory because the hard data is right in front of us. Where’s *your* empirical data? Where’s your—”

Dong ... dong ... dong! Three more icons lit up on Jan’s screen. They were the open door, the drumstick, and the palm tree.

“Out Eat Habitat?” Jan translated. “This doesn’t make any sense. He’s contradicting himself. Maybe he’s regressed.”

“Regressed!” Nimson objected, placing a hand on his forehead.

Ignoring him, she put her glasses back on and typed: “*Hungry Yes?*” The icons were that of a stripped leg bone and an upward pointing arrow. She looked at Napoleon.

Slowly, the Nano-T turned to face her. Its little claws opened and closed. Its tail moved from side to side. It turned back to the board and pecked: “*Hungry Out Out.*”

“This doesn’t mean anything,” Nimson mumbled. “He’s been *conditioned* to all the icons he uses. It’s no different than a mouse pushing a lever to get his dinner.”

“Yes, yes, it is,” Jan whispered, nodding her head. “Because he’s obviously confusing or interchanging the icons. He wants out, and yet he’s expressing the exact opposite by entering the palm tree, which was meant to signify the fake ferns of his habitat, and thus: ‘in.’ Clearly, he’s comparing a memory of the trees outside with what he perceives on the icon board. He’s *matching* reality with an icon—that’s a form of abstract thinking. Fantastic.”

Nimson looked at her with something like pity. “That’s wishful thinking, honey,” he said. “For one thing, fir trees look nothing like palms.”

Jan didn’t say anything; it was as if he didn’t exist. Eyeing Napoleon intently, she typed: “*Eat In.*”

Napoleon reiterated: “*Out Out Eat Habitat.*” Or: door, door, drumstick, palm tree.

Jan typed: “*No No.*” The lightning bolt icon flashed twice. *Dong...dong!*

The Nano-T suddenly snapped around to face her, snarling, its color changing to a blood red. Then it turned away and began pecking the same series of icons again and again and again. Jan leaned forward, staring at the screen. The symbols being hit were the lightning bolt, the drumstick, and an entirely new one: a simplified representation of a female, like the kind which marked the women’s restroom.

Project Napoleon was highly classified. Its staff was minimal. Jan was the only woman. Translated, the message could only read:

“*No. Eat You. No. Eat You. No. Eat You ...*”

It stopped, abruptly. Jan scooted her chair back. “Jesus,” she whispered, staring straight ahead. “*He’s threatening me.*”

Nimson lost it. He splayed his fingers and shook his hands drastically. “It’s an *animal*, for Christ’s sake! A genetically programmed mechanism!” He turned toward the window. “It doesn’t hold grudge—”

Napoleon was right there. He was glaring through the glass. Nimson froze.

"Nonetheless," he mumbled after a moment, "has the glass ever been tested?"

Jan shook her head.

The animal stared at them for several moments. Then it touched its nose to the glass, cocked its head, and began licking the pane.

Nimson started laughing.

Jan was confused; had the T merely been throwing a fit? Or had she been *that* wrong about his motives? Sighing, she held a hand to the window. Napoleon's tongue lapped at it on the other side of the pane, smearing the glass with grime. She noticed his tail was swaying back and forth. She heard the door to the lab swing open.

Levi, the janitor, called: "Dr. Nimson?"

Napoleon struck at the window, cracking the glass. Jan and Nimson jumped. The animal turned and stalked along the window, bristling. Its eyes never left the door.

Jan threw up her arms.

Nimson turned around. "Yes?"

Levi pushed the cap off his forehead and swiped the back of a hand across his brow. Droplets of sweat spotted the floor. "I need you to move your car, if you could," he said.

His face was flushed and he looked a bit feverish. It was probably just from working out in the sun, Jan assured herself.

"In your way is it?" Nimson asked.

Jan shook her head: Of course it was in his way. Nimson paid about as much attention to parking signs as he did to 'Do Not Disturb' signs. (He always parked his Corvette sideways, taking up three spaces instead of one and more often than not blocking the maintenance drive.)

“Well then,” he told Levi. “I’ll move it for you.”

He patted Jan’s neck and headed for the door. “You’ll learn, kiddo,” he said.

Fuck off, she thought.

She glanced at Napoleon, who was still staring at the door intently. *What was he so interested in?* She swiveled around in her chair. “Levi, could you push your cart away from the doorway? Napoleon seems to think it’s some kind of threat.”

“Oh yeah—sure. Whatever Napoleon wants,” he said, and began pushing the cart away. Cleaning solutions sloshed and an inverted mop jiggled in its holder. The cart’s wheels went *squeak-squeak* against the floor.

Touching Levi’s arm, Nimson gestured to the keys on the man’s belt and asked: “Do you have access to the shock prods, or is that just Oberon?” (He was referring, of course, to Oberon Gore, the Institute’s zoo keeper.)

Levi seemed guarded. “I ... well, yes, but—”

“Good!” Nimson slapped his shoulder. “See to it a few have fresh batteries, would you? Just in case. Napoleon’s got a date with the dentist.”

II | The Project

Jan gripped the wheel, watching the dark woods pass, and

tried not to persecute herself.

Bringing Nimson aboard had been a mistake—she could see that now. But DOD grants were becoming increasingly rare in the post-Cold War climate, and she'd had to move fast to secure the contract. As Nimson himself was fond of saying, the Department of Defense wasn't putting out like it used to. Besides, how could she possibly have risked losing the chance of a lifetime? It wasn't everyday someone told you they'd unearthed a 64-million-year-old spacecraft full of frozen dinosaurs!

She was driving west on Snake Road, heading home, the headlights of her Hyundai shining ray-like in the dark. It was starting to rain. Thunder rumbled in the distance, much as it had rumbled the morning of May 21, 1993—about a year ago now—in the sky over Stanford University. When the Air Force sedan had pulled into the slot outside her office ...

It was a blue Chevy Corsica, kind of sporty-looking, and clean. She noticed the plain government plate immediately, and the sticker in the lower-left corner of the rear window:

For Official Use Only
U.S. Government

A man in a military uniform got out as she watched—he was tall, trim, rather good-looking—and walked toward the Primate Center briskly. Jan went back to her work; she was midway through the second draft of a book she planned to call: *"Bird Brain!" & Other Misconceptions of Avian Intelligence*.

She was agonizing over a split infinitive when someone knocked on the door. "Come in," she said.

The military man stepped in. "Doctor Vasquez?"

She was surprised to find him even younger than herself. "Yes? May I help you?"

He shut the door behind him and approached her. "Lieutenant McKibben," he said, shifting his briefcase to his left hand, extending his right. "United States Air Force, Sentry Dog Training Branch."

She shook his hand; the palm was sweaty. "Pleased to meet you," she said, and started to get up.

"At ease, by all means," he insisted, motioning her to remain seated. He seemed anxious.

"What's this all about, Lieutenant—I'm sorry?"

"McKibben—Allen McKibben." He sat down on the edge of her desk, and popped the latches of his briefcase. "I must confess to having been unfamiliar with your work," he said, rummaging through its contents, "until it was brought to my attention by our former primary candidate—a Dr. Benjamin Nimson, of Yale University."

Candidate for what? she wondered.

He came up with a copy of Jan's first book, *Animal Insight*, and tossed it onto the desk. "Dr. Nimson quoted you regularly in his proposal to our department. Point and counter-point. He—ah—didn't seem to think much of your views."

Jan had nothing to say; her blood-feud with Nimson was hardly breaking news.

"We, on the other hand, found it more in tune with our own thinking." He leveled his eyes at her, and there was a moment of silence.

Jan was confused. "Lieutenant McKibben, if you'd just tell me—"

He whipped out a green form, and laid a pen in her hand. "Sign this."

She read it:

THE INFORMATION YOU ARE ABOUT TO HEAR IS CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET. Repetition by unauthorized persons is a criminal offense punishable by fines and imprisonment up to 20 years and \$20,000.

She read on:

RESTRICTIVE COVENANT

FOR GOOD CONSIDERATION, and in consideration of my being chosen by the United States Air Force, Sentry Dog Training Branch (Lackland Air Force Base, Texas) for the consumption of classified data, I, _____, the undersigned, hereby agree that I shall not, under any circumstances, disclose said data to any individual or institution (including, but not limited to, any and all media), either foreign or domestic. The phrase "NOT DISCLOSE" stated above, means that I will not directly or indirectly communicate said data by any means (including, but not limited to, the oral, written, or audio-visual mediums).

This can't be for real.

This restrictive covenant is global. It will be in effect for fifty (50) years, unless nullified earlier by the U.S. Air Force, beginning on the date of exposure to said data.

Signed: _____ Date _____

Witness: _____ Date _____

*****PRIORITY: NATIONAL (IEOB: *IN OP-SI*)*****

"You've got to be kidding," she said.

"No, ma'am. It's really all quite serious. If you'll please sign the form, we can—"

"Hell no I won't sign it!" She pushed it away.

"... *discuss* the nature of your funding."

She looked at him blankly. "Excuse me?"

He cleared his throat. "We are prepared, Dr. Vasquez, to offer you total autonomy over a government-sponsored research project, the funding of which may exceed \$30,000,000. Now, when I say total autonomy, I mean *total* autonomy. They'll be no MPs guarding your doors, no brass breathing down your shoulder. You and a staff of your own choosing will be alone with the specimen. It is, if I might say, a dream project. I should tell you that it was offered to Dr. Nimson of Yale first, and he accepted. However, based upon the nature of your work—as outlined in Dr. Nimson's own report—we have abandoned the behaviorist approach and opted to go cognitive. We feel confident that your research will take us in the right direction."

He appeared to take a breath, then said, "Now, if you'll sign the form, I can tell you what you'll be studying."

She closed her fingers on the pen. "Does—does he know?"

"I'll be notifying him in person this evening," he said. "There's a Navy helicopter waiting for me in Alameda right now. If you'd like, you could tag along."

"No," she said absently. "I don't think that'll be necessary."

She felt an overwhelming guilt as she prepared to sign the form. The ballpoint pen wavered. "He's a helluva biologist," she said at last.

"If you wish, you can bring him aboard in that capacity. We don't care."

She recalled dimly Nimson's remarks on *Nova*, which had produced a segment on her work with gorillas back in '88. What had he said? "*She can sleep with them for all I care—everyone knows that she's the field's running joke.*"

She signed the form.

He swiped it off the desk and it was gone—back into his briefcase.

"Splendid," he said, plucking the pen from her hand. He capped it and stuck it in his uniform pocket. "Now then ..."

He closed his briefcase and walked to the window.

Metal rattled as he peeked between the blinds. "We've uncovered an anomaly in the Montana Badlands," he began, straining to see through the rain-spotted glass. "A perfect slab, one hundred feet in diameter, comprised of a substance formerly unknown to us. It was discovered by a group of paleontologists three weeks ago. They were digging up fossils from the Late Cretaceous—chipping away at 65-million-year-old rock—when they struck something like metal. Suffice it to say that when we heard about it, we moved quickly. I won't bore you with the details. The site was quarantined, and the paleontologists paid off. After completing—"

Jan interrupted him: "'The paleontologists *paid off*?'"

Lightning flashed on the other side of the blinds. He turned to face her, bars of white light flickering briefly on his face. "Oh yes, quite handsomely. You'll understand in a moment. Because after—"

Thunder boomed, and the window rattled.

He cleared his throat and continued: "After completing an excavation and consulting with scientists, we realized that what we'd uncovered was probably ..." He paused.

"Yes?" Jan prompted anxiously.

"An alien spacecraft," he finished.

Silence flooded the room. She scooted her chair back and stood, then walked around to the front of her desk. She leaned against it, staring at him. "That's—that's extraordinary."

"It gets better," he said. "Because what I haven't told you is: *The thing was still humming.*"

She cupped her mouth.

"After breaching the hull," he continued, "we discovered why. It was honeycombed with large hexagonal cells, full of liquid nitro-

gen and some other agent, apparently a de-crystallizer. The solution was still held at minus 300 degrees Fahrenheit. Subsequent CAT scans revealed the presence of—

One of Jan's undergrads burst into the room. "Professor! Come quickly!"

Jan whirled around. "What is it?"

The young man ran a hand through his hair. "It's Stella! She's lying!"

Jan blinked. "She is?"

"Yes!" He stabbed at the middle of his sagging glasses. "Remember the broken chair episode? Well, now she's trying to tell me it was Dixon's fault. She keeps signing: *Dixon bad. Dixon hurt chair. Dixon—*"

"Okay," Jan cut in. "Enter it in the log and we'll talk about it later."

The undergrad hesitated. He glanced at McKibben, who was watching them in disbelief. "Oh," he said. "Sorry." He excused himself and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

McKibben looked flabbergasted. "Is that how your undergrads always behave?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your students; they're bickering over who broke a chair, or told a lie. Is—is this Stella *retarded*?"

"Huh?" Jan said. Then her eyes lit up and she laughed. "Oh, no!" She covered her face. "Stella is a *gorilla*."

He looked embarrassed. "A gorilla. Of course."

She brushed the hair from her eyes. "A five-year-old lowland gorilla, to be precise. We've been expecting her to lie about something for quite a while. Our first gorilla, Jonathan, started lying at roughly the same age. It's a good sign—it means the animal can displace events. Stella is using language to distort reality. She's abstracting."

"Yes," McKibben said, searching his memory. "Nimson mentioned that. You communicate with the apes through Ameslan—American Sign Language, correct?"

She nodded.

"Extraordinary." He appeared to file the thought away.

"You were about to tell me what was in the cryo-cells," she reminded him.

"Oh yes. Well—brace yourself. They contained biological specimens."

Jan's jaw dropped open. She moved away from her desk, slowly, and approached him. "What *kind* of specimens?" she asked.

McKibben hesitated.

"Dinosaurs," he said at length, and laughed suddenly, shaking his head. "The craft was full of dinosaurs."

Jan, who hadn't smoked in five years, asked him if he had any cigarettes.

He did; they both lit up.

Only five had survived, he explained. The remaining cells had been ruptured in the crash and yielded only skeletons. (These had been shipped to Dinosaur National Monument, in Utah, for dispersal to universities throughout the U.S.—the payoff he'd mentioned earlier.) The five survivors had been taken to a secret de-hibernation center, where one of them, a young *Nanotyrannus* which was to be her subject, had successfully been "thawed." This animal was presently alive and well at a lab in Baltimore, where it continued to dazzle its handlers with feats of chimp-like intelligence. A new lab would be built to Jan's specifications, he said, upon receipt of her proposal.

"If I'm to put together a proposal," she answered, gesturing with her cigarette, "it might help to know what your project goals are." The room was heavy with twisting blue smoke.

McKibben tapped his ashes in the petri dish on her desk. “We want to measure the thing’s intelligence, find out what we can, and go from there. That’s the short-term. However, this idea of communicating through Ameslan—it got me thinking. I wonder. Could a dinosaur learn language?”

She shrugged. “Hard to say. We’d have to study the animal. But if it’s displaying signs of a ‘chimp-like intelligence,’ and it’s young, like you said—well, anything’s possible. Of course, Ameslan would be out of the question. But there’s other means. In the ‘70s, for example, the people at the Primate Research Center in Atlanta utilized a computer display to—”

“Consider it a priority then,” he said, cutting her off. He handed her his card. “It’s a special extension number—memorize it.”

He seemed eager to go.

“You mentioned a crash,” she said quickly, hoping to stall him. “Do you know what caused it?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. The pilot of the craft turned to dust when we touched him—touched *it*, I mean. But it was hunched over the controls when we first found and photographed it. So we’re reasonably certain it died before the crash.”

Jan frowned. “I’m not sure I follow you.”

“We ...” He hesitated. “We found a Nano-T skeleton on the flight deck with it—with the pilot. It appears the animal got out of its cell ... and decapitated it. Of course, given the alien’s anatomy ...” He straightened up. “We’ll know more after the tapes are enhanced, two, maybe three weeks from now.”

Jan nodded. “I see.”

“Until then, you know as much as we do.” He headed for the door, swinging his briefcase.

Jan trailed after him. “When do you need the proposal?”

He stopped in the middle of the doorway, and turned around.

"48 hours," he said. "You have to understand, doctor, that there are limits to how long we can keep a lid on this. We want to be up and running, and tucked away safely, when the media picks up our trail."

"How do you know they will?"

"Because it'll be a red herring, and we'll lead them to it. Trust me, ma'am, they do their best work for us."

He walked out into the hallway.

"Look," she protested, following him. "I can't even *type* that fast, much less—"

"48 hours," he repeated, and left the building.

She'd done it, too. She'd outlined a program and assembled a team, though she might have chosen her staff more carefully. There'd been no background checks, no drug tests—very little screening of any kind. Of the people she'd hired, only Nimson was familiar (and she knew what an asshole he was). Oberon Gore—the zoo keeper—had come highly recommended; she wasn't too worried about him. But what about his team of handlers? What about the security firm she'd employed to patrol the grounds once per night—the janitor, for that matter?

She drove into Chief Joseph, the rain worsening.

It would be all right, she assured herself. Nimson might be brought into line yet. And as for the rest, early indications were she had a good crew. Everyone seemed to work well together, and no one had delusions of talking to the press. Not yet, anyway. The government contracts—virtual phonebooks compared to McKibben's one-sheet covenant—had contained some pretty grim warnings.

It was storming full-force when she swung her Hyundai into the carport, into the space marked: TENANT 14. The wipers locked and the heater fell silent as she killed the motor. Rain pounded the carport's roof. She scooped up her briefcase and headed in.

A cat meowed as she opened the door to her apartment—a prolonged, tortured sound. But Suzie wasn't there. Jan paused in the doorway and listened.

It was coming from outside, from one of the window wells. She went to the nearest and crouched at its edge; her long black hair dangled.

A stray cat looked up at her, shivering. There was mud on its claws and face. And there was something else, too. Something—

She swiped the hair from her eyes.

“Oh, *my*...” she began, and cupped her mouth.

III | The Torturer

Napoleon napped as rain spotted the habitat's skylight (foreshadowing the storm which was moving east toward the Institute). He stood on one leg like some monstrous flamingo, head and neck pulled back and up, chin tucked against his breast. His long tapered tail stabbed straight out behind him, balancing him perfectly even in repose, and his forelimbs were bent as if held up in prayer. Tonight as any other, he'd fallen asleep listening to the footfalls of spiders.

But now his super-keen ears detected something else—something more than rain ticking off glass. It was a faint squeaking noise, like chittering rats. His eyelids parted moistly, revealing yellow crescents which shined in the dark, and he blinked several times, awakening.

The sound was that of his nemesis. Drawing closer.

Levi glanced at the clock in Oberon's workshop; it read 11:09 p.m. *Anytime now*, he thought, bringing his cart to a halt. He reached for his mop, which stood upside down in its holder like a pale palm tree, and drew it out. Then he walked over to the big round viewport behind Oberon's desk—the shop was the only room besides the lab which looked in on Napoleon's habitat—and peered through the glass.

The animal was nowhere in sight. Levi could see the large log it used as a scratching post, resting on the island of soft earth they'd trucked in from Chief Joseph, and the shredded burlap bags strewn around it—the T liked to lay on his back, holding a bag in his forelimbs, and shred it with his hind-claws—but no Napoleon. *A little shy, tonight*, he thought.

He looked at his omnibus, and smiled. *Well, put on your boogie shoes and show yourself, baby. Because soon as Nimson's gone—we gonna dance.*

A door slammed and he whipped around. There were footsteps coming up the hall; he recognized the *thock-thock* of Nimson's ox-fords immediately. *Bingo*, he thought, elated.

Nimson appeared in the doorway, his tie loosened, his briefcase in hand. Levi thought he looked funny without his lab coat. "Calling it a day, Doc?" he asked.

Nimson leaned against the jamb. "I think so—yes," he said. "Enough is enough after all."

Levi nodded. "Another day, another buck ninety-eight," he said.

The remark was lost on Nimson. "Yes, well," he stuttered, standing straight. "Goodnight."

He moved to leave and then paused, touching his forehead. "Oh, and by the way ... the toilet's backed up in the downstairs men's room. It's—it's spilling over."

Levi just looked at him.

"Sorry," Nimson said, avoiding his eyes. Then he left, his ox-fords going *thock-thock* down the corridor.

Levi stood speechless. He whirled suddenly and slammed his fist into the wall—except his fist hit metal instead of sheetrock. He cursed and cradled his hand; he'd struck Oberon's yard-access door.

Seething, he looked to the viewport. Still no dinosaur. But there *was* something else: a layer of filth clouding the glass. *Christ*,

he thought. He wouldn't get home until after midnight. *These scientists and their goddamn project ...*

He glanced at his omnibus, eyes flicking to its lowest tier and the thing he'd covered with a tarp. Well, there was always that. And Nimson *was* gone ...

First, though, he had some plunging to do.

"Hurry," Alex hissed, ducking behind a fender. "I think somebody's coming."

Steve poked his head out from beneath Nimson's Corvette. "Is it ...?"

Alex squinted in the night, saw a dark figure leaving the building. The figure appeared to have a briefcase in its hand. A bald spot shined beneath the parking lot's sodium lights as the figure advanced. "*Shit*," he cursed.

"*Give me the bomb*," snapped Steve, holding up his hand.

"Are you crazy? *He's coming—*"

"Hand me the goddamn bomb!"

Alex handed him a plastic container; it held three cylinders, a battery, and a clock. Steve took it and disappeared beneath the car again.

Nimson drew closer, his oxfords going *thock-thock* on the pavement. He was less than 30 yards away.

Alex remained crouched, shivering in the rain. "Come on, come on, come on," he chanted.

Steve scrambled out from beneath the car. "Got it. *Let's go*."

Thock-thock-thock-thock ...

They dove into the bushes.

Nimson reached his car, and paused. Alex and Steve watched him from the shadows. The sky went white; thunder boomed. Nimson appeared to stare straight at them.

Christ, Alex thought. *He sees us.*

The biologist opened his door, and got it. A moment later the Corvette's engine rumbled to life. Alex and Steve watched as he drove away.

"Okay," said Steve, exhaling. "Let's find Leona."

The man stood, illuminated by a flash of lightning which made his ill-fitted lab coat glow. He had a nylon stocking stretched over his face, a wig of long, dark hair perched askew on his head, and a long metal tube in his right hand, which ended in two little points. It was a zoo keeper's shock prod.

Wedging it under his arm, he climbed the grassy knoll to a steel shed marked: RUN/Paddock. The shed's door had a small touchpad next to it. He entered the code and swiped his keyboard through the slit. A green LED flashed on; the door buzzed. He turned the handle and pushed it open.

Twenty minutes, he thought, descending the chilly concrete stairwell. He had 20 minutes until security showed up. Unless he planned on repeating last night's close call, he would have to hustle.

Reaching the bottom, he burst out into the night again. The storm was getting worse; the lightning was closer. He saw a streamer leap from a nearby pine—an instant later the tree was struck. He shielded his eyes from the flash and scanned the area, cringing as thunder cracked.

The place was barren. Rain slashed through steel fencing, soaking the run and the exercise-paddock. The paddock was illuminated by banks of security lights, and closed off from the run by a slab of rusted iron, which was secured between grooved uprights and connected to a pulley, like a guillotine. An identical door blocked access to the habitat.

Sandwiched between them, the run was isolated. About 18 feet long and six feet wide, it was usually used to transfer Napoleon from his habitat to the paddock. But the man had his own use for it, and his own name.

He called it The Straitjacket.

He went to the control box, mounted on a pole where the run and paddock met. He keyed in the code on the touchpad beside it, ran his card through, and flipped it open. There were three large plungers inside, marked: LADDER DOORS, PADDOCK, and RUN ELECTRIFICATION. He hit LADDER DOORS with his palm, and the slab of iron which blocked the habitat rumbled up its tracks.

He walked over and rapped on the side of the run with the shock prod's butt. "*Hey, ugly!*" he shouted down into the blackness of the habitat, "Come on up!" His voice was muffled.

The run's framework went *dwang-dwang* beneath the prod—like a flagpole in a gale. Its mesh walls rattled. Something snorted in the darkness below.

He stopped pounding, and listened. The snort came again, louder this time. He crept closer to the mouth of the ladder (named so because the shaft contained a stair-like incline of sculptured concrete, like a fish-ladder) and waited at its edge, gripping the shock stick tightly.

Rain battered his brow, and a cold wind ruffled his collar. He saw something oily glimmer in the dark—an eye, he realized. It blinked, and was joined by another.

The man was hopeful; in addition to being the method to his madness, the disguise was intended as a lure, too. The T probably wouldn't come up if it saw the same person who had harassed it previously waiting for it.

But it would come up for Jan, he was sure of that.

Napoleon paused at the base of the ladder; his senses were giving him conflicting signals. He *saw* what appeared to be the Good Watcher, standing at the top of the incline. He saw the pale coat, the long dark hair, the olive-colored face—though this last was distorted.

But he *smelled* the Bad Watcher, the Watcher who had lured him out before—and attacked him. The Watcher whose blood-colored beast ate the lawns; whom he had spied many times from the bars of his paddock—though never close enough to smell. Until last night.

Except that Watcher would have the Tree, and this Watcher did not. And while he had never smelled the Good Watcher, either (for the Clear Barrier stood between them always), it was possible that all Watchers smelled alike.

But there was another possibility, as well (though for him it was not a “possibility,” but an unnamed, unnamable *thought*). And that was that all Watchers were One, as he and his pack had been One. As, too, the small, fleet raptors—their enemies—had been One. If so, an attack by One was an attack by all ...

Napoleon ascended the ladder, a new set of signals racing through his brain. Something had changed, had turned—had gone. He was no longer trying to sort through his perceptions. He was merely hungry, hungry for this new prey which shifted its appearance as his own kind did color. Forgotten was the cold, dead food he’d accepted for so long; forgotten were the symbols of this new, softer world.

Reaching the top of the ladder, he prepared to take his prey in the Old Way. As Nano-Ts always had, before the Shape and the Long Sleep, before the Watchers beyond the Clear Barrier.

He would take it through deception—and ambush.

“That’s it,” the man urged. “Come on ... Come on ...”

He backed away slowly, his hands opening and closing on the prod. Napoleon emerged into the storm-light, pausing at the start of the run. He shook himself as though offended by the cold. His color was a dull gray.

The man cursed; so long as the animal remained in the doorway, he couldn’t trigger the doors. He would have to lure it further

in. "Come on, killer! Fresh meat!" he shouted, and retreated along the fence, raking the prod over the amply-spaced steel mesh, making a *tat ... tat ... tat* sound.

Napoleon padded into the run cautiously, his feet squishing in the mud. He sniffed the air, and stretched his limbs. He was painted in gridiron shadows from the meshwork.

The man halted by the control box, but didn't hit the doors yet. Napoleon was fast—if he triggered the gates too soon, the spring-heeled devil might dash forward into the paddock (God knows, it'd tried last night). Instead the man maneuvered the tip of the prod through a square gap in the mesh and waited.

Napoleon cocked his head, hesitating. He snorted, and clouds of pale breath billowed from his nostrils. Then he moved forward, looking from side to side. His footprints exposed the run's concrete floor.

The act didn't fool the man for one minute. That's how the bastard had nearly gotten him the first time, by pretending not to see him. *Never again*, he thought determinedly.

Napoleon stepped in front of him, and paused.

The rain came down in waves, backlit by the harsh glare of the security lights, and the man squinted. It was hard to see the animal this close to the paddock. Not impossible, but hard. He could make out the profile of its head and neck, but the details were a wash. And the nylon wasn't helping.

Lightning flashed above them, and thunder cracked. It was a sharp, ragged sound—like the crunch of a busting tree trunk. The man flinched, and Napoleon turned to face him. The two of them stared at each other through the rain and the steel mesh.

"So, *we meet again*," the man joked, though his intentions were no laughing matter. He expected the sound of his voice would set the animal off.

But nothing happened.

The man swallowed.

"I know you can see me," he said at last, and found he had to holler just to pierce the storm's din. "I know you can see me—because I can see you!"

The Nano-T didn't move.

The man laughed brusquely, and shook his head. "What's the matter—forget about last night?"

Rain pounded on metal and roared down the gutter. The T remained still.

The man was confused. Why wasn't it attacking? Was it wary of the shock prod? Was it sick? He readied his thumb over the prod's switch. There was only one way to find out ...

The Nano-T dipped its head to the ground suddenly, sniffing the mud, and the man hesitated. He withdrew the prod and shuffled forward, peering through the mesh ...

It wasn't mud the animal was sniffing. It was its own—

Something wet and foul hit the fence, splattering, and the man jerked away. The T's narrow muzzle darted between the bars—and slammed to a stop. Its teeth gnashed; the fence shook. Its eyes stared out at him from its wide head, their golden coronas close to the mesh.

The man fumed; *it had flung its shit at him!* He hit the LADDER DOORS plunger and the PADDOCK plunger simultaneously.

Steel pulleys whirred, and iron doors slammed into the mud. Napoleon pulled back from the mesh, bleeding. He looked at the closed gates, owlish eyes blinking, and brushed at his lacerated snout with a foreclaw.

The man closed the control box and jabbed him in the hip with the prod. The Nano-T jumped, squealing, and banged its head on a crossbeam. Hot orange sparks rained down in the mud. The man laughed, his mouth hung wide, and struck the animal again.

Napoleon howled at the sky.

They'd all heard it, but Leona Dix was the first to react. "Oh my God—somebody get the mic!"

She'd been standing in the rain with a pair of binoculars, trying in vain to see the paddock. But the government had built a 50-foot concrete "ridge" between the Institute itself and the purported enclosure, making its observation impossible. Leona had laughed when she first saw it, reminded of the Matterhorn at Disneyland. She wasn't laughing now.

Steve got up from where he'd been sitting and moved toward the back of the van. Its interior was cluttered with shelves, like an electrician's truck. He swept aside dark clothing and passed boxes containing cans of spray paint, explosive devices (both mock and real), crowbars, chemicals, walkie-talkies ...

And came to the audio/video equipment, at the rear of the vehicle. He took up the Nagra Sound Recorder and the boom-microphone, and returned to the front. Alex relieved him of the recorder as he stepped out through the sliding door, and Leona grabbed an umbrella off the dash, to shield the mic.

The animal's wails echoed off the ridge: an alien, chilling sound, like that heard in those alleged recordings of Bigfoot.

Leona unfolded the umbrella, and held it over the mic. Alex monitored the recorder as Steve positioned the polearm. After a moment he said: "Speed." (That meant the tape was rolling.)

The rain fell; lightning flickered. They listened to the sound of the animal being tortured. At last, Leona whispered: "I'm going to lay down some narration."

Steve and Alex nodded, a bit hesitantly.

She cleared her throat. "What you are hearing is the sound of Death," she began, adopting her most authoritative voice, "recorded on a hill overlooking a government concentration camp. Call it

Auschwitz, call it Treblinka; the difference here is the victims are animals, not people. Which is to say there's little difference at all."

Both Steve and Alex grimaced.

Leona continued: "As you can hear for yourself, the vivisectionists—researchers who perform surgery on living animals—are clearly inflicting great pain on this animal. In fact, its cries are so anguished, we can't even say for certain what type of animal it is. We challenge you to try. Furthermore, we challenge you to end this pointless cruelty by supporting our cause—the complete and lawful abolition of animal research ..."

She went on for several minutes. Alex stifled a yawn; Steve checked out her ass. She concluded at last by saying: "This is the Animal Liberation Underground—signing off. *Beware vivisectionists!*"

Then she turned to face them, her expression smug, and seemed to add: *And that, my little Guy Men, is how it's done.*

"All-right," Steve said.

"Way to go," said Alex.

She basked in the glow of authority. Then she asked: "Did you plant the bomb?"

Steve nodded.

"Under Vasquez's car?"

He shook his head. "Under Nimson's. It was the only one there, besides the janitor's."

"No Oberon tonight?"

"I didn't see his truck."

"Well ... good enough."

She began pacing. "Okay, then. The bomb's set to blow at 9 a.m. tomorrow morning, when everyone's inside. We'll leave a message on Vasquez's answering machine at 9:15, claiming responsibility for the explosion, and begin planning our next move."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Which will be?"

She turned to face the Institute. “Why, freeing the animal, of course.”

The men looked at each other, and stepped up beside her.

They all gazed out across the woods, at the fake ridge and stadium-like lights. Steve wondered if he should put his arm around her; Alex wondered if he should offer his coat; and Leona wondered if she'd been good on the tape, *really*. None of them were actually thinking about the animal—until the animal fell silent. Abruptly.

The steel mesh started to break: first one joint, then another. Napoleon stood sideways on the fence like a parrot, his splay toes gripping the bars. He braced himself with his legs and pulled at the grid with his teeth. The muscles of his neck rippled; his growl was a steady trill. Metal squealed as he peeled a section back.

Lightning flashed nearby, followed by a *crack-kaboom!* In the wash of light, the man saw the dinosaur looking at him. Glaring at him. Its color had gone blood red.

He dropped the shock prod and swallowed, tasting bile. His head was swimming; he felt nauseated. The game had gone far enough, he realized. He had to end it—he had to end it *now*. He stepped back over to the control box and flipped it open, sought out the RUN ELECTRIFICATION button. He punched it with the bottom of his fist.

The air seemed to vibrate, and sparks exploded beneath Napoleon's hands and feet. The dinosaur was knocked off the fence instantly. It crashed into the mud with a tremendous splash, and writhed violently. Then it struggled to its feet and latched onto the fence again. Sparks popped and spit; there was the smell of burnt flesh. Napoleon backed off, cocking his head. His foreclaws opened and closed. He sniffed at the electrically charged air, and at the ground. His left foot was smoking. He didn't approach the fence again.

The man stepped closer and peered through the mesh. "You're learning, aren't you?" he said, and scooped up the shock prod from the mud. He wiped it on his lab coat. "You're learning not to mess with me, *aren't you?*"

Napoleon looked at him, then shifted his neck to the side oddly. He was looking at something behind the man, something low to the ground.

The man turned around. There was nothing there but the steel hatch to the feeding shaft, set into concrete like an oversized man-hole cover. It was dotted with dried blood and padlocked heavily. He turned back to Napoleon, dismissing the behavior, and found the dinosaur craning to look *behind* itself. Its head was cocked as though listening to something.

The man exhaled; he was tired of playing dino-games. "Well," he began, preparing to prod it a final time, "here 's one for the road ..."

A pair of headlights suddenly appeared in the distance, from the direction the T was looking. They were moving through the blackness out beyond the perimeter, winking in and out between trees. The man glimpsed the car as it passed beneath a street light: it was a sleek white Saturn, the kind employed by Atrax Security. Its bluish spotlight scanned the area.

S.O. Trevor was making his nightly perimeter check.

The man's pulse quickened. He glanced at his watch, but had to swipe a palm across it to read it clearly. It was 11:19. Damn ... Now what? His heart pounded: *Get out of here*. He triggered the run doors, and they rattled up out of the way.

Napoleon swung his head around and peered down the shaft. His little hands opened and closed; his tail moved back and forth. He strode from the run abruptly, descending the "ladder" into his habitat. The man shut the doors. Then he took the flap of bent mesh in both hands and tried to straighten it.

It was no use, he decided at length. The stuff was stronger than it looked. He gave up and headed for the stairs.

Levi burst into the shop. Trevor was already coming up the hallway, his spit-polished shoes clicking over the tile, his keys jingling in perfect sync. *Damn*, Levi thought. The bastard's log would put him on Blue Level at 11:20—a full 10 minutes behind schedule.

He took up his mop and started mopping.

A moment later Trevor stepped into the room. "Hey Levi."

Levi looked up as if startled. "Trevor! How goes it?"

The guard shrugged. "Same as always. How are ...?" He paused, looking down. "Forget your hip-waders or something?"

Levi glanced at himself; he was soaked from the shins down. "One of the numb-nuts researchers plugged the toilet," he said.

Trevor nodded. "Always helps."

"Yeah, well." Levi shrugged. "Another day, another buck ninety-eight, you know?"

IV | The Escape

Pine needles cycloned wildly as Jan swung her car into the Institute's parking lot. It was 7:30 a.m. Heading in, she found herself mulling over what she'd say to Nimson: *Empirical data? I'll give you empirical data; my tomcat, whom I delivered personally to his new home not three weeks ago, has returned. He has crossed the length of a city to do so, leaving behind an acre of farmland, a barn full of mice, and a harem of willing females. Now, if that doesn't say something about an animal's ability to cognate, or express sentiment, then I don't know—*

She stopped abruptly, staring straight ahead.

"Oh, *my* ..." The briefcase slid from her fingers, striking the concrete with a dull thump, popping its latches. Paper riffled as Napoleon's progress reports scattered on the wind.

The building's front doors had been demolished. They hung from their hinges in shambles, frames bent outward as though racked by an explosion, panes shattered. Splotches of blood dotted the ground, as did something else: a trail of bird-like footprints—each about 17 inches long—which led off into the woods.

A balding man in a tweed jacket staggered into the vestibule; it was Nimson, his face white.

Jan stepped forward. "*Ben?*"

He stumbled through the breach and fell to his knees in the bushes. "It's— it's Levi," he groaned, and vomited.

"Bloody *reptiles*," Oberon Gore cursed, putting his fedora back on. He stepped over Levi's intestines and went to the security monitors, crimsoned water squelching beneath his boots.

Jan burst into the lab an instant later, and gasped. There was blood everywhere. The habitat's exhibition-window—like the doors outside— had been destroyed, and the mock Cretaceous marsh had spilled out onto the floor. Napoleon was gone.

Trembling, she turned to Oberon. "*What happened?*"

The handsome zoo keeper didn't look up; he had sat down and was rewinding the tape from the security camera, "I think that's fairly obvious," he said. "Your specimen has gotten out and killed someone."

He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating an abandoned maintenance cart. "The janitor, apparently. Levi."

Jan glanced down and saw the entrails on the floor. Like monitor lizards, the Nano-T consumed *all* of its prey, spurning only the contents of its stomach and digestive tract. She covered her mouth and looked away.

"Did you see the tracks?" Oberon said. "They head west. And at a fast clip, by the look of it."

Jan nodded, surveying the rest of the room. Oxygen and nitrous oxide cylinders were scattered everywhere (it was amazing the place hadn't gone up in flames), and the walls were cratered as though gouged by a wrecking ball. Most of the computers— her converted IBM among them—had been smashed. However, the two 7-foot-tall mainframes (situated side by side near the center of the lab, like a scale model of the World Trade Center) appeared undamaged. Whether or not they'd been shorted-out by all the water was another question.

“There,” said Oberon, stopping the tape. He motioned her over. “I think you’ll want to see this.”

Dazed, she joined him at the console. Staring over his shoulder as he played the tape back, she saw Levi—a chubby, twentysomething black man dressed in baggy shorts and a T-shirt—push his cart into the lab. Eerie gray video flickered as he steered the omnibus into the center of the room and parked it next to the mainframes.

“Unbelievable,” Oberon whispered, chuckling, but did not elaborate.

Jan hardly noticed. She was looking at Levi’s mop, which stood upside down in its holder at the back of the cart, its soiled yarns dangling like palm tree fronds. The sight gave her a sense of *deja vu*—why, she couldn’t say.

She glanced at the timecode window at the bottom of the screen; it read 11:38 p.m. “It’s all on tape?” she stammered, sitting down. “The killing, I mean?”

Oberon nodded.

“However,” he said, “the camera’s programmed to pan back and forth every 60 seconds. So we won’t see everything.”

Jan nodded distantly, recalling the one time she’d agreed to feed Napoleon a live animal: The T had used its slender jaws and even teeth like pinking shears, lopping off the animal’s head. Not seeing everything was fine by her.

She watched as Levi stooped to the cart’s lowest tier, yanked away a tarp, and came up with the biggest boombox she’d ever seen.

She put a hand over her forehead. “I explicitly said: *no radios!*”

Napoleon was a high-tech carnivore with super-keen senses; his visual, olfactory, and auditory capabilities were unparalleled. Something like *that*, she realized, staring at the footlocker-sized stereo, could blow his eardrums.

"You get what you pay for," Oberon said. "Any laborer will tell you that. I find it amazing how a major corporation will invest millions in its equipment, then pay the guy running it—or maintaining it—a minimum wage." He laughed. "Most companies are rotting from the inside, and they don't even know it."

Jan didn't say anything. If she had bothered to scan the nightly footage just once ...

Levi sat the radio on the floor by Napoleon's window and appeared to turn it on—it was impossible to say for certain; the closed-circuit TV cameras didn't record sound. Then he took up his mop and went to work, spinning his black cap around backwards so that its white "X" emblem faced the camera.

Jan's eyes narrowed. "Where's Napoleon?"

Oberon flicked his gaze to different parts of the screen, as though he'd had something and lost it. "Lying in wait," he whispered, appearing anxious. "*Somewhere.*"

The camera vibrated suddenly. The image blurred—and became clear again. An instant later it happened once more, but this time the pulsing continued, *rhythmically*. The camera, Jan realized, was being rocked by a bass tremor.

Her nostrils flared. "That's a *drum-b—*"

Napoleon dropped into view suddenly. He landed in a crouch, foreclaws splayed, then bounded left across the habitat. It seemed to Jan as though he'd appeared out of nowhere.

"Where'd *he* come from?!" she shouted.

"Up there," said Oberon, indicating the tops of the tree ferns. "He was perched high in the fronds, on that column of basalt."

Jan was aghast. "The radio drove him out?"

"It would appear so, yes," said Oberon.

On the screen, Levi threw his head back and stomped his feet; he'd clearly gotten a charge from the T's reaction. He held the

mop—business-end up—in his right hand as he did so. Again, Jan found herself comparing it to a palm tree.

Palm tree?

Her eyes narrowed as she thought back on the prior day: Hadn't Napoleon kept saying—kept *pecking*, rather, '*Out Eat Habitat?*' Or, translated: Door, drumstick, *palm tree?*

She nodded to herself. He certainly had, and it had seemed utterly incoherent at the time. Now she wasn't so sure. Perhaps Napoleon had been trying to say: '*Out Eat Mop,*' and thus: '*Out Eat Levi.*' After all, if Levi had been blaring his radio every night—which, she now suspected, he had—and causing Napoleon pain, the T would have had a *motive* to kill him.

She blew the hair out of her eyes, watching the janitor caper. "*Dumb* bastard," she sighed.

Oberon—not privy to her thinking but just as disgusted by Levi's antics—shook his head at the screen.

"That's the problem with being a pet-crazed society," he said. "And with keeping zoos, especially. People lose respect. What should be venerated becomes cute, and eventually someone gets hurt. I've seen it happen time and again."

Jan fell silent, considering that. It seemed odd that a man who'd dedicated the last 10 years of his life to zoo-keeping would hold such an extreme view—but was it, really? A formerly renowned bush-hunter and nature-writer, Oberon had appeared on *The Tonight Show* several times in the early '70s, often distinguishing himself from other wildlife experts by focusing on nature's dark side. Perhaps his exploits in Africa had left him with a dim view of animals.

Or of people, she amended, as Levi resumed mopping.

He was working his way left. By coincidence, the pulsing camera panned with him. After a moment, Napoleon rushed by in the

opposite direction, his head and neck pulled back and up, his stiff tail arched high.

"He's gone into a frenzy," Jan sighed.

Oberon didn't say anything, just nodded his head. He stared at the screen expectantly as the camera swept past Levi and continued on.

Squinting, Jan rediscovered the crack in the exhibition-window where Napoleon had struck it the day before. "There," she said. "The smoking gun. Do you see it?"

"Yes," he acknowledged. "But that's not how he got out." The camera reached the end of its trajectory and stopped. "Note the foreground."

Jan looked. She saw a cluster of cylinders standing in the corner, their steely sides covered in warnings: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE; HIGHLY FLAMMABLE; NO SMOKING WITHIN 50 FT ... "Nimson's anesthetics," she whispered. "Of course."

Then a shape loomed up behind the window and Napoleon's feet slapped flat against the glass. Jan jumped. The T rebounded and scrambled away.

She exhaled, pressing a hand to her chest. *Amazing*, she thought. Even without sound, the stark black and white pictures could startle. Then she tensed again, staring at the screen. Levi was backing into the shot, working his mop in a sawing motion. He wasn't watching where he was going.

"Oh no," she whispered.

And all hell broke loose.

Had the cylinders been chained together—as was required by law—things would have been different. But Project Napoleon had been rushed from the start, and at 11:41 p.m. the previous night, the chain needed was still "on order." Thus, the tubes fell like dominoes when Levi's mop-handle butted against them, and the securi-

ty camera—mounted in the upper-right corner of the room, near the ceiling—watched them fall, its reddish eye gleaming.

"Shit!" he cursed, hearing them bang against the floor, and whirled around—

Too late. With a hiss of escaping gas, one of the cylinders took off like a torpedo. He ducked as it whistled overhead and began ricocheting about the room—shattering vials, staving in walls, smashing out lighting fixtures. Levi hit the floor as broken glass rained down, adjusting his cap so that its bill faced forward and protected his face.

The footlocker-sized radio pulsed: *Boom! Boom-boom! Boom! Boom-boom!* Then the cylinder sheared through its center—spilling its electronic guts—and rebounded off the wall behind it, bouncing off yet another cylinder and throwing sparks.

KA-WHAM! There was an explosion. Hot shrapnel scattered; Levi buried his head in his arms; debris spatted his shoulders. Water poured out onto the floor, surging around his knees.

Levi's head spun. *Water*, he thought, *but where—?"*

POOF! Flames and smoke raced blazing up a wall chart, setting off the alarms: first a bell, which clanged continuously, then a horn. Levi heard what sounded like a fire-extinguisher discharging, but louder.

He looked up, smelling smoke, saw clouds of white gas filling the room. The halon system had been activated and was putting out the fire. (The suppressant, of course, was colorless and odorless; it was the propellant he was seeing.) Choking, he climbed to his feet and staggered through the whiteness.

He had to get out; he could hardly breathe. But where was the exit?

He stumbled and groped, yet found nothing. His sneakers made splashing sounds. At last, the halon sputtered out and began sinking to the floor. The alarms fell mute.

Levi pressed a hand to his chest, trying to calm down. He'd see the door in a second, when the smoke and gas cleared—he just had to chill.

He did so, listening to the room. The ruptured cylinder had stopped ricocheting; except for some residual propellant dripping from the nozzles in the ceiling— and the soft swishing of water about his feet—the lab was silent. He frisked himself; he seemed okay, though his lungs were about to—

He paused, looking down. A lily pad drifted lazily past his feet. *The water. But that would mean—*

“*Oh, Jesus,*” he whispered. Then something caught the corner of his eye, and he turned.

The hazy outline of the door had appeared.

He bolted toward it immediately but slipped on the wet floor and fell, *hard*. Water splashed up around him.

“*Jesus-oh-Jesus,*” he mumbled, whirling to look at Napoleon’s exhibition-window.

Gradually, the last of the propellant cleared away, revealing a jagged window-frame and a gaping void. Looking through it into the habitat, he saw the ruptured cylinder lying in the still-draining water, surrounded by the exhibition-window’s floating shards. Napoleon was nowhere in sight.

Levi’s heart pounded. He stood, slowly, but did not flee again. Everyone knew that the T could hear like a devil, and the wet floor was as noisy as it was treacherous. Even—to the T’s ears, he was sure—if taken by degrees. He remained still instead, trying to stay calm until he could see where the animal was (because in truth, it might be *anywhere*).

The nozzles in the ceiling went *drip ... drip ... drip*, and something wet splattered against the bill of his cap. He sidestepped and turned slowly, making a 360-degree scan of the lab. Nothing. The T was still in the habitat, then. Hiding somewhere.

He took a step backward, but paused at the sound of water sloshing against his sneaker. *Damn*. The bastard would come running, for sure. Trembling, he wiped sweat from his brow with the back of a hand. How the hell was he going to get out?

Very carefully, he decided, and took another step backward. Water stirred again. He watched the habitat. Nothing. He continued backing away.

drip ... drip ...

Jeez! he thought, brushing at the top of his visor. It was raining propellant in—

He paused, abruptly. His hand came away trailing a strand of slime.

He looked up.

Napoleon screamed, blowing the cap off his head. The inside of his maw was mottled pink and black.

The last things Levi saw before his senses short-circuited were his own sneakers—from floor level—and the security camera beyond, its reddish eye glinting.

Watching him die.

“Oh God!” Jan blurted, covering her eyes.

On screen, Napoleon stood in a straddling position atop the two mainframe computers—well above the choking mists. He was cocking his head from side to side, watching the blood jet from Levi’s severed neck. Then the body crumpled to the floor and the Nano-T dropped down next to it. He looked from side to side cautiously, then went to work on his kill: pecking at it gingerly to start, then gobbling it down in great gulps.

Mercifully, the camera panned away.

So did Jan, feeling as though she would vomit. She was startled to find Nimson standing beside her, looking at the screen.

“Ben,” she rasped. “I didn’t even hear you come in ...”

She paused, looking at him. He was paler even than before, and soaked with sweat. His entire body trembled as he stared at the screen.

“Ben?”

He turned to face her, his eyes haunted. “I—I ...”

And then he started to fall.

V | Operation Silencer

“Ben!”

Jan reached for him, caught his shoulder. He whirled and fell on her, knocking her from the chair. They toppled to the floor together.

Oberon scooped up Nimson by the armpits. He laid the man in his vacated chair and turned to Jan. “You okay?”

She struggled to her feet. “I’m—I’ll be fine. *How’s he?*”

Oberon examined him; the biologist’s eyes were empty, dead space. “He’s had a breakdown.”

“What? *Good Lord!*” She moved closer. “Ben, can you hear me?”

The biologist didn’t answer.

She loosened his tie. “Look, Ben—this wasn’t your fault. You know that, don’t you? This wasn’t your fault!”

He started to convulse.

“No!” She turned toward Oberon. “We’ve got to get him to a hospi—”

She stopped in mid-sentence. *Oberon was gone.*

“Hold out your hands,” said Oberon, reaching into his truck. The red Ford Ranger was parked askew by the shattered remains of the Institute’s front doors. Its motor idled; Nimson was inside.

Jan held out her hands. Oberon laid a rifle in them.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“That—” He stared at her from the shadow of his hat’s brim, “May be all that stands between you and Napoleon if he returns. Have you ever used one?”

She shook her head, sobering.

“To fire, switch the safety lever off. Then push up and forward on the charging handle, and back. It has an internal magazine of

eight rounds—*eight*, not 18—so don't make like Rambo and fire at everything.”

He climbed into his truck and slammed the door.

Jan stepped up to his open window. “Sure you don’t just want to call an ambulance?”

Oberon buckled up. “Yes.” He glanced at Nimson, who’d stopped convulsing, but was paler than ever. “He may only have time for a one-way trip.” Gears ground as he put the truck in reverse.

“What should I do?” she yelled, while he backed away.

He leaned out his window. “Call the police. Tell them we’ve had an escape: an HIV-infected gorilla. Tell them it’s large, and very dangerous. They’ll put out an APB.”

Jan cringed. She couldn’t do that. He should know—she couldn’t do that! She cupped her mouth: “*Oberon!*”

But he was already gone, tearing from the parking lot onto Snake Road.

Jan stared at the rifle. It was all coming so fast: that the danger wasn’t over hadn’t occurred to her. “*Goddammit!*” she shouted suddenly.

She paced furiously, pressing her hands to her face. *A man’s been killed*, she thought, *the lab’s destroyed*, *Napoleon’s gone ...*

The pager on her belt started beeping. She ignored it, thinking: *Poor Ben looks as though he’s lost his mind. How can things get any worse?*

The pager kept beeping. Finally, she took it up and thumbed it on.

She turned pale, listening.

It was McKibben.

He wanted to know how her project was coming.

The card read:

Lt. Allen J. McKibben, USAF

Sentry Dog Training Branch
Lackland Air Force Base, TX
DOD trunk line: 1-278-7246

She turned it over:

IEOB: OP-SI MUST BE INIT

She sat down.

Op-si? What was that?

Her office was silent. She laid the card on her desk, next to the rifle, and reached for the phone—but paused. Her hand hovered over the receiver.

Maybe I SHOULD call the police, she thought. After all, the nearest military installation was 70 miles away, in Spokane. And McKibben himself was 1,600 miles away, in Texas. What if—for whatever reason—Napoleon struck again?

It would be your fault, she answered herself. *Just as Levi was your fault. Just as Nimson was your fault.* And yet, the government contracts had been clear: NO DISCLOSURE OF ANY KIND. Not even in an emergency; not even by accident. The wording, in fact, had stopped just short of threatening violence on anyone who talked.

Her fingers closed on the receiver. *Jesus ... Who was she kidding?*
She breathed deeply, and picked it up.

There were two phones on Allen McKibben's desk: a black one, for direct communication to the Institute and Jan, and a red one. (A normal phone sat on a nearby cocktail cabinet, but was rarely used.) At approximately 8 a.m., 25 May 1994, just as the young lieutenant was readying to leave—the black one rang.

He picked it up. "McKibben."

The voice at the other end was hesitant. "Al—Allen?"

"Jan ..." He sat down. "Thanks for getting right back. How are things?"

The line buzzed.

Finally, she said: "There's been an accident."

McKibben straightened. "Oh?" His pulse had quickened. "What kind of accident?"

She cleared her throat. "An escape. One of my crew is dead; another incapacitated. Napoleon's gone."

"What?"

He could almost *hear* her cringe—and checked himself. Softening his tone, he asked: "When, exactly, did this happen?"

Static rose up suddenly, making it difficult to hear her. "S-s-s-s—time last night, about 11:45 p. —s-s-s-S-S-S!"

He waited for the static to pass. Finally, he asked: "Do you know where he is now?"

"No." She added quickly: "But his tracks lead west."

McKibben nodded, slowly. "What, precisely, lies in that direction— say, within the next 50 miles?"

The line buzzed; she seemed to think it over. "Well, there's the Federal Campground at Chatter Creek, about 12 miles away. And then there's Chief Joseph ... But Napoleon's ..."

He closed his eyes. It was just as bad as it could possibly be.

"Look, Jan," he broke in, "I want you to listen carefully: I need you to gather your staff into one area—preferably the lab—and keep them there. Can you do that?"

Static flared up again. He heard: "—can't—breakdown. Oberon's—s-s-s-S-S-S!"

He glanced at his watch: 8:03. They were in a race, now.

The static cleared: "—handlers won't be in until five. Do you want me to try and catch them?"

McKibben squinted. "Who?"

"Oberon and Nimson."

McKibben reached for a pen. "Look, reception is horrible at this end; very quickly, I need the locations of all your staff."

She gave him the locations.

“That’s it—that’s everyone with clearance? What about the janitor?”

“He’s—he’s dead.”

McKibben paused. “I see.” He breathed a sigh of relief.

Jan spoke up: “Did you want me to catch Oberon?”

“No.” He took a deep breath; if he wasn’t careful, she might start to suspect something. Calmly, he continued: “No, that won’t be necessary. In fact, I want you to stay *exactly where you are*. Can you do that?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Do it, then. I’ll contact you A.S.A.P.”

He hung up. Then, without a moment’s hesitation, he snatched up the red phone— and punched the pound-sign.

“McKibben, Allen J.,” he said. “Breach imminent. I repeat; *breach imminent*. Initiate.”

And he hung up.

1,600 miles away, on the other side of the country, Operation Silencer began.

VI | Naked Before The Beast

Shapiro and LeBar had been playing poker when the call

came, and that was okay.

Because they hated poker.

They’d been living in what was called “The Barn” for several months, eating C-rations and growing their beards, waiting for an eventuality *nobody* thought would come. It had been cushy duty—just check the helicopter every day and maintain the rifles—but they missed the world.

“The Barn,” as it was known by those who’d stayed there, was in fact a self-sustained habitat; behind its weathered facade lay a

steel structure, complete with hot and cold running water, heating and air-conditioning, a small gym, and a library. It was one of thousands that dotted the countryside from Washington to Maine, and all of them were part of an entity known as S.I.O.P. —Shadow Intelligence Operations. It was S.I.O.P. that would carry out Operation Silencer.

It was Shapiro and LeBar, however, who would do the actual killing.

Shapiro, at least, realized this as he sat in the black helicopter, watching the barn doors part (which, though dilapidated and wooden in their outer appearance, were clean and metallic on the inside). The doors were controlled by a garage door opener inside the chopper.

And he realized it as he armed the 30mm guns, which were mounted discreetly as possible on each side of the chopper, just above the skids (along with two streamlined Hellfire missile-launchers, which he also armed).

But he especially realized it as LeBar slid down the pole—one of two providing fast, simple transport from the loft to the hangar—with his P-H M85 sniper rifle slung from his shoulder. To Shapiro, that just seemed—more *personal*. He shook the thought away.

It didn't matter. This is what he'd been trained to do.

There was a whining sound as the engine engaged and the vanes began to turn, going: *shupe ... shupe ... shupe ...* LeBar climbed in and shut his door. Neither of them spoke as the *shupe ... shupe* became a *thwip-thwip*, and, finally, a thundering: *thump-thump-thump-thump ...!*

Shapiro worked the stick; the chopper lifted slightly. They crept forward into the sun.

"Let's do it," he said into his headset.

LeBar gave him a 'thumbs-up.'

Dust eddied beneath the helicopter's skids as it lifted off. Then, as the barn doors rolled slowly shut, it turned and zoomed away.

Its target: everything, *everyone*, associated with Project Napoleon.

The clock ticked; Jan sat in silence. It was 8:27.

This is good, she thought darkly. She toyed with McKibben's card as she brooded.

The cryptic phrase on its flipside flashed in and out while she turned it. *IEOB: OP-SI MUST BE INIT. IEOB: OP-SI MUST BE—*

She stopped, focusing on that.

What did it mean—*IEOB: OP-SI MUST BE INIT*? She chewed it over. Obviously, it was a string of acronyms ... or quasi-acronyms. But what did they stand for? And why put them on the back of the card?

She rubbed her chin. Hadn't Professor Dalmas said something about that once? That certain government contracts, certain programs, were considered so important as to require a coded "threat" on each and every article involved?

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP ...!

Jan jumped. An alarm was going off on her computer.

She swiveled in her chair and looked at the screen.

It was flashing. It said:

IN EVENT OF BREACH ALARM WILL SOUND
CONSULT OPERATION MANUAL TO SILENCE

"No," she mumbled, and started pressing keys. "*NO ...!*"

Too late; she'd been locked out of her own system. She erupted from her seat and beat on the desk.

Someone or something was erasing her database! Erasing all evidence that Project Napoleon had ever existed! Someone that—

Jan froze.

Slowly, she turned to look at the screen again.

It continued to flash:

IN EVENT OF BREACH ALARM WILL SOUND
CONSULT OPERATION MANUAL TO SILENCE

"Oh my god," she said, and reached for the phone.

McKibben had changed clothes for his meeting with The General; now, instead of his usual drab military uniform, he had on cleated golf shoes, a white golf glove, and a sky-blue alligator shirt with matching slacks.

"Yes," he was saying into a cellular phone, "very good. Proceed."

He hung up and walked around the electric golf cart, to where The General was standing. "SI-OP reports they're underway; an armed chopper left Barn-404 five minutes ago."

"Four-oh-four?" The General gazed off down the green. "Where the hell is that?"

McKibben addressed the back of The General's head. "It's in Washington State, sir. Near Chief Joseph."

The General nodded. "Ah." He stabbed a yellow tee into the ground. "Why 404?"

"It's closest to Chief Joseph, sir."

"Chief Joseph?"

"In Washington State, sir."

"Ah." The General chalked his hands. "And you've secured the data you'll need?"

"Yes, sir. In a way, we're rather fortunate this has happened just now. Certainly, the loss of life will be regrettable; however, the civilian project had about run its course. Now, we can minimize the number of 'wagging tongues,' while at the same time proceeding onto the next phase." The Lieutenant straightened proudly. "We'll have a corps of trained Ts within a year."

The General turned around. "Trained for Sentry duty?"

"Yes, sir. And more."

The General looked at him.

"They're extraordinary animals, sir."

"So I 've heard ..." The General walked around the cart. "Very well, then. Any other questions or concerns?"

"No, sir. Only—only that I hope the purge is successful, and we've no survivors."

The General grabbed a driver from the back of the cart, and prepared to tee off. "There won't be any survivors, Lieutenant. You'll see to that."

McKibben swallowed.

The General teed off.

Jan burst out into the sun, terrified.

She'd had something of an epiphany while staring at her monitor. Something about that phrase: IN EVENT OF BREACH ALARM WILL SOUND/CONSULT OPERATION MANUAL TO SILENCE. It had reminded her of the code on the back of McKibben's card, the cryptic: *IEOB: OP-SI MUST BE INIT*. Was it possible, she'd wondered, that the phrase on the card was just a shortened version of: *In Event of Breach: Operation Silencer Must Be Initiated?* She'd thought so, and done the unthinkable.

Five minutes after McKibben had hung up, she'd attempted to contact the Chief Joseph Police Department—and *found the line dead*. (Magically, all service had been cut.) Now, as she rushed to catch up with Oberon, she felt as though she were running for her life.

Because her every instinct was: She and her crew were being set up. She didn't know why, or what for, she just—

Reaching her Hyundai, she slung the rifle over her shoulder and grasped the door handle ...

Then stopped, cold.

She'd locked her keys inside.

"*SHIT!*" She pounded the roof with her fists.

Cursing, she ran her fingers between the drip molding and the top of the window; she'd left it open a crack—thank God.

Catching her breath, she scanned the area: The 'right' stick might be all she needed.

Sunlight lay harsh and yellow across the parking lot; except for Levi's Rambler, and Nimson's '67 Corvette (parked sideways, of course, in front of the maintenance drive), the place was barren.

She sprinted for the trees. Surely, she could find something there. Her arms and face were warm; her olive skin became shiny with sweat.

She left the pavement, jogging to a halt on a carpet of pine needles. Looking around, she found nothing. Birds chirped, flitting from branch to branch, and a wasp buzzed her face. She went further into the trees.

A moment later, she stopped.

A slight, cool breeze blew; something wet landed in her hair. She brushed at it absently—while out of the corner of her eyes spying the 'ideal' branch. She bent to pick it up.

And froze.

There in the scrub, illuminated by a dash of sun and twisted almost beyond recognition—lay Napoleon's copper ankle-band.

"Oh, *my* ..." she whispered, trailing off. She straightened.

And saw a van parked among the trees.

She squinted.

The van's windows were smashed, its doors dented. It looked as though it had been attacked.

Plink!

She looked down.

Something had plinked off the ankle-band—leaving a stain. The stain was maroon; its edges ran. She looked up ...

The tree limbs were hung with human bodies. (Two males, part of a female.) They were dripping blood.

She cupped her mouth and fainted dead away.

She was elsewhere and elsewhere.

She was in the habitat—actually in it, not seated at her workstation on the other side of the glass. She was standing before Napoleon in her white lab coat, which, inexplicably, she unzipped and shirked from her shoulders, allowing it to slide to the marshy floor. She didn't know how she had gotten there or how time had rewound so that the habitat and its great glass window were still intact ... she only knew she was there to take the experiment to the next level. And as Napoleon looked down at her with eyes that had become strangely human, she knew that *he knew* why she was there as well ...

And then she was awake as fast as she'd gone out, and she was standing, slowly, amongst the trees again ... wondering why she would dream such a thing. And wondering, too, about the hidden obsessions each and every human being might harbor in the darkest recesses of their subconscious. And then she scanned the trees, realizing, suddenly, that they were swaying—even though there was no wind—and saw Napoleon glaring back at her.

Napoleon hesitated, sniffing the Watcher. There were many smells with this One ... many comparisons. More than any he had found (and killed) thus far, this One reeked of The Bad Watcher.

And yet, like the last four—and though he couldn't name numbers, he could count, just as parrots could—this One bore a subtle difference ... an essence unique to itself. Regardless, the T had other means by which it could apprehend prey: Its eyes, for example, which were sharp as an eagle's, and its ears which were keen as a wolf's.

And these told him that indeed it *was* the Bad Watcher, for its head was draped in the same dark mane and it chattered as though trying to communicate (albeit with a new, softer voice).

And so he attacked.

Seen from the sky, the Ford Ranger might have been a mere TONKA toy, following a winding road through a miniature forest.

For Oberon, charged with keeping all four of the Ranger's wheels on the pavement, that forest seemed anything *but* miniature. In fact, it seemed down right menacing as the evergreens blew past—each and every one of them a candidate for collision.

He glanced at Nimson. "Don't worry. My pilot's license is good."

The truck rocked; the biologist didn't respond.

Oberon stared forward.

"You know," he said, "we could've done this a *lot* easier in your car."

Nimson remained mute, gazing out the window.

"Yeah," sighed Oberon, "I know ...Fat chance."

The cab fell silent again.

Oberon checked his speedometer. They were doing about 50. Not bad, considering how tortuous the road was. Oberon figured an ETA of roughly 20 minutes. If he could keep Nimson relaxed, possibly even get him talking, he believed everything would be all right.

"Music?" He clicked on the radio. Listening, he heard the L.A. Police Chief explaining to the press how he and his men had brought in The 'Cuda, the celebrated linebacker accused of murder. "Helluva thing, that," he said.

Nimson didn't budge.

"To throw away everything," he continued, "for an obsession. And to throw it away not just for yourself, but for your victims, your family ... How does something like that happen?"

The truck swayed; Nimson stared out his window.

Oberon became reflective. "You know ... I was watching him on the news this morning ... watching him plead ... and I couldn't shake the look on his face ... the look ... of someone who had utterly

lost himself. It was haunting; especially on the face of such an icon. And it brought to mind—I don't know why—a line I'd heard in a movie; that horror film with Jeff Goldblum—what was it? *The Fly*. When Goldblum is trying to explain his metamorphosis into an insect, he says: *I am a fly who dreamed he was a man, but now the dream is over.*"

The truck bounced over a rough section of road, and the zoo keeper grinned. "See?" He seemed embarrassed at having rambled. "That's what you'll have to listen to if you don't ..." He trailed off.

Nimson was *crying*.

VII | The Revelation

Jan had about three seconds to react when Napoleon jumped; fortunately, she had un-slung the rifle during the standoff and chambered a round. She was able to get off a shot *and* dive for cover as the T leapt through the air.

POP!

She slid into the bramble. Napoleon's feet hit the ground nearby. She screamed ...

And realized the gun was no longer in her hands.

She scrambled to her feet—and bolted. The tree branches seemed to grab at her. They whipped at her face, and at her outstretched hands. Her heart pounded.

Somewhere behind her, Napoleon howled.

And then he was coming ... she could hear him bounding after her. And good Lord—he was coming fast. She pumped her legs harder.

Clearly, her shot had missed.

She burst from the trees, suddenly. She was in the Institute's parking lot again. Napoleon snarled close behind her—just how close she couldn't tell. But she knew this: she would never make it to the Institute's front doors. And even if she did, there'd be nothing to stop Napoleon from following her inside.

And then she saw Nimson's Corvette, shining Marina Blue in the sun.

Yes! she thought. *Yes, that might work!*

She veered toward it. *Please God! Let it be open.*

It was. She got in and slammed the door.

Napoleon struck the car—knocking it sideways. Jan fell against the passenger seat. The Sting Ray's cockpit was rocked by noise as the driver's door crumpled in. “*NO!*” she screamed.

And then there was silence.

She stared at the passenger door's trim panel. The clock on the dashboard ticked. She brushed the hair from her eyes ... *had he backed off?*

Slowly, she sat up. A warm wind blew in through the Sting Ray's passenger window. It was partially ...

SSS-KRASH! Napoleon's beak darted in—then slammed to a stop. Shatterproof glass cracked. Jan shrieked. The T's nose touched her own. It snorted like a horse and she gagged—its breath was thick with the smell of flesh. She babbled insanely as she dove into the back of the car.

Napoleon grunted, trying to disengage. He had attacked in classic Nano-style: his long head tilted sideways. (Maximizing the narrowness of his snout.) But he was having difficulty escaping the glass.

Jan crawled into the 'Vette's storage area. The space was crowded with junk: a pair of shitty-smelling work boots, a ball cap, a nylon— a nylon stocking (that was odd) a shock ...

A *shock prod?* She tossed aside a lab coat—which smelled even worse than the boots—and inspected the 36-inch metal tube. Two thoughts struck her: one, she could use the thing to defend herself. And two, there was no reason *whatsoever* for it to be in Nimson's trunk.

The car shook as Napoleon pulled himself free.

Trembling, Jan closed her fingers on the prod. Then, from the corner of her eye, she glimpsed something else—something in the left corner of the compartment.

Something *hair*y.

She reached out to touch it—and felt soft netting, like the mesh base inside ... *Hub* ...? Confused, she pulled it into the light.

It was a wig of long black hair, so like her own she might have been holding her own scalp.

Meanwhile, in the shadows beneath the car, a small digital clock wired to three cylinders and a battery continued to count—clicking off the seconds until 9 a.m.

It was 8:46.

“You *what*?”

The truck swerved; Oberon got a grip on himself. He could not believe what Nimson had just said.

“I—I did it,” the biologist stammered. “I caused everything—I *murdered* Levi.”

“Bullshit,” said Oberon.

“No. It’s all true.” The biologist gazed out his window, taking in the mountains. “I wanted to sabotage her project ... I wanted ... She was making too much progress, disproving all my theories! I had to do something ... So I formulated a plan—I guess that sounds pretty pathological—and put it into use. I ...” He laughed brusquely. “I called it: ‘The Nimson Experiment.’”

Oberon didn’t say anything, just stared at him. The winding road had straightened somewhat; they were climbing now. On Nimson’s side of the truck, the land dropped away sharply. The view was staggering.

Nimson went on: “I started by harassing the animal with—all things—a mop. Not just any mop, but one with a shock prod lashed to it. I wanted the animal to think I was the janitor, you see. I wanted to see if it would hold a grudge—if it would *remember*. I even wore one of Levi’s grotesque, sweat-soaked ball caps to enhance the effect. And I pulled a nylon stocking over my head, also, to cloud my features. You see, it doesn’t see us. Not really. Oh, it can see like an eagle, of course, don’t get me wrong. I’m saying it can’t

see our *faces*. It can't tell if a person's handsome or homely, male or female, black or white—"

"Get to the point," said Oberon.

"If you'll allow me to finish, you'll see I am 'getting to the point.' And part of the point is because the animal had never really *smelled* anyone, in large part due to Vasquez's insistence on a glass barrier instead of bars, I was able to convince the T that I *was* Levi; just as later, I was able to trick it into thinking that I was Vasquez. And *that's* what the point is: that with the help of a few props—a wig, for instance—I was starting to turn Vasquez's own specimen against her. The idea, naturally, being to make it unresponsive to her language experiments."

Oberon looked at him with something like pity. "You sound proud."

Nimson turned to face him. "I was. I ... just didn't count on anyone dying. If the T sees human beings as something to be feared, something to be killed on sight—it's—it's because of me."

Oberon, who had kept his feelings pretty much hidden until now, started laughing—quietly at first, then louder and more brazenly. At last, he pulled a flask of whiskey from the folds of his coat and took a hearty swig. He replaced it quickly and took the wheel in both hands, chuckling sporadically.

Nimson looked at him as though *he* were mad. "This is funny to you?"

Oberon shook his head, watching the road. "It's you scientists," he said, still tittering. "The world's just one big petri dish to you, isn't it?"

"To me, perhaps," Nimson admitted. "To Vasquez—it's a big misunderstood child."

"Let me tell you something," said Oberon, taking out a cigar. "Thanks to you, everyone's precious *specimen* has just become a mankiller. If that weren't bad enough, he has ingested what he's

killed—which makes him a man-eater, too.” He paused, lighting the cigar.

“A tiger turned man-eater can kill up to 17 people in less than a month—often taking them from their very homes in the middle of crowded townships. A Nano-T, which is bigger, faster, and better equipped, could kill someone *every day*.”

He blew smoke at Nimson; it was sweet-smelling and cloying in the confines of the pickup. Then he pulled over suddenly, and slammed on the brakes.

“*Get out*,” he said.

Nimson looked at him; the engine idled. “You—you can’t be serious.”

The rugged zoo keeper glared at him.

Reluctantly, Nimson opened his door. He climbed out into the sunshine slowly.

Oberon leaned across the seat, and pulled the door closed. Then he put the Ranger in gear and made a U-turn ... tearing back down Snake Road toward the Institute.

Watching him go, Nimson felt a surge of terror.

Hadn’t the T’s tracks led west? Christ ... what if it was somewhere close? There’d be nowhere to run. No place to hide.

The wind blew; he scanned the trees.

Scale-like cypress leaves danced, wiggling. He heard a low noise. A soft, *thump-thump-thump-thump* ...

He walked out to the center of the road. He hadn’t a clue what that sound was, but he felt better—safer—out here in the open, with black pavement beneath his oxfords, and a painted yellow line to guide the way. Surely, there’d be someone to happen along. A semi, perhaps. Or a ...

Thump-thump-thump-thump ...

What the hell was that?

He scanned the trees again. No ... No, it wasn't emanating from there. So where ...?

Thump-thump-thump-WHAP-WHAP-WHAP ...!

He peered skyward.

It was a helicopter. It was coming on fast. *It was here.*

"Hey!" he shouted, X-ing his arms.

The black helicopter roared overhead with a blast of wind.

He whirled, watching it fly away ...

Damn.

Then, to his amazement, it began circling back, swooping low over the treetops to within a hundred feet of him. There it hovered.

WHAP-WHAP-WHAP-WHAP ...

Nimson moved forward, waving. *I'm saved*, he thought. *I'm ...* He came to a halt, suddenly.

The chopper was armed. He saw sunshine glinting off coils of ammo.

He lowered his arms. Wasn't it *against the law* for civilian aircraft ...

The chopper opened up—its 30mm guns blazing. Nimson danced like a marionette. He sparked from head to foot, throwing off blood.

By the time he landed in a ditch on the far side of the road, he'd been shot 300 times.

VIII | Sound and Fury

KRACK! KA-KRACK! KRACK!

Jan screamed. Napoleon had perched on the Sting Ray's roof, and was butting the rear window with the top of his head. The T was a tempest; she couldn't see much from the car's tiny storage area—just his feet, and the tip of his snout when he struck—but she could see his color clearly.

It was blood-red.

She curled into a ball in the farthest corner of the storage area. Her heart raced. She switched on the shock prod, awaiting the inevitable.

KRACK! KRACK!

She gritted her teeth.

You did something to him, didn't you, Ben? Rather than admit he was cognitive, you used a shock prod and a wig to make him crazy as you are.

She nudged yet closer to the trunk's walls—her right hand brushing a taillight's inner casing. It wouldn't be long now ...

There was a ringing sound, and she paused. She ran her hand back over the casing. *Yes*— She took the object off its hook, and held it out to the light.

It was a key.

Moreover, it was a key emblazoned with crossed-flags—the insignia for “Corvette.” She turned and poked at the taillight, which popped out and clattered on the pavement. *Clever bastard.*

KRACK! KRACK!

She closed her fingers on the key, making a fist. The tide had turned, it seemed. If she could make it to the driver's—

KRASH!

The Corvette's rear window caved in; Jan jumped. The Nano-T squawked, hopping over the window frame. She heard one of its feet hit the fiberglass above her as it ran down the fastback ... and dropped to the pavement. *Now what was he doing?* she thought—then woke up, scrambling from the storage area. She clenched the key between her teeth, and the prod in her right hand.

KROOM! The car jolted. She fell between the seats. Metal *tinged!* as the key bounced into the gear well.

“Shit!” she cursed, running her fingers around the bellows.

SCRAWNK! Napoleon screamed, blowing her hair forward. She spun around—

His head was *inside* the car. He was lunging at her through the broken rear window.

Jan shrieked, but calmed, suddenly. He couldn't reach her. Not from where he was standing. She was safe—

The talons of his left foot curled over the molding. He began to hitch himself up.

“NO!!” she screamed—and crammed the shock prod's tip into his mouth.

Sparks exploded from between Napoleon's jaws. They shot out between his teeth. He howled and pulled away, his beak-like muzzle smoking.

Jan turned, continuing to search for the key and found it almost immediately. Climbing into the driver's seat, she reached around the steering column ...

And froze.

Jesus, where was the ignition switch?

She scanned the twin-cowled dash; *there, lower right instrument panel* ... She jammed the key in.

KER-KRUNK! Napoleon landed on the hood.

She gripped the gearshift and put in the clutch.

Napoleon pulled his head and neck back, standing erect. His whole body appeared to undulate as he prepared to charge the windshield.

Jan turned the key; the 'Vette's 427 roared. Nimson's radio blared as she put the car into gear:

*...and that was, "Last Dance," by Donna Summers.
Speaking of summers ... you probably couldn't have
sailed through the summer of '77 without hearing
this little jingle:*

She eased off the clutch ...

(Here comes The King ...) Here comes The King, here comes The Big Number One!

The Sting Ray lurched—and stalled.

(Here comes The King ...) Budweiser Beer The King is second to none!

Napoleon launched himself at the windshield.

(When you say Bud—) The King is coming ...

KRACK! The top of his head hit the glass. Jan recoiled.

Let's hear the Call ...

She wrenched on the shifter, trying different gears. Its knob was a polished chrome ball, with no gear diagram.

When you say Bud you've said it all! (When you say Bud you've said it all ...

Napoleon rammed the window repeatedly. **KRACK! KRACK ...!**

LA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-HA-DA-DA-DA ...! (Here Comes The King ...)

Jan popped the clutch. The car leapt forward. And died.
“No,” she moaned.

KRASH!!! Napoleon's jaws burst through the glass.

IX | The Vanishing

Oberon glanced at his watch; it was 8:51. He'd arrive back at the Institute in approximately nine minutes. A good thing—considering there was a pissed-off dinosaur with every reason to hate humans (especially Jan) wandering the woods. Worse, Oberon didn't think it would wander long before realizing the world had changed; not just in its immediate environment, but *everywhere*. When that happened ... it'd be back. Back to the Institute, where it would find Jan—

She has a gun, he assured himself. *She'll be okay*.

Regardless, he eased the Ranger up to 55 mph.

Unnoticed in his outside mirror, a black helicopter appeared on the horizon.

"Got him," Shapiro announced into his headset.

LeBar didn't turn around. He was scanning the fir trees for signs of the Nanotyrannus. "Take him out."

Shapiro nodded. He placed the target—a red pickup which appeared to be the zoo keeper's—in the crosshairs of his helmet display. Then, configuring a single, air-to-ground missile, he lay his thumb over the firing mechanism and pressed down.

Thump!! There was a shower of sparks outside his window, and a Hellfire missile went screaming toward its target.

Seconds later, the zoo keeper's truck erupted into a fireball.

"Good shot," said LeBar.

"Hole in one," said Shapiro.

Both of them knew it was too late for redemption.

The phone rang just as McKibben was about to tee off. "Ah, a report," he told The General. "SI-OP has probably located the truck."

He went to the back of the cart and picked up the receiver. "McKibben."

The man talked fast: "Lieutenant? Sergeant Broughton, DHQ. Sir, *we have a problem.*"

McKibben raised a brow. "A problem? At the *de-hibernation* center?"

"Yes, sir. I—I don't know how to say this, sir. It ... It would seem the cryo-cells are missing."

"Run that by me again?"

"The cells, sir, containing the other Nano-Ts. It seems as though they've vanished."

"*What?*"

"There's more, sir. The excavation camp in Montana reports a similar occurrence. Apparently, the anomaly is missing, too."

"The slab?! It's a hundred feet long!"

"Yes, sir. I—nobody knows— Jesus. Sir, I don't know what to say. You'll have to talk to them. All I know is—when we came in this morning the cells were gone. The MPs who were here can tell us nothing; they're ... They said ..." He trailed off.

"Sergeant! *What* did they say?"

"They're out of their minds, sir; it's as if they're drunk. Surely—"

"*What did they say happened to the cryo-cells?*"

Broughton hesitated; the line crackled. Finally, he cleared his throat.

“They said *God* came in the night, and took them.”

• • • •

X | Heaven and Hell

Jan huddled beneath the dash, trembling, as Napoleon fished around for her. He'd broken through the windshield of the Sting Ray with his snout, but when she had ducked, had bitten the seat instead of her. Now the seat was obliterated, its stuffing floating about like chicken feathers, and the T's head was snaking around the cockpit. Finally, in frustration, Napoleon closed his jaws on the passenger seat.

The radio blared:

It's 8:58, and you're listening to Music Continuum 1994. I'm Kevin Coyle. Let's flash ahead now to some of today's music, starting with this little ditty from hip-hopper M.C. Wang. On The Continuum, it's: "Me So Horny ..."

Boom! Boom-boom!

Jan's eyes lit up suddenly. *My God*, she thought. *The radio ... That's it!*

She had a chance. It meant exposing an arm to the animal's jaws—but it was a chance. Without hesitating, she reached up quickly and felt for the volume control.

Boom! Boom-boom!

Napoleon tore off the top of the seat, and shook it wildly. Gray stuffing flew everywhere. It appeared to be snowing as Jan groped ...

Where the hell was the radio?

She stuck her head out. *There. Between the twin cowl.*

And then Napoleon saw her arm, dropped what was left of the seat, and struck at her.

She found the knob, turned it.

BOOM! BOOM-BOOM!

Napoleon screeched. He lifted his head, banging it against the ceiling. He withdrew from the window immediately.

Jan scrambled out from beneath the dash. Taking the wheel, she put in the clutch and grabbed the shifter but froze before she could turn the key.

There was a black helicopter hovering above the trees. An *armed* black helicopter.

And it was pointed at her—not Napoleon.

She started the car.

Napoleon looked skyward, his ears still ringing, and whimpered softly.

Something was up there. Something black, unnatural, Something ...

Something he had seen *before*.

He threw his head back suddenly, baying at the sky.

The Shape had returned.

“Holy shit,” mumbled Shapiro, looking at the dinosaur. The truth was: he’d never really expected it to exist.

A few yards away from it, the Corvette lurched—and stopped. LeBar nudged him. “Take out the car; I’ll get the animal.”

Shapiro nodded. “Right.” He turned his head, leveling the helmet’s sights on the ‘Vette.

It lurched again ... and stopped. He saw the driver beat her fists on the wheel.

LeBar stepped up to the sliding door, shouldering his M-85.

"Give me some rotation—about 40 degrees."

Shapiro rotated the helicopter. The 30mm cannons slaved to his helmet swiveled slowly, staying on the Corvette.

LeBar muscled the door open, letting in a blast of air. He stepped out onto the landing skid carefully. "*I'm in place*," he shouted, buckling in.

There was no response. He tapped his headset. "Shap! Do you copy?"

"I—I copy."

LeBar peered through his scope at the dinosaur. "You gonna be Okay?"

Another pause. "She looks like my daughter."

LeBar grimaced. He placed his crosshairs between the Nano-T's eyes. "So did your last girlfriend, Shap. Let's do what we came here to do."

"Right."

LeBar looked at his watch. "We'll want to coordinate this, so the big guns don't scare off the T. It's 8:59 now. We'll fire at 9:00."

"Copy."

"8:59:07 ..."

"What's it looking at, you think?"

"What?"

"The dinosaur. I thought it was looking at us, but now I'm not sure. What do you see through your scope?"

"*It doesn't matter, Shapiro!* Are you with me: 8:59:15 ..."

"Because it seems to be looking *beyond us*. Jesus ... look at its eyes. McKibben told me it can see things as far away as—"

"You goddamn coward, Shapiro! Don't crack up on me. We're at 8:59:25—are you ready?"

"OH MY GOD! GOD! DO YOU SEE IT?"

LeBar ignored him. "8:59:28 ..."

"LEBAR!"

"8:59:30 ..."

A shadow fell over the helicopter, and LeBar looked up.

'God' was right.

Jan leaned on the steering wheel, gazing skyward, and tried to decide whether to rejoice or scream. She did both.

Descending on the chopper was a giant black slab, surely no less than 500 feet long. And though she'd never visited the excavation in Montana, she knew this was the same thing. (Not the same craft, of course, but the same intelligence.) And she knew why it was here.

It was here for Napoleon.

Pop! Pop! Pop! There was a sound like firecrackers. She focused on the chopper; the man in its door was firing at the slab.

Idiots! she thought, and grabbed the door handle. And then she saw the twisted metal, the broken fiberglass, and remembered that Napoleon had crumpled the door in.

It was jammed.

The aircraft drifted. Shapiro watched the slab. There was a terrible *hum* emanating from it—as if it might explode. And it looked as though it were turning ... yes ... rotating—

It opened suddenly. White light flooded his cockpit.

It was blinding, beautiful. Shapiro laughed.

Everything was clear, now. There was no cause for fear. He had only to accept the light, to embrace it ...

To fly into it, so he could be redeemed.

His watch beeped suddenly; it was 9:00. The Sting Ray, now directly below him, exploded.

And while he gazed transfixed at Heaven—Hell dragged him down. Crushing him with its fiery fingers.

XI | The Return

Jan gasped, covering her mouth, as the helicopter fell into the flames. She'd escaped the car through the passenger door, only seconds before the explosion. Now she cowered near the Institute's front doors, or what was left of them, wondering why the vehicle had blown.

It didn't matter.

Watching Napoleon, she realized it was over.

The T was standing by the car's burning wreckage, his great head turned toward the sky. He was waiting patiently as dancing bands of light engulfed him like a cocoon.

Perhaps he was going home.

Jan watched the entire process; first the cocooning effect, then the show of light as the T was lifted into the belly of the ship. Then the slab closed again, its mighty hum fading, and moved off, causing the treetops to sway in its wake.

Exhausted, she slumped to the pavement.

Was it really over?

Flames crackled; a half-hour passed.

There was a distant: *Thump-thump-thump-thump ...*

With considerable effort, she lifted her head.

Another helicopter was coming.

Slowly, she climbed to her feet. It was coming from the direction of Chief Joseph. She shielded her eyes, trying to pick out its markings.

In the sun's glare, she read:

KIRO 4
ACTION NEWS

And then she smiled.

Now it was.

The End

