

THE COMPLETE ADVENTURES OF
ANK & WILLIAMS

by
Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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Tales from the Flashback: “The Ank Williams Story”

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A Short 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, Googie-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-hand-some 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 girls 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 happened 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.

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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 talking 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.

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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.

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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 cor-

ral's fencing, surrounded by the townsfolk who had pressed against its perimeter and trained their rifles and pistols upon 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, stoically.

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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.

A Dinosaur is a Man's Best Friend

A novel set in the *Flashback* universe

I

< **T**he 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 rub-

ble, 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 Niara-da—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 Eastlake. 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 clic 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 some-

thing 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 kneeling 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 pulsated 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 count-

ing 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-foot-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 Lonepine 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 on-to 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, fleetier."

“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 intro-

duce 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 elsenwhen even as it transported 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 Kat-

rina 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 Flashback 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 theropod 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 sens-

ing 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. Breath 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 ever since he could remember, ever 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 in-to 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 sand-bagged 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 SPINTED, GALLOPING and swerving around the hard-scrabble 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 Abriman, to Azazel and Mastema, to Al-Shaitan and Samael and Kōls-ki 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 eradication 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.

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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.

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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.

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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 stegosaurs 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 stegosaurs 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.

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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 sandbagged 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.

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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 ...>*

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“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.

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<*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.

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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, splattering 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 cost-ly. 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 Gojira'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.

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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 Gojira 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 memo-

ry 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 clasping 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.

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The End

