

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO
THE DINOSAUR APOCA-
LYPSE

–3–

“Ride”

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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The Flashback/Dinosaur
Apocalypse Cycle

Flashback

(re-printed in *Dinosaur Apocalypse*)

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Flashback Dawn

(re-printed in *Dinosaur Apocalypse*)

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Tales from the Flashback

(re-printed as *Dinosaur Rampage*)

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Flashback Twilight

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

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

• • • •

A Reign of Thunder

(serialized as *Heat Wave*)

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A Survivor's Guide to the
Dinosaur Apocalypse

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I switched off the loudspeaker. "We need ideas—fast."

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

"That's *bullshit*, man," snapped Lazaro. "There's a machine gun on top of this thing."

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

"He's right," I said. "It's no good. Those people aren't just human barriers—they're hostages. We start fooling around with that gun ... and

they're toast." I keyed the mic of my radio. "Sea One, this is Away Team Alpha. Come back."

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

Our radios squawked. "Go ahead."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Negative, I repeat, negative. It's too tight in here. Just stand by."

Atticus, meanwhile, was still going on: "... ever seen a pack of allosaurs take down a diplodocus? That's what this was like. Just hit and

run, hit and run, until the big dumb bastards collapsed from their own weight. Now they're dead—and a bunch of skinny anarchists have AR-15s ...”

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

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

“What is it?” asked Sam, sounding concerned.

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

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

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

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

“Yes, I understand!”

“Good. Now—Joan. Where are you, girl?”

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

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

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

Atticus, meanwhile, had been counting down. "Three ... two ... *one*." He sighed and lowered the megaphone—then lifted it to his mouth again. "The problem with you, Jaime, is that you just—don't—listen. Now I just explained to you what was going to happen if I reached 'one' and you hadn't come out, and *goddamn*ed if you didn't come out. So. What's going to happen now is that we're going to kill one of these people for every 30 seconds you remain inside the vehicle—starting immediately." He directed the bullhorn at the upper floors of one of the buildings. "Hershel? You awake up there?"

"Get ready," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’re at 18 seconds and counting, James,” said Atticus. “Best clean your glasses and get with it.”

“Seventeen, 16, 15 ...”

“Okay! Okay. We’re depressurizing. Right ... *now*.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t know, I think so,” she said. “They’re scrambling, I saw that much.”

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

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

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

"But I don't know—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Okay. I’ll try,” I said, and tapped the gas pedal.

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

We’d survived the Dinosaur Apocalypse. Again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We want you to too,” said Lazaro.

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

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

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

And it was on the tip of my tongue to suggest we actually go in and have a drink—or five—when Joan’s body seized up like a vice and her voice became muffled, at which I squinted through Lazaro’s window and

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

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

The Flashback will continue in the next installment of *A Survivor's
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