

## Foreword

This is an unauthorized novelization of the movie known alternately as “Mad Max 2” or “The Road Warrior” or a combination thereof, produced in 1982 by Warner Bros, written by Terry Hayes and George Miller with Brian Hannant, produced by Byron Kennedy, directed by George Miller. As such, the characters, events, and most of the dialogue within are theirs, not mine; I take credit only for the way they are portrayed herein. I elected to use the American name of the film for the novelization. Since I do not have any rights to this work, I am not charging for it – consider it a work of fan fiction, if you like. It's certainly my first novel-length piece of work.

There is, or at least *was*, an official novelization of the film titled *Mad Max 2*, by the screenwriter Terry Hayes – while I had found only the version in French when I searched before starting my own, it was available in English as well (thanks to self-professed rabid fan Curtis for this correction.) Good luck if you're trying to find either.

A few things have changed from the film, partially due to my perception of how events were more likely to occur, partially due to seeking a different flow, partially due to creativity. Many people take offense when a movie adaptation of a book is significantly different, and while I won't say that the differences herein are significant (at least, for *this* version,) if the reverse also bothers you, you have at least been forewarned.

Personally, I have always been impressed with the quality of the film, which I suspect passed the attention of many because it is not the subject matter or genre of a “classic.” This is a shame, since a lot of work clearly went into the nuances and portrayals, the subtle impressions and communications. I have tried to capture as many of these as I found, and introduced a few more. Some might disagree with my perceptions.

When you return to the movie, take careful note of the continuity, perhaps the best I've ever seen. I want to congratulate Mr. Miller on his attention to the details of damages, injuries, and even attitudes.

As I write this, the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* is due to be released in less than two weeks, part of the reason I pushed to have this done. I have purposefully only seen one trailer for the film, but it was clear that it is a re-imagining of the same story as *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*. I won't guess at how they will compare, but I felt obligated to put down my impressions and interpretation of the original before being influenced by the new version.

Please feel free to distribute this as you see fit, but it *is* a copyrighted work, and I ask that you keep it intact in its original form. If someone ends up quoting it or excerpting it for purposes of review, criticism, or satire, that's fine, but otherwise it remains my personal work and I'd like to retain recognition of *that*, at least. If you would like to offer feedback, I can be reached through my website (completely and utterly unrelated in subject matter) at <http://wading-in.net>

- Al Denelsbeck, May 5, 2015

**The Road Warrior**  
An unauthorized novelization by Al Denelsbeck

First e-book and PDF production  
May, 2015 by Al Denelsbeck

## Prologue

An enemy isn't a special person, or even a personality type. It's simply someone who feels that they've been antagonized by someone else, and seeks revenge, or justice, or recompense. It doesn't matter whether the event could even be rationally considered as antagonistic in the eyes of anyone else; at such times, rational consideration is rare. All that matters is how motivated someone is to pursue their retribution.

Any sequence of events can be traced back to a single point, a pivotal moment when fate could have nudged things in any direction, but in only one would the *story* unfold, a chain rather than unrelated, singular experiences. No one can see these as they occur; they're not known by anything other than hindsight.

## Chapter One

From high up, things were peaceful. Kilometers of desert stretched in all directions, bisected by a straight and unremarkable line of asphalt, a road connecting what used to be two important points, but now simply crossing the red, dry soil. It would not be hard to miss the four vehicles dotting this road, following it as if there were someplace to be. A closer look reveals the urgency, the high speed that they maintain, engines straining, their whines harsh with proximity but soon lost to the wind. Only up close does the tension become apparent.

In front, maintaining some distance from the other three, a car that was once sleek and black many years ago hurtled down the road, an alpha-male of vehicles. The V-8 engine under the hood was rare enough to find in ages past, almost unheard of now, but more notable was the scoop and blurred pulley of a supercharger, slamming fuel into the manifold to feed pistons moving too fast for normal air pressure to please. This was a car to run fast, dedicated to pursuit. Or at least, it had been at one time, ages past. Modified now with huge fuel tanks where the trunk had been, it was now a car to survive in a land where gasoline was scarce and came at a price all out of proportion to its former glory days.

The Driver, weathered by a life spent only surviving, looked almost like a pile of discards – hair trimmed with a knife, face shaven the same way, dressed in relics of those ages past but dotted with items pertaining to the conditions found now. Style was a thing long forgotten; function was all that mattered, and one's life might depend on it. The leather jacket, stifling in the desert heat, served nonetheless as armor and had the scars to prove it; the boots turned aside everything from twisted metal to venomous snakes. The left leg modeled a jointed metal brace, filling in for portions of the natural joint that had fallen victim to a bullet long ago. The thin leather gloves were necessary for long periods behind the wheel, especially when grip and dexterity were factors of life or death – like now. In the ersatz passenger seat beside him sat a cattle dog looking no better than the Driver, but watching the road unroll with the *sang froid* of a seasoned traveler, unconcerned with the three vehicles in pursuit.

Behind, an ancient sedan, a motorcycle, and a buggy that was little more than a cobbled-together frame with crash cage all jockeyed for position in a desperate attempt to catch the fleeing car. To some out here, life wasn't what you could find, it was what you could *take*, and a supercharged V-8 was a prize all by itself, regardless of how full those tanks were, or what else could be scrounged from inside. But the very appeal of the vehicle was what presented the problem, since catching it would not depend on outrunning it, almost impossible, but on the Driver making some fatal mistake. And like hunters flushing the quarry to a blind hollow, the three pursuing knew that all they had to do was keep their prey moving too fast to cope with their deadfall ahead.

The desert wasn't perfectly flat, undulating gently at times, and as the lead car crested a rise the Driver and dog saw it at the same time: a cluster of burnt-out vehicle carcasses spanning the road, itself bordered by deep gullies. Not something to be encountered at high speed. Yet, as the Driver observed, they were too old to be recent wrecks, and hadn't been moved, nor were they flanked by tracks from detouring around. There had to be a path

through. As they loomed in the his sight, he picked out the staggered pattern that would permit zigzagging through them – at a much lower speed of course. That simply wasn't going to happen, given the circumstances, so this was going to be a challenge.

Hitting the opening between the first two wrecks tight to the inside, the Driver started turning the wheel before even getting clear of the derelict cars, knowing at this speed the hind end of the vehicle would pitch out and skid slightly, wagging wide. As he got past the first obstacle and the shocks uncompressed to kick the car back to level, the Driver used that momentum, twitching the wheel only slightly to encourage a lean in the opposite direction – too much authority here would induce a spin or a rollover. The tires squealed in protest but held true, never fully giving up their purchase, and his vehicle danced around the second blockade with only centimeters to spare. With another nudge and a gentle press of the accelerator the car slipped past the last obstacle, giving up a little speed but not nearly as much as a collision with any one of the wrecks might have. Few cars had the suspension or precision steering to have pulled such a maneuver off successfully; few cars had spent a previous life as a police interceptor, built for high-speed chases. Once clear and with bare, open road ahead, the Driver slammed the accelerator down to regain his lead and turned his attention to his mirrors, watching to see how his pursuers fared.

As suspected, the three vehicles behind him were quite familiar with the trap, probably having laid it out carefully. The buggy-thing simply went wide, able to traverse the gullies by design, and avoided the wrecks entirely. The sedan attempted to thread the same path without the benefit of custom shocks and clipped the last wreck, fishtailing madly but spinning the stripped frame aside. The motorcycle hit the first gap and exploited some hidden, carefully-placed ramp, vaulting the second wreck and bypassing the third – this might have allowed it to close the gap if it hadn't been for the supercharger's edge. The dog, meanwhile, yawned. Another day. The interceptor extended its lead, leaving the pursuers increasingly further back.

The edge of the supercharger, however, came at a price, one that came due within a few kilometers, just when it appeared that the followers wouldn't be able to catch up. A sudden tone erupted in the cabin of the interceptor combined with a red light on a fuel gauge that had been scrounged from a road train; with the extra tanks, the original gauge was worthless. And those extra tanks were running dangerously close to empty now. The roadside gas stations had vanished, with most of the rest of civilization, in the wake of the world war that had taken away the delicate façade of mankind as a social species. Fuel was a commodity worth more than life now, and even harder to come by.

The dog, drowsing fitfully, started at the noise, filtered as it was through the howl of the engine and the ripple of air through the open windows. The Driver, meanwhile, glanced briefly at the red light of the gauge, just to confirm the alert, then looked at his rearview mirrors. The pursuers remained, not far enough back to make him feel comfortable with the next course of action, but there was nothing for it. He dropped his hand from the wheel to the shift lever and a knob that had been strapped to the side of it, depressing it. With a sad whine, the supercharger spun to a halt, producing a commensurate shrug of the vehicle as the engine, starved of its rich food, began to slow. It would still run just fine, but not at the breakneck speeds of before.

The dog was not at all pleased – the lapse of that sound from the engine while his master was still tense had never gone smoothly in the past. With an anxious growl, he quickly jumped from his bed on the passenger seat into a hollow in the back, among the cluster of scrounged materials that made up the possessions of a modern nomad, curling up alertly among the greater shelter they provided. Things were likely to get interesting.

The original design of the car was to be one of the fastest things on the road, but that was unladen, not crammed to the gills with cans and water bottles and two massive fuel tanks projecting through an opening that used to be both the rear window and trunk lid. Without the assistance of the 'charger, the pursuers were able to close the gap, lean as hunters. This was a prize they had chased for too long now, and it was almost as much a matter of principle as the promise of obtaining the coveted vehicle, a proven formidable survivor. In these times, out in the wasteland, there were two broad categories of people. The first were the wily traders, able to turn encounters with others into opportunities to gain something of greater relative value, maintaining a nostalgic facsimile of the thriving cultures that once were. The others were the scavengers who reveled in the collapse of those cultures, and simply took what they needed without bargaining or mercy; thin alliances were formed only because they improved the odds of the hunt. There was no doubt the pursuers were of the latter type. The Driver of the interceptor knew the only outcome could be death, and it would not be his if he could exert any control over it.

Over the next few minutes, the three vehicles closed in on the interceptor. The buggy-thing started to go wide in a flanking maneuver, its wheels at the outer corners of the short frame making it capable of negotiating the uneven, rutted desert soil – not comfortably, of course, but with some semblance of control. The sedan and motorcycle stayed on the road surface, taking either side of the interceptor as they gradually overtook it. The Driver realized it was a practiced pincers movement: the sedan had too much mass over the interceptor to engage in a battering contest and come out ahead, while the bike made an easy target. Had he yielded to that temptation, however, the bike likely would have braked heavily, capable of slowing much faster than a car, while the sedan took advantage of his swerve and forced him from the road in what would, if he were lucky, be merely a spinout – more likely a rollover. A car maintaining a straight fast pace, however, was more stable, able through inertia and balance to overcome the impacts of a similarly-massed vehicle trying to push from the side – the pushing vehicle would be pitching its body slightly and causing outside forces to affect traction and force. It was all about using advantages to maximum effect.

The buggy-thing, hurtling to overtake the other three and perform some kind of blocking efforts from the front, sheared off an old signpost, disdainful of detouring; the sharp crack almost alongside the interceptor nearly panicked the dog, already hearing the noises of the engines closing on either side. The Driver, however, just waited for his pursuers to play their hand, watching mirrors, sides, and road ahead with every portion of his vision, adrenaline hyping his system to the maximum. Peripherally he saw the two vehicles come into view at the sides, noting without surprise the studded black leather outfits and vulture feathers of punk fashions, somehow still not dead even when the culture they had been a rebellion against was long gone. Fetishes now, but also a method of intimidation, indicating these were not just scavengers, but ones who hunted for sport and pleasure.

More noticeable were the weapons they were bringing to bear. The motorcyclists (he could now see that there were two riding on the one bike) were brandishing wrist-mounted crossbows of sorts with nasty barbed heads to the quarrels, while the sedan driver aimed a homemade gun barrel out his own window. They were nearly in perfect position, ready to take out the Driver without needing any risky maneuvers at all – but they had left the rear open.

At the crucial moment the interceptor vanished from their sights as the Driver slammed on the brakes momentarily. The gun barrel, apparently running on some compressed air from the engine, *chuffed* before the wielder realized his aim was spoiled – it was most unfortunate for the motorcycle driver, who was directly in his line of fire and took the short arrow through his bicep. His scream of rage carried even over the clash of all the other noises, and he broke off his pursuit in the knowledge that the flanking maneuver was spoiled. The sedan driver turned to see how far back his quarry had dropped and couldn't spot the interceptor, which had slipped in directly behind him in the bare second of activity. The Driver, even as he nudged the wheel to slide in behind, had popped the knob on the gearshift, sending the supercharger howling into life again, and used the burst of torque to ram the sedan from behind while the driver was distracted. Such impacts are sufficient, should the wheel be turned even slightly in the rammed car, to throw it out of control; the sedan driver was better than that and weathered the crash without swerving, hammering his foot down on the accelerator to try and prevent another attempt.

This proved to be his undoing. The driver of the buggy-thing had missed the change in dynamics entirely, and vaulted back onto the road surface in an attempt to force their quarry to the side, towards another trap, a disabled rig sitting on the shoulder ahead. Since the cars had switched position, he instead leapt into the path of the sedan, whose driver was paying more attention to the interceptor closing from behind for another ram. The sedan broadsided the buggy-thing without slowing or swerving; indeed, he was accelerating madly. The buggy was agile mostly through lack of encumbering weight, having little more than a frame and a cage around its driver's seat, which meant it wasn't particularly sturdy. The impact of the sedan bent its frame fatally and sent it careening on two wheels out of control, where it slammed into the side of the disabled rig and disintegrated spectacularly.

The unexpected impact was too much for the sedan, which slewed and nosed down, spinning out of control and ending up in a high-speed rollover, crumpling itself into a ball down the highway and shedding parts as it dismembered itself. One of the things left behind with the trappings of civilization were seat belts, and thus one of the parts flung from the tumbling car was the hapless driver, arcing high into the air to fall heavily into the path of the still-rolling car. Two down.

The interceptor skidded to a halt just beyond the carnage, having slipped past as the sedan slewed from the impact with the buggy-thing, the supercharger still trying madly to drive the car forward before the engine revs were shed enough. In seconds, the cacophony from the encounter had died down to the quite susurrations of the desert wind and the idling rumble of the interceptor as the 'charger shut down. The Driver, surveying the scene quickly while he tried to bring his cardio rate back down to acceptable levels, determined that all of the threats had vanished abruptly, and shifted into reverse to bring his car back to the rig.

After a pause, still shaky, he got out and fetched a gasoline can, his knee brace eliciting a rhythmic squeak as he trotted up to the truck – the nearly-empty tanks of the interceptor were going to need more fuel soon. The dog vaulted out of the car to do some scavenging of his own.

The Driver slowed as he approached the truck, looking around warily – hazards could be found anywhere – and surveyed the mess. Against one side of the trailer the greater bulk of the disintegrated buggy ticked and rattled from the cooling engine parts, and a trickle of fuel spilled onto the asphalt. Moving quickly, the Driver gathered a pan and an old discarded helmet, detritus from the ransacked cargo of the truck, and placed them under the trickling gasoline to collect as much as he could. With a rag, he soaked up what had already spilled and added it to the pan, noticing idly that blood was dripping from the wreckage as well. Somewhere in there remained the buggy driver.

In a moment, he became aware of another soft sound, one that didn't fit among the others, and looked down the road in the direction they'd come from. The motorcycle sat there, shielded under a stunted tree – he'd missed it in his hasty assessment, and chided himself for this lapse; the fuel situation had made him careless. Feigning ignorance, he kept collecting fuel while watching the bike out of the corner of his eye, mentally preparing to drain one more tank should the cyclists make another attempt to overpower him. Even with an armed rider, a motorcycle was no match for a car, provided the driver kept his head.

A scream cut the air, distant, deliberate and defiant. The motorcycle driver was venting his frustration, and undoubtedly attempting to be intimidating, rather than trying to sneak up on his former quarry. Only a deaf person could have missed the display, so the Driver dropped his pretense of ignorance and stopped, watching expectantly to see what the cyclists would do next. Apparently, the scream was both to draw attention, and to psych out the biker. Still bleeding from the arrow projecting through his bicep, he gripped the haft in an elaborate display of bravado and, pausing to muster his nerve, yanked the arrow free from his arm with a violent wrench. The message was clear – it would take a lot more than that to stop him. Behind him his effeminate male companion watched the move with both alarm and adoration, and attentively wrapped the wound in a black rag (everything they owned seemed to be black, the Driver mused.) Satisfied with the show he'd put on, the cyclist leaned forward to grip the handlebars again, dropped the bike into gear, and began advancing down the road towards the scene of the carnage.

In an instant the interceptor Driver was out of his crouch and on his feet, advancing towards the cycle himself, drawing a sawed-off shotgun from the holster low on his right leg. The cycle was still a hundred meters away, but the move was unmistakable, and the shotgun would have much greater range and effect than a crossbow. The bike slowed, turned in a lazy half-circle across the lanes, and accelerated away back the way it had come, winding out noisily in low gear as the motorcyclist lifted the front wheel high through hard acceleration, a flamboyant display of skill – they were not running, they simply chose to take this up another time. In a few seconds, they had disappeared over the rise and the sound had dwindled into the wind.

The Driver listened carefully to assure himself that the engine noise had not quickly



died as the cycle got out of sight over the rise, which might have indicated an attempt to double back. Instead, he heard the distant whine of the engine for at least half a kilometer (*Suzuki*, he thought to himself – they were always ridiculously noisy bikes.) There was little cover to sneak back through anyway – apart from the slight ridge that they'd disappeared behind, traversing the landscape from left to right, the view was flat and open. He'd keep an eye out, but there was little chance of encountering those riders again. Hyenas; able to hunt in packs but ill-equipped to work alone, they tended to make themselves scarce when the odds weren't heavily in their favor. Turning his attention to his own scavenging, the Driver eyed the massive tanks of the rig hungrily, but with little hope. A few solid taps with his knuckles down the sides indicated that he was too late to obtain their contents, not that it mattered a whole lot, since they would have held diesel, not something he could use directly. However, it might still have served as something to trade, should he find anyone else who had not entirely forgotten the habits of civilization. He moved forward and reached for the door handle of the truck.

The sudden rasping, gurgling scream nearly right behind him made the Driver spin and draw a wicked knife from his left boot. Within the wreckage of the buggy-thing crumpled against the trailer, a hand waved weakly, wildly, seeking any kind of purchase, a vain attempt to drag the owner from his coffin. Death was not always instant, even in horrendous crashes, and the buggy-driver trapped and crushed in the unrecognizable vehicle was reluctant to wait for the inevitable, driven by instinct to try and escape, both from the wreckage and his fate. The Driver, unable to tear his eyes away, watched as the hand grew weaker, the rasping voice fading with an exhalation that was not likely to be followed by any intake. With another glance around at the landscape, still empty, the Driver himself exhaled and put his knife away, trying to once again convince himself that the threats had all now abated. There really wasn't any such thing as total relaxation anymore, no complete release from anxiety, yet there were times when one could let their guard down just a little, ease tense muscles, let the twitchiness abide for a bit. With a deliberate shrug to loosen shoulders protesting, he now realized, the state they had been forced to maintain throughout the chase, the Driver reached for the door of the rig and pulled it open.

The apparition that tumbled from the seat and crashed into the road at his feet had not been there too long, but long enough – the desert would desiccate bodies, but first they would bloat and split from gases within, turning colors humans didn't achieve but once. The storm of flies that followed only enhanced the horror, the face that stared up still recognizable enough as human to send a momentary wave of horror through the Driver – so much for relaxation. But he was only startled fleetingly. He'd seen much the same before, and had he been thinking clearly, he never would have hauled the door open blindly – booby-traps were common enough as well. Forcing himself, albeit with some internal reluctance, back to a survival-gear level of attention, he checked out the interior of the cab, the landscape, and finally the expired corpse, quickly but professionally, looking for any likelihood of danger. Only after he'd assured himself that nothing was immediately threatening did he notice the small device that had tumbled from the grasp of the dead man, somehow retained in hand all this time. It was too small to be of any harm, so the Driver bent and picked it up curiously.

The crank handle was obvious, leading to a small cylinder resting against a set of spring reeds, and he'd seen the like before – a music box, a child's toy. Turning the handle

produced a tinkly version of an old song, almost entirely forgotten. Unaware of what it would bring, he continued turning the handle, the faintest vestige of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Music, of any kind, was simply nonexistent anymore. The notes dragged at his memory, forcing the accompanying words out of long-disused portions of his brain. As they registered, his hand on the crank slowed, then stopped abruptly, right before the crucial lyric yet still far too late to prevent the pain.

“Happy birthday to you... happy birthday to you... happy birth... day... dear... ...”

The note never played, but the name hung in the air, memories of the last time he'd ever heard the tune... back when his child was still alive. The smile had utterly vanished now, not likely to return again. In a daze, the music box disappeared inside the jacket – he should have dropped it on the road there, left it behind in the hope it would carry the memories with it, but life was dependent on little advantages, and the music box might bring something in trade from someone who didn't feel the stab at the notes. Provided he could find anyone...

## Chapter Two

The strange shape in the distance did not become any more familiar as the Driver got closer, and it was only when he was almost right on top of it that he determined that this strange, narrow cluster of metal was a gyrocopter, rare even before the war. It sat alone at the edge of a dry riverbed, upright and intact, in far too good a shape to have been there for long. On the minuscule tailfin, someone had meticulously painted a nude woman, proof in itself that this aircraft hadn't been spotted by anyone else, since that would have been among the first things scavenged in this landscape lacking any vestiges of femininity. All of the unanswered questions crowded his mind: How did it get there? How long had it been? Where had the owner gone? No reply was apparent, and so it was with caution that he stopped the car to examine it. Yes, it was dangerous – what wasn't, anymore? But the fuel tanks might, just might, not be empty, and even if they were, there still might be something else of potential value. Quietly, surveying the surroundings, the Driver shut the interceptor off and slowly got out, drawing a short crowbar and approaching the aircraft cautiously, looking for anything that spelled trouble.

There were no tracks, which might have been suspicious given the other indications that it had arrived here recently, but wind storms could move a lot of dust around to obscure such clues, and small piles of sand rested against the tires on the upwind side of the gyro. Another part of the mystery seemed answered as he got closer; atop the cylinder head near the fuel tanks, a coastal taipan, one of the more venomous snakes, sat coiled but alert, watching his approach. Enough to chase off at least half of those who might have considered plundering the gyro, the snake sat possessively, not ready to give up its perch, and venomous enough to kill anyone it might bite. Yes, it was dangerous – what wasn't, anymore?

The Driver considered it merely in the way. Slowly hooking the crowbar on a belt crammed with tools, pouches, and the shotgun, he stretched out his arms slightly, ensuring that they weren't hampered in any way, then approached slowly, both hands out wide. The snake raised its forebody in warning and readiness, and began following the Driver's left hand as it weaved slowly back and forth, getting closer all the while. As the Driver stepped close enough to be effective, his left hand went wider, appearing to try and flank the snake; the snake recognized the move and dutifully followed. This left it open to the right hand, which shot in and enclosed the snake just behind the head, immobilizing the only dangerous part. Enraged, the snake coiled around his right arm, smearing it with feces, but there was nothing else it could do. The Driver stepped back, examining his capture, preparing to dispatch it so he could continue to examine the gyro.

Behind him the sand erupted; what he had mistaken for a small rock was a dusty flight helmet, mostly buried, adorning the head of the apparent owner of the gyro, who sprang from his shallow trough of self-concealment in the sand with a heavy crossbow in his grip, cocked and ready. The Driver's left hand groped for the crowbar on his right hip but the crossbow bolt came to bear unwavering on his face – up close, he might have had a chance, but five paces separated them. Even throwing the bar was out of the question.

“Put the snake down” commanded the gyro owner, with a Kiwi accent. “Gently, gently,

nice...” He emphasized the command with a slight dip of his head, dislodging more sandy soil. The Driver complied slowly; the snake hit the ground with a quiet *thump*, and immediately slithered towards the gyro, somehow trained to favor the vehicle. “Now the iron,” continued the pilot, punctuating it with a series of impatient sounds like a schoolteacher hurrying her kids inside after recess – the crowbar hit the ground before the last of them had been voiced. The gyro owner was surveying the Driver carefully, taking inventory of any potential dangers at hand “The gun,” he commanded, both of them knowing what he meant without more than the title, and the Driver withdrew it slowly and peacefully, but this time he dipped slightly to set the shotgun down without introducing dirt into the barrel. The gyro owner, had he been thinking carefully, should have been cautious at that; it meant his captive still intended to retrieve the weapon at some point.

However, the pilot was a little too enthused over his capture, circling the Driver excitedly, permitting both to closely examine the other. The gyro owner, tall and gangly, was nearly a foot taller than the Driver and almost painful to look at. Aside from the ancient leather flying helmet complete with goggles, he wore a leather jacket, not that of a biker or butch boy, but a lengthy dress jacket from days long past. It covered yellow-green long-johns and was accented with a flight scarf that was still nominally pink. Red hightop basketball sneakers completed the ensemble, presenting more color than the Driver had seen in a month. This homage to Beau Brummel danced around, shaking himself free of more sand, hooting softly, especially when he saw the interceptor and its oversized tanks.

“Looks like we copped ourselves some gasoline, hey?” he inquired animatedly, indicating the car. The supercharger projecting from the hood was a giveaway to what lie beneath. “Hey? V-8?” He was beside himself with delight.

The Driver, hands raised, trying to watch his captor warily even when he passed behind, spoke softly, voice almost unused. “Booby trapped. Touch those tanks and...” he finished with the sound of an explosion, intentionally dramatic – the graphic touches can be more effective.

This tempered the gyro owner's delight more than a shade. “Booby trapped?” he asked with chagrin, growling now in frustration. He motioned with the crossbow towards the interceptor behind the Driver. “Back up!”

As the two paced slowly towards the car, the pilot kept up a running commentary; it seemed likely *his* voice did not ever become dry from disuse. “Oh, you crafty little man! You're quick – *very* quick. Never seen a man beat a snake before. Who are you?” Without waiting to confirm that this query would remain unanswered, he plowed on. “Reflexes! That's what you got, reflexes! Me? I got *brains!*”

They reached the car, and the Driver kneeled behind the left rear wheel and reached carefully under the bumper, one hand still raised in surrender. His other hand felt along the underside of the car, past the homemade apparatus that wired the massive fuel tanks against tampering. The Driver had long ago considered many different scenarios, including this one; he'd mentioned the booby trap for a specific reason. Out of sight beneath the car, his free hand closed onto the handle of a machete he'd strapped there, slowly releasing the retaining

strap and starting to draw it out.

Unfortunately, this scenario suddenly occurred to the gyro owner as well, who slipped forward and placed the barbed tip of the crossbow quarrel against the Driver's temple. His voice was no longer in that garrulous, slightly-manic tone, but had dropped into soft menace.

"A fella," he said, "a *quick* fella, might have a weapon under there. I'd have to pin his head to the panel."

A pause; slowly the machete was returned to its location, and the Driver slid his hand back to the apparatus, found the safety toggle and tripped it. The dim red light alongside went out. Carefully, in a conciliating gesture, he motioned with the hand still visible to the pilot, and felt the tip of the arrow move away from his head. He got to his feet and stepped two paces back from the car. The gyro owner dodged around him, still keeping the crossbow trained on the Driver, as he eyed the fuel tanks hungrily while the Driver, keeping a wary distance, shuffled sideways in accord with the gyro owner, a move that brought him a little too close to the passenger-side door of the interceptor.

"Hey!" shouted the gyro owner, forgetting the tanks and circling close to the Driver again, cutting him off from the car. "Hey hey hey hey hey!" Placing himself between the Driver and the interceptor, he drove his captive back, scolding, almost gloating. He grinned smugly, pleased with himself, and reached down behind his back, his fingers seeking out the door handle, intending to collect the weapon he believed the Driver had been after. "Don't play *me* the fool!"

People that think of booby-traps rarely settle for just one, however. A rasping, almost gargling noise erupted from within the car, and the pilot spun in time to see the dog launching himself through the open passenger window at the unauthorized person who dared touch the master's car. The crossbow shot went wild as the gyro owner went over backwards with a scream, throwing up an arm to protect his face and thus giving the dog something to latch onto. He had no sooner hit the dirt, however, when the Driver blotted out the sky and hissed at the dog, "Leave it!" The dog relinquished his prize instantly, little comfort since the Driver slammed the pilot back down to the sand hard with his left hand, his right brandishing a wicked double-edged boot knife that the gyro owner had failed to spot in his inventory. The knife approached his throat--

"Nonononono!" screamed the pilot, arms up to placate his now-captor. "Gas! Fuel! Gasoline! Thousands of gallons! As much as you want!"

"Where?" asked the Driver.

"Kilometers from here!" sang the gangly pilot desperately, watching the knife blade almost crosseyed. "Pumping it, they are! Refining! *Ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-*"

"Crap," opined the Driver, hearing a ploy, and starting to press the knife home in the pilot's throat.

“*NO, it's true!*” cried the pilot, almost pathetically. “A huge tanker full! A fortress! It's not self-serve, no no, but a man of your ingenuity...” His voice trailed off on a pregnant note, a hint at the potential, a subtle appeal to ego

The mention of a *fortress*, however, triggered something in the Driver's recent memory. When scavenging through the vehicles that had tried to ambush him a day ago, he'd been surprised to find the fuel tanks of both nearly full. Moreover, the cars were unencumbered with possessions and trade goods, even blankets for sleeping; these vehicles were used for *hunting*, unlike the interceptor which carried all of the Driver's worldly possessions. The hyenas had operated out of a camp of some sort, someplace to, however loosely, call *home* – and the motorcyclists running with them also bore this out. Motorcycles, in this land, were like the tiny purses women used to carry only to fancy events: functional for immediate needs, but otherwise impractical, not for everyday use. If one person would know where this camp was without running afoul of its occupants, it might well be someone who could see it from the safety of the air. The Driver ran this through in fractions of a second, reached a tentative decision. “Where?”

His captive gritted his teeth, knowing he had just one hand, however weak, that he could play. “Kill me and you never find out.”

A gambit like that could easily go wrong out here; the hyenas who had met their end yesterday would probably just have killed the pilot for uttering it. No deals, no bargaining; bargaining implies both status and leverage, something they would take delight in denying with finality. The Driver, as the gyro owner correctly (though anxiously) surmised, was different. He'd paused, allowing the pilot to speak his piece. Whether this was a mark of honor, the habit of an inveterate gambler, or a sign of desperation – these yet remained to be seen. Regardless, it worked, and the shorter, grittier man yanked the gangly pilot to his feet almost effortlessly, backing him towards the waiting car.

\* \* \* \* \*

The gyro owner would have been the first to admit that he'd had better rides. Slapped into the back of the interceptor, where the small seats had been removed in favor of space and weight reduction, he'd been tied back to frame members, both arms raised in mock-crucifixion, head tied firmly back but without a gag, and high enough to see the road clearly; he'd need to give directions. Worse, far worse, was that damn dog, which had settled happily into the plastic jump seat attached to the passenger door (the front passenger seat having also been removed,) facing back over the top of an old tripod between the pilot and the dog. To this had been affixed the shotgun, aimed squarely at the pilot's forehead; a short length of wire led from the triggers to a battered rubber bone which the dog held alertly in his mouth, gaze fixed disturbingly on the gyro owner. A slight yank, a rough patch of road, a *sneeze* in this arid dustbowl of a land would drop those cocked hammers. The gyro owner had trained the snake, conditioned it really, to treat the top of the gyro's engine manifold as home, and thus protect it with its natural instinct – dogs were much easier to train, for sure. But just how thorough was this training? There could be no reasoning with this guard, no counting on rational decisions or pausing to reflect, which made it many times worse than any human holding a gun on him.

There had been moments, terrible moments. The time when the dog's gaze had shifted sideways to watch a rabbit hurtling off the road at the approach of the interceptor. The potholes. The large rock that had been thrown up by the tires to thump loudly into the floor pan directly under the gyro owner's backside – that had nearly been enough for an involuntary bowel evacuation. There was no solace in the fact that, should a shell discharge, he'd probably never know it. He tried to watch the road, to give the directions when necessary, but it was difficult with the two pairs of eyes staring at him, the blue ones of the dog, the black ones of the shotgun...

In due time, with only having to backtrack to a missed turn twice, they'd made their way to a promontory, a rocky outcropping sticking high above the red wastelands. By now they were running slow and quiet so as not to attract attention. It had required departing the roads some distance away, and a lot of careful driving across the outback, to remain hidden (the ruts! The rocking! That damned dog!) The gyro pilot's previous experience with the area had been from the air, and so he was little help in divining a useful route through the scrub and talus; his main contribution was in pointing out the roads that needed to be avoided, due to their traffic – now more than ever it was important not to attract attention, not to let anyone know who might be drawing near. There was a more direct route up the hill, but it was too known, too easy to be seen upon, and so had to be ignored. In time, the interceptor had made it to within a dozen meters or so of the pinnacle before the rocks had prevented further ascent on four wheels, and so there it sat, in the shade of a tree with a light camo net thrown across it. The Driver, the gyro pilot, and the dog clambered to the top, the pilot hampered by the police-issue manacles he was now trussed in, but at least the shotgun was holstered on the Driver's hip and out of the control of the dog.

The view from the top was almost astounding. To the west, a large structure rose high above the flat plain, an almost-forgotten example of industrialization that made the Driver blink. In the center rose the drilling rig, with a network of pipes and the strange distillery of a petroleum processing plant, although a small one. Even at its three kilometers distance from the promontory, the rig could be heard, pumping away, drawing oil from the ground. It was true, they were making their own gasoline! Scattered around the well head and pipes were odd structures, mostly cobbled together – huts and workshops and the piles of artifacts that allowed a tribe to flourish in an era where stores and factories no longer existed within reach, maybe no place at all. Around the outside was the fortification, a solid wall, high and firm, topped in numerous places with lookout stations, ballistas, and a peculiar cannon-like device that lacked the bracing the Driver felt would have been necessary. From this high vantage, the Driver could make out the bustle of activity within those walls, at least two dozen people, maybe more – and livestock, and a small garden, a tiny but complete village compound, anchored to the petroleum plant, a miniature OPEC nation.

This was not, however, the encampment the Driver expected to find; that sat to the southeast, not quite between the compound and this hill, a meager cluster of vehicles, tents, and fire pits perhaps a kilometer away from the refinery. This sparse camp was almost certainly where the hyenas were based. The vehicles, as seen through the worn binoculars that the Driver had unearthed from the depths of the interceptor, were not just maintained in functional order, but decorated, fetished, war-painted in reds and black, occasionally even

bearing weapons. The tents were temporary structures, indicative of a nomadic existence, but with little organization, while the vehicles ringed the outer perimeter in readiness of the hunts. The entire camp sat alongside the one road that led to the refinery compound, able to intercept anyone who tried to go in or out the accustomed way. The tire tracks ringed the camp made it clear that there was a lot of vehicular activity, while the road into the refinery compound was almost unmarked, especially right up to the gate, which was a block of heavy metal sheets filling the one gap in the wall. There were plenty of tracks surrounding the compound, however, fencing it, marking a waterless moat in the dry plain; it didn't take much imagination to see the sieges, the attempts by the hyenas to gain access to the facility and its precious treasure, the gasoline – the *endless* gasoline. And as yet, it appeared to have been entirely unsuccessful, especially if the burned-out hulks of several cars was any indication.

Behind the Driver, now chained to a old, twisted fallen tree, droned the gyro owner, unwilling to converse while strapped in the car under the eyes of dog and shotgun and now making up for lost time, narrating his recent life experiences.

“Four days I was up here. Me and the snakes, playing mah-jongg, taking tea. Watching, thinking: how was I going to get in and get the gas? Day and night it's pumping... fuel to burn. They've got the lot: power, lights, you name it. You can bet your life they mean to keep it.”

The Driver idly noted details of this soliloquy as he surveyed the compound, mentally filing important observations, comparing imparted tidbits against what he could make out personally. The land around the compound was flat, mostly featureless, the best cover provided by some shallow gullies that channeled the rain, the few times it ever arrived, off of this hill and across the plain. Other than that, there was no way to approach the compound without being seen, and it stood to reason that the light poles visible within the compound were operational; with gasoline, a generator is an easy thing to maintain, and thus nightfall didn't provide the cover it might have everywhere else – those in the compound could illuminate enough of their immediate surroundings to prevent any surreptitious entry attempts.

Could some kind of trade be established? Possibly, though it appeared they had want of little, being as self-sufficient as anyone might be. Which was probably good, in that they were likely cut off from all outside contact by the hyena camp. Even if they did want to trade, anyone attempting to do so would risk being intercepted by the scavengers, a prospect which gave little likelihood of coming out well. An overland approach from the northwest might allow someone to reach the compound without trouble only if the hyenas were, as now, relatively quiet within their camp. 'Relatively' being the key word; while the petroleum compound vented only the sound of the machinery, some restrained livestock sounds and an occasional shouted communication, the scavenger camp was sharply contrasted with revving engines, raucous shouts and laughter, and discordant metallic sounds that might have been an attempt at music, or perhaps only someone banging the dents out of sheet metal with monotonous rhythm. Some benefit might be derived from this, in that it could mask the sounds of someone trying to slip past – better, of course, if this continued into the night.

The gyro pilot muttered on about the refinery compound, half to himself. “Thirty of them in there! Arrows, flame-throwers, guns! 'No place for man or reptile,' I thought. Then *this* trash



arrived, as moths to a flame. Round and round, attack, attack, like angry ants, mad with the smell of gasoline.”

The Driver absorbed this datum as he continued spying on the compound. So the scavenger camp was a newer development? That made this particularly bad timing, in that any approach to the compound now would probably be considered hostile, possibly a ruse, raising an alarm. It might also mean that the scavengers, still fresh to the kill, would take some time to disperse – if they didn't actually breach the defenses of the compound before then. The more time that passed, the more likely this would become, especially if they managed to fully catalog the fortifications and devise some technique to overcome them. There might not be much time left to act – but this still didn't provide any inspiration. Abruptly, something the gyro owner muttered registered on his consciousness:

“In the tanker – that's where they keep it. *Thousands* of gallons, as much as you want.”

The Driver shifted the binoculars back over to one side of the compound, seeking out the detail he'd noted earlier. There, well away from the outer walls, sat the lonely hulk of a gasoline transport tanker, shiny, still displaying the logo of a long-defunct petroleum company. It was conspicuously close to the refinery equipment, and the tires appeared to be in good shape. What was missing was the tractor, or any towing rig that could make the tanker move; the Driver surveyed the compound again, but no semi-truck was among the few vehicles therein. Another look around: light poles, living huts, and the distance from the outer perimeter made the thought of sneaking up to that tanker an absurd one. They knew what they were doing.

The gyro pilot appeared to have more confidence in the Driver's abilities, though. “If anyone's gonna get in there, it's gonna be you. Me? I'm gonna feed the snakes.” He held up his manacled hands suggestively, imploringly, giving what might at one time have been a winning grin, had not years of dental neglect taken its toll. “A man lives by his word, I reckon. And I've kept mine, eh?”

The Driver looked carelessly at the pilot, and his restraints, then looked away dismissively, not offering any comment at all. The indignation rose in the pilot. “We had a deal! I show you the gas and you let me go, right?” The memory of that drive here, and that damn dog, was still fresh in his mind.

The Driver glanced back at him, faintly reminiscent of a headmaster reminding a forgetful pupil. “The arrangement was I wouldn't kill you.”

The pilot was on his feet instantly. “After all I've done for you– “

Moving fast and aggressively is often not the best of moves in front of those living on the road nowadays; the pilot found himself caught up by the collar, just shy of a choke hold, and almost held aloft by the smaller man. “I reckon you got a bargain, don't you?” the Driver asked casually, almost too quietly.

The pilot dropped his eyes and slumped visibly, offering no resistance or threat.

Regardless of the fine points of the agreement, he was in no position to counter this man, or effect any change at all. He realized he might not have avoided death, only staved it off for a short while longer. The conventions of the previous culture, a world so civilized it destroyed itself with weapons too big to be useful, were gone now, and the rules made-up on the fly. He could only ride it out, hoping for the best... and keep a watchful eye out for opportunities that might arise.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was early that evening, as the falling temperature passed through *comfortable* on its way towards *frigid* for the night, when they were able to witness the hyenas' renewed siege upon the petroleum compound. With sirens, horns, and screams, the scavengers descended on the compound area in packs of vehicles, making as intimidating a sight as they could. Leading the pack, yet stopping a safe distance away from the walls, was a large hybrid vehicle sporting a truck engine and six oversized tires – and, apparently, a loudspeaker system. At the distance to the promontory where the Driver and the pilot watched, hidden among the brambles on the hill, the sound was significantly delayed, and it took some time before the Driver was able to tie the gesticulations of the man atop the hybrid vehicle with the amplified voice coming several seconds later, but it was clear he was the ringleader. Unsurprisingly, as well – through the binoculars he could be seen as a massive man, parading his musculature in a suit of leather straps, lending weight to the idea that the hyenas chose their leader through feats of strength or combat. He even, it appeared, had an assistant, though what his purpose might possibly be remained unclear.

The hyenas swarmed to the complex but circled warily, and with good reason; they'd seen the weapons firsthand, and knew their reach. Instead, they set up a weaving interplay of vehicles, dodging from one another's paths as they revolved in opposing directions around the perimeter, hoping to present a confusing sight. At times, one or another would hurl a homemade bomb or Molotov cocktail at the walls, often falling short since the weapons of the petroleum refinery had a longer range. As the Driver watched, he saw one person tumble from the open back of a besieging vehicle, the victim of some defensive weapon or another, and another vehicle depart the circle at high speed to fail to jump a gully, crumpling against the opposite side and halting there permanently, its own driver no longer capable of controlling his car. Yet, the pattern was having some effect, as vehicles could at times dart closer to the wall, taking advantage of the mesmerizing interaction and the simple trait of there being too much to watch at once.

As the gyro owner droned on once again, alternating between play-by-play and largely pointless observations and trivia, the Driver did his best to ignore it and watch the progress of the attackers. He predicted, loosely, the next tactic, one of distraction. As three heavily-armored vehicles made a dash towards the gate, another positioned itself off to one side of the complex, far from the gate but close to the wall, its peculiar shape defined by metal sheets forming a sloping, flat surface above. It had no sooner stopped when two motorcycles broke from the pack in a broad arc and raced towards it at highest speed – it was now revealed as a mobile ramp, and so far none of the defenders had recognized the danger.

The first motorcyclist successfully hit the ramp and vaulted the wall into the compound,

quite a steep jump to make, and disappeared from view. The second misjudged his approach and rode the ramp awkwardly and obliquely, catching the wall's edge with a front tire and pitching the bike at an angle that would have made his landing less than graceful; he was spared from this experience by striking a light pole instead, where bike and rider separated with wild gyrations, the rider spinning in a tellingly limp manner that indicated, even before his impending contact with the ground, that he wasn't going to pose much of a threat.

The three armored vehicles were not faring much better. The peculiar cannon the Driver had spotted atop the walls earlier revealed itself as a flamethrower; *Of course*, he thought. As the lead vehicle rushed the metal sheets of the gate, the flamethrower laid down a steady stream of flaming oil under high pressure. The armor that had been hastily attached to the hyena's car was sufficient for a passing flame, but not a thorough soaking of flammable liquid at close range, and the car abruptly jerked to the side to strike the wall ineffectually; one occupant made a fierce yet pointless attempt to escape, but even without the burden of being on fire, there remained the weapons of the defenders, and he soon dropped motionless alongside his vehicle.

The second car caught a barrage of flaming pots that shattered across its armor, also spreading pools of flammable oil, and although it actually reached the gate, it crumpled against it, shaking loose most of its own armor without so much as shifting a plate to allow access to the compound. In moments it was a conflagration of flames and black smoke. The third vehicle, bringing up the rear and now all alone in dangerous territory, quickly determined that it was unlikely to fare any better and sheared off quickly, trying to circle back to a safe distance, but faltered under the combined fire and drifted to a halt without making it to safety; one occupant vaulted out and made a dash for the circling besiegers, only to fall under a hail of arrows. The defenders knew their tactics. While many of them were using crossbows, these took time to reload, so the first to fire would drop behind the wall to cock their weapons while a backup crew, weapons ready, took their place, and in this way they alternated, buttressed by longbow archers with greater speed, and a few ballista and catapult stations. Any defender that fell to wounds was immediately replaced. The compound could throw down a steady defensive barrage, and had a longer reach than anything the hyenas could bring to bear.

Another vehicle was slipping almost out of sight of the hill towards the north, bearing what looked like collapsible ladders and a passel of attackers to swarm up them, once again under the cover of distracting attacks (of the one motorcyclist who'd successfully breached the wall there was no further sign.) However, the people in the compound had thought of this too. A large portion of the dusty plain near the wall gave way, revealing itself to be plywood-covered pits, and the vehicle pitched into it far enough to indicate it was remarkably deep. Only two of the attackers managed to escape both the pit and the withering fire that following, though one dropped from his wounds when he should have been outside of range of most weapons. The Driver wondered idly what surprises had awaited within the pits, having several good ideas what he himself would have primed them with.

The attack had been planned a little too close to sunset, and as the sky darkened the lights of the compound came on, probably scavenged from some sports stadium. Incredibly bright, they were stationed high enough to see anyone approaching the walls and low enough

to completely dazzle anyone outside that was trying to take aim on the defenders – they were also far enough inside the compound that only firearms would reach them, and it appeared the attackers lacked those as badly as nearly everyone else these days. The hyenas still made a spirited attempt, but the retribution was high and progress became nonexistent; eventually the big guy with the loudspeaker called off the attack, and with as much noise as their approach, the hyenas retreated to their camp.

The Driver sat in thought in the growing darkness, cataloging the details he'd witnessed, scheming, wondering, until the increasing hunger pangs finally attracted his attention. Leaving behind the pilot, now muttering listlessly in his stream-of-consciousness patter, the Driver dropped down the hill the short ways to the car, causing the pilot's monologue to be replaced by the querulous demands of whether he was leaving. Instead, some idle rummaging unearthed a few canned goods and a small bladder of water, which the Driver brought back up to his station where the binoculars sat trained upon the compound, attached to the same serviceable tripod. The gyro owner strained to see what was on the menu, but couldn't make out the labels. The scent that wafted across made it clear in short order, however: almost certainly dog food. The pilot nearly reeled; meat and meat by-products, in a land where the lizards themselves were lean and the kangaroos had all but vanished. A feast! His anticipation was tempered with the suspicion that his captor wasn't going to share, yet he still dared hope.

The Driver, it appeared, had at least some memory of decency, or perhaps further plans for the gyro pilot, who received his own small can of cat food for the day's meal, one he didn't even have to share with the dog.

### Chapter Three

It was just before sunrise when the distant siren woke them both up. The Driver, enclosed in a heavy blanket behind the binoculars, sat up almost instantly, scanning the flats below in search of the source, while the gyro pilot fought briefly with the siren's incorporation into his dreams before realizing it came from without. He kicked his way out of the sand he'd covered himself with as the night grew cold, unable to produce any more protection from his position chained to the old tree. The Driver frowned briefly at the clatter of chains produced by the manacles, quickly realizing that even at the best of times the sound probably couldn't carry to the hyena encampment, certainly not now with the siren blaring – more, in fact, were joining it, the call to the hunt.

A lone car was on the road *from* the compound, running fast directly past the encampment, which was already disgorging vehicles in pursuit. Its engine could be heard above the sirens, howling flat out – quite a performer, since it seemed to be pushing the car to somewhere around 150 kilometers per hour. The hyenas were giving chase, but with its edge in speed, it was going to be a hard trophy to obtain unless something went wrong. The hyenas had not thought to put any kind of deadfall in the road, like the one the Driver had encountered a few days previously, so the runner had a clear path and the advantage or already being up to speed before the hyenas even had their vehicles started.

From his position on the promontory, the Driver noticed something else. While this lone car was rocketing away on the main road, two others had left the compound and immediately turned to the northwest, cutting overland almost directly away from the encampment. It was definitely rougher going, but they had even more of a lead than the fast runner on the road – which was a decoy, the Driver now surmised, hoping to draw attention away from the other vehicles leaving the compound. But the hyenas seemed to be not quite as single-minded and dense as was hoped, because a small contingent of them was leaving the camp in the direction of the other two vehicles, which looked to be slower and easier prey. They were able to use the road to the compound in the initial portion of their pursuit, as well as the beaten clearing around it where they'd been laying their siege the previous evening, gaining a bit of speed before encountering the badlands to the northwest that the two runners from the compound were now navigating. It was hard to say just who had the advantage in that race.

The Driver trained his binoculars down towards the gate of the compound, just to ensure that it had been prudently closed as quickly as possible, having a hard time even seeing it in the cloud of dust that had been raised by the vehicles exiting; it wasn't much to hope for, and he wasn't sure what he might have done had it been open, since far too many people would have remained in the compound anyway, but one never assumed. Seeing the gate was truly closed, he started to turn back to the chase when the presence of the guards atop the wall caught his eye. There were several of them, flanking the gate as if expecting a siege again, and in the binoculars they appeared to be watching the progress of the chase to the northwest; no one from the encampment was even close to the compound. So why were so many stations manned?

The answer came quickly enough, as the gate slid aside again and a lone vehicle

exited, quietly and without raising a lot of dust. With the attentions of nearly all of the hyena encampment taken up by the others, this one skipped out and headed south, also overland, hoping to escape all notice. The gate quickly closed again.

The runner to the south was heading for the road that skirted the very promontory that the Driver and the pilot now occupied, perhaps hoping to gain the surface and extend the lead enough to escape. Through the binoculars, the Driver could see that it was another cobbled-together buggy, seats completely enclosed in protective mesh and plates, but with enough ground clearance and an adequate suspension to run cross-country reasonably well. This, and its head start, might have been enough against any similar type of vehicle, but the hyenas had motorcycles among their complement, and three of these were now abandoning the encampment and trying to cut across the badlands to catch up to, or head off, the runner from the compound. An experienced rider on a cycle could outrun any four-wheeled vehicle across the same terrain, unless it came to deeper water or sand; there, four wheels could provide stability that would allow a greater speed to be maintained than any cycle could match. Unfortunately, no such hazards lay along that route, and the bikes were gaining appreciably.

The runner started to pass out of sight around the edge of the peak, blocked from view by trees and scrub, and the Driver quickly dismounted the binoculars from the tripod and scrambled back with them, skidding down more towards where his car was parked – it would provide a better view of the road that the runner was heading for... if it made it that far.

The driver of the buggy knew the area well enough, and reached the asphalt before the motorcycles could catch up, sprinting ahead on the road. It took a few more seconds for the cycles to attain the road themselves, losing much of what they'd gained in the cross-country chase, but they were lighter and more powerful, horsepower-to-weight – this chase was unlikely to go on for too long. The Driver eyed his own car briefly, satisfied himself that it remained hidden enough from this vantage (especially with everyone's attention drawn elsewhere,) and got into a stable position to watch, bracing his elbows on his knees to give a steadier view through the binoculars.

Any four-wheeled vehicle can easily take out a motorcycle, even a large group of them, if the driver remains calm and recognizes their advantage. And any wildebeest can easily kill a hyena. But with enough harassment, a wildebeest can lose a hamstring tendon to a hasty snap from a hyena's jaws, and then it often doesn't take a lot more effort to bring the much-larger, more capable beast down.

The weakness of the buggy lay in its tires, susceptible even to a small quarrel from a wrist-mounted crossbow, aimed with precision and foresight at the front tires, the ones necessary for stability. The buggy abruptly staggered, slewing, as one of the front wheels went flat, then skidded sideways and flipped, tumbling down the road, shedding parts and dust and rust in equal amounts. The pursuing bikes went wide and braked to remain with the wreckage, quickly converging on the hulk as it finally rattled to a stop, suspension sprung, frame bent, not capable of restarting the race without several hours of work.

The pilot, hampered by his attachment to the tree via the manacles, was leaning out,

struggling to see past the brush that sheltered their encampment. Digging within his long leather greatcoat, he produced a mariner's spyglass, an ancient collapsing telescope that he extended out to full length, picking a spot between the branches to try and make out the proceedings. There was certainly nothing pretty to be seen, but that has never stopped human curiosity in the history of the species.

The hyenas wasted little time in hauling the two occupants of the buggy from the misshapen cage – it was unclear whether the cage also prevented any weapons from firing out as well, or if the occupants were simply too disabled by the rollover to bring any to bear, but none of the hyenas seemed hampered in any way. There were at least five of them restraining the two runners, dragging them to the road surface, fighting the struggles and kicks without losing control of their captives. At least three more hyenas watched nearby, not getting in the way, ensuring that no escape was going to take place.

A strange, cracking shriek from behind caused the Driver to spin suddenly, drawing the knife from his boot; the gyro pilot was straining against the manacles for a better view and had shifted the dead tree slightly, producing the tortured sound. Relaxing, the Driver suddenly realized that the spyglass in the pilot's hands would undoubtedly provide a better view than the binoculars, and stamped quickly up the slope to take it from the pilot, absently dropping the binoculars at the pilot's feet in exchange. Retaking his position, he trained the glass on the captors, able to see much more detail now.

Quite a lot could be determined from the visual play now being performed, despite the fact that the vehicles were too distant for anything but the sound of the crash to carry weakly up to the mountaintop. One of the occupants was now pinned against a tree alongside the road, his arms drawn back tightly around the trunk with rope or cables. The other occupant had been discovered to be female, and was drawing attention of a different sort, pinned on her back on the road nearby as the hyenas rid her of her inconvenient clothing. The Driver, however, kept watching the man, who it seems was being interrogated, if the stances of his captors, and the occasional brutal blow, was any indication. As he watched, the Driver saw two of the captors step wider to either side as another took up position directly in front, raising his arm dramatically. The distance was still too great to see for sure, but even the captive's reaction spelled out the impact of the quarrel from the wrist crossbow – not a kill shot, not yet. This was only partly for fun; the goal was to somehow find a way into the compound, and if anyone knew of a secret entrance or weak point in the defenses, it would be a former occupant.

The torturer who had unleashed the crossbow bolt turned, and the Driver blinked in recognition – it sure as hell looked like the motorcyclist who had chased him the other day with his two companions in vehicles, the only one (beside the Driver himself) to survive the encounter. No, wait, there had been two of them on the bike; a brief scan turned up the other, confirming that the Driver was watching his old friend again, and also that the hyena encampment was indeed the one he suspected. In a way, this was very-slightly encouraging; it meant that there was less of a possibility of *another* encampment in the area. Other than that, however, it had little impact. No matter what, the hyenas were a barrier to be circumvented, one way or another, and too numerous to even whittle down a few at a time. He had been turning this over in his head ever since seeing the compound and its attendant

encampment. The value of the gasoline was tremendous, out here, to both nomad and settler; it spelled security and capability. But the barrier of the compound itself was daunting enough, made impossible by the marauders encamped so close by. Even if he'd been so inclined to try and throw in his lot with the village under the petroleum drill, he would still have had to reach it, as well as convince them he had something to offer.

His history, his displacement not only from society, but from even feeling *human*, prevented the idea of seeking a 'home' to even present itself. He had avoided the inherent self-destructive tendencies that had come from his losses, so long ago, by turning it outward – first by destroying the outlaw gang that had taken his wife, child, and companions, then as the world collapsed under the clatter of nuclear swords, by destroying the very same elements that now existed. He had a simple rule: live and let live. Any that violated that with any attempt on his own life, forfeited his willingness to ignore them. He'd seen that a lot of blood had been spilled over the years since, but he had quite assured himself that none of it was undeserved. Nothing was going to ever replace those now missing from his life, but as long as he was able, he could do his own part in somehow making the world just a tiny bit better. Among the population of the land, this was more of a goal than the simple survival that most pursued, and even attainable.

The torture didn't seem to be going well. The motorcyclist who he'd encountered before had turned from the captive in apparent disgust, stomping back towards his cycle with a curt wave of beckoning to his companion; the rapists were favored with a brief look of disdain in passing. Two other hyenas were also heading back towards their bikes, leaving the one captive pinned to the tree, the other pinned underneath the sweaty bulk of her torturer, who hammered away in anger. The buggy had been stripped of its supplies that hadn't been scattered over the landscape in the crash. In moments, the fierce whine of a motorcycle engine carried to them atop the hill – no mere rumble of a started engine had a pitch like that. The torturer and his boyfriend were racing down the road at high speed – *down* the road. Away from the compound and the encampment.

The Driver watched, and indeed, all of the hyenas, save the one still busy with his rape, were heading off in the same direction. The Driver leapt up and scampered over top of the hill, using the spyglass to scan the now-empty encampment. Not a soul, not even a lookout – they had gone all out to capture the runners from the compound. Another hard scan to the north, where the other runners had gone, pursued by the others from the camp. Leaving the immediate area clear, except for the compound itself.

He sprinted back down the hill, dropping the spyglass negligently alongside the gyro pilot, who snatched it up to replace the binoculars, still eagerly watching the last activities of the remaining hyena. Women were few and far between in this land; even a distant, vicarious view greatly surpassed the imagination.

The rumble of the interceptor's engine startled him, shaking him from his voyeurism – the Driver had slipped the car into gear and was heading down the slope, aiming directly for the bare drive that linked the pinnacle with the road below, instead of the circuitous path they'd taken to reach this spot; apparently he was prioritizing speed over stealth. The gyro pilot's protests died in his throat, already too late to be heard, and probably pointless anyway.



There was no telling if the Driver would be back, or even if he'd somehow attract attention to this post. Chained to a tree, there was little the pilot could do except hope. And that wasn't likely to be answered in any positive way.

He started to lift the spyglass again, then let it drop. He knew how it would end anyway.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hyena, decked out in leather and feathers, sporting a badly-trimmed goatee, was intent on pulling parts from the buggy; the center of his previous attentions lay sprawled in the road, finished off by two arrows from a full-sized crossbow that now lay, cocked and ready, just out from underfoot. The desert wind was coming from ahead of him, whistling through the framework of the crashed buggy, which helped mask whatever sounds not already drowned by the clattering of reluctant metal and his muttered curses that accompanied them. Too, he was confident in his position as alpha-predator, fearing nothing, which had convinced him there was no need to keep an eye out.

So when the soft rumble of the engine caught his attention, he looked up to see the interceptor not terribly far away, rolling forward quietly at near-idle. It took only a moment for him to realize that it wasn't any of his companions, both from none of them having a car of that sort and none of them ever driving so quietly, but in that moment, the interceptor leapt forward with a roar, accelerating at an alarming rate. The hyena's mad effort to dive for his loaded crossbow on the ground nearby only served to separate him from the one bit of cover that might have done him good, the disabled buggy from the compound. As his hand closed on the weapon, he realized this reflex was worthless in the circumstances, and he tried changing the move to scrambling aside while bent into a low crouch. It was too late for that, and the battered front end of the interceptor slammed him down brutally, forcing him underneath the car.

The Driver kept rolling just enough to know he had freed the marauder from his undercarriage and stopped the car, jumping out quickly with a set of massive bolt cutters in one hand. Retracing his path, he noticed the feeble stirrings of the hyena, crumpled in the dust, and took a massive two-handed swing with the cutters, almost casually in passing. With a terrible sound the man settled on the sand and lay perfectly still.

The Driver quickly made for the tree where the male captive was pinned. There was a disturbing moment when he received no response from his gentle patting of the captive's face, but then the man stirred weakly, opening his eyes to see the Driver leaning over him. While not much better in appearance than the vermin who had left him there, this one had a look of earnest concern that separated him by miles. Hope welled within him. "Take me back?" he ventured.

"For the gasoline," offered the Driver.

"Thank you," the captive murmured, gaining some strength. "Thank you, thank..."

"Save it," said his rescuer. "Do we have a deal?"

The captive slumped, exhausted by the brief display or perhaps disappointed in the lack of altruism, though he would have been a dreamer to expect more in this blight. The Driver lifted his chin gently, bringing him back to eye-contact, the question still hanging in the air, further actions awaiting the confirmation of the deal. “Yes,” the captive assured him. “As much as you like. Just take me back there.”

The bolt-cutters made short work of the crossbow quarrels that had served as torture implements, as well as the old jumper cables that kept his arms secured behind the tree. The runner tried to stand, couldn't, and found himself slung over his rescuer's shoulder in an experienced fireman's carry, the blood going to his head allowing a slightly better look around. The dead hyena was reassuring, the interceptor unadorned with war paint or fetishes slightly more so, but that was all he managed to make out before the shock of his injuries took over again and he passed out.

\* \* \* \* \*

The watcher in the compound saw the interceptor approaching from a kilometer off, and had already raised the alarm, so it slowly rolled up the road leading to the gate under the eyes and weapons of half a dozen guards on the walls. The Driver kept his approach very slow and nonthreatening, and just outside of what he perceived to be arrow range he stopped, getting the former captive out of the car gently and replacing him on his shoulder. With one hand, he unstrapped his tool belt with the shotgun holster and carried it extended well away from his body, walking towards the gate cautiously.

It was a hell of a gamble – he reflected that if he had been defending the compound himself, he'd have put an arrow through anyone approaching first, then gone out afterward to retrieve his companion. Thus, he was counting on the guards *not* being like that. Still, he shifted his burden slightly to fall a little more in front of his torso, having had the forethought to put the injured man head-forward when picking him up, to lessen the chances that someone would risk a shot.

Those watching from the compound had observed his actions carefully, and let him close about half of the distance with the expected warnings until he was stopped. “Drop the hardware!” someone commanded, and the Driver obediently allowed the belt to fall into the sand. This was it, the point of no return.

“Turn around!” was the next command, and he slowly turned, realizing now that a clear shot at his back was afforded to the guards, since it only risked hitting their companion's legs. Nothing came of it though, and he completed the turn and awaited the next move. From someplace atop the wall, a woman's voice cried out in desperate recognition: “Nathan! It's Nathan! Let them in!”

This produced a brief exchange within the compound, a little too quietly for the Driver to make out what was being said, but in a moment, there was a rumble of an engine and the plates of the gate slid aside. Quickly three armed guards slipped out, compound bows trained unerringly on the Driver, surrounding him outside of arm's length and goading him towards the

open gate. Someone, the same someone who had stopped him, called for a stretcher.

The inner secrets of the compound were slowly revealed as he approached, his view through the open gate becoming greater by steps. Completely expected were the various guards, heavily armed, supremely comfortable in their weapons; natural selection would likely have eliminated those that weren't. Unexpected was the peculiar apparatus that might once have been an engine block lifter, now re-purposed to support a man in a seat-sling, his legs dangling uselessly, oil stains in various locations communicating his primary skills. There was a healthy mix of people, male and female, young and old, surprisingly clean and well-groomed – it had been so long since he'd seen people of this nature, even at various trading posts, that he was almost discomfited by it, and aware of how long it had been since he'd dropped his guard long enough to bathe in a natural pool someplace.

There was a clearing just inside the gate, but not very big – old vehicles, stacks of tires, and heavy bits of machinery formed a barricade against going further, especially in getting anywhere near the towering structure of the petroleum pump. The people in the compound had their own collection of vehicles (two fewer, now,) scattered around, all having easy access to the gate but none of them a straight approach. Living quarters, food plots, and the refining equipment were all hidden from view by anyone within the clearing; they were maintaining a level of protection, perhaps several, from any who might somehow get through the gate. The Driver, under the watchful gaze of quite a few distrusting guards, avoided looking around too much, not wanting to generate any more suspicion than was absolutely necessary, but he did notice that the weapons on the walls could not aim into the compound. The gate itself was actually an omnibus, heavily plated along one side, able to be driven across the opening in the walls easily while still being far too heavy to move in any other manner, especially broadside.

There were even children, or at least, a child, a startling apparition really, not more than six years old if his size was any indication, with a mane of unkempt hair. The Driver stared; the kid wore *animal* skins, 'roo and rabbit, including some quite-serviceable boots, and had a matching feral look in his eyes, which followed the Driver unblinkingly. In one hand he held a boomerang, not casually, not as a toy or favorite possession, but with the bearing of someone who could use it properly – it was spotless metal, thick, but appearing to be sharp as hell, clasped in a hand wrapped in a thick padding of skins. Seen against the others in the compound the boy was definitely out of place, lacking only some black leather to slot him in with the hyenas instead. He marched alongside the Driver with as much attentiveness as the adult guards, and no one saw fit to chase him off.

Two people gently took the injured compounder from his shoulders, depositing the still-unconscious man onto a stretcher, where another two began ministering to him with obvious medical competence – for such a small enclave, the compound was surprisingly complete. Now, however, there was nothing protecting the driver, and he held still, endeavoring to look nonthreatening and innocent for the first time in... how long? He was acutely aware that his mode of dress was a lot closer to the hyenas than to anyone within sight, and his abrupt appearance from nowhere certainly didn't help at all. In a wild attempt to try and allay these rightful suspicions, he tried to watch the medical progress on the man that he'd rescued with an expression of both anxiety and hope, dredging these from distant memory.

A tall man approached him, with the sun-weathered face that used to denote a rancher so long ago, dressed in cricketer's padding and high boots, with a direct bearing that indicated he was likely the leader here, or at least close to it. The guards parted easily for him but their weapons never wavered, except to shift slightly to ensure that this man was out of their line of fire. He strode directly to the Driver and stopped close, pinning the smaller man in his gaze. "Who are you?" he challenged.

There was no answer that had any meaning anymore, to anyone, and little point in offering empty names, and the Driver remained silent, returning the gaze with a flat, empty look that might have provided an answer anyway. The leader pressed on with, "How did you get through out there?"

While this question was a little more pertinent, it was also hard to say just what a useful answer would be. Surely this man was aware of the empty encampment, and almost certainly wasn't referring to the immediate situation, but the fact that the scavengers ranged throughout this area for kilometers. Play stupid, as if unaware of the hazardous nature, coming through unopposed by sheer luck? Or admit that he not only knew of them, he'd already reduced their number by a few, perhaps stirring some bond or alliance, common enemies and all that? The problem with this was that it wasn't very believable, and was more likely to support the idea that he was a scout or spy. In the end he remained silent, allowing himself to look slightly confused.

The leader wasn't buying it. "Look, I want some answers," he said, his tone hanging in the air with the promise that his patience was about gone. "Where did you find him?" he demanded, jerking a thumb back towards the stretcher where a small crowd wasn't quite obscuring the activities of chest compressions and desperate work with a respirator, not a good sign.

"Two or three clicks down the road, left for dead," the Driver responded, happier with questions where his answers were less likely to stir up even more uncomfortable questions. "The car was wrecked, still warm, but stripped. He told me how to get here – we had a deal."

The leader's eyes narrowed. "There were other cars – did you see them?"

The Driver shook his head after a pause, as if trying to recall what else he'd seen on the road. Admitting that he knew of the other vehicles, which had departed in the opposite direction, would have likely revealed his observing position atop the promontory, or indicated his collusion with the hyenas. No good would come of it either way.

A mild-looking man approached, eager, anxious, appearing almost unwilling to speak; his compound bow dangled negligently. "There was a girl in the car," he ventured, the question hanging out there.

The Driver looked down at the ground, avoiding eye contact. "She's dead," he said simply, quietly.

The man stepped back slightly, shaking his head in internal denial even though he knew it to be true, then, even quieter: “What did they do?”

So much for safe questions. “She died in the crash,” the Driver said, perhaps a little too quickly, for the man continued backing away, suspecting the lie but also aware that there remained the truth that she was dead all the same. Spurred both by this uncomfortable situation and the sight of the man he rescued under desperate medical attention, the Driver tried to re-align the conversation. “Look, I just want my gas so I can get out of here.”

One of his guards, a young woman with the coldest eyes he'd seen since his high school days, snarled, “For all we know he's one of them – give him nothing!” She appeared to be eagerly anticipating the command to fire upon her captive, ready to end the misgivings and risk. Somewhere in the distant recesses of his mind, he considered the irony of this woman having almost the exact same outlook as he himself did, while being wholly unable to appreciate it within these circumstances.

Others in the small crowd that had gathered started to chime in, repeating the same sentiments; he wasn't winning any friends here. The Driver realized he'd overplayed it – living as long as he had out on the road in a solitary manner, you made deals where you could, always covering your own ass. It was different here, in a *community*; everyone was family, and expected a certain level of altruism. Had he not mentioned anything at all about the gas, just brought the man back as a good Samaritan, he might well have received it freely. But his voicing the deal made it seem to be, as could be heard from someone in the crowd, “trading in human flesh.” And he wasn't entirely sure this wasn't true.

He stepped forward suddenly, speaking over both the mutterings of the crowd and the murmurs within his own head, pointing towards the stretcher. “We had an *arrangement*; I could have driven off, saved my own skin, not put myself at risk from all of you here...” his voice trailed off, his attempt to portray them as insular and selfish dissipating into the wind. Alongside the stretcher, the medical duo had stepped back, reluctantly, finally, away from the still form of the man he had attempted to rescue. An older woman, black hair streaked with gray, leaned over his forehead, her tears mingling with the blood and grit on his face. The Driver could see the family resemblance in their facial features, felt the dig deep within. Parents should never outlive their children.

The leader's voice cut through the sudden silence from behind him. “Any arrangement you had was with him,” he observed dryly, “and it died with him.” The voice, now stronger, still came fainter as he turned away, towards those guarding the Driver. “Get rid of him.”

## Chapter Four

They almost dragged him off to one side of the clearing, someone gripping his shorter hair in a fierce grip, another his shoulder, arrows so close he occasionally grazed their razor sharp tips. The Driver knew better than to argue or make any untoward moves. One or two, perhaps, he might have handled, but not half of the compound, most of which were simply waiting for the excuse to drop him dead where he stood. As he watched, a towing winch was bringing his car through the gate; he knew no one had entered the car to try and start it, perhaps wisely on their part, perhaps by chance – they'd simply slipped under the front end and thrown a cable around the suspension.

The mechanic dangling from the lifting rig was guiding the operation, directing the car into the position he wanted. Catching the Driver's eye, he smiled wryly, almost gleefully. "Gotta hand it to you, treasure!" he said brightly. "The last of the V-8 intercepts – a piece of *history!* Haven't seen the like in years..." He trailed off, almost wistfully, favoring the car with an experienced and appreciative eye. Then he lifted a circuit board that looked all too familiar to the Driver, since he'd been the one to wire it up into its former position under the rear end of the car, near the massive fuel tanks. "Would have been a shame to blow it up," the mechanic continued, bestowing on the Driver a knowing look, one professional to another.

Fondly, he reached out and patted the fender – and jerked as the dog exploded out of the window and launched himself, once again, at someone who dared touch the car. *Really* good thing no one had tried to start it (notwithstanding the cryptically-wired ignition system, also capable of killing a man.)

The dog was slightly disadvantaged by the supportive rig holding the mechanic well off the ground, preventing him from going for the throat as usual. Instead, the dog fastened onto one of the mechanic's dangling legs, sans boots but wrapped in protective padding. The mechanic managed not to scream in terror or pain – a first, in the dog's experience. "Hey now, mate, slow down," he bade the dog calmly, "you're gonna choke on that drumstick if you're not careful!" He swayed gently in the harness under the fierce tugging of the dog on his unresponsive leg, rendered as useless as its companion by a spinal injury long ago.

The Driver took advantage of the momentary distraction to shrug off the grips upon him, getting to the dog before anyone else did, sweeping him up almost protectively. Immediately the hands closed on him again, too many of them bearing wickedly sharp knives, but he held still, gripping the dog. "Leave it!" he commanded, quietly enough that (hopefully) everyone would know he was addressing the dog. "Shush. It's okay." The dog calmed, releasing his grip on the mechanic's leg wrappings obediently. As hands hauled the Driver back to his feet harshly, he released the dog at his feet, again saying, "It's okay." The dog took his cue and stood quietly even as his master was pulled back. Whatever else happened, there was no point in the dog dying to defend a situation well past the possibility of a positive outcome. If he accepted it, if *they* accepted *him*, the dog could have a cushy little existence in the compound without the Driver. Not many people or animals died of old age anymore; the Driver never believed it was in the cards for himself. But maybe the dog could pull it off – he deserved it.

A shout from the walls galvanized everyone into activity: “*Here they come!* Close the gates – they’re coming back!”

No one had to ask who “they” were – it was a little peculiar that they’d been gone this long, really. Someone vaulted into the open side window of the bus that served as the gate, still idling near the opening in the walls, and slammed it into gear. Two of the people guarding the Driver left him, reluctantly, to take up positions on the walls, leaving him in the hands of the cold-eyed woman who still yearned to cut his throat; for her part, she snagged his right arm (having observed both where the shotgun holster had attached to his belt and how his jacket shoulder was cut away from ease of movement,) and wrenched it painfully behind his back. The Driver knew how to escape the hold – hell, he’d *trained* people how to, in another life – but even as he began the move by sheer reflex he came up against the serrated knife she pressed against his throat from the right side, away from his free arm. “I *want* to,” she told him quietly.

“I know you do,” he replied. If it gave her any satisfaction she didn’t show it, instead guiding him forcefully over to a scaffolding just inside the walls of the compound, some fifteen meters away from the gate and away from any of the defending positions. There, she produced a set of police handcuffs and clapped them onto his right wrist as tight as they would go, the other cuff being affixed to a vertical pipe of the scaffolding. Wasting no further time, she vaulted up the framework and over to a ballista alongside the gate, setting her compound bow in a stand at her feet to take over the much-larger defensive emplacement. With long practice, she wound the hand-crank to cock the bow and dropped a wickedly-barbed arrow into the slot even as she took aim at some hidden target outside the wall.

Above the shouts of those within the compound, either directing guards to defensive positions or securing something else further within, came the growing rumble of engines, the return of the hyenas, as stealthy as a three-year-old with a pot and a spoon. There was a difference this time though, the rumble deeper from engines operating at a lower throttle – they weren’t rushing to the attack. The Driver, ignored for now, glanced at the scaffolding he was chained to and realized the cold-eyed woman had missed a trick, attaching the cuff above a joint instead of below it; he took advantage of this and climbed the rigging, the cuff sliding up the pipe with him and affording him a vantage that would just barely allow a line of sight over the wall. On his way up, he took a quick look around, noting further details within the compound while no one was paying any attention to him. Among other things, he discovered the fate of the motorcyclist who had successfully cleared the wall – the wreckage of the bike was scattered among a purposeful collection of engine blocks and scrap metal, some of it sharpened until it gleamed. Picking a path through it even at a walking pace would be hazardous; landing a bike would (and did) prove impossible. A couple of distinctive pieces still bore bloodstains.

Atop the scaffolding, he looked out over the wall at the approaching hyenas, which were indeed maintaining a moderate pace with what must have been enormous self-restraint. Front and center came the hybrid vehicle of the hyena’s leader, sporting a pair of upright stanchions on the front, to which were tied two hostages. Their mode of dress was very similar to the runners he’d seen driven to ground, and indeed most of the people within the

compound; it seems another vehicle had failed to make it away. As the hybrid drew closer, one of these hostages could be seen, and eventually heard, shouting entreaties towards the compound, and at least two of the guards on the walls took careful aim at the muscular leader and his assistant, even before they were within range of a bowshot. But in a moment, the voice of the hostage could be made out; screaming as loud as he could above the sound of a few dozen engines:

“Hold your fire! He comes in peace! For god's sake, *hold your fire!*”

The weathered leader within the compound, manning the flamethrower, caught the words. “Hold your fire,” he commanded, and the cry was passed along through practice among the guards on the wall. No one lowered a weapon, however.

The hyenas drew almost within bow range, and came to a halt, following the lead of the hybrid vehicle. The assistant leapt down and walked a few paces in front of the pack, pausing theatrically, lacking only a baton and a top hat. He whirled one arm around over his head in a broad, slow circle, provoking a synchronized revving of engines from the entire pack of vehicles, drowning out any other sound for kilometers; then, with a flourish, he drew his hand across his throat and the engines all died at once, chased by their own echoes before the thin whistling of the wind emphasized the sudden silence. The Driver had seen much the same practice before, since it had been a favorite ritual of the biker gangs that had existed before the war, a few of which he'd thinned appreciably in his former duties.

The assistant – the Driver had already christened him, “Toady” – continued to face the compound, standing straight and tall, or as tall as he could, which wasn't much. “Greetings from The Humungous,” he intoned dramatically, somewhere between a court page and a jester. “The *Lord* Humungous! The Warrior of the Wasteland!” And with a brief smirk he paused, glancing around; this next bit was his own: “The Ayatollah of Rock and *Rollah!*”

Suitably introduced, the leader of the hyenas stood up in his vehicle, pausing for a moment – it appeared no drama was to be spared. Now closer, his musculature was even more apparent, very visible through his impractical suit of black leather straps, studded belt, and a ridiculous codpiece. His face was obscured behind a weathered hockey goalie's mask, which might have been there for more than just effect, since his body bore extensive burn scars from some unfortunate event long ago. Taking up an old radio microphone, his voice boomed out from the array of speakers set atop the roll cage, its gravelly, tortured tone reinforcing the severity of the burns.

“I am gravely disappointed,” he began, with all the drama of a school play. “Again you have made me unleash my Dogs of War.” He threw an arm wide, taking in a few of the cars that flanked his own, where bundles of rags could now be identified as bodies sprawled across hoods and windshields; the weapons wielded by the hyenas standing over them indicating that the captives were still alive. “Look at what remains of your gallant scouts! Why?” he posed, pausing to contemplate this philosophical question of the desert.

“Because you're selfish!” he continued, the accusation echoing off the rocks and the walls of the compound. “You will not listen to reason! You hoard your gasoline for a rainy day,



a day when it will bring you... what? Your *happiness*?”

A reedy voice, lacking the augmentation of the Humungous' amplifier, nevertheless made itself heard in the pause. “Don’t listen to him!” it wailed, drawing the eyes of those in the compound and the hyenas themselves to the stanchion on the front of the hybrid vehicle where one of the hostages, still bleeding from the injuries sustained in his capture, beseeched those within the compound in defiance of his captors; it was not the same hostage who had begged them to hold their fire. The Toady scampered up and tried to jam the hostage's mouth closed as his master went on.

“Now, my prisoners say, you plan to take your gasoline out of the wasteland,” the scarred leader said, disappointment evident in his voice. “You sent them out this morning to find a vehicle. A rig, big enough to haul that fat tank of gas.” Another pause, the disappointment giving way to pity. “What a puny plan!”

The defiant hostage was still crying out contradictions when the Toady drew back and slammed a fist into his stomach, knocking the wind from him and temporarily halting his imprecations. From his position atop the scaffolding, the Driver watched impassively, scanning the assembled hyenas alertly for any sly actions they might undertake during the distraction. In doing so, his eyes fell once again on the motorcyclist – the one who had attempted to run the Driver down a few days ago; the one who had tortured the runner just an hour before. He and his boyfriend stood not far from the leader's vehicle which, if the Driver guessed correctly about the tribal hierarchy, would mean that he was highly favored within the hyena enclave. Such gangs tended to mimic the pecking order of many species of animals, and members at such a high level were often more dangerous than the leaders themselves. Independent enough to act on their own volition without instruction or permission, with the potential of taking over the leader's position given the right opportunity, such beta-males were often aggressive and impetuous; given that, it would make sense that the failed attempt to run the Driver down had actually been orchestrated by this man. The Driver noted this all subconsciously, vestiges of the days when his duty had been to deal with 'scooter-trash' of exactly this nature, though now all it served to do was inform him of the actions such people were capable of.

In the same vein, the Driver half-listened to the posturing as the Humungous droned on. Those in the compound held almost all of the cards – a fortified position, the long-term security of self-sustainability, and of course the gas, all the power they should ever need. The hyenas, on the other hand, controlled all of the land surrounding them, and were greater in number, counting perhaps twice those in the compound. The compound couldn't expand, couldn't somehow ally itself with others in any way, and its only method of increasing its numbers would take far too long – fifteen to twenty years. The hyenas, meanwhile, were unlikely to strengthen themselves in any way, especially considering their attitude towards strangers, and their resources were already stretched thin. It was in their interest to break into the compound as soon as they could, before their numbers dwindled too low to be useful, before their gas or food ran out – before, even, dissension drove their ranks asunder. The Humungous held just a few cards, and could only hope to bluff his way against the advantages of the compound.

“Look around you!” he was saying, needing no gesture to indicate the surrounding, near-barren scrub and desert. “This... is the valley of death. It waits for you, closing in, eager to take your rotting corpses. Your rape of the land will be avenged – you cannot wait it out. The gasoline is a trap. It has lured you in, and will bleed you dry... unless you escape.”

A lone rabbit, having been driven to cover by the noise of the approaching vehicles a few minutes earlier, chose that moment to break from concealment and dash for its distant burrow across the open space between the hyenas and the compound. The motorcyclist caught the action and immediately raised his hand, firing off the ever-ready wrist crossbow and skewering the rabbit with a remarkably accurate shot, grinning evilly in triumph. The Toady leapt forward, pointing excitedly at the expiring rabbit. “See?” he cried. “Nothing escapes! The Humungous *rules* the wasteland!”

The Driver's eyes darted back to the Humungous, suspicious that this was going off-script a bit, but could discern nothing at this distance, especially beyond the mask. Hostages were always a bargaining point; if the leader had wanted to emphasize his control and the futility of resistance, they would have been killed outright, or in a dramatic display right in front of the compound. Instead, he'd had the hostages brought here alive to... what?

Again, the defiant hostage spoke up, addressing those in the compound again – quite possibly thinking along the same lines as the Driver. “Give them *nothing!*” he demanded, as if oblivious to his near-crucified position on the stanchion fronting the leader's vehicle. “Blow it up! *He lies!*”

The motorcyclist turned at this, darted back, and vaulted onto the bumper just beneath the stanchion. Gripping the hostage's face with both hands in what might, in other circumstances, be considered a gesture of endearment, he drew his own head back and drove his forehead into the hostage's brutally, the head-butt knocking the latter unconscious. It was telling in its own way – they did not like the contradiction, they needed to suppress it. Censorship has always taken place out of fear. The motorcyclist stepped back down, displaying the delighted grin he wore at his accomplishment.

There came a soft grunt of exertion off to one side, and a faint, high-pitched whistling, a repeated flash of reflected sunlight. The Driver and the motorcyclist noticed it at the same time; the motorcyclist had more to fear from it though, as it was aimed for him. He ducked reflexively, the gleaming metal boomerang cleaving the air where his head had been and, true to its nature, arced up and around. The eyes of the motorcyclist followed it briefly to ensure that it was up well out of doing any damage, then traced its path back to the source; the Driver had already pinpointed it. The kid from the compound, the unkempt little ape dressed in furs, was *outside* the compound walls. Had the boomerang been quieter, it would have nailed the motorcyclist in the head, likely with fatal results. The kid was no slouch.

As the boomerang sloped back towards him, the waif tracked it, dodging to intercept, and expertly caught the weapon in the hand that was heavily coated in skins... and in all probability, something a lot more substantial – the force of the boomerang snapped his arm back momentarily, but failed to harm him. The motorcyclist's boyfriend was almost stricken by the shock of how close his lover had come to being killed, and drew closer behind him in a

mixture of fear, reassurance, and support. The Humungous had stopped his speechifying – in fact, near-total silence was descending as those who had missed the drama began taking their cues from those who had not, and were turning to see the child with the vicious weapon.

The kid didn't hesitate even for a second. As his arm came forward from the successful catch it transferred the boomerang to his right hand, which immediately snapped back and hurled the weapon again, the entire action taking less than a second. Again, the motorcyclist was the target, and even forewarned, he barely had the ability to duck away from the missile as it sped towards his neck this time.

Unfortunately, he was unaware that his boyfriend had drawn in so close. The motorcyclist's dodge was enough to reveal the presence of the boomerang only a tiny fraction of a second before it cleaved into his lover's face with a sickening sound, digging deep to sever too many of the brain's connections; the man was effectively dead before he collapsed limply onto the ground.

The motorcyclist stared in horror, the death coming so quickly, so undeniably, so unexpectedly. He knew he himself was, in part, to blame, recognizing his complicity in dodging without thinking of who was behind him even when he failed to consider that he'd been targeted because of his abuse of the hostage. Blinded by rage, almost the only emotion that he, or any of the hyenas, allowed themselves to feel, he wrenched the boomerang free from its lethal resting place and, screaming incoherently, launched it back at the kid.

Boomerangs are a weapon for the skilled. By chance, the motorcyclist had gripped it the right way around, but a knowledge of how it behaved aerodynamically was necessary for any accuracy. The kid crouched but had nothing to fear, the boomerang arcing off well above his head and banking to make the return in roughly the motorcyclist's direction, yet well off to the side.

The Toady, perhaps in remembrance of days long ago when sports were civilized and some measure of popularity, realized he was within easy range of the returning weapon. Breaking into an awkward run, he moved to intercept it, excitedly crying, "I got it!" This almost-forgotten reaction and lack of foresight was his undoing; the hand wrappings that the kid used had a purpose. The most successful catch of the Toady's life was spoiled by the boomerang barely pausing in its flight, slashing through his outstretched hand and scattering his fingers among the sandy soil nearby. The sensation was painless at first, completely unknown in his experience, but the realization dawned very quickly, with a wave of nausea.

The hyenas commiserated with a wave of loud, raucous laughter – perhaps betraying the complete lack of empathy in their psyche, perhaps only indicting their dislike of the Toady (which would hardly have been a unique occurrence in the long history of tribal dynamics.) The Driver watched it all, knowing the plan was breaking apart. The leader would have counted on the idea of the inescapable threat, the impending doom, to foment the despair among those in the compound – laughter was not a part of that in any way. The Humungous was already trying to quell the laughter, none too successfully. Whether intended or not, the kid had accomplished a lot with his distraction. He was lucky, though, in that the motorcyclist had already discharged his crossbow and not thought to immediately reload it; his accuracy

with it was undeniable. But where the hell did the kid *go*? He had already vanished, even as the motorcyclist started at a sprint in his direction, off to the side of the gate among the jumble of rocks and wreckage. Both the Driver and the motorcyclist apparently came to the same conclusion at the same time; impetuous dashes into that area were not healthy, since the compounders had already demonstrated their prowess with deadfall traps, numerous times. The motorcyclist paused, then turned back in his fury towards the leader's vehicle.

The Humungous was trying to get things back under control and on track. "We are here for a *purpose*," he was saying, though whether this was to those in the compound, or his own charges, or both, couldn't be determined. "We come with an offer. All—"

"*Nooooo!*" came the protest of the motorcyclist, swarming up the side of the Humungous' vehicle, blinded by fury. "No more talk! *We kill them! We kill them all!*" He tried to shove the leader away from the driver's seat of his own vehicle, fumbling for the starter, ready to charge the gates.

The Humungous was forced to demonstrate why he held the position he did. Sweeping up the not-insignificant weight of the motorcyclist, he wrapped a muscular arm around the furious man's neck in a debilitating choke hold, even as the promises of death kept issuing forth. Having dropped the microphone, none of those within the compound could hear the exchange taking place.

"Be still, my Dog of War," the Humungous rasped from his position very close to the other's ear. "I understand your pain. We have *all* lost someone we love." He bent closer, reinforcing his position by word and action. "But we do it *my way*."

"Loser's way!" ground out the motorcyclist past the choke hold, kicking and trying unsuccessfully to tear the arm from his neck, managing only to gouge some furrows with his fingernails along the bigger man's arm, not winning any points by either.

"We do it my way," repeated the Humungous. "Wez! Fear is our ally! The gasoline will be ours – it takes time, but it will cost us less. Then, *then*," he promised, "You shall have your revenge." He finally tightened the grip he'd been withholding until he proved his point, re-establishing his control, and the restricted blood flow to the motorcyclist's head quickly caused him to slump unconscious. Waiting only a few seconds to ensure that there was no feint from the smaller man, the Humungous released him to drop limply alongside the vehicle, beckoning another hyena forward. "Take him away," he said, slightly out of breath from the struggle, and fumbled for the microphone. Regaining it, he addressed those in the compound once again.

"There has been too much violence, too much pain," he said sadly, using the distraction to reinforce the unstable nature of life, apparently trying to bring the narrative back to intentions. "None here are without sin. But, I have an honorable compromise." Another pause, a silent moment to draw closer attention. "Just walk away."

"Just walk away. Give me the pump, the oil, and the whole compound, and I'll spare your lives. Just walk away, and I will provide safe passage through the wasteland. Just walk

away... and there will be an end to the horror.”

The Driver idly noted that the Humungous was speaking singularly, making no promise of what “we” would do, wondering if this was lost on those in the compound.

“I await your answer,” the leader continued, reaching down to start his hybrid truck. “You have until sundown tomorrow to decide.” With a growing rumble, the hyenas got back into their own vehicles and began to start them. One dragged the deceased boyfriend away by his ankles over to a flatbed truck; two others wrestled the unconscious “Wez” onto a motorcycle sidecar, the former occupant of which was now starting Wez’s own motorcycle. The Toady, relieved of his duties as Humungous’ driver by his inability to operate a turn signal, wandered back and forth aimlessly, clutching his rag-wrapped ruined hand and trying to scavenge a ride from those apparently unwilling to provide one. Eventually, he clambered aboard a decrepit Ford; the pack of hyenas, all within vehicles now, were turning, driving off, following the leader as he traveled back to the empty encampment. Those in the compound watched quietly, mulling the offer and the actions.

One man within the walls, however, responded, albeit lately, which might have been subconsciously intentional. “*We’ll never walk away!*” he screamed, launching an arrow from a compound bow furiously but without discipline, a gesture of defiance rather than any functional attack; the hyenas had never been within range, but had now all turned away and neither saw nor heard the avowal. The Driver recognized the man as the one who had asked him about the fate of the female runner.

The murmurs were starting among those in the compound as the defenders left the walls to the sentries. The gambit to send runners out to find a rig that could pull the tanker trailer had failed horribly, and an air of desperation was growing within. Those killed or taken hostage were not just acquaintances or even comrades, but *family*, and their loss was all the worse for that. The debate started as the different factions within the compound each weighed the variables in a different manner.

A woman, the distraught mother he’d seen earlier, climbed to the top of the gate bus to better address the others, knowing that the compound’s leader often did the same for the psychological angle. She had watched the gesture of defiance played out just moments ago, and knew that a lot of those suffering painful losses felt the same, vengeful way. Emotions can be blinding, and don’t always lead to practical solutions.

“You heard what he said!” she called out to everyone within earshot. “He sounds reasonable! We don’t *have* to die! All we have to do is walk away!”

The dissenting voice rose immediately from the open area of the compound. “No! We’ve worked too hard!” Other voices began to clamor in agreement.

Undeterred, she plowed on. “It’s simple. All we have to do is exchange the fuel, and this *junkyard*...” she let the derisive tone color the word, “...for our lives.”

Another man had gained the top of the gate near her; the Driver suspected he was

second-in-command within the compound, after the weathered farmer guy. “Look, if we walk out of here they’ll *slaughter* us! They’ll set us loose, then cut us down like pigs! It’s sport to them – they don’t make *deals*.”

“Don’t listen to them!” interjected the woman. “We stay here only to deny the inevitable.”

Ignored by everyone now, the Driver listened with one ear as he manipulated the lock on the handcuffs with a pick that had gone unnoticed within his jacket. The cold-eyed woman was unfamiliar with police procedure, and had put the keyhole on the hand side of the cuff, instead of in towards the body where it would have been harder to pick. She had also neglected the second, safety lock which would have prevented them from being picked at all. The Driver had allowed his own handcuff keys to go along with his toolbelt, not the best of moves, but it wasn’t slowing him down more than a minute or so; he was far too familiar with cuffs, having put on quite a few of them in his former life. A recent memory, however, was likely to turn out to be a lot more useful.

Down in the clearing, a withered but spry old man stumped up, dressed in a military uniform complete with helmet and a respectable array of medals – ones, undoubtedly, from a campaign long before the most recent that destroyed civilization. *Those* officers tended to make themselves scarce and not admit to their status, after a few unfortunate incidents when the frustrations and ire were still high...

“All right, this is it!” he announced with optimistic determination, withdrawing his decorative service saber and placing it ceremoniously on the ground in the clearing. “I’ll talk to this Humungous. He seems like a reasonable man, open to negotiation.” If he had been counting on the others in the compound to rally in support, or even pause to see what he had to say, he was sorely disappointed – they ignored the display and continued the debate, quite possibly used to the ramblings. The woman atop the gate forged on.

“He promised us safe passage. He gave his word!”

The leader of the compound, from a position on an access walkway well up the structure of the refinery, finally spoke; his voice was sharp and clear, well-suited to such uses. “And let us suppose he *keeps* it,” he said, loud enough to carry above everyone else, yet still capable of expressing his skepticism over the prospect, before lowering it slightly, “and we walk out of here with our lives. What then?”

The Driver, bereft of his restraints now, was letting the debate play itself out when he noticed a movement below the scaffolding he was on. From the darkness beneath emerged the kid with the boomerang, clearly having some kind of tunnel system that allowed him egress from the compound without the benefit of the gate. The Driver briefly considered how foolhardy this was, until he remembered the compounders’ skills with traps, not to mention the inordinate capabilities of the kid before him. Anyone attempting the same route without explicit knowledge was likely just entering their own efficient grave.

The child looked up at him appraisingly, one hand clasping the boomerang still faintly

stained with blood. They examined one another, taking cues from the other's equally cool reactions, neither saying a word. After a moment, the kid raised the boomerang slightly, not as a threat, but to display it – one warrior to another. The Driver nodded slightly, honestly respectful. An adult with those kind of skills was to be admired; in a boy of an age when he'd be first learning his alphabet it was phenomenal. And abruptly, the Driver remembered the music box. Drawing it from within his jacket – casually, nonthreateningly – he started turning the lever, producing the tinkly little tune.

The boy's face split into a captivated grin, watching the action attentively – it seemed no one in the compound possessed any musical instruments. The Driver played nearly a full stanza again and stopped, holding the music box out from his position above the boy, and mimicked a toss. The kid's hands shot out immediately, ready to catch it, and the second time the Driver did let it go, the 'birthday' gift dropping gently into the boy's hands. With concentration and a little fumbling, the boy cranked the lever, not too smoothly, and produced an uneven, sporadic rendition of the song. This elicited an excited series of yowling grunts from him, as he momentarily favored the Driver with a look of bare appreciation intermixed with possessive greed as he scampered off with his prize to protect it. The kid was more feral than most of the hyenas, apparently, yet still loyal to the compounders.

The Driver turned his attention back to the debate, which had not faltered during this little drama. The leader was in full oratory strength, outlining the reasoning behind his plan to break from the compound with the tanker trailer in tow.

“...remember, it's not just gas – it's our lifeline to a place *beyond* those vermin on machines.”

The military geezer was derisive. “That's three thousand kilometers from here! How are we gonna get it there – *drag it?*”

“If we have to, yes!” the leader asserted. “There's always a way! But the first step: defend the fuel.”

Even those supporting him recognized this as a bad statement, a vestige of the capitalism that was responsible for the world being in the shape it now was. The safety of those in the compound was, *should have been*, more important – the fuel was just a means to ensure it. This might even have been what he meant by his statement, yet it came off sounding like possessiveness, a bad choice of priorities.

The mother atop the gate sneered. “Words. Just words. You'd die for a, a *pipe* dream.” The pun hadn't initially been intended, but she was pleased with it all the same.

The cold-eyed woman, not far from her position at the ballista, spoke up. “Wrong. We fight for a *belief*. I stay.”

The debate wasn't going well, but then again, such things rarely did. Though always intended to foster cohesiveness by whittling down to the best course of action, the most reasonable viewpoint, the usual result instead was that both sides reinforced their position

while seeing the same behavior from their opponents as intransigence. The compounders were splitting in two, strained to the breaking point by the loss of their members this morning, and the demarcation was not at all surprising. The younger and fiercer members, those that lined the walls when danger loomed, sided with the leader; they had faith in the approach of matching might with might, of fighting to retain what they'd accrued, realizing that the hyenas were not the type to honor deals. On the other hand, the more 'suburban' members of the compound, those that tended and farmed and had turned this refinery from a factory into a village, had no wish to devolve into the tribal raider viewpoint that had taken over so much of this area. If peace meant relinquishing a hold on such contentious and valuable commodities, so be it; possessions were a means to an end, but peace was the end.

The mother clambered down from the gate, walking into the center of the clearing that separated her from the leader, and dropped her crowbar next to the ceremoniously discarded saber; *everyone* in the compound had a weapon of some kind when the call rang out, though not everyone defended the walls nor, really, even knew how to use their own. Slowly, other members came forward to discard their weapons in the growing pile, while a faction stood resolute, ignoring the display. The polls were now open. One attractive young woman, cradling a piglet, addressed the leader in a soft voice that strained to be heard above the murmur of the wind and the industrial sound of the refinery grinding away. "I wish it could have worked, Pappagallo, I really do. But you can't expect to compete with *that*," she indicated the encampment out of sight beyond the walls with a toss of her head. "Every day, we get weaker while they get stronger. It's finished." And then, touched by whatever guilt she felt over the divide, she choked out, almost inaudibly, "I'm sorry."

The dilemma wasn't immediately clear to everyone, however. No divide was possible; both solutions could not be taken simultaneously. The safe passage promised by the Humungous came at the price of the compound and the fuel, and it would certainly not be granted if any faction decided to stay and defend their position, or leave with a supply of fuel to see them on their way. It was all or nothing, fight or flee. Telling, too, was the Humungous' proposal; there was no reason why, with a working refinery that likely would not run dry for ages, he could not allow the compounders to take what they wished when they left – there was more than enough to go around. It was a little detail that burned in the back of the minds of a few, spelling something unkosher about the proposed deal.

The Driver realized no better time would present itself. Putting two fingers in his mouth (and immediately regretting it – it had been a while since they'd even been rinsed off,) he issued a piercing whistle that caused everyone to turn in his direction; the closer ones had jumped and brought their weapons to bear. The cold-eyed woman noticed the missing handcuffs and watched him shrewdly, certain no good was going to come of this.

"Two days ago, I saw a vehicle that would haul that tanker," the Driver informed them all, matter-of-factly. "If you *want* to get out of here," he paused, looking around, "let's make a deal."



## Chapter Five

The compounders had, with some minor squabbling, brought the Driver into a low meeting area, a long table deep within the compound – not exactly ushered him in, and not exactly dragged him in as a prisoner, but something bearing a resemblance to both. Generously, they provided water, and smoked meat of some kind that the Driver knew better than to inquire about; it beat the hell out of dog food no matter what.

There was a select six of them, and they'd grilled him, hoping to catch him out on any inconsistency that would have spelled a fabrication; for his own part, he was careful not to reveal too much about where he'd seen the rig.

“So it was just sitting there, and you expect it to be in running condition?” the second-in-command asked skeptically.

The Driver shrugged. “The man behind the wheel was dead, but hadn't been there long. The cargo on the trailer had been ransacked, but the tractor looked intact.”

“Why wouldn't they have taken it?” the leader – Pappagallo, apparently – asked.

“Who needs a rig out here?” the Driver countered. “They're slow, and burn diesel. Eventually, however, someone's going to fetch it to run your gate.” That drew a mild reaction, a shifting of eyes among several of them.

The mother, the leader of the opposing faction, was also present, and leaned forward. “What bothers me,” she said, “was how you plan to get out there.”

The Driver looked her square in the eye, calmly but forthrightly. “That's not in my interests to hand over to you. But if you want to pay for it...”

“I don't think it matters,” Pappagallo interjected. “If you can deliver a rig that works, it's not of any concern to us *how* you get it.”

The Driver turned back to him. “So that's the proposal: I bring you the rig, I get back my vehicle and all the juice it'll hold.”

The second-in-command spoke quietly, only to Pappagallo. “We lost eight good people today, going out on a blind scavenger hunt.” He glanced at the Driver, coldly, but kept addressing the leader. “I'd rather risk this guy, on a warmer lead, than any of our own.”

Pappagallo didn't nod, but looked attentively to the Driver. “What are you gonna need for this little endeavor?”

“Just twenty liters of diesel and ten of high-octane gasoline, in the lightest containers you have.”

The cold-eyed woman was in attendance as well – though, judging from her demeanor and her position behind the Driver, it was more to see that an attempt to do anything more than talk would be met with a few quick fatal wounds. She sneered openly. “And that's the last we'll see of him.”

“He's gotta come back for his wheels,” the second-in-command countered. “And we lost a hell of a lot more than that this morning.”

“I don't like it,” the mother averred. “It's too convenient.”

Pappagallo knew what management was, however, and was willing to demonstrate it. “I'm not concerned with whether or not we believe the situation. I'd like to hear any better suggestions, from anyone.”

Only silence greeted him at this, and he went on. “Then it appears you have yourself a deal.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Driver waited until late at night. He'd talked the compounders into allowing him his weapons and toolbelt, but they'd elected to return these to him only as he was leaving the compound. They provided four rubber bladders with the required fuel, on a makeshift backpack harness – the weight was significant, but manageable. He didn't intend to shoulder it for very long anyhow.

He kept a watch on the encampment for most of the evening, watching the fires die down, listening to the noises abate. Two hours after all activity seemed to have ceased he prepared to head out; most of the hyenas should be in deeper sleep at that point, and even the sentries might be nodding off.

Rather than start the engine of the gate bus and risk attracting any attention through that, they lowered him gently off the wall with a harness, followed quickly by the dog, which might have its own uses. As he shrugged out of the sling at the base of the wall, he looked back up one last time, to Pappagallo framed dimly against the residual glare from the spotlights that illuminated most of the surrounding area. “My vehicle, and all the juice I can carry,” the Driver stated again, a question.

“In exchange for a drivable rig,” Pappagallo replied. “Nothing less.” Just the bare fact that he would qualify it carefully, rather than simply confirming that they had a deal, was reassuring – not a lot, but as much as could be hoped for in the circumstances. The Driver nodded, probably unseen in the darkness at the base of the wall, and set off with his burden.

They had showed him the route, on hand-drawn maps, and he'd memorized it meticulously. A shallow swale off to one side would remain in shadow from the compound's lights for most of its length, and if he maintained a certain bearing after leaving its protection, he would never be silhouetted against the floodlit plain, backed instead by scrub brush. Near the hyena encampment, there was another gully that could be used to avoid detection,

provided he stay low and make no noise.

It was slow going, picking his footing as carefully as possible to avoid crunching gravel or dry twigs, checking frequently behind him to see if he was being outlined against anything brighter, pausing periodically for a few minutes at a time to listen for any movement. The dog came into its own here, since its sense of hearing and smell were many times better than the Driver's, and it was quite adept at pointing out danger. The Driver failed to notice, however, the times when the dog paused and looked behind them, curiously, without anxiety or aggression.

It occurred to him, just before he gained the gully that would skirt the encampment, that there was a good chance no one in the compound had ever really confirmed this was a valid passage. The camp had probably not been here for long, and there were few reasons to try and slip past on foot. Nothing to do about it now, though, and so far, their info had been accurate.

He was almost safely past the encampment when it occurred. Negotiating a steep slope in loose gravel, overbalanced by the weight of the fuel, the Driver slipped, thudding down on his backside and skidding a short ways down the slope – not a lot of noise, but too much this close to the camp. Immediately he drew his boot knife, its blade blackened earlier that evening over a sooty oil flame, and waited silently. The dog trotted over with a soft whine and he hissed very quietly at it to silence it. He could afford to wait a bit to ensure that no one had been attracted by the sound, but not too terribly long – first light would be rising within two hours, and he'd need to be much further away by then.

The Driver was almost ready to resume his trek when he heard it: the soft crunch of gravel underfoot, about twenty or so meters away from the top of the gully, perhaps ten or so back the way he'd come. A sentry was stealthily approaching the ditch, taking his time, using his own ears to seek the cause of the noise. There was little question that he'd heard it, and had every reason to be suspicious; the compounders would be desperate given the ultimatum from the previous morning, perhaps provoked towards more attempts to escape, or to secure a rig.

And then, ahead of him along the path of the gully, he heard a soft whimper, the sound of a dingo snuffling for food. Abruptly a light flashed on from above the gully's edge, a battery-powered lamp carried by the sentry, lancing into the darkness in the direction of the dingo as the sentry trotted to close the gap. Head twisting to watch the events, the Driver could make out the bare silhouette of the sentry holding the light, and there, about twenty meters ahead in the edge of the beam for a moment, the dark pelt of the wild dog darting off into the shadows with a faint yelp, followed by the crackle of gravel scattered in its haste. The sentry bent and picked up a handful of stones, side-arming them in the direction of the dingo to hasten it on its way, then extinguished the lamp. Another few moments of silence, and then the soft crunch of gravel again as the sentry returned to his post closer to the encampment.

The Driver counted off two-thousand seconds before he dared shift again, having heard no other sounds during that time, and when he did move it was with excruciating care. He wondered how his noise had failed to spook off the dingo, as close as it had been, but

didn't begrudge the luck that had befallen him; the sound and sighting of the wild dog was explanation enough for the sentry, and might even cause him to ignore any other minor noises that could occur. There wasn't a great distance to cover before the Driver was far enough from the encampment that his passage was unlikely to be noted, at least until shortly before sunrise when the twilight would illuminate the landscape; he needed to be a ways further along by that time.

Then he froze, hand dropping to the knife again. In the gully ahead of him sat a shape, obviously different from the rocks and dead roots that were scattered about, too small for a sentry, but slightly large for a dingo; nevertheless, it still had a furry look to it. As he stared at it, it elongated vertically, stretching up to a little over a meter in height, and it took him a second to realize what he was seeing, another two to piece it all together. The damn feral kid was waiting for him, having left the compound, and was almost certainly what both he and the sentry had seen scurrying off in the light. The dog trotted up to the boy placidly, earning a friendly nuzzle from the kid – no pats here – before the kid turned to the Driver and jerked his head along the gully in a 'follow me' gesture. Gently replacing the knife, the Driver shook his head. The son of a bitch could do a wicked good dingo impersonation, but then again, it was probably much easier for him than human speech would have been.

The three of them forged ahead, getting well away from the encampment without incident, and after a while the Driver halted, looking around to get his bearings. The kid waited expectantly, sniffing the air gently, and the Driver went up to him, gently placing his hands on both of the boy's shoulders, giving them a firm squeeze. The boy looked slightly confused, seeking any meaning in the man's face, but interpreted the head jerk well enough: go back to the compound. With some uncertainty, the kid started back, watching. The Driver gave him the go-on motion again, not unkindly, then turned away himself and marched off without looking back. As respectable as he was, he was still a boy, and it just wouldn't do to get too close to him. To *anyone*, really, but especially a child. They really didn't belong in this world.

He never saw the look of confusion, the hesitant steps away, then the abrupt turn as the boy made up his mind and headed back to the compound, to home.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a little later than intended when the Driver reached the near-summit of the promontory, the place where he'd camped only a day ago – the sun was making its appearance through the scattered clouds on the horizon. The weight of the fuel had greatly slowed his ascent, but he was well out of sight of the encampment and the compound, so it mattered little. What mattered more, however, was that there was no sign of the gyro pilot he'd left chained to a tree right here. The tree itself was split, half of it missing – the pilot had broken it off, failing to free the restraints from its tangled branches (the Driver was no amateur when it came to securing the chains,) and had made off, dragging the tree limb with him.

This changed things, but only slightly. There was still a bit of a trek on foot to be undertaken, but he'd been counting on offloading the weight of the damn fuel bags. Still, there was nothing for it, and no backing out now. The path the pilot had taken wasn't hard to discern, marked as it was by the meandering gouge of the dragging branch, and the Driver

set off along its route, back down the other side of the promontory, away from the encampment and the compound.

\* \* \* \* \*

The gyro pilot trudged on, making far less progress than an average walking pace due to the dead weight of the tree limb. The four-point manacles he was wearing allowed some leverage against this; he had taken the two chains leading to the wrist bands and worked them up over his shoulders, leading down his back to the point where they joined the two chains from his ankle cuffs. With his hands out in front of him, he could bear more of the branch's weight on his shoulders, actually lifting it a little against its own weight on the ground, and thus avoided taking any of the drag on his legs. Leaning into the weight, he was able to make decent progress, but it remained questionable if it would be enough. Kilometers from here sat his gyrocopter. Someplace along the way he'd have to get rid of the manacles, and also find some water – not far from the base of the promontory he'd located a small spring and had gorged on it until he felt ready to burst, but whether that would be enough remained to be seen.

He'd watched the Driver, returning with the runner, enter the compound, and shortly afterward had seen the car towed in. Not a good sign at all – the little man would almost certainly have driven it in himself if he was able. At that point, even as the hyenas were making their boisterous display outside the gate, the pilot had begun trying to free the chains from the tree. Finally achieving a position that permitted a lot of leverage, he'd hoped to separate the chain at a weak link somewhere, but the damnable tree had split instead, and not in a way that allowed the chains to slip off. With no way to brace the detached limb for another try, he'd been forced to drag it along. Perhaps, far enough from where the hyenas might notice the signs, he would set fire to the limb and remove the chains from the charred remains. Until then, he plodded along, slowly, towards the place where he hoped the gyro still sat.

It was close to midday when the strange yelp carried over the wind. The gyro pilot paused; this was not the time of day that dingoes or feral dogs tended to be out hunting. He scanned the landscape, turning slowly, and heard the call again, this time pinpointing it as behind him. He whirled, dread rising, and could see the pair standing perhaps seventy meters back; the dog was the expected shape, not discernible from any other, but the man standing alongside had the unmistakable scarecrow appearance of the Driver, defined by the worn leather jacket and laden tool belt. It was disturbing, to say the least, both over the thought of recapture by the horrid man, and in light of his belief that the Driver was long dead, perhaps stewing in a pot within the compound. Reflexively, vainly, he tried to sprint off, something the tree limb was not going to permit in any useful fashion.

The Driver, almost amused by the sight of the pilot frantically trying to run in the manacles, watched for a moment in a way that couldn't be called, 'sporting,' before looking down at the dog by his side. "Dog," he said quietly but commandingly, "get him!"

With a spurt of dust the shepherd followed instinct, seeing a sheep attempting the perfidious act of leaving the flock, and closed the distance to the gyro pilot in seconds. The

gangly man's wail carried extremely well over the wind when the dog caught up, even though the dog didn't actually touch him – it only cut off his retreat and, darting in with barks and nips, tried to drive him back into the fold, as it were. Casually, still bearing the weight of the fuel bladders, the Driver ambled up to intercept them.

“*You!*” the pilot accused, once the dog had been called off. “What the hell do you want? You *left* me! You left me to die!”

“I came back,” the Driver said simply.

“Without your fancy car, I see!” the pilot said cuttingly. “I took you there, *told* you what was going on! You even got inside! What do you want from me *now?*”

“C'mon,” said the Driver, shrugging off the harness with the fuel. “Let's go find your helicopter. We've got work to do.”

“*We've* got work to do?” the pilot demanded incredulously. His follow-up question, however, died in his throat as he saw the smaller man bend to the tree limb with the keys in his hand, removing the manacles from the limb. This was a *positive* action; it wouldn't do to interrupt it or make him change his mind. When the Driver stood, the pilot held out his hands, palm up, allowing access to the manacle cuffs obligingly. “What's our task?” he asked.

The Driver ignored the gesture, clipping the lock at the far end of the chain to his toolbelt to chain the two men together, causing that hope to die out quickly – the pilot knew it was too much to expect anyway. The man had sought him out for a reason, and it wasn't to give him an opportunity to escape. Instead, the Driver indicated the harness with the fuel bladders. “There's food and water in the small brown bag. Eat quickly – we've got a lot to do today and we're already behind, thanks to you.”

The unfair accusation passed without recognition – everything after “food” might as well have been gibberish. The pilot fell on the bag eagerly, unearthing a substantial ration of smoked meat and, wonder of wonders, a healthy tomato. He raised it up, staring it at, not having seen one for years. It was the kind of thing one wanted to hoard, to keep for that rainy day, but of course that was pointless, and after a moment he succeeded in getting the entire thing into his mouth, whole, before biting down. Some memories grow too big, tarnishing the real experience, producing a faint disappointment when one has the chance to relive the moment, while others cannot capture all of the sensations of the real thing. The slight toughness of the skin, the tang of the acid, and the juice all crowded in for attention, and the pilot almost sagged to his knees in ecstasy. He avoided swallowing for as long as he could, determined to gain as much as possible from the experience – and not a little bit, just to flaunt it in front of the Driver; he'd gulped the entire tomato for a reason. The past few days made him disinclined to contemplate sharing.

After this spectacle had been played out, the Driver gestured impatiently to the fuel bladders. “Grab those, and let's go,” he said.

The gyro pilot eyed the harness with no small amount of distaste, ambling over and

giving it a tug to confirm that it was as heavy as it looked. “Go where?” he asked.

“To where you left your helicopter,” the Driver said simply, looking into the middle distance in the direction the pilot had been going. “We'll need it to cover some distance – there isn't a lot of time left.”

“It's not a *helicopter*,” the pilot said disparagingly, “it's a *gyrocopter*. Totally different con–”

“As long as it flies,” interrupted the smaller man. “Get the fuel.”

The pilot shouldered the burden with resignation, nearly getting tugged along by the manacles as the Driver started off without waiting. “And what happens once we get to the gyro?”

“You take me to where I need to be, about forty kilometers from there, to the west. And then you're free to go.”

“To go?”

“Yep.”

“What's *at* this place, where you 'need to be'?” the pilot pressed him.

“Something I can trade for gas,” the Driver said vaguely.

“Back at the compound?”

“Yep.”

“You're gonna get your car back, then?”

The Driver squinted his eyes shut tiredly; this was gonna be a long walk. “Yes.”

“And you got your return ride all sorted out then, is that it?”

“If everything goes well, yes.” The Driver didn't feel the need to add that, if it *didn't*, if the truck didn't start, that was just about the end of the options. He couldn't fly the pilot's vehicle, and wouldn't get back into the compound. He'd have to try and secure another set of wheels, somehow. This wasn't the first tight circumstance he'd been in, since he'd left the MFP, and while he might have credited his continued existence to his skills in handling all of those previous, he knew that it was as much resignation as ability – the bare recognition that there wasn't anything else he could do, and no real direction in which to go. Sooner or later, fate would play itself out, the options would disappear, the luck wouldn't run his way. It didn't matter much – his life had ended years ago; now he just existed. *Survive* was about the only base instinct left, and it didn't lead anywhere.

The gyro pilot wasn't privy to this internal reflection. "You always have an angle, don't you?" he asked, partially an accusation, partially in admiration. "A door closes and another one opens. Always a hand to play."

The Driver didn't answer. Perhaps, he thought, if the taller man stopped receiving any kind of reply, the constant talking would cease. He walked onward.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You know what I miss most of all? Clean women. Shampoo and nail polish! Delicate perfume. The smell of bicycle seats..."

\* \* \* \* \*

...Or perhaps not.

\* \* \* \* \*

"*Lingerie!* Remember lingerie? Strewth, a lace teddy with red bows..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun was low in the sky when the dry gully came into view, the peculiar outline of the gyrocopter casting a longer shadow across the mud flat. The Driver paused, however, at the sight of additional elements: a stripped-down Holden sitting nearby, the shape of someone sprawled in the dust at the door. He drew his shotgun warily with his right hand, and the boot knife with his left, flipping it around to hold it by the blackened blade in a throwing position. Slowly, he approached the prone figure, the gyro pilot in tow behind him. The pilot willingly fell silent and paced as quietly as possible, at least until they got within a decent visual distance of the figure on the ground, whereupon he began to cackle gleefully.

The reason was readily apparent. The figure's face was gray, with a telltale swelling on one cheekbone, and the dirt surrounding him was churned up by his death spasms. His hands were close to his throat in a vain attempt to open his airways, and dried vomit stained the ground.

"I knew it would work!" crowed the pilot, forging on ahead towards the gyrocopter but being brought up short by the manacles still chained to the Driver's belt. "Lethal! *Lethal*, these snakes! Born killers." The Driver glanced towards the gyro, able to make out the golden brown coils of the venomous snake atop the manifold. The corpse at his feet either hadn't spotted the taipan himself, or had tried and failed to dislodge it from its perch – probably the former, judging from the bite in the face. The Driver checked the interior of the car carefully to ensure that no one was waiting there in ambush, then started rifling through the dead man's possessions, fairly certain, given the manner of dress and the nature of the car, that this had been one of the hyenas from the encampment. Meanwhile, the gyro pilot drummed his hands on the ground in a curious manner, and the snake dropped from its perch on the aircraft and slid determinedly across the dry mud towards him. The dog, who had been pacing alert



circles throughout the immediate area, spotted the snake and growled threateningly, backing away as the serpent closed the gap.

The gyro pilot was nonchalant about the snake's approach, and once it got within reach he gently reached over and picked it up; his efforts at conditioning, a tricky proposition with the minimal cognition of a reptile, had paid off. The dog, seeing the apparent harmlessness of the snake now, succumbed to a different instinct and leapt for it, yelping.

"Get out of it!" snapped the pilot, twisting his body and arms away from the dog's leaps. "It's my snake – I trained it, I'm going to eat it!"

The Driver heard the menu plans with only peripheral attention, having learned through long experience that there was little value to the vast majority of utterances from the gyro pilot. He unearthed several personal possessions from a pocket inside the vest of the dead man, discarding most of them as valueless: small tools, dice, a variety of coins both local and foreign. Then he came across a pair of 12-gauge shotgun shells. The cardboard cylinder of the first crumbled under his test squeeze, obviously having been exposed to far too much humidity over the years. The second held up reasonably well, and didn't seem in visibly bad shape. Withdrawing the sawed-off shotgun from the holster he'd recently returned it to, he cracked open the breech and slotted the single shell into one of the two empty chambers, causing the sudden cessation of culinary reminiscing from the pilot.

The gyro pilot was staring, open-mouthed, at the formerly-unloaded shotgun, remembering the perpetual fear of looking deep into those barrels from the other end just two days earlier. After a moment, he regained his power of speech, unsurprisingly. "*Empty*. All this time," he croaked, the perfidy of the deception ringing through every word. "That's... dishonest. *Low*."

The Driver stood, disregarding the accusation and the dire look he was receiving. "Let's have a look at this machine of yours," he said.

The pilot wasn't about to let go that quickly. "How do we know *that* one's not a dud?" he challenged.

The shotgun came back out of the holster once again. "Find out."

"All right," said the taller man appeasingly, raising his hands, still clasping the snake, in negation and dismissal.

The shotgun remained out. "Put the damn snake down," commanded the Driver.

The pilot nodded, turned left and right looking for a good place, and finally set the snake gently on the ground, where the dog tried to pounce but was met with an alert striking pose from the reptile, forcing the canine to back away again. The pilot meanwhile followed the other man over towards the gyrocopter. "Now, the thing to understand about flying is how important weight distribution is. You can't–"

“Is this necessary?” interrupted the Driver.

The pilot looked at him with a devilish grin. “That depends on whether you like slamming into the ground or not.” The smaller man's silence was answer enough, and he forged on with his lessons about being a good passenger.

The Driver noticed, with some alarm, that the rotor blade atop the mast wasn't linked in any way to the engine, and in fact had only a couple of control rods beyond the fixed main shaft itself. Realizing that asking about it would only lengthen the schooling, he remained silent but watchful. When, eventually, they started to taxi out to an open flat area near the gully, the rotor remained resolutely immobile while the propeller behind them howled reedily from its minuscule four-cylinder engine. The dog, tightly clasped in the lap of the Driver, was difficult to placate in the face of the noise and the vibration. The fuel bladders were affixed to the underside of the frame, between the landing gear, with rope and wires scavenged from the car of the corpse.

As they picked up speed across the flat, the blade above them began to turn, and soon was spinning at a healthy rate from just the wind of their passage. Abruptly, they were airborne, the dog clearly not at all in favor of the move but able to recognize that bailing now was out of the question; the Driver wasn't sure how much better he himself was coping with the idea. He hadn't allowed himself to think about this portion of the trip, mostly because there wasn't any other option. It might have been better in a proper cabin of some kind, but gyrocopters have to be light; he was strapped into a small seat perched on a single frame member that extended forward to support the pilot's seat as well, along with almost a joke of an instrument panel and the forward landing wheel. The pilot sat in tandem directly in front of him, which at least blocked some of the wind of their flight, but other than that, he might as well have been hurtling alone through space. The dog attempted to burrow into his jacket, hiding its head away from the wind blast and the noise. Now, he saw the purpose of the ridiculous headgear the pilot wore, the goggles keeping his vision clear, the ear flaps protecting him from the wind noise and the howl of the four-banger and the propeller behind. Had he thought about it instead of trying to ignore the prospect, the Driver might have grabbed the ugly face mask worn by the corpse now well behind them, affording at least *some* protection.

Before they'd started off, the gyro pilot had quizzed him mercilessly about where they were headed. Still wary of anything that could be used against him, of losing the one angle he could manipulate, the Driver had been cagey: “Just get up to the road heading northwest out of here and follow it until I tell you when to turn.”

The pilot shook his head sadly. “You don't understand – we don't use *roads*. All twisty turny, going around rocks and trees, waste of gas. We go *straight*, over anything in the way. Much shorter, much faster.” He illustrated his argument with elaborate hand motions, making the still-present manacles jingle. “So, which way is *straight* to this angle of yours?”

The Driver had to think about it, trying to mentally plot this direct line across the imagined map in his mind, with rough guesses as to distances covered on the road and how much any turn was. “West,” he said after much deliberation, “and a little south.”

“No no no no no,” muttered the pilot, as if to a truculent pupil. “West and a little south' covers fifteen degrees or more of heading; I need— “

The Driver grimaced at the thought of another lecture, stabbing a hand in the air forcefully, pointing into the distance. “*That way!*”

The pilot came closer to peer along his arm. “About where the tree is, you mean?”

“Yes. No,” the Driver said. “The rock to the left.”

The gangly man walked over to the gyro, taking a bearing on the compass atop the panel. “Two hundred fifty degrees. That's more— “

“Shut up.”

Now in the air, the Driver watched the landscape, trying to spot landmarks that he hadn't been paying a lot of attention to in his first pass through the area. Drivers follow roads, remember junctions and forks – the scenery along the way is only of use if it's interesting, and he was long past the sightseeing frame of mind. He cursed inwardly; how much longer would flying along the roads have been?

At one point, he spotted something that looked familiar and leaned forward and to one side to shout into the ear of the pilot. “Turn right a little.”

“*Don't lean!*”

“*Shit!*” cursed the Driver, snapping back to vertical. The pilot, however, had heard him, and dutifully corrected course.

It still took a zigzag route, as they zeroed in on the point along the road where the rig sat – thankfully, it stood out starkly against the largely empty landscape. The road was an excellent landing strip, and they coasted up to the crumpled wreck of the sedan that had tried to force the Driver off the road three days earlier. The sun was very close to the horizon; the Driver knew the deadline of the Humungous was almost upon them, though what, exactly, the hyenas were going to do about it wasn't clear, since they'd had no luck in overrunning the compound with their earlier attempts. The pilot shut the engine off before they'd come to a complete stop, and the dog had vaulted from the aircraft the moment it occurred, dashing to a safe distance before stopping and watching the thing warily, waiting to see what the other two were doing.

The gyro pilot had realized the plan only moments after seeing the rig, especially since he knew the bladders strapped to the undercarriage were full of diesel fuel. As the Driver had checked the cabin of the truck, the pilot reconnoitered the immediate area, hardly the first one to try and salvage stuff from the scene. He quickly found the remains of the driver of the sedan, rather unpleasantly sprawled in the road where he'd landed after being thrown from his rolling car, right before the car had rolled over him. This wouldn't have been a pleasant

sight when fresh, and was considerably less so now. “Friend of yours?” the pilot asked.

The Driver, sitting in the open door of the truck, looked up sharply, thinking the hyenas might be arriving, before realizing the pilot meant the corpse. “You might say that,” he’d replied noncommittally before turning back to the truck.

The pilot chuckled. “Nobody gets advantage of you, do they?” he said with some admiration.

The Driver didn’t feel the need to point out that his interceptor was being held hostage back in the compound. “Not so far,” he admitted.

“You’re a survivor, mate,” opined the pilot. “Last man standing. You know, we could go far, *you and me*.”

If he’d been silly enough to expect a delighted reply from the Driver, he would have been disappointed, since the Driver gave no indication of having heard. Most people would have considered the lack of a positive response as their answer; the gyro pilot was the kind that heard no *negative* response, forging onward. “There’s a lot that can be accomplished with aerial support, knowing what lies ahead. A couple of blokes could practically rule this land...”

He rambled on, while the Driver checked out the cabin of the truck, finding it in order and getting a rewarding response from the instrument panel when he’d turned the key; the battery had been left behind, at least. Perhaps not surprising at that, since truck batteries were a lot of dead weight to haul around and useless for most cars, which couldn’t push the amps necessary to recharge them. Hopping down, he interrupted the pilot to enlist his help and dump the diesel fuel into the empty tanks. Returning then to the driver’s seat of the rig, he tried to get the motor to catch.

It didn’t take too long – the Driver had been correct in his assessment that the truck had been running not much more than a week ago. The air starter had cycled a few times, cranking the engine but not catching, but on the fourth attempt the engine roared to life with only a brief stutter, then easily dropped into a steady idle. The gyro pilot whooped delightedly, practically leaping into the air, and the dog jumped eagerly through the open door of the truck to sit expectantly on the passenger seat.

The Driver leapt down, leaving the truck in idle, and trotted back to the nearly-stripped flatbed trailer, cranking down the forward support legs, then reached in under the lip to find the release handle for the fifth wheel and yank it, unlatching the trailer from the truck. Regaining the driver’s seat, he dropped his foot on the clutch and shifted the truck into gear, reaching for the door handle. The gyro pilot was almost too late in his protest.

“*Hey!*” he shouted above the engine, swarming up to the door. “Heyheyheyheyhey. What about me? You’re not gonna just leave me behind, are you?”

The Driver looked at him briefly, still capable of recognizing a fair deal. Fishing on his

toolbelt, he found his key ring and removed the key that opened the manacles. "You're free to go," he replied, tossing it down without warning, where it evaded the pilot's hasty grab and bounced on the asphalt. As the taller man bent to retrieve it, the Driver shut the door and depressed the accelerator while releasing the clutch, effectively forestalling any further conversation attempts.

The gyro pilot stood to see the truck already moving away. "What are you *doing*?" he cried desperately, raising his hands high in the air for attention. "We're *partners!* You and me! We're mates!"

The truck continued without pausing, rapidly gaining speed down the road, back towards the compound.

## Chapter Six

The Driver saw the promontory that overlooked the compound from a long way off, and started mentally preparing for the final stretch. The hyena encampment would become well aware of his presence quickly and would throw everything they could into preventing his passage, and if the truck stopped moving, that would be it. He'd have to break through at speed, and there was a lot that could go wrong.

He'd briefly considered stashing the truck someplace nearby, and sneaking back in the way he'd gone out, but that was risky on numerous aspects; not just the chance of being caught on foot while passing the encampment, but also of the truck being found at any point before a task force from the compound could retrieve it, and the probability that outlying scouts were cruising the roads. No, it was better to run straight in and hope for the best.

About a kilometer out, the Driver had started his run, getting the truck up to the highest speed it could manage; this would not only outrun pursuit for a short while, it could bash its way past any number of physical barriers. The sun had set on the drive here, and coming from the east as he was, he had the darkest skies at his back, which helped to mask the truck, but also produced little light to see his own route. He was, of course, running without lights, facing into the twilight sky.

Within the encampment, the normal racket of the hyenas helpfully covered the sound of the truck approaching until it was a few hundred meters away. A lazy lookout on the back side of the camp, opposite the compound, wasn't expecting anything from that direction and so missed the approach until the noise was unmistakable; by then, several others in the camp were already noticing and starting to react. This delay prevented them from mounting the most effective response.

The hyenas had gotten a little wiser, however. As the truck came thundering down the road towards the encampment and the compound beyond, the Driver found several blockades on the road itself, intended to prevent easy access via the normal route, though the surrounding land was largely too flat to fully prevent an off-road approach. The Driver skirted the first by just slipping around it, losing little speed in the process, and aimed dead center for the second, which was flanked by rough country and a gully, the same one he'd slipped out through the night before. The barricade, assembled from detritus that the hyenas had handy, burst apart without any effort; it might have slowed or even stopped something the size and weight of an average car, but the mass of the truck multiplied the impact value significantly. The 'roo bar on the front, used by road trains to prevent damage from wandering animals when crossing the open desert, prevented any of the barricade from getting past to damage the nose of the truck.

Almost immediately after this impact, some of the hyenas were closing in – never very far from their vehicles and hunters by nature, the sounds of the approaching truck had fostered little confusion, only the impetus to give chase, and a few had gotten off within thirty seconds. Two quick thinkers had actually started to cut across and close in ahead of the truck, their vehicles light enough to accelerate quickly, their position within the camp

conducive to the ambush.

The first to intercept, driving a light pickup truck, aimed for the only vulnerable spot he could take advantage of, the front wheel. If he could jam his vehicle in there, he could force the truck off the road or even disable the wheel, halting the truck and allowing the rest to swarm over the vehicle. It was a maneuver that required precise aim, and could easily be spoiled by, for instance, a driver who saw it coming and tapped the brakes ever so briefly. Overshooting the mark, the light pickup instead fell just barely ahead of the oncoming truck, getting caught at an angle by the edge of the 'roo bar and having the front fender of his own truck ripped off, the lighter vehicle being spun by the impact and careening away uselessly.

The next hyenas that had achieved a decent lead had a tiny homebuilt vehicle popular among the marauders, fuel-efficient and ideal for off-road work but far too small to be of any use in a battering contest with a rig. Instead, this one came up along the right side the truck, where the passenger took aim with a crossbow at the Driver in the side window. The Driver had been watching them approach, well aware of this kind of tactic, and allowed them to get close, hunched down well over his own wheel to make a smaller target. At the crucial moment he swerved, and the driver of the homebuilt, also aware of this tactic, swerved away, spoiling the aim of the passenger with the crossbow; the shot arced away over the hood and lanced into the desert. What the hyena driver hadn't counted on was the lack of coordination among his companions, and he collided with a motorcycle that was just now closing in on the truck. Both vehicles tumbled across the landscape in a cloud of dust that fortuitously obscured the fate of the operators.

The motorcyclist named Wez, the one recently bereft of his boyfriend due to the boomerang, was having his mohawk trimmed by the barber of the encampment, close to the opposite side of the encampment and far from his own cycle, when he heard the commotion. Leaping up, he dealt himself a nasty cut on his temple that was ignored, seeing the truck and recognizing it as his own failed deadfall from days ago, an asset, in fact, that he'd been biding his time to use; he had no intention of breaching the gate for the greater glory of the Humungous. Enraged now beyond all reason, he screamed in frustration, then darted across an open space and vaulted onto a sidecar motorcycle that had just started off in pursuit of the truck. The operator of the bike, startled to find he'd suddenly gained a passenger, nevertheless took this in stride and raced off across the camp to try and catch up with the truck.

The Driver kept the accelerator floored, noting the frenzied response from the camp, much of it a little too slow to be of any use. Ahead and off to one side, several former police vehicles were lined up, possibly evidence of some sub-faction within the hyena camp. Even as it was striking a nerve in the Driver, he realized the opportunity their position provided, and he dodged left just a little, taking aim at the car on the end of the row. Sitting in line with the truck's path, the car was essentially aimed at the others; twitching the wheel to ensure that he only impacted the one car, he sent it sailing off into the others without slowing the truck too much, a tricky game of snooker that damaged a lot of vehicles with one tap. He hadn't noticed, not that it would have mattered at all, that the last car in the row was propped up on blocks; the owner was scrambling madly to get out of under it when it collapsed off its supports. His scream was lost in the commotion.

Further across the encampment, closer to the petroleum compound, the Humungous heard the approaching furor, taking a moment to realize that at the head of it was a much larger vehicle than any of the hyenas possessed, piecing it together rapidly after that. He dashed back to the strongbox strapped to the floorboards of his hybrid vehicle, fumbling out his key, and quickly unlocked the trunk to draw out a smaller, ornate wooden case a little bigger than a lunchbox. One of the spoils of war, he'd been saving the valuable contents for a special occasion, and there seemed little better time than the present. It opened to reveal a long-barreled .44 Magnum pistol, in immaculate condition, fitted with a specialized pistol scope. From the foam padding of the case he withdrew one of the five remaining bullets, slotting it into the cylinder which he carefully closed to place the cartridge directly under the hammer.

The Driver forged through the camp, swerving slightly to damage any vehicles he could in passing, as long as their impact wouldn't slow the truck too much. One hyena, thinking quickly, seized a sizable rock and darted almost into the truck's path, hurling the rock with stunning aim; the safety-glass windshield was the only thing that prevented it from catching the Driver full in the face. The windshield shattered but held in place, seriously affecting the Driver's forward vision. He leaned to either side to try for a clearer view, realized this was fruitless, and started bashing at the glass with a gloved fist from the inside, knocking the fragmented glass aside in a crumpled sheet.

The Humungous took up a position alongside the road through the camp, raising the pistol and taking careful aim as the truck drew closer; he wanted as clear a shot as possible at the Driver. Patiently, he waited for the perfect second.

As the shattered windshield fell free, the Driver saw the Humungous standing almost dead ahead, with a recognizable straight-arm two-handed stance; he didn't need to see the gun itself to know it was there. Hastily, he drew the shotgun and took aim through the opening of the windshield. At the best of times this was extremely risky; sawed-off shotguns are meant for close-quarters use, their lack of barrel length turning accuracy into mere fantasy. From a bouncing truck, aimed one-handed, it was a mark of desperation only.

And worse. Nothing happened when the hammer fell; this cartridge was a dud too. The Driver dropped the weapon on the floorboard and started swerving, hoping to spoil the aim of the hyenas' muscular leader. Close enough now to see the bead the scarred man was drawing, the Driver ducked behind the dash.

The Humungous, having locked onto the face of the Driver, tried to follow the motion downward, overcompensating just a little. The gun discharged with a deafening report, yet functioned better than the aged shotgun cartridge, and the bullet slammed through the upper hood and clattered among the engine within. Immediately a spray of steam erupted through the front grill. The Humungous dodged the truck as it swerved towards him, knowing this would be attempted, and watched impotently as it raced past without slowing while he cursed the hoarding mentality that had prevented him from loading more bullets in the cylinder.

The distraction had allowed the motorcyclists to close in on the truck without



interference, save for having to avoid the swerves. As the Driver straightened out and accelerated again, the motorcycle-and-sidecar drew in close, and the furious Wez vaulted off onto the rear of the truck, the flat frame supporting the fifth wheel. He faltered, almost falling off alongside the rear wheels, but sheer desperation locked one hand onto the frame, and he dragged himself aboard.

While unseen by the Driver, this maneuver was noticed from another quarter: the gyro pilot was closing in from directly above in his aircraft, having followed the truck back from the deadfall, maintaining enough altitude to scout for potential hazards. Without intention, this had still kept the presence of the gyro unknown to the Driver. In frustration, the pilot started dropping lower and off to the right of the truck, hoping to signal the Driver about the presence of the stowaway almost directly behind the cabin.

The truck crested a small ridge, revealing the compound dead ahead. The Driver looped his hand through the air cord along the top of the cabin and tugged repeatedly, gladdened to hear the throaty sound of the air horn. He sounded off a brief folk ditty, or as much as he could in monotone, hoping to signal the compounders to open the gate.

The motorcyclist, having gained the back of the cabin unnoticed by the Driver, grabbed the convenience bar alongside the driver's door and leaned around, punching through the side glass with a rain of glass pebbles and narrowly missing the Driver's face. Recovering quickly, he tried to grapple the with the smaller man behind the wheel, to either incapacitate him or drive the truck out of control. That this might not have been the safest move from his position hanging on the outside of the truck passed without any consideration in his furious state.

Initially startled by the sudden attack, the Driver rallied well, leaning back away from the grasping hand and stiff-arming his assailant through the now-open window. One hand remained in control of the wheel, and he would have to free the other for a moment to snag the boot knife and dispatch this nuisance. The motorcyclist, however, had no intention of giving the Driver any opportunity, grabbing the wheel and yanking, both to swerve the truck and to pull himself further inside the window, which spoiled the vicious uppercut that would have knocked him senseless at least. The Driver drew back, re-aiming the wheel, and fired off a flathand chop to his foe's larynx, catching his chin instead as the motorcyclist barely saw it coming. Neither was gaining an advantage.

Another small truck of the hyenas was closing in on the right, a 'ute' with a passenger in back manning a multi-barreled homemade weapon. Staying fairly wide and shielded from detection by the motorcyclist blocking the side mirror, the passenger took aim and fired off a volley of darts, propelled by compressed air; two of the four rear tires on that side blew loudly, venting the pressure within explosively. Shouting in triumph, the passenger directed his driver over to the other side to try and disable the tires on the left while he quickly reloaded the dart array. With another set of tires flat, the truck would be slowed considerably. They had little time; the compound loomed only a few hundred meters away.

Spotting this, the gyro pilot switched tactics. Swooping in overhead, he fished within his greatcoat and a leather bag therein, gingerly drawing out his trained taipan; it would serve

better here than as a meal. Pulling up above the ute, he dropped the snake across the top of the dart gun, directly in front of the passenger.

The scream carried very well over the din of everything else, though it came only from the passenger recognizing the venomous nature of the snake, which hadn't been able to respond to the drop and wasn't attempting to bite anyone. A little more composure would have allowed the gunner to flip the snake away, but instead he kicked backwards, panicking, tipping the grips of the gun upward – and thus the barrels downward – before they discharged. The darts blew through the driver's seat and the driver himself, neatly incapacitating him. The ute, still accelerating under the dead weight of the driver's foot, swerved drunkenly, drifting wide away from the truck, aimed at the broad wall of the compound.

Finally gaining a solid strike to the hyena outside his door, the Driver split his attention enough to see the gate looming ahead, the bus even now moving aside. He spared no attention for the ute, which sailed at high speed into one of the deadfalls outside the walls of the compound and crumpled into the scrap metal therein with a disturbingly final sound. A safety harness would have done the man behind the dart gun little good in the impact, but the lack thereof certainly did not. The snake had never managed to do him any harm whatsoever.

The Driver, realizing that the space beyond the gate, within the walls, was not intended to allow deep access, slammed on the brakes even as he was passing through the gate, almost wrenching the motorcyclist free from his grip on the convenience handle. Two other vehicles from the hyenas followed through even as the gate was closing again, one running into the back of the truck as it skidded to a halt. A third lagged too far behind and spun out trying to avoid broadsiding the gate bus; the hyenas already knew it was impervious to any vehicle they could muster. The gate slid closed with finality, and the hyena outside the walls, finding himself in dire proximity to the weapons almost directly overhead, tried to wrest his vehicle around and away, in vain. Countless missiles and a flamethrower converged on his Chevy and it hiccuped and stalled without going more than a meter, almost immediately enveloped in flames.

The arrival of three vehicles into the compound sparked chaos among the residents. Several of those tasked with guarding the walls, having taken their positions only moments before when the horn of the truck had announced its arrival, abandoned their positions to address the immediate danger of the marauders now inside the compound. Three hyenas were swarming out of the two cars that had breached the defenses, one staggering a little from having bashed his head on the windshield during the collision with the rear of the truck. Wez quickly hauled himself up the back of the cab, took two steps across the roof of the truck and launched himself at a nearby gantry, avoiding the Driver's emergence from the cabin with his boot knife in hand. Swinging his legs up athletically, the motorcyclist got to his feet atop the narrow catwalk and sprinted towards the end, a path that would eventually lead him towards the gate bus.

One of the hyenas, still on the ground, had a more direct access, and dashed across the open area to jump onto the side of the bus and lean in the window, attempting to haul the bus driver out of her position. He had only a moment, and it wasn't enough; the cold-eyed

woman, sprinting across the compound, threw herself into the air, simultaneously nailing him in the back with her knee while catching his hair with one hand. As he started to fall from his position, she finished him off with her own serrated knife across the throat. The two collapsed onto the ground, but only the woman quickly regained her feet. The hyena's convulsions on the sand alongside the bus just served to spread the blood around more.

Outside the compound, the Humungous was arriving in his hybrid vehicle, exhorting his minions to the attack in blind fury. Only two defenders were available immediately alongside the gate: Pappagallo manning the flamethrower, and a wicked Bowman, the flamethrower obviously doing more to keep the marauders at bay. It had a short range, however, only about eight meters, and the single Bowman wasn't able to keep all of the hyenas back out of arrow range. Small groups were closing in, trying to find safer ways to approach the walls, using cars to create fortified positions. The lack of guards slinging firepots or manning the ballista would take its toll quickly. Pappagallo hosed down a broad defending spray, keeping a faction back away from the gate, and turned to see how it was going within the compound, and whether anyone could be spared to reinforce the walls.

This distraction was his undoing. Stepping back away from the front shield of the flamethrower, he left himself an open target for one of the hyenas who'd been watching for this opportunity. The crossbow quarrel went a little lower than intended, but sank deeply into Pappagallo's hip. The leader of the compound tried to step back, shifting his weight, but the injury prevented his right leg from responding properly and he tumbled to the parapet, gripping his hip and wincing.

The motorcyclist was watching it all take place as he maneuvered along the pipes and scaffolds, for the moment unnoticed by anyone within the compound. Too far away to reach it himself, he screamed down at one of his companions who had driven in behind him. "Mudguts! The gate! *The gate!*"

Mudguts didn't need the directive, already dashing for the gate bus, exploiting a small gap among the defenders. A few steps shy of his goal, however, he arched, stumbling, feeling an arrow tear between the ribs of his back and lance into a lung. He dropped to hands and knees, trying to gasp, but it would have been pointless even without the compounder who caught up with him and applied an axe to take his mind off his injuries.

Wez spun, hunting, seeking the source of the missile. On another gantry only ten meters away, the mild-looking man, the one who had inquired about the fate of the female runner, was withdrawing another arrow from the quiver on his back, looking for another target. The motorcyclist vented a roar of chagrin and purposefulness, running, leaping, and swinging through the maze of pipes and catwalks to reach the man, giving a final broad leap and landing with the barest foothold right alongside him. The man spun with the ready bow, never intended for close-quarters use, but the motorcyclist was too quick. Grabbing the man's head, he once again delivered a savage head-butt with a scream of triumph, and as the man sagged, the arrow spinning away uselessly as the bowstring snapped from limp fingers, Wez hurled his body from the scaffolding onto the pipes below.

Impetuous revenge is not always the best tactic. The motorcyclist's shouts might have

gone unnoticed, but his animal-like screams of rage, so very unlike anything uttered by the compounders, drew the attention of too many people in his direction. The first arrow missed by only a fraction, close enough that he heard the hiss of its passage. Reflexively he ducked and dodged, spoiling the aim of the next compounder to draw a bead on him, causing another to pause and wait for a clear shot. In desperation, the motorcyclist dove over the railing with a half-roll and landed on a canvas sheet stretched tight to form a rain cover, skidding down it and out of the immediate aim of anyone in range.

The Driver, eyes darting in all directions, saw the spectacle with the motorcyclist as well as Pappagallo being injured and falling away from the flamethrower. His gaze swept the walls quickly, seeing too few people up there, and then caught sight of the remaining hyena within the compound, who had dived under the truck to emerge out the other side, away from any immediate danger and with a reasonably clear shot at the gate bus. The Driver took off in his direction, knife in hand, determined not to let him get to the bus.

The mechanic, the one who rode suspended in the lifting harness, was on top of things. Seeing his opportunity as the hyena cut across the compound very close to his harness, he reached out, grabbed a scaffolding support bar with both hands, and heaved with all of his might. The scaffolding remained resolute, which was fine; it was the mechanic's own counterweight that he was trying to shift, which obediently swung in a broad arc at the other end of the arm that supported the mechanic, even drawing the wheeled contraption around after it slightly, and caught the hyena full in the face. The marauder stretched out flat on his back from the clotheslining, dazed, only to see the cold-eyed woman blot out the sun above him with a tight smile on her face. He felt that this did not bode well, and he was quite right.

The Driver, seeing his first target was well and truly taken care of, switched to his second, sprinting as well as his bad leg would allow towards the wall alongside the gate, actually jumping over Pappagallo as he clambered up to the flamethrower position; the leader of the compound watched the man take up his former position, registering the act in his mental catalog of personal value. As the Driver crested the parapet, he saw exactly what he'd suspected he would, what *he* would have done if the situations were reversed: a contingent of hyenas taking advantage of the lapse in defenses and swarming towards the gate. As he gripped the controls of the flamethrower and aimed the barrel, one of the hyenas almost directly beneath him caught the motion, suddenly realizing the danger with a comical look of surprise. Another, not quite as inept, shouted to his companions to take cover even as the tongue of burning oil burst forth. The bright flame and smoke obscured the Driver's view of his targets momentarily, but as he swept his aim aside he saw the advance contingent beating a hasty retreat, two of them presently on fire.

Wez had only briefly escaped the attentions of the defenders within the compound, being spotted again almost immediately. He ran between cover as much as he could, ducking and hiding, always moving towards the gate, realizing as he did so that this was where all of the attention would be concentrated and he was unlikely to do much good. His focus was rapidly switching from opening the gate to getting the hell out of harm's way, and there was no place in the compound that fit this description. His main hope was to get to the wall without getting shot, stabbed, clubbed, or ignited, get over it, and regroup to find some other, more plausible plan of action. He briefly thought of trying to disable the truck, but bare-handed, this

was unlikely, even more so with the number of people now surrounding it. *Another day*, he thought, and scrambled towards the outer barrier.

By sheer luck, he found a path that shielded him from clear views, much less clear shots, and vaulted up the scaffolding near the wall some twenty meters from the gate. An arrow would clatter nearby every moment or so, forcing him to keep dodging, but somehow he avoided any injury. Rolling off some planking, he was just making it to the wall's peak and an empty defensive station when he looked towards the gate, and saw the Driver at the flamethrower, doing no small amount of damage to the motorcyclist's compatriots. In his attack on the truck he'd never gotten a good look at the Driver as they grappled, wasn't really trying, but now recognition stopped him short: he *knew* this man, having burned the memory into his brain a few days back, out on the road, when his trap had been torn asunder. That alone had been enough to place the man on the list of people that must die gruesomely; the wicked interceptor that might be obtained by the action was a significant bonus. Blind vindictiveness drew the hyena up short, causing him to ignore the danger he was in. "*You!*" he screamed.

The Driver heard the bellow, turned to see the motorcyclist standing brazenly atop the wall, pointing an accusing finger at the smaller man. The recognition was mutual, the acrimony slightly less so; the Driver would remorselessly kill the motorcyclist, given the least chance, but had no overwhelming desire to ensure that this was done – given how often the man turned up, however, it was starting to seem like a prudent move.

"You can *run*," raged the motorcyclist, nearly spitting, "but you *can't hide*."

The Driver started to reach for his shotgun, not that it was an effective weapon, but for exactly the same reason he had drawn it towards the end of their first encounter; the motorcyclist didn't know how useless it was. It would be interesting to see who ran this time.

The warbling whistle was identifiable by everyone by now, the motorcyclist having additional incentive to remember it. The flash spurred his reflexes just barely in time, and the lethal metal boomerang, hurled by the feral kid within the compound, caught his hastily raised arm even as he dropped sideways away from the attack. With more luck than anyone should have, the wrist crossbow, unloaded since long before the motorcyclist had given chase to the truck, caught the brunt of the blow, the underlying leather gauntlet deflecting the remainder. The boomerang spun away harmlessly and clattered among the debris on the outside of the wall, while the remains of the crossbow dangled uselessly from the motorcyclist's throbbing wrist.

The motorcyclist staggered to his feet, his ego not willing to let the encounter end without *some* display of dominance or control. He started to address the Driver again with a predictable promise of what their next meeting would bring. Yet, even as he did so, the buzzing roar growing rapidly from behind became too loud to ignore. He was not *completely* blinded by rage, and threw himself flat.

The forward landing gear of the gyrocopter shattered the air right where his head had been. The pilot had pulled up and away from the towering pipes of the compound as the truck

passed within, then circled around harassing the marauders. None of them had any experience aiming skyward at such a rapidly moving target, and none of their missiles presented the least hazard. Once he'd spotted the incensed motorcyclist standing atop the wall, the pilot had come around quickly, nearly stalling the sensitive aircraft in the steep bank, and zeroed in for a nasty game of football. It was, perhaps, just as well that he missed, since such an impact might not have been borne well by the light aircraft.

With two rapid reminders of how untenable his position really was, Wez screamed in impotence and dove from the wall, outside, away from the hazards of the compound. With a creditable somersault he thudded feet-first onto the roof of a derelict car, one that had belonged to another hyena some days earlier before succumbing to the defenses of the compounders. He bounced from it and landed already running, desperate to put some safe distance between himself and the refinery.

The pilot came around again, in a broader circle this time, as many of those within the compound watched it in fascination mixed with fear, not quite sure who this contraption belonged to. The second-in-command of the compound, having seen their leader get injured, was directing more defenders to their positions on the walls, both to protect the gate and mount some response to the gyro, should it be needed. The compounders rallied quickly now that the threat from within the walls had been eradicated, and in moments a renewed hail of arrows and firebombs was driving back the hyenas.

Those along the defensive positions were able to witness the next pass from the gyrocopter, which dropped low and made a beeline for the space in front of the gate where the hyenas were massing, running more-or-less parallel to the forward wall of the compound. Screaming along less than two meters off the sand, the gyro approached like a reaper, scattering the hyenas in all directions. While the Humungous was exhorting his men to focus on the gate, his shouts went unheeded in the face of the howling blades bearing down, while the distraction and the abandonment of cover was allowing the defenders atop the walls to wreak their own toll on the numbers of the hyenas. The area immediately outside of the walls was turning into carnage, and the unknown nature of the gyrocopter was tipping the odds too far away from feasibility for the marauders.

Realizing this, the Humungous, with reluctance, called back his Dogs. The opportunity to breach the gate had passed; it was time for more careful planning, before his numbers were reduced any farther. Even as the copter was circling around for another pass, the hyenas, those that could anyway, were withdrawing.

Pappagallo, still lying on the scaffolding near the top of the walls, watched the howling gyro bank around, fairly confident now that it was not an ally of the hyenas. But it remained unclear if it was *anyone's* ally. "What the hell is that?" he demanded, more or less rhetorically.

The Driver, still at the controls of the flamethrower nearby, wondered if he was going to regret his answer. "He's with me," he said simply.

\* \* \* \* \*

The second-in-command quickly summoned up medical assistance for their leader, who was trying to wave it away. The cold-eyed woman came up onto the wall and relieved the Driver of his control of the flamethrower. As he was just about to hop down from his position, she stopped him, not unkindly.

“I was,” she said, pausing, then resolutely looking him firmly in the eye, “I was wrong about you.”

The Driver, slightly taken aback, shrugged it off with a half-wave, but she continued. “You deserve my apology. You did well.”

Some bare recognition of decorum stirred from long ago, forcing him to respond when he normally would have ignored it. “Sure,” he said. “Uh, no worries.” It did not succeed in forcing a *proper* response, apparently.

Under the orders from their leader, with some reluctance and questionable looks, the compounders moved the gate aside once the hyenas were well away from the refinery, to allow the now-landed and taxiing gyrocopter to roll casually into the compound, where it drew a fascinated but wary crowd of sightseers after the engine died down. Once the gyro pilot had spotted the Driver and flashed him a cheery thumbs-up, the crowd warmed a bit more, not noticing the lack of response from the Driver.

The pilot was in his element, surrounded by people looking at him with a mixture of gratitude and awe. Years back, *before*, his tiny aircraft was often considered a joke, hardly comparable to anything else that a pilot might fly, too limited in ability to merit any attention. But now, being responsible, at least in part, for driving off the hyenas, he was a hero, and needed no encouragement to accept this role.

“You did a great job, mate!” enthused the spry old military man, energetically pumping the pilot’s hand with both of his own, face split wide in an eager grin.

“Oh, now, let’s not go overboard,” averred the pilot, managing to look just a tad sheepish and possessing a little more tact than the Driver.. This changed quickly as he saw two children on their knees at the rear of the gyro, tracing the nude painting on the tailfin with undisguised delight. “Don’t touch, please,” he requested in his best schoolmarm voice. “It’s a precision instrument.”

He had turned away and was accepting more adulation as the feral kid ambled up, staring intently at the gyrocopter, perhaps seeing some distant kinship between the machine and his boomerang. Unblinkingly, he reached out and felt the edge of the propeller blade, absorbing the shape of the airfoil surface.

“Don’t *touch*,” repeated the pilot, catching sight of the boy, who looked at him for just a moment before ignoring the gangly, strangely-dressed man; the two of them side-by-side was enough to drive any *fashionista* into cardiac arrest. “Hey! *Shoo!*” continued the pilot, waving his hand at the kid, which provoked a deep, inhuman set of warning growls from the lad’s diminutive chest. The pilot blinked, unsure of himself, but the boy backed away distrustfully,

which met the intended purpose.

The military man was looking over the gyro almost greedily. “Tell me, son, this machine of yours,” he began conversationally, noting the second seat directly under the rotor mast, “it can take two, can it?”

The pilot's gaze was affixed, however, on one of the young ladies of the compound, not just the first he'd seen in months, but perhaps the most attractive he'd seen in *years*, amazingly delicate-looking for the nature of life under the refinery. She caught his gaze, which was more than a little lascivious, and returned a polite yet perfunctory smile, unsure yet what to make of this man.

“Possibly,” said the gyro pilot, though whether this was in response to the older man's question or just a vocalized musing of his own wasn't immediately clear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pappagallo was being tended to, sitting a little below the wall still quite close to the gate. The wound was nasty, but not debilitating, and while it was unclear if he would ever walk without a limp again, at least no major arteries had been severed by the arrow. He had refused any of their limited stock of anesthetic or sedatives, both to ration them for more serious uses and because he wanted to remain as clearheaded as possible. As a result, he was in no small amount of pain, especially after the removal of the barbed arrow.

The truck had been driven in under a broad tarp and was being examined by the paraplegic mechanic; the two damaged rear tires had already been removed and were in the process of being replaced. Pappagallo, impatiently, directed his second-in-command to find out the prognosis on the vehicle; the man shifted position along the wall a little to be able to see underneath the tarp, though he couldn't make out the mechanic at all. “The rig!” he called out loudly across the open space between himself and the 'garage.' “How is she?”

Propped almost horizontally under the hood, the mechanic heard the question and, rather than try to shout back, muttered quietly to his own assistant, a massive young man from a remote area who had never received any formal schooling – his fate had been to take up the farming of his father, until the fallout from the war had rendered this pointless. Aimless and orphaned, he'd latched onto the mechanic and was learning the trade as he went. By now, he was able to understand the cryptic and carelessly issued words of the mechanic as the man frowned thoughtfully at the intake manifold: “Go' a crak time case co'r an's broken a coupla tee'ff time gea'.”

The assistant dutifully called this out to the second-in-command, across the compound: “It's got a cracked timing case cover and it's broken a couple of teeth off the timing gear.”

“Radi'tor's damaged cor'.”

“The radiator's damaged at the core.”



“Go' a crak wa'r pum'...”

“It's got a cracked water pump...”

“...frac'ured injec' line.”

“And a fractured injector line.”

Pappagallo, sitting at the base of the wall sweating rivulets, glared in annoyance, having heard it all clearly but not getting the answer he was actually after. “Well what does all *that* mean?” he muttered irritably.

His second-in-command passed it along. “Yeah, okay, but what does that *mean*?”

The mechanic's assistant opened his mouth to answer and paused, realizing he was a little out of his league. “What *does* that mean?” he asked his boss quietly.

“Twe-for owers,” came the reply.

“Twenty four hours?” the assistant called out, tentatively, to the second-in-command.

Pappagallo shook his head, knowing the hyenas would be driven to new heights now, hampered only by the inability to see past the blinding lights of the compound at night to make their assault. They needed to be ready to move at first light. “Tell them half that,” he said.

“You got twelve,” relayed the second-in-command.

The assistant looked questioningly at the mechanic, who frowned even more into the depths of the engine, weighing this and that, before finally issuing his response: “Ar’.”

“Okay,” called back the assistant happily.

## Chapter Seven

As night fell and the compound erupted into activity, preparing for what promised to be a hazardous run away from the refinery, past – and through – the hyenas, the Driver sat off to one side, alone in near-darkness, patiently hand-cranking a pump to transfer fuel into the massive tanks of the interceptor. He'd seen the attitudes of those in the compound towards him do a rapid turnover, and he was silently mulling over the events.

Even as the truck was being diagnosed and the gyro pilot was basking in his adulation, a separate contingent of admirers had singled out the Driver as he had paused, momentarily lacking a course of action. The truck was delivered, the immediate threats vanquished, his job was done; all that remained was for the compounders to uphold their end of the deal and relinquish his car back to him – topped off, of course. Even *before*, he had never been one that accepted praise gracefully, or even felt he deserved the recognition. But now, he'd only met his portion of their arrangement, one for which he was to be substantially rewarded.

Maybe it was the difference in perspective. Those in the compound had been living with the refinery, and all the gas that they needed, for a long time. They had never had to chop the locks off of the underground tanks of a petrol station and try to determine if there was fuel remaining in there, much less figure out a way to raise it (no human had the lung power to siphon a column of fluid up that far.) They had never used rags to soak up spilling gasoline to take their vehicle just a few hundred meters further, towards... what? Or perhaps, away from what? Or was it just an end to itself?

Regardless, the hundreds of liters of gasoline he was now pumping into his tanks was a windfall, considering that he'd often expended the same efforts, run the same risks, for far less in this land. But perhaps to those here in this tiny village, shielded by the walls from at least *some* of the 'culture' that had arisen in the wasteland, the delivery of the truck was an act of resolute heroism. Certainly, they were viewing it as more than a deal; they treated it as a commitment, a show of not just worthiness, but the *inclination* to join them on their mission. This had been made clear very quickly.

One older gentleman, perhaps a little younger than the military man, slapped him on the back heartily; the Driver twitched but stayed the reflex against an assault – no one had personal contact in the wasteland unless it was to attack. "It's been a long time since I've seen driving like that, son," he said, oblivious to his near-fate.

The mother whose son the Driver had brought home to die approached him, grim-faced but not antagonistically. She pressed something tightly wrapped in waterproof nylon into his hand, a small hard bundle. "I've been saving these," she said. "I want you to have them."

The Driver looked at her blankly, and she nodded in encouragement, so he started to unwrap the package. At about the same time as he revealed a half-dozen pristine 12-gauge shells, the elderly man said, "With *you* driving that rig, we got it licked!"

The woman smiled, with more warmth than he expected to see again, and several

others mimicked the expression. "Thank you," she said. "And, welcome."

*Welcome.* Driving the rig. The Driver looked up sharply, almost wide-eyed. He bit off his first words before they emerged, realizing they would sound more than ungrateful, and backed away, raising his hands in avoidance as if he'd just stumbled across a den of snakes. "Hey, it's been a pleasure doing business with you all," he managed finally, in a brisk and efficient tone, "but I'm leaving." In the silence that followed, he thoughtfully pressed the shells back into the woman's hand in a reverse of her gesture, turned and headed quickly towards the spot where his car was stashed. He didn't see the change in expressions of those who were congratulating him, didn't need to, didn't *want* to.

The other thing he'd missed had been the feral kid, pacing alongside the dog, trying to match the Driver's long strides, attempting to place his own feet in the bootprints the man left in the dust. Considering how bandy-legged the boy was, this was a feat verging on the impossible, yet he struggled to emulate the straight, upright stance of the Driver across the compound.

In the hours since, the Driver had gone over his response, repeatedly. Years ago, he'd lost everything, *everyone*, he was ever close to, almost all at once. Some of it, he'd realized, was because of what he was – his position in law enforcement had exposed his family to the scum out there, made them targets, and he blamed himself almost as much as he'd blamed the parties directly responsible. It had become apparent that it was not just a job, not something that could be left behind at 'the office' – not what he did, but what he *was*, and he knew, even as he tried, that he couldn't actually abandon it to pursue whatever anyone else considered a *life*. In those soul-destroying days, he had come to believe that he could only be who he was if no one else was close. He had never believed that he was *wrong* in what he did, at least – only in allowing anyone else to become involved in it. And in the years since, he'd largely carried on the same duties, alone. It was not the laws that he enforced now, and never really was, but the underlying concept instead.

The best course of action, though, is not always the one that is the most comfortable. *Humanity* is defined by the social aspect. He refused to let himself *miss* the days when he interacted with others in a positive, even friendly manner, but that didn't mean the urge had vanished, or could. He could tell himself that the compounders were better off without him, and still somewhere in the recesses of his mind, wonder if they would do better with his help. *He* had survived, alone, for years, despite the hazards; was it selfish to deny the benefits of his skills and instincts to others? Would they *all* do better by throwing their lots in together? Was there some point when he could let his guard down, even just a little, and not face the perpetual tension of survival? Or was that just the sly, wheedling tones of the demon Loneliness?

There is no answer to be gained from introspection, and so he continued to argue within himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the call rang out from the sentry high atop the refinery towers, no one was

surprised. The spectacle was horrifying all the same.

There was a storm rolling in, gusting winds promising rain and more, and the Humungous was standing atop his vehicle, loudspeakers cranked to full to carry his voice across to the compound. The hyenas had set their stage, well out of effective range of any weapons from within the compound, even firearms, but close enough to be seen clearly.

There was no preamble this time, no court page to announce his beatific presence. The Humungous just started speaking – ranting, to be more accurate.

“You have *defied* me!” he cried raspily. “You shit upon my olive branch, treading on my generous offer! You will *know* the *vengeance* of the Humungous!”

Alongside the gesticulating, muscular figure, X-crosses of wood were being set up, to each affixed one of the captured runners from the previous day, still held as hostages by the hyenas. The scene was lit, sporadically and eerily, by the headlights of their vehicles, and by torches – many of which were being held in close proximity to the crosses. It was clear they were aligned for maximum visibility, and no one in the compound had to ask themselves why.

“This I promise,” came the avowal from the scarred leader of the hyenas: “Nobody – *nobody* – gets out of here alive!”

Those within the compound, unable to see over the wall, did not ask the sentries what was going on. They did not wish to have their imaginations confirmed, and the sentries would not have bothered to enlighten them anyway. The torture of the hostages commenced as the storm broke, and the drumming of the torrential rain obscured, but could not completely mask, the screams as they were exposed to the whips, the knives, and the flames. Above it all came the raging of the Humungous, as well as the whine of engines as the hyenas put on elaborate displays of vehicular prowess, for no reason other than to intimidate those within the compound.

Or so it might have seemed. Pappagallo, having struggled up to a vantage point despite the pain in his hip and leg, squinted at the display, trying to ignore the hostages themselves, people he knew, *his* people. There was bile in his throat that he continually tried to swallow, not just from the gruesome actions of the hyenas, but because he knew his best course of action was to do nothing about it. Instead, he viewed their positions with a shrewd eye, noting the careful spacing and alignment. The hostages were atop a small rise, just off to one side of the road, with only a few vehicles nearby, and no visibility behind them down the slope. In fact, there seemed fewer cars and motorcycles than had been in the camp only hours ago. Pappagallo knew they were there, out of sight, waiting.

“It’s a trap,” he said simply to the guards nearby on the wall, not imparting anything new or insightful to anyone who could hear, but voicing it just to convince himself of the necessity of inaction. “They *want* us to come out, to try and... to drive straight into their jaws. There are too many cars missing, waiting somewhere.”

The cold-eyed woman left the ballista nearby, came up softly behind him. “We can’t

afford it," she told him, the confirmation she knew he needed.

"No," he agreed, not quite avoiding the catch in his throat. He turned away, started down off the wall. "Zetta!" he called to his second-in-command. "Meet me in the public hall. We have planning to do."

Behind him, the carnage continued into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The compound was alive with activity, mechanics shouting and cursing as they readied vehicles to make the run, blue-white bursts of welding throwing dancing shadows as everything available with wheels was brought to peak running condition, some outfitted with defensive armor as well as offensive spikes and blades. What had been the small open space behind the gate was now crammed with vehicles. Further back within the compound, however, was another set of vehicles, different from the former. These bore no armor or spikes, but were being laden as much as they could, possessions and food and water and even livestock. What didn't fit inside was strapped to the outside, often leaving room only for the driver to see out the front.

And away from both of these epicenters of activity, two figures wended their way quietly past the tents and pipes, off to one side, heading towards the peculiar tall outline of the gyrocopter. One figure was unmistakable: tall, gangly, with his leather greatcoat and flying helmet. Tagging along behind was a much smaller figure, graceful, delicate, hair tied up into a topknot, and clasping a knapsack and the piglet she'd been holding earlier. As they approached the aircraft, she paused, turning to stare fixedly back into the heart of the compound where nearly everyone else bustled. The pilot failed to notice this at first, reaching the gyro and gathering up some cord to tie down their possessions, but soon found that his new companion wasn't right alongside, catching sight of her a short distance away. He trotted back, taking her gently by the shoulders. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly, solicitously.

She maintained her gaze into the compound. "It just... seems really wrong, sneaking away like this," she said softly, her childlike voice betraying her youth; in another world, she'd be a college freshman, still breaking hearts.

The pilot's tone also reflected this, taking on a cajoling note. "But you said you wanted to come, sweetheart," he reminded her. In truth, she'd agreed that it was safer than driving out.

"I know I did," she admitted. She swallowed, seemed ready to add something, but it never came. She was breathing more rapidly than was warranted, tense, conflicted.

The gangly man was understanding, soothing. "It's okay, you're scared," he said. "It'll be much safer up there, soaring like a bird. Come – what are we waiting for?" He tried shifting her towards the gyro, encountering more resistance than he expected. She almost seemed near tears.

At length, she voiced her concern. "This is my family," she said, almost to herself, coming to the realization, like many others before her, that family is not about genes and lineage, but about who cares for who, above all else. The people in the compound, some of whom might die within the next day, had been with her for a long time. They weren't acting through fear, but through determination, the same determination that had built the village and defended it against all comers. The split that had occurred a day and a half ago, the one that almost divided the whole compound, had nearly vanished with the sudden appearance of a *chance*, a wild card that might just spell a winning hand; it was considerably better than the chance that the Humungous might actually keep his word. Together, the people in the compound had committed to an agreed course of action and had thrown themselves into it without looking back. "I'm not going to leave these people," she said finally. "I'm staying."

The pilot, so close to being able to fly away with the woman of his (recent) dreams, on the verge of finding what he considered happiness in this desolate land, began to protest – not fiercely, but with more than a hint of desperation. As he took the preliminary breath, however, she finally turned to him, calm blue eyes visible even in this dim light, revealing the sudden removal of the internal conflict that had been present, he realized, ever since he'd broached the subject with her. "I'm sorry," she said honestly.

Under that gaze, he capitulated, graciously, magnanimously, almost as if it had been his idea all along. With a regal nod and a gesture, he bade her to proceed, and the smile she delivered in return was something he'd remember for a long time. He was rapidly coming to the realization that the same ethics that she was displaying right now was what he found the most attractive anyway; he himself was not untouched by the guilt of running, even though he knew there was a fine line between 'running away' and 'surviving.' On your own, this distinction is of little value, but around others it becomes far more important. He watched her trot back towards the activity, ready to pitch in as needed, with something like sadness mixed with pride.

\* \* \* \* \*

The military curmudgeon was leading Pappagallo over to the interceptor, where the Driver was finishing off a can of dog food, yet again; he'd felt somehow either too guilty or too proud to take their food, and had refilled the water bladders within the car from the recent rain.

"C'mon, I'll show you," the older man insisted, unmindful that the pace he was setting wasn't comfortable for their recently-injured leader. They hove in view of the Driver, who had on his lap the circuit board that served as the booby-trap on the fuel tanks, in preparation of re-installing it under the car. "I told you," said the uniformed man triumphantly, yet with a tinge of disgust. "He's leaving."

Pappagallo fixed the Driver with a questioning stare, which was ignored – sufficient to serve as the answer anyway. "Look, I don't have time for long speeches," the compound's leader said forthrightly. "I want you to drive the tanker."

The Driver did not even bother to meet the man's gaze. "Sorry," he said simply.

Eventually he looked up. "We had a contract; I kept my part of the bargain."

Pappagallo was unfazed. "We'll make a new contract."

A shake of the head in reply, gaze sweeping across the interceptor. "I've got all I need here."

"You don't have a future," Pappagallo observed, not batting an eye. "We could offer you *that*. Rebuild our lives." He leaned closer, earnestly. "Buy a ticket for three-thousand clicks, mate. If it's not to your liking you're always free to go."

The curmudgeon reached into his service jacket, which the Driver watched warily without appearing to, hand conspicuously close to his knife. The older man only drew forth a battered set of accordion-fold postcards, letting them drop open like a centerfold. Naturally a relic of *before*, they depicted a resort beach area, complete with bikini-clad women and surfboards, cloudless blue skies and palm trees. "You have to come, sonny," insisted the man. "This is where we're going: paradise! Three thousand kilometers from here. Fresh water... plenty of sunshine. Nothing to do but *breed*," he finished off, with a lascivious wink.

The Driver almost managed a tight little grin at that, partially at the more-than-innuendo, but also at the improbability of it all, not feeling the need to point out how unlikely it was that the place still existed, at least in that state. He wasn't sure how much of the continent he'd actually crossed in the intervening years, but the conditions he'd seen in all that time weren't significantly different from the locale of the compound; there had been fewer marauders now and then, even some trading posts and semi-civilized stockades. If such a place existed, the word would have gotten around quickly. Yet, it also was true enough that, had the Driver been getting close to any semblance of such carefree living, he would have, somehow, seemingly at random, turned back into the wasteland. Domestication is impossible for some species. "No thanks."

Pappagallo studied him, curiously, appraisingly. "What is it with you?" he asked, almost conversationally. "What are you looking for?"

Like their very first encounter, there was no answer that would make any sense, and no reason to try. The Driver stood up from his perch on the fender of the car and started towards the passenger door. Pappagallo, however, was disinclined to allow the quiet man to dictate how the discussion should end, and followed him. "C'mon, mate. Everyone's looking for something. You happy out there, are you? Eh? One day blurring into the next?"

The Driver remained silent, reaching inside the car to tighten the cords tying down some of his—... it wasn't accurate to call them "possessions," just trade goods, or items of potential use. None of them needed any further tightening down anyway, but the leader wasn't much for taking hints.

"You're a scavenger, son," observed the weathered leader, distaste evident in his voice. "You're a maggot, d'you know that? Living off the corpse of the old world, wrapped in the past so tightly you can't see a future. I've seen a lot of people like you... but nobody has any use

for you.”

As a psychological ploy, it *might* have worked on someone else, provoking a denial, the willingness to demonstrate otherwise – that was the intention, anyway. But it only served as outside confirmation of the suspicion the Driver had been fostering for the past couple of hours, reinforcing the idea that he really didn't belong, among anyone. He had already overstayed his welcome, and while he had intended to leave just before first light, it was probably better that he be going as soon as possible. He straightened out of the car, started moving to the driver's side.

Pappagallo wasn't through, however, and had adopted an almost bullying tone, sensing that he was hitting home. “Tell me your story, mate,” he bade the Driver, not quite mockingly. “What burned you out, huh? Kill one man too many? See too many people die?” He reached out with the heel of his hand, striking the smaller man in the shoulder, an ancient provocation. “Spend too much time at the funerals of family members?”

The blow came out of nowhere, not telegraphed, not even requiring the classic 'windup' of leaning back to gain more momentum; the Driver's fist simply shot up from his side and caught Pappagallo's jaw solidly, clacking the larger man's teeth together, sending him stumbling over backwards when his ability to step back to keep his balance was hampered by the hip wound. He crashed down in the dust of the compound, wincing, gripping his hip in pain, ignoring the dizziness and the throbbing in his jawline; he had no intention of giving the man the pleasure. The Driver, for his own part, mentally insisted that the leader had provoked a reflexive response with the mild assault, ignoring all of the times he'd stayed the reflex over greater provocations. It still burned, in the back of his mind, unknown to anyone: *he'd never attended the funerals*. He couldn't – there was work to be done, and the past was the past. So he'd repeated to himself, many times, blotting out the very suggestion that he couldn't face the ceremony, that he'd crash, that he would likely have been found dead of alcohol poisoning the next day. They'd been his life, and if he'd sought *closure* for that...

Pappagallo waved off the curmudgeon's assistance, as feeble as it was, and struggled to his feet; the elderly man was staring hot death at the Driver, but the leader of the compound maintained his composure, becoming almost haughty. He still addressed the Driver, who was leaning on the roof of his car, trying not to appear to be breathing heavily, his ears ringing, but not enough to blot out the leader's words. “Do you think you're the only one who's suffered?” Pappagallo asked, calmly, rhetorically. “We've all been through it in here. No one asks anyone else for their stories; we just know they exist. And we haven't given up on it all, either. We're still human beings, with *dignity*, and compassion. But you?” He turned away, knowing the value of a dramatic exit. “You're out *there*, with the garbage.” He limped away without another word, and the elderly man, giving the Driver one last glare, followed.

Alone again, the nomad dropped into the driver's seat of the interceptor, comfortable and reassuring through long familiarity. Even as he denied it to himself, he was ashamed, knowing the response, *any* response, was unnecessary. He wondered, not for the first time, if he was actually in control of himself, if he should even allow himself to be near anyone, no matter how briefly. He consoled himself with the thought that he wasn't actually *proud* of his actions, wasn't justifying them as necessary, much less what *should* have occurred, as he



imagined someone who was truly mentally ill would have. And then thought, *but is that what they'd tell themselves too?*

He stood again, seeking and picking up the circuit board, and took it around to the rear of the car, where he dropped onto his back and slid underneath, masking his confusion with brisk activity. It took only a few minutes to make the connections again, including the failsafe line that should have triggered the explosives should someone try to remove the board in any normal fashion; the one that the handicapped mechanic, crafty man that he was, had circumvented so handily. The Driver considered reworking that failsafe to be a lot harder to spot.

As he emerged from under the car, he heard the tinkly strains of the music box again, not far off, but the source was nowhere to be seen. He followed it over to the passenger side of the car, swinging the door open to reveal the feral kid sitting complacently in the jumpseat, concentration furrowing his brow as he fought to maintain a steady rhythm; the dog sat happily in the rear of the car, apparently more than willing to not only let the boy invade the sacrosanct cabin of the interceptor, but to give up its own seat as well. As the Driver absorbed this scenario, the boy looked up from his efforts and gave him a lopsided grin. At his feet, wrapped in more animal skins, presumably sat the boy's worldly possessions – at the very least, the boomerang could be seen tucked into the cords tying it all together.

Chastened by his recent display, the Driver seemed only tired. He couldn't let responsible adults get near him; a *child* was out of the question, and he would never accept that responsibility again. He was quiet, but firm: "Get out."

The kid continued grinning at him, showing no sign of comprehending even as the Driver repeated the command, trying some sweeping hand gestures intended to shoo the boy off. Changing tactics, he reached down and seized the music box, tossing it a short distance away from the car. The boy looked almost stricken, following the arc of the toy and vaulting over the open window of the door even as the box landed. As he ran to scoop it up, the Driver picked up the bundle of skins, tossing it at the kid's feet as he turned back with the treasure.

The youth looked confused, uncomprehending. "*Get out! Scat! Go on!*" the Driver nearly shouted, intent on discouraging any sense of companionship or camaraderie, or whatever the boy was thinking. The kid backed off, face turning to its normal, deadpan expression. After a moment, he turned away and trundled off with his possessions. *Get used to it, kid*, the Driver told him silently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Zetta, the second-in-command within the compound, heard the unfamiliar growl of an engine that was not one of their own, coming from within the compound. Through long exposure, and the necessity of picking up on anything that didn't seem right, he and nearly everyone else knew exactly what each vehicle that they possessed sounded like. This one was easy to distinguish as well, since it was an eight-cylinder. Seeking the source, he found the interceptor rolling slowly towards the gate, the Driver behind the wheel; several others in the compound watched it roll by with more than idle curiosity. Frowning, Zetta sought out

Pappagallo, eventually finding him in the 'public hall,' the tent they used for meetings, where they'd made the deal with the Driver to deliver the truck.

Their leader had his leg propped up, and was staring fixedly at a small egg timer hourglass in his hand. As the sand ran almost out of the top bell of the hourglass, he turned it over, starting the process all over again.

"You're letting him go," Zetta said, almost an accusation; it was clearly against his own better judgment, and against what they'd discussed when they had hashed out various plans of action not long ago.

Pappagallo, however, said nothing, not bothering to look up from the hourglass. It was a true statement, after all. He appeared engrossed in his own thoughts, something rarely seen from the alert and responsive leader.

"Well, let's keep his vehicle at least," Zetta asserted.

Pappagallo finally turned to look at him, calmly. "He fulfilled his contract," the weathered man pointed out. "He is an honorable man."

Zetta took this to mean that something had occurred between the two, though he had little idea of what. He also knew that their leader was capable of being convincing when he needed to; there were many reasons why he held the position that he did. Whatever had happened, Pappagallo was convinced that this was the best outcome, and at this point in time, there were more pressing concerns than finding out just what had transpired. "Okay, so who's gonna drive that tanker?" he asked.

Pappagallo's look of apparent surprise was a little too transparent, this time. "I am," he said, as if there could be little doubt. Zetta stared at him, inviting further comment, contemplating a protest, but their leader had turned his attention immediately back to the hourglass, virtually dismissing the topic from discussion. He turned the relic over again, never letting the time run out...

\* \* \* \* \*

With the Driver at the controls, the gate bus slid back from the gap in the walls quietly. Several of the more thoughtful workers within the compound had seen that lights and welding torches immediately in line with the opening had been extinguished, so as not to make the open gate visible from a distance. In a similar vein, two of the bright spotlights that sat within the walls, shining out across the landscape to reveal anyone creeping closer to the compound, had also been shut down temporarily. The rain had finally stopped, but most of the gullies were awash and portions of the landscape and the packed earth roads were slippery with mud.

The Driver slid out the window of the bus and strode quickly over to the interceptor, but not without another encounter. The gyro pilot, with his young companion tagging along not far behind, came up quickly. Conversation with the Driver didn't exist in normal form, the pilot

knew already, and he never thought to offer any of the things that might have been said by others in the circumstances. He was at a loss, in fact, as to what he *should* say, what might work to convince the smaller man, knowing this was an unlikely prospect at best.

“They've got you wrong – you're not a coward,” he ventured almost reassuringly, conveniently ignoring the fact that the compounders to whom he referred had said nothing of the sort, most of them simply being confused over what to make of this tattered man. “*Stupid*, maybe, but not a coward,” the pilot went on speculatively. If the Driver even registered this it failed to show, as the man brusquely slid past him and seized the door handle of his car, dropping into the driver's seat without any hesitation.

The pilot plowed onward. “You're making a serious mistake, splitting a great team,” he tried. “Think of the possibilities! The right people are gonna change this world!”

While the Driver often appeared oblivious to what was going on around him, like now, he was almost always alert, hearing the words, even knowing how the tide was turning, as with the debate within the compound soon after he'd first appeared, right before making the deal to bring back the truck. So he was listening to the pilot, not so much out of politeness, but to absorb the information, when those last words came through. They were an echo years old, never actually spoken out loud then, of the attitude he himself had possessed, what had actually made him join the MFP in the first place. Now, they just seemed satirical, mocking.

He glanced up at the pilot through his open side window as he started the car; he knew the gangly man could go on for ages if allowed, and sometimes even if not. “See you around, maybe,” the Driver offered with little sincerity, just to close the encounter. He glanced at the two of them, realizing that the pilot was onto something else with the young woman here, wondering idly how much it was influencing the man's decisions. “Goodbye; *good luck*.”

Those final two words had a faint edge to them, reinforced by the interceptor darting forward, through the gate and out into the darkness, running without lights. The horizon ahead was just barely beginning to lighten, dawn to occur about 45 minutes hence, but the interceptor had to get past the hyena encampment. The pilot and the woman watched it go, accelerating rapidly, until quickly lost in the purposeful pool of darkness amidst the light thrown from the compound, one created by selectively extinguishing a pair of the floodlights. With luck, the car would be neither illuminated nor silhouetted to provide any advance notice to the hyenas that it was approaching.

Even as one of the people rolled the gate back into position and he could no longer see anything outside the walls, the gyro pilot stood there, watching, turning over the words in his head. He'd seen the Driver's glance over at the pilot's companion right before he sarcastically muttered, “Good luck,” but the pilot was fairly certain this wasn't what was meant by the rejoinder. The attempt to run from the compound, past the hyenas, promised to be as hazardous as could be imagined, and not two hours before, the pilot himself was willing to avoid this endeavor altogether and fly off with the girl. Then, the romance, the old film happy ending, had been playing in his mind to some extent, but the alternative, of fleeing straight into the teeth of those hounds out there, only held appeal when compared against the inevitable: the overrunning of the compound, the hunting for sport, the rape and murder.

Perhaps some within this village had actually believed they could make a deal with those sub-humans and walk out; more had likely *wanted* to believe it, unwilling to face the idea of fighting their way free, either *from* the compound or just to retain it as home. Himself, he'd never believed those option were the slightest bit plausible. The hyenas would break through or die trying, and the compound had no opportunity to reinforce its numbers. The truck had changed a lot, both providing a potential escape *and* spurring the hyenas to new lengths. The hornet's nest had been disturbed.

The hyenas' brutal spectacle of earlier in the night, along with the Humungous' fierce vow, had helped to reunite the compound. The truck could take them *away* from the compound; when the compounders left, the refinery would remain behind, unclaimed. This was almost in accordance with the Humungous' earlier offer, the only difference being that the compounders were taking some of the fuel with them. This was apparently so unacceptable to the hyenas that it threw them into a rage, while most civilized people would have seen it as an effective compromise. It had become clear that compromise was not an option, that the marauders were not the type to *settle*. Virtually no one, now, believed that they could have bargained for their lives in any way.

The pilot turned back, facing into the compound and reorganizing his thoughts. The light of day would hold a lot of changes; he'd best prepare for them as well as he was able.

And outside the walls, a diminutive, wild-haired figure had also watched the car roll away into the darkness, from the concealment of a narrow tunnel. While he was too late to do anything about the interceptor leaving, and often had a hard time comprehending what was going on about him, he still knew what was planned for the morning, and had his own ideas.

\* \* \* \* \*

The throaty roar of the interceptor wasn't entirely unexpected, though its velocity was. Almost as the hyenas were rousing to the chase, the car tore through their encampment at reckless speed, avoiding the deadfalls on the road and plotting a course almost through the center of the camp, right where a battalion of motorcyclists had set up their own little enclave. Most of the cycles were sparse and lightweight trail bikes, made to be maneuvered and manhandled over rough terrain; too much mass meant too much inertia, too much effort to yank over for hard turns. This meant, as the interceptor hurtled through, that any bikes it contacted did little to arrest its speed, at the same time faring none too well themselves, flung across the landscape in mangled form. The Driver still knew that one direct hit could crumple the front end of the car, or hurl the bike through his windshield, and used the light of the campfires to aim as carefully as he could, taking the opportunity to trim out a few of the vehicles that could give the best pursuit without sacrificing much of the speed or integrity of the car.

Not far off, Wez recognized the sound of the engine, leapt up in an instantaneous frenzy. In the darkness, he could barely make out the shape of the car wreaking havoc as it tore through the camp, but there was no doubt in his mind that it was the one, and no question that he couldn't let it get away. Screaming at his companions, quickly gathering a small contingent, he avoided his own cycle and made straight for the Humungous' hybrid

vehicle; it possessed an edge all its own, far better than attempting to bring the interceptor to ground with a bike. The Humungous had still not emerged from his elaborate command tent, and there was no time to include him; worse, he might have other ideas that would hamper or completely avoid the capture of the prize interceptor, much less the delightful torture of its owner. Without giving an opportunity for protest, the motorcyclist drilled his contingent aboard the hybrid and quickly set off in pursuit, taking only seconds to start the vehicle and thread their way to an open path after the car.

When the Humungous emerged from his tent, both at the commotion in the camp and the sound of his own vehicle roaring off, he could only make out the shape of it disappearing over the rise, too far away to do anything about now. Enraged, he reached out and seized another hyena by the throat, effectively halting the man's rush towards his own wheels. "Who has the command car?" he bellowed at the struggling minion.

"Wez," gasped out the man, "and Crowbar, and and..."

The Humungous dropped the other man, having heard enough. *Wez*. The headstrong motorcycle jockey was a continual problem, the proverbial loose cannon. "You defy me," he muttered into the distance. "*You puppy!*"

\* \* \* \* \*

The Driver had waited until he regained the road surface, a proper one, asphalt instead of gravel or packed earth. The weight of the full tanks could help a lot with traction on mud and uneven surfaces, but it also hampered maneuverability, making the car soft on its shocks and too susceptible to swerves; he could overturn his own car if he drove it as he might have when the tanks were considerably less full.

But once on the hard, properly-crowned surface that drained away the rain, he dropped his hand down to the gearshift and lifted the knob thereon, setting the supercharger howling into life. The engine modification was really only useful on a straight and level road, but within those conditions, it worked supremely well. Without the light, he couldn't tell much from his mirrors how many were in pursuit, though he *would* be able to make out an empty road. But with the 'charger, it wouldn't matter – nothing in the camp had the ability to outrun such an engine, and the tanks would last for quite a while. With enough of a lead to prevent any visual clues, he would begin making turns off the initial escape route, and his trail would soon be impossible to fathom. His only concern was coming across something in the road small enough to be invisible in the darkness, especially at the pace he was maintaining, but big enough to disable the interceptor.

He had not had any opportunity to see the hybrid vehicle in action outside of its few approaches to the compound, however. As befitting the champion of the hyenas, the heavily-modified truck sported a massive hemi engine and twin turbochargers, intended for towing heavy loads yet still burning regular gas; this made its acceleration considerably better than a diesel counterpart. Being stripped down to the frame and then redecorated with the Humungous' 'throne' and some streamlining body panels, the hybrid was a lot leaner than its original design, making it even more capable of running fast.

Of the small pack of vehicles that had erupted from the camp in pursuit, before the Humungous had rallied the hyenas back together in suspicion of a decoy intended to split their forces, the hybrid soon forged its way out in front, in at least one case by brazenly pushing another vehicle out of the way. Wez was not about to be denied or impeded in this hunt. While the Driver had to rely on mirrors to make out his pursuers, the visibility was much better for those doing the pursuing, in most cases not even hampered by windshields. Though it was extending its lead by the minute, the interceptor could be seen as a dark blot on the empty road ahead, ever-so-faintly outlined by the lighter asphalt.

Moreover, the hyenas *knew* these roads intimately, could practically drive them in their sleep. While they'd only been besieging the compound for a few days, they had roamed the surrounding roads as scavengers, not to mention having chased down the scouts from the compound in search of a truck. They didn't need light to see where the interceptor was going, especially at that speed; it couldn't afford to depart the road, and would have no turns available to it for a while. Out here, roads forged a straight path, or as straight as they were able given the geography, from one former settlement to another – efficient and boring.

Wez waited. He had relinquished the wheel to one of the other two riding along, the one identified as 'Crowbar' – the other was the Humungous' own assistant, hand still wrapped in bandages and so unable to offer much help, yet quite familiar with the quirks of the vehicle. The Toady pointed down to the blue pressure tank affixed to the side of the cowling just ahead of the driver's station. "Down there," he pointed. "Open the valve."

Wez did as instructed, was disappointed when nothing happened. "What's wrong?" he demanded. He was shushed with a wave as the Toady watched a pressure gauge on the dash, waiting for it to reach a certain point. "*When I tell you,*" he said sharply, knowing the motorcyclist's impetuous nature, "get a good grip on something, then flip that toggle just above the tank."

Wez braced himself in well, glancing at the road ahead and the dwindling interceptor, then back at the assistant, who was still watching the gauge alertly. "Keep the wheel straight," he told the driver. "Don't even twitch." After a moment, he pointed to Wez. "Now!"

The word hadn't fully left his mouth before Wez slapped the switch down, opening the line into the engine's injection system. Nitrous oxide is a wicked fuel additive; flammable on its own, its combination with gasoline instead of air, which was only twenty percent oxygen itself, formed a super-combustible mixture that expanded in the cylinders exponentially faster than mere gas. It was generally only used for drag racing, since its affect on an engine was brutal, and even here on the Humungous' vehicle, it was saved for brief use on special occasions; rebuilding a motor was a task to avoid when one is nomadic and spare parts difficult to find. The hybrid roared, surging ahead so fiercely that the rear tires spun even at the high speed they were already maintaining. While they watched, the interceptor ahead began to grow larger as they closed the gap.

The assistant knew that they couldn't maintain the injection of the nitrous, lest the engine literally explode, and he judged their approach carefully. "Get ready to shut it off," he

told Wez.

“Not until we catch him!” seethed the motorcyclist, nearly blinded by the wind of their passage yet glaring at the interceptor unblinkingly.

“We're going fast enough to catch up! We're going to blow the engine!” shouted the Toady.

“No!” returned the obsessed man, perhaps to the engine itself, *willing* it to hold together long enough, not permitting any failure until the goal was reached. Looking around, he found the ceremonial axe that the Humungous kept on board; he'd seen it used to behead a wayward and disrespectful minion some time ago, never realizing that he was presently in danger of making that acquaintance himself, upon his return to their leader. Grabbing it up, he shifted position on the hybrid, gingerly, moving close to the side as the interceptor loomed ahead of them. Seeing him otherwise occupied, the assistant shifted over himself, in the opposite direction, and slapped the toggle closed, depriving the engine of the explosive mixture – the temperature gauges were well into the red. The vehicle sagged, decelerating slightly though still hurtling down the road at speeds none of them had achieved before. Shutting down the nitrous was actually beneficial to Wez, since they likely would have hurtled past their target if they'd maintained the pace they had been, but the loss of speed meant they approached the interceptor at a more manageable rate.

The Driver wasn't aware of their approach. Perhaps it was the nearly 48 hours without sleep, perhaps it was some subconscious relaxation now that he was away from the compound and the hyenas, but he'd spent just a little too long without looking in the rearview mirrors. The howl of the 'charger ahead of him and the open window had served to prevent the scream of the rapidly-approaching hybrid's engine from carrying to him. So when the axe crashed through the windshield directly in front of his face, it was Armageddon itself.

Wez lost his grip on the axe when it slashed into the windshield, but it didn't matter. They were still overtaking the interceptor, so he had to turn to watch it as they passed, and he saw it dart suddenly to the left, nosing down at the breakneck speed, and start a skid. It might well have rolled over on its own, but as it skidded it left the road surface, contacting the uneven, rutted scrub alongside; this served to send it tumbling, hurtling too fast for the sudden drag of the wheels to affect it, its mass attempting to leave them behind. It catapulted further from the road, crested an embankment and crumpled itself down into a gully, even as the hybrid hurtled onward, completely unable to halt its own forward motion. Wez was screaming in triumph, which soon turned to chagrin as they continued to leave the wreckage behind. At over two hundred kilometers per hour, the hybrid was not going to halt within a few hundred meters.

The interceptor balled up into a distant caricature of itself, flinging parts and cargo away wantonly, engine still screaming in death. When it finally came to a halt, the place where it had left the road wasn't even in sight over the crest. Though considerably quieter now than the wreck itself had been, accentuated by the cessation of the howl from both engines, the silence wasn't complete; the engine and exhaust system still *pinged* away their heat, debris and lost portions of the car still trickled down the slope.

Only a minute or so later, the hybrid eventually reappeared on the road well above the wreckage, having finally slowed enough to turn around. Wez, standing tall on the throne, directed the other two down to the wreck, having already accepted his position as the head of a new faction within the hyenas; such were the rules of salvage, though he might still have to combat the Humungous. And right now it was unclear if there would *be* any salvage; the interceptor itself was completely worthless, but the fuel tanks might have retained enough to make him extremely wealthy in the currency of the wasteland. “The gas!” he commanded his new minions, not that they needed any prompting. “And don't waste the driver! If he's alive... *I want him.*”

The assistant, crashing down the slope in the darkness with little grace, skidded and thudded into the side panel of the overturned car, fumbling with the two jerry-cans he could manage with the one hand. Coming at a more sedate pace behind him, Crowbar surveyed the scene with the assistance of a flashlight strapped to the forward stock of his crossbow, not seeing the Driver within the car from his vantage but unsure if that was accurate. The wreck was violent enough that the man could have been thrown out at any point, and the land uneven and rocky enough that this might not be immediately apparent. Reaching the car, he bent low to peer in the side window opening, cautiously, crossbow and light aimed within. The interior was a shambles, yet appeared empty all the same. Noticeable, though, was the four-point racing harness that dangled from the driver's seat. It wasn't clear whether it was so plainly visible from being thrown about in the wreck, or if it had recently been in use. Standing, Crowbar examined the ground outside the window, finding the faint evidence of drag marks.

The assistant had himself bent underneath the rear of the inverted car, rapping on the fuel tanks that had, somehow, remained both intact and firmly secured to the chassis. His banging produced the telltale solid sound and feel. He turned and called back up the slope. “The tanks are *full*, O mighty Wez” he announced, as fickle as he was dramatic, “and it's all yours!” He began struggling the the lid of one of the jerry-cans, hampered by his missing fingers.

Crowbar was sweeping the light's beam left and right, tracing the trail back, seeing it round a large rock. He eased around it, crossbow at the ready, and found the Driver sprawled beyond, still pushing himself along in a feeble parody of a crawl. “Well, now, sweetheart,” Crowbar said quietly. “Where are we off to in such a hurry?”

He never really received an answer to his question, or at least it came too quickly for his comprehension. The assistant had positioned a jerry-can precisely underneath one of the filler caps to the large fuel tanks aboard the interceptor and opened the tank. The secondary battery strapped deep within a body panel, where no one would think to disconnect it, was triggered by the circuit board of the booby trap, and sent its signal to the charges buried within the tanks, which detonated as designed. The blast tore apart both tanks, and indeed most of the rear of the car, atomizing the gas which produced a secondary effect, a massively expanding fireball. Crowbar caught the explosion full in the back and was hurled over the rock, most of his internal organs ruptured; he would die a fairly quick but still quite painful death. The Toady, right on top of the blast, had virtually vanished.



The shockwave from the initial detonation had rocked Wez backwards, and so he had already closed his eyes and crouched by reflex as the fireball expanded. He was well out of the immediate danger zone, in his position high on the road's edge, but it meant he did not see most of the explosion, and turned back tentatively to see the roiling flames that almost entirely obscured the wreckage of the car within, the heat beating his face even at this distance. Of his two companions, there was no sign, but in the glare of the flames in the darkness he would have been hard-pressed to see any such details regardless. Amid the obscuring rocks and scrub brush, he had never seen who Crowbar was advancing upon, nor heard the words uttered.

The arrival of two more of the pursuing cars, ones badly outstripped by the speed of the interceptor and hybrid, forestalled further speculation. The hyenas got out and looked down at the conflagration, seeing only Wez – they had never registered who was on their leader's vehicle as it passed them. One gaped. "Is the Humungous down there?"

"No," bit out Wez, almost pacing in disgust, but catching the eye of the other man who was now looking at him with suspicion, ubiquitous weapon already half-raised. Not everyone was quick to switch allegiances, and the Humungous relinquished his truck to no one. It was occurring to Wez that, without anything to show for his rash actions, without any leverage of assets gained, his position in the hierarchy of the hyenas was considerably lower than it was only a half-hour ago. "It's all over," he said firmly. "Let's go."

His brash attempt at dismissing the peculiar circumstances didn't work. The hyena he'd addressed raised the weapon to firing position. "*Where* is the Humungous?" the man asked, slowly and distinctly, the tone brooking no argument.

Wez eyed the crossbow, considering his chances, but suicidal gestures sometimes registered even with his impetuous brain. It was worse that the man holding the weapon knew him well, and would not hesitate. The man's stance was firm, rock-steady, ready to release the quarrel straight into Wez's face. With only a momentary pause, Wez answered the man's query: "Back at the camp."

The hyena remained unconvinced. "Then we best be getting back there, hadn't we?" he suggested. It was clear that Wez was now a prisoner, and perhaps even worth a reward – dead or alive. Alive, however, would be much more fun for everyone involved. Wez knew better than to count on this providing any hesitation on the part of his captor that could be exploited; "alive" did not necessarily have to mean, "uninjured," or even, "intact." Acquiescing by silence, he waited for his captor to gesture back towards one of the other cars. The Driver was now, not exactly *forgotten*, but both out of reach and low on the list of issues now faced by the motorcyclist. He trudged towards the car, careful to do nothing suspicious.

And towards the bottom of the gully, the large rock that the Driver had sought out, struggling against unconsciousness by the thought of the booby traps going off, had served its purpose. Shielded by its bulk from the blast and the expanding fireball, he had survived the detonation. The burning gasoline was centered around the wreckage of the interceptor; what had reached his position had been mostly vapor that burned off as it rose. Thus, the immediate dangers had passed, but he still had a laundry list of injuries sustained in the

rollover to contend with, and he was in no state to effectively evaluate their extent. In fact, with the realization that the blast and the fire had left him untouched, the adrenaline faded from his system and Driver lapsed into unconsciousness where he lie.

## Chapter Eight

The dawn was lightening the sky, the sun just before breaking over the horizon, and things in the compound were going slower than planned. While the number of people in the refinery 'village' wouldn't fill an average-sized meeting hall, it still took a lot of time to get that many people packed away – to tear up their roots, take everything they wished to keep on a drive halfway across a continent, to start a new life. Without knowing what supplies could possibly be obtained on the way, they were also stowing as much as they might be able to carry, with every vehicle they could manage. At least three trailers had been created from the scrap within the compound, now piled high with tarp-covered cargo.

Pappagallo had intended to be out as soon as it was light enough to see, but had forced himself to reevaluate that idea; it would be better to be *ready*, to have every advantage that they could, rather than sticking to an arbitrary schedule. He also considered that the hyenas would be fully expecting them to break at that time, and it might be better to thwart their expectations. He also would have liked to have used the distraction of the departing interceptor, making their break almost immediately afterward, but did not feel it was his right to ask, much less dictate, that the Driver delay his leave. Nor was this likely to be heeded anyway.

Zetta was directing the loading of several drums onto the gate bus; as one of their larger vehicles, it would serve a new purpose once the compound was no longer needed. The delivered truck's repairs had been ready only slightly after the promised time, the paraplegic mechanic being one of the compound's biggest assets, and now it was fitted to the tanker, both of which presently being laden with defensive weapons and armor plating.

A call from a sentry high stop one of the gantries around the refinery drew Pappagallo's attention, pointing out to the east where the sun was ready to peek above the horizon. Gaining the summit of the wall with some difficulty, the leader looked out in that direction, seeing the plume of black smoke some kilometers distant. He also knew the roads in the area, and that direction did not bode well. He had someone fetch the gyro pilot.

As the gangly man reached the wall and gazed out, his expression was a mixture of chagrin and disappointment. "Aw, hell," he muttered quietly. "You blew it, you fool." He watched for a moment, turned to look back inside the compound, then back out over the wasteland. The conflict was apparent.

"Go," the leader said simply. It wasn't an order, but permission.

The pilot turned to look at him with some surprise. "You'll need air cover," he protested.

Pappagallo was pleased to hear it – he wasn't exactly sure where the pilot's allegiances might lie, and the interaction with the Driver had caused him not to assume nor to expect anything. Survival was a personal choice. Pappagallo turned to glance around the compound himself, unnecessarily since he already knew the info he was supposedly obtaining. "We won't be leaving for at least another hour."

The pilot nodded, looked out again, then his face split into a reassuring grin. “Right,” he said. The leader clapped him on the back companionably, then turned away and shouted down to another to ready the gate for the departure of the gyro.

\* \* \* \* \*

Navigation wasn't hard – the beacon of black smoke continued for a short while, dwindling, then switched over to white smoke, thinner and a little broader in scope. The pilot was already pushing the small aircraft to its maximum so there was little he could do, even as he recognized the signs. Black smoke meant petroleum products, plastics, and so on; white smoke was scrub brush and dry wood. Considering the volume of the fuel tanks on the interceptor, this was right in line with what one would expect. He could only hope he was viewing instead the funeral pyre of one or more of the hyenas, where their defeated cars had ended up, but without seeing it for himself he could never be sure.

It was only about ten clicks or so out, and right alongside the road. The scrub fires weren't extensive, and the wreck was still smoking a bit but the fuel had largely burnt itself out. The interceptor was hard to recognize until about the third low pass, when he could make out the side panels well enough. His heart fell; it was not a pretty sight.

Still, holding out unreasonable hope, he circled, making more passes, and spotted the two leather-clad figures sprawled in the dust, one eminently recognizable. It still didn't mean a lot – being thrown from the wreck was highly likely, and he'd already spotted the corpse of the dog – but it remained a chance, especially with what appeared to be a dead hyena nearby. He did a quick turn, watching the roads into the distance to see how risky the maneuver was going to be, before landing the aircraft onto the road surface.

When he got to the body of the Driver, there was no response. He felt for a pulse along the man's neck, noting the variety of injuries he had sustained in the crash, and the smaller man stirred, reaching weakly but with purpose at what he assumed was his assailant. He was alive at least, and fighting – there was little more that could be asked.

“Relax, partner,” soothed the gyro pilot, easily evading the hand groping for his throat. “We'll be departing momentarily; please fasten your seatbelts and restore your tray table to the upright and locked position.”

The Driver opened one eye, being greeted with the horrendously grinning visage of the pilot leaning over him, winking reassuringly. It wasn't fair, after all he'd been through, but at least it told him not only that he was alive, but in friendly hands. He lapsed back into a fitful semi-consciousness, the familiar narrative emanating from the gyro pilot intruding at times in a confusing and disjointed manner.

After determining that there was no way the gyro could be brought close, the pilot had flipped the smaller man onto his back and trudged up the hill with him, ignoring the exertion required. Affixing the injured and incapable man to the gyro had taken some time and all the cords he could manage, going back down to the dead hyena to collect whatever helpful bits

he could from the man's garb (and ensuring that the marauder wouldn't be offering any resistance in the process.) The Driver's legs had been strapped to the footpegs so they wouldn't dangle or flail about, and upon his head he wore the hyena's riot helmet as additional protection. Satisfied, the pilot regained his seat at the controls and started up the tiny engine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Floating, dipping, queasiness. The scream of an angry hornet chasing him close behind. The roar of a monsoon. The distant voice of the most unattractive flight attendant in history thanking him for flying Qantas.

And somewhere in there, the frowning face of Jessie, upset with the memories that he had chosen to retain, instead of their happy times. He felt, suitably, ashamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Driver awoke with a start, the now-familiar industrial sound of the refinery causing confusion. He was lying flat, a position that he hadn't slept in in ages, and certainly not anyplace within the interceptor. His initial attempt to sit up caused an explosion of pain from his chest, courtesy of at least two broken ribs, and another from his head. Trying to take shallow breaths to avoid aggravating his ribcage, he struggled to achieve functionality, slowly regaining some control of himself. As he waited, he opened his eyes to stare at the nearby sheet aluminum and ribbing of an old produce truck, seen from the inside. He tried blinking, felt pain, realized that his left eye was swollen nearly shut.

In short scenes, the crash came back. He still wasn't sure what had happened to cause it, but he was certain, now, that the interceptor was irrevocably gone, and with it everything that he owned. He also had a vague memory of a hyena standing over him and exploding; eventually he pieced this together with some small satisfaction, hoping he got more than one.

Turning his head slowly without sitting up, he made out a makeshift medical facility, unfamiliar until he spied the open door; once accustomed to the glare of the light spilling in, he could make out part of the refinery structure beyond. As he watched, a small head, hair even wilder by being inverted, appeared from over the top of the doorway for a moment, peering in on him from the outside. These details, at least, told him he was out of immediate danger. As he pondered how he'd arrived, pieces of the flight came back to him, and he took a tiny bit of solace in the fact that he was largely unconscious for it.

More looking around revealed another bench similar to the one he now lay upon, also occupied. This one held the meek-looking man, the one who had inquired about the female runner, the one who had suffered a head-butt from the motorcyclist in the chaos of the truck's arrival. He lay, staring glassily into the distance past the ceiling, skin gray, a peculiar indentation in his forehead. Abruptly, the Driver realized this wasn't exactly a medical facility, but a morgue. The polite thing to do would be to go out and apologize for disappointing them all.

This did not prove to be as easy as imagined. With some difficulty, the Driver managed

to sit upright, only to set off a fit of coughing that threatened to lift the top of his head off, to say nothing of the ribs that could not handle the flexing. Between that and his badly-abused system's inability to supply adequate blood to the brain, he flirted with passing out again, but managed to overcome it through sheer determination. In sitting up and clutching his side, he discovered he was also stripped down to his trousers, his jacket, toolbelt, shirt, and boots missing. Turning both ways, he could see no sign of them. Slowly, he lifted his legs and swung them sideways off the bench, preparing for the elaborate feat of standing.

A thump alongside him drew his attention, but his motion towards a weapon was halted by both the realization that he had none, and the pain of the attempt. Looking over, he found a loosely-wrapped bundle now sitting on the floor just inside the door, clearly made up of his clothes and possessions. A double-thump heralded the appearance of his boots, and a clatter produced the knee brace. Confused, he kept peering at the space at the top of the doorway, and the feral kid soon fell into view, landing on the floor of the truck body with barely a sound. This unlikely angel struggled to pick up the entire collection that he'd just deposited on the floor, then walked over, with a passable imitation of the Driver's stride, to bring the man his clothes. The Driver was embarrassed; he'd never had a valet before, and didn't know how much was appropriate to tip one. The boy was already hefting one of the boots and grunting with authority, motioning at the Driver's right leg despite holding the left boot...

\* \* \* \* \*

Pappagallo was addressing most of the assembled compounders in the open area just inside the gate. As a group, they wore additional scraps and padding, jackets and vests, the closest thing to body armor that they could manage; a few, including Pappagallo, were wearing some of the leather accoutrements taken from various dead hyenas. The weathered leader was clasping the sawed-off shotgun taken from the Driver, breech open, using it to punctuate his words as he outlined their plans.

"We're going to crash, or crash through," he said, which only a few recognized as part of some politician's speech from *before*. "Now, I'll be driving the tanker, and right now, that's *all* they want. So, we're gonna use that to punch through – which will give all of you a very good chance. *Don't hesitate!* Once you're outside, split up and go as hard as you can!"

He paused in front of a hastily-drawn map pinned up to a board, tapping it with the barrels of the shotgun. "Now, three hundred kilometers to the north, there's a place with a bridge, called Powder River. That's our rendezvous. Give us til sunset – if we haven't made it by then, keep going." He looked around at the villagers, pausing for any questions, received none. Pointing to the map again, he asked, "Does anyone need to see this any longer?"

When no affirmative came, he struck a match, held it to the bottom of the map in several places, and watched as it burned to ashes; no sense leaving their plans lying around. As he turned back to muster the troops, he noticed there was an argument brewing in the back. The mechanic, still hanging from his harness, was red-faced with anger and shouting.

"Good enough for me to build, but not to ride? *Bullshit!*" he spat.

The cold-eyed woman was facing off with him, adamant. “You're not coming on this tanker!”

“I sweated blood on this!” he replied. “No bastard's gonna tell me I have to ride in a lousy school bus!” Both of them had their own personal reasons behind their standpoints, and both believed this was a secret known only by themselves, though in truth nearly all of the compounders had picked up on the peculiar dynamic the pair had, and knew the argument for what it was.

Pappagallo stepped in; there had already been several such altercations in the past few hours, as tempers flared on who was going to ride in which contingent when they all went through the gates. “Settle down!” he called out for, by his count, the sixth time this morning.

It had all served to prevent anyone from noting the approach of the Driver, dressed again in his accustomed gear, leaning heavily on the feral kid for support and he limped over towards the assembled compounders. He'd been assessing his injuries on the short walk across, and while he wouldn't be vaulting over the wall anytime soon, he was gaining strength, his head clearing a bit, and believed he wasn't about to tackle anything out of his current abilities. Fortuitously, he had kept his hands locked tightly to the steering wheel as the interceptor had tumbled across the landscape, so while his arms held numerous abrasions, they were not impaired in function, or crushed as they might have been had they flailed out the open window.

“If it's all the same to you,” he called out loudly, ignoring the throb this sent into his head as the compounders turned as one to find this unexpected scarecrow standing at their outskirts, “I'll drive that tanker.”

Pappagallo turned with some surprise. He had seen the Driver when he'd been unloaded from the gyrocopter, and had received a professional opinion from the medically-trained members of the village after their examination; the chances had not been something one would want to bet on. Even if the man was standing now, it was no indication he'd be standing twenty-four hours from now. “The offer is closed,” he announced to the Driver with finality. “It's too late for deals.”

“No deals,” replied the Driver. “I want to drive the truck.”

Pappagallo strode forward, with an air of affected curiosity. “Why? Why the big change in heart?” He knew as well as anyone that there was no altruism to be found here, perhaps never had been, for years. Without the car, without any possessions, out here in the wasteland, the man was as adrift as any orphan. *And yet, he's not asking for a ride out with the second contingent, is he?* the leader observed silently.

The Driver met his eye directly, knowing he wasn't imparting any new information, just confirming that neither was putting anything over on the other. “I haven't got the choice.”

Zetta stepped forward, looking at the smaller man with distaste. “And how do you suppose you would do it?” he asked dryly. “I mean, look at you – you couldn't even drive a

wheelchair.”

Pappagallo chimed in, but with a softer tone that seemed to imply he was more on the Driver's side than his own assistant's. “You should look at yourself, mate,” he suggested to the Driver quietly. “You're a mess.”

The Driver calmly met the leader's gaze, unblinking and direct. “Cut the crap,” he said, almost casually. “ We both know that my driving the truck is the best chance you've got.”

The leader looked hard at the Driver for a few moments, wondering if he had meant the compounders as a whole with that assertion, or merely Pappagallo himself – and then, whether that distinction meant anything. He'd finally taken note of the MFP gear when the medical people were examining this man, realizing that here was more experience on the road, *before* and since, than perhaps everyone in the compound combined. And he knew what driving the truck actually meant – with little doubt that the man in front of him also knew it.

The mark of a good leader is achieving the balance between functional skills and popular support. Any man can lead others into battle, which may be seen as heroic and commendable – and, dying there, be as useless as anyone else. A different man can run things with supreme efficiency and exacting foresight – but never inspire confidence and allegiance from his charges, and thus never achieve a useful cohesion. Most of the compounders were very narrowly focused on the immediate future, the charge through the pack of hyenas out there, but Pappagallo was trying to also consider the future beyond that, and what would be needed then. The postcards that the curmudgeon had displayed implied a carefree existence, but their colors were faded...

It took only a few moments, but in the end, he turned the shotgun around and offered it to the Driver grip-first, about as close to the ceremony of proffering a sword as one would get out here.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the opening behind the gate, the compounders were rapidly disappearing, being absorbed into various vehicles as the zero hour approached rapidly. The truck and tanker sat in the center, transformed now into a vicious-looking combination. The wheels of both were shielded with metal gratings, and barbed wire was strung along the sides of the tanker to discourage anyone from climbing aboard. At the front and rear of the tank, on the top, sat two armored guard stations, festooned with meticulously-sharpened spikes and harboring within a variety of weaponry; hanging off the back of the tank, down low, sat another, fashioned from the trunk portion of an old car. The 'roo bar on the front of the truck had been replaced with a bulldozer blade and 'cattle-catcher' addition arching over from the top edge, to help prevent collision debris from flying into the air towards the windshield. The driver's-side panel of that was still missing, no spares to be found within the collections of the compound, but it had been replaced with a set of iron bars to provide some protection at least. Both side windows had been covered with bars as well, leaving enough space for adequate visibility of the side mirrors, which had been augmented with additional mirrors aimed in a variety of directions.



To either side of the truck sat the two cars the hyenas had breached the gate with as they followed the truck in the day before. One, another stripped buggy that had collided with the rear of the truck when it had skidded to a halt, had been repaired and augmented with additional armor, being careful not to weight it down too much. While the wheels had formerly marked the outer corners of the car, crash bars had been installed front and rear, extending significantly wider than the car itself. The other vehicle was a curious contraption, betraying few clues as to its origin. It resembled an oversized dragster, with a single open seat in the middle between two big-block engines, bearing truck tires on a heavy-duty suspension providing lots of ground clearance – a serviceable off-road racer. This had also been outfitted with defensive plates and a couple of strong crossbars, one of which attached roughly in the middle of the car and a meter off the ground, extending out perhaps a meter-and-a-half past the sides of the car each way.

The rest of the cars within the compound sat off to one side, mostly near the gate bus. There were trucks and vans here, and the trailers that had been hastily assembled, and these were all heavily laden with the compounders' possessions. None of these had been modified for defensive or offensive purposes; the second contingent, slotted to leave the compound after the hyenas took the bait of the tanker, would depart via a different route and intended, *hoped*, to encounter no attention in doing so.

The Driver sat at the wheel of the truck, having had his more serious injuries bound and a judicious dose of painkiller administered – not so much that he might lose concentration or become impaired, but enough to try and prevent his injuries from forming any distraction. He had refused it, multiple times, but Pappagallo had prevailed upon him to gain whatever edge he could against the disadvantages that his wounds produced. In the end, the leader had simply thrown a hard right at the Driver's face, never letting it connect, but smiling with grim satisfaction when the act of trying to block the assault brought a gasp of pain from the Driver as his ribs protested. Pappagallo accepted the epithet that the man bestowed upon him with good grace, but the argument had vanished.

The shotgun's breech was open, and the Driver fed in two of the handful of shells that he had been given again. The bars on the windows were spaced wide enough to allow the twin muzzles of the gun to poke through, though belatedly they realized it would have been far better to install the bars horizontally instead of vertically, which would not have limited the aim of the gun as much, and allowed for the tracking of a moving target. Next time.

In the forward defender station atop the tanker sat the cold-eyed woman, looking ahead alertly into a conflict so far only imagined. Behind her at the rear of the tanker sat the mechanic at the other top station, a short heavy lead attached to his waist to help make up for the lack of influence and leverage from his legs, which were bound together in a broad canvas sheet. Below him in the station on the back end of the tanker sat Zetta, much closer to the level that the pursuing vehicles would inhabit and thus more heavily encapsulated in defenses. There had been discussion about pulling both the ballista and the flamethrower from their positions on the walls of the compound and installing them onto the tanker, but this would have meant taking away the two strongest, and most visible, defenses from the gate; the debate had finally weighed towards not introducing a risk while they were preparing for

their run, especially when some of the normal defenders were busy making preparations themselves and could not man their stations along the perimeter.

While they had fully expected to be harassed by the hyenas at some point, perhaps as a legitimate last-ditch attempt to breach the walls, perhaps solely as a distraction, the only actions from the encampment had been the brutal display of torture, and at present, the camp was quiet. No one knew if they were simply saving their energy and scant fuel for the inevitable dash by the compounders, or if something else was being plotted, and careful observations by sentries had revealed no further information. One thing was clear: the Driver's passage had stirred things up, and most of the marauders' vehicles were now arrayed in ranks facing the compound, ready to dash out on the slightest notice, and larger deadfalls had clearly been erected. This also left the burning question of what *wasn't* visible, and where.

There was nothing for it, though. The compounders made their preparations to break through, aware that the less time they allowed the hyenas their own preparations, the fewer they would be. Pappagallo called out a two-minute warning, spurring a frenzy of activity, mostly of people getting into their respective vehicles. The gyro pilot was running preflight on his aircraft, and glanced up to see the young woman whom he'd almost managed to fly away with, poised at the side of the gate bus but looking in his direction. When he made eye-contact, she flashed him an encouraging smile the held an expression of confidence within. Struck by the unexpected support to the point of being speechless for once, he tried to return the smile as best he could.

Pappagallo, from his seat at the controls of the off-road dragster, wearing a lacrosse helmet and visor, looked to his left into the cab of the truck where the Driver sat, giving him a thumbs-up when the smaller man turned his way. The Driver merely nodded grimly and returned his own gaze to the front again, waiting for the gate bus to move aside. Pappagallo glanced around the compound, satisfied that they were as ready as they would ever be, and ended the anticipation. "*Let's go!*" he called out strongly.

## Chapter Nine

In the hyena encampment, the numerous sentries were attempting to discern whatever activity they could within the walls of the refinery compound, which wasn't much. The Humungous had been drilling discipline into them fiercely since the interceptor had crashed the camp, and if his ceremonial axe hadn't been lost in the pursuit of that prize it would surely have been used on Wez. As it was, the motorcyclist had endured countless lashings with a whip for his actions, and was now chained, hands, feet, and neck, to the Humungous' hybrid vehicle, perched directly over the cowling atop the engine. The heat that would be produced there after only a short period of operation would surely be more than uncomfortable, but worse, should the engine explode from its recent abuse, Wez would bear the brunt of the damage.

The sentries noticed the few defenders on the walls of the compound had left their positions, and dutifully reported this along the lines; fear of the raging Humungous had them reporting *rabbits*. Still, no actions were taken as everyone awaited their orders from their muscular leader, who sat atop his throne with regal patience, calmly watching the compound from the forward edge of the encampment.

When the squeal of an air-starter carried past the wind, the sentries relayed it excitedly to the Humungous, and even as the other engine sounds erupted from the distant compound, including the nasal buzz of an aircraft engine, the hyenas' master gave the command to start their own engines, filling the air with a deafening multi-toned roar – the hyenas were not content to let their motors remain at idle, but revved exuberantly as was their nature, a mixture of machismo and intimidation. Amid the noise, the Humungous had withdrawn his ornate pistol case and was fitting the remaining cartridges into the gleaming firearm.

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As the truck started, the cold-eyed woman looked down from her position to see the wild boy in furs standing on the frame behind the cab of the truck, between it and the tanker trailer – gripping the rear window's edge in readiness, legs spread wide for stability. “Gaja!” she called out desperately. “Get that boy off of there!”

The mechanic's large assistant leapt out of one of the second-contingent vans, scrambling over to the truck and making a grab for the kid, who saw him coming and darted to the opposite side of the frame, unfortunately into the arms of another compounder. Hefted from the rig and carried towards an overloaded, ancient Leyland, the kid growled fiercely and struggled, but stopped short of biting the man holding him; even he knew what side he was on. As someone leaned out the door of the Leyland to receive the boy, his captor shifted his grip and the boy, sensing the change, burst free in a manic spasm, landing adeptly on his feet and scrambling for the tanker. The gate bus had already rolled aside and the truck was starting to grind forward with authority. In a flash, the kid had scrambled aboard just before it passed through the gate and out of reach. The Driver, evaluating the newly-revealed positions and defenses of the hyenas, remained oblivious.

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When the gate rolled open at the compound, there was no need to relay the information along – every eye in the encampment was pinned to the action. Immediately the truck appeared, transformed now, looking ominous with the defensive additions that bristled out in multiple directions. Still in low gear, it dashed aside those carcasses of the hyenas' vehicles that blocked its path, without hesitation, accelerating strongly across the open space between the compound and the gathered marauders. The Humungous, wielding his microphone over the noise of the engines, bellowed out, “*Hold your position! You have your instructions, my Dogs!*”

Almost unnoticed in the tumult, several engines among the assembled ranks of the hyenas faltered and died, demonstrating the worst possible timing. Some drivers desperately cranked starters, while others leapt out to throw up hoods and curse elaborately at their machines, unable to fathom what had caused the failure. The Humungous remained unaware of the issues as he watched the approaching truck, now flanked by two cars formerly belonging to his own men. These honor guards remained slightly back from the truck; their mass and impact value was a tiny fraction of the rig, and they would perform best by relying on their agility and acceleration when needed.

As it drew closer, the truck turned off the road slightly, avoiding the deadfalls and taking aim at some of the heaviest vehicles that the hyenas possessed. Too late, the Humungous saw his mistake; while he had arranged those vehicles there to channel the compounders towards the traps, they weren't big enough to withstand the rushing rig, and someone who recognized the tactic for what it was could both avoid the traps and disable the useful larger vehicles of their inventory. He knew he couldn't redirect those cars in time. In frustration, he raised the pistol and took careful aim at the approaching truck, which was passing wide of his position; his own ranked men would soon spoil the shot. The pistol roared twice, bucking madly, but the first shot merely pitted the huge bulldozer blade on the front, and the second went wild.

Peripherally, the Humungous was aware of his second mistake. Not wishing to risk getting too close to the compound and depleting his forces even more, he had remained back, strategically placing their vehicles in groups that could close off the runners from the compound, as well as allowing his Dogs to create some deadfalls that might halt the truck. But this distance allowed the gyrocopter the necessary room to get up to speed and airborne after it followed the rig and honor guard out of the gate, and it now approached at high speed, perhaps only fifty meters in altitude. The Humungous turned and raised the pistol, tracking the aircraft, and fired off another round. The aircraft suddenly banked hard, making him think he'd scored a hit, but his pride in his marksmanship was short-lived; the pilot had merely heard the thunderous report over the engine noise and put some respectable distance between them.

Turning back, he watched the rig smash into his largest vehicle, one of the ones used as cargo-carrier for their camping supplies. The driver of the carrier, seeing the bristling truck bearing down, had vaulted from the driver's seat in desperation, unfortunately leaving it in gear. Without brakes and still idling, the carrier almost bounced away from the impact, rolling freely, and as it did so it drifted off and ran down a motorcyclist who was too slow to dodge.

The Humungous raged.

“Smegma Crazies to the left!” he shouted into the microphone, trying to salvage his careful game plans. “Gayboy Berserkers along the gully! Close them off from the road!”

Galvanized into action, the hyena vehicles leapt forward, breaking into packs and maneuvering clear of one another, part of the Humungous' careful instructions while they waited for the inevitable rush from the compound. The air was filled with the scream of engines – and, punctuating this, the clash of metal as the Driver selected his targets carefully. The Humungous' drill also caused the hyenas to sit still where they would normally have been dodging, and while some of them realized their peril and managed to escape the oncoming juggernaut, others allowed their discipline and fear to slow their reaction times just enough to fall victim to the rig bearing down.

The Humungous watched as his Dogs swung around to either try and close off the rig from escaping, or to give chase when they were too far from its path to be effective in this regard – and something else. A significant number of them had faltered, remaining where they were or accelerating slowly; one nearby was struggling with flat front tires, and as he watched, a motorcycle darted forward for two meters before being arrested by a chain that pulled taut from the sand behind it, throwing its operator over the handlebars violently. *Someone*, someone capable of skirting the encampment at night unnoticed, had learned enough from observing the mechanics within the compound to cut fuel and brake lines, to hide sharp spikes in the sand just ahead of tires, and had even chained down a few motorcycles. Only a handful of the vehicles on the outskirts of the camp had been victimized, but it was enough to cut the ranks of the hyenas by a notable margin.

The honor guard escorting the rig was beginning to make itself useful. As the first of the hyena vehicles closed in on the truck intending to disable it in any manner possible, the off-road dragster darted forward, intercepting the marauder with the added forward crash bar, deflecting the pursuer away from the truck with a shriek of metal. On the opposite side, the buggy was weaving back and forth, effectively keeping two motorcycles at bay; they dare not risk a collision with something, even as light as the buggy. While the number of roadworthy hyenas had been thinned slightly, there was still far too many of them for two escorts to hold off forever, and sooner or later they would be able to get past the flanking guards. The defenders in their stations on the tanker itself bided their time, knowing their greatest effectiveness would come as the hyenas managed to get much closer to the rig.

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Within the compound, a lone sentry lay low atop the walls, peering out through a subtle opening to keep watch on the proceedings. As they'd hoped, the bulk of the encampment had emptied out in force to pursue the rig; not one vehicle had turned towards the refinery to take advantage of the now-open gate. The previous night's rain had mercifully prevented the dust clouds that might make it hard to observe the hyena's movements – and might also reveal the advance of the second contingent. There remained a significant margin between the compound and any marauders, with the nearest still a kilometer off. The sentry pulled a cord poking up through the scaffolding next to his leg, scrambled from his position and leapt down

onto the roof of the bus, dropping through one of the emergency exits on the roof. "Hit it!" he said to the driver, the older woman who had vied with Pappagallo during the fractious split the compound had nearly undergone. "They're away. Nobody's coming this way yet."

She offered no reply; none was needed. Dropping the bus into gear, she led the way through the gate, immediately turning left to skirt the compound and follow the wall around a short ways, heading north. Behind the bus, the remainder of the second contingent followed closely in an assemblage of vehicles and trailers, anxious faces peering past possessions crammed into every available space to watch for any signs of pursuit. While not perfectly defenseless, the contingent was far more vulnerable to attack and wouldn't be able to withstand a concerted force of hyenas.

It was even better than they'd hoped, disturbingly so. While some vehicles could still be seen in the encampment, they weren't going anywhere, and the contingent left the compound, and the whole area that held it, without any resistance at all. To some extent, this heightened their anxiety: honest pursuit was expected, and would have given them a specific fear, as well as something to prepare for. The complete lack of any difficulty, given the persistent and antagonistic nature of the hyenas, simply left them wondering what trap was awaiting them. They scanned every inch of the landscape relentlessly, save for those driving, who split their attention between operating their own vehicles and watching the semaphore systems of the one preceding them, the only way to communicate through the line without shouting.

Their escape did not go unnoticed, however. Some of the hyenas at the back of the packs, well away from the rig and blocked from doing anything effective by their brethren, thought to look back at the compound. The gate was visibly missing, the line of escaping vehicles already heading for the horizon. Two motorcycles made frantic turns and darted in the direction of the refinery, the laws of salvage making it a deadly serious race. Their haste drew the attention of others, including most of those stranded by the efforts of the feral kid, and a mad dash for the compound began, many on foot. The appeal of the chase, the sport of hunting down the remaining compounders, competed against the idea of unlimited wealth in the form of gasoline, against even the idea of creating a *new* faction that held the compound, and lost. With all focus on the abandoned refinery, the hyenas ignored the second contingent.

The first two motorcyclists raced through the gate and skidded to a halt in the open area, quickly realizing they had no method of blocking anyone else from coming in. Instead, they ditched the bikes and began a hurried search of the huts and tents within, the mark of a scavenging species. As the first couple of cars followed, they tried to block the gate opening themselves, but it was far too easy to swarm over decrepit passenger cars and utes, and there came the group realization that the compound was open to all comers until some method could be found to close the gate opening off. In ones and twos, over a dozen hyenas were making their way into the compound, rummaging through every crack and crevice in search of treasure.

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The rig dashed through the encampment with little resistance, partially because of the route the Driver had chosen, but primarily because there was nothing in the hyenas'

possession massive enough to halt it, or even slow it down significantly. One coordinated pack of cars succeeded in heading the truck off, and one among them attempted the same maneuver that had been tried a day earlier, as the truck had come through in the other direction: aiming for the front wheels to cripple or redirect the rig from its course. It works best, however, when one's target maintains a steady speed and course. The Driver spotted the car closing in and tapped the brakes slightly, pulling hard to the right, giving the other driver no time to correct. The dozer blade 'hyena bar' on the front of the truck slammed edgewise into the car just aft of the front doors, wracking the frame and tearing off the rear quarter-panels and rear wheel. The car spun to a near-halt before being broadsided by a Ford pickup, the driver of *that* crushing his chest against the steering column as his truck folded up.

From the other vehicles that had cut across in front of the rig came the clatter of arrows and darts, most of them flying wide of their targets and none of them penetrating either the cab or the covers over the wheels. The hyenas had little else they could do, so their advantage in heading off the rig vanished in the lack of viable actions. They were still sizing up their opponent, trying to determine what they could do to halt the truck. While weaving to make a harder target as well as picking a path across the rutted desert, the Driver still veered closer and closer to the asphalt road surface, which would allow a greater turn of speed for both the rig and its pursuers, but provided for a possible advantage he hoped to exploit. Much more importantly, it held a significant lack of unexpected gullies or boulders that would halt the truck's progress entirely.

Some of the hyenas realized what was going on and hoped to find a way to keep the rig in the rougher scrub, running off-road, but lacked any method to achieve this. Their feints and dodges, which might have caused a more inexperienced driver to veer off and avoid a collision, were blithely ignored, and they ended up swerving away themselves to prevent the massive tanker from plowing over or through them. With a swarm of angry but ineffectual hornets almost circling it, the truck gained the road surface; the Driver dropped down a gear and gunned the engine, surging ahead momentarily, and set up a gentle, unpredictable weaving, trying to balance speed against blocking ability, feeling the tug from the tanker as the liquid contents sloshed. The rig was heavy and thus limited in maneuverability, but it was large enough that it wasn't too difficult to block the entirety of the road surface with small swerves. The area on either side of the road was flat but still unfinished, hard to maintain speed upon, and so he had a chance of preventing the rig from being overtaken.

The escort vehicles were helping significantly. Both capable of going off-road as well as nearly any of the four-wheeled vehicles in the possession of the hyenas, their offensive additions were being put to good use. Pappagallo had demonstrated the function of the horizontal bar amidships of his dragster as one car tried to pass him; with a slight jerk of the wheel, he sent the bar crashing through the driver's-side window of his opponent, and a quick tap of the brakes and accelerator in quick succession wreaked havoc within. The car wobbled and drifted away across the landscape, its former driver in terrible shape.

On the other side of the rig, the honor guard buggy was racking up its own score. The wide bumpers could be jammed into the wheels of any vehicle trying to overtake the rig, and the frenetic work the night before on reinforcing and sharpening them had not been in vain. A souped-up Toyota had come racing in towards the cab of the truck, the passenger leaning out

of the window with a crossbow, when the buggy had caught up to it and slipped its bumper into the rear wheel. There was a clatter, and the fierce shaking of collision, before the sharpened iron found its mark and stripped the tire clean from the rim. The Toyota began fishtailing madly, nearly taking out the buggy in its erratic course, before it left the road surface and spun out rapidly, losing the passenger in the process. Upon seeing this, the motorcyclists closing in chose to give the buggy a wide berth, since one small tap of those bumpers would turn a bike into wreckage tumbling down the road, the rider faring much worse.

One eager marauder used the road surface to his advantage and rushed up behind the tanker, hoping to tailgate close enough that his passenger could leap aboard. As the car drew up within a dozen meters, Zetta in the rear defensive station prepped and hurled a Molotov cocktail, a gasoline-filled bottle with its neck plugged by a rag. The rag had soaked up the gasoline, lighting easily and burning without igniting the contents – until something burst the bottle and the gasoline mixed with air. The incautious hyena had closed to a distance where accuracy was almost guaranteed, and Zetta had chosen this station because of his throwing ability. The bottle smashed through the windshield of the pursuing car and shattered within, turning the interior into a conflagration fed by the wind through the open side windows. In desperation the hyena driving it slammed on the brakes, simply wanting *out*, but the slewing car forced two others to have to break off pursuit to avoid a collision. One dodged in front of a rapidly-approaching buggy, which itself swerved too hard for having only two wheels on the road surface at the time. The uneven traction caused it to spin and roll over, handily protected by the crash cage encircling the occupants.

The cycle rider following wasn't so protected. Faced with the overturned buggy suddenly stopped dead right in his path, he realized the dirt surface would prevent any attempt at a hard turn and locked the rear brake vainly, trying to jump free at the last instant, *beyond* the last instant. It meant he was going a little bit slower when the bike crumpled against the buggy, and his leap wasn't sufficient to bring his feet above the car's frame. Both legs broken in multiple places, the rider cartwheeled through the air with a scream that was almost lost amid the other noises.

A few hundred meters back from the truck, the Humungous' hybrid vehicle rode, driven by the muscular leader himself, the errant Wez still strapped across its cowl. He had watched too many of his men forced out of the chase already, with nothing to show for it, and recognized that stopping the truck was going to be a multi-step process. Impetuous, uncoordinated attacks were going to accomplish little, and would deplete their manpower wantonly.

Taking up his microphone, the Humungous cranked the loudspeakers to full volume, hoping to be heard by as many of his Dogs as possible. "Take out the guards!" he commanded. "*Take out the guards!*"

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The hyena encampment was devoid of human life, empty tents and disabled vehicles making it a mockery of a ghost town. The pursuit had vanished into the distance, but a faction



of hyenas were within the compound now, rooting throughout, some deciding on what huts or tents would be *theirs*. A few of the more mechanically-minded marauders were examining the refinery apparatus, trying to figure out just what was necessary to turn the petroleum still being pumped from deep underground into glorious gasoline. The Humungous could come back with the tanker if he desired; it would run dry one day, while the refinery could last *forever*. They would all see who would emerge as ruler of the wasteland.

Some of the wires in the network stretching overhead, across the compound, hadn't been there the day before. Had they had the time to trace them back and forth, the hyenas might have found that the common denominator was a small device near the top of the highest mast, fed by the same generator that kept the pump operational. The timer within, started by the lone sentry tugging on its trigger cable right before he left his post to jump into the gate bus, finally reached its goal.

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The peal of thunder caught up to the second contingent of vehicles from the compound, rattling windows while passing it, and almost everyone therein turned back to see the mushroom cloud already high into the sky, rising even as the sound raced across the desert. In moments, the thunder morphed into multiple reports, distant and echoing, the children of the array of charges hidden throughout the compound. By now, the small village built around the refinery was a vast splash of debris and burning oil, little more than a stain marking the location of their former home.

As the curling, black and angry cloud stretched high into the atmosphere, some watched with delight, others with sadness. It meant their trap had worked perfectly, and who could tell how many of those vermin, the same ones who had tortured and killed their family, had perished in the explosion. And it also meant the disappearance of a large portion of their lives, a sparse but tight community built with hardship and desperation, created from the dregs of a dead civilization. During its forging, hope was intermixed with cynicism; the idea of a new start weighed down by the grim reality of the postwar world. Gradually, the cynicism faded as they overcame so many of the disadvantages, as their little village emerged, self-sufficient and viable. One could hardly call it cozy, but within, people were slowly letting go of the past and facing the future with plans and optimism.

Gone now.

In perspective, it was probably gone the moment the hyenas had discovered it. There was a certain grim satisfaction that the community they had worked so hard to create would not be violated by the subhumans that would have danced upon their graves. That they were *leaving*; not hunted down for sport, nor dying in vain defense. That nothing was left behind to scavenge, or give the faintest advantage to those bastards.

There was no going back. Everything they possessed was crammed into the vehicles, aimed towards a point on the horizon that masked their promised land.

As the last of them turned away, the smoke dwindled into a thin line, marking the

eternal flame of the petroleum that issued from the pipe in the center of the former village.

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From up high, the procession was curious, dynamic. Almost always leading was the tanker rig, clearly the focus of attention. On occasion, another vehicle or two, mostly motorcycles, would dart ahead like overeager members of an entourage racing to open a door, and like such, soon dropping back to be overtaken by the truck again as their ploys failed. Some cars would spread out on the flanks a bit, the honor guard and the hyenas they attempted to keep at bay, but the wider any vehicle went, forging across the terrain instead of along the road surface, the more they tended to drop behind, creating a narrow wake of cars trailing the rig, themselves pursued by their own dust. Strung out behind the tanker on the narrow road came a weaving, dancing fleet of followers, all dwarfed by the rig itself, nipping at its heels to try and bring down this massive quarry. It was a race, not to a distant locale, but between the eventual success of the pursuers or the reduction of their numbers to the point where they could never achieve their goal. The desert dwellers, the lizards and rabbits, knew the howl of the storms from time to time, always heralded by the growing winds and dark clouds, but the passage of this strange parade came suddenly, with sounds most of them had never experienced, inducing a panic and, soon afterward, the confusion over what had caused it.

The gyro pilot looked down from over five hundred meters in the air, the little engine behind him straining to overtake the mass of vehicles far enough to be of use; there were few turns on this road that he could cut across to his advantage. His altitude would mean an extra turn of speed shortly as he tipped the gyrocopter into a shallow dive, allowing him just a bit more of a lead, before he had to turn. He chafed at the thought of being so far out of the melee even while a part of his mind was relieved, but this was the most effective way to make his contribution. Dive and turn too soon, however, and it would be effort wasted.

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Zetta and the mechanic, as rear defenders, kept up a judicious barrage of Molotovs, arrows, and heavy debris to try and whittle down the hyenas. They knew that simply keeping the pursuers back was only a temporary delay, and a reduction of their limited ammo as well, so they made their attacks judiciously, often allowing a dangerously close approach so that the damage they dealt in defense would be most effective, taking the target out of the fight for good if possible. At the forward defense station, the cold-eyed woman kept an eye on the flanks, using her own arrows and cocktails to harass any vehicles that approached the truck; long experience over the years had given her a deadly aim, hampered to a small extent by the wind of their passage yet still more effective than most of the hyenas' efforts. While these marauders had been the most recent and most coordinated of the attackers upon the compound, they were far from the first, and she'd never kept track of how many foes she'd dropped; bragging rights were a guy thing.

Behind the truck, following at a careful distance, yet another buggy was biding its time, the driver having figured out Zetta's pattern of behavior. As the second-in-command fired his crossbow at a motorcyclist, following it with a Molotov, he took the opportunity to grab the

crossbow's cord and yank it back for reloading, and the buggy driver made his move. The car shot forward straight for the rear of the truck, the passenger leaning out and whirling a grappling hook on a light cable with experience. Closing to effective distance, the passenger let it fly, and the grappling hook passed over Zetta's defensive armor and dropped into the space where he sat surrounded by arrows, heavy metal 'bombs,' and bottles of gasoline. As soon as it appeared to be in place, the driver of the buggy braked, pulling the grappling hook firmly against the back wall of the station. Zetta had heard it crash down next to him and was reaching for it even as it pulled tight, pinning his thigh against the bulkhead with excruciating pain. Momentarily blinded by the shock, he rallied, tried groping for a knife to cut away the cable and release the tension.

The buggy driver, with the cable tied off to the roll bar of the diminutive car, had been hoping to put significant drag on the rig with his own vehicle, having no experience with the loads some of the road trains used to haul. He also had no experience with what happens when you apply a tow rope off of a vehicle's centerline. The homemade car's brakes proved to be completely ineffective, but worse, with the eruption of mad chirps and squeals from its tires, the buggy pulled sideways out of line with its travel, tipped, and overturned; the passenger's delight at his successful toss vanishing as the asphalt rushed up to greet him. The buggy soon set up a mad tumble behind the truck, shedding parts, producing far more drag than its brakes ever could have.

The Driver felt the dead weight and the vibrations take hold of the rig, straining in the mirrors to see what was going on. It didn't seem to be slowing the truck by any significant amount, but he still didn't know what it meant, other than some effort of the hyenas that was taking effect. The short cable on the grappling hook and the defensive additions to the tanker's sides meant the buggy remained mostly out of sight, with the occasional glimpse of it as it skipped sideways slightly under some erratic tumble; these brief views were insufficient to tell the Driver just what was happening. Hoping it would help, the Driver downshifted and hammered the accelerator, jerking the wheel a little more enthusiastically to set the tanker weaving.

The hazard wasn't to last long. Even as Zetta, dizzy, sweating, was desperately applying a knife to the cable in what was sure to be a time-consuming pursuit, the forces on his defender's station passed critical and it separated from the truck completely, flipping over and crashing heavily into the road to tumble a short ways. The bottles of gasoline burst, ignited by the torch carried for that purpose, and created the sudden eruption of a fireball from the wreckage.

The mechanic grimly watched it go from above, unable to do anything except curse fluently. He knew that Zetta's loss was also the loss of two of the hyenas, but that still wasn't a ratio they could afford. Silently, he vowed to raise those numbers.

The Driver felt the effect of the defensive station and tumbling buggy breaking free, took it to mean his tactics were successful without knowing the full details. The wreckage hove into view in his mirrors, but far enough back and enveloped in flames so that he couldn't make out what it was. Turning his eyes forward again, part of the constant scan in as many directions as possible, he caught a flash of sunlight off of something in the distance, against

the background hills but appearing to be closer than that, yet also too high to be on the ground ahead. He kept watching, this item temporarily gaining a high position on the list of potential hazards, and after a moment realized it was the gyrocopter, dead ahead and coming this way fast. His trust in the pilot was high enough that he ignored the aircraft now in favor of the other hazards on the list, confident that the gangly man was running his own attack on the marauders.

Ahead, the pilot quickly assessed the situation, decided that the honor guard buggy needed the most help. Drifting sideways in his approach head-on towards the advancing cars, he set his altitude just slightly above their rooflines, praying that he didn't encounter an errant downdraft, and bore straight in on two vehicles to one side of the buggy, a motorcycle and what might at one time have been a Chrysler, reaching behind him into the basket strapped to the passenger seat as he did so.

The motorcyclist had been splitting his attention between the truck and the landscape ahead of him, running overland off of the road to try and bypass the honor guard and vault onto the cab of the truck, when he caught sight of the whirling blades of the gyrocopter bearing down on him far too fast. In a mad panic he threw himself sideways, needlessly since the pilot couldn't afford a high-speed collision, even with a rider, and was too high to actually make contact. This avoidance maneuver of the motorcyclist was sufficient to take him out of the competition for good.

The driver in the Chrysler had better awareness, recognizing the light aircraft for what it was and realizing it was a little too high to form a threat. He ignored it as it bore down directly overhead, making it a matter of pride that he didn't even duck within the car as it flashed past. He never saw the brake rotor that the pilot dropped, its weight and momentum carrying it through the windshield and into his hands, shattering the steering wheel and well as most of the bones in his wrists and forearms. His car, doubly uncontrollable, drifted off randomly across the landscape before the stricken driver gained the presence of mind to stand on the brakes, whereupon it spun out in a cloud of dust and was soon left behind.

The hyenas at the forefront had been among the first to give chase, also the furthest from the Humungous and so unable to hear his commands bellowed through the loudspeaker. As they began to drop away, through attrition or from the difficulty of maintaining pursuit, they were replaced by others who had both witnessed the failed attacks and heard their leader's instructions, and were closing in with the honor guard as their primary targets rather than the truck itself.

One such vehicle, a flatbed Ford farm vehicle sporting a four-barreled dart gun on a gimbal mount in the back, raced up alongside the honor guard buggy. The light homebuilt car would easily have been able to outrun the heavier Ford, but it was pacing the rig to maintain the defense on that side, and so was quickly overtaken. Its offensive modifications also required the driver to be alongside any opponent – not ideal, but what the compounders had to work with at the time, all other vehicles needed for the second contingent. The driver within the buggy, an engineer who knew the operation and functions of petroleum refining, had realized how little her skills would be needed once the compound was gone and had volunteered for this position, her decision assisted by the other candidate being a family man.

She saw the Ford bearing down on her through the hastily-added mirrors, drifting a little in the lane to conveniently permit its approach and line up a better target. She was intent on the vulnerable wheels of the pickup, sparing little attention for what the passenger in the back was doing.

Coming up between the rig and the buggy, the Ford watched those wide spikes on the bumper carefully, ready to try and dodge the swerve aimed for the tires to cripple his vehicle. He needed to give the gunner in the back a clear shot, and the armor plate added to the back of the buggy's cabin had prevented the easiest attack. The driver believed he was lining up his gunner for a shot at the buggy's own tires, but the gunner had other ideas as they drew abreast and he could see how little protection there was on the side of the cab – essentially, a crash-cage of bars and nylon netting, with just a few plates added. He took careful aim and fired.

With just one barrel, the chance of him hitting anything vital was slim, but his odds were quadrupled by the multiple barrels. One dart flashed through the netting and ricocheted off of the dashboard ahead of the engineer, but another slammed home in her neck. She felt it hit, knew it wasn't good, hoped it had missed anything vital, but within a few seconds the rapid approach of tunnel vision spelled otherwise. Still fighting the inevitable, she swerved for the Ford anyway but it had already dropped back, and the buggy kept going until it collided with the rig, just ahead of the rear wheels of the truck.

Still clinging to the back of the truck cab, the feral kid saw the buggy come in and crash against the frame only a meter from where he stood. Wide-eyed in alarm, he could see the engineer slumped back in her seat, the blood pouring down her neck, even as the buggy wobbled away, catching and tearing off one of the protective plates over the truck's rear wheels with a fierce shrieking of metal.

The collision and the noise had not been missed by the Driver, who watched the Ford start to advance again to take a shot at the exposed truck tires. Limited in his options, he also bided his time until he had an effective action to take, glancing at his other mirrors to ensure that nothing else was happened while he was distracted.

The fur-clad boy riding unnoticed behind the cab, despite his nature, still knew what family was, and did not brook any attack upon his own. Growling softly in a manner that anyone familiar with dogs knows is the most ominous, he carefully shifted his position on the back frame of the truck, grabbing the air hoses between truck and tanker with one hand to steady himself.

As the Ford came up for a clear shot at the truck's rear tires, a movement caught the attention of the gunner, who found himself staring at the sight of the boy that appeared in the opening behind the cab. He gaped, not just from the ludicrous idea of a small child riding *outside* of the truck, but because he recognized the kid; he'd had a good vantage point to witness the lethal power of the boomerang a few days ago, and this memory came simultaneous with the flash of bright metal as the boy completed his throw. The gunner's desperate shout was cut short, his attempt to fling himself out of the way far too slow, and the boomerang caught him squarely in the face, tumbling him from the back of the truck. The kid

vented a triumphant howl.

The Driver didn't see the exact details, noticing only the disappearance of the gunner and a flash of movement through the rear window, peripherally, but the battle cry of the kid was clear enough. *What the hell?* he thought wildly, craning around to try and see behind him, but the boy had already crouched for more stability, his work done. The Ford driver had missed nearly all of it, only now realizing his gunner was gone, and was looking around in confusion while quite close to the truck. The Driver, still confused himself, was not one to waste an opportunity and swerved sharply, bringing the truck hard against the Ford with a crunch, sending it sailing off the road surface and across the scrub.

The Ford driver rallied desperately, fishtailing in the dust but managing to avoid spinning out, partially due to skill, partially due to the farm tires still mounted on the flatbed vehicle. The struggle caused him to lose a lot of speed, and he dropped well behind the rig even as he regained control of his pickup.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Humungous watched this from his position a short ways back from the action, raging like a football coach on the sidelines. While pleased that one of the honor guards had finally been removed from the action, the attrition rate among his men remained high, and the tanker sped onward almost undamaged. "You disappoint me, my Dogs of War!" he rasped over the loudspeaker. "These housecats are *mocking* you!"

Ahead of him, constantly shifting his weight to try and reduce the burns that he was now suffering from the heat of the engine, Wez saw the gunner topple from the flatbed unexpectedly, kept watching the limply tumbling corpse even as they caught up and passed it. His eyesight was nothing if not sharp at a distance, and he did not miss the gleaming metal shape of the boomerang lying in the dust where it had dislodged from the gunner. His howl of rage was animalistic, almost deafening. For a man that lives on fury, vengeance is a drug. Unable to do anything while chained to the Humungous, his mind scrambled in desperation. Finally he turned, lifting himself as erect as the chains would allow, and waited until he could meet the Humungous' gaze directly. "Your puppies are not equal to the task," he observed disparagingly. "I will stop the tanker for you."

The Humungous stared at him, gaze narrowed behind the hockey mask he wore, distrustfully weighing the mixed defiance and allegiance expressed so close together. While headstrong and nearly uncontrollable, Wez had served so well in the past largely because of his obsessive and tireless viciousness, and as their manpower dwindled, it seemed foolish to squander this resource. Reaching out and taking up the chain that led to the collar around the motorcyclist's neck, he drew the man across the cowl of the hybrid to hold him close to his own face, recklessly ignoring the road. So that there could be no doubt, the Humungous allowed his eyes to burn into the other man's. "The gasoline is mine," he said deliberately. "Defy me, and I will slowly peel the skin from your bones as you watch."

Wez didn't falter, didn't look away, his own eyes burning with the heat of his berserker-like rage. He had seen the rig crashing through the camp, got a glimpse into the driver's seat

past the bars; identification was far from guaranteed in the circumstances and the man *should* have been dead, but it had seemed to Wez that he'd recognized the Driver, again. If he was wrong, it mattered little, since the truck must be stopped no matter what – but if he was right, that man, that ongoing bane of his life, must die by his own hand – as must that bastard child. “I only want the driver and the boy,” he ground out.

Confused as he was by the reference to the boy, the Humungous had known Wez for a long time, could recognize deceit when it appeared; he saw none of that now, and was confident that if Wez wanted the driver of the truck for whatever reason, he would stop at nothing to achieve it. “Then we have a deal,” he said. Glancing back at the road, he corrected the drift that had occurred during their encounter; the other hyenas nearby, inconvenienced by the wandering of the hybrid vehicle, had wisely chosen to make way. The muscular leader turned, beckoned to a sedan nearby with the roof cut away. As the car pulled close, he pointed to Wez. “Cut him free!” he commanded.

The passenger within looked around for a moment in mild confusion, then rummaged in the back of the car and unearthed a pair of bolt cutters. He directed his driver forward and up close to the hybrid, leaping aboard unsteadily and making his way to the cowling where Wez waited anxiously. In moments, the motorcyclist had been freed. With an exultant whoop, the released prisoner scrambled to the side of the hybrid, screaming at the driver of the dartgun-bearing Ford to come in close. It took a few moments before the driver caught the commands in the tumult of the chasing vehicles, a few more to recognize that *he* was the one that the wild, fuming motorcyclist was addressing. He drew in close, and Wez leapt the gap between them before the driver had completed the maneuver. Pounding on the roof of the flatbed, the berserker took up the controls of the dartguns, already reloading them. “Go!” he screamed. “Go!”

## Chapter Ten

In the off-road dragster, Pappagallo ran alongside the rig, darting back and forth to prevent any vehicle from either overtaking the truck or riding close enough to permit boarding or damage. The crash bars added front, rear, and amidships were reasonably effective, though hampered slightly by the lightweight nature of the car. In a collision with something heavier or moving fast enough, the dragster could be forced into a swerve or skid, and he struggled to limit contact to situations where he could maintain control.

As hyena vehicles closed in on either side, Pappagallo realized the inevitable had finally come to pass: he was being targeted directly, to clear an unobstructed path to the rig. The one thing the dragster lacked was protection for the driver, something they'd been unable to add on the sparse framework and streamlining body panels. He settled for plying the accelerator and brake in fits, twitching the steering wheel in short jerks to present a difficult mark, even as he drifted further from the tanker in an attempt to draw off some of the marauders. He was in greater danger from thrown objects, which were more accurate than arrows or quarrels aimed between bouncing, moving cars.

The weathered leader hadn't realized that some of his protection was coming from the cold-eyed woman on the top of the tanker, with her higher position and more stable shooting platform, and as he drifted off he negated this. She frowned inwardly but accepted it as part of the dynamics, switching more of her attention to those coming in close to the rig. This meant she missed the flatbed Ford bearing Wez and the dart gun, which approached rapidly from behind and closed in on the off-road dragster.

Pappagallo was finding himself engaged with an old blue Mazda van, heavy enough to handle the collisions better than the dragster. The side windows were high and out of reach of the midship bar, and the driver was alert for attempts to cripple his wheels. The driver of the van had gained a position slightly ahead of the dragster and was gradually, subtly, drawing it down slower while he battered at the lighter car. Pappagallo had chosen to move their encounter away from the rig, but this put them all at the mercy of the landscape and whatever hazards it might throw their way; the van driver was looking for an opportunity to exploit this while working to negate the dragster's advantage of acceleration and agility.

On the opposite side of the dragster an ancient Chrysler was darting in, the passenger hurling scraps of sharpened metal at Pappagallo's exposed position. They were unlikely to fully incapacitate the weathered leader but they could distract or disadvantage him enough for their combined efforts to disable the car. Neither had any weapon capable of attacking the exposed tires of the dragster, but the Ford that closed on them did.

Despite the ease with which the dragster could be disabled, Wez was not thinking of such opportunities, and never thought in terms of teamwork; while others were often expected to assist him in his own endeavors, the concept of crippling the dragster to let others take out the driver did not enter his mind. As the Ford drew even with the defending vehicle, even as it started to overtake, he kept the four barrels of the dart gun trained on Pappagallo but held his



fire, waiting for the other man to make eye contact.

When Pappagallo finally looked over from his battle with the other two hyena vehicles, it was to see the motorcyclist's face over the top of the gun barrels, splitting into an evil grin. Even as his foot was slamming down on the brake it was too late; the barrels chuffed from the release of compressed air, spitting their load in his direction. He felt the thump but not the pain, not yet. The dragster was braking, letting the harassing cars shoot ahead, and he looked down to see two of the darts protruding through the leather vest he'd taken from the dead hyena, one in his shoulder, one in his belly. He began to reach for the one in his shoulder, since that would be the one that would restrict his movement the most, and the movement brought the pain from both of them. The realization came to him in a rush of dread: all of their medical people were far away from here, and the only way to reach them would be to make the rendezvous some 250 kilometers away. Pappagallo really didn't see that happening, especially since the first signs of shock were beginning to show and he wasn't exactly out of the hyenas' attentions yet. Nauseous, sweating, he lifted his foot from the brake and kicked the accelerator angrily, sending the dragster shooting ahead even as he fought to steer it in the direction he wanted.

Considering the compound's leader to be critically injured, Wez was already pounding on the roof of the Ford again, directing it back towards the rig as he fumbled to reload the dart gun – his real targets still remained. The pickup could accelerate faster than the rig but had lost a lot of ground pursuing the off-road dragster across the open desert, so the driver swerved back over to the road to take advantage of its smoother surface. Once on the asphalt the pickup surged ahead.

In the top rear defending station, the mechanic was watching the Ford approach, knowing it to be one of the more dangerous opponents with that dart gun in the back. He fired off a final quarrel with the crossbow at another vehicle that was encroaching from the side, then laid the weapon down and picked up a Molotov; even if he didn't penetrate the windshield with it, the flaming gasoline it distributed might incapacitate the gunner in the rear. He quickly lit the rag in the neck and shifted himself higher in the station for a clear throw, waiting for the pickup to come within effective range.

Behind the tanker, a motorcycle with sidecar closed in itself, unnoticed by the mechanic. The passenger in the sidecar took aim, waiting for the driver to steady their path, and fired off a shot at the mechanic as he sat half-exposed above his armored station.

The shot wasn't exactly on target, but close enough, the short quarrel catching the mechanic high in the right arm as it was raised to hurl the bottle. He spasmed, dropping the bottle, which broke on the top of the tanker beside him. In a flash the gasoline ignited, mostly spilling down the rounded sides of the tanker but also pooling in narrow walkway along the top filler hatches. Some of it soaked into the canvas wrapping of the mechanic's legs even as it was catching fire.

The mechanic had been through a lot in his life, and tended to view adversity with bitter stoicism. While his legs weren't going to feel the burning gasoline when it made it down through the canvas and wrappings, it still wasn't a situation to be ignored even as he ignored

the arrow lodged in his arm. He hurriedly beat at the flames, but they were fed by the wind of the tanker's passage and the gasoline that had splashed everywhere; in moments, his gloves were also burning. He blasphemed several different gods but kept at his task, unable to do anything else.

The cold-eyed woman saw his predicament and started from her station, a loaded crossbow in either hand. They'd put no railing or grips along the top of the tanker, trusting the defenders to remain in their stations, so she stayed in a low crouch and tried to compensate for the bouncing and swaying of the rig even as the Driver continued to block and evade the vehicles trying to overtake it.

The mechanic saw the movement, broke his attention from his desperate actions to wave her back with a flaming glove. "*Stay in your station!* I'm all right!" he shouted, despite the evidence. "Nothing a year in the tropics wouldn't cure..." She ignored him and kept moving back to his position.

The same motorcycle and sidecar moved up alongside the tanker, and the passenger grabbed some of the barbed wire strung along the side in a gloved hand, tugging mightily, but it was anchored well. Using it, he placed a foot on the running light fixture near the base of the tank and hauled himself aboard, starting to pull himself towards the top of the tanker.

The cold-eyed woman didn't miss the action, triggered one of her crossbows as the man's war-painted face crested the side of the tanker. Even at such a close range, firing left-handed from a bouncing truck meant her aim was slightly off, the quarrel missing the man's face and burying itself deep in his shoulder pad. The man cried out and dropped back, but he didn't lose his grip on the wire and dangled off the side of the tanker, feet kicking the air far too close to the whirring rear wheels.

She was still advancing, almost to the mechanic, when Wez pulled up close enough, delighted to see someone foolish enough to stand out in the open. The dart gun array coughed again, making the woman stagger and drop the crossbows, bent double, teeth gritted in a fierce grimace.

The mechanic watched it happen, stricken. The reason he'd demanded to come along was almost entirely because of her, partially to protect her, partially because he knew if separated he'd only be worthless with anxiety over what might be happening. Instead, she had come to harm when coming back to *his* rescue, and the irony caused the bile to rise in his throat. He never knew that she had fought *against* him coming along for much the same reasons, knowing the tanker duty was far too hazardous, and left her station to ensure that he escaped the flames; she'd watched the man defy the odds and the old injury to pull more than his share of the weight within the compound, recognizing a fellow warrior in spirit.

As the mechanic reached out helplessly, too far away yet to do anything and without the legs to launch himself forward, she tumbled from the top of the tanker to be caught, head down, in the barbed wire strung along the sides.

Maddened, the mechanic considered the flames only in the way now, and tore at his

leg wrappings in a frenzy, casting them off into the wind, sending the gloves after them. Freed from the most treacherous of the flaming material, he unhooked his harness, dodged the gasoline still pooled in the top trench, and hauled himself over to her position, locking one iron grip on the the top edge of the trench and reaching down for her, stretching.

The hyenas were not idle, and they had recognized the woman who had thwarted so many of their attempts on the compound's gate without ever sustaining an injury herself. This was an opportunity not to be ignored, and a Falcon dashed in along the tanker, the passenger leaning out trying to get a grip on the ensnared woman.

Wez had already dismissed the situation, now close to the rig and without any defensive hazards to watch for. He realized the darts would be next to useless against the fortified Driver's position and ignored the gun for the moment, taking up a grappling hook and cable. As the Ford closed in on the side, Wez whirled the hook and let it fly for the side window, hoping to pull away some of the protecting bars that had been hastily welded to the frame.

The Driver saw it coming, flinched away despite the protective screen of the bars, watched it hit and lodge into the lower framework of the side mirrors. He swerved towards the Ford, but the driver of that vehicle knew it was coming and matched the move, daring the rig to leave the road surface; with the unstable mass of the tanker behind, the rig would probably fare quite poorly off the road at this speed.

Wez vented an animal scream of frustration, jerking on the cable to either free to grappling hook from the light frame of the mirrors or to flip it behind the bars on the side window. On the fourth try he managed to get one of the four hooks through the bars, shook the cable to set the hook, and shouted at his driver to brake, letting go of the cable before it pulled taut against its anchor within the back of the truck.

The Driver couldn't do much about the hook, and swerved away from the Ford, further across the road surface in the hopes of drawing it close enough to be rammed. The Ford braked, and the cable drew taut, momentarily pulling the Ford along reluctantly – the hook had dropped down the vertical gap between the bars and was looped over the bottom of the windowframe itself, digging into the door. With a shriek of tortured metal, the entire driver's side door of the truck ripped free from the cab, springing back almost to collide with the Ford as the pickup dropped away under its own brakes. Wez screamed in triumph even as the Ford narrowly missed the Falcon, up against the tanker behind them, the passenger still struggling to pull the cold-eyed woman free from the wire.

The Driver cursed violently. Not only was his position fully exposed now, he also had no mirrors on that side to see what was happening. The truck had been hastily modified with a kind of cruise control, a simple device to hold the throttle down at full when depressed, and he activated that now even as he drew the shotgun from its holster at his side. Still gripping the wheel in one hand, he leaned out the side of the truck and turned to the back, assessing the situation and ready to unload a shell or two into anybody close enough to reach.

Everything seemed to happen at once. He saw the Ford drop away a little too far to do

anything about, behind the back edge of the tanker. Closer was the Falcon, the hyena hanging out the side window pulling violently on the cold-eyed woman as she dangled off the side of the tank. Above, the mechanic had finally succeeded in reaching her, stretched out full down along the slope of the tank, and locked a firm grip onto her belt.

Stretched as he was, with only one hand holding both her and himself, the mechanic wasn't equal to the task. The hyena yanked the woman free and dropped her between the vehicles right alongside the rear wheels. The mechanic's preferential grip remained true, and he never released her belt even as his other hand failed against the efforts of the hyena, and they fell as one onto the asphalt whipping past at well over 120 kilometers per hour. He only felt his failure.

The Driver had assessed it as it happened, fractionally too late to save them, but didn't hesitate a moment more. The man piloting the Falcon saw the shotgun level in his direction but never saw the flash.

Both cartridges emptied their load of buckshot simultaneously straight through the windshield of the car, punching a huge hole in the safety glass and staining it faintly red from the inside. The passenger hanging out the side window yanked himself back inside in desperation to be greeted by an unpleasant sight in the driver's seat. The driver's foot was still pressed down on the accelerator in death, and the passenger seized the wheel from the side, fighting against the torso of the corpse as the car swerved drunkenly. Until the accelerator was released, the car would be traveling at high speed and the passenger realized it had better be going someplace stable and safe.

Even as the Driver folded himself back into the truck cab and refocused his attention, the Falcon bashed against the side of the tanker near the rear wheels of the truck once, but the passenger corrected and managed to get it on a reasonably straight course, where it started to pass the rig. The Driver heard it approaching through the missing door at his side, glancing at it in surprise – he'd considered the car well out of the race. He could make out the awkward position of the passenger as he leaned across the center console separating the seats, and figured a little help was needed. As the car drew abreast of the huge 'hyena bar' fixed to the front of the truck, the Driver swerved and tapped the car in the rear quarter panel.

The Falcon's tires screeched as it entered a mild skid, driven out of a straight path by the impact. An experienced driver would have no issues correcting for such a skid, but it's a different matter when one is leaning across from the passenger seat and cannot use both hands on the wheel in a typical fashion. The car was overcorrected, began fishtailing madly while still trying to accelerate – the other rule of dealing with a skid is to get one's foot off the gas. In the rig, the Driver downshifted and pressed his own accelerator home as the car's erratic path crossed his own.

Catching the Falcon at a diagonal, the truck wracked the rear axle as it twisted the car sideways, soon plowing it along completely perpendicular to the road, tires squealing and smoking in protest. The passenger was still frantically, pointlessly, trying to maneuver the car in any way possible; it was that, sit back and wait for something else to happen, or bail out.

Off to the side, the blue van that had been harassing Pappagallo's dragster was closing back in on the rig, unaware that the same dragster was approaching fast from the rear. He *became* aware with the impact from directly behind, more startling than damage-inducing - he couldn't even see the dragster in his mirrors. Pappagallo, having slowed slightly before contact, now pressed his accelerator to the floor again, vision already starting to go darker.

The van was propelled forward at a significant increase in speed, aimed across the verge towards the front of the rig. The driver within, panicking as he saw the truck looming ahead, couldn't coax the van to outrun the twin-engined car pushing him from the rear, tried to turn away from the push instead. Just like accelerating into a turn, this was a bad move in something as top-heavy as a van.

In the truck the Driver saw the van approaching, propelled by Pappagallo's car, and tapped the brakes. The van was starting its own skid across the road, and it missed the front end of the truck to slam into the rear of the Falcon, twisting them both sideways into spins. Pappagallo had let off the accelerator and turned away right before impact, the dragster now paralleling the road. A deep gully loomed ahead, the road spanning it with a small bridge. The Driver noticed the narrow path between the concrete bridge abutments and accelerated again, straight into the spinning vehicles in his path.

The wide truck, two out-of-control vehicles, and a narrow passage between concrete barriers all came together at once; only the truck emerged intact as the van was flattened and the Falcon nearly shredded. The noise was deafening, with pieces of vehicle departing to litter the landscape for a rather broad swath. The hyena still dangling from the side of the tanker, hampered by the quarrel in his shoulder, never saw the wreck coming and only heard the first clash of sound milliseconds before he was swept from the side of the rig by the crumpled van. He crashed down among the clattering car parts, not dead but certainly pondering the advantages of it.

The wreckage blocked the entire road save for a thin path directly behind the tanker, which only a few of the pursuing hyenas were in position to take advantage of. Many of them broke off the chase temporarily to negotiate the deep gully, a couple broke off the chase by colliding with their companions' dismembered vehicles, increasing the chaos at the bridge. Back when such had actually existed, emergency responders would have had a hell of a time trying to reconstruct what had happened.

Craning his head around painfully to assess the situation now to the rear as the truck forged on, the Driver saw the dragster drop unheeding into the gully and grind to a halt there, without apparent action from the compound's leader. The immediate threats were reduced, but he realized he was largely alone now, without any of the defenders who had begun the journey with him. The hyenas numbered fewer, but not few enough – the Driver had a momentary flashback of the days *before*, when at times it seemed that no matter how much human trash was removed from the road, it was replenished immediately. He'd had nightmares about it then; *now* his dreams were only tiny fragments of distant memory, and occasionally a taunting scenario where his life with a family had all been an elaborately staged joke.

Pushing this from his thoughts, the Driver turned once again to his routine frame of mind: there was no goal, just the Sisyphean task, and he would carry on until there was no *he* left to do so.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Humungous drove carefully through the gap along the bridge, noticing as he did so how many of his Dogs were struggling across the gully to either side, losing precious time. Or what *would* be precious time, if one were impatient. The tanker was a massive foe, difficult to cripple, but it was being whittled away – it could not escape unless his men all perished in the attempt, and haste would not help. There was nowhere else to be.

The Ford bearing the irascible motorcyclist Wez had threaded the same gap ahead of the Humungous, not far behind the tanker, his furious bellows distantly heard above the din of the chase. That man was more of a concern than their time - should he gain control of the tanker intact, he was very unlikely to return. While there had appeared no evidence that this was in his thoughts when the muscular leader released him, it could easily occur to him once his primary goal of eradicating the driver of the truck (and the boy?) had been met. Allegiance was not an asset Wez possessed, only a temporary alliance for convenience.

*Before*, the Humungous had been a military man, a soldier. The burns which covered so much of his body, especially disfiguring his face, had come from an ill-planned and futile engagement, one that he had internally questioned the wisdom of even as he obediently carried it out. He vividly remembered the air that burned as he breathed it, forcing him to halt the action of his lungs and bury his face, waiting for the end. When he'd regained consciousness, it was to nauseating pain as the evac ambulance carried him away from the shambles of their mission.

Later, shunted from hospital to hospital, he heard the news every day as the political system faltered, as the world leaders postured and asserted, as nothing that they promised ever came to pass. In that time, his own corrective surgery was postponed – he could breathe and walk, he was told, so others had a higher priority. After hearing this for the third time, he simply left the hospitals never to return, only weeks before they collapsed in a tangle of administrative bickering and the crumbling of civilization.

The Humungous was forever through with taking orders. He had watched partisan politics ruin the old world, and knew there was no room for it in *this* one. He brooked no deviation from this. The iron fist accomplished more than the compromise of negotiation.

Clear of the wreckage, the Humungous forced his hybrid vehicle to top speed. Whether the errant puppy knew it or not, loyalty or death were Wez's only two options.

\* \* \* \* \*

Most of the pursuers near the rig now were motorcycles, the ones able to negotiate the bottleneck at the bridge and catch up to the speeding tanker. Many were armed only with knives or battering weapons intended for close range; there are few things able to be wielded

by someone whose primary concern is keeping their vehicle balanced. Even cars were having difficulty in clashes with the mass of the truck, so bikes weren't going to accomplish much. This meant their only option was targeting the Driver.

One cycle sped up along the passenger side of the rig, two people perched on the narrow saddle. The operator slipped in close, watching the truck warily for any swerves, and the passenger reached out and snagged a handhold on the barbed wire of the tanker, lifting himself free from the bike without pushing off, which would have been disastrous. The man slipped his legs in under the forward lip of the tanker and gained a foothold on the fender above the rear wheels of the truck, right by the fifth wheel trailer hitch. As he started sidling forward toward the cab, he shouted at the other man on the bike: "Shoot the tires!"

The operator had a wrist-mounted crossbow similar to the one Wez had possessed, before it had been shattered by the feral kid's boomerang. The short bow produced little power, the short quarrel track little accuracy, and it required another hand to reload, something that couldn't be spared on a moving bike. But it was just right for a job such as this. The rider slipped up close to a wheel to guarantee accuracy and fired at the sidewall.

With a significant internal volume under high pressure, truck tires are not things to breach when one is close. The tire exploded and took the front wheel of the motorcycle out sideways, pitching the operator in the other direction, directly under the tanker itself. The man hit the road and had time enough for a painful half-roll before the six tires on the back of the tanker flattened him with finality.

In the cab, the Driver had been reloading the shotgun cradled in the crook of his left arm as it held the steering wheel. Hearing the report of the tire failing, he glanced in the mirror and could see the former rider making his way forward toward the cab. The truck had three more tires on that side and could operate effectively, but the stowaway was another matter. He quickly tossed aside the spent shells and slammed two more home, taking the sawed-off gun in his right hand and snapping the breech closed with a practiced flick of his wrist. He had no shot as yet, but knew he would shortly.

The hyenas were swarming now, the lighter vehicles buzzing in a higher pitch from the smaller engines pushed to greater revs. Behind the rig, a buggy raced up and the passenger climbed up onto the roll cage, then forward onto the sparse possessions strapped to the front frame that lent some steering weight to the tiny homebuilt. The car inched forward to the rear of the tanker, and the passenger leapt across when close enough, snagging the access ladder that extended down from the top of the tank. In seconds he had swarmed up it and was trying to ease his way around the sharp spikes surrounding the mechanic's empty defending station.

Another cycle was riding a little wide, cutting across the landscape again, approaching the Driver's side of the truck to aim a wicked set of barbed chains through the missing door. He thought his engine noise had taken on a peculiar tone, frowning down at nothing in particular – the gauges of the bike had vanished long ago. He shrugged it off, since the bike was performing fine, but slowed a little to handle a bit of rough terrain. The front tire of the pursuing gyrocopter missed his head by a hands-width, the gyro pilot trying for an accurate

shot at the bouncing, dodging bike as he closed from behind. The rider ducked away and twisted to see what was attacking him, pitching off the seat to face-plant violently into the dust. The bike continued upright, wobbling, until its front wheel turned sideways, making it cartwheel and bounce spectacularly.

The pilot nodded in grim satisfaction. Racing forward to overtake the procession for another head-on pass, he'd seen the change of odds, the missing defenders, and had ditched the high-altitude run for one that would do a little more good. Exposed now, the only targets he could affect were bikes that were steering a wide berth, so he flashed a quick salute to the Driver and extended his lead to bank around up ahead.

This had been a wiser move than the pilot believed. The Ford with Wez at the dartgun had been closing in on the truck from behind, and the vengeful motorcyclist had seen the gyro nonchalantly slap a rider from his bike. Even as he was directing the flatbed toward the aircraft in pursuit, the copter was outdistancing them, so he turned his attentions back to the rig.

The Driver had used the reprieve afforded by the bridge collision to increase the truck's speed and its lead as much as he was able, which might have helped though it meant just the faster vehicles were now harassing him. He went back to weaving, favoring one side of the road to help shield his exposure through the open door – anyone trying to come up that side would have to do it off road, at least. This also put his existing mirrors to better advantage, since marauders trying to use the road surface for a faster and smoother approach would be most visible. Glancing back over his shoulder as he now needed to do with the missing door, he spotted the Ford closing in, realizing for the first time who was manning the dartgun in back. Without the protection, this promised to get a little hairy. The Driver shifted over in his seat more, away from the opening – a trivial difference but a difference nonetheless.

Wez readied the guns, training them straight at the side of the truck as the driver of the flatbed struggled to overtake it across the uneven terrain. This was personal; he wanted the best shot possible, wanted the Driver, like Pappagallo, to be *looking* at him as he released the darts. Closing in, he saw the feral boy in a half-crouch at the back of the cab, still clinging with both hands to the framework there. Could he line up a shot to get them both without reloading? It was almost too good to be true.

The Driver spun out of the side of the truck without looking around, once again hanging on with one hand on the wheel as the other raised the shotgun. Even as Wez decided to forget the boy for now and aimed directly at the driver, the shotgun discharged as soon as the Driver looked at the Ford. The range was slightly shorter than his shot at the Falcon, but the target more unstable, the shot hastier in memory of last time; the round, just one to save the ammo, missed its intended target of the motorcyclist's torso, falling far too low. Providence, however, guided it into the compressed air tank exposed on the flatbed of the truck, which exploded loudly if not effectively. Wez's triggering of the dartgun came a fraction of a second too late and the array remained silent, useless.

Wez screamed in frustration, nearly hoarse by this time, as the Driver disappeared back inside the truck. With repeated attempts, he got the flatbed operator to understand that



he should drive up against the truck, *under* it if necessary. His companion had been startled by the appearance of the shotgun and the explosive result, unsure what they were actually dealing with here, and refused the order in particularly colorful language, already dropping back out of range. Practically frothing with rage, Wez was still forced to use some diplomacy, unable to do anything without the transportation, and finally managed to convince the other man to drive up behind the tanker. Finding this safe enough, the man drove the Ford onto the road surface and closed the gap to the rig again, this time from directly behind, trying his best to remain precisely aligned and invisible from the cab.

Another motorcycle, a trike, was edging close to the rear of the tanker, nearly getting blocked off by the swerves of the Driver; the tanker was weaving pretty fiercely across the road, if randomly. The passenger on the trike, bearing a torture claw implement on either hand, settled for the rear ladder as had the other before him, jumping across and starting up. The trike was actually blocking the Ford from approaching close enough, tipping Wez close to a stroke. "Leave the driver!" he shouted raspily. The clawed hyena turned, unable to cup an ear to indicate that he hadn't heard but somehow conveying the same message.

*"Leave the driver!"* Wez demanded again. "The scum is mine!"

The clawed man frowned momentarily, eloquent in his expression: *Yeah, right*. He resumed climbing without looking back. Had Wez been driving, the trike would have been battered aside in his impatience and disregard, but the Ford driver was more of a team player and allowed the trike to get out of the way as the berserker fumed. It only took another ten seconds, but that was far too long for Wez, and when they finally drew close enough he vaulted across to the ladder and hauled himself up it quickly, a nasty homemade flail tucked into his belt. If either of the men before him were too slow, he'd use it to clear them out of the way first; otherwise it was for the Driver.

The first hyena to have gained access to the tanker minutes before had made his way gingerly around the defending stations and had jumped onto the roof of the cab, alerting the Driver that someone was up there though his only view was of the worn interior – one of the wide-angle mirrors ripped off earlier had provided a vantage of the roof and front defending station. Knowing he had only one shell in the shotgun, the Driver had nevertheless been busy keeping the pursuing vehicles from pulling alongside the rig. With the man on the roof he remained alert, gun raised, watching the top edge of the windshield and the door opening beside him for the first sign of the attack that was sure to come.

The hyena was better prepared, however. He carried a short, arm-mounted metal tube, another compressed-air gun fed from a small tank strapped to the small of his back. Kneeling and gripping one of the air horns affixed to the truck roof, he made a careful estimate of the Driver's position, aimed the tube downwards, and fired.

The lag bolt that served as the projectile punched easily through the metal of the cab roof, yet deflected from its course, grazing the Driver's inner thigh as it tore a hole into the seat between his legs. Not sparing even a second to assess his injury even in his surprise, the Driver aimed at the new hole in the roof and triggered the shotgun, the noise deafening within the cab. He was rewarded with the appearance of the hyena tumbling past the open

door to crash into the road alongside the truck, immediately swept away to the rear as he bounced and rolled. Whatever injuries the shotgun blast had bestowed were compounded by hitting the road at this speed.

The hyena with the claws had been working around the front defending station, already bearing two cuts from their sharpened edges, when he heard the shotgun and watched his companion pitch off the roof. Prudently abandoning his plans to jump onto the roof himself, he settled for dropping onto the framework behind the cab where the rear wall afforded some protection and the ability to remain out of sight. He landed nearly on top of the kid, who issued a feral squall in surprise, which in turn caused the hyena to stumble backwards and hit his head against the tanker. He might have fallen from his perch himself had he not come up against the air hoses between truck and trailer. The boy scrambled around the edge of the cab and up to the open door alongside the Driver.

It was the empty shotgun that saved him, now breeched in the Driver's free hand as he attempted to reload it. The sudden appearance wasn't itself unexpected, but the Driver's only option was to chop out against the perceived attacker with the edge of his hand, the one still holding the gun, and he wasn't going to risk tossing the shotgun out the window in doing so. The fractional delay allowed him to recognize the feral kid, confirming that the two vocalizations he'd heard earlier were as familiar as they'd sounded. The boy looked up at him with mute appeal, making the Driver curse inwardly; *what the royal hell was he doing on the truck?* And *how* did he himself get saddled with being responsible for a child, again after all these years? Leaving the shotgun in his lap, the Driver snagged the furs with one hand and quickly whipped the boy up over the steering wheel, depositing him with a crash into the empty passenger side of the cab as the man's broken ribs gave excruciating protest.

The hyenas continued to close in on either side, with more cars finally catching up as they overcame the delay from the bridge. The Humungous followed behind, made slightly wary by the thought of another massive collision throwing up an unavoidable impasse, content to let his Dogs do the work. They were out of familiar territory now, roads well north of where the hyenas had roamed, scavenged, and terrorized, but it mattered little. When finally in possession of the tanker, he would establish control wherever he pleased, with a pack of loyal minions, dependent on the fuel, that would do his bidding.

He spared no thought for the time when the gas would run out, when his ability to buy allegiance no longer existed. Like many of the politicians which he cursed and despised, he had no concept of *future* beyond his own impending gratification, convinced that he was bestowing value upon others as he pursued his personal carrot on a stick, no matter where it led.

In the truck, the Driver snagged the small package containing the few remaining 12-gauge cartridges out of the breast pocket of his leather jacket, intent on fishing out two to drop into his lap – reloading the gun with one hand took a lot longer than with two. As he fumbled the wrapping open, the clawed hyena behind the cab peeked up cautiously, recognizing what the activity meant. Standing nearly upright, the marauder punched through the glass of the rear window, showering the cabin interior with glass fragments as he groped for the shells. The Driver flinched away from the attack, but the result was that the shells were flung towards

the barred windshield opening directly ahead, two of them catching at the edge of the hood as the others disappeared off the side.

The hyena grappled, trying to haul himself in the window as the Driver fought him off angrily, throwing blows hampered by the awkward position and his protesting ribs. The feral kid swarmed up and sank his teeth into the hyena's closest arm, feeling bone grind under his incisors and eliciting a scream from the marauder. In the distraction the Driver landed a solid uppercut to the man's jaw, clacking his mouth closed and chipping his teeth. A fragment of the man's own tongue dribbled off his lips.

Wez, coming recklessly around the top defender's station, vaulted onto the truck roof with a scream, wielding the flail. It consisted of a half-meter handle with a short chain attached, at the end of which swung a softball-sized cluster of spikes welded together – not only a nasty thing to use against a person, but fairly effective against even light metal objects. Hooking a foot under the air horn, the incensed motorcyclist brought the handle around in a vicious overhead arc, thrashing the ball through the opening of the missing door with the target of the Driver's head.

Grappling with the hyena in the rear window, the Driver was out of a normal seated position and the spikes rent the air in front of his face with a brief whistle, slamming into the ceiling quite close to Wez's own feet. The hyena in the back chose this opportunity to employ his torture claws, drawing his hand into a fist and tucking the wrist inwards, pulling the claws out from their normal position across the back of his hand. He yanked his arm backwards, sinking the claws into the Driver's shoulder deeply, cutting down through the leather jacket and shoulder pad with the meticulously-sharpened hooks. The Driver, not one to vocalize unless absolutely necessary, couldn't prevent the cry of anguish which escaped even as he arched backwards to get as much pressure off his shoulder as possible.

The scream of pain came a little too late, the feel of the impact from the end of the chain not entirely consistent with previous experience, and Wez was unconvinced that he'd scored a hit. Still growling with every exertion, he pulled back on the flail and whirled it around for another strike. The truck, freed from the attentions of the Driver, drifted off the road's shoulder at a dangerous speed.

The second arc of the spiked ball, aimed blindly at where someone might be leaning away from the last attempt, brought it slamming against the bars across the open windshield, loosening several as it lodged tightly among them. The empty shotgun had dropped on the floor at the kid's feet, with the kid hanging onto the hyena's other arm with all of his weight and doing his damndest to peel all of the skin from it. The Driver had started lifting his left leg to bring his boot knife into reach, but realized he had a more pressing action to take right at the moment. Straightening the wheel and waiting as long as he dared for the following trailer to come into line, the Driver slammed his foot down onto the brake savagely.

The air horn ripped free of the roof as the entire truck tried to let Wez go on without it. The motorcyclist left his precarious position, flying forward to crash violently against the debris bar atop the dozer blade on the front of the truck. The Driver had a momentary vision of the man slamming against the ironwork, one arm flailing madly as the body disappeared over the

front edge, even then recognizing him as the damnable motorcyclist he'd encountered too many times before. With the vibration of the truck on the gravel and debris alongside the road, he couldn't tell if the wheels passed over the body or not, but it hardly mattered at that point.

His one arm held back from contact with the steering wheel by the claw in his shoulder, the Driver started to return the truck to the asphalt gently, trying not to induce a skid in the unstable terrain. Straightened enough for the moment, he lifted his left leg and released the wheel as he withdrew the boot knife, switching to a tight hammer grip. The hyena behind him saw the weapon raised, shrank back in panic and tried to drop below the window level, too late to dislodge the claws in the smaller man's shoulder. It did him no good. The Driver glanced back only long enough to confirm his aim and drove the knife savagely, deeply, into the hyena's face. The marauder slumped; the feral kid howled in delight.

One hand back on the wheel, the Driver dropped his foot back down to the accelerator to regain the speed the truck had lost in the altercation. There remained a large number of hyenas left still buzzing around the rig, and a long distance to the rendezvous.

## Chapter Eleven

The Humungous, still riding back in his position of observation, had seen Wez and two of his other Dogs move forward along the tanker, and watched the truck drift negligently off the road with satisfaction. And then, saw it straighten again, coming back onto the road with care, picking up speed. He wasn't able to make out anything happening at the front of the truck, though he *had* seen one of his men tumbling limply like a rag along the verge before the truck drifted. He continued to watch, and even as more of his Dogs of War closed in, the truck went back to swerving, making deliberate attempts to shake itself of pursuers.

His eyes narrowed, considering two distinct possibilities. Either the driver of the truck had rid himself of the boarders, including the nearly-insane Wez – a little hard to fathom, but Wez might have forgotten about the shotgun being carried – or the motorcyclist had succeeded in wresting control of the truck during that period off-road, and was even now in command, making off with what he considered *his* salvage. For nearly all of the Humungous' men, the continuing actions to avoid the others would have been evidence to the contrary – but not for Wez.

The Humungous glanced down at the homemade holster affixed alongside the steering column of his hybrid command vehicle. He had one bullet left; it might be fitting that it be used to end this arrogant insubordination, once and for all. Leaving his safe position, the Humungous accelerated towards the rig.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dead weight of the hyena hanging on the claw, still embedded in his shoulder, was a significant disadvantage to the Driver, keeping his arm pinned back away from the wheel. It also prevented him from twisting around to see out through the open side of the truck, where the mirrors had departed with the door, and determining what was happening along that side. Once again, he favored that edge of the road to limit the hyenas' ability to overtake the truck on that side; they couldn't use the advantage of the road surface, at least.

This didn't matter a lot to most of the vehicles pursuing, which had been modified long ago to handle areas without roads at all. Maintaining a high rate of speed was the rig's primary defense, and would have been sufficient for most areas of the world, but here on the desert plain, the road often wasn't distinguishable from the surrounding area except by the color of the asphalt. The limited rainfall had made it largely unnecessary to even provide drainage ditches along the shoulders.

The Driver tried to watch behind him as much as he could, limited as his ability was. He could see in the mirrors of that side another motorcycle with sidecar that had raced up along the road, pacing the truck along the rear wheels as the passenger reached over. The Driver considered it an unlikely place or method to try and board the truck, until he realized the plan. The hyenas occasionally had their moments; the man was trying to reach the release handle for the fifth wheel, to cut the trailer loose from the truck. It was incredibly risky, since the tanker was unlikely to maintain integrity if it began skidding down the road without any support

in the front, and the result was likely to be a huge fire that burned for a day, but either way the Driver couldn't allow it. With a judicious yank of the wheel he sent the entire rig crashing over into the motorcycle, dislodging both passenger and operator and watching the whole mess cartwheel down the road.

Still, he was almost certain that there were more boarders coming up from the rear where he couldn't see what was happening. There wasn't much he could do about it; the occasional hard braking might have been enough to prevent the close approaches necessary, and that would have been fine for a vehicle with appreciable acceleration afterward. The diesel engine of the truck was made for towing power, not speed, and took a long time to regain whatever it had lost, far longer than anything in pursuit. Discarding velocity had to be done only under extreme necessity.

The claw was making things far too difficult. Waiting until the situation around him seemed as quiet as it was likely to get, the Driver let go of the wheel with his right hand, steering with his left leg, and reached back, pulling his boot knife free from the deceased hyena with effort. He handed it to the feral kid, who accepted it, stains and all, with a disturbing look of delight. This faded into incomprehension as the Driver began explaining what he wanted done with the weapon, hampered considerably by his inability to gesture without removing his hand from the steering wheel again. Recognition dawned, and the boy set to earnestly trying to detach the hand from the uncaring owner. Neither of them were going to pull the dead weight forward enough to release the claw, and time was of the essence. Might as well give the kid a task he could get into.

The Humungous had left the road surface, riding wide on the Driver's side of the truck, moving forward to get a clear view within. It didn't matter too much who was driving at this point, though in truth, the muscular man was more motivated to eradicate a perceived mutiny. He had the pistol out and raised high, ready to aim across as soon as he had a clear and steady shot, a questionable thing when bouncing across the terrain, but necessary with only one bullet.

The gyro pilot, returning from his turn ahead, was coming in low, sweeping back and forth across the road surface – he had no other method to communicate. As he was drawing closer to the truck, he could see the Humungous' vehicle, and the raised pistol caught his eye. Abandoning his warning maneuvers, he straightened out the light aircraft and reached into the basket on the passenger seat behind him, rummaging around desperately. He'd have only one chance, and had to make it count.

The Humungous was nearly abreast of the truck, now able to make out the Driver sitting in an awkward position. While two more of his men were making their tentative way forward along the narrow walk atop the tanker, no one was presently visible around the cab. No, he corrected himself, he could see another figure crouched behind the cab, obviously from his manner of dress a hyena, but the man didn't seem to be accomplishing much. The Humungous brought the pistol to bear, trying to draw a bead on the Driver, but realized that the terrain was preventing a steady shot. Even as he considered trying for the engine block itself, he glanced forward to determine if the wasteland immediately ahead would present some nice, smooth driving for a few seconds.

The flashing gyro blades were very close ahead, approaching fast, and he ducked instinctively, realizing they were a little too high even as he did so. He was already raising his head again, the shrill whine of the aircraft engine beginning its drop in pitch from passing, when the bottle crashed across the vehicle's cowling. He felt the coolness of the moisture in the wind of his passage, and caught the whiff, right as some of the gasoline splashed onto the exhaust pipes and heated to the flash point. Abruptly, the top of the hybrid vehicle was bathed in flame.

*Fire!* The Humungous fought the impulse to leap away in panic, a fatal move at this speed, and slammed on the brakes, sending the vehicle into a broad skid across the dry soil. Had it not been stripped of most of its body weight, the hybrid would have overturned, but it remained stable enough as it spun. Even before it stopped moving, the muscular man had vaulted from the seat and crashed to the ground, rolling over and over in terror, trying not to breathe in the burning vapors again as the memories of his accident burned almost as badly as his skin had back then.

The gyro was already banking around, the pilot both wanting to see if he'd been on target and having a pressing reason to catch back up with the rig. As it turned, he could see the Humungous' vehicle skidding to a halt in flames, an immensely gratifying sight. He was already a few hundred meters away and couldn't cut the turn too tightly or the whirring blades overhead would lose their purchase on the air and he'd skid sideways from the sky. He was glad he'd bypassed the selection of scrap metal he carried as bombs to pick out the Molotov instead. The torch he'd taken off with, as feared, had been unable to remain lit in the wind of his flight, rendering the bottles of gasoline almost useless – unless wielded against something with an open, overheated engine. The pilot hooted in delight.

In moments, the Humungous overcame his panic as virtually none of the pain he expected actually materialized. The gasoline had dispersed quickly, mostly burning as vapor, and he suffered only trivial burns. Getting to his feet, he surveyed his vehicle, which was also only fitfully burning, mostly along the floorboards where the gasoline had pooled, and some of his various possessions where it had soaked in. It had stalled in the skid, still in high gear, but didn't look any the worse for wear. The Humungous was almost as angry at himself for his panicked, unthinking reaction as he was at the gyro pilot for inducing it. Almost.

As he heard the gyrocopter turning in the middle distance, coming around for another pass, the Humungous desperately searched the soil nearby, soon finding the gleaming black firearm lying where it had been dropped as he vaulted from his vehicle. He snatched it up, banging it against one palm to try and dislodge any jamming dirt, and leveled it at the returning gyro, noting with grim delight that his aim was much steadier now.

The gyro pilot, closing in at low level on the burning hybrid, spotted the man off to the side, recognized the purposeful two-handed stance with sudden dread. In desperation he banked, trying not to draw any closer, realizing that the aircraft couldn't do a lot in the way of unpredictable dodging.

The Humungous tracked the movement, not unexpected, and the hand cannon went

off, kicking back violently against his fierce grip. The impact against the metal of the gyro was clearly audible in the tiny fraction of a second that it occurred after the discharge, and he watched the aircraft continue turning, cursing the evidence that he'd missed the pilot. The engine sound was changing though, stuttering with a tinkling overtone, and he continued to watch the spectacle.

The pilot actually *felt* the impact in the shock carried through the light airframe, even though he was physically unscathed. There wasn't a whole lot of the gyrocopter that *wasn't* vital to operation, and he noticed the faltering of the engine immediately as one of the cylinders lost all effectiveness with the gaping hole in its side. Hurriedly bringing it back to level flight, he could feel the engine was already causing a crucial loss of airspeed, the drag of the damaged cylinder limiting the effectiveness of the other three. There was no option; the aircraft was coming down whether he liked it or not.

The Humungous watched with satisfaction as the tiny gyro came earthward, pitching up at the last minute as if in denial of its wounds, and the tailfin touched the ground before the wheels. The aircraft pitched forward and cartwheeled, the top rotor kicking up a sudden cloud of dust, the engine and propeller whine disappearing in the clatter of the crash. Satisfied with the first thing that had gone right in the entire day, the Humungous turned back to his vehicle.

The fire was dying out. Gingerly, he reached in to grab a canvas cover that had protected his possessions from the rain, one that had gotten only mildly burned, and yanked it free from the car, thrashing out the remaining flames on it upon the ground, then returning to beat out the fires still burning on his vehicle with it. He took only a moment to ensure himself that no flames remained, then regained his seat, tossing the tarp over the melted vinyl of the seat cover. Up the road there was no sign of the rig or pursuers to be seen.

Kicking in the clutch and disengaging the gears, the Humungous reached down and tried the starter, was rewarded with the growl of a healthy engine springing to life. Wasting no time, he dropped the hybrid in gear and regained the road surface, setting off in pursuit of the vanished rig.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Driver had seen the zigzag approach of the gyro, watched it without comprehending as it veered off and buzzed the Humungous' vehicle (alerting him to its presence for the first time,) saw the flames erupt and the vehicle drop back. He didn't spare any attention to the aftermath, couldn't. But the reminder was enough to change his plan of action. He could still see two of the shotgun shells where they'd lodged in the gap between hood and fairing under the windshield, out of reach beyond the bars, especially with his arm pinned to the back of the cab. But, perhaps, not out of reach of everyone.

He was trying to clear the truck of immediate dangers for a moment, and was forcing another motorcycle and a Holden from the road, as he crested the rise and saw it. Abruptly, he realized what it was that the gyro pilot had been doing as he weaved up the road in his line of vision.



The road descended ahead, part of a significant valley that got abruptly deeper, dozens of meters in a sharp drop off to what had once been a riverbed. The road had crossed this by a long bridge.

*Had.* The bridge was well and truly gone, broken support pilings rising in mockery, the deep valley splitting the landscape away from any vehicle on this side. One of the motorcyclists, making their way carefully, *might* have crossed the rift given time, but nothing else was.

Shit.

The Driver braked hard, already trying to figure out his options. His destination lay somewhere well ahead, and he wasn't aware of any particular alternate route, though he'd passed a small handful of crossroads on his way here. There was nothing else for it.

As soon as he determined the truck's speed had dropped to a safe enough level, the Driver cranked the wheel over hard, cutting across the landscape in a broad U-turn, feeling the shifting load within the tank pulling the whole rig against the maneuver. A battered tow truck of the hyenas failed to brake or dodge in time and slammed into the side of the tanker, getting turned aside as the rig curled around. Those who felt the much-slower rig would be easier to board found it hard to coordinate the turns involved, failed in frustration.

The Driver started to speed up again almost immediately but kept weaving wickedly, sacrificing the acceleration for unpredictability and difficulty in boarding. The erratic path still aimed for the road surface again, but the Driver made sure to cripple a few vehicles along the way, especially those that were trying for the front tires. The redundancy on all rear axles meant he could lose a couple of tires here and there, but the front wheels were far too vulnerable, and because of the space needed to allow them to turn, only lightly protected by flared spikes ahead and behind. For most of the chase, getting to them meant getting past the entirety of the rig, as well as its defenders, but the slow turn greatly increased the vulnerability of the front tires. The Driver watched warily, unable to even brandish the empty gun as a threat because of the claw still buried in his shoulder. The kid, having difficulty maintaining the standing position necessary for one of his height in the wildly bouncing cab, was still doing his best to sever the marauder's hand, but there was only so much leverage he could bring to bear.

Completing the turn and hammering home the throttle, the Driver knew he'd picked up at least a couple more boarders in the maneuver, and kept jerking the wheel as hard as he dared in the hopes of throwing them off. His attention turned back to the 12-gauge shells again, suspecting he'd need them soon – weighing everything, they would probably be more useful than being able to use both arms unrestricted, if he had to prioritize. He interrupted the kid's furious efforts on the hyena's wrist. “*Boy!*”

The kid looked up, startled by the speech as much as anything else. The Driver gesticulated madly with the next-to-useless hand, capable of painfully reaching the gearshift but little else. The boy knew some speech, though disdained its use himself, but came to realize that this man wanted him to reach out through the windshield, between the bars, and

pull back the shotgun shells lodged out there.

The youth was more than amenable; the shotgun was the best thing he'd ever seen, and he wondered if he might even get the chance to try it for himself. Scrambling up, he sprawled across the dash and stuck his arm between the bars, stretching for the shells. Small enough to fit between the bars, however, meant too short to reach the shells. After a few moments of earnest attempts, the Driver pulled the boy down gently, realizing a different path was needed. With more gestures and explaining, the Driver got across his plan to the boy, who looked out onto the hood with far less enthusiasm this time. Still, he trusted the man, sensing a kindred spirit, seeing someone who had handled more adversity than anyone he'd ever met, unaware of how small a set this really was. Wide-eyed with anxiety, the boy crawled under the Driver's legs and eased out the open doorway, seeking a handhold anyplace he could. The Driver couldn't spare a hand for a safety grip on the boy's legs, but he leaned forward as much as he was able, prepared to release the wheel momentarily to snag the kid if he started to slip.

The wind whipped the boy's eyes harder than he'd felt before; he'd been shielded by the cab for his trip to this point. He knew about hot engines, and gingerly felt the air cleaner canister before using it as an anchor for his climb onto the hood. The Driver held the truck as steady as possible as the boy crawled out, until the youth reached over and gripped the bars across the windshield with a small but capable hand. The shells would require him to be almost completely out onto the hood, exposed like a cliff top in the midst of the rushing air and blur of the road beneath. As fearless as he was in many circumstances, this was always in conditions that he had control over – this one held too many variables.

With a dry mouth, the boy pulled his legs up off of the air cleaner, completely onto the hood, only a meter away from the Driver and yet utterly alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Humungous, alone on the road, raced onward, hoping for a glimpse of the rig and harassers. He tried to reconcile how long he'd actually been stopped to estimate how far ahead they might have gotten, and what it would take to catch up, but realized he didn't have a very good idea. No more than a couple of kilometers, he was sure, but the gentle hills of the country he was now in kept the distant road hidden from him, his best view allowing less than a half-kilometer ahead. He was fairly certain he could catch up to the chase within ten minutes, but so far, he had not had a sighting to help confirm this.

The chase had been going on for too long, prompting the Humungous to use whatever advantage he could, despite the risk involved. Reaching down, he opened the valve to the nitrous oxide tank and watched his gauges. Just a little, he told himself. He could coast on the burst for a bit, cut his pursuit time in half, get back to where he could keep an eye on their progress. The engine could surely handle a short run under the explosive additive.

As the gauges hit their mark, he pressed himself back into his seat, gripping the wheel firmly in one hand as he tripped the toggle with the other. The engine screamed in response and he quickly brought the other hand up to the wheel as the hybrid hurtled recklessly down

the road, causing the wind to shriek through the openings of his hockey mask.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Driver set up a very gentle drift to try and keep the road blocked without dislodging the wild-haired boy stretched across his hood. His side mirror told him that at least one hyena was inching up to the rear frame of the truck near the air hoses. He'd either need the shells or the ability to kick the truck around a lot, as well as free use of his other arm. "Hurry up!" he shouted through the windshield in desperation.

The boy showed no signs of having heard but continued with his task, one arm gripping the window bars while the other grasped the first shell, bringing it up and tucking it into his mouth. His hand stretched out for the second.

Over the front of the truck, directly on top of the dozer blade, rose an apparition, screaming like a banshee. The kid shrieked in alarm, drawing back even as a bloody hand groped from him. The motorcyclist, the certifiably insane Wez, had somehow kept himself from plummeting all the way down in front of the truck when he'd fallen from the roof, though the blood on his hands and the bare, oozing patch of skin on the side of his head gave testimony that it was an extremely close call. Swarming up over the blade, the still screaming man struggled to get a handhold to carry himself back towards the cab, or simply allow him to grab the kid and hurl him to his doom.

The Driver, as startled as the kid, started to lean forward reflexively to pull the boy back, was halted by the claw again. With a growl of ultimate frustration he released the wheel to reach back and grab the arm to which the claw was attached, hauling it forward as hard as he could despite the pain that it caused *everywhere*, managed to get the corpse partially within the rear window of the cab. With a little slack, he launched himself forward immediately, leaning around through the open door and grabbing the kid's leg. Even as the corpse started to fall back and pull on his shoulder, he yanked the kid away from the grasp of the psychotic man scrabbling on the hood, releasing the leg to grab the kid's furs and haul him in the door.

The truck crested a small rise, revealing the road ahead – and the impossibly-fast approaching hybrid vehicle dead in their path less than a hundred meters away. The Driver hurled the boy into the footwell next to the clutch and placed his left foot on him, slamming on the brakes and assuming a crash position, hands braced on the steering wheel and head ducked.

The braking caused Wez to start to slip, and as he spun dangling from his one good handhold he took in the panic in the Driver's eyes, turning to look behind him, ahead of the truck. The presence of the rushing command vehicle barely had time to register.

The impact was dead-on and horrendous, a cataclysm of stressed metal. The truck frame buckled under the impact, the dozer blade breaking free and the hood collapsing. The Humungous' hybrid vehicle nearly shattered, stripping the body panels free of the frame and flinging them wide; the engine and frame crumpled into a much-smaller mass, cartwheeling up over the nose of the truck and nearly stripping the roof from the cab.

Three hyenas had been aboard the rig when the collision occurred, more or less. One had seen it about to happen and had correctly assumed that jumping was the safest of any action available. *Sooner* would have been better, as he was still airborne when the impact came, and he flew directly into the shrapnel that had been both his master's car and some of the truck's front-end bodywork. The others fared worse. Even a hyena Dodge that had been closing in on the rear of the tanker was caught, the abrupt loss of speed causing the car to merge irretrievably with the rear of the tank.

The unstoppable mass of the rig emerged from the cloud and debris of the collision, stricken, driverless, front-end crumpled beyond repair, the weight of the tank still forcing the wreck forward. Bouncing and grinding, the truck slid off the road's edge and down a light embankment, one too steep and uneven for something with the varying balance of a tanker, and the whole affair toppled over, still at speed, plowing a terrible path through the dry soil and rock. As it slowed, somewhere in the wreckage the compressed air tanks blew with a deafening report, and seconds later the truck ground to a halt in death.

The hyenas that had escaped the effects of the collision, through luck or quick action, came to a halt as they witnessed the death throes of the rig, watching as the dust drifted away from the motionless hulk. Without further hesitation, they closed in on the overturned tank, already spilling its load across the sand.

## Chapter Twelve

The Driver, grudgingly, reluctantly, awoke to the tugs and growls of the feral kid. His battered body protested vehemently, with overwhelming disorientation preventing the man from gaining much control. He managed to mumble a few words in appeasement, mostly just to stop the kid from pestering him, but in the back of his mind several items tried to break through and gain his attention.

The first was simply *danger* – it took several seconds more before the specifics came through: attackers, gasoline, bleeding. As he began to move arms bathed in pain, he started to register another aspect of the disorientation, realized he was dangling almost upside-down in an awkward position. Dreading what might greet him, he cracked open one eye.

In truth, it was surprisingly peaceful. The boy looked at him in concern, himself bleeding from a scalp wound that didn't look terribly serious, and behind the wild hair sat the sky, serene, blue, without a trace of smoke or other hazards. The Driver gradually took stock, turned his head to establish more of the surroundings, found the remains of the truck cab, the roof split open. The steering column had collapsed against the driver's seat, pinning one leg up over his head, and the entire cab seemed skewed rather badly, just this side of total collapse. Another turn despite protesting neck and back muscles, and he found himself not really suspended, just held at an odd angle. With a little shifting, he freed the pinned leg and toppled over, then got his hands underneath him and pushed himself up.

In another minute he was out of the cab and standing, not exactly upright, but close enough for a hominid. Inexplicably, there was no one around – check that, no one *alive*, except for the kid. But of the hyenas there was no sign. He struggled with this, even as he realized he had no weapons; was there a trap? No, that didn't make sense either. He turned and scanned in all directions, then thought to look down at the boy who had been conscious longer than he had. The boy shook his head sharply; *no one*.

And no fire, not even the smell of gasoline vapor. The Driver staggered back to the tanker. He could hear fluid splashing and pooling, but the smell that came to him wasn't right.

The tank was ruptured in several areas, slowly dumping its contents into the soil, but the liquid wasn't as clear as expected, being murky, grayish. The color and the scent tied together at once.

Of course. No running water out of the compound, no plumbing, no rivers nearby. The tanker wasn't for storing gasoline or even petroleum, but for managing their waste production. He'd been hauling a septic tank.

It made sense. They had fields for growing crops, which had been doing quite well despite the poor condition of the soil throughout the area. Thirty or so people – it would add up. Everyone *assumed* the tanker would be full of gas, but why put it in something so difficult to move? He'd been hauling shit, and drawing away the single-minded hyenas as the others made their escape. He recalled the barrels, had even filled his car from them, watched them

being loaded into the trucks and vans of the second contingent. It never registered.

Unexpectedly, he laughed, the first time in ages; hardly joyful, but in sincere appreciation. He tried to imagine the faces of the hyenas as they approached the tanker, received this mocking note from the compounders. The kid looked at him uncomprehendingly, always having known the contents of the tanker himself, not sure what the man had expected.

The hyenas, while they were both unconscious, had indeed faced the tanker with mixed responses: confusion, rage, despair, aimlessness. Until one of them had wordlessly leapt into his vehicle to race up the road, back the way they'd come. Others looked on in bewilderment, but the memory of the compound quickly dawned on each of them. They'd all been too far away to know of its fate, and so believed it still held the refinery. Thoughts of ensuring that the Driver and boy were dead, at least, vanished in the desperation not to be locked out of the remaining prize. And so, as a pack, they had dashed back the way they'd come, yet to reach their peak of disappointment for the day – to embrace, in fact, the futility of *weeks* of effort.

The Driver turned and looked around at the horizon in all directions, not exactly looking *for* anything, just seeing the emptiness of his future. He hadn't exactly counted on meeting up with the compounders at the rendezvous; he'd taken the driving position from a lack of any other options, and would have delivered the gasoline if he could, but knew that the main goal was to draw the hyenas away from the others, even though he hadn't suspected the full nature of the decoy. There was no plan for *after*, just the plan to keep going, to follow it where it led.

It led *here*. No vehicle, no destination, no options. And on top of it all, a *kid*. If there was a higher power, it had to be finding this hilarious.

He had no idea where he was, and so no idea where to head. Someplace behind him, along that path of destruction, might still sit a drivable vehicle. There was no other option. There had been no supplies in the cab, no time to make any use of them. If they had survived the three-hundred clicks to the rendezvous, there would have been food and water available, but few considered this likely.

And then, above the wind, came the weak sound of an engine. He cast around for something the right size to use as a weapon, bending (with another protest of pain from his abused system) and seizing a bent piece of metal torn free from a defending station as the tanker overturned. Even as he drew the kid with himself into the hollow between the crumpled cab and the tanker, nearly trodding on the remains of the clawed hyena as they did so, he registered the peculiar sound of the engine, staccato, with an overriding buzz – nothing that he could place or imagine.

It took another minute to draw close, died out into silence. The Driver strained to hear any clues, making out nothing but a faint scrape of boots on gravel. Until the curse, slow and deliberate, almost awed: "Son of a bitch."

The Driver sagged, not exactly sure how relieved he was, but letting the weapon drop

from his hands. He recognized the voice, wasn't sure how the gangly man had managed to keep his mouth shut for so long.

When the Driver stepped into view, the gyro pilot gaped at him in disbelief. The smaller man had looked bad at the start of the run, coming so close after the destruction of the interceptor, but was much worse now. "Cor," the pilot breathed softly, still staring. "Are you actually alive in that corpse?"

The Driver nodded curtly, not to agree, but to direct the pilot's attention back to himself. "You don't look so hot yourself," he croaked.

It was true. The pilot was dusty, covered in bruises, stood a bit hunched himself, and had fashioned his flight scarf into a sling to hold a presumably broken arm. Behind him, the gyrocopter sat drunkenly, the rotor badly bent and dangling back, tied to the tail, obviously useless. Apparently the engine could still drive the propeller to push it down the road. The pilot shrugged deprecatingly. "I flew into a hornet," he explained. "You?"

The Driver hadn't done such a thing for years, somehow couldn't resist. "Out of gas," he said.

The pilot stared at him disbelievingly, the grin coming slowly, the hooting laughter soon afterward. The Driver didn't join in, but managed a wry smile, staring down at the ground; a pawn, but he'd have done the same himself, sacrificing a stranger before family. After a moment, the pilot trailed off and shook his head, still grinning. "You're a piece of work, partner," he asserted.

The three of them stared at the truck wreckage, the sewage still pooling around the tank; the area would be real lush in the near future. The Driver turned back towards the wreckage of the cab, began poking around, searching. In time he located what he was after, picking up his boot knife and restoring it to its place on his leg. In the search process he'd found some small portions of the psychotic motorcyclist, who certainly wasn't going to be bothering anyone else, ever again. No longer feeling completely naked, the Driver limped back slowly to where the gyro pilot stood and, oddly, was the one who broke the silence. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

The pilot looked around at the distant hills, getting his bearings from the sun. "If I reckon right," he said at length, "there's a trading post about fifty klicks west. As the gyro flies."

The Driver picked up the boy, carrying him with difficulty up the embankment and depositing him in the passenger seat of the wrecked aircraft. "Take him with you," he said. Without another word he started walking slowly up the road, back the way they'd come.

The pilot looked confused. "Where are you headed, then?" he asked.

The Driver didn't look around. "Same as always."

## Epilogue

At a place once known as Powder River, a tattered line of vehicles stood along the road next to a bridge. A few people milled about, checking loads and running messages back and forth, while most remained in the cars, looking out anxiously, sadly. Three men stood atop the taller vehicles, the highest vantage point within kilometers, scanning the horizon to the south. The sun was sinking below the distant hills.

The sky grew darker, the twilight fading. As it was only staining the western edge of the sky, an older woman leaned out of the bus at the head of the line, looking up at the man atop the roof. "Anything?" she asked.

The man didn't speak, only shaking his head grimly. The woman hadn't expected else, but they'd held up their end, the varying degrees of hope retained by the people within the vehicles fading with reluctance. At one time, she might have led a prayer for those who had drawn the hyenas off on a futile chase, but such ideas had long since given way in the face of life, now, in this wasteland. "Let's go," she said simply.