

Paroxysm
Gremlin

Indicia

Written and Unleashed by Gremlin

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ISBN 0-9711832-X-X

Published by WastedDiscourse Publications.

 **Wasted, Inc.**
wastedinc.com

For Greenback, who, having seen even more zombiefilms than I, will like it or not, and be right either way.

Also by Gremlin:

News of the Stoopid [NotS]

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

—John Donne
Sonnet X



Battle within battle must ever be recurring with varying success; and yet in the long-run the forces are so nicely balanced, that the face of nature remains uniform for long periods of time, though assuredly the merest trifle would often give the victory to one organic being over another. Nevertheless so profound is our ignorance, and so high our presumption, that we marvel when we hear of the extinction of an organic being; and as we do not see the cause, we invoke cataclysms to desolate the world...

—Charles Darwin
On the Origin of the Species



And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews. Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?

—Saul of Tarsus
Acts 26.6-8

Dramatis Personae

ALEXANDER POE: A vertebrate palaeontologist joining a dig at Mount Kirkpatrick, Antarctica
CHARLES BAXTER: The team leader at Mount Kirkpatrick
MICHAEL COOKE: Chopper pilot at Mount Kirkpatrick
JENNIFER KELLY: A waitress at McMurdo Station, Antarctica
STEPHEN MCCLAIN: An American in Christchurch
CASSIE BENNIGAN: The webmaster of *ZombiesAteMyBrains.com*
DONOVAN BAKER: A clerk at Merle Hay Mall in Des Moines, Iowa
MEL SILBERMAN: A history professor at Drake University in Des Moines
KATHY REYNOLDS: A PreLaw student at Drake
DARYL NASH: A farmer near Des Moines
SUZANNE ETIENNE: A waitress at a truckstop in Greater Des Moines
CARL BOCCACCIO: A trucker and regular at Suzanne's truckstop
COLONEL GORDY HUNTER, RETIRED: The king of the skywalks
MADDOCK: The leader of the Des Moines Underground
MEDFORD, ANNIE, BILLINGS, GRAHAM, MORTON, HARTLEY, ET AL: Roadwarriors in Des Moines
VINCENT ZACHARY: A zookeeper at Doorly in Omaha, Nebraska
RANDY CASH: A televangelist operating out of Atlanta, Georgia
BRUCE SWENSON: Cash's bodyguard
ARNOLD DIFRANCO: The television producer for Cash Ministries
RODNEY, JACOB, WENDELL, FROGSTAR, HELLRAISER, ET AL: Cash's missionaries
BOBBIE JO JORDAN: An expectant mother-to-be in Atlanta
TREVOR PAGE: A professional assassin
MARVIN, TJ, LOC, AND OLD HEAVY: The Norfolk Street Posse
BARBOUR AND SOMERSET: Military virologists stationed in Denver, Colorado
SARGE: The owner of a military surplus store in Denver
RICK MARLOWE: The webmaster of *ConspiracyFacts.com*
SHEILA AND MICHELLE: Attendants on Flight 242 from Los Angeles to Cleveland
BUDDY MILLER: A bouncer from Los Angeles
JACK, JEFF, MATT, AND PAT: The Ohio National Guard
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR CAMPBELL: An FBI spook assigned to oversee a terrorist investigation
MARK WENTWORTH: The American President
RON GATES: The Secretary of Defence
BILL CUMMINGS: A doctor in Sydney, Australia
SANDY FARMER: A nurse in Sydney
LISA BILTMORE: A fillingstation clerk in Sydney
STACEY PENN: A United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases virologist
PETE SANFORD: Another virologist at the USAMRIID
GENERAL MCAULIFFE: Senior officer at the USAMRIID
TROY HARRIS: A failed writer living on disability in Frederick, Maryland
SUSAN HARRIS: Troy's wife
DELITE: A prostitute in Frederick
DUKE: A hotel clerk in Frederick
BEATRICE WALTON: A senior citizen in a nursing home in Sarasota, Florida
JIMMY AND JOEY: Chicagoland joyriders
MIKE ROLLINS: The owner of a fillingstation at the border of Indiana and Ohio
ETHAN FAIRCHILD: An officeworker in Knightsbridge, London, England
REGGIE SIMON: A resident of Imperial Beach, California
REAR ADMIRAL PEARL: Commander of the *USS Abraham Lincoln*

Prologue

Antarctica, Gondwanaland, Pangaea
Pliensbachian Age, Jurassic Period, Mesozoic Era

Four billion, three hundred fifty-five million years after the planet had begun to cool into a solid, oblate spheroid; three billion, seven hundred million years after the first lifeforms had compiled autopoietically from available chemicals; one hundred ninety million years before the first hominids had begun to evolve into true homosapiens: the *Cryolophosaurus elliotti* wandered the coastline of what would later become known as Antarctica.

The *elliotti* was an early carnosaur, newly endothermic. It had evolved the ability to produce its own heat, at the cost of ninety percent of its nutrition. Further north, smaller, lesser reptiles remained coldblooded, relying on the environment to warm them into activity. But Antarctica in the Pliensbachian, balmy though it was in contrast to its later state of permafrost, dropped into the forties at night. And night, in Antarctica, even during the Jurassic, was three months long. But for its endothermy, the cryolophosaur would succumb to hibernation in the winter months. At best. If it didn't die out altogether.

The planet was already old by the time *C.elliotti* had evolved from its lineage of theropods. Over ninety-nine percent of species were already extinct. To date, some fifty billion types of creatures had occupied branches on the animalia's family tree; now, halfway through the Age of Reptiles, less than half a billion extant species walked, flew, and swam the biosphere. Three hundred million years earlier, at the end of the Cambrian, the brachiopods and conodonts, as well as the trilobites, had been all but exterminated; sixty million years later, at the Ordovician-Silurian Boundary, oceanic life had been devastated as sea levels had first shallowed, and then risen magnificently, as glaciers had invaded the world in a frozen, global flood; eighty-five million years beyond that, seventy percent of species had been slaughtered from the Devonian through the Carboniferous—a span of merely three million years; then, less than sixty million years before the evolution of the cryolophosaurinae, at the end of the Permian, nine out of ten species had died out in a geological instant—the greatest mass extinction ever to have plagued the earth.

It had now been two million years since the Triassic had snapped to a close, taking with it the therapsids and the amphibians, clearing room for the saurischia and ornithischia—the dinosaurs. They would rule the planet for the next hundred and thirty million years, until finally dying out at the end of the Cretaceous, when one in two earthly species would be annihilated, making room once again, and giving rise to the mammalia.

None of that mattered to the cryolophosaur. His role was simple. He ate. He slept. He mated as the opportunities arose. That night, which had begun six weeks earlier, he hoped to eat. It had been nearly a week since he'd swallowed the last bite of spoiling meat—a meal which had lasted for two days. He'd discovered and ambushed a plateosaur back at the stream. He and it had been roughly equal in

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size—eleven hundred pounds and twenty-five feet long. He'd stayed with the carcass, gorging himself and pausing to rest and guard his meal from competitors—other cryolophosaurs, and scavengers. Finally, dangerously full, he'd abandoned the rotting corpse, bequeathing it to the last link of the foodchain: the bacteria.

He'd now forgotten about it. His instincts were his only reminder; he was hungry, and food could be found at the stream. What he and his prey had in common was the need for fresh water.

He headed there now.

In the darkness, dragonflies a metre wide buzzed and clicked in maddening cacophony, silencing and freezing as their thoughtless instincts warned them of the approaching predator. They had little to fear from the carnivore; they'd likely outlive his species by billions of years. One day, millions of years hence, the world would be a different place. The species from which the dragonflies now hid in terror would be extinct; but the dragonflies would remain in the marshes, smaller perhaps, but eternal, dominating the future world.

The cryolophosaur ignored the insects. He could smell the water now. And something else. Something musty and green, like old, wet leaves. Yet strangely different. Muddier, somehow.

The plateosaurs had been evolving too. Adapting to their environment by emulating it. They smelled like the surrounding plants—an aromatic camouflage used in concert with their colouration. Remaining motionless, they looked and smelled like nothing at all; to the predators, they appeared to be more of the jungle.

The predators, meanwhile, were evolving the ability to differentiate the food from the flora. The cryolophosaur sensed, dimly, that one of the trees he was smelling now was, in actuality, something he could eat. He slowed to a stop, sniffing the air.

Whatever he was smelling was upwind. It impressed him as food. And that impressed upon him the need for stealth. But there was something else up there near the stream. Something familiar, yet alien. Rotting meat again. But unusual. Something potentially dangerous.

He sniffed the air again, quietly. The alien's signature was becoming more profound. It was becoming closer, heavier in the breeze. He squinted in the darkness, seeing nothing to which he could attach the scent, despite his nightvision.

And then, a new scent. Also rotting and dangerous, but familiar.

Another cryolophosaur.

The paradox was instant. Food was ahead. A competitor was ahead. An alien was ahead. The three subjects formed a triangle of confusion in his brain. He needed to eat. He needed to drive the other cryolophosaur away. He needed to do something about the alien, whatever it was. What could be done, though, remained a mystery. He didn't even know what it was. If it was like the dragonflies, it might just hide from him once it knew he was there. But he couldn't be sure of that without identifying it first.

And the other cryolophosaur remained. And the food waited. And his stomach growled and his saliva flowed.

His confusion ended. His nose and his stomach convinced him that feeding was his first priority. *Eat first; then care about the other issues.*

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He moved forward. Slowly and quietly. If the food heard him coming, all would be lost. The food had to be acquired. He had to be quiet.

Ahead lay the jungle, beyond which he would find the stream. This was the most difficult part: manoeuvring through the trees, across the twigs and the rocks, without alerting the food. He'd done it before; he could do it now. It just took patience.

And still the other scents remained in the breeze. The predator and the alien. It failed to occur to him that his food might smell it too; his food, to him, was a separate issue entirely.

The silence of the dragonflies moved with him. He walked through an envelope of whispers, barely noticing as the buzzing and clicking slammed in again behind him. This too failed to appeal as a warning to his prey. It had never occurred to him that his food might have its own thoughts. That it moved on its own, and even counterattacked at the last minute, didn't make it alive, to him. It was just food. Food which disappeared if he got noisy. He remained silent.

The jungle came to an end. Now there was mud, and the water beyond. And, his nose and stomach told him, there was food. His eyes disagreed, for the moment.

This, his instincts reminded him, was a good time to become noisy. Now that his nose was certain that his prey was right in front of him, noise would get it to move; then his eyes would detect it as well. He began to trot toward what the scents suggested was his target.

In the darkness, the trees moved quickly to the side, snorting and gasping. Food. He had his prey in sight now: green and brown and splotchy, just like its backdrop, but obvious nonetheless. And it was the only smell in the world: swampy and musty and delicious, despite its similarity to the slimy vegetation surrounding the clearing.

That was just the wrapper anyway. The good stuff was inside. Blood and meat and fat. Food. He charged it with abandon, the rest of the world falling away. The moon and the dragonflies and the alien slipped off into the darkness of his tunnelvision. He saw the plateosaur, and nothing else.

The plateosaur saw him too, and overreacted frantically, crashing off to the cryolophosaur's left, away from the stream, trying to erase its mistake; but it wasn't that simple; the mistake had been made, and necessarily. Death by dehydration was still death. It was just the way of the world. The plateosaur needed water, even if the water was guarded by cryolophosaurs.

That was all incidental now. Now, the plateosaur had five seconds to live. It spent them trying to accelerate a thousand pounds of bulk with six ounces of navigational systems; its intellect was less evolved than the cryolophosaur's; the animal wasn't tremendously smarter than the dragonflies.

And its time was up.

The cryolophosaur had reached it, leaping into the air and crashing into its portside ribs, crushing the fragile bones—a serendipitous miscalculation: the predator had meant to land on his prey's back, but he'd missed and, it turned out, had done more damage this way.

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The plateosaur shrieked in the night, silencing a mile of dragonflies. Its bovine plea echoed off the young mountains to the south, but the cryolophosaur ignored the doppelganger; he had more than enough to eat right here.

The plateosaur couldn't breathe—shards of bone punctured its lung. Its brain was saturated by pain, blinding it; still it attempted to run. Somewhere. Anywhere. Away from the stream or into it. Its destination didn't matter much, so long as it wasn't the inside of the predator's stomach. It crashed and thrashed; it whipped at the air with its tail, the bullwhip beyond the caudal vertebrae cracking in the sky.

Its progeny—the sauropods—would develop a superior defence one day: bulk. The titanosaurs and brachiosaurs would crush their stalkers under dozens of tonnes, rearing up like startled horses and crashing down upon the tyrannosaurs and giganotosaurs which threatened them. For now, the prosauropod's counterattack was that of an iguana: hind legs stiffened, chest low to the ground, tail swinging madly and trying to connect with anything it could.

But the cryolophosaur had seen that tactic before. He remained at the plateosaur's shoulder, out of reach of the bullwhip. And now, smelling the blood as it ran freely from its ribcage, he attacked, not with his feet, but with his jaws.

The plateosaur managed to scream again, despite its inability to inhale, as the theropod tore fifty pounds of flesh from its shank. It was a reaction to the pain, nothing more. If the plateosaur could conceptualise hope, it had abandoned it now. Now, it just waited to die—waited for the pain to die with it.

Its brain overflowing with the throbbing in its ribs, and underflowing with blood, the plateosaur never saw the newcomer. It wouldn't have cared about her either way, unless she had also attacked, bringing a peaceful darkness to the prosauropod as it went fully offline. But it did register a new scent, in its final moments. Sickly and acrid, like the attacking cryolophosaur, but different. Nearly familiar, but strangely unknown.

The cryolophosaur didn't detect the newcomer by scent; his nose was buried in the plateosaur's side, folding away the epidermis and scraping the bones for sinew and cellulite. But then there was the astonishing pain in his lower back as countless daggers slid casually through his skin.

Abandoning the food, he spun round to defend against his attacker. Standing before him was a female *Cryolophosaurus ellioti*, larger than he was, with a lesser supraorbital crest. His own crest, pronounced and resplendent in crimson and gold, had impressed the females of his species in the past, convincing them, at some subconscious level, that his genes and theirs would lead to strong, dominating offspring. The females needed no such advertising media; they had pheromones to do their talking.

This one, though, was different. She was female, and she was a cryolophosaur, but, he now began to understand, she also produced that alien scent he'd detected, and ignored, back when he was still stalking the herbivore.

He wasn't ignoring it now. The cryolophosaurine scutes and sinew hanging in her maw didn't escape him either. He barked at her authoritatively: *don't do that again, Bitch.*

She dismissed it, bursting forward, her jaws exploding open in a cascade of his blood and her saliva. He nearly understood that she'd never swallowed the

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chunk of flesh she'd carved from his spine, but his thoughts were more focussed on her second attack, which seemed to involve his neck.

He countered, blocking his throat with his skull, dropping his lower jaw and tensing to strike; her lower teeth came up in a blur, slamming into the roof of his mouth, driving his snout into her upper incisors. His eyes rolled back in a combination of pain and preservation, the lids squinting shut; giving in to inertia, he let himself fall backward onto his tail, rolling into the tattered ribcage of the dying plateosaur [which released a final, impossible scream], and, with nowhere else to go, flung himself forward again, setting the female off balance; with no plateosaurs behind her to rebound against, she lost her toothy grip on his nose and went sprawling onto the mud, sliding easily down the slope and into the stream beyond.

He barked another string of warnings at her: *piss off; I'm eating.*

She was up in an instant, water erupting in a dramatic arc of blue against the moon. Silently, she stepped out of the stream, her strange crimson eyes glowing white in his semichromatic nightvision. She barked nothing back at him; not so much as an indignant chirp. Methodically, she strode up the riverbank, back to the clearing, stood before him, and snapped at his neck again.

This time, he dodged her altogether, cutting to the side and trapping her against the plateosaur. He could play the same game, if that's really what she wanted. She outweighed him, and enjoyed the advantage of having wounded him at the onset, but he'd survived this long frequenting the stream and had seen it all. He'd guarded his prey from ambushes made up of a dozen opportunists, including flocks of cryolophosaurs. One female was easy enough to take care of, even if she was too stupid to take his warnings seriously.

Having positioned himself, he attacked her, leaping into the air, shifting his weight, surprising her; as with the plateosaur, he landed on her ribs, pulverising them beneath his weight and sliding back to the ground; in an extension of the motion, he plunged his jaws into her side, furrowing through the scutes and scooping out a large slab of hot meat. He swallowed it as a matter of course.

She blinked, and said nothing. Instead, she moved toward him, ready to bite again.

He stepped away, simply maintaining distance. Something was wrong now. He'd never eaten a cryolophosaur before, but, even so, she'd tasted...wrong. Rotten. Doomed.

She reached him and snapped again, catching his arm in her teeth. He barked, more in anger than in pain, and positioned his jaws dangerously at her throat, exhaling pointedly. She released him.

In the distance, the dragonflies silenced again, and the female's head jerked in their direction. He sensed it too: a third cryolophosaur, possibly attracted by their noise, or by the mounting scent of plateosaurid blood drifting off in the breeze. More fun, if this third theropod arrived on the scene.

The female turned back to him, eying him stupidly, weighing her options, perhaps; then she looked again to the south, where she suspected the third cryolophosaur approached.

A final glance at the cryolophosaur she'd wounded, and she simply walked away, ignoring him and his meal, and heading off to meet the third halfway.

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Perplexed and pained, the *Cryolophosaurus ellioti* turned back to his plateosaur, ready to swing round again if she were to return, and got back to his dinner.



Several hours later, once the moon had set beyond the mountains to the south, he rested midmeal. He simply wasn't hungry anymore. Not because he was full, but because his stomach churned with nausea. His snout and spine itched madly; the latter was beyond his own reach. He rolled maniacally on the ground, cooing pitifully at the stars, trying to subdue the tingling behind his scapulae. His vision was blurring, too: the stars doubled and trebled and wavered as his eyes teared over. Behind his eyes, a dull throb began to manifest—similar to the throbbing he'd felt there when he'd once gone three weeks without eating, yet oddly different. More painful, and less distinct.

He blinked the tears from his eyes, regretting it as the fire in the sky burned his dilated pupils. The stars were closer now. Or larger. Brighter, in any case. Painfully brighter.

He turned to the shredded plateosaur, sniffing it curiously. His stomach, which had talked him into coming here in the first place, betrayed him. Meat and bile poured out of his throat, littering the carcass with phlegm and blood.

The blood, his nose told him, was cryolophosaurine. Possibly, the blood was his own.

He staggered toward the stream, splattering the mossy mud with a second barrage of bloody mucus from his throat. He fell to the side, losing all sense of balance, the pain behind his eyes sparking to new life. He gasped for air, inhaling the stench of his own bloody vomit and nearly expelling more still.

Fighting the mud, he got back onto his feet; they delivered him to the water at last. He gulped it, then retched as the ice hit his stomach. Waiting for the water to carry the slimy blood downstream, he bent down for another, slower drink, dimly registering his own newly glowing, crimson eyes in the wavering reflexion. This time, his stomach held it. For the moment.

He returned to land, abandoning the plateosaur now that it smelled like the blood from his innards, settling instead for a dryer spot at the treeline. There, he collapsed into a soft, painless sleep.



He was awakened by his own yowling. Needles stabbed through his eyes, scraping about behind them. The pain was unprecedented. He suspected that his spine and nose still itched, but he didn't care anymore. The pain was behind his eyes. It was still there. It wasn't going away. It was getting worse. It had to stop. But it was still there. And worse. Getting worse. All the time. It had to stop. It wouldn't stop. He had to act. He had to make it stop. He had to do something. He had no idea what to do. He didn't want water. He didn't want plateosaur. He wanted—he wanted something—something like—he'd known back before the pain—it hurt—sheer

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pain—churning behind his eyes—bright as the sun in the middle of the endless night—her—he wanted her—he wanted to bite her.

Or something like her. Another cryolophosaur. Something like that. Bite them. Bite them all.

He couldn't see. He could barely hear, apart from the enhanced din of the dragonflies. They must have finally learned that he wasn't a threat to them, because the noise they made was so loud that—they were inside his head now. Senseless buzzing in the white darkness. And he could smell...

A cryolophosaur. Somewhere out there in the pain. But, he thought, *beyond* the pain. If he could reach that cryolophosaur, he'd be beyond the pain. Especially if he could just bite it.

That's all it would take. Bite the cryolophosaur. That's what would make the pain go away. He was sure of it. Bite it. Bite it soon.

Bite it now.

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Book One

Endemic

ENDEMIC: An epidemiological infexion maintained within a population without the need for external input.

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Chapter One

McMurdo Station, Antarctica
Thursday 20th December 2012

Alexander Poe had taken his doctorate in vertebrate palaeontology well ahead of schedule at Johns Hopkins. He was twenty-seven.

Over the course of ten calendar years of college, he'd managed to get out into the field during the summers—Snakewater in 2003, Kenya in 2006, the Gobi in 2010. Now that he was finally done with school, he had the winters free as well. And, as luck would have it, Charles Baxter had set up an Antarctic expedition this year.

That sort of endeavour, Poe mused as the LC130 swung in for its final approach into McMurdo, had become far more possible in recent years. Just ten years ago, excavations in Antarctica were damned near impossible, even from December through March, when the frozen continent warmed up enough to let them work in short bursts. Now, finally, the fifty-year-old space age had produced the apparatus required to work down here indefinitely.

The field of palaeontology itself was somewhat older, but still a young science. It had been less than two hundred years since Richard Owen had first proposed the taxonomy of the deinosauria. A lot had been accomplished to date: some two thousand distinct [if debated] species discovered on seven continents, including the one looming below. There was a lot left to do. A lot left to discover. As one of his more entertaining professors had once suggested, the science of palaeontology was barely older than the science of automotive engineering; and no one was done thinking up the perfect car just yet.

Curiously, the cars here in Antarctica were becoming closer to perfect, Poe had read. Solarpowered SnoCats. Ironically, using four months of endless sunlight to keep running above the largest deposit of crude oil on the planet. But the oil here was a matter of trivia; international mandates prohibited its removal. What mattered, to Poe, was that oil was the product of dinosaurs. They'd been here.

That was no secret, of course; the fact of Antarctic dinosaurs was as old as Poe was. They'd been pulling things out of the ice down here since the nineteen eighties. Back then, that had been insane. Now, there was actually talk of inhabiting Antarctica within the next ten years. Though it usually came later in the conversation than the idea of inhabiting the ocean floor, the moon, and Mars.

Antarctica remained the deadliest place on Earth. They just had a Starbucks now.

The LC130—a twenty-nine-metre-long C130 Hercules with retractable skis for landing in places like Antarctica, and one of only ten such planes in the world—touched down at Williams Field. The primary function of the LC130, down here, was to land at Amundsen-Scott, but someone had finally approved the lingering redevelopment plan, so the place was functionally abandoned. Which was

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a pity; Poe might have liked the opportunity to traverse the eight hundred feet from the station to stand on the literal south pole. That would have to wait for another winter.

McMurdo Station, at which the LC130 would have had to have landed before continuing on to Amundsen-Scott, was the main hub for this half of Antarctica. Poe had taken a simple commercial flight from the states to Christchurch, New Zealand, twenty-two hundred miles north of here, before transferring to the massive skiplane to reach the end of the earth. Christchurch had been warm and cultural. McMurdo, he could see from the air, looked dismal. Large and powered, but cold. The ice seemed to be invading the buildings; the trucks all had hubcaps made of snow. The plane slid to a stop in the middle of nowhere.

Poe got to the ground, shocked by the temperature, despite his foreknowledge and extreme weather gear. This was cold. Well below freezing. Christchurch had been warm enough to wander around in shorts and a TShirt; this was colder than Chicago had been yesterday. He breathed as little as possible.

The next step was to board the waiting Delta—a sort of monster panel-truck—to ride the final ten miles to McMurdo Station. Poe got into the shuttle and shuffled his dufflebag off his shoulder before sitting down. The Delta's heater burning his cheeks, the thirty-minute ride began.

At its end, Poe got out of the Delta and hurried toward the closest door. There, he caught sight of a large cardboard sign onto which its owner had scrawled *A.poe*. He waved and approached.

'Welcome to MacTown. You Poe?' The guy was wearing a thick flannel jacket, red and black checked. He'd have looked more at home in rural England, or maybe Maine, than in the only place on the planet capable of dropping beyond a hundred degrees below zero every year.

'Yeah. You must be, ah...'

'Cooke. Michael Cooke.'

'Michael.'

'Cooke. We're all pretty used to goin' by surnames down here.'

'Cooke, then.'

'Baxter wanted to meet you here, but...well, I guess that's a sort of surprise for you.'

'You found something?'

'We found...something, yeah. We're not for sure on the species yet, but Baxter's, shall we say, hopeful.'

'Oh wow,' Poe said. He could guess: he hadn't even got to Kirkpatrick yet, and there was a chance that there was already a theropod to dig up.

'I'll bet you got shit for sleep on that one-thirty,' Cooke said.

Poe nodded bleakly. 'Eight hours of noise. I'm awake though. I'm too cold to sleep.'

'This ain't cold,' Cooke said, grabbing at Poe's dufflebag, 'Lemee give you a hand with that.'

'Oh. Thanks.'

'This ain't cold, though. It's a good ten degrees out there. That's ten-C. Above zero. Above freezing. Wait'll we get back to my place. That's cold. About maybe thirty below by the time we get there.'

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‘If your surprise turns out to be what I hope it is, it’ll be worth it.’

Cooke led him through MacTown. The place was surreal. Lots of wood and old west, broken up by plastic and computers. It was like a chilly transition between two of the seven cities of Troy. He mentioned that to Cooke.

‘You’re closer’n I was, first time I saw it,’ Cooke said, ‘I saw it all backwards. Thunderdome. Like the place had begun in the twenty-first century, but got taken over by the nineteenth.’

Poe laughed. ‘Your take’s more colourful, anyway. And I can kinda see that: like Mad Max’ll be coming through here any minute.’

‘Don’t say that too loud,’ Cooke warned, ‘I think half the guys here are *named* Mad Max.’

‘It looks it.’

‘You wanna grab some coffee before we go back out there?’ Cooke asked, ‘It might not kill ya to feed in some warmth first. There’s the Starbucks, and then there’s the old coffeeshop, which, I think, is better.’

‘I can’t believe they actually got a Starbucks down here.’

‘Believe it. Once MacTown’s general population got over a thousand people...someone told me McDonald’s and SevenEleven are thinking of opening up, too.’

‘I thought there were about fifteen hundred people here.’

‘There are. Maybe more. I’m talking year-round people. Used to be that the residents were only a couple hundred. In the last few years, though, I’d say there are a good twelve hundred people here, even in July.’

‘Man. I’ve been to *warm* towns with less people than that.’

‘Too late; we’re here.’ Cooke stopped at the door to the coffeeshop, which was rumoured to be the oldest existing element of MacTown.

‘Oh. Well, good; this looks better than Starbucks anyway.’ They went inside.

‘Hey Cooke,’ the waitress said, waving casually. Upon noticing Poe, she stiffened slightly. ‘Oh, there’s two of you? Menus, Guys?’

‘Not for me, Kelly,’ Cooke said, ‘Poe?’

‘Uh...sure; I could eat. Thanks.’

‘Find a seat,’ Kelly told them, ‘I’ll catch up.’

‘So, waitresses don’t get surnames?’ Poe asked, following Cooke to a table in the gloom. One advantage to the coffeeshop was its lighting; in the midnight sun, it was one of the only dark places in Antarctica.

Cooke smirked as Kelly approached. ‘Alexander Poe: Jennifer Kelly.’

Poe smirked too. ‘Hi there.’

‘Hi yourself. You can just call me Kelly.’

‘I’d got that.’

‘Usual?’ she asked Cooke.

‘If you’ll make it a double.’

‘Poe?’

‘Uh...black coffee, please.’

Kelly handed him a menu, nodding, and wandered off into the darkness.

‘Black coffee?’ Cooke asked, ‘Yuck.’

‘I like coffee,’ Poe said, ‘Why muck it up with cream and sugar?’

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'You'll find that out soon enough,' Cooke told him.

'It's that bad?'

'No idea. But cream and sugar equal heat.'

'Ah. I see your point.'

'You might wanna pick something fast. She won't be more than thirty seconds getting back here; if you miss your window, you might not get fed.'

'Oh. Uh...are cheeseburgers safe here?'

'Should be. Not like they can warm up enough to spoil.'

Kelly returned with a tray. 'Black coffee,' she said, setting a large mug before Poe, 'Nuked Pibb.' She handed the large, plastic glass to Cooke. 'Straw?'

'Nah. Thanks.'

'Ready, Kiddo?'

'Uh, yeah,' Poe said, 'If I could get a cheeseburger please. Kinda on the raw side, if possible.'

'Totally. Two minutes.'

'Hey, Kelly,' Cooke said, glancing at his watch, 'That might be better to go.'

'No problem,' she said, hurrying off again.

'Are we running late?' Poe asked.

'Could be. I fractured a femur a few years ago. Dumb little fuckup in the Rockies. It's starting to ache in just the right way; I'm thinking we'll wanna be up and down asap.'

'Weather, you mean.'

'Could be a lot of weather.'

'Okay. I'm ready anytime, then.'

'We've got a minute. Lemee drink this first.'

'Warm Mister Pibb?'

'Nectar of the gods. Or something.'

Poe drank his coffee. It wasn't bad at all.

Kelly returned with a simple brown bag. 'Here you go, ah, Poe.'

Poe nodded quickly and dug into the pocket of his jeans to produce a twenty. 'This enough?'

'Looks good,' she said.

'Keep the change,' Poe told her.

'Thanks, Kid. Need more coffee yet?'

'No thanks. I just got started, and I guess we gotta split anyway.'

'Come back anytime,' she told them, turning to return to the shadows.

'Yeah,' Cooke decided, 'I'm thinking we should get going.' He slurped his Pibb quickly, 'That, or I'm in pain for no reason.'

Poe blew a long gust at the surface of his coffee and finished it in a single gulp. 'All set,' he croaked, his throat burning.

Kelly met them at the door, a Styrofoam cup in each hand. 'Coffee; Pibb,' she announced, handing one to each of them.

'Hey, thanks, Kelly.' Cooke said, 'See ya next week.'

'Thanks again,' Poe said, hoisting his cup at her. Then they were out the door, heading for Cooke's chopper.

'Oh yeah,' Cooke said, picking up the pace, 'It's dropped a good ten degrees out here. Storm's a-comin'.'

GREMLIN

‘Have we got time to fly to Kirkpatrick?’

‘Hope so. Spending the night in MacTown is a mistake. The noise never ends anymore.’

They reached the chopper and got in; Cooke flipped switches madly, getting the rotors moving. A quick glance at the panel, and he nodded. ‘All good,’ he said, ‘Up, up and away.’



By the time the chopper reached Mount Kirkpatrick, the storm was in full force. The only thing keeping Cooke from flying blind was the GPS deck he’d installed in the cockpit.

‘Two minutes!’ he screamed over Poe’s headset.

‘Okay,’ Poe replied conversationally, doubting that screaming was necessary, even with the roar of the rotors and the howling of the wind.

‘Say again!’ Cooke shouted, ‘Didn’t copy!’

Poe nodded emphatically; apparently, shouting was required after all.

The preprogrammed blip of the Kirkpatrick complex moved toward the centre of Cooke’s GPS; the pilot adjusted the control stick slightly, easing the chopper toward a stop in the air. ‘Okay!’ he shouted, ‘We’re right on top of it! Make up a god and pray to it; we’re goin’ in!’

Poe laughed, too quietly for Cooke to hear him. One thing Poe didn’t see among biological scientists was devout theists. Especially in fields like palaeontology, *god* was just a metaphor for *We Don’t Know Yet*—the Great Deity called *To Be Determined*.

It still shocked Poe to remember religion. It shamed him in a lot of ways. As a kid, he’d grown up in an überbaptist environment, believing in christ without question. Believing even that he *knew* the planet was only six thousand years old. Because the bible said so. He noted, with some amusement, that he felt stupider for falling for that than he felt for falling for Santa Claus at about the same time.

The chopper hit the ground with a simple thud. Cooke paused for a few seconds, then nodded to himself and began flipping switches again. When the rotors had quieted to a low, rhythmic whooshing, he pulled off his headset and dropped it next to his seat. ‘That’s that,’ he announced, ‘Get yer shoes on; we’re home.’

Poe tried to look out the window, but saw only an ocean of snow. ‘Shoes, gloves, spaceheaters...that’s thirty below?’

‘Prob’ly so. Or more, by now. If I did this right, we should find the main building about a hundred feet thataway.’ Cooke tilted his head absently to his left.

‘Okay. Ready when you are.’

Cooke nodded quickly. ‘Let’s get it over with.’ He flung the door open and escaped into the whiteout in a single motion, pausing only to slam the door and test the latch before moving away from the machine.

Poe followed, leaping to the ground and pushing hard against the wind to get the door shut. Once he was sure it was latched, he circled the chopper to the pilot’s side, finding Cooke’s footprints to follow toward the heat.

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Visibility was bad enough that he actually lost sight of his own feet, and the tracks he was trying to follow, a couple of times; he nearly panicked before finding the trail again, which happened to lead directly into a marker. It was a little scary to be blind in the snow like this, especially seeing that Cooke, who should have known his way around, had nearly wandered out into the freezing void. He locked on to the weaving footprints and followed them to the base of the building; then he hurried inside.

‘Hello?’ he called from the foot of the stairs. The building itself was above the ground—a spherical pod resting on stilts.

‘Up here!’ Poe recognised Baxter’s voice and climbed the stairs.

‘Hey there,’ he called, reaching the top, ‘Made it.’

Baxter, nearly sixty, looked grave even for his age. Poe suspected it was disappointment. To have found something worth pulling out of the ground, only to be pinned down by a blizzard...Poe was a little disappointed himself.

‘I see Cooke got you *most* of the way here,’ Baxter said, ‘You didn’t get too lost out there, did you?’

‘What? Nah. Just followed his tracks.’

‘I’m glad to hear *that*,’ Baxter said, ‘You didn’t bring any bags?’

‘Yeah, I—oh. They’re in the chopper. I guess they can probably wait.’

‘I’ll get Cooke to go back out for them in a minute, when he locks down the damned rotors,’ Baxter said, ‘The good news is that, this late in the day, there should be plenty of hot water, if you wanna melt off the ice and change clothes.’

‘I might do that. I take it we’re off the clock for the day.’

‘We are, and it’s a tragedy. We found something up the mountain th’smorning. I’ll give you three guesses.’

‘An *elliott*?’

‘Could be. It’s saurischian, at the very least, near as I can tell. And, right at the moment, Mother Nature’s undoing all our hard work, covering the sucker right back up again.’

‘Yeah. Shouldn’t be a problem. You can’t shovel limestone. Snow’s easy.’

‘The snow down here,’ Baxter told him, ‘is anything but easy. But I’m hoping we can clear it back off the find in under a day. Anyway: lemee show you where your room is.’

‘Okay.’ Poe followed him down the white plastic corridor.

‘Don’t worry about memorising it all just yet,’ Baxter said, ‘But this here leads down to the main room, which doubles as the diningroom, livingroom, den...pretty much everything but the kitchen and bathroom, though those aren’t far beyond. Then the rest of the hallway here is the dorms. These pods are just cool. Cheap to build, cheap to maintain, and we’ve got enough rooms to accommodate three dozen people before we resort to roommates. Now, lemee just think...yeah: this one’s yours. Bed, closet, electricity; there’s a little dorm fridge, too, in case you’ve got any munchies you can’t live without—and take that seriously; there are a few gluttons down here who’ll eat every last thing in the public fridge, regardless whose name’s on it.’

‘I didn’t bring any food with me. I was only allowed to have, like, seventy-five pounds of gear on the flight. About the only thing I’m selfish about is my lap-top.’

GREMLIN

‘I hear ya. I’m that way with my books. Anyone can borrow them; but, damnit, get them back to me quick, and without any damage. Don’t fold, spindle, or mutilate.’

Poe grinned. ‘You’re serious? Like, printed books?’

‘Hell yeah, I’m serious. I get that EBooks make sense; but, I’m old, Man; I like how the real books *feel*; plastic pages bug me.’

Poe nodded. ‘My dad doesn’t understand them either. He tried dogearing one to mark his place—ruptured half the nanorods. Turns out BestBuy’s little extended warranty doesn’t cover that, either.’

Baxter rolled his eyes and nodded. ‘Is your laptop still in the bird?’

‘Uh...yeah. I should probably go get it before it drops below freezing in there.’

Baxter shook his head. ‘I’ll have Cooke get it. Since he abandoned you out there.’

Poe shrugged. ‘He drank about a gallon of soda on the way here. I think he was just a bit rushed. On which note: where’d you say the bathroom was?’

‘One sec,’ Baxter said, producing a retractable Sharpie and writing *POE* on the card by the door. ‘Just so you can find your way back again. It’s back this way, off the main room.’ He turned and led Poe back down the corridor.

‘Okay,’ Baxter said as they walked in, ‘This is the main room: videogames and films and stuff; timewaster spot. Go right down that way, and you end up in the kitchen. Make and eat whatever you like; just, eat all you make; we’re palaeontologists, not ecologists, but the garbage truck doesn’t stop at our curb very often. Down *that* corridor is the bathroom. You can probably figure out that part for yourself.’

‘Hope so,’ Poe said, ‘Presuming it’s not some weird ZeroGrav setup.’

‘Nope. Pretty standard. Just plastic. I’ll be around when you get back out.’

Poe wandered back toward the bathroom, which was less standard than Baxter had suggested. Everything made sense to him, but he was surprised to discover a large hot tub in there. Pausing to take a hasty leak, he went ahead and took a long, hot bath.

Drying off, he winced as he pulled on the same cold, wet clothes he’d come in here with. He carried his boots at his side as he returned to the main room.

Baxter glanced up from his book—*Extinction: Bad Genes or Bad Luck?* ‘Ah hell,’ he said, ‘I shoulda mentioned that there are some new bathrobes in there; I guess I figured you’d see them.’

Poe rolled his eyes in self-reproach. He *had* seen them; he just hadn’t *noticed* them. ‘Next time,’ he said.

‘In any case,’ Baxter added, ‘Cooke got your stuff into your room for you. Dunno if those clothes’ll be any warmer, but they might be dryer.’

‘I’m pretty dry,’ Poe said, ‘It can wait until later. I was thinking, though: did you get any shots of the theropod?’

‘Yeah, we did. Wanna see ’em?’

‘Sure.’

Baxter hunted through the stacks of papers on the coffeetable until he found the remote for the HDTV on the wall, switching feeds from the HDR to the

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computer. ‘I think they’re on this thing somewhere,’ he said, trading the remote for the wireless keyboard and trackballing along the desktop to the newest folder; he clicked it open. ‘Yup; this is it.’ He clicked the first thumbnail, filling the screen with the image. ‘Okay: we find some bone,’ he narrated, clicking the arrowkey to move to the next image in the folder. ‘Here we’ve cleared away some of the rock...here’s Cooke doing a weird little dance about it...this is Cooke telling me to delete that last shot...here’s a couple of vertebrae, which gave us the orientation...and then here’s the pelvic girdle—not quite fully exposed, but if you look here...’ Baxter abandoned the keyboard and walked over to the HDTV, ‘If you look here, can you see the ischium there? I guess we hadn’t got it quite cleared by this point. But my money’s on the theropoda. In fact, I won’t be too shocked if this turns out to be another cryoloph.’

Poe nodded enthusiastically. ‘It could be. But...that could be a plateosaur, too. That’s it so far? Hips and some vertebrae?’

‘So far, yeah. The storm started up about ten minutes later. We didn’t even have time to ping the thing.’

‘Any news from the weather desk yet?’

‘National Weather Service—the same geniuses who never saw this storm coming—think it’ll be clear and sunny down here by noon tomorrow. So far, I’m planning to be up there by twelve thirty.’

‘Me too,’ Poe agreed.

‘Hard part now’s getting to sleep tonight. For me, anyway. Speaking of night,’ Baxter paused to glance at the twenty-four-hour clock on the wall, ‘I guess we’re there now. Time to think dinner.’

Poe glanced at the clock, and out the window, trying to get the time to make sense against the daylight; it was after 19.30 in December, and the sun was still trying to punch through the snow.



By 20.30, the team had assembled in what Poe was learning to call The Room. Dinner turned out to be a surprisingly tasty compound of ramen noodles and canned peas and carrots in tomato soup with, Poe suspected, about half a canister of garlic powder stirred into the mix. He juggled a glass of orange juice and a mug of cocoa as well.

The recent discovery of what might turn out to have been a new *Cryolophosaurus elliotti*, or even some unknown species, notwithstanding, the conversation quickly degraded to a debate, among palaeontologists, half of whom had PhDs in at least one discipline, about, of all things, *Star Wars*. The primary issue was whether tauntauns were reptiles, granting that they had fur and apparent endothermy. Poe thought that they probably were.

As people filled up and began pushing plates away, Cooke produced a pack of cigarettes which, to Poe’s surprise, turned out to be weed. Cooke offered him one; Poe went ahead and took it.

‘One nice thing about this continent,’ Cooke explained, ‘is that there really aren’t a lot of laws here. Except for laws of nature maybe; but we try to disregard those anyway.’

GREMLIN

‘You get this at McMurdo?’ Poe asked.

‘This? No. I’ve got a hydroponics setup in my room. Then I just process these through a homeroller gadget. But you can get the stuff in MacTown; it’s just not as cheap there.’

Tauntauns gave way to politics—specifically the idiocy of outlawing recreational drugs. Outside, the sun swung its way around the south pole, but never managed to set entirely. Around 23.00, tired and stoned, Poe wandered off to re-discover his room.

It took him five minutes to fall asleep, even with the hazy sunlight invading through the main porthole. He dreamt of furry cryolophosaurs wearing scarves in the Antarctic, skiing down Mount Kirkpatrick, smoking weed.

PAROXYSM

Chapter Two

Des Moines, Iowa

Thursday 20th December 2012

Cassandra Bennigan was the unlikely webmaster of *ZombiesAteMyBrains.com*. Unlikely because chicks, as she was well aware, tended not to dig zombiefilms much.

So she was strange. Which was fine with her. There were, however, stranger people still.

She scowled at the EMail in her Inbox:

From: 'mike morgan'

Date: Thursday, December 20, 2012 3:20 PM

To: webmaster@zombiesatemybrains.com

Subject: ws name

why is ur sight called zombie's 8 my BRAINS??????? The only movies w/
zombies eating brains was return of the dead and it was a JOKE lol!!!!!!!!!! U
should change ur sight 2 sumthing else cuz braineating zombie's r dumb

Alas: she'd been tracked down by the Global Village Idiot. She hit Control-R to reply to the little SpEd.

Dearest Mikey,

Thank you for your kind words regarding *ZombiesAteMyBrains.com*. Thanks in particular for spelling half of those words correctly.

As you may not be aware, Dan O'Bannon's spoof, *Return of the Living Dead*, was, in fact, the first commercially-released film to suggest that zombies specialized in braineating. Its sequels continued the trend.

Elsewhere in the zombiverse, however, our favorite undead will eat any part of a person, and/or animals, and/or blood, and/or nothing at all. There's really no set standard to a zombie's behavior in Hollywood; they do whatever the plot happens to call for.

As such, and given myriad alternatives, O'Bannon's braineating zombies are among the more popular and well-conceived species available to date. *ZombiesAteMyBrains.com* is proud to pay homage to this quintessential creation.

Of course, if you really can't stand braineating zombies, but still admire the undead and O'Bannon's works, I might recommend the segment *B-17* from *Heavy Metal*, the film *Dead & Buried*, and even *Lifeforce*.

~Cassie

"When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the Earth"

www.ZombiesAteMyBrains.com

GREMLIN

Next EMail....

From: 'Greg Burton'
Date: Thursday, December 20, 2012 3:23 PM
To: webmaster@zombiesatemybrains.com
Subject: 28 days later
How can you include movies like 28 days later and resident evil and the remake of dawn of the dead (2004) as movies about zombies? Those things werent zombies, ZOMBIES DONT RUN!

'Zombies don't run,' she told the screen, 'But they *have* learned to write E-mails.'

She deleted the thing. There was no point replying to it. Reply to one moron, and ten more will appear just around the corner. Besides: she had a messageboard for just this sort of complaint. If the imbeciles would only post to the board, her more rational regulars would flame them back into lurking before she ever even got a look at their bullshit. Idiots needed to learn to follow the rules, if nothing else at all.

Dawn of the Dead reminded her, though: she'd planned to go to the mall today. And Merle Hay Mall in late December was damned near indistinguishable from a mall full of zombies.

She folded her palmtop phone shut and carried it over to her coat, sliding it into the inner pocket and glancing in the mirror by the door. She had no opinion. But she suspected she looked exactly perfect for irking the shit out of people at the mall. She pulled on her coat and searched the pockets for keys, gloves, and sunglasses.

She paused, contemplating pulling out her phone and replying to the 'tard after all. Zombies don't run. Great.

Zombies had evolved seriously in nineteen sixty-eight, on her birthday, as it happened [not that she was forty-four; but her birthday had been on the same day as the film's release, in nineteen ninety-one]; Romero had reinvented the concept of zombies, borrowing heavily from Matheson's *I Am Legend* and making them undead. People complaining that the nuts infecting each other with an inhibitor in *Twenty-eight Days later* weren't zombies would have to claim that the zombies in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* or *I Walked with a Zombie* were also not zombies. People were fucking stupid.

As for zombies not running, she could think of a few films with running zombies: *Night of the Living Dead* had a running zombie [with a changing haircut, no less]; *Dawn of the Dead*—the original version—had running zombies [children, in fact] attacking Ken Foree in a filling station; *Day of the Dead*—again the original, Romero film—had a couple of hyperactive zombies, including the one which caught a speeding golfcart without so much as looking at it; *Land of the Dead*...the list went on. All films within the accepted canon of zombie lore. All too advanced for zombie fans to grok.

She abandoned the phone. If she replied to one, ten more would appear. Sometimes, it was hard to tell the zombies from their little boyfriends.

Cassie tried to keep these thoughts to herself. When that didn't work, she tried to keep them off the record. Two years ago, she'd cost herself a lot of visitors [and, by extension, a lot of advert sales] by replying to one of the trolls on the

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board: *I see now why you like zombiefilms so much; it's always a thrill to see yourself on television.*

She'd predicted a self-defeating retort from the twit. Something like *I'm like one of the soldiers in Day of the Dead, killing all those dumbfucks and scientists*, which she could have left alone, given that those soldiers' IQs averaged at room temperature; the best flames were the ones she could wait out; the regulars would eventually put it together that the imbecile had just flamed himself, probably populating pages of the board with overexplanations of that fact. But it hadn't happened that way. Curiously, the regulars had held it against her, apparently taking it personally. It had made no sense to her. Not only was it beyond the scope of her intent to have the regulars infer a global zombiefan insult, but history would suggest that, had she meant it that way, they'd have all laughed and, probably, agreed.

People were fucking stupid. It was the only way to account for it.

She wanted some coffee, she decided. There was a decent restaurant, in that it was lurkerfriendly, up the street from the mall. She could sit there and work on a few things, like ZAMB. She grabbed her laptop, shoved it into her backpack, and walked out the door, instantly regretting the decision. Des Moines in December tripped over itself working out which to be more of: wet or cold; today, it had settled for both. She bolted for her DeSoto.

It was a funny thing. She ran a zombiesite, not a vampsite. But, when she'd seen Spike née William the Bloody driving a 1959 Adventurer on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, she'd thought it was the coolest car in existence, replacing the 1958 Fury from Carpenter's *Christine* and the original batmobile. She'd tracked one down though eBay.com and won the auction. Now the car was hers. She'd painted it black.

Sadly, cool though the car looked, the DeSoto's heater was cooler. She didn't even bother turning it on. She just coaxed the car into Reverse and waited for the wheels to find something they could catch on. Finally, she got the thing going, just in time to start braking for the stopsign at the end of the street.

Merle Hay wasn't nearby. Not that much was really far from anywhere in Des Moines, except maybe for civilisation. She lived closer to Valley West and Jordan Creek, but she didn't like them much. She was a rich kid by accident. She only lived in West Des Moines; she made no attempt to stay there.

Merle Hay also wasn't much of a mall. It looked as though it probably had been, forty years ago, the last time it was really remodelled. It looked like the future had looked at the end of the sixties. It looked like shit. But it had a Suncoast in it. And, somehow, she'd been talked into ordering a couple of films there, despite their availability at amazon.com.

She avoided the freeway. The DeSoto on ice at high speeds led to bad things. Nothing lethal—for her, anyway; the thing was too heavy and solid to fold on her. But, with her luck, she'd slam into some farmertard with a SubUrbanVehicle Overestimation Disorder and get sued to death. Instead, she crept along Grand Avenue to Fifty-sixth and got up to University. Partly because the cemetery was there.

There were several cemeteries in Des Moines, but Glendale Cemetery impressed her. Particularly its western side, where all the affluence dried up in a matter of feet.

GREMLIN

The rest of the cemetery was picturesque. The apotheosis of the wealthier end of a smallish city like Des Moines: hills and trees and ponds and harmless shadows. At the western fence, though, things fell quickly into disrepair. Mogens were replaced by crosses, then simple, cubic headstones, and, finally, brass plates in the ground, with plastic-and-Styrofoam trinkets stabbed into the grass by floral wire in anarchic patterns. This end of Glendale reminded her very much of the dilapidated necropolis from *Return of the Living Dead*: dust and crushed cans and bare dirt overflowing onto the meagre, perpendicular roadways.

Not that she disliked the eastern end. It was just too shady and peaceful to impress her as a real cemetery. *You don't bury the dead in any place that nice*, she thought, *or they won't be pissed and restless when they come back out of the ground.*

Which was bullshit, of course. If there had ever been, in the history of the world, an opportunity for zombies [or vampires, by the same token] to return from their graves, it had ended when federal law had begun to require that all corpses be embalmed. No one was going to shuffle his way out of a grave and into the streets looking for people to nosh upon while his internal organs were all sitting in jars on some coroner's desk.

Pity, in a way. A good zombie attack was just what this town needed. Nothing tragic, like the ghouls crossing the bridge into Manhattan at the end of Fulci's *Zombi*; maybe something simpler, like the forty-eight-hour expiration date of the zombies in *Night of the Comet*. The perfect end of the world: everyone not fully shielded from the radiation turns to calcium dust. Eventually.

Or even *The Last Man on Earth*, with its weird zompies annoying Vincent Price on a nightly basis—effectively harmless to anyone immunised against their virus, if it *was* a virus, but...there again, clumsy, retarded, loud people already existed in inestimable numbers.

Might as well go for broke. The full *Night of the Living Dead* epidemic. Only the smart survive.

She'd have liked to see that one day. But reality was working against her. There was no zombie virus out there in space, or in a stopmotion monkey in New Zealand, or waiting in the KZones to be discovered. She was stuck with zombies who knew—more or less—how to drive.

She didn't bother entering the cemetery. If she drove inside, she'd be tempted to get out of the car. If she got out of the car, she'd freeze to death. She was cold enough already, since her heater wouldn't warm up before June. Instead, she just took her foot off the accelerator as she passed University, watching through the cemetery's hurricane fence, seeing the dusty, frosty, forgotten side of the place. Then she was beyond it, and she pushed the DeSoto back up to thirty-five or so, ready to start skidding to a haphazard stop at Franklin.

Busy though Franklin was, no one in charge of doing smart things had thought it needed a stoplight at Fifty-sixth yet. Now, as rush hour approached....

She aborted, powersliding into a UTurn and heading back to the south to catch Merle Hay Road from University. Merle Hay and Franklin had a four-way stop, which, while slowing things down, at least gave her a chance.

Beyond Franklin was Hickman, which did have a light. It was red, but that would change. Then she was off again, heading for Douglas—the southern end of Merle Hay Mall.

PAROXYSM

She found a spot near the entrance to Younkers—a paradox of a store; it was clearly meant to be upscaled and overpriced, but some nut had inserted it into *this* mall, damning it by association. She hurried through the store, ignoring *O Christmas Tree* and the perfume pushers. Then she'd escaped into the mall itself, which was crawling with zombies.

Not really. Not zombies. Just normal people wandering about in fleece jogging suits and a daze, freezing like deer in headlights at the first sign of whatever unremarkable shit a given store was trying to sell them.

Maybe they *were* zombies, of a sort. A sort looking for shit to buy, instead of brains to eat.

Cassie giggled at her tankerboots as she weaved through the walking dead. Ten thousand morons, shuffling through the mall, moaning *shit...shit...shit...*

Then she was at Suncoast, which was full of yet more zombies. *Films...films...films...* She expected one of them to shuffle over to her, brandishing its chains: *sorry, Doctor Frankenstein; I think I broke something*. But that was too much to hope for; Bub had been trainable; these creatures were less erudite than anything in *Day of the Dead*.

She bypassed the counter for the moment, heading back to the SciFi/Horror section for a quick glance through the lessening options. She already had most of the films available in the store—at least within this section. And most of them really sucked anyway. Although, even the worst zombiefilm could be good, for some purpose or other; *Plan Nine from Outer Space* proved that rule, even if *Hot Wax Zombies on Wheels* tested it all to hell.

She abandoned her privatised search and got in line to the register, waiting through the obstreperous blathering of some sesquigenarian with a decisionmaking disorder regarding Disney toons. By the time the antiquity had decided that her great, great, great grandbrats would be *just tickled* with *101 Dalmatians*, Cassie had nearly forgotten why she'd got into the line in the first place.

When she got to the counter and Donovan hurried over to help her, she remembered why: because she was trapped in Des Moines.

'Hey, Cassie,' he greeted.

'Hey. Thought I'd see whether my stuff came in yet.'

Donovan rolled his eyes back into his skull, where he'd maybe left himself a note. 'You were looking for, uh, "Night of the Creeps" and...was it "Scanners"?''

'It was "Night of the Comet" and "Slithis".'

'That's right,' he told her. Apparently she'd got the answer correct.

'So?'

'Oh. Lemee check here.' He pulled a nondescript shipping box out from under the counter; it had been ripped hastily open and contained a number of films on disc and VHS. She was able to skim over the spines faster than he could.

'That one's mine,' she said, tapping the spine of *Night of the Comet*, 'No "Slithis"?''

'I guess not. Lemee grab your card here and make sure we sent for it.' He pulled out a cardholder and leafed through its contents dogmatically. 'It's Bernall, right?'

Cassie rolled her eyes. 'No. My name is not Cassie Bernall. I never went to Columbine, and I never got shot claiming to believe in Jeepers.'

GREMLIN

‘Huh?’

‘It’s Bennigan.’

‘Oh, that’s right.’

‘Yay for me.’

‘Here it is,’ Donovan said, pulling out the flimsy yellow orderform, ‘Yup: “Song of the Slithis”?’

‘It’s “*Spawn* of the Slithis”.’

‘Oh. Hard to read. See?’ He showed her the card.

‘Yeah. And?’

‘I guess it’s not out yet.’

‘Two weeks ago, you told me it was in the system.’

‘Uh...maybe it got cancelled. Want me to look again?’

‘Not really. I’ll just go with this one.’

‘Just “*Night of the Comet*”. Okay. You ever seen this?’

‘Half of it.’

‘The ending’s hysterical.’

‘That’s not the half I missed. I missed the half cut out of the four-by-three version. I’ve got it on video; I’ve been waiting for the widescreened disc for years.’ The negative for *Night of the Comet* having been lost sometime after 1984, it had taken until 2012 to retromaster a digital version from the best remaining celluloid print.

‘Oh yeah; I know what you mean. I got one of those new widescreen’ HDTVs about a month ago. All my movies are all smeared out so everyone looks all fat and shit.’

‘One of the new ones, huh,’ she echoed, ‘Wow. All right Hector.’

‘Who?’

She brandished the case for *Night of the Comet*. ‘Line from the film.’

‘Oh yeah? Cool.’

She handed the case to him and he scanned it in. ‘You got your Replay card on—ah,’ he exclaimed as she held her keychain out to him, ‘Prepared as always. Total comes to thirty-one, forty-nine, with tax.’

She tossed her MasterCard onto the counter for him.

‘Bennigan,’ he said, picking it up and reading the front, ‘Gotta remember that.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ she said, glancing at the cover of last month’s *Fan-oria* in the magazine rack, ‘I’ve got enough stalkers.’

He cackled at that, swiping the card and handing it back to her. She slid it into the internal pocket of her trenchcoat, trading it for a pen.

‘Just need your autograph now,’ he told her, slicing the ticket against the blade in the printer and sliding it toward her on the counter; she signed it and separated the store’s copy from hers. ‘Happy holidays,’ he added, handing her the sack containing the disc.

‘Merry Giftmas,’ she returned, ‘And have a new beer.’ She turned and manoeuvred through the wall of zombies within the store, hoisting the sack over the security scanner [she didn’t trust Donovan to have got it fully demagnetised] and walking back out into the mall, which now had more of the shopping dead than before.

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‘Welcome to Potter’s Bluff,’ she muttered, making her way back toward the main entrance and her car beyond.



North of the mall, on the other side of Merle Hay Road, was a Perkins Family Restaurant. There were two other Perkins closer to her house, but she preferred this one, because it wasn’t closer to her house.

West Des Moines sucked. Because it didn’t know that it sucked. She lived there, and she got that it sucked. No one else had worked that out yet. Especially the cops. Cops in real cities would pull someone over and ask for a licence and registry and insurance; cops in West Des Moines would ask, before anything else, *What brings you to West Des Moines?* as though there were some iron curtain separating the suburb from smart people. The one time she’d tried to answer the question, she’d replied with *I lost a bet; now I live here.* The cop had let her know that it had been the wrong answer, and also that he smelled alcohol, giving him the right to search her car. She’d asked him what pure alcohol happened to smell like; she now knew that pure alcohol smelled like *shut the fuck up*; the cop had asserted so.

The restaurants in West Des Moines were no better. Snide twats with more hairspray than brains served out sentences as waitresses. They clearly had no interest in being waitresses. Perhaps they’d lost a few bets as well.

The Perkins on Merle Hay was tolerable. No one cared about her there—sometimes to the extent that she had to get up and find someone to get her more coffee; once or twice, she’d given up and got her own from within the kitchen. She could sit there lurking for hours, provided that there wasn’t a huge line of people in the lobby waiting for a seat to open up in Smoking. Cassie turned onto Meredith and bounced the car up the driveway into the carpark before she could lose her inertia. She slid to a stop in a parking space without killing anyone and made for the door.

In the lobby, she waved at the hostess, who smiled and jerked her head toward Smoking. Cassie knew that the southeasternmost table—technically off the chart and serving as the employee’s smoking lounge—was hers to use. It was walled off from the rest of the place by ugly wallpaper and a large window to the south. The wall to the west had an electrical outlet embedded in it, which came in handy for laptops; her old HewlettPackard ran at eight gigahertz for about two hours, which was barely enough time to start *thinking* about the site, let alone getting anything done on it. She sat down, pulled the laptop out of her backpack, and shrugged her coat to the side.

Staring at the laptop’s screen for a moment, she dug through the backpack for its powercord, connected it to the computer, and plugged it into the wall.

‘Hey Cassie. Coffee tonight?’

She looked up to find Sonya standing there, mug and coffeepot in hand. ‘Yeah; please,’ she said. ‘Oh: and an ashtray, maybe?’

‘Oops,’ Sonya said, pouring the first cup of coffee for her, ‘No one ever sits here but us, and we’re not supposed to. I’ll get you one. Need a menu?’

‘Not really; I’m good with coffee.’

A fitful expression flashed across Sonya’s face. ‘I’ll grab you that ashtray.’

GREMLIN

Cassie sipped her coffee, mousing over the Firefox icon and thumping the touchpad to bring it up. The browser brought up the cached version of *ZombiesAteMyBrains.com/index.asp* for her. She stared at it, pondering.

The ashtray clinked down onto the table, and Cassie glanced up again to thank Sonya. Instead, she found a new manager standing at her table.

‘Oh, thanks,’ she said, reaching into her coat for a cigarette.

‘No problem,’ he told her, ‘You think I could get you to do me a favour, though?’

‘Maybe. What is it?’

‘We really don’t like it when people plug computers and things into our outlets. Would you mind?’

‘Uh...are you joking?’

‘fraid not. It’s policy.’

‘Since when? I’ve been doing this just about nightly for a couple of years now. No one’s ever mentioned a policy before.’

‘Well, see, the problem is that—suppose there was a powersurge and your laptop got fried. We wouldn’t want that; and Perkins can’t be held responsible for the damage.’

Cassie let her head fall forward, watching the guy through her eyebrows in guarded pity. ‘If there were a powersurge, your responsibility would include the lightbulbs exploding and perforating everyone’s faces, she told him, ‘Between the plastic surgery and CNN telling the world that your criminal negligence had endangered the lives of children, I doubt a burned out surgeprotector would be your greatest concern.’

‘That’s why we also ask that you don’t unscrew the lightbulbs.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Right. I know. But really: I need you to unplug the computer now. Thanks.’

And the manager turned and walked away.

Dumbfounded, Cassie turned back to the screen. Her cached site remained. Exhaling deeply, she hit Start-D and Alt-F4, arrowing through the shutdown options to turn the machine off again. After a few seconds, the laptop had finished dumping its RAM and died unceremoniously. Cassie pulled the cord out of the socket, then turned to reclaim the pronged end from the outlet in the wall.

The manager, having apparently circled the restaurant and come back to this spot, snapped at her: ‘I told you to unplug that thing.’

She froze, an inch from the outlet, her eyes rolling to the side to glimpse his dying shoes. ‘What’s it look like I’m doing, Dickmunch?’

‘You don’t have to take that tone with me, Young Lady.’

Cassie grinned dangerously, her neck twisting just enough to allow eye contact. ‘Y’know...maybe this is a bad idea,’ she said, her voice rising to broadcast quality, ‘Given that, as you’ve confessed, the wiring in this building is well beneath osha regulations, the act of unplugging this thing could easily result in my death. Worse, given your suspicions about the integrity of the lightbulbs in this joint, unplugging this could easily cause them all to blow out, sending shrapnel into everyone’s food and eyes.’ Sitting upright, she had the general attention of the restaurant now. ‘I don’t think I can risk that happening in good conscience. Tell you what, though.

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Lemee get clear of the danger, and I'll let you unplug it while the rest of us all pray to Jeezuz that you don't kill everyone in the building, okay?'

'Very funny,' the manager said, bending down to unplug the cord.

'Take cover!' Cassie shrieked, sliding across the booth and covering against the windowsill.

With a quick glance of pure death, the manager pulled the cord out of the outlet with a snap of his wrist, noting the audible tension in the restaurant behind him. He stood up again and dropped the cord to the floor. 'Your coffee's on the house,' he told her pointedly, 'Please don't return.' He turned and walked away again.

Cassie blinked once. 'You're kicking me *out*?' she called after him, 'This is the thanks I get for trying to save *lives*?'

The manager kept walking, turning the corner and stepping behind the register. Cassie bunched up the powercord and stuffed it into her backpack, followed by her laptop. 'Fucking moron.' She sipped her coffee dejectedly.

Sonya returned to the table, grabbing the coffeepot. 'Sorry about that. New guy. Real dick, too. Um, and I think he's on the phone to the cops.'

'You have got to be fucking kidding.'

'I wish. You know Stu? Older guy? Comes in here about as often as you do? Just has coffee while reading the paper?'

'Sure.'

'Larry told him last night that we've got a minimum order now.'

'Policy again, I'm sure.'

'If it were me, you could sit here all night with water; you know that.'

'Yeah. I know. Listen, I was gonna put this on plastic, but—'

'You don't hafta pay for it,' Sonya told her, 'One of the benefits of getting ejected: they can't kick you out *and* expect money.'

'No, I know. I just—I was gonna add a tip to the printout. Lemee see if I have any cash on me.'

Sonya grunted a short laugh. 'For what? Half a cup of coffee and a late ash-tray? Don't worry about it. Besides: I really doubt this guy's gonna be here long. It's been four days, and—' Sonya dropped her voice to a loud whisper, 'It's been four days, and I've already had ten or fifteen regulars complain about him to me. I give it a week. Maybe two. Once he's gone, you're welcome back in here again.'

Cassie shrugged. 'EMail me when it happens, I guess. Until then, there are other restaurants. It's not the end of the world.'

Chapter Three

Atlanta, Georgia, US
Thursday 20th December 2012

Randy Cash was a Rockstar for God. He was of no relation to Johnny Cash—a fact he exploited for all it was worth, which was quite a bit; even the keywords of his website included the phrase *Randy Cash, of no relation to Johnny Cash*, which got him listed in search engines under returns for the Man in Black. The name on his original birth certificate had been Randolph Kashir, which had sounded dangerously towelheaded, to him. Cash sounded nicely American, christian, and subliminal. His marketing department had agreed, even recommending the ill-fated title *Cash for Jesus* when he'd released his second album of Feelgood Ditties about Armageddon.

Did Cash really believe in a messiah who advocated the use of the devil's music to relay a message of benevolence and brimstone? He didn't know. But he did believe that, whatever else he was doing, he was making seven figures a year and getting people's attention. The jewish messiah might have existed; Cash most assuredly did.

Just now, he existed in the backstairs of his ministry, halfway to drunk, wondering what the fuck was wrong with his producer. Not the show's producer—things were fiveby here in Atlanta; the weekly show's ratings were rising steadily as Christmas approached and the war in Syria escalated. All those poor American GIs—those soldiers for christ—fighting the good fight against Al'lah's armies of terror while the BabyJesus sat vigilante upon the reddish lawns of half the homes in Georgia. Arnold DiFranco, the *show's* producer, was doing his fucking job just fine. But Lenny Cohen, that dumb jew bastard producing the new album...Cash had half a mind to fire the stupid little kike.

Everything had been fine, as of a week ago. Randy Cash had flown all the way out to LA to spend three goddamned weeks recording the new tracks. Once that had been finished, he, Lenny, and that engineer guy—whatever the little fruit's name had been—had gone over every inch of tape. Just the vocals; just the guitar; the guitar and the drums; the vocals and the drums; the vocals and the guitar; the bass; everything, together, alone, and all mixtures in between. It had all sounded perfect to Cash. And Fucking Cohen had told him—*assured* him—that it was all good.

It had been one thing when the little jew had talked him into delaying the new record by four months, just to save money. It was all about supply and demand. Record the thing in December, when everyone else is busy rushing their completed albums into the stores for the holiday crunch, and studiotime will be damned near free. Cash had understood that. If this fourth release became available at the end of the month, with just a couple of shopping days left before Christmas, there'd still be a hell of an initial surge. And besides: time was an illu-

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sion; between his ministry and online sales, the Easter rush was just as good for his numbers.

But this new problem wasn't so easily rationalised. Cohen had absolutely *sworn* that everything was ready to go. And yet.

The first call had come in around noon. There *might* be a slight problem with the third track. Probably nothing, but it could cause a few delays while it got straightened out. On *their* end. Hardly worth mentioning; probably nothing to worry about; the new disc should still be pressed and packaged and ready to ship by Monday. By Christmas Eve.

The second call had been an hour ago.

That teeny, tiny little problem with Track Three wasn't going to go away. Track Three was a problem. Track Three was broken. Track Three wasn't going on the disc in its current condition; the disc wasn't going to press without Track Three; Cash was going to return to California to rerecord Track Three. Today, tomorrow, next year, or whenever, Track Three was going to be rerecorded before the album sold a single copy. It was just that simple.

Cash had erupted, screaming things he shouldn't have whispered in the information age, and over an open line, no less. Which was hardly his concern. He'd gone off the handle in the past, live on the damned radio; his PR people had spun it into a sensation—that Randy Cash had been temporarily infected by the devil in the hopes of undermining the message of christ. And his ministry had eaten it up; it had brought everyone closer together. Randy Cash was just like the rest of them: susceptible to the games of Satan. If slightly more important and therefore slightly more infected. He'd since worked the excuse into his routine, occasionally freezing up and apologising: *Just a bit of that Old Scratch trying to come out of remission; as you can plainly see, Folks, the devil never takes a day off; our old enemy is always trying to speak through me, to lead all you good people astray....*

And, of course, as a beneficial side effect of that old infexion, Randy Cash was now able and willing to compete with the devil's own at the musical level. If only Stryper had used the same excuse, they might still be around.

Oh well: more for him, he supposed.

But not if the fucking album was delayed.

He finished his latest drink and pondered the glass obstinately; then he flung it against the wall, disappointed when it bounced back, rolling across the tailored carpeting without so much as a chip in the brim. He pulled out his phone, autodialing Fucking Cohen.



An hour later, he was stumbling out of the limousine at Hartsfield-Jackson International Aeroport. His bodyguard closed the car's door for him and hurried over to open the terminal's. Then he was inside.

'Wait a minute, Bruce,' he slurred, 'The tickets should be waiting up there at the whatever-it-is—counter whatsit. I gotta si'down for a minute; can you just go get'em for us?'

Bruce gave the terminal a quick, suspicious glance. 'Sure thing, Mister Cash. You just call me if there's a problem between now and then.'

GREMLIN

Randy nodded automatically and fell into a seat, feeling defeated. Fucking Cohen had...the hell with it. Just business. Fly back to LA, fix the fucking song, fire the fucking moron. Get home in time for eggnog. All in a day's work.

He glanced at his Rolex Quartz. Going on ten o'clock. No wonder he was so fucking worn out.

He ran through damage control in his mind. The song itself—the album in general—that was all probably a snap. The coverart for the disc had been ready for months now; the final design had been approved back in, what, October? He thought so. It was a great image, he had to admit: a worm's eye fullbodied shot of Randy Cash, foot planted firmly on the devil's head, clad in white but for a purple tie and handkerchief [he'd balked at the gayness of the purple, but had conceded that it was originally the colour of kings], all against a background of blackness and fire and brimstone [so they told him; to him, it had looked like charcoal briquettes in a Weber a sunset], with the flames swirling in and out of contorted faces—either the daemons of hell or the souls of the damned, whichever the audience wanted to suppose they were. To Randy's knowledge, the inserts and the cases were all ready to go, awaiting only the CDs pressed from the glassmasters, which awaited only the glassmasters themselves, which awaited only Track Three, which awaited only him, even though Cohen had fucking—

Let it go, he told himself, Save it for the studio; use the anger against the devil, not against the fucking jew.

Okay, that was the issue with the disc. Beyond that, though...

Sunday's broadcast was cancelled. And that was fucking tragic. You just don't wind down into the Christmas Weekend with a fucking rerun. It just ain't right. At the very least, you—

He sobered in an instant. Or, more practically, he sat upright, telling himself he was sober. He hunted frantically for his phone, snapping it out of his pocket, nearly dropping it, and getting it flipped open. Cycling through its phone-book, he tracked down DiFranco's number and autodialed it.

It rang three times before Arnold managed to pick up. 'DiFranco,' he muttered, sounding sleepy.

'Arnold? Cash. Did I—were you *asleep*?'

'No—no, just...I'm awake. What's up?'

'You remember that potential record problem I mentioned?'

'Oh shit, Randy. Okay. What's the situation.'

'The situation is that I'm at the christing aer'port getting my christing tickets to christing fly to christing LA.'

'Are you gonna be back in time for—'

'I doubt it. And that's what I'm calling about. I've got a good idea for Sunday. But I gotta leave it in your hands, and I can't afford another fuckup here.'

'Another fuckup? When have I ever—'

'Not *you*, fucking *Cohen*.'

'Oh right. Okay. Lemee get to my laptop here...okay, hit me.'

'Okay. Four words: Johnny Carson's Last Show.'

'A montage?'

'A...yeah. A collage show. A Best Of. Start off with some sort of disclaimer about it—that Randy Cash has made a promise to blah-blah-blah and must blah

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-blah with the blah-blah but will return live next—wait—better—get that ready to run, but I'll see whether I can get something set up on my end—some sort of, you know, “this is Randy Cash from my satellite studio in LA” sorta—’

‘Wait. Ixnay on the satellite studio; they'll think you're in fucking space.’

‘Well, okay. But, you get the picture. If I can get someone with a DigiCam to record me out there...you know: on the beach, surf against the sand, some foley-eyed seagulls—’

‘They've got real ones out there, you know.’

‘Yeah; shit breaks. If I can get that done, I'll find a way to overnight it or EMail it or something. If *not*, be ready with something more, like, clinical. Then launch into whatever the hell will keep people glued in between spots for the bibles and CDs.’

‘Got it. Montage show for Sunday; have warm, tasteful, apologetic disclaimer ready to roll; await possible liveaction footage from Randy. That right?’

‘That's fucking *perfect*; yeah. Uh, just...kill “apologetic”; I'm not apologising for shit; this ain't my fucking fault. Think “explanation” here. Prior commitment; way important; saving children in fucking Africa; that sort of thing.’

‘I like that. Missionary work. Maybe even—well, no; that would be a bitch to sell.’

‘What's that.’

‘Missionary work in Syria. But you'd actually have to *go* to Syria; and that's not an option.’

‘Option or not, it ain't happening. I don't do wetwork, Man. I'll sit in the war room and strategise the grunts. That's my job.’

‘My point exactly.’

Randy glanced up to see Bruce returning with the tickets. ‘Okay, so we're set,’ he told Arnold, ‘I gotta head for the gate now, and you know how phones mix with the security whatsit here. I'll get hold of you in the morning, from LA. Fiveby?’

‘Sounds great. I'll see what I can come up with for the disclaimer before then,’ Arnold said.

‘Good deal,’ Cash said, ‘Don't work too hard. Just hard enough to justify your salary.’

‘Always do,’ Arnold said.

Cash grinned and hit END, then stood up, swaying less than before.

‘Hope I'm not interrupting, Mister Cash,’ Bruce announced, ‘But I've got the tickets and we're ready to board. Given holiday security, they're advising us to beat feet.’

Randy rested his hands on his knees, preparing for the walk to the security sector. ‘Fucking towelheads steal a few planes, and now *we* can't fucking get *on* one.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Okay,’ he said, straightening up again, ‘I'm all set. And you've got the tickets.’

‘Right here, Sir.’

‘Keep'em. One less thing to remove from my goddamned pockets so they can scan for fucking bombs.’

GREMLIN

Bruce moved in close. 'Yes, Sir. I gotta remind you, though, that it's illegal to say "bomb" in this building.'

'Oh for christ's sake.' Cash popped the vertebrae in his neck and tapped the sides of his ducktail. 'Okay. Let's get this over with,' he said, starting to walk, 'Tell you what, though: we're gonna win this fucking war. If it takes the extinction of the goddamned muslims to do it, we're going to restore order on this christing planet.'

PAROXYSM

Chapter Four

Mount Kirkpatrick, Antarctica

Friday 21st December 2012

The sun was still up when Poe awoke, and he had no immediate idea what time it was. He might have slept for ten minutes, or ten hours. He got out of bed, glancing at his watch, trying to do the math from Central Time to whatever time it was here in the middle of nowhere. He gave up and put on his shoes.

Finding his way back to The Room, he glanced up at the clock. It was after ten in the morning, locally. *First day on the job, and I overslept.*

Baxter was reading a book at a cardtable, drinking either cocoa or coffee with just enough cream to turn it brown. ‘Doctor Poe,’ he sang, setting the novel facedown on the table and climbing to his feet, ‘Awake at last.’

Poe grinned. ‘Yeah; sorry about that. I guess I—’

Baxter fluttered his hands at him. ‘We let you sleep in. That trip here from Chicago is taxing; believe me: I know. Coffee?’

‘And lots of it, please.’

‘Well, let’s see what we can do about it,’ Baxter said, hinting Poe toward the kitchen with a nudge of the head, ‘We got coffee, we got cocoa, we might even still have some soda around here, though that goes pretty fast.’

‘Jeezuz. People drink cold stuff down here?’

‘It’s not cold in the long run. The sugar does its job in a hurry. Plus, it’s simple: open a Coke, and you’re done; coffee and cocoa take some preparation.’

‘Nothing I mind,’ Poe said, ‘Coffee’s just fine, and the blacker the better.’

‘Black coffee,’ Baxter echoed as though it had never occurred to him, ‘No cream? No sugar? No kilocalories? No simple carbohydrates?’ He closed in on Poe and intimated, ‘You let that get out, you’ll wanna sleep with a knife under your pillow.’ With an explosive cackle, Baxter elbowed Poe in the ribs and continued with the voyage to the kitchen.

‘Okay, the coffee,’ Baxter said, adding, ‘Ick.’

‘Little old?’

‘Little old; little cold; little solid. You might need some cream and sugar just to rehydrate this stuff.’

‘I’ll chance it.’

‘If you’re willing to chance it, I’m willing to nuke it. It can’t be all that bad, though; I made this myself. Know what my secret is? Here, I’ll show you.’ Baxter opened a cupboard and produced a canister of ground cinnamon. ‘What you do is dump however much coffee you’re supposed to use into the filtre; then, kinda sprinkle in, oh...what they call a “pinch” I suppose; maybe two. Call it about a tea-spoon of cinnamon here, just kinda scattered around over the top of the coffee grounds. Snap that into the maker, add water, and go. Fact, I could just make some

GREMLIN

new stuff; this sludge is scaring me. Put *this* in the microwave, we might unleash Godzilla or something.’

‘Well, don’t go to any trouble.’

‘Bah; what trouble; we’re waiting for noon before we go anywhere near outside. In a week or two,’ Baxter explained, transferring the used filtre from the machine to the wastebasket with the distaste of anyone who makes it to the age of fifty without learning to like it, ‘we’ll be able to head out closer to nine or ten. But for now,’ he pressed a new filtre into the machine, pulling his fingers away as the standing water soaked its way into the paper, ‘it’s not warm enough yet. Summer, on this side of the planet anyway, is still a good week away, regardless the solstice. Basic ectothermy, my friend: once it gets warm enough to count, then the clock starts ticking; it still takes a few days to really convince the atmosphere that it’s all the way up to twenty-five below.’

‘Crazy,’ Poe said, ‘Looking forward to the bright, sunny days of subzero weather.’

‘Ain’t all bad,’ Baxter said, ‘Tell you something neat about this place: what we *do* find tends to be pretty well preserved.’

‘I’ve heard that,’ Poe admitted, ‘But...it wasn’t frozen back then. You can’t be talking about actual meat. Not like the mastodon in the glacier back in the seventies or so.’

‘Oh no; hell no. No, if you came here to find a perfectly cryonised Mesozoic animal, go ask for a refund right now. It’s gotta be pretty damned cold, the whole time, to prevent even the bacteria from eating away the flesh. But it did get down into the forties around here, which means that the bone marrows occasionally survive. Can’t say I’m thrilled about the methodology there—in my day, we just cut the bones in half and studied the vasculars—but we’re learning a lot more in a lot less time, these days, just combing through the genomes of these animals. And I’m not sure what’s more surprising, to me: what we’d got wrong the old way, or what we’d got *right*.’ Baxter got the new coffee scooped into the new filtre and put the can back in the fridge.

‘A lot of things came full circle in the last couple hundred years,’ Poe agreed, ‘We start out with the pachypoda tracks, which we figure came from giant birds; then we find the bones, and decide that they’re big lizards for over a hundred years; finally, we test the big lizards, and learn that they’re birds after all.’

‘Well, *birdish*, anyway. What birds tried to be in a different evolutionary line. The birds really came out of the therapsids; they went one way, and the dinosaurs went the other. And the dinosaurs, of course, got to the end of the trail and found a big “Dead End” sign waiting for them. Oh, here: see this? Just two or three fingers’ worth of cinnamon against your thumb, and then...just kinda, toss it around over the coffee here, just like that. Makes all the difference in the world.’

‘Sounds good.’

‘Oh, it is, if I do say so myself.’

‘Your recipe?’

‘Me? Nah. Old navy trick. You want bad coffee, you don’t go to Antarctica; just hop on a damned iron boat. What am I forget—oh: the water. Add water; it helps the coffee along, see.’

PAROXYSM

Poe giggled. ‘So, have we actually got a genetics lab down here? For the marrows?’

‘Not really. No good way to staff it. We’re pretty barebones, as you’ve seen. We can do some cleanup down here—just getting the bits of rock off the bones. But then we seal everything up and get it back to the real world to do the rest. On the bright side, we’ve got no shortage of packing ice down here.’ Baxter grabbed a dishtowel and wiped off his hands, leaning back against the counter as the coffee brewed.

‘You actually use snow for transport?’

‘We have. In a pinch. Dry ice is better, of course. But, a cooler fulla snow works just about as well. It’s not a short trip back to the states—about like getting here in the first place. But you can keep a cooler fulla snow intact for up to a week, if no one ever opens it.’

‘I wouldn’t think real snow would be cold enough.’

‘It’s colder than forty degrees. Remember: this stuff went a good hundred and fifty million years or more at forty degrees without degrading. Now, if we *did* find something with skin and muscle, tha’d be a different story. But, for bones? I’m comfy with anything under forty Fahrenheit.’

‘Huh. Makes sense, I suppose. No one ever mentioned that in school, though.’

‘School,’ Baxter said, slightly distastefully, ‘School leads to a piece of paper; the paper gets you into the field; then you start learning how things work. Now, don’t get me wrong: I’m all for PhDs; I’ve got one myself. But, you’ll never get from twelve years of lecturehalls what you’ll get in twelve days of fieldwork. It’s the difference between theory and practise.’

‘I’m getting that.’

‘Course, I’m just making noise now. You’ve done your share of fieldwork. Summers and so on. But Antarctica is a little different from north Montana, even this time of year. Montana can be cold; this place is deadly.’

‘Fieldwork aside, I spent some time in Alaska as a kid. I can handle the cold. I don’t like it, but I can survive it.’

‘Alaska’s a resort. No offence there, but...it’s something to bear in mind. If you go out there thinking you’ve seen it all before, you’re going to be unhappily surprised by your sophistry. I can’t stress that enough. Indoors, we’re a happy, casual lot. Out there, the rules change. Or, not so much change as get enforced. We’ve all learned to ignore buzzwords like Safety First and such, just by desensitisation. But you can’t ignore it down here. Fact, I wasn’t gonna mention this, since it’s between me and him, but I gave Cooke a pretty good lashing for rushing the hell in here yesterday without tethering you along for the hike. After a week or so, I’ll cut you a little more slack, and figure you can find your way to and from the chopper. This first week, though, you’ll have to excuse me if I treat you like an infant most of the time.’

‘Oh. No, that’s okay. Both are okay. Doctor Cooke had to dash for the men’s room; I understood. As for putting me through training, I appreciate that too.’

‘Well, again: Cooke knew better, and I think he knows better’n *that* after our little talk. I’m just relieved that nothing went really wrong. In a whiteout like

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that...if fuel weren't such a concern down here, I'd have wanted him to take you the hell back to McMurdo until today. But: that's all over with now. I just don't wanna see it happen again—'specially with the alternative outcome.'

The stream of coffee slowed to a complaining sputter.

'Here we go,' Baxter said, shifting back to his more jovial personality in the blink of an eye. 'You're sure you don't want cream and sugar, now?'

'I'll try it out as is,' Poe said, grabbing a cup off the shelf and reaching for the coffeepot, 'If I'm wrong, I'm wrong.'

'Yup,' Baxter said, 'Never too late to change your mind.'



Three hours later, having filled up with coffee and hot food, the team were in Cooke's chopper, flying up the mountain to the digsite near the top.

'Mostly for Poe,' Baxter called over the headsets, 'lemee remind you all that, after yesterday's storm, the site's prob'ly gonna look a little different. All our progress from Wednesday will probably be under the snow again. Don't worry, though: the rock don't grow back over two days. First thing I wanna do up there is to get the new snow back off the find; then we can get back to cutting away the rock and seeing what we get for it. Make sense to everyone?' Baxter looked back at the other scientists, who all nodded affirmatively.

'Now,' Baxter added, 'the air's thin up there—thinner'n this. We're gonna give it all we can, but we're also gonna go easy, and keep talking to a minimum. Much higher up'n where we're going today, we'll have to bring our own air. Prob'ly should be doing that today, but we'll make out fine without it, just so long as no one brought along a football. Remember: conservation of energy. Don't move around a lot if it don't serve a purpose. Right?'

The team nodded again.

'Okay. And fellas: first one a'you to ask "are we there yet" gets to wash the dishes for the rest of the winter.'



The chopper set down as close to level as possible, given the terrain.

'Okay,' Baxter called, 'Everyone all sealed up? Then let's get going. Remember: stay together, and don't be afraid to head back to the chopper if you start getting numb. Let's go.'

Nodding to Cooke, Baxter opened his door and hopped out into the snow, turning to latch the door behind him. Cooke jumped down and got the cargodoor open to let out the others.

The team regrouped at the site.

'Right,' Baxter said, muffled by layers, 'First order of business: let's get the snow off the bones. Then we can work on getting the bones outta the ground.'

The first hour in the field was devoted to returning to the progress made two days earlier. Poe hovered close to Baxter, hoping to catch up.

'You really think this is a cryolophosaur?' he asked, 'Any idea what its gender might be?'

PAROXYSM

‘Not with any certainty, no. I’m not even sure it’s a cryoloph yet. Personally, I suspect that it’s a male, though. The females might not have needed the crest, if it was only used for mating.’

‘So the female might just look like a regular allosaur?’

‘It might. Though we’re starting to think it mightta been a higher sinraptor ’stead of an allosaur.’

‘Really.’

‘That’s “we” as in “people”; not me personally. It’s prob’ly an allosaurid.’

‘I have to admit, I’m not too familiar with the type species. How close did this one look before the storm?’

‘Pretty close. To be honest, though, I’m just presupposing that it’s a cryoloph, just based on the location. I really do think it’s a theropod though. Oh look: see here? This is part of the pelvis. It’s saurischian for sure; and I don’t think it’s another plateosaur.’

Poe looked at what had been exposed of the bone in the snow and rock. He had to concur that it was lizardhipped. Whether it was a theropod couldn’t yet be ascertained.

‘You’ll see it better once the snow’s outta the damn’ way,’ Baxter promised, ‘We’ve got enough rock chipped away to expose most of the ischium. It’s pretty theropodic.’

Poe leaned in for a closer look, brushing aside the powdery snow with his bulky mittens. ‘Could be,’ he admitted.

It was exciting. It had only been less than thirty years since the first Antarctic dinosaurs had been discovered, and those discoveries had begun with *Cryolophosaurus elliotti* in 1986. Most people, palaeontologists and laymen alike, had regarded *C.elliotti* not only as proof that the animals had been truly global, on every continent on the planet, but also that they must have been endothermic. Modern reptiles simply failed to thrive in places with three months of darkness and a daily temperature close to freezing. Yet the cryolophosaur had evidently survived it. Probably for millions upon millions of years, possibly as early as the Sinemurian and as late as the Toarcian.

All that, from nothing more than a partial cranium, the mandibles, the pelvis, a femur, some vertebrae, a fibula, a tibiotarsus, and some metatarsals. If this was, in fact, a cryoloph, and contained more remains than Hammer’s find in 1986...exciting developments indeed.

As more snow was removed, Poe saw why Baxter was so confident about the ischium. It certainly looked like that of a tetanuran—reptilian, yet oddly avian. Which stood to reason, in light of new discoveries. The modern birds were no longer regarded as a separate class; they were, in fact, an order within the reptilia. Birds, it turned out after years of suspicions, were in fact reptiles, just as humans were apes: the clades proved the relations.

‘I think you’re right,’ Poe told Baxter, ‘It’s saurischian, but probably not sauropodomorphic. The ischium and the base of the pubis here—’ He was pointing to tiny details with massive mitts on his hands; hastily, he pulled the mitten off and pointed in at the bone again. ‘Right here, I mean. The base of the pubis isn’t what you’d expect a prosauropod—oh damn.’

‘What’s that,’ Baxter muttered, still scooping away the snow.

GREMLIN

'I'm stuck.'

'You're what?' Baxter turned back to see what Poe had got himself into. 'Oh Jeezuz. Where in hell are your contact gloves?'

'My what?'

'Your—' Baxter yanked off a mitten, revealing a shiny glove beneath. 'Your contact gloves. What you wear under the mittens so you don't stick to things like pens and clipboards and bones which have been supercooled to negative twenty-five damn' degrees.'

Poe grinned sheepishly. 'I guess I missed that one.'

'You remember that Safety First thing I told you about last night?'

'Yeah. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking.'

'Good enough. Just think about thinking next time. How stuck are you.'

'Uh...pretty good. About like getting your tongue stuck on a swingset pole, except I can't just drool all over this to loosen it.'

Baxter pondered the situation.

'Okay. That bone's not just gonna lift outta the ground for us. I think we're gonna have to chip away the part you're stuck to—'

'What? Not on your life. I just need a way to pry myself free. Have we got a file or something? If I can just kinda slice off the epidermis, I can get my glove back on and that'll be that.'

'Might hurt a bit,' Baxter said.

'It'll hurt less than just yanking my hand away. And, as numb as it's getting, I'm kinda concerned about leaving my fingers behind when I do it. Let's just cut the dead skin off and be done with it.'

Baxter nodded, producing a pocketknife. 'I imagine you've probably got frostbite on your fingerpads as it is. Course, the knife'll wanna stick to you too.'

'The knife is portable. I can thaw that off back in the chopper.'

'You're a brave kid, Doc.'

'Or stupid.'

'Bravery is never stupid,' Baxter said, easing the knife's blade into position. 'It can be dangerously unwise, but it's never stupid.'

'Okay. Ready when you are,' Poe said, 'The back of my hand's getting numb now, too.'

'Right. Here we go. Need a bullet to bite on?'

'No; but I might see what Cooke charges for a bag of weed.'

'It'll be on me. Here we go now.'

Poe pulled up and away as far as his skin would let him, trying to ignore the cold sting as the blade sawed back and forth at his fingertips. Drops of blood bounced about on the bone and snow, frozen and spherical.

'Just about through the first one,' Baxter said, 'Once it's free, don't let it touch anything else or we'll have to start all over again.'

'R—Right,' he acknowledged through the pain.

His index finger popped loose, and he held it as high in the air as he could, sucking in frozen air through clenched teeth.

'Halfway done,' Baxter told him.

PAROXYSM

Poe craned his neck to look at the underside of his index finger. Frozen blood coated what might have been the muscle. In any case, he'd lost the prints from his fingertip—possibly permanently.

Baxter had begun sawing through the bond between his middle finger and the bone. It stung like mad, but Poe remained as motionless as possible, ready to pull away and get his mitten back on his hand at the first possible instant.

'Just about...almost...maybe a centimetre to go here...I know this has gotta hurt, but it's just about...okay...*done! Go!*

Poe's finger came free in a spatter of frozen spheres of blood; he swept his hand through the air, stabbing it into his readied mitten.

'Go-go-go!' Baxter told him, scattering to his feet, 'I want you in that chopper doubletime! Let's move it!'

Poe got to his feet and ran, quickly running out of air, but daring not to stumble in the snow. Dimly, he saw the others looking at him. But he lacked the breath to explain. He just ran.

Baxter, despite his age, kept up with him, even bursting ahead and getting the chopper's cargodoor open for him. 'Go-go! In-in!' Once Poe was inside, Baxter followed, pulling the cargodoor shut from within.

Poe stripped off the outer layers of winterwear with his good hand, instantly feeling the sting of the heat: the interior of the idling chopper remained in the high seventies—nearly a hundred degrees warmer than the ambient temperature beyond its windows.

'Oh, *man* I can't believe I did that,' Poe complained.

'Live and learn,' Baxter told him, 'We've all done some...dumb things out here. Lemee catch...my breath and I'll tell you some of...my funnier little mistakes.'

Poe grinned, nodding and gasping.

Cooke knocked on the window of the chopper, shrugging. Baxter waved at him—short, downward strokes: *go away; we're fine*. Cooke ignored it, opening the pilot's door and hurrying into the cockpit. 'Sorry, Boss. But there's a trail of blood leading back here. If it's a problem, I wanna be close by to evac y'all outta here.'

Baxter nodded. 'Just as well...it's prob'ly...nothing. Just a slight...mishap back at...the site...oh damnit...do me a...favour and go...back and grab...the mitten I...that I left there...please.'

Cooke nodded gravely. 'Two shakes,' he said; then he was off into the snow again.

Baxter turned to Poe again. 'Okay...let's have a look at...that hand while we've...got a minute...to ourselves.'

Poe nodded and pulled the mitten back off his bloodied hand, offering it to Baxter, palm up.

Baxter huffed at it, trying to see the extent of the damage without touching anything. 'That's a...pretty good chunka...skin missing on the...on the second finger there.... I think we're gonna...gonna hafta get you back...back to the camp and...treat that proper...properly...you think?'

'We just got here,' Poe said, regaining his breath, 'I'm not sure it's that bad...just stings a lot.'

Cooke returned with Baxter's mitten. 'Okay, so what's the plan? He asked, 'Are we heading back?'

GREMLIN

Baxter looked over at Cooke. 'Take a look at...at this here.... You think this needs some...some dealing with?'

Cooke leaned in and examined Poe's fingers. 'Oh yeah,' he said, 'Me, I'd get that dealt with asap. It's your call though, Boss.'

Baxter nodded quickly, coughing into his reclaimed mitten to clear out his throat. 'It is and I call it. Now, the question is whether to take us all home, or leave the team here without an immediate ride. And there's no right answer to that one.'

'Oh, hey, listen,' Poe urged, 'It's nothing; look.' He wiggled his fingers, 'I'll be fine in a couple of minutes. I just need to rest and warm up first.'

Baxter was nodding dismissively. 'Your vote's counted, Son. But it's already decided. You're goin' back. I just gotta...Cooke: go see what the others wanna do. We've been up here a good hour and got mosta the snow cleared out. It'll be clear the next few days; we can afford to kick off early today if they're getting cold yet.'

'Will do, Boss.' Cooke returned to the great outdoors.

'Be straight with me,' Baxter said, 'You really okay?'

'Physically?' Poe asked, 'Great. Mentally? I just wanna get that cryoloph outta the ground and into the lab. That thing's been waiting in the ground at refrigerator temperatures for the last, what, hundred and ninety million years? You *know* the marrow's gotta be intact. I can't wait to get it under a microscope and see what's in there.' Poe laughed. 'Although I guess I'll have to use my left hand for a while. I can't *believe* I did that.'

'Sounds like it mightta stopped hurting though.'

'Pretty much. It still feels sore, and a little itchy. But the real pain is gone now.' He looked at his fingers again. The blood coating the trauma was melting quickly, and starting to drip. He held his mitten underneath his hand to catch the drops.

'Is that *new* blood,' Baxter asked, 'or just the old stuff melting in the heat?'

'Little of both, I think,' Poe said, 'I can feel it pulsing. So at least I didn't freeze a lot of capillaries shut out there.'

'I really wanna get back and have that cleaned out,' Baxter said, 'I don't want any clots getting into your bloodstream.'

'Yeah. Or bits of rock and bone,' Poe agreed.

Baxter grimaced. 'Hadn't thought of that. I was trying to avoid the deep meat back there; I prob'ly scraped the rock pretty good though.'

'It's harmless. I wiped out on a dirtbike once when I was seventeen. I'm still pulling bits of sand and glass out of my shoulder. It's harmless.'

Baxter studied Poe's fingers again. 'Maybe so. But I don't like the way the redness is spreading. Could just be the heat in here, maybe. Does it feel warm?'

'Yeah. Almost hot. But I think that's just from the sting going away. You know how it stings like hell for a minute after you manage to touch boiling water, and then feels really warm for another few minutes after that?'

'That's an antibacterial reaction. Your immune system heats up the spot you burned, trying to kill anything invading the site.'

'Then I probably got some bits of rock in this after all. It's getting pretty warm. It itches, too.'

'We'll hit it with some peroxide back at base; that oughtta put a quick end to that.'

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The door opened and Cooke climbed into the chopper again. 'We're set,' he said.

'The others?' asked Baxter.

In response, the cargodoor opened and the rest of the team began to pile in. 'Little cold today?' Baxter asked, moving forward to the passenger seat up front.

'Cold enough to leave when the ride leaves,' Myers replied, 'I could go for some coffee, too.'

Cooke flipped switches, readying the chopper, then hopped out long enough to secure the cargodoor from the outside.

'Seatbacks and traytables,' Baxter announced before the rotors could get loud enough to drown out his voice. He got his headset on and buckled his harness.

Cooke got back to his seat and scanned over the instruments. 'All set,' he told his headset as he pulled it over his ears.

The chopper lifted away, swinging about and heading back down the mountain.

Chapter Five

Denver, Colorado

Friday 21st December 2012

Trevor Page was a professional assassin. A serial killer for hire.

He and his cat lived otherwise alone in a modest flat in his hometown of London. He'd been killing for a living for nearly twenty years. Now, having turned thirty-eight in October, he was tiring of the gig.

Serial killers, he was well aware, tended to be white males ranging from twenty-five to thirty-five. There were countless exceptions to the profile, but that was the average. He'd never given the statistics much thought, personally—they were trivial and cliché—but he'd borne them in mind merely to avoid them: in his business, patterns were deadly. Being now over thirty-five, he was beginning to take the numbers more seriously: his penchant for murder was losing its hunger.

It was becoming a job. A job paying seven or eight figures a year, taxfree, but a job nonetheless. A chore. A mundane dharma which seemed to require less attention than he gave it.

He couldn't afford to get sloppy. The cops finally had the upper hand. Even back in the nineties, when he'd got started in the business, they were linking genetic evidence to killers. Today, they were filming them from traffic signals and satellites. There had been a time when the success of the cops and the criminals was decided by which party had the faster vehicle, to the extent that John Dillinger had once written a letter to Henry Ford, thanking him for producing such fast get-away cars; but that had been nearly a century ago. In the information age, everyone was accountable, and accounted for. It was no longer just a matter of sneaking up on the Target, but also of sneaking past the cameras.

And, lately, it was getting boring. He needed to quit. At least for a while.

As a kid, he'd thought it would be fun. Not being an assassin, as such; just being a murderer. At eighteen, he'd joined the army to learn how to kill. He'd been transferred quickly to the Special Air Service: his psychological profile, along with his stamina and intellect, suggesting that he'd serve most effectively in covert operations. But he'd outgrown the SAS within a year. Maybe it was just bad timing, but he'd had better things to do than spend the early nineties cleaning up the drying mess in Kuwait. He'd parted with the Service in 1993 and disappeared into the world with little more than his training.

Now, pushing forty, he was here in Denver, driving down Colfax at three in the morning, stalking his prey.

He thumbed open his computer and glanced at the screen. A simple, unsaved textfile he could shut down and purge irretrievably from the RAM at an instant's notice contained all he needed to know: the Target's name, its habits, its car, and its crime. The latter was Employee Theft: the Target was a two-bit pusher

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who was only producing one and a half bits. Its employer wanted the Target's extermination to set an example for the rest of the peddlers.

Page had given up trying to work out what dealers were thinking when they skimmed, conceding instead that they were definitively stupid people. The whole drug trade was staffed nearly exclusively by morons. Page had known one outstanding exception: a kingpin who, upon netting enough from brokering street shit, had expanded into prescription narcotics, bribing the FDA for approval; his income had increased tenfold in the first year.

This current client—the Target's judge, jury, and employer—was no such animal. The guy was an invulnerable joke, making every attempt to appear more brandoesque than he actually was, and breaking character every third sentence to mention his dead mother, Jesus, or both. On the other hand, Brando had produced a briefcase containing fifty banded sets of twenties on demand—fifty thousand American—which Brando's accountant [a guy in his late twenties who'd have looked more at home shiftmanaging a McDonald's] had counted out and advanced to Page as a retainer. The other fifty thousand would be paid out upon completion of the mission.

It was a job. It paid the bills, and failed to thrill him. He needed some time off, before the monotony outgrew the danger.

What he needed to do was to go off on some sort of adventure. A safari. His various colleagues went on hunts once a year or so, bagging elephants and crocodiles. Trevor's problem was that, apart from the human animal, there was no species he actually enjoyed killing. Regardless the textbook cases, he'd never been one, as a kid, to torture kittens and foxes. He killed people. That was his thing.

Unfortunately, poaching homosapiens was internationally outlawed. PETA and their bullshit notwithstanding, killing people was still a greater crime than killing spotted owls and manatees. As much as he'd have liked to wander down Main Street USA with a SPAS12, blowing people's heads off at random, there was no practical way to do it outside a videogame. And he was tiring of videogames as well.

Clocktowering with a decent Ruger was less risky: ten years ago, the Free-way Snipers had got away with it for weeks before fucking up and getting caught. But that was another cliché. It was clinical. He might as well leave a timebomb in a mall, or launch a damned missile from three countries away. Killing people was an experience to be had in person: the smells; the screams; the whites of their eyes. Half the game was sneaking in and out without getting splattered by the blood. It was a hands-on activity.

That was another one of Page's abnormalities: statistically, male killers preferred guns, while the females, being more emotional, would use knives, needles, and other methods of stabbing. Page, while not tremendously emotional—at least, not in any psychologically normal manner—liked the feel of skin and muscle fighting the losing battle against a blade. He liked hearing and feeling an axe penetrating the back of a skull. Or a machete cleaving the spine at the cervical vertebrae. It was primitive and carnal. It made the job worth doing. He'd have done it for free, if philanthropy were practical in this day and age.

Colfax, as it happened, was the longest street in the damned country. Page had got a room at one of its dismal motels near Chambers as a base of operations. His 2013 Corvette had looked out of place among the antiquated Monte Carlos

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and Cutlass Supremes in the carpark, but it hadn't been parked there long; the room had served mostly to store its wheels. Having readied the car for the job, Page had pulled quietly out onto Colfax, heading west, coasting along between gentle surges to the accelerator and watching for the Target.

The Target's pattern was simple, but irksome. It would likely be on or near Colfax, anywhere between Chambers and Federal—possibly driving; possibly parked at any given Subway or Wendy's; possibly idling on one of a hundred perpendicular streets. The Target's customers would know the car—a purple 2008 Pontiac GTO. Page would know it too.

Page was now nearly to Federal, passing Speer and approaching the bridge across Interstate Twenty-five. He hadn't seen any evidence of the Target yet—the car, the individual, the expected collection of junkies gravitating toward a fix, nothing. And that was bothersome. West of the freeway, the territory beyond Federal fought to gain yardage. If the Target were to be found within the zone of dispute between rivals, the situation would become more complex.

Page had been in such a situation before, some years ago. He'd found a Target in enemy territory and liquidated it, only to find himself being mistaken by the Target's enemies as some third party, attempting to conquer the land. The debacle had resulted in a quick, furious gangwar, with bullets firing in all directions. The Iraqis had been archaic, but trained to handle weapons; gangies were barbaric melee warriors with no sense of strategy at all. Page wouldn't trust them to play checkers.

He'd survived the clusterfuck, noting with some bemusement that two in five of his enemy had been cut down in friendly fire. By the end of it, he'd taken to crouching in and behind perforated cars, sniping the few remaining morons as they wandered brainlessly down the street, barking out questions and demands. It had been fun, in a way, despite the odds against his survival. In retrospect, he'd been amazed by the utter lack of cops on the scene over the course of half an hour. He'd never seen so much as a newscopter overhead.

Precisely the safari he'd like to go on. Maybe in some forgotten thirdworld country somewhere. Some uncharted village full of people he could chop up at his leisure. Possibly—

He caught the GTO an instant too late, parked facing northbound on Fifth—the final street before the bridge across Twenty-five. With the proper tyres, he'd have trusted the car to make the turn; but he'd traded those out. And he didn't trust the twit riding his bumper to slow as quickly as his Corvette. He crossed the bridge and turned back.

Eastbound across the bridge, he realised two upsetting things: turning left onto Fifth was impractical, requiring him to pass the street again before turning round for a third pass; also, the GTO had been alone on the street—no lights, no customers, nothing. It was optimal for Page's purposes, but terribly unlikely. Passing Fifth on his way to the next good place to turn back, he slowed and peered at the abandoned GTO. Its numberplates were correct. He'd found the car. What he hadn't yet found was the Target.

A moment later, he was westbound again, slowing to turn onto Fifth, ready to tap the brake or punch the accelerator, depending on the GTO's reaction to his

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presence. He hit the indicator light and rolled lazily up behind the Pontiac, slowing to a stop two metres behind it.

Letting the Corvette idle there for a few seconds, Page decided that the GTO was parked indeed. He pulled forward, passing the Pontiac and parking in front of it.

The Target's car was dark and cold. Abandoned. Yet, Page saw, a figure sat motionless in the driver's seat. He pulled his Glock out of the compartment he'd installed beneath the steering wheel and opened the door.

There was no movement in the GTO as he approached it. The form within sat still, leaning slightly against the door. Possibly asleep; possibly dead; possibly hoping to surprise him. He got to the window and tapped the glass.

Nothing.

Frowning decisively, Page tested the door, which opened freely, dumping the Target out onto the pavement, dead and grey.

Shit.

The primary mission was over. Someone else had got to the Target. Post-cranial bruising suggested, at first glance, that the Target had been clubbed from behind. Possibly a hammer; possibly a bat; certainly enough to kill it dead. Bother-some. Page considered the options.

One option he didn't have was standing here over a corpse, waiting for someone cruising along Colfax to glance to the north and see this. He jammed the Glock into the back pocket of his Levi's, under his coat, and grabbed the stiff by the collar, dragging it aside and nudging the Pontiac's door shut with his knee before relocating to the gap between the two cars. Another option he wasn't comfy with was leaving the body here with any of his skincells on it. He popped the Corvette's trunk by remote.

In preparing for the gig, Page had lined the trunk with two layers of sheet plastic sandwiching a cardboard tray for the body. Now, he lifted the corpse up against the taillights and folded it neatly into place, its legs following its torso by simple inertia; he closed the trunk and crouched to examine the back of his car.

So far, the various lightcasings remained intact. The Corvette was clean and shiny, with no external evidence of its cargo. *Good.*

The street between the two cars belied a useless scene: someone wearing Converse Chuck Taylors—arguably the most ubiquitous sole pattern on the planet—had walked from one to the other and back, possibly dragging something large and heavy. Alongside the footprints were hints of any given General Motors sedan—thin, all-weather radials, and the last thing one would connect to a Corvette. *Good.*

Satisfied with the trail of evidence, Page opened his door and got in, removing the Glock from his pocket and replacing it to its compartment in a single motion. Starting the Corvette, he pulled forward slowly, clicking his seatbelt into place and exploring the maze of streets ahead.

After a moment, he found an outlet back to Speer, turning northwest and driving to the freeway, tapping the accelerator to remain within the speed limit. The freeway could take him fully out of the state; he settled for the cosy residential district ten miles to the north, surrounding Hunters Glen Lake.

GREMLIN

In the dead of night, there was little activity up here. A few porchlights burned by default. He saw no one on the small, curving streets. The residents had gone to bed hours ago; the paperboys and milkmen wouldn't arrive until after four. He found a spot on Emerson in which he could park the Corvette a matter of feet from the water.

Working quickly but precisely, he pulled the body out of the trunk, wrapped in the topmost sheet of plastic, dragging it to the edge of the lake, then returned to grab the rest of the plastic and cardboard, along with a large Tupperware bowl containing various tools and jars of chemicals. He saw no evidence of the corpse in the trunk. *Good.*

Back to the body on the sand. He widened the mouth quickly with a coping saw before extracting the teeth with a pair of vicegrips and placing them into the bowl. He also cut into the Target's portside leg to remove the surgical pin he expected to find there; he placed that in the bowl as well.

The eyes were more delicate work. He removed them carefully from the ocular cavity and stored them separately in formaldehyde: his client would want them for retinal analysis—evidence that the Target had been eliminated before paying out the remaining fifty thousand.

The rest was easy. Page cut away the Target's clothes and set them aside before removing its skin with a simple acidic compound, erasing any tattoos and birthmarks.

Left with an anonymous lump of muscle and bone, Page sliced open the stomach and added his acid to its contents to help the digestion along. Now to get rid of the thing altogether.

He returned quickly to the trunk and grabbed the last tool: a self-inflating rubber raft. He filled it quickly and rolled the corpse inside before setting it adrift in the lake. Replacing the remaining evidence to the trunk in the sealed bowl, he retrieved his Glock and tightened the silencer.

He waited for a few minutes until the raft had found the centre of the lake, then sighted down the barrel and sent a single, silenced round into its hide. Ninety seconds later, the raft and the body had left the surface. Waiting a few more minutes for the bubbles to quit, Page swept his eyes over the sand for anything he might have missed, and over the darkened houses along the lake for any signs of onlookers; he saw neither. *Good.*

He put his gun away and started the engine, returning quietly and exactly to the motel on Colfax, near Chambers, to finish with the car.

He seriously needed a vacation. If killing people was becoming tedious, finding dead bodies was outright boring. He pondered locations as he accelerated down the entrance ramp.

There was Africa, which remained largely prehistoric. He could eliminate entire villages there with little more than a large rock. But it lacked atmosphere—glass and steel and lights. The screams echoed incorrectly off of trees and mud. He was happiest in urban jungles.

Interstate Twenty-five connected to Seventy-six, which got him to I270 through Commerce City. That's what Africa lacked: the smell of burning rubber and oil. Africa smelled like uric acid and rotting plants. It wasn't where he wanted to be. Asia wasn't much better, for the most part.

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I270 expelled him onto Seventy, eastbound, which would connect him to I225 for a mile or two before letting him off at Colfax, just west of the motel. Traffic remained sparse and sleepy. He never even saw a squadcar.

South America was just Africa again, separated by hundreds of millions of years of plate tectonics, but still remarkably identical in smells and sounds. And, of course, somewhat more modern than its estranged half. Cameras and telecommunications. America with more trees.

He reached the motel and parked by the door to his room.

America was the right place to be. For all its technological and cultural advancements over the prehistoric countries, its citizens were largely clueless. If there were anywhere on the planet where he could kill in peace...

One last thing to do to the car before he got away with it. He reclaimed the Corvette's wheels from the room, swapping them out one at a time with those of the Oldsmobile he'd cannibalised.

The thinner wheels all fit within the Corvette's trunk, but not well enough for Page to close it. He secured it with a bungeecord and returned to the motel's office to drop off the key to the room.

'Help you?' the clerk asked.

Page shook his head quickly. 'Y'already did,' he claimed, faking a southeastern American accent, 'Damn' if I c'n sleep, all th'noise goin' on round here. 's'Blackwell, Room 'Thirty-se'en o't there.'

'Blackwell 'Thirty-seven,' the clerk agreed, 'Sorry 'bout the noise, Man. Can't give out no refunds, y'know.'

Page shrugged. 'I used y'all's room like I paid fer. Good'nuff fer me.' He dropped the key from his gloved hand to the counter. 'Y'all take care an' gaw'bles, Son.'

The clerk shrugged, tossed the key into the room's mailbox behind him, and went back to his magazine. Page nodded once, eagerly and stupidly, before returning to his car.

'Only in America,' he muttered, English again, glancing to the left before stabbing the accelerator and fishtailing out onto Colfax, eastbound. Maybe it was just time to give up and go full auto. Fuck the evidence. Camp out at Colfax and Broadway and just open fire. He might even last for an hour or two before some rookie cop got in a lucky shot. He turned south onto Tower, abandoning the plan.

The trunk was clean. The body was submersed. The wheels had to go. He turned right onto Mississippi and drove along until he found a row of slums hidden on a sidestreet, where he parked the car and tossed the Oldsmobile's wheels and the last of the Target's remains into the trashskip; the preserved eyes could go into the hidden compartment with the Glock.

Under the painful chemical lights, he looked over the trunk again. No signs of blood; potentially some hair and fibre, but nothing he was terribly concerned about. Later today, he'd drop a cigarette into the boot and let it singe the lining, then take it to someone to have it gutted and repaired. For now, he'd got away with it. He went off to find a restaurant.

'Just one tonight?' the hostess asked at the podium, 'Got a smoking preference?'

GREMLIN

‘Usually Dunhill,’ Page acknowledged, met her vacant stare, and nodded, clarifying, ‘Smoking. Please.’

The hostess smiled, grabbing a menu, and leading him off toward a booth. ‘How’s this?’ she asked, stepping aside and giving him a chance to sit down before relinquishing the menu—a modern trait he found particularly irksome; he’d rather have had her drop the thing on the table and simply leave.

‘Fine. Thanks.’ He sat down as quickly as possible, neglecting to remove his coat first, to get it over with. If there was anything worse than having to dance with a hostess just to get into his seat, it was having her trap him in there while chatting about nothingness.

‘Oh, wow,’ she started, seizing on a discussion, ‘Are you British?’

‘Um, yeah,’ Page confessed, ‘English. Thanks again.’ He held out his gloved hand for the menu.

‘I’ve always liked Britain,’ she said, fondling his menu and drifting off into some remote area of her mind, ‘I mean—I’ve never actually *been* there, but...well, *say* something. I love that accent.’

‘“Say something”; right. Um: might I get some coffee when you’ve got a moment?’

She giggled as only Americans could, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet. Then the message within the accent got from her ears to her brain and made its point. ‘Oh! Coffee! Totally. Just one minute on that.’ She turned to go, noticed the menu in her hands, and aborted. ‘Oops. Here’s a menu for you,’ she announced, thrusting it at him.

He took it, smiling diplomatically until she’d turned away again, then scowling at it, nearly seeing her skincells lurking on its cover. Repulsive.

It was a curious proclivity, he knew. He could stand to touch people when he was dismantling them; the rest of the time, the mere thought of tactile contact made his stomach turn. Even contact buffered through things like menus disturbed him. He lit a cigarette.

SURGEON GENERAL’S WARNING, the side of the pack read, *Quitting Smoking Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health*. He nearly laughed at it. *Americans. Quitting as a Professional Assassin Might Do Some Good As Well*.

On the other side of the Smoking Section, a group of UrbanityChallenged gangies chattered and chortled endlessly in a manufactured language. Page ignored them in favour of the menu’s own thoughtless dialect: *Eggs Benedict, with hash browns and your choice of pancakes, toast, or muffin*. He wondered when and how *hash* had become a damned adjective.

He was coming apart. And he knew it. The Ancient Deity of Sanity required a sacrifice. Kill a few people, and he’d be right as rain again. Tonight hadn’t cut it, as it were.

The gangies shrieked and cackled in the corner. *Hash some browns*, the Ancient Deity of Sanity suggested.

It was immaterial, of course. Ethnicity wasn’t an issue, to him; that they were still breathing was the issue. Someone needed to put a stop to that. And the Ancient Deity of Sanity had already charged its agent.

‘Here you go,’ the hostess proclaimed, returning fully to the table before demonstratively pouring coffee out into the mug; she set the coffeepot on the edge

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of the table and the mug directly in front of him. He noted invisibly that her fingers were clutching the outer brim. 'Have you decided yet?'

He hadn't. But he was willing to settle in a hurry. 'Yeah; the Eggs Benedict, please. And, I wonder: could I trade in my hashbrowns for some chips?'

'For...sorry?'

'I'd prefer a plate of ch—of *fries*, if that's possible.'

'Oh! Fries. Chips. Got it. Wow. You are so *British!*'

He smiled again. 'Oh: and white toast sounds fine, if I could.'

She nodded. 'Eggs Benny, white toast,' she paused for an instant before effecting the worst attempt he'd heard to date at what sounded like a painful mix between a cockney and Geordie accent, 'Und Cheps.' Abandoning the parody, she returned to her native drawl. 'Absolutely. Did you want a side of ranch for the fries?'

'Ranch? Dressing? Um...all right; why not. Thanks.'

'Two minutes,' she promised.

The prehashed browns erupted in another burst of vexation. The waitress née hostess grimaced apologetically. There was a moment of empathy as he understood her expression: *they bug the hell outta me, too*. She, he thought, could live after all.

And then she was gone. Only he and the hashbrowns remained. For the moment.

The body is gone. The trunk is clean.

The Glock was back in its hidden compartment. That was good. He had no need for it here. In fact, it was potentially a liability. Weaponry came in other forms—most of them supplied by the victim, he'd found.

One of the hashbrowns glanced over at Page, catching his reptilian stare. It postured, stiffening and puffing out, arms lifting slightly out to the side from its torso. Page raised a silent eyebrow at it. It spasmed its neck and lost evident interest in the predator.

The body's gone. The trunk's clean. The gun and eyes are hidden.

He could do it. He could manipulate the situation correctly. He wouldn't be blamed for anything; he'd be commended. He was sure of it.

The trunk's not clean. Hair and fibre. Trace evidence.

The Ancient Deity of Sanity repudiates: *No one's going to CSI the damned boot over anything you do in here.*

Page counters: *The Bill of Rights went offline ten years ago; for un-Americans, doubly so.*

The Ancient Deity of Sanity asserts: *It was replaced by the media. Good luck serving any time if the cops bumble across evidence without a search warrant in a car owned and operated by a Desert Storm Veteran.*

Page scoffs: *Reporters don't rule the courts. Yet.*

The Ancient Deity of Sanity counters: *No, juries do; and the media rule them.*

Page denies: *Fallacy.*

The Ancient Deity of Sanity becomes restless: *The Corvette's in the fucking carpark. No one's going to glance at it. Kill the tasteless cunts.*

Page concedes: *I'll see what I can do.*

The Ancient Deity of Sanity rests: *Do that. Now watch out: your food's here.*

GREMLIN

The waitress set the plates on the table. ‘Here you go,’ she all but sang, ‘I had them put the fries on a separate plate to keep the hollandaise off them. Can I get you anyth—oh! The ranch. I’ll be *right* back.’ She fled.

Page studied the plates. And the table. And the total lack of cutlery. He grabbed a chip and popped it deftly between his teeth, letting the saliva exchange salt and oil for sogginess.

The waitress reappeared, brandishing a small, plastic medicationcup of dressing. ‘I had it all set to go back there, and I left it on the dang’ counter.’ She giggled again in exactly the manner he’d come to suspect the internet’s *LOL* to be meant to indicate: obstreperously and brainlessly.

The din of the hashbrowns effected that pained look of attrition in her face again, and Page remembered to let her live.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said quietly, tilting her head slightly toward the gangies, ‘They’ve been here for three hours now.’ She lowered her voice to a bare whisper. ‘They never leave a tip, either.’

Page nodded slowly, regarding the hashbrowns warily. He emulated her pained expression, communicating his agreement.

Her voice returned to normal and jubilant. ‘Okay! Have you got everything you need now? Catsup? Tabasco?’

‘Silverware?’ he added genially.

She rolled her eyes skyward. ‘See? I always forget something, don’t I.’ She spun round and snatched a roll of flatware from a bin bolted to the wall, spinning back and holding it aloft in a single motion. ‘Silverware,’ she reported. ‘Anything besides that?’

Page grinned with a hint of predacity. ‘That should cover it, thanks.’

She nodded, slightly uneased. ‘Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you tonight.’ She smiled quickly and retreated back toward the kitchen.

He finished off his Dunhill and mashed it out in the ashtray, turning to the food. The fries were overly crisp; the eggs were nothing short of deplorable; the toast, given enough jelly, was about what he expected it to be: somehow soggy and dry at the same time, lacking any flavour of its own but a stale, carbonised essence at the crust. He finished off the lot in a matter of minutes—quickly, but not hurriedly. Peckish, but not starving. Just clearing the way as a matter of course toward dessert.

Dessert, he suspected, would be hashbrowns.

Layering the silverware on the smaller plate, and that onto the larger one, he slid the whole mess aside and lit another Dunhill, sipping at his coffee and waiting for the inevitable.

He felt suddenly anxious, sitting there with nothing to do but sip and smoke. He pondered his strategy.

The plan formed. He set the cigarette in the ashtray and got up from the table, seeking a copy of the day’s newspaper, if available. He found several in a magazine rack in the lobby, grabbing one and returning to his seat. There, he pulled his Dunhills out of his pocket and conspicuously began to pull one out of the pack before noticing the one he’d left in the ashtray. Smirking, he dropped the pack onto the table and reclaimed the cigarette he’d begun.

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After a moment of looking through the paper, he glanced at the date: *Thursday, December 20, 2012*. With broadcast distaste, he folded the paper back up and tossed it across his table to the empty seat beyond, then stood with the evident intent to go find a newer copy out front in the machine.

Three steps from the table, He stopped, glancing back at his pack of cigarettes, and then clearly at his pack of hashbrowns—three males and three females. After three or four seconds of advertised consideration, he turned away, continuing on his mission to find today's paper out front.

Fortunately enough, as he pulled on his gloves and walked outside, the delivery truck was just pulling away from the machine. He slid four quarters through the slot and pulled out a fresh copy from the stack within.

Returning to the warmth inside, he neglected to remove his gloves. He didn't particularly want to *touch* any of the damned hashbrowns, after all.

And there, at his table, stood the first of his victims, fingers poised atop his pack of Dunhill, eyes combative and wary.

What...?' Page started, stopping abruptly at the sight of it groping his property.

'These any good?' it demanded, lifting the pack and showing it to him.

'Yeah,' Page said. 'So put them back and go away.' He hoped the camera over the register was recording sound as well as footage; he wanted this to look like the hashbrown's fault after the fact.

'Man? Now why you gotta get all up in my face with that shit!' the hashbrown whimpered, throwing the pack against the wall at the inner side of Page's booth; it dropped behind the sugartray. 'The fuck you think you dealin' with, Nigger!'

Page grinned ferociously, casually noting the estranged presence of the waitress through the door; her expression suggested that he was in the right. 'I'll reiterate: go away.'

'The fuck is "reitalate", Nigger! That, like, some sorta British for suck-adick?'

The balance of the hashbrowns reacted in a laughtrack of *damn* and *no you din't* and *ammm*. The master hashbrown turned to his group and grinned stupidly, covering his mouth bashfully with one hand and discarding them with the other; Page took the opportunity to step forward by a metre.

It turned back to him. 'Shit, Nigger: sneakin' up on a brother? Ain't wise in this particular location, knowwhaddIsayin', Dog?'

'Wisdom was never my prowess,' Page told it, advancing by a final step. He was now two feet from his Target. His next move would be painful. 'Last chance: go away.'

'"Last chance"! Damn, Nigger: y'all *threat'nin'* my black ass now? Let's see you back that shit up, Cracker.' It stepped forward and tapped Page on the clavicle.

Page blinked. 'Strike One.'

'Oh no, Nigger; that wasn't no "Strike One". Lemee show y'all "Strike One".' It punched him ineptly in the jaw.

Page reset his gaze, quickly tonguing his teeth, scoping for damages. 'Strike Two.'

GREMLIN

‘The fuck, Nigger; y’all dustin’, or what. Fuck it, Man; y’all gettin’ served nohow.’

‘Yes,’ Page agreed, grinning and nodding slowly, ‘I’d heard it was in your nature to serve. Particularly upon any given plantation.’

This time, there was no warning. The instant it had processed Page’s statement, the Target punched him with all its might.

‘Strike Three.’

‘Watcha sayin’, Nigger: I’m *out* now? Fuck y’all. Here comes the pain, yo?’ It swung aggressively—enough so that it fell offbalance; Page snatched its wrist out of the air and twisted it, forcing the hashbrown to fold forward and rotate to the side, its forearm pinned to its back between its scapulae; Page slid his free hand behind him, pulling a fork out of a roll of silverware in the bin mounted upon the wall.

‘The *fuck*, Man!’

Page ignored it, bracing its middle finger and plunging the fork directly through the carpal; amidst the screams, he twisted it along the circumference, peeling the skin and muscle away from the bone. Cleared of those attachments, the finger popped off neatly into Page’s waiting palm. He released the hashbrown, offering the emancipated digit: ‘Sorry it’s not a cigarette, “Dog”.’

The rest of the gaggle jumped to their feet. Page watched them blankly. At the edge of his vision, he saw the waitress leap for the register, grabbing at the phone. ‘Fifty-nine fingers to go,’ Page told the hashbrowns, ‘I’ll bet I can collect, say, twenty, by the time the bobbies arrive. Any takers?’

The gaggle of hashbrowns deflated a bit, pondering their odds. Page gave them a moment to make a decision before sitting down, sipping his coffee, and reclaiming his cigarettes from behind the sugartray. He set the finger he’d taken on the stack of plates at the far edge of the table.

The Ancient Deity of Sanity critiques: *Disappointing.*

Page agrees: *Yeah; but the pain and, ah, ‘service’ are a gift which keeps on giving: death is the easy defeat.*

The waitress cautiously approached Page. ‘I called the cops,’ she whispered, ‘You think you’ll be okay until they get here?’

Page neither laughed nor killed her. He simply answered: ‘I think we all understand each other now.’ And that was true. The situation was clear: the hashbrowns had no chance of defeating him; they also had no interest in trying to get past him to the door, even under pain of impending arrest. As for Page himself, he’d responded with precisely the level of force required to put an end to the conflict. The only judge opposing his actions would be the Ancient Deity of Sanity. And that judge, Page understood, was a mythical construct.

Other deities? Who could say. If Jehovah or Al’lah or Fucking Cthulhu wanted to punish him with a plague of righteous angels...Page would take their fingers as well.

The Ancient Deity of Sanity responds: *Be careful what you wish for...*

PAROXYSM

Chapter Six

Memphis, Tennessee

Friday 21st December 2012

Rick Marlowe was the webmaster of ConspiracyFacts.com. 2012 was very much his year.

On 20th March, there had been a solar eclipse. Routine though those were, they always set off the nuts hitting his site. The last significant one had, after all, been over Zambia in 2001, eleven years ago. The annular event this year, while unimpressive on its own, crossreferenced nicely against everything else 2012 had to offer.

On 6th June, in a related story, the second twenty-first century solar transit of Venus had occurred. That no one knew what in hell a solar transit was had little impact; the nuts might have been disappointed to have learned that it was nothing more than a tiny planet obscuring an insignificant percentage of the sun; what mattered was that the mention of Venus was, to them, proof of some sort of astromilitary coverup. Which suited Marlowe just fine.

There had, of course, been the presidential election on 6th November. In modern times, presidential elections tended to make conspiracy nuts out of everyone in the country. However....

13th November 2012: a total solar eclipse had plunged IndoAustralia into darkness. The sun had become black as sackcloth. Clearly a harbinger of, well, Today.

21st December 2012. Which had begun five hours ago. Here in Memphis, anyway. The Rosetta Stone of conspiracy theory. There were hundreds of conflicting expectations for Today.

The most rational was, naturally, nothing much at all. The entire issue with the date was that it had been the last one plotted into the Mayans' LongCount calendar. A sort of twenty-first-century Y2K bug. For whatever reason—most probably that it happened to be a date, well beyond the probable lifespan of the Mayan civilisation, which featured all factors of the calendar they were completing—the Mayans had abandoned the math at pretty much precisely this moment in the future.

That they'd simply figured that enough was enough was too simple an explanation for the nuts, though they curiously disregarded a similar abandonment within modern computers: what could be called the *actual* Y2K bug, whereupon Unix machines, counting up one second at a time from 1st January 1970, were poised to reset their count in the year 2038. By the same token, Microsoft machines, typically counting up from the year 1900, would run out of seconds to add in the year 2179.

In all probability, the greatest cataclysm to result in those future years would be some amusing chronological resets on a few web servers, provided that

GREMLIN

any current machines would remain in use by 2038, let alone 2179. Rick doubted that the nuts were ignoring this impending doom for those reasons, though; more likely, computers and math lacked the supernatural appeal of extinct civilisations seeming to predict the end of the world by declining to plot out the phases of the moon beyond five millennia.

That explanation being boring, the nuts had seized upon a number of 'facts' to support their delusions.

On 11th August BC3114, the LongCount had begun at 0.0.0.0.0, by the Mayan convention. Today, one million, eight hundred seventy-two days later, the LongCount stood at precisely 13.0.0.0.0. Which again suggested to the rational that the Mayans had abandoned the damned thing at a convenient point fifty-one hundred years in the future; to the nuts, however, the mere presence of the number *13* in this strange little IP address belied evidence of Badness.

It didn't hurt that the number *13* could be numerically manipulated toward *12*, *21*, and *2012*, either. Numerology was the engine of conspiracy paranoia.

Rick regarded it all as total bullshit. What mattered to him was that a site he'd started up as a joke of a hobby of a timewaster had grown into a massive community of morons posting their bullshit to his boardsystem and clicking on his adverts all day and all night; ConspiracyFacts.com had evolved from a sort of budgetless LandoverBaptist.org into the cnn.com of the congenitally retarded.

Today would be the real test. In a number of ways. Rick had already dumped an extra fifty thousand bucks into mirroring backbones to supply the feed to a record number of idiots. However ironically, his concern now was whether the postcount in the scripting behind his webfora would end up rolling over, not unlike the Unix dates would in twenty-six years, due simply to the barrage of posts to his site. And that wasn't a phantom concern; it had happened before, when he'd had his postcount set to the arbitrary limit of 99,999 possible posts. Post Number 100,000 had never occurred; its contents had hit the server as Post Number One, overwriting the original Post Number One and fucking everything up for the board.

The new postcount was set at 9,999,999, which was the greatest number the script would allow. Based on the last database backup, he currently had room for another three million posts or so. With some eight hundred thousand registered imbeciles likely to post once a minute with new thoughts, testimonies, and LOLs throughout the day...gathering another three million posts by nightfall wasn't actually impossible.

He hit the board to see how the land lay.

The day is finally upon us, people. The end of the world. Its today that the papal vuh (sp?) predict's 4 the end of the 4th world which came after the 1st 3 were the god's failed 2 make mankind (us) before creating mankind 4 the 4th world.

Today the 4th world ends. Then the 5th world begins.

The 5th world is the last 1. That's when mankind goes extinct 1nce and 4 all.....

PAROXYSM

Glee. Another fucking moron. *Click on an advert, Dummy; justify your existence.*

The Fifth Fucking World. Pretty much the same myth as the one in the bible's *Revelation*, albeit significantly older and arguably better-written. The *Popal Vuh*, being the Mayan equivalent of the bible, preempted *In the beginning* with the more eloquent *This is the account of how all was in suspense, all calm, in silence; all motionless, still, and the expanse of the sky was empty* before going into lengthy detail about the Five Stages of Creation, from the First Three Failures [the modern bible had lost most of its deities' failures, like the tale of Lilith, to various edits over the centuries] to the Fourth World—presumably ranging from the start of the Mayan Empire until, some would claim, Today—to the Fifth, in which the cataclysm taking form on the Final Day of the Fourth World would somehow expand into some sort of supernova and exterminate mankind.

Whether that was more plausible than dragons and talking sheep materialising and destroying mankind was something Rick had less than enough interest to decide.

He hit F5 to see what replies this moron might be eliciting.

Woo-hoo! Extinction here I come!

And,

How does this extinction happen exactly??? What causes mankind to die out?????

And, finally,

Whatever pops into your mind at the last minute. OH NO!!!
IT'S TEH STAYPUFFED MARSHMELLOW MAN!!!!!! RUN FOR
YOU'RE LIVES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Christ.

In fairness, Rick supposed, there really was no cogent identification of the Agent of Extinction in the Fifth World. The most popular 'theory' had it that a comet or asteroid would strike on the Final Day of the Fourth World, and the nuclear winter following the initial catastrophe would ultimately relegate mankind to the fate of the dinosaurs. Evidence supporting that hunch was, of course, nil; evidence *against* it included the utter lack of observed astral bodies approaching the planet Today.

Perhaps the Mayans had been predicting an *invisible* comet. Possibly one shaped like a dragon and sounding like a talking lamb.

Rick opened a new tab in the browser and brought up his travel plans. Masquerading as a roving reporter for ConspiracyFacts.com—a job description which rarely carried much weight in the real world—he tended to funnel percentages of his advertising income into bullshit writeoffs; the one he'd set up for Today had him boarding for takeoff in two hours. Once in Los Angeles, he'd be onsite to watch for invisible, dragonshaped, sheepspeaking comets at CalTech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, armed with half a dozen digital camcorders. He'd arranged it though a graduate student who was in on the joke in general.

GREMLIN

F5.

So where will the comet or whatever actually strike? And when?

Good question.

probably in australia or close to it thats where the eclispe was after all

And not a bad answer.

IF IT DONT STRIKE TODAY THEN JUST WAIT CUZ OTHER PPL THINK ITS ON THE 23RD NOT THE 21ST SO THERES STILL SOME TIME LEFT

Always. There's always some time left. Because the conspiracy nuts didn't really want to have the world end, or to be abducted by aliens, or to discover that the mafia had killed Kennedy; they simply wanted to fight a harmless, invisible enemy for the sake of manufactured conflict. Rick suspected that even the nuts themselves understood that at some basic level.

Not that their potential innate understanding got in the way of their spending habits; they still bought bumperstickers from him:

I WANT TO BELIEVE

www . Conspiracy Facts . com

Which, again, suited him fine.

Pity about Australia, though. If only the little twit had suggested that a week ago. Rick could have been writing off a ticket to Sydney to watch for the phantasmagorical comet from Ground Zero.

No matter. In a few days, the Fourth World would be dead and gone, replaced by whatever Impending Doom came next. There would be other excuses to leap into danger down under.

PAROXYSM

Chapter Seven

Mount Kirkpatrick, Antarctica
Friday 21st December 2012

Alexander Poe was down with the sickness.

It had been six hours since the chopper had returned to basecamp. Now, safe and warm within the structure, Poe was freezing and sweating at the same time. It wasn't the flu, as far as he could tell. It was similar, but worse.

His fingers were bandaged up, which aggravated matters. They itched and burned like all hell. The heat extended up to his elbow. It was infected. Badly.

Separate from all that, his head hurt. And his back hurt. Everything hurt. The headache was the worst part: a dull thud at the base of his skull, and at his temples, and behind his eyes; his eyes themselves seemed to bulge with every heartbeat, occasionally blurring his vision. It was maddening.

He sat on a sofa in The Room, fully dressed but for his shoes, covered in two blankets—one covering his shoulders from behind, and the other spanning from his feet to his throat. Still he was cold, and yet sweating. He shuddered involuntarily.

Baxter sat nearby at the table, glancing through a handful of medical books. He looked up from one of them and over at Poe. 'Any changes yet?'

Poe shook his head, regretting it instantly. His head throbbed; his neck creaked. 'Not really,' he rasped, choosing his words carefully, favouring the shortest and most precise; the act of breathing was murder on his throat. He paused for a slow, careful breath. 'No *good* change. Symptoms are worse.'

'Worse but the same? Nothing new to report?'

Poe considered that carefully. 'No new ones. Headache...sore muscles and joints...stomach cramping...almost flulike but...new.'

Baxter nodded curtly. 'You've had the flu *before*, I take it. Pretty rough stuff?'

'Rough stuff. This is worse.'

Baxter pondered for a moment, glancing back at his book. 'Ten to one,' he proposed, 'you've got the flu *again*. Simple, ordinary bug. You probably got it back in Chicago, in fact, and it took until now to display any symptoms.'

Poe dug an arm out from under the blanket and held it aloft in protest. 'Not flu.'

'Not flu,' Baxter echoed, 'Well, maybe not. Ten to one it is, but that don't mean a hellavalot. Could be something else. No shame in getting the flu, though, if that's what this is. People get it every year, so we don't give it much credit anymore; but it can be deadly—literally, in fact. There was a pandemic a hundred years ago. Well, ninety...yeah: ninety-four years ago, I guess. Nineteen eighteen. Influenza wiped out one in ten people on the planet. Maybe one in five. More deaths than World War One accounted for, anyway.'

GREMLIN

Poe shrugged in response, rotating his hand at the wrist in concession. 'Could be flu.'

'It's not a debate,' Baxter assured him, 'Flu or not, better or worse, it's a problem. Whatever it is, it's hurting you. And we can't do a lot for you all the way out here. And we sure as hell can't do much for you if what you got is communicable. This time tomorrow, we *all* could be sick. And if it hasn't gone away for you by then, as I suspect it won't, then you'll be in no shape to take care of us.'

'The plan,' Poe croaked, clearing his throat painfully and reiterating: 'What's the plan?'

Baxter shrugged. 'I haven't quite got one just yet. But I'm thinking the plan is gonna involve a trip back to McMurdo. Somehow.'

'Somehow?' Poe, dedicated though he was to remaining at Kirkpatrick, was developing an interest in heading back to civilisation, insofar as McMurdo was actually civilised.

'It's the headache that's got me worried,' Baxter explained, 'We're not driving to McMurdo, y'know. Cooke's good at flying low, when the weather allows—and it should be clear for the next eight hours or more. You think you could survive going up another hundred feet, in a flying paintmixer? Or would that blow out the sides of your head?'

Poe exhaled. 'When.'

'Be at least an hour, I s'pose. But within three, if I'm right about the weather. Call ahead to McMurdo to advise them of the sitch, hop in the bird, haul ass across the bottom of the world, and see what they can do for you with their med unit.'

Poe breathed for a moment. 'Okay. I'm up for it. Prob...might sleep through flight anyway.'

'I'm almost tempted to fill you up with a bottle of vodka first,' Baxter said, 'Warm you up and put you out. But vodka's not the best thing for the flu; and if it ain't the flu, I can't guess what's good or bad for it. Could you eat, y'think?'

'No!' Poe barked. He hyperventilated for a moment. 'Sorry. No. Food bad. Stomach full. Of something. Could puke already.'

'Okay. We'll cancel that order,' Baxter joked, 'You should probably have some more water, though. Gatorade, maybe. Fluids are gonna be your friend for the next day or two—flush out your whole system so you can start over again.'

'Ick,' Poe said, 'No Gatorade. Maybe water. Try to hold down.'

Baxter nodded and climbed to his feet, pausing to pat Poe's knee through the blanket on his way to the kitchen. 'We'll get you through this. Just hold on for two, three hours, and you'll be comfy and warm in McMurdo, slurping who knows what antibiotics through an IV.'

Poe laughed, quietly and painfully, grimacing at the taste of whatever was flaking loose in his throat. It tasted like copper. Old blood. Maybe bile. He held his breath, head spinning slowly, waiting for his stomach to calm down again.

From the sofa, eyes blurring, he could just make out the titles on the spines of some of the books Baxter had been looking through. One of them was *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Dangerous Diseases & Epidemics*, he noted with some humour. Another was Baxter's copy of the palaeontological tome, *Extinction: Bad Genes or Bad Luck?*

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Poe smirked, in spite of the pain and nausea. Gaining favour over the Chicxulub Theory—that the asteroid hitting the Yucatan in the Maastrichtian Age of the Cretaceous Period had caused or complicated the Fifth Extinction, which had claimed the last of the dinosaurs at the Cretaceous-Tertiary Boundary—was Bob Bakker's hypothesis that the archosauria had been wiped out by a global plague. A simple little bug, probably orthomyxovirid in nature, leaping from species to species within the Saurischia and Ornithischia at the end of the Mesozoic Era. It was possible that *Velociraptor mongoliensis*, *Triceratops horridus*, and *Tyrannosaurus rex* had been wiped out by, of all things, the flu.



The chopper flew along some fifty feet above the permafrost, convulsing under the power of its own motor, driving millions of needles into Poe's skull.

Teeth clenched desperately, he lay motionless on a stretcher in the hold, layered in blankets, lamenting his heavy shoes. He wanted to pull them off to give his feet more room than they had. But he couldn't move. The weight of the blankets pinned him down. It was all he could do to lift the dishtowel he'd appropriated as a handkerchief; his nose ran profusely with a dark, phlegmatic, acrid fluid; snot mixed with something—blood, tissue flakes from within his lungs, lymphatic fluid; he had no precise idea. It was dark, and it smelled and tasted horrible.

His jaw was agony: his lymphnodes were swollen, and he had what he supposed was a periodontal inflexion in his gums; pustules along the roots of his teeth throbbed mercilessly in time to the pounding in his temples. He pressed his tongue against one of the abscesses along the roof of his mouth, and it popped open, spilling out hot, slimy, coppery seepage. He painted it onto the dishtowel, trying to get it out of his mouth, trying to keep it away from his stomach, trying to expel it from his system altogether. It was black.

Tormented but lucid, Poe analysed his symptoms again. It wasn't the damned flu; he'd worked that out long ago. It almost seemed zoonotic, which was impossible. Terrifying, but impossible. The only virids he could think of which presented the symptoms he now displayed were in the filoviridae—the thread virus—which included what had once been called stretched rabies, due to its shape and its effects, but had since been renamed *Ebola Zaire*.

Baxter had renounced his usual seat up front, and sat on the deck of the chopper next to Poe's cot, keeping a surreptitious eye on him. It occurred to Poe that Baxter was likely pretty good at poker; whatever concern he had at the moment was obstinately masked by an aloof thoughtful expression. Poe knew better than to take that for granted. He was sick; Baxter knew that; the only question was how sick he really was, and how sick Baxter supposed him to be.

And the communicability factor, which hadn't been discussed beyond its introduction back at Kirkpatrick.

Poe got that. If he was contagious—and he probably was—it was likely too late to worry much about it now. Contagion typically ended where the symptoms began. The effects of the bug itself were, in fact, the effects of the body killing the bug. A bug's communicability was generally one of the first things to go once the

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immune system counterattacked the invader. If Poe was going to give this to anyone else, odds were good that he already had.

Therefore, he and Baxter were on board along with Cooke, and the rest of the team. After landing at McMurdo, and unloading Poe for analysis, the rest of them would hang around until—probably—christmas, waiting for their own symptoms to display. If none ever did, they'd return to the dig, with or without Poe. Otherwise, McMurdo was the better location in which to become suddenly and violently ill.

Better still would have been Chicago. But Poe was in no shape to fly that far. McMurdo had a competent staff. And Christchurch was a quick hop from there, if this proved to flabbergast McMurdo as it had Kirkpatrick.

Poe drooled into his towel again. The sore on the roof of his mouth continued to expel the sickly fluid. It tasted cleaner now, as though most of its ingredients had run themselves out, leaving pure blood. Probably just his own system running a bit of its own detergent through the little hole, trying to keep it clean so it could heal over without further incident. Another minute and it would clot, remaining sore for a few days, like a good pizzaburn, but otherwise a thing of the past.

The minute went by, but the blood kept coming out. Poe pressed his tongue against the little hole, then took it away, getting a mouthful of blood from it. It wasn't stopping after all. His platelets weren't forming a scab. Also an indication of Ebola. Also impossible.

He swallowed the blood, to his stomach's displeasure. He didn't want to spit out a hundred millilitres of blood and alarm Baxter out of his fallow pokerface. Not yet, anyway. At McMurdo, there would be plenty of time for candour; for now, it was simpler to wait it out, live through the ride, try to will his skull into postponing its imminent explosion.

But damnit it hurt. His head was in a slow vise, his teeth under attack by phantasmagorical drills, his stomach spinning and cramping, his eyes swelling and failing. And his mouth was bleeding, and he couldn't swallow any more blood yet; he made an effort to conceal the crimson stain on the towel as he wiped it away from his teeth.

His fingernails, he noted, were darkening toward blue. He shot a concerned glance at Baxter, in spite of himself.

Baxter's eyes had been focussed on the dishtowel; they snapped over to meet Poe's. He'd seen the blood, but he wasn't going to bring it up. There was simply nothing productive to say about it. Baxter merely nodded.



McMurdo had been waiting as they'd landed. A team of medical technicians had sprinted out into the snow, dragging their gear upon dogsleds. Expertly, they'd got Poe inside and into a bed before the chopper's rotors had slowed to a stop.

The next twenty minutes had been a whirlwind of preliminary tests: temperature, blood pressure, pupillary response, stethoscopes and needles and lights and diagnostic machinery. Poe hadn't understood much of it as it was going on; his

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brain had sprung a leak where the pain had punched through; nothing much was registering with him anymore.

Then, all the tests had suddenly ended. He was alone in a bed in a room on a continent which didn't support human life. And that felt right to him.

Poe closed his eyes.



'Hey there,' came a voice in the darkness, 'Heard you're not feeling so hot today.'

Poe's eyes rolled open to halfmast. An MD in a labcoat stood at the foot of his bed, glancing at his chart. Poe tried to clear his throat and ask what time....

'...is it.'

'What's that?' the doctor asked, replacing the clipboard to the hook at the foot of the bed and glancing up again.

'Time. Day.'

'It's about seven now. You've been here for three hours.'

'Diagnosis.'

The doctor's posture stiffened slightly. 'We're still running some tests on that,' he said, 'We've ruled out a few things, though.'

'Ebola.'

The doctor grinned. 'Ebola's negative. So is HIV, incidentally. It could be a new strain of the flu, but it's a bit early to tell that yet.'

'Virus?'

'Yup. Virus. And not one I've personally seen before. You're a palaeontologist?'

'Vertebrate. Took PhD this year.'

'Bravo. When you're up and running again, I'll show you the imaging from the electron microscope. It's an interesting little guy, whatever it is.'

'Prognosis good?'

The doctor didn't answer, instead pulling a chair up to the side of the bed and sitting down. 'We're not there yet, Doc. Without knowing what you've got, we're not sure how to get it out of you, or what to expect it to do next. Probably, given time and rest, it'll just take its ball and go home. The best thing for you to do now is to relax and just bore the thing to death.'

'Feel worse now. Than before.'

'That's probably a good sign, actually. You're feeling worn out, like you just went ten rounds with Godzilla? That's your system sending all resources to fight this inflexion. It means that you're winning the war.'

'Tired. But worse. Bad. Head bad. Stomach.'

'Okay, okay,' the doctor protested, 'Calm down and relax; save your strength to fight the enemy here. Headache and stomach pains? Like cramps?'

'Cramps. Yes.'

'I'm assuming that the cramps are probably the result of your stomach trying to reject your saliva. You got hit hard by this thing; every ounce of fluid is carrying off dead bugs, into your stomach in this case. If you feel like vomiting, it's probably a good idea. One thing we haven't ruled out yet is some form of toxic

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shock. The faster you can purge all infected fluids, the sooner you'll be back on your feet.'

'Where. Puke. Place.'

'Gimee just one sec to grab a nurse; we'll get you all set up.'



Poe's eyes rolled open. He was alone.

Time had come to an end. The interminable sun played through the slit blinds, dust sparkling like stars in its beams. The world had gone away.

That's what had happened. The world had gone away. Poe was Patient Zero. Typhoid Mary. He'd survived the virus, but given it to Baxter. Or Cooke. Or the doctor. Or a nurse. Someone had walked off with his disease, and given it to someone else. Ten others, who each gave it to ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million, a billion, seven billion. The world had gone away. Now it was only Poe. And he wasn't feeling so well himself.

Lines ran into his forearm, dripping in fluids intravenously. Saline, he supposed. The bag hung from the stand thingy. Clear with black, blurry lettering. Whatever it was, it remained half full. The world had gone away recently.

Taped to his wrist was a button. Probably for calling in a nurse back before the world had gone away. He pressed it, for old times' sake.

He looked at the window again. The sun. Day or night, the sun would be there. For a little while. It would finally set sometime around May. Then, Antarctica, home of the Last Guy on Earth, would slip into eternal darkness. The temperature would fall halfway to absolute zero. A hundred and fifty degrees below freezing. And Poe would finally die.

'Doctor Poe?'

A ghost. A voice from the past. Poe turned to see whether it was visible. The ghost looked like a nurse. Maybe there were two people left on the planet. And, lucky her, she didn't look sick. Copulation was in order. Perhaps she was fully immune to the virus; if so, then the kid would be immune or not; society could be rebuilt. Maybe.

'Sick,' he told the nurse. Or the ghost. Whichever she was.

'I know,' she told him, a painful look of sympathy on her young face. He suspected her to be about twenty-four. Or to have died and become a ghost at twenty-four. Unless ghosts aged after becoming ghosts. Maybe she'd been younger when she'd *thud*.

'No!' he shrieked as his headache returned fully. Zero to Armageddon in a heartbeat. And another heartbeat. And it hurt. *Thud*, and it hurt. *Thud*, and the walls of his skull rattled with pain. *Thud*, and he clenched his jaw and *thud* it had to end now it *thud* had to be stopped *thud* it couldn't go on *thud* there was no time *thud* between heartbeats *thud* to get over *thud* the pain before *thud* he had to *thud* think of *thud* maybe if *thud* couldn't think *thud* needed some *thud* thing for the *thud* pain something *thud* like—

'Morphine.'

Thud.

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'I can't,' the nurse began, but a glance at Poe's face silenced her on that point. 'I'll get Doctor Reynolds.'

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

It had to end.

Thud.

There were limits.

Thud.

This was his.



But...what happened to the thudding?

Thud.

Oh. There it is. Good.

Thud.

Funny, it doesn't *feel* like a thud anymore.

Thud.

I guess I just got used to it.

Thud.

The ceiling is going by so *fast*.

Thud.

Oh. So are the walls.

Thud.

No. Maybe they're where they belong.

Thud.

I'm the one who's moving.

Thud.

So fast now.

Thud.

You Must Be This Tall to Ride This Ride.

Thud.

Well, as long as I'm not held responsible for this mess.

Thud.

Look at the sky. It goes on for ever.

Thud.

Oh. Big plane. Big, big, big.

Thud.

Shush. They're talking about us.

Thud.

I'm fine. It doesn't hurt anymore. I'm just flying to the plane.

Thud.

Why not? How much morphine have I had?

Thud.

Well, that's impressive. But I'm not as think as you drunk I am, Ociffer.

Thud.

GREMLIN

Tell you what. Cancel the morphine, and bring me barbecued ribs.

Thud.

Yummy.

Thud.

We're going into the big plane?

Thud.

Don't you want to look at my shoes first?

Thud.

Pretty sky, bye-bye.

Thud.

Up, up and away....

Thud.

I could use a nap.

Thud.

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Chapter Eight

Christchurch, New Zealand
Friday 21st December 2012

Thud. Beep.

This is new.

Thud. Beep.

Rhythm *and* percussion.

Thud. Beep.

This isn't a plane.

Thud. Beep.

Ambulance.

Thud. Beep.

On a road, I think.

Thud. Beep.

Chicago?

Thud. Beep.

No. Not Chicago. England.

Thud. Beep.

No; maybe Australia.

Thud. Beep.

New Zealand. That's where people sound like this.

Thud. Beep.

They're not keeping the rhythm.

Thud. Beep.

Man I'm hungry. I never got my ribs.

Thud. Beep.

I need more than this. More than fucking saline.

Thud. Beep.

Meat.

Thud. Beep.

Lots and lots of meat.

Thud. Beep.

Don't bother cooking it. Just givit. I'm starving.

Thud. Beep.

The hell with it. I'll get it myself.

Thud. Beep.

Thud. Beep.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

I wouldn't say No to some barbecue sauce, but this shit ain't bad at all.

GREMLIN



Stephen McClain staggered over to the incoming ambulance, holding his forearm tightly, staunching the flow of blood. He held his arm aloft, still gripping it, to show the EMTs that he was one of the casualties.

The ambulance slowed to a rapid stop next to the overturned remains of the first.

‘You injured?’ asked the driver, flinging open the door and hopping down to the pavement.

‘Yeah,’ McClain acknowledged, brandishing his bleeding arm, ‘Lunatic just ran up and bit me.’

‘What’s that?’

‘From the other ambulance. I don’t really know yet. I was following it—kinda using it to get through traffic on the way to—anyway, the thing—the ambulance hit the brakes at me and toppled over on its side like this. I got stopped and got out of the car to—I dunno—to help, or something. I guess.’

‘You’re an American,’ the EMT told him, cautiously prying McClain’s fingers away from the bite, ‘Here on holiday?’

‘Uh, vacation, yeah. Friends in town.’

‘How’s your trip been? Up to now, I mean.’

‘Good. Up to now.’

‘This hurt a lot?’

‘Yeah. I got bit by a dog once when I was a kid. That didn’t hurt as much as this does.’

‘Okay, let’s step back over here so I can get it cleaned up and bandaged, right?’

‘Right. Okay.’

‘Looks like a pretty good mess, though,’ the EMT observed, ‘If you don’t mind, I’ll just call in some backup.’

McClain started to answer that he didn’t mind, but the EMT was already on his radio, advising the dispatcher of the magnitude of the situation.

Someone’s wires must have got crossed somewhere in the first place. To send two paramedics to a scene like this was laughable.

The ambulance had been moving along at a fair clip, presumably heading for a hospital. Then it had swerved violently to the left, then the right, nearly got back on course, and finally swerved hard enough to the right that it flung itself sideways, tilting over onto its portside and sliding down the street in a shower of sparks. McClain had hit the brakes, nearly sliding into the back of the ambulance; he hadn’t got used to the rental even now, on his last day in New Zealand; but for this, he’d have been back at the aeroport by now, waiting to board the plane back to the states.

He’d got out of the rental and approached the ambulance, watching for signs of survivors. Stopping at the back doors of the thing, he’d glanced through the upper window just in time to see a madman lurching toward him beyond the glass. He’d backed up instinctively, saving himself a good smack on the chin as the guy had got the upper door flung open and simply toppled out. An instant after

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that, the guy had been back on his feet, wearing, strangely enough, extreme weather gear, saturated with blood.

McClain hadn't reacted in time, upon seeing the condition of the madman. He'd just got his arm up to defend against the attack. Then, the guy had grabbed him and sunk his teeth into McClain's forearm.

No warning. No explanation. Just pain and revulsion. Then, the lunatic had turned away, almost as if he'd been looking for someone in particular. Finally, the guy had sprinted off to his next victim—a woman who had also stopped and got out of her car at the scene of the accident.

In all, McClain had seen the guy attack a good dozen people before running madly off into the night. He might have gone off after the guy, but he'd lost too much blood already. And, really, by the time that thought had occurred to him, he hadn't even been sure which direction to go.

So, he'd sat down in his rental again, waiting for help to arrive.

The EMT returned. 'Okay. Let's have another look at that bite.'

McClain gave him his arm again. 'Listen, uh...is this gonna be okay, you think? No offence, but I'd kinda like to get home again. This isn't something I'd have to be hospitalised over, is it?'

'This? Nah; shouldn't think so. There's a lot of blood here, but the trauma itself is superficial. Lemee finish cleaning this off, and you'll see that for yourself.'

McClain peered at the wound, his forearm twisted toward the technician. 'Really? Just a scratch?'

'Bit more than a scratch, but less than fatal, I think. A pretty good bite. But it's mostly the skin; the muscle beneath looks okay, to me.'

'Does it need stitches?'

'I could stitch it, or I could just butterfly it. You're probably looking at a pretty good scar either way. But that just impresses the ladies, right?'

'Heh.'

'Let's just antibacterialise this and tape it over. Sound good?'

'You're the exp—'

'Where's our backup?' the other tech called from several metres away, 'I'm losing this one! And there are two more here who can't wait long!'

'Shit. Okay, listen: you're basically okay here. There's still some bleeding, but,' the tech was already backing away toward the larger mess, 'you'll keep for a few minutes; I gotta see to these others. Just wait right there, okay?'

'I...okay.'

The tech nodded quickly and turned away, jogging over to his colleague.

McClain waited a moment, watching the two work frantically on the woman who'd been attacked second by the maniac. Then he wandered over to the wrecked ambulance.

Inside, blood coated everything. It looked as though there were two guys in there, both dead; he assumed that a third corpse sat seatbelted in behind the wheel. After a quick glance back to the EMTs in the road, he shrugged and shuffled through a stack of bandages until he found a package with little blood on it. He opened it and unrolled it around his arm. To him, it looked okay now.

'Hey, Guys?' he called, approaching the two, 'I found some stuff in the wrecked one—the wrecked ambulance. I think I've got this fixed up now.'

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The tech he'd been talking to glanced back at him quickly, 'Yeah? Okay: great. Just one minute here, okay?'

'Well, I was just saying that I've got this all bandaged up now. See? And I thought I'd go ahead and get moving again. I've got a plane to catch here.'

'Uh, yeah. Well, okay. You're sure you feel okay?'

He wasn't sure of that at all. Under the bandages, his arm was beginning to burn and itch. But this wasn't the time to worry about it. The two specialists who had been sent out were hopelessly busy with the critically wounded. Having what amounted to a bad scratch, McClain figured he could stand to wait to get back to the states before dealing with it properly. So: 'I think I'm good. I'll just get out of your way and onto my flight. I can have someone look at this back home.'

'Okay,' the tech agreed, not glancing back, 'Have a good trip.'

McClain began to wave, but aborted; no one was looking at him anyway. He returned to the rental and started the engine. He'd be okay for the trip back home.



'You're just letting him go like that?' Max, the second EMT, asked.

RJ shrugged nonchalantly. 'It really wasn't that bad. Not like this. Just a scratch on the surface.'

'Lotta blood for a scratch.'

'He's probably just got a low platelet count. His problem; not ours.'

'Can't save everybody,' Max agreed.

McClain's car pulled away in the distance.

'So, what was his story, anyway?' Max asked, 'Did he have an explanation for all this?'

'Said some guy freaked out and bit him. And these others, I guess.'

'This was one guy? The hell'd he go?'

'Away? We'll find out sooner or later. Fucker'll bite a few more people, I reckon. Probably already has. Might explain why our backup ain't backing us up.'

'Shit. Pulse is dropping here. Mind entubing while I grab the paddles?'

'On it.' RJ pulled the gear out of the case; Max hurried back to the working ambulance to grab the defibrillators.

This was fucked up. RJ had seen some weird shit in his three years as an Emergency MedTech, but this was one for the books. One fucking guy. *What drives a guy to—*

Rabies?

Not terribly plausible, but not impossible. Rabies in primates was rare in developed countries, but it still killed nearly a hundred thousand people every year. Mostly in Africa, where the virus was endemic.

Rabies. Something in a forgotten corner of RJ's mind reminded him of the word's origin: the Latin *rabere*.

Rage.

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Chapter Nine

Los Angeles, California

Friday 21st December 2012

Randy Cash stepped outside for a cigar. Fucking LA. Psychopaths. Earthquakes, drivebys, sharks, hurricanes, acid rain from the smog, a cybernetic assassin for a governor; yet the LosAngelinoids were irrationally terrified of cigarettes. The bible had missed that Sign of the Apocalypse: amidst these devilish attacks of nature, Man would pussy out in the face of carcinogens.

Strike One against the evolutionists, though. That Natural Selection shit wasn't helping anyone grow an immunity to cancer, now *was* it.

He got his cigar going as his eyes adjusted to the brightness, even through his polarised sunglasses. Fools. Even now, a group of them were collecting across the street, reacting to a bank of HDTVs in the window of a pawnshop. Probably just another moron trying to outpace the Orange Country Sheriff's Department on the 405.

Randy could just make out the image on the upper set: a seventy-two-inch wallscreen. It didn't look like a freeway chase, to him. Giving the traffic a moment to thin out, he walked briskly across the six lanes for a better look.

The screen's HUD identified the feed as that of CNN, broadcasting live from New Zealand. There was no sound, but the ticker running along the bottom of the screen described the story: *DEATH TOLL AT 47, INCLUDING FIVE POLICE OFFICERS. SUSPECT DEFIES ARREST.*

Fucking kivi wetbacks. You'd never see this shit in America.

'It's so awful,' one of the onlookers told her companion—a woman in her late forties or early fifties, and probably a damned dyke, 'Does anyone know why he's doing this yet?'

'Doing *what*,' a guy with a pillowbiter moustache and a hippack asked, 'Is it some sort of murderspree?'

'Some fucko just went ballistic,' a hoodlum announced; her hair was mostly green; her ears were pierced half a dozen times each; one of her earrings, Randy observed, was a cross. He scowled at her.

'It's been going on for a few hours,' claimed an antiquity who looked like Andy Griffith's Aunt Bea, but for her Reeboks, 'It was on the car radio all morning: some...man began running around and biting people.'

'Random people?' asked the pillowbiter.

'I believe so,' Aunt Bea confirmed.

The reporter on the screen held her fingers to her ear, pressing the wireless earbud lightly; snapping to attention, she mouthed something severe to the camera.

'Something's happening,' the younger dyke told her partner.

No shit, Ellen.

GREMLIN

The ticker fluttered for a moment, dropping *PRESIDENT DEPARTS ON SCHEDULE FOR GENEVA* in favour of *NZ SUSPECT SHOT AND KILLED AFTER INJURING 114 PEOPLE, KILLING 51*.

‘Rest in hell,’ Randy told the screen.

The reporter chick blathered on silently for a moment before saying something pointedly and nodding at the camera; she was replaced quickly by the anchor in the studio, who nodded back, smiling gravely. Resituating in his chair and talking mostly with his eyebrows, he mouthed a paragraph or two at the camera before swivelchairing to the side; another camera cut in to reveal the anchor sitting with a guy in tweed, who began gesticulating silently, grasping at the air with flexed fingers. Randy had no idea what he was going on about.

The pillowbiter coughed dramatically. Randy looked at him eyeing the cigar as though it were...a cigar, he supposed; he couldn’t imagine the little fruit being offended by anything actually offensive. He declined to apologise for sucking on something big and brown, instead watching for another break in traffic through which to return to his overpriced nonsmoking studio.



Rick Marlowe finished placing the camcorders on tripods throughout the room. Three were DVCs; two were the highbandwidth HDCs; the last was a tiny MPEG device recording to a forty-gigabyte MemoryStick. The HDCs would broadcast thirty frames per second at 1920 by 1080 pixels for the TLine viewers; the DVCs would send out broadbandfriendly 720*480 at 12fps.

His MPEG model was just one of his bullshit writeoffs. He’d thought it was cool, so he’d bought it and deducted its six-hundred-dollar pricetag; its quality, he’d discovered, was lacking: it was good for a basic 640*360 WebCam feed. It was a toy. On the other hand, the thing was the size of one of the DVC’s MiniDV cassettes; a camcorder the size of a Zippo came in handy for filming things he wasn’t supposed to film. The essence of ConspiracyFacts.com.

Wandering the circuit one last time to aim the lenses correctly, Rick opened the intrafeed to his laptop, ascertaining that everything was running correctly. Then he checked his watch and blutoothed the server, preparing to feed the six options into a bandwidth-detecting .fmv file on the site.

‘About set?’ asked Roger—Rick’s gradstudent contact here at JPL.

‘Looks that way. Feed’s ready to go.’

‘Watcha running?’

‘Sixway DotFMV. Basically a FlashFile autodetecting the throughwidth of the user, and feeding them the best video they can handle. If they’re at, like, a couple of megs, they get the twelfeframe at seven-twenty; TOne, TThree, and higher get an actual HighDef feed.’

‘Cool.’

‘Anyway: we’re green. One thing: the cameras are static, and pointed mostly at the monitor over there,’ Rick pointed to the large screen receiving the digitised image from the telescope, ‘So we’ll wanna stay standing in front of it, if we can. Oh, and, if you happen to care: I haven’t got a seven-second delay on this

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thing. If you fuck up, I'll know about it at the same time as a couple million nuts online.'

'Television has come of age.'

'Something like that.'

'I'm not too worried about it. You've got a disclaimer, right?'

'Oh yeah. I'm sharkproofed. My lawyers basically rewrote the boilerplate from Fox; the CarlinList's not a problem.'

'Then we're good. For all it matters.'

Rick grinned. This was a total waste of time, mostly by design. He could have done this over the phone a week ago: *Any comets approaching? No? Just making sure....*

But even 'failed' publicity stunts got publicity. Geraldo hadn't lost anything personally at Capone's Vault. Nothing he hadn't lost years earlier, anyway; like, say, integrity and objectivity.

Two things Rick had never tried to develop in the first place.

He looked again at his watch. ZeroTime. 'Okay. Let's do it.' He jabbed a key on the laptop and nodded to Roger. Roger blinked once, indicating that he was ready to go.

'Hey there, Factfinders,' Rick announced through his wireless LapelMic, walking out from behind the laptop and row of cameras, into the frame, 'Rick Marlowe here, reporting live from JPL in Pasadena to observe any approaching astral bodies on this Day of Days. I'm joined by Roger Stanton, who pretty well runs the observatory here. I'll, ah...defer to the expert on the most obvious issue: what's the forecast—are we in for a nuclear winter this year?'

'Hi Rick. Um...we—actually, for the record, we're not actually in Pasadena; this is technically La Canada Flintridge right here. The main gate's on the edge of Pasadena. To answer your question, though...well, let's have a look at the monitor. This is the current view from the telescope to our left—'

'That's the viewers' right, on their screens.'

'Uh, yeah. On the monitor itself...we're not seeing anything notable up there today. Though not for the usual reasons; the skies are nice and clear today, and, even now in the daylight, we should be seeing evidence of an approaching comet, if there's one to be seen.'

'That was my next question,' Rick confessed, 'Whether we'd even be able to see the thing, as bright as it is out there. Though I should ask, since someone bought it up on ConspiracyFactsDotCom, whether we'd be seeing a comet, if that's what we're watching for, if it was headed for the other side of the planet. We've got some reason to believe that it could be striking in or near Australia. Does that remain a possibility?'

'If so, it's a remote one. You're right, of course: we can't see the skies over Australia through this scope. What I *can* do, though, is to pull in the feed from telescopes on that side of the planet. Gimee just one minute to tell the computer about that. Now, it is early morning over there, so, again, we'll be searching daylight for any invaders; but we should know what we're looking for the instant we see it.'

'Right. Supposing that we did see a comet approaching, about how long would that give us. From, say, orbit to impact.'

GREMLIN

‘What, to get from the upper atmosphere to the ground, you mean?’

‘Yeah. How long does a comet take to fall, what, about a hundred thousand feet?’

‘More than that. Depending on what you mean by “upper atmosphere”, we’re talking about closer to a hundred thousand metres. Fifty or sixty miles.’

‘So, supposing that a comet moves faster than freeway speeds....’

‘It does. I suppose it would take a significant comet, travelling at terminal velocity...say about sixty kilometres a second or so...well, do the math real quick: you’ve got about two seconds, on the outside.’

Rick blinked. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Something like that. Maybe three seconds if the thing isn’t shooting straight down.’

‘Oh. So, if we could see a comet on this screen...we’d have about enough time to, like, say, ‘Oh, it’s a comet; pity there’s no time to react’.’

‘You’d have to say it faster than that, but yeah.’

‘And the effects?’

‘Those depend slightly on the comet itself. If it *were* a comet. An asteroid might be a little different too. But, historically—or, I should say “prehistorically”, I suppose—the sort of damage you’d expect from a rock or icecube measuring, say, five to ten miles wide would be...total.’

‘Like the Cretaceous.’

‘Exactly. A rock the size of Manhattan Island pretty well evaporated half the planet. That happening today—’

‘Literally today.’

‘Um. That happening today would—if we’re planning for Australia—probably vaporise that continent, firestorming Eurasia and Antarctica; here in the Americas...it’s all theoretical, but I’d be expecting massive tidalwaves in the first few hours, followed by months of rain—probably saltwater rain, in fact; that would lead eventually to snow, and we’d probably see the return of the glaciers within a year.’

‘Bleak stuff.’

‘Somewhat. All that notwithstanding, if you’ve seen films like, oh...“Armageddon” comes to mind. The assertion that “not even bacteria would survive” is total bullshit. Um...in a word. The fact of the matter is that this has happened several times before, and the bacteria very much *did* survive. Along with some higher animals. *We’re* still here, after all.’

‘The question on everyone’s mind being, “What about tomorrow”?’

‘Which brings us back to the monitor here. I’m happy to report our failure today: there are simply zero comets, asteroids, meteors, et cetera dropping in to kill us all. Whatever you’re expecting to end the world in Australia, I guess it builds from the ground up.’

Rick grinned. ‘So instead of watching the skies, we should be watching the news.’ He turned to the bank of cameras. ‘And that means you’ll wanna keep it locked in to Consp—’

On the monitor behind him, Roger had misunderstood the suggestion, and dropped the telescope feed for FoxNews: ‘—mains unknown at this time, as do the identities of most of his victims.’ Rick turned back to look at the screen. It

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showed a smallish community—possibly Dutch—reacting to some form of bloodshed; glancing at the lower left, he saw that it was, ironically enough, New Zealand. The reporter continued: ‘Local authorities are describing the man as a white male in his twenties, astonishingly enough dressed in polar gear. Now, remember that, here in Christchurch, it’s currently in the low eighties, so the man’s outfit is as perplexing as his rampage. Let’s go now to the footage of the attack itself, recorded earlier.’

The reporter was replaced by a videofile of a madman running into a darkened intersection, his skisuit dripping in fresh blood; there, he paused for an instant, hunched down like a quarterback awaiting the snap, eyes rolling sickeningly as his head darted about on his neck like that of a flustered cockatiel. Seeming to notice the camera itself, the guy moaned loudly—nearly a roar—and rushed the lens. The camera pivoted skyward, then jolted and snowed as it landed on the pavement. The madman’s knee could just be seen in the frame as hideous sounds played through the speakers: the cameraman’s screams, the madman’s moans, and the sound of a famished village attacking a carton of fried chicken.

The videofile faded slowly to a mugshot of the cameraman: *Larry Morton. FoxNews Cameraperson. 1987-2012.*

After a tasteful hold on the obituary, the reporter onsite faded back into the frame. ‘Our hearts go out to the family of Larry Morton, as well as those of the more-than-one-hundred victims in today’s senseless killingspree. Mitchell?’

The screen snapped back to the anchor in the FoxNews studio. ‘Thanks, Rita. I’m sure those families will appreciate the support. For more on this developing story, be sure to visit FoxNewsDotCom. We now go live via telephone to the president, aboard *Air Force One*...’

Rick stared at the screen for a moment before remembering how many screens he was currently on himself. He fluttered his fingers to get Roger’s attention and clicked off an invisible dial in the air. Roger nodded and switched the screen’s feed back to his telescope’s image.

‘Well,’ Rick announced, turning back to his cameras, ‘That sure as hell wasn’t part of the plan, Factfinders. But it certainly sounds like the sort of thing we’d like to hear more about. Perhaps one of our NewZealand...ish...NewZealous? Maybe one of our factfinders *in* New Zealand can get us an update on this, ah, event. I’m sure there’s more going on down there than FauxNews is allowed to tell us, after all.’

‘I think it’s “NewZealander”,’ Roger said.

‘Yeah. You guys know what to do with any footage you’re able to collect: upload those files to FactfindersDotConspiracyFactsDotCom in the public directory; I’m heading back home to Memphis in the next hour, and I’ll be able to look through your submissions for the rest of the night. If the FourthWorld is ending in New Zealand, we’ll get all the facts we can before the Ministry of Truth can cover it up.’

‘Orwell? Nice.’

‘This—this is Rick Marlowe for ConspiracyFactsDotCom, signing off.’

And now the awkward part: having no one to dial down the lights or to fade out the cameras, Rick could only step dramatically to the side, out of the frame, and hurry back to the laptop to superimpose the leadout.

GREMLIN

‘Clear,’ he said.

‘Sorry about the FoxNews feed. I thought—by the time I caught on, I was there.’

‘No, it’s cool,’ Rick said, ‘Better than cool. Helpful. Now we’ve got hours’ worth of shit to “theorise” about; maybe days’ worth. Good job.’

‘Can you get in trouble for, like, rebroadcasting FoxNews?’

‘Nah. Maybe if I just *did* it; but that was a pretty obvious fuckup. Besides: I doubt anyone at Fox even knows I exist.’

‘Go bite a few people. Then they’ll know.’

‘Heh. Whaddaya think’s a good title for this one? VampiracyFacts?’

‘Nah. Vamps are more, like, cultural. Or something. All “I vant to zuck ya blood” and shit. That guy was more of a...like an animal. A werewolf, or something.’

‘A zombie.’

‘Yeah. Yeah, totally. “Day of the Dead” sorta shit.’

‘Oh wow.’

‘Hmmm?’

‘I know this chick,’ Rick explained, ‘She runs a zombiesite. Uh...ZombiesAteMyBrainsDotCom, I think.’

‘Oh yeah? She cute?’

‘In a gothy way. She’s gotta be loving this shit. I should EMail her about it. It’d make her day.’

PAROXYSM

Chapter Ten

Des Moines, Iowa

Friday 21st December 2012

Cassie slammed the fucking door and stomped over to her desk, nearly smashing the laptop onto it before calming down enough to preserve her own property. *Fucking dick.*

It was turning out to be one of those days. First had been Donovan the WonderDummy at the damned mall, then that dumb fucking officious fucktard at Perkins, and, finally, Officer Taxbase [the same cocksucker who'd claimed to have smelled alcohol, in fact] actually giving her a fucking ticket for failing to stop at an abandoned fourway—as if she'd had a choice in the matter. *Plough your fucking streets, and I'll stop my fucking car.*

She dropped into her chair and plugged her laptop into the outlet. As it started up, she aimed the remote over her shoulder to turn on the television. The SciFi Channel popped into existence.

'I seriously need to start killing people,' she told her laptop as the browser loaded up. She clicked the quicklaunch icon for Outlook, too. On its startup, it began pulling down the EMail she'd got over the last few hours. She clicked the hyperlink to go from its splashpage to the inbox.

'Shit. Spamday,' she muttered, watching the doubledigits of a reported six hundred seventy-three new E-mails download. She eyed the subjectheaders casually, slowly seeing the pattern. Most of them mentioned New Zealand.

The Land of the StopMotion Monkeys.

She caught one as it scrolled its way down in the list.

From: 'Sandy Clarke'

Date: Friday, December 21, 2012 7:39 PM

To: webmaster@zombiesatemybrains.com

Subject: Have you seen the news from New Zealand?

Hey Cassie you probably already know about this but....in case you don't, there's a zombie killing people in nz today, or there was, I guess they shot it to death a couple hours ago.

Anyway I thought you'd want to now about it if you hadn't heard.

Sandy

Cassie blinked at it, and ArrowKeyed up to the next NewZealand message:

Subject: DID U SEE THE ZOMBY IN NEW ZAELAND???? COOL SHIT!!!

And,

Subject: There's no more room in Hell: New Zealand seems to be the hell mouth.

GREMLIN

And,

Subject: Peter Jackson was right, there are zombies in new zealand

She moved her hand instinctively to the remote and punched in Channel Eight over her shoulder.

KCCI was, predictably enough, focussing less on the event in New Zealand itself, and more on any chance in hell that someone from Iowa had managed to get eaten. After a moment of pretending that Iowans could find New Zealand on a map, they reran a CBS filetape of the carnage, albeit edited down to TV8's standards and practises. Cassie studied it, already reaching back to the keyboard behind her to AltTab over to the browser and F6 the cursor quickly into the AddressBar to type in *cnn.com*. She glanced quickly to the laptopscreen to ensure that she'd spelled it correctly before hitting Enter.

On the television, she saw a sort of zombiesque guy in arcticwear bouncing about like a maddened chimpanzee, screeching and moaning; she suspected that the glossy brown shit all over his outfit was KCCI's colourcorrected blood. Then the guy swung about, apparently seeing a cop [or someone in New Zealand wearing a uniform of some sort, anyway] and lurching toward him; then the footage degraded to pixelated bullshit.

Which was suggestive of something. She'd never seen that before. Zombiefilms tended not to pixelate. Not by design, anyway. Pixelation meant either a DivX encoding fuckup, or Real Life.

She turned back to *cnn.com* and discovered that the New Zealand Massacre was its top story. She clicked the link to the online video.

TITLE

A CNN Special Report

WARNING: The Following Footage Depicts
Images and Events of a Graphic Nature.
Please Be Advised.

We FADE IN:

Ext. Abandoned New Zealand Street. Dawn.

All is quiet in NEW ZEALAND as the SUN rises slowly in the east. ONLOOKERS peer cautiously into the distance. The mood is fervent; something is about to happen in this peaceful little town.

In the distance, a ZOMBIE scampers into view against a backdrop of MANICURED HEDGES. It pauses there for a moment, investigating its surroundings. Its face is a mask of pain and rage; unlike most zombies, it lacks the sorrowful expression of selfpity. This zombie wants only to kill. Again.

PAROXYSM

Its SNOWMOBILE SUIT is drenched in BLOOD--likely that of its previous victims. It crouches, readying to strike, watching for prey.

It finds what it's looking for: in the foreground, a smorgasbord of new blood awaits--our ONLOOKERS. The ZOMBIE snarls ferociously, leaping into an awkward dash toward the fourth wall; the ONLOOKERS react, some scattering out of harm's way, others readying to counterattack the preternatural threat.

OC AUTHORITY FIGURE

[NewZealander accent] This is the police. Stop where you are and place your hands atop your head. I said STOP! Lay down upon the ground and place your hands behind your head. [bleep] This is your last warning! Freeze or we will be forced to open fire!

The ZOMBIE ignores the commands of the cop, continuing to sprint in the general direction of the group. Its motorskills are decaying now; it can't quite run in a straight line. Still, the menace remains: what it lacks in dexterity, it makes up for in aggression and dedication.

OffCam, we hear muffled orders to fire at will. Weapons click and clack as rounds are chambered and safeties are released.

A din of GUNFIRE erupts to both sides of the stereo microphone. The ZOMBIE is ventilated by dozens of rounds of ammunition. A HAZE OF SMOKE obscures the lens, silhouetting the ZOMBIE in these early moments of the day.

The barrage comes to an end.

The ZOMBIE remains, apparently unaware that it's just been shot by a platoon's worth of ammo. Stunned muttering can be heard offscreen.

The ZOMBIE has had enough of these people, though. Perhaps it registered the pain after all. Now clumsier than ever, it turns to its side and shuffles quickly out of the frame.

We PIVOT after our subject, accidentally catching the BRIM OF ONE OF THE COPS' CAPS for an instant before he ducks out of the way, presumably repositioning to a new vantage point. These cops aren't just going to let the ghoul walk away into the sunrise; they're here to arrest it, kill it, or both.

The ZOMBIE continues to shuffle away from the cops.

GREMLIN

OC COP#1

Damnit. Freeze! There's nowhere left to run! Drop to your knees with your hands aloft or we will open fire! ...again!

OC COP#2

He's got to be wearing Kevlar or something. Aim higher.

OC COP#1

Probably so. Good call. Right! Final warning! Down on the ground or we WILL KILL YOU!

The ZOMBIE ignores the cops, as usual, simply shuffling stupidly down the street as we PAN ALONG to watch its progress.

OC COP#1

[bleep] Okay: Let him have it.

A new wave of bullets hits the ZOMBIE, tearing at its calves and thighs. Unable to maintain its balance, it finally falls to the pavement, still attempting to escape by pulling itself along on its elbows.

We DOLLY IN quickly and chaotically, the handheld camera betraying the shaken nerves of its operator. The downed ZOMBIE fills the frame, still snarling and undulating pathetically on the ground.

OC COP#1

Now stop moving, damnit. We don't want to hurt you anymore. We'd really rather get you to hospital and fixed up. Wouldn't you prefer that?

The ZOMBIE would prefer a bite to eat, it seems: its teeth catch the cop's ankle, shearing through the fabric of his uniform and drawing rivulets of blood.

OC COP#1

MOTHER[bleep]!

The ZOMBIE's head explodes in a fountain of BLACK BLOOD. Finally, its proverbial soul is laid to rest.

We FADE TO BLACK.

TITLE

This Has Been a CNN.com Special Report.
Copyright © 2012, Cable News Network.

'Holy shit.'

PAROXYSM

Cassie replayed the video a couple of times, watching for hints. But there really weren't any. She'd seen the Nick Berg beheading video years before, and been disappointed by its jumpcuts—it had looked like any lowbudget horrorfilm. cnn.com's New Zealand footage had looked more realistic, apart from the impossibility of its content. Kevlar didn't explain it. AngelDust didn't explain it. Zombification...nearly explained it. Still, the ageing complaint echoed in her mind: *zombies don't run*.

She grunted a desperate laugh. Of course zombies didn't run: they were fucking fictional.

In a way.

There remained the fact behind the mythology, of course. Haitians poisoned and drugged into zombification. Provided, of course, that the Haitian zombies were factual—more factual than Romero's inventions. But the question was whether Haitian zombies ran. And Cassie had no idea at all.

She was going the wrong way with this. It wasn't a damned zombie; it was a guy who took a hundred bullets because...for some other reason.

There were no other reasons.

Supposing that the guy was Kevlared and 'dusted, it was clear that too many of those bullets had pierced his flesh. Even if his heart had been shielded, there was little chance that his femoral arteries hadn't been altogether destroyed. Yet he hadn't bled to death; he'd developed a fucking *limp*. And that was, in Real Life, impossible.

Other options.

Someone at cnn.com had a really weird sense of humour.

Not a chance. One guy couldn't have made it happen. And cnn.com wasn't staffed by large numbers of pranksters plotting out new ways of wasting lots of money faking the news. Not only faking it, but—

But then there was TV8, which had fuckall to do with cnn.com. Pixelated or not, their CBS video of the same exact guy had differed dramatically. Now she had a conspiracy on her hands.

She laughed again, suddenly wondering what Marlowe was making of all this. She hit his site.

A few clicks beyond the index.php, she found the archive of today's video from JPL. She logged into her account to download the broadband version.

Oh good: cometwatch. You missed the news, Dude.

Then she was watching Marlowe watching Fox, and noting his reaction. And that was truly scary: either Marlowe, of all people, had been duped by this hoax, or it wasn't a hoax at all. She disliked both options.

New Zealand.

It couldn't have been a StopMotion monkey. There had to be some other reason for it. Comets, it seemed, were out. KZones were stupid. That left two general possibilities: the supernatural, and the scientific.

On the supernatural hand, there were Deities Who Were Fed up with the World, Witchcraft, Alien Invasions [arguably closer to the scientific hand], and so on; on the scientific hand, there were BioTerrorism, A Botched Cure for an Existing Disease, The Natural Mutation of an Existing Disease, The Release of an Existing Disease No One Knew Existed, Crazy Morticians [more of a supernatural

GREMLIN

hand thing], Infected Venusian Probes, and...and whatever StopMotion monkeys could be called.

She didn't have enough information yet.

There was the one thing, though: immortal though the SnowmobileZombie had appeared to be right up until its head exploded, it hadn't actually looked *dead*. It hadn't looked quite alive, either, though.

She replayed cnn.com's video, pausing on a closeup of the zombie's face.

Its eyes, she noticed with some excitement, were crimson. Blood fucking red.

'To cure,' she told the paused video, 'we must first understand.'

PAROXYSM

Chapter Eleven

Los Angeles, California

Saturday 22nd December 2012

Stephen McClain was not feeling well at all.

He'd survived the flight to LAX, but, now...he'd probably caught some sort of summer cold down there in the warmth. Here in the aeroport in Los Angeles, it was kicking his ass. He sat down to rest and weigh his options.

What he wanted to do was to find a damned doctor here in town. But he barely knew this building, let alone the streets of LA. And what he couldn't see himself doing was stepping out into the relative cold and the sunlight, only to change his mind and rush back in to wait in line for another fucking hour to get searched for exploding shoes. If they wanted to find a bomb, it was growing inside his skull.

He didn't have an hour anyway. His connecting flight was scheduled to depart in forty-five minutes. He was therefore scheduled to be onboard, in his seat, within forty-five *seconds*. He took a deep breath, coughed it wetly back out, and returned to his feet, trying to make sense of the polylingual signs through tearing eyes. His stomach sloshed revoltingly; it felt like a dying, rotting octopus. He thrust toward his departure gate with diseased abandon.

Find plane; enter plane; sit down; sleep; wake up; leave plane; find doctor.

He'd be in Cleveland in less than five hours. Five hours was a decent nap. And he knew he could use one. *Five hours. Three...three hundred minutes. And minutes aren't that long. Half a night's sleep. Over in no time, and probably feeling better after....*

He lost the concept. He'd deal with it on the plane. It would help him fall asleep. If he even needed any help with that. He just had to get home.

He reached the counter at his departure gate and brandished his ticket. 'Hi,' he croaked, 'Sorry to bug you; I caught a bad cold in New Zealand.'

'That's perfectly all right, Sir. Is that your boarding pass? May I see it?'

'Yeah.' McClain swallowed loudly, tasting copper. 'Am I even in the right place?'

'You certainly are, Sir. And right on time, too. We're just boarding now. Would...would you care for a wheelchair?'

'Huh? Oh. No. I'm okay. Just kinda...exhausted. Just...hit me in the head with something if I walk off in the wrong direction.'

She giggled. 'Oh, we wouldn't do that, Sir. I could certainly arrange for an escort to your seat, though, if you like. Hmmm?'

'An escort. Um...I'd hate to be a bother. I'd also hate to need an escort. Yet. Maybe in fifty years.'

'Whatever you think is best, Sir. You just let us know. There's a water fountain right over there by the restrooms, if you'd like to take a moment. Hmmm?'

GREMLIN

‘Uh...no; I’m all set. I just wanna get on the plane and sit down again.’

‘Of course, Sir. Why don’t I go ahead and show you where that is, hmmm? Michelle? Would you mind—actually, are you ready to board? Mister, ah, McClain here has had a rough day; maybe you could help him to his seat.’

Michelle smiled her way over to the counter, ‘Sure, Sheila. Mister McClain? Are you all set to get onboard?’

McClain grinned sheepishly. ‘Yeah. Sorry. Just...under the weather today.’

Michelle took his arm. ‘I’ve had days like that myself. And what I’ve found works,’ she said, leading him slowly toward the umbilical, ‘is to sit down, relax, maybe listen to some music,’ she glanced quickly at his ticket to see which class he was in, ‘maybe even have a drink to calm y—my nerves...just leave the flying to us, you know? We’ll have you home in no time.’

‘Um.’

‘I see you’re flying to Cleveland today. Is that Home?’

‘Yeah. Heh. Can’t wait to step out into that Ohio weather. Who knows, though; maybe it’ll help. I caught this bug in New Zealand, which is summertime right now. Maybe the cold air’ll kill it for me.’

‘New Zealand! Wow. How’d you like it? Oh—you got out in time, right?’

‘In time for what?’

‘Oh, right: you’ve been on a plane. Some whackjob down there on, I think it was the southern island, he just went *nuts* and started *killin* people. Can you *believe* it?’

‘Huh. Did they get him?’

‘They sure did. They had to shoot him though. Real tragedy.’

‘I saw him, actually. Or—maybe. Was this guy, um...was he wearing extreme weather gear? Like he was all set to climb Everest?’

Michelle nodded gravely. ‘That’s the guy. You know he killed over fifty people?’

‘I believe it. I think I saw his first victims.’ McClain held up his forearm for her to see, noting the blackness in the spot at the centre of the bandage with some curiosity.

‘Oh *no*,’ she gasped, ‘You mean you—oh *dear*. Are you all right?’

‘Fine. Except for the cold. Little fuh—freak just ran over and *bit* me.’

‘Well, isn’t that the darndest thing. I’m sure you’ll be fine, though. You made out luckier than most of them, if the news is to be believed.’

‘I guess. Fifty people? That’s crazy.’

‘Well, it’s all behind you now. And look: here’s your seat. You just sit down and buckle yourself in. Or I can give you a—’

‘No! I’ve got it. Thanks.’

‘Can I get you a drink before takeoff?’

‘Eww. No. Thanks.’

‘I—you could—I could get you some water, or some milk, maybe? Orange juice.’

‘No, really: I’m okay. I’m a little unsure about putting anything in my stomach right now. I think it’s a stomach flu, maybe.’

PAROXYSM

'Tck,' Michelle told him, 'Well, I probably don't have to tell you what these are for,' she said, pulling an air sickness bag out of the pouch in the seat before him.

He looked at it, seriously for the first time. 'Has anyone in the history of the universe ever actually puked less than enough to fill one of these things?'

She smiled at him. 'Why don't I get you a blanket and a pillow. Could you sleep for a while, do you think?'

'I think. Hell: I pray.'

'I'll be right back with that.'



Rick Marlowe found his seat in First Class and took it. What a total waste of time *that* had been. Australia had been where the real story was after all. Or, New Zealand, really. Which was like a suburb of Australia, or something.

To have filmed that fucking guy...those were the breaks, he supposed.

He clicked his seatbelt together before pulling out his laptop to review his recordings before takeoff.

'Oh, Sir?' a stewardess prompted even before he could turn it on.

'Yeah. Hi.'

'Sorry to disturb you, but...we'll be taking off in just about five minutes now. Any chance I could get you to wait until we're in—'

'In the air. Right. I know. Not a problem.'

'Thanks. You're a dear.'

He smirked, 'Hopefully not in the headlights.'

'Oh! Not that sort of deer, Silly. Could I get you a drink while we're waiting to take off? I think you've just got time.'

'Uh...yeah. Yeah, Scotch Rocks, please.'

'Comin' right up!'

He watched her go, wondering bemusedly what secret cloning facility was being used to produce flight attendants. No one was that cheerful in the natural world. He pulled out his MPEG camera to watch his video on its tiny little screen.

Across the aisle, Randy Cash glanced over at the kid with the device. He turned to Bruce. 'The hell'd he get that thing on board?'

Bruce glanced over at it. 'I think that's a camera, Mister Cash. Far as I know, you can still have those on a plane. Unless it's a cameraphone; he could have that if he turned it off, I guess.'

Randy raised his eyebrows, bewildered, and shook his head. 'I couldn't even remember all these rules, let alone *why* we've got 'em. When was the last time a terrorist actually—'

'Um...you don't wanna say that onboard. The TWord, I mean.'

'Christ on his throne....'

Bruce shrugged. *Whaddayagonnado.*

'Hey, Kid,' Randy called to Rick, 'Young Man, I mean. Is *that there* a camera?'

Rick glanced over at Cash dismissively. 'Yeah. It's a—oh it's you.'

'Sorry?'

'You're Randy Cash, right?'

GREMLIN

‘Oh! Sure am, Son. Thanks for watchin’.’

‘I think we have mutual lawyers. I’m Rick Marlowe. ConspiracyFactsDot-Com.’

‘Cons...oh. Our mutual lawyers seem to be having a civil war.’

‘I’d agree with that.’

‘What was it again? Aliens in the ministry?’

‘Alien technology in the miracles. After a fashion.’

‘That was it. Where in the blue fuck did you come up with that?’

‘You know I can’t reveal my sources.’

‘You mean you *couldn’t*, if you were a *journalist*.’

‘Yeah. That’s what I mean. Just like, oh, you couldn’t say “blue fuck”, if you were a minister.’

‘Now you hol’ on one godd—blessed minute there, Young—’

‘Your secret’s safe with me.’

‘M—it is? What secret’s that?’

‘Whether you’re a minister or I’m a journalist, we’re both gold with the IRS. That’s what counts, right?’

‘Working an angle, Kid?’

‘Tell me the truth. The *real* truth, not the GodsHonest one. Have your ratings gone up or down because of my story?’

‘Uh...they’re up in general. Can’t say your story helped’em much.’

‘Can’t say it hurt’em, either. Can you.’

‘Well...I can’t say much either way; that’s what my lawyers tell me.’

‘Let’s stick to the FactsHonest truth, Man. You and I both are a couple of genuine frauds. You talk about the Men in White; I talk about the Men in Black. But, the truth? They’re the same thing: Hoaxes in Grey. You’ve never seen a deity, and I’ve never seen an alien. But what *counts*,’ Rick leaned over the arm of his seat at Cash, ‘is people *believing* we’ve seen things.’ He sat up again. ‘It’s a dogshow. Ponyshow. Whatever it is. It’s entertainment. Neither of us are ever gonna change the world with our bullshit; but: betcha we’re gonna make a lot of money and have a lot of fun looking like we try. Sound about right to you?’

Cash regarded Marlowe’s camera. ‘Is that thing filming?’

‘Nope. We’re off the record. Just two frauds talking shop.’

Bruce cleared his throat.

‘I think we’re gonna have to find us something else to talk about, then,’ Cash said.

‘Ever think about it?’

‘What’s that.’

‘Coming out? Halfway through your next show, just stop holding in the laughter? Make the announcement? “Ladies and Gentlemen: you are all morons.” I’ll tell you what I think, ah, Randy: I think that, as a ballpark, you’d get one in three to tune in again the next day. That’s how stupid they all are. After a week, you’d have two in three coming back. After a month, you’d be three for three again. And, beyond that, you’d probably hit four for three, just from all the added publicity. And that’s why my bullshit report about your bullshit ministry is doing you more good than harm.’

‘Be that as it may, unsolicited advertising is still—’

PAROXYSM

'Is still bullshit. You haven't got shit for damages. You're just looking for something to complain about. Tell you what about that: call off the lawyers—hear me out. Call off the lawyers. Get on your show and tell all your little baptist 'droids that I'm the tool of the devil. They'll believe you, and I won't care. Because guess what: they'll keep buying your shit, and their *kids* will keep buying mine. Everybody wins.'

'You want me to give you publicity?'

'No. I want you to slander the living shit outta me. Which, really, is the same thing. And you already know it.'

'That ain't a bad spiel, Kid. I'm not sayin' I'm gonna do it. I'm just sayin' that...whichever I do, you've set this up to win. I'll give ya that.'

'Yeah, well...it's just an option. Join me, and we'll rule the galaxy. Or something.'

'It shouldn't shock you to hear that I can't give you an answer on that today.'

'It doesn't. But give it some thought. Give your lawyers something to think about too. Mine say that yours are milking you for less already.'

'On that point, your lawyers ain't wrong.'

'Here you go,' the stewardess announced, bringing Rick his drink, 'Scotch on the rocks. Now, I don't want to rush you, but we are set to take off in about three minutes. Are you gonna have time to finish that, do you think?'

'If not, I'll be sober enough to keep it from spilling.'

She smiled, holding back her response.

'I'll be okay,' Rick told her.

'All right, then. My name's Sheila. You just press that little button there if you need anything else this flight. Okay?'

'Okay. Thanks again.'

She turned away, still smiling her plastic smile. 'Oh! Mister Cash! How good to *see* you again.'

'Hi Sheila. You're looking good. Still presbyterian?'

'You know what: I am, but, I picked up that book you recommended? And—'

'Oh sure. How'd ya like it?'

'Well, to be honest, I just haven't had time to read it yet? But I've got some time off in the next couple weeks, and that's on the top of my list.'

Cash glanced at Rick surreptitiously. 'Hmmm...no pressure, now; but some things are better done sooner than later, if ya know what I mean. I think you're a good soul, with just a little misdirection. I'd like to see you again in heaven, when this is all over and done with. Just sayin...'

'Well, that's thoughtful, Mister Cash; I'd like to see you there too.'

Rick choked on his drink; he held three fingers up where Cash could see them, alternating to one, two, three, and then four; then he closed his fist and thrust up his thumb.

Cash nodded subtly; he'd got it. 'Well, Sheila...I'll be sure to ask Jeezuz to show you the way.'

'I'll put in a word with ET,' Rick mumbled into his glass.

GREMLIN

‘Thanks! You do that!’ Sheila grinned again and turned away, lips glued to the roots of her teeth.

‘This is your captain speaking,’ the captain spoke, ‘We are just about ready to taxi into position. Or next scheduled stop *is* Cleveland, Ohio. If I could direct you to the “No Smoking” signs I’ll remind you that this is a nonsmoking flight...’



McClain had just about fallen asleep after all, then the damned captain had started bellowing at him through the speakers. Which was odd. It seemed as though the speakers were actually *inside* his head. He squinted out the window, seeing very little in the hot wash of white. He could just make out the swimming shape of the wing a few rows back. He pulled down the shade and squeezed his eyes shut.

‘...*ALTITUDE OF THIRTY-EIGHT THOUSAND FEET...*’

Why was this captain *screaming* this shit...he could barely make out the words. He could actually hear—feel, in fact—the static in the speakers. The fucking *feedback*. That should have been impossible: the cockpit had to be sound-proofed against the Public Address System. He pulled the pillow out from behind his head and covered his eyes with it. Still the glare got through. This was no cold; he was fucking *sick*.

‘...*FLIGHTTIME OF FOUR HOURS AND FORTY-THREE MINUTES...*’

He readjusted the pillow to cover his ears as well as his eyes, which also failed to help much.

‘...*AND THANK YOU FOR FLYING...*’

Just shut the fuck UP.

Then things got worse. The engines screamed at him through his molars. Louder and louder. They’d break the glass beyond the shade in a minute. They might break his temples. He felt a groan growing in his throat; he heard nothing but the protestant whining of the RollsRoyce cacophony.

His stomach lurched dangerously as the plane began to move. Slowly at first, turning its nose to point in the correct direction. Then his seat slammed into his back and everything beneath his ribs floated eerily aft. The plane was taking off, and leaving parts of him behind.

Then he was laying on his back, staring upward through the pillow. The base of his skull elongated, making room for the extra pain. The tops of his thighs went cold.

Up, up, and away.

The cabin continued to pressurise, boiling his brain. He couldn’t breathe. His lungs were full of syrup and his teeth were screaming above the gumline. He’d got on the wrong plane: this one was destined for hell.



Buddy Miller had seen some wild drunks in his years as a bouncer, but the guy two seats up and across the aisle was a different animal entirely.

He’d been watching him most of the flight, even before takeoff. The guy—McClain, if he’d heard correctly back at the departure gate—was obviously tran-

PAROXYSM

qued. And, to his credit, he'd turned down the option of *more* to drink. Then he'd become strange: sleeping fitfully in little bursts of sweating and moaning. Probably a desperate hangover, even while he was still drunk. At nearly forty thousand feet...Buddy couldn't even imagine how that would feel. Based on McClain's convulsive expression, he suspected that it didn't feel too good at all.

Buddy did nothing. For now. His instincts told him to watch, and to be ready to drop the guy. But this wasn't his place. He couldn't bounce a guy off a plane, after all. He wasn't sure he could touch him at all. If the FAA had any rulings on that, they hadn't been covered between *no smoking* and *fasten your seatbelts*. So he waited and watched, hoping his instincts wouldn't overrule his discretion.

The speakers clicked once, softly, and McClain snapped awake, sitting bolt upright like an electrocuted meerkat.

'This is your captain speaking. I'm happy to announce that we're making pretty good time, this flight. Those of you on the leftmost side of the plane will be seeing Denver, Colorado, sprawling out beneath us in the next few minutes. You may also have noticed our flight attendants bringing out the beverage carts. We'll be serving meals in a matter of....'



'...MINSREEEEE IWREEEEE SHREEEEE KUHEEEE KEEEEE FEEEEE SEEEE THEEEE TEEEEE EEEEEE....'

That fucking captain was back, screaming his way into feedback. Drilling his way into McClain's fucking skull. *JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP...*

And then, the pain suddenly stopped. The lights returned to normal. The noise dropped down to safe levels.

'...Alaskan Cod, or Beef Wellington. Enjoy your lunch, Folks.'

McClain peeled the saturated pillow away from his eyes and looked around, lucid again. He felt suddenly foolish; the rest of Coach had clearly been watching him this whole time. They'd watched him sweating and whimpering and crying. They'd probably been terrified. Poor them.

His arm itched where he'd been bit. He looked at the bandage, which was now totally black, as though it had been soaked through with crude oil. More of the black oil ran down the underside, dripping slowly at his wrist and elbow. *Is that blood?*

The itching worsened. But he dared not scratch it. If he was bleeding black oil....

The itching intensified, actually hurting now. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the armrests. Fire. His arm was on fire. The bite itself, his hand, his elbow. Racing up to his shoulder. Fucking *fire*. Not warm; not hot; fucking *burning*.

Then, his head exploded. A pain so sudden and intense that he actually saw stars. Like no headache he'd ever had before. It pulsed from the crown of his head all the way to the base of his skull, surging down his spine to the small of his back. He may have groaned or even screamed; he wasn't sure. He wanted to scream, but screaming would only make the pain worse; somehow, he simply knew that, if little else.

GREMLIN

He wasn't breathing. Trying to inhale caused more pain in his head. Failing to breathe caused more pain in his head. Having a head caused more pain in his head. He was fucked, regardless what he did or didn't do.

Moving his head caused pain; moving his eyes caused pain. Still, he managed to shift his gaze away from the sunlight streaming in through the windows. Everything was too bright—washed out in whiteness. Blurry shapes undulated in the distance, making no sense to him. Other passengers, he supposed. Some still sleeping, others screaming at each other about...something he couldn't comprehend anymore. Enemies. Trying to hurt his head. Succeeding.

Something happened in his head. A sort of click, he thought. Like knuckles cracking, but inside his skull. And, for another instant, he was okay again. The pain echoed loosely through his thoughts, and things made sense again. The other passengers weren't screaming after all. Just talking. Idle chitchat. Gossip over orange juice and coffee. Another day in America.

And another click. And the pain inside his head slammed back with the force of a bomb. The screaming returned. And the white blur. And the pain. So much of it. Too much. All at once. Like nothing had existed before it.

If his forearm still itched, he wasn't aware of it. Now, he gripped the arm-rests only in reaction to the pain in his skull. His neck. His back. Everywhere. If he still had legs, he couldn't see or feel them. He was nothing more than the headache. The headache was the entirety of the universe.

Something in there told him something of interest. Something about something he'd read, perhaps. Something about migraines. Something about migraines hurting more than labour pains. But it was gone now. There was only the pain.

And more pain. And movement. But not his own. White blurs swelling in the distance, and shaking him. Touching him. Screaming at him. White enemies. So hot. So cold. So sweating. So pain. White blurs and noise. Nothing else anymore. Nothing else. White pain. Fading to black.



Michelle had been doing this for fifteen years, and had thought she'd seen it all. Airsickness, vertigo, even a split personality, once, who had awakened with some surprise to find himself at thirty-five thousand feet. She'd been retrained since the terrorist attacks in 2001, and was qualified to deal with surprises. But this was new, to her.

McClain. The guy with the flu. The guy who'd nearly been killed by the New Zealand Maniac. And now he was looking somewhat maniacal himself. He didn't particularly *look* like a terrorist, despite the vehemence with which she'd been told that terrorists could look like anyone at all. McClain *didn't* look like anyone at all. He looked like a rabid animal. Sweaty and insane. Hissing and moaning. Dangerous. She shuffled back a bit—surreptitiously, she hoped; she couldn't afford to let her panic infect the other passengers. She had to play it by the book, just long enough to—

McClain shrieked at her. Loudly. And the other passengers knew. Murmurs augmenting toward demands. The beginning of a crisis. Just what she wanted to prevent.

PAROXYSM

'Is he okay?'

'What's wrong with him?'

'...probably drugs....'

'...could be shellshock....'

'...a smuggler; a mule; sometimes they....'

'...looks really sick....'

'...thing happened back in 'Nam....'

'...anyone a doctor....'

'...swallow cocaine to get through....'

'...seen'em freak out in theatres when....'

'...think he's having a heart attack....'

'...but the balloon breaks in their stomachs....'

'...think the movie's real....'

'...someone help him? Anyone?'

Michelle stiffened, still watching McClain, barely hearing the other passengers. The guy was really sick, and possibly dangerous—to himself as well as others. Diplomatically, she turned toward the rest of the plane.

'Okay, Everyone. Obviously, this passenger is having problems, but that's not your concern. Give me just a minute to inform the captain, and we'll see if we can't bring out some drinks while we deal with th—'

The passengers listening to her gasped as one as she felt herself being yanked backward into McClain's seat. *Fuck: he IS a terrorist; now I'm a damned HOSTAGE—*

McClain scratched a deep furrow into her arm, which filled quickly with blood. She screamed in pain and surprise. 'Mister Mc—'

McClain, seeing the blood, hissed desperately, snapping forward and burying his teeth in the flesh around the wound, gulping and rending like a damned shark.

Michelle tried to pull her arm away, but all her strength had evaporated in shock. It wasn't happening to her. It was just happening to someone whose eyes she was borrowing at the moment. It wasn't possible.

She was yanked backward again, in the other direction. This time, she saw, a large guy in a flannel shirt had flung her away from McClain. A large, angry guy.

'Cut it the fuck out!' the flannel guy ordered McClain. Michelle could sense the guy deciding whether to belt him one, or just keep his distance. Whatever was wrong with McClain, even this lumberjack was intimidated. And she had doubts that Mister Flannel had ever run from a fight.

Mister Flannel backed up a step before turning to her. 'You okay, Miss?'

She pondered that for a moment, and then laughed in surprise. She honestly didn't know the answer. 'I think so,' she said; then, glancing at her glossy, crimson arm, added, 'I *hope* so. I've just got to—'

Sheila gripped her shoulder. 'Just rest there,' she told her, 'Don't move yet. I'll get the captain.' Sheila stood upright, announcing, 'Everyone else: we have an emergency situation onboard. I want you all to remain in your seats, with your safetybelts securely fastened.'

Mister Flannel shot Sheila a glance.

GREMLIN

‘You too, please, Sir,’ Sheila confirmed, ‘Take your seat while I bring this under control.’

The lumberjack processed that for a moment, and then snorted. ‘I don’t wanna tell you how to run a plane, Lady; but...’ He looked at McClain again. McClain looked back, mouth bloody, chewing slowly on....

Mister Flannel got it then. The guy was chewing on whatever he’d bitten out of the chick’s arm. The guy was fucking *eating* her. Even now that they’d been separated, he was still chewing on her arm. And that was too much to handle. ‘Nevermind,’ he said quietly, backing toward his seat.

Michelle watched the plane from the floor, somewhat awed. Everyone in the section was aware of the situation—that McClain was grinning and chewing and rolling his eyes ecstatically, that she was sitting here bleeding, that they were almost to Denver. The passengers were clearly startled, but no one was doing anything about it. If the lumberjack hadn’t intervened, how much of her would McClain have eaten?

And, she found herself wondering, what would McClain eat next, once he’d swallowed what he’d already got?



Buddy sat back down in his seat, watching the nut still chewing on the stewardess. Watching him warily. What a way to start christmas. He’d bounced some real assholes in his time; this guy was one for the books. Even the ‘dusters possessed some human qualities, even as the PCP surging through their veins convinced them that they were supermen. He’d never seen anything like this before.

McClain had just stopped, once he’d bit her. Now he sat there, happily munching on her flesh, content. Never in all this time had he—although, he *had* seen that before. Hardcore, violent alcoholics, finally getting a drink. All the threats and screaming and bawling just ran out the instant they swallowed that first gulp of whiskey. Music soothed some savage beasts; Jack Daniel’s soothed others. And *this* beast, it appeared, was soothed by Stewardess Tartare.

The other stewardess, who’d told him to sit back down, had wandered off toward First Class, and, presumably, the cockpit beyond. The bleeding one stood up wordlessly, wandering back toward the bathrooms. No one spoke now. The crazy guy smacked his lips, making the only sound.



Sheila hurried through the First Class compartment, ignoring questions and requests—*was everything okay back there and could I get that drink now, Miss*. When she made eye contact, she just smiled and nodded quickly: *whatever answer you find for yourselves will certainly be the correct one*. Then she was at the station, grabbing the transceiver and calling the cockpit.



‘Captain? Have you got a moment?’ It was Sheila.

PAROXYSM

Captain Dawkins grabbed his microphone to respond. ‘Yeah. Sheila? That you? What’s up?’

‘We’ve got a...we have an irrational passenger back in Coach. Violently irrational. He, ah...he bit Michelle.’

‘He *what?*’ Dawkins shot, ‘Say again. *Bit?*’

‘Bit, Captain. Tore some meat out of her arm with his teeth.’

Dawkins looked at the mic in shock, and glanced at Mark—the CoPilot. Mark shook his head slowly. *It’s the holidays*, he seemed to say.

Dawkins keyed the mic again. ‘Okay, copy. Is this under control now?’

‘Um...kinda. He’s not biting her anymore. But the situation remains, ah, critical.’

‘How’s Michelle?’

‘Awake and alert, I think. The guy just flipped out and bit her. He seems to have calmed down again now, though.’

‘Okay. We’re into Denver in ten; we’ll have to land and take care of this shit. Go back and keep an eye on the nut. I’ll make an announcement.’

‘Yes, Captain.’



Sheila took a moment to inhale before stepping back out into First Class.

‘Miss?’ Scotch Rocks asked, looking up from his laptop, ‘Everything, like, okay back there?’

‘Everything’s...the captain’s about to address that. If you’re working on something important, could you save it and shut your computer down? We’re setting up for an emergency landing.’

‘We are?’

Sheila shook her head quickly. ‘Medical emergency. Sick passenger. We’re dropping him off in Denver. We’re fine, though.’ She smiled quickly and hurried toward Coach.

‘Excuse me, Miss?’ another FirstClasser prompted.

Sheila smiled toward her, reacting extemporaneously as the announcement came over the speakers: *why, it’s the captain, with something to tell us all...*

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking,’ the announcement began, ‘As you’ve no doubt gathered, we’re clearing the Rockies and approaching Denver now. If I could get you all to make sure your seatbelts are securely fastened, seats and tray tables are secured, and any electronic devices shut down for the landing, I’d appreciate it. As you may also be aware, we have a medical emergency onboard, so I’m attempting to clear an emergency landing at Denver. We’ll have Emergency Services standing by on the ground, but, let me assure you, there’s no need to panic—the plane itself is fine, and we’re expecting a routine landing.’



McClain had swallowed the yummy meat, but the headache remained. And now his stomach hurt too. Hunger. Lots and lots of hunger. He needed more yummy meat. Headache. Hot. Cold. Sweaty. Itchy. Tasty. More yummy meat.

GREMLIN



Buddy the bouncer continued to watch McClain. Just like an alcoholic: happy for now; but, once his throat had dried up again, he'd start screaming for more.

And McClain was no longer chewing on anything.

McClain was dry.



Michelle was in the station at the back of the plane, dealing with her injury. People, it was said, had more germs in their mouths than dogs had. And, if a dog had been acting like that when it bit her, she'd be pretty worried right about now.

She'd got her arm washed off with soap and water, ignoring the sting and concentrating on sterilisation. Now she was pouring hydrogen peroxide into the wound, wincing as it frothed and itched. She'd hoped that, once the blood had been washed away, the trauma would look less severe; instead, it was clearly deeper than she'd initially assumed. Dumb luck the bite had been on the top of her forearm; if it had been the paler, fleshier side, she'd probably have bled to death.

She washed the peroxide out and added another dose before securing a bandage with gauze. She'd need some stitches—maybe even a damned graft—but she thought she was getting the bleeding under control, at least. She'd live to see Denver, and Denver's paramedics. She'd be okay.

Then, Coach screamed.



The panic was instant. McClain, no longer happy to sit there chewing on the last of his stewardess, wanted more. The only thing in his way, now, was his seatbelt; apparently, the psychopath had lost understanding of it; he was trying to stand up, prevented by the restraint, and settling for hissing and groping madly for anyone foolish enough to come within reach.

The bouncer hadn't seen *this* before. Even an alcoholic on PCP would know to unhook a damned seatbelt before trying to rush someone. This guy was just whacked.

Worse than that, though, were the other passengers. They must have noticed that the guy couldn't get up; still, they screamed and huddled together in fear. It was almost comedic. Almost.

The comedy ended. McClain, groping at random, managed to hook his fingers under the clasp, releasing the seatbelt. He was on his feet even before the stainless steel fasteners had hit the sidewalls of the seat.

More screaming. More panic. Things became a blur of colours. Mostly shades of red. McClain tore his way up the aisle, grabbing and biting people at random, never stopping to feed on any one victim before moving on to the next. It was a feeding frenzy. Catch, bite, abandon, repeat.

The stewardess whom the bouncer had pulled away from the guy in the first place walked slowly past him, watching the carnage. He grabbed the exposed

PAROXYSM

tail of her shirt, not wanting to grab her by her bleeding arm. ‘Miss?’ he said quietly, ‘You don’t wanna do that.’

She stopped walking, looking down at him, terrified. Then she looked up again at McClain. He’d slowed now, possibly noticing all the new meat. Finally, he stopped seeking new victims, and crumpled to the floor to feed.

Michelle inhaled sharply, watching him eat. He stood on the balls of his feet, sitting on his heels; he looked like a cat now, except that he used his hands to secure whomever he was chewing on.

Coach was mayhem. People running toward McClain; others running away; everyone running into each other and bottlenecking in the aisle. Michelle backed toward the rear station again and grabbed the transceiver. ‘Captain: we’ve got a serious fucking problem back here. Passenger McClain is—is eating everyone.’

‘Michelle?’ the captain asked, ‘Is that you? You okay?’

‘He bit me. But now...we’ve got to do something here. He’s attacking and eating everyone in Coach.’

‘You mean he’s literally *eating* people. Not just biting them.’

‘I think so. I think he’s eating people. But I can’t really tell anymore. It’s all panic and blood back here.’

‘Okay. Okay, roger that. You’re doing good. Just stay calm back there. I’m gonna—just hang on a sec; I’ll tell the tower we’re heading in, okay?’

‘Okay, Captain,’ Michelle said, dropping the phone mechanically. *We’re telling the tower we’re heading in. That’s a good thing. We’re heading in. No more problem. All gone. Yay for Captain Dawkins.*

She sat down hard on the floor, resting her head on the side of a drink trolley, giggling quietly.



Dawkins raised the tower.

‘This is two-forty-two heavy from LAX; come in Denver; over.’

‘Denver here, Two-forty-two; what’s the problem; over.’

‘Major, Denver. Clear me a runway for a seventy-seven; we’re landing ASAP. Requesting EMS Medical. Multiple casualties. Copy? Over.’

‘Uh, copy that, Two-forty-two. EMS on alert for multiple casualties. Gimee just one minute to get you a strip. Over.’

‘Copy that. My ETA’s about two—make that one minute thirty. Get me that runway fast, Denver. Over and out.’



Yummy, yummy meat. Lots of yummy meat. Lots of bad pain, and lots of yummy meat. Yum, yum, yum.

McClain ate. But not McClain. Not him. Just his mouth. That wasn’t him anymore. His arms weren’t him. He wasn’t eating. He was just in pain. The other him was eating. Eating yummy meat. Yummy people.

People.

Eating people.

GREMLIN

But his head hurt too much to care about that just now.



Michelle stopped giggling as the doorway darkened. McClain had eaten them all, and come for her. So much for the paramedics.

‘Miss?’ It was the lumberjack, poking his head into the station, but keeping an eye on Coach.

‘Oh, it’s the lumberjack,’ Michelle said, ‘That’s good news. The lumberjack doesn’t eat people.’

‘Lumber—oh.’ The bouncer grinned at his shirt. ‘Nope. Not a lumberjack. I guess I just dress like one. And you can call me Buddy; everyone does.’

‘Okay, Buddy.’

‘Okay, Miss. We—’

‘Michelle.’

‘Oh. Okay, Michelle. We’ve got a problem in here.’

‘McClain.’

‘McClain. Yeah. He’s, uh, still...he’s still hurting people up there.’

‘Eating them.’

‘Yeah. Eating them. Look: I think I can take’im. But...what do you think.’

‘You’re bigger than he is. It’s possible.’

‘Okay. Am I *okay* to take him, or am I gonna get hauled in by the FAA.’

Michelle smiled vacuously. Then, it all hit her. ‘Huh?’

‘If I take this guy out—if I can pin him down until we land—how much trouble—’

‘*Can* you?’

‘Can I pin him down? I think so.’

Michelle stood up. ‘Do it. If you think you can do it, then *do* it. Knock him the fuck *out*.’

Buddy looked out into Coach again. ‘You just remember you said that. Michelle.’



Yummy people. The other him was eating yummy people. And all McClain had was a headache. It just wasn’t fair.

Through the pain, he wanted the other him to stop eating the yummy people, yummy though they were. But that wasn’t up to him. He wasn’t doing it. He was only seeing it. And tasting it. And feeling it. And itching and sweating and exploding in his skull. He didn’t want to eat people. He just wanted a gun and an arm to pull the trigger.

There was a funny noise out there in the other him now. It sounded like *dime for a gap numb duck*, whatever that meant. Then, there was a funny tilt to the world, and no more yummy meat.



PAROXYSM

‘Time for a nap, Dumbfuck,’ Buddy called, tackling McClain and driving him to the floor. Aware of the snapping jaws, he managed to pull McClain’s arms back behind him, forcing him onto his stomach. ‘Anyone feel like sitting on this guy’s legs for me? I can hold him here all day if he can’t kick me.’

‘Got it,’ Michelle told him, hurrying over and dropping to the floor, seizing McClain’s ankles and pushing down hard. ‘The rest of you,’ Michelle bellowed over McClain’s hissing and snapping, ‘We’re setting up to land *right now*; those of you able to take your seats, go; the rest of you...two minutes, and we’ll have paramedics in here to help.’

Buddy would have little trouble holding on to McClain for two minutes. His left foot was planted on the floor; his right was pinning McClain’s neck; he’d crossed McClain’s arms up between his scapulae; McClain was effectively inert, now that Michelle had his legs immobilised. ‘I’m good for two minutes,’ he told her, ‘Hell: I could do this for two *hours* if I had to.’

‘You won’t have to. Feel that? The landing gear’s folding down. We’re landing.’



In First Class, Rick Marlowe had shut his laptop down within seconds of the captain’s announcement. Now, with nothing to do but wait, he drummed his thumbs absently on his tiny camera, wondering what in hell was going on back in Coach.

‘Landing’s always the spooky part,’ Cash said, ‘For me, anyway.’

Rick nodded knowingly. ‘For me, the spooky part is whatever’s going on back there.’

‘You think it’s a damned terrorist?’

‘I dunno. What happens when there’s a terrorist? Do they *tell* you that, or do they just tell you they’re landing, and that there’ll be emergency vehicles?’

‘Oh shit. Sweet Jeezuz oh shit.’

‘I don’t think it’s a terrorist, though.’

‘No?’

‘A terrorist would want to secure First Class, right?’

‘Maybe they took him down before he could.’

‘Maybe,’ Rick allowed, ‘But then...what’s going on back there?’

‘I don’t know. And I don’t wanna know. I’ll find out on CNN, if it’s all the same.’

Rick tapped his tiny camera against his dufflebag.



The plane landed faultlessly, decelerating to a stop within easy reach of the emergency rigs. The firetrucks moved in first, awaiting confirmation that the plane was in no danger of exploding; a phalanx of ambulances waited momentarily at the perimeter; equidistant were unmarked SUVs with numberplates from the great state of US GOVT.

GREMLIN

A guy in a conservative suit emerged from one of the SUVs. He held his finger to his ear, pressing the two-way radio closer to his eardrum. ‘Understood,’ he told no one visible, walking toward the firemen.

‘Hold it!’ one of the firemen called, ‘Give us a minute to see if there’s a fuel leak.’

He produced a billfold containing an FBI badge. ‘Special Agent Barlow,’ he announced, ‘There’s no fuel leak. Thanks for coming out.’

‘You sure?’

‘Pretty sure,’ Barlow confirmed, tapping his earpiece, ‘It’s a federal matter now.’

The fireman shrugged. ‘Fine by me; I get paid either way.’

Baxter looked up at the plane. ‘Okay,’ he told the earpiece, ‘Let’s go ahead and get a staircase over here. I want Ops to secure the site before anyone else goes in or out.’



In First Class, Rick stopped tapping the camera against his dufflebag at the sight of governmental vehicles outside his window. Instead, he glanced at it, pondering its Record button. Whatever was happening back in Coach, maybe he’d go get a quick look at it. Maybe he’d even film it, in the event that it might prove entertaining on his website, once he’d uploaded it.

It never hurt to be prepared.



Back in Coach, Buddy and Michelle kept McClain restrained on the floor.

‘Now what,’ Buddy said.

‘Now, we keep holding him,’ she explained, ‘Someone’ll be here in a minute to handcuff him. Or, better yet, put him in a straitjacket.’

‘How’s your arm?’

‘It stings a bit,’ she said, ‘But it’s starting to itch now. So I suppose it’s healing.’

‘I just wish I’d moved faster,’ Buddy told her, ‘I think I had time to stop him before he bit you. I just...I wasn’t in a hurry to get involved before things got all bloody. This really isn’t my turf.’

‘Yeah? What’s your turf?’

‘Bars. I’m a bouncer. I usually bounce drunks trying to grab waitresses asses—uh, behinds, that is. Never seen a drunk try to *eat* anyone before, though. I just wasn’t ready for that, I guess.’

‘It’s done,’ Michelle said, ‘Whatever could have worked out better, I’m not complaining. At least he didn’t chew out my damned jugular. I was luckier than some.’

Buddy nodded, glancing about at a dozen bleeding passengers. Most of them were unconscious now. One was crying softly, holding her shin, blood running out between her fingers.

PAROXYSM

McClain was still hissing and chomping, raking his teeth along the plane's utility carpet, furrowing it.

'What makes a guy freak out like this,' Buddy said softly.

'I can't guess. I've never seen anything like it before.'

Except for that guy in New Zealand.

Buddy shook his head at McClain's back. 'We'll probably never—hey, look at this.'

'What's that,' Shelia asked.

Buddy moved aside slightly to show Michelle McClain's arm. 'He's got a bandage right where you do.'

Michelle laughed at that. 'Does that count as irony?' she asked.

The guy in New Zealand who bit the guy who bit me.

'Could be, I suppose. Maybe it's more like karma. Maybe someone bit him, and he's just passing it along; could be your turn next, Kiddo.'

Michelle flushed. *If it had been a dog acting that way...*

'I'm kidding,' Buddy told her, 'This guy's crazy enough, he probably tried slashing his wrist or something.'

'Yeah,' she said, 'Probably.' *But he said he'd been bit by the guy biting people in New Zealand.* She was sweating now. But not from nerves. She'd been feeling oddly warm for a couple of minutes, even before this new idea had been introduced.

Sweating just like McClain had been sweating before he'd bit her.

If it had been a dog biting her, she'd have been worried.

It's fucking contagious.

'Seriously,' Buddy promised, 'I was joking. I don't think you're going to go off biting any—'

McClain, still sweating and jerking about, slipped an arm free from Buddy's grasp.

'Ah shit,' Buddy yelled, instinctively reaching for McClain's free arm with both hands, freeing the other one. 'Shit, shit, shit!'

McClain got his hands on the floor, pushing hard enough to knock Buddy off balance as he got to his knees. Michelle, unable to hold his ankles anymore, released him and hurried for the back of the plane. At the last row of seats, she turned back in time to see McClain bury his teeth into Buddy's hand.

This is how the madness spreads. I'm fucking next.

Buddy reacted by tossing McClain away, toward the front of the plane, and pausing just long enough to look at his bleeding hand before chasing after him again. 'Watch out up there!' he called as he ran.



Rick hit the Record button, aiming the SpyCam down the aisle toward Coach. The footage was, in a word, priceless.

The curtain separating First Class from the rest of the plane erupted up toward the ceiling, producing a hissing, locomotive zombie. This new zombie, having reached First Class, darted to the side, grabbing and sinking its teeth into the arm of the first passenger it found. It tore a large chunk of muscle completely away from the ulna, chomping frantically and searching for future prey with its crimson

GREMLIN

eyes. Then, a massive guy came flying through the curtain, landing bodily on the zombie and pinning it to the ground.

‘Someone gimme a damned hand!’ Buddy ordered.

Bruce hopped instantly out of his seat and fully over Randy’s knees, deftly ducking the overhead compartment by an inch; sprinting aft, he stomped on the zombie’s head. Rick zoomed in on the creature’s face; it was still chewing on the meat it had got into its mouth before being tackled. People began clapping and cheering.

Rick blinked, and looked around at the rest of First Class. Talk about entertainment value. He glanced out the window at the FBI trucks, feeling a cold sweat as he fully realised what had just happened.

He shut off the camera and ejected the MemoryStick. Working quickly, he dug through his bag, finding a new MemoryStick and slamming it into the SpyCam, aiming for the zombie again and hitting record.

Half his problem was solved. This being a crimescene, the feds would probably sequester everything, discovering that he’d been filming the event. They’d want that footage—the footage he was now recording to the new MemoryStick. Now there was just the first MemoryStick to hide from them.

How ironic. He’d been complaining about the fictional Men in Black for years. And now they were here. There was no way they’d let his evidence leave the scene, as long as they knew about it. He had to hide it somewhere. Somewhere clever. Somewhere invisible.

Jamming it into his dufflebag was pointless; they’d probably make him leave all his stuff on the plane. His coat was no good; if they searched him at all, that’s where they’d start. They’d already searched his shoes when he’d got onto the plane in the first place, but they’d probably do it again. Swallowing it wasn’t really possible. And, looking out the window at the approaching paramilitary, he was running out of time.

Ob, of course. Switching the camera to his left hand, he slid the MemoryStick into his watchband, hoping it would prove impervious to sweat. And that he could avoid metal detectors. *Let’s just hope the spooks have larger problems than bootlegging today.*

He kept the camera trained on the zombie until the SWAT guys arrived and ordered him to turn it off.

PAROXYSM

Chapter Twelve

Denver, Colorado

Saturday 22nd December 2012

That had worked out about as Page had expected it to, but for the downtime.

Following the incident, the cops had shown up and detained the lot of them: the hashbrowns, Page, and even the waitress. Now, some thirty hours later, having reviewed the security recordings, they'd come to a conclusion on the matter.

'Mister, ah, Page,' the detective began, entering the interviewing room—a sparse office containing a cheap conference table, a few plastic chairs, and an evident microphone leading in through the acoustic ceiling at the corner of a simple, white wall and a massive mirror; the mirror itself, Page knew, was a window through which he had been watched and filmed from the darkened room beyond. 'Sorry for the inconvenience. We've had a chance to go through the video and compare it to your statement—and the statements of the other suspects.'

'It all checks out?' Page asked.

The detective nodded, clearly at the edge of exhaustion. 'It certainly matches your version of the events—which is good, of course. Our concern is now your involvement *in* the events. I guess...I'm just wondering what you were thinking.'

'You think I overstepped a boundary,' Page said.

'I do. Which is my opinion. Legally speaking...you could have done worse. What's saving you here is that you restrained yourself until the transgressor had bodily assaulted you three distinct times. Looking at your service record from nineteen ninety-one, though, and your basic terminology in your statement, I suspect that you knew that even before this situation went down. Am I right?'

'You're not wrong.'

'So...level with me—off the record: was this something you could have walked away from, do you think? I mean, was this literally a matter of self-defence, or was it a convenient opportunity for you to hurt someone and get away with it?'

Page smirked silently.

'It's not an accusation. The video's already cleared you. For all I care, you could tell me that you went into that restaurant looking for a fight, and I couldn't arrest you. But you probably know that already.'

Page raised an eyebrow. 'I already know that and more. Including the fact that any indiscretion, or—worse—contradiction against my official statement, could incriminate me on new charges. So: on the record or off, I don't wish to revise my details.'

'The guy hit you a few times, and you reacted, as trained by the SAS, by immobilising the subject, and, ah....' The detective consulted the statement itself. 'Uh,

GREMLIN

“inflicted the minimal damage evidently required to convince it to back down”. Correct?’

‘Correct.’

‘I’ll tell ya, Man: this is, hands down, the most clinical statement I’ve ever read. Most people—even professional people, like soldiers and psychiatrists—will kinda...screw up things like pronouns and tenses. But here you’re backlinking “it” to “subject”. That’s pretty impressive, to me.’

Page smirked again. ‘I suppose that’s the notable difference between English and American schools. One ultimately falls back upon one’s primary education. No offence to your public schools, of course.’

The detective grinned. ‘I don’t think you *could* offend our public schools.’

‘Be that as it may.’

The detective said nothing for a good thirty seconds. Page suspected that the guy was waiting to see what he—Page—might say to break the silence. Page remained quiet.

‘Well. I suppose we’re all done here now, Mister Page. Officially, we wouldn’t mind knowing how to reach you in the event that new evidence is found, but, other than that, you’re free to go.’

Page nodded. ‘You have my mobile number. If I’m awake—and I usually am—you’ll be able to reach me anywhere on the planet.’

‘Oh? Are you off again? Y’know...I’m sure I asked this already, but it’s slipped my mind now. What was it you’d come to town for in the first place? Some business venture of some sort?’

Page nodded, standing to go. ‘Consulting. I have—well, *bad*, perhaps—a client whose accounting hardware is...outdated. My intention had been to impress upon them the importance of my firm’s cutting edge technology.’

The detective drummed his fingers atop the statement on the table, nodding. ‘Right. Interesting where we end up in life, isn’t it. I mean: to go from Special Ops in the gulf war to selling computers to multinationals in the twenty-first century.’

‘It’s not as odd as you might think,’ Page said, reaching the door and turning back, ‘Half the blokes in my unit were working their ways through college in the service. And half of those are now in precisely the fields they’d planned for twenty years ago. Not everyone in the military is a soldier, after all; mostly, it’s a bunch of kids working toward a life beyond the service.’ Page shrugged. ‘Well: you’ve seen the adverts for GoArmyDotCom.’

‘Yeah. Okay. Well: thanks again for coming in, Mister Page. Hopefully you’ve still got time to, ah, get that account you were after.’

Page nodded quickly, opening the door behind him. ‘I’ll certainly give it a try.’ He walked through the door, pulling out his phone and calling information to connect him to a taxi service.



Rick Marlowe sat in a chair by the window of his hotel room, pondering the phone.

PAROXYSM

Having denied sustaining any physical injuries during the attack, he'd been escorted here, along with half the other passengers, and deposited without much explanation in a suite, pending something or other.

His room didn't have a computer in it. Whether it had a camera was something he couldn't ascertain.

The MemoryStick remained under his watch. He hoped it wasn't getting too warm or wet in there.

The phone sat on the table, useless. His own phone had been confiscated in the sweep following the incident, along with his cameras, laptop, and luggage. A cursory search of his coat hadn't turned up his MemoryStick. For that, he was relieved.

Now, sitting here, if he'd even had anyone to call, he'd have had no idea what number to dial: all of his contact information was currently regarded as evidence. For whatever stupid, illegal reason.

The door to the room was effectively guarded by a pair of spooks containing the hallway. He'd discovered that upon attempting to leave thirty minutes ago. His excuse, that he was looking for a restaurant in the hotel, had been countered by the offer to call Room Service, and the guarantee that the federal government would pick up his tab—the least they could do to make up for this inconvenience.

The Ministry of Truth fucks up. That was, in fact, the least they could do.

What had happened to the zombie after the Men in Black had stormed the plane was unknown, to Rick. The first two of them to reach First Class had deftly relieved Cash's bodyguard and the guy who'd tackled it in the first place; the third had stepped in, scanned the cabin quickly, and ordered Rick to shut off the Spy-Cam and place it on the floor. By then, the two spooks on zombie detail had begun to carry the thing out of First Class, and another dozen Ops had rushed in, pointing their weapons and barking questions and orders at everyone.

Cash's bodyguard hadn't appeared to have been injured; the other guy had shown the spooks where the zombie had bit him, and been quickly 'persuaded' to go off with two of the soldiers, presumably to some MedUnit on the ground. No one else in First Class having been bit, the whole section had been made to wait in their seats until Coach had been dealt with. Finally, Rick and the others had been escorted down the stairs from the plane to the tarmac, and to an airport shuttle nearby.

The shuttle had brought them here to the hotel—the rear entrance, Rick had noticed—and they'd been corralled onto the forty-eighth floor via the service lift, each party to its own room. Rick, having been travelling alone, had no roommates. Cash, he suspected, was currently sharing a room with his bodyguard, somewhere else on this level.

Now, with no computers and no one to call, he had nothing to do but wait. Possibly for ever. He went ahead and picked up the phone, glancing at its directory to find the number for Room Service.

'Yes, Mister Marlowe,' a voice said. It was that of a male, and a stern, unpleasant one at that.

'Oh. Hi. I was going to call Room Service?'

'What can we bring you, Mister Marlowe?'

'Oh. Um...that's a good question. Watcha got?'

GREMLIN

‘You’ll find a menu beneath the phone, Sir.’

‘Uh...yeah. Got it. Um...how are the cheeseburgers here?’

‘They’re fine, Sir. Will that be all.’

‘Uh...yeah. Medium well, please. Uh—with fries. And a Coke or something?’

‘On its way, Sir.’

The conversation ended there. But Rick never heard the line disconnect.

After a moment: ‘Hello?’

‘Yes, Mister Marlowe.’

‘Ah. Sorry. Thanks again.’ He rang off quickly, depressing the cradle and staring at the receiver. After another moment, still holding the circuit closed, he spoke to the mouthpiece again: ‘Hello?’

Nothing. He carefully set the receiver on the cradle without letting the line open back up.

‘Fuck.’



‘This is a fucking outrage,’ Cash told Bruce, pacing the room like a caged animal. Which, in fact, he was.

‘They’re just being thorough, Mister Cash.’

‘Ha. Thorough would be working out that we—that *I* had nothing to do with this. You’re the one who had to go help that guy pin the bastard down; I didn’t do a fucking *thing*. Why am *I* still here.’

Bruce loosened his tie by a millimetre. ‘It’s SOP, Mister Cash: they don’t even know what’s happened yet. In their minds, this could be a terrorist attack, or a smuggler gone schizoid, or anything. What’ll happen now is that they’ll look at all the evidence and come up with their own story. Next, they ask each of us for our stories. If all our stories match the story they came up with, that’ll probably be that. If not, they’ll separate us all into groups based on our differing accounts, and wait to see who says what next.’

‘So this could take fucking weeks.’

‘It could, but it won’t. What we want to do is to tell them the truth. Just tell ’em what we saw. Just that easy. Don’t bother telling them what you suspect, or believe, or figure happened: stick to what you know. If you saw something, tell them what you saw; if you didn’t see something, leave that part out. They’ll just want to confirm all the evidence. And that’ll happen a lot faster if you don’t theorise at them or ask a lot of questions.’

‘You’re telling me to tell them I didn’t see anything.’

‘No. That’s the worst thing you could tell them. Because you *did* see things. You saw me. You saw the terrorist—don’t *call* him a terrorist, though; just call him, like, “the psycho”. Don’t give ’em any new ideas.’

‘I actually didn’t see all that much, you know.’

‘Great. You can tell them that. But understand that your website guy across the aisle was filming this thing. He probably caught you in a few frames. So you’ll want to be honest when they question you. Because that tape’s not gonna lie for you.’

PAROXYSM

‘So, how long *will* this take.’

Bruce shrugged. ‘We were on a Boeing seven seventy-seven. That’s an expensive machine. If it wasn’t damaged during all this, I’m guessing that the airline’ll pressure the feds into releasing their crimescene within twelve hours. Beyond that...it could be a simple matter of describing what you saw, and you’re on your way.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll probably have to stay behind, to be honest. I came into contact with the guy. My actions changed the outcome of the situation. I doubt I’m in any *trouble*, but I’ll probably be figured to have more information than you do. They might keep me here for a day or two.’

‘Christ. So, at best, I’ll be out of here in maybe twenty-four hours, but alone.’

‘It’s possible.’

‘You think my being a celebrity would carry any weight?’

Bruce looked at him cautiously. ‘If I answer that honestly, are you going to hold it against me?’

‘You know better.’

‘Okay. As a celebrity...no. I’d have to say “no”. You could be Nick Cage, and I’d say “no”. But: you’re not that sort of a celebrity. What you are, in all honesty, is a televangelist. And if the first amendment didn’t prohibit laws from applying to that, you’d probably be arrested as a terrorist yourself.’

‘Huh?’

‘Every day, you get on television issuing theopolitical threats to believe or burn. You’re not a free man because you’re issuing these threats for a good cause, subjectively speaking; you’re free because the constitution prevents you from being arrested for it. For now.’

‘That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. How am I a fucking terrorist?’

‘How was Koresh?’

‘I’m not Koresh.’

‘And Koresh wasn’t bin Laden. Give it a few years.’

Cash rolled his eyes and went back to pacing the room.



Michelle lay in bed in a private room. She had no idea which hospital this was, or whether it was a true hospital at all. She didn’t know Denver as well as she should have, personally having stuck mostly to coastal cities in her days off. If she recalled correctly, there’d been a sort of VA building on East Colfax some years ago—Fitzwater, maybe. Perhaps she’d been taken there, if it remained in service.

She hadn’t seen much between the plane and this room. When help had finally arrived, it hadn’t been the EMTs she’d expected; they’d been soldiers. Or SWAT. Gasmasks and black tactical uniforms. And with machineguns. The nightmare hadn’t ended once the plane had reached the ground.

One of the soldiers had cornered her in the Coach station, demanding to know if she was armed, injured, able to walk, and certain, in that order; she’d been unarmed, injured, able to walk, and not certain of much of anything anymore.

GREMLIN

She'd been led quickly off the plane and down the mobile steps in a blur of noise and bright colours. Then she'd been fastened to a stretcher, which had gone into a helicopter. That had landed someplace, and her stretcher had moved out of the craft and into the cold sunlight before reaching a large, busy area—probably some sort of reception hall—and she'd been unbound and transferred to a rolling bed, skimmed along beneath fluorescent lights and white tiles, and finally transferred into this bed in this room.

The next few minutes had been a haphazard blur, as doctors and nurses had rushed to inject her with things, including an IV needle, swabbed her arm, cleaned it, and wrapped it in gauze.

Now she was here, fighting to stay awake, listening to things beeping and whooshing, and watching the wall connect to the ceiling across the room through a strange sphere of whitening tunnelvision. Somewhere in Denver.

Her arm itched, but she couldn't quite find it. Maybe she was still strapped down. All she could feel was the itching. She tried wiggling her fingers, but they didn't seem to be there anymore. Craning her neck to see them, she discovered that, whatever else held her to the bed, a simple white hospital blanket covered everything beneath her throat. She gave up and stared at the ceiling.

She traced the lineage of the horror as well as her mind could assemble it. McClain had bit her. And Buddy. And others. But that was the future.

McClain had been bit by the guy in the New Zealand Massacre. Who'd bit over a hundred others, killing nearly half of them. His identity hadn't been released, last she knew.

That maniac had been bit by....

She had no idea. She should ask someone about that.

In any case: NewZealandGuy had bit McClain; McClain had bit her; she hadn't bit anyone.

Yet.

If it had been a dog acting that way....

She knew dick about diseases, except that she preferred to avoid them. The only thing she could think of like this was rabies. But she had no idea what rabies did to people. If a rabid dog bit someone, did the guy go out and bite dogs, or people, or nothing? She should ask about that too.

There was no one here to ask.

Of course not. You got a bite on the arm. Others were maimed. Some were even killed. You're not a priority. Give it time, and someone will come around and let you know what you contracted. If anything.

She'd contracted something. That seemed obvious to her. Otherwise...explain all the itching.

Psychosomatic: it's all in your mind.

Also, they amputated your arm.

She reacted lucidly to that thought, nearly sitting upright, but ultimately unable to. She *was* strapped down. And her arm had been—

It's still there. It's just numb. Probably a local anaesthetic. You'll be fine.

She hoped so.



PAROXYSM

‘Anything?’ asked Doctor Barbour, returning with a coffeemug. They’d been at this for three hours now.

‘I’ve got the bug,’ Doctor Somerset acknowledged, ‘But it’s nothing I’ve seen before, personally.’

‘Viral?’

‘Oh yeah. Nice one, too. Have a look.’

Barbour leaned in, replacing Somerset at the microscope. He was looking at a virus, all right. But not one he recognised offhand. ‘Not rabies,’ he said.

‘Not rabies, not filovirid, not retrovirid. Almost arbovirid, but not quite.’

‘Arbo...WestNile?’

‘But not quite.’

‘So what is it?’

Somerset shrugged. ‘Barring crossreference? It’s something new. Oh. Have another look real quick. You see the rest? Is that thing bacterial?’

‘Uh...possibly proteobacterial. Probably just the casing.’

‘So this is fluidic.’

‘I’d say so. I’d hope so, anyway. But I can’t say much for sure yet.’

‘Where in hell’d it come from,’ Somerset wondered.

‘The virus fairy.’

‘Yeah.’

‘It’s not manmade,’ Barbour said, ‘At least, not that I can tell. Man this thing is weird.’

‘So who’s next? CDC or yousamrid?’

Barbour straightened up, blinking to readjust his eyes. ‘Both. And anyone else you can think of. I wanna know where this came from, and what its hobbies are.’

‘Lemme see what I can get on that,’ Somerset said, returning to his passengerlist, ‘So far, it’s looking like our PatientZero was this McClain guy, coming out of Los Angeles.’

‘He was *from* there?’

‘Uh...no. He’s from Cleveland, returning home.’

‘Did he *get* it in LA?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Keep on it,’ Barbour said, ‘I’m gonna make some calls.’



No more yummy meat. No fair.

Bright light, too. Big bad bright light.

Why won't it stop hurting

Itchy big bad bright

I...he...we ate them...we ate those people

Where yummy meat

Can't think anymore too much pain just stop the pain let me think no more pain

Itch yum meat

Just kill me

GREMLIN



McClain was bound to a gurney in a stark, white room, filmed and observed from all angles. He lay still now, rarely blinking, occasionally chewing expectantly at the air.

Diagnostics were attached to his limbs and torso, recording his vitals, such as they were. His pulse had dropped to thirty over ten; his heartrate had slowed to eight beats per minute; his breathing remained sporadic—he'd hold his breath for minutes at a time, then hyperventilate and return to moaning and screaming.

The observation continued into the night.



'Sir: Trevor Page to see you.'

'He's late.'

'Yes Sir. Shall I show him in?' The secretary smiled sympathetically at Page.

'Yeah. Show'im in.'

She clicked off the intercom and led Page wordlessly to the oak door, pausing for a moment before easing it open.

'The hell have you been!' Brando demanded, 'Shut the door!'

Page did. 'An unforeseen situation arose. I handled it.'

'A different situation, you mean.'

'An additional situation. I have your sample here in my case, of course.'

'My samp—oh! Oh? Well, thank christ for that. Let's see it.'

'I'd be interested in seeing something myself,' Page hinted.

'Oh right. Your, ah, fee. Of course. Got it right here.'

'Let's get it right on the desk, then,' Page said, taking a seat and laying a casual hand alertly atop his briefcase.

Brando frowned. 'I guess I can do that.' He brought up his own briefcase, dropping it unceremoniously atop the desk.

'That's a good start. How's the lining?'

Brando spun the case round so that its hinges faced Page and clicked open the latches, sneering as he opened it fully. 'It's all there,' he claimed, 'You can count it on the way out.'

'No need,' Page said, setting his own case on the floor and reaching into his coat.

Brando stiffened; his aides reached into their own coats.

'No need for alarm,' Page announced, pulling a small vial out of his pocket between two fingers, his thumb clearly poised out to the side. 'Whose is this.' He offered it to the room.

Brando nodded to one of the aides, who released his invisible grip on his pistol and took the vial out of Page's gloved hand.

'I think you'll find that they're both there; you can count them on my way out.' He stood, leaning toward the money.

'Let's just ask the computer about that,' Brando suggested, keeping a wary eye on Page while the aide played with the hardware in the corner.

PAROXYSM

Page remained standing, smoothing out his tie against his shirt, smirking.

‘Checks out,’ the aide said, ‘You want me to doublecheck?’

‘Nah,’ Brando said, ‘My mother always said to trust my instincts, may she rest in peace.’

‘So,’ Page prompted.

In reaction, Brando slammed the case shut and clicked home the latches, standing and tossing it with slight aggression into Page’s arms. ‘So. We’re through here.’

‘We are.’ Page stepped back, reclaiming the case he’d brought in, as well. ‘It was a pleasure.’

‘Bullshit. It was a hundred large for zero effort. Word on the street is that you had nothing to do with this.’

‘Word on the street stays on the street,’ Page said, shrugging and lighting a cigarette, ‘It’s not of a class appreciated elsewhere.’

Brando sneered at Page again. ‘I want you to know: I’ve made ten times that since I saw you last.’

Page nodded, retreating toward the door. ‘Of course. Good day.’



‘Yo: how’s that finger, Marvin.’

‘Shit,’ Marvin said from the next cell, observing the bandaged stump of his middle finger, ‘Hurts like a motherfucker, ’at’s how it is.’

‘A’ight; damn. Jus’ askin’, yo?’

‘Ain’t no thing, Bro. Tell you what, though, Loc: that dumbass’ cracker sonabitch gonna *pay* fer this shit, all down there disrespectin’ an’ shit. The fuck the world comin’ to when the *Man* get off crippling a nigger, knowwhaddIsayin’ y’all?’

‘That the truth.’

‘Know it is, Dog,’ Marvin sang. ‘Yo! TJ! Yo! The fuck that dumbass’ cracker *go*, anyway. Come he ain’t down here with us, yo? Probably got his white ass up in a fuckin’ *penthouse* cell, an’ shit.’

‘Oh, yeah Man: cracker too damn’ good t’do time down here where we is,’ TJ agreed.

‘Yo!’ Marvin bellowed, leaping to his feet and bouncing toward the bars of his cell, ‘Hey, yo! Hey I’m talkin’ t’y’all down in here! Yo! I needs some *service* here!’ He cackled at that and began punching the bars with his good fist. ‘Yo! The fuck you all *at*, Niggers! Shit.’

‘Damn,’ TJ exhaled loudly, ‘They done f’got about our black asses, now!’

‘Oh *no* Man,’ Marvin countered, ‘They gonna remember me, I guarantee.’



Michelle’s head was throbbing now.

‘Hello?’ she called, the pain clear in her voice, ‘Is anyone out there?’

She just needed some Advil or something. And to know where her arm was. And something else. But she couldn’t remember now. The headache was erasing her mind.

GREMLIN

Who bit NewZealandGuy

That was it. Who bit him, and when. How long did she actually have. Those were other questions. But first: Advil. Maybe Motrin. Or codeine.

A nurse hurried into the room. 'It's all right. I'm here. What's the problem, Miss?'

Michelle coughed spasmodically. 'Headache. Bad. Advil. Codeine, maybe.'

'You *have* a headache? Now?'

Michelle scowled sceptically at the nurse. 'Yes. Headache. Now. Codeine. Now. Run.'

'We've already got you on Demerol, Miss.'

'But...headache. Bad. Help.'

'Let me just see if your doctor is available.'

The nurse was gone before Michelle could say anything more. *Stupid bitch.*

Something bit NewZealandGuy; he bit McClain; McClain bit her; she...she thought she might bite the fucking nurse.

But not yet. She wasn't crazy yet. She wasn't ready to bite yet. She just needed painkillers. And answers. And the chance to do it all over again, saving herself from this fate.

She cried quietly until she fell asleep.



'We've reviewed your recording, Mister Marlowe,' the spook told him, sitting across from the phone in his suite. The remains of the cheeseburger and fries sat on the rolling cart, barely eaten. Rick held his Coke in a shaky hand.

'Like it?' he asked.

'We're a little confused about one matter, Mister Marlowe. Other witnesses have suggested that you'd brought the camera out several minutes earlier than your actual recording suggests. That leads us to wonder why your recording is merely three minutes and twenty-nine seconds in length. Can you explain that?'

Marlowe had been expecting a question like this. And he'd prepared a simple answer: 'I fucked up. I pointed the camera at the z—guy when he first came into First Class. But I guess I didn't thump the Record Button hard enough. By the time I noticed that I wasn't actually filming, it was mostly over with. Sorry.'

'That's a shame, Mister Marlowe.'

'It is?'

'It would have helped our investigation to have had a full record of this incident. From your perspective, that is.'

'Uh...yeah.'

'Fortunately, the cameras aboard the plane were able to record the *entire* situation.'

Rick felt the blood leave his face. 'Oh. Well...good.'

The agent said nothing.

'So...will I be getting my gear back then?' asked Rick.

The agent peered at him for another moment. 'Of course you will, Mister Marlowe. We can't infringe upon your first amendment rights, after all.'

'The freedom of the press.'

PAROXYSM

‘Indeed.’

Rick blinked. ‘So...are we done here?’

The agent regarded him for another moment. Rick thought it was clear that the feds had worked out that he’d switched the damned MemoryStick—probably even where he’d hid the thing. *Idiot.*

‘We’re done, Mister Marlowe.’ The agent stood up. ‘Again, we thank you for your cooperation, and your patience.’ He offered out a hand.

Rick stood slowly and shook it. ‘Uh...glad I could help.’

The agent said nothing more, simply walking slowly out of the room. He shut the door behind him.

Rick glanced around the room quickly and grabbed his coat. Shaking it on, he moved toward the door.

He opened it to find an older agent standing there. ‘Oh.’

‘Mister Marlowe. Assistant Director Campbell, Federal Bureau. Got a minute?’

Rick dropped his eyes to the floor, backing up to let Campbell in.

‘No need for that. Just a moment of your time. Let’s walk together.’

‘Uh...where?’

‘Outside. You’re free to go. Your belongings are waiting for you in your taxi.’

‘Oh. Okay.’

Campbell turned and led Marlowe down the hall to the lift. ‘We’ll take the standard elevator this time. I’m sure you understand the need for some secrecy upon our arrival: this is, after all, a corporate hotel. Bring in a floorful of people at once, most of whom look scared to death...word gets around. Bad press, and all that.’

‘Uh...sure.’

Campbell nodded to the agent, who pressed the button for the lobby. ‘Speaking of bad press—or, I should say, just press—you say you’re the webmaster of ConspiracyFactsDotCom.’

‘Yeah. That’s me.’

‘Funny coincidence. I’ve had that site bookmarked for a couple of years now. You guys have...an unusual take on us spooks. Don’t worry: we actually find it pretty entertaining.’

‘Oh? No hard feelings?’

‘Nah. You’re not the first; you won’t be the last. Sure, your stories have given us a couple minutes of extra work here and there, explaining to people that we’re not all that secret agency in the XFiles. But it’s mostly harmless. No worse than Leno slamming the president every night.’

‘It’s purely for entertainment and educational value,’ Rick said.

‘Yeah. I just wonder...you’ve got onsite footage now of this incident. I can’t tell you what to do with it, of course. You could put that on your site, or sell it to a bigger one, or burn it; that’s not my call.’

‘Right. Freedom of the press.’

‘Yeah. Pretty much. I do wonder, if I were in your shoes right now, with what could be called priceless footage, whether I’d be thinking about the money and the fame, or about the repercussions.’

GREMLIN

‘Uh...which repercussions.’

‘You have the attention of a lot of people on the ’net. A lot of people who might blur the line between education and entertainment and panic and mayhem. I’ll tell ya: if it were me, I guess I’d have to wonder what the results would be of unleashing that footage onto the public.’

‘Um...I guess I’d have to ask my lawyers what they thought.’

‘Um. Good idea. But I’ll save you some time. Civil issues aside, like the other passengers suing you for using their likenesses, or the airline suing you for using their location, your footage is legal. This isn’t about laws. This is about civic responsibility. I just hope you’ll give the matter some deserving thought before you start telling people that the same shit going on in New Zealand and Australia is going on here in the states—especially now that we’ve contained it.’

‘Wait. Australia?’

‘Oh right. Sorry. You’ve been...preoccupied. Similar situations have begun to arise in Sydney. We—meaning even I—can’t be sure whether it’s related. But my hunch personally is that the events in all three countries are somehow connected. Off the record, of course.’

‘Of course.’

‘So,’ Campbell said as the car came to a stop and the doors opened, ‘You now know as much as I do. And I know just about as much as anyone, at this point. So far, the public is drawing its own conclusions, and remaining relatively calm about it. Of course,’ he lowered his volume a bit as they walked through the lobby to the waiting taxi, ‘the public doesn’t know much about our little incident here in Denver yet. And we’re happy with that, for now. Not because we like to keep secrets, or lie to people; but because, sometimes, people who are already forming conclusions about something can incorporate the truth into their own ideas, leading to panic. And no one wants that. Not even you, I suspect.’

‘So...if I upload this stuff, no one’s going to make me disappear; it just might lead to riots. That’s what you’re saying?’

‘That’s exactly right. We don’t make people disappear, Mister Marlowe. Not recently, anyway. We’re just cops in better suits, serving and protecting—even if we’re protecting people from misunderstanding the truth into something larger than it is.’

‘Huh. So, off the record, do you know anything about Roswell?’

Campbell laughed. ‘Have a nice day, Mister Marlowe.’



‘Got it. Thanks.’ Barbour ended the transmission on his mobilephone and stared at his notes, glumly. Taking a deep breath, he scooped up the papers and returned to the lab.

‘Nothing here yet,’ Somerset told him, hearing him enter.

‘I’ve got something. PatientZero? Wasn’t. Stephen McClain, LA to Cleveland, *got* to LA from Christchurch, New Zealand.’

‘Oh shit.’

PAROXYSM

‘Yeah. Presuming this is the same strain, it’ll end up being the Christchurch morph. I’m still waiting on confirmation that the Sydney morph is the same thing again.’

‘This could be bad.’

‘It’s already bad. PatientZero appears to have been, ah...Alexander Poe, of Chicago—’

‘Chicago!’

‘No, wait: he was *from* Chicago, but left there two or three days ago for Christchurch. He was a palaeontologist, working in Antarctica. Ring a bell?’

‘A small one. Some theory about ancient diseases being trapped in the ice down there?’

‘Right. Now I’ve got leads trying to track down the rest of the group—they were looking for Antarctic dinosaurs, we think—to see whether they have any information. Where, ah...Poe could’ve got this, whether anyone *else* down there got this, and so on. We’re waiting for, ah, McMurdo to get back to us with their location now.’

‘Okay. So, new theory: a palaeontologist digs up a virus in the ice, and then takes it to New Zealand, gives it to, um...McClain? McClain. And he crashes out over Denver, giving it to half the plane. Or is there more news.’

‘No. That’s about what we’ve got. If Sydney comes to the same conclusion.’

‘Okay. Um...what’s the containment?’

‘There isn’t one. We’re still racing to catch up. Denver’s contained, as far as we know. But this could easily go epidemic down under. There’s just no way to guess who all Poe bit. Or where they all are now.’

‘Two or three days.’

‘No. Not even. If Poe bit McClain two days ago...call it thirty-six hours, at best.’

‘Fucking hot.’

‘Yeah. But, this isn’t Ebola. It’s not gonna burn itself out. It’s reached civilisation now. It’s got fuel. And momentum.’

‘AllAccess Pass,’ Somerset lamented.

Barbour’s phone beeped incessantly. He glanced at its readout.

Incoming Text Message:

**SYDNEY MORPH = CHRISTCHURCH MORPH
SITUATION EPIDEMIC**

‘It’s the same strain,’ Barbour announced, ‘We’ve got a runaway.’



Bright light. Much pain. Cold. Hot. Itchy. Bite. Bite, bite, bite.

No. No biting. Just sleep.

Bite. Bite them all.

Bite her.

Bite nurse.

GREMLIN

Michelle shut her crimson eyes.

PAROXYSM

Book Two

Epidemic

EPIDEMIC: An epidemiological inflexion which appears as new cases in the population, in an arbitrary period of time, at a rate which substantially exceeds expectations, based on recent experience.

PAROXYSM

What's New

Denver, Colorado
20th October 2005

The final 450 pages of *Paroxysm* are necessarily offline—I can't actually be *that* generous with this thing, after all. The final, entire, printed, bound version is available at paroxysm.wastedinc.com for those who wish to finish the story. This being an EBook, you can just click on paroxysm.wastedinc.com to get there directly, on the computer.

For those lacking the interest in reading beyond Book One, gimee just one more minute of your time to address a couple of things worth mentioning....

In the course of the eighteen months this novel took to write—and that's closer to two years, factoring the preproduction elements like working out how and why the zombiebug could and would appear, spread, et cetera, along with the basics of the primary characters followed within the story—and just in the few days since the last word was technically typed into the file [incidentally, that last word was roughly the 240,000th, which might explain, in part, how this thing took eighteen months to get banged out in the first place], a number of people have been on hand to help out in a number of capacities, from the experts helping to tailor my zombiebug into something feasible and even probable to the cops and soldiers encountered on the streets and hit with the general scenario of this story—none of whom, I should add, happened to arrest or shoot me for terrorism—to the army of proofreaders catching the various mistakes even within this smallish fraction of the tale I've had lurking online since the summer of 2004 as a sort of teaser advert as I finished the larger part of the book; I wouldn't really have the room in here to name them all, even if the majority hadn't been anonymous, hidden behind badges and usernames; most of them know who they are, which may be credit enough; in any case, I wanted to take a moment, officially, to thank them all for their effort—including those who, being disinterested in reading beyond this teaser, still took the time to get back to me with little mistakes they'd caught.

Of course, there will probably be a few such mistakes to be found in the full, official version of the novel, already technically available at the link above; anyone catching mistakes in that can get hold of me through the EMail address and website below.

Okay. That's it. We now return you to whatever you're doing next, whether that's running off to buy the book and finish the story, or just walking away back to your lives. More later....

—Gremlin
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