



Flowers of Cardinal and Violet

A Bloody Colony Special Edition

Issac Grey Lambert

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*A Bloody Colony Special Edition:
Flowers of Cardinal and Violet*

Issac Grey Lambert

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ISBN 978-1-917414-18-0

FRfocv01a MMXXIV eBook

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Cover design by the author.

Dedication

For physicist Jocelyn Bell Burnell.

The brightest of stars.

Books by Issac Grey Lambert

Buried Dogs Don't Bark

Beyond the Barycentre

Exploding Head Syndrome

The Amoral Imperative

The Christmas Selection

Flowers of Cardinal and Violet

Epigraph

"My father, Coxson Bragga, warned me not to stray beyond the boundary fence alone. It was one of his golden rules, but heck, I was a bored teenager with a chip on my shoulder the size of a small moon. I ventured out too far, of course, further than my arrogance would allow me to admit. Lost at the edge of Blood Ridge, I fell into an abandoned gator trap. Set by an indolent hunter, or a dead one, most likely the latter. As tall as I was, I couldn't climb the sides, slippery with the evening rain. The bottom was swathed with forest trash and exposed tree roots. Then, I saw it, scratching in the dirt. A

gator, tired and gaunt, huddled in a corner, snared like me in the trap. I know gators are eyeless, blind, but I swear it looked straight at me with abject hunger. Fortunately, the hunter's net had snagged the beast, but it struggled for release. Even more vigorously, I imagined, with such a tasty treat having just landed in its lap. I became increasingly fixated on the animal as the hours raced, certain with every second it would break free and attack. Finally, as the net unraveled and hope almost faded, father's voice reached through the trance. I remember him jumping down like a superhero between me and the gator. As he landed, something must have broken free, unleashing the beast before he could raise his rifle. By the time Zeus

and the others stormed the pit and killed the monster, father could not be saved. All I could do was scream."

Simone Bragga

Eventum

Colony: Gehenna

Star System: Hinnom

Date: September 3rd, 2194

Distance From Earth: 490 Light-
Years

Dramatis Personæ

Anderson Fairchild

Beltram Enterprises CEO

Madelyne Mackenzie

Celebrity and Tri-Vid Host

Travis Woodstock

Dental Practitioner, The Smilie
Academy

Simone Bragga

Proprietor, Gehenna Game

Zeus

Head Guide, Gehenna Game

Tanisha Lomax

Scientist and Entrepreneur

Chapter One: This Heat

This heat is going to kill me, Anderson decided.

Gehenna's triple suns seemed to beam in conspiratorial unison, launching scorching attacks upon anyone foolish enough not to be hiding in the shade.

Being forced to loiter in an outdoor customs queue proved mortifying enough, let alone having to wait alongside economy ticket passengers.

At least the line shunts forward occasionally, he considered, if albeit slowly.

The automated customs officials scanned his luggage and rifle case, with the torpidity only expected from a comatose snail. With a chirr, they gestured him towards the exit.

Another backward Brith-Space colony, the galaxy is vermined with them. Anderson imagined a celesti-

al broom, sweeping them all into a supermassive black hole.

Outside, the sole concession stand, an Etepano's kiosk, pumped out a pungent fusion of burnt pizza and teenage acne. Ignoring a line of customers, the spotty server rushed from behind the counter. "Hey, you're that famous hunter! I've seen all your Tri-Vids."

Anderson hoisted the smile only perfected by the most patient of public relations experts. He even forced a balmy grin for the selfie: obnoxious behaviour did not play well on social media.

With mopped-up sweat, his handkerchief became a sodden rag. Finding a recycling receptacle, he traded it for a fresh one.

A vending machine served up a garishly decorated carton of pow-milk. He cautiously smelt the drink before sipping at it.

The spaceport, although adequate for the riff-raff, grated on his preference for a little more refinement.

Still, this wasn't that kind of excursion. His inner voice sought to remind him of the trade-off between the rigours of local character and the zeal of adventure. Let's hope, he contended, the latter outweighs the former.

After all, I am here to hunt.

"Mister Fairchild?" A robot attendant enquired.

Anderson identified himself.

"We have a long ride." The machine motioned towards a waiting transit pod. "Please make yourself comfortable. I will collect your belongings."

"Why is it so damn hot?" He asked.

"The weather here changes quickly." The attendant observed, somewhat redundantly. "Some regions on this planet would welcome the sunlight." A scripted response, of course. Further discussion would be fruitless.

As a colony, someone could only characterise Gehenna as 'kitsch' without resorting to more unsavoury language. Nearby high-rise tenements, best

described as mostly functional, defiantly wore a garish paint. Possibly to shroud rusting metalwork, or to designate gangland boundaries. In places, the decoration appeared weather-worn or scorched by lightning strikes. Distantly, a tall, ornate tower blocked as much light as possible for everyone else.

Hanging above the lower storied buildings, a large blimp gleefully promoted Oksoko mouthwash and deodorant. The promotion probably said more about the people of this planet than any encyclopaedia entry ever could. A newscaster interrupted the regularly scheduled advertising with a story about a movie set massacre.

As the journey got underway, Anderson finally relaxed. Fully air-conditioned, the vehicle was more upmarket than he expected. However, the seat covers proved to be an approximation of leather, the difference only apparent at close inspection.

This had better be worth it, he reflected.

Outside the pod windows, the sights and wonders of an entirely new world, new to him at least, sped by unnoticed.

Inside, Anderson searched for the beverage compartment.

Chapter Two: Welcome

Hot butter rum poured, Anderson activated the Tri-Vid. Scrolling past the interactive gambling and reality shows, he found the news channels.

"...details are still emerging from the shocking rampage. Unconfirmed reports put the fatalities at forty-seven, with an unknown number of casualties. KXBYNZ channel thirty-nine senior correspondent Tina May is on the link. Tina, what can you tell us?"

"I'm here at Winslow Field, where until last night, renowned director Yumiko Kagekatsu was shooting the feature film Ruins of the Star People. The scene is one of utter carnage. The police won't allow us any closer than this; however, I can tell you that the medical examiner has been steadily wheeling

body bags out for the past few hours. This is, by any measure, the most monstrous spree killing in the history of Gehenna or, indeed, any of the outlying colonies. We are expecting an official announcement from the local authorities shortly. The story is still unfolding. What we do know is that a local man burst on to the set late last night, whilst twilight portions of the film were being recorded. Heavily armed, the as yet unnamed assailant opened fire on the actors, who made up most of the fatalities. The indiscriminate gunfire injured many more, including the director, Yumiko Kagekatsu, who we understand is in critical condition at Aldrin Memorial hospital. Sheriff Brickner is now ready to make an announcement."

"I will now make a brief statement. Following which, I will take no questions. Further announcements will follow when appropriate.

At ten minutes past midnight, a fifty-two-year-old man interrupted the filming of the movie Ruins of the Star People. Early accounts suggest the man believed the movie set to be a real alien invasion. Armed with legally purchased assault weaponry, the assailant attacked the costumed actors. I can confirm that forty-eight cast and crew have been, regrettably, declared deceased by the medical examiner. The number of injured is near twenty or more, with the exact count yet to be confirmed. With the serious nature of the injuries, we expect the number of fatalities to rise over the coming hours. I will not be taking questions."

"There you have it from the sheriff. Forty-eight now confirmed dead at the hands of a deranged lunatic killer. I'll keep you advised as the story unfolds. Back to you, Martin, in

the studio. This is Tina May for KXBYNZ, channel thirty-nine."

"Thank you, Tina. The horrendous nature of the crime has once again brought gun control to the fore. Many analysts suggest this incident may well push the senate into immediate action. If public responses to early political statements in social media are any gauge, we may well see some movement to regulate or eradicate gun ownership colony-wide within days."

"Same story, different colony." He murmured to himself.

Anderson had almost exhausted the mini-bar by the time he arrived. The concierge emerged from its robot-shaped hollow on the side panel of the vehicle, to open the door with a florid genuflection.

"Enjoy your stay." The machine chirped with a surly salute.

Stepping back out into the heat, he felt the effects of the alcohol a little too precipitously. Steading himself, he took in the surroundings.

The Triple suns formed a dazzling triangular cluster. Anderson guessed tidal forces bind the stellar bodies together, in what some might consider an unholy embrace.

Tall, unfamiliar trees grew all around the compound, sprawling across the hills beyond. Beneath them, a lush undergrowth thronged in brilliant shades ranging through carmine and purple. Almost hidden by the vegetation, an imposing wall circled the perimeter. On the way in the entry gates had opened outward, the fortifications clearly designed to keep something out, not in.

The grounds were well kept, planned, but sufficiently random to create an impression of nature. A mouse-sized insect gorged itself on a brilliantly coloured blossom. With a whipping crack, the flower impaled the wretched creature with a razor-edged

tendril. As its petals wrapped around its catch to create a miniature sarcophagus, the animal squirmed sickeningly.

Having stacked his luggage, the attendant allowed magnetic clamps to fasten its body to the transit pod, which raced away, leaving Anderson alone.

The hunting lodge ahead looked plucked from a nineteenth-century museum. Constructed with thick beams and replete with a grand veranda, the hotel loomed larger than he expected.

Similarly impressive, fashioned in a vibrant rainbow dress, a beautiful young woman effortlessly made her way down the main stairs.

"Anderson Fairchild." She announced. "I am Simone Bragga. Welcome to *Gehenna Game*."

Chapter Three: Start From The Outside

Suitably attired for dinner, Anderson lingered for a moment before the dresser mirror. A full British tuxedo, of course, anything less would be simply barbaric.

The bedroom suite, plush and richly adorned, reflected the booking price. Gold-laced furniture, clearly shipped from Earth, complimented the hand-woven linens from Lalande VII colony. It impressed him. This far into the colony frontier, the transit costs would have been close to prohibitive.

The scenery proved as spectacular as the infomercials promised. In the fading light of the day, a herd of animals clustered on a hillside. About the size of a transit pod, with plump bodies held aloft upon spindly poles for legs, the creatures roved in

silhouette. From the way they herded, Anderson guessed them as prey animals, gathering in mutual protection against the night's unseen predators.

As the last of Gehenna's suns fell below the horizon, he descended for dinner.

At the foot of the stairs, Simone took his arm, ushering Anderson into the taproom lounge. "Let me introduce you."

A small group sipped cocktails at the bar, enraptured by polite conversation.

Before Simone could announce him, Anderson made a beeline for a tall woman dressed in a fine silk gown. "Madelyne Mackenzie!" He frothed, a little star-struck.

"Do I know you?"

"No, maybe, but everyone knows who you are."

Madelyne hoisted a counterfeit air of interest. How only celebrities can.

"May I present Anderson Fairchild. Madelyne, you know, clearly. This is Travis Woodstock, and my

head guide and trapper, Zeus." Simone gestured to each with a gracious flourish.

"Hey, I saw you on Tri-Vid once." Travis gushed. "That Jonny Famous show, he got you perfect."

"Uh-huh."

After a vigorous round of elbow bumps, Simone handed Anderson an elaborate cocktail, complete with a miniature umbrella. "Dinner is almost ready. Shall we sit?"

Although five took their appointed places, the circular table had been set for six.

"Do we have another guest at this lawn meet?" Madelyne enquired.

Stroking his greying beard, Zeus shifted awkwardly in his seat. He looked at the cutlery as if trying to decipher a puzzle.

Unfolding a napkin, Simone allowed a brief but acknowledging exhale. "The empty place is for my father, Coxsone Bragga, may the Gibborim accept his soul into the eternal moons."

Madelyne and Travis appeared discomforted by the revelation; however, Anderson knew this kind of theatre. The archaic religious reference was cute, though.

"Was he killed on a hunt?" He asked, although certain of the response.

"How did you know?"

Anderson rubbed his cheek. "It was in the brochure."

As if to distract them, the first course arrived: a sort of pungent, spicy soup. The broth continued to swish, as if stirred by an unseen spoon.

The waiter returned with baskets of strangely shaped bread.

Pushing the soup aside, Travis gnawed messily on a small loaf. Once consumed, he corralled the fallen crumbs into a tidy pile, then swept the grains onto the floor.

After slurping apprehensively at the watery concoction, Anderson discovered how hungry he was. It was surprisingly tasty.

"My father fought to tame this land. He built this lodge." Simone elaborated. "A gator took him, five years gone. Not just any gator, it was a Double. Now, I respect his traditions by introducing new visitors to the wonders of Gehenna."

"I am sure we would all join in expressing our sympathies." Travis seemed to be the sort to speak for everyone else.

Anderson considered it lucky that the soup was so good, keeping him supping instead of launching an acidic retort.

"Hear, hear." Madelyne raised her glass, now empty, of course. At least the gesture was there.

Anderson sought to ease the awkwardness, as if quelling a raucous business meeting. "A Double? Do you mean bicephalic?"

Simone stood. "I need to check on the plat du jour. Zeus, may I ask you to enlighten our guests?"

"I will do so, ma'am." The guide waited for Simone to leave before proceeding. "Gators are as curious as they are dangerous. Nothing like them exists on Earth, nor in any colony. But that's the trouble. There is much about them, even now, that we do not understand."

Soup consumed, Madelyne stacked the side plate and bowl, creating space for the next drink. An attendant duly obliged, delivering another ornate cocktail. She smiled in thanks, but made a cyclical gesture.

"During the foundation of the colony, many newcomers fell prey to the gators. Ferocious bastards they are, vicious enough alone but in packs, utterly deadly. Early settlers aimed to kerb gator numbers by seeking and killing their young. However, successive expeditions could find neither nests nor fledglings. Studying the animals proved fruitless. Cap-

tured gators died quickly, unable to endure confinement."

Drawn in, even Anderson felt his stoicism lured into abatement. Although, he wondered, how much of this is scripted?

Madelyne looked on intently, while Travis absent-mindedly picked through the bread basket.

"Hundreds needlessly lost their lives to discover that gators reproduce asexually. Not by producing buds, like a Hydra, or by cellular division. The gators have an approach so unique that only those who have witnessed it believe it. When resources are plentiful, an adult gator will actually divide into two."

Anderson rested on his elbows. To hell with etiquette.

Expertly enrapturing the audience, Zeus utilised a pair of bread rolls as visual aids. "The process takes only a few weeks. Then, one adult becomes two fully formed gators. There are no cocoons, no pupae. The animal transforms in the open, still capable of mov-

ing and feeding throughout. Although we are uncertain, many think the memories of the original, duly replicated, persist within both. Anecdotally, I have to agree with that. This perpetuation of learned experience makes the gator such a formidable opponent. We must adapt our tactics constantly to stay ahead of them."

"Like a strategic arms race." Madelyne observed.

Zeus nodded. "The more colonists that fell to the beasts as prey, the more gators would rise to threaten the rest."

"And even more cunning, to boot," Travis added unnecessarily.

Anderson thought he saw the curtain to the kitchen part slightly, then close.

"But there is a wrinkle." Zeus held court. "Exceptionally, the division isn't perfect, resulting in something akin to a conjoined twin. Two rapturous beasts in one ferocious package. But something else happens, a kind of unnatural growth acceleration. Each

Double is not just twice the size of one but bigger, much bigger than two equivalent animals.”

The bread basket exhausted, Travis merely stared at the guide.

“It was a Double that took Master Bragga. He killed one side of the beast, only for the other to drag its cadaverous brother forward.” Zeus dipped his head in reverence. “His gun jammed and then, well, by the time we killed the brute, only Master Bragga’s legs remained.”

“Phritz me.” Madelyne whelped.

“It’s said that somewhere out there, there is a Quadruple. An extremely rare Double of a Double, an unimaginable beast with four mouths and more legs than a skoccer team.” With a fork, Zeus pointed out into the wilderness. “Although none have seen it, some peddle conspiracy nonsense, suggesting that the Quad is watching us, planning, scheming, yearning to retake the land we have fought and bled for. What is for sure is that on the hunt tomorrow, do not

underestimate them." He held up a hand, hiding the thumb. "If we encounter the Quad, remember this; four bodies, four brains, four times as smart."

"I knew I should have brought a body bag," Travis joked. Looking around, he parted his hands. "What? A little too on the nose?"

Chapter Four: Bullet Time

Anderson insisted. "I will hunt the Quad."

Having reviewed his psych profile, Simone was not at all surprised. "Well, you've paid for it and signed the waiver. It is your privilege."

"Too right."

Signalling for Zeus to depart from the main convoy, Simone advised. "I can't endanger my other guests, you understand." To Zeus, she instructed. "Mister Fairchild wants the Quadruple. If you are amenable, go with him and keep him alive."

Zeus stroked his goatee. "I am, but I want twice the fee."

Simone threw a scornful glance.

To Zeus, Anderson acceded. "How about four-times standard? Seems fitting, don't you think?"

The guide nodded, then began filling his pockets from an ammunition dispenser.

Simone waved for the caravan to start-up. "Happy hunting, gentlemen."

Stepping towards the wilderness, Zeus threaded a handful of ammunition into a cartridge belt. "We have a long walk ahead of us." He announced.

Anderson raced to catch up. "Aren't we taking a transit pod?"

Zeus turned to examine his patron, as if checking to see if a small child had soiled itself. "He will hear vehicles a mile away. Old Quad is smart, four brains smart, remember?"

"So, he is real?"

"Oh, yeah, he's real." Zeus checked to ensure that Anderson carried a first aid pack.

Anderson smiled. "See, you do care."

"Knock that off," Zeus retorted. "I know you've hunted before, but this, this is a whole new level. Do what I say, when I say it."

"I've hunted lusca on Kotharat, trapped Lalande scuttle hordes, coursed giant pseudis across the moons of Orthrus, faced the most hostile creatures in the colonies." Anderson boasted. "Few hunters have a trophy case approaching my own. I can bring your pesky beasts to heel."

Zeus took two high-velocity shells and secured them in a breast pocket. "One for you and one for me."

Chapter Five: Heathens

Zeus insisted they skirt the edge of a wide field.

Stopping for a moment, Anderson watched the tall grass ripple with the wind. "Is that maize?"

"Almost. Someone genetically altered it to grow here."

"This is the first time you've surprised me. I thought you folks were all about the Gaia thing, or whatever the equivalent is on this planet."

"Babylon."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You're all about the contradictions, that's for sure."

"My people didn't plant it."

"Walking away won't dissuade me from further enquiry."

"Oh, I got that message."

"Well? I'm walking, do the talking. I believe a little local colour is inclusive of my contract."

Zeus audibly sighed defeat. "Only if you keep up."

"This is me keeping up."

"Several years past, not long after Coxson Bragg established the lodge, a puritan community purchased the land rights to this basin. The soil here is rich and there's a nearby water source. The valley walls provide protection from the worst of the thermo-thunder cyclones. If there is anywhere better on Gehenna to start a farm, I haven't found it. I suppose we were just as naïve; otherwise, we might have dissuaded them of the notion. Or formed a mutual defence agreement, not that they would have considered that. Something about their beliefs prevented accepting help from outsiders. They were from the Church of Gibborim or some other such nonsense. Thought they could force god upon this land." The

guide pointed beyond the field. "They had a ranch out near the river. It was impressive, looked like the set from a musical Tri-Vid show about the North American old west. Some real-life pioneer wagon train bullphritz going on right here in Gehenna. There might be gold in these hills, but you have to stay alive to spend it."

"I'm guessing it's not there anymore."

"Not in a liveable sense, no."

"I think I am catching on to how things work around here."

"Really?"

"That's why we have to go around the field. At a guess, a gator got them, using the crop as cover."

"Those bastards would be preferable, I promise you. But it wasn't the gators. A vile burrowing weevil infests the plants. The only thing they savour more than cereal crops is human flesh. A couple of dozen will strip an adult gator to the bone in under an hour."

"Is there anything on this planet that wasn't imagined by a vengeful god?"

Zeus ignored the jibe. "The houses they built were quite the sight. Steep roofs and round windows. I visited them once, suggested that they build a taller perimeter fence, but it did little good. Some might call it bravery, but it's just plain ordinary human arrogance. The pilgrims believed that the land innately belonged to them – that settling here was their god-given right, the beneficent act of a loving deity. No one knew, or thought to discover, that under the right conditions the larva could become airborne and swarm at night."

"This story will not end well, will it?"

"Huh. Although we might have described them as neighbours, the community kept almost entirely to themselves. It was only when we sought to alert them to some changes in gator migration that we found their remains. The worst part of it all, and this is worth remembering, is the critters secrete neurotoxin. The

paralytic effects are painless, I'm told, but the victim would have remained conscious throughout."

"Phritz, me. They had to watch as they were being eaten alive?"

"There were so many bodies and so few hours until dusk... We buried the dead in a mass grave, intending to reinter them at a later time, but ultimately no one had the stomach for that. However, in the last sweep, we found a miracle. A baby, sealed into a grain silo, along with a dilapidated nursery maintainer. We don't know how long the robot had kept the child alive. For weeks, maybe. Coxson raised her as if she were his daughter born."

"Phritz me. Simone."

"Uh-huh. The crop has grown here ever since. We burn it to contain the spread, but the roots run deep."

"An invasive species."

"One of many."

After circumnavigating the field, Zeus examined the ground. A beaten path, made from loose groupings of muddy pockmarks, appeared initially chaotic. As they stepped carefully around the scat, the pattern grew unmistakable.

"A small pride, perhaps five or six, heading out to the northeast, on a migration route. The landscape here carries the scent. I should have brought a me-chound." Anderson deliberately exhibited his tracking experience. "No attempt to hide or consume their excreta. They must be keystone predators. Therefore, gators."

Zeus needlessly waved agreement.

Given a few more days, Anderson would have recognised the gesture for the concern it concealed.

"And the word for a group of gators is frenzy, not pride."

"Frenzy, really?" Anderson scoffed. "Even the collective nouns on this planet lack subtlety."

Interlude: Don't Drink the Water

Hinnom's largest sun reached zenith, noticeably raising the heat and humidity.

Zeus: "There's no pow-water out here. Top up your filter-flasks, but don't drink or bathe with the water direct from the creek."

Anderson: "Hmm, parasites or contagion, my favourite Gehennan game show. From what I've learned so far about this planet, I am guessing parasites."

Zeus: "That and prey animals urinate in the river to conceal their presence from predators."

Anderson: "Nice. Diluted piss. I could have stayed in the city for that, and they have hot buttered rum."

Zeus: "Is everything a joke to you?"

Anderson: "Pretty much."

Zeus: "The sight lines are good. We'll break here until the sun falls a little. You hunted in Lalande Four, right?"

Anderson: "You looking for a review?"

Zeus: "Just curious."

Anderson: "Huh. I've hunted scuttle hordes on Lalande Seven, not Lalande Four. I know you know that, so what do you want?"

Zeus: "Not every interaction is transactional, Fairchild."

Anderson: "Isn't it?"

Zeus: "Never mind. Take the northern over-watch. If it moves, kill it."

Anderson: "Yes, sir."

Zeus: "Now you're getting it."

Anderson: "I didn't think the rumours would have reached this far into the outer colonies."

Zeus: "Rumours?"

Anderson: "Man-hunting on Lalande Four. That's what you are asking about, isn't it?"

Zeus: "Huh. Maybe."

*Anderson: "I'm not sure if you are being coy,
or just downright objectionable."*

Zeus: "Neither, and you'll learn."

Anderson: "(Sigh). You wonder if I am capable of it, of taking part in the hunting to death of a human being, aren't you?"

Zeus: "Frankly, yes."

Anderson: "I'm hurt you would think so little of me."

Zeus: "You'd need a conscience for that."

Anderson: "For the pain, or for the empathy?"

Zeus: "Only those with deep pockets have both."

Anderson: "Ah, that's it, right there, hidden beneath the burn, the intrinsic link between money and immorality. Have you been watching those war-against-the-wealthy Tri-Vids again?"

Zeus: "Tri-Vids rot the brain. And I don't believe that affluence makes someone evil, not everyone, anyway."

Anderson: "What I don't get is, if you subscribe to effective altruism, why doesn't that extent to gators? Animal rights are part of the doctrine, right?"

Zeus: "A gator isn't an animal, it's vermin."

Chapter Six: Chance

"This is high enough." Zeus fastened a harness. "Any further up, the branches will become too thin."

Anderson tried not to look down. "I haven't climbed a tree this high since I was a kid."

"You know how to hitch one of these?"

If it was possible to pour ice-cold sarcasm into a glance, Anderson was giving it the old college try.

Attaching and unfolding a hammock, Zeus deftly rolled into the mesh. Within a few minutes, he appeared to be enjoying the sleep chronic insomniacs crave all their lives.

Two of Gehenna's suns drifted below the horizon. Soon to follow, the third and most remote star cast no more light than Earth's full moon.

The hazy dark of the forest now brought forth the rumpus of the night.

Distant whelps, the ruffling of something creeping through the dense undergrowth, betrayed a nighttime in Gehenna's outback far from uneventful.

Something cooed from the nearest tree. Whether an eliciting call or a warning, he could not be sure.

He listened for a little while until sleep finally wrestled the noise into submission.

—

Although the first sun only just dawned, his hunting partner had already packed and descended. Anderson found him beneath the tree.

"Don't forget to bury your excrement."

"Top of the morning to you too, Zeus."

The guide chewed on a strip of dried bushmeat. "I found fresh tracks leading into the mountains. They can't be more than a day ahead of us."

Anderson spied the woods in that direction. "The same frenzy, are you certain?"

"What do you think?"

"They've changed direction, then."

"Get buttoned up. We've a distance to cover today."

The terrain grew rougher and more unforgiving as the day drew out. The forest gave way to bracken hills and stone gullies. Ahead, a valley appeared chiselled into the landscape by a master carpenter. Meadows flanked a shallow but meandering marshland. A pack of small creatures gathered to drink hesitantly at an overgrown pond. A few held back, perched atop their hindmost appendages, watchful for predators.

Tracks, but no sightings.

The hours lost skirting a large herbivorous herd allowed for a study of the indigenous wildlife. The strange-looking beasts, even for such a begotten place, moved with awkward gaits. Composed of many spiny globules connected by sinuous limbs, the creatures appeared to have no discernible head or torso. Zeus explained: their feet ended in down-

ward facing mouths, to graze the land as they walked.

Anderson felt his patience wither and sought a distraction. "I could pick off a few. I'm guessing they are edible."

Zeus fidgeted as if strangling a doubt. "No, and no. The stampede would likely kill us both. Not even gators are stupid enough to hunt on the plain. Anyway, consuming the flesh causes necrotising bowel disease. Have you ever seen someone excrete blood as a solid turd?"

"Oh."

A fast-running river led to a rickety rope bridge. On the far side, a broad pasture encompassed several tall haphazard structures, constructed from compacted soil and overrun with woven vines. Splashes of purple flowers adorned the leeward side, sheltered from the wind. Garrulous hullabalooos, clattering like crickets, buzzed through the structures, forming a kind of haze.

"We call them treacle trees." Zeus strode towards the nearest. After punching through the brittle exterior, he scooped up a handful of sugary syrup. Ignoring the hapless larva trapped within, he avidly slurped at the mush. "Loads of calories, the good kind, help yourself."

Anderson made the face children make when presented with broccoli. "Maybe another time."

From a tunnel at the base, Anderson grimaced at a hideous insectoid creature, squawking angrily at the intrusion.

"Don't worry, even warrior drones won't brave the sunlight." Zeus assured.

"Are these the things that killed those pilgrims?"

"Eh? No, burrowing weevils are far nastier." Zeus ladled more of the pulp into a container. "We'd better be at least two clicks away by nightfall, though."

"Yeah, yeah. Next, you'll be telling me that the bugs will be on us for revenge."

"Sure will."

"I loathe this planet."

Rolling grasslands gave way to a wide plain smoothed by a long extinct glacier. Weathered rocky debris still littered the glacial trough. Large, rounded boulders stood in defiance of time itself. Anderson imagined giants playing billiards upon the green-grass baize.

As the day dragged on, the land became mountainous. The expanding prominence of scrub thickets revealed their rising elevation.

Further along a well-worn path, Zeus knelt to examine clumps of scat. "More fresh spoor." He announced with hesitation. "Several of them, crossing over our original frenzy."

"You seem surprised." Anderson studied the landscape. "You've seen this before, I take it?"

Palming the earth, his compatriot mirrored his ward's gaze into the distance. "Unusual for this time of year. There are far too many crossing trails. It's curious."

"More for us to hunt."

"More of them to kill us."

"The Quad?"

"Not definitive, but I've seen gators disguise their tracks before."

"Hmm. Deliberately? They have that kind of intent?"

"We need to deviate before nightfall." Zeus asserted.

"No, let's stay on point."

"I will pretend that you suggested that we *not* get caught out at nighttime without perches or shelter."

"That's not what I meant..."

"I know a place. We can pick up a trail tomorrow."

Something in Zeus's demeanour quelled Anderson's otherwise inevitable retort. As if Banquo's ghost had urged him to shush.

The old man is worried.

A steep climb found them atop a rocky mesa, splashed with vibrant golds in the dusky light. Before

them, a rusty fence enclosed a sprawling compound, crowded with decaying Nissen huts, dominated by a tall, featureless structure.

Those flags still fluttering had become tattered and faded. Weeds grew wild, intent on slowly devouring the buildings.

Anderson knew Zeus would decline to answer, but he asked anyway. "What is this place?"

As they strode towards a large entrance, the gates creaked, then slowly opened with a metallic scrape.

A sole path meandered through the regularly spaced cabins. Pockets of bright flora had reclaimed the margins between them, revelling in respite from the icy winds. Tiny flightless birds, no bigger than a human thumb, clambered the plant stems to drink from the nectar.

"Keep off the grass." Zeus gruffly ordered.

"Phritz me. Is that yet another damn, ridiculous rule?"

“No, but you are welcome to take your chances with the landmines.”

Chapter Seven: Pathways

Anderson dawdled behind, stepping lightly.

"What are you doing?" Zeus glowered.

"I just wanted to make sure I was stepping on asphalt."

In the well of the central building's shadow, something emerged. It took Anderson a moment to realise what it was.

The K-unit stood over three metres tall. Bristling with weaponry, the metal giant advanced effortlessly, slinking silently towards them.

"Whoa!" Anderson hoisted his rifle in panic.

The android beeped in recognition or indignation, one of the two.

"Pull it back, Fairchild." Zeus gripped his shoulder. "It's just curious, that's all."

Tinny, mocking laughter echoed from behind the combat robot.

"Tani, a touch too theatrical, don't you think? My friend here is a guest." The guide called into the darkness. "And he only has one pair of trousers."

A wheelchair appeared to guide itself into the fading half-light. The occupant, a smartly dressed woman, urged them forward.

"Two gentleman callers, aren't I the lucky one?"
Her lips didn't move. A voice box attached to the chair spoke for her.

"Tanisha Lomax, may I present Anderson Fairchild."

"Is he rich?"

"I understand, obscenely so."

Here we go. Anderson attempted to hide his exasperation, unsure of how successful it was.

"Well, you'd better come in."

What once had been equipped as a science laboratory now became visible as a sparse but

ordered home. Someone had repurposed the difficult to remove medical equipment as decorative ornaments. Some patient advisory posters, reframed into art, staked a claim to the invention of post-post-modernism.

Although short on furnishings and lacking in comfort, Anderson thought it quite tasteful.

After all, comfort was for the indolent.

Walls, bare but for the occasional floral display, attempted to mimic the view beyond. The graduated colours rolled slowly from floor to sky. Imitation illuminance enhanced the image, glowing with the same unsaturated colours as the suns of Hinnom.

Anderson remembered a quip a reporter had once dropped during one of those war-against-the-wealthy hit pieces, 'only the rich can afford to own empty houses'.

Until now, understanding that had eluded him.

Appreciation of the decor aside, he was not sure what to do. The empty room included no furniture.

As if to answer his thoughts, a small cadre of aging maintainers noisily hauled in chairs and a large wooden table. One machine returned with drinking glasses and an oversized bottle of hooch, the kind usually reserved for a fraternity kegler. Another robot doled out bowls of deccra sclip and a condiment which looked not dissimilar to the mush harvested from treacle trees.

Tanisha followed them in, affording a first proper look at their host. Although her eyes appeared to track every movement, Tanisha's face remained stock-still. Not mere stoicism. As far as Anderson could surmise, some terrible tragedy had befallen the woman, robbing her of full mobility.

Their host clearly had a story to tell, as did the silvery lines of cranial implants. The enhancements looked exquisite, among the best Anderson had ever seen. Such modification surgery is expensive, even when performed legally.

Zeus settled into a seat, yet failed to find comfort, as if he had never sat in a chair before. The guide displayed a similar unease at the dinner a few nights before. That was an entire world away, at a distance only measured in experience.

Anderson wondered why, living out here on her own, Tanisha would bother wearing a wig.

"Looks like you fellas need this."

A maintainer filled three cups to the brim.

Without hesitation, Zeus gulped down the beverage.

The robot wheeled around the table depositing miniature umbrellas, straws, and Captain Oksoko emblazoned napkins.

Cautiously, Anderson nosed the concoction. "I am detecting hints of engine oil and raw liver. Where is this from?"

"I made it."

Out of sheer etiquette, he forced himself to sip, but only tasted immediate regret. "It has character,

that's for sure." Anderson wondered if he would ever taste food again.

Tanisha attached a long straw to the metal collar woven about her throat, then slurped noisily at the concoction.

She noted Anderson did not shy away from her disfigurements, merely observing with mild fascination. Either a strong stomach, or a familiarity with body modification.

"I would have brought you chocolate, had I known we would be out this way." Zeus held out his cup for a refill. "A private hunt can be unpredictable that way, you know."

"I hate it when you're circumspect, Zee. Thoughts are like a cat that claws at the cage."

Zeus regarded Tanisha with knowing eyes.

Zee? Anderson pretended not to listen.

"You've seen it too, haven't you? Otherwise, you wouldn't have cut so far from the seasonal hunting grounds. Especially with a ward in tow."

"I'm no one's ward."

Tanisha ignored Anderson's remonstrations. With her functioning arm, she unrolled a plexipad, then gestured to raise the topographical display. *"My latest modelling is ambiguous and incomplete, but does exhibit significant deviation from the norm."*

"Their routines change every season. This is no different."

Although piqued, Anderson held his tongue. While the hooch recipe might forever remain a mystery, conflict is a wheelhouse, he understood. In the interaction's kernel, something stood implacably between them. Almost absentmindedly, he swigged a second mouthful. The flavour did not improve, however; he was grateful for the alcoholic warmth.

"You know my theories on this, so I say this to the newcomer." Tanisha spoke directly to Anderson. *"The risk profile is spiralling in the wrong direction, the behavioural patterns abnormal. The gators are spooked, and so am I."*

"Spooked?"

"Unusually so. The movements are wild, chaotic. Rival frenzies seem to merge and demerge repeatedly." She explained as much with her hand as with her voice. *"It's almost as an army on manoeuvres, attempting to hide their strength."*

The guide shook his head. "Gators are gators. Beasts don't deviate, they are tactical, not strategic. No matter how smart, they are still driven by bloodlust. They collaborate to kill, sure, but nothing else. It is their nature."

"Oh, please, there is more to it than that. You, above all others, know how clever they are."

Zeus visibly stung from the jibe, regardless of how much he tried to hide it. "You know, I know there are smart." An edge of bitterness crept into his voice. "But ultimately, they are just vermin and as susceptible to boot and bullet as any other."

Anderson filed the comments away in his ask-about-that-later bank.

"Maybe that's why you refuse to accept it."

For a flashing instant, Anderson felt like a child caught in a custody battle. Mommy and daddy are fighting again.

The maintainers broke the tension with dessert. Or at least what masqueraded as such.

Anderson prodded the globules of frozen jello, as if expecting something better to appear at any moment.

Throughout, Zeus studied the map. Tanisha watched him. Such intent must hide a story Anderson considered. There was history here, between these two, something unsaid. Not that he expected an explanation. He was a stranger here, after all. They owed him nothing.

After coffee, Tanisha caught Zeus's attention and motioned with a crooked hand. *"There are some cots in the Orangery. Why don't you make up a couple?"*

Zeus dabbed a napkin around his mouth, more for show than anything else. Arising without complaint, he followed the pointed finger.

Pushing the partially eaten dessert away, Anderson watched Zeus depart. "I guess you really wanted to talk to me."

Tanisha's frozen face revealed nothing.

Chapter Eight: Palisades

"I know you." Their host turned the chair to face Anderson. The clanking whir betrayed faltering, decaying gears.

Anderson smiled. "Well, they featured me in Cosmimo a few months back. Voted the most eligible bachelor in the outer colonies."

Tanisha audibly suppressed a laugh. Not that the speech synthesiser could accurately reproduce it. *"You? This is not about you. Not about you, but it is about your kind."*

"My kind?"

"A sopping rag of privilege hangs about your shoulders, drenched in the blood of your kills." The visible expression of defiance beyond her frozen face, her words did Double duty. *"So, not just you,*

those like you. Hopping from world to world, treating them like playgrounds for your notoriety."

Anderson straightened his back. "So?"

"So, nothing." Tanisha drained her glass. "Whatever you're after, whether thrill or prestige, you'll find neither here. Call Simone, have her send a transit pod, tell her that Coxson would never have allowed this. End this hunt."

The chair spun as if stencilling a full stop.

In any other situation, Anderson would have vigorously remonstrated, but even for him, chasing down a disfigured wheelchair user felt more than a little unseemly.

The maintainers returned, busying themselves. After a few moments, the maintainers returned and busied themselves by squaring away the empty chairs, cleaning the table, and buffing the floor.

A sole remaining robot loitered at the door. On the way out, Anderson handed his still almost full glass of hooch to it. "Knock yourself out."

In the morning, Zeus and Anderson ate breakfast in silence. Not that they didn't have things to talk about, it just didn't seem necessary.

Their host failed to join them. A robot attendant made excuses for her. Zeus accepted the lie unquestionably. What once we buried can clearly grow without further excavation.

As they departed, the K-unit stood absently by the entrance. As seen from behind; the innards eviscerated, probably some time ago, the weapons deactivated, and the armour hollowed out. The device might stumble a few steps, but its potency as a war machine would never return.

Chapter Nine: Evidence

Hours later, Zeus signalled with a clenched fist. He need not have done so. The waft of decomposition provided sufficient warning.

Crouching, Anderson snuggled the rifle bump stock into his shoulder. Quietly, he followed Zeus into a small clearing.

After palming the ground once more, the guide announced. "Gators. They've moved off, at least for now."

Upon stepping in, Anderson found the area blanketed in ruddy-red foliage.

Once that initial impression had subsided, he fought hard against the reflex to plaster the woods with gunfire.

Something had transformed what once was an idyllic campsite into a scene of murderous carnage.

As they stepped forward, in all directions, scuttling sounds pattered into silence. Anderson glimpsed a rat-sized creature ducking beneath a rotting log, a raggedly torn human finger in its mouth.

The tent and grounds around it, in an almost perfect circle, swam in bloody mud. Clotted drops, held suspended by dangling drool, clung to the foliage as if splattered by an abstract painter.

Zeus watched for Anderson's reaction.

Beneath a tree, a rancid pile of disarticulated limbs seeped into the ground. The gators somehow gnawed saplings to waist-height and mounted human heads upon them. Then gorged on the soft parts, the eyes, brain, bone marrow and the faces, ignoring almost everything else. In the low morning glare, regurgitated puddles sparked with undigested human teeth. The foul miasma, carried upon the humid air, tasted almost sweet to the lips.

Anderson removed his hat. It seemed the decent thing to do.

Partially devoured human organs littered the ground, as if they were treasures fought over by bickering thieves. Thin, bloodied trails ran into the undergrowth.

They had interrupted a scavengers buffet.

The guide prodded the detritus with a large knife. "Gators will be back for the limbs later, once they get hungry enough."

"Should we tell someone about this?"

"Tell someone, like who?"

"The police, the authorities, whatever you have here."

"And that will do what?"

"Well, at the very least, I imagine their relatives would want to know..."

"Know that their loved ones have had their faces ripped off, and dismembered body parts piled like butcher's garbage? Better to think they had run away."

"You sound as if you speak from experience."

Rocks from a tidy pile had been used to make an improvised fire ring. Over a fading electro-fire, a tall pot still bubbled, surrounded by spilled plates and half-packed rucksacks. A tattered Captain Oksoko plush toy laid among the wreckage, marinated in bodily fluids.

The evisceration proved so complete Anderson could not count how many people there were, nor tell their gender. An edge of burnt coffee only added to the stench. "This happened within the last few hours. Bushwhacked right when they were about to break camp."

Pausing every few seconds to scan the environment, Zeus unhooked his body-cam to capture some finer details.

"So you will report this?"

Zeus sighed. "I'll upload to the Parks and Tourism Commission when we return." He evidently thought about the need to explain, especially after that remark about ripped-off faces. "Otherwise, their rela-

tives will come looking for them. They always have relatives."

"I assume you take the gators' side in all this?"

"Of course not, but there shouldn't be anyone this far into the bush, especially not without weapons, vehicles, or any appreciation for their personal mortality. It's a simple fact of life. Gators do what gators do."

Light broke through the canopy, intent upon cruelly highlighting the scraps of human remains.

"I'm surprised they lasted the night. Other than stupid enough to camp on the ground, who do you think they were?" Anderson tried to sound nonchalant, a vain attempt to pretend that this was not his first campsite massacre.

"Tourists, most likely, judging from the clothing. Off-worlders' lack fashion sense. No native Gehennan would be caught dead in khaki."

"Dark, Zeus. Real dark."

Chapter Ten: The Emperor And The Water Tiger

Zeus knelt to examine a fallen tree, the bark stripped and the wood beneath gouged. "Talon sharpening."

"You seem surprised." Anderson attempted to hide his irritation. Zeus's newfound pedagogy made for painful conversations.

Palming the earth, his compatriot looked to the horizon. "Unusual for this time of year." He stated coldly. "Over and above what we've already seen, there are far too many trails, too much activity. It's curious."

"Maybe Tanisha was on to something?"

"We can't rest here for long, too many sight-lines to cover."

After finding a place to urinate, Anderson returned to find his compatriot counting ammunition.

"Have you heard the tale about the Emperor and the water tiger?" He asked with the random spontaneity Zeus had learned to expect, and he sought not to disappoint.

A feigned consideration of the request failed to wane Anderson's enthusiasm. His new hunting partner proved far too chatty for the guide's liking, but at four times the usual rate, he had more than sufficient incentive to play along. "Phritz it, we have a long trek ahead of us. You might prove entertaining after all."

Anderson smiled. His stories were legendary, after all.

"One bright autumn morning, a courtier raced into the palace. Falling to his knees, he pleaded forgiveness for the intrusion. To dare disturb him on such a perfectly good morning, the emperor expected the occurrence of an event of some significance. The attendant explained: a mighty caravan, a thousand

wagons long, had arrived at the border, requesting to enter.

Interest piqued, the emperor keenly sought to learn more. Upon arrival, the expedition leader proclaimed himself the prince of a faraway land, eager to trade and foster economic relations. To underscore this intent, swarthy merchants flaunted their wares, and apothekers touted elixirs and restoratives. Traders displayed many exotic treasures to be offered for sale or exchange. Few oxen hauled the wagons. Instead, pities of slaves, more valuable than cattle, pulled all but the least ornate trailers.

The emperor asked what the prince made as an imperial offering. The courtier reported the prince brought no tribute, or offered any gift. Aggrieved at the diplomatic blunder, he ordered to disallow the wagon train entrance for a year and a day. However,

he instructed the prince not to be told how long the wait would be, only to deny admission. He would test the patience of this royal envoy.

Upon hearing the news, the prince flew into a savage rage. The success of the trade mission would prove to the king, his father, that he was a worthy successor, over his brothers as the king's heir apparent. Although the wagon train included luxuries and riches of every sort, the prince knew that only something truly dazzling would satisfy the emperor. Dispatching his most trusted lieutenants, he demanded they return with something that not even the mightiest sovereign could resist. Meanwhile, the wagon train would wait outside the walls.

Exactly one year later, the mission returned. The prince himself hammered on the gate, declaring that he wished to present a

gift personally. Intrigued, the emperor allowed the prince to lead one wagon through the capital and into the palace. The prince's attendants hauled a large cage before the emperor. Drawing back the shroud, he proudly presented the prize within.

Prowling the cage, a fully grown, adult male water tiger roared at the court. Larger than any other big cat, the water tiger is especially remarkable for its tusk-like teeth, similar to the fabled sabre-toothed cat. Although the emperor had heard tales of such beasts, he had yet to see one in the flesh. The offering impressed him greatly. So much so, he ordered the gates opened to the caravan.

Delighted at his success, the prince, impatient to return, omitted to inform the palace staff how to care for the animal. That night, anguished cries awakened the emperor. Racing through the family quarters, he found his

son brutally slain. Deteriorated from months of travel, the cage proved too weak to hold the roused tiger, which escaped and killed the emperor's only heir.

Destroyed by grief, the emperor dispatched the palace guards to snare the tiger, commanding that he wished to deliver the killing blow. The streets of the capital were narrow and the beast swiftly trapped. As the Emperor approached, his general handed him a qiang. Enclosed in a net, the bloodied tiger fought for its freedom. Hoisting the weapon, the emperor mustered his strength.

Despite experiencing incomprehensible loss, he hesitated. Handing the spear back to the general, he ordered the tiger returned to safe confinement, unharmed.

Early the next day, the prince arrived back at the border gate. As the news spread along the wagon train, excitement bristled as they

prepared to enter. Merchants rubbed their hands, anticipating the wealth the excursion would now finally accrue, and relinquish the expense of boarded slaves.

When the gate finally opened, the reception was not what they had expected. A cohort of the emperor's elite troops spilled through the gateway, brutally massacring the entire caravan. Each soldier wore a tabard emblazoned with the depiction of a leaping water tiger. The soldiers spared no one, neither child nor slave, except for the prince. The wagons, even those brimming with priceless tapestries and antiquities, soon became burnt to ash.

Finally brought before the emperor, squirming in fear, the prince pleaded for mercy. In his mewling, sufficient words rose to demand why the emperor would perpetrate such a needless, bloody slaughter. Your gift

crept through the night, the emperor explained, sending my son to the very highest realm, beyond pain and craving. I do not fault the tiger, in the same way that a hanging man cannot blame the rope, only you are responsible for all of this. The emperor pointed to the carnage, making his judgement clear for all to see. The prince's body, cut to ribbons, was served to the tiger piecemeal."

Allowing the ending to simmer, Anderson studied the landscape ahead.

After a few moments, Zeus paused. "So, who am I in this sorry allegory?"

Anderson sneered. "No one is anyone. It's just a story."

Chapter Eleven: First Encounter

After yomping in circles for most of the day, Zeus's physical fitness impressed Anderson once again. A dramatically inclining ravine made for difficult going, but the guide seemed to relish the hardship.

"We'll bunker here." His companion announced after rounding an overgrown thicket replete with dazzling flowers. The position made for a perfect blind, overlooking a sweeping meadow of tall grasses. "But tread lightly. There are many trails and this is soft ground. Gators are extremely sensitive to surface vibrations, like Jesús bugs, only on land."

"You're telling me this, now?"

"Be alert. They might just wonder why we've stopped moving and come and look-see."

Anderson frowned. "You think we are being stalked?"

"Maybe." Zeus sought to explain. "Gators are naturally lazy. They only blood-hunt if they have to. Otherwise, they're happy to pick up whatever carrion they can find. Whether they would risk attacking depends on how hungry they are. They might even think we have made a kill and hope to steal it."

"Like hyena, from back on Earth." Anderson suggested.

"Don't know, never been."

"They're blind though, right?"

"How would I know if hyenas are blind?"

"Oh, please. The gators. The gators are blind."

"Well done. You did indeed read the brochure." Zeus scoffed. "Doesn't mean that they can't see, they just don't have eyes as we understand them."

Unsheathing his rifle, Anderson trained the weapon along the edge of the meadow.

Opening a container filled earlier from the treacle tree, Zeus triggered the heating element. Supping at the lukewarm mush, he fished an enquiry from a bank of burning questions. "That's one fancy weapon you have there – what edition of Romington is that? I don't know the variant."

"That's because it's custom." Gratified that Zeus noticed, Anderson continued to boast. "Multi-target with auto-scope. Extended mag and armour piercing ammunition. I could wage a small-scale war with this babushka."

"I am sure you could."

Overhead, Hinnom's primary sun provided most of the warmth. Thirty hours long, Gehennan days were tiring for most people, let alone those hunting keystone predators.

The excessive sunlight provided for a lush planet, especially on the lower plains, where plentiful water ran. Deeper inland, the vegetation ultimately gave

way to desert lands. But no one ventured there. Well, no one without a death wish.

"Consider having a nap," Zeus advised. "We have plenty more walking to do."

"Phritz me." Anderson quietly exclaimed.

At the fringe of the meadow, only a few hundred meters from their concealment, a shape tentatively emerged from the undergrowth. As if walking a catwalk, the beast crept further into the field. Stick-like legs teased the ground before applying weight as the creature moved tentatively forward. Its body resembled a giant cigar the size of a full-grown man. A darkly stained carapace glinted in the sunlight, revealing barbed appendages and razor-like talons. The torso bristled with patchwork armour along the entire length of the exoskeleton, as if added over time or glued haphazardly. The body had no head but culminated in what Anderson could only conclude was its mouth.

"That was quick." Zeus slowly retreated further into cover.

"Wait, you knew they were close by?"

"You paid for this, remember?"

"You and me, we need to work on our communication skills."

The guide broke into an uncommon smile.

"You could have just told me you made us bait."

"Can your indignation, Fairchild. They know we are near, just not where."

Anderson carefully snapped flower stems to provide a better view. "I can take it."

"I thought you wanted the Quad." Zeus extended a pocket telescope. In the expanded view, the gator made a show of sniffing the air and drumming the ground. "Killing it would only reveal our position. Our new friend here is a lure, they're trying to smoke us out."

"Wait." Anderson quizzed. "A lure?"

"Just watch. I told you, these bastards are smarter than you think."

"Smart like grizzly bears?"

"Maybe, but gators are pack animals, not solitary hunters. They want us and them in the tall grass."

After several nervous, yet uneventful minutes, the rest of the frenzy lost patience and scuttled into the light. Anderson estimated a little over twenty, perhaps many more. Most of them were coloured a motley deep scarlet, but a few others displayed different hues, ranging from dark green to purple.

Different subspecies, Anderson surmised. Running together, though, was that normal?

Zeus noticed his bewilderment, but shied away from a retort.

The gators would do the talking.

From the rear of the pack, a Double emerged.

"Phritz me sideways."

"Hold your guts in, Fairchild."

As the Double trampled defiantly from cover, the pack dutifully parted.

Anderson thought it magnificent.

Its bodies, each considerably larger than a normal gator, undulated in a lumbering stride. Spindly limbs, which would otherwise have grown into legs, connected the torsos in a twisted game of cat's whiskers. Well-healed bullet holes revealed a previous encounter. Twin mouths squawked in unison as the savage monster released what could only interpret as rasping disappointment.

Retrieving a notebook from a side pocket, Zeus thumbed the pages. "I thought so. It's Oberon."

"What, you name the gators?"

"Only Doubles or above. The first to sight gets to choose."

"I get it. Like storm naming."

Zeus suppressed a guffaw, lest the sound carry.

"What idiot names weather?"

Anderson decided not to bite. "How can you be certain that this is Oberon? That is."

"See the dorsal scars on the right body? One of our patrons clipped this one a few years back."

"Clearly didn't finish the job. Poor sport not to track a wounded animal."

"Couldn't do it."

"Huh. Lost their nerve, did they?"

"Not quite. Let's just say Simone was grateful the guest signed a full liability waiver."

The Double pushed the lure side, admonishing the subordinate for not getting itself killed. After fruitlessly thrumming in the tall grass, it led the others back into the trees.

"Now, we have a hunt." Zeus proclaimed, as they rose to follow the frenzy.

Chapter Twelve: What Once...

The early morning dew made for a misty haze and fresh tracks.

Zeus pointed ahead.

"Our frenzy?"

"Not everything has to be owned, Fairchild."

An overgrown trail opened into a rubble-strewn plateau. At places, clumps of vegetation defied the rough terrain to eke out an existence. Something appeared out of place, though.

"You see it, don't you?" Zeus observed.

"There used to be a road here."

"It's the only way down the mountain."

Further along, cut into the landscape, the roadway became more obvious. Stony debris and creeping vegetation proved no vehicles had been through

in a long time. A silted culvert revealed gator footprints.

"This way." Anderson followed the trail down into a small quarry. Abandoned pieces of cut stone littered the area, like crazy paving gone crazier. Mining equipment, rusted almost beyond recognition, drew the eye to a large opening in the rock face.

"The tracks lead into... a tunnel of some sort." Anderson searched for a flashlight.

"It's a Rubidium mine, and that is an adit."

"A what?"

"A mine."

"No. I get that. What is an adit?"

"Hmm. The entrance, it's called an adit."

"Ah-ha." Anderson found a torch and attached it to his rifle.

Zeus seemed uncommonly amused. "You think we're going in?"

"Yeah."

"Look at the tracks again."

Anderson sighed. Reluctantly, he trudged over.
"Phritz me, they faked the trail. Can gators do that?"

"Not seen it myself, but heard about it."

"And there's something in the cave, right? Some kind of face-ripping monstrosity, or an old-timer looking for payback?"

"No, but the radiation might just shrivel your balls."

—

Beneath the mountain, Zeus unshouldered his rifle.
"We need to pass along here before nightfall. Welcome to Bonanza City, population zero."

A turn in the road steadily revealed a shanty town, half reclaimed by the wild, half left to rot.

"Like so much on this planet, *city* is an optimistic assertion."

At the edge of the settlement, a faded gateway sign stood broken, underlining the lack of welcome Bonanza offered.

"Welcome to Main Street. Keep your wits," Zeus ordered.

"No one lives here, do they?"

"No one human."

Main Street turned out to be the only street. Rows of ramshackle low-level houses gave way to taller buildings with wide windows. Retail stores, some with still readable signage, suggested a once bustling community.

Zeus kept his gun trained on the roofline.

"What are you concerned about?" Anderson really wanted an answer this time, so reinforced it. "What might we be in for? Do gators attack from roofs?"

"Raptor birds, called Stympts. Not big enough to kill, but they find human eyeballs delicious."

"Uh-huh. Our thing, where I ask questions and you ignore me. Let's go back to that."

Skeletal remains, all picked clean, littered the uneven ground. That, and the need for vigilance, made for slow progress.

"So, is this place connected to the mine?" Anderson wondered why the further in, the more carcasses graced the street, but guessed Zeus would get to that, eventually.

"Subtlety and patience are virtues."

"I don't think anyone has ever described me as virtuous before."

"I am sure you're right."

Mannequins, bleached by the sun, waved happily from a fashion store window as if enjoying a day at the beach. Although rotten, the clothing resembled khaki. A shop for tourists, obviously.

"Does your Romington boom stick have incendiary rounds?"

"Oh, yeah. It sure does."

"Well, stow them. You'll burn this place down, and us along with it."

Ahead, Main Street culminated in a small plaza. To the north stood a church, the first Anderson had seen since arriving. The central tower still rose resolutely, exhibiting clearly where the citizenry placed their priorities, and their money.

Zeus stopped short of the plaza at what appeared to be a bar or restaurant. "This way." He stated after a careful inspection.

"I wonder what the special of the day is?"

Although dingy, the diner proved relatively untouched by mould or creeping vines. Anderson decided it was a diner after finding condiment containers shaped like the sauces they contained; tomato sauce in a tomato shaped dispenser and so forth.

"Don't sit," Zeus ordered.

"Hmm. Parasites?"

"No. We'll get take out. This way."

"Dear diary, today Zeus cracked a funny."

At the rear of the kitchen, a passage ended at a walk-freezer. Perplexed, Anderson watched as his

guide cautiously opened the door and walked in. Empty shelves and dangling hooks led to the far wall. Excavated bricks revealed a hole as if bank robbers had taken a wrong turn.

Finding his flashlight, Zeus entered. Anderson shrugged to himself, then followed.

They exited into a carpet store and through another opening, a boutique of some sort. After several further improvised doorways, the final gave way to stone floors and gothic columns.

Zeus motioned for silence. A winding staircase culminated at the top of the tower. Peeking over the sill of a window, Zeus made a whispering sound which Anderson interpreted as self-satisfaction.

On the rooftops, but far enough back not to be seen from the ground, hundreds of four-winged birds clustered.

The guide allowed his ward a moment to imagine what would have happened if they had strolled into the square.

Chapter Thirteen: Campfire Songs

"It's still a cage."

"It's called a baiting coop, but, yep." Zeus slowly rounded the strange object, examining it carefully.

The coop nestled in an open clearing. A tightly wired cage about the size of a small house. It even had a door.

"Looks rusty."

"You can spend the night back in Bonanza, if you prefer."

Anderson pretended to consider it.

"Thought so."

Conveniently, Zeus knew the access code, but declined to share it. He closed the gate behind them.

"For trapping prey, right?"

"Sure is."

"Where does the bait go?"

"You rich folk always assume that's something or someone else."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, though. I doubt we'll see any gators tonight."

The fire pit had to be dug out before use. A stack of wood yielded mostly worm-riddled logs, but they were dry enough to burn.

"You've hunted from within here before?"

Zeus stoked the fire into life. "If you call gunning down prey from the safety of this cage, hunting."

"Copy that. Feels more like a trap for idiot campers."

With an excessive clattering of utensils, Zeus set about to prepare for dinner.

Somehow, that hit a sensitive spot. Anderson felt strangely guilty. Although the cause was not entirely apparent. "Too soon, or something else?"

Zeus noticed his discomfort. In response, the guide placed the cookware aside. "This isn't my cage."

"Tanisha built it, didn't she?" Anderson brought more logs to the fire. It gave his guide a moment to consider whether to answer.

"Yeah, her and the military. They used this place to capture specimens for their experiments. It wasn't useable for long. The gators soon learned to give it a wide berth, mostly. Instead, they targeted the transport vehicles."

"Smar..." Anderson caught himself. I am an idiot. "Is that how...?"

No acerbic response. Instead, Zeus silently returned to meal preparation.

Anderson felt like a child urinating on the campfire after their first taste of alcohol. To distract from his unkept tongue, lest it make things worse, he chose humour. "Deccra fritters, again? I'm so glad we don't share a sleeping bag."

After the food was ready, he felt a vast emptiness in his stomach suddenly open up, and he tucked in gratefully.

Zeus inched closer to the fire.

Anderson knew it now. Tanisha was Zeus's love of his life.

Outside the cage, the night stirred with coos and growls. A small herd of chicken-sized creatures darted through the grass. Gehenna's moons, unusually bright, appeared as eyes, gazing hawkishly over the tree line. A swarm of bioluminescent bugs flew, arcing vertices over the meadow.

The evening proceeded with a hard silence until Anderson broke the hush with the only social lubricant he could wield with certainty: arrogance. "See this." A rolled sleeve revealed an angry scar weaving almost to the shoulder. "You've heard of a giant pseudis, right? They have these tentacles with thousands of tiny barbs." He made an awkward hooking

motion. "One took a liking to me, almost ripped my arm out."

Zeus sniffed.

Anderson pointed with a fork. "Are you telling me a grizzled old fool like you never earned yourself a scar or two?"

"Who are you calling grizzled?"

"Come on, I know you can tell a tale."

"All part of the package, right?"

"This again? I have earned my notoriety. I am known as a famous personality in the outer colonies."

"Just because you are a personality doesn't mean that you have personality."

"Why do I feel like someone threw a Molotov cocktail into my bunk, sang *Burning Ring of Fire*, and declined to piss on me to put it out?"

Zeus fed his uneaten dinner to the fire.

To Anderson, for the first time, Zeus appeared fragile, almost human. Leaving what he thought might resemble a poignant pause, and with the soft-

est voice he could muster, he asked: "Tell me. What happened here?"

The campfire sparked the air, creating a heat haze between them. Perhaps that barrier became a comfort, and he sensed Zeus wanted to talk. This story would be worth the fee on its own.

"You've worked much of it out, and I don't want you chewing my ear off for the rest. After my parents died, I drifted through the outer colonies looking for permanent residence. For a time, I worked farm construction on Lalande Seven, finally earning sufficient points for a new colony application. I washed in on the first colonial wave, immediately after interplanetary colony recon deemed the planet habitable. I helped build the first colony buildings and residences.

The land proved cruel, and we were ill-prepared, naïve to the dangers. When the mi-

grations began, the gators fell upon us like locusts. I wasn't a hunter then, just someone stupid enough to believe the Beltram promotional garbage. By the time Master Bragga arrived on the sequence-two ships, more than half of us were dead. Those that we could bury filled the infield between the habitats and the perimeter fence.

Unlike us, Master Bragga arrived well-equipped, knew how to fight, and how to kill. He armed and trained us, organised those with the stomach for it to go beyond the defensive boundary, take the hunt to the gators. Oh, and they are smart, more of us died before the tide turned, but with each foray, we reduced their numbers, drove them back.

The military arrived in the third year. Surprise, surprise, too late to save us from the gators. It was... the outer colonies had formed a government, at least what resem-

bled one. I can't remember being asked to vote for it, though. Of course, the first thing they did was to exploit the colonies for resources and biotech. That's by and by now, but the commission included a small civilian contingent, a group of scientists from Orthrus. Why anyone would trade Orthrus for this phritz-on-a-stick is beyond me, but here they were.

Master Bragga and I acted as guides for the commission. That's how Gehenna Game got started. We identified the trails, helped catch gators for their research. The scientists supported the soldiers, analysing the gator's behaviour, biology and potential usefulness in military operations.

I was young, shy as hell, and greener than grass. Tanisha was post-doctoral, working towards professorship. She was so confident and self-assured, as beautiful as she was

clever. Whenever she spoke, it was almost as if all the knowledge in the world, crammed into her head, struggled to get out.

One day, she asked me to accompany her on a field trip. Something about documenting gator migratory behaviour, or some such, I can't remember now. As we toured the uplands, I didn't know what to say. What could a country hick like me say to impress someone like Tani? She had other ideas, though. She engineered the opportunity to get some alone-time with me.

To say I didn't know how to react is a universe full of understatement. Three months later, we were married. Master Bragga bought us some land at the lake, near the edge of the reserve. We even talked about having children. Seems so stupid now.

We had two good years. Two exceptional years. With the gators quelled, the colony

prospered. Trade routes to Orthrus and Kotharat opened, and while the gators proved difficult for the military to exploit, Tani discovered Gehenna flora with remarkable medicinal properties. The patents proved lucrative. As fortune had it, pun intended, I ended up married to the richest woman on the planet. I cared little about that; the money meant little to me. It only mattered that we were together.

Then, they built this cage. Trapping gators had proved futile. The creatures quickly died during confinement, fit only for the flesh house. So, the military focused on observing the gators in the wild, tagging those they thought had value, killing those that didn't. To do so, they camped here, just where we are.

Someone failed to secure the gate, I never found out who. A gator got in, and you can

imagine the rest. Only Tani survived, if you call what she became, survival.

I nursed her for three long, painful years. The multiple surgeries, and then the chair, took their toll. When the military finally pulled out, Tani insisted on buying the compound. In the time that followed, things grew...cold. Over thirty years later, here we are. I drop by here and there, bring her chocolate like I used to, about all I can do."

Anderson gnawed at the inside of his cheek. He mentally stepped through several responses, each less disparaging with every iteration. At any other time, less than two weeks ago, he would have cut Zeus to the quick, layered on the locker room trash-talk, poked and prodded at any weakness, perceived or real. Now, the twist in his stomach acted as an arbiter, berating his worst instincts. "I can't imagine."

Zeus studied him for a second. "Get some sleep.
We'll close on the frenzy tomorrow."

Chapter Fourteen: The Bloody Nose

"Is this it?" Anderson requested.

At the ridge of a gully, Zeus stopped to point downstream. "The outpost cabin is a half a click through the swamplands. We need to find a safe path. It's getting dark."

"Let me guess. Best not to get caught out in the open. We can't track over hard ground. A foil for us as well as them. Gators are more dangerous at night. Should I go on?"

"That you are learning gladdens my heart."

Ahead, the broad rocky riverbed stepped down to what might have been a sheer cliff, if eons of erosion had not washed it smooth.

"Remember to tread softly."

Anderson found the repeated advice grating. The day-long trek had been wearing enough without the constant condescendence. He wondered what had happened to the détente from the night before.

"You said we would close on the frenzy today."

"Looks like they had a different notion."

As the glaring suns of Hinnom fell to the horizon, thick rain clouds gathered above them. On either side, tall trees stood with broad branches and leaves the size of dinner plates. A fine mist rolled from the forest, the flowing edges glistening like diamond. Peering over the ridge revealed the marshlands below, lush, ruffled by the drizzle of an coming storm.

"I would have expected sight of some small frenzies down in the valley floor, at least," Zeus confessed. He knelt to palm the stony ground. "This is the last watercourse before the boundary of the badlands. You can feel the warm winds."

"What's that?" Anderson marched ahead towards an assembly of rocks at the cliff edge. "Is that a cairn, or a scent mound?"

Zeus regained his feet to find his ward examining the rocky pile. "Anderson, get back here!"

The rocks fell away as the floor suddenly heaved. "Blimey!" Anderson crouched to save from falling, only to face the roaring maw of a gator. The ground around him came alive, writhing with the beasts. Upended, he spiralled, plummeting from the clifftop, tumbling down the steep incline.

The gators spilled behind.

Racing to the edge, Zeus watched his ward crumple cumbrously into a dry creek beneath the cliff. About him, the fallen gators had already scrambled to regain their feet. From concealment, the rest of the frenzy appeared, forming an oncoming rush of death.

"Get up Fairchild!" Zeus hollered, clutching his rifle. "Get the phritz up."

Anderson pawed dust from his eyes. Above him, Zeus took aim. The nearest gator reared, then thundered toward Anderson, mouth salivating. Fire rained, smashing the animal into a bloody mess. Its brethren joined the attack, barrelling toward their fallen prey.

As they frenzied, Zeus pumped the trigger, expertly picking off each one, their bodies pocketing with crimson eruptions.

A gator crashed mere inches from Anderson's head. Although already dead, the brute's mouth continued to snap in the air. From his crumpled heap, he watched Zeus unleash salvo after salvo, cutting down the attacking gators.

The only thing keeping him alive.

Betrayed by sudden lightning strikes, a dark figure rose behind the guide.

Oberon.

Focused on saving his ward, Zeus failed to sense its approach.

The monster hawked its garrulous limbs, pausing like a mantis, then feverishly attacked.

Zeus mouthed bewilderment, gargling with rich blood. The Double hoisted his convulsing frame, then flexed, ripping the hunter into pieces. Body parts cascaded down the cliff to cradle into a rocky hollow, forming a viscous mess.

From the top of the cliff, Oberon trumpeted defiance, thundering its legs, revelling in the kill.

Fear took Anderson, but muscle memory reached for his rifle.

About him, the frenzy circled with murderous intent. Gapping maws chewed at the air, unveiling rows of sharpened teeth. The Double crested the ridge, baying at the flashing sky, urging the others to strike.

Allowing a split-second of personal reflection, Anderson thumbed the Romington's safety switch, pushing the dial to full automatic. In a controlled burst, he brought down the nearest gator. Its body,

perforated with armour piercing rounds, staggered to a motionless stump. The beast's mouth mewed pathetically with a final sickening convulsion.

Two more creatures leapt in ambush, talons wildly flailing. Anderson mowed them down, creating a drizzle of blood and corporeal fluids.

As the gator frenzy rushed to attack, he rained hell upon them. The auto-targeting system pivoted the weapon's muzzle, forming a barbaric arc of fire.

Face splattered by flecks of clotted detritus, the bloody taste only fuelled his euphoria. A pent-up release manifested as a guttural exaltation.

Smashed by projectiles and scorched by incendiary rounds, the creatures fell one by one. The onslaught shattered legs and eviscerated flesh, pounding bodies into macerated goop.

The dying released sickening death rattles, rivalling Anderson's screaming bloodlust.

Biting against the recoil, Anderson felt his arms weaken against the vibrations. Ammunition exhaust-

ed, the weapon empty clicked against his trigger pulls. A caustic smell signalled overheating barrels.

About him, the shattered carcasses of more than a hundred gators bled into the soil.

A few of the vermin still clung to life. Deathly mewling cries only denoted a slower, but certain, journey to the grave.

An aching remorse gripped him, reaching through the adrenaline-fuelled haze.

What have I done?

Racing along the gully floor, he found the hollow, a gruesome puddle overflowing with viscera and excrement. Anderson retracted in horror when he recognised the sloppy bath of filth as what remained of Zeus's body. His severed head, pinioned upon a gator talon, watched him with piss-holed eyes.

Failing to watch your partner's back is the ultimate hunter's sin.

The self-reproach would have to wait.

At the edge of the broken beasts, the Double crawled over the cadavers of its broken brethren. Twin mouths released defiant cries, then fell into a low, rasping rumble. The creature's legs drummed, as if mimicking the rain. In a blur, it sped towards him, mouths grinding, appendages whipping.

Ammunition exhausted, Anderson hoisted his rifle, seeking to stave off the attack. As the creature lunged, he spun away, tumbling into the hollow.

If anyone had asked him when he would die, he would have answered, right then, right there. But his foot nudged against something, the butt of Zeus's rifle.

Only metres away, Oberon scuttled to a frantic stop. Turning, it pounded into a run, snapping angrily. It would close the gap between them in mere seconds.

Clutching the fallen weapon against the creature's advance, he screamed, unleashing the entire magazine, firing wildly. Pock-holed and pulverised

with bullet wounds, with a wash of gore, the Double's carcass spiralled limply into his lap.

Chapter Fifteen: The Last Dance

Mercifully, he found the outpost easily and returned for the body. The spilled equipment he ignored, lest more predators, waited in the dark.

Although weather-beaten, the cabin proved sufficiently sturdy if somewhat cramped. He covered the lower bunk with a folded tent cover, arranging Zeus's remains roughly where they should be, as best he could. Finally, wrapping the canvas and placing the guide's rifle on top. A broadsword laid upon the grave of a gallant knight: an offering of tempered steel to barter for passage into the afterlife. Not something Anderson believed in, but possibly Zeus did. The name might be a clue.

A shortwave radio gathered dust in a corner. For a fleeting moment, he deliberated contacting Simone to explain what had happened.

Anderson's dignity, however misplaced, declined the thought on his behalf.

It mattered little. The conjured excuse, Simone would not believe it.

This is going to cost me, he considered, unsurprised at his personal heartlessness. The compensation clause is quite comprehensive, causing the death of an employee would add a zero or two to the foot of his bill. Not that the money is an issue, it was more a question of shameful admittance. Even his dignity sought to protect itself, even from himself.

The temptation had to be admitted, though. A metaphorical open door. The urge to return to civilisation beckoned with uncanny strength. In a few days, he could be on a luxury liner back to Earth, supping hot butter rum and chatting up flight attendants.

In another universe, I would do just that.

The guilt proved novel, yet cleansing. I am the Prince; he acknowledged. My beast isn't any animal, it is now, and has always been, my ego.

The realisation, however cathartic, fought against his innate sense of self-preservation. A prickly attack of self-awareness the only impetus to place that consideration aside. Have I ever been good? Righteous? Heroic? Now, that is a dunghill to be mulled over. This, though, was a question of pride, not one of honour. Any shadow of righteousness had long since been dragged into the undergrowth and beaten senseless.

He filed it under pending.

Still, a decent man was dead. A man whose last name he did not know, or thought to ask.

"Penance means nothing to the wealthy, who can so easily pay for it."

Zeus had said it, Anderson couldn't remember when.

The top bunk yielded poor quality sleep and, most likely, bedbugs. A small dose of Narinoxolyn helped. Fortunately, the cabin contained an automated armoury. Overnight, the machine rattled out more ammunition than he could carry.

Placing Zeus's body-cam on the corner of a table, he ensured they would easily find it.

Emerging to find the ground sodden from the storm, Anderson cursed his luck. Spoors washed away, impressions muddled. It would be easier to target a running piss in the dark than find a useful trail. He must rely on fresh tracks, but the fresher the tracks, the closer the predator.

After finding Zeus's hunting knife at the crest of the hollow, he gathered what remained of the usable gear, which was not much.

A large flock of spidery birds already made a feast of the gator cadavers. At approach, they squawked in defence of their banquet.

Every planet has its vultures.

Carefully circling the ravine, Anderson finally discovered virgin trackways deep enough to survive the continuing rain, betraying several new animal corridors. It was clear, gator frenzies were converging. The reason was not immediately clear, but the evidence proved indisputable.

They were gathering.

Gators are not all that different from trailing any other prey on any other planet, he decided. Few keystone or apex predators felt the need to disguise their bearing towards, or away from, a quarry.

He tracked a frenzy until the second dawn since the attack, when the trail became a well-worn, spiralling path. From the volume of scat, the frenzy must have merged with many others.

With surprise, he found no signs of the alphas contesting leadership – neither bloodstained mud nor cadavers of the vanquished were evident.

After many hours, the path snaked across a lea and around a dense copse. Like children playing in a

distant field, he could hear them. In Zeus's backpack, he found a pair of sound enhancers.

Close ahead, gator feet drummed like Agamemnon's army marching on Troy.

No, not like an army. There was no rhythm to it. Just sheer noise, a frenetic storm heralding the first rain at the end of a long hot summer.

Ahead, a meadow of tall grasses moved in a way that the wind never would.

Breaking for the nearest holt, Anderson stayed as low as he could. Upon reaching the trees, he nestled against a fallen trunk. There, a small but overgrown burrow led into the hill.

The sound of something approaching from behind drove the remaining doubt from his mind. Strapping Zeus's hunting knife to his belt, he dumped everything save his fully loaded rifle and munitions auto-feeder, then headed in.

Barely spacious enough to accommodate his lumbering physique, the tunnel reeked like a pseudis

latrine. In the darkness, the burrow's occupants squeaked in annoyance at their uninvited guest.

A faltering racket of rushing water revealed the exit, a path onwards into a dense thicket. With caution, he crawled through the undergrowth. After a time, the sound of falling water became so loud that he dispensed with the sound enhancers.

Emerging through the fauna, Anderson felt his swagger falter. Earlier uncertainties resurfaced.

To hunt is to prove something to oneself, not exact revenge for another, at least that is how it always was. Anderson grappled with the shift in perspective.

No.

To hunt is to dominate.

Is to win.

The substance of a successful man: the higher the thread count, the richer the suit. Proof to the entire universe that he was more resolute than any brute which would dare to present a challenge. Whether facing man or beast, in any competition, he

would best all comers. Killing it, killing them, would destroy what he repressed for so long.

The only monster here is me.

Distantly, a mighty waterfall thundered into a basin of chaotic froth. About him, a ring of trees encompassed a marshy channel, perhaps at one time the main course of the river. Debris and fallen branches now formed a natural dam, diverting the flow. Nourished by the waters and fertile silt, the vegetation created an almost perfect canopy.

"Phritz me." Anderson leapt behind the meagre cover as movement stirred all around.

Rushing in waves, tumbling like acrobats, torrents of gators trampled into the riverbed. Several hundred of the bastards, he estimated, maybe many more.

Divided into frenzies of varying breed and colouring, each followed a Double, the sergeant to a soldierly sQuad.

Hiding would be needless. They clearly recognised his presence. Finding his feet, Anderson conceded the location was perfect for an ambush.

They had indeed been circling a quarry.

Him.

Phritz me.

Seduced into a corral built from arrogance and vanity, Anderson felt like a witness at his own trial.

Those gators near enough to strike held off, regulated by the dominating presence of their Doubles. Clawing disappointedly at the air, they rehearsed the gleeful shredding of his flesh. Some dug into the sand, releasing craven clicks and whelps, yearning to wrench his body and scoff his blood.

This isn't just pack behaviour, he decided, suppressing a rising fright as best he could. This is a well-managed hierarchy, driven by common intent and direction.

The numbers swelled until the throng appeared as a seething carpet of hatred.

Anderson swallowed dryly, then raised the rifle. Even stocked with extra ammunition, this would be tough. I need to take out the Doubles first; he determined. Leaderless, the rest might scatter, making for easier targets. With rapid taps, the firing computer blinked into life.

Although imperfect, the targeting system would enforce a defensive fire-zone. Patience, a key factor in ensuring as many of the leadership caste were in effective range before firing.

The throng suddenly fell into a murmur.

Like a river, the swarm of gators scuttled aside, and all he could do was gawp numbly at why.

From the perimeter, two Triples appeared. Each triptych, three hideous bodies batted by fibrous tissues with cylindric bodies far larger than even those afforded to a Double, strode through the horde. Pattering legs thicker and longer than the rest allowed the tri-beasts to rise well above their com-

rades. Replete with mawkish mouths, they gawped as if grinding bones.

The Triples chased away the nearest Doubles and their frenzies, forming a wide open space.

In the gator world, bigger was conspicuously better.

Then it emerged.

Roaring into the void, the Quad strutted defiantly, four hulking bodies oscillating with sickening momentum. Dwarfing even the Triples, the Quad could only be described as a behemoth. Its bodies bristled with a multitude of baton limbs, each viciously clawed. Working in the utmost symphony, the appendages rattled their own thunderous tune. Its chameleonic skin rippled, as if painted with oil. Four enormous mouths slavered with globules of congealed saliva.

Above all, it looked pissed off.

Anderson understood why. A few nights ago, he had decimated Oberon and its compatriots. Now the brute wanted to make him pay for it.

With the Quad almost upon him, Anderson prepared to fire.

Unexpectedly, the gators, all of them, including the Quadruple, raked the air. They sought to escape, to retreat, tumbling chaotically over others racing for the trees. In a few brief moments, the monsters fled into concealment. Last to leave, the Quad backed into the shadows. For a moment, the creature appeared to pause, as if seeking to memorise the scene.

Anderson drew a bottled breath.

Above, a deafening buzzing preceded a trio of aerial police maintainers. Descending through the canopy, the enforcement drones radiated dazzling searchlights. Rapidly locating Anderson, they flew towards him, hovering only a few metres away.

"Anderson Ignatius Fairchild?" The primary enforcement robot enquired.

Flummoxed, Anderson could only respond. "Yes... what is this?"

"Following general order Five-Seven-Three-C, the Gehenna Municipal Authority now unconditionally prohibits all full and semi-automatic weapons." The robot ordered. "Please place your weapon in the receptacle provided. We will return the item upon planetary departure."

Anderson thought he felt his heart stop.

How dare any authority deny him victory!

He considered shooting the drones out of the sky. An intent rethought upon realising each of the police drones arrived equipped with a large calibre rotogun. The specifications of which he did not wish to discover.

Although the machines would have limited artificial intelligence, he had to know.

"Why?"

After clicking to itself, the primary enforcer explained. "Order Five-Seven-Three-C results from a multi-fatality ballistic incident at Winslow Field."

"What?" Anderson wasn't sure if he was seeking further clarification, or merely expressing confusion.

"Please place your weapon in the receptacle."

Persuaded by the sound of powering rotoguns, Anderson laid his rifle and autoloader in the hamper slung beneath the hovering robot.

"Gehenna thanks you." The machine merely stated before it, and its cohorts ascended through the canopy.

"Wait!" Anderson impeached. "Don't I get a receipt?"

For a long moment, he stood in lonely disbelief.

Now entering a late evening, the air felt cool and rich with moisture. The subtlest of breezes caressed his face. Chinks afforded by the canopy allowed wind-riven patches of fading light to dance on the ground.

Miraculously, despite the poor light, a sprig of petaled plants forged a hard life in the gulley's heart. Flowers of cardinal and violet yearned for pollination, as if fighting for existence.

From the furthest edges of the forest, the lowliest of attendant creatures tested the space beyond. Finding the metal intruders retreated, the swarm returned.

A chorus of rapturous rasps and howls drew Anderson's full attention. Not that he needed it. Anderson had never felt so invested, exhilarated, and *alive*.

Exuding defiance, the packs trilled a jubilant obligato. Flanked by the Triples, echelon'd by the frenzies, the Quad leisurely advanced.

Although eyeless, the beast seemed to study him, cocking heads like a curious dog. Its teeth gnashed in gradually decreasing intensity, as if counting down competing duellists.

"I guess you'll be wanting that name now?"

Drawing Zeus's knife, Anderson straightened his back.

Afterword

At the time of writing, astronomers have identified almost six thousand exoplanets, with our galaxy potentially hosting more than a billion planets. Irresistibly drawn to these distant wonders, explorers will seek the ultimate thrill of taming these new frontiers and settling these planets. Worlds so alien, every detail is extraordinary, every discovery is significant, every step a new adventure.

Yet the repercussions of our actions are so rarely considered, even when foresight is readily available to us. We fail, humanity that is, time after time, to autopsy the bodies of failures past. Such scrutiny

would profit us well, informing future decisions and avoiding inevitable disasters.

How can I state that for sure? From the decimation of the indigenous civilisations of the Americas, to the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade, and the horrific internment and mass murder during the colonisation of Indonesia, destruction and exploitation is the human way.

As we prepare to venture beyond this fragile world, curbing such instinctual drives is paramount. Otherwise, a repetitious loop of depravity is all we can expect and deserve. In *Bloody Colony* we explore what that future might be, and face an inexorable truth.

Humankind's deadliest enemy is ourselves.

About The Author

Issac Grey Lambert is a writer, musician, and artist. He is the author of the Bloody Colony book series, blending visions of the future of human colonisation with tales of hubris, greed, and arrogance.

When not killing off beloved Bloody Colony characters, Issac enjoys a good pint of apples and walks in the Surrey countryside.

His executive editor, a local cat who drops by to supervise his writing efforts, is almost certainly using mind control to ensure a steady supply of fishy treats.

Issac blends science fiction, horror, tragedy, and promise. Born far too early, he hopes to be cryogenically frozen and reawakened in the far future. It is said that curiosity never dies. Let's hope so.

The most important part of any writer is readers and their support. If you enjoy his stories, please tell your friends and family. Find out more at quahx.com.

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Dinner at the Roosevelt

Rite of Emnity

Rivers of Oxia Palus

Random Vector

Beyond the Barycentre

Issac Grey Lambert

Bloodshot

Phobos Dawn

Beyond the Barycentre

Exploding Head Syndrome

Issac Grey Lambert

Exploding Head Syndrome

The Short End

The Ins and Outs

The Green-Eyed Monster

Anti-Sceptic

Flowers of Cardinal and Violet

Claude

The Amoral Imperative

Issac Grey Lambert

Death By Murder

The Amoral Imperative

Barton's Wager

Zombulance

The Christmas Selection

Issac Grey Lambert

Death By Murder

The Green-Eyed Monster

Dinner at the Roosevelt

Barton's Wager

Anti-Sceptic

Buried Dogs Don't Bark

Phobos Dawn

Rivers of Oxia Palus

Flowers of Cardinal and Violet

Issac Grey Lambert

Flowers of Cardinal and Violet

*I was going to buy you a calendar,
but I got you this book instead*

Raymond R. Raymundo

The perfect gift for the overly or-
ganised or excessively fussy