



ROB ZIEGLER



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—Paolo Bacigalupi, Hugo Award-winning author of *The Windup Girl*

SEED

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For Cindy

CHAPTER 1

The prairie saint wore a white lab coat with a black cross fire-branded onto the lapel, blotting out the name of some long dead doctor. He paced, pale and tall, between two burning fifty-gallon drums. Spit flew from his lips as he sermonized, his stage the wrecked maw of a department store at the end of the abandoned shopping mall, his audience a captive huddle of migrants clad in paper FEMA refugee suits, sheltering from the sandblasting north Texas wind. Sweat gleamed on his forehead.

He preached the end of days.

Brood yawned. He sat against the wall with Pollo and Hondo Loco, carving grit from beneath his fingernails with a sheet metal blade ground into the shape of a hook. The rhythms of the prairie saint's grind lulled him. When he could no longer keep his eyes open, he tied black hair behind his head with a leather thong and settled deep into the oversized flak jacket he wore hidden beneath the broad spread of a canvas zarape.

Beside him, Pollo'd quietly bent bird-thin shoulders over a clamshell he held in one dirty palm. He seemed fixed on the sewing needle he held in his other hand. With intense concentration, he dipped the needle's point into the tiny black pool of charcoal and water he'd mixed in the shell. Raised the needle, pressed it to sun-browned skin at the tip of his protruding sternum. The tiny glyph of a flightless desert bird slowly took shape there. One animal in a broad spiral that covered the boy's ribs, shoulders, arms. Goners, he called them. Brood laid a hand lightly on the back of Pollo's shaved head. Stubble upbraided his fingertips.

"*Hermano,*" Pollo murmured. He didn't look up, didn't break the meditative rhythm of his dip-and-pierce. He stared at an empty spot in front of him. Wind moaned against the building. The prairie saint ground on.

Brood let his eyes close. Found a happy half-waking dream already waiting: Rosa Lee was mere days away.

It had been hard work to make Rosa laugh. A speckle of acne on her cheeks made her shy, and she tried to be hard. Hard like her stone-faced Tewa brothers who spent their days watching the south road into Ojo Caliente, scoped rifles cradled in their arms. Likely to shoot anyone who came along and couldn't show seed, and even some who could. But Rosa's hair shone black as the charcoal in one of Hondo Loco's water filters, and Brood hadn't been able to let her alone. When he'd finally coaxed a laugh out of her it was as though he'd found a secret button in her belly, and every time he pressed it the bell would ring.

His mother had told him, when he was very young, not to fall in love until he was eighteen. The world was a hard place, she'd said, and love just made things harder. But Brood figured he'd never live to be eighteen, so he may as well be in love.

He held the memory of Rosa Lee deep in his chest, a second and secret heart, beating life into him. He could still hear the jingle of what seemed a thousand silver bracelets, fine as spider webs against her brown wrists as she'd taken him by the hand. Led him deep under the Ojo pueblo to a secret cavern lit by biolumines. There in the thick sulfur stench of the hot spring got him drunk on myconal brewed from mushrooms. She'd pulled off her stained t-shirt and brought Brood to her breasts, cocooned him

within the folds of her black, black hair. She'd smelled like the sweet figs that the Tewa grew in long plastic greenhouses lining the Ojo ridge top.

Brood inhaled deeply. Came awake to the smell of dust, acrid plastic smoke from the barrel fires, the sour shit stench of dysentery.

The prairie saint's grind crescendoed. He paused, stared out at the migrants, waited. The silence stretched. The prairie saint glared. The migrants regarded him with hollow faces. The prairie saint and three acolytes stepped forth from the department store's shadow. Tall boys, thick faces, well fed. They each wore the red scarves over their heads and red-splashed paper FEMAs, signifying *La Chupacabra*. They stepped forward, glaring, until a few weary "amens" rose from the migrants. The prairie saint pulled his shoulders back, smiled approval, preached on.

"Amen," Pollo echoed. He smiled but his eyes remained empty, fixed on his clam shell and needle.

Hondo Loco trembled with silent laughter beneath the greasy foil blanket he'd wrapped around both shoulders. He pushed grey dreads out of his face and smiled black gums at Brood.

"Blessed are the meek," he whispered, and laughter wheezed out of him. He settled back under his blanket, settled his chin against his chest, let dreads cover his face. A tired old man—he even pretended to snore a little.

One of the *Chupes* stepped forward, tossed a broken hunk of Styrofoam into a barrel fire. He stood over it for a moment, scanned the gathered migrants, then leered at a group huddled nearby.

Brood saw a girl there. A smear of dirt on her cheek, rats' nests in her hair. She shuddered, obviously sick. Tendons protruded from her neck. The Tet, in full rigor. The *Chupe* boy motioned and his two companions stepped up. The girl turned her back, scooted closer into her group, a herd animal sheltering from predators. An older woman wrapped an arm around her. A young boy whispered something and the woman shushed him. The *Chupes* surrounded the group. One grabbed the girl's hair.

"You got bad Tet, don't you, baby bitch?" Brood heard him say. "You going north with us."

The older woman stood. Soiled yellow FEMAs hung loose from her hungry frame as she faced the *Chupes*. The third *Chupe* gave her a kindly smile. Then drove his fist into her face. The old woman dropped. The sick girl cried out.

Anger flared in Brood. The girl had black hair. Black like Rosa Lee's, black like Brood's mother. Her head started to rise.

Hondo's hand snaked out, gripped Brood's forearm, hard as a hawk's claw. The old man gave his head a tiny shake. As Brood watched, a blade flashed in the barrel fires' sallow glow. A *Chupe* had his knife under the girl's chin. He stood her up, marched her away from the crowd, sat her against the wall.

"You wait right here, girlie. You think about going anywhere, I cut up your mamma." He held up the blade for her to see. The girl sobbed, quivering like a snared rabbit. The other two *Chupes* laughed. The prairie saint preached on, never pausing.

Brood clenched his jaw, let out a breath, settled back against the wall. Hondo released his arm.

"Satori pays for Tet, *homito*," he said. "*La Chupes* just getting themselves fed. Same as us." He leveled one milky eye at Brood. "Same as us."

"Sí." Brood spit onto the cracked tile floor. "Don't mean they ain't bitches, every single one of them." A slight smile crossed Hondo's grizzled lips.

"Sí."

The girl's head fell between her knees and she shuddered, whether with sobs or Tet, Brood couldn't tell. He eyed her for a moment, shook his head, and shut her from his mind.

He reached inside his zarape, shifted aside the ancient flak jacket and withdrew a hunk of smoked rabbit meat. Tore a piece off, nudged Pollo's shoulder. Pollo snatched the meat without looking.

“Amen,” he said quietly.

“*De nada.*”

“Don’t be shy,” Hondo said. He extended his hand once more. Brood tore off a second hunk and placed it on Hondo’s calloused palm. Hondo winked. “Amen.”

....

It had been a *Chupe* who’d turned them on to the prairie saint. They’d been rolling north on Hondo’s wagon, tailing a caravan up Route 83 a hundred or so miles north of old Laredo when they’d pulled into a hollowed-out gas station to siesta away the day’s heat. They’d found the *Chupe* there. A short whiteboy in splashed-red FEMAs, squatting on the remnants of a curb in the shade of a solitary cinderblock wall.

“*Que onda, guero?*” Brood called as Hondo pulled the wagon up short on the broken asphalt.

“Sorry, sir,” the whiteboy mumbled. “Don’t speak Spic.” Indecipherable swirls of tattoos covered his cheeks and forehead. Brood hopped down from the wagon.

“Crazy Tats. Where’d you get those tats, homes?”

The *Chupe* said nothing, just stared out at the empty distance where heat shimmers rose off the desert floor and the hollow west Texas wind whipped phantoms out of the dust.

“*Él está bendecido.*” Hondo tapped a finger against his temple. Brood shrugged. “What’s the matter, son?” Hondo asked the kid. The whiteboy blinked, then, and turned his eyes to Brood.

“Got anything to eat?”

“Your boys don’t take care of you?” Brood aimed a finger at the splash of red on the whiteboy’s paper FEMAs. The whiteboy stuck his tongue behind his lip and shook his head a little.

“Not so much.”

“We maybe got something to eat.” Brood smiled. “You anything to trade?”

“Maybe.”

“Satori?”

“What else? Got wheat.”

“Let’s see.”

The whiteboy hesitated. His eyes narrowed, fixed again on some distant patch of desert. Brood spread his hands wide.

“Don’t be scared, homie. S’all good.”

“All good,” Pollo echoed, distantly.

“You hungry, right?”

The whiteboy’s eyes refocused on Brood. He nodded, slid a bony hand inside the open top of his *Chupe*-stained FEMAs and withdrew a square of greasy cloth. Unfolded it, delicately proffered it. A dozen seeds lay there, thin as needles. Brood held his breath and leaned in real close, squinting. Kneeling instantly the seeds were wrong, too long, too frayed. Hope forced him to reach out anyway. He pinched a single seed between thumb and forefinger, brought it close to his nose, swallowed hard as he saw the tiny Satori barcode running its length. He closed his eyes, ran the barcode against his fingers, searching for smooth perfection, genetic inherency.

Felt instead the lazed edge of a counterfeit.

He smiled again at the *Chupe*. Held the seed aloft on the tip of his index finger. It balanced there for a moment, trembling in the dry breeze as though mustering its courage, then sailed away into the Texas wastes.

“Hey!” the whiteboy cried.

“Fucking cheat grass.” Brood swatted the cloth away from the boy’s hand. Worthless seed drifted up

out, was gone. The whiteboy stood, watching it go. Violence rose in his face. Brood took a short step back—reached beneath his zarape, gripped the leather-wrapped handle of the hooked blade tucked into the waistband of his canvas pants.

The whiteboy hesitated, gradually seemed to chill, to assess the situation for the first time. He took them in, Brood standing before him, hand hidden beneath his zarape. Pollo, sitting cross-legged on a frayed Kevlar vest, scratching his canvas pant leg with a piece of charcoal. The whiteboy's eyes lingered on the old carbon-mold Mossberg propped against the wagon's water tank, within easy reach of where Hondo stood by the tiller. Hondo cocked a grey eyebrow, showed the boy friendly black gums.

"Well." And now the whiteboy smiled, revealing a brown cavity the size of a pea in one front tooth. "Wouldn't trade any Satori even if I had it."

"First thing you said today, *ese*," Brood told him, "makes me think you might be something other than stupid."

"Ya'll do look like capable gentlemen." A swirl of tattoo wrinkled on the whiteboy's cheek as his gaze grew speculative. "Could be I know something worth knowing. Sort of thing capable gentlemen might be able to do something with."

"We're capable," Brood assured him.

Hondo snorted. "We something."

"We're capable," Brood told the whiteboy. "Let's hear it."

They'd set up camp there and the whiteboy'd spoken to them late into the night. They'd fed him pickled Satori radishes and snake meat. In the morning, they'd shaken hands, left the whiteboy with a jar of canned potatoes, and a promise.

....

Hunger gripped Brood, momentarily so powerful he knew nothing else. Then it receded, resuming its normal place in the back of his mind. A raw nerve, like a toothache he could never quite shake, that ran the entire length of his body. He sucked hard on the rabbit meat, trying to trick his body into believing it gave him real sustenance.

A hint of salt. He recalled his mother teaching him how to eat a tomato, before the migrations had begun.

"Like this." She'd opened her wide mouth, pressed tongue to tomato's ripe edge. Brood recalled a greenhouse, clear scrap plastic tacked over a wood frame, attached to a sheet metal shanty where they'd lived. A small windmill had churned overhead. Pollo had been there, a baby sitting naked and silent in an empty metal irrigation tub, his eyes even then registering nothing outside, scanning instead some unfathomable inner topography.

Brood had done as his mother'd showed him. Licked the tomato's smooth skin, dribbled salt from a tin can, marveled as it clung to his saliva. Then bit into it and...heaven. His mother had worn cut-off fatigues and the dark skin of her knees had pressed into the soft earth between two rows of tomato vines. She'd shifted and clumps of dirt had clung to her skin, part of her.

"Yo." Hondo jerked his head at the sermon. One of the *Chupe* acolytes had moved into the crowd and now stepped methodically from one migrant to the next. He was big, over six feet, well-fitted enough to be strong. He glared down at them, shook a galvanized steel bucket in front of their faces. The migrants broke under his hard gaze. They reached deep into hidden places—sewn folds of blankets, pockets, orifices. Pulled forth small handfuls of Satori seed. Brood leaned forward, watching. He swallowed hard.

The bucket rattled with seed. Seed the government doled at the Amarillo stadium to migrants with

family and plot claims up north. Seed gotten by other means by those, like Brood and Hondo, who the government deemed ineligible. The ones who had no provable family.

“Look at that,” Hondo said. “Straight up robbery right in front of everybody. We should be the good.”

“You know anything about preaching?”

“*Dios y yo somos así.*” Hondo held up two crossed fingers, and Brood shook his head.

“Met shit less full of shit than you.”

“Don’t tell nobody.” Hondo smiled wetly and pressed a finger to his bearded lips. Then turned serious. “Heads up.”

“Donation.” The *Chupe* towered over Brood. He pushed the bucket close to Brood’s face and shook it. Brood peered down inside at the small heap of seed. Wheat, corn, cucumber, tomato, barrel squash. All smooth, regular, and every single seed zippered by a tiny Satori barcode. “Donation,” the *Chupe* growled. Brood looked up, saw high Indian cheekbones mottled by burn scars.

“You Tewa?” he asked.

“Nah,” The *Chupe* said. “Cherokee. Fuck you care?”

“Got some Tewa friends up north. Thought it might be a small world.”

“Well any friend of the Tewa...” The *Chupe* gave Brood a humorless smile, burn scars twisting deep lines into his face. He shook the bucket again. “Time to donate,” and his free hand curled into a massive fist.

“Relax, homes.” Brood held up a hand, placating, and reached inside his zarape. Produced another hunk of rabbit meat. He considered it for a moment, then tore it in half and set one piece in the bucket. The other he placed in his mouth. “*Dios los bendiga.*” Smiling up at the big *Chupe*, chewing.

“Don’t want no stringy ass rat meat,” the *Chupe* said.

“Not rat, *ese. Conejo.* Much better for a big boy like you.”

“No fucking *conejo* neither. Satori. You got your dole yet?”

Brood laughed. “I look like a family man to you?”

“Fucking gutter Spics all got dependents, don’t pretend you don’t.”

“He’s my dependent.” It was Pollo who spoke. He kept his gaze fixed lapwards, his voice a careful, enunciated monotone. The hand holding the needle rose, weirdly independent, marionette-like, and pointed at Brood. “My dependent,” he repeated, emptily. “We under age, so no Satori. No Satori. No Satori.” His voice trailed off in hollow repetition, a fading echo. The *Chupe* stared. Scars puckered cruelly as a sneer worked its way across his mouth.

“Donation,” he commanded. Pollo didn’t respond. His shoulders remained curled over, eyes fixed on the needle, once again dipping rhythmically into the shell of charcoal ink he held. The *Chupe* stood forth a canvas-wrapped foot and with a toe poked one of Pollo’s bandy legs. Pollo began to rock back and forth. He quietly moaned.

“Fuck’s wrong with you?” The *Chupe* bent down, peering close. “You Tettered up, boy?” Pollo said nothing, just kept oscillating, eyes empty, the needle dipping, dipping, dipping.

Rage rose in Brood’s chest, the eruption of some deep and vicious brotherly instinct. Beneath it, the unspeakable fear, as real and constant as hunger, something he never let his mind touch, but which sometimes infected his dreams: what he would do if he ever lost Pollo. What he would be...nothing but a mouth, wandering the dust of seasonal migration routes, trying to feed itself. *Espiritu enojado*, hungry ghost. His muscles drew taut, the urge to do serious harm barely checked. He kept his voice real quiet as he spoke.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with him, *gordo.*” His hands snuck under the zarape—gripped the hooked blade, wrapped around the chipped wood handle of the ancient .32 he’d found one summer in O’Juares beside the body of a skinned dog. “He just like that.”

The *Chupe* turned. Eyes narrowed as he saw the look on Brood's face. He glanced down movement beneath the zarape.

"No fucking Satori," Brood told him. They held each other's gaze, a moment of perfect mutual understanding, then the *Chupe* nodded once. He grinned twisted yellow teeth, about-faced and strode away.

"Thought you was about to have some fun," Hondo observed. He unconsciously probed a finger in the scabrous pock of a sun sore on one cheek, and chuckled. "Guess Cherokees ain't stupid."

Pollo kept tilting back and forth, metronomic, unable to stop once in motion. Brood laid a hand on his brother's shoulder, stilling him. Bones, hungry and fragile, protruded against his palm.

"You stupid?" he hissed.

"Helpful," Pollo said.

"Somebody fuck you up, you stick your head out like that."

Pollo turned his head, for an instant met Brood's eye. Defiance there, and pity, and something deep that reminded Brood of their mother. Then it was gone and Pollo sank once more back into himself, boy who couldn't stay afloat in this world.

The prairie saint and his three *La Chupes* milled around for an hour after collecting their seed waiting for the wind to abate. When it did, two *Chupes* gathered the Tet girl under the arms and they all left abruptly, sauntering past the gathered migrants, disappearing into the hot light at the end of the long empty corridor. The bucket of Satori dangled like a taunt from the Cherokee's hand. Brood, Hondo and Pollo waited a few moments, then Hondo scratched the sun sore on his cheek, shed the foil blanket and stretched, all sinew beneath his ancient Kevlar. He wrapped up the foil blanket and then picked up the Mossberg from where it had lain concealed beneath him.

"Gear up."

....

A line of migrant caravans stretched along the scar of I-27, as far south as Brood could see. Aiming for where the stadium rose, gleaming in the late February sunshine, a monolith of old world concrete. It towered, stuffed with Satori seed, over the ruined twen-cen brick of Amarillo's downtown. Three federal government zeps hung there, anchored to its rim.

"Looks like you got a shot," Hondo said, peering over the top rail of the corral they'd chosen as blind. The prairie saint and his *Chupes* had led them to the far outskirts of Amarillo's ruins, to the district of gutted agri-warehouses. Crumbling concrete domes protruding like the backs of half-buried beasts from farmland gone white with alkali. "You got a shot?"

"*Sí, esta bien,*" Brood said, "assuming the wind don't pick up." He laid his blanket gently in the dust and unwrapped it, revealing the broken-down compound bow and seven aluminum arrows. He pieced the bow together and plucked its double-folded string as though it were a harp. It twanged briefly, and he nodded, satisfied. He pulled a tiny spotting scope from the pocket of a quiver he'd fashioned from a vinyl rifle holster, put it to his eye and peered through a gap in the corral's dry-rotted slats.

Across a hardpan lot, four *La Chupes* mingled at the warehouse's arched entrance, close enough for the scope that Brood could make out acne on necks, nascent mustaches, the Cherokee's mottled skin.

"Ninety-four meters. *Muy bien,* definitely. Don't know how fast I can hit all four, though. And who knows how many more inside."

"We'll wait. Just before dawn."

"I like dawn," Pollo said quietly. He intently traced lines on his FEMA'd legs with a piece of charcoal. A bird, a snake, a rabbit and a rat, all linked in a complicated series of arrows. "Everyone else asleep. Except me. I'm the only one in the world."

Brood knelt beside him. He took the boy's chin gently between his fingers and forced his face up until wide, dark eyes met his own. Pollo's pupils dilated as though facing bright light, but he did not look away. Brood smiled.

"Exactly, little bro. Nobody but us." Pollo gave a quick smile, then pulled away and leaned with one shoulder against the fence.

"Pollo." Hondo reached under his Kevlar vest and withdrew an ancient polycarb pistol, it's grip barely large enough to get two fingers around. "Take this, little homes." Pollo glanced furtively at the gun, at Hondo, locked his eyes on the ground. The tats on his chest seemed to grow as he swelled with obvious pride. He reached out and Hondo laid the tiny pistol in his hand.

"Fuck'd you get that?" Brood demanded. Hondo shrugged

"Had it."

"Up your ass? Ain't seen that pistol once in ten years I know you." Brood thought real hard, mentally cataloging every nook and cranny on the wagon where Hondo might've hidden the pistol, and came up with nada. "Well, don't give it to Pollo. He liable to shoot his own dick off with it. Or worse mine."

"*Entiendo exactamente cómo funciona,*" Pollo stated. Without looking, he pointed to his paper palette leg. There, beneath his charcoaled fingertip, Brood saw a tiny diagram of the pistol, pieced out and linked by arrows, so precise it could have come from an instruction manual. Brood leveled a finger at Hondo.

"You cagey, *chamuco.*"

"I know exactly how to use it," Pollo said.

"*No te preocupes, ese, no está cargada.*" Hondo showed happy gums. "Ain't seen bullets for that thing since before you was born."

"And when to use it," Pollo insisted.

"*Chale.*"

"And when not to use it."

"We got a extra gun hand." Hondo's dreads swayed as he jerked his head in Pollo's direction. "Ain't no use without no gun."

Brood turned to Pollo and found the boy sitting in the dirt, leaning back against the fence. He had already secreted away the pistol and begun drawing once more on his FEMAs, apparently considering the matter settled.

"Just 'cause you got a gun doesn't mean you do anything with it," Brood told him. "It's just for emergencies. *Entendido?*"

"*Entiendo.*" A smile split Pollo's face. His eyes remained empty.

....

"Yo," Hondo hissed. "'Bout that time." He sat on his knees, watching through the fence, one hand gripping the Mossberg.

Brood blinked in the cold night air. The wind had died and stars blazed, clear as bullet holes in the Texas sky. A sliver of dawn light edged the horizon, backlighting the stadium. Brood reached out, felt Pollo's knee, solid and real, and realized he had been holding his breath, submerged in some dream he'd already forgotten. He exhaled, rolled over, peered through the corral's slats. The warehouse entrance flickered with firelight. Two *La Chupes* sat there in the dirt, wrapped in blankets. They were still, hopefully asleep.

"How many inside?" he asked.

"Four. Plus some girls."

“I didn’t see no girls.”

Hondo glanced sidelong at him. “You sleeping.”

“*Mierda.*”

“Like a baby.”

“Shit.”

“Snoring.”

“Fuck you.” Brood looked down at Pollo. The boy slept wrapped in a blanket, curled against the fence in a way that reminded Brood of a nested bird, small and fragile. “We do it like usual?”

Hondo nodded. “Just don’t put no arrows up my ass.”

“Only if that’s where they need to be, *ese*. Wait until I get there before you go through the door the next time.”

Hondo slung the Mossberg over his shoulder, pulled a skinny meat carving blade from somewhere beneath his Kevlar. A puckering sound came from his mouth as he smiled in the darkness, then he disappeared silently around the back side of the corral.

Brood picked up his bow, let its familiar weight settle in his palm. Plucked the string twice with the calloused tips of his fingers, tuning himself to it. He reached for the quiver. Only one of the arrows had a tip, a four-razored broad head. The shaft of this he’d marked with a ring of black electrical tape. The other six arrows were headless, but the bow drew with enough force to punch even their blunt noses through a cinderblock. He pulled out three of these, nocked one, leaned the other two against the fence.

“Bout that time,” Pollo whispered. Brood turned, found his brother watching, eyes bright and alert. Completely there.

“Don’t be scared,” Brood told him.

“I ain’t. But you are.”

“*Sí.*” He watched Pollo’s face, and marveled at the calm focus the boy possessed when his personality managed to navigate to the surface. “You stay here until I come get you. Keep your head down.”

“*Entiendo.*”

Brood touched the top of Pollo’s shaved head, a gesture that bordered on the religious, and settled himself against the fence. He forced himself to breathe slowly, inhaling through the nose, exhaling through the mouth, just as Hondo had taught him, letting the fire in his nerves spread through his limbs, bringing his body awake, sharp as a hunger pang. He held a hand out flat: steady as a motherfucker.

Hondo appeared, a dreadlocked shadow moving silently along the warehouse’s curved side. He stopped ten paces from the *Chupes*, crouched, raised his hand. Brood saw the thin curve of the carving blade.

He stood. The bow squeaked slightly as he pulled the string back to his cheek. He sighted down the arrow through the crosshair sight at the *Chupe* closest Hondo. A little high at this distance, a hair to the right to compensate for the bow’s leftward push. Hondo signaled, a short chopping motion.

Brood exhaled...released.

The bow emitted a whip-snap sound, echoed an instant later by the arrow cracking into its target. Brood reached for a second arrow, nocked it, sighted on the second *Chupe*. Exhaled. Released. Another crack, and this time the *Chupe* twitched. Brood heard a gurgling sound. Hondo moved now, smooth as a viper.

“*Chale!*” Brood hissed.

He nocked the third arrow, sighted it, released just as Hondo reached the second *Chupe*. The arrow cracked home. The *Chupe* twitched once, and sagged. Hondo turned and held up his hands, like: whoa.

the fuck? Brood smiled, grabbed his quiver.

“Wait here,” he told Pollo, and vaulted the fence.

Hondo glared as Brood trotted quietly up beside him. “Thought I told you not to put an arrow up my ass.” The old man stood over the *Chupe* closest the door, the one he had been about to knife. Two arrows protruded from the overfed boy, one from the throat, a second from his cheek just below the eye. Both had pinned him to the concrete wall. Another arrow protruded from the center of the fire *Chupe*’s forehead—no wonder he hadn’t made a sound.

“Move a little faster and I won’t have to,” Brood whispered.

“Shoot a little straighter, motherfucker, and I won’t have to.”

Brood grinned. Pulled the .32 from his back pocket and stuffed it into the waist of his canvas pants beside the hooked blade, then nocked another blunt arrow.

“You ready?”

Hondo unslung the Mossberg. He pistol-gripped it in one hand, held the carving blade in the other. Paused long enough to let out a supernaturally long breath, then nodded.

Brood stepped to the doorway and peered inside.

A fire built of shredded tire rubber burned fifty meters away at the center of the warehouse concrete floor. Farming equipment sat parked around the building’s convex perimeter. Combine threshers, fertilizer trucks, all rusted out. Fossilized monsters in the fire’s vague illumination prehistoric, covered by a century’s dust.

“Count six asleep around the fire,” Brood said. Slumbering bodies wrapped in burlap and canvas. Brood wrinkled his nose at the stench of dysentery. “One awake.” A red-scarved *Chupe* sitting in a plastic chair and drinking from a ceramic pot. “That’s it. Couple AKs on floor. We go fast and quiet, we should be good.” Brood raised the bow. Hondo placed the flat of the carving blade against Brood’s arm, halting him.

“Wait ’til he sets that pot down.”

The *Chupe* took another long swig. Golden liquid ran from the corners of his mouth. Corn mash. Brood set the pot down. Brood exhaled. Released. The arrow thudded home. The *Chupe* grunted, keeled over. Hondo ran past. Brood dropped the bow, pulled the .32 and his blade, and followed. Quick, silent steps, the rubber souls of tire tread sandals padding across the concrete. He felt fast, light, the weight of the flack jacket forgotten.

They worked quickly, slitting throats.

Four *Chupes* never knew they’d died. A fifth stirred, rose to an elbow and spoke somnolent words to Brood. Then he seemed to register what was happening. His eyes went wide and he reached for the rusted AK that lay nearby. Brood extended the .32, fired three shots fast into the boy’s chest. The *Chupe* fell back into his blankets like he’d never awakened. The last *Chupe* leapt to his feet, startled by the gunshots. He was older, near Hondo’s age. His mouth made a perfectly surprised black circle in the center of a grey beard as he watched Hondo swing the Mossberg his way. The gun shrieked. The man rag-dolled away from the fire and lay still.

Brood blinked in the Mossberg’s ringing aftermath. “Thought you said there were girls,” he said.

Movement sounded behind him. He turned to find the *Chupe* he’d shot with the arrow still alive, squirming. High cheekbones, the dark mottling of burn scars. The *Chupe* went still as Brood moved to stand over him. The arrow quivered his chest as he struggled to breathe.

Brood stuffed the pistol and knife back into his pants. “Sorry, homes, I need that arrow.” He placed his foot atop the *Chupe*’s belly and gripped the shaft. He started to pull, but the big *Chupe* moaned in a way that made him feel all twisted inside, so he stopped and stepped back. Flecks of pink foam speckled the boy’s lips. “Got you in the lung, *ese*.”

“Richard.”

“What?”

“Richard. My name’s Richard.”

“Richard.” Brood considered the sound of it. Decided perhaps it was right that one’s name be used when one was close to death. “You ain’t got long, Richard. I can take care of you, you want.” He drew the inverted blade and held it up for Richard to see. Richard stared at it for a tortured heartbeat, then closed his eyes and shook his head. “Alright,” Brood told him, and felt strangely awkward, as though he were invading the *Chupe*’s privacy. “Alright.” He left the arrow where it was and moved to where Hondo stood by the fire, stuffing fresh shells into the Mossberg.

“Don’t see nobody else. Thought you said there were girls.”

Something slammed into Brood’s back. He tried to turn, but his body didn’t respond. Instead he fell forward. Cracked concrete moved up to meet him. Pain erupted along his spine, spread through his ribs. He heard gunfire then, the unmistakable clang of an AK roaring out from some recess among the farming machines. Hondo yelled something, but the shotgun sang, drowning out his words.

Brood found himself staring into the dead eyes of a *Chupe* whose throat he’d cut. He tried to get his body to move, tried to breathe, and failed—just lay there gasping like a fish on a stone.

The gunfire went on for a long time, ripping the air, before abruptly ceasing. Footsteps approached, scratching across the concrete from where the AK had fired. The pain felt distant now, like watching someone else get punched. Brood felt calm.

A rough hand gripped his shoulder and turned him over. Brood heard a moan, realized it came from inside his own body. A *Chupe* stood over him, so astonishingly well fed that a pink lip of flab edged the perimeter of his chin as he gazed down at Brood. An AK with a broken stock dangled recklessly from one hand.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” He smiled as he spoke, and the words sounded tough. Beneath the low-pulled red scarf, his eyes looked sad and scared.

Brood found himself mesmerized by the boy’s flab, wanted to reach up and touch it, prove to himself it was real. He opened his mouth to say something, but now the pain hit him. He let out a wailing sob. The *Chupe*’s lip curled in disgust. He raised the AK. A sharp pop rang in the air. It didn’t hurt—not at all. For an instant, the *Chupe* seemed confused. He turned, angry, looking for something. Another pop. His forehead opened like a dropped melon. He fell.

“Carlos?”

Brood smiled at the intimate sound of his real name. Pollo’s gaunt face filled his vision. A face consisting almost entirely of concavities, deprivation. It made Brood sad, like he hadn’t really looked at his brother—hadn’t really seen him—in a long time.

“Pollo...” Brood said. The boy peered down, eyes wide and curious, fully there, connected... his rodent fist clutching Hondo’s tiny pistol.

“Carlos, get up. I found the seed. There’s lots.”

CHAPTER 2

“This is corn.” The mountain of seed, piled high as the spine of the nearby dirigible, glowed molten gold in the late afternoon sun. Pihadassa extended a long hand from beneath his simple cotton shift and waved languidly at the pile as though caressing its aura. A single helix, repeated a hundred million times, once for each individual kernel, danced in her head. A vision of uniformity, not a chromosome out of sync. “It can withstand temperatures as high as one hundred forty degrees Fahrenheit, as low as negative twenty degrees.” A sine wave appeared in her mind, temperatures rising higher each summer, growing colder each winter. “Not anomalous extremes. I can speak of sustained heat and cold. It needs one-tenth the water of the corn we produced six years ago.”

The Special Liaison to the President seemed not to care. He grunted absently, sucked his lip, scuffed the sole of one gleaming leather boot impatiently against the tarmac. He kept glancing at the dirigible’s pilot, who leaned in her black drop suit against the craft’s rear hatch, arms crossed, exuding indifference.

“This,” Pihadassa explained patiently, “is the best corn I have ever made. It will resist climatic fluctuations worse than what we have seen. Worse than what we project for the next decade.”

Ten Satori landraces—her children—worked the corn pile. Muscle rippled beneath skin the color of fecund soil as they leveraged stocky bodies against the sinew cords of a skeletal pulley crane—a bone raptor rising beside the pile.

“Corn,” Pihadassa repeated. The Liaison’s sharp face turned her way. He pointed a hard smile at her.

“Your goddamn clones were supposed to be gone by the time we got here.” His lip curled in distaste around the word “clone.”

The deep folds of the Liaison’s coat fascinated Pihadassa. A cotton and maize weave, a dense thread count. It bespoke a concentrated resource expenditure. Satori seed flown halfway across the continent. Rows of grow lights burning in the subterranean fields of New D.C. Water drawn in from the Chesapeake, desalinated over algae diesel fires and pumped down furrows of seaweed foam flown from Newfoundland. Crops harvested, their fibers ginned and spun into fabric, sewn and tailored. A garment for the sake of primate preening.

This, while spring migrants gathered already outside the bone-and-skin length of Satori’s outer wall. They camped around detritus fires in the brick remnants of old Denver, wore old FEMA paper refugee suits. Turned their hungry eyes towards the broad back of Satori’s dome, which enclosed the steel brick and plexi of what had been downtown. They watched as the dome’s winter fur sloughed away, exposing acres of pink skin. Watched as Satori children brought seed through the dome’s luffing gates and piled it high on the tarmac, where it awaited the government zeps.

“You need not worry about my landraces,” Pihadassa assured the Liaison. “The Fathers will discover soon enough that I have gone.” Pihadassa’s Satori children released cords; the crane’s yellowed jaws plunged deep into the corn seed.

“They’ll tell the Fathers *I* was with you. My people can’t be connected to your defection.”

His people. A government whose only real function was to distribute seed to a populace in a state of permanent migration. Seed provided exclusively by Satori, and which Satori could easily distribute on its own. A government afraid of its own obsolescence.

“To whom else would I run?”

“What’s obvious and what Satori can prove are two different things.” A scar moved above the Liaison’s eyebrow. Anger flexed in his jaw. Pihadassa noted the broad structure of his cheekbone. She took a long, meditative breath.

The Liaison’s helix unfurled in her mind, a map of his past and future. Solid musculature and military bearing belied bones not quite as dense as they should have been. A thin heart wall that would open up and cut him down before he was old. The offending chromosomes had unfurled, vulnerable like a hangnail along the helix’s length. They might have remained latent if not for childhood malnutrition. A pity. Otherwise the Liaison was solid, strong. Pihadassa wished she could bring him along, could breed him. Sometimes all nature needed was a little management. Perhaps she could convince him to give her a sample.

“You need not worry about my children,” she said, and smiled. “They will not relay any information to the Fathers. They are going with me.”

The landraces heaved. The crane’s head rose, swiveled to one side. Its jaws opened, vomiting seeds into the beds of wooden carts with a sound like static. Five other Satori children put thick shoulders to bone and leather yokes, hauling the carts up the dirigible’s rear ramp.

The Liaison stared at Pihadassa. Muscles worked in his jaw. Pheromones rolled off him in waves. Without a word he turned and strode towards the pilot. Pihadassa reached out a hand to stay him, but the Liaison shrugged it off.

The pilot watched impassively as the Satori landraces strained past her and up the steel ramp into the zep’s hold. The Liaison moved up beside her, close enough to brush his chest against her shoulder. The pilot did not look at him, but Pihadassa smelled the abrupt flow of pheromones. A sexual response to most kinds of stress—anger, fear, excitement—it had always struck Pihadassa as an elegant primate survival trait. She smiled, watching. She would have to describe this to Sumedha—

Sumedha...Something cratered in Pihadassa’s chest as she remembered she would not see him again.

“The mountains have nice weather this time of year.” The Liaison stated this flatly, challenging. The pilot jerked her chin west, where beyond the tarmac, beyond the high skin fence separating the airfield from the ruins of west Denver, the Rockies rose, icy and dark in the February dusk.

“A good year for skiing,” she said. It seemed a strange thing to say. Nobody had skied since before the first Hot Summer, since long before Pihadassa had come awake in Satori’s warm embrace. The Liaison stepped back, nodded, satisfied that the tenants of some ritual had been met.

“So you’re Rippert’s girl then,” he said.

“That’s right.”

“I know you. We met when you were a little girl. Back in Dubai.”

“I remember.” The pilot looked directly at the Liaison for the first time. “You and your troops have just come in from the desert. Dad was pissed that you got sand all over his Turkish rug.”

“Sounds about right,” the Liaison smiled. “How is he?”

“He’s okay. Bored. Doesn’t know what to do with himself without a war on.”

“We might be about to solve that little problem for him.” The Liaison glanced up meaningfully at the massive dome’s animal expanse. Shoved hands deep into pockets, pulled his coat tight around himself, as though chilled by his thoughts. “He tell you anything?” The pilot shook her head.

“Just that I’d have extra cargo. And don’t fuck up.”

“Seconded.” The Liaison briefly withdrew a hand from a pocket and jabbed a thick finger at Pihadassa. “That’s your cargo.” Pihadassa moved forward, the tarmac hard and cold against her bare feet.

“Hello,” she told the pilot.

“She looks cold,” the pilot observed.

“I do not normally get cold,” Pihadassa said. The quick freeze that came with the fading light felt crisp against her skin.

“How’s that?”

“My vascular system is efficient.”

The pilot’s eyes narrowed with understanding. “You’re a clone.”

“A composite,” Pihadassa corrected. She took a breath, coming fully to the moment. The girl’s helmet unfolded. Pihadassa reached out, brushed the tip of the girl’s tight pony tail. The girl swallowed involuntarily, caught somewhere between attraction and disgust. Pihadassa smiled at her.

The pilot slapped Pihadassa’s hand away. Backed up a pace, screwed her shoulders back, military defensive.

“Touch me again, you bleed.”

Pihadassa smiled pleasantly. “I understand.”

“We can leave as soon as these monkeys finish loading.” The pilot gestured at the ramp. “Hop in.”

“These landraces will be joining us. As will some others. I wait for them.”

“We’ve waited long enough,” the Liaison said. “Get in.” Pihadassa said nothing, simply remained still. The Liaison’s nostrils flared as he seemed to calculate exactly how much of his natural aggression to unleash on the situation. “You can get into the zep yourself, or I can assist you.” He took a step forward, presented big hands, ready to execute his will. “Your choice.”

“If you touch her, I will kill you.”

Warmth spread through Pihadassa’s body at the sound of the advocate’s voice. The Liaison turned.

The woman had arrived silently. She stood a few meters away. Like Pihadassa, she wore a simple shift, but there was something different about her stance. Something loose, predatory. She watched the Liaison with pale eyes.

“I will.” Her tone matter-of-fact, the flash of a sharp smile, eager.

“Mercy,” Pihadassa said. At the sound of her name, the advocate’s eyes flicked to the Designer.

“Mother.”

“Be still.”

Mercy sank slowly to her haunches, and balanced there, balletic on the balls of her feet. She looked again at the Liaison, who took a step back now, lowering hands. The pilot settled her palm on the butt of a ceramic pistol at her hip. Pale eyes following the movement—the advocate smiled.

“Mercy!” Pihadassa spoke sharply. “You will do only as I command.” The advocate glanced at Pihadassa, then back at the pilot. Smiled again, the baring of sharp teeth, defiant, an expression of beautiful malice that struck Pihadassa as reptilian, rooted in some primordial stretch of the creature’s helix. “Kassapa gave you to me,” Pihadassa said. “You are mine. Obey.” The smile faded. The advocate gave a barely perceptible nod, the slightest acquiescence. Pihadassa turned to the Liaison.

“This is my advocate, Mercy. She will accompany us.”

The pilot kept her hand on the pistol. Pihadassa watched the pulse in the girl’s neck, felt the sudden heat rolling off both her and the Liaison: their bodies sensed death. The Liaison shoved hands one more into coat pockets. Pihadassa wondered if he knew of the advocates. His tone grew conversational.

“How many of your friends will be joining you?”

Pihadassa smiled.

The Satori landraces rolled the last cart up the ramp. Abandoned, the crane fell limp, a macabre doorman against the heap of corn seed. Landraces gathered around Pihadassa, some taller and graceful, others short and dense. They genuflected to her.

“Mother,” each murmured in turn, and in turn Pihadassa affectionately touched the tops of their bald

pates. She let the helix of each fill her mind, noting minute variations from one to the next. She knew each intimately. She'd made them.

"The females," she inquired.

"They are right behind me, Mother," the advocate said.

"Females?" the Liaison asked. Pihadassa gestured with a languid hand at the landraces.

"They are primates. Like you." Like Sumedha—her twin, her mirror, her Other...His face filled her mind and something inside Pihadassa tore. Her throat clenched with the need to sob. She breathed, putting her attention on the sensation until it passed. "Like me. They couple."

The females arrived then, a score of them jogging across the tarmac in the dusk, skittish as heron animals, their shifts wet with sweat. They pressed in close to their mates, touching fingers, forehead to forehead, lips. Pihadassa noted the barest extra curve to three of the females' bellies. Their skin glowed in the fading light.

"Up the ramp," she ordered them. "Get aboard. We are leaving." She looked at the Liaison, then the pilot. "Now." The Satori children filed aboard and nestled into the seats filling the storage bays. The Liaison placed a hand on the pilot's shoulder.

"Tell your father he owes me a scotch." He nodded once to Pihadassa, then turned and stalked back towards the dome, shoulders bent against a sudden icy gust rolling down off the frozen Rockies.

"Mother." Mercy motioned Pihadassa up the ramp.

The pilot followed. The hatch squeezed slowly shut behind her.

Pihadassa nestled into a bed of corn seed with two Satori children, tall ones, and began stroking their shoulders, backs, necks. The female shuddered with pleasure as Pihadassa touched her ear—an ear that was a mere G and A switch from the gills through which the fetus in the girl's belly breathed.

"You are beautiful, child," Pihadassa whispered. She watched the pilot's hands rove the zep control panel, hitting switches with deft jabs of her fingers as she went through her preflight. The quiet hum of electric props soon vibrated through the steel cabin. The landraces gave one another startled looks as the floor shifted beneath them.

"We are flying?" the girl asked, and her face filled with wonder. Pihadassa kissed her forehead. The girl smiled and gripped her mate's hand.

Pihadassa closed her eyes and began to meditate. She tried to open her mind to the helix, but it would not come. Instead her awareness fell into orbit around a void, an empty place deep in her chest that throbbed like the socket of a lost appendage.

Sumedha.

He would be thinking of her now, wondering where she had gone. Soon he would learn of her defection, and he would cast his mind puzzling down the chain of her choices. Perhaps he would understand, would reach her same conclusions. If not, he would be left alone. She felt cold absence.

"Are you alright, Mother?" the girl asked.

Pihadassa opened her eyes. The cabin was dark except for the soft glow of the cockpit's instruments. Sleeping children breathed softly. The girl watched Pihadassa with wide eyes. She reached out, touching slender fingers to Pihadassa's cheek. They came away wet.

"I am fine." Pihadassa nodded at the girl's partner. "I miss my mate." The girl glanced down at the male sleeping with his head against her hip. Her face went soft with immediate empathy.

Pihadassa touched the girl's cheek and stood. Nearby the advocate sat on her haunches, balanced on the rim of a storage bin. Pihadassa reached her mind out, touched the creature's helix. Kassapa had done beautiful work, had ripped code from everywhere—deep marine sources, insects, raptors, even creatures long extinct—and hammered it into human form. Vertical slits of irises watched Pihadassa. Pihadassa gave the advocate a tiny nod and moved up to where the pilot sat fiddling at a partially disassembled sat phone with a pair of needle nose pliers. The advocate lowered herself silently to the

floor and followed.

“Where are we?” Pihadassa asked, sliding into the empty copilot’s chair. The pilot set the sat phone on the metal floor beside her seat and leaned forward, squinting at the instrument panel. She tapped a glowing readout, then peered into the darkness beyond the windscreen.

“Don’t know exactly. Once in a blue moon you can pick up GPS out here, but not usually.” She shrugged. “Western Kansas, on a heading for Fort Riley.” She yawned, stretched, propped her boots up on the instrument panel and leaned back in her chair, lacing fingers behind her head. “Hope you’re not in a hurry. These fatties don’t exactly push Mach. Wind’s with us though. We should hit Riley before sunrise.” Pihadassa closed her eyes, breathed; the pilot’s helix settled in her mind and began to slow turn.

“You could come with us,” she told the pilot.

“Come with you?”

“You have strong genes. Endurance, and resistance to disease. You would make a strong contribution. You would be welcome.”

“No offense, but I don’t speak Chinese.”

Pihadassa opened her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

“You are beautiful. And the Mother created you without any help at all.” Pihadassa breathed, matched her heart rate to the girl’s, which had begun to quicken. “We are starting a new life. You could join us, if you wanted.”

The pilot took her feet from the dash and leaned forward. Her pupils dilated. Her nostrils flared. A wave of pheromones washed over Pihadassa. Anxiety, but...curiosity as well.

“What life?”

“A life where we are free. Where the Mother shapes the helix, as she has always done. With only a little help from me.”

“I don’t know what Mitchell told you back there, but I don’t expect your pups are going to taste much freedom at Riley. More like the south end of a scalpel.”

“We are not going to Fort Riley,” Pihadassa said. She spread her hands, inviting.

A vein throbbed three times in the pilot’s neck. Her hand dropped towards the pistol on her hip.

Movement flickered in Pihadassa’s peripheral vision. The pilot’s body jerked upwards. Something snapped. Blood sprayed the windscreen. The pilot rose slowly, then seemed to hover over her seat. Surprise shown for a moment in her eyes, then she went limp.

The advocate stared down the length of her arm at where her fingers—bones spliced with coral and dense as granite—disappeared into the pilot’s throat.

“Are you injured, Mother?” she asked. Her pale gaze stayed on her kill. A slow smile crossed her face. Pihadassa watched the wolves, the snakes, the eels, the raptors—all the various killers swirling up out of the advocate’s helix, reveling.

“I did not order this. You do only as I command. Next time you wait.”

“If I had waited, Mother, she would have killed you. How, then, would you command anything of me?”

“You will wait!”

The advocate let her arm drop. The pilot slid off her fingers and collapsed into a heap on steel floor plates.

“Yes, Mother.”

“Such a beautiful creature, and you ruined her.” Blood pooled as the last vestige of life ebbed from the body. “Get rid of it.”

“Yes, Mother.” The advocate defiantly licked one bloodied finger with a dexterous tongue before sl

spun the wheel on the pilot's emergency hatch. The hatch hissed open. Frigid air flooded the dirigible. The advocate gripped the pilot's neck and, with a motion smooth as a breath, hurled the limp form of the pilot into the darkness. Then pulled the hatch closed, spun the lock. Pihadassa pointed at the yoke protruding from the cockpit's control bank.

"Fly. East-southeast. Land before sunrise."

"Yes, Mother." The advocate took the seat and Pihadassa returned aft.

"What happened, Mother?" The pregnant child and her mate lay nestled in corn seed, faces creased with worry. Pihadassa settled in with them.

"Do not worry. What is your name, child?"

"Name, Mother?" The girl looked confused. Pihadassa stroked her ear.

"We start our lives together now. Your life is yours to name." The girl thought about this, then glanced skeptically at the Designer, hesitant to reveal a desire, lest it be taken away. "Truly, Pihadassa assured her.

"What do you call the ring around the sun? That you can see just before it rises and after it sets?"

Pihadassa smiled. Love filled her.

"Corona."

CHAPTER 3

The Lobo sat like a matte black spider on eight burly run flats. It growled a mean, atavistic nuzzle growl.

It drew hungry eyes. Migrants crouched on stoops along the block of once well-to-do old Philadelphia brownstones. They peered down the street through the acrid smoke of laminate scrap cook fires, over which they'd spitted rats and skinny dogs. None moved forward, but Agent Sienna Doss felt they were watching.

She stood in the armored crook of the Lobo's driver's side door, arms crossed, right hand thrust not so subtly inside her Kevlar-weave blazer, palm on the carbon fiber Ingram slung beneath her arm.

"Tick tock, Emerson," she whispered, her vocal chords massaging the tiny mic collared around her neck. The Lobo idled at the stoop of the cleanest brownstone on the block, before which three barefoot boys stood guard: *La Chupacabra*. They wore red scarves tied over their heads. AKs dangled to the ground casually from their fingers. Doss gave the rifles a less than even chance of firing, even if the *Chupacabra* had, by some miracle, scrounged bullets.

"Roger." Emerson's voice came back tinny in her left ear. "Boss man's gotta put on makeup before he goes to the dance."

Doss' teeth ground. She had taken four Go Pills an hour earlier. They'd already spiked, then dulled, mellowed to a steady, vigilant hum at the base of her skull. Great for focus, bad for patience. She seethed, checked her watch. Three minutes, thirty-eight seconds doing nothing but scratching her ass and waiting for bullets to find her.

"Bitch ain't the queen of England. Kick his ass out the door."

"Roger."

Sewage flowed in rivulets along the buckled sidewalk. It reminded her of Siberia. She'd spent six months in a frozen prison pit there, where the snow had fallen in an ephemeral column through a grated hole in the ceiling. Where dysentery had been as pervasive as frostbite. She found its reek almost comforting now.

What rankled, however, was that the shit had smeared her boots and the cuff of her slacks. *Real machine-tailored cotton slacks*. The US government's notion of civilian dress: slacks that fit snug around the hips and hung stiff and neat at the ankles. Like they were made for her. White cotton blouse. Green Kevlar-weave blazer and matching Kevlar scarf tied over her head. Like something a character from a movie would've worn in the flex vids Doss and her sister had watched as children. She felt civilized, even as the Go Pills punched at her heart.

She scanned windows for rifle barrels, for muzzle flashes. Windmills, cut from cloth and heavy PVC, churned on fire escapes up and down the block—but only on the upper stories. Proof of a siege mentality among the *Chupes*. Doss had seen the Chinese do the same thing in Dubai. Hole themselves up in the top half of those cartoonishly massive skyscrapers, blockading all the elevator shafts and all but one stairway. It had worked, too, until the Americans had decided to ratfuck their policy of limited damage to civilian property. With apologies to the UAE, they had fired in barrage after barrage of cruise missiles. Doss had watched from a cot set up in the middle of empty square miles of flat desert as the missiles screamed in from the night, their explosions imprinting afterimage novas on her

retinas. When dawn came, a single Dubai Tower rose like a tongue of flame over the rubble—all that remained of that strange theme park of a city. The Chinese had pulled out the next day. Two weeks later the UAE had admitted that its oil supplies had run dry, and within months had ceased to exist. And those missiles for a scrap of empty desert that was useless to anyone but the Bedouins.

La Chupacabra's rivals didn't have cruise missiles. But they did have AKs, and worse.

"Ass in gear, Emerson." She set her jaw, waited for bullets.

"Good to go." Emerson appeared at the brownstone's door.

Like Doss, he wore civilian garb, a trim dark suit with a blue tie that made him look like an old-timer American businessman. Like he should carry a briefcase, hail a cab with a thrust of his chin, oblivious to the deep ambient thrum folding over him, because he was an integral part of it—a city alive with elevators, revolving doors that breathed air-conditioning out onto the street. A city raucous with thousands of ethanol engines, blaring horns, the murmur of a million pedestrians, all sucking the teeth of impossibly complex supply chains.

He looked good.

Doss bit her lip, forced herself to stay On Task. Emerson stepped out into shit smell rising from the gutters, into the oppressive silence of the brownstones' vacancy, an Ingram propped ready against his shoulder. His eyes, hard and alert, scanned the block as he crossed to the Lobo.

Their assignment followed close behind. A white man with a thick neck. Burly shoulders protruded from a sleeveless robe—ostentatiously opulent leather, *La Chupe* red. He clutched Emerson's blazer and peered furtively over the agent's shoulder. Emerson ushered him through the Lobo's rear passenger door, slammed that shut, got in front and slapped the dash three times hard with his palm.

"We're good!"

Doss got in, slammed her door. She loved the Lobo. It was EMP proof, which meant no superfluous electronics and thus no computer-assisted pumps for brakes or power steering. And best of all, no pantywaist electric motor.

She punched the accelerator. The reactor roared. The Lobo twisted perceptibly under the force of its own torque, oblivious to the massive tonnage of its titanium armor plating as Doss threw it into gear and muscled out into the street.

She leaned into analogue steering with all her Go-Pill strength, wove around cook fires and detritus under the indifferent eyes of vacant-looking migrants. She aimed the Lobo south, out of the Flourtown squat, down empty and crumbling Stenton Avenue, onto Broad Street. Pulled heavy Gs up the ramp onto the Roosevelt Expressway, 1200 horses howling as they surged east towards New D.C., Kevlar run flats chewing pavement like breakfast.

"You drive well, Agent." Doss glanced up to see the assignment watching her in the rearview with unblinking grey eyes. He held his wide jaw at an angle that exuded self-satisfaction. Perfectly shaved skin, offensively healthy glow. Doss said nothing. She kept her face professional, impenetrable. "I find tall, black women very compelling," the assignment said. His voice had an irritating nasal quality. "What's your name?"

"None of your fucking business," Emerson snapped. "That's her name."

"I see." The assignment gazed out the window, where the skyscrapers of old downtown Philadelphia reached out of upper Delaware Bay. Titanic steel and concrete fingers glowing orange in the late February sun. Windmills and old reclaimed PV squares hung precariously from open windows high up. Small boats floated on water brown with early runoff, trailing nets and fishing lines through glass canyons that had once been streets.

"It's like Venice," the assignment mused. "Or it could be, if you covered one eye. I wonder what it's like living there year-round. How do they survive the winters? I've heard the temperature tops out at twenty below in December and January. And those are the highs. And how do they fight off malaria in

the summers?” He sank back thoughtfully in the seat, then looked from Emerson to Doss. “So you two are together.”

Doss and Emerson exchanged a glance. Emerson turned and glared. The assignment’s thin lips turned up, a knowing smile.

“On task,” Doss snapped. Emerson turned back around, letting his glare linger for a few seconds on Doss. Doss pushed the Lobo up to 150 kph. The empty expressway, cleared of detritus by the US Go unfurled like a lucid concrete dream.

“That’s alright. It makes sense. Partners should be close.” The assignment paused. “You don’t like me much, do you?”

“No offense,” Emerson said. The assignment blinked placidly.

“Yet it’s your job to step in front of a bullet for me, should the need arise. How can you take a bullet for someone you don’t like or respect?”

Doss thought of her sister and father, living in climate-controlled Gov housing in New D.C. Her sister studied biomechanics at school. Her father walked without a limp on a titanium hip, and never lacked for malaria meds. All because Doss had never Fucked Up.

That had been the secret to her success. Up through the army, through Rangers and Spec Ops, and now with Sec Serv: Don’t Fuck Up. A simple, perfectly linear road, navigating the landscape of incompetence that defined every military operation she’d ever witnessed. Everybody fucked up usually always. Just not her.

“Not you I’d be taking it for,” she told the assignment.

“Ah, she speaks. Good. So for whom would you be taking it?” Doss said nothing. The assignment smiled. “What’s your name, Agent?”

“Doss.”

“I am Tsol. My people call me El Sol. Pleasure to meet you.” He patted Doss on the shoulder with a beefy hand.

“Back in your seat,” Emerson growled.

“Your name’s Richard Davenport,” Doss objected.

“My given name, yes. My chosen name, and therefore my *real* name, is Tsol. It’s Aztec. It means... He smiled again. “Soul. Also, sun. As in, El Sol. I am the soul and the sol of my people.” Emerson snorted. The assignment ignored him. “Do you believe in fate, Agent Doss?” he asked. In the mirror, a wild crescent of white shone over the tops of his irises. Doss had once seen a man with eyes like that in Siberia. Alyosha had been his name. He’d convinced three other prisoners that the certainty of transcendence lay in discorporation. He’d facilitated it by strangling them, one by one. They’d lined up for him. One of them had been Doss’ lieutenant. Afterwards Alyosha had chewed the flesh off his own hands.

“Our ideas feed us,” he’d told Doss, and showed her teeth black with his own blood. “And we feed them.” Infection had killed him. The bodies had lain for more than a week at the pit’s center, going rigid in the pool of frozen northern light that fell through the ceiling grate.

Doss had lost things over the course of those days. God was the first thing to go. Then her country. Even her own name had slipped away from her. She’d known her fate then. She would die, but only after her soul disappeared, like Alyosha’s body under a dusting of snow.

“I don’t either,” Tsol said, interpreting Doss’ silence as an answer. “At least not for most people. Most people, they live, they die. That’s it. They breed, get diseases, carve out some crops, beg, starve whatever. The wind blows, the wind doesn’t blow. It’s all the same to them. There’s no difference between living and dying. But some of us...*We* are the wind.” His eyes filled the rearview. “I am fated.”

“You’re a pissant gangster,” Doss told him. “A deluded one.”

“Roger that,” Emerson agreed. Tsol leaned forward in his seat.

“~~Gangsters sit by the roadside and rob people of their precious corn seed. I *provide* seed to for~~ thousand people. I lead those people south every autumn and north into the Midwest every spring. During the summer, the entire Midwest is *mine*.”

“You keep your people hungry.” Doss kept her eyes flat on the road, face expressionless as she spoke. “You force them into line and make them come to you for seed. You’re a thug.”

“Maybe.” Tsol gave her a diamond-hard smile in the rearview. “But the difference between me and your President Logan is merely one of scale. Have you read your Hobbes, Agent Doss? No? Well, Logan has, you can be sure. He prefers to have forty thousand hungry refugees whipped into line by a thug like me than to have them descend on New D.C.”

Doss aimed them east down the 202. Philly’s deserted burbs spread out around them like crumbling termite colonies. They crested a rise and Doss saw the burned frames of two twen-cen cargo trucks draped across the road half a klick ahead.

“Could be company,” she told Emerson.

“You. Down.” Emerson reached back and shoved Tsol down behind the seat. The professional calm in his voice set Doss on edge. Adrenaline spiked her chest. For an instant her brain froze, then years of training took over. She let out a long breath through her nose. Adrenaline ebbed, flowed to her extremities. Her fingertips tingled.

Things slowed down, details stood out. Late afternoon sunlight gilding the skin of two zeppelins that hung like fat maggots ten klicks out over New D.C. A crack in the concrete freeway barrier as the trucks were whipped by at 150 kph. The way the truck frames overlapped, creating a solid, obviously intentional blockade. The boy in FEMAAs, maybe ten years old, kneeling behind the concrete barrier beside the trucks. The AK he brought level with his shoulder—

“Definitely company!” Emerson bit the words out of the air.

“Yep.” Doss saw another refugee to the left. He held what looked like a long piece of pipe on his shoulder. It flashed. Doss saw a cloud of smoke and fire blazing towards them, a black dot at its center.

“RPG left!”

“Yep.” She stomped on the breaks with both feet. Run flats shrieked against the pavement. The missile hissed over the Lobo’s nose, inches from the windshield. A cry issued from the back as Tsol crashed into the back of the driver’s seat. Doss saw the young migrant fire his AK spastically in the same direction. Two other migrants stood beside him now. One fired a pistol and the other merely waited, a cinder block dangling from his hand. A sound like hard rain on pavement came as bullets disintegrated against the Lobo’s armor. Doss glanced left, saw the RPG shooter reloading. Another stood beside him, taking aim. She checked the rearview. Migrants flooded the freeway behind them. She noted at least three RPGs. “Shit.” Tsol peaked over the top of the seat.

“*These* would be gangsters, Agent,” he said. Doss was pretty sure she heard him laugh.

She let the Lobo coast, down now to 110 kph. She considered her options—simple on this narrow band of freeway: reverse, or forward. *Do not fuck up*. The familiar mantra focused her in a way C-pillars never could.

“Now’s the time.” Emerson’s voice had gone ultra calm. “Left!” The RPG flashed. Doss grabbed the steering wheel. The Lobo heaved forward. The rocket came in off center, clipping the vehicle’s back corner and—

Blackness. She was back in Siberia. Naked, bent over a saw horse, her face submerged in a barrel of freezing water. A red flash as the Spetz officer struck the back of her head with his palm.

“We’re breached!” Emerson yelled.

Doss came to with her hands still gripping the wheel, her jaw still set. The Lobo rode a straight line

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