

CLICKERS NEVER DIE



STEPHEN KOZENIEWSKI AND WILE E. YOUNG

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By Stephen Kozeniewski and Wile E. Young



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(Based on characters and situations created by Mark Williams, J.F.
Gonzalez, and Brian Keene)

Clickers and all associated characters created by J.F. Gonzalez,
Mark Williams, and Brian Keene

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Meet the Authors



Stephen Kozeniewski (pronounced “causin’ ooze key”) is a two-time winner of the World Horror Grossout Contest. His published work includes the Splatterpunk Award-nominated THE HEMATOPHAGES and its Indie Horror Book Award-nominated prequel SKINWRAPPER. He lives in Pennsylvania, the birthplace of the modern zombie, with his girlfriend and their two cats.

Bibliography

Billy and the Cloneasaurus
Brineater Jones
Clickers Never Die
Every Kingdom Divided
Hunter of the Dead
Skinwrapper
Slashvivor!
The Ghoul Archipelago
The Hematophages



Wile E. Young is from Texas, where he grew up surrounded by stories of ghosts and monsters. During his writing career he has managed to both have a price put on his head and publish his southern themed horror stories. He obtained his bachelor's degree in History, which provided no advantage or benefit during his years as an aviation specialist and I.T. guru.

His longer works include *Catfish in the Cradle* (2019), *The Perfectly Fine House* (2020), *The Magpie Coffin* (2020), and *Shades of the Black Stone* (2022). His short stories have been featured in various anthologies including the *Clickers Forever* (2018), *Behind the Mask—Tales From the Id* (2018), *Corporate Cthulhu* (2018), *And Hell Followed* (2019), and *Bludgeon Tools: A Splatterpunk Anthology* (2021).

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Thank you for your assistance and your support of the authors published by Crossroad Press.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Mark Williams and J.F.
Gonzalez.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

If you've identified a factual or historical discrepancy in this book, please bear in mind that the seeming error was deliberate on our part. We wished to signal to those truly "in the know" that this novel takes place in a reality somewhat different from our own. Subtle differences such as PT boats appearing at Guadalcanal three months early, or a military head of Los Alamos rather than civilian, are meant to hint at the deeper secrets hiding in this tragic timeline. That, or a wizard did it.

- Kozeniewski and Young

A NOTE FROM THE ESTATE OF J.F. GONZALEZ

This work is a reboot of the *Clickers* franchise, and should be considered separate and removed from the previous continuity found in the novels *Clickers*, *Clickers II: The Next Wave*, *Clickers III: Dagon Rising*, and *Clickers vs. Zombies*, the *Clickers Forever* anthology, or the various short stories they've appeared in. In other words, these are not your parents' *Clickers*. These are *Clickers* for a new generation. Because *Clickers* never die...

- Brian Keene

“Old Clickers never die, they simply...argh! It got me in the eyes!
It got me in the eyes!”

- Douglas MacArthur, last words

CLICKERS: THE NEXT GENERATION

An Introduction by Brian Keene

In 1993, J.F. (Jesus) Gonzalez and Mark Williams began working together on a novel called *Wave of Terror*. It was meant to be tribute to the horror and science fiction B movies of the 1950s, Guy N. Smith's *Crabs* series, and other "munch-out" novels such as James Herbert's *Rats* series and Sean Huston's *Slugs* saga. It was also meant to have elements of both extreme horror and something akin to H.P. Lovecraft's mythos. In talking about *Wave of Terror*, Jesus said: "We were more interested in appealing to readers who were into H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu or Richard Laymon's *The Cellar* and *The Beast House*...Mark and I grew up with the monsters in the cinema and between the covers of magazines like *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and books like *The Rats* by James Herbert, and this is the book we intended to write. We had no use for flowery purple prose, obscure metaphors, or politically-correct statements or themes. We wanted monsters, blood and guts, violence, naked women, and some humor. In short, a Roger Corman movie on paper."

Jesus once told me that he figured it actually took them about six months to write *Wave of Terror*, but that actual process was spread out over a period of three years, due to their other commitments. Jesus was editing two horror magazines at the time—*Iniquities* and *Phantasm*—and Mark was shopping several screenplays, and doing artwork for films like *The Fly* and the *Alien* franchise). Horror fiction, as a publishing category, was healthy when they started collaborating on the book, but by the time they had finished it, the genre was undergoing a now historic collapse. Again, in Jesus's own words: "I loved the book...was having a great time writing it. But during its initial composition I was learning from friends and colleagues that the entire market for horror novels was collapsing. So how did Mark and I react? We ignored what was going on in publishing and continued writing the book anyway. How's that for throwing caution to the wind?"

Here is an excerpt from Jesus's journals, about the creation of the novel: *"Set in the fictional town of Phillipsport, Maine, this is the straightforward story of a young author who relocates to the small town to get away from the big city. Coincidentally, upon his arrival, the town is besieged by hundreds of giant crabs which go on a killing spree in the town, reminiscent of Guy N. Smith's Crab series, of which Mark was influenced by and who provided the initial seed of inspiration for this work. The crabs are also equipped with scorpion like appendages and highly toxic venom which acts as a corrosive on flesh. After joining the town in fighting the creatures off, Rick, along with the town physician, get the impression the creatures aren't so much as invading the town, but are trying to escape something from the ocean. And the next day, with all the creatures dead, something from the ocean does come. Giant, man-like amphibian creatures who hunt the crab things for food, that display human like intelligence. More slaughter occurs, and in the end Rick manages to escape with one of the people he met earlier in town, a waitress named Melissa, but not without seeing a woman he has come to fall in love with and her son be brutally killed by what he has come to call The Dark Ones. With Melissa, he escapes government detection as the government has covered up the truth about what happened, and plans a dossier that will unravel the truth and expose the secret of the life that exists in the deepest part of the ocean.*

This novel was originally conceived by Mark in '91, and in '93 we talked about collaborating on it together. We started the novel in late '93, and in early '94 showed a portion to Pat LoBrutto at Zebra, who was interested and wanted to see the rest of it. Midway through the year, Pat left Zebra, and both myself and Mark became involved in outside projects (films with Don Jackson for Mark, Phantasm Magazine for me). In late '95, I resumed writing the book with the help and input of Mark and finished it in Spring of '96. Its pulpiness, reminiscent of the British "Nasties" which it was intended as an homage to, has made it a difficult sell. It was almost bought in '98 by Canadian Publisher Commonwealth Publishers, but the deal was nixed by me due to a bad contract. The novel will inevitably see print in some form, either serialized in a small press magazine, or on the web."

It is also worth noting that Kensington had also expressed renewed interest in publishing the book in paperback, but by then, the horror market had completely collapsed.

Time passed.

And then so did Mark, who died in 1998.

Jesus wanted to honor his friend. He saw *Wave of Terror* as Mark's legacy, and he was determined that the rest of the world see it, as well. And so, even with the pressures and responsibilities of having just become a father to a newborn daughter, he continued to shop the manuscript. Eventually, he sold the electronic rights to Hard Shell Word Factory and the print rights to DarkTales Publications, both in 2000. The title was changed from *Wave of Terror* to *Clickers*. Through Hard Shell, it was released (as were Jesus's novels *Conversion* and *Shapeshifter*) as one of the very first e-books—a then unheard of and untested concept. If only for that reason alone, *Clickers* deserves a place in publishing history, particularly. But *Clickers* was also one of the first bona fide hits of our generation of horror writers. Its success earned Jesus a devoted readership. It has since gone through countless printings in many different languages and has become a genuine cult classic, viewed by many critics and academics as a seminal work of pulp horror.

It also went on to spawn three book-length sequels—*Clickers II: The Next Wave*, *Clickers III: Dagon Rising*, and *Clickers vs. Zombies*, (all co-written with me), a tribute anthology called *Clickers Forever*, and several short stories. And the *Clickers* themselves have since guest-starred or made cameo appearances in works by other authors in the genre, all with Jesus's blessing.

Fair to say that Jesus honored Mark's legacy, and then some.

Since we were already good friends, and knowing that I was a fan of the first novel, when Jesus decided to continue the franchise, he asked me to collaborate with him on the first sequel, rather than writing it by himself. I said yes, because I wanted to help out my friend, and because I thought it would be fun to play with the *Clickers* and the *Dark Ones* (and Colonel Livingston, whom I had a fondness for). We started writing, and soon found out that we worked very well together, with both of us able to end in the middle of a sentence and pick up where the other person left off without thinking about it. Our

styles meshed. Our imaginations meshed. And our love of the horror genre—and of all of the things that inspired the first *Clickers*—meshed. I've been lucky enough to collaborate with a number of our peers over the years, and enjoyed every one of those efforts, but with Jesus, it was often like I was writing with myself. He used to say the same thing.

The books became popular. Not bestsellers—but reliable, steady sellers. Critics called the series “a cult hit” and in this case, they were right. Even in the worst months, when nothing we'd written seemed to be selling, Jesus and I could always count on receiving royalty checks for the *Clickers* books. That's one of the reasons we kept writing them—for the money. Why lie about it? We made a lot of money from these ridiculous crab-scorpion-lobster monsters over the year. And since both of us had families to care for and support, that was always something that factored into our decisions. But we also kept writing them because it was just so much goddamned fun. We had a blast doing these together, and the only thing better than that camaraderie was how much fun our fans had reading the books. That was always important to both of us. If people weren't having fun, we'd have stopped.

We had plans for two more *Clickers* books. They would have been called *High Plains Clickers* and *Southern Fried Clickers*. The first one would have been set in the past, during the era of the American Old West. It is *Southern Fried Clickers* that summons one of my happiest memories of Jesus. And I have hundreds of happy memories regarding him, but this one is one of my absolute favorites. We were on a long drive and were bullshitting back and forth, and somehow, we got on the idea for *Southern Fried Clickers*, which would take place in Mississippi and Louisiana. We were brainstorming plot points and scenes and lines of dialogue, and Jesus came up with the idea of the *Clickers* attacking a Ku Klux Klan rally, and somebody hollering, “That's the biggest damn crawdad I ever done seen!” This caused us both to double over with laughter, because it was ludicrous, and we were exhausted, and punch-drunk, and his southern accent was atrocious. We were laughing so hard that we had to pull over to the side of the road because neither of us could drive. And for nearly twenty-minutes we sat there, laughing.

Every time one of us stopped, the other would repeat the line, and we'd start giggling again. By the end, our stomachs hurt and both our faces were streaked with tears.

Unfortunately, we never got a chance to write them. The month Jesus got sick, we were just finishing up a short story collection together, and had planned on starting *High Plains Clickers* next. On a Wednesday, we were supposed to give publisher Larry Roberts some art suggestions for our short story collection. Jesus called me that morning and asked me if I could go over it with Larry by myself. He had to go to the doctor because "he'd woken up yellow". Turned out that an unknown tumor had blocked off his bile duct and was messing with his liver. He was diagnosed with cancer later that day. A little over a month later, he was gone.

When Jesus died, I originally thought that the Clickers franchise should rest with him. After all, these weren't my creations. He and Mark created them. All I did was help keep the franchise going, and introduce a few new facets. It had been fun while it lasted, but in the aftermath of his death, it seemed like all the fun in my life had died, as well. But about a year after his death, his wife, Cathy, mentioned to me that she'd like to see the franchise live on, given its enduring popularity with readers. As the executor of Jesus's literary estate, it's my job to honor his wishes, and those of Cathy and their daughter. She pointed out that Jesus had asked me to collaborate on a second Clickers novel with him as a way to honor his friend Mark. If I figured out a way for the series to continue, I'd be honoring the memories of Jesus and Mark both.

So, I went about figuring out how to let the Clickers live on.

I didn't want to be involved in the writing process. Of that, I was certain. No matter who I collaborated with, I'd be constantly reminded of collaborating with Jesus—and my writing partner would feel the weight of that. It was unfair to whomever was saddled with me. So instead, I proposed to Cathy that we use writing teams composed of fans of the series. We'd do four new books—one to match each of the novels in the original series. It would be a reboot, so that the new writers weren't beholden to the continuity of the previous books if they didn't want to be. She enthusiastically agreed. And I knew right away who I wanted for the first team.

Stephen Kozeniewski and Wile E. Young are two younger authors whom I have a great deal of fondness and admiration for. Admiration because they're talented. Fondness because they remind me of Jesus and myself. Stephen has Jesus's personality, and Wile E. has mine at that age. The two are dear friends, as Jesus and I were, and they've collaborated together before (on the exquisite *The Perfectly Fine House*). Both were fans of the original series. And I knew they could both write within the franchise, as they'd both contributed stories to the aforementioned *Clickers Forever* anthology. The question was...would they want to do it? Well, luckily, they said yes. I gave them the parameters (of which there weren't many) and set them loose.

And this is the result.

When I received the manuscript from them, I set it aside for the evening, and then, after some trepidation on my part, started reading it the next day. My nervousness vanished by the end of the first chapter. By the end of the second, I was engrossed. By the middle of the book, I was laughing and cheering. And by the end, I cried. I was so happy with the results. As a fan of the original novel, they'd made me a fan all over again. I loved it. More importantly, Jesus and Mark would have loved it, as well. Thank you, Stephen and Wile E., for being the first to breathe new life into this franchise, and help me honor its original creators.

It's perfect, really. A new generation of writers rebooting a popular horror franchise for a new generation of readers.

Clickers never die, indeed...

—Brian Keene
Somewhere along the Susquehanna River
September 2021

PROLOGUE

PRIMETIME PROGRAM LISTING

Staff

Guide For Television

September 17, 1999

Friday

9:00 pm

Channel 3—UNDERSEA WORLDS - Documentary

Yawn. Tune in (or don't) for the premiere of the once-vaunted series. Cameron Custer, once the toast of public broadcasting, is as long in the tooth as the sharks he swims with. Possibly a cheap alternative to sleeping pills. (60 min.)

WHEN WESTWORLDS COLLIDE

Duke Thorn, interviewer

Transcript, Guest of Honor interview, Saddlecon VII

May 18, 2013

Duke Thorn: Howdy, pardners!

<raucous applause>

DT: Boy, that is good to hear. But I know you're not here for me. I'm just a dumbass actor. Let's meet the real star. Dudes and dudettes, I give you the head writer, executive producer, and showrunner of *Unashamed*, *Black Fang*, *The Kudos Kid*, and, of course, *Reboot Hill*...Ms. Christine Morgan.

<raucous applause>

Christine Morgan: Wow! What a reception.

DT: Well deserved, well deserved.

CM: Well, thank you, Duke.

DT: Let's cut to the chase. You made my career. I owe you everything. And really, how many people can you say have changed the entire course of pop culture?

CM: Oh, come on!

DT: No, I'm serious. If you'd told me ten years ago that even elementary school kids could rattle off all the old cowboy characters of the '50s and '60s, I'd have called you crazy. But here we are!

CM: Well, it was a group effort...

DT: A group effort started by you.

CM: No, no. There's love there. The fans, they have this immense love for the Western as a genre. That never went away. They just stopped making the movies.

DT: Well, that's interesting. Westerns were famously movies. Why did you say, "Let's take it to the small screen?"

CM: The TV execs were the ones who were willing to hear me out.
<chuckling>

DT: How did that go, exactly?

CM: Well, first I pitched *Unashamed*, you know, and I had to sell that as a continuation, where it was the kids of the original characters, and the original actors would show up in their original roles and everybody claps like a seal, which is fine, you know, as far as that goes, but a bit exhausting. But then that one blew up, so they asked me to do more and then once I had three shows I knew it was time to bring them all together for *Reboot Hill*.

<raucous applause>

DT: So, you said *Unashamed* was a continuation, but *Reboot Hill* is a reboot, obviously. What exactly is the difference?

CM: Well, the main difference is that in a continuation you have to respect everything that was established beforehand. The history, the character attributes, everything. In a reboot, just imagine it's a different world. Like, imagine our world except instead of Westerns being brought back to television, I don't know, comics were brought to the movie screen.

<chuckling>

DT: So our world is like a reboot of somebody else's universe?

CM: You could look at it that way. In a reboot, it's a whole other world, things are different, history went differently, don't worry about continuity, just enjoy the ride and...yeah.

DT: Yeah, indeed.

PREHISTORIC PERIL? OR PASSIONATE PROPAGANDA?

Katie Trivilino
International Geographic
June 4, 2018

What lurks under the ice? That's the question explorers have been asking themselves ever since the discovery of our world's two poles. Buried under miles and miles of frozen tundra, the far north and south are nature's "no-man's land". But that hasn't stopped man from arriving, or at least the effects of man.

As populations around the world continue to increase, carbon emissions are becoming trapped at an increasing rate, and while scientists and activists have leaned on the "climate change" and "global warming" horn for years, it has seen very little if any traction in changing political or cultural positions on the subject. But now scientists say a new threat lurks beneath the ice. That of a prehistoric variety.

"Prehistoric viruses trapped in the ice could run rampant, solving the overpopulation crisis in barely a fortnight," leading Brazilian climatologist Dr. Sebastio Romas stated, striking quite a figure with his windchilled rosy cheeks, a melting piece of glacier chipped off in his hand.

With the current global pandemic, people seem to be taking the thought of a Jurassic Plague more seriously. But Dr. Romas believes that pre-Cambrian super-flus are just the tip of the melting iceberg.

"Worms frozen in permafrost after 42,000 years have come back to life. Who is to say other, more deadly creatures aren't frozen and waiting for the right time?" Dr. Romas says.

Dr. Romas's threat has yet to emerge, and though plenty of dead and frozen animals have been pulled from melting permafrost, other than worms, the icy wastes are quiet. But as the world heats up, this reporter watches each new melting glacier with new and dreadful curiosity.

I THOUGHT I WAS DONE WITH SEX UNTIL I DISCOVERED MY MONSTER KINK

"Uncle Wesley"

UK Today

January 29, 2019

I Thought I Was Done With Sex Until I Discovered My Monster Kink

Dear Uncie Wesley,

I didn't know how to describe my situation until I saw somebody on Facebook use the term "bed death." I didn't have to Google it. I immediately knew what it meant. And that my husband and I had been suffering from it for years.

We hadn't fallen out of love. He was still my best friend. We still cuddled up on the couch together and watched cartoons and cable news every night. Our children were raised in a loving environment. The only thing that was missing was, well, sex.

Then it happened.

I'd never been much for monster movies. Maybe I remembered watching a "Godzilla" movie or two on Saturday afternoons when I was a kid. But, one day, flipping through channels, I happened to settle on that old black-and-white movie "Creature from the Black Lagoon." And then I couldn't stop myself. Seeing that...thing climb out of the water and slither away with the blonde bimbo just made me tingle. For the first time in years I jumped my husband's bones.

We discussed what had happened, of course, because it had been so long. But I couldn't bear to tell him the truth: I was in lust with a weird reptile man. What the hell was wrong with me?

So, what is wrong with me? What do I do? Tell my husband the truth? Or just close my eyes and dream of my amphibious lover?

- Generally In Lust Maiden At Nebraska

Dear GILMAN,

Let me tell you about a community called the Furrries. I hope you've got some money in your savings account...

OZARK MYSTERY, MOONSHINE MONSTER?

Kyle Parish
Arkansas Times
April 26, 2020

There is an unspoken rule when going in the backwoods: know where you're going and never go exploring.

Time has brought a sense of legality to the old Ozarks: illegal growing operations evolving into legitimized farms for cannabis, old moonshiners grabbing licenses to sell their wares. But there are still places that locals warn tourists to avoid.

Nowhere is this truer than the remote mountain rivers. Though hundreds of float trips make their way down the Spring Creek, Buffalo, and White Rivers every year, the list of missing persons increase with every season.

Detective Oswald King states that the most likely cause is drowning. Flash floods are a recurring danger to canoers traversing remote river systems. But he admits that other, more sinister elements could be at play. Namely, the New Testament of Hemah, originally a tent congregation who fled into the backwoods due to their extreme religious beliefs. With converts rare, this sect has taken to a new form of revenue: moonshine.

Reverend Argent Payne, two-time felon and leader of this religious sect is not seen in town, nor are their activities spoken about, though many in the communities surrounding these rivers suspect their involvement in a number of mysterious deaths. So little is known about the congregation and its leader that the only source of information comes from a member who was found at the Woolum access point, half dead and bearing serious burns across his entire body.

Thomas Woolf sits in a hospital, his blind eyes staring at the ceiling, his skin alabaster pale, a far cry from the powerful Wall Street investor who once ruled the speculative trading scene (readers will remember his fall from grace in 2015). When questioned, Mr. Woolf stated that he had not been tormented or tortured into his lowly state, but baptized in the blood of the angel.

"Brother Payne took us to the mound when I was ready to receive the bowl of anger, my turn to be made worthy. All the faithful know

the mound, like a tower. The angel lives there. Brother Payne called forth and it came clicking up from the mound, member waving above its head. Its dark eyes locked into mine as Brother Payne milked it, letting its issue into the tub. I bathed in it and it closed my eyes to this world, opening my eyes to the next.”

And while Mr. Woolf is under heavy anti-psychotics, locals believe there might be something to his “angel” and the Hemahite moonshine spreading through the community.

“Pappy used to put a little rattlesnake venom in his morning coffee. Gave it a tang!” said local resident, Jeff Johnson.

1. August, 2020

Dr. Cameron Custer clutched the railing of the *Claverhouse*, trying to assert control over the queasy fire in his stomach before his dinner splattered across the freighter's iron sides.

"Keep it bent over nice and steady, Doc. The deckhands have enough work already without having to clean up your carrots and mash."

That was Remo, the captain of the ship and an all-around bastard. Cam thought that his face looked scrunched up like a bulldog's, bobbing along with the roll of the ship against the waves.

This wasn't the first time Cam had ridden along on the *Claverhouse*. Some of the places that the seedy vessel had ferried the good doctor to in the past hadn't been the safest or sanest, but this time wasn't going to be quite as extreme. Not even top ten, probably. Guadalcanal was no Haiti or Vietnam. Still, the thought of sailing with a stockpile of illegal weapons in the hull made him almost as sick as whatever cookie had put in his meal. One stop by a respectable nation's patrol and Cam could kiss his already faltering career goodbye.

The island before him was set against the black sheet of night. Lights shone from the shore to let ships of all kinds know that there was safe harbor in the town here. He stared into the black sea, mentally charting the metal hulks lining the bottom of this channel. The Ironbottom Sound, that's what they called it. Cam knew all the ships resting beneath him, some fifty-plus, had been sunk during the Battle of Guadalcanal. That had been nearly eighty years ago, almost to the day.

The date of Remo's journey had been a coincidence, and not a welcome one. The *Claverhouse* had to be in and out before whatever United States destroyer had drawn the duty to sail through here in remembrance arrived. It would be just Cam's luck to get picked up for illegal arms trade by a ship on a ceremonial mission.

Cam wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. He'd never thought of himself as a handkerchief guy before, but here he was. He paused, taken by the uncanny sense of eyes on him. He turned,

slowly, and spotted two swabbies sticking their elbows in each other's sides and snickering.

"Yeah, it's him, man!"

They were talking about him and not even trying to hide it. Rolling his eyes, he turned back to his contemplation of Ironbottom Sound. Tentatively, he nudged some of his puke over the side with the side of his shoe.

The two swabbies were now humming the theme music from his show.

"Do *you* believe in undersea worlds?" one of them said mockingly.

His old catchphrase. He had opened a dozen Ivy League commencement speeches with it. Then, slowly, only state schools were interested in inviting him anymore. His honoraria had declined precipitously as his reputation. He thought he'd reached the bottom of the barrel when he started getting invited to supermarket grand openings - but then he stopped even getting invites to those.

He was, in a phrase, washed up. And he would be damned if he was going to help the swabbies reminding him of that fact clean up his vomit anymore. Christ, the time was he never would have gotten sick on a boat as a matter of pride, not in a monsoon, and certainly not just bobbing off the coast of an island. He walked away, leaving them to it.

Remo followed him through the maze of shipping containers that held more than cheap car parts and luxuries. Cam wished that he could've had a moment to ensure that the habitat for his specimen was up to speed, but he understood entertaining the captain who loved to pester his famous passenger was part of the dance.

Cam could smell the earthy scent of Remo digging into a can of tobacco even over the spray of the sea.

"They're just giving you a little ribbing, Doc. You know how sailors are. Chew?" Cam shook his head. Remo's voice reminded him of crackling paper. Everything about the tobacco-stained seaman was repulsive to the core, but he'd never let Cam down yet. "So, this thing you're looking for is like an extinct lobster?"

Cam drummed his fingers against the metal crates as they passed, as though physically tamping down his annoyance. "In a

manner of speaking, Captain. Consider it my ticket back into the greater scientific community.”

His greatest living rival, Dr. Rosamilia of Jacksonville University, had insisted that the animal simply didn't exist. Edler in Princeton had been somewhat kinder, asserting only that the fossil fragments were contradictory. Even his most trusted friend, Jay Wilburn out of Coastal Carolina, had granted him only that it was just another species of Eurypterid. Cam had heard all the arguments, then the accusations, and then the laughter that had drummed him out of serious academia.

“Any money in it?” Remo asked, spitting onto the deck.

Cam did everything to keep his lips from curling back in disgust. “As a matter of fact, there very well might be. It's proof of a prehistoric specimen and if the other artifacts they've recovered match—”

Remo waved a hand. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, benefit to society and all that. Let's talk figures, Doc. This is the first time you've paid me in advance with a song and a dance instead of cold, hard ducats. Those *Undersea Worlds* royalties coming a bit slim these days?”

Cam wanted to tell him that if this roll of the dice didn't land a natural then he'd be lucky to get a teaching job at some underfunded public school district. Although VHS sales of his show had been all right in the '90s, no production company had even been able to justify a DVD re-release. These days even the free streaming services didn't want his dated old show anymore. His royalty checks had gone the way of the silver trout, and what was left of his dwindling savings would be there soon, too.

Instead, Cam gave a warm smile, the same one that had captivated tens of thousands. “The sudden appearance of the specimen on the market made for a quick trip. You'll get paid, same as always.”

Remo stood, contemplating for a moment. Cam hoped that he couldn't see through his line of bullshit. The captain shrugged and stuck out his hand. “You've never disappointed me before, Doc. Can I tell you a secret?”

Cam worried that the artery in his head would explode but somehow he just smiled and nodded. Remo leaned in so close that

his chaw breath threatened to make Cam vomit for a second time.

“I was always a fan.” To be fair, Cam was taken aback. But a moment later Remo straightened up, ever the salty sailor again. “I’ll send Morrison and Southard to the launch. I figure you’ll need some help transporting your dinosaur lobster.

Get what you need. We weigh anchor in six hours.”

Cam nodded and took the hatch into the lower levels of the *Claverhouse* where he’d been given a berth on the Fiesta Deck. He’d done his best to keep his research and materials neat and orderly, but somehow they’d exploded across the space like his university room.

He had statements from fishermen, cargo ship captains, islanders, anyone, really, who had a connection to the sea and a story. Some tales were, understandably, taller than others. There were hypotheses on potential care, reports on the proper salinity in water, everything needed for proper care and feeding. And alongside all of the charts and forms were drawings, rough sketches of what the animals were supposed to look like. His favorite was almost cartoonlike, and dated from the ’40s, supposedly the work of an American castaway.

But all this flotsam and jetsam was no more convincing than a grainy photo of Bigfoot. The holy grail had come from one of Remo’s less savory contacts. It had almost seemed a dream come true when Cam received the call.

“My name’s Bonifacio. I caught a Clicker.”

Cam felt the sea spray on his face and tried to hold the edge of the launch tight as they rolled over the water. Morrison had a handle on the rudder and Southard reached out a steady hand to keep the good doctor from pitching over the side as they motored over a speedboat’s wake.

“Easy there, Dr. Custer. You’re not a fat seal, but the sea dogs would jump clear out for a morsel like you.”

Cam knew that the swabbie meant well, but years of amateurs trying to prove they knew more about sea life than him had frayed his patience. Still, he had to tolerate it. They had no way of knowing

they were on the cusp of a scientific breakthrough, that *he* was on the verge of newfound waves of fame.

His thoughts drifted to the classics, the black-and white-film that had awakened his desire to go exploring and see the world. *King Kong* had sailors who hadn't been interested in their prehistoric discovery either.

At least until it was staring them in the face.

Morrison angled the rudder and the launch shifted, heading into a small inlet with a smattering of docks and dilapidated warehouses. Cam noted the boarded-up windows and weeds growing from the roads. This area was little used.

A flashlight blinked once, twice. Southard pulled a similar one from the launch's compartment and mimicked the signal. Morrison killed the motor and the launch drifted to the end of a long dock.

Cam had traveled to his fair share of dangerous locales, but in all that time he and his film crew had never been through a real violent altercation. He was an academic at heart and the sight of three men bearing rifles made his heart beat rapidly. These men reminded him of a Moray eel he'd seen once coiled in a round ball of coral on the edge of a reef near Cozumel: at ease, but dangerous.

"Dr. Custer?" the lead man asked, his accent making it sound more like *cos-stare*. Cam raised his hand. "We spoke over the phone. Do you have the money?"

Cam heard Morrison shift behind him. Remo's swabbies were always armed, but Bonifaco and his men clearly had the drop on them. If this came to violence, they would end up floating, chum for the crabs and sharks.

He fished around in his coat and retrieved the fat wad of bills, almost the last bit of money to his name. Bonifaco snatched the cash as soon as it was within reach, flipping through the stack of bills like a dealer on poker night.

Now they're going to shoot you.

The thought came unbidden, too many of Remo's horror stories about deals gone bad playing through his mind. Cam shook those thoughts from his mind. He had come all this way and to start giving into fear now was not an option.

“Alright, doctor, undersea wonders await.” Bonifaco and his men laughed, and Cam affected a smile.

The Filipino mercenary offered him a hand ashore and Cam took it, grateful for the feeling of something other than a boat under his legs. The tension died away just as fast as it had come, replaced by excitement.

“We found it lurking out on one of the reefs in the sound. Couldn’t believe my fucking eyes!”

Bonifaco chattered away. Longtime fans always had a way babbling on about their favorite moments from the show or asking him more questions than he could possibly answer. He’d always nodded pleasantly, waiting for them to run out of gas. But this time he was hanging on every word.

The mercenaries led Cam and his companions to the nearest building. It was a dark, crumbling edifice with boards nailed everywhere proclaiming, *No Trespassing and Keep Out*.

The doors of the warehouse slid back, revealing thrumming overhead lights and a veritable indoor bazaar. It was a small building, maybe only a few hundred feet across but Cam could make out tables with disassembled weapons, sunglasses, hats, wallets, even kilos of cocaine just laying out for all to see. Shady fuckers who looked like they had come from everywhere from Hong Kong to Hawaii sifted through it all. Cam’s attention was instantly drawn to one thing and one thing only: a massive saltwater tank in the center of the room.

“Reinforced steel structure and nearly a foot of plastic all around. This thing killed two of my guys before we figured out a way to keep it from removing any more arms.” Bonifaco was launching into his story like Cam hadn’t already handed over ten thousand dollars, like this was just another sales pitch to some street kid hesitant to try their first dollop of pearl.

The good doctor pressed himself to the glass and whispered under his breath, “Hello, beautiful. Aren’t you gorgeous?”

And in Cameron Custer’s mind, it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. The specimen was about the size of a St. Bernard. The tank was just big enough for the animal to swim and turn from one end to the other. He’d seen blurry photographs, drawings based

on fossils, but none of it compared to the real thing. It looked like a massive lobster, its beady black eyes on the ends of its stalks seemed to focus on him. Was it just his imagination or did the animal turn around in its tank to follow him?

But the color...

His studies had shown that the creatures' carapaces were supposed to be bright red, like a crab left in boiling water. This one was solid white.

Well, solid white except for the large, smiling cartoon face that had been drawn on its back.

Cam's eyes trailed up to the tail, expecting to see the creature's magnificent signature stinger. He realized that the tail was nothing but a deformed stump at the same time the Clicker rushed the glass.

Cam screamed and fell ass-over-end to get away as the tank barely rattled. Bonifaco and his men lost all sense of decorum, pointing and laughing like it was damn grade school. Cam flushed. He picked himself up from the floor and tried to regain the air of dignity he'd always comported himself with.

Bonifaco tapped the glass, "Aggressive little bastard, isn't he, Doctor?"

Cam had to agree with the mercenary. The tank had barely rattled but the thing was still trying to get its pincers through the plastic. He could faintly hear a telltale *click-click*.

He felt frustration build, anger. It wasn't supposed to be like this. This was supposed to be his moment of triumph. He supposed that it still was. He had a live Clicker, he could prove his theories, prove their existence. But it was maimed and his hopes of testing the effects of the venom vanished. "What caused its injury?"

At this, Bonifaco smiled. "That's the thing, Doc. You didn't pay just for the *sugpo*. It comes with party favors."

The mercenary waved two fingers and Bonifaco's men produced a chest from the depths of the warehouse. Cam felt the weight reverberate in his chest as it thudded to the floor. He immediately recognized the object. World War II footlockers were common in old surplus stores. His trained eye scanned over it, noting the rusted metal and faded words stamped in black across the lid:

CLASSIFIED: MAJESTIC 13. The side was similarly stamped, this time in white: WEBB, ARTHUR: GySgt, 1ST MARINES.

“Found that out in the wrecks at the bottom of the sound, not too far from where we found that big fucker. Should be quite the prize for you, Dr. Custer.”

Cam covered his nose and threw back the lid. The smell of mildew, dead fish, and old seawater came spilling out in to the warehouse. Cam was momentarily confused by what he saw; the ocean had done its work and plenty of items inside were ruined, but the rest were strange.

This doesn't look like a World War II soldier's kit.

There were necklaces of teeth and hand-carved symbols. Each side of the trunk bore a carving that Cam didn't recognize and small mason jars full of dirt and other materials that he didn't even want to guess about were strewn across the bottom. But sitting on top of it all was a small leather-bound book, sealed tight in a waterproof bag. The bag was from the right era, but it had recently been opened.

Cam looked up at Bonifacio. “You've read it?”

The other man smiled deep and produced a cigarette from the pocket of his cargo shorts, “It's a hell of story.”

Gingerly, Cam picked up the book, whispering to himself as he read the words scrawled in faded pencil across the interior.

Property of Alcide Robichaude

2. June, 1942

“**D**ammit!”

Christopher “Doodles” Enterline angrily tossed his stick as far out into the ocean as he could, which, frankly, wasn’t very far these days. The stick bobbed away on the waves.

Doodles was pissed because he was eight apostles into his sand recreation of “The Last Supper” and the tide was coming in. The salt water nibbled away at the bottom of Jesus’s table. Wait, had Jesus been the host? He’d have to remember that question if he ever saw Chaplain Broaddus again.

“When,” Doodles corrected himself out loud. He had to stay positive, right?

Sighing, he stood up and wandered into the brush to find another stick. By the time he found one long and sturdy enough for drawing in the sand, his entire masterwork had been washed away. Retreating further up the beach he drew a circle, added two eyes and a smile. Then a nose, hands, and the whole rest of the body. He couldn’t help himself. He could never just stop with a simple drawing.

“Wish I had my damn sketch pad back.”

Doodles sank to a crouch, cradling his head in his hands. He should have been happy, he knew. And he had been at first. Some people saved up their whole lives to retire to a tropical paradise, and most never made it. For his first few days on the island he had avoided panicking, happily wading into the bathwater-warm ocean, climbing trees, pretending his halved coconuts were tropical island drinks. And at first there’d been no reason to panic.

He’d had managed to salvage half the galley supplies from the *Lexington* when it had gone down in early May. He’d been working below, peeling potatoes, when explosions had started to rock the ship. At first he hadn’t thought much of it. That part of sailing wasn’t really his concern. He just had to keep the bellies of the people who had to worry about that stuff full. But when the fires had started Doodles had immediately begun a furious rush to pack up pots, pans, and produce into his packs.

Other men might have tried to save their personal goods—and a lot of men whose ships went down did, he supposed, and he didn’t

blame them. But for Doodles the galley was his home. His tea kettle was like a picture of his kids, his pantries like his foot locker. His only regret was that he hadn't saved his sketchbook, the only thing he ever used in off hours (not that he had many off hours, feeding a crew of nearly 3000. It was also the reason he was called Doodles instead of Cookie, like almost every other cook in the Navy.

He'd made his way off the *Lady Lex*, aboard a lifeboat with a dozen other sailors. And all had seemed well at first until a swell had pushed them out of earshot of the salvage boats. When no amount of rowing could set them right, the men had all left the boat and started swimming back to safety at Ensign Mangum's orders. All except one: Doodles Enterline, who had never learned to swim. That, and he had been reluctant to leave behind the pack of kitchen supplies he'd managed to salvage. They were like his kids.

Mangum had given him a compass, map, flares, and extensive directions on how to meet up with the salvage boats, but it had been nearly a day before he had finally reached land, making any instructions pointless. They had probably looked for him for a while, but he could hardly blame them for giving up. The ocean was a vast place.

So, washing ashore, he'd at first had food aplenty, and, turning the lifeboat over, shelter enough. He'd spent his first few days on the island trying to catch crabs with an increasingly comic series of traps before finally learning that they weren't really all that smart. A large enough rock, dropped shortly in front of their path of flight, would both kill them and finish half the business of shelling them. He'd started gathering coconuts and lemon grass, and all manner of edible forageables, a skill that combined his experience as a youth on the farms of rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and his years since as a Navy cook. Food just made sense to him, and he had no trouble finding it.

As the days had stretched into weeks, he'd started weaving a fishing net out of some of the local fibrous plants. And that had been his worst mistake. In a way, though, he'd been lucky. He'd wandered off into the brush to see a man about a horse and then, returning, found a gaggle of uniformed Japanese tugging his fishing net in from the ocean, and turning over his lifeboat-cum-hut.

Well, “gaggle” was too strong. There had probably been three of them. Honestly, though, he’d never seen an enemy combatant before in his life, and had really never expected to. Things would’ve had to go to all hell and gone before they stuck a cook on one of the guns. Down in the galley he could’ve easily passed the whole war without even seeing a Japanese vessel. That fateful day, though, his hands still reeking of his own shit, hastily cleaned in the dirt, he was not more than fifty yards from an armed trio of them.

And they looked...well, pretty normal honestly. Somehow, probably through the cartoons they played before picture shows if he had to guess, he’d gotten the impression that Tojos would look like monkeys or rats, with huge hanging buckteeth, tiny pinprick eyes, and glasses the size of half their face. Instead they’d been three pretty ordinary looking guys, pawing through all his worldly possessions. Still, he’d been terrified.

He’d stood stock still, like a rabbit caught in a car’s head beams, and then he’d carefully slunk away in to the underbrush. As soon as he’d been sure he was out of earshot, he’d taken off like a bolt and never gone near his temporary campground again.

That’d been months ago. Since then he’d survived like a real pioneer. Mostly, he’d figured out where the Japanese base was, and figured out their patrols, and then avoided them. Living largely in fear of people, and surviving in no small part off their castoffs, he liked to think he’d learned a lot about them. Besides, spying on the Japanese base was the closest he got to a radio show around here. He couldn’t read any Japanese, but he’d picked up a few words, and thought he’d figured out the names of the ones who commonly got sent on patrol and some of the bigwigs at the base.

Private Yotashi was a skittish sort, and one of the few who always paid attention on patrol. Sergeant Ohno was fat, somehow, and lazy, and more likely to wander far enough from base not to be noticed and then take a nap rather than completing his rounds. Still, Doodles had never felt inclined to attack Ohno, although it would have been easy enough. Better not to draw attention was always his outlook. As far as he was concerned, if the Japanese went on for the rest of the war never noticing he was there, all the better.

But then there was General Katou. He'd developed a grudging respect for the man. Neither quiet nor overly loud, the man was clearly in charge. His men loved him to the extent that any enlisted man could love an officer. In the last few weeks, though, a gaunt storm cloud of a man, Colonel Hanshiro, who had always been busy and invisible had started undermining the general at every turn. Doodles didn't know much, but he knew a mutiny brewing when he saw one.

Doodles rose as the waves began to eat up his cartoon. Maybe it was time to go spy on the Japanese base a bit. He glanced back at the beach, seeing his figure reduced to nothing more than a nose and face peeking over what could've been a wall, before it was washed away entirely. Hmm, he kind of liked how that looked. He'd have to remember it.

Moving with a noiseless grace, he found himself not much later within spitting distance of the Japanese camp, his belly full of wild taro. Sergeant Ohno was snoozing happily in a glen nearby, rather than leading a patrol, so Doodles was confident he could watch in peace.

Now, here was something strange. The general wasn't wearing his usual uniform. In fact, he was wearing what looked like a white dress. Doodles was so put off by this funny appearance, that he was startled into laughing. Normally he never broke his silence this close to base. Even Ohno might get suspicious, and he was not one who went looking for trouble, or even woke from his naps normally. But Doodles couldn't help himself. The general, looking as dour as possible, wearing a fancy dress, was just a sight he couldn't unsee.

But Doodles shut up real quick when he heard what sounded like the bolt of a gun locking.

Click-click.

Doodles's heart sank into his stomach. Since the day his makeshift camp had been discovered, he hadn't had so much as a close call. Luck had always been on his side, he knew, but maybe God had been, too, and maybe, just maybe, he'd developed a certain skill for skulking around. It wasn't one he'd ever expected. Drawing, sure. Maybe he'd get hired by Warner Brothers to make pictures one day. Cooking, eh, he wasn't going to be a chef at a

fancy French restaurant, but maybe he could make some dough as a short order cook someday. He wasn't sure what could be done with sneaking and spying, aside from maybe being a secret agent, but he didn't plan on ever getting into that line of work.

But all of those options were gone now and his number was up. He raised his hands about halfway, enough that he could claim he was surrendering if necessary, or maybe jump the guy if he was alone. Slowly he turned around.

But it wasn't Private Yotashi facing him. And it sure as shit wasn't Sergeant Ohno, who was still sawing wood, or any of the other Japanese soldiers for that matter. He found himself staring smack dab into the maw of some horrifying, massive crab-type creature. And the thing looked pissed.

3. August, 1942

Alcide Robichaude muttered prayers as the ships behind him hurled thunderous cannonade. He could smell the spray of the sea and the sweat of the men in front of him. They made a fat target stuck in as tight as they were.

There were thirty or so men tucked in with him. A few slickers and the boys from the landlocked states weren't handling it so well. Vomit joined the seawater swirling around his boots, vibrating along with the motor from the landing craft as they maneuvered toward the island dominating their view.

Alcide had barely paid attention while the colonel had been giving the briefing back on the ship. He'd been busy whispering protection for the men he'd spent the past months training and traveling with. All of them were going to meet what was waiting in this jungle thrust out from the middle of the sea.

He knew the island's name, Guadalcanal, and that the Tojos controlled it. He'd heard the scuttlebutt same as the rest of the guys. They'd be seeing combat today and despite his upbringing, his preparation, Alcide still fidgeted as the green on the horizon slowly overtook the blue of the sky.

Captain Palmer was shouting orders, screaming over the drone of the engine and the battleships turning whatever positions the Tojos were still trying to hold onto nothing but mud and dead brush. "As soon as we hit the beach, move up! Don't get caught in the open! Hear me, Marines?"

Alcide shouted back that he heard him, just like every other man in the boat, then he went right back to muttering workings under his breath, and praying to whatever god could hear him that a bullet wouldn't find him today. Alcide heard the shout from behind him, the time until the ramp dropped and they'd be charging up the beach.

"Thirty seconds!"

He heard someone breathing sharp and quick. It was a kid they called Trick, on account that he always seemed to be coming ahead in their card games on the way over. Alcide wanted to pat him on the back, let him know that he'd watch over him, that he just had to remember his training like the rest of them. He couldn't reach the kid,

though, so he continued to hyperventilate. And he wasn't the only one.

Planes flashed overhead, Corsairs by the looks of them. The coxswain shouted, "Ten seconds!"

"Here we go, Papa. Don't go looking for me to come calling at the crossroads just yet." He felt the boat grind into the shallow sand. There was a pause like the world taking a deep breath, then the ramp was falling.

He heard the skipper hollering, "Let's go, Devil Dogs! *Get your asses off the beach!*"

Alcide felt his breath hitch and he jogged forward. There was nowhere else to go as the men behind him jostled their way forward to get off the boat before some Tojo machine gun round tore through them.

His boots hit the water, immediately soaking through, and he struggled with his pack and weapon as he tried to leave the surf. Alcide expected war cries, chattering weapons, and screaming. But instead he only heard the splash of the surf, the thousands of motors from landing craft... and laughter?

The crowds thinned and Alcide noticed that he wasn't the only one staring. Marines lounged at the tree line, gear strewn about the place as they watched the arriving men.

One of them waved a cigarette, "Welcome to Guadalcanal!"

Alcide looked over at Trick and both of them began to laugh before they heard Gunnery Sergeant Arthur Webb begin barking orders. "Don't sit there with your pecker in your hand, Boudin. Get your ass up the beach!"

Boudin. They'd been calling him that since basic, on account of his Cajun accent. Alcide was just glad they hadn't cottoned to his practices yet.

Dutifully he responded, "Aye, Gunny," and began the jog toward the rest of his unit.

4. August, 1942

Captain Ezekiel Palmer rubbed the five-o'clock shadow that had already started forming under his chin. This wasn't what he had been told, hadn't been what he'd expected. The colonel had made sure that all of them were aware of just how savage the resistance was going to be.

So where the hell was it?

The truth was he felt relieved. Annapolis and all the finer lessons on command seemed like a lifetime ago. A few years in the peacetime Corps shuffling papers around and overseeing base expansion had left him unsure of his capacity for combat. Ezekiel was untested and he knew that if he screwed up, his men would die.

Of course, some men were going to die anyway. That was the way of things, as his father who had fought in the Great War had told him. It was his job to get as many boys home as possible.

Your goddamned feelings don't matter, Marine. Move up, secure the objectives, and eradicate resistance. Those are your orders.

"What's the word, Skipper? Can we get back on the fucking boat? It's hot as shit and these mosquitoes have already bitten my ass enough that it's redder than my mama's fucking Sunday gravy!"

The curly-haired private chewing gum and holding his rifle in the air like he was posing for some news rag's war hero editorials was Allen Martino. Only a Brooklyn boy could get away with being such a smartass, but everyone in the company seemed to like him, Ezekiel, much to his chagrin, included.

"Well, Martino, today isn't your lucky day since we're marching straight into that jungle to root out Tojo holdouts."

There were a flurry of groans and cursing. One of his other men, a big hick from somewhere close to Alabama named Basher asked, "What about the airfield, Skip? Don't know about the rest of you lugs, but I'd rather be hoofing it somewhere without monkeys and poison frogs and nonsense."

Gunny Webb, who would have quickly shut both men up if they had dared to sass Ezekiel in front of him, was just out of earshot, helping a man who had spilled half his kit. Webb hadn't been frocked yet, but since 1st Sgt Masterton was recovering from dysentery in

Australia, Webb was filling the role in his place. Ezekiel knew Webb's absence was why the men were testing him and he had prepared for all manner of bad attitudes and disrespect. More importantly, he didn't want to just hide under any NCO's skirts.

Most of his boys were fresh out of boot. His two years filling out concrete requisition forms practically made him a veteran by comparison. And truth be told, he didn't want to be heading into those dark trees, either. But orders, he reminded himself, were goddamned orders. He opened his mouth to remind the men of that same fact when he stopped dead in his tracks.

About a hundred yards from them a dark wall of green gave way to darkness the deeper he looked. Tangles of limbs and brush on the side of the trail resembled a man.

Sniper.

Ezekiel's mind was screaming, but he kept his composure. But upon closer inspection there was nothing there. The enemy had retreated deeper than anywhere that his men could reach today.

He realized that he still needed to answer his man's question, but his Executive Officer jumped in before he could look like a fool spooked by the shadows.

"Why don't you stuff a rag in your cheesehole, Basher? Scared of frogs. You'd better be scared of Tojo instead. Now if the skipper doesn't have anything else, we're heading up into the hills."

Ezekiel and Jake Dempsey had graduated from Annapolis the same year, but hadn't really run in the same circles. A prodigious love of liquor and loose women had held Jake back from making captain, but it had suited him just fine. "Would rather follow your lead," he'd say when Ezekiel questioned him about his career goals.

He picked up the slack when Ezekiel was unsure of himself.

All eyes were on him again. Ezekiel nodded his head and motioned with one hand towards the jungle. "Said it all already. We've got our orders, so let's try not to fuck them up. Move out!"

Jake and Webb immediately took the lead on getting the men moving, hollering for them to get everything in gear as they marched resolutely towards that towering wall of green.

Ezekiel's breath hitched in his throat. He clutched his carbine tight and walked resolutely forward.

Please God, if you're listening, don't let me catch a bullet right here.

The excited chatter that each man had brought with him after they realized they weren't going to die on the beach had disappeared. All of them were staring at the green leaves that were mimicking the waves crashing against the shore. Each new gust of wind caused the limbs of emerald to jump like the crowd at a baseball game.

They reached the edge of the trees and Ezekiel held up a hand. The men stopped and immediately ducked into the tall grass. He scanned each edge of shadow, looking for any sign of movement, the glint of a rifle, the light breathing of a man waiting to kill.

"Better not kill me now, you bastards," Ezekiel muttered as he stepped into the woods sweeping his weapon back and forth.

But nothing moved and no bullet came. He sighed in relief and waved them on.

One by one, they went into the trees.

5. August, 1942

Deep beneath the green trees, in a cave carved under the dirt closer to the high hills of the island, a man prepared to die.

Colonel Ota Hanshiro was not that man. His hand was poised over a sheaf of rice paper. He had been trying to write a letter to his wife back home in Hokkaido for the past week. He'd been able to put together no more than two words at a time, though. Never in their thirty years together had he spoken a false word to her. Now, though, he could think of nothing, not about his mission, not about his feelings, not even about the weather that wouldn't be a lie.

A shadow loomed over him and he rolled his eyes. Captain Atagi, his aide-de-camp, was from a no-name town in rural Gifu prefecture. He was too polite to knock. Too polite for a lot of things, really, to make an effective aide-de-camp, though Ota, as a fellow country boy, respected his rural upbringing. So, instead of knocking, he loomed, loomed in doorways or, as now, the entrance to Hanshiro's cave.

"Yes?" Ota asked, after a pregnant enough pause to let Atagi know that he was doing him a favor by breaking the silence.

"It's time, Hanshiro-*sama*."

Ota nodded and packed away his calligraphy tools. He checked his uniform, making sure every button shined and every line was perfect. Ota had never enjoyed the harsh, disciplinary nature of his job, but he also understood that it was vital. For the Empire he would force down his normal, academic, pacifistic nature. For the Empire he would do anything.

Katou, the Imperial Japanese Army general in charge of the island's defenses, knelt in the dirt, eyes staring resolutely forward, a frond of *sakaki* leaves before him. Katou wore a white kimono, rather than his uniform. Given the time they had, it was the appropriate dress for the ceremony. The dishes before him showed he'd eaten his last meal and drunk his *sake*, and Atagi would not have fetched him before the man had been given the chance to compose his final words.

That, though, would be the last of the traditional elements of today's ceremony.

“Your failure to hold the beach against the invaders has brought weakness and shame to our work here.” Ota paced back and forth, forcing his voice to be stern, despite his overwhelming desire to comfort his fellow soldier.

Katou’s most trusted officers surrounded him, including his second-in-command and apparent successor, Colonel Shinsato, ostensibly Ota’s peer. Most knew Ota by sight from his long tenure on the island, but few knew the nature of his secretive work, leading the island’s detachment of Unit 731 scientists and soldiers. And none of Katou’s men knew that the IJA General Staff had sent orders for him to take over for their beloved leader.

Shinsato obviously suspected, and hated Ota’s guts for it. That was all right. Ota had never had a shred of respect for Shinsato. He was a city boy, Kyoto born and bred. Unlike himself and Atagi, someone like Shinsato had no business being in the IJA. He should’ve joined the Navy, perhaps.

The engineers had designed their fortifications well, bunkers threaded with underground tunnels hollowed the highlands of the island jungle, but Ota had specifically asked for this fortification.

The one closest to the sea.

There were caves on the island, ancient entries underground that the IJA had made use of when they had first come to this green hell. It would have been perfect for holding out if the pools of water deep inside the mountains had been fresh. The ocean had seeped in and these dark pools were just passages to the vast darkness of the sea.

But things that Ota had never considered in his wildest dreams laid claim to these passages. He’d seen them after coming to see why a whole company had not emerged from the dark of one particular cavern. And what he and the rest of his unit had found there could change the course of the war.

Ota had been pleased with the initial results. The deep waters around the island had been brimming with specimens and his patrons the *Umibozu* had brought him fresh ones when his previous samples expired.

His subjects bred quickly, a fact that had proved invaluable in his experiments. He’d tested the creatures out on the natives of the island, all the worst sorts of traitors to the Greater East Asian Co-

Prosperity Sphere. The successes were still serving His Imperial Majesty. The failures had been returned to the *Umibozu* and their pets as fodder or sport. So it went with traitors. Though Ota was a man of peace, he understood that in times of war men had to forge themselves into blades of steel, and he had no patience for treason. And as a man of science he was delighted. Even if his project was in the early stages of success, there was still so much to learn and so much to do.

But first, he had his duty.

“Bring me my sword,” Katou said.

Shinsato, who was also Katou’s second for the seppuku ceremony, was quick to comply, placing the weapon tenderly into his beloved leader’s hands. Ota noted by the stamp that it was a *showato*, a modern-day knockoff rather than a family heirloom. That was like Katou. He was a pragmatist. The General Staff ordered officers to wear swords, so he wore one, but he placed his faith in rifles and modern tactics.

Still, here he was.

Katou proffered his sword to Ota. “I accept what is to come, I give my life in honor of myself, my comrades, and His Imperial Majesty.”

Ota nodded, then stood behind the general. There were nearly two-dozen men here to witness Katou’s death. They’d also be witnessing the first public display of their new commander’s work.

“Are you ready, Katou-sama?” It was a small thing to address the dying man with honor. By this sacrifice he would retain it in the next world and for his family in this one.

Katou nodded his head and began the intricate, painful process of self-vivisection. It was not much done these days, being a relic of a bygone age, but all the men present still understood the gravity of the situation. Ota also supposed that in those olden days a second would have allowed his master to go hours at this purifying self-torture before beheading him. Times had changed, though, and Shinsato, either out of love or respect, stepped forward after only about a minute to take Katou’s head.

Ota held up a hand to stop him, eliciting horrified stares from all those assembled.

“Japan must modernize,” Ota said loudly, “without forgetting our traditions. That has always been General Katou’s philosophy, is it not so, Katou-sama?”

“*Hai*,” Katou choked out, struggling to speak and hold his intestines in simultaneously.

Ota nodded. “It is in honor of that philosophy, I offer you this blending of the old world and the new.”

Ota gestured at two of his men holding ropes attached to a metal grate that led deeper into the caverns. Both men looked pale as they pulled the ropes. The metal ground as it hit the rough edges of stone before locking in place with a piercing clang that echoed through the caves.

Katou stared into the dark cave, his face placid in a way that made Ota proud to be a member of the Imperial Army.

Water splashed around inside the dark hole, and then came another sound.

It sounded like a pistol cocking, or a rifle, a weapon now primed to take any of their lives. The soldiers surrounding their beloved leader shuddered, memories of the morning and other battles across the whole of the Pacific flashing through their minds.

The noise never stopped. *Click-click, click-click*. Katou himself strained to see whatever was crawling up from the dark sinkhole.

Ota watched with barely restrained excitement, but maintained complete decorum as the creature emerged. Two pincers the size of a man’s chest clutched at the metal rails. A keening screech echoed through the cave as it scratched the metal. Two eyes as black as night on the end of stalks reflected Katou’s no longer placid expression.

Eight legs dug into the dirt as the bone-white creature hesitantly stepped into the cave, claws clicking as it eyed each man in turn, segmented mouth parts opening and closing in anticipation.

The monstrous crustacean’s tail arched up and small drops seeped from the sharp tip at its apex. The rock below steamed from the fallen venom, drilling tiny holes into the cave floor.

The albinos were an Umibozu breed, their venom exponentially more potent than that of a wild specimen. Ota drew his sword. Unlike Katou’s, his was a family heirloom from the late Tokugawa period.

The *Umibozu* trained these creatures with tridents, but the specimens he had trained responded just as well to his sword. He pointed the blade at the disgraced captain who stared resolutely into those white eyestalks.

“*Kurikka*,” he said, the best translation he could come up with for what the *Umibozu* themselves called the creatures, “strike!”

The *Kurikka* obediently charged, its claws working into a frenzy. It caught Katou in its grasp and held him tight before its tail flashed forward and stabbed the general through the chest. Blood erupted from Katou’s mouth and his teeth were gritted tight, but all present could hear the pained wheezing escaping from his throat. His flesh turned a bright shade of orange. Ota had seen this happen before on test subjects.

Katou’s flesh rippled, then the skin began to slide away, wet piles melted to the floor. Ota watched with special pride as the general didn’t so much as open his mouth to scream, as was fitting during *seppuku*.

Nor did he scream when his eyes melted and rolled out of their sockets. Truly the man was a credit to the Japanese fighting man, and Hanshiro regretted his loss.

The *Kurikka* feasted, white claws scooping up puddles of flesh and shoveling them into its mouth. Ota stood before it without fear, looking at each of Katou’s men in the eyes, their faces filled with terror. No. Not Katou’s men any longer. They were his now, welly and truly. Shinsato’s look of terrified respect sealed the matter.

“Go now and do not speak of what you have learned here today. But know that with the work that you make possible with your unwavering defense of this island, and by the grace of His Imperial Majesty the Emperor we shall triumph over the foreign cowards who have come to our lands.”

The men didn’t cheer, as was customary after such a speech, but filed out as fast as they could, leaving Ota alone with thoughts of his wife and farm, and kinder times that had no need of monsters.

6. August, 1942

The going had been tense, the path strangely quiet but for the billowing breeze that brought smells of death. Alcide had spent plenty of time out on the bayou and he knew the scent of something left to rot. Pools of stagnant water coalesced in the low places, so still that they looked like deep pits in the island's rock before a leaf would land and send ripples across their dark surfaces.

But stagnant water wasn't the faint odor that came drifting. No, this was something putrid, something that had gasped its last breath in dark water. Back home in the bayous of Caddo, he'd once seen a deer that had fallen victim to a hunter's shot and plunged headlong into a bog. Alcide had been out appeasing the things that his family kept under their thrall when he'd found it, bloated eyes writhing with maggots and water bugs, its skin and fur a soggy mess swarming with flies feasting on the black rot oozing from the bullet wound and into the water.

So when Captain Palmer called for the unit to halt, Alcide had an idea of what they might discover. Everyone crouched low, sweeping weapons back and forth and eyeing the trees for any sign of movement. Trick just seemed to delight in finally being able to put down his "pig." Somehow the tiniest man in the unit had been saddled with carrying a massive .30 caliber Browning. No doubt the battle buddies would welcome the pig's protection come nightfall, though.

Trick licked his lips and nudged Alcide, nodding up the hill where the skipper and XO were discussing something between themselves.

"Think it's Tojo?"

Alcide pursed his lips and stared at a shadow under the trees that looked vaguely like a man. "If it is then we're crawdads roasting in a pot."

Alcide notice that the two hundred and fifty or so men were spread out in a raised copse of bamboo bordered on all sides by the low pools and the jungle. If the enemy was poised to attack they'd make suckers of them all.

"You two becoming sweethearts?" Gunny Webb hissed as he hustled down the line, making sure that each man had enough

ammo.

“No, First Sergeant,” Alcide and Trick said in near-unison.

Webb paused, his lower jaw sliding back and forth, seeming to decide whether to correct them or not. But 1st Sgt Masterton had been convalescing for a while now, and whether he liked it or not, Webb was the new top NCO in the company.

“Count the rockers, you numb nutses,” he grunted.

“Sorry, Gunny,” they both replied, again in infuriating sync.

They’d been marching for three hours and hadn’t seen hide or hair of the Japanese. Occasionally a group of planes would fly overhead, but Alcide hadn’t been able to tell if they were Zeroes or Corsairs. Didn’t much matter; their problems were on the ground.

The tension was beginning to get to the men. Every time a twig snapped it was weapons at the ready. Alcide had tried to read the trees and land, relying on the same skills that helped him track game back home, but if the enemy had been there, they had covered their tracks a damn sight better than most living things. But that itch that they were being watched tickled the back of the Cajun’s neck and it hadn’t gone away since they’d entered the jungle.

The skipper signaled from the front of the line and the unit was moving again. Trick sighed. “Probably stopping to check the fucking map. The old man’s greener than lime Jell-O.”

Alcide liked Captain Palmer all right, but Trick was right that the man lacked confidence. He decided not to comment one way or the other, which was his usual decision about most things. When they reached the top of the hill, they saw that the skipper had not, in fact, been stopping to check the fucking map. Two marines had been tied to bamboo crosses, erected up to their calves in the brackish water. Both of them had been castrated and their midsections eviscerated, intestines spilling out of the gaping wound.

Alcide watched the blood drain from Trick’s face, anger filling up the space that it had occupied. Then he whispered, “Bastards. Fucking bastards.”

“Boudin! Trick!” Gunny Webb growled, looking around and spotting another pair. “Basher and Martino, too. Take care of those men. We’ll bury them next time we stop.”

Trick looked ghastly, but for once refrained from bitching. Alcide didn't much like drawing the short straw either, but knew he would want someone else to do it for him.

Alcide and Trick began to cut the bodies down while the other two began constructing makeshift litters. All four tried not to stare at one of the dead marines' heads as it floated in the dark pool at their feet.

A small crab dug its claw into the eye socket, a wet plop sounding as it lifted its prize in the air.

7. August, 1942

Ezekiel Palmer wiped the sweat from his eye, staring at the map which had soaked through with humidity. He thought about asking Boudin if this was what it was like back home in the bayou. The man barely looked like he was sweating.

He hadn't recognized the dead men (thank God for small favors), but they hadn't died clean. Maybe he should have directed the company so as to avoid the corpses, as he had initially intended, but Jake had convinced him it was only fair for his guys to witness the brutal truth.

The dignity of the dead men, Jake had argued, benefited no one. But the lesson they imparted might stiffen the resolve of those still living. Though squeamish about the matter, Ezekiel had acquiesced.

He'd been told to expect resistance on his route, but so far all he'd seen and heard was the deep green of the jungle and the distant gunfire from other units whose paths had been less fortunate. He was beginning to imagine Tojos behind every tree.

The sun began to set. They'd been on the Canal for most of the day after weeks at sea, and now their shadows under the jungle canopy were growing long and threatening to swallow them whole. This position wasn't defensible, and he could feel in his bones that something dreadful was coming with the onset of night.

Ezekiel decided that he didn't want to find out here. He made a circle in the air with his finger in Webb's direction. "Let's get a move on."

Arthur Webb nodded, his grizzled bulldog face twisting into a snarl. "All right, Marines, let's go. Double time!"

Ezekiel watched as his men picked up the pace. Earlier they had been complaining about seasickness, empty stomachs, his leadership, and everything else under the sun. Now, after seeing the battle dead, they were unanimous in cursing the enemy under their breaths.

Good.

8. June, 1942

Doodles scrambled haphazardly backward in the sand in what his schoolteachers had always called a “crabwalk.” The thing standing before him—like a crab, yet not quite a crab—belied that notion as it scuttled toward him. He tried to struggle to his feet, but the sand was too soft and he just flailed. Louder than a bullet, a snapping sound ripped through the jungle as the crab-thing snapped its claw just shy of his crotch, catching a bit of his trousers.

“Oh, hell,” Doodles shouted, “he’s after my dingle-doodle!”

Doodles immediately flipped onto his belly, a decision he regretted as the creature’s next snap ripped a bloody chunk out of his butt. He vigorously pulled himself through the sand with his forearms toward a palm tree. Glancing back to make sure he was staying out of the scuttling menace’s reach he saw the long bloody slug trail he was leaving behind.

He yanked himself to his feet and began scooting up the tree like he’d seen lumberjacks do in cartoons. Without a lumberjack’s strap, though, he pretty much just had to hug the trunk. The blood dripping from his derriere seemed to be driving the monster below into a frenzy of clicking and scuttling back and forth.

“You pinched my butt!” Doodles shouted.

Holding on to the trunk as best he could with one arm and nearly toppling to the ground not just once, not just twice, but four times, Doodles finally managed to finagle the boot off his right foot. The boot wasn’t really what he wanted, but as long as he had it, he decided turnabout was fair play.

“Eh, maybe it’s good we met, Pinchy. Tonight I can make a tasty bisque.”

Doodles tossed his boot angrily down at the crab-thing, hoping to kill it or at least stun it. Instead, it didn’t even react as the boot bounced off its white-hued carapace. Doodles grunted in annoyance, but when he nearly lost his grip on the tree trunk again, remembered why he’d taken his boot off in the first place. He tugged his sock off, sighing because socks were worth more than gold here in the South Pacific.

Nevertheless, he'd have to clean it later or try to scrounge another one from the Japanese base. He filled the hole in his butt (the new one, anyway) with the sock and held it in place until the blood seemed not to be flowing as much.

He glanced down at his unlikely captor. Pinchy was continuously clacking its claws together, making an annoying, rhythmic clicking noise. Its tail was also slashing forward.

Doodles had once seen a scorpion in a Tijuana brothel. Some of the other boys had been trying to make it fight a Gila monster, to little avail. But the scorpion had acted just like that, lashing out with its tail. In fact, the more Doodles looked at it, the more he thought Pinchy's tail looked like a scorpion's, except that the long stingy part was missing. Doodles was no animal expert, and hadn't even been much of a good attention payer in science class, but he would have sworn that the end of Pinchy's tail was wounded, as though it had once had possessed a stinger which had been broken off.

Doodles nearly swooned from blood loss, which was not helping him keep his grip. He had to get out of that tree but fast.

Reaching up, he wrapped his one free hand around a still-green coconut. Those things were as hard as rocks. With all of his might, he threw it down and hit Pinchy squarely in the...head. Or middle of its back. Whatever that part of a giant crab monster was. In any case, Pinchy seemed unfazed by the strike.

"Ah, stick it in your nose," Doodles muttered, grabbing a second, even greener coconut.

This time he tossed it down with even more force. Pinchy's left claw shot out with pinpoint accuracy and snatched the incoming fruity projectile out of the air. The creature barely seemed to exert any pressure at all and the green coconut exploded into a million shards under its grasp.

"Okay," he said, "no more Mr. Nice Guy. Coconuts are for kids and tropical drinks with umbrellas. Let me introduce you to my friend, Lieutenant Commander Rock."

His head still swimming from blood loss, Doodles grabbed another coconut and tossed it off into the surf. Pinchy turned to watch it go, giving Doodles just enough time to slide down the palm

tree and take off running. He didn't even look back as a fusillade of clicks sounded closer and closer behind him as he ran.

He knew exactly where he was heading, because he had nearly died there not two weeks ago. He'd even made special note of it in case the Tojos had ever gotten wise to him and he needed a booby trap. He hadn't set it, exactly. It was nature's booby trap.

A small promontory composed of shale stacked in a just-barely stable arrangement loomed up ahead of him. He pounded up the incline, nimble as a mountain goat, locating just the perfect purchases in a pattern he had spent many whole afternoons practicing. By the time Pinchy, only a few seconds behind him, had reached the base of the outcropping, he was at the top. He kicked at the precarious rocks and the whole thing came tumbling down.

"And that's the end of that chapter," he said proudly, clapping his hands against each other.

Atop his personal little bear trap he sighed wistfully. He had really wanted to see Sergeant Ohno get crushed under the rockslide one day. He hated to waste it on an oversized decapodian, but there'd been no alternative. He figured it was better for someone to use their last shot than to be buried with a loaded gun.

He was truly wiped out from a combination of terror, blood loss, and running around.

He started to head back to his new camp. The Japanese had discovered his first camp, but they'd only taken some of his most basic cooking implements. He'd managed to recover most of the best stuff from his galley.

He rummaged through his gear, before finally finding a heavy metal mallet and a pair of nutcrackers. He stuffed them into a burlap sack and slung it over his back, then thought to rip off a piece of fabric to replace the now sodden sock in his million-dollar wound. Then he stopped dead.

There, on the ground, just outside his camp, was a long but unmistakable stinger. Just as he had suspected, Pinchy was an amputee. He grabbed the thing out of the sand, which at its base was as thick around as his fist. A long, wicked needle sprouted from the fist-like connecting base.

“So, this is how you found me. You tracked me from camp. But something got you first. A shark or a crocodile or...”

He shrugged. It could have been almost anything. These jungles were dangerous.

He turned the stinger over and over in his hands, at one point staring down the pointy end like a gun barrel. A few seconds later, as he fiddled with the fistula, he realized how close he had come to being blinded or even killed. He triggered something and a long, thin stream of liquid sprayed out of the needle and onto the sand. Whatever goo or venom he had just released ate up a gallon of sand like it was nothing.

“Holy craparooni!” Doodles exclaimed. “Well, now I’m glad you lost this.”

He shoved the stinger into his pocket and turned around, only to be greeted by a leering, clicking lobster-crab monster. Pinchy had not only survived being crushed under half a ton of rubble, but it seemed no worse for wear, save for gray dust and chunks of gravel covering its normally bright white carapace.

Doodles immediately shifted on his feet to a boxing pose, although even at his athletic peak in high school he’d never been very good at the sweet science. Thinking he’d better find a weapon, he snatched a filleting knife out of his knife block.

Bobbing back and forth like Joe Louis, he looked for a spot to shove the knife into the monster. But, unfortunately, he couldn’t see any obvious seams in its armor. He struck with the knife anyway, which immediately splintered.

“Holy shit,” Doodles muttered, for once forgoing his trademark pseudo-profanity.

The creature was obviously incapable of giggling, but Doodles assumed it was doing the crabby equivalent as it lunged at him, massive claws clicking in gruesome delight. Squeaking like a mouse, he ran around the campsite, tossing pots, pans, and even some of the precious plates the Japanese had left him. Everything either dented or shattered against the creature’s seemingly impenetrable shell.

“I got something for you,” Doodles muttered, stopping his Three Stooges routine with the deadly creature just long enough to fish a

massive, cast iron skillet out of his stores.

He stood back like Joe DiMaggio at the pitch, and when Pinchy lunged at him, swung away with all his might, straight into what he assumed to be the creature's face. He was disappointed, but, sadly, not shocked when the skillet came away dented into the shape of a Clicker's carapace.

That was it. His last bullet fired. Pinchy toppled him over like he weighed nothing. He felt the last of his strength ebbing away into the sand, bleeding out from his butt. That would be his epitaph: "He bled out from his butt while a sea monster ate him." Well, something like that anyway. He wasn't a poet.

The thing loomed large over him, much larger than its dog-like stature would have allowed in normal times. But, then, like manna from Heaven, his hand fumbled into something that would get him out of all of this.

Rubber bands.

The Navy didn't spring for lobster often. Usually on special occasions, like the *Lexington's* birthday. But when they did, Doodles had kept the lobsters properly subdued with those little rubber bands. He'd always wondered why they came in so many different sizes. Surely lobsters didn't grow to greyhound-like stature. He'd even remembered laughing about it once with the other cooks. But, now, here he was, hands on two foot-long restraining bands.

As Pinchy's useless tail flicked, attempting, no doubt, to figure out how to dissolve and devour him without its stinger, Doodles fought with every last ounce of his might to slip the rubber bands over first the left, then the right claw. Pinchy reared back, angered by its sudden inability to grasp, slice, or even make its trademark intimidating clicking noise. Now, deprived of both its stinging tail and its shearing claws, it had been rendered essentially neutered, and collapsed in the sand.

"My, how the tides have turned," Doodles said, smiling happily. "How do you want to end up, as a Thermidor or a Newberg?"

Pinchy didn't respond. It simply cowered like a beaten dog. If a mindless crab monster was capable of looking morose, this one did.

"Aw, now, don't be like that, Pinchy. I won fair and square. You'd've eaten me if the shoe were on the other fist...claw...you

know what I mean.”

Pinchy simply hung its “head.”

“Craptastic,” Doodles muttered.

The immediate danger over, he remembered how famished he was. And despite his chest-thumping, he didn’t have the heart to kill the defeated animal before him. Not yet, anyway.

He stood and set about putting together some porridge from the raw grain he’d managed to scrounge. Pinchy didn’t move from the spot where it’d been banded, seemingly utterly despondent. When the porridge was finished, he plopped down next to it. The bowl was still steaming and, though it wasn’t much, it was better than a kick in the face by a long shot.

“Now, look,” Doodles said, scooping a warm and much-needed mouthful of mush into his waiting mouth, “this isn’t a pardon. It’s just a reprieve. I reserve the right to eat you, just as soon as I can figure out how to crack open that shell of yours.”

Pinchy seemed to shrug in resignation.

“Ah, heckballs,” Doodles said, and shoved the bowl in its direction. “You hungry?”

Sore, but not willing to pass up a meal, the monstrosity lurched forward and began scraping the mush into its mouth with its banded claws. Perhaps porridge had been a good choice. It didn’t seem capable of eating anything much chunkier, which certainly explained the acid in its tail. Maybe it just sprayed any animal or plant it wanted to eat, then slurped it up.

Doodles rose and made himself a second bowl. Together they sat, slurping their porridge together noisily.

“You know, Pinchy, I think this might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

9. August, 1942

Night had fallen and the entire company had dug into their foxholes. Alcide and Trick had dug deep, and, as Alcide had expected earlier, no matter what a pain in the derriere it was to lug during the day both men were happy to be under the protection of the massive Browning come nightfall.

The memory of the dead Marines they'd found weighed heavily on everyone in the company. Basher and Martino were in the nearest foxhole, and both looked white. For his own part, he'd had to swallow the urge to vomit when burying the bodies. He'd tried to get the parts he needed then, but his three comrades had never given him a chance.

They were camped on a hillside overlooking the airfield and the ocean beyond it. The night was bright with sounds of distant cannons and screams. Ships burned in the strait, fire raging on their decks. Alcide thought it looked like the damn Fourth of July. Small drops of rain began to fall. Alcide could smell the storm on the air, a thick humidity that preceded the deluge.

"The squids must be giving Tojo Hell," Trick whispered beside him.

Alcide sighed and shook his head. "Admire that spirit, but I don't think we're the ones down there giving out the hits."

A ship went up in a massive explosion that echoed across the island hills. A wave of dirt fell into their foxhole and they were still trying to clean it back out when Basher appeared to pass along ammunition.

"Here's your .30 cal rounds, guys."

"Hey, hey, Betty Grable, you going to kiss and run?"

Basher sighed. He was carrying practically a foot locker's worth of rounds on his wide shoulders.

"Give me a break, Trick. I've got twenty more foxholes to get to."

Trick held up a hand in mock surrender. "All right, all right. Just tell me if any of the great minds in this company know what that explosion just was."

Basher shrugged. "Had to be a Tojo ship!"

He disappeared back into the dark to complete his rounds. Alcide decided that he'd had enough of just sitting and waiting in the dirt. There were powerful ingredients he needed, and they were just waiting on the edge of camp. If it helped him and the rest get home, he'd risk leaving his position.

"I'm crawling outside the wire to take a piss."

Trick looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "Are you kidding me? Webb will have you by the gonads. Not to mention the Tojos will skin you alive if they're watching."

Alcide smiled and touched the red mojo bag that he'd hung around his neck. "Good thing I've got all sorts of things looking after me."

Trick didn't ask him what he meant, just shook his head and pointed at the dark tree line. "I'll cover for you as best I can, but if Webb comes I'm denying I ever met you. Better get going while everyone is enjoying the show."

Alcide grinned and crawled out of the foxhole, pressing himself into the dirt and feeling the soft coolness even through his shirt as he crawled through the overgrown grass.

A few men's heads popped up as he crawled past, and when his intentions became clear, whispered at him not to be an idiot and to get back in his foxhole. He ignored them, hell-bent on getting to the trees. Alcide hoped that any Tojos in the area were just as enthralled with the battle taking place in the strait as his comrades were.

He'd subtly encouraged the others to dig shallow graves earlier in anticipation of this moment. After just a few minutes with his e-tool, he'd uncovered the bodies.

The dead marines had that putrid smell common for things that had been left to stew in brackish water. It wasn't the first time he'd smelled a dead man, either. Carefully, he pulled back the first man's lips, easier when his head wasn't attached. His knife sliced through the gums, what little blood was left staining his hands as he collected the dead man's teeth.

If Gunny Webb or the skipper or...pretty much anyone saw him now, he'd be out on his ass and probably court martialed, but he had no choice. Human ingredients were necessary for his workings.

Alcide had moved on to the second body when he heard it. The river that ran through tree line wasn't deep, but it was deep enough that Gunny had warned them to watch for crocodiles before they'd crossed. This was different, though. He'd heard plenty of gators back in the bayou. But he was also familiar with this sound.

A flash of red came from the bushes. He saw the waving tail as it watched him from behind the high brush, its dark eyes, blacker than the night, barely visible. But it couldn't disguise the noise of those claws...*click-click click-click*.

Oddly enough, it reminded him of home, where the river ran deep and a colony of these creatures bred, summoned up by him and his kin only on rare occasions, and even then only in desperate need. But this wasn't one of the strain he was familiar with. This was a wild creature that to his knowledge shouldn't have been prowling around on land, much less a battlefield.

Alcide stared down the Clicker, keeping absolutely still as it emerged from the tree line, its claws wrapping around the corpse of the man that he hadn't begun to work on.

His mojo bag wouldn't protect him here. The animal could be summoned, but it couldn't be controlled.

Slowly, the dead Marine's teeth clutched tight in his hand, he backed away. The Clicker barely noticed, its claws digging into the bloated flesh and peeling it like wet paper, spilling putrid black blood into the grass.

He had managed to back off a good way when Goodrich, the sixteen-year-old from Vermont who'd lied about his age to join up, appeared. "Boudin, Trick said that you were out here taking a... Sweet Christ!"

The Clicker hissed and the young private swung his Springfield, taking a potshot that barely scraped the shell.

"Goodrich, don't..."

"*Incoming!*" someone yelled.

The night came alive with explosions, both tiny and large, until Boudin curled up into a ball, putting his hands over his head.

It seemed like an eternity before Webb's unmistakable voice rang out with, "*Hold your fire!*"

Slowly, the gunfire trickled away and then the calls came to sound off. Alcide opened his eyes and took in everything. The bodies of the dead men were gone, a trail of black blood and viscera disappearing into the brush. Pvt. Goodrich was ventilated, blood and chips of bone leaking into the brush.

His frozen face still looked afraid.

10. August, 2020

Cam couldn't get his top mop to sit right. He licked his hand and ran it through his hair, but that wasn't doing anything aside from making the secretary watching him nervous.

"Can I...get you anything, Dr. Custer?"

"Do you have a comb?" Cam asked, realizing even as he said it that he must have sounded like a hammy '90s movie villain.

"Uh...I meant, like coffee."

"Oh," Cam said, scowling. Then a thought struck him. "Oh, yes, then in that case, a fork."

The poor girl had a look in her eye like she had many follow-up questions but didn't want to deal with the lunatic any more. She stood, walked over to the mini-canteen co-located in the waiting room, and handed him a plastic spork.

"Thanks!"

Cam turned back to the not-quite-a-mirror he had been using to clean himself up and began running the spork through the trouble spot in his coif. It immediately bent backwards and broke off in his hair. He turned back to the secretary, holding the broken plastic handle toward her in what must have been a threatening way, judging by her terrified expression and the sudden rush of blood to her face.

"Have you got a metal one?"

A boisterous voice intoned, "Do *you* believe in undersea worlds?"

Cam whirled around. Marching towards him, finally, out of the main office, was the head of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. Cam flashed the most roguish smile he could muster.

"Mr. Under Secretary! I don't think I've seen you since that conference in, where was it...?"

The chief of NOAA wrapped Cam in a semi-dignified man-hug, which consisted mostly of back slapping.

"Good to see you, Dr. Custer! Ah, was it Rota?"

Cam smiled. They'd never met at a conference, and if they'd ever even attended one together, Cam wasn't aware of it. He was just that damn smooth.

“That must have been it.”

“Well, come in, come in. I haven’t got much time, but you’ve got my undivided attention while it lasts. Tammy, hold my calls for fifteen minutes, would you, lamb chop?”

When the under secretary’s back was turned, Cam wrinkled his brow. He’d heard sexism was back in a big way in this administration, but even this seemed a bit extreme.

“Uh, fifteen minutes?”

“And all of them yours, Dr. Custer. Well, we’re down to fourteen and a half now.”

“Uh...of course.”

Cam scrambled to wheel what looked like a hotel dinner service behind the under secretary as he followed him into his office. He nearly bashed into the man’s back after an unexpected pause. He felt the water inside sloshing almost inexorably forward, and had to yank back with all his might to stop from running over the Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere’s ankles.

“So, how are you liking Silver Springs?” the man asked after taking his seat, almost so slowly that he might have been deliberately wasting time to irk Cam.

“It’s lovely, Jim. We should discuss more about it over lunch...”

“Nah, can’t. I’m having lunch with the presidents of Exxon, Sunoco, and Shell today.”

Shit. Things really were changing. He should have known that when he’d had so much trouble even getting this appointment. The name Cameron Custer had once carried great weight in these circles. Now it didn’t so much open doors as crack them briefly before the occupant shooed him away like a door-to-door salesman.

“Well, then,” Cam said, deciding not to waste any more of his limited time and switching directly into big top mode, “I want to talk to you today about something that I know is near and dear to your heart: climate change.”

“Nope,” the head of NOAA said.

Cam was caught up short. He hadn’t expected to be interrupted so soon. He hadn’t even given his opening yet, god damn it.

“What do you mean, ‘nope?’”

“I mean do you want to get me fired? Do you want to get arrested? It’s a federal crime to even say those two words in the same sentence in this building.”

“You mean climate...”

The head of NOAA nearly leapt out of his seat, waving his arms wildly to shut Cam down.

“Yes,” he hissed, “those two words. You get one pass and then it’s Guantanamo Bay.”

He pointed to a series of cameras positioned in the corners of the office which all, ominously, seemed to be zeroing in on Cam simultaneously like the scopes of sniper rifles.

“Uh...can I use a euphemism like global...”

“Nope. No euphemisms either. There’s a whole list of shit we can’t say.”

The under secretary pulled out a mammoth tome called *Don’t Sez What Donny Sez Doesn’t Sez* and tossed it to the floor at Cam’s feet. Cam struggled to lift it off the ground and began flipping through it. Apparently “pollution” could be called “job creation gas” and “fracking” was supposed to be referred to as “fun mining” but “climate change” and all of its variants were right out.

“Oh, Christ,” Cam said.

“Oh, that you can say. In fact, it’s strongly encouraged. We probably should have started this meeting with a prayer, in fact.”

The head of NOAA seemed to be getting out of his chair and down on his knees when Cam suddenly remembered how truly little time he had left.

“Ah, no wait, ah, Jim, praying is so...personal?”

Jim furrowed his brow. “But you do do it?”

“Yes, of course.”

The under secretary wiped his hand across his forehead.

“Well, thank God for that. Goddy Goddy God.” The cameras seemed somewhat mollified by that and returned to a less aggressive pose. “Yes. Would not have wanted to have to send you to Gitmo for that, either. I want you to know, Dr. Custer, that I am, generally speaking, against your extraordinary rendition.”

“Well, thanks, Jim. Um... you know what, fuck it. We’ll just jump to the meat of the demonstration. Due to...reasons unknown...many

marine animals are...spontaneously...appearing in different habitats. And this little beauty is one of them.”

Cam dramatically whipped the curtain away from his mobile aquarium. The bright white Clicker inside was sluggish and miserable. Partly that was due to being confined in a cage barely bigger than itself. But another serious component was the sedatives Cam had dosed the water with. Though the creature’s stinger was missing, he didn’t doubt that its claws were still dangerous enough to rip a human being limb from limb. So, bulletproof glass, a water refrigerator, and a fuckton of crab sedative had eaten up the last few droplets of his fortune before the trip here.

Cam smiled and waited to bask in his long-awaited moment of triumph.

“What’s that, some kind of Muppet?”

“Muppet? Jim, you’re a scientist for God’s sake. At least you used to be before this administration got to you. Take a look. This is a previously undiscovered species. A modern-day coelacanth. It’s a man-killer, too. And they’re coming up on land in Guadalcanal. Some day in the not-too-distant future, due to climate...unknown reasons, people are going to worry about crocodiles, alligators, sharks, and Clickers.”

The under secretary snorted. “People will never be scared of a thing named after a remote control.”

“Custersaurus, then,” Cam said with disgust.

“Ah. So we get down to it. You think I made this meeting because I wanted to help you get back in the limelight, Dr. Custer? I took this meeting because I might...might...get a headline or two in some obscure pop culture rag that still follows washed-up celebrities. Maybe a few hardcore ocean nuts on Twitter will chatter about us talking. And you may think NOAA has taken a NOAA-sedive since the heady days of the ’80s or whatever, but we still have some fucking integrity here, Custer. I am not going to underwrite your last gasp at relevance by claiming this jackalope here is real.”

“Jacka...you think this is a fake?”

Cam shook the aquarium, causing the Clicker to stagger drunkenly and snap its claws. It wasn’t a very convincing display,

considering how doped up the monster was, but it was certainly proof of life.

“I’ve seen better animatronics than this in a Reel Splatter movie. Sure, it’s a little more convincing than sewing a fishtail to a monkey skeleton, but I know a carnival mermaid when I see one, Custer. Maybe you shouldn’t have painted a cartoon on its back.”

“It’s real, you buffoon! I spent my entire fortune hunting this thing down. I’ve verified it, I’ve had DNA tests, the whole McGillicuddy. At least look at my damn research. You haven’t even given me the dignity of hearing me out.”

The phone rang. The under secretary deliberately and heavily pressed his meaty finger on the speaker button. “Yes, Tammy?”

“Sir, the oil company execs are here for your working lunch.”

“I’m so sorry, Dr. Custer, I guess that’s all the time we have. Will you please show him out, Tammy?”

The secretary appeared at the door with a smile and gestured for Cam to follow him.

“Oh, and Dr. Custer?”

Cam turned back, hope springing eternally on his face.

“You’ve got a broken fork or something in your hair.”

Dejected, Cam reached up and pulled the spork head out of his hair. It had clearly been prominent the entire meeting. As he rolled his aquarium out, a squad of men in cowboy hats and snake leather boots strode past him.

“Well, would you look at that,” one of them said with a whistle, “They must be remaking that Abess movie.”

“It’s pro-nounct ‘abyss,’ yaidjit.”

As Cam made his slow, dejected walk of shame, Tammy scurried in front of him to open doors so he wouldn’t have to stop, open the door with his back, and pull the tank through after him. Probably she was more worried about him doing damage to any of the doors or walls than concerned for his dignity, though he did appreciate that at least someone in NOAA still acted like they cared about it.

As soon as they reached the parking lot, he jumped back in surprise as the woman leaned in to kiss him.

“What the hell?”

“Quiet,” she whispered. “The bugs are all inside. Out here the cameras don’t have audio.”

“Oh,” he said, weirdly upset at what suddenly felt like a romantic rejection, “I thought you were trying to kiss me.”

She smiled. “Maybe when I was a teenager and had your poster on my wall. But I’m not a creeper, Dr. Custer. I...was the one who swung you this meeting.”

“You did? I...well, thank you.”

She nodded as though it were nothing.

“I can get you another one with people almost as high up as him, but that’ll actually listen, that haven’t swallowed the Kool-Aid yet. But there’s a problem. People will always find a way to debunk a single specimen, even if it is real. And I believe you about this monstrosity and the danger it poses. Is there any way you can get a second one?”

Cam held up his hands and let them drop to the sides with two loud simultaneous slaps.

“It was my whole life to find this one.”

“Is there anything else? Haven’t you spent your whole career hunting down rumors?”

Cam’s eyes suddenly lit up.

“Actually...there might be something else.”