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The gull swooped by, seemed to hover a moment on unmoving wings.

Hell Tanner flipped his cigar butt at it and scored a lucky hit. The bird uttered a hoarse cry and beat suddenly at the air. It climbed about fifty feet, and whether it shrieked a second time, he would never know.

It was gone.

A single white feather rocked in the violent sky, drifted out over the edge of the cliff, and descended, swinging, toward the ocean. Tanner chuckled through his beard, against the steady roar of the wind and the pounding of the surf. Then he took his feet down from the handlebars, kicked up the stand, and gunned his bike to life.

He took the slope slowly till he came to the trail, then picked up speed and was doing fifty when he hit the highway.

He leaned forward and gunned it again. He had the road all to himself, and he laid on the gas pedal till there was no place left for it to go. He raised his goggles and looked at the world through crap-colored glasses, which was pretty much the way he looked at it without them, too.

All the old irons were gone from his jacket, and he missed the swastika, the hammer and sickle, and the upright finger, especially. He missed his old emblem, too. Maybe he could pick one up in Tijuana and have some broad sew it on and . . . No. It wouldn't do. All that was dead and gone. It would be a giveaway, and he wouldn't last a day. What he would do was sell the Harley, work his way down the coast, clean and square, and see what he could find in the other America.

He coasted down one hill and roared up another. He tore through Laguna Beach, Capistrano Beach, San Clemente, and San Onofre. He made it down to Oceanside, where he refueled, and he passed on through Carlsbad and all those dead little beaches that fill the shore space before Solana Beach Del Mar. It was outside San Diego that they were waiting for him.

He saw the roadblock and turned. They were not sure how he had managed it that quickly, at that speed. But now he was heading away from them. He heard the gunshots and kept going. Then he heard the sirens.

He blew his horn twice in reply and leaned far forward. The Harley leaped ahead, and he wondered whether they were radioing to someone farther on up the line.

He ran for ten minutes and couldn't shake them. Then fifteen.

He topped another hill, and far ahead he saw the second block. He was bottled in.

He looked all around him for side roads, saw none.

Then he bore a straight course toward the second block. Might as well try to run it.

No good!

There were cars lined up across the entire road. They were even off the road on the shoulders.

He braked at the last possible minute, and when his speed was right he reared up on the back wheel, spun it, and headed toward his pursuers.

There were six of them coming toward him, and at his back new siren calls arose.

He braked again, pulled to the left, kicked the gas, leaped out of the seat. The bike kept going, and he hit the ground rolling, got to his feet, began running.

He heard the screeching of their tires. He heard a crash. Then there were more gunshots, and he kept going. They were aiming over his head, but he didn't know it. They wanted him alive.

After fifteen minutes he was backed against a wall of rock, and they were fanned out in front of him, and several had rifles, and they were all pointed in the wrong direction.

He dropped the tire iron he held and raised his hands.

"You got it, citizens," he said. "Take it away."

And they did.

They handcuffed him and took him back to the cars. They pushed him into the rear seat of one, and an officer got in on either side of him. Another got into the front beside the driver, and this one held a pistol in his lap.

The driver started the engine and put the car into gear, heading back up 101.

The man with the pistol turned and stared through bifocals that made his eyes look like hourglasses filled with green sand as he lowered his head. He stared for perhaps ten seconds, then said, "That was a stupid thing to do."

Hell Tanner stared back until the man said, "Very stupid, Tanner."

"Oh, I didn't know you were talking to me."

"I'm looking at you, son."

"And I'm looking at you. Hello there."

Then the driver said, without taking his eyes off the road, "You know it's too bad we've got to deliver him in good shape, after the way he smashed up the other car with that damn bike."

"He could still have an accident. Fall and crack a couple ribs, say," said the man to Tanner's left.

The man to the right didn't say anything, but the man with the pistol shook his head slowly. "Not unless he tries to escape," he said. "L.A. wants him in good shape."

"Why'd you try to skip out, buddy? You might have known we'd pick you up."

Tanner shrugged. "Why'd you pick me up? I didn't do anything."

The driver chuckled. "That's why," he said. "You didn't do anything, and there's something you were supposed to do. Remember?"

"I don't owe anybody anything. They gave me a pardon and let me go."

"You got a lousy memory, kid. You made the nation of California a promise when they turned you loose yesterday. Now you've had more than the twenty-four hours you asked for to settle your affairs. You can tell them 'no' if you want and get your pardon revoked. Nobody's forcing you. Then you can spend the rest of your life making little rocks out of big ones. We couldn't care less. I hear they got somebody else lined up already."

"Give me a cigarette," Tanner said.

The man on his right lit one and passed it to him.

He raised both hands, accepted it. As he smoked, he flicked the ashes onto the floor.

They sped along the highway, and when they went through towns or encountered traffic, the driver would hit the siren, and overhead the red light would begin winking. When this occurred, the sirens of the two other patrol cars that followed behind them would also wail. The driver never touched the brake, all the way up to L.A., and he kept radioing ahead every few minutes.

There came a sound like a sonic boom, and a cloud of dust and gravel descended upon them like hail. A tiny crack appeared in the lower-right-hand corner of the bulletproof windshield, and stones the size of marbles bounced on the hood and the roof. The tires made a crunching noise as they passed over the gravel that now lay scattered upon the road surface. The dust hung like a heavy fog, but ten seconds later they had passed out of it.

The men in the car leaned forward and stared upward.

The sky had become purple, and black lines crossed it, moving from west to east. These swelled, narrowed, moved from side to side, sometimes merged. The driver had turned on his lights by then.

"Could be a bad one coming," said the man with the pistol.

The driver nodded, and, "Looks worse farther north, too," he said.

A wailing began, high in the air above them, and the dark bands continued to widen. The sound increased in volume, lost its treble quality, became a steady roar.

The bands consolidated, and the sky grew dark as a starless, moonless night and the dust fell about them in heavy clouds. Occasionally there sounded a ping as a heavier fragment struck against the car.

The driver switched on his country lights, hit the siren again, and sped ahead. The roaring and the sound of the siren fought with one another above them, and far to the north a blue aurora began to

spread, pulsing.

Tanner finished his cigarette, and the man gave him another. They were all smoking by then.

"You know, you're lucky we picked you up, boy," said the man to his left. "How'd you like to be pushing your bike through that stuff?"

"I'd like it," Tanner said.

"You're nuts."

"No. I'd make it. It wouldn't be the first time."

By the time they reached Los Angeles, the blue aurora filled half the sky, and it was tinged with pink and shot through with smoky, yellow streaks that reached like spider legs into the south. The roar was a deafening, physical thing that beat upon their eardrums and caused their skin to tingle. As they left the car and crossed the parking lot, heading toward the big, pillared building with the frieze across its forehead, they had to shout at one another in order to be heard.

"Lucky we got here when we did!" said the man with the pistol. "Step it up!" Their pace increased as they moved toward the stairway, and, "It could break any minute now!" screamed the driver.

As they had pulled into the lot, the building had had the appearance of a piece of ice sculpture, with the shifting lights in the sky playing upon its surfaces and casting cold shadows. Now, though, it seemed as if it were a thing out of wax, ready to melt in an instant's flash of heat.

Their faces and the flesh of their hands took on a bloodless, corpselike appearance.

They hurried up the stairs, and a State Patrolman let them in through the small door to the right of the heavy metal double doors that were the main entrance to the building. He locked and chained the door behind them, after snapping open his holster when he saw Tanner.

"Which way?" asked the man with the pistol.

"Second floor," said the trooper, nodding toward a stairway to their right. "Go straight back when you get to the top. It's the big office at the end of the hail.

"Thanks."

The roaring was considerably muffled, and objects achieved an appearance of natural existence once more in the artificial light of the building.

They climbed the curving stairway and moved along the corridor that led back into the building. When they reached the final office, the man with the pistol nodded to his driver. "Knock," he said.

A woman opened the door, started to say something, then stopped and nodded when she saw Tanner. She stepped aside and held the door. "This way," she said, and they moved past her into the office, and she pressed a button on her desk and told the voice that said, "Yes, Mrs. Fiske?": "They're here, with that man, sir."

"Send them in."

She led them to the dark, paneled door in the back of the room and opened it before them.

They entered, and the husky man behind the glass-topped desk leaned backward in his chair and wove his short fingers together in front of his chin and peered over them through eyes just a shade darker than the gray of his hair. His voice was soft and rasped just slightly. "Have a seat," he said to Tanner, and to the others, "Wait outside."

"You know this guy's dangerous, Mr. Denton," said the man with the pistol as Tanner seated himself in a chair situated five feet in front of the desk.

Steel shutters covered the room's three windows, and though the men could not see outside, they could guess at the possible furies that stalked there as a sound like machine-gun fire suddenly rang through the room.

"I know."

"Well, he's handcuffed, anyway. Do you want a gun?"

"I've got one."

"Okay, then. We'll be outside."

They left the room.

The two men stared at one another until the door closed, then the man called Denton said, "Are all your affairs settled now?" and the other shrugged. Then, "What the hell is your first name, really? Even the records show..."

"Hell," said Tanner. "That's my name. I was the seventh kid in our family, and when I was born the nurse held me up and said to my old man, 'What name do you want on the birth certificate?' and Dad said, 'Hell!' and walked away. So she put it down like that. That's what my brother told me. I never saw my old man to ask if that's how it was. He copped out the same day. Sounds right, though."

"So your mother raised all seven of you?"

"No. She croaked a couple weeks later, and different relatives took us kids."

"I see," said Denton. "You've still got a choice, you know. Do you want to try it, or don't you?"

"What's your job, anyway?" asked Tanner.

"I'm the Secretary of Traffic for the nation of California."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I'm coordinating this thing. It could as easily have been the Surgeon General or the Postmaster General, but more of it really falls into my area of responsibility. I know the hardware best, I know the

odds..."

"What are the odds?" asked Tanner.

For the first time, Denton dropped his eyes.

"Well, it's risky . . ."

"Nobody's ever done it before, except for that nut who ran it to bring the news, and he's dead. How can you get odds out of that?"

"I know," said Denton slowly. "You're thinking it's a suicide job, and you're probably right. We're sending three cars, with two drivers in each. If any one just makes it close enough, its broadcast signals may serve to guide in a Boston driver. You don't have to go though, you know."

"I know. I'm free to spend the rest of my life in prison."

"You killed three people. You could have gotten the death penalty."

"I didn't, so why talk about it? Look, mister, I don't want to die, and I don't want the other bit either."

"Drive or don't drive. Take your choice. But remember, if you drive and you make it, all will be forgiven and you can go your own way. The nation of California will even pay for that motorcycle you appropriated and smashed up, not to mention the damage to that police car."

"Thanks a lot." And the winds boomed on the other side of the wall and the steady staccato from the windowshields filled the room.

"You're a very good driver," said Denton after a time. "You've driven just about every vehicle there is to drive. You've even raced. Back when you were smuggling, you used to make a monthly run to Salt Lake City. There are very few drivers who'll try that, even today."

Hell Tanner smiled, remembering something.

". . . And in the only legitimate job you ever held, you were the only man who'd make the mail run to Albuquerque. There've only been a few others since you were fired."

"That wasn't my fault."

"You were the best man on the Seattle run, too," Denton continued. "Your supervisor said so. What I'm trying to say is that, of anybody we could pick, you've probably got the best chance of getting through. That's why we've been indulgent with you, but we can't afford to wait any longer. It's yes or no right now, and you'll leave within the hour if it's yes."

Tanner raised his cuffed hands and gestured toward the window.

"In all this crap?" he asked.

"The cars can take this storm," said Denton.

"Man, you're crazy."

"People are dying even while we're talking," said Denton.

"So a few more ain't about to make that much difference. Can't we wait till tomorrow?"

"No! A man gave his life to bring us the news! And we've got to get across the continent as fast as possible now, or it won't matter! Storm or no storm, the cars leave flow! Your feelings on the matter don't mean a good goddamn in the face of this! All I want out of you, Hell, is One word: Which one will it be?"

"I'd like something to eat. I haven't . . ."

"There's food in the car. What's your answer?"

Hell stared at the dark window.

"Okay," he said, "I'll run Damnation Alley for you. I won't leave without a piece of paper with some writing on it, though."

"I've got it here."

Denton opened a drawer and withdrew a heavy cardboard envelope, from which he extracted a piece of stationery bearing the Great Seal of the nation of California. He stood and rounded the desk and handed it to Hell Tanner.

Hell studied it for several minutes, then said, "This says that if I make it to Boston I receive a full pardon for every criminal action I've ever committed within the nation of California . . ."

"That's right."

"Does that include ones you might not know about now, if someone should come up with them later?"

"That's what it says, Hell, 'every criminal action.'"

"Okay, you're on, fat boy. Get these bracelets off me and show me my car."

The man called Denton moved back to his seat on the other side of his desk.

"Let me tell you something else, Hell," he said. "If you try to cop out anywhere along the route, the other drivers have their orders. They will open fire on you and burn you into little bitty ashes. Get the picture?"

"I get the picture," said Hell. "I take it I'm supposed to do them the same favor?"

"That is correct."

"Good enough. That might be fun."

"I thought you'd like it."

"Now, if you'll unhook me, I'll make the scene for you."

"Not till I've told you what I think of you," Denton said.

"Okay, if you want to waste time calling me names, while people are dying..."

"Shut up! You don't care about them, and you know it! I just want to tell you that I think you are the lowest, most reprehensible human being I have ever encountered. You have killed men and raped women. You once gouged out a man's eyes, just for fun. You've been indicted twice for pushing dope and three times as a pimp. You're a drunk and a degenerate, and I don't think you've had a bath since the day you were born. You and your hoodlums terrorized decent people when they were trying to put their lives together after the war. You stole from them and you assaulted them, and you extorted money and the necessities of life with the threat of physical violence. I wish you had died in the Big Raid that night, like all the rest of them. You are not a human being, except from a biological standpoint. You have a big dead spot somewhere inside you where other people have something that lets them live together in society and be neighbors. The only virtue that you possess, if you want to call it that, is that your reflexes may be a little faster, your muscles a little stronger, your eye a bit more wary than the rest of us, so that you can sit behind a wheel and drive through anything that has way through it. It is for this that the nation of California is willing to pardon your inhumanity if you will use that one virtue to help rather than hurt. I don't approve. I don't want to depend on you, because you're not the type. I'd like to see you die in this thing, and while I hope that somebody makes it through, I hope that it will be somebody else. I hate your bloody guts. You've got your pardon now. The car's ready. Let's go."

Denton stood, at a height of about five feet, eight inches, and Tanner stood and looked down at him and chuckled.

"I'll make it," he said. "If that citizen from Boston made it through and died, I'll make it through and live. I've been as far as the Missus Hip."

"You're lying."

"No, I ain't, either, and if you ever find out that's Straight, remember I got this piece of paper in my pocket, 'every criminal action,' and like that. It wasn't easy, and I was lucky, too. But I made it that far, and nobody else you know can say that. So I figure that's about halfway, and I can make the other half if I can get that far."

They moved toward the door.

"I don't like to say it and mean it," said Denton, "but good luck. Not for your sake, though."

"Yeah, I know."

Denton opened the door, and, "Turn him loose," he said. "He's driving."

The officer with the pistol handed it to the man who had given Tanner the cigarettes, and he fished in his pockets for the key. When he found it, he unlocked the cuffs, stepped back, and hung them at his belt; and, "I'll come with you," said Denton. "The motor pool is downstairs."

They left the office, and Mrs. Fiske opened her purse and took a rosary into her hands and bowed her head. She prayed for Boston, and she prayed for the soul of its departed messenger. She even threw in a couple for Hell Tanner.

The bell was ringing. Its one note, relentless, interminable, filled the square. In the distance, there were other bell notes, and together they formed a demon symphony that had been going on since the dawn of time, or at least seemed as if it had.

Franklin Harbershire, President of Boston, swallowed a mouthful of cold coffee and relit his cigar. For the sixth time he picked up the fatality report, read the latest figures, threw it down again.

His desk was covered with papers covered with figures covered with ashes, and it was no good.

After seventy-six hours without sleep, nothing seemed to make sense. Least of all the attempt to quantify the death rate.

He leaned back in his leather chair, squeezed his eyes shut, and opened them again. From the inside they had been like wounds, red, swimming red.

He was aware that the figures were by now obsolete. They had also been inaccurate in the first place, for there had to be many undiscovered dead, he knew.

The bells told him that his nation was sinking slowly into the blackness that always lies a half-inch below life, waiting for the crust to weaken.

"Why don't you go home, Mr. President? Or at least take a nap? We'll watch things for you. . .

He blinked his eyes and stared at the small man whose necktie had long ago vanished, along with his dark suit coat, and whose angular face now bore several days' dark growth of beard. Peabody had been standing there a second ago. Had he been dozing?

He raised his cigar, to discover that it had gone out again.

"Thank you, Peabody. I couldn't sleep if I tried, though. I'm just built that way. There's nothing for me to do but wait, here."

"Well, then, would you like some fresh coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

Peabody seemed gone for only a few seconds. Harbershire blinked his eyes, and a cup of fresh coffee was steaming beside his right hand.

"Thank you, Peabody."

"The latest figures have just come in, sir. It seems to be tapering off."

"Probably a bad sign. Fewer people to do the reporting, and fewer to handle the figures. . . . The only way we'll really know will be to take a count of the living, if there are any living, when this thing is passed, and then subtract from what we had to begin with. I don't trust these figures worth a damn."

"Neither do I, really, sir."

Harbershire burned his tongue on the coffee and drew on his cigar.

"The drivers may have made it by now, and help may be on the way."

"Possibly," said Harbershire.

"So why don't you let me get you a blanket and a pillow, and then you stretch out and get some sleep. There's nothing more to do."

"I can't sleep."

"I could find some whiskey. A couple shots might help you to relax."

"Thanks. I've had a couple."

"Even if the drivers don't make it, this thing may dry up on its own, you know."

"Maybe."

"Everybody's keeping to himself now. We've finally gotten across the idea that congregating is bad."

"That's good."

"Some people are leaving town."

"Not a bad idea. Head for the hills. May save their necks, or some of ours, if they've got it."

He took another sip of coffee, more gingerly this time. He studied the blue smoke ladders that bent above his ashtray.

"What about the looting?" he asked.

"It's still going on. The police have killed a dozen already this evening."

"That's all we need, more deaths. Take a message to the Chief. Have the cops try to arrest them, or only wound them, if possible. Let the public think they're still shooting to kill, though."

"Yes, sir."

"I wish I could sleep. I really do, Peabody. I just can't take much more of it."

"The deaths, sir?"

"That, too."

"You mean the waiting, sir? Everyone's been admiring the way you've borne up..."

"No, not the waiting, damn it!"

He gulped more coffee and puffed a great cloud of smoke into the air.

"It's those goddamn bells," he said, gesturing at the night beyond the window. "They're driving me out of my mind!"

They descended to the basement, the subbasement and the sub-subbasement.

When they got there, Tanner saw three cars, ready to go; and he saw five men seated on benches along the wall.

One of them he recognized.

"Denny," he said, "come here," and he moved forward, and a slim, blond youth who held a crash helmet in his right hand stood and walked toward him.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked him.

"I'm second driver in car three."

"You've got your own garage, and you've kept your nose clean. What's the thought on this?"

"Denton offered me fifty grand," said Denny, and Hell turned away his face.

"Screw it! It's no good if you're dead!"

"I need the money."

"Why?"

"I want to get married, and I can use it."

"I thought you were making out okay."

"I am, but I'd like to buy a house."

"Does your girl know what you've got in mind?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Listen, I've got to do it, it's the only way out for me. You don't have to."

"That's for me to say."

". . . So I'm going to tell you something: You drive OUt to Pasadena to that place where we used to play when we were kids, with the rocks and the three big trees_you know where I mean?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Go back of the big tree in the middle, on the side where I carved my initials. Step off seven steps and dig down around four feet. Got that?"

"Yeah. What's there?"

"That's my legacy, Denny. You'll find one of those old strongboxes, probably all rusted out by now. Bust it open. It'll be full of excelsior, and there'll be a six-inch joint of pipe inside. It's threaded, and there's caps on both ends. There's a little over five grand rolled up inside it, and all the bills are clean."

"Why you telling me this?"

"Because it's yours now," he said, and hit him in the jaw.

When Denny fell, he kicked him in the ribs, three times, before the cops grabbed him and dragged him away.

"You fool!" said Denton as they held him. "You crazy, damned fool!"

"Un-uh," said Tanner. "No brother of mine is going to run Damnation Alley while I'm around to stomp him and keep him out of the game. Better find another driver quick, because he's got cracked ribs. Or else let me drive alone."

"Then you'll drive alone," said Denton, "because we can't afford to wait around any longer. There's pills in the compartment to keep you awake, and you'd better use them, because if you fall back, they'll burn you up. Remember that."

"I won't forget you, mister, if I'm ever back in town. Don't fret about that."

"Then you'd better get into car number two and start heading up the ramp. The vehicles are all loaded. The cargo compartment is under the rear seat."

"Yeah, I know."

". . . And if I ever see you again, it'll be too soon. Get out of my sight, scum!"

Tanner spat on the floor and turned his back on the Secretary of Traffic for the nation of California. Several cops were giving first aid to his brother, and one had dashed off in search of a doctor. Denton made two teams of the remaining four drivers and assigned them to cars one and three. Tanner climbed into the cab of his own, started the engine, and waited. He stared up the ramp and considered what lay ahead. He searched the compartments until he found cigarettes. He lit one and leaned back.

The other drivers moved forward and mounted their own heavily shielded vehicles. The radio crackled, crackled, hummed, crackled again, and then a voice came through as he heard the other engines come to life.

"Car one, ready!" came the voice.

There was a pause, then, "Car three, ready!" said a different voice.

Tanner lifted the microphone and mashed the button on its side.

"Car two ready," he said.

"Move out," came the order, and they headed up the ramp.

The door rolled upward before them, and they entered the storm.

It was a nightmare, getting out of L.A. and onto Route 91. The waters came down in sheets, and rocks the size of baseballs banged against the armor plating of his car. Tanner smoked and turned on the special lights. He wore infrared goggles, and the night and the storm stalked him.

The radio crackled many times, and it seemed that he heard the murmur of a distant voice, but he could never quite make out what it was trying to say.

They followed the road for as far as it went, and as their big tires sighed over the rugged terrain they began. Where the road ended, Tanner took the lead, and the others were content to follow. He knew the way; they didn't.

He followed the old smugglers' route he'd used to run Candy to the Mormons. It was possible that he was the only one left alive that knew it. Possible; but, then, there was always someone looking for a fast buck. So, in all of L.A., there might be somebody else.

The lightning began to fall, not in bolts, but sheets. The car was insulated, but after a time his hair stood on end. He might have seen a giant Gila Monster once, but he couldn't be sure. He kept his fingers away from the fire-control board. He'd save his teeth till menaces were imminent. From the rearview scanners it seemed that one of the cars behind him had discharged a rocket, but he couldn't be sure, since he had lost all radio contact with them immediately upon leaving the building.

Waters rushed toward him, splashed about his car. The sky sounded like an artillery range. A boulder the size of a tombstone fell in front of him, and he swerved about it. Red lights flashed across the sky from north to south. In their passing, he detected many black bands going from west to east. It was not an encouraging spectacle. The storm could go on for days.

He continued to move forward, skirting a pocket of radiation that had not died in the four years since last he had come this way.

They came upon a place where the sands were fused into a glassy sea, and he slowed as he began his passage, peering ahead after the craters and chasms it contained.

Three more rockfalls assailed him before the heavens split themselves open and revealed a bright-blue light, edged with violet. The dark curtains rolled back toward the Poles, and the roaring and the gunfire reports diminished. A lavender glow remained in the north, and a green sun dipped toward the horizon at his back.

They had ridden it out, and he killed the infras, pushed back his goggles, and switched on the normal night lamps.

The desert would be bad enough, all by itself.

Something big and batlike swooped through the tunnel of his lights and was gone. He ignored its passage. Five minutes later it made a second pass, this time much closer, and he fired a magnesium flare. A black shape, perhaps forty feet across, was illuminated, and he gave it two five-second bursts from the fifty-calibers, and it fell to the ground and did not return again.

To the squares, this was Damnation Alley. To Hell Tanner, this was still the parking lot. He'd been this way thirty-two times, and so far as he was concerned, the Alley started in the place that had once been called Colorado.

He led, and they followed, and the night wore on like an abrasive.

No airplane could make it. Not since the war. None could venture above a couple hundred feet, the place where the winds began. The winds: the mighty winds that circled the globe, tearing off the tops of mountains and sequoia trees, wrecked buildings, gathering up birds, bats, insects, and anything else that moved, up into the dead belt; the winds that swirled about the world, lacing the skies with dark lines of debris, occasionally meeting, merging, clashing, dropping tons of rubbish wherever they came together and formed too great a mass. Air transportation was definitely out, to anywhere in the world. For these winds circled, and they never ceased. Not in all the twenty-five years of Tanner's memory had they let up.

Tanner pushed ahead, cutting a diagonal by the green Sunset. Dust continued to fall about him, great clouds of it, and the sky was violet, then purple once more. Then the sun went down and the night came on, and the stars were very faint points of light somewhere above it all. After a time the moon rose, and the half-face that it showed that night was the color of a glass of Chianti wine held before a candle.

He lit another cigarette and began to curse, slowly, softly, and without emotion.

They threaded their way amid heaps of rubble: rock, metal, fragments of machinery, the prow of a boat. A snake, as big around as a garbage can and dark green in the cast light, slithered across Tanner's path, and he braked the vehicle as it continued and continued and continued. Perhaps a hundred-twenty feet of snake passed by before Tanner removed his foot from the brake and touched gently upon the gas pedal once again.

Glancing at the left-hand screen, which held an infrared version of the view to the left, it seemed that he saw two eyes glowing within the shadow of a heap of girders and masonry. Tanner kept one hand near the firecontrol button and did not move it for a distance of several miles.

There were no windows in the vehicle, only screens which reflected views in every direction, including straight up and the ground beneath the car. Tanner sat within an illuminated box which shielded him against radiation. The "car" that he drove had eight heavily treaded tires and was thirty-two feet in length. It mounted eight fifty-caliber automatic guns and four grenade-throwers. It carried thirty armor-piercing rockets which could be discharged straight ahead or at any elevation up to forty degrees from the plane. Each of the four sides, as well as the roof of the vehicle, housed a flamethrower. Razor-sharp "wings" of tempered steel, eighteen inches wide at their bases and tapering to points, an inch and a quarter thick where they ridged, could be moved through a complete hundred eighty-degree arc along the sides of the car and parallel to the ground, at a height of two feet and eight inches. When standing at a right angle to the body of the vehicle, eight feet to the rear of the front bumper, they extended out to a distance of six feet on either side of the car. They could be couched like lances for a charge. They could be held but slightly out from the sides for purposes of slashing whatever was sideswiped. The car was bulletproof, air-conditioned, and had its own food locker and sanitation facilities. A long-barreled .357 Magnum was held by a clip on the door near the driver's left hand. A 30.06, a .45-caliber automatic, and six hand grenades occupied the rack immediately above the front seat.

But Tanner kept his own counsel, in the form of a long, slim SS dagger inside his right boot.

He removed his gloves and wiped his palms on the knees of his denims. The pierced heart that was tattooed on the back of his right hand was red in the light from the dashboard. The knife that went through it was dark blue, and his first name was tattooed in the same color beneath it, one letter on each knuckle, beginning with that at the base of his little finger.

He opened and explored the two rear compartments but could find no cigars. So he crushed out his cigarette on the floor and lit another.

The forward screen showed vegetation, and he slowed. He tried using the radio but couldn't tell whether anyone heard him, receiving only static in reply.

He stared ahead and up. He halted once again.

He turned his forward lights up to full intensity and studied the situation.

A heavy wall of thorn bushes stood before him, reaching to a height of perhaps twelve feet. It swung on to his right and off to his left, vanishing out of sight in both directions. How dense, how deep it might be, he could not tell. It had not been there a few years before.

He moved forward slowly and activated the flamethrowers. In the rearview screen, he could see that the other vehicles had halted a hundred yards behind him and dimmed their lights.

He drove till he could go no farther, then pressed the button for the forward flame.

It shot forth, a tongue of fire, licking fifty feet into the bramble. He held it for five seconds and withdrew it. Then he extended it a second time and backed away quickly as the flames caught.

Beginning with a tiny glow they worked their way upward and spread slowly to the right and the left. Then they grew in size and brightness.

As Tanner backed away, he had to dim his screen, for they'd spread fifty feet before he'd backed more than hundred, and they leaped thirty and forty feet into the air.

The blaze widened, to a hundred feet, two, three . . . As Tanner backed away, he could see a river of fire flowing off into the distance, and the night was bright about him.

He watched it burn, until it seemed that he looked upon a molten sea. Then he searched the refrigerator, but there was no beer. He opened a soft drink and sipped it while he watched the burning. After about ten minutes the air-conditioner whined and shook itself to life. Hordes of dark, four-foot creatures, the size of rats or cats, fled from the inferno, their coats smoldering. They flowed by. At one point they covered his forward screen, and he could hear the scratching of their claws upon the fender and the roof.

He switched off the lights and killed the engine, tossed the empty can into the waste box. He pushed the "Recline" button on the side of the seat, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

He was awakened by the blowing of horns. It was still night, and the panel clock showed him that he had slept for a little over three hours.

He stretched, sat up, adjusted the seat. The other cars had moved up, and one stood to either side of him. He leaned on his own horn twice and started his engine. He switched on the forward lights and considered the prospect before him as he drew on his gloves.

Smoke still rose from the blackened field, and far off to his right there was a glow, as if the fire still continued somewhere in the distance. They were in the place that had once been known as Nevada.

He rubbed his eyes and scratched his nose, then blew the horn once and engaged the gears.

He moved forward slowly. The burned-out area seemed fairly level, and his tires were thick.

He entered the black field, and his screens were immediately obscured by the rush of ashes and smoke which rose on all sides.

He continued, hearing the tires crunching through the brittle remains. He set his screens at maximum and switched his headlamps up to full brightness.

The vehicles that flanked him dropped back perhaps eighty feet, and he dimmed the screens that reflected the glare of their lights.

He released a flare, and as it hung there, burning, cold, white, and high, he saw a charred plain that swept on to the edges of his eyes' horizon.

He pushed down on the accelerator, and the cars behind him swung far out to the sides to avoid the clouds that he raised. His radio crackled, and he heard a faint voice but could not make out its words.

He blew his horn and rolled ahead even faster. The other vehicles kept pace.

He drove for an hour and a half before he saw the end of the ash and the beginning of clean sand up ahead.

Within five minutes he was moving across desert once more, and he checked his compass and bore slightly to the west. Cars one and three followed, speeding up to match his new pace, and he drove with one hand and ate a corned-beef sandwich.

When morning came, many hours later, he took a pill to keep himself alert and listened to the screaming of the wind. The sun rose up like molten silver to his right, and a third of the sky grew amber and was laced with fine lines like cobwebs. The desert was topaz beneath it, and the brown curtain of dust that hung continuously at his back, pierced only by the eight shafts of the other cars' lights, took on a pinkish tone as the sun grew a bright red corona and the shadows fled into the west. He dimmed his lights as he passed an orange cactus shaped like a toadstool and perhaps fifty feet in diameter.

Giant bats fled south, and far ahead he saw a wide waterfall descending from the heavens. It was gone by the time he reached the damp sand of that place, but a dead shark lay to his left, and there was seaweed, seaweed, seaweed, fishes, driftwood all about.

The sky pinked over from east to west and remained that color. He gulped a bottle of ice water and felt it go into his stomach. He passed more cacti, and a pair of coyotes sat at the base of one and watched him drive by. They seemed to be laughing. Their tongues were very red.

As the sun brightened, he dimmed the screen. He smoked, and he found a button that produced music. He swore at the soft, stringy sounds that filled the cabin, but he didn't turn them off.

He checked the radiation level outside, and it was only a little above normal. The last time he had passed this way it had been considerably higher.

He passed several wrecked vehicles such as his own. He ran across another plain of silicon, and in the middle was a huge crater, which he skirted. The pinkness in the sky faded and faded and faded, and a bluish tone came to replace it. The dark lines were still there, and occasionally one widened into a black river as it flowed away into the east. At noon one such river partly eclipsed the sun for a period of eleven minutes. With its departure, there came a brief dust storm, and Tanner turned on the radar and his lights. He knew there was a chasm somewhere ahead, and when he came to it he bore to the left and ran along its edge for close to two miles before it narrowed and vanished. The other vehicles followed, and Tanner took his bearings from the compass once more. The dust had subsided with the brief wind, and even with the screen dimmed Tanner had to don his dark goggles against the glare of reflected sunlight from the faceted field he now negotiated.

He passed towering formations which seemed to be quartz. He had never stopped to investigate them in the past, and he had no desire to do it now. The spectrum danced at their bases, and patches of such light occurred for some distance about them.

Speeding away from the crater, he came again upon sand, clean, brown, white, dun, and red. There were more cacti, and huge dunes lay all about him. The sky continued to change, until finally it was a blue as a baby's eyes. Tanner hummed along with the music for a time, and then he saw the Monster.

It was a Gila, bigger than his car, and it moved in fast. It sprang from out the sheltering shade of a valley filled with cacti, and it raced toward him, its beaded body bright with many colors beneath the sun, its dark, dark eyes unblinking as it bounded forward on its lizard-fast legs, sable fountains rising behind its upheld tail, which was wide as a sail and pointed like a tent.

He couldn't use the rockets, because it was coming in from the side.

He opened up with his fifty-calibers and spread his "wings" and stamped the accelerator to the floor. As it neared, he sent forth a cloud of fire in its direction. By then, the other cars were firing, too.

It swung its tail and opened and closed its jaws, and its blood came forth and fell upon the ground. Then a rocket struck it. It turned, it leaped.

There came a booming, crunching sound as it fell upon the vehicle identified as car number one and lay there.

Tanner hit the brakes, turned, and headed back.

Car number three came up beside it and parked. Tanfler did the same.

He jumped down from the cab and crossed to the Smashed car. He had the rifle in his hands, and he put six rounds into the creature's head before he approached the car.

The door had come open, and it hung from a single hinge, the bottom one.

Inside, Tanner could see the two men sprawled, and there was some blood on the dashboard and the seat.

The other two drivers came up beside him and stared within. Then the shorter of the two crawled inside and listened for the heartbeat and the pulse and felt for breathing.

"Mike's dead," he called out, "but Greg's starting to come around."

A wet spot that began at the car's rear end spread and continued to spread, and the smell of gasoline filled the air.

Tanner took out a cigarette, thought better of it, and replaced it in the pack. He could hear the gurgle of the huge gas tanks as they emptied themselves upon the ground.

The man who stood at Tanner's side said, "I never saw anything like it. . . . I've seen pictures, but. . . I never saw anything like it . . ."

"I have," said Tanner, and then the other driver emerged from the wreck, partly supporting the man he'd referred to as Greg.

The man called out, "Greg's all right. He just hit his head on the dash."

The man who stood at Tanner's side said, "You can take him, Hell. He can back you up when he's feeling better," and Tanner shrugged and turned his back on the scene and lit a cigarette.

"I don't think you should do..." the man began, and "Screw," said Tanner, and blew smoke in his face. He turned to regard the two approaching men and saw that Greg was dark-eyed and deeply tanned. Part Indian, possibly. His skin seemed smooth, save for a couple pockmarks beneath his right eye, and his cheekbones were high and his hair very dark. He was as big as Tanner, which was six-two though not quite so heavy. He was dressed in overalls, and his carriage, now that he had had a few deep breaths of air, became very erect, and he moved with a quick, graceful stride.

"We'll have to bury Mike," the short man said.

"I hate to lose the time," said his companion, "but..." And then Tanner flipped his cigarette and threw himself to the ground as it landed in the pool at the rear of the car.

There was an explosion, flames, then more explosions. Tanner heard the rockets as they tore off toward the east, inscribing dark furrows in the hot afternoon's air. The ammo for the fifty-calibers exploded, and the hand grenades went off, and Tanner burrowed deeper and deeper into the sand, covering his head and blocking his ears against the noise.

As soon as things grew quiet, he grabbed for the rifle. But they were already coming at him, and he saw the muzzle of a pistol. He raised his hands slowly and stood.

"Why the goddamn hell did you do a stupid thing like that?" said the other driver, the man who held the pistol.

Tanner smiled, and, "Now we don't have to bury him," he said. "Cremation's just as good, and it's already over."

"You could have killed us all if those guns or those rocket launchers had been aimed this way!"

"They weren't. I looked."

"The flying metal could've... Oh. . . . I see. Pick up your damn rifle, buddy, and keep it pointed at the ground. Eject the rounds it's still got in it and put 'em in your pocket."

Tanner did this thing while the other talked.

"You wanted to kill us all, didn't you? Then you could have cut out and gone your way, like you tried to do yesterday. Isn't that right?"

"You said it, mister, not me."

"It's true, though. You don't give a good goddamn if everybody in Boston croaks, do you?"

"My gun's unloaded now," said Tanner.

"Then get back in your bloody buggy and get going! I'll be behind you all the way!"

Tanner walked back toward his car. He heard the others arguing behind him, but he didn't think they'd shoot him. As he was about to climb up into the cab, he saw a shadow out of the corner of his eye and turned quickly.

The man named Greg was standing behind him, tail and quiet as a ghost.

"Want me to drive awhile?" he asked Tanner, without expression.

"No, you rest up. I'm still in good shape. Later on this afternoon, maybe, if you feel up to it."

The man nodded and rounded the cab. He entered from the other side and immediately reclined his chair.

Tanner slammed his door and started the engine. He heard the air-conditioner come to life.

"Want to reload this?" he asked. "And put it back on the rack?" and he handed the rifle and the ammo to the other, who had nodded. He drew on his gloves then and said, "There's plenty of soft drinks in the fridge. Nothing much else, though," and the other nodded again. Then he heard car three start and said, "Might as well roll," and he put it into gear and took his foot off the clutch.

Charles Britt listened to the bell. His office was diagonally across the street from the cathedral, and each peal of the massive bell made his walls shake, and he was contemplating a lawsuit, for he maintained that its constant tolling had loosened his fillings and was causing his remaining teeth to ache.

He brushed a wisp of white hair back from his forehead and squinted through the bottom of his bifocals.

He turned a page in the massive ledger and lowered his head to read further.

Losses, all. If only he'd cornered the drug market. Patent medicines and aspirin seemed the only things that were selling just then.

Clothing was out. Everyone was making do with what he had. Foodstuffs were all suspect. Hardwares were doing very poorly, for few repairs were being made these days. Why bother?

He was in deeply when it came to clothing, foodstuffs, and hardware.

He muttered a curse and turned the page.

Nobody was working, nobody was buying. Three ships waited in the harbor, unable to unload their cargoes, his cargoes, because of the quarantine.

And the looting! He'd saved three extra damns for the looters. He was sure that the insurance companies would find a way to renege. He was sure because there was a lot of Britt money in insurance. At least the police were shooting to kill when it came to the looters. He smiled at that.

A light rain stippled his window, melted the cathedral beyond it. He felt a small pity for the wet town crier, whose bawled "Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!" rang now across the square, competing with the monotonous tolling of the death bell. This, because he, Charles Britt, had once been town crier, many years ago when his pants had been short and his eyes unimprisoned by spectacles and ledgers, and in

those days he had hated the rain.

Nobody was riding in his taxis. The hearses and the ambulances had all the business this day, and he owned neither.

Nobody was buying guns and ammunition. With the reduced population, there were now enough to go around, for all who desired to offend or defend.

Nobody was visiting his movie houses, for there was drama enough, and pathos, to fill each human life this day.

And nobody, nobody, but nobody, was buying the last edition of his newspaper, a special, at that, for which he had driven his decimated staff to heroic ends, not to mention himself, what with the double-time he'd paid them to produce the thing. The Plague Edition, it had been, with an attractive black-bordered front page; an exclusive article on "The Plague Throughout History," by a professor at Harvard, yet; a medical article on the symptoms of bubonic, pneumonic, and systemic plague, so you know which variety you were coming down with; six and a half pages of obituaries; one hundred human-interest interviews with fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, widows, and widowers; and a stirring editorial on the heroic drivers of the six doomed vehicles on their way to the west coast. He almost wept when he considered the stacks of these growing old in the warehouses, for nothing, but nothing, is so stale as a dated newsrag, even if it does have an attractive, black-bordered front page.

The only thing that made him smile again was the final page in the ledger. He'd managed at the last moment to corner sixty percent of the coffins in town, two florist shops, which were presently costing him dearly to keep open, and somewhat over five hundred cemetery plots. "Buy into a rising market," had always been his philosophy, not to mention his religion, sex, politics, and aesthetics. This, at least, would serve as a weight on the other side of the balance, possibly even net him a profit. If death is the wave of the future, ride it, he figured.

He tugged at his ear and listened again to the crier's words, half-hid among those of the bell.

". . . there to be burned!"

This troubled him.

And as he heard the announcement repeated, he remembered the exclusive article on "The Plague Throughout History," by the Harvard professor.

Funeral homes, hospitals, and morgues were now as packed as the old charnel houses had been. So in those days they had taken to. . . Yes.

". . . Mass cremations to avoid spread of the disease!" cried the boy. "The following three places have been chosen, and the dead will be delivered to these sites, there to be burned! Number one, Boston Common . . ."

Charles Britt closed his ledger, removed his glasses, and began to polish them.

He resolved to bring suit in the morning, as his jaws tightened upon the cold iron blade, relentless and a metallic taste filled his mouth.

After they had driven for about half an hour, the man called Greg said to him, "Is it true what Marlowe said?"

"What's a Marlowe?"

"He's driving the other car...Were you trying to kill us? Do you really want to skip out?"

Hell laughed, then, "That's right," he said. "You named it."

"Why?"

Hell let it hang there for a minute then said, "Why shouldn't I? I'm not anxious to die. I'd like to wait a long time before I try that bit."

Greg said, "If we don't make it, the population of the continent may be cut in half."

"If it's a question of them or me, I'd rather it was them."

"I sometimes wonder how people like you happen."

"The same way as anybody else, mister, and it's fun for a couple people for a while, and then the trouble starts."

"What did they ever do to you, Hell?"

"Nothing. What did they ever do _for_ me? Nothing. Nothing. What do I owe them? The same."

"Why'd you stomp your brother back at the hall?"

"Because I didn't want him doing a damn fool thing like this and getting himself killed. Cracked ribs he can get over. Death is a more permanent ailment."

"That's not what I asked you. I mean, what do you care whether he croaks?"

"He's a good kid, that's why. He's got a thing for this chick, though, and he can't see straight right now."

"So what's it to you?"

"Like I said, he's my brother, and he's a good kid. I like him."

"How come?"

"Oh, hell! We've been through a lot together, that's all! What are you trying to do? Psychoanalyze me?"

"I was just curious."

"So now you know. Talk about something else if you want to talk, okay?"

"Okay. You've been this way before, right?"

"That's right."

"You been any farther east?"

"I've been all the way to the Missus Hip."

"Do you know a way to get across it?"

"I think so. The bridge is still up at Saint Louis."

"Why didn't you go across it the last time you were there?"

"Are you kidding? The thing's packed with cars full of bones. It wasn't worth the trouble to try to clear it."

"Why'd you go that far in the first place?"

"Just to see what it was like. I heard all these stories, and I wanted to take a look."

"What was it like?"

"A lot of crap. Burned-down towns, big craters, crazy animals, some people..."

"People? People still live there?"

"If you want to call them that. They're all wild and screwed up. They wear rags or animal skins, or they go naked. They threw rocks at me till I shot a couple. Then they let me alone."

"How long ago was that?"

"Six, maybe seven years ago. I was just a kid then."

"How come you never told anybody about it?"

"I did. A coupla my friends. Nobody else ever asked me. We were going to go out there and grab off a couple of the girls and bring them back, but everybody chickened out."

"What would you have done with them?"

Tanner shrugged. "I dunno. Screw 'em and sell 'em, I guess."

"You guys used to do that, down on the Barbary Coast, sell people, I mean, didn't you?"

Tanner shrugged again. "Used to," he said, "before the Big Raid."

"How'd you manage to live through that? I thought they'd cleaned the whole place out?"

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