

A derivational excerpt from “Mojo Rising: The Sage of Trio de Dio”

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Bothsams Publishing introduces its new ongoing series, “Mojo Rising”, a special multi-volume project where readers can become contributing authors for volume 2 of the series, “Lost Lenores”. In lieu of a synopsis, Bothsams presents this version of a satirical apocalypse, in which life is a dream and dreams are life. The question is, can you make it safely to the Fish-Camp to become a lost Lenore found? Will you find or be found by your soulmate? Will you end up walking through death in a dream or a dead man walking who doesn’t know he’s dead? Or will you just end up as road-kill?

Have a read. If you’re inspired to pick up the book, you can find it at <https://www.bothsamspublishing.com>

If you’re inspired to be a contributing author, soundtrack composer, or illustrator for the series, request to join the Facebook group Lost Lenores Found @bothsamspub, make an inquiry at [contact@mojorising.info](mailto:contact@mojorising.info) and submit a sample of your story, character, or musical interpretation.

And if you’re a piper, or you just love a good read, then subscribe to the Mojo Rising newsletter at <https://www.mojorising.info> and follow us on Twitter @TriodeDio to get updates, announcements, a chance to win tickets to a fandom convention near you, receive gifts and other fannish things, and welcome to the family!

Don’t worry too much about life - no one ever makes it out alive...

## The Saga Begins

We were standing on the edge of a cliff that sunk straight down for hundreds of feet to a churning ocean of blood, the three of us, "trio de dio", as we had dubbed ourselves. There was Blake, Desré and me, Granville Preston Gordon, of the Highland Gordons (yes, it's my real name, only, I've never even been to Scotland). It was our last stand. We could jump into the molten organic fluid below, probably die halfway down and get smashed on the black cliff rocks, or we could go down facing the throng of dripping undead that stretched from one end of the horizon to the next. I looked at my buddies. They were caught, like I was, undecided.

"What's it gonna be, guys?" I asked, keeping my assault rifle leveled at the undead mob that shuffled ever closer.

Desré lit a cigarette and the wind caught the smoke and blew it out to the seas. She took one drag, then tossed the cigarette away. She hefted her grenade launcher. I didn't know she could level a grenade launcher. "Welp," she said, "let's blow a hole through 'em and make a run for it, instead."

Blake nodded, leveling his rifle. "I'm with her."

I shook my head but I rather preferred the idea of dying on my feet, not cornered and not drowning like a lemming. "Let's roll!" I shouted over the trade winds which had just kicked up, propelling us forward.

Desré's grenade launcher cleared a space, then she pulled again and again, clearing a channel for us to charge. She stayed ahead while we cleared a bubble around us and we made forward progress. For as far as we could see, there was nothing but goopers, piled up on each other and still twitching. I was screaming as we went and I think Blake was, too. It wasn't long before we had to reload. Blake fumbled with his ammo belt and I covered him, spraying wildly into the throng. Disgusting chunks of grossness were flying everywhere. I had to cover both flanks as Desré kept clearing space in front of us. Gore was raining down everywhere. Something splashed in my eye and I freaked out. I heard Blake scream and cracked open an eye to see a gooper about to sink its teeth into Blake's upper arm. Blake wrenched away and the gooper's teeth popped from its rotting jaws - sloop! demonic dentures now chewing away on Blake's arm. Blake smacked at the teeth like he was putting out a fire and he let loose with this incredible boss-fight volley. We hunkered down then, shooting blindly, and plowed our way through and through and through...until we were standing in the middle of an entire city of goopers, then a state, then a country, then a planet.

We were all floating, all of a sudden, above the earth, watching zombies take over everything, everywhere. The entire earth went black and the oceans and seas went red. I looked all around and saw a ring of light encircling us. Blake was fixated on his arm, thinking he would turn. Desré was examining it and shaking her head. I didn't hear a voice then, but I knew someone was telling me that we were all safe. Nothing could hurt us now. Blake lifted his arm and all of a sudden, it was whole again. He was astonished, but then he just started laughing and showing it to me.

"I'm alright! It didn't get me! I'll live!" He kept saying it.

When I woke up, the warm feeling of safety and security bled into my reality like congealing blood filling my bones with strength and surety. I blinked and then shut my eyes, going back to the better place. Where I live, dreams are the reality and reality's just a nightmare...but I'm not a storyteller, I'm just the guy who loved zombies and had very, very real dreams, until one night, the dream came to life and walked right into the living room. Desré, she tells the stories. Desré doesn't dream; she already walks in the dream time when she's awake, you see. Blake, he's that guy in the middle, the guy like you and everyone you know, the guy who wakes up and just wants to know what the hell is going on and why did everyone lose their minds while he was sleeping, does he have enough gas in the car and will his student loan payments be late. That's us, Trio de Dio, and this is our story, "Mojo Rez", and this is your story, all of your stories, the living, the dead and the undead alike...welcome to the apocalypse, make sure you participate...

*in media rez: start with the good parts, first*

Maybe it was because she had no real fear, felt no real alarm, that Desré was able to focus on her chemical experiment, climbing onto the roof, smoking a cigarette, holding the solvent hose attached to a drop tank full of ammonia cut with bleach like she was just hosing down the driveway on a Sunday afternoon. Blake and Granville were stuck in permanent freak-out mode, but she could tune them out. Ammonia worked. It melted the recently dead and the grave-risen. The toxic mixture stank but it left a tinge of fresh-scrubbed kitchen when it washed away the goopers. Even so, at least gooper-funk didn't burn the hairs out of her nose. She felt confident that they could get a gassed-up fire truck across three states without any problems. She wasn't worried at all about survival, going hungry, getting bitten, freezing to death. A hike in the mountains at the wrong time of the year was more dangerous than navigating a cozy heavy transport convoy stocked with gas, food, music, water, alcohol, cigarettes, weapons and medicine. All the things guys like in zombie movies were stashed in the fire truck and the semi. The ambulance was her idea and hers to drive. She went for the medicine stuff, the stuff everyone always overlooks in the movies. So, what the hell did they have to worry about? Yet she thought about the three of them winding up all that were left, in the end. They'd have to sit there and watch each other grow old and wither. Humankind would end, she thought, casually washing the remnants of dead things away with poisonous common household cleaners, saying to herself, "Ssame two people for the rest of my life? Unless we could artificially inseminate a corpse or grow a baby in a Petri dish - only thing's gonna kill me'll be boredom."

The three of them, "Trio de Dio", had survived the midnight assault, barricading themselves indoors for as long as they could hold out in Blake's apartment. Granville, the former Navy MP, demanded to go to the Air Force base, pronto. So, pronto, they caravanned it in Blake's Camaro, a squad car Granville had commandeered, and the ambulance that had careened over the curb and into their private parking lot when the driver had been dragged out by a grotesquerie and torn to pieces on the lawn just across the street. Gran wanted to hit the base, craving guns and ammo and gear and things he was used to. Blake and Des finally relented. They just wanted to head east and see the nightmares fading in the rear-view mirror.

The base looked like a war zone, with casualties almost laughably draped over fencing, hanging out of guard posts, dangling from windows.

All wiped out...Desré insisted they hit the hospital, only to find the same trails of goop and gore there. There was a cold-storage semi at the commissary loading dock. Granville had gotten a CDL after he'd been dishonorably discharged from the Navy for his weight and his drinking. He abandoned the squad car and commandeered the semi for himself, and they raided the place for every valuable thing they could think of, and a whole lot that had no value at all, just to have something they could otherwise never have afforded on Granville's partial disability pay, and Blake and Desré's part-time work as special education tutors at the university and their collective food stamps, a whopping \$326.00 a month among the three of them.

That's what people do, the theorists always say, acquire commodities during a zombie apocalypse, an apocalypse they believe they can somehow survive...that's where Desré disagreed with the critics. For her, all apocalypses looked like hurricanes and all raiding for supplies looked like all looting and the carnage looked like all riots, all battles, all bombs. She'd been inside the maelstrom of a riot as a child. The city lay blanketed in smoke like yellow gaslight glowing from flames near and distant, scorching the air, every passing shadow delineating a potential enemy or a terrified neighbor fleeing a potential enemy. Enemies and neighbors were all the same to her. Folks you have to live with and folks you could live without. As for apocalypses, she'd been witnessing them since 1968, even the Cold War kind that just kept not happening, and her people had been witnessing them for five hundred years, in two countries, Canada and America. Blake and Granville, however, had never seen the end of the world outside the movies and video games, not even once, and couldn't recognize a curse even when it was staring them right in the face. She let them believe what they wanted, because that was how they were making sense of things, but for her part, this had been a long time coming. She only wondered what had kept it. From '68 to now had been more than half a lifetime. She was too mellow and aged now for heeding trumpet calls. She had resigned herself to leading her two younger companions to some kind of answer and resolution, or purpose, and intended to keep going until she reached the modernized, upscale mud camp she'd summered at in her youth. She wanted to see if others of her species had managed to survive the judgment day, and whether the Jehovah's Witnesses were happy, now. She wanted to count tree frogs down by the lake where her uncle's boathouse was tied, maybe catch fireflies in a jar until they faded with dawn's light, faded like the sign on the old bait and tackle shop across the lake, past the shoals. Or had all that faded into the mists of lakes past since she'd left to enlist, served ten years and graduated from college. The further east she got, the younger she felt, and that was her sign that she was on the right track.

I-10 wasn't clogged until they got to the border of New Mexico and Texas, at a little town called San Simon. They stopped at a weigh station to refuel. Granville knew how to work the pumps and climbed out of his rig to see if he could manually refuel. Blake and Desré stood guard, taking turns in the restroom. They were pretty wired, but no one wanted to stop hauling. The weigh station had been abandoned but there were signs of carnage, stains, mysterious clumps of...things...drifting papers torn away from clipboards by the wind and a cap with an emblem none of them wanted to touch. It was eerie. Heading up into Las Cruces on I-10, they saw fires burning sporadically. The airport was lit with a tarmac of embers and plumes of smoke twisted up into the afternoon skies. Everywhere, chaos had visited. They had to pull over and huddle up to devise a plan to circumnavigate a swath of highway clogged with backed up traffic for miles. The goopers had evidently made their rounds, going down the line of stalled passengers like an all-you-can-eat buffet of oysters in the half shell. Some people had bailed and had made it to various lengths and distances before succumbing to the hoards.

Desré wondered aloud, "Say...where do you think they all went?"

Gran harrumphed. "Maybe they gorge and pass out."

"I hope so," added Blake, who worked out a driver's crick in his neck. "We should just keep driving, then. Maybe we'll miss them."

Gran had snatched a road atlas and they pored over it to trace alternate routes. They found a junction to a frontage road and headed that way, fairly certain it would not be obstructed. They'd have to get off on route 70 and head back south to catch I-10 again, but it wouldn't take much time. Gran had figured out how to fill his tanks from the pumps which were still operating. Everything was automated, she figured, or nothing would be working, and it wouldn't be long before everything shut down without somebody monitoring something somewhere. She didn't know how bad things had gotten, but the airport was smoldering away and there were no signs of a concentrated effort to contain the situation. She couldn't fathom how this deluge was progressing, or the scope of it. These deadies would have had to have swarmed entire cities in one fell swoop. She'd seen it in Tucson, how fast the hoard swept through neighborhoods, disabling law enforcement, medical outfits, the base. She didn't know exactly how this was spreading, either. They'd seen no one get bitten and turn, like the movies. All they'd seen were the torn apart remains of victims, and some of these were still moving, trying to get to the food, no matter what their condition. But some of them weren't. They just didn't have enough information, and living people were nowhere to be found, yet. Their plan

was to hit Biggs in El Paso. Their fuel would get them just about across Texas, to the Louisiana border. After that, they'd just have to see.

\* \* \*

They rolled on down the highway, speeding when they could and cruising when they had to. Desré expected car pile-ups everywhere, but, after taking the frontage road back to the main stretch, there were hardly any cars at all in sight. What had happened at the weigh station? Was it a swarm that just kept going somewhere? Where were they? She was glad to be riding solo. It gave her time to think. Blake had Sabrina, his Camaro, up ahead, and seemed to be enjoying weaving in and out of lanes at leisure. She smiled and pulled out from behind Sabrina to commandeer the other lane, making a face at Blake as she passed, teasing. He rolled his eyes and threw up his off-wheel hand. She sped up to get nose-to-nose with the semi and honk at Gran. The ambulance drove just fine, made for breakneck speeds. It was at 150 miles or so that they saw the first manned vehicle going west. It was a Dodge Ram 1500. The driver was white as a sheet, even at a distance, eyes like saucers, jaw slack. Desré honked at him and Granville followed suit. He glanced over, shocked to see other passengers heading into whatever he was fleeing.

Desré hit the top gear and jerked ahead of Gran, aiming for the emergency access lane, intending to u-turn and run the Ram down, just to get some news. She could see in her rear-view mirror, though, that he was speeding up, tearing away from them and going on to whatever destination he had in mind. She sighed and kept in her lane, looking for other passengers, or possibly someone in need. She had medicine and knew basic paramedics. She'd learned in the Red Cross what the Air Force had neglected to teach her unit, even though they were seasoned disaster response personnel. Go figure. When they approached El Paso proper, they rolled into a film classic scene of death and destruction. Cars and trucks were derailed, facing every which direction and in every possible position, flipped over, turned on their sides, nose-down in ditches, facing backwards. Whatever had happened here seemed to have occurred inside the vehicles. They had to stop again. Desré got out first, hefting her rifle. She walked through the tumble of wrecked vehicles, some of them burning, and tried to assess the cause. The leftovers were everywhere, soaking the road in guts and gore and scarlet horrors. Gran and Blake joined her, equally stunned at the scene. As they walked, they saw gutted bodies pinned under vehicles, remains still strapped into the seat of their mini-vans. But no deadies. Nowhere.

“What the fuck!” It was all that kept coming out of her mouth. She’d seen hurricanes that had scorched the earth and strewed bodies in twisted trees like Christmas ornaments, and she’d seen bombings, but this was something all out of order with how things were in the world. “How did this happen? Did goopers bust out in a fucking caravan or something?”

Blake, the former college student, shook his head. “It just doesn’t make sense. How are they wiping everyone out so fast? What the fuck is this shit!” He bellowed at the sky, which did not hear him. Clouds kept rolling and twisting by overhead.

“Well,” the former Gulf War Navy SP holstered his pistol, “I guess we’ll just have to keep taking detours all the way there.”

Desré, the former Desert Storm Air Force Mobility Officer, sighed. “Yeah, that’s what it looks like. But there’s so many cars, going both ways, too. It’s probably much worse the closer in we get.”

“Yeah, we should take the rural routes, instead. Go further south. Seems like it’s only bad in the cities.” Blake’s two cents dropped.

They got back in their vehicles and followed Granville’s scouting sense, winding down frontage roads, rural routes, empty stretches of highway. The big concern was running out of fuel. The ambulance and Sabrina were easy, with the fuel cans, but the big semi was high maintenance. They chose to drive roads that were adjacent to the border, figuring correctly that traffic there would be sparse even in a normal world. They were right, but all along the way, signs of carnage reminded them that something wicked had this way come. When they finally parked at a truck stop and pow-wowed about next steps, there had to be some innovative solutions brainstorming. But first, they had to see if there was any food left or were the patrons the only things that were edible any more.

They saw a different scenario, here. The diner and gift shop area of the trucker’s haven were locked and all the lights were out.

“Oh, no. They closed it up and ran,” Gran groaned.

Des shrugged. “Electricity’s still on, though. The main is still on. It’s gotta be.”

They busted the glass doors at the entrance and entered the dark, spacious building.

“I’m gonna go find the lights,” Gran declared, off on his scouting mission again.



Blake looked around at all the idle, trivial things people invest their money into. The place looked pristine. No sign of death, here, just vacancy.

“Ah, it’s creepy, innit,” Desré dropped her voice to a deep timbre.

“Yeah...like in a movie.”

And just at that moment, their intrepid dwarven scout hit the eureka button and let there be light. Desré went back to the kitchen and flipped on every switch she could find.

“Hey! We can grill our own cheeseburgers! Ah, they got an ice cream machine!” She sent back happy reports to Blake, who came sniffing and rubbing his stomach.

So, they cooked and grilled and prepared foodstuffs and drank coffee and ate melty ice cream and sorbet and, for a moment, it wasn’t so bad, what was crawling around outside. They looted the place clean of every useless thing they could think of that wouldn’t rot or melt, for absolutely no reason at all. You never know who might need a dreamcatcher or a Japanese whistle or a key chain made out of key chains. Loading the semi with goodies, it dawned on Desré that they might be able to solve the gas problem if they took a semi from someone who’d been chewed before heading out, after refueling. But, that would mean digging through a dead man’s bloody pockets. Gran admired the ingenuity of it, though, and didn’t care if he had to unload and reload. He was getting shakier and shakier about the fuel situation. There weren’t any rigs parked here, except theirs, as they discovered, but the idea was a plan. It went on the to-do list, and then Granville’s eyes lit up.

“Put this on the list...I want a fuel truck.”

Des grinned. “Damn! Why didn’t I think of that?”

They went over the wishlist a while, and it gave them a certain sense of satisfaction, a certain relief, to have a goal, even if it was a one-step-at-a-time thing. Their next goal, at that point, was to clean up and scrub teeth and hit the sack in the vehicles. The ambulance worked out well for the couple, because there were two gurneys and they pushed them together and strapped the legs tight and were able to make a kind of nest out of them. Blake checked and double-checked the doors, though. He took a ventilator that was on wheels and shoved it up against the doors at the foot of the gurbey, just in case, and they were able to finally succumb to pure exhaustion that adrenaline had been holding at bay. Granville had the cab in the semi, and was barricaded in for the night, where the couple could not hear him snoring.

“What do you think he’ll dream this time?” Des asked a barely-conscious Blake.

“Dolphins...”

“Dolphins?”

“Sea lions...we passed a zoo. Who’s gonna feed ‘em?” And he was out, down for the count.

“A zoo...oh, no...” Des fell silent and refused to think about that, or animal shelters, or stranded dolphins, or anything until she got back home and saw her mother alive and well again. That was their first day and night on the trek toward rez life. They slept like the dead, but, oh yeah, the dead didn’t sleep any more, now did they...

When they woke up, they were alive and well, sound and intact, but leery. Des got off the gurney and shoved the ventilator aside and hesitantly creaked open the doors to have a look around. There was nothing but flies buzzing. The day was a mild one, dry, dusty, bland. The Gordon was up fiddling around with things in his semi. She could hear the shuffling of things being rearranged. She exited the ambulance and joined Gran for a little house cleaning.

“We’ve got all this useless stuff!” The stalwart warrior complained.

“Yeah, ya never know. One day, it’ll be useful,” Des teased.

“When I get my fuel truck, you can take the semi and then you can haul whatever you want.”

“Okay...but you’ll have to teach me how to drive a semi.”

“This one’s automatic. They make ‘em like that now.”

“Okay. Deal. Where would the nearest fuel truck be?”

“I was looking at a map, and I think there’s a fueling station and a distribution station way on the other side of town.”

“Sounds like the plan of a lifetime.”

She helped him rearrange a few things so the food stocks were easier to get to. He had picked up an entire professional BBQ grill back in Tucson, at some point, and she couldn’t help but shake her head. “You’re all geared up for an epic road trip, I see.”

“Hell, yeah. If I’m gonna be food for zombies, I want to make sure I keep my strength up.” Granville retorted, utterly serious.

"I'm gonna go get Blake up. Hey...can we cook up some eggs and bacon here?"

Gran grinned. "Come and see."

He showed her how the cab was outfitted, like a tiny studio with a kitchenette in it.

"Jesus! You truckers live like kings of the road!"

"It's great. How do you want your eggs?"

"Hey, lemme do it. I'm a breakfast queen."

Gran stepped aside and let her be absorbed in her culinary creativity zone, while he went on about his rearranging business.

Des had two platters of eggs, French toast, and bacon, to order, ready in under half an hour, and brought the offerings to Gran and a sleep-eyed Blake, who received the platter as if it were a life-saving gift from the gods. There was Simply Lemonade and Gatorade Cool Blue, for choices of drinks. These were Gran's addictions. Blake took the raspberry lemonade. Des went back for her coffee. She made a mental list for herself of food stuffs she would stock up on, if she got a fridge of her own, at some point. Everything the guys could eat was potentially fatal to her, with her crap Coeliac's gene and lactose intolerance, and shellfish intolerance. Hence, she cooked breakfasts to die for, but she rarely ate breakfast, unless it was steak and eggs and fresh fruit. She rooted through the little fridge and, luckily, Gran had stuffed a container of strawberries in there. He had grabbed them with the intent of adding them to his sundae supremes. She helped herself to those. They were plump and fresh and sweet and made her want to cry to have something so pure in the depths of a valley of grotesqueries.

After breakfast, a surreal repast where the guys sat back to rub their bellies as if it were any other morning, Granville produced a trucker's map, showing them all the weigh stations and distribution centers that were marked. They went over their route together.

"It's that we never know what the traffic's going to be like, if roads are blocked," Des pointed out.

Gran beamed. "I have a push bumper on my rig. Didn't you notice?"

Des and Blake shook their heads. "No, I was too busy trying to find something to eat that wouldn't kill me," Des remarked.

"Well, it'll help clear the way if cars are jammed in at turn-offs. We got that, at least." The Gordon-clan man was a proud father with his brand-

new baby. "I think I'll name it...Waylander, like that book from David Gemmell."

"Oh? Never heard of it."

"Oh, they're fantastic! He's my favorite author. He's like an old soldier who's just wandering around. That's 'Waylander'. And then he has 'Legend' and 'Deathwalker'. We gotta pick up his books. We should raid a Barnes and Noble."

"I guess that goes on the list, right under 'fuel tanker'." Blake quipped.

"Deal," Gran agreed, utterly serious.

Des just chuckled. "Are we evading a zombie apocalypse or going on a shopping spree?"

To her surprise, the guys answered, in synch, "Both."

She just sighed. "I thought women were the ones who liked to go shopping."

The guys looked at her with chagrined expressions and said nothing in their defense, for once.

Des sipped from her coffee mug, something weighing on her mind. "You know what..."

"What's that..." Blake sat back, eyeing her, knowing there was going to be a conversation bombing, just from her tone.

"We're sitting here like...like nothing's going on. We're not even acting like people do after a natural disaster. We're acting like we're in a fucking movie, and...I just don't like it. We need to talk about what the fuck is happening. I mean, did we die? Are we dreaming or something? Are we even really here? I can't make no sense out of this shit. I don't know about you, but I need some answers. I need a bigger picture, okay? Not a bigger truck."

Granville and Blake regarded each other. Blake chewed on his cheeks, reluctant to offer any hypothesis. Granville looked like he always did: what did it matter why, what mattered was where to next. But they had to consider her words, at least. She got up and left them to do that, getting a refill on her coffee, which was her immediate comfort food, at the moment. She went to check on Mugsy, the stray they'd had to rescue, who had been overlooked, she feared. Mugsy was wagging his tail and whining to be let

out of his dog carrier. He practically jumped into her arms when she freed him, almost spilling her coffee.

“There you go, good ole boy,” she cooed as she petted him in his favorite spots. “Who wants to live in a cage...” And the moment she said it, she regretted it, thinking at once about all those poor animals stuck in the zoo. It plagued her, until she had to go bring it up, Mugsy heeling along beside her.

The guys had launched into some completely off-track discourse about video games when she and Mugsy returned. Mugsy wagged his tail and ran over to Blake, the dog-lover.

“Guys, we gotta head to the zoo. I just can’t stand the thought of all those animals being trapped in there. Let’s go check it out.”

And that idea instantly became the new then-plan of the moment.

It was easy to head south-bound and, to their surprise, there wasn’t a massive pile-up. That seemed to be further west and north, heading into the town. There were festival grounds right at the junction and the zoo was across the highway. They saw immediately that a hoard had swept through. There were bits and pieces and globs and debris everywhere. It looked like the people at the festival had not made it back to the expansive parking lot in any great number. Maybe there was an outbreak on the packed grounds. Anyway, it was a feast of gore. And the flies...they were everywhere, on everything. Stray animals, suddenly untethered to doting owners, meandered around, taking nips off the remnants of victims. An older dog, a large labrador, simply lay on the ground next to...whoever that bloody tangle had been...looking as forlorn as only dogs can look. He lifted his head momentarily at Des as she stumbled around the grounds, but then laid his head back down on his paws and sighed. She didn’t even have water for him. Mugsy tugged away from Blake and Granville and ran to him, all nose and tail, having himself a sunny little reunion that only served as a vivid counterpoint to the inexplicable carnage around them. God bless animals, she thought. They are the better portion of our so-called humanity. She felt nauseated. She looked away from it all, wondering how bad it had gotten in the zoo.

“How did all of this happen in just three days?” she kept asking herself. “Three days...three days to kill...” She murmured at every spot that drew her gaze. None of these snapshot images added up to anything resembling a bigger picture. It was not even like combat, where buildings and terrain display the evidence of “what had happened”, everywhere. It was as if scenes from a horror movie had been superimposed on otherwise

unremarkable vistas, as if placed there by a prop master on a film set. No, nothing about this made any sense, had a pattern, not even for the incredible and impossible nature of the situation to begin with. But of course, in movies, things had a logical direction, a contrived story arc to them. This was no movie. This was the real world, alright, and the real world never made any sense...but oh yeah, that's why people watch zombie movies, instead, isn't it...

Gran, whom they'd just taken to calling "Granny" that morning, scanned the stage, looking for something only his strategic security-trained brain could perceive. He jogged up the ramps and disappeared behind the wings, off on his own easter egg hunt. Blake was a whiter shade of pale and held his hand over his stomach.

"I know...it's so disgusting I can't stand it," Des shared his dyspepsia, coming to stand beside him.

"It's the smell...blech!" He covered his mouth with an elegant hand and lifted his chin, to get his nose somehow above and beyond the stench.

"How in the hell can dogs stand that, when their sense of smell is so sensitive?"

"Rancid is in the nose of the beholder, I guess," Blake zinged out one of his typically whimsical quips.

"Well, it's definitely all the hell over mine, right now. Ugh! I'm audi. Fuck this." Des turned to head back to the vehicles, maybe find a jug of ammonia to whiff, anything to get the stench out.

But Granny hollared from the wings, "Hey, guys! Guys! Come here! I found a band! A whole band!"

This halted two of the trio in their tracks. Des and Blake shrugged and climbed the stair-ramp to the stage and pushed curtains and sheers aside to locate their significant third.

Granny came out from behind a half-drap, excited as a kid at Christmas. "There's a whole band back here! Bagpipes and everything! They're awesome!" he announced, as oblivious to the gore outside as Mugsy and his new friend were.

Des stepped forward to have a look, and a band member, a strange-enough looking fellow with a Viking half-scalp lock and a hand-made fur-lined sleeveless surcoat came staggering towards them. His eyes were fixed in his face like virtual plates with little black dots in the center. He stammered,

"I- we- Jesus Christ! What the fuck is dis!"

His accent was Celtic of some region or another, sounding more Irish to Des than Scottish.

"We came in from Tucson," she told him. "Three days ago, it broke out there. We hit the road. We're heading toward New Orleans."

"Oh, New Orleans. We have a gig there..."

"No, buddy," Des tried to remain calm-sounding and comforting, "no more gigs for you guys. You were nearly headliners for the Great Gig in the Sky."

He paled beyond the ashen gray that had already painted him over. He swooned, unsteady.

"Come on, let's see if we can help you out. How many are there back here?" Des took him by the elbow and steered him toward the band's niche, wherever they were.

They had huddled up in a dressing room, which was actually below the stage. The deadies had never gotten wind of them, apparently. The band was six members, all together. Their manager was - gone, presumably eaten. This band of troubadours looked like the typical Rennie or Celtic festival fare, decorated, tassled bagpipes, odd embroidered clothing, traditional instruments leaning up against every surface, and lots of clothes, luggage and stage dressings languishing in every corner. There were trays of crumbs from whatever the promoters had given them to eat as part of their band rider. They had cases of water and other drinks, however, that they'd scavenged from various storage closets backstage. They had been too terrified to leave their haven for any length of time, other than to filch water. Their phones didn't work - nothing but that sigil that had blocked off the trio's communications back in Tucson. Laptops, iPhones - all defunct. The band had just started their set, with flaming bagpipes as a grand entry, when the chomping commenced and the fire-dancers who'd been part of the opening went berserk, swiping at the goopers, hitting other patrons. Des figured, that's why it looked the way it did, like the tasmanian devil from Disney had passed through, swinging poi all the way.

A couple of the band members had sedated themselves and were lying on the couches with fabrics and jackets over their faces to chase the light away from their self-induced oblivion. The three that were still up, albeit in unblinking shock and numb panic, were the lead piper and singer, the second piper, a tall, stalwart woman, and the drummer, another tall, stalwart player. It was like bumping into a Pict flanked by two Viking titans,

replete with blue tattooing and sidelocks. She was rather hoping they would say the band's name was the Pictish battle-cry, 'Slo-gan!', but, no, it was merely 'Celtica'. Well, of course, and what else would it be...

Blake was inspecting the foreign instruments, politely, hands off, biting back inquiries that would seem trivial in the gruesome context of the situation. Granny was beside himself, being a good and faithful member of the Gordon clan. It was like he'd been given a VIP backstage pass to his favorite clan band. He was joking, asking if there were any Gordons in the group. The poor lead singer was baffled by this tack change and merely shook his head, not understanding.

Des went over their inventories in her head, trying to see what they would need and what the trio had to offer them.

"Okay, so, was anyone hurt?" she asked, distracting the lead singer away from Gran's bubbly gushing.

"No, just...piss-scared, is all."

"Sure, sure," Des patted his upper arm lightly, not knowing just how jumpy he might be at being touched. Touch is real, and reality in a nightmare is not always comforting. It ruins the fantasy that you might just be sleeping and it will all go away soon. "So, we've got water, food, coffee, even..."

Someone slipped a jacket down and blinked, sitting up. "Coffee? Did someone say coffee?"

The lead regarded his guitarist. "She said coffee. These people have food and medicine and vehicles."

The guitarist hoisted himself up from the couch, disturbing the other figure who had curled up under a satin drape, or maybe it was a garment. "Coffee...man, I'd love coffee..." The musician was still lost in a sedative whimsyland. He rubbed his eyes. Des could see the reality rise up and grip him and blow his eyelids open. He began to tremble. She immediately moved in to steady him.

"Don't worry, man, we gotcha. We got vehicles. We're gonna get you guys out of here."

"Oh, jesus," he kept whining, his voice getting softer and higher at every pass, but he said it funny, like "gee-ay-zeus". He fell back down onto his rump, landing on a coffee table which creaked under his weight, unheeded. He put his head in his hands and just rocked to get some image out from behind his eyes.



“Yeah...you guys are all fucked up, hunh,” Des murmured with pity. “Well, get packed. We’ll get you in the truck. We’ll stop by the zoo, too, see who might have gotten stranded over there.”

Gran piped up. “Wait a minute. We’re not fucking Uber drivers...”

“Damn, Granny...how’d you feel if we just blew by you when all this went down?” Des confronted him.

Blake seemed decidedly undecided. He kept eyeing the instruments. “Fuck it,” he said, finally, “We got plenty of room and food.”

Des went around the room tapping sleepy shoulders and reaching for gig bags and hoisting them, despite protests from band members. “Pipe down, pipers,” she laughed, hauling some drum ehads and a guitar case out with her. “You coming or staying?” she said over her shoulder. “Cuz your bags are leaving town, either way.”

The band, obviously, came with them, bags in tow. Des warned them before they hit the open air.

“Don’t look...trust me. Just look up and keep close. Truck’s just a hundred feet away from the stage.”

They did as they were told, remarkably. Des had led a lot of civilians out of disaster zones before, but never had they complied with good advice. This band had some sense to them. When Gran opened the semi, grumbling a bit, they leapt aboard like refugees and huddled together with their heads down, clutching each other by the back of the neck.

“They’re like good soldiers,” she remarked and Gran had to admit to that, too.

He closed the doors on them and began complaining straight away. “We can’t give everybody a free pass, here,” he said. “We’ve got places to be, too.”

“We’re stopping at the zoo, and we’re carting these guys into New Orleans. That’s where they were headed. Look at ‘em, they’re not even from this country.”

Gran mulled that over. “Yeah, I know. But they’re so cool!”

“Of course, and, maybe they’re related to you. You never know. Can’t strand relatives.”

“Gordons look out for each other.”

“Well, pretend they’re all Gordons for now.”

“That works for me,” he said and just like that, the complaint spicket dried up and he was all smiles again, mercurial as mercury, itself.

Blake had recovered Mugsy, and was standing there looking at the old dog, deliberating on what to do.

“Here, I’ll take Mugsy. Go ahead and get the old fella. He can ride with you guys in Sabrina. He needs water, bad.”

Blake handed Mugsy’s leash to her and went to scoop up the old fella, who lifted himself painfully and came to him with a limp and a look of pitiful gratitude. Blake hefted him over to his Camaro, in which he had driven point this whole way. Des had her ambulance, which was her preferred vehicle and service, and the first thing on wheels they had absconded with when the goopers had hit their part of town, at 2:33 a.m., exactly, on a night with no moon, a night as hot and dry as Hades’ gates. That night happened to be Marie Laveau’s birthday. The trio had happened to be lighting birthday candles, presenting hearts and gifts and making harmless wishes, because Des has decided the guys should be introduced to something of her own family history and culture. They’d been watching zombie movies and drinking Smirnoff Ice until they couldn’t keep their eyes open any more. They’d gone to bed, Gran on the couch in the front room and Blake and Des in Blake’s king-size nest in the bedroom, the ancient swamp cooler churning and gurgling away ferociously on the roof. They’d been awoken by a bang and a crash and Gran shouting,

“Zombies! Guys! Zombies!”

They’d snickered, thinking he was talking in his sleep again, and then the stench got them out of bed.

The rest was a blurry bloody nightmarish apparition of disjointed memories. Blake took a nose-dive by the pool, trying to get away from the rotten garbage bag with hands that kept pawing at his legs. Des and Gran had military training that just kicked in and took over without their consent. They had come back to whatever was passing for reality in New Mexico, with a semi, an ambulance, Mugsy and the Camaro, wondering how they’d ended up in a road to hell movie and where in hell was Rose McGowan?