

CROSSING THE BORDER

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PETER

August, 2058

Water circled down the drain. But water alone didn't do the job. Peter grabbed the bottle of dish soap from the counter by the sink and squeezed the silky liquid into the palm of his left hand until it overflowed and ran into the sink. Replacing the bottle, he rubbed his hands together, slowly at first but with increasing speed and force until they disappeared in a mass of foam.

He rinsed them under the running water. The white foam had hidden any spots he'd missed, but after rinsing, traces remained—in his knuckles' wrinkled creases and the web between his fingers, around his cuticles, under his fingernails, and one large spot high on his right hand just below his wrist.

Once again, only this time he scratched with his fingernails, digging hard on his skin and under his nails. He brought his hands, scrubbed raw, from under the stream of water and stared at them as if they were alien things. Shutting off the water, he turned away from the sink and slid down with his back against the cupboard doors scraping against the handles until he rested on the floor, knees drawn to his chest, wrists on his knees, traitor hands hanging limp before his eyes.

In the living room, their grandfather clock ticked; drops from the leaking faucet pinged in the sink. Fixing that leak had been on his list of things-to-do-today. He thought about rising, but couldn't bring himself to make the effort.

After uncounted ticks and pings, Peter's sense of self-preservation pushed its way into his consciousness. He could fight this; he'd probably win. His actions were justified regardless of what was on the wall; besides that, he was good—he'd proved over and over again that he could convince a jury that rain was dry.

He turned the idea over in his head and then dismissed it. Sure, fight the charges in court, but then what? He could rebuild his tattered professional life, but for what

purpose? Everything he'd built his practice for in the first place was gone, and he was responsible. He should have seen the signs, should have intervened, could have prevented it. He deserved what was coming. Besides, he was tired of the violence, sick of having to be ready to fight to live, horrified and disgusted with the choices forced on him. No, let them come and take him away—he wouldn't resist. Or maybe Janice was right and the answer to his problems was upstairs.

But the will to live and be free was ancient and powerful and would not stay silent. Life and liberty *were* precious, not to be thrown away on a whim and, if he wouldn't fight, he had to leave. One of his relatives or friends would take him in.

Peter closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the cupboard door. *Fine*, he thought, Janice's way was not the answer, but relatives and friends were out of the question. If he were to flee, it had to be somewhere he wasn't known and that was too much work. *Just let me be caught and punished*, he thought, willing away the pestering voice.

But the thought wouldn't leave. He could go to the east coast, scrounge a new identity, and lose himself in New York or Boston. Things had gotten bad enough that the search for him would only be cursory.

His attention wandered. Recent memories hovered just outside his consciousness. Pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes, Peter clamped down on those thoughts and dismissed the idea. Fleeing east might solve his immediate problem, but the cities on the coast were more dangerous than Chicago. If he stayed in the U.S., he might escape punishment, but he wouldn't escape the conditions that had led him here. No, there was no point in leaving. He should just give up.

But his primitive urge to survive wouldn't allow him to surrender. So, what then? If he couldn't stay in the U.S. could he leave? What about the Lost Land? Could he travel there and start over in peace?

Peter considered the counter arguments. No one knew with certainty what conditions were like in the Lost Land. And did he really want to spend his life with a bunch of religious nuts? He tried to dismiss the thought, but the idea remained. Television and newspaper accounts of life in the Lost Land were uniformly negative, but he'd always been curious about descriptions from the fringe media contradicting the consensus view. The minority reports painted a picture of a well-ordered, non-violent society. Maybe that was propaganda, but maybe there was something to those alternate voices. Despite his weariness and despair and against his better judgment, Peter found himself intrigued.

"Okay," Peter said into the silence. "I'll give it a shot."



Trudging down the jet way, Peter entered the almost empty terminal, surveying the corridor and marking the few other passengers. Peter's heart rate picked up as he entered public space again. Slinging his travel pack over his shoulder, he headed toward the exit and baggage claim. Not long ago the airport would have been bustling with travelers. Now, fellow travelers were scarce and Peter and the others eyed one another warily and kept their distance.

The terminal had seen better days. Most of the shops lining the walkway were closed—metal gates drawn across darkened interiors, signs partly torn down. A quarter of the light bulbs were burned out, leaving the graffiti-covered walls in shadow. Spotting a sign, he went into a restroom and washed his hands, then dried them. He paused at his reflection in a mirror. His thinning hair was much grayer than he remembered, and had his face sagged like that a week ago? *Haggard*, the word appeared in his mind. Maybe he should eat something. He searched for a memory of his last meal. Lunch two days ago, the day...he shut out that thought. Since that day he had tried to focus on the present. Take one step, then another; don't think about why he was taking those steps or what was beyond his goal. And above all, don't feel. He'd been mostly successful. Surely he'd eaten in the last two days, but he had no memory of it.

Turning from the mirror, he relieved himself and washed his hands again, this time avoiding his reflection.

Walking down the concourse, Peter passed a pair of armed guards. Cradling their automatic weapons, they eyed Peter with suspicion. Peter attempted a smile and kept his hands open and in clear view—armed patrols were justifiably twitchy. Past the guards, he glanced at a newsstand and caught the headline on a local paper: "Mayor Imposes Curfew—Murder at a New High." Peter knew the story without picking up the paper; he'd lived it for the last six years. An armed citizenry, with little to no provocation, was slaughtering itself. Incidents of violence had overwhelmed the system in many cities—his hometown of Chicago among them. It was no longer news. A body in a pool of blood failed now to spark horror, it merely heightened alertness in case the danger lingered.

At the end of the concourse, Peter drew to a halt. Baggage claim was on the ground floor which meant he had to take an escalator or a flight of stairs—not a problem normally. But, here the railing overlooking the escalator and the stairs lacked any Plexiglas barriers. Someone standing at the concourse railing would have an unimpeded shot at him as he descended. Cursing the obvious design flaw, Peter

hung back deciding what to do. He was alone now on the concourse except for a man and woman who'd been walking ahead of him.

They approached the descent and stopped. Surveying the concourse, they spotted Peter. After staring hard for a moment, they held a brief conversation. The man pointed at Peter more than once. Ending the conversation, they scanned the concourse once again. A few others were approaching the descent in the direction Peter had come from. The couple moved quickly to the escalator. Stepping on, the man faced backward staring up and behind, while the woman faced forward studying the floor ahead.

The escalator or the stairs. Whatever he was going to do, he should do it before the people approaching from behind arrived. Taking a deep breath, Peter reached inside his jacket, fit his hand to the familiar grip of his gun, and stepped on the escalator. The ride to the bottom seemed to take forever as Peter constantly scanned his surroundings. His neck hurt when he stepped off.

Baggage claim was off to his right. Locating the correct carousel, Peter noticed a few men and women standing in a knot waiting for their luggage to arrive. *That was odd*, Peter thought. Most of the people waiting for their luggage were scattered around hugging the walls.

Peter moved to a point where he could see the luggage sliding onto the carousel and backed as close to the wall behind him as he could and still move to the carousel without being hindered by other people. This, by good fortune, placed him right behind one of the pillars supporting the floor above.

A gentle chime announced the imminent arrival of the luggage from the plane. The little knot of people swayed as some jockeyed for position. Indistinct, angry words came from the knot. The words became louder. Several armed guards hurried toward the baggage carousel from other parts of the baggage claim area.

Not liking this turn of events, Peter reached inside his jacket and pulled out his weapon. He'd seen more than one of these skirmishes turn into a broader melee. He wanted to be ready.

Before the guards could get to the carousel, a man was pushed to the ground. Peter dropped to the floor, putting the support pillar between him and the carousel, as people scattered in all directions and hit the deck. Two men grappled on the floor each attempting to free his arms from the grip of the other. Two armed guards, weapons raised, advanced toward the men on the floor. The other guards, scattered among the rest of the people in the baggage claim area and with weapons at the ready, shouted for everyone to stay down and keep their hands away from their guns, trying to keep this incident from flaring into a general fire fight.

Peter stayed on the ground behind the pillar and let out his held breath. Shaking from released tension, he lowered his weapon, fumbled at the safety, and replaced it

in its holster. This fight only involved the two men. With the guards watching, the disturbance wouldn't turn into a free fire fight.

The scattered people remained where they had found cover, eyes fixed on the two men wrestling on the floor. The watching guards knew better than to try to separate the two men—such interference might get them hurt or killed as the men turned on the guards. The struggle on the floor would have been comical in another setting. Here, after all, were two middle-aged men bulging out of their business suits fighting like children. Fat wiggling as they bounced on the floor, they wrestled over—what? No one knew. No one ever knew.

At first, the answers from the surviving combatants around the country had drawn shakes of disgust and long “What is Wrong with Society?” op-ed pieces. Now, after numbing repetition, their explanations sounded surreal: She was going to steal something. He pushed me. She cut in line. He laughed at me.

For those and other trivial offenses, lives gushed onto sidewalks. The wrestlers in front of him didn't care about the beginning, only the end. Now, one of them had freed his hand and both of them shoved their hands into their coats.

“Show your hands,” one of the advancing guards shouted at the men, twitching the barrel his weapon between the two wrestlers.

“I'll shoot whoever pulls a gun,” the other guard yelled raising his weapon.

And this is what Peter had never understood, though he had seen it and heard the endless circling analyses. The men ignored the guards, so focused were they on harming their opponent. Instead of backing down each yanked a gun from his coat and, before the guards could react, shot the other as many times as he could before collapsing. One fired two rounds, the other three.

The echoes from the gunfire died away. Baggage began to ride up the little conveyor belt and slide clunking onto the carousel. Trying desperately to suppress all emotion, Peter pushed up from the floor and dusted himself off. The guards congregated around the fallen men bleeding on the floor, eyeing the rest of the passengers as they started to drift back to the carousel. Two men in business suits smiled and laughed, gesturing at the bodies on the ground. A woman, her mouth set in a grim line, pulled a young boy away from the carnage even as the boy struggled to return for a better look. One older man withdrew a handkerchief from a pocket with a trembling hand and patted his forehead. The rest exhibited varied degrees of studied indifference. Peter understood those. If you allowed yourself to care about every incident, you'd be unable to function. But despite his attempt to wall off his emotions, a wall he'd successfully erected several times over the last few years, this time some of the horror, all too reminiscent of recent events, leaked through. He approached the carousel feeling like he'd shatter at a touch.

Bags in hand and breathing deeply, Peter waited in a short line outside the terminal for the next available cab. The shooting had rattled him more than it

normally would have. Striving for calm even as he continued to scan the area for threats, Peter finally made it to the head of the line. He hefted his luggage into the trunk and climbed in the back seat with his travel pack. Cracked plastic on the seat caught at his shirt and pants as he slid into the car. Fogged, scratched Plexiglas separated the front and back seats. The smell of stale cigarettes and a nose-wrinkling astringent odor of cleaning solution not quite strong enough to hide the lingering tang of vomit and urine completed the package. *Ah, the joys of public transport*, Peter thought, relaxing a tad at the familiar decrepitude.

"Hemingway Regency," Peter said.

"One fifty," the driver said, and a little tray extended from the seat in front of him.

"Cash in advance," the voice came from a speaker by Peter's right ear. He pulled the money from his wallet and put it in the tray and his gun from its holster and laid it on his lap. Opening his travel pack, Peter pulled out a small plastic mask and fitted it over his nose and mouth. The compressed air canister attached to the bottom of the mask hung down below his chin. Not only did it provide protection against being gassed and robbed, the mask had the added benefit of cutting off the stink from the cab.

"No offense." Peter looked at the driver in the rear-view mirror.

"Nah." The driver checked his mirror and pulled away into the light traffic. "I'd do the same."

The sound of the gunfire from the terminal echoed in his head. Unable to sit still, Peter shifted in his seat, reflexively sweeping his gaze through the windshield, the side windows, and, only seeing the driver's face in the rear-view mirror, twisting around to look behind. His hand, seemingly of its own accord, repeatedly touched his weapon. After a few moments, Peter forced himself to stillness; no one knew he was here and he convinced himself the driver knew what he was doing. But in the stillness, memories floated up from the depths: the iron tang of fresh blood, Janice's voice. Rubbing his hands together, he forced the images from his thoughts and concentrated on his surroundings.

They had entered the highway into Denver. Dilapidated warehouses surrounded by broken, rusted chain-link fences and parking lots with crumbling asphalt stretched for mile after mile as they approached the city. Occasionally, a half empty strip mall broke the monotony. Nearing the center of town, the sun glinted off empty, mirrored skyscrapers. The last decade's recession had hit Denver hard.

Dropped in front of his hotel, Peter carried his suitcase past the armed guards, through the front door and up to the desk. "Peter Gillen," he said, handing his identification and a payment card to the woman behind the reception desk, hoping she didn't notice the slight tremor in his hand. Glancing around the lobby at another set of armed guards, the part of Peter that wanted to be there tried to look casual,

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assuring himself that the guards were not studying him carefully, waiting to take him away. Part of him, the part mostly scooped out and shattered, didn't care. Let them come and put an end to it all.

"Just the one night?" the woman asked a second time, her voice raised.

Peter nodded.

"What?" the woman said even louder. One of the guards turned his head toward the sound.

"Yes," Peter said quickly, wanting to avoid calling attention to himself.

"1458." The woman handed Peter his card and a room key.

In his room, Peter dropped his two suitcases on the floor and slung his travel pack on top of them. He stared at the pile and ran shaking hands through his hair. There it was—his entire life compacted into one small mound. *Forty years and this is what I end up with. And tomorrow I disappear into—into what?* He'd booked passage on a bus that would cross into the Lost Land at the Border north of Denver. It would have been easier if flights had been permitted; he wouldn't have had this time to rethink his choice. An alert note sounded on his phone. Pulling the phone from his pocket, he stared in disbelief at the message.

Effective immediately pursuant to Executive Order 21484 the Border between The United States of America and The Sovereign State of Deseret is closed. No entry to Deseret from the United States or exit from Deseret into the United States will be permitted. Anyone attempting travel into or from Deseret will be detained and prosecuted.

Absently, Peter rubbed his hands together wondering what he was going to do now.

He'd counted on escaping to the Lost Land before anyone started looking for him. *That's it*, he thought. *That's a sign*. The whole attempt had been madness anyway. Time to pack it in, give it up, return and accept his well-deserved punishment. Maybe then he'd be able to live with himself.

No, another part of him insisted. *You can't go back you; did nothing wrong. Right*, Peter thought, *tell that to...* Anyway, with the Border closed, his only options were trying to disappear, which he'd already ruled out, or giving up.

Or...he'd read about people, desperate people, who evaded scrutiny at the Lost Land border by crossing through the mountains where it was easier to hide. That way was still open. He shook his head burying the thought. That was a lot more work than disappearing.

But the thought would not stay buried. The Lost Land beckoned, its promise of peace and security made more beguiling by rumors and speculation. Relenting once more, Peter pulled his computer from his travel pack, sat down at the desk in his

room, connected to the U.S. data net and started tracking down what information he could on the overland route. Hours later, he leaned back in his chair. He'd need supplies and a map. It would take longer. It wouldn't be a stroll in the garden. He'd be breaking the law, hah, the least of his concerns. But he could make it to the Lost Land.



"A fun creative read!"

"Exceptional writing, riveting action, surprising storyline."

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