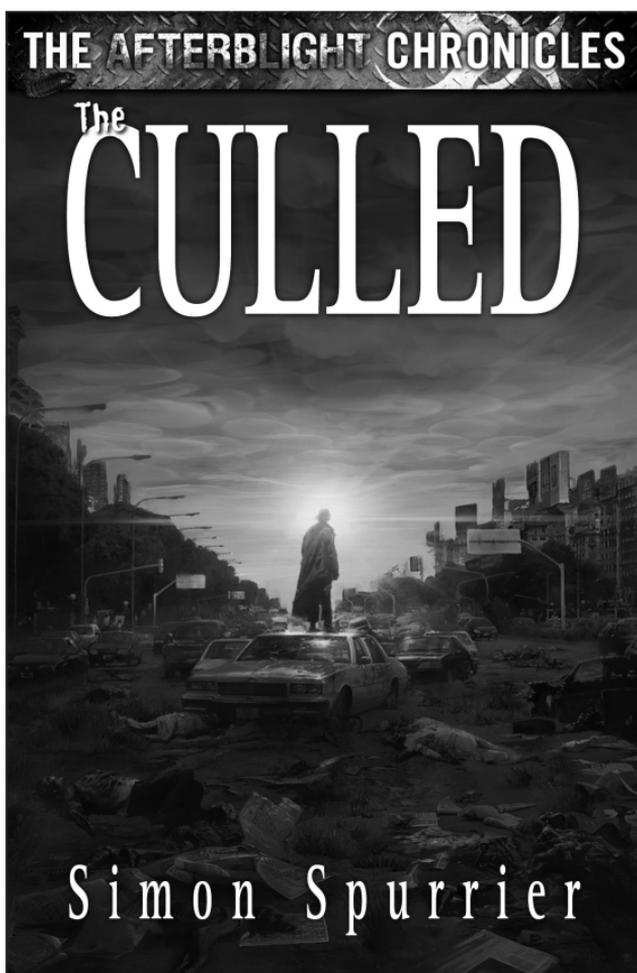


The Afterblight Chronicles: The Culled



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THE AFTERBLIGHT CHRONICLES: THE CULLED

By Simon Spurrier

The Blight arose from nowhere. It swept across the bickering nations like the End of Times and spared only those with a single fortuitous blood type. As the numbers thinned and societies crumbled, the survivors picked their way between silent streets and looked out on the squalid new order... and reconsidered their good fortune.

Hotheaded religion and territorial savagery rule the cities now. Somewhere amidst the chaos a damaged man receives a signal, and with it the tiniest flicker of hope. The chance to rediscover the humanity he lost, long ago, in the blood and filth and horror of the Cull.

In New York he must face a city run by gang lords and overseen by the Clergy, the biggest gang of them all, ruled by a half-insane Bishop who seems strangely invulnerable to The Blight. To gain dominance in this dog-eat-dog world our man must run The Tag. A deadly chase across the broken metropolis.

The Afterblight Chronicles details a world broken by biological apocalypse. A world where the right to survive has to be fought for, tooth and nail.

Now read a sample chapter from this exciting new novel...

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Tag went back a year or four.

The Tag was one of those little things the Clergy put in place as soon as it was obvious no other motherfucker was ever going to be big enough to kick them off the top spot. The tag was... a tradition. A ritual, if you want. A way for the robe-wearing arseholes to take charge of every dispute, every promotion, every power play.

Above and beyond all other things, the Tag was entertainment.

The way Nate had explained it to me, sitting in the dark outside the United Nations was:

“You’re a chicken. You spent your whole goddamn life afraid of the wolves. What you want right now is freedom. Get away from the meat eating shitheads. Spend some quality time without carnivore assholes watching your back.

“But you know what? What you want so much more than that, is to have a go at being a wolf too.

“Tag’s how you do it.”

The Tag was a pretty simple concept, all things considered. A tough sort of justice: survival of the fittest with a lopsided twist to favour the overdog. I guess when you’re living in a pit, the rules need to be as nasty as everything else, which is scant comfort for the underdog.

That’d be me.

In a nutshell:

One man, or woman, challenged another. Rules varied from here to there on the nature of the challenge, but generally you’re looking at punching, slapping, kicking, hair pulling, whatever. Something publicly humiliating. An affront to the challengee’s dignity. He or she was permitted to defend themselves by any means – as if

in self-defence – up to and including muscle-bound lieutenants with machetes, machineguns and magnums.

Heh. For all the good it did.

But as soon as the challenge was made, everything stopped. No more violence allowed. Break the rules and the Clergy adjudicators would be down like a ton of bricks.

The challenger was escorted away, told a place and time, and left to prepare whilst the disgruntled VIP who'd been tagged set about assembling a hunting party.

Five people. Any weapons, vehicles or gadgets they wanted, which amounted to whatever stuff they could get their hands on.

Five people, drugged to the gills, with territorial knowledge on their side and not a scruple in sight.

At the allotted time the challenger and the hunting party were placed in position, normally beneath the gaze of a thunderous crowd. In a world without TV, this was the Superbowl.

The challenger was stripped of all guns, tools and blades. An electrical tag was pinned beneath his skin (joyously provided by the friendly neighbourhood Clergy), and with all due ceremony, gravity and cheer, he was told to fuck off and get running.

The hunters were released five minutes later.

When you initiated a tag, there was only one rule worth knowing:

Stay alive for two hours; you've won. Everything that belonged to the loser belongs to you. Power. Privileges. Property. Rank.

I got the impression it didn't happen often.

And just for the record, just to make the whole shitty thing even more wonderful, it was overseen from start to finish by representatives of – take a wild guess – the Apostolic Church of the Rediscovered Dawn, the Clergy.

The cleverest thing I'd done – and if I'm honest it

wasn't until afterwards that Nate explained why it was such a smart move – was to wade into Gull HQ heavy and cause some serious collateral along the way. At the time I'd done it as a path-of-least-resistance thing: I wanted to get to the boss, his goons were in the way – QED.

But no. I'd got lucky. It turned out that killing a clansman in the normal course of life carried an immediate penalty of 'Oh-God-Make-The-Pain-Stop-Please-Please-Please' death. It was supposed to prevent glory hunters from killing their way up to the top without effort, to stop disgruntled scavs getting mutinous around their overlords, and to deter internal arguments from spilling over. It worked too – most of the time – and the only ones exempt were the klanbosses themselves.

Which meant I'd accidentally carried off a neat spot of playing the odds. If I won the tag I'd be the new Boss, and they couldn't hold me accountable for all the chop-socky I'd caused en route. And if, Nate said, I lost then it didn't matter then either.

I scowled. "How come?"

"Cos you'll be dead anyway."

I'd crippled, killed or incapacitated more of my potential hunters than seemed fair or decent. I'd wiped out the klanboss's top dogs in one fell swoop. I'd left him with an untested rabble to try and catch me, and put the fear of god up them at the same time. They'd seen what I could do. They'd hesitate, I hoped, to corner me alone.

And, frankly, I needed every advantage I could get.

All this just to get into the UN building. It had better be fucking worth it.

They kept us waiting until ten o'clock. It meant that when things kicked-off, the two-hour limit would expire at midnight. I guess they thought it was more dramatic.

I wasn't about to complain. It gave me the rest of the day to sleep and prepare, whilst they – the Gulls – scuttled

about like headless chickens, conspiring and scheming, treating the wounded and carting-off the dead.

All through the day, Nate kept a nonchalant sort of 'watch' while I kipped, nestled up in a bed of dry leaves beneath a footbridge, on an out-of-the-way path in the park. He shuffled off once or twice to chat to the little knots of Red Gull scavs living in bivouacs in other parts of the greenery, keeping himself out of sight of any Clergy passing through, and seemed to be warming to the role of information gatherer. I like to think he saw himself as a duellist's 'Number Two', preparing for his benefactor's moment of pistol-waving tribulation... but frankly behind his open face and warming smile it was fucking impossible to work out what he was thinking, let alone what historical-romantic notions he was dreaming-up.

He mumbled a lot, just under his breath, and had started to sweat too much.

All very weird.

Nate woke me at eight. He'd caught a couple of rats off the banks of the stagnant Turtle Pond and sat cooking them, not once complaining at doing all the hard work, rambling away blithely on the events of the day, apparently not troubled by whether I was listening or not.

I was.

He said the whole territory was in uproar. He said the scavs were all but hysterical at the news of what I'd got up to that morning, and it was a toss-up as to whether said hysteria was based on delight or disgust.

He said no one had ever heard of a klanboss getting himself tagged before. He said already the other tribes in the area – the StripLims to the east and the Globies up on the edges of Harlem – were choked with gossip and book-running. Already barter-wagers were hot business

all across the Island, he said, and scavs from klans he'd never even heard of had been showing up in the En-Tees all round the edges of the Red Gull patch, to stand about and murmur in low voices about the 'Big Tag', hoping to catch a glimpse of the action.

He said it was big news.

"You, ah..." He coughed awkwardly, and twitched. He looked unwell. "You sure you wanna do this?"

I told him, of course I did. How the hell else was I going to get into the UN building?

"Yeah, yeah... Yeah." He coughed again. "Only, ah... That Cardinal asshole - Cy. He was up here 'round noon." His voice shook.

"Did he see you?"

"You think I'd be talking to you if he did? Shit, no! Stayed well outta his way. You live in En-Why any lengtha time, you get good at making sure folks ignore your ass. Like... There was this one time I got stuck with—"

"Nate." I interrupted the tangent before it got started, troubled by his uncomfortable manner. Even in the midst of his most enthused ramblings, he'd never seemed quite twitchy. "You were saying. About Cy."

"Yeah. Sure. H-had himself a little chat to Scrim, that's all. In-depth, man. Intense."

"Who's 'Scrim'?"

Nate looked at me like I was stupid. "Motherfucker you tagged. Top dog."

"Fair enough." I poked the rat into the fire. "Stupid name, but fair enough. So what did our friend Cy have to say for himself?"

Nate shook his head, eyes rolling weirdly. "Pass. No way was I getting close enough to hear. But you want me take a wild stab; I'd say he's keeping an eye. Knows it's you. I mean, shit, it don't take a genius! Raggedy-assed stranger shows up at LaGuardia, goes through a pack of Choirboys like a razor. Next day you got witnesses see

the same guy heading through Queens on a quad. And next day, Mister ‘Nobody-Knows-Who-The-Hell-He-Is’ not only gets himself balls-deep in the Red goddamn Gulls, but also slaps a challenge on Big Scrim.

“You think Cy ain’t gonna make the connection? C’mon! He knows. He knows it’s gonna be you out there tonight.”

“But you said this shit is sacred, right? You said nobody else gets to interfere.”

“And that’s the truth. But that don’t stop our pal the Cardinal from helping the odds. Clergy got themselves every killing-toy in the world holed-up over there.” He nodded east, towards the unseen slab of the Secretariat. His hands were shaking. “They got every brand of... of chem with a name, and twice as many without.

“I hate to say it, most guys, running a Tag, they got less hope than a snowball in Hell. But you...? Up against the Gulls? And them tooled-up by the Choir?

“Shee-it.”

I let this sink in.

“I see,” I said.

Ten o’clock. I stood and waited, tensed, beneath a canopy of spindle-fingered trees. Beside me the stagnant water sucked at the south bank of the Turtle Pond, on the fringe of what had once been 79th street and was now a crippled lane of rubble; its tarmac long since plundered for the construction of the Gulls’ shanty nest.

I’d filtered out the noise of the crowd by now, but the force of it was still there at the back of my head, nudging against my concentration. I’d spent an hour flicking through my tattered map, and a series of notes Nate had gathered from the scavs nearby; all of them covered in spidery descriptions that didn’t help at all (‘gud rats!’ and ‘watr mostly clean’). I had a vague idea where I’d go. I wasn’t stupid enough to let myself believe I had a plan;

that I was ready. In situations like this, there's no such thing as 'ready'. There's just people who can wing it, and people who can't.

I let the instincts take over, like shrugging on an old coat: patched and frayed and stinking, but so comfortable you can't imagine ever taking it off.

Vehicles rumbling nearby. The five Gulls glaring at me, weapons bristling in every direction. Four blokes, one woman. That same crazy chick who had the sword before, but the others were just faces: muscular, armoured-up, and ready to play. All except Big Scrim, the Gull boss. He stood out: encased in flashy sports gear and rubber body-armour, holding the Clergy's tracker-device like a novelty TV aerial in the back of an open-top jeep.

Everywhere I looked, Clergy.

Clergy guns. Clergy AVs. Cardinal Cy whispering to Scrim, his four goons cross-armed behind him, pointing and directing, throwing glances my way beneath hooded eyelids. Silent communication between us, crackling like static.

The crowd gets noisier. Arms slap against my shoulders, people shout and laugh, something painful digs beneath the skin of my neck.

The tracer.

Stay calm.

Breathe.

Are you ready, soldier?

Sir, no sir!

Well done, son. Right answer. Now get goi—

A flare went up.

I ran.

Trees whipping past. Branches scraping cheeks already sliced and puffy from last night's mêlée. Legs pounding like pneumatics.

It's almost a joy to open-up. All cylinders. Let go. Feel

the burn.

Know everything.

Cover the angles.

Their advantages: speed, local knowledge, the tracker in my neck, more guns than a survivalist all-comers WorldCon and enough drugs to make a pharmaceutical multinational look like a primary school chemistry kit.

So. One thing at a time.

Get off the track. Confound the vehicles.

I took the verge beside the street at a vault, darted through more trees; heading for the dark blot of stone ahead. Heading west, I think, over slimy husks of rotting trunks. Something man-made looming between the boles: an escape from the preternatural chaos of the park with its forested wildernesses. Too many shadows here. Too many unknowns.

I paused for a second, shaking my muscles down, taking the time to stretch whilst I caught my breath, then onwards. Up steps greasy with lichen and mould, past knots of scavs hoping for a good view, clamouring in the shadow of a colossal building. The poor buggers recoiled and ran when they saw they'd got their wish, terrified I'd bring down the Gulls on their viewing-spot.

A second flare went up behind me – blood red and baleful – and I stumbled without pausing through a shattered doorframe into a great emptiness.

It took my eyes a while to adjust, and as I groped the echoes of my clumsy movements suggested a vast void all around me; the tinkling of broken glass and crunch of rubble underfoot. Shapes swam into focus. Button-like eyeballs regarded me. Brass signs and red ropes.

A fucking great elephant, staring down. Someone had snapped off its trunk.

AKELEY HALL OF AFRICAN MAMMALS.

...a banner read, plucked out of the shadows in my peripheral vision by the overstretched blur of the instinctive training.

Trust your perceptions.

Don't think. Just react.

Trust yourself.

Go!

Reality swam and reformed, and I'd barely noticed myself, rushing up stairs that folded back and forth in concertina ribbons, up the sides of a great hallway, passing glass cabinets crammed with taxidermy's greatest trophies and fossilised impressions screwed to walls beside plastic plaques.

Engines growled in the distance, rushing nearer, audible through crack-holed windows, arched and medieval. Raised voices.

Fuckers.

On the fourth floor a frieze of limp connections and cable-like structures swam together in my mind to form great prehistoric beasts: fleshless and comical in their gawky poses, tangled amidst steel supports and gaudily coloured waxwork models.

In my state of mind, adrenalised to hell and incapable of rationalising through the tsunami of reactions, finding dinosaurs on the fourth floor of a vast building did not seem worthy of remark. Just another bunch of dumb bastards, wiped out before their time.

Up here, scav kit was everywhere. Blankets and cushions concealed lazily between titanic ribs, small piles of combustible rubbish pulled off the displays, heaped in odd corners for tinder and late-night fires. Beside me a glass cabinet containing rows of fossilised teeth had been partially shattered; torn away from the wall, left jagged with razor panels incised. On the other side of the room someone had used the Apatosaurus as a toilet, and the whole chamber was thick with flies and dust.

Voices spiralled up from the great hall far below, shouts and curses followed by the conspicuous silence of people being quiet. I peered cautiously over the rim of the balcony, hoping the radio marker didn't provide a vertical reading. Sure enough, ghostly shapes moved in the light-dappled lobby; oozing from cover-to-cover with the exaggerated care of those who think their enemies are close.

Cat and Mouse. Rule number one. Don't be the mouse. Sir, yes sir. Etc etc.

So I picked up the remains of the cabinet with all the care I could muster, winced at every tinkle of fragmented glass, and pitched it with a roar over the balcony's edge.

The snarl took on a violent life of its own in the acoustic void of the stairwell, modulating musically with the xylophonic traumas of the cabinet.

Someone below reacted fast. The poor sod.

Automatic gunfire stitched the open stairwell with muzzle fire and noise, and then nothing but glass. Like champagne. Like watery froth, dazzling.

Shattering.

Tumbling.

Slicing.

The sound was shocking. A calamitous crash that resounded in every dimension and shook the air.

Then nothing but silence.

Then screams that bubbled-away into gasps, as whoever was underneath the cabinet rustled off their jagged little coil. Then more silence.

Then just the moans of shocked survivors, cut to shreds.

And the soft sound of me, running like hell.

I'd stopped twice on the way down from the dinosaur exhibits. The few fractured shards of rationality still spinning inside my head had decided I was inside a museum, and the one thing museums always have is an

enormous floor plan in every corner.

That was stop 'Number One.'

In a display of the Woodlands Indians, in the far western wing of the third floor (within easy sprinting distance of a stairwell which – I was reliably assured – led down to the side exit on West 77th Street), I crouched and bled.

This was the result of stop 'Number Two'.

Thick rivulets down my spine, oozing under the hem of my trousers and down the backs of my legs. Didn't matter. I was in control.

Taking my time. Calm. Breathing well.

The sensible savage.

I think somehow, somewhere inside, I felt indignant, too. How dare these fuckers chase me? How dare they? How dare they outnumber me?

Me!

It was a useful emotion.

This was home, in a way. Worming through the darkened corridors of an embassy in some exotic place, waiting for the moment to strike. Lurking, stalking, closing in.

Or letting them come to me.

This time the arseholes came mob-handed. They'd closed on the tracker beacon with admirable speed, slinking along open corridor-corners to avoid ambushes, sidestep-by-sidestep. I could hear their progress with practiced acuity: three together on point then another (a softer tread – probably the woman) taking rearguard.

Only four. The other one was staked-out in the lobby, crushed and sliced-up by the glass cabinet.

It would be dishonest to pretend I wasn't enjoying myself.

I could hear them beyond the last corner of the twisting hall.

"Strong signal," one grunted, voice terse. "Directly ahead. Other end of the room."

An arm blurred in the shadows.

Something small flying, bouncing, rolling, then—

Light and smoke and noise, and three heavy figures springing out to let rip into the phosphor distraction. I couldn't even see the weapons: only feel the drumming of the air, the epileptic nightmare of endless automatic muzzle flare, and the quiet smugness on the bright faces of the attackers.

They were standing so close I could almost have touched them and, for the record, they were shooting in completely the wrong direction.

I waited until they'd walked further into the room. The one with the tracker grunted in satisfaction, claiming the marker was stationary and they must have hit me. They took up swaggering stances before the darkened 'Iroquois' display – now reduced to shattered plastic and crumbled wax – and took a few more pot-shots into the rubble, just to be sure.

Behind them, I ducked out from beneath the cosy chicken wire-supported wigwam of the Ojibwa tribe (never heard of them) and ghosted back along the empty corridor.

Divide and conquer.

The woman stood with her back to me, pressed into a pool of darkness, nervous at the cacophony her comrades were throwing-up from round the corner. She had a mini-Uzi in each hand – compact little toys with folded stocks and extra-long mags – and the pale curve of her neck was perfectly caught by the dim moonlight of the arched windows, like a ski slope. Waiting for an avalanche.

Carefully, using swaddled fabrics I'd stolen from my pals in the Ojibwa, I palmed the long shard of glass I'd used to slice the electric tag out from the skin of my shoulder (stop 'Number Two', remember?). I'd hidden it carefully amongst the dummy-display of the Iroquois, letting the morons walk right past me.

Some people might call that 'cheating'.

Cat and Mouse. Rule number two.

Even the biggest cat picks-off mice one by one.

The woman had the good grace to die quietly, and she'd even warmed up the grips of my two brand new Uzis. That's consideration for you.

Half an hour later, the others were getting frustrated.

I'd left the museum and headed south, careful not to double-back on the park. This whole lightless neighbourhood was their turf, and the more advantages I could give myself, the better. Right now that meant staying away from the moon-dappled weirdness of the trees, hugging the right angles and solidity of the West Side.

I turned off down 74th and found a tenement block; took the fire escape up to the top floor and bust my way inside as quietly as I could. Still no sounds of pursuit – and after all why should there be? The marker pressed under my skin was their only ace; and now that was nothing but a bloody shard of circuitry in the pocket of a mannequin. It was almost tempting to sit out the two hours here, reclining on the unscavved sofa in some long-dead New Yorker's grotty little apartment.

But.

Think. Cover the angles.

But other people had surely cut out the trackers before.

The fuckos must have a Plan B.

But.

But if they have the marker, couldn't they just claim victory anyway?

'Proof of kill'?

But, but, but.

And the biggest shitter of them all:

The End.

By midnight I had to present myself to a member of

the Clergy. That's how it finished. That's how they knew who'd won or lost.

They'd given me a perfunctory description of places I could look: slums on the En-Tee border zones, territory markers down to the south, Clergy-run checkpoints. With each item on the list, spoken through softly clenched teeth by the pale-faced Cardinal Cy, I'd cast a quick glance at Nate – hiding in the crowd, face shadowed inside a hood. He'd simply shaken his head, over and over.

The Clergy weren't going to make this easy for me. They wouldn't be waiting to shake my hand, tell me well done. If they were waiting at all, it was with a bullet.

Think it through.

Cover the angles.

Which just left the park. Right back to the start. Presenting myself to the crowd and the bastard Cardinal himself, standing up there on the podium beside the Turtle Pond with his four hulking Choirboy guards and his stupid ruby-red glasses, to show I'd done it.

Easy as that.

Big Scrim and his two remaining goons, they knew it as well as I did. They knew I'd be scurrying out from the undergrowth, back in the park, at five minutes before midnight. And that meant all they had to do was wait.

Shit.

Cat and mouse.

So I plundered anything useful from the apartment – an out-of-date band-aid for my shoulder, a vac-sealed packet of salami on a shelf, a couple of rusty kitchen knives in plastic sheaths and went out to find them. Following the sounds of engines rumbling. I took the rooftops where I could; a raggedy tabby going arm-over-arm, pouncing across alleyways and ghosting up empty fire escapes, leaving a trail of terrified scavs, their sleep disturbed by a prowling monster.

I found the Gulls hunched in the back of the biggest

AV, far below the roof ledge of a fire station. Voices rose from below the closed hood, and I worked my way down with the utmost care; letting go of everything, letting something unevolved and primitive – but so much better at this shit – swim to the forefront of my mind.

I climbed down to meet them. An ape with Uzis.

At the foot of the building an alleyway cut out onto the main street, and there I nestled myself into the bricks, unfolding the stock of one of the tiny guns to give myself at least a fighting chance of hitting something.

I could see them clearly, shadowed by the moonlight like patches of cut-out card.

I could hear them.

Both of them. Two guys.

So where's number 3?

Scrim was busy, bent down over the scrawnier of his two warriors. Jacking a hypodermic needle into the other man's neck, holding him tight in a vicious headlock as he grunted and pleaded. I found myself entranced, all but forgetting to poise myself for that critical moment, that perfect shot.

“You fuck! You stay still. You fuck!” Scrim kept up a volley of abuse, squeezing the plunger with a sly grin. “You gonna help us, boy. You gonna find that limey shit. You gonna track his ass.”

The little man jerked his head and finally pulled away with a howl. Scrim watched him, smiling quietly, clambering down to the driver's seat.

The man shivered for a moment, sweat prickling along his forehead. I held my breath; wondering what weird shit Doctor Scrim had prescribed. What narcotic treats the all-conquering Clergy had handed over to help their pet Gulls finish me off.

The little man grunted. Frowned.

Then...

Changed.

He sat up. His head moved a little too quickly. Darting, like a bird's, from position to position with no intermediary movement. He drooled. He closed his eyes.

The thing inside me, the primitive 'self' in control, gave a little grunt of recognition.

The little man sniffed.

And licked his lips.

Scrim plucked something silvery-red from his pocket and dangled it above the man's nose. He tilted his head to taste it like a wolf on a scent, lapping at it, smearing it across his cheeks, then closed his eyes and looked away.

Scrim re-pocketed the tiny shape. Didn't take a genius to figure what it was.

The tracker. The tracker covered in my blood.

I shivered, despite myself.

The little man smiled. Sniffed again. Pointed his finger.

Opened his eyes.

Moaned.

Stared right at me.

Fuck.

I was already running, I think, though I didn't realise it. Engines growling to life behind me, a voice shouting "There! There!", radios crackling in some distant world.

I heard someone say, through thick static:

"Yeah. Roj that. Got him."

And then the sniper shitbag on the roof above, the third Gull, who'd been waiting like an angler poised over bait, waiting for the dumb psycho to try and turn the tables, opened fire and blew my ear off.

Things rushed past without shape. Everything seemed to throb. The whole world bulging in time to the pain inside my head.

It hurt like a bitch, and I hadn't even had the time to poke and prod at it yet, to see how bad it was. In the

mean time I was letting myself get good and freaked, imagining the worst.

I think I could still hear okay, though frankly nothing much came through except the throbbing and the engines. Always the engines. It felt like they'd been chasing me forever, though I guess it was more like an hour. Maybe more. I'd stop and look at my watch, if stopping wasn't tantamount to getting dead quickly.

The me doing the thinking – the instinctive snarling primate bastard I was taught to let out in situations like this – howled and yelped at the pain, fighting to scratch at the torrent pouring down my neck.

The me inside – rational, detached, cold, keeping the monkey-man in control...He loved it.

Such focus!

Such sensation!

Don't you fucking give up, soldier!

I ran like a steam train. Like a bloody Duracell bunny, with an amphetamine volcano up its furry arse. Like an animator's run-cycle stuck on a fast-forward loop. The same movements over and over, with a background cyclorama tumbling by and nothing but the throb, throb, throb to accompany the slapping of my feet. Puddles. Cracked tarmac. Weed-strewn sidewalks.

What I'm getting at is, I ran like a robot. Never tiring, never feeling. I ran until I was sure my heart would pop, and smiled through frothing teeth and kept going.

Fuck it, I kept thinking. Fuck it all.

Down tight alleyways. Over dumpsters, through drifts of shitty litter. Sharp corners. Over wire fences and down labyrinthine passages. The vehicle-roar came and went, bashing and smashing at intersections, voices raised in curses.

Hot breath, burning my lungs.

The AV couldn't keep up. It kept trying to double-round, to sneak ahead, headlights blazing then jerking

off on some random course. They might have had some luck, if I hadn't been a contrary bastard. If I hadn't been changing my mind about what direction to run every five minutes.

The third man had a bike. Some suped-up Japanese travesty, whining like a prepubescent dragonfly, and he had no trouble sticking to me; negotiating alleys too tight for the four-wheeler. I took him down circuitous switchbacks and wide avenues, letting the skittish scavs confuse him, hiding behind dark corners and doubling-back every time he scorched past. Earning ten minute respites here and there, curled-up in dark rooms with terrified squatters moaning beneath soiled sleeping bags. But he was good. Give him his due; he turned on a penny and came straight back the instant the sniffer-freak on the AV caught the scent, headlight tracking like a laser-sight, rubber squealing.

It would be fair to say – in fact it would be a royal bloody understatement – that I got fed up with him. The bike was enclosed like a sleek little turtle with riot-shields and bulletproof plex; caroming off angled walls that should have unseated him, slipping through the oil drum fires I pulled down in my wake like a galleon through fog. And yeah, maybe he couldn't shoot me through the balustrades of shielding; but it worked both ways. Every time I found some perilous vantage point – dangling from a low-hanging escape ladder, peering like Oscar the Grouch out of a scav-nest dumpster – to open up with the Uzis and riddle him with lead, all it achieved was to let him know where I was.

He was trying to make road kill. Exhaust me; flush me out in the open. Re-curved scythe-blades on the bike's front mudguard, ankle-breakers poking like twisted spokes from both wheels.

He was running me down, and he was fucking good at it.

So eventually what I did was: I stopped running.

Stood in full view.

Waited.

(Took a moment to glance at my watch. 23:13hrs, yank time. Not out of the woods yet, boyo.)

He came round the corner like a flaming bullet, and pulled-up with unnecessary flashiness, propping himself on the far leg so I couldn't even blast open his knees.

I willed him to get on with it before the AV caught us up.

He laughed behind his dusty shields and shouted:

“Getting tired, little limey?”

I opened fire. For all the good it did.

He gunned the whiny engine like every mosquito in the universe shouting in unison, blurring tyres snagging at the floor with a smoky blast of inertia, and came for me.

Bullets punching worthless craters in the glass.

Laughing.

Closing the gap.

Scythe-blades looming.

It was all deeply melodramatic. I rolled my eyes, took three steps backwards – down the flight of stairs lurking in the moonless shadows directly behind me – and lay down.

He didn't see that one coming.

“The fu—?”

The stupid little prick went hurtling over my head, angled in mid-air, hit the wall of the subway stairwell, and just sort of..

Came apart.

No flashy fireballs or smoke-drenched detonations. Just a noise like a big cockroach, cracking under a swat, and a lot of debris.

He was gurgling nastily when I walked away – like maybe he'd broken his back or something – and I should probably have put him out of his misery.

Paint me bothered.

The AV found me fifteen minutes later. The scrawny little freak doped-up on whatever military-grade tracking drugs Scrim had dished-out – clung to the roof like a surfer, rapping on the glass and snarling inarticulately, directing the klan boss's crazed steering. Again with the sodding circling-round, slipping along too-tight alleyways. It felt good to begin with. Rushing past their clumsy attempts to get ahead, disappearing into the shadows to clamber up on this or that fire escape, pausing to catch my bearings, trying to head back towards the park. It was time to begin the home run.

It took me a fair old while to realise they were herding me. They were smarter than I thought.

I came upon an office block. Nothing special; redbrick and shattered windows – with a door hanging open on a narrow stairwell. Sick and tired of the growl of engines, I rabbitted up the first few flights without any trouble, pausing to vomit discreetly before pushing myself onwards. Somewhere near floor five – or maybe six – a particularly large scav wearing Gull colours tried to axe me in the head, yelling for me to get the hell away from his wife.

There was an inflatable sex-doll on the floor next to him, but it didn't seem like the right time to point this out. I shoved the Uzi up his nostril until he got the message and backed off, and then carried on upwards towards the roof whilst he noisily comforted his 'wife' below.

On the roof, I puked again. The throbbing in my ear was jacking about with my sense of direction, and it didn't help when the moonlit city put itself together bit-by-bit inside my topsy-turvy bearings.

I was so far west of the park I could see the tiny fishing punts on the Hudson, beyond the tangle of docks and quays spread out below me. Taller buildings rose to

my left and right. Faint lights glimmering inside where innocent scavs struggled to get by with some semblance of a life.

It was actually sort of beautiful. If it hadn't been about a mile in the wrong direction I might have paused to appreciate it.

There were no roofs to leap across to here. No secondary stairways to scamper back down.

And, if I'm honest, no energy to go on. The thing inside me curled up and went to sleep, exhausted, and left me alone. Only human. Outnumbered and outgunned.

Trapped.

"Fuck." I said. "Fuck fuck fuck."

From the open door I heard the huge scav shouting again - "My wife! That's my fucking wife!" - then a sharp little gunshot to shut him up.

Footsteps up the stairwell.

Time for the endgame.

SIMON SPURRIER is an award-winning writer of novels and graphic novel fiction. He's worked extensively for the UK's talent-factory title *2000 AD*, has published novels with Abaddon, the Black Library and Black Flame, and has won a series of accolades and prizes for screenwriting. He's worked as a cook, a bookseller, a BBC Art Director and a film student. He lives in London because the night sky is a far better shade of green there than anywhere else.