Never Catch Me Alive

by Mark Matthews

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I would have been eaten first, if I wasn't so fast. It's not my fault, I just have a bit of a kick to my legs, so that when the Meat-Eaters came for me, I enjoyed it. I wouldn't say so, but I loved it when they attacked. Sure, I didn't like seeing my friends have their necks dug into with daggers of teeth, and the little noise only our breed can make while being eaten alive, but being chased was a rush. My legs kicking in the dirt, muscles firing away. It was ecstasy, especially first thing in the morning, when I could smell the blood of my brothers on the roaring breath behind me.

Nobody knew I was teasing them, letting them get close to my tail before accelerating ahead. The longer the chase, the better I felt - so free, so alive.

But now all the meat-eaters were either dead or dying. If we came across any they were too tired to move. The meat is gone, they are gone, and we'll be gone too, if we don't find water or forage.

The meteors that showered down upon us seem to have stopped. The earthquakes that swallowed some up and made canyons are gone, but the heat that boils our blood remains.

We walk with our heads down, maybe 15 of us, moving under a sun that has grown to encompass everything. Everything is in hues of orange and red like a bloody eyeball on fire.

Some have sunk in oily tarpits. I think maybe they are the lucky ones. The rest of us, walk on.

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My body is dying and my spirit is crushed since I can't run. A few fast strides would certainly boil the last bit of water inside me, so instead I step forward, head down, with ten brethren with me now perhaps. The others have fallen behind and will die slow. Something ahead is tugging at my heart, but I make no mention of this.

There have been murmurs of cannibalism, of eating the more sickly who are slowing us down… nobody is thinking straight. None of us have eaten meat and would not be able to. But I can already tell the two who are going to try.

Mostly we just walk across the scorched earth looking for water. And anything green. Water and green.

My family drops, our herd thins. Their eyes remain open as they fall to the desert ground, but something pulls me forward despite my hollow stomach. I can feel myself feeding on my own organs, my stomach sucking at my liver, my once powerful legs cannibalizing themselves. It's just me and one other now, a female, walking two by two.

Up ahead I see what is pulling me. A flying mass with tiny brilliant shining suns. It is like the moon has come down to hover near the ground, and brought with it all the stars of the sky stuck onto its outsides, blinking as the massive vessel floats. Below it, animals herd to it, summoned there, two of each; elephants, insects, alligators, snakes, and flying creatures circling above.

Hovering on the ship's bridge a being appears, standing on two legs. Grey hair comes long out of its face, and somehow I can hear him in my brain.

“This is the first of the great floods” his voice rings in my brain, “it is one of fire and will destroy all. I come to take you to safety, where the pastures are green and glisten with rains. Come, come be in

peace. In time, you shall return, and multiply, and repopulate this planet once again....”

Weary animals saunter with heavy legs, and out of the big ship I see small balls of orbs floating, flying, and scooping them up with mighty jaws, before returning to bring their captives back. To eat them or save them, it is unclear, but no energy is left to give resistance, so they are eaten by the orbs and taken back inside the floating ship.

Two orbs shoot at us, and I watch as my female brethren gets swallowed. I see her face resigned to capture.

My pulse quickens. A trap, like a raid on a sleeping herd, a slaughter, the final…

No. No, I will not be caught… and just as the shooting ball comes flying to me I move. I run with legs that feel hollow. I run, with the last bit of my might, my legs kick, my legs fly, the fear of death commands them and I have faced monsters before and have not lost, but this one is new, moves without legs and has jaws of steel. My feet bound over the scorching ground; I dash and dash but not fast enough. The whooshing noises are closing in behind me.

It's done, I can't go on. There's no fuel left inside me for the run, just tiny particles of the dust in the air shooting in out of my lungs and the electric current in my spine that propels me. I can sense the jaws opening, ready to eat me, a boulder in front of me, and I run to it, ready to smash open my head against it because I won't be caught alive.

I pivot before the rock, hear the crashing noise of this round flying beast smashing into its surface, titanic crash noises and shavings flying everywhere. I collapse, fall to the ground, I'm done but not caught. Never will be caught again.

In the air, I see the giant ship swallow up the last of its captives, and it shoots into the sky. Gone. All of them gone.

It's never a mistake to run, I tell myself, never a mistake to run. I will be caught, but not alive. My eyes close, I feel safe, the tiny streams of running ecstasy remain in my blood. The wind buries me in sand, and I wait for the day someone will dig for me.