

SCAVENGER  
By Jesse Krenzel

Hunger had become the relentless enemy, the demon that stripped away all pride and pretense, the bottom line that drove people to do whatever they must. But while half the world starved, David Lathrop survived. On his knees, scraping away soil baked hard in the fiery crash of an alien space probe, he'd found hope. Not bad for a guy who'd prepared tax returns before the world went to hell.

Lathrop clawed more brittle cinders away from the glowing alien energy pod with his raw, bleeding fingers. How this fragile remnant of alien technology had survived the crash didn't matter. It would change everything. He'd never be hungry again and neither would Amber. She'd take him back for the children's sake, if not her own, all because of this crazy, beautiful egg-shaped ampule of alien goop. And it was almost his.

When the alien ship crashed outside Des Moines two years ago, the government called it a harmless robotic space probe. *No cause for concern*, they'd said and then sealed off the 10-acre crash site behind a tall concrete wall. Their posted signs warned that trespassers would be shot. But then the food riots started. Cities turned into ash heaps and most everyone forgot about the novelty behind the wall: but not the ultra-rich – the collectors. They never went hungry, and they always snapped up every shred of alien technology that made its way to the Black Market. The sheer beauty of this energy pod would surely drive the collectors into a bidding frenzy. And who knew what its glowing contents might be worth?

Too bad Lathrop's mentor, Garcia, hadn't lived to see this. He'd have appreciated it. The tunnel under the wall had been his idea. That was before he'd tried to steal Lathrop's share of their salvage.

A cloud of dust rising from the mold-covered ground triggered a dry coughing fit in Lathrop's chest. When the coughing stopped, he tugged the curved surface of the pod and felt the stubborn soil finally release. Lightheaded and trembling, he tried to gather himself. It would be tricky leaving the Zone this late. Things got strange here after dark, in the weird jungle of alien foliage that had grown up around the crash. At sunset, he'd seen odd movement within the veils

of twisted vines where leaves began to quiver and quake in the dead still air. No telling what they might do now, near full dark.

He secured the pod in a small canvas backpack and kicked away a tangle of vines at his feet, dreading the short hike through the dense jungle to the exit tunnel. A cautious man might have marked the pod's location and returned to dig it out in the morning. But Lathrop's hunger and desperation left him no margin for such luxury. He couldn't risk losing something like this. Garcia always said, *Grab what you can, when you can, and try not to get robbed or killed.* Good advice that Garcia himself hadn't followed.

Something brushed Lathrop's ankle. A thin black shape lay at his feet. *A snake? Impossible since the Extinction of the 2030s.* As he tried to focus his blurred vision, the thing moved: at least the end did. The growing black vine added length to its wriggling tip as he watched.

He staggered back. All around him, huge triangular leaves fluttered in the dead night air. The plants were waking. Ugly saw-toothed blue and red leaves turned toward him. Branches reached out with twigs that flexed like skeletal fingers.

Fear gave him new focus and strength as he jogged through coarse growth that scraped his bare hands and face. A small clearing allowed a pause for a few wheezing breaths, but all his hunger and exhaustion suddenly returned with a wave of panic. *Which way is the tunnel?* Nothing around him looked familiar. In the distance, the curved edge of the rising moon silhouetted the grotesque undulating limbs of an alien tree. He took a deep breath and gathered himself, saying, "Okay, that's approximately East, so the exit's over there, maybe a hundred yards."

Dappled patches of silver moonlight lit traces of a trail across the clearing. He started out but the path soon disappeared into a thicket of man-high brush. He stopped and tried to fight back his claustrophobic fear of being trapped within the tangle of sharp leaves and vines. The crazy thought of Garcia's vengeful ghost waiting for him in there didn't help: neither did his hunger.

Thoughts of beautiful Amber calmed him, her blue eyes and full lips, the way her shiny auburn hair spilled onto her bare shoulders. They'd be together again when he had food. Maybe there'd be more pods if he dared hunt for their subtle glow after dark. He could do it alone and never have to kill another partner. Whatever. One thing for certain: a better life awaited beyond the wall.

If only there was some food now.

He pumped himself up with thoughts of the future and started out again. A few steps into the thicket, the stiff angular leaves turned and stretched toward him. Their jagged edges felt like little bites on his skin. Maybe they were hungry too, like the carnivorous plants in his childhood terrarium that baited their insect prey with delicious scents and lured them to their death.

But nothing smelled delicious in the Zone. The pungent stink of rot filled the air.

A finger-sized vine slapped at Lathrop's arm and coiled around his exposed wrist. An ugly bush thrust a coconut-sized bud at his face. He raised a hand to protect his eyes, but the bulbous mass stopped short, suspended before him like a serpent about to strike. It wavered there, inches from his nose. Its moonlit petals parted to reveal a smooth ball of pale tissue. Its surface pulsed and shifted like living clay. Worse was the sense of something cold worming its way into his mind, probing and taking hold like the vine that trapped his wrist.

Lathrop struggled again to pull free, but the vine held like a steel band. The bud-thing churned and shaped itself to the form of a human head with the shifting features of a malformed face. Lathrop worked frantic fingers under the wrist vine but could not turn away from the face. The cheek bones and nose thinned to a pale parody of Amber's perfect features, complete with almond eyes that gazed into his.

But they weren't Amber's eyes. These eyes were dangerous and hungry.

Lathrop screamed and twisted free of the wrist-vine, bolting from the thicket, and gasping for breath. A gaping wound on his wrist felt inexplicably numb as he staggered toward the center of the crash site. Behind him the alien flora creaked and rustled with movement. The vines, excited now, stretched after him in a hungry frenzy.

After a hundred or so aching strides, he reached a small meadow and fell to his knees. All around him, the night air grew noisy with movement. Dark leaves sprouted from spindly branches and vines squeaked toward him with their impossible growth.

With no available route to his exit tunnel, Lathrop tried to think of some other way to survive this night. He'd been so close to having a good life with Amber, but now it was slipping away. *Maybe this isn't even real. Maybe it's all hallucinations from the mold fumes or the exhaustion.* Another thought came, one that felt true: *Maybe denial is prey's last fantasy before the predator's jaws slam shut.*

Then a new sound, something above the squeaking and rustling of the plants, a hum from behind a blackened sheet of crashed alien hull. He peered around the edge of the debris and

squinted at the bright blur. The image resolved to that of a police hovercraft a few yards away.

*Police? What are they doing here? This is a military zone.* He looked back at the wall of growth roiling toward him. Black vines led the way, wriggling out ahead to guide the mass that followed. *The plants or the police? A bullet in the head would be better than what's coming.*

He stomped on the leading vine. It drew back and trembled, cringing in pain as if more animal than plant. He limped into the slow path of the small hovercraft and raised his arms in surrender. Floating a few feet above the mold-covered ground, the craft stopped and trained its blinding spotlight on him. The cops were considering what to do. Maybe they'd simply shoot him and go on their way.

"Help me," Lathrop called. "I – I got lost, and now the plants are chasing me."

The spotlight swiveled to the rear, lighting the approaching biomass. Long seconds passed with the thrashing of the approaching brush and vines covering the soft hum of the craft.

"My name is David Lathrop," he shouted. "Let me in. Do what you want after that." A leading vine snaked around his ankle. He kicked it off. "Come on. I screwed up, but nobody should die like this."

Another vine slid up his pants legs. He screamed and pulled away. "COME ON!"

The hatch on the side of the craft slid open with a metallic click. Lathrop stomped on another vine and jumped toward the craft. A dark figure pulled him inside by his collar and slammed the hatch closed.

The cop handcuffed Lathrop to a metal ring on the wall and climbed into the left cock-pit seat.

*Only one cop,* thought Lathrop. *Maybe still a chance to work something out.*

Inside, the craft was much smaller than he'd imagined: two bucket seats up front, one empty, and the small bench seat in back next to the hatch. The dark cabin was lit only by the instrument cluster up front that glowed in vivid reds and greens and yellows.

The cop sat in unmoving silence as an avalanche of vines looped over the windshield and grated against the hover-craft's hull.

"Are you going to get us out of here, or what?" said Lathrop.

The cop began working a series of switches on the instrument panel. The hum of the engine grew louder, straining. But the vines held fast.

"What is it?" said Lathrop.

"Shut up." The cop flicked more switches and the craft quieted. "We're stuck here until

morning. Because of you.” He turned to Lathrop. “What the hell are you doing in the Zone? And at night?”

“You know what I was doing,” said Lathrop, relaxing a little, feeling the full measure of his exhaustion.

The cop turned back to the instruments saying, “Whatever you were after isn’t worth getting pinwheeled by those things.”

“Pinwheeled?”

“Yeah, when a vine runs a pointed tendril down your throat, or up your ass, gives you a spin.”

“No, probably not worth that.” Lathrop touched the numb wound on his wrist.

“Probably?” he scoffed. “What’d you find out there?”

Something about the cop seemed familiar. He was big and had only a few inches of clearance beneath the craft’s ceiling. From the light of the instruments, Lathrop could see dark hair, a big square jaw, and small ears that laid back against his head. The craft tilted back and then righted itself as another vine took hold.

“Can’t you blast us out of here,” said Lathrop.

“Blast? K-keep your mouth shut, or I’ll change my mind and dump you now. I’ve been three months without a d-day off, and sixteen straight hours on this shift, just to get cocooned with you. So, shut up and think about your prison time.” The cop’s stutter was familiar too.

“At least there’ll be food,” said Lathrop.

The cop scoffed again. “You think we sh-share our food with criminals while our kids starve at home? You’re looking at your food, Felon.” He gestured toward the mass of vines on the windshield. “You want it boiled or baked?”

“That stuff is edible?”

“That’s not what I said.” The cop’s sarcasm struck another chord in Lathrop’s memory.

“What’s your name, Officer?”

“Shut up.”

“Come on. I told you I’m Lathrop. You know that name, don’t you? Maybe my brother, Kenneth?”

Staring at the instrument panel, the cop said nothing.

“You knew Ken, didn’t you?”

The cop sipped from a canteen, thinking. He glanced back at Lathrop. “Your old man

should'a snipped his own balls after having a kid like Kenny."

*Jackpot.* Lathrop grinned. "Yeah, I remember you hanging out with him in high school. Miller, Mullins? Something like that?"

The cop reached back between the seats and punched him hard in the face. "What are you g-goin' for here? You think I'm gonna turn you loose because I knew your dead brother? Fine, get off the craft now, if you want."

Lathrop wiped blood off his split lip and glanced at the vine-covered windshield. "No, I'm fine here."

Neither of them spoke for a long time. The sound of the vines on the craft grew softer, muffled by layers of foliage already clinging to the hull. The cabin was cramped and smelled bad, but at least it was warm; and Lathrop's feet had finally stopped hurting. His stomach let out a long, hollow growl.

"Stop that," said the cop.

"Can't. What was on that alien ship besides plants?"

"Do I look like a t-tour guide?" He stared at the vines for a long moment. "I don't know what came on that thing, but I b-bet it's as hungry as everybody else around here." Then he turned back to Lathrop. "You prob'ly know more than me. I've never been out of this hovercraft in the Zone."

"Have you ever seen energy pods laying around in here?" asked Lathrop. "Football-sized things that glow in the dark?"

"That's a bullshit rumor."

"No, it's not." He waited, hoping Miller or Mullins was interested in a deal.

"So, those are worth a lot?" said the cop.

"Yeah, a lot."

"How much?"

"Enough to feed a family for months, maybe years. What's that smell? It's like rotting garbage in here."

"The plants give off a stink at night. Where do you sell those things?"

"I've got contacts. Reliable people who can handle whatever I bring them. How often are you in here?" Lathrop's mind was in overdrive. *What could be better than a cop partner in a hovercraft?*

"Three or four nights a week, when I'm not on patrol in the city."

“There’s something on the floor,” said Lathrop, squinting down into the reflection of instrument lights. “It’s wet. Are we leaking?”

“Some kind’a condensation that happens when the vines take hold. We hose it out back at the station.”

“Do you want to see one?”

“One what?”

“An energy pod.”

Miller or Mullins watched Lathrop release the shoulder straps on the backpack and maneuver his cuffed hands to withdraw the glowing pod. In the pod’s cool blue light, the cop seemed bigger. His head was actually touching the low ceiling. His waxen complexion and flat eyes looked cold and corpse-like. The interior walls of the craft were wrong, too: rough and grainy, not the sort of smooth hi-tech alloy that Lathrop expected. And the instrument panel up front seemed flat and somehow vague, like a child’s prop instead of an actual device. *And why hadn’t the cop searched my backpack when he cuffed me?*

Something cool dripped on Lathrop’s hand. The ceiling was oozing more of the smelly fluid that pooled at his feet. The depth was half-way up his calves, numbing all that it touched. He tried to raise his feet out of the soup, confused by the bizarre sight. Below his knees, nothing remained of his feet and lower legs. He screamed and looked to Miller or Mullins, or whatever he was. The cop’s head had grown oddly misshapen with his torso twisting and contorting in impossible angles. The instrument panel flickered and went black. The dripping walls and ceiling of the craft were contracting like a leaking balloon.

In that moment, Lathrop’s mind slammed shut. It went as numb as his dissolved and digested feet. Deep in his prey fantasy, he clutched the pod to his chest, rejecting the true nature of the thing, denying that the warm glowing object he embraced was only alien bait.

END