

New Fiction from Henry Kronk: “We Found Out”

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Could be an ambush.”

“Could be.”

“But here? The corps is miles back.”

“Looks like it broke down.”

It was true. Steam trailed through the windows in the engine. Driggs could see the shimmer of heat from the stack all this way off without the bins. The tracks went through a wooded stretch, but the high desert loomed off in the distance and vegetation grew sparse. They could see intermittent open stretches along a length of the train. And in those stretches, no cigarettes burned, no bayonets glinted, no enemy moved. Not that Driggs could see.

“Let’s take a look.”

“Let’s report back to Captain first.”

Driggs looked from Cote’s left eye across her freckled nose to her right and back to her left. Cote gazed, unblinking, back. She broke the silence.

“You know about Captain’s and Donwalla’s beef. You were at muster this morning. You were standing right next to me when he leaned in with his pink cheeks and spat in my face. Shouldn’t be wearing my SSI for the 3rd Rangers? Are you shitting me? After what happened? Driggs, the man doesn’t trust us. He doesn’t like us. He has no faith in us. Until we

do something about that, we're on our own."

Cote had been blessed with the gifts of persuasion. Driggs had been wary of this fact since soldier onlining in Tacoma. Despite the war, one night she had gotten her hands on a bottle of whiskey. When half of it was gone, she then had talked Driggs into climbing one of the base's mobile towers. From the top, they could see Mt. Rainier in the moonlight and, to the north, the remnants of Seattle still smoldering.

"The Janks could be back any minute," Cote broke in again. "If we take this back to Captain, he'll chew us out for not taking a closer look. And then he'll round up a half dozen more experienced rangers and investigate. And if-if-this freighter is still around when they come back in a couple hours, they're going to keep all the scotch and cigars they find for themselves."

Driggs twitched. Cote chewed a twig and stared o at the train. It didn't resemble any commuters or freights he'd seen. It was black and dilapidated. It looked like the trains from the pictures he'd seen in his history textbook.



Finally, he spat. "Ok, we take a closer look. And then we report back."

Driggs scrambled down the blu face after Cote. He jumped the last ten feet and skidded through the scree. The two rangers made their way forward, hugging the red pines and stopping every 100 yards to listen and scan. Only hawk calls broke the silence, along with their own footsteps, which were impossible to stifle on the tinder-dry pine needles.

Whenever the sirens used to blow and they sheltered in their basement, Driggs' father would always tell him by the light of

their LED lantern about how he took up smoking on the day of November 3rd, 2062.

“It was then that me and just about everyone else in Port Angeles knew for sure that the house was divided against itself,” he used to say. “You had President-Elect Morrison parading across screens and broadcasts, celebrating his 92% landslide victory over the so-called ‘Supreme Commander.’ We thought he was such a plushed-up load of wash—the ‘General’ or whatever else he was calling himself. He really showed us. Suddenly, everyone realizes we’re not hearing a chirp from regions all across the country. The Southwest, the Rockies, the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic, Alaska, Florida, Maine—they all went dark. Nothing. 404 Error Page Not Found. Then we heard rumors about the transport and information sector sabotage, the round ups, the murders.

I walked to the corner store and asked for a pack and a lighter. Red Robert who owned the place knew all too well I was 14. He didn’t say a thing to me. Didn’t even look at me. He just kept staring at his screen.

I walked home, sat on the front porch, and I’ll always remember this: The Church of Latter Day Saints across the street, they’d put up a new sign a few days before. It said, ‘Free trip to Heaven! Details inside.’ I hated it and I loved it. I wanted to believe it. I wanted somewhere to escape to. I wanted faith. But all I had was a pack of smokes. I flicked my butts at that sign all afternoon.”

There in the high desert, twelve years after his father had passed, Driggs remembered the last cigarette he had smoked with painful clarity. When the word got out that tobacco rations had been cut altogether three weeks back, he started measuring his supplies. He took out his three remaining packs from the waterproof pocket in the top of his rucksack. He

lined the blank government issued labels side by side. Two were full, and four remained in the third. He took out two darts, lit them at the same time, and resigned himself to two a day for the next three weeks. Maybe by that time, things would change.

Six days and twelve cigarettes in, the Third Rangers made it over the Cascades and down onto the plains. Screening the movement of the main corps, his unit skirted the edge of the forest. Then they were ordered to scout ahead. Intelligence believed a Jank division sat camped some miles off and were backed up by guerrilla mountain people, no less.

At dusk, the corps was 10 miles back, and dark clouds began to pour over the foothills to the West like slow-flowing lava. Captain Donwalla ordered the rangers to camp. They posted sentries, ate a cold supper, and staked out their bivouacs for the night. Cote had wandered off to piss. When she came back, she told Driggs about a cave she'd found and how there was room for two. And then the rain started coming down by the gallon. Driggs gathered up his roll and followed her through the storm. It was some ways out and it took Cote ten minutes wandering around before she found it again. But a cave it was, and it was dry. The two laid out their rolls and soon were sound asleep.

They woke at first light, collected their things, and headed down the gentle slope. Mist hung just above the treetops. Their fellow rangers' shelters lay among the pines glistening from the rain.

"How about that," Cote said. "First ones up. Guess that proves Donwalla does sleep after all."

But as Driggs stepped beyond the next tree, his captain's eyes met him with a stare. He wheeled about in horror. Donwalla's high-and-tight head was pinned to the tree with a rebar stake. His body was nowhere to be seen.

Driggs ran over to the nearest bivvy and kicked it. No response. Same with the next. And the next. Looking closer, he saw knife cuts through the denier nylon.

"We need to get out of here," Driggs said to Cote, who was slumped down below Donwalla's head with her rifle raised.

"Cote!"

Cote held up her hand, and Driggs clammed up. He caught some movement at his 2:00. And then Cote's rifle went off and a body fell in the distance.

"Go," she whispered.

Shots responded. The instinct for survival lifted Driggs' feet with the momentum of generations, tipping him onward.

After they reported back to the Colonel, Driggs smoked every cigarette he had left. Their unit, the Third Rangers, which now numbered two, was dissolved and absorbed by the Fourth.

They could see the train through the trees now and they began to smell the faint smell of death.

"Are those dogs barking?"

Driggs stopped walking and listened.

"Not dogs ... vultures."

They followed the sound and sure enough came upon the bodies of three horses beside the first car. After pausing for a few, the rangers approached.

They hadn't been dead long. Their coats still gleamed and the few carrion birds that had arrived were only just beginning to battle over the choice spots. Driggs could see no apparent cause of death.

"If these horses just died, where's the smell coming from?"

Cote shook her head. A trail of blood ran off toward the train. They followed it across the coupling and around the other side.

A Jank lay slumped against a wheel. He wore a moustache not unlike the one Driggs' father used to grow. His bewildered eyes gazed up into the muzzles of Driggs' and Cote's rifles. With his left hand, he clutched his right arm. It had been severed off cleanly—surgically—below the elbow. His sand-colored uniform was stained crimson down one side.

"What happened?" Cote whispered.

The dying man raised his eyes.

"Do you have a cigarette?"

"No." They said in unison.

His mouth went slack. And he lowered his gaze to the horizon.

"What happened?" Driggs said and nudged the dying man's stump with his muzzle.

He gasped and, in racking breaths: "We—we—we—we ..."

"We what?"

"We found ... out."

He used his last breath to say his last word. His left arm dropped and his head swung forward.

"Found out what?"

"Fuck knows. Check him and them." Cote gestured to a distance away from the train where a half dozen dead Janks lay lined up in a neat row. "I'm going inside."

Like the horses, none of these Janks bore any visible wounds.

Driggs searched their khaki pockets. He found a locket holding the picture of a woman that could be a mother or a wife to the late wearer, a stained embroidered handkerchief, some worn polaroid porn, two journals, a deck of cards, fishing line and three lures, along with the six Jank regulation canteens, carbines, clasp knives, fire pods, watches, bivouacs, and extra rounds. The unit leader, one Captain Harrison, also carried a pair of binos, a compass, a spot device, and one melted 'government' issued Jank chocolate bar. Driggs tore open the package and shoved the melted bar in his mouth. He tightly closed his front teeth and slowly pulled the plastic out, trapping the chocolate within.

When Driggs was 17, Jank guerrillas blew up the Port Angeles supply stockpile. He and most of the others started walking south towards Olympia. The rumors were that the Mounties at the Canadian border had orders to shoot migrants on sight. Still, some scraped supplies together and set off in boats hoping to land somewhere on Vancouver Island or to venture further north and seek shelter with the Haida.

With his father dead and his mother off running a field hospital somewhere around Fort Vancouver, he loaded up a backpack and headed south alone. He walked from sunrise to sundown and on a little further, lighting the way with his headlamp. The road was full of others like himself.

When the sun rose the next morning, he carried on. Toward noon around Briedablick, Driggs found himself in open farm land, with the Olympic range framing the horizon. The road ran beside a river bordered by blackberry bushes and poplars. Two quads motored up towards him, traveling in the opposite direction. It was two shirtless boys with shapeless torsos, younger than Driggs. As they neared, they slowed, and then stopped ten feet away. One showed him his shotgun.

"You can stop right there."

Driggs stopped.

"Put your pack on the ground and empty your pockets."

"I don't have any money or much of value. I'm heading to—"

"PUT your pack on the ground. And empty your pockets."

One of the boys' quads had a trailer fixed to it. Driggs saw other packs, suitcases, and miscellaneous gear in the back.

Then all three heard a ping followed by the sprinkling of glass. The left rearview mirror of the quad ridden by the boy with the shotgun had been shot off. A sandy-haired young woman wearing tan waders with a fishing net on her belt walked slowly up from the river bank with a rifle under her cheek.

"The next one is going through your ear if you don't throw that shotgun down."

The unarmed boy towing the load looked to his friend.

"Do it, Jackson."

Jackson tossed his shotgun on to the pavement.

"Good job. Why don't you go pick that up?" Driggs knew she was talking to him. He walked forward and grabbed the gun. The woman now hurried forward to face the boys.

"If it were olden days, I'd say you boys are going to hell, robbing refugees in times like this. But we're past that now. I guess I'll say you better think about how you treat your fellow humans, otherwise you're bound to wind up dead. Get out of here."

The boys fired up their quads without a word and rode them past. At last, the woman lowered her rifle.

"My name's Cote."

"Driggs."

"Driggs!"

He turned to see Cote's head poking out the doorway of the engine.

"Come on and check this out."

He sneezed as he entered the cloud of dust in the engine car. Cote had her undershirt up over her nose. It was hot; fuel still burned in the engine. A fine layer of dust covered the controls, the sills, every surface. It blew like smoke out into the car behind. The only marks in the dust were their own.

"Cote—what the...?"

"What?"

"What's with the dust?"

"It was windy last night."

"The windows are closed."

"The door's open."

"This isn't sand."

"Whatever. Look at this." Cote held a piece of a single piece of paper with a dull red seal at the bottom corner. "Can you read it?"

Driggs brought it into the light, but it was so heavily mildewed that the words had been all but completely obscured. He saw marks that looked like '□□□□.'

“Not a chance.”

They jumped out and headed to the next car. Driggs struggled to pull the iron latch down, and it creaked along the way. They needed to push together just to crack the door ajar. But the second they had it open, they were hit with a wave of aroma and moisture. Cote and Driggs climbed in to another world.

All was dark and dank; heavy and hard to breathe. Driggs had to sit down. An aisle ran down the center of the car and, on either side, there were dense rows of lush plants. Their green stretched out, down, and up toward the glass-paned ceiling.

Orange-purple flowers sprang from the gaps in the husky trunks and yellow fruit hung in bunches.

“What on earth ...”

Driggs wandered closer. He’d never seen flowers like these. And now that he was close, he could smell the ripeness of the fruit. He picked off a bunch and brought them to his mouth, bit, chewed, and swallowed.

“Cote!”

“What the hell, Driggs?”

“Try this fruit!”

Cote grabbed her own bunch. A second passed.

“Jesus on a jet plane! That’s good!”

“Hehehe, pretty tasty, aren’t they?”

The laugh sounded a guttural baritone and echoed throughout the car. Driggs and Cote froze. In the corner, a dark figure rose from a sitting position in the shadows.

“FREEZE JANK.” Juice ran in a stream from Cote’s chin down on

to the stock of her raised rifle.

The shadow raised its hands and spoke. "*Hinene*. There is no need, for I am unarmed."

"Where is this train headed?"

The figure walked forward. He was tall and wore a black coat with tails. A black, brimmed hat hid his downturned face from view.

"The official documents say Seattle, but its true destination is Vancouver, and on from there."

"Seattle? But our forces are all the way south to Bend."

"The present conflict between your state and your opponent's state does not concern me."

"Well then how'd you get all this fruit past the Jank inspectors?"

"They're called chupas, and I have a few cards up my sleeve."

"Are those cards Verified Greenbacks?"

"Hehehe oh no."

"Why'd you break down?"

"I didn't. I received word your forces have pulled up the tracks a few miles north. I just stopped." He drew these final words out.

"Who are those Janks outside?"

"Part of a platoon from the Army of the Supreme Comander."

"Why are they dead?"

"Why? Were you family?"

“No, but—”

“Why’s the engine so dusty?” Driggs’ voice cracked.

The figure paused, slowly turning his head. “I like it that way.”

“So, what is this? What—” Cote paused. Her rifle dipped. “—what are you bringing north? Why are there a half a dozen dead bodies outside? It’s time to start making some sense here pal.”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?”

Driggs’ mouth opened wider. Cote stomped her foot.

“Whatever man. First, I want you to step forward. Driggs, go pat him down.”

When Driggs slapped the figure’s breast pocket, a hollow thud sounded. Out of it emerged an unopened pack of Marlboro Reds.

“Want a smoke?”

The figure raised his head to reveal a pale grin.

Outside, his skin looked even paler. Nicotine washed over Driggs in gentle waves. Despite the heat and the black dress, the man did not sweat.

“What’s your name?”

Cote had already finished her cigarette, after dragging furiously with it clenched between her teeth. She still held her rifle raised with both hands. The man offered her one more.

“You can call me Jo.”

“Where are you from?”

"Down south."

Driggs finished his cigarette and took one more. They all smoked in silence down to the filter.

"Ok, let's see the rest of the train."

"Yes Private Cote. I have another car of the chupas here." He gestured inside the following dank container. "Their root can be used to mix a psychedelic tea. Many find it heals afflictions of the nerves and the mind. It can also serve as an undetectable poison in highly concentrated doses."

Jo cracked the latch on the car and thrust it effortlessly open. Cote and Driggs followed him inside to the close air.

"Chupas have an amazing ability to regenerate if injured."

He reached out and snapped off a green outgrowth.

"And their shoots make for an excellent salad addition."

He popped it in his mouth.

"Look."

Driggs and Cote bent close. In the place where the shoot had grown, already another young outgrowth had emerged to replace it.

"I love these organisms for their structure. Human society for centuries now has prized and supported the lone individual, The Napoleons, the Michael Jordans, The Supreme Comandante who overthrew the hold of the technologists that bound him."

"That's not us, pal."

"But he's still in charge, isn't he?"

"Down there he is."

"It makes no difference. The purpose of life is to live, to

love, and to spread life and love. And with luck, new creations will do the same. Over the years, organisms typically do one thing well. They either love well and spread love, or they live well and spread life. Too often, they destroy life to spread love or destroy love to spread life. They see things as a competition. But these chupas strike a balance. Like the poplar, or the hive, or the rhizome, they have no conception of the individual. They may appear to be single organisms, even being potted here individually for more convenient transportation. But in the wild, they exist as a network. Each grove represents a hub of chupa life. If one falls ill or suffers damage, others will divert resources to help it rebuild. In potting them like this, I have done them a great injury. I hope they will forgive me."

"So this is what all those Janks got jacked up for?"

"I doubt those men had seen a chupa in their lives."

"Look, Jo," Cote scratched her narrow hip. "These plants are great and all, but we need to get this tour moving so we can make our report to our superior. And I'm also gonna need another of those Reds."

"As you wish, Private Cote."

The next car was refreshingly cool, refrigerated well below the heat outside. The walls were lined with illuminated glass cases filled with glass cylinders. The cylinders were filled with liquid, and through the liquid floated particulate matter.

"What's in those?"

"Other creatures. Well, their DNA at least."

Driggs coughed. He remembered his mother's lab where she collected dead specimens in jars. Always in the evening, after her office hours had ended, his father sent him down there to call her for dinner. She left her work with gravity. Driggs'

older brother and sister had died of the measles. His own cheeks and forehead still bore the scars from when he had it. His mother would talk about how humans once knew how to cure and vaccinate against it. But since the Breach, doctors in the Resistance had lost much knowledge.

“What creatures?” Cote still held her rifle pointed between Jo’s shoulder blades, though she had lowered it to her hip.

“Some of my favorites. The cuttlefish, the bonobo, the venus fly trap. The three-toed sloth—they’re cute. I very nearly made room for the Welsh Corgi too ...”

“Why aren’t the chupas in one of those?”

“Well, they can’t bear fruit if they’re just DNA in a test tube, can they?”

In other cars, Jo showed Driggs and Cote an assortment of bins filled with precious gems and earth metals, jagged materials that glinted with sunlight. Another held rows of filing cabinets. In another, they found dusty shelves full of old holy books, all written in honor and glory to the creator.

They walked back outside just before the caboose. Jo turned and said, “I want to tell you about a people I once knew.

When once, they were lonesome, I took them in. They had nowhere to go, no values to live by. I gave them purpose. When once, the yoke wore and wore till it fit too snug, I handed them the axe. I gave them the grinder, the haft, and the bronze point to crown it.

I bade them to rise up against their enslavers in Mizraim, and brought them to the land which I promised unto their fathers; and I said, ‘I will never break my covenant.’ I parted the waters.

When once, and many times more, fires of rival tribes burned too close, I raised the spirit in them and sent rider after

rider galloping down the mountainside. I cared for them like children, and in return, they called me father.

They were very much like you—taking up arms, offering their lives to further their cause, even under a commander who thinks you should have perished alongside your comrades and his rival whom he hated. I know they would recognize you both as a brother and a sister in arms in the fight to preserve life and love.”

Driggs felt his vision go warm and hazy. A low buzzing became audible. He realized that he was slowly nodding. Cote fixed him with a quizzical expression, and he quickly regained his focus. Jo was still talking.

“With them and with those that came before, I built a beautiful society of plants, mammals, fungi, cetaceans, bacteria, Noah, Abraham, Lot, and countless other houses, domains, and families.

But these great men and women have passed. Like rain upon the mountain, they have all passed. As the years went on, fewer and fewer loved me. Some claimed they had killed me. And now, I fear the conflict between your warring factions will destroy all I—all we—have built. I ask that you grant me safe passage. I carry with me only life and love. All I ask is you help me spread it. Go unto your commanders and rally your brothers and sisters with my message. Re-lay the tracks south of Bend and allow me safe passage north.”

The sound of Jo’s voice died away slowly in the dry desert air. Driggs looked from Jo to Cote. He was about to speak. And then—

“What’s in that car?” Cote asked, sucking on another red, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder to the caboose of the train.

“That—that car holds more chupas.”

“Uh-huh.”

The buzzing subsided. Driggs stood up straight and raised his voice. “Why aren’t those chupas with the others at the front of the train?”

“I wasn’t sure if I’d have room.”

Cote looked from her fellow ranger to Jo.

“Go open it, Driggs.”

“It might interest you to know a unit of the Commander’s cavalry will arrive within minutes. I can only delay them for so long. I beg you, make your report.”

“I don’t hear anything except those vultures.”

Cote pointed her rifle at Jo again.

“Open it, Driggs.”

Driggs started walking toward the caboose. Jo looked to Driggs and back to Cote, who kept her rifle raised.

Impossibly fast, Jo crouched to the ground and threw sand in Cote’s face.

“Driggs!”

He wheeled around to see Jo flying across the sand. His knees collided with Driggs chest and knocked him to the ground.

“I thought I could convince you—I thought I could inspire you,” Jo spat, his face growing taunt and drawn beneath his black brim. “But it appears you’re like the others. And like the Amakelites, you shan’t be spared. It is written.”

At that moment a bullet passed through Jo’s head from jaw hinge to jaw hinge. He was knocked sideways o□ Driggs. Cote sprung forward, running toward the caboose door. Jo rose

unscathed.

"NO," he shouted. Driggs felt his bones vibrate. Cote made it to the door and popped the hinge down with the butt of her rifle. A sound like a shell blast emitted from the car. The door exploded open and Cote and Driggs were lifted from the ground and thrown through the air. Cote struck a tree and landed unconscious among the dry needles.

Driggs landed hard a few dozen feet away and scrambled over to his fellow ranger. But before he could rouse her, he raised his head to watch the train. A kind of smoke or cloud was issuing from the caboose. Behind it, he saw what looked like masses of limbs and pulsing organs. They were hit with a wave of stench. It smelled like thousands of nameless carcasses left to rot under the sun. Soundless bolts of lightning flashed, followed by a howling gale. Jo stood beside the train, but had inexplicably grown in size. He grew larger still, towering over the train, seeking to contain the cloud with his hat. His enormous bare head revealed tattoos of ancient characters and deep, purple scars.

Fire, ice, toil, and sickness flew from the open caboose, igniting the forest floor beside the tracks. The wind from the train spurred the fire on, toward where Driggs and Cote lay. Driggs hoisted Cote over his shoulder and ran north along the track. Past the train, he crossed the ties and made his way into the forest. He knelt and laid Cote on the ground. After gently lowering her head, his hand came away bloody, and he uncorked his canteen to splash water on his friend's face.

Through the storm issuing from the train, he shouted her name. Her eyes flickered.

"Cote, we have to go!"

Her eyes snapped open, her jaw clenched, and her hand thrust up to catch Driggs' shoulder.

"Help me up."

The rangers ran back toward the blue and scrambled up it. At the top, they collapsed with heaving chests and looked back. The fire had spread impossibly fast. It had crossed the tracks, and approached in their direction.

"Look."

A section of the horizon shimmered.

"What is that?"

"Hell is murky."

Driggs raised his binos. Three Jank columns marched forward. Refocusing, he saw cavalry units peppering the sparse forest. Driggs looked back to the train. The now-massive Jo still battled amongst the storm that issued from the caboose. A noise sounded at their nine and the two looked up to see incoming Resistance birds.

"Wonder what good they'll do."

"Maybe a little more damage than my rifle."

The two watched as the aircraft rained down missiles onto the Jank cavalry and into the cloud in which Jo was now obscured. Upon contact, the train erupted and flung ash and smoke miles overhead. Below, the fire drew nearer and nearer.

"Cote."

She looked at her ranger in arms. Driggs held out the half empty pack of Reds, with one protruding in her direction.

"They were knocked loose when that thing had me down."

"Driggs," Cote said, lighting up, "you're one hell of a ranger."