

If it were only the dinosaurs and the rugged wilderness out to get them . . .

NO MERCY *in* DINOSAUR COUNTRY

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Author's Notes

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Chapter 1



Kat desperately needed time to unwind – away from the rest of the crew and the bickering which had become infectious as of late. Being on the fly, hopping from world to world, had worn her down. Her eyes closed for a moment, and she sighed. The rest of the crew were just as tired, but they weren't to blame any more than herself. They all just badly needed a break from excitement for a while.

Off on the northern horizon stood tall mountains of ice. Not where she and her crew were headed, but the glaciers were responsible for the way the land had been sculpted and the way the animals had developed on this world. A reminder there are always forces more powerful than humans in shaping the universe. This world bore no resemblance to the one on which she had grown up, but it had a certain appeal to her, nonetheless. It had spots one could sit and hear nothing but the whispering wind. There was the abundance of wildlife with a few truly spectacular animals, and she never tired of watching them. Only of having to talk about them.

Flinging her long auburn pigtails in an arc around her head, Kat turned until her eyes locked onto George. She frowned. “It was you who insisted on getting this last fucking shoot in. So, are we doing this or what? If you want to just call it off, you

know, I would be fine with that.” She heard the edge on her tone when she spoke but felt she lacked control over it. She sighed a second time. It was weariness, really. Nothing a long vacation couldn’t fix.

Her producer, George DeMooney, glanced in her direction and harrumphed. George also did the directing and half the filming. “Just keep your Glocks in their holsters.” He scratched the top of his shiny forehead, rubbed his hand over what little remained in the back, and then returned back to his fiddling.

Kat rolled her eyes. She had only one Glock on her, a 19C Gen6, but it was not worth the effort to correct him with a retort over that.

“And don’t fricking shoot off my butt with them just ’cause I’m the one holding us back this morning.” He pointed down at the gadget in front of him. “Been fricking struggling to get this new camera to work. For the show, you know. It’ll make it better.”

“You’ve been fiddling with that all week.”

“Yeah, no tech support out here. But I finally figured out what I’ve been doing wrong.”

“Oh, for all the heavens’ sake, can’t you just use one of your old ones? This is our last shoot of the season, right?” Kat didn’t like how every little thing irritated her.

“Camera tech’s my area,” George snapped back. “It’s not like I tell you—”

“Tell me what?” Kat glared at him. “How to stand? How to point? You tell me how to do everything except—”

“I’m your director.” George cut her off before she could finish the crude remark that dangled on the tip of her tongue. He broke eye contact with her and fiddled with his camera again and then mumbled, “I just want this to be a good episode.”

Yes, Kat had to admit he was always trying to make the episodes better. The consummate perfectionist. But she wondered how much his persistence with the gadget was due to his stubbornness to get something out of it before the end of the trip since he had paid a bundle to have it meet up with them in time after being backordered. “We’ve been shooting footage for a six gosh darn days. There’s got to be enough to piece together an episode.”

“Yeah, well, we could. But it just feels to me to be missing something that could make it ... um ... special. Hoping this camera can get us that something special. There.” He popped a panel back in place. “I got it working now, so don’t get your ...” George cut himself off and mumbled something unintelligible instead. He turned back to Kat. “Let’s get this last footage done, and then we can all get the hell out of here. Shuttle’s set to arrive in just over four hours.”

Kat’s eye caught Jose and Ricky heading over. Jose was yelling something at Ricky, and Ricky was not taking it. She definitely did not have a monopoly on crankiness. The problem was they had been shooting episodes week after week for nearly six months, and they all sorely needed a break. Time away from each other.

Kat turned back to George. “What’s so special about this

camera anyway?”

George chuckled as he leaned over into a cardboard box and pulled out a huge case. Inside was what looked like a miniature blimp, complete with tiny stubby wings and propellers attached. “Camera mounts to this. It’s the latest in drones. Filled with helium to give buoyancy. Not just quiet, but totally silent. The only downside is it can’t be used if winds are too high.” He grinned from ear to ear.

Getting the camera working had given George joy, and that somehow irritated Kat. “Or if there is a football game nearby.”

“Very funny.” George faked a chuckle. “Nobody’s tossing my camera.”

Kat shook her head as she rose. It was not that she couldn’t see the value in the new camera drone; it was just that she wanted to be done with the shoot. Get back to civilization and sleep in a real bed instead of on a cot in a tent.

George rose from the table where he had been sitting, signaling to everyone he was finally ready.

“Let’s get on with it then.” Kat peered toward the west. They would have to hike out to where they had last seen the animals, get their footage, and still get back in time. The last thing she wanted was to be late getting back. Hopefully, the animals were still in the vicinity of where they had been last spotted, or the whole morning was going to be a waste.

“Right. But you better spit out whatever sour apple you bit into before we start shooting. I need Katgirl, not Tartgirl in front of the camera.” George squinted at her a moment longer before

turning his head. “Jose, grab your gear. Ricky, you carry this case for me. We’re heading out.”

Kat crossed her arms and frowned. However, she knew he was right. She needed to cheer up before the filming started. Or at least act like she had once the cameras were rolling.

“Nothing but a fricking mule,” Ricky mumbled as he reached for the case.

George ignored the comment and turned toward the tall older man who just exited the closest tent. “Doctor Toulouse, you’re welcome to join us.”

The doctor was the scientist kind of doctor. He called himself a mammalogist while some of the others on his small team called themselves ethologists. They were here on the world to study the animals just because that’s what scientists do. They study things.

“I’d really love to, but I’ve got samples I need to make sure are properly packed for the shipment back to Prime.” Dr. Toulouse stroked his bushy red beard with two fingers. “Just make sure you’re back in time before the shuttle leaves. They stick to their schedules and won’t be back again for another week.” Kat could see Toulouse had tired of their irritability too and didn’t want any part of it. She didn’t blame him.

“We’ll be back in plenty of time,” George said as he turned and followed Kat.

Toulouse was the reason Kat and her team had been able to come to the world. Worlds like this one had some of the most interesting wildlife in the multiverse but could only be accessed

via the science teams' supply shuttles. Luckily, Toulouse was a big fan of their show and was thrilled when George asked if he could bring his small film crew. Most scientists he had contacted simply said no. They didn't want a video team messing up their pristine research environments, as if George and Kat's presence were really going to make a difference. But after a week of the filming crew being around, even Toulouse had apparently gotten his fill of them.

Kat led the way as they marched across the tundra, colored red and yellow by the moss and small bushes that covered the rocky terrain. A warm dry breeze blew from the south, probably not strong enough to prevent George from trying out his new toy. In the distance to the north stood what appeared to be mountains but actually were glaciers, extending far to the south on the continent; the same ones Kat had stared at earlier.

This was an alternate Earth, Earth₁₉₁₂ to be precise. The 1911th alternate Earth to be catalogued back at Earth₁, also called Earth Prime or simply Prime. Kat was reminded of an Earth similar to Earth₁₉₁₂ which she had been on half a dozen years prior when the ship she had been on was lost. That version of Earth too had a North America locked in the grips of an ice age.

Kat topped a knoll and stopped, waiting for the others to catch up. A wide valley spread out below. Unlike the rocky terrain they had just hiked across, the valley was bright green with fast-growing grass. A shallow milky river wound through the center of the valley which stretched to the left as far as they could see. To the right, it wound around a bend and continued

beyond their sight up toward the glacier.

Down in the valley a few hundred yards away, six magnificent giants grazed on the verdant grass of the wet valley. Woolly mammoths.

Kat glanced back at the others. George already tugged on his new drone with its camera from the case Ricky had carried. She wondered, as she watched the small skinny kid next to George push his wire-rimmed glasses back up higher on his nose, whether he would be back after their much-needed break. The kid, barely out of high school, seemed homesick most of the time. But mostly, Kat sensed George was a little disappointed in him. Off to the left of George, Jose carried a second camera in his big muscular arms and already had it already pointed at the giants.

George was right. She needed something to put herself into a better mood. She thought back to when they were on Earth₉₈, a mostly water world with a few archipelagos. She had placed an eye patch with its elastic strap over one of the 3D camera's two lenses when George had turned his attention elsewhere. Then she kept pointing out across the surf and saying things like "Aargh! Thar she blows," and "Aargh! Load the monkey," until he figured out why his camera suddenly wasn't working right. Afterward he laughed along with her and the rest of the crew. She smiled at the memory and reminded herself he really was a good man, just a little obsessed at times.

She turned her attention back to the mammoths and assessed where to do the shoot. George would also be looking, but he

would be using only his artistic eye. She would have the final say on where she stood, taking into consideration her own safety. After all, when it would be her butt closest to the fire, she had the right to say when it was too hot. An outcrop of rocks a little to the right of the animals caught her eye. The rocks weren't a big enough barrier to really stop an irate animal if it decided to charge, but the rocks should at least slow it down. Besides, six days of being around the animals had given her a sense of their temperament. She pointed the spot out to George, and he nodded his approval. She eased down to the spot, not wanting to spook the animals, and knowing George needed time to get his camera in optimal position.

Once she reached the rocks, she pulled out a pad and used its camera to check her appearance. She made a minor adjustment to her hair in front and brushed one of her pigtails back. She had wanted to cut her hair short, but George insisted she keep the tails. They had become a hallmark of her video persona. The young woman known as Katgirl, the new outdoor video star of *The Wild Multiverse*.

“How do I look?” She smiled at George as she rolled up her pad and stuck it into her hip pocket.

George stared at his pad as Kat looked straight at his camera, then she turned and gave a profile, followed by a spin on her heels to give the opposite cheek.

He saw everything through his screens. He flashed a thumb skyward. “Good. Go with it, anytime you're ready.” He kept the cameras recording much of the time since modern file storage

capacity was so high. He and a team back on Earth Prime would later splice together what was best for the program. It also gave them lots of extra stuff to use for the behind-the-scenes episodes.

“It’s our last day here on Earth nineteen twelve, and I must admit I’m going to miss this world when we leave in a few hours.” She blinked at the camera Jose held and then pivoted her head toward the mammoths. “I am going to especially miss these animals behind me. Like the broncos on my home world, there is something—”

“Stop.” George lowered his pad controlling the drone camera and shook his head.

“—majestic.” Kat squinted at George. “What?”

“You said broncos instead of brontos.”

“I did not, did I? That makes no sense. Why the frick would I— ”

“You need to see the recording yourself?” George lowered his gaze to his pad without waiting for an answer. “Just take it again from ‘Like the brontos’ and continue from there.”

Kat took a breath in and turned her head back toward the mammoths. “Like the brontos on my home ... Whoa! What the frick’s going on?”

The closest mammoth had turned toward them and stomped a few steps forward. It raised its big, curved tusks outward and let out a loud trumpeting sound much like that of an elephant. Clearly a warning. The other adult mammoths quickly turned and faced Kat and the crew as well. All seemed riled. Only the

lone juvenile remained to the rear of the herd.

Startled, Kat took a step back. The crew had been filming the mammoths for nearly a week without any sign of aggression from them. She had even been much closer to the animals on one of the earlier sessions. Doctor Toulouse had assured them the animals had never seen people before and seemed not to be bothered by them. Why then were these animals behaving like this?

Kat had a feeling of being watched; she spun her head around away from the mammoths. It wasn't her or the crew that had caused the reaction.

A large cat stared down at them from atop a boulder. It had a gray coat that blended into the bare rocks around it. What stood out, though, were the two huge canines clearly visible even from fifty yards away. The doctor had warned about the saber-toothed cats being around, but Kat and George had not seen one in their week of filming. Now a brute easily topping 500 pounds intently stared at them through large dark eyes.

"Guys, back up out of here," Kat said. "Whatever you do, don't turn and run though." She reached down and pulled the Glock out of the holster on her thigh. The pistol held fifteen 9-mm jacketed hollow-point rounds in its magazine, plus one in the chamber. She hoped she didn't need to use more than a few of the rounds, though, and then only to scare the cat off.

"What do we do if it attacks us?" Jose's voice quivered.

"Stay behind me." Kat's eyes were glued squarely on the cat in front of her. "If I have to, I'll put him down, but I hope it

doesn't come to that. Do not turn and run. He'll run you down, and you can bet your sweet ass he's faster than you. Just keep walking backward and keep an eye out for others coming from the side."

"Others?" Jose's voice rose. "Where?"

"Just watch for others." Kat stepped backward quickly but carefully, making sure with each step her footing was solid.

The cat stretched out its paws, dropped off the rock, and disappeared. Only to reappear as it hopped onto the top of a closer boulder. It dropped off the second boulder and trotted toward them, moving faster than them until it had considerably narrowed the gap.

Kat stopped walking backward. "Hey, buddy! That's as close as you're coming." She squeezed the trigger and fired off a single round. Rock splinters flew up in front of the cat. It sprang back a step, displaying fast reflexes, and dropped into a crouch.

"There are two ... two more above us," Ricky said. "We're surrounded. Whatta we do?"

Kat sneaked a quick glance at the other two cats. They were still fifty yards or more away.

The cat in front of her rose slowly out of its crouch. Kat squeezed off another round and rocks flew up in front of the cat again.

It did not jump back this time. Its jaws opened wide, and it let out a guttural snarl, telling Kat it was not afraid of her. She didn't buy it though. The cat was wary of them. Otherwise, it would have already pounced. The other two cats closed in on

them until they were almost as close as the first cat. Kat swung her pistol at them and then back to the first cat.

She took careful aim and squeezed off a third round. Bullets move too fast to see, but part of the cat's right ear suddenly disappeared. What had been a pointed tip suddenly became a ragged red edge. The cat sprang five feet straight up into the air, screeching. Its legs barely seem to touch back to the ground before it spun, and sprang back away, disappearing over the rocks above them.

Kat quickly swung to her right, pointing her pistol toward where she had last spotted the other cats. One of the cats was there above them for just a moment before it too disappeared. The last one leaped to the rocks above and to the right of the other two.

Kat had been right in her guess. The first cat to appear was the alpha of the pack, and when it decided the humans were not easy prey, the others were not about to attack with their leader retreating.

She lowered her pistol but did not holster it. "Let's get back before that shuttle arrives."

"Hope there's time to change my pants." Jose glanced at Kat. "Holy buckets, that was scary."

"Are they, uh, gone?" Ricky continued to stare at the spot where the cats had perched above them.

"Most likely," Kat said. "But keep sharp anyway. George, tell me you got that."

"Well, there was the difficulty of walking backwards and not

tripping over the rocks,” George said.

“George?”

“And the fact that those lions were about to eat us.”

“George!”

“Yeah, of course, I got that. When have you ever known me to stop filming just because I thought we were about to die? Those are the scenes that are going to make a legend out of you. Not to mention drive up our ratings.”

Kat rolled her eyes. “You’re one of a kind. You know that, don’t you, you son of a bitch?”

George laughed. “Yeah, well, right back atch ya. Lucky for me ’cause you’re why I’m still here alive.”

Kat cocked her head toward George. “I guess I was a little cranky earlier.”

“A little?”

Kat laughed. “Hey, I said sorry.”

“Actually, you didn’t. Not yet anyway.”

Kat holstered her pistol. “Come on, I’ll buy you a beer when we get back to Prime.”

“Make that two beers, and you’re forgiven.”

Kat glanced at Jose and Ricky. Their eyes were still wide as if they had just spotted the grim reaper. Kat thought about it for a moment. The cat’s canines were shaped a lot like the business end of a scythe.