

JUDD'S ERRAND

GREG KROJAC

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1

Judd kicked the body with a boot that looked like it had seen at least five wars and lost three of them, the force of the impact causing dust and sand to drop hastily back onto the desert floor. There was no need to be gentle; the man was already dead – just how Judd wanted him to be. He didn't like killing people, but sometimes he had no choice. The man had tried to steal his precious box and had ignored all requests to go on his way unharmed, demanding – at gunpoint – that Judd hand over the graphene-coated container. That was never going to happen. Judd wasn't overly protective of the box because of its inherent value, even though it was almost indestructible and actually worth a lot of money in itself, but he would rather die than give up its contents.

He'd built up quite a reputation as a courier. He was driven and didn't allow himself to be distracted from his task by anybody or anything. If you wanted a package delivered, Judd was your man. He had a 95% success rate which was quite a feat when most of his competitors could only muster 52% – those that were still alive, that is. Of those 5% failures, only one could have been avoided; he had trusted someone who didn't deserve his trust – he wouldn't make that mistake again.

He could tell by the tattoo on the man's forearm – two suns overlapping like a celestial Venn diagram –

that he was a follower of the twin sun gods Suncé and Sunon. He didn't believe in the gods himself, but many did and, even though this man had tried to kill him and steal his property, he would respect the man's burial traditions.

He gathered a few rocks together and covered the man's face with them. It was important to followers of the Sunsu religion that their life spirit should find its own way to the Resting Place, and they needed eyes in order to be able to do that.

Stopping momentarily, before crouching down and positioning the last two stones over the corpse's eyes, he took a pair of mirror sunglasses out of the breast pocket of his jacket, placed them on his nose, and glanced up at the suns which beat down mercilessly on anything that wasn't in shade. If he was taking the trouble to protect a dead man's eyes, it didn't make sense to leave his own eyes unprotected.

He reached over his right shoulder and drew his razor-sharp machete from its sheath. Raising the blade above his own head he swung it down on the dead man's neck with such force and accuracy that just the one downward sweep sliced the head clean apart from the torso. Laying a few more stones to cover the vulnerable stump of the still visible neck, he had a final message for the dead man.

"I warned you but you wouldn't listen. I only did what I had to do. But I bear you no ill-will on your journey to the Resting Place. I've adhered to your

customs – even though, personally, I’m a non-believer – so your life force should pass on without problems. May your gods go with you.”

Those closing words spoken, he walked the ten metres to where his buggy was parked and returned immediately to the decapitated corpse with a length of strong rope wrapped around his right shoulder. He slid his arm underneath the headless body just enough to allow him to thread the rope under its back and leave enough cord free to fasten a knot, securing the corpse tightly in its loop. He attached the other end, to the tow bar of the buggy. Settling back in the driver’s seat he pressed his thumb onto the card-key and the engine purred silently into life.

The car edged forwards as his right foot applied pressure to the accelerator. He didn’t push the gas pedal down hard yet as he didn’t want to disturb the sand too much when he left the scene – that would have been counterproductive.

Once he’d travelled about three hundred metres distance from the buried head he stopped.

“Well, Ruby? Ready for a drive?”

The vehicle didn’t answer him; it never did.

He opened up the throttle and Ruby lurched forwards, her tyres fleetingly clawing for grip. Once found, the car rocketed onward, kicking up a large dust trail behind it; the decapitated body tumbled and somersaulted as it was dragged behind in Ruby’s wake. After another kilometre, Judd stopped the

buggy, climbed out of it, and released the now battered and bruised corpse from its bonds. He returned the rope to its place inside the buggy's meagre trunk, tucking it beneath a dark brown trench coat.

Returning to the driver's seat, he slid his hand underneath the passenger seat to confirm that the box was still there; of course, there was no way it wouldn't be there but he felt better for feeling its familiar touch.

Ruby accelerated away and what was left of the body faded into the distance. Judd patted the buggy's dashboard.

"I know, girl. It's messy but dragging the guy's body behind us has given the sand-jackals something else to find and fight over. They'll leave his head alone for a while and his life force will have time to make its journey. We did a good thing."

The suns were beginning to set and the light was starting to fade. Soon it would turn pitch black and the night-time temperatures would drop to a biting chill of minus twenty degrees. Judd needed to find shelter and find it fast. And it wasn't only the low temperature that made the night dangerous – darkness gave cover to the many predators that roamed the desert.

The sand-jackal's larger and more terrifying cousin, the bear-wolf, was the most dangerous of them all, seemingly devoid of all fear. Once a bear-wolf got your scent it would pursue you relentlessly until one of you dropped dead. Its Achilles heel was that despite its aggressive nature, evolution had decreed that it should live a solitary existence and avoid contact with its own species at all costs – except for the purposes of mating. The animal would only approach a female bear-wolf when she was on heat, they would mate several times over a few days – a pretty violent experience and hazardous for the male – and then both disappear back into the desert separately, never to be seen again.

Judd learnt at a young age how to deal with bear-wolves; spending his early years in the desert, he had no choice. His father had been killed by a bear-wolf when he was ten orbits old and his mother had been

determined that her son wouldn't suffer the same fate.

One day, hearing the screech of an adult bear-wolf in the distance, she decided that it was time to pass on some valuable survival tricks to her son. She locked the boy inside their small cabin and all he could do was watch as, not wanting to ruin her clothes, she stripped off and smeared bear-wolf faeces all over her body.

Judd was accustomed to his mother's eccentricities – she had never been the same since the death of his father – but this was a new low, even for her. He was disgusted – he could smell the putrid stench even from their home – but he was also immensely impressed by what he saw next.

A bear-wolf emerged from the nearby woods and galloped towards the homestead, the thunderous pounding of its feet unsettling the young lad as it hurtled towards his mother. He shouted out for her to get up off the ground and run back to the house but she ignored him and simply lay motionless, waiting to be devoured.

Suddenly, the bear-wolf skidded to a halt and raised its head, sniffing at the air. Judd watched as its ears and nose twitched simultaneously, trying to recognise the odour that was coming from his mother. He feared she was about to die and a tear trickled down his cheek.

Without warning, the bear-wolf rose up on its

hind legs and bellowed to the skies, before dropping back onto all fours and cantering back into the woods. Judd's mother waited a couple of minutes to make sure that the animal had really gone and then stood up. Still grasping the key to the padlock in her hand, she made her way back to the building.

Judd was just thankful that she had survived the ordeal.

It wasn't until Judd was almost a man that he discovered that, had the faeces been from that same bear-wolf, he would have been orphaned there and then. He learnt his mother's lesson well and never travelled without a large tub of bear-wolf excrement tucked behind Ruby's passenger seat.

An outcrop of boulders rose up in the distance and he directed the buggy towards the potential shelter. The stones looked like nibbled at stacks of pancakes, eroded in that fashion by sea (the desert had once been underwater), by rain (when rainfall was common), and by prehistoric winds.

Arriving at the rocks, Judd got out of the car and checked out the structure, finding not only a narrow entrance which led to a safe refuge for him but also an opening that looked like it had been created as a shelter for Ruby. He got back into the buggy and backed it into the space; the last thing he needed was to have to reverse out if he were in a hurry.

Stopping only to pick up his backpack, the tub of

bear-wolf faeces, his lightweight sleeping bag, and – of course – the precious box, he returned to his naturally carved sleeping quarters and squeezed through the entrance. The fact that it was a tight fit was a huge benefit – it was way too small for a 400 kg bear-wolf to pass through. He was thankful that he wouldn't have to cover himself with bear-wolf dung and, instead, just coated the entrance to his temporary bedroom with the foul-smelling paste. The precaution would also keep the smaller and less lethal sand-jackals away. The scavengers wouldn't kill him but their presence would certainly prevent him from getting a decent night's sleep.

Next morning, the suns rose at ten hours, as they always did, and darkness surrendered to daylight, the sky's hues returning from a black void, bedecked with thousands of twinkling stars, to a bright orange sheet, punctuated only by the twin suns. Judd took two sachets from his rucksack – one containing powdered nutrients and the other containing a liquid mixture of water, sugar, taurine, caffeine, and vitamins. He consumed the contents of each sachet, folded the empty packets and placed them inside a plastic case inside his backpack; he didn't like to pollute his environment and never left any trace of himself bar footprints, tyre marks, or memories.

He peered through the opening in the rocks to ensure that there were no nasty surprises waiting for

him outside and returned to his vehicle.

“Good morning, Ruby. I hope you slept well.”

He looked the car over, checking that all was as he'd left it. Everything was fine.

“You're looking good, girl. A bit dirty but nothing that won't wash off when we get to The Spring. I might even treat you to a polish and wax – if you're lucky.”

Ruby's bodywork was constructed of a light but strong alloy polished to a fine ruby red finish – hence the buggy's name. Strictly speaking, Ruby was actually a sandrail, as the buggy had a protective tubular steel roll-cage to protect its driver and passenger in case of an accident. The entire surface area of the vehicle's coachwork was covered in minute solar cells, almost invisible to the naked eye, which continually supplied solar energy to a converter at the rear of the vehicle, in turn, providing power to the motor. She was the perfect self-sufficient vehicle for the desert environment.

Judd and Ruby had gone through a lot together and he hoped the day never came when he would have to surrender his companion to the great scrapyard in the sky. He pushed the card-key into its slot and started the engine.

“Ready to rock and roll, girl? Next stop, The Spring.”

It was important to stay within the invisible desert strip when travelling through the desert. If a traveller strayed outside the bounds of the two-kilometre wide safety ribbon there was a serious risk of death through heat exhaustion, and not just the regular heat exhaustion that his ancestors back on Earth occasionally suffered. It was very hot within the two-kilometre safety area but exposure to the obscene temperatures outside of The Corridor could rapidly lead to fatal heat stroke.

To ensure that this would never happen to Judd, Ruby was fitted with a GPS system that set off alarms if the entirety of the vehicle transgressed the unseen borders. This was potentially the most important of the vehicle's modifications – the tract that Judd drove on was indistinguishable from the rest of the desert and the risk of committing a life-ending error was never far from the minds of those who used the inter-city corridors.

The continual ticking of the Corridor Location System was irritating to novice travellers – the time between ticks increasing or decreasing according to a vehicle's position between the invisible walls – but experienced drivers like Judd were able to drive more or less centrally within the boundaries and the ticks only occurred every thirty seconds or so. Indeed, with this constant interval, they didn't even notice them

after a while. However, Judd was still subconsciously alert to any change in tick frequency and could correct his course immediately if necessary.

Occasionally he'd see dead animals as he neared The Spring; some had been killed by predators – usually bear-wolves – and some had clearly died of thirst. All were in varying states of decay. Their carcasses were a constant reminder to travellers to respect both the environment in which they were travelling and the fragility of their own bodies; the desert showed mercy to neither man nor beast. Some people used this roadkill for sustenance along the way – those that couldn't afford the nourishment packs that Judd used – but Judd shied away from this. As long as he had enough fi-creds to pay for the life-giving sachets, he would do so; scraping dead animals off the floor of The Corridor and putting them into his mouth was reserved for the menu of last resort.

After another hour of the same incessant expanse of sand, Judd was finally able to see the low-rise structures of The Spring. The buildings looked about ten kilometres away, as the Corvus flies, but he knew that the true distance was at least double that. He was used to the mirages that the terrain threw up but he was content in the knowledge that, be the city ten or twenty kilometres away, before long he'd arrive at the city gates.

Approaching the settlement gates, Judd knew what to expect. He'd suffered varying levels of prejudice his whole life but now that he had money, it seemed that the bigotry had intensified. It was almost as if people believed he wasn't entitled to live comfortably, and that he was a troublemaker, just because he looked a little different to them. Throwbacks were considered an abomination to many but, fortunately, there were still enough people around who understood that their appearance was just a genetic mutation – or rather, a lack of one – that gave them the same ocular characteristics as their Terran ancestors. The vast majority of Duoterrans had cat-like eyes, whose pupils changed from their natural vertical slit state to round, depending upon the amount of light that was available or the mood of the owner.

This flexibility of dilation was a consequence of the terraforming of Duoterra, back when terraforming was in its infancy and some mistakes were understandably made. Consideration hadn't been taken for the inherent natural forces of the planet and, after millennia of a world during which Duoterran eyes had evolved their feline qualities, the planet and its twin suns had conspired to return the planet to its pre-terraform environment. This left the ever-present orange glow to the daytime sky and the accompanying climatic changes. Whereas the early colonists had transformed the planet to something resembling their

home planet – an ecological diversity of flora and fauna, of tropical, temperate, and dry climate zones – the latter climate rode roughshod over the tropical and temperate areas and installed itself as the primary climate of the entire planet.

One of the two guards at the gate eyed Judd suspiciously.

“Remove the shades.”

Judd pretended he hadn’t heard the man, who repeated his demand.

“The sunglasses. Take them off.”

Judd did as the man said. He didn’t know exactly what it was about him that rubbed some people up the wrong way – even before they saw his eyes – but the guard’s demand wasn’t uncommon.

The guard peered at Judd’s eyes. His suspicions confirmed that Judd wasn’t quite like him, his attitude became one of contempt.

“A throwback, eh? You’d better not start any trouble.”

Judd had no intention of causing trouble. He planned to have a beer or two to wind down, and then get a decent night’s sleep in a proper bed. He’d leave the next morning.

The guard’s colleague, meanwhile, was poring over Ruby.

“Nice set of wheels you have here. Tell me something, how does a throwback like you afford a

buggy?"

Judd would have liked to verbally spar with the two men but resisted the temptation. He didn't want to ruin his chances of entering the settlement walls by rising to the bait. He was looking forward to a good night's sleep.

"I'm good at my job."

The first guard re-entered the interrogation.

"And what job's that, throwback?"

"I deliver things."

"Yeah? And what are we delivering today? Let me have a look."

Judd didn't want to reveal the nature of his most prized cargo – it was nobody's business but his own and the treasured box was well hidden from view – so he pulled a large white sealed tub from behind the seats. The guard took it from him, set it on the ground, and went to open the lid. Judd grimaced.

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

The guard looked up at Judd.

"Orders are orders. I have to check inside. You could be smuggling something."

"Oh, I wouldn't be smuggling that."

"Why. What is it?"

Judd was about to explain what was inside the tub when the guard flipped the lid off and it fell onto the ground. The pungent smell of bear-wolf excrement suddenly filled the air, enveloping the three men. The guard's eyes started watering and he started

coughing.

“Frigging bear-wolf shit. Why didn’t you stop me?”

Judd leapt from the car and helped the guard replace the lid.

“You did say – and I quote – orders are orders. I was about to tell you what was inside but you jumped the gun.”

The second guard pulled a large handkerchief from a pocket and held it to his nose, in an attempt to filter out the smell.

“Okay, throwback. You can go in, but don’t even think about opening that tub again inside the city limits. And don’t leave it your buggy overnight. I don’t trust some of the citizens here to leave it alone – we can’t have people running around the settlement spreading bear-wolf shit all over the place.”

As Ruby descended the down ramp into the main city area, Judd kept his eyes open for a guesthouse that offered secure parking for the sandrail. Such accommodation was scarce in most settlements, as normally only the wealthy could afford vehicles, and there was no real call for garage space. The roads were packed with cyclists, a heaving throng of arms, legs, and bicycle wheels, and moving through the crowd was a slow and precarious business.

An overripe jarrow-fruit suddenly exploded onto Ruby’s protective canopy, momentarily startling Judd,

but he shrugged off the act as just one of those things – a throwback driving a vehicle was bound to attract some hostility. The culprits, a group of children of no more than thirteen orbits, ran down a narrow alleyway – Judd couldn't have chased after them, even if he had wanted to.

Eventually, he happened upon a three storey building with a vacancy sign in the window. No building in the city was more than three storeys tall – the constraints of constructing an underground city didn't allow for anything taller. The important thing about this building was that it promised secure garage parking. Judd wasn't too bothered about the quality of the room – the previous night he'd slept inside a rock outcrop so any room would be better than that – but Ruby needed a secure environment to stay the night.

A pressure sensor in front of the garage alerted the guesthouse's owner to his presence, and a middle-aged woman, with a friendly and welcoming face, came outside to greet him.

“Yes, how can I be of help?”

Judd climbed out of his vehicle.

“The sign says you have a vacancy. Do you have room for Ruby too?”

The woman looked around but could only see the one man standing there.

“Ruby? Who's she?”

“My car.”

The woman nodded, thinking how foolish it was

to give a car a name.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were travelling with your wife. Or girlfriend.”

She pointed at the garage door.

“Plenty of room for your car. The garage is secured by combination. I change it for each guest. So your Ruby will be perfectly safe inside.”

Judd was satisfied.

“How much?”

The woman looked at her latest client and made some mental calculations according to what she estimated he could afford.

“Forty fi-creds and ten for the car. Per night.”

She hoped the throwback wouldn’t be staying long, even though the extra money would come in useful.

“You are staying just the one night, I assume?”

Judd knew that he was paying throwback tax – twenty-five fi-creds would have been a fairer price – but he didn’t feel like haggling over the price. He wanted to make an early start in the morning and to enjoy a couple of beers before turning in for the night.

The guesthouse owner’s attitude changed from friendly to terse as she held her hand out.

“In advance, if you don’t mind.”

Judd handed over the payment and drove the buggy into the garage. He left the tub of bear-wolf dung in its place behind the passenger seat but took his trench coat and the graphene box with him.

The room was nothing special – a functional double-bed, a wardrobe, a bedside table (with built-in bedside lamp) and a weathered armchair. It definitely wasn't worth the forty fi-creds he had paid but his kind were used to having to pay a little more than regular Duoterrans. It's just how things were. He didn't like it, but it wasn't always worth confronting the bigots. He'd rather save his energy to fight more important battles. And it wasn't as if he couldn't afford the price she charged him; it was well within his means. Having the garage for Ruby was worth the ten fi-creds though; she was his livelihood.

Ruby safely ensconced, Judd put on the trench coat before leaving the house to look for a bar in which to quench his thirst. It wasn't uncommon for people to walk the streets armed, but he didn't think it was a good idea to advertise the fact that he had a machete tucked behind his back. Some might see a throwback with a machete as a challenge. Although the city streets were artificially lit, he kept his sunglasses on; his naked eyes would make his origins too obvious. He was only in town for one night. Surely he could survive the night without getting caught up in a fight?