

INTERGALACTIC EXTERMINATORS, INC.

by Ash Bishop

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

RUSS

Russ woke up lying flat on the ground, his mind foggy as hell. He could smell blood. When he reached forward as gingerly as possible, his muscles screamed at the movement.

He was on his back. The forest trees waved down at him, blocking out the faint moonlight. He took a couple of deep breaths and reached forward again, groping around in the darkness. His hand came back slick with blood and fur and leaves.

And then he heard voices.

“ . . . do you want to do this, then?”

“I just wouldn’t call this tracking, is all. The blood trail’s three feet across. A tiny baby could follow this trail.”

“Show me that baby.”

“Shhh. Both of you, quiet. Something’s registering on the heat index.”

The confusion and pain made it hard to think. *Are these locals . . .?* he thought. He fumbled in his pocket, looking for his flashlight but also testing for further damage. His hand found the light. It illuminated the small clearing.

The deer’s corpse was just a few feet away, right where he’d shot it, but it wasn’t whole. Something had torn off its back legs, shearing straight through the muscle and bone.

Russ took a deep breath but didn’t let his body or mind react to the sight of the carnage.

Seconds later, the strangers’ flashlights found him.

“He’s over here. To our left.”

Russ heard three or four people hurrying through the brush. A woman in all black stepped into the clearing. Her brown hair was tied back in a bun, and she had a long steel shotgun in her hands. An odd earring twinkled in her ear.

“You okay, son?” she asked, crouching down to place her hands on his chest. She stared into his eyes, examining him. “Looks like you’re going into shock. Just stay on your back and concentrate on breathing.”

A man followed shortly after her. He glanced around, holding up a funny-looking flashlight to cast out the darkness. “He’s alone,” the man confirmed. “Are you from around here?” he asked Russ.

“I’m from California,” Russ groaned.

“I don’t know what that means,” the man said.

“Just hold still,” the woman said. She pulled a gadget from her pack. The end telescoped out like an antenna.

Russ watched as an aqua blue light shone down from the device, running across his entire body. He flinched as it reached his face, and even that small movement caused his lungs to burst with pain.

“He’s got four broken ribs, a hairline fracture in the left wrist and a torn hamstring. Did you see what hit you?” the woman asked him.

Russ tried to think. “No.” The word was as much a groan as anything else.

“Tell us what you remember.”

Russ rolled over onto his side. It hurt badly. Now that she’d pointed out the injuries, everything was localized. His ribs throbbed. His wrist felt hollow. His left leg was pierced with pain. “I was driving down Route Eighty-Nine, and a deer . . .” Russ pointed to the half deer corpse beside him. “. . . *this* deer dashed in front of my car. I knew I’d injured it by the sound it made when it hit the bumper, but I didn’t think I’d have to chase it this far into the woods to put it out of its misery.”

Russ took a moment to swallow. “After I shot it, I—I was kneeling, jacking out the leftover rifle shells. But then . . . I was flipping through the air. I think I hit that tree right behind me.”

The woman looked back at the tree. “It’s pretty splintered up.”

“I was flying upside down. Backwards.”

“Can you walk?” the man asked.

Two more women, dressed in the same black combat gear, entered the clearing. They both had long rifles slung over their backs.

Russ glanced at the newcomers, his eyes lingering on the guns. They weren't locals. He could tell that much. "Who are you guys?"

"Just local hunters," one of the newcomers said.

"Sure," Russ said.

"Tell me what hit you," the first woman said firmly.

"I don't know. A meteor? A buffalo? Maybe . . . a . . . rig?"

The woman pulled a roll of pills from a MOLLE strap on her backpack. "Swallow two of these. They're going to kill the pain."

Russ chewed the pills. Their chalky taste filled his mouth and crept up his nose.

"They won't cure any of the damage. You're going to feel fine, but you're not fine. Move carefully until you can get proper medical treatment. The road is two miles north. Can you reach it without help?"

Russ nodded. Whatever she gave him was blazing through his bloodstream, kicking the fog and ache off every organ that it passed.

"What'd I just eat?"

"Two miles north. Don't stop for any reason."

One of the newcomers, a well-muscled young woman with close-cropped brown hair, glanced at the half deer corpse lying next to Russ. Its blood had sprayed a pattern across the splintered tree. "Look at the animal, Kendren," she said.

The guy, Kendren, shone his flashlight over the deer corpse. "Whoa," he said. "We definitely found what we're looking for."

"You really chummed the water with this stag," the short-haired woman told Russ.

"Kendren, Starland, mouths shut," the first woman said, making a slashing gesture. She pulled Russ to his feet. He gritted his teeth against the pain, but it was gone.

Kendren and Starland stayed huddled around the deer, crouched low, inspecting where the hindquarters had been sheared off the bone. Kendren looked at the deer's head and saw where Russ had shot it.

"You make this shot?" he asked Russ. "In the dark?"

"Yeah."

"Was the deer already dead? Were you a foot away? Point blank?"

“No. I was up on a ledge over by the river. Forty feet in that direction.” Russ pointed up the gradual incline.

Kendren was still looking at the dead deer. “You shot it between the eyes, from forty feet, in the dark?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Head on back to the highway,” the woman said firmly. “You should start now. It might be dangerous to stay here.”

The way she was looking at him, Russ kind of figured she meant that she was what was dangerous. If he didn’t do what she said.

“I just need to find my grandpa’s rifle first,” Russ told her.

She grabbed him by the arm. Her grip was incredibly strong. In the light from her flashlight her eyes seemed almost purple. “Start walking toward—”

Before she could finish her sentence, the third woman, who’d melted back into the darkness, stepped forward again. “Cut the light,” she hissed. “It’s here.”

Something came crashing through the brush, making a howling sound. It wasn’t a sound Russ had ever heard before. It was a deep rumbling growl, followed by a pitched screech that made the hair on his arms stand up. Branches were snapping, and he could hear claws scraping on rock. It was still thirty feet south, but it scared the hell out of him.

“‘El Toreador.’ You’re up,” the woman hissed.

The girl they called El Toreador had been on lookout. She was far enough into the darkness that Russ could barely see her, just a wisp of thick brown hair bobbing in the darkness—that is, until she pounded her chest with her fist. The vest lit up red, casting shadows across the trees. “My real name’s Atara,” she told Russ quickly. Then: “Don’t look so worried. We’re professionals.”

“Starland, hit her with the hormone.”

“The vest is enough,” Atara growled.

Starland slipped back into the light. She was carrying some kind of tube that looked like a pool toy. She pushed hard against the end, blasting thick goo all over the other woman.

“Hurry up. It’s almost here.”

Russ was scrambling around in the brush, looking everywhere for his rifle when the creature burst through the perimeter glow of his tiny flashlight. Atara’s vest reflected off its face, bathing it in red

light. It was all fangs and claws, huge, twice the size of a grizzly bear and full of rippling muscles stretched out in terrifying feline grace. It leaped at Atara, but midflight it caught the scent of the goo and reoriented to the left, bumping her off her feet but not harming her.

The huge cat-thing landed softly, immediately turning toward the fallen woman, sniffing the air, growling, and bobbing its head.

“It’s got the scent. The big kitty’s feeling amorous,” Kendren yelled. He, Starland, and the other woman all had their rifles raised. They were tracking the cat, ready to fire. Atara looked pissed, sprawled on the ground with her legs splayed.

“Knock it down. We’re authorized for lethal. What are you waiting for?” she shouted.

The creature was fully in the light now. It looked a lot like a tiger, but it was at least six times the size, with wavy, shaggy hair.

“What the hell is it?” Russ shouted.

The feline was practically straddling Atara. “I don’t like how it’s looking at me. Come on, shoot!” she demanded.

The creature batted a paw, claws extended, and tore the glowing vest off her chest. It drew the vest up to its nose, sniffed, and started to growl again.

Then the huge beast paused, slowly turning away from Atara. It sniffed the air, shoulders hunched, fur on the scruff of its neck rising. As it turned, its deep onyx eyes looked squarely at Russ.

It growled and took a step toward him.

Russ thought his heart had been beating hard before, but as the huge cat glided toward him, the thudding in his chest was so loud it drowned out every other sound. He didn’t even hear the discharge of Starland’s shotgun, two feet away from the monster. The wad of pellets sprayed against the creature’s flank and it howled, tearing away into the darkness so fast Russ didn’t even see it move.

Atara scrambled to her feet and dropped her rifle. “Did you see that? A direct hit and no penetration. I told you Earth tech was garbage. What is this? The thirteenth century? I’m powering up.”

The first woman—the one with the purple eyes—glanced at Russ. She was short, wiry, with the powerful shoulders of a linebacker. Russ realized she was the leader of . . . whoever these people were.

“When are you going to learn to keep your mouth shut?” she barked at Atara.

“You already used the CRC wand on him.”

“Two hours of mandatory training videos. The second this is over.”

“I’d rather be cat food than watch those again,” Atara said.

“You skip the videos and I’ll send you back through CERT training.”

Atara wasn’t really listening. She crashed off through the brush in the direction of the big cat.

Nodding toward Russ, the woman shouted, “Kendren, you’ve got containment.” Then she disappeared into the darkness. Starland drew a pistol from her belt and followed.

“Containment? More like babysitting,” Kendren grumbled. “I should be the one doing the good stuff.” He glanced in the direction they’d gone. Russ kind of agreed. Kendren was huge, at least six-five, and covered from head to toe with what Russ’s cousin had always called beach muscles. He had thick, wavy hair down to his shoulders.

Out in the darkness, Russ could see the others’ flashlights bobbing up and down. They were headed up an incline, probably straight toward the bank of the river.

“Was it my imagination, or was the cat more interested in you than the vest covered in mating hormone?” Kendren asked.

At first, Russ didn’t answer. Finally, he said, “What would make it do that?”

“No idea. It’s supposed to follow the hormone. What’s better than sex?” Kendren shook his head, seemingly unable to answer his own question. He frowned slightly. “The only thing I’ve seen them more interested in is an Obinz stone. You ever seen an Obinz stone? They’re about this big”—Kendren held his hands six inches apart—“usually green, with yellow veins running all along the edges? I don’t think they’re native to . . . this area.” Kendren looked around in distaste. “But I’ve seen these cats jump planets just to get near one if it’s in an unrefined state. An Obinz stone is basically intergalactic catnip.”

“I’ve never seen one,” Russ told him. His voice wavered slightly, but Kendren didn’t seem to notice.

“Then we better shut this vest down,” Kendren said. He stepped up onto a boulder and reached high into a tree, grabbing the vest from where the cat had tossed it. He folded the vest up and tucked it under his arm. “I’m not even sure how to turn it off,” he said.

“That was a saber-toothed tiger, right? You guys cloning stuff? Is this Jurassic World or something?” Russ rubbed his temple. His questions were coming so fast, they were jumbled in his mouth. Kendren had just said *intergalactic*, and something about *jumping planets*, but here in the dark

Wyoming forest, six miles from his grandmother's house, he wasn't yet ready to face those pieces of information.

Kendren threw the vest on the ground and raised his rifle, pumping a slug into it. It kept glowing. "Damn. It's pretty important I get this thing turned off."

Starland's discarded rifle was just a few feet away. While Kendren kicked at the vest with his boot heel, Russ inched toward it.

"Touch the weapon and I'll shoot you in the face," Kendren said. He stomped on the vest again.

The flashlights were way north now, probably on the other side of the river. Russ could hear the distant voices arguing about which way the big cat went.

The voices were so loud, neither Kendren nor Russ heard the cat until it was right in front of them, growling, hissing, and spitting. It stalked into the circumference of the faint red light from the vest.

Kendren was still standing on the vest, his rifle slung over his shoulder. Beside him, the cat was enormous, twice as tall as a man. It crouched down, looking him straight in the eye.

"I'm dead," he said quietly.

The creature coiled back on its powerful flanks and threw itself forward like a bullet. Its wicked claws stretched out, razored edges slashing at Kendren's neck and chest.

Russ kicked Starland's gun off the ground, caught it, leveled it, and fired. The bullet split the cat's eye socket, ripping through its optic nerve and straight into its brain.

Momentum carried the dead body forward on its trajectory, smashing into Kendren and pinning him to the earth.

A few moments later, the rest of the team returned, clambering through the thick brush. The leader approached the enormous beast and nudged it with her boot.

"Is it dead, Bah'ren?" Atara asked, her gun still pointed at the fallen creature.

"Sure is," the leader, Bah'ren, responded.

The wind was starting to pick up, blowing the branches of the trees, shaking off a few dead leaves.

"How about Kendren?"

"Negative," Bah'ren said.

"Get it off me," Kendren demanded. "It's gotta weigh nine hundred pounds."

“How many intergalactic laws do you think we’ve broken here?” Atara asked. She moved next to Bah’reen, looking down at Kendren with an expression that was half pity and half amusement.

He had managed to sit up, but his legs were still wedged under the huge carcass.

“Including the law about referencing intergalactic law on a tier-nine planet?” Bah’reen asked.

“You guys are being a little careless,” Starland said.

“Not our fault this thing was a hundred miles off course. The MUPmap promised there wouldn’t be any tier-nine bios in the vicinity.”

“What are we supposed to do now?” Atara said, nodding toward Russ.

“Oh, we’re conscripting him, for sure.” Bah’reen said.

“Really?” Atara said. “We’re getting another human?”

“Who? Who do you mean?” Russ asked. He glanced back in the direction of the highway. His eyes were starting to adjust to the dark again, and he could make out a thick copse of trees just a dozen or so yards away.

“Get the huge beast off me,” Kendren insisted.

Bah’reen moved to one side of the big cat and dug her powerful shoulders into it. Starland ran over to join her, wedging one arm against the creature’s flank, but putting her other arm around the waist of the woman giving the orders. “Atara, come on. You, new guy, we could use your help too. It’s heavy as hell.”

Russ half ran over to them and dug his side into the creature. Its hairy skin sloshed around against the pressure, but the four of them eventually got it moving.

“Roll it the other way!” Kendren demanded. “Its penis is right next to my face.”

They kept rolling, and Kendren kept protesting, as the great shaggy cat slowly grinded over his shoulders and face. Gravity finally caught hold of its weight and the corpse flopped to the ground. The three in black all chuckled as Kendren spit out the taste of cat testicle.

“Oh, that’s what you meant. Sorry about that,” Starland said, laughing.

Kendren crawled onto his knees, still hacking and spitting. He stopped for a minute and looked at the cat’s face, poking a finger in the thing’s empty eye socket and wiggling it around. “Another hell of a shot.”

“The debriefing wasn’t just wrong about location,” Atara said. “The creature’s fur is like steel mesh. Our bullets were doing jackshit.”

Kendren rolled up onto his knees, both hands propped on his thighs. “You saved my life,” he told Russ.

“No problem,” Russ said.

It was the last thing Russ said before he dropped the rifle and sprinted full speed back toward the safety of the trees. He was running as fast as he could, pumping his arms, banging his shins on rocks, bumping past pines, carelessly plunging through the dark.

He’d only gotten about twenty yards, running full speed, when something metal slapped around his ankle. It tipped him off balance and, for the second time that night, he could feel himself careening head over heels.

He hit a tree, again, then slowly slipped out of consciousness.