

Will of Chrome

A story series by Sylvia_the_Wanton_Poet, aka Diavora

"Well one of these nights bout 12 o'clock, this old world is gonna rock...
Well old Mr. Satan he got mad, missed that soul that he thought he had...
God gave Noah the rainbow sign: 'No more water, but fire next time.'"

---O Mary Don't You Weep

Chapter 1

Ashfall

Eric's single working photoreceptor blinked on, a low amber beacon amidst a world of gray. It was dangerous to go into hibernation mode during a black blizzard, but conservation of energy was a necessity. There was not much one could do if something did happen, anyway. It was all forces of nature during one of the rolling ash storms. Lightning, black clouds of volcanic glass, wind. Sometimes sheets of light gray ice would bring some sense of change, but these were almost as dangerous, filled as they were with contaminated water. The make-shift shelter and protective garments he wore could help keep ash out of his joints, but the protection was moot if they literally froze.

His shelter had held up against the storm, though without the lights built within his head even he would not be able to see, as dark as it was. With careful, calculated movements he gathered his clothes. Patchwork gloves were drawn over delicate plastic hands, with extra care taken near the

joints. These were followed shortly by a cracked pair of plastic goggles and a tattered scarf which Eric carefully wrapped around his head, taking care to cover the gap where his left photoreceptor used to be. The ensemble was completed by a pair of old rubber rainboots, trousers, and a quilted cloak the same color as the ash outside.

It was once a jacket belonging to his former owner, and he gave special attention to repairing the pockets whenever they were damaged. A most useful human invention, pockets. Like so many things he and his owner had taken for granted, they were in short supply these days. Along with everything else.

It took Eric longer than usual to dig himself out of the ash that morning. More than a foot of it had piled up on all sides, and he had to move slowly to prevent it from collapsing onto him and his things. Soon he was shaking off the tarp as best he could and re-wrapping it, stuffing it into a rucksack for safe-keeping unless he needed it again. Lastly, with his shelter and transportation extracted from the ash and towed to steady, rocky ground, Eric retrieved his most prized possession in all of the world. It was an old black bowler hat with an upturned brim. When Eric and his owner fled their homes and began to make their way east, it was the one item of nostalgia that was brought with them. It served his owner well, and served Eric too, as he found that no matter how hard the wind blew, even if the hat tilted a little over his broken eye, it would stay on his head. Very useful for keeping the headscarf wrapped and protecting his neck joints.

With that, it was a simple matter to hitch the jury-rigged wagons to his bicycle and continue on his way. It wasn't the most eloquent of rides, but it was what he had, and he had built most of it himself, and that always made the fans in his chest spin a bit faster when he thought on it. Two old wagons, covered in rust and paint that may have once been red, were crudely bolted together with layers of sheet metal, creating a larger bed on top of the two of them. Inside the smaller beds went spare parts, batteries, his sewing kit, and anything else that needed more protection on the road. The larger bed held several electronic devices and an old car battery, all protected by a shorter section of the same tarp he had used for a tent. A large flywheel was attached to the batteries, and it in turn was connected to the gear system of his bicycle, so that when he traveled it turned the wheel and charged the batteries. While it wasn't the most efficient setup, it had allowed him to recharge himself and the few electronic items he owned, and was quite rugged for being made of scrap.

The wagon also held the most primitive, but most useful item in his collection: A simple garden shovel. Of course its handle has been replaced many times, originally it was of a hardened plastic similar to that of his chassis. Now it was wood, reinforced in places by wraps of aluminum that were bolted on. It was a wonderful tool, as well as a weapon. While he had high hopes of avoiding any predators that might confuse him for something edible, it was still good to have something long enough to keep them at bay while scavenging. It was quite useful on locked doors, too.

Eric checked his internal clock to see that he was still on schedule, then pulled out a small flashlight from one of the pockets of his cloak. He gingerly unscrewed the bottom, revealing a small chamber containing twine, a small screwdriver, and a compass. This last he held very still, inspecting it before he put everything away and got on top of his bicycle, ringing the bell as he rode due east. He wasn't even particularly certain why he was moving east, only that it was the direction his owner thought they should go. It was as good a direction as any other, really.

Better than north, for certain. While most of the eruptions had stopped, heading anywhere *towards* Yellowstone was still suicide, and probably would be for decades. The supervolcano was predicted to produce ash and erupt periodically for at least twenty years after the big one that started the Long Night.

Eric tilted his hat up again as he passed an old, desiccated wooden pole. There were several of them, in various degrees of decay, all lined up. They weren't precisely lined up, mind, but obviously whoever built them didn't have access to the processing power of even the most rudimentary hand computer when they were set. They appeared to follow the general direction of where he was going, so he decided to use them as markers. If he was very lucky, they might lead to an old town.

There wasn't a road to be seen of course. Even with the rough tires of his bicycle, and the overly large wheels on the wagons hitched behind it, he still had to slog through the ash. In some places potholes lead to pits of ash more than two feet deep. The poles themselves were only visible

by the virtue of being so tall to begin with, and most of them were cracked from repeated freezing and thawing, or were knocked over and uprooted by savage winds. The last time he had even seen a house it was at the bottom of a hill, and covered up to the second floor in ash, dust, and detritus. For many days and nights, the view was the same. Eric stopped only to weather black blizzards or recharge. It was wearing, and internal sensors told him that he needed to look to his joints, but he could not do that here. Nowhere in the wastes was safe to do any sort of maintenance, for robot or human. During his trek through an ocean of swirling gray, he came across a rock on the path.

He rang the bell on his bicycle twice, for 'luck', as his owner used to do, and stepped off, his cloak billowing around him in the howling wind. His photoreceptor twitched, trying to focus on the object, but he just couldn't make out what it was. There was only one thing for it, so, taking his shovel, he walked closer.

The rock was far too smooth, even covered in ash, and with the swipe of a gloved hand, Eric revealed the cracked, solar-paneled roof of an Endelyne hybrid car. The panels, of course, were quite useless now, and so were too the batteries and the hydrogen cells. The glove compartment might hold something useful though.

With his trusty shovel, Eric got to work. First he cleared off most of the ash from the roof and windows, then began to crack at the windows themselves. He had long ago discovered that regardless of whether or not

a door is open, most of them were stuck anyway. Windows were much easier to open by comparison. It only took around an hour for him to bust open the front windshield. He was lucky that someone had tried before, some time ago. The cracks in the window had long ago been expanded by the weather.

Inside of the vehicle were the desiccated corpses of two very unfortunate humans who didn't quite escape in time before some manner of end met them. He couldn't tell who they were, and only knew *what* they were from the general shape and the tattered clothes they wore.

“Dreadfully sorry, master and mistress, but needs must when the devil drives.”

Thankfully it did not take long to drag them out of his way so he could enter the the car, but it was still discomfoting to see them out here on this lonely stretch. The glove compartment, unfortunately, held nothing useful. A broken flashlight with dead batteries, a now-useless map, and various papers. He supposed he could take them and use them for trade, in the unlikely event he met anyone out here, but he had limited space and needed to use it carefully, especially given the easily lost nature of the papers. He decided to fold them carefully and stuff them into one of his pockets, then returned to looking for anything he could scavenge.

Of the various items within the vehicle, the couple's pockets, and the engine, he found a bent tire iron, spare change, and quite a bit of

electronic wiring that he had pried out of the engine. He decided to leave the change and take the rest before turning to the deceased humans now laying on the ground beside their vehicle. He pondered them for several minutes before removing what remained of their clothing and stuffing it into his wagon. He would need it later if his garments were torn.

He left the car behind with a shattered windshield and two carefully constructed mounds beside it, beating his shovel against one of the poles to shake dirt and ash off of it, then went on his way.

He still had a lot of traveling to do.