

THIS WORLD and the next

a Novel by

Dave Essinger

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Act I

The Last Day - Rosa

When the power went out on the last day of the world, Rosa and her best friend Hannah would later call it the totally overrated series finale of the Anthropocene era. It began like an ordinary citywide blackout, and Rosa heard generators kicking on in the neighborhood across from base housing, but those quickly went quiet. And her phone wouldn't power up even on battery, or her laptop either. She didn't want to think about what could be messed up in the guts of her devices.

Outside, the night sky wasn't right. She'd seen videos of the Northern Lights, and it looked like that, except brighter. Or maybe the video hadn't done them justice. "Aurora Borealis," she told her brother Leo. "It's when solar flares make an electrical disturbance in the upper atmosphere. Supposed to only happen in the far north, like, the Arctic Circle. Might be what blew out the power grid."

"Aurora Boring-ass," Leo scoffed. Their mother had forbidden them to go out, and in protest, he'd been kicking one leg of the kitchen table rhythmically for a good half hour. Something plastic, the salt shaker probably, had fallen off right away, and more clutter on the tabletop jittered in the dark with every impact. "That's not even a real thing," he said. "You're making shit up."

"Leo," their mother admonished quietly from the couch, where she sat perfectly still in the dim light, her back straight, head slightly tilted as if attuned to something only she could hear. "Stay away from the windows, please," she added.

Leo continued kicking the table. No one was near a window. "That's tornados, Ma," Rosa said. "It's not a tornado." She was eyeing the sliding glass door, watching for McDonnell, but if he hadn't appeared by now she guessed the cat must be holed up somewhere else. A series of heavy thuds echoed, and she said, "Leo, quit."

“That wasn’t me.”

The sound came again, this time clearly a pounding at the front door, and a voice announced, “Base security. Hello, is anyone here?”

Rosa froze. Her mother was watching the door, apprehensive, waiting to see what would happen. Leo remained firmly seated at the table, arms crossed tight over his chest. When the knock came a third time, Rosa went to the door.

A soldier stood silhouetted against the shimmering sky. He had some kind of a baton that emitted a cold blue light, and a rifle slung over his shoulder. He asked for Sonja Calder, and her mother stood. He said he was there to take them somewhere safe, and they should pack some things.

Miraculously, as if the soldier possessed some persuasive power that Rosa could not discern, Leo and her mother rose in unison and moved into action. After a moment, Rosa went to fill a bag of her own.

Outside the window in her room, the sky flared with colors, green and red and bird-egg-blue now. By this weird light, she scooped a handful of items from her nightstand—paperclips and loose change, two barrettes and a hair tie—and dropped it all in the bottom of a duffel, with her dead laptop and its power cord. Then she started piling in clothes. She found her favorite hoodie sweatshirt by touch, the one with the three-view Blackhawk helicopter schematic, and pulled it on even though it wasn’t cold out. For no good reason, she felt safer.

Out in the apartment, her mother kept slapping at light switches that didn’t work, going from one room to the next and opening drawers. “I’m packing, Rosa,” she protested, as if Rosa had said she wasn’t. Her voice was light but strained, like she couldn’t catch her breath.

Rosa slid open the back door, scanned their tiny yard once more, then shook a cupful of dry kibble into the dish on the patio. She considered calling, but reminded herself that that had never worked, ever. She poured out a second cup of kibble and closed the door.

In the living room, by the light of his blue baton, the soldier looked nervous. “Ma’am?” he called. “Get everything you need, but we do have to go.” He looked at their duffels and bags. “Do you have a wagon or something?”

Outside, everything was bright, and people's faces glowed with reflected light, like fireworks but with the sound turned off. Some more soldiers had the blue light sticks, but no one was using any flashlights or speaking loudly. An old lady carried a Pekingese, and a younger man with her wore a backpack and pushed a wheelbarrow loaded with suitcases. A soldier waved his blue light in a circle, directing pedestrian traffic. "Follow the column, have your IDs ready," he was

saying. "Be safe, but, as quickly as you can."

Rosa smelled acrid smoke on the air, but everything was orderly, calm even, until they turned the first corner out of base housing. She registered the change in the quality of light first, from cool pastels to a hot orange, then realized it was really the soft push of heat she was feeling on her skin, and that the object on fire was an overturned car. The soldier leading them raised a hand. "We'll go another way," he said. Shouting figures rushed from around the car, and the sharp snaps of gunshots rattled the air.

Soldiers swung their rifles out and spread apart, circling the riot. Their own boyish leader spun around, breathless, his eyes wide and darting, settling on Rosa's mother. "Ma'am, get to the east gate of the base," he said. "Show your ID there."

A low crumpling roar pushed a wave of heat across the street, followed by the stink of gasoline. Rosa's mother watched blankly, lips parted, the light of the flames flaring over her features.

"Ma'am?" the soldier shouted, then turned to Rosa. "Kid," he said, his voice almost breaking. "Can you get to the main checkpoint gate from here?"

"No!" Rosa screamed, feeling her chest tighten. She didn't know where anything was, or what to do when they got there. "I can't!" she choked.

But the soldier wasn't listening, instead fumbling with his rifle and raising it to his shoulder. A piece of the fire had detached and was headed straight for them. Then Rosa saw that the fireball had legs, was running, was a person. "Halt!" the soldier shouted, "Stop right there!" He fired a single shot, and Rosa saw an open mouth, screaming with no air, and a face distorted through flames. The soldier fired again and the person fell, twenty feet away. Rosa could smell oily fuel smoke and burning meat and hair, and her throat closed up. She wasn't sure if she was going to cry or throw up.

The soldier barked back to get her family out of there, now, and then, rifle raised, he hurried away. Her mother was not moving, and Rosa felt her own face greasy and wet, and thought, *tears*, and wondered if the whining she heard was her own. She swung around, looking for Leo, who stood transfixed with wonder at the flames. She screamed his name and snatched at his arm.

“No way!” he said back, shaking her off. “I’m watching this!”

And that was it, she would have hoped she’d be stronger, but she wasn’t ready for any of this to happen, it wasn’t fair that a few minutes ago, they’d been home, safe. As she felt herself lowering to the ground, crouching to a squat and wrapping her arms around her knees, she thought, *panic: so this is how it happens*. It wasn’t fear so much as feeling helpless, not knowing what to do, but her mother wouldn’t move and Leo wouldn’t listen, and so what was she supposed to do, leave them here? With no clue even what direction to go?

She was shoved hard from behind then, and almost fell over, but a hand grasped at her shoulder, and someone was shouting her name. In this dream of hell, she placed the voice as her friend Hannah’s, but it didn’t match the girl in flannel pajamas and flip-flops, with no makeup and her hair down, but she shouted Rosa’s name again, and yes, it was her. She was with her father, wild-haired and wearing a mis-buttoned shirt. Hannah shook Rosa’s shoulder again as her father was pulling her away.

“Help me get them!” Rosa cried, waving at Leo and her mother. “They won’t—”

After a quick scan of the situation, Hannah’s dad forcibly turned her mom, then wrenched Leo’s arm around and tugged them both into motion.

“God!” her brat of a brother protested. “I’m coming already.”

And a block away, Rosa found the wagon’s handle in her hand, the plastic Radio Flyer they’d brought from their apartment, and she was pulling it, and everything was quieter. Hannah was speaking, but Rosa couldn’t hear, couldn’t think of anything but how she’d lost control so fast.

Soon they were a small crowd, crossing a flat open space that could only be the airbase, but was hardly recognizable in blackout, with no electric light anywhere. When the surface under their feet changed from hard runway to scabby short-mown grass, no one stumbled, because the sky was still bright. It rippled and blazed with green and blue and pink

waves. When the waves flared brightest, Rosa heard a crackling sound, and the hair on the back of her neck prickled.

When a soldier on a bicycle pedaled up, a woman asked in a panicked voice what was happening, if they were under attack, or it was nuclear war, and the soldier told her to keep calm, adding, “It’s none of that.” Addressing everyone, he said, “The power grids are down, all across the state. The cause is not yet known, but we are not at war. Until the power’s back on, you’re being relocated inside the base for your own safety. Those of you with security clearance for the hardened site will be allowed to enter if you so choose.”

“Hardened site, what the hell?” one man said. “What’s going on?”

“And what about the rest of us?” the panicky woman asked. “Are you just going to leave us out here, for God knows what?”

The soldier was already pedaling away, and ahead, Rosa heard him saying the same thing to the next group.

“Everyone,” a young man said, stopping suddenly. He held up his hands. “What if—I don’t want to sound crazy, but—what if this is it? I mean—the end of days?”

“It’s the Rapture,” a woman said beside him. “Simon, say it.”

Her mother stopped to watch them. Rosa nudged her elbow and started her moving again.

The night air was cool on her cheeks, and they kept walking. The tick and hollow rumbling of the wagon’s wheels echoed in her ears.

The hangar they finally entered was cavernous. Their group was conducted deep inside, then stopped at a processing desk before a gated stairwell; the blue batons, and globes emitting the same cold glow, were the only light now. Hannah’s dad shouldered to the front and told the clerk at the desk, “Linc Leary. And this is my daughter.” When asked about rank, he said emphatically, “No, it’s on Prism. Directorate G-one-one-six.” And he flashed the same rippling security badge Rosa had been seeing everywhere lately.

An officer leaned over the desk. “That’s coded Senior Span,” he said. “You’re the designee?”

“I am if it’s goddamn Tuesday,” Hannah’s dad growled.

The officer looked grudgingly impressed. “Level requested?”

“All the way down.” He looked around, back at the rest of them. “And these are the Calders,” he added. “They’re with me, same list. I don’t know the rest here.”

Wand-lit faces swam around them like deep-sea fish. The people they had walked in with crowded around now, fearful and hesitant. Leo waved to some older boys from school. Two of them came over, with their own parents and groups, and some of those pulled along others.

The clerk asked, "How many?" and said the facility was rated for twenty.

"I don't know," Hannah's dad said impatiently. "Twenty then."

They were counted off and moved toward a stairwell. Behind them, the enormous doors they'd entered through, at least three stories high, began to laboriously slide closed. Rosa heard a great creaking, as of disused wheels rolling in their tracks.

Had she known then where it would lead, she might have risked separating from the group, just for a minute, running back toward the huge doors for just another glance at the narrowing slice of sky and, below it, already black and powerless and inert, the skyline of the world she'd known. But of course, the only question anyone's mind could form then was, *How long?*

In the moment, even as they were unloading wagons and strollers and carts, choosing armloads of most-essentials for the first long trip down the series of corridors and stairs, everything still was only a precaution. They were overreacting, keeping on the safe side, with every expectation they'd be back quickly for the remainder of their belongings.

They descended stairs until the air felt different, making slow progress with someone always stopping to arrange their load, or flex their stiffening arms. Finally, they entered a long corridor, and a ceiling full of yellow lights popped on in panels. Everyone blinked.

The last room had a thick metal door. A soldier said some things about air and water filtration, and how to work a generator, and sleeping quarters. "Once I seal this door," he said, "even I can't get back in," which to Rosa sounded overly dramatic. "Does anyone want to change their minds?" Rosa felt her mother's hand on her shoulder, pulling her firmly to her.

"OK," the soldier said, and nodded. "This could all be over in twenty-four hours."

Before the End - Rosa

Rosa always woke to fire up her gaming station and monitor array before the sun, when she could catch Europe, Russia, and much of Asia still active. Her screens lit the room like a huge aquarium, casting shadows of a half-dozen model warplanes on the ceiling: a Focke-Wulf 190, an F4C Phantom, a couple loose MiGs, and her favorite, the Battle of Britain Spitfire with the gunsight she'd improvised out of clear prism styrene and some watch gears. Every time they moved, she hung the planes in a new dogfight configuration from the ceiling, and put up her framed poster of the USAF Thunderbirds in diamond formation, signed "Col. Fifi" by the first woman to fly with the team.

That morning, as a cut scene of an F-14 in full afterburner flashed across her screen, she had hesitated for about a whole tenth of a second before logging in with her dad's account, again. When her latest kill video hit everyone's highlight reels, the anonymous dot-mil sign-in made the chatter a lot more fun. Sure, these sims were all gamers and kids, boys in darkened rooms, but their speculation that Israeli Air Defense was outsourcing their sim training, or that Top Gun grads were logging in to mess with people, always made her smile—whatever excuses the gamer-boys needed to justify getting their asses handed to them yet again. Because she was just that goddamned good.

After another solid session of dominating the virtual skies, she slid off her headset and heard voices from her parents' room—how long had her father been home? She eased her door open, listened, then padded silently out into the hall.

"You said you'd be done flying missions," her mother muttered dully. Rosa stopped outside their cracked-open door, her posture off balance, poised to resume walking away.

"And I will be," her father insisted. "Just—not yet."

"You said two weeks ago. We had that whole discussion. Can they just do that, keep you both flying, for no reason?"

"They could," he said testily. "You know that." He sighed and went on, deflated. "But that's not how it happened. Jon and I reconsidered. In light of recent events."

Her mother snorted, derisive. "How long," she said.

"I've been telling you, it's not just media hype with the removal and succession," he said. "Command is divided, the Secretary's an appointee and the Joint Chiefs don't respect him, I'm really worried where this could go."

Her mother said wearily, "You know I don't follow any of that." "I'm needed, to keep things from collapsing right now, OK? The whole system's in free fall, but the point is, there are people working to keep it together."

"What," she said, "our government's 'better angels'?"

"Try, 'the grown-ups in the room,'" her father said. "Sonja. I'm needed." He softened his voice, and Rosa leaned in. "Look, as of a couple hours ago, my security clearance is a color I've never even seen before, and I've learned some things that just keep getting more disturbing. These media blackouts, the marches? You don't think there are active measures at play, all those people being influenced somehow?"

Her mother made a soft sound that Rosa couldn't interpret, then said, "And here I'm the one sampling antipsychotics."

She heard sudden movement then. Her father hissed something about "working through this, instead of just swallowing all these goddamn—" He paused. "I shouldn't have said that."

Her mother sighed sharply, almost a laugh. "Why not?" A silence followed, and Rosa held her breath.