



KILL ALL SURVIVORS

Z

APOCALYPSE

STEVE COLE

GAME
OVER

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Acknowledgments
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Also by Steve Cole
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About the Book

Here comes the end of the world . . .

The destruction of the White House by prehistoric beasts marks the start of an incredible assault on the great powers of the world. Geneflow – the terrorist group forcing evolution into revolution – will not stop until humanity's total destruction is assured.

Only Adam, a fourteen-year-old boy, holds the key to stopping them – and he must travel to the ends of the earth to stop a nightmare vision of the future from becoming reality.

It seems impossible. But the return of an old ally makes it just possible that he might succeed . . .

Z. **APOCALYPSE**

STEVE COLE

RHCP DIGITAL

For Poppy Bristow

I do not know how the Third World War will be fought, but I can tell you what they will use in the Fourth - rocks!

Albert Einstein

And then his captor became visible.

It was a giant, birdlike monster with a body as big as an elephant and a face that was little more than a vast beak – easily big enough to swallow him whole with room to spare. The beast's upper jaw ended in a kind of circular crest, crusted in blood. Its eyes shone black, each the size of a dinner plate. But it was the thing's wings that held him transfixed – colossal sails of scaly flesh rippling over an intricate framework of bone. Stretched out as it was, its wingspan was easily greater than a light aircraft.

Not just a pterosaur. A Z. pterosaur.

Chapter 0: Seek, Locate, Destroy

THE CREATURE SOARED above the ocean. Her wings were long lengths of leather and rust. Her great beak was pointed like a giant's spear. She rode the thermal currents, the sun hot on her back, the salt wind cooling her belly.

There was still over an hour until the battle ahead; until then she had no orders to follow and could enjoy the freedom of flight.

Freedom . . .

The blue ocean flecked with white was a mirror to the sparsely clouded sky, as the kilometres clicked off one by one. A crosswind kicked in, buffeting her body; she beat the great fleshy sails of her wings to increase her speed.

On and on she flew, shutting out fatigue, dead on course.

When the distance between her and her target dipped below fifty kilometres, her brain clicked automatically into battle mode. With a blink of her enormous eyes she switched to infrared vision, seeking out heat traces in case the target was submerged. Her natural senses, enhanced in ways she didn't understand, brought the scent of prey to her nostrils, the cold whirl of machinery to her ears. With a blink, she selected maximum magnification and zoomed in on the target area.

Something white and alien floated on the water. A boat.

The scent of the sea was snuffed out in the rush of data; the sun's warmth was lost as her blood temperature rose and her predator's instincts kicked in.

The first hunt-and-kill tests had been games; no one got hurt, not for real. But now, playtime was over. There were three living things on board the boat; they had machines

she knew could hurt her. She wondered what the machines' range would be, and fought to suppress her fear.

She was not allowed to be afraid. The surgeons had hacked fear from her brain along with all other emotions – or so they thought. She might act like a machine, but if the programmers realized she could feel like an animal as well, she would be recycled – thrown to the slaving monsters in the pit . . .

I want to live, she thought.

As she closed the last few kilometres, her senses detected a missile incoming. Instantly she dived to a lower altitude, streaking seawards. She saw the steel projectile hurtling towards her, locked onto her body heat.

Go faster. Evade.

Programmed strategies auto-loaded, screaming at her to accelerate, to fold the great sails of her wings close to her sides so that she became a kind of missile herself, to push the air from her lungs in a long breath and then—

There was a booming hiss as she plunged into the sea. Her nostrils closed. Her lungs, emptied of air, gave her no buoyancy as she needled into the deep. The missile detonated behind her with a colossal blast that sent shockwaves down to the seabed and an enormous plume of water skywards. Buffeted by the vibrations she levelled out and held her course, approaching her target now from below. The water was like a different sky. A liquid night, close and comforting around her . . .

Eleven kilometres and closing.

Her super-sharp senses soon became aware of a new threat: a torpedo, pumping through the depths, its digital tracking systems seeking her out. Propelled by her long snaking tail she pushed down again, passing 500 metres below the surface, 600 metres . . . Computers in her mind told her the torpedo's precision systems would stop working accurately below 800 metres—

A wave of anger damped down the data. So many facts, they smouldered, filthy and foreign in her head. *Go down deeper.* She switched to true vision, turned off her battle systems. Suddenly she was alone. The blackness all around was soothing. She could go deeper and deeper into this ocean of night and never come back . . .

Then the torpedo exploded and her sense of peace was torn apart. She was lost in a gale of pressure and heat. Pain stabbed from her head to her heart as the computers in her mind switched on in response, half drowning her with information. Terrified and angry, she began to beat her wings, propelling herself upwards.

No more debate, no more conflict.

It was time for the kill.

She broke the surface with a terrifying screech. Her prey stood on the deck of the assault craft – soft things, the weapons they clutched no use at all. Machine guns spat noise and bullets that only bruised and made her madder. One victim she clawed with flailing talons, another she smacked over-board with the sweep of a single wing.

The last soft thing kept firing; the idiot blare of his weapon driving her desire to kill. Her jaws closed on him, and she twisted her head. His spine snapped and the firing stopped.

She tossed the limp body into the water after the others of his kind, and hesitated. The sun was starting to set. The air was cool. Besides the lap of the waves, there was silence.

Objective achieved.

She could break off now, fly out of reach, make for whatever shore lay beyond the horizon . . .

But the programmers would know she had disobeyed. They could make her whole head burn with pain. Pain hard enough to kill.

She launched herself from the bloodstained boat and began the long flight back to her hidden home. *Hide what*

you are, she told herself. *Wait*. With the completion of these kill-tests, the work to end the world of flesh and fur would enter its final phase.

And with the last hunting, freedom would come.

Chapter 1: A Virtual Reality

I WANNA GO home.

Adam Adlar lay rigid on the couch as electrodes were fixed to his chest and forehead, his fists and feet. Wires trailed from the pads to a battered black console and a computer on a side table. There was little else in the meeting room: two hard-backed chairs and a desk.

You're in a military base, Adam reminded himself. What did you expect - comfy sofas and a home cinema?

Adam shivered as his dad crowned him with a high-tech headset and finished hooking him up to the console. He tried to focus on the kind, careworn face, the grey eyes behind the round glasses, the thinning hair and frown-lines.

'It's just like playing another sim, right?' Mr Adlar tried to give him an encouraging smile. 'Gaming - the thing you love most, the thing you do best. See if you can relax, OK?'

Adam closed his eyes, tried to think himself calmer. *Imagine you're back home in Scotland, back in your bedroom . . .* He'd done that a lot lately. His room was a small, warm space painted blue and black, bulging with books and Blu-Rays and videogame boxes; a place that felt safe. Or as safe as anywhere could be after all he and his dad'd been through the last year . . .

And now you're going to relive the horror, he thought. See through the eyes of the monsters who almost killed you. And it's all down to your genius games-architect father . . .

Tension tugged Adam's eyes back open. 'You know, Dad, there are times when I wish you'd never invented Ultra-Reality.'

Mr Adlar nodded and muttered. 'Me too, Ad. Just about each minute of every day.'

Adam sighed. Ultra-Reality should've been so cool: a games console that drew you so far into the action, you actually *became* the character. Thanks to Mr Adlar's incredible invention, the 'Think-Send' system, the only controller required was the gamer's mind – you had only to *think* what you wanted the hero to do, and he would do it. It was revolutionary.

If the big games companies had bought into the concept and funded his father's work, U-R might have changed the games market for ever. Instead, broke and almost bankrupt, Mr Adlar had been forced to take cash from a shady organization called Geneflow – whose directors had darker plans for this unique technology . . .

'This simulation,' said Adam, trying to keep the shake from his voice. 'If the United States military found it in an abandoned Geneflow base, why can't they just try it out for themselves? Why drag the two of us eight thousand kilometres to Maryland to play it for them?'

Mr Adlar pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. 'The simulation the military recovered was damaged, Ad, it wouldn't run properly. They've tried all kinds of players, but it seems no one can get the Think-Send system to work correctly.' He grim-aced. 'No one except maybe the boy whose brainwaves helped create that system, who's more compatible with the technology than anyone on Earth.'

'Me,' said Adam softly.

He could have laughed. The situation was like the set-up for some incredible game. 'A boy's father gets kidnapped by scientific terrorists making hyper-evolved dinosaurs . . . They want to use Think-Send to train and teach the creatures they've created, but Dad won't play ball. The bad guys threaten to hurt the boy – but one of the dinosaurs turns good and gets to him first. Boy and dinosaur find they think alike because Boy's personality got caught up in the

system. They work together to beat the baddies. But the terrorists won't quit. They're hell-bent on making their mad plans a reality . . .'

Yeah, quite a set-up. Adam swallowed hard. *Only it's not a game.*

It's all real.

He shuddered as a wave of nightmare memories washed over him: *T. rexes* force-evolved into *Z. rexes*, prehistoric predators at the peak of their powers . . . *Velociraptors* with freakily human minds . . . mutated sea monsters that tore whole ships apart with teeth and claws . . .

The door opened and Adam jumped. A slim officer walked into the room, handsome and dark-skinned. His uniform was immaculate and well tailored, so that he looked more like a movie star than a military man.

'Sorry for startling you.' The man's voice was a deep purr. 'I'm Colonel Oldman, Special Activities Division. You must be the Adlar boys, fresh out of the UK. Welcome to Fort Meade.'

'Thanks. I'm Bill, this is Adam,' said Mr Adlar, shaking the colonel's hand. 'I'm originally from Chicago myself, only moved to Edinburgh in my twenties.' He paused. 'And as a well-informed American citizen, I know that the SAD is the secret paramilitary unit of the Central Intelligence Agency.'

'Then you don't need me to tell you just how classified this entire operation is.' Colonel Oldman put a finger to his lips as if for silence, then smiled at Adam. 'So, young man. You've played sims like this before, right? Gonna get it working for us?'

Cheeks reddening, Adam nodded. 'I'll try.'

'That's all we ask of you, Adam. That's all we ask.' Oldman watched him closely. 'We hear you're a natural-born gamer, and we're kinda counting on you. See, we think there might be something important on this disc, and all the evidence in this Geneflow case points to you being the guy to show us what it is.'

Mr Adlar nodded curtly. 'And this is why your people summoned us here, with barely a day to pack up and fly out?'

Oldman inclined his head in apology. 'I appreciate the disruption to your lives bringing you here has caused. I only wish it hadn't been necessary. But the Geneflow threat hasn't gone away like we all hoped it would. Recent events have revealed certain . . . developments.'

'Developments?' Mr Adlar frowned. 'Will you stop talking in riddles and tell us what's going on?'

'Mr Adlar, I assure you that you and your son will soon be briefed on the situation through the proper channels.' Suddenly, Oldman's manner had grown stiff as his uniform. 'Now, if Adam's been connected to the console as we requested, and we can capture what he sees on the computer . . .?'

'It's all set up.' With an air of reluctance, Mr Adlar switched on the battered U-R console. A red light glowed in its casing. Then he tapped at the computer keyboard, bringing up a window on the screen. 'Ready to record sound and vision.'

Adam tapped his headset and smiled nervously at his dad. 'Ready to try and get you some.'

Oldman crossed to the far side of the room and dimmed the lights.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Adam felt his nerves fade away with the rest of reality as the world within the console worked directly with his senses.

Suddenly the meeting room didn't exist, and he was no longer a skinny teenager, isolated and afraid. He felt a power surge through his body - a coldness harden his mind. Around him, everything was dark. He turned to try to take in details and the world jerked and skipped - *Glitches in the software*, he realized dimly. *Concentrate. Be as one with this world . . .*

Adam focused hard and his surroundings smoothed out, stretching on for ever, more real than anything his human senses could understand.

Human?

Here in this world, Adam knew he was no longer human. He was more than a beast; more than a bird. A single, dominating impulse burned in his mind, driving out every other thought.

It was the impulse to kill.

In a dizzying blink Adam's sight was dazzled by a vast orange sun, low and heavy on the horizon. He looked down to find the glimmering, rolling sea far below; with a thrill he saw that he was airborne. In the same instant, he felt the weight of his expansive, leathery wings, felt the warm currents of air caressing his sinewy skin.

He spotted a ruined city sprawling in the distance, its details lost in the reddish haze.

A place to hunt.

He beat his wings harder, eager to reach the shore and the ruins. Soon he found that his sight was like the viewfinder on a camera; he could zoom in to get a closer look. Not that there was much to see but ash and rubble and charred, misshapen buildings. As he reached the city, Adam's eyes darted all around, scanning for the slightest movement that would betray the presence of a survivor.

Suddenly, on the edge of his vision, a shadow flitted through the debris. He blinked and zoomed in closer – and spied a human dressed in rags, slipping and stumbling over the rocks and masonry.

Eyes fixed on his new target, Adam shifted his weight, tilted his great wings and swooped down, his body slicing through the air with incredible speed towards the lone figure. There was an open wound on the creature's leg; he could almost taste the salty blood on the wind. Violent urges swelled inside him as the programmed orders burned fiercely at the forefront of his brain.

KILL ALL SURVIVORS.

Adam felt his whole body convulse with the thrill of the hunt, the anticipation of the taking of one more life. He let out a long, guttural screech of triumph. Terrified, the human creature whirled round to face him, its bruised, grimy face stricken with terror. There was nowhere for it to run.

KILL IT NOW.

Closing the last few metres, Adam splayed scythe-like claws, ready to seize his victim before ripping its body in two—

No. No, don't.

What was that voice? Saliva frothed in his jaws. Was there another human to be killed?

I can't do this. I'm Adam Adlar. Not a killer. This isn't me. IT ISN'T ME.

Adam's skull felt ready to explode. An inhuman scream burst from his lungs as the world turned red and his victim's face shattered into a million pixels . . .

Chapter 2: Caught in Carnage

WITH A JOLT, Adam sat bolt upright on the couch, back in the darkened meeting room, panting wildly. *It's over*, he realized. *It wasn't real . . .*

'Ad?' His dad tugged off the headset, tousled Adam's sweaty hair. 'Are you all right?'

'Think . . . so . . .'

Adam's heart slapped mushily against his ribs while his dad tore the electrodes from his clammy skin.

'What happened?' Colonel Oldman sounded cross. 'Was that the end of the simulation?'

'I *made* it end,' said Adam's dad tersely. 'You saw how distressed Adam was. I should never have let him do it. That sim was meant for animal minds, not human.'

The lights glared on again; Adam flinched, screwed up his eyes.

'It's clearly a training program for Z. beasts,' Mr Adlar went on, 'honing their instincts, teaching them how best to hunt and kill people.'

When Oldman spoke again it was more quietly. 'On the screen . . . Were we seeing . . . some kind of *pterodactyl*?'

'Yes . . .'

Adam barely recognized the tortured croak in his throat as his own. 'Dad, I *was* that thing . . . Flying. I was flying . . .'

'I'm here, Adam, it's OK.'

'I wanted to kill . . . I was hunting people . . . had to kill everyone . . . everyone left.'

Oldman peered down at him. 'Everyone left after what?'

'I don't know,' Adam whispered. 'Something bad. Something terrible . . .'

‘Easy,’ Mr Adlar whispered, trying to settle Adam back down on the couch. He sighed and looked up at Oldman. ‘I should never have agreed to this.’

‘You had no choice,’ Oldman said softly, the assurance sounding somehow sinister. ‘Now, while I take this video footage to the Pentagon, I’d like you to meet with some of my colleagues on the National Security Council. They want to speak to you about Geneflow.’

‘Right now?’ Mr Adlar was growing exasperated. ‘We haven’t even checked into our hotel yet.’

‘Bear with me, Mr Adlar.’ Oldman gave him a tight smile. ‘Recent evidence has raised fresh questions. I just hope to God we can answer them.’ He turned and opened the door. ‘I’ll have someone escort you to a car in just a few minutes. They’ll drive you to DC, and back again afterwards.’

‘Back here?’ Mr Adlar said sharply. But he was talking to shadows; Oldman had gone.

Adam puffed out a breath. ‘Did he mean DC as in Washington DC?’

‘And National Security Council as in the men and women who advise the president of the United States of America on what to do in a national crisis.’ Mr Adlar sat down on the couch beside him, looking dazed. ‘Nice to feel wanted, isn’t it?’

Adam closed his eyes and sighed. ‘It’s the biggest thrill of my life.’

An hour later, Adam sat in the back of the black SUV, watching through tinted windows the interstate clog with cars. From the overhead signs they had to be nearing Washington DC.

About time, Adam thought. He had been playing his 3DS for much of the journey, but the constant stopping and starting of the car through the thickening traffic was beginning to make him feel sick. Besides, he reflected, once

you'd played Ultra-Reality, even the most sophisticated hand-held or console felt uninspiring by comparison. It had been getting harder and harder to lose himself in gameplay, to shut out his problems in the real world.

And now he was on his way to confront them head on.

They turned from 13th Street onto I Street Northwest – the city was a gridwork of letters and numbers and Adam counted three stately parks within six blocks. It felt a very tidy and grown-up city; a serious place for serious people.

'Whereabouts is the meeting?' Adam asked his father beside him.

'The Eisenhower Executive Office Building, just west of the White House. Saw the outside on a school trip once.' Mr Adlar looked at him. 'How're you doing now?'

'I'm OK. Just wondering what this new evidence is all about.'

His dad considered him. 'We know that Geneflow have been creating living terror weapons, and uploading human minds into the bodies of beasts. Perhaps now we'll find out why.'

Adam nodded solemnly. 'Can't believe they're using pterodactyls.'

His dad shrugged. 'They've re-engineered *T. rexes* and raptors – perhaps they've experimented with flying reptiles too?' He placed a hand on Adam's and squeezed. 'Try not to worry.'

Uh-huh. Right. Adam tried to accept the intended reassurance, but all he could feel was the clamminess in his dad's grip. *Time to change the subject.* 'This traffic's a nightmare. Are we going to be late?'

Mr Adlar checked his watch. 'No, we're good. The meeting doesn't start until seven, we still have a good forty minutes . . .'

But as the SUV turned onto 17th Street, there was a thunderous explosion from somewhere ahead. Their driver swore as the car jerked to a halt, almost crashing into the

vehicle in front. The traffic ahead was gridlocked, and horns were blaring.

Then Adam realized people were getting out of their cars, pointing up at the skies or running for cover. He felt a sick feeling rise in his stomach. 'Dad, what's going on?'

'I don't know.' Mr Adlar looked grave. 'Driver, do you see anything?'

The driver's reply was lost beneath another boom that rocked the entire street like an earthquake. Crowds of pedestrians swarmed past in the opposite direction, the air filling with their footfalls and terrified babble.

Adam craned his neck to look upwards, following their line of sight. He saw a massive shadow streak overhead, something impossibly huge in the sky – and his heart stabbed with sudden recognition.

'Zed?' Adam gripped his seat. 'Dad, I think it's Zed! Did you see?'

His dad stared up at the clouds. 'Zed? Are you sure—?'

'Like he was in stealth mode . . .!'

Memories and emotions churned inside Adam. He had spent a good ten days trapped in the company of Zed, the first of Geneflow's prehistoric recreations – a true-life *T. rex* who had been force-evolved all the way to a *Z. rex*, the Z standing for Zenithsaurus, or *lizard at its highest point* in plain language.

'Geneflow cloned Zed, remember?' Mr Adlar was staring out of his own window. 'Whatever's up there, I think there's more than one . . .'

Adam squinted against the evening sunlight. Geneflow had given Zed the gift of adaptive camouflage – a chemical sweat secreted by the skin that deflected light and left the massive beasts practically invisible. A blur of brickwork as they sped past buildings, or ripples in the blue as they swooped down from the sky – these were the covert clues that a creature was coming.