

Bugs in the Arroyo

By Steven Gould

The first few days were just weird and annoying. You'd come out in the morning and find one of the damn things had chewed most of the way through your car's antenna. A week later, people were crashing because the bugs had eaten through brake lines or the cars wouldn't start at all 'cause the bugs had gone for all the copper wire. And remember, they just bud off another bug when they've eaten enough so their numbers increased geometrically. By the end of the first month they'd done for the entire car, finishing off the engine block and every last steel wire in the radial tires. By the end of the first week people were driving out of the southwest. By the end of the first month they were walking.

We didn't realize they'd go for your fillings and crowns until they'd done for most of the infrastructure in Arizona and New Mexico. What? Yeah, that's what caused the scarring. There was extensive reconstructive surgery too, or it would be worse. Would I go back? Huh. I'd have to have some of my dental work replaced but it's not like I have a pacemaker or an artificial joint. But no. I don't think so. It may be more crowded outside the territory, but who wants to live without metal?

Excerpt: When the Metal Eaters Came: First-Person Accounts

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The second day after leaving the Rio Grande, on the downslope east of the Manzanos, Kimball pulled over the lip of a hill and found an argument in progress.

Mrs. Pedecaris, the mule drawing his cart, had apparently heard them first for her ears twitched forward well before the top of the hill. Kimball was not surprised. The trail they were following had become more of a road, well-defined wheel ruts with fresh tracks, and fresh horse manure just beginning to dry.

Kimball had looped the reins over the brake lever while he was weaving the last bit of a wide-brimmed green cattail hat—and Mrs. Pedecaris slowed as she approached the cluster of vehicles just over the hill.

There were five carts similar to Kimball's, high-wheeled boxes with composite wheels and axles. Three were horse-drawn, one mule-drawn, and one cart had lowered shafts and a cross bar to be pulled by hand, like a Mormon cart. Then three freight wagons with six-horse teams stood in a row, and there were a couple of saddle horses in front of them.

Kimball took Mrs. Pedecaris off the edge of the road to where a tough patch of dry buffalo grass was doing all right in the shade of some low mesquite bushes. He pulled off her bridle so she could crop the grass and said, "Pull up a chair, Mrs. P." The mule snorted and dipped her head into the grass.

The road dipped sharply, into a cut leading down into a broad arroyo running down from the mountains. That's where the cluster of people stood, crouched, or sat.

“—dehydration is really the issue.”

“Maybe we could throw a canteen?”

“Dammit, how many times do we gotta argue this? You crush a bug they’ll swarm her for sure. Us too.”

Kimball looked out beyond them and saw that the arroyo glittered copper and silver and crystalline blue. Out in the middle, on a large chunk of limestone, a small figure sat cross-legged and still.

“Oh,” he said aloud.

Several people turned and saw him.

“Afternoon,” Kimball said.

They looked at him blankly. A big man wearing a teamster’s emblem on his vest suddenly swore loudly. “Who’s watchin’ the wagons? Marty, Richard! Get your lazy asses up there! Unhitch the teams and let ’em have a little water.”

A short, dark man in orange and maroon Buddhist robes turned around and Kimball blinked. It was *Thây* Hahn, a Buddhist priest of the Tiep Hien Order. Every December he led a *Seshin*, a meditation retreat, at the Dojo. Kimball had also stayed at his home in the territorial capital. Kimball shaded his eyes and looked harder at the figure out on the boulder. “Shit! Is that Thayet?” It was. True to form, she wasn’t just sitting cross-legged, she was in full lotus.

Thayet was Hahn’s twelve-year-old daughter.

“Kimball?”

Kimball bowed, his hands together. “*Thây* Hahn. What happened?”

He stopped counting on his rosary and bowed back, his face calm. “There was a storm up in the Manzanos that sent a flash flood. It happened before we reached the arroyo but the water was still high when we reached here so we waited, filling our water barrels.”

“All of you?”

“Ah, no, Mr. Graham’s teamsters arrived only an hour ago. Some of the others came yesterday. At first it was just the Joffrey family’s two carts and us—we’ve been traveling the same road since we met near Isleta. The water slowed to a trickle on the far edge and the sand was starting to dry so Mr. Joffrey took an empty cart across to test the footing.”

A man with male pattern baldness was standing a bit further down where the road turned. He held a cloth hat in his hand and he was twisting it back and forth in his hands though the sun fell full upon his head. “I ran over a damn bug.”

Kimball squeezed his eyes shut for a moment.

“Was Thayet in your cart?”

The balding man shook his head. "Hell no. I heard that pop. It's like nothing else, right? Once you've heard one and see what happens you know forever. I whipped up the horse and we bolted forward, but the damn thing sank up to its axel in some quicksand and I panicked. The bugs were already in the air and I just jumped up and ran for it."

"Let me guess," Kimball said. "Thayet went for the horse."

Hahn nodded. "Just so. She got him unhitched and tried to ride him out but he bucked her off when a bug burned him."

Mr. Joffrey added, "*He* made it out. Stupid was grazing on the far ridge at sunset."

"Sunset? How long has Thayet been out there?"

Hahn's fingers clicked through his rosary automatically. It was not unlike Mr. Joffrey's twisting hat. "The storm was two days ago. She's been on that rock for two nights."

Dehydration indeed.

Kimball looked over the wash. The cart was in pieces, riddled with bug holes, perhaps halfway across the wash. There were a couple of boulders also sticking above the moving sea of copper and steel but none of the bugs sat on them. "Iron rich sands?"

"I believe so," said Hahn. "There were dark streaks."

Not enough to attract the bugs in the first place, but enough to keep them here once they swarmed.

A woman with a toddler asleep in her lap was sitting in the small bit of shade at the edge of the cut. "Isn't there something that can be done?"

One of the teamsters muttered, "Here we go again."

Mr. Joffrey turned, anguish twisting across his face like the hat in his hands. "If it would just rain again..."

Bugs hated water. They'd abandon the arroyo while water covered it. Of course, it was the water that probably uncovered a piece of refined metal to attract that first bug, the one run over by the cart.

The first rain was unlikely enough this time of year. No counting on a second storm.

"This won't do," Kimball said. "Anybody have a shovel?"

"What, you gonna tunnel to her?" the teamster boss, Graham, said. "That's limestone under that sand. Might as well build a bridge above, as long as that would take."

"Lend me a shovel and I'll go get her."

Graham, a big man going gray, stared at Kimball, slight and young. Kimball had even depilitated that morning so he looked his youngest. "Stupid to send one fool kid after another."

"You want to just sit here and let her die of thirst?"

“All I see is two dead kids instead of one and a shovel rotten with bug holes. No gain in that.”

“I die out there, you can have my mule and cart and all its contents. That’s a pretty good trade for a fiberglass shovel.”

Hahn was watching the conversation intently and Kimball saw him open his mouth, as if to argue on with Graham, but Kimball shook his head. The priest knew of his association with Territorial Intelligence. He’d even passed messages to and from the Rangers for Kimball. Kimball didn’t want Hahn blowing his cover to convince someone to lend a shovel.

Graham said, “I’ve got kids myself. The only thing worse than losing one is losing two. Forget it.” There was something in his voice that made Kimball think this wasn’t just theoretical knowledge.

Kimball shrugged. “Right. How about you, Mr. Joffrey?”

Mr. Joffrey was looking at his wife. The hat was twisted tighter than ever.

She was biting her lower lip. Her arms tightened around the toddler in her lap so much that he woke, complaining. She shushed him, kissing his head, and he settled again. She looked up at her husband and gave him a short nod.

“Right,” he said. He stared down at the hat in his hand and then touched his sunburned bald spot. “Ow. What a fool thing!” He settled the hat on his head and started up the hill.

Kimball turned to follow him. “Now just wait a minute!” said Graham and started to walk up the hill after them.

Hahn stepped in the big man’s way and held up his hand. “Your choice is inaction. I understand that. But she is not *your* child.”

Hahn was a good two feet shorter than the teamster but something made that man pull up short.

Kimball kept walking. At the cart, he took a water bottle, his first aid kit, and some dried apples and walnuts, and put them in a shoulder bag. Joffrey took a rough composite shovel out of his remaining cart and handed it to Kimball. “It’s seen better days.”

The edge of the fiberglass blade was worn and cracked but the handle was all right. “It’s perfect,” Kimball said.

“Be careful, right?”

Kimball nodded. He started to walk away but at the last minute stepped back to his cart and took that wide-brimmed green cattail hat with him.

He didn’t walk back down into the cut. Thayet was far closer to the other side and he saw no point in traveling through more bugs than he had to. Besides, this would save arguing with the teamster.

A quarter mile upstream, where the edges of the arroyo were higher and steeper, a slab of limestone shelved across the bed, probably forming a waterfall when the water ran, but now it was a broken swath of rock with only a little of the iron rich sands pooling between raised boulders. Kimball slid down the side of the arroyo in a cloud of dirt, dust, and pebbles and picked his way across the arroyo, boulder to

boulder. He had to cut steps into the far side with the shovel to make it back to the top.

He came down the road cut on the far side and studied the space between him and Thayet's rock.

Bugs don't really care about people. As far as they're concerned, humans are just a slightly thicker manifestation of air.

Bugs care about three things, near as Kimball could figure. They loved metal. That's what they're after, what they're made of, what they ate to turn into even more bugs.

You don't want to have an artificial joint in the Territory. Ditto for metal fillings.

In preference over metal, though, they go after electro-magnetic radiation. This means they love radio and really, any of the humming frequencies caused by current flowing through conductors.

Forget computers, radios, cell phones, generators, and—remember fillings and crowns?—well, a pacemaker, an imbedded insulin pump, a vagal stimulator brings them quicker.

But there is one thing that brings them even faster than all of those, that makes them *swarm*.

A broken bug is to the territory what blood is to a shark pool. They come in numbers, they come fast, and they come with their coal-black nano snouts ready to eat through anything.

Kimball used the shovel like a spatula easing it under the bugs, under the sand itself, and lifted. The minute it was up, he stepped there, into the moist sand below, temporarily free of bugs.

He sprinkled the shovelful of sand and bugs off to the side, gently, only inches above the others. Some rattled, some spread their silicon-blue photovoltaic wings from under their metal carapaces and buzzed off to land elsewhere, and some just fell to the ground and kept working on the bit of iron they'd separated from the surrounding sands.

Kimball took it very slow. He'd seen bugs sufficiently disturbed that a whole cloud of them rose up without the usual requirement of one getting broken—not quite a swarm—but sufficient to badly scar the horse that had stirred 'em up.

More than once one of the bugs buzzed to a landing on Kimball's clothing. He scraped them carefully off with the blade of the shovel and they'd drop or fly off.

When he was fifteen feet or so from Thayet's boulder he spoke. "Hey, lazy girl, you gonna sit there all day?"

She blinked and turned her head. She did not look good. Her lips were cracked and crusted with blood. Her nose was peeling and there was a hole in her pants above one knee that was brown with crusted blood. "Go away," she said, and closed her eyes again.

Kimball blinked. *Ah*. "Thayet, I'm not a hallucination."

"Yes you are. Kim is hundreds of miles from here."

He laughed. For some reason that made her open her eyes again. "If you can convince me you won't drop it, I have water."

She shook herself, then slapped her cheek. She looked back across the arroyo to where her father and the crowd watched. Kimball hadn't been looking at them. They were all standing, many of them with their hands raised as if they could reach out and snatch both of them to safety. Graham, the teamster boss, even had one hand raised to his mouth.

"Kim?" She looked back at him.

"Yes, Thayet." Kimball shifted another shovelful of bugs and sand, made another pace forward. He stopped again, to let the bugs settle. "Here, catch."

He took the hat and threw it like a Frisbee. She clutched it weakly to her, eyes widening.

"Does that feel like a hallucination?"

She rubbed it between her fingers. "No."

"Put it on, silly."

She did, and sighed audibly when the rim shaded the sun from her face.

"Ready for the water?"

"Give me a moment. I'm numb from the waist down."

"Well, you better do something about that." Kimball's legs had gone to sleep before during meditation but he was afraid her experience was really more like the time he'd been locked in the stocks by the People of the Book.

She had to use her arms to uncross her legs. She pushed them out, extended and leaned back.

Kimball took another shovelful, another step.

Thayet screamed as the sensation began returning to her legs. There was a sympathetic shout from the crowd across the arroyo. They probably thought a bug was boring through her, but Kimball saw Hahn talking, his hands raised, explaining about the legs.

Thayet gritted her teeth together, then, methodically began massaging her legs. "Aaaagghhh." After a few moments she said, "Water?"

"Sip first, right? You drink too much you'll throw it right up." He swung the bag by its handle, underhand, and she caught it neatly.

She was careful, rinsing her mouth before swallowing. She managed a half of a liter in small gulps before he got the rest of the way to her boulder.

"Scoot over," he said, sitting beside her. "Whew, I'm bushed." It wasn't the effort, but the tension.

They sat there for another half-hour. Thayet tried some dried apple and a few walnuts and another half-liter of water and Kimball bandaged the bug score on her right thigh. Finally, he helped her stand and encouraged her to take a few steps side to side atop the rock.

They went back the way he'd come, one shovelful at a time, with her hands on his waist and stepping into his vacated footsteps before the bugs filled them. The bugs crawled around their ankles and once one took a shortcut through the leather of Kimball's moccasin and the skin of his ankle, leaving a bloody dribble across the sand.

He cursed a blue streak but he kept his steps and the shovel steady.

When they made it back to the edge of the bugs, where the cut dropped into the sand of the arroyo, they staggered up the road several yards. As they collapsed there was a ragged cheer from across the arroyo.

Thayet bandaged his ankle, then drank more water. "You want some?"

"No girl. That's your water. Until you're peeing frequently, copiously, and clearly."

"You're gross."

"Yes, little dove."

* * *

They found Joffrey's errant horse, Stupid, near the road, its lead reins tangled in a patch of prickly pear, and Thayet refused to move another step until Kimball had gotten its halter and harness off. Its mouth was a mess after two days of chewing around the composite bit. Kimball settled both the horse and Thayet a good quarter mile up the road in the shade of a rock outcropping.

Back at the lip of the arroyo, across from the teamster boss, he shouted, "You ready?"

"Yeah," the teamster yelled back. "We got them back over the hill. Your mule didn't want to go. Josh was reaching for its bridle and she came *that* close to biting off his arm. You could hear the teeth come together clear down the hill. But Hahn, here, he bribed her with a bucket of oats and she followed him down."

"She's a lot of trouble. Okay, give me five minutes."

What he had in mind wouldn't take as long as the painstaking slog across the arroyo to get Thayet, but it was probably as dangerous.

While one might be able to take the carts and saddle horses cross-country downstream to where the walls of the arroyo were less steep, the freight wagons would have to detour thirty miles to a crossing they could handle.

Unless they could clear the crossing of bugs.

The spot he chose was a half-mile downstream, where the walls of the arroyo had been undercut by the recent flooding, but a three-foot stratum of limestone kept the rim solid. There was more limestone below, with shallow pockets that had caught some of the iron-bearing sands. While the bugs were nowhere near as thick as at the crossing, there were some grazing for ferrous bits.

He found the first thing he needed about fifty yards back, a depressed hollow between two rocks,

perhaps two feet deep, two feet wide. He used the shovel and made it deeper, but he kept his eyes open as he dug. The last thing he wanted to do was uncover an old metal fence post.

The second thing he needed he found closer to the arroyo, a big chunk of limestone about the size of a large watermelon. It was sunk in the dirt but he cleared an edge and levered it out with the shovel. It was flat-topped and flat-bottomed so it didn't roll worth beans. He might have carried it a few yards but instead he just flopped it over and over, thud, thud, thud, all the way to the rim. Then he shifted it sideways a bit and tested his choice by dropping a very small pebble over the edge. Nope. Another pebble, a foot to the right, was dead on target so he shifted the boulder, took a deep breath, and shoved.

He was running before it hit, but he still heard multiple 'pops.' One would've been sufficient. He could hear the bugs in the air, a harsh cicada buzzing with ultrasonic overtones. It was mostly from upstream but he still had to dodge a few that arose from the brush in front of him. He dropped into the hole and several buzzed overhead, more than he'd expected.

Maybe there was some old barbwire in the neighborhood.

After five minutes his heart had stopped pounding and his breathing slowed and he was back to boredom. He stuck to the plan, though. Bugs could keep coming for a while and it was better to be cautious.

He'd intended to meditate but he fell asleep instead.

The teamster boss's voice woke him, yelling at the top of his lungs, yelling his name from about ten feet away, worry and fear in his voice.

Kimball shuddered awake, his heart pounding, the sick sound of a bullwhip crack fading back into the dreamscape.

What on earth has happened now?

Kimball stood up and his head cleared the rocks. The teamster wasn't looking his way and when Kimball spoke the teamster boss like to fell over.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! We thought you were dead!"

Oops. "How long have I been asleep?"

The man opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again, then just shook his head and marched back toward the crossing. "He's all right!" he yelled back toward the road.

They were all out there—the Joffreys, the teamsters, and the others—spread out across the desert, looking for Kimball. He picked up Joffrey's shovel and waved it overhead. Kimball started back toward the edge of arroyo, to take a look at the impact site, but the bugs were thick on the ground before he reached the rim, their wings extended and held flat to the sun, so he veered away. He could only imagine what they were like in the arroyo below.

Back at the crossing they'd already brought the stock and vehicles across and when Kimball glanced down the cut into the wash it was just sand, now, clear of bugs.

Mrs. Pedecaris snorted and walked to meet him. Mrs. Joffrey, with a large smile on her face, handed

him a cold apple empanada. When Kimball thanked her for it, she lunged at him, and it was all he could do not to throw her in the dirt before he realized she just wanted to hug him. When she let go her eyes were wet. When Kimball gave Joffrey his shovel back, the man nodded gravely and said, "I'll keep this handy. I see it still has plenty of use in it."

Thayet was lying in the shade under their handcart, a jug of water to hand. Kimball approved. "You pee yet?"

She shook her head.

"Drink more water."

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