

TAKE-OUT

By Arnaldo Lopez Jr.

I'm Harvey Hickman and I've got the most dangerous job in America... I'm the pizza delivery guy.

Oh, I know, I know. Some people argue that the Chinese food delivery guys have it just as bad, but c'mon, the guys that deliver your Chinese food travel in gangs that ride around in hopped-up Japanese crotch rockets and they carry fully automatic weapons (even though they're still illegal). Maybe mailmen, uh, *mailpeople* did have it tough for a while, but the post office was going bankrupt anyway and once everyone went strictly email, well that was the end of that – so no, it's me alright. And that's why the chicks love me and all the guys hate me, 'cause they all wanna *be* me (I mean the guys, not the girls).

It all started when the Rift happened. BTR (Before The Rift), I was just a skinny loser with perennial acne, a crappy car, and an even crappier job – *pizza delivery guy*. I mean, I couldn't get laid if I were an egg! Even tips from my customers were rare. I'd be standing in someones doorway wearing that stupid "Pizza Pete's" paper hat on my head, my hand held out for some sort of gratuity, and more often than not I'd get the door slammed in my face. What really burned me was hearing them all laughing at me from the other side of those doors. Now, not only do I get big tips, but there are plenty of times when a beautiful woman will show up at the door and pull me inside for a little "afternoon delight." Ah yeah, life sure is sweet now... but hey, don't get me wrong – it's still dangerous as hell. Literally.

I don't exactly know what happened, maybe nobody does, but the word on the street is that about a year ago some scientists working on a sort of secret collider project on a little island in

the East River accidentally tore open a hole in the so-called fabric of time and space. Well, whatever it is they did, it turned into a real mess... or as an army colonel once spit into the T.V. cameras during an interview, “A real clusterfuck!”

You see, that tear in space or whatever – what we now call the Rift – allowed all kinds of creatures from some other dimension (or whatever!) to enter our world and cause all kinds of trouble. At first it was just Manhattan, but soon after it became the tri-state area, and then the whole country! All kinds of weird animals and monsters were soon roaming through every neighborhood, attacking and eating people, pets – anything they could catch. There were hundreds, heck, thousands of them – all different kinds, but they all had two things in common: they were all mean and they were all *hungry*.

The cops put up a good fight at first, but it was just too big a job. It took the military to get things under control, but as the weeks and months wore on it became clear that these creatures (Rift Dwellers we call ‘em) weren’t going anywhere – they were the new reality. But folks still had to make a living, and the president even got on T.V. and told everyone to continue with their lives and go back to work. A lot of people did just that, and a lot of ‘em got killed. So then it became legal for everyone to carry a gun, and so the majority of folks formed armed carpools and were able to get back to work, but by then the damage to what they call the National Psyche had been done. Plenty of people were still *really* afraid to go out, with hundreds of thousands of folks stuck in their homes or offices – too afraid to get out and work, shop, or get something to eat without being eaten themselves. People were starving, and law enforcement and the military were stretched too thin to be everywhere at once.

That’s when guys like me became the new Rock & Roll gods!

Another Friday and I’m sitting in the back room at Pizza Pete’s’ with my feet up and my 3-D glasses on – watching a movie between gigs. And there *will* be another gig soon, my eighth of the day so far since Fridays are our busiest days.

“Yo Harv,” came Joey’s voice from out front. “Have another delivery for you – lock and load, babe!” That’s Joey Riccio, he owns Pizza Pete’s. I never actually met Pizza Pete, in fact I don’t know if there ever was a Pizza Pete.

I walk out into the dining area, past the heat of the ovens, and nod hello to the regulars. The regulars are actually three guys and two women that were here when the Rift happened and have been too scared to leave since. They look a little bedraggled now; their eyes have dark circles under ‘em and their hair’s a little dull and shaggy. Marla, that’s one of the women, was pretty once and she used to smile a lot. Now she still smiles a lot, but in that weird kinda way that tells you she’s close to losing it. I’ve offered to escort them home plenty of times (especially Marla), but they’ve always been too scared to leave.

“You got two cheese pies, same address, right across from the park. You also got a pepperoni pie, buffalo wings, and a couple of two-liter sodas mid-town,” Joey said, taping invoices with the addresses on them onto the boxes.

I take the boxes and wings, and slip them into the wide vinyl sleeve that’ll help keep them nice and hot. Next I grab the sodas and drop them into my backpack. Lastly, I check my weapons. My main arsenal consists of a Mossberg semi-automatic sawed-off shotgun, a .38 Colt Diamondback Revolver with the heat-dispersal vents along the top of the barrel, a two-shot .22 Magnum Derringer, and a really, really big Bowie knife.

I prime the shotgun, sling the pack onto my back, grab the vinyl case with the pizzas and wings in it, and back out of the door.

At first the bright blue sky of outside dazzles me, but my eyes adjust quickly enough and I make it to my car without incident. I put the pizzas and sodas on the passenger seat, and turn in time to see a Bagger and two Hump-Lizards heading my way. A Bagger looks exactly like a plastic supermarket shopping bag, and it floats in the air or scoots along the ground just like those bags do when a breeze

gets a hold of ‘em. But then you notice that there ain’t no breeze and by then it may be too late – the Bagger whips itself over your head and suffocates you. Then it slowly starts to digest you, but eventually other R.D.’s (Rift Dwellers) find your fresh corpse and help themselves to the feast. Hump-Lizards are Mastiff-sized lizards with humped backs that ooze acid, 3-inch claws, and 6-inch fangs.

I considered blasting them but changed my mind, jumped in my car, and took off instead. I mean, c’mon, I had to get those pizzas delivered in 30 minutes or less!

Speaking of my car, I got rid of the Yaris and now I drive a black, armored, super-charged, 2013 Chevy Camaro with bullet-proof windows and tires. This baby’s basically a tank that can do 240 M.P.H. on a straightaway, and shatter windows for a block when I crank the system up and blast music from the six titanium-reinforced exterior speakers. Holla!

I delivered the first pizzas to an address on East 71st Street and Fifth Avenue with virtually no problem – I just wound up running over a couple of love-sick vampires, dodging some real persistent Baggers, and blasting a Raticorn (kind of a giant rat with tusks and a horn) that came running out of Central Park and right at me.

The second delivery was a little more eventful. It was in the “Lipstick” building on 53rd Street and Lexington Avenue. A few office workers got stuck there when the Rift happened and just never went home. There’re a lot of places like that all over – people saw their friends, family, even heavily-armed military guys get torn apart right in front of their eyes and it freaked them out. They don’t want to end up some R.D.’s meal and figure it’s a whole lot safer to stay put... and they’re right.

While I’m getting the pizza out of the car I hear a roar off to my right and it’s getting closer – I already know what’s coming and I brace myself. They come zooming around the corner in tight formation, the sun gleaming and glinting off their helmets and Suzuki Hayabusa motorcycles. A Chinese food delivery gang and, wouldn’t you know it, they’re making a delivery at the same address I

am. They stop right behind my car and drop onto their kickstands in unison; like they've been rehearsing it for years. I finger the safety off my shotgun.

The leader of the gang saunters over to where I'm standing, checks the skies and removes her helmet – shaking free her long, glossy black hair. Oh shit, it's Lisa Lim; so that means that this gang is the Sunny Garden crew... a very tough bunch.

“How ya doing Harvey,” She says, putting one hand on her hip and resting the other on the snub-nosed Heckler & Koch fully automatic rifle slung over her shoulder on a Hello Kitty strap. “What are you doing in Sunny Garden territory?”

I sigh and repeat what I've told her a bunch of other times, “It's only Sunny Garden territory as far as Chinese food is concerned – I deliver pizzas.”

She laughs and I can hear the rest of her all-female gang laugh under their helmets. I think I already mentioned how I don't like being laughed at.

“If I say it's Sunny Garden territory Harv,” Lisa says. “Then I'm talking about any and all food; and that includes your lousy pizza!”

More laughter. Then her voice and attitude get much more serious. “But tell you what, we're going to do you a favor and deliver your stale pizza for you... isn't that nice of us Harv?”

While she's talking I'm trying to figure a way out of this mess. I check my watch – I only have 7 minutes to go before the customer gets a free pizza and it comes out of my pay. I'm sweating. I figure I can take Lisa and maybe two of her crew with the shotgun, but then they'd just chop me to bits with those automatic weapons of theirs. Then, as if she were reading my mind:

“Don't try anything stupid Harv,” Lisa says as she swings her rifle in my direction. I notice that the rest of her gang does the same. In unison again. Like synchronized swimming. Cute.

“Just give us the pizza, whatever you have in the backpack, your weapons, and your wallet. If you’re real nice and quick about it, we might let you keep your car.” There’s more laughing, so I don’t feel too bad about what happens next. Very slowly and deliberately I pull my knife out. I check my watch – 4 minutes to go.

Lisa sees me slide the 12-inch blade from its leather sheath and her eyes go wide in surprise. I hear the loud click as she snaps the safety off her rifle.

“That was a very stupid thing to do Harvey,” Lisa says menacingly as she levels her rifle at me.

I take a deep breath and use it to yell one word as loud as I can, “Incoming!!!” I point above and behind them, and luckily a few of them do turn to look. It’s their yelps of fear and surprise that makes them all turn and look. That’s when they see the Baggers, hundreds of them, coming right at us.

Lisa’s gang forgets all about me as they point their weapons at the fast-approaching R.D.’s and begin firing. The noise is incredible! I haven’t heard a racket like that since the early days of the Rift. Lisa’s firing her weapon too, and to their credit, the Sunny Garden crew shred dozens of the Baggers – but there are plenty of the little bastards to go around. Lisa’s gang really is doing a good job of fending off the attacking Baggers; but then they’re all wearing helmets. In fact, the only ones not wearing helmets are...

Lisa stops firing her rifle at the Baggers long enough to once again turn it towards me, “Saved some for you Harv,” she yells over the clatter of her gang’s guns.

I figure I’m done for and mouth some quick prayers – thankful that at least I’d finally gotten laid (quite a few times actually!) before I died.

Suddenly a Bagger swoops down and covers Lisa’s head, immediately wrapping its translucent appendages around her neck and pressing itself tightly against her face to deprive her of oxygen.

Lisa drops her gun and opens her mouth to scream, or maybe take a gulp of air; I don't know which, and it doesn't matter because she doesn't succeed at either. She starts pulling and clawing at the Bagger, but it's fastened itself onto her pretty tightly; and its skin is tougher than it looks. I check my watch: two minutes.

I grab my pizza bag again and start for the building when I spot a shopping bag bulging with Chinese food hanging from Lisa's motorcycle, and I make a decision. I take my knife, slice through the elastic cord holding the food, and grab the bag before it hits the ground. I spin on the ball of my foot, knife flashing, and I cut open the Bagger on Lisa's face, saving her life but opening up a gash on her pretty face that's gonna leave a nasty scar. I duck under and slice apart a Bagger that was coming for me and sprint for the building; with at least twenty of those Bagger bastards right behind me.

I make it inside, leave the Baggers outside, and grab the elevator to the third floor. As soon as the doors open I run to suite 3404, my sneakers squeaking as I skid to a stop in front of the doors and press the buzzer. The door opens and a gorgeous brunette with soft gray eyes and a beautiful smile is standing there. She's wearing a blazer that matches the color of her eyes; part of what was once a chic business suit. I check my watch: 19 seconds to spare.

"Well, another minute and I would have gotten a free pizza," she says with that great smile.

"Nineteen seconds," I say with a smile of my own. We exchange food for cash, and I remark, "That's a lot of food for just one person..."

"Yes it is," she says with another smile as she opens the door wider and steps aside.

I start to step inside when I notice that there are already two other guys in the room. The older guy, in shirt sleeves and tie, salutes me with a glass he's holding; the clear liquid inside sloshing around.

As soon as realize my mistake I quickly step back out of the room. What I thought was an invitation was just her showing me she already had company. Now, I just stand there feeling idiotic and I can

sense the color rising in my face. The woman in the gray blazer notices of course and says, “Those are my neighbors from suites 3406 and 3409... *they’re lawyers.*” She whispers the last two words as if she’s imparting some secret knowledge to me in confidence.

“We were just going to eat and watch the news, see if anything’s changed. You’re, uh, welcome to join us,” she hurriedly adds at the end.

I hear the faint rat-a-tat of gunfire from outside; Lisa’s gang still doing battle with the Baggers. Then I remember the Chinese food I’m carrying.

“I, uh, gotta deliver this,” I stammer as I hold up the torn shopping bag with the Chinese food inside. Something must have spilled because it’s leaking some sort of brown sauce.

“Oh!” She says in surprise. “You deliver Chinese food too?”

I can only nod dumbly and turn away, heading back to the elevators. During my elevator ride up to the 11th floor, I mentally kick myself over and over for losing it during my delivery to suite 3404.

“That was the *old* Harvey Hickman,” I admonish myself. “The *new* Harvey Hickman is a red-hot lover, monster killer, and ass-kickin’ Chinese food delivery gang fighter!”

By the time I reach the 11th floor, I feel a lot better about things and I ring the buzzer next to a highly polished wooden door. A brass plaque on the door reads, “Rift Systems: Division 1.” Rift Systems? *The Rift*? Could this be a coincidence? I look around and see that there are no other offices or suites, which means that this *Rift Systems: Division 1* (whatever that is) takes up this entire floor. The hair goes up on the back of my neck; there’s something weird about this.

I’m about to press the buzzer again when the door opens and some military-type ushers me inside. The soldier closes and locks the door behind me.

“Put that on that table over there,” he says. “And try not to get whatever’s leaking outta there on anything.”

I nod and look around; more than just a little surprised at what I see... The entire 11th floor looks like it's been converted into a gigantic lab, with steel tables, computers, screens, gadgets, cubicles and scientists all over the place. There are soldiers too, although not many, and I wonder what the hell is going on.

“How much will that be son?”

The voice, tinged with a slight southern accent intrudes on my thoughts so suddenly that I jump. Another soldier, this one an officer I guess by all the ribbons and medals on his jacket, walks over to me and asks again, “So, what do we owe you?”

I remember the amount written on the invoice stapled to the bag and I tell him. He counts out several bills and I see him add a \$10.00 tip for good measure.

“Thanks, uh, thank you sir,” I say as I stuff the cash into my pocket.

The officer glances at my weaponry and nods approvingly. “Glad to see you're loaded for bear, son,” he says. “Times call for it! But hopefully that'll all be in the past soon and things can get back to normal.”

“Normal?” I ask as I look around the room. This guy is starting to scare me. “What do you mean normal?”

The officer puts a big, meaty hand on my shoulder and points at a guy in a lab coat. “See that man there? He is the world's foremost expert on the Rift and he's figured out a way to close it,” he says.

“C-close the Rift?” I ask. My head swims; I can feel the old Harvey Hickman bubbling to the surface.

“Here let me introduce you to the man that's going to save the world,” the officer says as he steers me toward the guy in the lab coat. “This is something you'll be able to tell your kids and grandkids about someday!”

We walk over to where the man in the lab coat is standing, talking to two foreign guys in tweed jackets.

“Professor,” the officer says; interrupting their conversation. “I know you’re busy but I just wanted to introduce you to a fan... or at least he will be once you get rid of this goddam Rift!”

The professor stops his conversation long enough to turn towards us. He’s a regular looking guy, about my height, a fringe of graying black hair surrounding about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the dome of his bald head, and he’s wearing glasses. “A fan huh?” The professor says this while he looks me up and down like I’m some kind of specimen. “Come back in another three months, the Rift will definitely be gone by then and you can be a *fan* all you like, until then I’m too busy to talk to some delivery boy.”

The professor turns his back on me and dismisses us with a wave of his hand. He continues his conversation with the two guys in tweed and basically forgets I ever existed. Just like the bad ol’ days B.T.R. (Before The Rift), when everyone pretty much dismissed the old Harvey Hickman as being someone unimportant; someone of little or no consequence... while I’m having this, uh, revelation, the officer has me by the arm and he’s leading me back to the door.

“Sorry about that son,” the officer says. “The professor’s a busy guy, but hey at least you got yourself a nice tip out of it!”

Suddenly, I make up my mind – I know what I have to do...

I spin on the ball of my foot, much like I did with Lisa and the Baggers earlier, and I march back towards where the professor was still conferring with the two guys in tweed.

“Hey kid, what are you doing? The professor’s too busy to talk to you right now,” the officer calls out loudly from behind me. “You have to leave now, let’s go!”

The other soldiers look on curiously; they’re all carrying sidearms but no one reaches for their weapon.

The professor, maybe wondering what all the yelling is about turns around and faces me. I whip out the Colt and shoot him exactly two inches above the bridge of his nose. The guys in tweed look on in shock until I shoot them too. Then all hell breaks loose.

By the time I leave that suite on the 11th floor, everyone in it is dead. I feel bad about the soldiers, they were only doing their job, but I *had* to stop the Rift from being closed... *had to*.

My backpack is heavy with all of the harddrives and other electronic filing equipment I plan to toss into the Hudson. Whatever hardware or software I couldn't carry out of there I made sure to thoroughly destroy. I found a couple of manuals with lists of passwords for a series of online backup files that I plan on deleting as soon as I can get to a public computer in an internet café or somewhere...

I feel a stitch in my side and I put my hand there – it comes back wet with my blood. One of the soldiers back in the suite must have hit me. It's not serious, I'll live.

I take the elevator to the lobby and peer outside through the glass doors, expecting to see Lisa and her crew still out there waiting for me. To my relief, they're gone – although it looks like they took the time to tag my car with that lousy silver spray paint that's impossible to get off.

I limp to my car as quickly as I can, toss my backpack, the pizza bag, and my shotgun in, and climb behind the wheel while the sun starts to go down on another day. In the distance a sticky-cat yowls its welcome to the coming night, while from somewhere closer I hear the coughing sound made by a Fool You-Kill You. Soon all of the night creatures will be up and adding their own weird and unearthly sounds to the chorus.

I reload my weapons, start the car and put it in gear. I pull a u-turn and point my car's nose uptown, towards the George Washington Bridge. I know a doctor in Jersey that's terrified of leaving his home and he owes me a couple of favors, I'm sure he'll patch me right up. Then it'll be back to delivering pizza... and killing monsters.

THE END