

*Opening Scene of CLUTCH: Book One of The Wrecked Earth*

Clutch shifted gears and stomped on the go pedal, the deep traction of the muscle car's oversized tires biting deep into the wild grasslands. The car was painted a flat black from fender to fender, and her name — Sweetheart — was painted along the driver's side in foot-high white letters. Her engine roared a challenge, and the six-legged cougar that raced ahead answered back with a high-pitched scream. Its middle pair of legs were longer than the other two, the odd rhythm granting the creature extra speed. Even with mutant-born swiftness, however, Clutch and his passenger, Jorge, rode closer and closer to their quarry's double-tipped tail.

The cougar cut left. Jorge swore as Clutch jammed the wheel to follow her.

"Get out there," growled Clutch, his thick brows furrowing over smoked-glass goggles. His voice was an avalanche of rock, his face a mountain of slabs and angles of scree, weathered and bare of adornment, save for a thin, black beard. The brown eyes were fixed on the flashing yellow and brown of the cougar. He cut right suddenly, Sweetheart's engine protesting as Clutch struggled to match the cat's agility. "I can't do this forever."

"I don't know, big brother—I kinda think you can!" Jorge grinned. He checked the action on his rifle. A series of golden-brown flashes caught his attention. "Hey, we've got company!"

A dozen six-legged cougars broke from the tree line and moved to intercept Sweetheart. Clutch's target broke right again, heading to join her pride. He kept straight, pulling a touch to the right to move the target alongside and give Jorge a clean shot. They were going to have to move fast: he wasn't sure they could take out an entire pride without injury.

"Move your ass, Jorge!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Where Clutch filled more than his share of the car's cabin, Jorge filled less. He was as skinny as the other man was massive, the first of many contrasts. The younger man was handsome and clean shaven, and despite sharing a tanned complexion and black hair, Jorge's eyes were a clear green. Where Clutch wore his hair long and free, Jorge's was short and covered with a herringbone fedora—a hat that suddenly blew around the car as Jorge rolled down the window and pointed his rifle at the fleeing cat.

The hat battered Clutch about his head and face and he cursed up a storm. Jorge took aim and squeezed the trigger—but the cat went down, hard, before the rifle went off. The closing gang of cougars broke apart in confusion, most reversing course and heading for the trees. Small puffs of dirt flew up around them. Jorge frowned as Sweetheart sped past the downed cougar. He turned to keep track of it, looking for the rifle-wound. No bullet hole, but there was a smoking hole the size of his fist in the cat's shoulder. The car kept going, Clutch now absorbed in trying to catch hold of the fluttering fedora. Jorge kept his eyes on the cat, frowning. Something struck the door below his hand. He looked up and his heart pounded at what he saw.

"CLUTCH!"

"I swear, Jorge, I'm going to make you eat this hat!" bellowed Clutch, finally snatching it away from his face with one meaty hand. He glanced in the rear view mirror and saw a fireball hurtling down from the sky.

"METEOR!" shouted Jorge, pointing.

The sunlight dimmed in contrast to the brilliance of the meteor. Tiny flashes sparked around and behind it as smaller rocks lost their fight against the atmosphere, but the fireball—easily twice the size of Sweetheart— raged on and right for them.

Clutch knew they couldn't hope to match its speed.

*How close? Where will it hit?*

Jorge ducked inside and frantically rolled up the window as more meteorite hail peppered Sweetheart's hull. Clutch shouted, "Hold on!" and jerked up on the emergency brake, pulling the

steering wheel left. Sweetheart dipped and listed right as all of her weight leaned into the massive tires. Clutch released the brake before they completed a quarter turn and threw his weight left.

“Come on!”

Jorge hollered himself, a formless prayer. He was certain Sweetheart would roll and the meteor would crush them at any moment. She bounced and shuddered and her engine screamed, but Sweetheart held steady, leveled, and shot off back the way she came. Jorge had little time to be thankful for answered prayers, however, as the blazing meteor filled the windshield before them. While the younger man watched death approach, Clutch kept his eyes on the ground ahead, searching for dips or rocks or branches that would foul their escape. He could not, however, ignore the shadow of the hurtling rock as it speed towards them, closer and lower by the second.

Jorge squeezed his eyes shut as the shadow and Sweetheart raced toward each other. They felt the heat on their faces. They heard the grumble of the meteor tearing the sky asunder. The two juggernauts flew at each other.

Sweetheart flashed underneath as Clutch roared, her two-meter rear antenna bouncing and scraping along the belly of the rolling space rock.

Their escape was short-lived. The meteor made Earth-fall, the explosion sending out a shock wave that caused Sweetheart to fishtail. Clutch struggled to compensate as the solid, level grassland became a rolling wave lifting the vehicle’s tail in the air. Sweetheart flew down the face of it, propelled from behind. He grit his teeth, gripped the wheel and stood on the gas, desperate to stay ahead of the crumbling earth behind him.

The shock wave passed, the liquid ground became steady once more, and Clutch stopped with a stomp on the brakes that sent a shower of dirt to litter the ground around them.

The two men, heaving and panting, opened their doors and stepped down to the grass, looking back at the newly formed hill that lay between them and the cougar they had hoped would be dinner. Clutch pulled off his goggles as he and Jorge climbed the hill and looked down upon the smoking crater on the other side. Jorge handed the rifle to his brother and produced the much-abused fedora. He smoothed its brim and then placed it on his head.

Clutch raised the rifle and looked through the scope. He spotted the carcass of the cougar, smoking and crushed.

Jorge stretched. “Another day, another near-death experience. Do you see the cat?” Clutch handed over the rifle and Jorge took a look through the scope, then handed the rifle back.

“I’m not eating that.”

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