

Indian Falls

An Alien Invasion novel

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Published at smashwords.com by Gary L. Morton

80,000 words. Indian Falls is an Alien Invasion novel set in the near future.

Supernatural happenings at a town and large conservation area become a full-scale invasion of bloodthirsty aliens. The battle and the search for answers is on in Indian Falls as the residents, led by heavily armed local militia and a vacationing city private eye, tangle with the monsters and government, military and police aiding them.

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[Chapter One: THE HIT MAN](#)

Recent days had been long and troubling. An early summer heat wave scorched city streets. Its sweat and fever like a polluted balloon, giving rise to headaches and sour stomachs. Thirty-five people were already counted among the toe tags due to 42C heat two days previous. An unlucky number as San had done exactly thirty-five court appearances over the last while. It was like doing time as a long string of old cases came to a close. Sentences were already being delivered; the remaining bodies were in the cooler. It was time to get out of the city and escape the blanket of heat ... time to get the office and court-bench sores off his ass.

There were too many enemies on the streets here so San had a working vacation in mind. He'd scored an out-of-city missing-person case and leaving town and cooling off for a while seemed like a sexy option. Leaning back in his padded chair he looked out the narrow window; office people were rising in a street-view elevator on the side of the cylindrical building next door. Sunshine gleamed on the ledges of two marble-black towers, and through the knife-edge alley space between them, he saw dappled reflections of light and a twinkle of blue from the waters of the nearby Toronto shoreline. Haze was dissipating out there over the water and the temperature dropping down to a bearable 31C.

He'd already shut down his office setup, leaving one portable work screen turned on at the left side of his desk. As his tablet beeped, he transferred the message to big-screen display and studied it. Initial payment had gone into his hidden account and the details on the person he was looking for came up. San studied them for a moment then he configured the security systems for his office and enabled mobile use so he could access it through low-power boots from outside. The secure transfer and setup of mobile use software to his tablet was painfully slow. During that time, he packed a small suitcase and placed it on the visitor's couch. A thick envelope of special legal papers rested beside it. They were case papers that had to be delivered personally at a court processing office, sensitive items that couldn't be filed online at any secure level. So it was the delivery and then he'd be leaving in a rental car. His own vehicle could be traced too easily. For this vacation and case, it was a car that would be traced to a phony owner. The crypto phone would dummy his location back to Toronto while masking all communication and searches. Any interested parties would get a random trace on him as being somewhere in Toronto, though not at the office. His condominium was already set in booby-trap mode, so it would be bad news for anyone who broke into it looking for him. San had his real home with him anyway, in tablet form that was safe and easy to use. No one, not even intelligence agencies could backdoor into his remote office system.

With his car hidden away and the rental waiting for pickup, he took city fast transit a few kilometers to the court building. Emerging at the sweep-arched exit door, he had to follow an enclosed live-ads walkway over the highway and take a short dusty walk down a forgotten side street. This was downtown and summer sun flashed off the rows of towering buildings, sending waves of radiant heat down to bake all flesh. The street was crowded, a busy afternoon and mostly well-dressed people hurrying to a near run as they raced from one air-conditioned building to another, fleeing a hot exhaust of pollution and the open street like it was some huge killing ghost pursuing them. San's summer suit was light, but he'd already removed his jacket and was carrying it over his suitcase as he walked up the shallow steps to the court building. At the top, he turned and squinted in the bright sunlight, studying the passing people. A couple of guys had been following him. The first was an unknown quantity he'd spotted on leaving his office and the second was another private eye that had appeared briefly near the courthouse. Obviously, they knew enough about him to gather he'd be making this delivery and had used it as a sure way to follow him.

They were out of sight now, lurking somewhere in the shadows, and they likely wouldn't make any move on him in a heavily guarded court building, so he turned back

to the entrance and walked calmly inside. His detective license got him past lazy guards who already knew who he was and then it was the usual boring wait as he dealt with various bureaucrats, clearances, and closings regarding his cases. The last item was a legal search booked on one of the new anonymous terminals. He was doing it this way because of the higher access level and organized delivery of information. He doubted that it was as secure as his tablet but it would be good.

A piggish guard released a temporary entry card to him and he took the fourth terminal. Entry was through an ordinary office door but the inside was a bit different; cramped to an extent and all the equipment was embedded in the wall and lock-down desk. Taking a seat, he popped in an entry code and ran some checks. He was looking for a missing person and the subject had been last seen in a place called Indian Falls to the north east of Toronto. There had been no trace of him since so it was safe to assume that whether alive or dead or a prisoner he was still somewhere near Indian Falls.

San had never visited the place so he watched with interest as various overlays moved across the on-screen map. The remote area had a tiny population of 7,000 and in many ways didn't exist in the modern sense. It had no police department but only the Indian Falls Conservation Authority, which covered the town and the nature area. The most important readings for any community in newer police-state fragmented Canada were economic and threat-level indexes. As readings went up the scale in importance so did the degree of police and military control. Indian Falls read as a big economic zero, which was why it had no police department. The military installation had been closed down decades ago.

Zooming out on the map, San could see military and police colors expanding out of Toronto. When he zoomed toward Indian Falls a sort of security ring formed around it on the edges of deep forest. Military and police forces that were combined in Toronto fragmented to various public and private forces in the countryside. Indian Falls was surrounded by them as it was circled by economic zones of a much higher rating. Mining, forestry interests, the Deep River Isotope station and even a new military installation were off its perimeter, while on the inside, the falls area had a small local economy of some farming and light industry. The only security alerts that came up on it were due to the presence of a nudist colony, a militia group and the protected conservation area itself.

A deeper study had San scratching his head as he viewed an older alert that had been downgraded to junk status. It concerned UFO and ghost sightings in Indian Falls, a long history of them. Aside from that, everything seemed okay; as long as he stayed within the rather large area of the town and conservation area, he would avoid dealing with numerous other police and military forces. And that was a good thing as from experience he'd learned that the authorities of the day were not friendly, especially when it came to private detectives or anyone who might be snooping around and accidentally collecting information on their corrupt clients and bosses.

The rest of the dope on Indian Falls was ordinary. Cost of living was low as they traded local produce for any needed imports. Part of the economic zero was in its local nature. No free trade or mass produced products, just farm goods, minerals and

minimal forestry. The nudist camp was one of the largest employers. There was fishing and rafting in the river and it was fast flow with rapids and ran through the town. Photos showed a modern small town, nearly all new buildings in the core replacing those burned out in wildfires twenty-five years back. Older houses remained along the riverbanks.

San walked out of the booth wondering why anyone would need a detective to find someone there. Most likely the subject was dead. Anyone making human contact would be easily found, while anyone not doing that would have disappeared in the wilderness or rushing river waters. That realization gave him a course of action that spelled quick investigation and then some vacation time. Cooling off time. It wasn't likely he'd find the person and if a larger search took place, like for a dead body, it would be a police matter. Only forest rangers could search the huge semi populated wilderness around Indian Falls.

A desk guard signaled him as he came out of the washroom so he walked over and picked up a small envelope that had been left for him. It had only his name on the front so he pulled off the seal. A note was inside and the message was rather urgent. Handwritten in capital letters it advised him not to leave by the front of the building and gave the location of a place to meet. He knew he'd been followed so perhaps this was wise advice.

San avoided the front and the lobby with its large open-view windows and looked for a back entrance. Security posts were present there and he wanted to leave unseen so walked around until he found a nearly hidden emergency fire exit at the side of the complex. He knew the type of fire door; the alarm would be silent and a fire car would automatically arrive and create a distraction at the front, which was what he wanted. So he went out, finding himself in a narrow dead-end alleyway that exited in the trash-compactor area at back. Realizing that the rear could be under watch as well he ducked around the large bin, looked, and then walked off quickly down the back street.

He got behind a gated wall segment, looked around, and then entered a nearby condominium building by following a dog walker through the back door. From its lobby he looked from behind a potted tree over to the front area of the court drop off. A construction area was off and up to the left with a derelict building awaiting destruction by the Ridell Corporation. San studied the stripped building then left out back again and worked his way around to the side of the lot. A gate for workers wasn't even locked and he slipped in easily. No one was on site today that he could see so he went through some weeds to a robot dumpster and calculated a line of sight and an angle. If someone planned to shoot him at the front of the court, it would be from the third floor south window. He couldn't see it from his location but he knew any shooter would be there. Reason being no one would do a drive-by shooting at a court location, but if someone really wanted to get him, they'd do a targeted hit.

He used a flat of metal he found on the ground to pry open a closed side door and quietly went up some stairs. Three floors up he had to use genuine stealth as the windows and most of the doors had already been removed and only a shell remained awaiting demolition. It was a stripped building with even parts of the floors and walls gone, like they'd grabbed tiles, wiring or anything else of value. Entering a hallway and

pausing in a gloomy corner, he listened. A few minutes passed and he heard birdcalls and wings and then finally a few footsteps on a creaking floor. The sounds told him he'd guessed wrong and had been prepared to rush through the wrong doorway. Moving quietly he got to the suspect door; the handle and lock had been removed so he ducked down and peeked through the door hole.

Light from the missing window gave him a clear view. A tall tanned blond man was sitting in a canvass chair back of the window. Some supplies and his jacket were on the floor around him and he had a big gun on his lap as he observed the front of the court building down the road. He suddenly began to move as though alerted so San threw the door open and rushed him.

As the big man rose and turned, San banged him hard in the head with the metal slat from the yard. The gun, a rifle, flew across the floorboards and the man staggered back. He had a head like a rock because he didn't go out. Instead, he moved to counter San's second blow and got in to grab him. San threw him off, seeing blood drops spatter from the gash in his head.

The gunman came back fast, swinging a wild right-hand punch that was easily countered. San hammered him one in the belly and as the man doubled over, he whacked him with an elbow in the chin. His head snapped back and he stumbled back but managed to rally for another charge. San threw him over easily and his head took another bang as it hit the floorboards.

That was it; he was down and out on the floor like a tumbled sack of sand. San moved quickly for the weapon. With the big rifle in hand, he stepped up and looked down at the unconscious hit man. He was completely out so San searched him and a small pack beside him. Other than tools of his trade, there was no identification. The man was a pro; San whacked him on the head again with the rifle butt then grabbed the tumbled chair and sat down to do an inspection.

What he found he didn't like. The gun was feather light but not of any metal he'd seen before. It was metal but no paint scratched off with a knife blade. It didn't have the feel of any sort of hybrid plastic. He could see that it was easy to assemble and the case it came in was there on the floor. It wasn't a rifle at all but a beam weapon and a generic weapon that didn't require a fingerprint or eye scan to fire. It could be assembled to fire powerful beams or bullet-style energy shots. To test it he simply aimed at the hit man's head from a ways across the room and watched the quick flash and burn as it put a neat clean hole through the forehead.

Steam emerged and the hole sealed itself. Perhaps it was killing, but it was also necessary self-defense as it was the only way to stop a professional. This guy hadn't been hired by any of the current crop of criminals he'd sent up. They were mostly drug criminals – illegal Intel drug dealers for the large part. Any hit man sent by them wouldn't have access to this sort of weapon. It was military and experimental and unless stolen could only be gained by someone with high military clearance. The weapon was also deadly accurate if the man had intended to use it for a sniper shot from this location to the front of the courthouse. Someone big was after him and he couldn't figure out why. The only unknown was his current case, Indian Falls, and it seemed impossible that a small case like it would attract any powerful response. There

had to be something more to it and he had a person to meet, so after packing the gun and wrapping his suit jacket around the case, he walked off cautiously and got off the construction site.

He didn't have a name, just a location on a street named Jansen Blvd. It had tall buildings beyond the east side and an open area to the west that allowed direct sun that combined with the reflected light to create a vibrant and scorching scene. Stores with market fronts, attic apartments above other local businesses, and patio restaurants led to an easy feel. No sense of danger here, but he wasn't fooled by impressions. He walked the street and studied everything, including windows higher up, before he walked up some narrow steps and past the gold latticework of a tiny Thai restaurant. It was shadowy inside and sectioned off into three areas that were obscured from one another by screens and potted plants. As per the note, his man was right inside at the back, sitting at a table alone with his hat placed on the chair beside him.

San walked up, the man nodded and he sat down.

"Sometimes a note is better than a text message," the man said. He was twirling chopsticks in a bowl of soup, and when he looked up San saw an honest sort of face. He had an Italian look and was another private eye. The hat, clean suit and tie in hot weather were a giveaway. Business dress on a person obviously not a corporate shill.

"Yeah, especially if you don't want to lose copyright and have everyone in the world reading it."

"To get to the point. I sent you the note because I was paying you a visit; at least I was until I noticed you were being followed. It seems you have a shining reputation these days. Off market Intel drugs are in big demand and you're putting everyone dealing them in jail."

San waved the flower-shirted waiter away. "Just a chance thing to do with a number of cases I had. But the person following me wasn't sent by them. It was something else, I think."

"I don't know who it was. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Enzo Florinto. I was trying to contact you because I have a note for your client. I know about the missing person case you have; I turned it down."

"Yeah, I've heard of you. Corporate clients."

"That's right. My kind of guys like you. They don't like their copyrighted stuff being faked and sold everywhere like candy."

"I don't have a moral opinion on that issue. If the powers that be say it's illegal to sell something I take the case."

"Why is a big name like you taking this idiotic missing person case? I looked at it and it seemed ridiculous at the time. If the guy went missing there he drowned or something. Why bother to look? At least I thought that then. Now it appears he's alive."

"The answer is to cool off. I'd appreciate it if you don't mention where I'm going to anyone. I figured I'd take a small case and a vacation."

"It looks like at least one person had an in on your movements. You had better hope it's not more than that. They won't get any info from me. They don't even know about me, unless you were followed here."

"I wasn't. You have the note."

Enzo reached in his pocket and passed a crumpled piece of paper to San. He opened it and looked it over. It was a brief scrawled message written on the back of a food bill for the Indian Falls Little Red Diner and signed by Marco Santino, the missing person. Apparently, he'd sent it to his brother via Enzo. All it said was 'Don't worry, I'm still around. Investigating some strange happenings in the Falls. Have gone undercover.' The bill was dated three weeks back.

"Looks like you have no case," Enzo said. "The guy is still around. He fancies himself an amateur investigator of the supernatural, so I hear. They own a cottage out there so he's around his own territory."

"I've already been paid so if he's there I'll grab him and find out what he's up to. Maybe he's either eccentric or gone off his nut out there looking for ghosts in Indian Falls."

"The only mention I've heard about Indian Falls was a news thing about a nudist camp out there."

"Yeah, that and a nutso militia that holds training exercises in the woods."

"Have a nice vacation and keep your clothes on. Getting captured by the nutsos with guns out there, and in the nude, wouldn't be nice."

San spent two hours arranging and getting to a second meeting on the other side of town. The change in plans left him without possession of the rental car and walking through the black-onyx plated lobby of a gated condominium complex for the super-rich out in Scarsdale. A private elevator took him to a secure office located on the 35th floor of the complex. It was the office of Jerem Thomas, a captain of the PSF, which was the Public Security Force or private security contractor that had taken over policing in Toronto several years back. Jerem owed him more than a favour since information from San had given him a number of convictions.

Jerem's office was awesome once one got past the dull panel design of the waiting room. The entire north wall was a security setup of screens and maps and the only window was a false view of an otherworldly city that didn't exist, at least not on this planet. San went through the rather dreary story of the courthouse hit man and the fact that someone with higher military sort of clearance had to have sent him.

Jerem Thomas' deep black skin was almost radiant. He paced athletically behind his desk as he thought things over. Then he spoke. "I'm going to use a couple of my close men, do some checks and forensics on the body and dispose of it at a black site. I have to bury this case before some military outfit comes in to make trouble attempting a cover-up."

"Any ideas on who could be behind this?"

"No. Gangsters and corrupt cops are everywhere but this doesn't fit the pattern. It's someone outside. I mean from outside the city. Generally, what I deal with has to do

with policing for profit as we work by contract. The incentive is always there for cops to do whatever saves money or makes money. Often covering up things or taking bribes saves money. In addition, the power to write out custom fines means too many crooks simply pay out cash ... like drug dealers doing it as a payment to the copyright holders as though they're small dealers when they are big time. With this one, I'll have to put the investigation into a compartment. If someone is sending in hit men I want to know who it is and put a quick end to it. The only end-game publicity being the word put out underground as to what happens to people who try that."

San nodded, and then he took out the gun case he had draped under his jacket. "This is the weapon."

Jerem took the case and set it on the desk. He opened it and slowly assembled the weapon. He aimed it at a sculpture across the room. "My systems didn't register you as carrying a weapon on entry, so it's invisible. There's nothing like it in our arsenal or under development or approval process. This is a beam weapon and I can see by the adjustments and engine that it fires various types of beams. Nothing beam on the market today could kill a man hit style from a distance. You'd even have to lock the beam on for a bit to burn someone. They're all close-range wide beam weapons. There are no markings on this one, but what identifies it is that in classic assembly it's styled to look like one of the old sniper rifles ... smaller, but the Canadian military version."

"Someone with deep military connections must want me dead. I can't think of any damn reason for it."

"Neither can I. Your hit man was ace calibre to be in possession of this gun. I can't even figure out what powers it. The engine is better than nano technology. My advice for you is to go into hiding for a while."

"I am doing that."

"Where are you going?"

"Place called Indian Falls."

"I've been there. Beautiful nature area. Easy place to disappear or get disappeared. You'll be taking the weapon with you. Hide it somewhere in the bush and shield it in case there is hidden tracking of it. We'll grab it later after the investigation. I can't put it in storage here. Weapons are stolen all the time and this one may be hot. Word will get around if we keep something like it."

"That should be it then. I leave town. All the bad guys will know is that their hit man and his weapon disappeared. No body reported, no weapon. It should stall them for a while."

"Long enough for me to find out who it is and burn their asses."

An elevator from the underground took him up to High Rapid Transit at the Scarsdale Station and San flowed against a casual crowd headed out of the city. Some Transit Authority cops were pounding a beat on the platforms and he definitely wanted to avoid one of their targeted searches. The sort of thing most people put up with while anyone with a brain opposed such foolish security measures. Turning and looking out

the sweep of plastic windows providing a view from the tube shell, he studied the curved bronze sides of a residential tower that rose 35 tall stories against a public-park backdrop. The cops ambled by without noticing him and a couple minutes later an express train pulled up and he was racing back into the city on a twisting transit path running at about penthouse height. The air engines whooshed in long decompression coming into the Lakeside stop. On the outside, he walked through a public garden and went down a slide escalator into an underground commercial area. Though not widely advertised there was a second underground here that hosted businesses that could be considered a touch on the shady side and not boasting signs affiliating them with any of the twenty-five key world mega corporations. San passed a number of shops. He wasn't here to buy cheap knockoffs of brand-name stuff or pirate goods like most of the others. Half of the people he passed were hopeless addicts here for counterfeit Intel drugs. Though addiction these days showed less as a physical disease and more in offbeat fashion and style.

His walk ended at the very back of this underground near the warehouse area at an unmarked bronze-painted door with a small buzzer panel. There was only one code and he used it and waited for the lock to click, then he walked into a customer service area and talked to a hot redheaded woman wearing shorts, sandals and a bead necklace that covered about as much as her blue top did. Her name was Juana and she had a looking-for-a-date smile. San returned it but the conversation was brief and unless she wanted to go to Indians Falls, the date was off. The only information San gave was the name of his sales contact, Josh Ponce.

Poncy as he was called, appeared in less than a minute and broke up San's small talk with the receptionist. Poncy was the type of guy who existed only as a sales flack. There was no other aspect to his personality. No private life that didn't have to do with his pushing of hot vehicles; meaning vehicles off the government books with washed temporary plates that would pass cop checks. In a society where getting your license suspended was common, business in this area was booming. San had a license, all he wanted was a car set up to trace to some other identity that wouldn't connect to him if someone passing in Indian Falls or on the route there decided to run the plate.

Out in the showroom, the low flat ceiling gave San the feeling that a big crusher was about to come down. The musty air left most of the vehicles in need of a wash. Rather than ask for a specific car, he asked Poncy to pick something.

"I've got a special deal," he said, shifting on his feet in his rumpled suit and nodding his curly head in a way that made San wonder if he was using. "A guy like you doesn't want just any car. You need something special."

"I don't know about that. I don't want to stand out. I just need a vehicle."

"Follow me." Poncy took him through the first lot and down a concrete walk to a second smaller lot. He pointed out a small cream car, with no recognizable logos on it. Just an unknown one of a strange spun wing on the hood.

San frowned, wondering if he was being taken by a used car salesman. "It's not exactly a brand name."

“That's the beauty of it. Everything from the flat-free tires to the aerodynamics and interior is understated. In fact, it's an experimental model. It even looks smaller than it is. The interior easily seats a big man like you.”

“What sort of engine is in it?”

“This is the total smart car. The fuel tank is only for backup. This is super-efficient electric and solar and the operating computer is the car's doctor, detecting problems before they occur. It is and constantly altering all of its systems to increase efficiency. Engines are small, power is big stuff. But what you'll be interested in is the smarter onboard computer.”

“Maybe not. Smarter usually means more built-in detection and a car that reports everything somewhere else.”

“This one doesn't. No head office so to speak. It reports only to itself unless returned to the manufacturer for tuning. Supposed to be coming on the market as a private car for military VIPs. You know, police-state bosses and corporate executives. People who know better than to trust anyone. It's developed by Andersen Wing, the same people that developed High Rapid Transit.”

“Okay, I'll take it. But I'm not driving it out. I want you to deliver it to a location on the outskirts of Scarsdale.”

It turned out the car had advanced auto drive, which he tested. This was a hilly area with many mansions and large country estate structures rising up from behind wildfire shielding. San went back to manual control as the car raced through an area of townhouse complexes formed around a huge shopping mall that bubbled out on flat land. After that, it was a stretch of farm fields and forests with the mostly automated farm buildings showing through the dust haze over another distant road. Traffic was light and Poncy had been right about the vehicle. It attracted barely a glance and he'd been waved through the police screen on his exit from Toronto.

The A-wing as he called it accelerated like a racer and here he was in an area without any speed limit, heading into Indian Falls. Running the roads felt great and for a moment he wondered why he didn't leave the city and its nanny police state altogether ... then he remembered that except for areas considered economically or strategically unimportant like Indian Falls, the whole country was a police state. A place where you could vote and select between the political skills the corporations and cop state put forward as leaders. Though there really was only one policy paper – it was all about economic control while the media put forward a cartoon world of civil progress that no one other than a fool would believe. The genuine picture of progress was now so obscure millions of human beings never quite figured out they were living in a corporate hell. It was a strange hell too as the devil was everywhere with a grin and a baton as he pretended to be your protector and friend ... at least up to the point where you met the flaming oven and felt the hand shoving you from behind.

Foaming river rapids showed from the top of the hill so he knew he was heading in to Indian Falls. San slowed the car for an easy cruise in but it didn't turn out to be that easy as he suddenly saw a flashing light to his rear and heard the siren of an approaching police car.

San cursed and hit the steering wheel with the flat of his hand, causing an interior alarm to sound and the car to swerve slightly as he looked for the shut off. After that, a Provincial Police Authority car pulled up beside him and he pulled over on the sandy side portion by the ditch.

Two cops got out. They wore wrap mirror shades, dark paramilitary style dress that wasn't suited for the heat, and broad-brimmed felt hats. One walked around the car, studying it, and the other came to the window.

"Saw you losing control there. I hope you can pass a drug test?"

"I'm not on drugs, officer. You guys came up fast on me and startled me."

"We tracked you driving a bit fast back there."

"There is no speed limit on this road."

"Got ID."

San passed him the phony ID and registration that came with the car."

"Hum. 200 pounds. You're Marvin Hurley, is that correct?"

"That's right. I'm a salesman."

"And you bought this vehicle at the New York dealership listed on the registration?"

"I did."

The cop suddenly whistled and his partner walked up, took off his mirror shades and stared in the window. "Get out of the car slowly," he said as he drew a G4 Stun Shooter from his belt.

San got out and found himself quickly cuffed. "What's this about?" he said.

Ignoring him, the arresting officer looked to his partner. "Looks like we've got the big guy. Marvin Hurley himself."

San gulped, not knowing what to say. Poncy had assured him he'd been given a clean ID and car. The idiot must have forgotten to clean the registration and he was going under the ID of the guy who stole it.

The two officers turned back to San, but the situation changed and all three of them ducked as a low-flying drone passed over.

"What in the hell is a Hawk drone doing here?" said one cop to the other.

But it was San that answered. "There's more. I hear a helicopter."

The sound rose and they all looked to the east as a sleek military chopper came over the trees and in for a landing in the open field next to the road. Three armed commandos hit the ground and hurried over with weapons drawn. To the surprise of the police officers, they were held at gunpoint along with San.

"Make any moves and the three of you are dead," said a chunky commando with grease-black under his eyes.

“But I'm Sergeant McKraken of the Provincial Authority,” said the boss cop. “You can't arrest me.”

“Didn't say anything about arrest. I said I'd shoot you.”

The Sergeant puffed up his chest but backed off a step. A tall man in civilian clothes was now walking over from the chopper. Everyone remained silent until he arrived, then the lead commando spoke. “Can you ID him?”

The man studied San with intense dark eyes. San pegged him as an intelligence agent but he wasn't sure which agency until he spoke. His hair was gathering some gray, his accent was Canadian, his look brooding. “I don't know who he is. The two Provincial Authority cops are just cops.”

“What in the hell is this about, Mike?” Sergeant McKraken said. “You guys are going to be in big trouble for trying to aid this terrorist.”

The tall man ignored him. “Who exactly are you?” San said.

“Mike Nelson's the name, and I'm with the Canadian East Intelligence Service.”

“You got no authority on the highway!” McKraken exclaimed.

Nelson studied him for a moment. “Shut up! This is a federal investigation.”

“Yeah, well that's Marvin Hurley. The arrest is ours. We've got a terrorist king pin. Without a doubt he was bringing a package in to the Indian Falls Militia, and in a stolen experimental car.”

Nelson grinned. “He isn't Marvin Hurley. We took him into custody a long time ago. This guy has somehow come up with the car Hurley ditched.”

“What?” McKraken sputtered.

Turning to San, Nelson looked him up and down. “Who are you?”

“I'm San Michaels, a Toronto private detective. The car and the name Marvin Hurley were supposed to provide a clean identity to hide me from some bad guys while I vacation in Indian Falls.”

McKraken looked furious. “He falsely identified himself as Marvin Hurley. The car is stolen. He is definitely under arrest.”

Mike Nelson ignored McKraken and continued talking to San. “Had we not come along you would've been grabbed by McKraken or other cops and be off somewhere in a detention facility. The car is an experimental model. Three of them were sold off a while back. This one got stolen after that by Hurley. It was sold again after his capture. Looks like the dealer you got it from first wiped it then accidentally reactivated the agency tracker on it so it comes up as stolen.”

No detective would be coming out here to vacation,” McKraken said. “He's up to something.”

“It's a missing person case, too. I'm checking up on a person who might've drowned or something.”

Mike Nelson put his hands on his hips. At six three and with neat-clipped dark hair and a hard face, he looked impressive and threatening. He passed San a business card. "I'm on a special assignment, too. We have a case going on in this area. Don't get in our way if we happen to send any people in on the ground. Contact me if you see anything strange."

"I can do that."

McKraken gestured at both men and the commandos. "Wait a minute. The Provincial Authority hasn't been given full information on this federal case. What exactly are you guys looking for?"

"That is top secret. The local Indian Falls police are working with us."

"Huh," said a surprised McKraken. "Indian Falls police? There are no Indian Falls police."

"Really, well I see their vehicle coming right now," agent Nelson said, pointing to an all-terrain vehicle pulling over a ditch to the road. The vehicle continued to approach from the direction of Indian Falls. The driver being another large man with a broad-brimmed hat somewhat like McKraken's.

"That ain't no real cop, that's Nev Sweeting of the Conservation Authority," McKraken said, looking quite peeved.

The roar of the ATV broke the silence as Nev Sweeting approached on the road. He pulled up and stopped, and then he jumped out and slapped dust and debris from his canvas pants. He stepped up past the gun-toting commandos as if they were no threat and exchanged a nasty glance with McKraken. Nev Sweeting was best described as a beefy red-faced hillbilly type dressed in the ranger garb that was the outfit of the Conservation Authority. He looked more like someone who would wrestle a bear than he did like someone who would solve a crime or be working with special agent Mike Nelson. Nev Sweeting's bright blue eyes were behind whisker stubble that was rough as straw and what they were seeing now was probably his best shave. Rather than wait for introductions he spoke first.

"Howdy boys, this must be that detective I heard was coming in. You can take the cuffs off him McKraken. We know who he is. He's looking for a body. Pardon me. I mean, missing person."

Sgt McKraken seemed more than stunned, but he did move to take off San's cuffs.

Taking a look around at everyone, San spoke. "Damn, is there anyone in Indian Falls that doesn't know who I am already?"

"Nope," Nev Sweeting said. "Gossip gets around fast and people are talking about the top secret case I'm working on with the federal boys. They think you got to do with it since you're coming in to look for that crazy fella."

Sgt McKraken turned to press Sweeting. "Must be real top secret if everyone in Indian Falls knows about it. I need details on that special case."

"Can't reveal anything about it."

"I can keep you busy, McKraken," San said. "That car dealer in Toronto set me up. Sold me a hot car connected to a criminal figuring to get me shot or put away. Some big players went down in the city due to investigations of mine. Once they find out I'm still kicking they might come out this way."

"Really. Well, the way it is you may have to look after yourself. We can't be hassling every tourist that comes by out here. You better watch out for the Falls Militia too because they'd probably put you underwater for a hundred bucks if somebody paid them."

Nev Sweeting grinned. "Come on now, McKraken. Those militia boys are just waiting for the big one, for the end to come or world war five or whatever. They ain't contract killers. But they might kill someone they think is spying for the feds."

"Sounds like they should be killing you," Sgt McKraken said.

Agent Nelson grimaced like he'd had enough. "Let's wrap this deal up. I'll disable the tracker on Mr. Michaels' car and he rides into the falls like any other tourist. You boys can hit the road, he doesn't need a police escort."

The road into town hugged the wide Falls River bank and in narrow parts ran close enough that the flow looked threatening. A rocky river it displayed wild rafting paths through the rapids and was at its foamiest on the other side of town. On its stretch through the town, it broadened and calmed before quickening on its passing. It was this calm portion that San was now approaching. Judging from the sheer size of the huge oak trees gripping the banks the river had fought off the huge wildfires of a quarter century ago. A new bridge arched over the river just past the town sign and as he mounted it, he saw rainbows in the mist then the stretch of commercial buildings that created the main drag. A couple churches of the newer broad hall design and some tall buildings loomed in the background, but River Street itself rarely rose above six stories, though the stories themselves were tall at 9 feet or more. San already knew that no sell-every-sort-of-thing big chain stores existed in this town. For numerous supplies, the best option would be a hardware store so he made his first stop at The Big Nail. It was a rather garish place with large display windows and a few parking spots out front.

Walking across the beaten lot to the front doors, he experienced a sudden rise of neck hairs and the feeling of being watched by people nearby. There were a few pedestrians, people with a country look for the most part. Older people were overdressed in rumpled clothing while a couple of young women wore the close-to-nothing-at-all summer outfits that were common everywhere. The short black man behind the counter wore brand-new jeans, suspenders and a plaid short-sleeve shirt. He continued working on a shelf and gave no greeting. San had a thing for lights and if he was going to be out at missing man Marc Santino's cottage, he wanted powerful portable lights in case any offbeat night work came up. Forgetting about being a detective he went on a bit of a shopping spree, filling an entire shopping cart as he grabbed stuff that could be needed. He whistled a faint tune as he came up a long aisle to the front counter but when he was almost there, he looked up and stopped dead.

A small crowd had gathered outside the store, and some people were taking pictures of him through the window with their phones. They didn't seem hostile or friendly but more like nuisance rubberneckerers. Since no one else was at the cash, he rolled the cart up and addressed the clerk.

"Afternoon, Mr. Michaels," the clerk said.

"Who are you? How do you know my name? And why are those people watching me?"

"I'm Leon Ottawa. I own The Big Nail. Most people here knew you were coming. They figure you might have an in on that big case Nev Sweeting and special agent Spook Nelson are working on."

"Figures. Your local lawman has a big mouth. Who in the hell is this special agent Nelson guy? What sort of case do they have going out here?"

"Spooks ... that's why we call him Spook Nelson. He's a federal agent and he's helping Nev Sweeting with hunting the spooks out here. Some strange happenings going on again and word came in that you're a pal of that Marco Santino fella. He's the guy that unleashed the spooks first then disappeared."

"I don't even know him. His family asked me to find him. He's around here somewhere because he sent a message recently. Other than that, I'm here on a vacation. I don't hunt spooks."

"Well, Sweeting and Nelson drive out every spook hunter that shows now. But even if you're not a spook hunter you might become one if you're looking for Marco."

"Why's that?"

"They appeared on his property first and I heard you were to be staying out there."

"There isn't a crowd waiting for me out there, I hope?"

"Nope. Town people are scared to hang around out there. You'll be on your own. If you need anything from town just call and I can have it delivered."

"I'll keep that in mind. So what do I do about those people out there, sign autographs?"

"Just be friendly and play like a detective. That's what they came out to see. You want to keep on their good side. Nev Sweeting says you're cleared for now, but I just got a call from Sergeant McKraken asking me to report on what you're up to."

"Tell McKraken to kiss my ass. If you want to do something for me I'll leave you a number."

"A number for what?"

"To warn me. If anyone comes into town asking questions, leave me a message on it. Any strange happenings I'd like to know about too."

"Okay. I can do that."

With Leon Ottawa's help, San left the store, pressed the flesh out front, and loaded the car. He drove away with a smile and a wave ... that turned into curses and his angry fist pounding on the wheel a half kilometre up the road. He'd driven across an invisible border into another world here; at least it seemed like that ... and he wondered what

kind of spooks would inhabit a territory like this one and how Marco Santino, a city boy, could be the lead part of it.

Some wide bends and a dead-man's curve decorated the road out to Marco's cottage. After twisting away from the river the road went back to it and he saw the falls sending out a rainbow in the mist beside the steep hillside banking them. San felt like stopping for a look around but reminded himself that he wasn't a tourist while still working on a case. Coming around the bend to a store and souvenir shop, he decided he could have a look around there and still be investigating. A couple people were exiting the storefront as he pulled in. Other than them, he appeared to be the only customer. The store was a new structure designed with an antique flavour that would fool most people. Inside it was separated into a section for the souvenir items with a second grocery or general store area. Apparently, San had arrived at a slow time, as only one clerk was present in the store. The clerk was a young woman, nice slim figure and native in appearance. Her hair was long and deep black and its flow accentuated her full lips and big dark eyes. At the counter, he struck up some conversation, finding first that her name was Deena.

Deena's smile was cherry-lipped. "We don't get the bus tours we used to get. Used to be a lot of business for the falls and haunting sites before the cops shut everything up."

"What do you mean?"

"The Provincial Authority, a cop named Sgt McKraken harassed visitors and spook hunters so much the bus company cancelled the tours. Nev Sweeting, the town ranger, and a man named Nelson drive people out if they get into town. McKraken discourages them from coming in."

"I've met all three. Don't particularly trust them. What's their game anyway?"

"Been a lot of hush-hush stuff about missing people out here. McKraken wants to run some kind of investigation into it but he has no authority over the town line. Nev Sweeting is in charge of that."

"How many people are missing?"

"About twelve. But not the usual sort of missing. It has to do with the strange happenings."

"I'm looking for a guy with a cottage near here. Name's Marco."

"I know him. He is also missing."

"He's around somewhere."

"I don't advise looking for him unless you want to go missing yourself."

"How about Nev Sweeting. What kind of cop is he?"

"A stupid one. Talks all over town about how he's working with that secret agent guy, Nelson, to crack this case."

"I take it you don't have much confidence in him?"

“No. I've talked to that special agent Nelson guy too. He's always snooping around out here in weird ways. No wonder the people call him Spook Nelson. It's hard to figure whether he's trying to solve the problems or is the cause of some of them.”

“Listen, I'll give you my number. Call me if you hear anything about Marco or anyone else missing reappearing.”

Outside the store, San watched a pickup pull up and couple of bikers pass on the road. The bikers wore semi camouflage outfits and he pegged them as members of the Indian Falls Militia. A big sign next to the pop machine advertised the tours to haunted locations in Indian Falls. Cobwebs and dead moths gave it some realism but San didn't really believe that spirits of natives and people who died in the big wildfires were really coming back from the spirit world.

It was all too easy to commercialize and haunting and supernatural occurrences had become another commodity around the world. Tourist stuff for night walks and displays. Apparently, here it had actually run past that phase to a new form of weirdness. Perhaps it was because everyone connected to this town was unusual and disconnected from the standard mass-media brainwash networks. Proof that the stupidity spectrum couldn't reach into every corner and perhaps had little power in remote areas where other cultures of oddness had already set things into motion for a separate reality.

He wound through deep ravines and up some hills before coming back to the river beyond the falls. It ran strong here and this was deep country. Still tourist country to an extent as he saw a number of pullovers to fishing holes and signs for boat rentals farther up river. Houses spotted the landscape, all of them small to intermediate size and new constructions. It was high summer now and he recognized Marco's cottage from the satellite photograph as he rounded a last bend. The structure was on elevated land with a view to the river and forests and fields at the rear. Sitting in tall summer grass and weeds run through with the brown of summer straw, it seemed quite elegant. At least it did until he came partway up the rise and saw that the place was occupied, and by people who would not be considered sophisticated.

A number of motorcycles and ATVs were parked at the side under shade trees and a group of militia types were lounging and strolling with booze in hand on the front yard. San slowed to a near crawl, taking in the scene carefully as he pulled in and stopped in front of a small side garage. He saw the men continue talking and paying him scant attention as he got out and walked over.

A tall man, unshaven and wearing camouflage pants with a sleeveless jean jacket stepped out to meet him. His hair was wild and straw color and his eyes were on the piercing side in spite of the fact he was swilling Mooseland beer. The necklace he wore was animal teeth of some sort.

San spoke first. “This Marco Santino's place?”

“You lookin' for him?”

“You could say that – his family is looking for him?”

“Yeah, well were lookin' for him, too.”

“Good. At least I won't be working alone. I'm supposed to be staying here. Got permission from his family.”

“Wait just minute. You're not working with us. I got word you're another federal spy Nev Sweeting brought in. Means you're part of the conspiracy.”

“I'm not a fed. What conspiracy? Who are you?”

“I'm Burk McCraw, captain of the Indian Falls Militia. The feds want to get Indian Falls primed for world government takeover and we are the resistance.”

San looked at a second rough-at-the-edges guy walking up; carrying what looked close to a rocket launcher. It was hard to tell if he was native or oriental, but he was a militia type.

“You don't need a rocket launcher to fight me,” San said. “I'm only a private detective. Here, check my card. I met Nev Sweeting and that Spook Nelson guy on the way in, but I'm not working for them. They won't even say what they're working on. It's supposed to be top secret.”

“Rin here knows how to deal with top secret folks,” Burk said.

“That's right,” Rin said, shouldering his weapon. “If that alien ambassador shows up here again I'm going to burn his top-secret ass.”

San raised his eyebrows. “Listen. I'm not a supporter of world government and I thought it was supposed to be ghosts or Indian spooks around here. So where do the alien ambassadors come from? I know Marco was a spook hunter but I didn't hear anything about aliens. What I did hear was that he's still around somewhere. He sent a message to another man in Toronto three weeks ago.”

Rin lowered his weapon and turned to Burk. “Maybe you better tell him so he can get out of town before the big fry goes down. He's probably got nothing to do with world government. The federal spooks are just using him as tool to find Marco.”

“Marco appears to be the key to all this,” San said. “Maybe if I find him everyone will be happy.”

“Okay,” Burk said. “Come on over to the picnic table and have a beer. You need to know a bit of what's going on out here.”

“Top-secret stuff, you mean.”

“Yup, top secret,” Rin said with conviction.

Chapter Two: THE AMBASSADOR

For some unexplained reason the other militiamen took to their vehicles and kicked up pebbles and twigs as they blasted off down to the road and went north. San sat on the picnic table with Burk McCraw while Rin paced back and forth in weed stubble. With a Mooseland beer in hand, he relaxed and watched high clouds paint a picture of summer while McCraw told a story.

Burk McCraw had obviously spent a lot of time around the fishing hole telling tall battle tales. He was on the illiterate cutting edge of the extremist movement that existed here and there in the countryside or freer zone of the police state that had once been the Canadian nation. "Yeah, I'm an expert on guerrilla tactics and small weapons. My brother developed the guidance systems that ground rocket launchers and missiles use today. The same system that makes it possible to shoot tiny drones out of the sky. We fought side by side against the feds during some of the big battles ten years back. People like us have put a lot of holes in world government and left a lot of open pockets of freedom like Indian Falls."

San cleared his throat. "Uh, what exactly does this have to do with disappearances here?"

"Cool it, he's getting to it," Rin said.

"That's right. Rin fought at my side too. The militia here don't care if Rin is part Injun, part Chink and part Scotsman. We care how a man fights. We spent years in the bush. The key here is understanding that the feds and the big conspiracy for a one-world government never comes to end. They want a cop state from sea to sea and in the sea as well, and when they see free areas like Indian Falls they see red. It's always new ways to scare people into submission or to control them. In the city, it's fear of terrorists and the rogue celebrity assassins. But out here that doesn't work because we are the terrorists, at least according to them. Locals don't fear us so out here they need a new way to scare folks and get them running in for federal protection."

San took a big swallow as this appeared like it was going to be a long story. "I buy it so far except for one thing. I can see maybe special agent Nelson being part of a big conspiracy of that variety, but I can't picture Marco being in any way involved in it. He was a sort of hobbyist spook hunter."

Burk McCraw took a slug. "Marco is on our side. That's why we're looking around here for any clues. You see, the other people that disappeared were taken by the alien spooks, but Marco was on this thing all along with his investigation. He's ahead of them and he has gone underground somewhere. He's trying to find a way to stop them or beat them."

"Okay," San said as he started to wonder if Burk McCraw was sane. "But how would he go underground out here where everybody knows everybody? You think he's hiding in the woods? And who are these alien spooks you're talking about?"

Rin suddenly threw his beer bottle into the straw grass. "That's where we disagree, me and Burk. I think the ambassador is from hell or some evil spook world. Burk thinks he's from an alien world or dimension and Marco actually got in there and is hiding in their own world."

San massaged his eyes, wondering if this interview would produce even a single clue as to Marco's whereabouts. "So you're saying the feds, Spook Nelson and Nev Sweeting are party to bringing in forces from hell or another dimension to scare people in Indian Falls?"

"We are saying that," Burk said. "Because Spook Nelson has known about it all along. We've chased all his agents out of the area now so he's turned Nev Sweeting. Sgt

McKraken and the Provincial Authority are watching too but they're in the dark. They know something's going on but not exactly what. They help Nelson by cutting off traffic into the area.”

“Count me as being in the dark like Sgt Mckraken,” San said.

Burk grinned. “You look a shot brighter than McKraken. Okay, let's hit on the disappearances. There always was the odd disappearance stretching back three decades. The old haunted tour hit on some of the locations of the disappearances. Where there were witnesses, they all heard strange noises and some saw people vanish in mist puffs. They saw evil faces in that mist. It was all native spirit stuff until recently. Then the light and bubbles came. Always at night. Rin saw old Joe Boulos taken right off in one. Isn't that right, Rin?”

“Sure is. We did a booze run out to Raven's Nude Beach and were parked outside the perimeter in the lot when twilight was falling in. Joe was drunk and drinkin' a sampler of whiskey while he fooled around over by the pond. Right there while I was sipping a beer, I saw bluish mist forming and I was sure I saw a weird bird circling the pond. Joe stuck a foot in the water and was yelling some foolishness into the mist when I saw like a big soap bubble come off the surface and cover him. Right away, he was trapped inside this man-big thing with mist and he was struggling as it lifted and floated away. I could see him screaming but I couldn't hear anything, then I saw evil faces in the mist – black evil things with beards of creepy shadow. That bubble went off in the trees and Joe Boulos has never been seen since. Other people disappeared the same way, and not just people. One of those things struck in the lot outside the souvenir shop. It almost got Deena Muskok, but she jumped out of the way and the crazy thing swallowed Nev Sweeting's big-screen TV. It had come in on order and he hadn't loaded it yet. It's like those devils are stealing stuff to study us. They might still be experimenting on a lot of them. And they did learn, because after that the ambassador came.”

“Ambassador?” San said, mystified. “Never heard a story like yours, and you guys look at least half sober.”

McCraw burped. “That's one of the reasons why we're here at Marco's cottage. He was studying these things with some kind of portable equipment he carried. Studying them all along like they were ghosts, but he knew different. They tried to get him in town before he disappeared. Leon Ottawa saw a gold light like some kind of shimmering wall chase him from the old haunted hotel just before he went underground. Leon may be a crazy old Nigger but he's always truthful. We came out here looking for him and saw the ambassador.”

San nodded as though he believed it all. “Ambassador, who's that?”

Rin stepped up close like he was disgusted. “Ambassador is a pretty name Burk came up with for him. I call him the demon because that's what he is. Whether he comes from another planet or dimension like Burk thinks don't matter. If the place is hell he's from hell.”

Burk cleared his throat. “True enough, but I don't think it is our hell. Maybe just some other place that happens to be similar. That was on our first day looking for Marco. The

militia was out here searching the grounds. Around nightfall, we spotted blue lights past the forest there where the fields run over to the Falls River. We thought it might be Marco so we blasted off on the new all-terrain machines – they're the Lift ATVs we use now. We were fully armed of course in case of trouble. Not that we expected any as at that time many people had disappeared, but in that spooky way and without armed violence. On the down-run through the meadow, we slowed. The lights were in the big pines and oaks at the riverbank. We had to follow a rocky path through the sumac scrub fringing the end of the meadow then we were out and gathering in assault formation. But other than the weird flickering lights and mist on the river, there was no enemy. Rin and me are the commanders so we broke out and went alone down toward the bank. Rin had our new Frisco launcher, same one he's got there now. Fires some potent stuff from shock up to kill level.

So we were getting close to the bank and saw one of those bubbles floating in the mist there by a big oak that leaned out into the water on exposed roots. It was bigger, about twice the height of person and what made this one different was it was like a crystal ball ... meaning me and Rin saw ugly visions. I saw blood pouring and body parts then it was like a lens showing some world of steaming ground and screaming aliens. Like Rin says, there were ebony black demonic things and the world wasn't even their world because some of them were feeding on these smaller humanoid creatures like it was a world they'd invaded. It was hypnotic, so much so that we didn't notice another bubble floating off to the south. It had come off the river mist and up the bank and was nearly on us. Rin spotted it first and we backed up at a near run with Rin drawing up the launcher. Thing was this one had a person inside ... or maybe I should say alien person. Other things were in there with it like dead fish and weeds and some rocks and sands like it was taking a sample. And it was trying to speak to us. The face was twisted and evil to say the least and it still had blood on its lips from wherever it had been. We couldn't hear a sound, but got a vision of its mouth moving and its hands clawing at the bubble's surface.

So the bubble stopped there and settled to the grass with this sick thing trying to communicate with us ... and at one point it disappeared and an image of gold showed in the bubble. It seemed to be a machine of sorts or computer or I don't know what. Then it reappeared and it was beckoning to us like it wanted us to enter the bubble with it. It had changed and I could tell it was the same creature but now it was a handsome man wearing a suit. A magnetism of a type came with him and I found myself taking a step toward the bubble even though every bone in my body told me not to do it.

That's when the shape-shifting thing put a hand out through the bubble, hoping I'd walk up and take hold of it ... and Rin fired the launcher ... not a lethal weapon, but a shock grenade. It was powerful enough that at that range it knocked us back. On our asses, we saw the blast dissipate around the bubble, but some of the force had passed in when he pulled his hand back. His arm was badly scorched and his expression was a hateful open-mouthed thing ... gross black blood drops flew out and ran on the bubble and we got up and retreated and that's when Rin fired again. Close range rockets that blew up the grass and dirt and part of a tree and knocked the bubble for a short

bounce. The ambassador was unhurt though and still mouthing silent screams at us ... and I told Rin to try the Frisco's beam mode. It has the new close range beam weapon. He hit that at top setting ... and get this ... the blast lit the bubble up and burned the hair or tentacles, whatever it was that looked like hair off the ambassador's head. He was wounded and angry but had control enough of that bubble to take a fast float out over the river and disappear in the mist. After that, the mist cleared and the event was over, and we have our theories on it. Maybe you got an idea on it, too."

"It's the sort of thing that has to be seen to be believed," San muttered as he mulled things over, thinking that everyone in this place had eaten some strange mushrooms because their testimony ran against any scientific explanation. "You say the feds and Mike Nelson are behind something this crazy. How could that be? Unless they are inducing hallucinations of some type."

"They're no hallucinations," Rin replied. "You'll find out soon enough. The town records say there was a military experiment conducted here a long time ago, but we can't find the location as those facts were blotted out. The feds caused this somehow ... bringing this ambassador and black bastard monsters in to terrify people here. They likely lost control of it and that's why Nev Sweeting and Mike Nelson are working top secret. They don't send in federal agents anymore. This area is slowly being quarantined and sealed off."

"They let me in and I'm a detective. It did seem like quarantine, though. I got stopped right away and all of them showed up. They may be using me to find Marco or for some other reason, and then they'll have no further use for me. I want you boys to call me right away if something strange happens so I can do some checks. Let me suppose what you witnessed is real. This demon or ambassador guy has been pulling in samples and taking people, which is a military move that happens before an invasion. It would be more than a scare tactic. A possible invasion, where the feds have some secret knowledge of its possibility, would be a reason for slowly sealing off this town."

"Yup, those things got out of control. It's more like sealing off the whole Indian Falls area," Burk said. "Hell, invasion. Bring 'em on ... were ready for those black demon bastards. Just let them show their asses instead of sneaking around like robbers and kidnapers."

It was dark now and the Indian Falls Militia had roared off to their lair and other haunts. San felt certain he'd reached an accord with Burk McCraw, but he still took time to check all directions from the cottage with high-powered binoculars to make sure they didn't leave someone behind in the woods to watch him. He batted bugs away from his sweaty brow and once satisfied he pulled out a beam light and took a tour of the cottage.

All the power was off but he found the service in the small basement. He checked the basic wiring and fuses to see all was in order. It was as this was a new cottage and even had a bit of built-in house intelligence. The base setting was all lights so when he snapped over the big main switch the cottage lit up with brilliant light – a yellow glow in the basement and brighter light outside the window. Marco's work area was next to the house systems; he'd thought it was a small storage area when he looked at it with the

beam light but brighter illumination showed it to be disorganization with a motive. As a scientist or ghost hunter, Marco was a sloppy one. His work setup looked like stacks of electronic junk in a wall curve around his chair and bench. \

The equipment was all Greek to San and he was tech savvy. San worked with systems for detection and avoidance of detection in the human world, combined with his office security system, so he really had no idea what sort of technology a spook hunter would use. The sophisticated equipment gave more the appearance of someone who scientifically disproved crazy stories like the one he'd just heard from the Indian Falls Militia. As a whole, the equipment would be quite valuable so it told him that people in the area were honest. Either that or scared of ghost tales and the militia that had been hanging around the place. As for the militia themselves, well, nothing here looked like a weapons system so they would leave it all alone.

A rather interesting device sat on the bench. It was a hand-held thing with a series of buttons, tiny dials, a read screen and a scope mouth. Some sort of reader he figured as he picked it up. He could see that it was Marco's own invention as M-Scope was embossed on the back. It looked professionally manufactured and Marco had his own symbol system to mark the buttons.

San powered it up and went through some of the settings, which were quite complex listings. It didn't take him long to figure out that Marco was a genius of sorts. He'd created a scope that at various levels could read the composition of just about anything by point and shoot. Taking off his ring, San placed it on the table and did a shoot on it without doing any special settings. The device gave a camera-type flash and readout of it as a ring with its dimensions and metallic composition.

Rather amazed San looked over the rest of the equipment and then took the M-Scope with him as he went upstairs. At the side of the house, the view was amazing. Marco's lights lit up the whole cottage and a vast area around it. It was much more than San wanted lit up so he did a walk around turning off lights here and there until only the immediate exterior was lit up. He checked the interior before unpacking the car and found it somewhat cobwebby but cozy with a small bedroom and side kitchen. The living room had a large wall TV connected to a general entertainment center. It flicked on to a baseball game, which he left at low volume, and then he unpacked the car. He had a lot of gear and tried to justify it by thinking of himself as a detective that might need anything rather than a city boy trying to move all luxury within his reach out in the country.

The Mooseland beer he'd been drinking with the militia was already fading to a shitty semi hangover. No pure spring water in it, he thought as he polished a rock glass and poured himself a straight double of Southern Comfort. The double did the work and short minutes later he had his connection set in to his downtown office. There were spooks in the secure wireless sector out here and he had to do a loop around only an expert could do to get everything connecting nicely. Realization came that more than the highways were being closed off. With that done, he decided to go out and do some checks on the car. He hadn't had time to look it over and he wanted to see exactly what it was agent Mike Nelson had disconnected.

At the car, he opened the hood to reveal an offbeat engine and the strange construct that special agent Nelson had altered, supposedly so the car wouldn't report in as stolen to police. San knew that Nelson would have simply changed it so his location would always point to him but not Sgt McKraken and others. This addition had him baffled as the control electronic mind was in the dashboard. Why would such a complex additional device be needed unless the car had other capabilities?

San was suddenly struck with an idea; taking Marco's scope in hand, he got a focus covering the device and took a flash of it. He didn't get an exact reading; he got comparable to – Device Comparable to Learning-7 armoured vehicle weapons controller. With that reading, he went over, sat at the picnic table, and spent a long time adjusting the M-Scope to get more details on it. As well as being connected to an advanced AI controller in the dash that was capable of speech, the vehicle had a tracking system that enabled self-tracking as well as tracking of the surroundings. A weapons system was also included that listed projectiles and an energy shield of sorts. After some time he made some guesses, went back to the car and snapped open the assembly. Self-tracking he disabled as Nelson had placed a code in it. With that done, he enabled the weapons system and local tracking. San disliked talking cars so he set the mind for dash readout then he got in and powered up the vehicle. This time the full screen system lit up across the dash except for the self-tracking panel.

He decided to do a few tests and pulled the car around back, testing readings while facing forest and the river direction. Map and screen readout told him exactly what lay ahead and offered to connect to get detailed maps. He didn't allow a connection attempt, but instead tested the weapons system, which turned out to be a bullet system front and back. A test fire tore a limb off a nearby tree, meaning whoever had supposedly disabled this vehicle had only done it electronically while leaving it fully loaded. The gun test gave him an idea and he went back to the cottage to get the hit man's gun. San assembled it on the picnic table and then used the M-Scope for a reading. The scope picked up its registration as SNX Sniper Experimental. But other than listing it as a weapon, it registered nearly everything else as unknown, including the alloy composition. Deciding to do some test fires with it, he went through the panel modes, carefully checking the numbers and ranges. It had auto tracking so he enabled that then took some practice shots at a distant boulder. He found he could do everything from a target piercing to an outright blast that broke up the stone. And the weapon had other modes he was afraid to test.

Back inside, he had another shot of liquor and began to think things over, and what he came up with he didn't like. He was being used and had been tracked all along. Special agent Nelson and the military people behind him were the ones doing it. Maybe they just wanted to track him and see if he came up with anything. Burk McCraw had mentioned that the feds couldn't get any agents inside Indian Falls any more or didn't want any inside. They were using parks cop Nev Sweeting for God's sake.

It was odd that he'd picked up this powerful car and gun or maybe not so odd. Mike Nelson had to be the military connected guy that sent the hit man with the special gun. They wanted him dead because they knew he was looking for Marco. Since the hit man had been buried anon, Nelson wouldn't know what became of him or the weapon.

The only reason Nelson could have for sending in a killer was that he didn't want Marco to be found. At least not by a detective. Agent Nelson's people must have checked his entire background and when he didn't pick up the usual rental car, they'd known he'd go to Poncy. And Poncy had passed him the dirty car provided by a military source so he could be tracked. That meant it wasn't criminals from Toronto behind it all. It all connected to Indian Falls and what was happening here. Most likely, he wouldn't be allowed out of the Indian Falls area now. Not if they suspected him of having any information. The only course of action seemed to be to pretend he knew nothing and was no more than a dumb private eye, stumbling around on a search for Marco.

After taking a last look around with binoculars, he strung out some tiny wireless cameras and had the signal replace the baseball game on the big screen TV. His team was losing to New York anyway so he settled for an easy sleep on the couch. He kept his eyes on the cameras for any movement. The small bedroom, he wasn't using yet as he didn't feel confident enough for heavy sleep. There was always the possibility that enemies had got here first. He'd already done a bomb check through the hook-up with his office in Toronto and so far the cottage and its surroundings checked out okay.

San drifted in and out of shifting light nightmares for about an hour and then he got a call. It was a number with priority and the display brightened to show that it was Deena Muskok.

He hadn't undressed so all he had to do was set the camera surveillance to alert him if anyone approached the cottage, then with some stuff in hand and under his arms, he went out to the car.

He raced down the dark road and over a hilltop and from there he saw the lights of Deena's store. She'd closed up and was standing out front among some swirling moths. Only Deena's car was in the lot and San kicked up some dust as he partially slid in on the entry drive.

Deena looked surreal stepping out of the yellowing light with moths swirling behind her, but in the dim interior, her dark beauty was apparent. San wondered why she'd be out here by herself and not picked up by a boyfriend already. And the answer he got was surprising.

"Sometimes I sleep over at the store. Yes I have a boyfriend," she said in a sad tone. "He's one of the people that disappeared. Though Nev Sweeting won't list the disappearance. He says my guy got bored and left for better places."

"Our parks man Nev Sweeting isn't much of a cop is he?"

"Other than clear away tree falls and road kill and harass the people at the nudist colony, I don't think he does anything. All the missing people and he hasn't even arranged a proper search party or brought other police in to investigate."

"He's got federal agent Nelson, and when Nelson says he can't get a man in here I get the feeling he doesn't want anyone in here. The provincial guys like Sgt McKraken are mainly blocking access rather than investigating anything."

“Yeah, but it’s always been a bit like that in Indian Falls. Everything we have here we built or paid for ourselves. Other levels of government won’t invest a dime here. Even the Parks Authority is paid for by the town.”

“All right, town’s just over a couple hills. What’s the story on this Queen’s Hotel place?”

“It used to be on the original tour of Haunted Indian Falls as a feature. Closed down fifteen years ago after some killings there. A mad dentist from Toronto killed his whole family there. The rental cottages to its side were closed up and it continued as a sleazy watering hole for some time. There were shootings and stabbings at it. Then some of the first so-called new haunting happened there. People said there were ghosts there and it lost business. It was little more than a late night booze can by then. It closed but parts of it were fixed up some when they ran the Haunted Indian Falls tours. A couple of my spookier paintings are in the lobby. So originally it was just ghost stuff but when new a wave of spook stuff started, some of it occurred there. A couple people disappeared spending the night in it and there was a night of mist and a fire at the old cottages.”

The interior lights were faint but San spotted the glitter of a tear in Deena's eye. “So it was open fairly recently as part of the Haunted Indian Falls Tour. I also take it your boyfriend was one of the two people that disappeared staying overnight.”

“Brett Peck is his name. And I hate him.” She practically spat out the words.

“So it was another woman, the person that was with him and went missing with him.”

“That's none of your business.”

“It is. If I'm looking for a missing person, it matters whether the others really disappeared. What I see here is that Nev Sweeting saw an opportunity to write it off, saying Brett Peck ran off with another woman and really didn't disappear. That pattern probably fits all the disappearances.”

“What can I say? He's an incompetent cop with no resources.”

“I always look at things from both sides. There's always the possibility he isn't incompetent at all but that he knows something or is somehow involved. He has federal resources now because he is working with special agent Nelson.”

They were on the run into town, passing a red highway diner building with a couple trucks and three cars in the lot. The hotel was set well back with its own entry road and San didn't miss it. He turned in on the worn asphalt and followed the road through some deep scrub and pines, uphill then down into bright lights.

The bright lights weren't from any haunting. San pulled over and found parks cop Nev Sweeting already there with a wireless spectrum cube on his vehicle powering brilliant lights he'd mounted on a tall wooden side fence. Instead of illumining the hotel, he had the whole parking area and part of a lawn lit in focus. Other cars were parked in the lot, many of them askew. About forty townspeople had got out and were standing back of a rope fence Sweeting had strung up to block all the walkways. The hotel was set back in semi darkness and resembled a classic spooky structure. San had to squint to see it ... and other blue lights flaring behind it. An occurrence of some sort was happening at

the hotel but ranger Sweeting's focus seemed to be more on the crowd of locals than it.

The parking lot was situated at the north end and mostly off the grounds. Patios, tables and wide steps were at the front, existing amid what had once been sculptured bushes, a manicured lawn and gardens. The area was now more of weed garden. The edge of a pool peeked out from another patio at the south end and he could tell the water in it was stagnant, as he could smell it. The pool area was open with trees well back, meaning that in the daytime it got light from the east, south and west. It appeared that this patio stretched around back and that was where the lights were coming from as an aura showed on the hotel structure itself. Some of the light was inside glowing blue through the windows and it worked to clean up some of the building's decrepit look. There was a long wide lobby with huge extended windows and further structures of the rooms themselves with wide bay windows at the lower level. It had been an impressive place at one time. Perhaps not a five-star hotel but a country hideaway that was much bigger and more luxurious than what could be referred to as cozy. The poor upkeep showed even in the dark as only the main lobby and front entertainment area was in good repair. The rest seemed to be crumbling under the weight of weather and encroaching weeds.

Deena jumped out of the car and marched over. San followed at a slower pace as his eyes were still on the hotel. He turned back to the uninteresting sight of Nev Sweeting waving a rifle as he argued with some of the locals. Sweeting shoved a man in mechanic's bib overalls then Deena stepped up and started to argue with him.

"Why are you holding the people out here," she said. "Is there something in there you don't want them to see?"

"That's right, it's a cover-up," hollered an obviously drunk man with bush of dirty hair.

Nev Sweeting's expression was a mix of arrogance and fear. Fear that he might lose control. "Shut up, Dan," he spat as he continued to use his rifle as a block. "There's no cover-up. The best way to keep you people from disappearing is to keep the lot of you out of there."

The crowd booed. Dan hollered back. "If those alien kidnappers are in there I want a piece of them."

"Me too," another drunk yelled. Then San stepped up and spoke. "Whatever's happening is happening around back. Those blue lights are shining right through the hotel. There isn't any way to investigate it by standing over here, a football field away."

A tall man standing on the back of a pickup suddenly shouted. "He's right. I see something moving around back. It's one of those kidnappers from Mars."

"It ain't nobody!" Sweeting yelled. His loss of control apparent. And in an instant, everything changed. The people rushed Nev Sweeting and knocked him and his rifle aside. The rope barrier they simply pulled down and then they were all walking at a brisk pace across the lawn and taking the pool area patio around back.

San and Deena were left standing there with Nev Sweeting and there was a roar as Burk McCraw suddenly pulled up. He was driving a sports car this time with the roof

down. Rin was in the passenger seat. Rather than take the long way around Deena began to pace up the front patios towards the main entrance. San followed, Nev Sweeting was on his heels and Burk McCraw and Rin were two abreast behind him.

The blue lights flickered through the windows and in the chandeliers of the entrance. Deena opened a huge silent door and they were inside a spacious lobby with a few steps up to the old front desk and an adjoining entertainment area. Sweeting clicked on a powerful torch orb that vanquished the spooky light and they were looking around at some old slot machines in an otherwise empty area. San stared up at a large stylized painting of the falls and rapids. Apparently, one of Deena's paintings of haunted Indian Falls. Other nearby paintings showed ghostly beings moving through forest.

Darkness suddenly returned as Nev Sweeting shut off his light and clicked on an interior chandelier. It changed the picture considerably. The area now took on a grand if aging appearance and they could see across and out back to the crowd gathering there near the glow of blue lights.

Rin snapped a clip of ammo in his gun as they walked through the hotel and Sweeting glared at him with a don't-even-think-about-firing-shots look.

"Brett disappeared right here near the back entrance. A witness outside said he was running from something," Deena said.

"That wasn't a reliable witness," said a confident Sweeting. "He was seen stopping at the diner, then he left town."

Burk McCraw slapped Sweeting on the shoulder. "Let's skip this argument. Something's happening right now, out there. Maybe it'll help us find out what happened to some of the missing people."

Rin grinned knowingly. "They were taken. That's what happened. And it ain't going to happen to me. That ambassador ain't sucking me down into some hell."

Deena slid a tall tinted glass door aside and they stepped out on the debris-covered back patio. The crowd was at the far end of it staring at huge bubbles of blue light moving nearby in the dry grass and trees. Some of the bubbles were floating off the back end of the stagnant swimming pool. The lights shifted through different hues and had a hypnotic effect ... the feeling of standing in twilight ... and nightfall where some otherworldly darkness would arrive with ghosts of it. San studied the show of lights and the way the bubbles rose to the sky and disappeared. There was a quality that didn't seem manufactured and also a feeling of static that gave one a climbing feeling that something wicked was about to take place. The sense of awe was also one of growing terror and he could see it in the faces of the people. They had marched around back as an angry mob about to take in hand kidnappers or murderers of some variety, and now their anger was condensing to fear of something none of them could see but only sense. It was certain that something was coming and it was something creepy.

Nev Sweeting saw opportunity and walked over to the front of the mob. Again levelling his antique rifle, he began to order people to back away from the lights. This time most people kept silent and obeyed for some moments. A sound, some type of screeching rose and faded and it was a tin-foil-on-teeth noise with no apparent source. Then there

was a big play of the bubbles and a larger orb floated into view over the grass. It was unique as something was inside, a blurry figure. This bubble also had red tints and an aspect of the surreal as it shifted in shape. Somehow, it wasn't quite real and couldn't be called an illusion either, and that realization led to fright.

Another dimension of movement took it as it came closer along the ground so that it was almost like a space ship coming in but not from space – it seemed to be arriving through a hidden door or opening like it was more than a bubble. It had an aspect of being a view window from somewhere else.

This effect drew a few amazed gasps; the being contained in the view remained fuzzy but some features were visible. This being was mostly human but not quite. Its facial features were angular, warped and predatory, full of obvious evil intentions and it was ebony black. It was hard to tell if it wore a hat, had a pointed head or if it was hair. In the blur, its features shifted in red blood-colored motions. The face remained warped and poked in every movement and expression and when its teeth showed they were sharp predator's teeth. Most of the lower body was lost in mist and it was trying to say something through cracked lips. But no words came out.

Rin was beside San. "Looks like the ambassador is back," he whispered.

San glanced around. Nearly everyone was wide-eyed with fright except for Dan from the Red Diner and Deena. Dan still had some anger on his face from his earlier encounter with Nev Sweeting, but it was now mixed with disbelief. Rin's gun hand was shaking and Deena had an intense expression like she might be going to try something stupid. Tough guy McCraw looked like he was about to bolt up his dinner and he had no weapon ready. San waited for Nev Sweeting to turn his face back to the crowd. He didn't like what he saw in Sweeting's eyes – something glassy and desperate, like he'd been through all this before. Like he was about to sell everybody out to this bizarre creature. A cowardly look.

The ambassador gestured at the crowd and mouthed some more words. San could read lips a bit and could tell that whatever language it was it wasn't English. Sweeting seemed to be waiting for something and the ice broke with Deena suddenly stepping up toward the bubble and the ambassador changing in appearance, morphing almost seamlessly to a dark handsome man in a suit. Just like Burk had mentioned in his story. The ambassador was now somewhat dark in aura all over – suit, complexion, hair, eyes and shoes.

San expected Nev Sweeting to stop Deena but this time he didn't. He let her go. And she began to speak to the ambassador. "Where is he? Where did you take my Brett? We want him back."

The crowd looked on. A sea of faces silently staring. The ambassador didn't vocalize an answer. Instead, he moved in the now expanding bubble and reached one hand outside of it. It was a dark long-fingered hand and he was imploring Deena to step forward and take it.

"Go ahead. Take his hand," Nev Sweeting said in a near whisper as he took a couple slow steps forward.

San was about to move to stop Deena, but Dan got in the way. He sprinted forward and grabbed the ambassador's hand. Then he began to scream in pain as the ambassador yanked hard and drew his hand and arm into the bubble. There was distortion and only the arm went in as the rest of his body hit the bubble and stopped like it had come against hard glass or a force field.

San had less than a moment to act. He saw Rin lifting his weapon so he dived in and tackled Deena, taking her down and out of the way. Deena struggled as he held her on the ground and he looked up with one eye clear at unfolding horror. Dan had pulled back while the ambassador pulled in and he lost his arm. The bubble had closed on it like cutting glass.

Dan was falling back to the ground with a fountain of blood spurting where his arm had been severed. The being in the bubble held the severed arm in long fingers and was turning to face the crowd then a burst of projectiles from Rin's gun ripped into the bubble. Blinding blue explosions and mist followed; the bullets failed to penetrate and the bubble began to float back. The crowd panicked and those that hadn't already turned to run off were backing off quickly. Burk McCraw and Rin were among those stepping back when a sudden power burst from the bubble hit Rin and he flew in the air in a blue explosion. Burk was also knocked off his feet and in moments, the encounter was over.

San and Deena stayed down, Rin looked to be out cold. Burk was rising, the crowd had fled and as the bubble disappeared in fading mist only Nev Sweeting remained, standing where he'd been at the front of the crowd. He had the same glassy look in his eyes and an expression of terror on his face.

San walked over to Dan but was afraid to touch him. He leaned over him for a closer look then put a hand slowly to his heart. He listened for breath, found none and cleared his mouth. Pulling his hand back fast when tissue and blood oozed out in a hot mass. Dan was dead and beyond any technique of revival.

Burk came close; Deena followed and also looked down, her expression grim. Inside the blood-spattered overalls, the body had shrivelled. Dan's face and hair had blackened. The soles of his boots were burned through like he'd been electrocuted.

Burk McCraw spat to his left. "He was the best cook in town."

Rin suddenly coughed and got to his feet. His brow got stormy when he noticed Nev Sweeting beside him. They walked up to the body. "I told people not to come out here," Sweeting cooed.

Rin gave him a spiteful glance. "You told Deena to take that ambassador's hand. Whose side are you on?"

"I was hypnotized. Can't even remember saying it."

McCraw kicked some dust over the body. "You better not be lying. This better not happen again."

Nev Sweeting tapped his rifle butt on the ground for emphasis. "Need I remind you that I'm the law here?"

San looked up from the body and from Burk McCraw to Nev Sweeting. "You're the law. But not much good if that ambassador guy can control you."

Deena turned away, unable to look at the body any longer. "What exactly happened to Dan?"

San was the first to speculate. "I think he would have gone through into that bubble whole and alive, but he resisted. It left his arm in one reality and his body in another and created a shock wave. The bubbles are a barrier or force field, but where you end up if you enter one I don't know."

"This is supernatural stuff," Nev Sweeting said. "Now I got a dead body. It's not just a missing person. I have to notify Sgt McKraken and his provincial boys. I can't report what actually happened. They'll think I'm crazy. We have to cover this up somehow."

Burk frowned with disbelief. "You've been covering everything up right from the beginning. So I don't think it will be a problem for you."

San was already walking away. "I'll be right back," he barked at Nev Sweeting. At the car he used the code to open the dash and pulled the out the M-Scope. Powering it up, he ran some tests, and then he went back to the others and the body. Nev Sweeting and Rin were arguing, with Rin making some accusations about the feds being behind the trouble. "They want an excuse to bring the army in. They want to take away our guns"

Stepping up San cleared his throat. "Cool it with all the talk about the feds. I don't see special agent Mike Nelson around tonight and I can't imagine the feds as being able to cook this sort of event into being. They know something about it though and so does ranger Sweeting here. But they aren't telling us."

Nev Sweeting was taken aback. He was about to answer then he decided to keep silent as he suddenly noticed the M-Scope in San's hands. San focused on the body and the others jumped back from the flash. He took more shots of the body from other angles then some readings where the ambassador had been. Some lines ran by on the screen and then he powered it down and looked at Deena. "I'll have to run out to the cottage to check these readings on Marco's equipment. I can't get a full reading with the scope alone."

Nev Sweeting's jaw was half dropped in amazement. He'd watched San take the shots with growing interest. "What in the hell is that thing?"

"It's an invention of Marco's that I discovered. Quite amazing really. Does complex readings on the composition of things."

Sweeting stepped up close. "I'm afraid you'll have to hand that over. It may be evidence."

Rin suddenly had his gun on Nev. "We ain't handing nothing over to you or agent Nelson. You boys can keep on with your top-secret investigation and we'll do our own."

"Look, if I discover anything with this everyone will be told about it. Since I'm the only one who knows how to use it, confiscating it won't be any help."

Burk McCraw looked interested. "We'll run out to the cottage with you and Deena. Provide security while you do your checks."

"Sounds fine with me," San said. "We'll be out of your hair, Officer Sweeting, so you can call Sgt McKraken and do your forensics on the body. Witnesses shouldn't be a problem. You got about forty of them."

Back at the cottage, Burk McCraw and a few of the militiamen were hanging around outside under the bug lights while San and Deena were down in the basement at Marco's work area. San had to go through a number of custom software programs as he continued to get a grasp on Marco's operation. There were a couple programs the scope plugged into so he ran them and tried to get something he could understand on the shots he'd taken. The scope readout gave simple things like the composition of the air or the notification that he was shooting a dead body. What he needed was knowledge on what could be wrong or different with the readings. That came with a trace of the blue light that had remained in the distant trees while he was shooting the area.

The small patch of light read as a big zero, it wasn't anything. Since the M-Scope read things it didn't understand or wasn't programmed for as unknown, he wondered what zero meant. According to the software, he found zero was a theoretical reading. The scope read between zero and other numbers set as the highest value. Zero was the absence of everything.

Sitting back, he scratched his head. His intention hadn't been to prove the supernatural or that the lights didn't actually exist at all. Alternatively, a better way to describe the lights and force bubbles would be that they appeared but they were actually not in existence in this world. It was too bad that he hadn't thought of bringing the scope out for a shot of the ambassador.

Going to work on the shot of the body, he got various readings from the initial reading of it as a dead body. Its contact with nothing so to speak had done a number of things to it. The severed area near the shoulder read as mineralization and the blood in the body had turned to some form of liquid copper that was unknown. It was a dead body in total as all bacteria and organisms on it had been killed or better stated, were no longer present. They had somehow vanished into the unknown with the man's arm. There were other things, the teeth had turned to stone, the hair to plastic. Various impossible transformations all from the broken contact with the ambassador.

Finally, he concluded that since fantastic changes had taken place on the body, it wasn't a supernatural event. It was a scientific event of some type and a man had been killed, but other than that, he didn't know what they had seen. Had the whole thing been hallucinations or effects on the human mind, meaning they saw something happen but not what actually did happen? San considered that then decided they had seen pretty much what had happened. A hostile being of some type was coming through into this world; so far, it registered as nothing or a ghost. In fact, it came from somewhere and by some means or force field that they had to discover.

San wanted Deena's opinion. "Any police investigation by Sgt. McKraken or Nev Sweeting will go nowhere. This little study shows that Marco had been on to something

beyond the normal or paranormal all along. He may have been taken by this thing already as he tried to complete his investigation.”

“Probably. So what do we do?”

“We work with Burk McCraw and as many other locals as will help us. As soon as an event occurs, we head for it and try to get more information. We can forget about higher powers like the federal government helping us. They obviously already know something is happening and are either covering it up or investigating in secret. Nev Sweeting we can't trust so we watch him. Maybe the place to start is to track all known recent events and map them.”

“I can do that,” Deena said. “Maybe I'll map them as a painting.”

“Okay, let's talk to Burk. Then we work slowly, and wait for this thing to appear again.”

Morning found San with a cottage full of houseguests. He woke to the sound of gunfire and hurried out of the bedroom. Deena was propped up on the couch watching drama on the TV and eating a bowl of cereal. Feeling a mess, San said nothing but walked out the door to look around. Rin and three other militiamen had set up targets in the back field and were doing some firing practice with their automatic weapons. Burk McCraw was coming up the drive in his ATV and flock of crows were hurrying west away from all the noise.

San stepped back inside the cottage and said good morning to Deena. “People get up early around here.”

“It's hard to sleep with all the excitement.”

“Yeah, and even harder when militia guys are having a shootout in your back yard.”

“Don't worry about them; they're just boys with toys. Since you're up, how about taking the water bottles out to the spring and filling them.”

“There's a spring here?”

“Yeah, in the first copse of trees beyond the targets they're shooting at. Ask them to hold their fire for a bit.”

“I'll check for signs of Marco while I'm out there. Is there any reason why you people seem to know his cottage and its surroundings better than him?”

“Marco was never here for more than half the summer. People used to stay out here all the time.”

Deena changed her mind, got up and gave her long dark hair a quick brushing, and then they walked along a dirt path, pulling a wagon loaded with four large water bottles. Off to their left Rin was blasting a target with a shockingly deadly automatic gun. Looking off to clear skies of the summer morning and the copse of trees ahead, San wondered what they expected to accomplish with guns. Last night had shown them to be somewhat ineffective against the enemy, so unless they were still rehearsing for the final battle with the forces of world government, they needed more than guns. A better understanding of the enemy was needed before they could plan anything.

They reached the spring and entered a calm shady area of bubbling water surrounded by some large smooth boulders and creeping greenery. Halting at a sandy patch, they sat on a rock and studied the spring.

“Marco sent a message recently, but after last night I'm starting to wonder how he could be alive. Don't get upset, but I feel the same regarding your boyfriend and anyone else missing out here. That thing we saw was purely hostile and so were the forces it was harnessing. Unless it can somehow pull things through to its side alive and has a reason to keep them that way for a while my expectation would be death.”

“My thoughts have been about the same. I had a nightmare with Nev Sweeting in it. In the dream, he was out by Deer Clearing. It's near the nudist area. He was there using sign language to speak to one of them things.”

“The man is an idiot and he thinks he's working on a top secret mission with our federal agent, Mr. Nelson. Nev Sweeting might try anything dumb. Your dream could even be true and he's trying to establish communication with that thing.”

“He picks up supplies at the store all the time. Says he's doing stakeouts at the locations. Places where people were reported missing or the lights seen.”

“I'd like to take a tour of those locations. See if I can find anything.”

“I said I was going to map them for you – a painting, remember.”

“We'll go today, but forget the painting. Bring your sketchbook along. Sketch the whole area and map out the points. There may be a reason why they appear at certain locations.”

After filling the water jugs, they pulled the wagon back to the cottage and along the way decided to leave for a drive around just after noon. The militiamen had a barbecue set up at the front and had returned to eat a breakfast of eggs and deer meat. As he waited for breakfast, San sat in a canvass chair and talked to Burk McCraw about the state of Indian Falls.

“Strange stuff has been going on for a long time,” McCraw said cheerfully. “Helped our recruiting last year. Place has a reputation that draws people out here. At least it did before this summer. About a month back they practically sealed the place off, sending tourists around us and harassing others. Right now we're waiting for the showdown with the feds.”

San looked at the tall brown grass blowing nearby. In the daytime the area was normal country summer. Burk, his militiamen and Deena were people he'd expect to see out here. “Showdown,” he speculated. “The federal government and its assortment of intelligence agencies would have raided you guys a long time ago if they wanted to. So far, we see more of a growing quarantine. They're sealing us in ... maybe hoping they'll learn by watching what happens to us.”

“That rat Sweeting knows what they're up to. Maybe we should torture him for information.”

“Put a man on him. Watch everything he does. He'll play his hand soon enough. Right now I have a gun I want to test.”

Burk McCraw and Rin looked on with interest as San walked up with the gun case. Opening it on the picnic table, he began the simple assembly. He now knew the weapon had some other capabilities from detailed readings via Marco's scope.

Rin nodded. "Imitation of a sniper rifle. The old military issue. The real item would be quite valuable now. Not many were issued and only to top shooters. Killers ... guys that equal the odds on missions in against hard enemies. It's amazing how that one comes apart and fits in such a small case."

San suddenly did some switches on the assembly. In a few seconds, the sniper rifle had an altered scope and was short-barrelled instead of long.

Burk was amazed. "That was a neat trick. What is that gun? It's only made to look like a sniper rifle."

"It's an experimental model ... a beam gun in fact."

"How did you get it?"

"By accident. I wanted to ask you McCraw. Take no offense. How good of a militiaman are you?"

"Better than they think. What the federal boys think ... and boys is an expression because you know that with them the bigger half is soulless women. Well, they reason by the old terrorist script. They think we're dumb homegrown animals that love guns and worship a wrong view of God and our dead country. We're smarter than that ... under Rin and me, it's been strategy on how to beat them more than politics. They think we're political extremists when they are that. But everyone has politics. Without it, you'd be a clean hit man. No beliefs, no worries other than collecting the payoff."

San laughed. "You have a way with words. So we're all dirty and political in some way. Even apathy is a political opinion. But aren't you dreaming, thinking you can beat them. I believe you are right. The tentacles of world government are everywhere unseen. They have a forward contact here in agent Mike Nelson pretending to be federal. Canada is mostly under corporate control but the dead feds have kept a beachhead and a strong one. They're ready to come in anywhere with world government riding their asses. We know about them, but what we're dealing with here ... you people call him the ambassador, represents something unknown. What's interesting is that this new enemy is more direct than even others on Earth, as they have sent this vile ambassador. This spells big trouble because it means when they come big time they aren't worried about us knowing about it. My experience shows that Nev Sweeting and agent Mike Nelson know something is going on so local and federal levels know some of the details, but Sgt McKraken for some reason doesn't know many details. The provincial powers have been left out of the equation, except that they are being used to blockade the area."

"You're a better detective than you know. We don't usually trust anyone from Toronto. But you don't look Toronto or police, more like a real private eye who uses his brain before his badge. We trusted Marco. He was on our side. He ran weapons in for us, many things. Then this stuff happened. No one ever thought that his oddball specialty

would become the most important work of all. The ghost hunter stuff was initially thought of as a cover and a joke, but never by Marco. Damn smart-ass, he knew something all along. Why do you think we're still hanging around here? It's because we don't know exactly what to do. The feds used to call us conspiracy nuts and dangerous, but what happens when the conspiracy gets too big for anyone to handle and damn aliens are making people pancakes."

"What's happening is some really big people are playing games. They know something is weird here. Maybe they think we've been affected by it and are locking us in. In one sense, we are the real government now because those jerks are playing a dangerous game with the whole planet. You can bet that the same assholes that underestimate us have left themselves and the rest of the planet in the soup via their stupidity."

"Shit. I really hope we can find Marco. Either that or we have to find a way to shoot at a big zero. I've seen all those lights and Deena has likely seen more than she's saying."

"Tell me something, McCraw. How do you shoot at nothing? I'm serious. I took readings on that thing and it is nothing and nowhere."

"It can't be nothing and nowhere because we saw it. It's there but it is hiding like a plane with stealth technology. We just have to figure out what destroys it."

"Okay. I'm going to do a gun test and see what this gun can do."

Burk McCraw looked mostly satisfied. "One last question. Are you a fag?"

San grinned. "I take it that question has to do with me coming from Toronto. Worry about the ambassador and the feds because they're the ones that might get it in mind to chomp down on your balls."

The range was flat open field, long tall weeds with nature's gray of brown dry straw marking high hot summer. Crows and other birds had already fled leaving white butterflies as the only visible omen. The copse marking the spring was the only close area. Burk McCraw, Rin, Deena and two militia guys wearing worn jeans looked on as San went to one knee and targeted the gun. He was adjusting it according to readings from Marco's scope, having found the hidden twist engine.

Sunlight was bright so he didn't expect to see any beams. In wide-mouthed mode, the first blast was a noise wave that shook the distant wooden targets. It was at sniper range so for a sound blast it was deadly. The targets were mostly faces of celebrities and somewhat racist in order. San's bias had him aiming at random, as racism wasn't his personal deal. Probably wasn't Rin's either. Targets went down in succession and some in a big way that demonstrated the power of the gun. Its engine, tracker and sights ran down the scale to smaller targets and the computer had the physical composition of nearly everything he would shoot at. Sliding down on the computer led him to readings where he had to do fine twists on the inner engine itself. It was like cracking a safe and everything he did was to cancel things out. He got to the end where he either had disabled the gun or was firing at zero. Shooting unfiltered at nothing but a location; and from that point, he did a setting to refine all other modes. The result was a yellow beam that was visible even in brilliant sunlight. San got knocked back for a somersault that saw him lose the weapon as the beam flew then hesitated in the air as a rainbow arc that hit the target and caused it to vanish."

“Jesus,” McCraw said as his eyes widened and he tried to see. “You vanished that target.”

“That is exactly what I want. We don’t want to touch anything on this weapon. We want the setting because we’re going to fire a special beam. It’s a start. If I can get a read on those force bubbles I may get other settings.”

San had Deena at the wheel and she was racing down a country road, marvelling at the power of the car. A kaleidoscope of foliage passed but he kept glancing surreptitiously at her out of the corner of his eye. She was one of those women with natural features doing what makeup usually intended ... jet-black hair that moved like silk, long lashes and a radiant complexion and facial symmetry that allowed light and shadow to create some of the beauty of her cheeks and big soft eyes. Without warning, she went into a dangerous skid at the sight of some roadside deer. The car came out into some open road as they passed an old farm hidden in a hollow. A half kilometre past it, they turned left down a bumpy road and came to a stop at a pond. The grass was worn around some limestone boulders that appeared to have been positioned to block the shoreline and its bit of reddish sand.

San got out thinking that the cream car seemed to fit neatly into the surroundings. Lizards scurried on the old limestone and past the light haze over the small pond; he saw a cloud of butterflies rising in open meadow. This was a remote swimming hole but one people around here knew about. Four people had gone missing here and that was certain as their vehicles were found and towed off. They were young adults parked for Saturday night skinny dipping, drinking and smoking some dope. If the listed drowning tragedy had happened bodies would have eventually been found in the water. San wondered how Nev Sweeting could write these disappearances off and concluded that it could only be that the provincial and other policing levels wanted it that way.

Deena wore tailored jeans and an embroidered shirt with sleeves to the elbows, unlike other local women who wore tank tops and short shorts like a uniform. In spite of it, Deena was beautiful, back-dropped by the pond. Her walk and movements were unique; a woman that was a graceful animal. If she had fangs, they were honey coated and hidden behind a gentle smile.

The old swimming hole had its ways and was way ahead of a city pool. But San could also see a touch deeper and that it would be a scary place at night. Especially so if those lights appeared, and he believed they had. There was no logic in looking for other suspects, even though people could take advantage of the remote situation. The evil they had seen was most likely the evil they were tracking, if it could be tracked when it had shown as a force that came to people on its own, not as one that could be found.

Deena pulled up her sketchbook and riffled open the cover. “Okay. I’m putting this on the map as location four of fifteen. We can look around. With that car of yours we can make the other sites quickly.”

Deena sat on a rock ledge with her sandals on the sand and worked on her drawing as San strolled the length of the shore. He’d left his hat in the car and had to keep finger

combing his now lengthening hair back. Coming up to two fire pits he paused and picked through the ashes with a stick. Taking his shoes off, he walked in at the edge of the water. The shore was sandy and lightly pebbled, the water blue and rippled from the westerly breeze. The litter around the fireplace was mostly beer caps, cigarette butts and bits of foil. He could see that anything larger had been taken by Nev Sweeting. If so Sweeting had at one time attempted to do some forensics or a real investigation.

“No one’s come to this swimming hole in a while though there’s a farm nearby. Who owns the farm?”

“One of Sweeting’s cousins, Jesse Milbrand. His kids are grown and gone to your hometown, Toronto. My guess is Sweeting told him to keep people away.”

“Don’t see him bothering us.”

“Yeah, but it isn’t Friday or Saturday night and he may not be around. Maybe he’s working somewhere like in the barn or fields.”

“True enough. So far, our locations give up no clues. I mean other than they are somewhat remote and popular at evening or night. Can you map them on the sketch map you’ve drawn and we’ll check for things like distance from town or any other pattern.”

“Yeah, I can do that in no time.”

San walked around the edge of the shore and into a scruff of weeds on the forest perimeter. On this side, it was open pines, on the other deciduous with massive maples. The pines were well spaced and had patches duff, an area with enough open ground in places to camp. He could see no litter but heard a few telltale sounds. Ten minutes later he walked back to Deena, seeing that she had her sketch book placed on the ledge and was looking towards him.

San made a deep impression in the wet sand with his foot then turned to Deena. “We got company.”

His words were followed by a click and a man stepping over from behind the parked car. A shotgun was pointed straight at them, the person holding it old and chiselled with a tanned face. The man had a quick pucker that ran to meanness. And the pucker was highlighted at present.

“Bringing feds out here now, Deena?”

“Not at all Jesse. He isn’t a friend of Spook Nelson or Sweeting.”

“Who is he, then?”

San remained calm as though there was no threat. “He is me, and that’s no one you know. But I did see you going through the car.”

“Good eyes. Guess you know I found something. You got a case with a rifle in it in the back of your car. A new sniper rifle. You ain’t out here to kill squirrels fella, so who are you planning to shoot?”

“Not you or bears or anyone else from Indian Falls. That’s a special gun. I plan on trying to shoot the same forces of evil you’re hunting.”

“How do you know I’m hunting anything?”

“Easy. You’ve kept people out of here for some time. You’re hoping for a clean shot at those things. Like that ambassador everybody knows about.”

Jesse lowered his gun. “There’s more than him now. I’ve watched them standing right on the water and I didn’t shoot. They are in some kinda tunnels from hell, like they’re flying in them but never quite arrive. It’s like seeing them through a big lens. Shooting might not get through to them. Like a force field is protecting them. The ambassador is the one that takes on the look of a fancy dark man. The others are pure black creatures of Satan.”

“Exactly what I thought. More are coming, but the plan is bigger than grabbing you and your farm. You should think of getting out of here. If they come through this way, they’ll roll over your dead body. My advice is to get into town and wait.”

“I ain’t going into town. I’ll get out if I can’t kill them. Which brings the question to mind. What are you and Deena doing here? You think you can track them?”

“Deena is mapping the locations where folks disappeared on a sketch with the local map. At the sites we’ve checked so far, there are no clues. Looks like Nev Sweeting has gathered up all possible evidence.”

“It’s done,” Deena said. “Maybe you men should look this sketch over. See if it means anything.”

Excitement flashed in Jesse’s razor eyes. He set his gun down on the rock ledge and walked up with San. Deena handed the sketch to San and he sat on a knob of rock. Jesse peered over his shoulder.

Deena was no amateur artist and the sketch was large and detailed. San remembered the maps of Indian Falls and recognized that Deena’s was much better. Using pencils, she’d done it out in detail with occurrences and the border marked.

The border was very close to same borders on standard maps, but hers had been shaded in according to the recent disappearances. The pattern was all over the falls area and not concentrated in any one spot.

Some time passed and the sun broke in bright. San took his hand from his chin. “I see that everything happens in the falls area, like it’s contained here. Other than that I gather nothing.”

Jesse suddenly spat to the water. “I see something.” He pointed to the sketch. “Deena, pencil in thin lines where I point.”

Bright sunlight was now on the sketch and Deena began to pencil in thin erasable lines where Jesse directed. When it was finished, he asked her to hold the sketch back at a distance for him and San. San looked at the altered sketch, saw nothing unusual, blinked and then looked away. When he looked back, it was with immediate surprise; the lines formed a face, an evil face ... similar to the dark side of the ambassador, except for one eye, as that area was blank.

San looked to Jesse. "The blank area where the left eye should be. What is it?"

"Look closer city boy, at the background map. That's the falls and the river below."

Deena studied her own drawing with surprise. "I didn't realize just how symmetrical that thing's monster face was ... but, to make it exact I would do this." She drew in some faint curvy lines that expanded it to a full face. "That adds two more areas. The campground stretches across the larger part, and there is the nudist colony touching on the other."

Jesse seemed to be speculating. San observed that he was a working farmer to the point of having dead flies in his hairy arms. A question came to mind. "Did some of your livestock get killed off?"

"Yeah. Two horses. All torn up. I buried them in the pit today."

Deena's eyes remained riveted on her sketch. "This is bizarre evil we are dealing with. These new occurrences bear no relation to the old haunting. Why would the occurrences form a face and why kill horses?"

San reached for his tablet and pulled up electronic notes stored at his office. He spent some time studying the small screen. The images soon vanished, as did any record of their transmission. "Looking at the dates you gave, the image forms like someone drew the perimeter first then filled in the rest. I think it means everything will happen in this area, and we know where the next two happenings will be. The reason for it is some other form of reasoning. Beings that think but not at all like we think." Turning to Jesse, San considered him for a moment. He had talents that could be used. "I'm gathering a phone list at all the locations. People that have experience with these occurrences. I want you to call in if something happens here, and we'll call you along with the rest if anything happens elsewhere."

"Sure. Jesse Milbrand is the name. I'll come right out if those things show somewhere. Bring my gun and some boys too."

A thunderstorm threatened to strike but passed leaving a flow of clouds in its wake. Deena was racing up a dirt road from another remote location. The rest of the drive had been uneventful with the visit to Jesse and the drawing being the clue of the day. Pulling out on the Falls Road San saw something across the fields and asked Deena to stop. At roadside, they got out and looked. The 607 Highway that bypassed Indian Falls but went past the perimeter of Deep River had three military trucks moving on it followed by a number of police cruisers. San grabbed some field glasses from the glove compartment and took a closer look. Open canvass in the back of one of the trucks revealed sawhorses and portable fencing. The soldier driving was dressed in combat gear rather than the standard issue uniform.

He put his free arm around Deena's shoulders. "What exactly is that base at Deep River?"

"It's located there partly because the isotope reactor is not too far from there and it is considered vital. Soldiers from there rarely come out our way as it is nearer to the main highway. They hold exercises from time to time. Some of them are combat troops but it's not an air base. They have a runway and one big hangar."

“Military is federal, so you can bet special agent Nelson is based there. I'm wondering why they'd be working with the Provincial Authority. Let's take a drive out that way.”

The last stretch of road to the highway turnoff was a long uphill stretch and with Deena at the wheel, they were going well over the speed limit. She began to slow as she came up the last rise then braked quickly. A police car and sawhorse was ahead at the freeway ramp blocking the entrance.

San told her to stop so she did but waited in the car while San walked up to the cops. One officer was familiar. It was Sgt McKraken.

San met McKraken at the barrier. “Planning on leaving town in a hurry?” McKraken said.

“Maybe. Are you concerned about it?”

“I'm concerned about how fast that girlfriend of yours is driving. I know that woman. My advice is to stay away from her. It's a bad lot that lives in Indian Falls.”

“Really. Except for a few people in town, I've met mostly natives and odd country folk. No bad eggs except for maybe that Nev Sweeting character.”

“You got him pegged right. But he's still a ranger so show some respect.”

“Any chance on letting us through to the highway?”

“Nope. There is no exit from Indian Falls at the moment so plan on staying a while.”

“I've never heard of that before, quarantining a whole area.”

“We got some emergency problems at the Deep River reactor. Military is taking care of it. Roadblocks may be up for some time.”

“If it's serious and there is radiation maybe a lot of people will want to leave the falls area.”

“It's not that serious and we aren't putting out any news on it. Special agent Nelson is taking care of things. Indian Falls isn't a high priority area with the feds. Matter of fact it's about the bottom of their list, so they aren't worrying about a few people that cry about being held at the border.”

“It sounds to me like agent Nelson is in charge because there is some radiation.”

“Just be patient. If you try to create some kind of radiation scare we'll charge you.”

A beautiful meadow spread out on either side of the narrow road as they drove up to the reservoir. Small as far as reservoirs go, this one was fed by a tiny canal and was a bird watcher's paradise due to the meadow and a bit of marsh on the south shore. Beyond it, they were back on better road on the approach to the falls. At the turn, the road took on wide shoulders with picnic areas on both sides and some parking. Deena pulled up in a sandy lot then they were out and strolling up to the falls. San found them impressive; the fast water and spray still creating rainbows in the sunshine like the one he'd seen driving in to town. The water flow itself passed over a huge overhanging ledge and thundered down on rocks below. There it raced on an incline down to continuing rapids. San's inclination was to head for the observation bridge but Deena grabbed his hand and took him down stream where the picnic area ended and trees

lined the steep bank. She went ahead as they went down a narrow path that angled back toward the waterfall. They ended up right down by the water with a huge flow breaking over huge granite boulders by the shore. Mist and spray hit them lightly and San saw ahead to where the path ended at the edge of the falls. The heavy flow of water thinned to foam near the shore and he saw a transparent and even flow and beyond it to an area behind the falls themselves. Deena suddenly raced through the flow, San followed, finding himself soaked, and in a huge area that existed under the falls overhang. Here the rock was sheer and curved up to the point of the waterfall. A solid flat rock floor existed at the bottom. It was bit slippery with algae, moss and some form of water lilies at the edge and led all the way across the falls. San studied the stone wall as they walked across. There appeared to be several kinds of stone as there were patches of color from deep gray to beige. One large section was light blue and a rap with his knuckles showed it to be softer stone.

San looked out at the flow and pulled Deena close to him. They were both soaked but feeling exhilarated. "This is amazing. I suppose only locals know about this."

"Most visitors never find it. We used to play here when I was a kid. This is the important part of the falls to me. Not the rafting and fishing down river."

"This is also the eye of the evil face on that sketch of yours. I wonder why that is?"

"Well, it's a magical place, at least to natives and born residents of Indian Falls. There are many legends about it but none of the ghostly occurrences in recent decades happened exactly here. At one time, these falls were closed off to the public completely as the rock formation was declared unstable. There was no access and the road was routed off to the west for a dozen years. Apparently, it stabilized on its own and they reopened tourist trips here. The area got called Indian Falls because through history numerous native tribes lived in the area. It likely would have been named after one tribe or the other if any had stayed permanently. Way it is it became Indian Falls, past home of many native bands."

"What we just saw out there on the highway is history repeating itself on a larger scale. Now they're closing off the whole area and not just the falls. Slowly reducing traffic in and out according to some information or time scale we don't have. They don't present any believable explanation. I've been following local news and there's no news on anything happening out at Deep River. It's time to start listening in on military and police bands."

"The militia already does that. We should get an update from them on what they've been hearing."

San pulled Deena to him in a close embrace. Their eyes were misted by fine spray and the light of the falls was like a rainbow. "We will, after we explore the magic here," San said.

The night passed with a hot wind rising in Indian Falls and news of distant forest fires raging. Deena drove San down country roads, doing brief stops at the campground and the perimeter of the nudist colony. The colony or Raven's Private Beach had its own super-size log cabin restaurant and store and was really only fully nudist deeper in as far as naked flesh went. San passed the tall screen fence and saw families still out

at night on the wide sand beach. There were BBQ circles and people playing volleyball under night lighting that lit swaths of the beach. Over at Cedarwood Campground it was much the same though instead of communal cottages like the nudist colony it had tenting and trailer areas. As well as a store, it featured an outdoor dance floor that according to Deena was busy nearly every night. San studied it from the dark road but didn't stay over to dance with Deena. Instead, they drove back to the cottage with it in mind that nothing strange was on the order tonight other than a few extra bats on the wing. San had been hoping to be alone with Deena but as he found the militia boys' Lift ATVs parked around the cottage he knew that would have to be indoors and late night.

He had a few drinks with Burk, then went in and talked to Deena. No phone calls had come in so they watched a movie and made plans to go fishing the next day. A conversation with Burk on the possible whereabouts of Marco turned up nothing. There didn't seem to be any place for him to be hiding unless it was some secret spot in the conservation area and he was alone. If even one person spotted him, news would get around lightning fast, so San was left scratching his head and wondering if Marco actually had escaped into some other dimension.

The hot sun rose in a balloon of mist for another day and with nothing much happening San arranged for some afternoon fishing with Deena. Leon Ottawa rented boats from The Big Nail and had a special order towed out and waiting in the water when they arrived. They went up river to a calm wider part of the flow and hooked the boat at a small dock beside a boathouse made of timbers and corrugated siding. The river was so clear here they could see to bottom near the shore. Out in the deeper channel it was murky green, and that was where Deena said to fish for lake trout and small-mouth bass. An hour passed before San caught his first trout. Deena pulled in two bass.

San's fiddling with a custom radio killed the romance of the outing as he kept switching through bands and listening in on irritating police and military channels. Occasional messages were being passed from checkpoints all around Indian Falls to a command centre at the Deep River base. It was all rather frustrating and foolish. Finally, San turned it off. All he could gather was that Indian Falls was pretty much sealed shut but never did any of the messages contain information as to the reason.

To ease the radio ear sores San had a quiet talk with Deena.

"... and Jenny sent a message from the store, no business other than local today. Maybe Burk McCraw and his people are right. The feds are either planning to invade or they want to kill us economically."

"What we've been able to pick up has the area nearly sealed off, but the invasion part is not a factor. There are no troops coming in for any major military action. So far it looks like McCraw's final battle won't be with the feds."

"The whole thing means little to the locals, other than truckers most of them rarely leave Indian Falls. People here are isolationists. Zoned out they call it. But that all happened when government decided to value everything by economics. Because the falls area produces no international free

-trade product we've been taken off the world government map as far as importance goes. Only the exploited are valued and this is a conservation area they haven't been able to crack."

"They have no proper sense of what is of value or even of what is moral. Propaganda techniques hooked through media control allow them to alter what is perceived as right and wrong at will."

Deena looked off to the sky over the distant treetops and San suddenly realized the bright day had darkened while they were talking. A high flow of dreary clouds had taken shape and was becoming a funnel of gray. A longer look showed the clouds to be ashes blowing by in a high stream of wind that curved over Indian Falls and went southwest. It had the effect of darkening the area while leaving brilliant light on distant horizons. San was about to speak but remained silent as a huge flock of crows passed heading south. Though a natural phenomenon the growing gloom had a spooky touch like it was the precursor of a long night to come.

San glanced at the dull reflection on the water. "Nearest forest fires are fifty kilometres off and not headed this way. I find it very strange that the ash is blowing over us."

"This will definitely scare people. You never see it unless a fire is coming."

The gloom became a marker for the end of the day's fishing and they headed for the boathouse with the catch. They barely arrived when another odd occurrence appeared in the sky. Huge flakes of ash drifted above. A sudden lull in the wind followed and then it was snowing dark dead ashes all across the falls area. The ash continued to fall as they packed up. Pulling out they found the highway coated with the dust. The treetops and fields wore a cloak of it. Coyotes were howling in the distance and San went up the drive to cottage with a bad feeling; he could taste the ash in his mouth and he was certain it was an ugly omen.

The morning breeze and dew melted some of the ash fall but left the fields around the cottage showing an odd gleam in the sunlight. After breakfast, Deena followed San down to the basement and helped him do a communications setup. He ran his tablet through Marco's computer hook-up and also ran an intermittent encrypted connection to his office in Toronto. It didn't take long for everything to connect securely and then San was running surveillance, analyzing communications in the region and the messages in and out. Because of phone monitoring, he had to set some flags to weed out uninteresting gossip calls. The rest was easy. One of the first things he found was other monitoring, likely military, and it was more than software but a planted device monitoring all communication in the area and controlling what got out. His sort of bypass it didn't expect or find.

Though he'd planned to have Deena aid him, her friend Jenny from the store showed up and they were sitting out at the picnic table. San glanced out with phones on his ears, seeing a sleek young woman, more like a schoolgirl, drinking spring water with Deena. Apparently, the store was closed until later in the day as the ash fall, forest fire trouble and blockade had killed all but local business.

A fattened sun floated up in some dissipating haze. San studied the start of a humid day then switched on the air conditioner and decided it was a good day to stay inside.

Everything on the forest fires came in first, and if there was a force of evil in Indian Falls, it was protecting itself from being burned alive. The fires had taken a wide cut north after swinging in a loop south and threatening to approach. The sudden diversion of the fires had been the cause of the huge ash cloud floating in on the wind. Fortunately, the ash had drifted high and cooled before falling or the falls area would be sprouting with fire.

Over the course of a few boring hours, San tracked all radio and other messages of the Provincial Authority and some messages from Deep River. It was after lunch that his office system cracked encryption for local messages out of the Deep River military base. He got a line on Sgt McKraken and messages to him from a Major Kowaleski and learned that the military and the province were now working seamlessly together in the closing of Indian Falls. They were also using a separate code and encryption meaning they were running the operation in a compartment. Police and news agencies any distance from the falls area would have no idea what was going on because no official messages were sent out. Limited access by vehicle and the routing of all calls and even emails and texts of local officials through the filter, which he traced to Nev Sweeting's Parks HQ, meant Indian Falls had been locked in another sort of bubble. It had been turned into an exclusion zone, but none of the messages ever gave any information as to why such an operation was underway.

By afternoon San had swallowed four iced teas and was still listening to communications. He saw Deena drive off with Jenny, using his car without asking permission. As he nodded off he saw Rin and three other militiamen racing by on the road on the Lift ATVs, then he was in dreamland experiencing an ugly dream where police were floating behind a force field at the cottage. An alert suddenly woke him and he shook his head and tried to gather his faculties. A message had passed and been recorded. He played it back then another alert came in. It was communication between special agent Nelson, the base, and Nev Sweeting. Part of it was unintelligible but what he could grab was Nelson informing the others that he'd arrived at Ground Zero and all was in order. The second message a few minutes later said he was with the asset.

Startled, San woke fully and ran a program to attempt to track the message's source. It took a while but he found that Nelson was inside Indian Falls. Yet he couldn't pinpoint the location to anything other than the general town area. Another hour passed with no further messages but he got notification on communication between Nev Sweeting and the base. Parts of it were garbled but what he did hear was enough as Sweeting mentioned Cedarwood Campground and tonight.

Chapter Three: THE CAMPGROUND

The day was heading to evening on a bright and beautiful note, the temperature dropping down to a comfortable level and the sky clearing to brilliant with a falling sun. Deena was on the way as San had made a couple calls about spending the evening

out at Cedarwood Campground. He hadn't sent the message to the whole list he'd gathered but soon got reminded of the nature of small towns. Calls started coming in from all over. Jesse Milbrand told him the word was out from Rin that something was going to happen at the campground tonight, making it the hotspot for a night out.

"Might as well bring a few cases of booze," San thought as he clipped the phone. A crowd he didn't want but he supposed that since it was a campground it would be busy anyway. More people wouldn't matter that much as long as they didn't go looking for trouble.

Deena ignored him, talking only to her girlfriend as she packed the car. San took the wheel this time and along with Jenny they headed out on pristine summer highway to the campground. Yesterday's ash fall had mostly disintegrated and faded except for some areas of road where it had pillowed and was blowing in the light breeze. If evil was lurking it was hidden behind the glory of the sun god, waiting to make an appearance after dark. Jenny gossiped with Deena about her new boyfriend, Donnie. Apparently, he was the hottest guy in town, which out here likely meant he was two steps above the swamp thing. Jenny was immature in comparison to Deena and that was obvious as Deena spent more time playing with her pocket tablet than conversing with her. After a few minutes, she slid the cover shut.

"I can't connect to standard wireless channels," she said. "Some messages come in but replies don't go out. It's like everything except local internet traffic has been disabled."

San studied the road ahead. He remembered the turnoff and its sign, which would be coming up soon. Flocks of birds appeared overhead, a sign of the distant fires as they were coming in here to safe territory. He looked to the sky but saw no sign of ash clouds returning.

Jenny tapped him on the shoulder. "We should go in on the back road. Otherwise we'll have to line up and pay."

San agreed and slowed at what Jenny called the short cut. They were in deep forest and he saw no road at all until she pointed it out. It looked like tire tracks through the ditch weeds into a small forest pullover, but when he went through he found that it became a road of weed and sand interspersed with wood chips that ran like a nature trail through to the back end of the campground.

On the exit from the forest, the car was running next to a four-foot-high swath of golden rod mixed with other weeds. The golden rod touched on a marshy band of reeds up to seven feet tall and the reeds ended up at a screened wall eight feet high.

It confused San. "Where are we? Is that the same fence we saw before?"

Jenny answered. "Probably the other end of it. That band of reeds and marsh marks the border between Cedarwood Campground and Raven's Private Beach. You keep moving on the road to its end. The nudist colony and their beach are on the other side."

San did as she said, finding that the road ended at a hill of sand. With impassable reeds, weeds and a wall to the right, a hill ahead and tree falls to the left, it seemed

there was nowhere to go. "Looks like the end of the road. We'll have to walk in. This isn't good if we need a fast exit."

Deena chuckled. "You can get in if you drive around the bottom of the sand hill."

San went a piece up the hill, his tires spinning in the sandy loam as he tried to round the perimeter of the hill. "Damn, if this thing didn't have four wheel drive we'd already be stuck. It isn't an ATV," he said. Then he found himself suddenly around the hill facing several ATVs, those of the Indian Falls Militia. He swerved to avoid one vehicle then stopped in an open space. The impromptu parking lot was a clearing of packed sand and tufted grass hidden from the campground and lake by a stand of cedars.

No one was hanging out in the hidden lot and getting out they could hear music coming through the trees from the distant outdoor dance area. Fragrances of campfire smoke and spruce filled their nostrils and other than the occasional shout, the remaining noise was the rustle of foliage and weeds. Beneath the strains of music, a low hum of crickets marked wooded areas.

Jenny's light hair became a flash of reflected light as she ran and disappeared through the trees, hurrying to find her new love, Donnie. San remained with Deena, taking a slow look around. He could see they were at the far end of the campground. It spread out on the shore of the lake beyond the spruce trees, working its way around to where they were at the wall's end and sand dune marking the beginning of Raven's Private Beach. Turning and facing off with Deena, he put his hands on her shoulders. "Let's take a tour," he said.

Instead of heading off on the path winding through the spruce they followed the sand trail along the line of tall golden rod and reeds leading down to the pebbled shore of Small Trout Lake. The lake had a kidney shape and they were on the inner depression. To their right the marshy area and reeds ran past the dividing wall. They could hear voices from Ravens on the other side but couldn't see through, though San noticed a path through the weeds where people climbed the wall to either spy over or get over.

The far shore was the broad curve of the kidney and calm water spread out to a brilliant portion catching the setting sun and the opaque turquoise ripples beyond it by the trees lining the far banks. Some water skiers were still out and farm buildings showed in faint haze on the far side. To his left the stony shore became wider sand beach that ran for the left dip of the kidney and he assumed Raven's Private Beach to be more beachfront along the other dip. He had the feeling of walking along the edge of a huge swimming pool as many pools were the same shape. It was warm inland water making it perfect for water sports. No cold ocean or Great Lakes water here but a purer river and spring fed flow.

Off toward the setting sun he saw another beach past the campground area and some people fishing near a dock. As they walked along the beach, they began to encounter children playing and the strains of music from the dance area grew louder. The strip was still crowded and they were down a ways before he could see any of the cottages and structures. A tenting area showed first, set in fields with pine and spruce along with sand and grass that was either tufted or short. Many beaten paths and then a cottage area set farther into the trees showed.

Deena pointed ahead. "We're at the far end. The main entrance is way over there where you see the high roof. That's a sort of general store too while the beach food hut is over there by the dance area. They keep the music playing all afternoon and evening. There is no dancing at this time."

They'd been walking long enough for San to notice that the music was an eclectic mix from past decades. He also noticed that the campground was only filled to about half capacity. An effect of the rogue policing that hit the area in recent days. Other than locals, only a few outsiders who had been camped here for while were present.

Coming out in the dance area San and Deena passed some teens leaning on the railing. He noted that it had a raised DJ area and a wide path by it to the food and ice cream hut, which also had the music playing. The hut had a semi-tropical design and was staffed by more teens, these ones in pseudo ranger garb. San picked up a sports drink, Deena grabbed an ice cream, and then they took a stroll over by the main beach. The entry lot was nearly full so they knew that word had got around and many people from town had got here long before them, thinking to find some excitement or maybe witness conflict with the forces of evil.

They stopped briefly at a picnic table, having spotted Jenny and Donnie there, and then San signalled Deena to leave. A couple of armed members of the militia were walking past by the water so they followed for a short stroll and found Burk and Rin commanding some troops by an RV in a large open campsite. Except for holstered handguns, the militia guys were locking their weapons to a rack by the RV and the military exercise for the moment appeared to be organizing a BBQ by a fire pit.

San followed Deena as they walked up to Burk. "Looks like the whole town beat us here," she said.

"People have relatives gone missing. No one around here is smart enough to keep their noses out of trouble. If I wasn't in the militia I'd mind my own business and leave others to get killed off."

Deena fanned away a billow of smoke from the fire pit. "What's for dinner?"

"Corn, venison, stew ... whatever we decide to put to the fire."

San grinned. "I guess hotdogs and marshmallows aren't standard fare out here."

Burk popped open a beer. "More like burgers and ice cream for the tourists, but we eat a healthy meal."

"Depends on your opinion of healthy food," Deena said.

San was looking off through the trees at the entry road. He could hear someone talking on a loudspeaker or bullhorn but not what was said. "So what's happening over there?"

"Leon Ottawa's got a crowd at the tables just past the entry over there. Our ranger pal Nev Sweeting is already here so that's likely him hollering at them. He's got a fed with him too. It's that Major Kowaleski guy from Deep River."

The news interested San. "I picked up transmissions from him on the radio. He got any troops with him?"

Burk tossed his head in that direction. "So far none in uniform, but they may be parked out there somewhere. He does have some soldiers inside dressed as rangers. To avoid conflict he never brings uniforms in past the conservation area perimeter. They have no real authority here other than what they claim by bullying."

Deena wore a worried frown. "Let's take a walk over. Maybe there's an ugly reason why this military guy is here."

Burk shrugged and remained at the BBQ, not interested in what Nev Sweeting or Major Kowaleski might be jawing about to the crowd of locals. Rin tagged along, walking behind San and Deena as they cut through trees and shade and then over the dance floor and around the busy food hut. The gang of locals had put a ramp over a ditch and come directly in, avoiding the pay gate. Their cars were all parked on open grass and they'd created a semi-circle three picnic tables deep and had a large BBQ pit working.

San grinned at the pleasant scene. "Looks like no one wants to pay around here."

"We all know that Jew Stu Pooler and we don't pay him," Rin said.

Deena grimaced. "Stop repeating Burk's racist stuff. Pooler isn't a Jew."

San raised an eyebrow. "Rin. I don't think you'll find any Jews behind what's happening out here. Maybe some feds though."

They came out on the sand path into an odd scene. Nev Sweeting had his portable lights hooked up like he was waiting for nightfall. It made San wonder if the guy wanted to impress his military guest by leading a surprise raid at night. Sweeting and Major Kowaleski were standing on the open tailgate of a high-wheeled pickup truck addressing the crowd with a horn. Almost half of the people were ignoring him. There were children playing with balls, badminton rackets and Frisbees off in the field and men drinking beer and playing cards on screens mounted at the picnic tables. Those that were paying attention to the authorities were those that wanted to heckle them. The Major remained silent and stern while Nev Sweeting lectured the locals present. A man holding a shotgun stood at the forefront of the crowd; he was balding and sad-faced, with rosy limbs, and could only be Stu Pooler, the owner of the grounds. Mr. Pooler looked pissed but not in any way Jewish, so San took the Jew tag as another of the militia's errors of prejudice. Most likely guys like Burk thought all sorts of people were feds, Jews, or spies involved in conspiracies.

Pooler shifted his gaze around and his glance turned nasty when he spotted Rin. It appeared he had a couple reasons or more to be angry – those being all the people coming in without paying at the gate and Nev Sweeting attempting to shut him down altogether with help from the military. To make it worse heavily armed militia were roaming the campground. Legally too, as there were no gun laws in Indian Falls.

Nev Sweeting's voice through the horn was coarse and echoed in the treetops. He was in mid-flight of a bullyboy talk. "... and you locals didn't pay at the gate so you're all trespassers. Sun's setting and I want everybody out of here by nightfall. You all see the Major here, and he wouldn't be here if it wasn't trouble."

Stu Pooler was the first to holler back. "You can't clear out all locals. Most of the people legitimately camped are locals, too. Almost nobody came into the falls today because of that Major's blockade."

Another angry man jumped up on a picnic table prompting Sweeting to shout, "We don't want to hear from you, Randy Giffen!"

"Well, you're gonna. On Stu's authority, I'm head ranger at this camp and I ain't gonna kick paying customers and my staff out. I've already done an investigation and nothing strange has been happening here. The trouble is elsewhere."

Twilight and shadows were beginning to settle in now. A liquor bottle came flying out of the trees and smashed on a boulder near the pickup truck. "I'll make arrests if I have to," Nev Sweeting said.

Stu Pooler replied. "I didn't ask for any arrests, only that those that snuck in pay at least a portion of the admission price."

"You gonna arrest us," Rin shouted, making San feel extremely uncomfortable to be standing beside him.

"That's another thing," Sweeting fumed. "We don't need an armed militia on parade in this campground. You boys should be minding your own business."

"Our business is in a BBQ and a quiet night," Rin said calmly.

"Ours too," a drunk yelled from the picnic area. And that was it ... suddenly shouts were happening all through the crowd. "Our business too. Barbecue! Barbecue! Barbecue!"

Nev Sweeting's face paled and the Major seemed to deflate beside him. It was now obvious that no one was going to obey him. Then a man shouted, "Why does he only want locals out? What about people from out of town? What's the plan for them?"

Rin got up on a picnic table and started yelling, "Feds out! Feds out!" In moments, the whole crowd was shouting. Defeated, Nev Sweeting and the Major hopped down off the pickup truck and retreated toward Stu Pooler's campground headquarters with Stu himself hurrying right behind them.

San ignored the chanting, walked with Deena back on the path, and bought snacks at the food hut. Sitting at a table, they watched the people gathering by the outdoor dance floor and made some plans. The decision was to take it easy until midnight and if nothing happened by then they could return to the car, pull the portable tent out of the back and stay the night. San didn't see any reason for a constant patrol of the grounds because if anything happened they'd see the lights soon enough. It was better to stay at the front area and keep an eye on Nev Sweeting to make sure he didn't spring some brand of surprise.

Sunset fell in shades of otherworldly orange due to the pollution off on the horizon. A warm breeze wafted in with odors of cedar and the lake and as the night-lights and firelight took over the campground kept its promise as a summer paradise. And one for all ages as the crowd gathered for the dance was young to old. The music soon shifted from eclectic to tunes that moved and night was underway with everything from cooked

moose meat to bison dogs. San sat for a time with Deena at the food hut watching the odd social scene of people mingling and dancing, some with food and booze purchased from the ranger-outfitted staff, but more with their own goodies and beer.

While dancing with Deena, San tried to catch the feeling of the night and though on the surface all seemed normal, he had a sense of foreboding. In times like these, the simple night was too good to be true. It was unusual the way the Indian Falls crowd tied together. Militiamen still wearing side arms interspersed with very ordinary country folk. Then there were young people that were like young people everywhere. No hillbilly kids in the countryside any more. The tourists or visitors, most of which were from parts of the United States, came here for relaxation without being in the jaws of the armed military camp most of that nation had become.

They headed back to the militia BBQ but paused to kiss in the dark. A bat swooped overhead and as Deena pulled back San looked into her pooling eyes, suddenly realizing that he was developing a deep attachment to her that might not be healthy in the long run. Especially not healthy for her considering his popularity with the criminal gangs in Toronto. But this was an escape and he'd be a fool running from romance that others searched for all of their lives. Embracing her, he decided to go with the flow, wherever that might take him.

Mosquitoes were coming on thick now, back at the BBQ Rin had pots of smoking herbs, and battery powered bug lights to drive them off. The food was delicious as Burk's women friends brought every sort of condiment and bread and salad. Farther off, the mad Nev Sweeting now had the portable lights blazing atop his parked van and the lights refracted upward like a beacon calling for a plane or alien craft to come in.

Some of the militia crowd took a walk down to the beach. San took Deena went along and they discussed Nev Sweeting.

San spoke quietly to Burk. "If anything does happen what do we do about ranger chief Sweeting? On his own he'll make things worse."

Burke remained silent, but Randy Giffen, Stu Pooler's campground assistant spoke. "Nev's got a few of his rangers in the building with Stu. Make sure you note the difference between their ranger uniforms and our staff outfits. I don't want my guys to get shot. Nev is supposed to come out with them and take control if need be. I don't know why that major is there. He says pretty much nothing, like he's here to watch if anything goes down."

Burk spat in the sand. "We know who is who and you know more than you're telling. Some of Sweeting's so-called rangers are soldiers. The Major's here to more than watch. He's looking to declare an emergency of some sort and then bring federal troops in to make arrests on my men."

San shook his head. "We've got them monitored at the blockade perimeter now. None of them have come in in any large numbers. It would be a standoff. It would be too dangerous for them to attempt a raid."

As they walked on the beach, it occurred to San that the military could come in by boat. He paused and thought it over. Burk lit a cigar and Deena was throwing pebbles out on the water. A few minutes passed then it suddenly got darker. Across the water,

the moon had suddenly disappeared in a blackened sky. San knew there was no prediction of a thunderstorm but it looked like one was coming in. He turned to Burk as the wind gusted suddenly then he noticed that everyone was looking south along the beach toward the border and fence marking the entrance to Raven's Private Beach. Mist and faint green lights were appearing near the marshy area and a moment later they saw brighter orbs of light rising over the area. As the lights brightened, every dog in the campground began to bark.

A siren whooped like a knife through the night. San jogged from the shore and glanced through the trees. The emergency proved to be Nev Sweeting's vehicle pulling out. His group of rangers and the Major were approaching other vehicles.

Four men remained and kept people and other cars back as the rest of the rangers pulled out and kicked up gravel on the run to the main road. As soon as they were gone, the remaining rangers moved back and blocked the exit road with vehicles and pylons at a section that had marsh on both sides. So Nev Sweeting wasn't evacuating the campground at all, at least not at present. He was penning everyone inside while he raced around on the road to Raven's Private Beach and the new visitation.

The dance music ended abruptly on a bass note and a twang followed by a chorus of shouts. Stu Pooler, Randy Giffen and his ranger-outfitted employees were moving through the campground and pointing to a large central clearing where they wanted people to gather. It was beside the area the town people had seized. Some campers obeyed them but others argued. A brighter aura of green showed again from the direction of Raven's so San went back to the others, who were already congregating at Burk McCraw's trailer.

Burk, his militia forces, Deena and a few of the town people had already formed a discussion circle.

Randy Giffen ran up and addressed them. Sweat already dripping from loose curls. "Nev's orders are for everyone to gather at the designated clearing. Stu will get instructions over the radio as to what we are to do next."

Rin threw a strap over his shoulder and ran through settings on the militia beam gun. A few of the militia people gaped at Randy like he wasn't quite real. Rin spoke. "Get out of here, boy scout. The Indian Falls Militia doesn't take orders from Nev Sweeting or Stu Pooler."

A frightened expression gathering on his strained face, Randy took slow steps back. San spoke. "Let's cook up a fast plan. It looks like Nev Sweeting wants us held here. No evacuation because he wants to make sure we don't drive over to Ravens. Unless we want to shoot it out with his roadblock boys the only other option is to head across the campground to the barrier."

"That's a no-brainer," Burk said. "Our vehicles are parked over there. We have to get to them before those alien things come over the wall."

San nodded. "OK. We all head to the dividing wall. The militia can form a line and take the lead. There's no way to stop others from following so Deena and I will be just behind and take charge of them."

Randy stepped back up to the circle. "Stu ain't gonna like this."

Burk turned on him like an angry dog. "Fuck Stu. You stay behind us with the campers and don't get in the way."

Rin took the lead, taking a small militia party along the beach while other armed members fanned through the trees. San, Deena and some unarmed men and women followed a minute behind. Other militia irregulars took a slow walk through the campground. The green-blue lights and mist grew in power, but some of it was an effect of the darkened sky. Blue tracers rose over the water and fanned to a low aurora of sorts. Ten minutes later, they all reached the clearing by the dividing wall; a haze of light lit the twenty yards of golden rod and reeds running along the wall and the sand dune had a halo at its top. Still, nothing was happening here as the brightest lights were far over the fence. San raced over to the dune's edge to check the vehicles and found some of the militiamen there. The cars and ATVs were okay but a cloud was growing overhead and suddenly ashes began to fall. It wasn't mist that they'd seen over Raven's; the approaching storm was another high wind carrying hot air and ash from the distant forest fires.

Instinct gripped San. He told Deena to get in the car, and then he backed away, turned and drove it down to the beach. They went a few hundred feet toward the campground. Parking by some close trees he saw some of the militiamen following his lead, moving their vehicles down the beach in case the events happening at Raven's spilled over the fence. Running Nev Sweeting's roadblock seemed a better option than trying to get out through the forest road later.

Back by the wall, they heard garbled shouting and saw bright white lights come on at the other side of the fence. A terrifying cry echoed from the distance and in lights and falling ash the view of the tall weeds, reeds and wall was eerie. San moved ahead with Burk and Rin and they went down the narrow path through the reeds. At more than seven feet the divider was formidable but they could see where notches had been cut in the wood, likely by teens that had climbed it in the past. Burk pulled out a hunting knife and using force hacked the bottom notches to larger footholds. As he stepped back, San scrambled up and paused at the top.

"What's up over there?" Burk yelled from below.

Irritated by drifting ash and mosquitoes, San shielded his eyes and blinked, then looked through the dark into the strange tunnel of light down the beach.

"A major event is happening farther down. This is ten times bigger than what we saw at the hotel. Nev Sweeting and his rangers have bright lights shining through the ash near it. I'm going over; it's hard to see from here."

The path through the marsh also existed on the other side. San hit the ground on a wood-chip path that ran up to and along part of the fence. He paused deep in the reeds, looking for possible danger. A glance back showed him four figures come one by one over the fence. The last was a female form he knew had to be Deena. Coming out in the darkened end of the sand beach, they looked ahead to the lights. Nev Sweeting's lights were in the trees while green floaters and a large bright aura formed a line along the beach. The falling ash was just the odd flake now from the high dark

sky. It showed that a flow of ash was up there passing over in a wind stream. San was sure he saw people down the beach running into the trees and he took the lead as they jogged a ways down on a path through the scrub.

They heard a few more throaty screams and more chaotic shouting. Heading into a path through some beach rock, they worked their way down and came out in a cedar-ringed clearing that was crowded with fleeing people. Beach huts were farther back and San assumed the people had fled them and congregated here. These were the nudists but most of them were clothed at night. Some were wrapped in towels. Clothing being the best idea for people that didn't want to become a feast for the bugs that zoomed in on paths through foliage and trees.

The commotion and lights were farther ahead and San halted with Deena while Burk and Rin ran ahead. San grabbed the shoulder of a blond woman with ashes and tears on her face. "What's happening up there?"

"Death," she hissed. "Creepy like black murder and lightning. Those things ripped most of the old guys to shreds. We saw some of it and ran."

"Old guys?"

She kept shaking her head, like it was both disbelief in what she'd just seen and an attempt to shake the filth of ash and sweat from her hair. "Yeah. Their portion of the beach is up here. It's closest to the dividing wall. Keeps the gawkers away as all they see over the wall is naked old farts."

"I see. So the main areas are deeper in."

"Main beach is farther down, other areas in back. We got here by coming around behind on the path. Usually there are no official nude beach events late at night except for the male gay strip, and it's mostly old guys that hang out there, looking for late action. This was the only safe way to run. The killers moved through the gay beach and are swarming the main camp now."

Deena frowned. "Jeez," she said.

San and Deena were the only civilians nervy enough to be moving toward the lights now, and they passed a number of Raven's campers hurrying past them to the clearing. Some of these were completely naked and San jumped aside from a grossly overweight woman with huge swinging breasts. The path went on a semi-circle so they ducked off it, taking the straight way through. A line of trees showed with green-blue ghost fireworks beyond. The lights hanging in the higher air like liquid explosions. Reaching the trees, they halted by a large embedded boulder and stared ahead at a weird scene happening on the beach.

Burk and Rin were just ahead of them with weapons at ready. Nev Sweeting and his parks rangers were slowly coming off a grassy area to block the beach in front of them. A group of naked men had run down the beach and a few rangers were moving with them. Nev Sweeting had brilliant banks of lights mounted on a monster-size ATV he was driving and they clashed with the teal supernatural light to create a circle of bizarre effects two hundred yards long. At end of the reach of Sweeting's lights, huge flare bubbles like they'd seen at the hotel were floating and light shimmered off something

that seemed like a curtain across the beach. Behind it another group of naked men were struggling, crying out, most of them stumbling and falling as they attempted to run. But the mostly transparent curtain was blocking them. It was a force field of some variety that slowed them so that it looked like they were running against a wind that held them back. A charged wind as blue and green light flashed like sizzles in the curtain of light.

Nev Sweeting's Godzilla ATV rolled closer, the rangers with weapons at ready positioned themselves slowly and San, Burk, Rin and Deena moved up silently toward the light. A closer view clarified a startling reality. Gleaming bones littered the sand like they'd been strewn there helter skelter. A quick flash of light spun overhead and a fast moving shadow came down on a naked man. He had been choking as he tried to yell or scream and he was unable to move ahead against the force. The flash became a black blur as the force field shimmered, and its effect on striking the man was deadly. Blood and brain matter exploded from his skull as the flash struck and moved downward at slow spin, expanding out to steaming splashes of liquid and ripped flesh as it moved to ground. The sand thundered; a bubble formed around the remains as all of the corrupted flesh was somehow consumed in the vanishing light. Then an ebony face, similar to that of the ambassador's dark side, appeared in the air and faded into a black figure dashing through the sand. Nearby the skeleton of another victim remained erect on the sand for several moments and the metal rings and piercings the man had been wearing remained in the air before a collapse that dropped it all to the sand.

About twenty desperate men remained behind the shimmering force curtain and the dark creatures began to flash to each one with the same grotesque and deadly effect. Nev Sweeting's rangers panicked and opened fire, their bullets creating sparks all along the transparent barrier. One young ranger ran forward to attempt a rescue but bounced back in a shower of sparks while his rescue target became another grim explosion and more bones floating down to the sand. Rising from the ground, the ranger stumbled in a half circle then fell backward into the shimmering lines of force. Amazingly, he went through the wall and tried to regain his footing. Seeing where he was he moved to run back out but couldn't and a second later the face of a grinning demon appeared in the air, a dark form flashed and he was instantly devoured.

The rangers had no stomach for this and lost their nerve. Nev Sweeting was turning his monster ATV to begin a retreat toward the reeds and dividing wall. Teal light flashed on nearly all of the campground ahead and as San studied the edge of the force curtain it shimmered and crackled like cellophane. Anyone caught to the rear of it was dead meat. Most of the people though had already retreated and were in the clearing so it was a matter of getting them over the wall. White lights flashed as Sweeting finished turning his machine, blinding San. He turned to Rin who was also shielding his eyes.

“Run up and tell that fool to turn those lights off. All he's doing is highlighting our location.”

Burke came out of a state of semi shock. Along with Deena, he'd been staring at the whirl of lights and bizarre carnage as though it were a feature hallucination with revolting special effects. He tapped San on the shoulder. “I've got a sniper's eyes.

Those flashes of light and dark are evil creatures of some variety. They're partially camouflaged by that force curtain in front of them. They tore those people up buzz-saw fast and from the top down. Probably sucked down their souls too. For some unexplained reason they leave the bones. Sweeting's no help either. All his lights do is blind everyone."

San ground his teeth as he watched Nev Sweeting's ATV approach and the rangers behind it pacing backwards along with it, never taking their eyes off the evil fireworks of Raven's. "When the ambassador showed at the hotel he was in some brand of large force bubble. Now there are a lot of evil creatures with a whole force sheet. These ones are all ugly, no handsome human illusion like the ambassador. And look closely, that force curtain is moving slowly, foot by foot towards us."

"Yeah, it's creeping up on us." Burke said. "Okay, fuck Sweeting and his school boys. We have a whole clearing full of people back there to get over the wall. Raven's is screwed at the other end, which is nearly the whole place. Those things have already combed through most of it. Time to write it off."

San turned his head toward the lake. "Shit. Look. There's a boat just off the water and its turning to leave. That bastard Major Kowaleski is in the back of it."

Burk didn't hesitate. He broke into an instant run, pulling up his weapon as he ran. He was at the water in seconds and as his boots splashed in, he opened fire on the boat. "Bastard feds," he shouted. "Leaving everyone here to die!"

Water splashed up then fire was returned from the boat. Burke dived to the sand on the shore and rolled as Rin ran up and fired a burst from his beam gun. Water and fire exploded but the boat was already roaring off across the lake.

Nev Sweeting's rangers turned and nearly opened fire on Rin, and then they turned back as a large light bubble floated over the trees from deeper inside Raven's. The force curtain took on an aura, giving the effect of swimming distortion as it continued to slide slowly up the beach, and the human face of the ambassador became clear in the bubble. His movements were blurred and he held something in his right hand that emitted a sudden fan of blue beams. More bubbles appeared out of the sickly ash fall, some of them briefly flaring before settling on the beach behind the ambassador. Blurred figures moved inside the bubbles and dark predatory faces shifted in the lens-like distortion. These monsters were speaking or hissing and revealing glinting rows of sharp fang-like teeth. Their bubbles thinning like soap floaters with a rainbow shimmer and about to hatch them free on the beach.

Deena had already left in a run to begin to organize an evacuation of the clearing. San moved with Burke and Rin over to the waterline and let Nev Sweeting and his rangers pass. They were now facing off with the forces of alien hell, both sides in a near pause as they studied each other.

"What the fuck are those things? What do they want?" Burke whispered.

San reached down and cupped a handful of water. Taking a moment, he washed the sand, sweat and ash from his face. "They aren't human and they aren't man-made mutants or monsters. I'm sure Major Kowaleski could tell us more on what they are. One thing that's certain is they're here to kill us and everyone in Indian Falls, and that

the military has marked a perimeter. It means we have a huge problem. Not just how to stop them but figuring out why anyone on earth, especially higher levels of government, would be complicit in this.”

Rin had a knowing look lighting his face, like he wasn't baffled at all. “The fucking feds. They want us dead so they're using us for a crazy experiment. Jeez. They brought them in here and fed them a crew of crazy old queers for the appetizer, and most of the rest for the main course. That must've been mighty tasty.”

San focused, seeing deep into the flickering teal lights. “They also plan on desert. A number of fires are burning out of control up in the main camp. We may end up dealing with a forest fire.”

Burke took a swallow from his wine skin, rinsed his mouth and spit it out on the sand. “You want to bet the feds will put it out so no outside help will be called in. Those idiot things are just grinning and creeping up. Best we get out of here. Bullets don't seem to be any use; they become flying slag when they hit that plastic curtain of theirs.”

“It isn't plastic and it's not a force field in the human sense. I think it's a corridor of energy, where they flow into our world. Let's try Rin's beam gun on it. Hit it with two bursts. One after the other.”

Rin nodded and raised his beam gun. He altered the settings for a wide hit and maximum heat and puncture force and he fired a sustained burst for five seconds. A circular area blazed on the force curtain to the right of the ambassador. Red fire burned and swirled like a vortex to Hades was being created. Then Rin was knocked off his feet. He rose from the sand somewhat stunned and fired again at the same target. The blast hit with a bang like it'd struck a steel door, and then for a few moments the flames vanished and there was a round hole four feet wide in the field. A third quick blast hit a bubble behind it and it exploded and rose to the sky like a green flare. Then the hole closed, the area becoming like cracked glass. For some moments they were looking at a giant round eye, red rivulets in the transparency resembling veins ... and it all went fully transparent again and was sealed.

As the hole slowly finished healing, a number of flashes lit the force curtain. When they cleared a number of crooked ebony figures were standing at the shimmering edge. More ashes were blowing in and these beings had a ghastly look; grinning wicked ghosts that were waiting silently as though for a signal to attack. That came with a high scream, not human but almost industrial in volume and pitch. It signalled movement of the force curtain as it suddenly opaqued to the color of burnished steel and swung up and over in the air like a big trap. Thundering down like a guillotine it came just short of slicing Rin in half. San and Burk were a few feet farther back and got temporarily blinded by the wave of sand kicked up. All three of them staggered and through stinging eyes saw that one of Nev Sweeting's men over by water's edge had got trapped behind the field. The lightning flashed again and the monsters appeared right in front of them. Others flew in a blur to the trapped ranger and came down on him like a spinning tornado that devoured him in fast gulps.

Burk took off first and San and Rin turned and ran a second later. The field swung up and over again, the thundering knife edge right at their heels as they escaped and

caught up to Nev Sweeting at the edge of the clearing. A glance showed San that the crowd of people was now larger and the knowledge that there wasn't nearly enough time to get them through the weeds and over the wall was frighteningly clear in his thoughts.

They stopped at Sweeting's ATV. San suddenly choked then caught his breath. He turned to Burk. "Those things are coming fast now. We have to take down that beach wall. Have Rin move up and flatten a section of it with the beam gun."

Nev Sweeting jumped down from his ATV. His face was bright red like his high blood pressure was about to finish him. His rangers had formed a semi-circle at the front of the crowd. He turned a fierce gaze on San and Burk. "That dividing wall is public property. I can't allow you to damage it."

Burke stared at Nev Sweeting with contempt; Rin shouldered his weapon like he was going to take a long shot at the wall. An arrogant look on his face, Nev Sweeting stepped in the way, followed by San who stepped in between the two. Before this silent showdown could continue, Burk simply took off, dashing across the edge of the clearing, around the crowd and rangers and into the marsh. San decided to follow while an angry Rin remained in a faceoff with Sweeting.

Burk reached the wall and pulled two objects from his pocket. In the darkness, they looked like two chocolate bars. San caught up and looked down, amazement on face. "You were carrying explosives in your pockets while dealing with that hell out there?"

Burk passed him one of the thin bars. "Yup. It's E42, enough to vaporize that wall. Plant yours over there then duck back. Keep those damn rangers back too."

San nodded, then he turned and plowed through the goldenrod and deeper into the wet marshy area and reeds. He planted his explosive pack in a notch in the wall then came crashing out quickly. He saw Burk a ways down doing the same, almost like they had it perfectly timed, then he was face to face with a couple of rangers and telling them to get out of the way and back. They obeyed, but Burk wasn't quite as lucky. A big ranger attempted to seize him and Burk responded by slugging him with a knockdown punch. Two other rangers dragged the fallen man off then Burk pulled the trigger fob out of his pocket and did the unlock on it. He looked around and seeing everyone well back hit the tiny button. A bang and a crack like a lightning strike hit the wall and flashed yellow as crooked lines of red fire spread across the wood. Though thick and solid, the force of the explosion cracked the large section of wall apart like it had been made of potter's clay. Dust and smoke rose in the already darkened night as it all crumbled to the ground. The remains smoldered but there was now clear passage. Perhaps not obstacle free but open enough to get the people through quickly.

As the explosion died out many people converged on the opening, but the night was a confusing one and the blast itself frightened others into running the wrong way. Adding to the confusion was ranger chief Nev Sweeting. He was back on his big ATV and he unleashed a whooping siren as he lurched the vehicle across the clearing. Deena flailed her arms and yelled to some of the people headed away from the opening. The ambassador was again moving forward with his wicked army and the force shield in

front of him was crackling with heat, causing a rush of air. Like an expanding balloon of cellophane the glittering force field zoomed forward several yards and three men that had been running the wrong way were sucked into it.

Campground boss Stu Pooler's assistant, Randy Giffen, was right behind them, and he grabbed one man by the shirt as he was sucked in. But that rescue attempt was unsuccessful; his ranger hat flew up in the hot wind and he was left standing there with a piece of torn cloth in his hand. The man he'd been trying to save was screaming horribly as three of the dark monsters dashed in and seized him. The impact was a flash of blood and burning flesh and there was nothing left but ebony ghosts floating away in the night as smoking bones fell to the sand.

The other two men were running for the water's edge and got enveloped and taken down by dark forces that silenced their howls with surgical cruelty, their voices losing tone to become hot rasps a moment before the flesh got stripped from their bones. Black entrails pulsed on the sand as a steam cloud and the creatures it held moved down and fed on the remains.

Randy Giffen turned and fled. Nev Sweeting hopped off his vehicle and hurried towards some confused people. The siren still whooped. In the chaos, San saw an opportunity, popped up on Sweeting's vehicle, turned it around and gunned the engine to race straight toward the approaching ambassador. The ATV picked up speed, San threw himself off and into the sparse grass; the ATV hit the force field with a bounce that sent it up and over to explode before it hit the ground.

Everyone moved in the right direction now. The rangers led people through the flattened band of marsh and hole in the wall going out of Raven's Private Beach into Cedarwood Campground. San was now the last civilian; he could see a crowd from the campground gathered behind the big sand dune, and more importantly, just how near the force field was getting to him. The ambassador and four other strange beings were now moving close and they all had that weird predatory grin.

Then something unusual happened far off in the main grounds of Raven's. The fires burning sent flaming debris up into the sky and while he watched, a large flaming object fell toward him. He saw it before it hit – a flaming log. San dodged it and it burst to a burning shower near him. More burning debris fell, pushing him closer to the shimmering force curtain. His shoulder brushed against it and caught; he was being sucked through and a moment later he tumbled on the sand and thin grass on the other side. In moments, they'd be on him. Running up to the wall, he tried to push through. A painful shock knocked him back and he slipped on loose rocks and fell sideways back into the curtain. Surprisingly his arm went partway through, the feeling being like plunging through liquid.

The ambassador and his evil friends were racing to him with some power of levitation that eased their feet over the sand. Flashes were spinning in the air. Rather than push San continued to turn sideways like he was turning around and that took him through the sparking curtain. On the other side, he rolled and sprinted through the grass toward the crumbled wall and the tail end of the fleeing people. His thoughts whirled, but he'd learned something; the force field or curtain wasn't solid at all but some type of thin energy shielding that could be passed through at certain angles.

A period of intense gloom arrived. San reached the other side of the broken wall and found people congregated behind the sand dune near the paths through to the main campground area. Serious organization was lacking. They should have been evacuated already, but instead people were still coming through from Cedarwood to rubberneck. Nev Sweeting had his parks rangers gathered in a circle discussing something. Some of Stu Pooler's campground rangers were next to them and still gaping through the fence at the fading lights. They looked like boy and girl scouts in the wash of firelight from a bonfire pit one of the militiamen had set aflame. A few more goose-bump screams echoed over from Raven's and the fearful expressions on the evacuees as they looked around and took a count on one another told a story of its own. None of them wanted to discover that one of their friends or relatives had been left behind. But a few did and Rin had to step out and seize a man attempting to run back through the fence.

The guy was lanky and blond – sleeveless T-shirt, shorts and sandals and in good shape. He gibbered something about his father, tears pooling in his eyes. But he met harsh reality when he tried to break free. Rin spun him around and slugged him so hard he fell to the sand in a daze. Two other men dragged him off then Rin shouted, “If no one is fucking in charge here I'm taking charge. Don't even think about running back through that fence. Anyone still there finds their own way out.”

Nev Sweeting became suddenly alert to the fact that he was seen to be dicking around and the militia was about to take charge of the situation. He stepped over to Rin right away. “All right, they aren't coming through the fence. At least not yet. We're going to begin a slow evacuation. My rangers and Stu Pooler's staff are in full charge and they will be leading you all through the campground. Everyone is to get to the big clearing with the others, past the main beach and the dance floor.”

A woman, a buxom brunette, stepped from the tight-knit crowd. “There are still people missing. My brother is one of them. We can't just leave people over there.”

Nev Sweeting shook his head like he was pissed at even hearing such an idea mentioned. “My rangers are not going back in there so no one is going back in there. Anyone that goes looking in there will be dead.”

Randy Giffen stepped into the fire light, his plump young face pink and baby-like. “I've got five volunteers willing to do a scouting mission back in there to bring out anyone hiding.”

Nev Sweeting spat in the sand. “You know Stu would never allow that. You and your girl scouts are working on the evacuation. Any one of you tries to play hero and go back in there and I'll shoot for the leg. Disobey and be carried out of here.”

Randy continued to argue. “I saw military trucks on the far side of Raven's. Maybe there are soldiers in there that can help us.”

Nev Sweeting spat again. “You were hallucinating boy. Don't be spreading rumours about the military being in there. Consider that place sealed. It's too dangerous to enter, especially by idiots like you that think they can snoop around.”

Ignoring most of this chatter, San remained near the fire with an arm around trembling Deena. Her face was unusually pale. Her eyes were on what was happening on the

other side of the fence. Burk was also ignoring Sweeting and the others under the auspice that taking one's eyes off the enemy would not be wise. There appeared to be a lull. No more howls of victims. The aura fanning from the ground up through the trees had faded, as had the blue flares and lightning-like forks in the sky. It was still dark above, the moon and stars buried, but the ash was only flakes here and there now. The force curtain was still present and had moved up to the edge of the marsh at the wall; it wasn't crackling or sparking at present but in an almost dormant state – nearly invisible but lurking as very faint blue amber. It seemed almost intangible like dusty moonbeams fading in from a crack in the clouds. A few alien lights were passing in and out of visibility but there were no beings revealed by them. The enemy had gone close to invisible, becoming movements of darker shadow in the odd scintillation of faint night light. Overall, the atmosphere was calm, as the wind had suddenly died. The crickets were now silent. Two dogs barked from deep in the campground and they proved to be announcing a new arrival of the ambassador as an ominous flash followed. A large light suddenly flared above the reeds in the marsh and drifted over to the opening. The elegant figure of the ambassador showed right at the borderline as he stood on pieces of the blasted fence. His face lacked the evil grin of his dark side, and he didn't seem fully present, like he actually existed somewhere else. His mouth was now a stern black line and his eyes glowed blue in deep sockets. His expression came across as intense, full of hate ... though it was hard to tell what was real and what was distortion.

Burk had no intention of further contact. His feeling was that death was the only message so he tapped Rin on the shoulder and signalled the other militiamen with his left hand.

Nev Sweeting and the assortment of rangers along with the rest of the crowd ended up caught in the trap of their own arguments, and when they did notice what was going on the militiamen and women had their weapons up. Burk hollered for action and the scene became an explosion of bullets followed by a sustained beam from Rin's gun.

As the projectiles hit, the lights in the opening flared and became a swirl of black ... a hole that most of the people didn't see as the rangers were ordering them back through the trees. But they were unable to get a full retreat going as many of the people kept halting and staring back at the action. They saw the hole as it took on another dimension, like a tunnel and the next red beam Rin fired fly down it and bounce back out, reflected over the top of the sand dune into the sky. A shining shield remained in the air, spun and became the light flare again. Blue mist faded behind the transparency and the ambassador was again there before them and holding a small blue orb delicately in his fingers.

The militia guns fell silent. The open area of broken fence glowed and emitted a piercing wave of sound. The ground began to quake. Cracks opened and beams of blue light shot up and fanned out. The sand dune also came alive with light and huge plumes of earth rose in the air. Two rangers were sucked right into the opening ground, Burk nearly went under a spray of sand and everyone went into retreat mode as flashes of black zoomed through the wall. A sudden gust of ash came down from an aura over the trees and the force curtain ballooned over the wall. A militiaman and one of Nev Sweeting's rangers were caught at the edge of the field. The first was sucked

into a vortex in the sand and the other met a clutch of black demons that consumed him.

Burk's formerly calm face had gathered a stamp of pessimism. His lips skinned his teeth like his intellectual powers were stressed. This mad disaster was more than the expected war with the feds. It was more like a war with alien creepazoids. He turned to San, his eyes salty and wide. "I just lost a man. Sucked down into a hellhole. We better get to the vehicles and move them back in case those things come on even stronger. It's better to pull out than lose good men. Get a breather and figure out how to kill those slime-balls."

San's expression was also grim, and he nodded as Rin and Deena ran up. "Okay. Let the rangers pull the people back. Call the militia out of battle formation and run for the vehicles. We got to get them clear because we need them to get out of this damn place."

Rin hesitated a moment as he looked over his shoulder at more sand exploding from the dune. The rangers, Nev Sweeting and the crowd were seriously on the run now and already disappearing on the tree-lined paths. After taking a glance at them Rin barked out some loud commands and then they were all running down to the beach and along it to the spot where they had moved the vehicles. Forks of lightning were now exploding like mauve-feathered cracks in the sky, but there was no thunder – at least not immediately. That came when burning objects began falling from the sky; sparks and embers singed the night air as they flew in spectacular bursts. San ended up doing a roll as one landed near him in the sand and bounced. He recognized it as a burning log – most likely it had been part of one of the log structures at Ravens before the ambassador and his forces had sent it as burning debris into the sky.

Debris was still falling behind them as they reached the vehicles and in moments, ATVs were kicking up sand and roaring away. San had to wait for some of them to move as his cream Andersen Wing was boxed in. A leather-jacketed militiaman roared out and he got to the door. Burning twigs showered down out of the sky and he batted them away as he got in. The light outside was purplish-blue and brightening the area, giving the feeling of being under some strange x rays or cosmic rays. Deena appeared and more burning debris fell. A flaming shingle bounced off her shoulder as San ducked over and opened the passenger door. She practically dived inside and something banged on the roof, then sparks showered over the windshield and San revved the engine and tore off down the beach.

Deena's long tresses had found a windblown style. She looked sexy when frightened as her eyes had a childlike aspect. She gave San a knowing glance; he pulled his attention back to his driving. There was a bottleneck ahead as the vehicles all squeezed through on the same narrow path. San slowed then reached over and squeezed Deena's shoulder. "You never said anything about your family. Are they in this area?"

"No, so at least I don't have to worry about them. My brother is in Vancouver. He's a high school teacher. My father died of cancer when I was ten. Two years later, my mother drank herself to death. I was raised by my grandmother. She's buried here. Died two years ago."

“So you're independent. What about that Nev Sweeting character, does he have a family?”

“Some relatives like Jesse. His parents and brother left town and sold their property. He has a house in the conservation area. Probably couldn't find anyone that would be interested in marrying him. He's boring, but he wasn't any trouble before this happened. Something very strange about him now. He's been touched.”

“Yeah. More so than other people. You lost your boyfriend and it didn't affect your mind.”

“Maybe that agent Nelson guy or the Major messed up his mind. Promised him a big promotion or something if he tows their line.”

“It would be something like that. He's not working for his people here in Indian Falls. It's like he wants everyone to die. Maybe he hates people or maybe he's just over his head and doesn't have the skill set to deal with this kind of stuff. If not, he's in some way turned. Like the feds seem to be turned. I mean, there's no logic in being on the side of a hostile force like what we're dealing with. Unless it is somehow their hostile force and they sent it.”

“Or it contacted them first, and has power over them.”

The bottleneck cleared and San followed the last ATV out into a wider clearing and across to the park with the other vehicles in the grass by the gravel lot near the entry road. They could see bright lights and the roadblock farther back blocking the exit from the campground. San spotted something else just off the edge of the lights; military trucks, classic style with canvass-covered backs. He pulled his field glasses from off the floor by Deena's feet and took a closer look. The helmeted heads of a couple soldiers poked out of the back. All of the men standing at the roadblock were rangers, or soldiers disguised as them.

San put the glasses around his neck. “They've sandbagged the road up past the roadblock and are hiding military trucks there. For sure they want us locked in here and they don't want us to know the military is behind it.”

Stu Pooler had all the lights on, creating a huge yellow dome of light in the large clearing. Bugs swirled up to the top of it but the sky was so dark it began in the treetops and tunneled off to the fading light show over at Raven's private beach. People were streaming through the trees, coming from trailers, tents, the beach, dance floor and other hidden places. In fleeing, they'd abandoned nearly everything and most of them had already pulled their vehicles out, creating a huge parking lot filling the road and stretching down over the grass to the beach in places. For tonight people wanted out, most of them likely thinking they could return and pick up the pieces another day. Stu Pooler was shouting to Randy Giffen and his campground rangers, having them bring women, elderly and kids up to pre-teens into the brightest area around his entry headquarters. The long log structure had a fenced area around it that he opened up. The security formation being created was a roadblock of rangers keeping vehicles inside with the most vulnerable people packed in the area around Stu Pooler's place. Healthier adults ringed them and were guarded by more rangers. Militia formed the protective half circle facing toward Ravens and generally, it wasn't a solution at all.

Everyone knew the night was long from over and for any real safety people had to load into vehicles and get out.

Ranger chief Nev Sweeting appeared on a commandeered dune buggy. He'd somehow managed to mount blinding lights on it and was dogging all the paths outside the area while calling on a powered horn for everyone to gather in the clearing. The last stragglers slowly showed on the paths; Randy Giffen and some rangers went out to search the campground for anyone left behind, then Sweeting decided it was time to address everyone and rode up and got off the buggy. Sweat and sand dust streaked the whisker stubble on his face. He glared at both San and Deena as he swaggered by, then he called the rangers around him like they were a personal army. In the shining lights, his eyes flared with wild effect. He truly did look mad, and San was now certain he'd been touched. Nev Sweeting was working against everyone in a clever way, and there was no smooth way to deal with it. It would be nice to just step out and restrain him.

Burk passed Rin a cigar and watched as Nev Sweeting's men ran a hook-up to the sound system on the dance area. The rangers and Sweeting positioned themselves a ways off from it, facing the crowd, preparing to make announcements. Some of the town people were now armed and following direction from the militia. Jesse Milbrand was there with some shotgun-toting farm boys and older men with assault rifles. Leon Ottawa had apparently brought weapons in for his circle of armed men and women. Most of them from downtown Indian Falls. San was now weapons ready too, but not visibly so – he had the SNX experimental gun in its case and the M-Scope inside a plastic bag in his left hand. He noted some activity off towards Raven's again and mauve light shot through the sky in tentacles in that direction. Like odd lightning, the branches arced in the sky and flashed to an end point inside Cedarwood. Trouble was definitely afoot as the heavenly signs indicated the ambassador his bizarre forces were about to move deep into the campground. All eyes remained on the sky, and then flicked back to ground as Nev Sweeting started talking to his rangers. Ignoring Sweeting, San pulled out the M-Scope and ran through the settings. He held it up toward the dark sky and the lights. More tentacles flashed and he pulled it down and checked the reading.

Burk stepped up. "Get any reading on that light show."

"Yeah. It reads as an unknown energy source, unknown spectrum ... and the power estimates are beyond belief. Those things are aliens because everything else is ruled out. They are cracking into this area using a force beam and power source of incredible strength. Think of them as predators with technology that allows them to tunnel right into other worlds and destroy them. Or more aptly put, destroy other life forms as that is what they appear to feed on."

"I knew they were more than ghosts. Those sick things are near impossible to fight, and on top of that, the damn cops and feds are helping them. To me they don't make any real sense. They use fantastic powers just to kill people."

San shook his head, somewhat disgusted. "They have some things in common with the bad side of the human race. But there never was a guarantee that alien beings would share our humanity. It is actually more likely that any alien life would be strange

to us. On the power, think of how much energy we gain in splitting atoms. They may be splitting energy from biological life in ways currently unknown to us.”

“Shit,” Rin said. “Sweeting wants to convince us that we should stay here and die.”

Burk puffed his cigar. “Ain't gonna be that way. If those things start coming this way we'll blast that roadblock out of the way. As far as those feds and rangers at it go, let God sort 'em out, because we aren't wasting time screwing around with traitors to humanity.”

San was still moving the M-Scope and tuning the focus around the sky. Again, the heavens were slowly brightening like an incandescent lamp, slowly producing more light. Unexpectedly, a long terrified cry came from deep in the campground. It served to halt the chatter. Nev Sweeting and his rangers looked off in that direction for a moment then the restless people grew noisy and the militiamen and rangers moved out a few yards and held a line to block anyone from running off in that direction with ideas of a rescue in mind. The people were agitated now and some were shouting. Nev Sweeting was again in an argument with a couple of his rangers and not yet addressing to the crowd.

San lowered the M-scope and talked low to Burk and Rin. “I think I just took a reading on a person being killed out there. This is important. The scope has been recording what it calls bursts in transmission power from a local source. The scream registered as a burst of refined energies, like the dying person released it.”

Rin scratched his chin. “So what in the hell does that mean?”

“You saw how those things kill a person. It's almost like they instantly pull someone apart and swallow every atom except those in the bones. If the scope is right, their attacks aren't to feed on flesh, organs and blood. That horror is a side effect. They are deconstructing the atoms or energies of the flesh and brain ... or somehow processing body chemicals and feeding on a burst of refined energy.”

Burk's eyes widened. He was definitely spooked. “Bastards eat your soul. They won't get me alive.”

San continued in a whisper. “The scope records transmissions of energy, but it can't say what the energy is except that huge bursts come and go from a local source. That's how these things appear here and there around Indian Falls. They are in some way transmitted from one point somewhere in this area. Or maybe they initially arrive at one point.”

“Got a location on the source?” Rin said.

“No. Haven't figured it out. But I think there is a person who did figure it out. Marco will likely be found at that source. We have to find it too, so the immediate goal is to get out of here. No matter what Nev Sweeting or rangers or soldiers want, we blast our way and everyone else's way out of here.”

Burk grinned. “Copy that. My plan is take the center of town, move everyone there. You're coming, too. We'll move that lab of Marco's in from the cottage. Once we have the people in the downtown we can defend against military and alien creeps. At least for a while until we figure out how to stop them things or find that source and Marco.”

San nodded in agreement. "Send one man around to everyone we can trust. Do it while Nev is distracted up there. Tell them to wait and break out with us at the signal."

Burk agreed, walked off and talked to one of his men. San noticed the lights at the roadblock had been shut off so the area was in the dark. In spite of the bright lights in the immediate area, the sky in the direction of Raven's was still brightening so that one could now look through the treetops at a huge splash of mauve that illumined the bottom of the low ash clouds. A flash appeared in nearby trees and it introduced Nev Sweeting's latest talk. Back up on the open tailgate of a pickup he had a wireless microphone on his collar and his opening words created a blast of ear splitting distortion. Behind him, his soundman adjusted the software on a control screen and his next words came out slick and smooth.

"I know everyone's upset because some people are dead, but I need everyone to remain calm."

Angry catcalls instantly rang out. Some teenagers booed. Gill Ottawa, Leon's son, made a rational challenge to Nev Sweeting's intro. "Those lights are moving close fast. Remain calm, yes. But we should remain calm while you remove the roadblock. We need to get out of here."

Nev Sweeting took it in stride. "You don't have your thinking cap on boy. It's best that everyone stay together. If people leave, they'll disperse around the area and there'll be more victims. We can't let people go back over to Raven's looking for the missing. Any searches have to be in daylight hours when those things don't show."

Jenny's boyfriend Donnie was the next to yell. His voice sounding weak in comparison with Sweeting's amplified tones. "Don't let people disperse. We all go back into town in a convoy. That's safest."

Nev Sweeting almost crooned, like his being the centre of attention was what this was about. "We can wait them out. They've done their damage for one night. Give it an hour and you'll see their lights die down."

San saw Burk's man whispering in Deena's ear. She listened and then yelled out to Sweeting. "That's no temporary roadblock over there. You sandbagged us in. You're trying to keep people here and you aren't telling us why."

Leon Ottawa followed with a holler. "He's penning us in ... fresh beef for the slaughter by those alien demons!"

A wind of nasty whispers swept the crowd. A couple pop cans bounced off Sweeting's pickup, causing two rangers to step back and point their rifles at the teenagers.

"All right, there's more," Nev announced in his firmest tone. "The fact is we have to be sure you people haven't been infected. You've been exposed to an alien life form and rays we can't identify. Indian Falls and the surrounding area is under quarantine. This crowd stays here until medical experts arrive by helicopter tomorrow. Once tests are done everyone can leave."

Boos and angry cries cut Nev Sweeting off. His rangers were fanning out, some with handguns drawn, and others with rifles. Jesse Milbrand and his farmers stepped forward facing off with them with drawn shotguns. Burk's militia didn't react. They kept

their guns down. It looked like the restless crowd might settle things by refusing to be penned in, but if Nev Sweeting's men fired on them, chaos would break out.

The standoff reached a point of high-wire tension, and then a green light suddenly flared high in the sky, right over the trees at the edge of the clearing. It was a startling flash, and this time there was thunder of sorts – but more of a bang, like a car crash had happened in the heavens. A plume of blue sparks appeared high above and fanned out as sparkles floated slowly down on the trees lining the far end of the clearing. Glowing brighter by the moment they caused a loud crackling of the air and by the time some of them hit the ground a curtain of light had formed. It shifted and smoothed to a semi-transparent curtain all across the tree line at the edge of the clearing.

This was not exactly the same force curtain they'd encountered at Raven's, but likely another form of it. And rather than have it creep across the campground as it had done on the nude beach the monsters were in with another surprise. Slowly the curtain took on the mauve shades that had been appearing in the sky and the whole thing blew forward in ruffles so that it moved a few yards into the clearing. It shifted in lace-like semi transparency and had a shine like dark silk at the folds. All eyes were on it and initially the tree line showed behind it, but that image slowly changed until no trees at all were seen. An illusion; a vast barren landscape existed there and large creeping shadows and boulders could be seen in faint light that came from a moon-like orb far on the other side.

The wash of the water tumbling in at the nearby beach became the only sound as the crowd and even crickets fell silent in view of this new occurrence. Rangers and Jesse Milbrand's armed farmers now moved farther out in front of the crowd to face the strange event, but the militia slowly melted back into the people as Burk went ahead with the plan. He had men creeping into position on the north side along with Rin and the beam gun as they prepared to knock out the roadblock and clear away the sandbags. San was busy M-Scoping the event and after a seesaw reading of huge unknown energy fields, he put the scope away. Squatting, he opened the case and assembled his gun.

Whispering swept the frightened crowd, as something was moving on the horizon beyond the curtain. Humanoid figures, darker than shadows. They shambled slowly, backlit by the strange orb. As they grew closer, they took on sinister silhouettes.

A hot breeze that was more than wind in its creepy touch and fragrance suddenly blew and a portion of the energy curtain flew loose and generated long wisps of floating gossamer. Like webbing it twisted, spun, and then fluttered around the area of the food hut and dance floor, which was an abandoned area now. It swirled there in a carousel emitting sparkles that hypnotized like the gleaming of an arcing watch fob, and then the energy of it became a flash of light. The food hut brightened, faint music began to play on the dance floor, and out of the light growing shadows appeared and slowly took form.

San glanced at the dance floor. He judged what he was seeing there to be an illusion, and then he turned to crouch and watch the figures moving behind the curtain. He knew the others, especially those close up, were under a spell of sorts. Most of the

militiamen were clear of it as they had moved off and were stationed at hidden spots near the roadblock. Both Nev Sweeting's and Stu Pooler's rangers lowered their weapons and looked on stupidly at the dance floor. Nev himself went owl eyed and silent. Jesse Milbrand's armed farmers had become like the rest, spectators that had forgotten the danger they were in.

With his weapon assembled, San walked over to Burk, shook him and turned him around.

Burk shook his head and rubbed his eyes. "The crowd is hypnotized," San whispered. "The dark creeps over there behind the force curtain are the reality. What's happening at the dance floor is an illusion."

Burk gave a groggy nod then regained his composure. "Those things are all tricks and stuff like spiders with their webs. They play with reality like they aren't quite real themselves."

"Get ready to signal Rin. We're going to make things happen before that ambassador shows and does. Give me a few minutes to position myself and my SNX gun then start the fireworks."

Burk slipped away quietly and moved in Rin's direction, San walked off and the show began before a few minutes had passed. By the food hut and on the dance floor, the play of moving shadows became a gathering of human forms. They were conversing with one another and looking over at the staring crowd. Faces came clear in the lights followed by gasps from people in the campground crowd. The faces showing were of some of the disappeared and dead or an illusion of them, and that illusion was enough to put the crowd in confusion. As the vision strengthened, Nev Sweeting's rangers lost control.

Jesse Milbrand saw a missing nephew there, put down his gun and began to stroll over. He was wide-eyed like he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. Deena was another; she broke from beside a group of teens and headed across the field to reunite with her disappeared boyfriend Brett. Others hurried past them, some women weeping, and when Sarah Parker from the town records office broke into a run toward what she thought was her missing daughter, Nev Sweeting suddenly appeared well in front of them. He'd quickly circled around and now he raised a handgun and fired into the sky, bringing everyone to a halt.

San glanced back and marvelled at the perfection of the illusion and how quickly people forgot how it came about ... from whirling wisps of an energy field to a mass hallucination that blended perfectly into the reality of the campground. The dance floor and food hut were there as before but suddenly alive with ghosts that had become flesh. If you believed in magic, it was real, and if you were filled with grief, it was real. It played on the human desire to believe loved ones were alive. But San didn't believe anyone had magically returned, most or all of them from the grave; he believed in an alien technology that created a honey trap. Possibly, it was because he'd looked away from it at the beginning. The hypnotism hadn't clicked in on him. He knew it looked like reality. It was as if you could run up and touch these people. But it wasn't possible or

likely. What was likely was that underneath it something else was there hiding. A hostile force.

Nev Sweeting began shouting and the group of twenty people that had come closest to the dance floor halted momentarily out of fear of being shot by him. "We'll do this in an orderly fashion," he commanded. "I want everyone in a tight group, and then you walk up slowly. These people aren't coming out to us. So let's see if you folks can talk to them."

Stunned silence had again come over the larger crowd. The small group streamed around Nev Sweeting and he had them move forward, taking position at the rear as though he was bringing over a herd of sheep.

Leading them to the slaughter, San thought. A thought that was brief because the militia suddenly opened up on the barricade with their guns.

All hell broke loose instantly and San found himself part of it. As he was lifting his weapon and moving off to the side there was a brilliant flash rising over by the roadblock. Rin had stepped out from behind a tree to fire his beam gun. The sustained blast sent the pile of sandbags flying and bursting into burning spray. The militiamen that had crept up also fired and took out some of the soldiers disguised as rangers. There was return fire and then panic on the grounds as people dived down and ran off in various directions ... some headed for their cars, others for the beach and some for Stu Pooler's HQ building.

San only had a moment to get far enough over for a clean shot and he found himself on one knee and squeezing the trigger button on the SNX barely in time. Deena and a few of the people had almost reached the food hut and dance floor area. The wide beam he fired expanded to the left of them. He kept the burst sustained, and on the illusion he was sure existed.

Hellish flames sprouted and replaced the dance-floor mirage and off in the dream everyone was having delusion vanished and was replaced by the revelation of a magnificent lie. The show was on and everyone was to die ... but now nearly everyone was aware.

The flames killed the beautiful human illusions and the memories they'd conjured up, and the melting fire of San's beam painted a new picture -one that brought surprise and shock. A dance floor and food hut that was empty and dead ... while foolish hope still had a few people running for a dream of loved ones. It gave San the sudden stomach-turning feeling of his life left as another fading flare in a sky become alien. Then the flames and all light receded and in a blink the moon came out of the clouds.

The dance floor and burning food hut became the home of faded ghosts and San gained little satisfaction from destroying the illusion. It was disheartening to see cruel disappointment appear on Deena's face as the beloved she'd been hoping to embrace turned into sprouting flames then inky shadows. Wicked images that became the twisted faces and fangs of the ambassador's vile army. Faces she was able to avoid as she screamed and dived to the ground. Some of the others did not halt in time and ran into the jaws of the trap and an enemy that ripped up body and soul at the speed of sound.

Jesse and five other people had also thrown themselves down, and they turned and ran back to a crowd no longer there. The others had already panicked and dispersed, aware of the movements other evil beings were making in the dark.

The remaining rangers and secret soldiers were quiet shadows looking for an opening on the militia. Others were dead or bleeding in the dirt. In the panic of the desperate crowd, children and younger teens got pushed quickly into the back of cars that could not move. Stronger minded adults threw Stu Pooler, a few rangers and their guns aside. Other folk were confused and one beautiful blond Indian Fall's mom ran screaming down to the lapping waves, crying for her daughter. Just past her a stray cat ran out and did a mad dash right up and across the dance floor ... cheating the alien shadows and their hungry mouths as it escaped into some bushes.

Fingers over the buttons of the beam gun, San wasn't certain on the setting, but Rin was as he locked his beam. Burk keyed the militia to fire and the night exploded again, taking out the rest of the roadblock in a heavy explosion of blood, sand, swamp, mud and fire. The eruption buried a couple military vehicles in the muck with blasted bodies that would likely never be found except perhaps mingled with the foul odours of swamp gas.

Those rangers assigned to Stu Pooler had thrown their guns down and gone in with the people loading the convoy of vehicles. In the faint moonlight illuminating the chaos, San saw only the blinding burst then Deena's dark hair blowing up as she dashed over the grass. Her dress tore against her slim legs and her cat-big eyes found him. She was like another ghost running from a terror the people of Indian Falls had yet to name. Fleeing the sudden rise of motion on an evil dance floor ... blackened things that posed as shadows when they weren't that but inky bodies raised out of some alien killing ground.

They were coming through the curtain of energy across the field. Organized forces of some otherworldly wickedness, appearing to twist up from the lower ground into tall forms hurrying out into the killing moon now beginning to show in this world.

There were still some people randomly dispersed around the campground. Deena was in immediate danger, fleeing monsters already shifting shadowy form like they were ready to lunge in at lightning speed. Nev Sweeting also remained close to the monsters, running about and spouting words like a madman no one would listen to any more. He'd gone from commands to crying for help and San believed him to be a lying siren trying to pull others in range of the ebony killers.

Like ink with magic power, the monsters snapped into order. A force of fifty of them coming through the buzz of the energy curtain, moving to pounce on the rest of the strays dispersed in the field. At the same moment, Burk showed in the lights, running down the entry road, yelling, "Start your engines and move! Get everyone in and get out! The roadblock's gone!"

The monsters got a number of victims, cutting them down fast in the dark. Car engines roared, more ignitions found power and many more doors slammed as the moment of final escape arrived. San saw a black wave ... a vision that reminded him of bats flying in ... then the energy field morphed to absolute darkness, blacking everything out in a

fast flash. His fingers tapped out a difficult pattern on the experimental gun and then he fired, going to one knee, sweeping the widening beam. A flash of yellow brilliance melted the darkness and he saw Deena. She'd likely never been this frightened before. She tumbled beside him as his beam swept up.

The flash was a lucky one, striking a swarm of the approaching inky monsters, causing them to flare and melt like shadows become dripping oily liquid. Across the clearing, the energy wall hissed, became visible as a burning curtain and shot blue fire into the treetops. A cloud of smoke drifted, new cover for the regrouping monsters.

It was over for a moment. Deena got up from the thin grass at San's feet. The main campground lights came back on in sequence, and in the small return of reality, San felt residual energy wash through him and collapsed. He saw Deena taking the weapon from his hands then he fainted and dreamed.

[Chapter Four: THE RETREAT](#)

The sense was of falling, being sucked down, and San heard sounds and voices that were mostly nonsense. The dream congealed to coiling snakes and repulsive dark images. Finally, a hissing mist took it all under. It was as if his mind had been snake bit. It cleared on a vision of giant coins, some bronze, others silver and gold. They were like parts of a collection and one flew out with vast overwhelming power. He found himself in space looking down at a planet and moving down toward it. The descent was like that of a meteor with fire and burning, but of his soul. He felt cleansed and a spirit seeing an earth-like world ... floating down to a city and in a sudden updraft he was overwhelmed.

A ghost passed through him and he saw vibrant times and music and celebration ... not images he could fully understand, but they were beings and humanoid and it was another Earth with animals, culture and beauty ... until the ambassador appeared deep in a crowded city square. And he was much like he appeared at present ... humanoid and with wicked features hidden behind a suddenly developing elegant facade.

The dream became a bloodbath, except that the population of this planet had blood that was more yellow than red ... and it ran as the ebony monsters swarmed in and fed. They rested and fed again, killing and using strange tricks and devices. Blue lightning cracked the sky and force fields crackled on the ground as they moved with incredible speed over the surface of the world.

Grief rose with the emotions of ghosts of the dead passing through him ... all of it adding up to a final scream and a falling tear, dropping down to a planet become skeletons and desert.

There was no mercy in this dream; another coin slipped into the galactic slot and he saw another planet destroyed ... and the soul-killing pain went on, leaving him alive and the only witness and record. The only possible agent of retribution for billions of beings on dead planets.

He saw how the monsters arrived from space, and there were always local betrayers. Always a chamber through dimensions of space and time. The biggest coin was the last world, the dead world of the legions the ambassador led ... a desert world, all sand and piles of massive bones with a host of vile hungry things ... bleak things that had killed their own planet. They gathered in legion near a sky-high arch imprinted with the bones of the dead giants of their own planet. Waiting to traverse space to new worlds, using an alien technology originally created by the morally superior home-world race they'd destroyed. An arch that allowed them passage through to decimate other worlds.

Inside that incredible and evil edifice, a new coin spun and glowed in wonder and beauty. It was the Earth and the glory of a planet rich with life. Behind the gate black hordes of vile creatures waited ... they had no food, no culture, and no legacy beyond the dead cities towering across their planet. Earth and a new feeding was their lust, they knew only suffering, and chattering jaws as they waited. They were life forms with no purpose, other than one – to feed on and destroy others, and in their spinning scopes hundreds of planets showed ... all with one thing in common — advanced life.

These hungry villains had no heroes, love or literature. All the past glory of their home world had become dead bones on the sand and a vacuum in their minds. They were creatures with the stolen knowledge that had taken them through the planets to feed and kill. All of them now desert planets left behind as mouldering monuments and doomed places where any future visitors could only curse and wonder what had happened.

San's consciousness returned in the back seat of the Andersen Wing. Two kids were spilled across his body and Deena and two militia women were crammed in the front. One of the kids, an eight-year-old girl, screeched as San shook his head and rose. The windows were closed but he could see out. The road ahead was illumined and he noted that they were at the tail end of the convoy fleeing Cedarwood Campground. The Wing was the last car and behind it were some of the militia's ATVs. He could see bright lights in the clearing and that it was split with the back half darkened by blue mist and odd sparkles that stretched all the way down to the beach. As he watched, a man burst from a copse of cedar, running for the rear of the convoy. He didn't get far; a swirl of black shadows suddenly rose in the mist and turned him into a blast of blood.

San cleared his throat. "We didn't get everyone out?"

His voice disappeared in the sound of gunfire as the militiamen to the rear blasted bullets into the darkness. He saw Rin step out and fire a beam blast at the grass that sent a wave of dirt and fire in the direction of the monsters.

Deena turned to him. "We got most people but not those that panicked and ran off from the entrance. Them we can't help. We can't go behind their lines without being erased. They use shadow and dark for cover like chameleons. They speed out from any shadows and massacre people."

Ahead the convoy picked up speed. Deena hit the gas, driving fast over the rutted blast area to avoid getting stuck in the sand. Light was sweeping over the back windshield

so San opened his window and stuck his head out to look back. He heard the kids yell for him to shut it as they got down on the floor at his feet.

San felt for his field glasses and they were still there around his neck. The car bounced on ruts and that gave him some knocks but he saw past the militia vehicles on their tail and swept the view through the campground. He caught a glimpse of some figures running on the beach, the wrong way toward Raven's. A group of campground dogs proved to be smarter because they were running the other way on the beach, fleeing the monsters. Bones littered the dance floor and the area around the food hut and he saw shadows in that area seething and moving like beasts lying in wait. Blue and green flares lit the sky and what had been the force curtain was now an area of twilight where it wasn't quite dark and where the campground lights didn't penetrate. Night lights nearly as high as the trees glowed but cast no light to the ground. Mist was drifting as well and he took a guess that the entire area all the way back to the far side of Raven's was inside the alien circle of control or feeding. The last place he looked was over by Stu Pooler's huge log cabin headquarters. The east end of it had caught fire from one of the blasts and behind it in the lights he saw two figures by a birch tree. They were facing one another. One was the ambassador, looking barely ruffled considering the chaos. The other was conservation boss Nev Sweeting. Sweeting had blue light reflecting in his eyes and a glow on his face. He was talking hurriedly, like he was almost begging something of the ambassador.

San pulled his head inside and leaned over to Deena. "Deena, where the hell is Burk?"

"At the front – some of the militia are our escort. In case more military or Sgt McKraken's men show up to block us."

"As soon as you get a chance, I want you to run ahead and catch up with him."

"That would be difficult. Rin's right behind us. Maybe you can get him to call him on his pocket communicator."

The lights of Raven's and Cedarwood had all but vanished in the distance, leaving the night like a hot breath in the darkness. Ashes were still falling here and there causing San to avoid deep breaths as he got out of the car on the roadside. The main convoy was moving ahead and he waited while Deena and the kids were transferred to the pickup Burk had commandeered. Deena gave San a goodbye peck on the cheek and said only, "Be careful." Then the truck pulled out, caught up with the convoy and San was left in the taillights of the Andersen Wing and facing Burk and Rin.

Burk lit a sweet tailored cigar. "So what's this about Nev Sweeting?"

"I saw him there through the glasses when we left. He was off in the dark with the ambassador and he wasn't dying. He's been working with those monsters all along."

Rin raised an eyebrow. "The feds too, because they aren't dying unless we kill them. The ambassador must have got to them all back at the beginning. He got to the feds, our local provincial police, the military at Deep River and conservation ranger Nev Sweeting. They all want the people here at Indian Falls eaten up by those devils. At first, I thought they wanted a war with us. But what we saw back there tells a different tale. They don't even take us seriously, but think we're an easy kill."

“My car here has a weapons system. If we encounter any of them on the road it'll see some use.” He glanced to Rin's gun. “That beam gun of yours held them back and the experimental gun had effect, too. Got any more beam guns?”

“One more,” Burk said. “We can only do a fighting retreat because once they're on us they're too fast. We have to find another way to kill those things. Maybe that scope of Marco's will help.”

San had doubts about that. “I think we've got nearly all the information we can get with it. I had some readings about energy transfers. Those monsters come from somewhere else, like across space, and I think they have a main entry in the falls somewhere and a way to transfer location. The reason I wanted to stop here is Nev Sweeting. Where is his ranger HQ? We need to check it.”

Burk savoured a puff. “He's deep in the conservation area. Lives in the main HQ as his home. Few people go out there, as he has a storefront office in town. Town office has nothing but radios, a computer satellite hook-up and walls of real-time maps. I've been in there before.”

San took a deep breath. “I had a crazy dream back there. It told me something. Let's go ... we're going to see what he keeps at his HQ.”

Nev Sweeting's HQ was deep in owl country, down a country road in the heart of the conservation area. Wild enough country that most people drove slow out of fear of hitting deer or even bears. The road began to wind through ravines and gullies. As they were approaching an arched bridge over a fierce running stream, Burk told San to pull over and stop.

“If we drive over that hill and someone's there, they'll see us coming. If anyone's outside, they might have noticed our lights already. Going in on foot is the only safe way.”

After hiding the car behind some scrub, they set out on foot, taking only small automatic weapons. The darkness was blinding but all they used was a pen flashlight and turned even it off as they crested the hill. The trees were tall and the forest deep here but Nev Sweeting's HQ showed in an open crescent circle off the road below. It consisted of one large structure and a garage that looked big enough for a number of vehicles. Part of the main house was a temporary barracks that could house a number of rangers. Only one vehicle was out in the open so it looked like that wasn't populated now. A single light showed in the parking lot at the entranceway by signage marking the public office. A few other soft lights showed in some interior rooms near it but other than that, the place looked empty.

“That's not a ranger truck,” Burk whispered. “It's military.”

San lifted his glasses and studied the building. “I see one person on the inside in the office area. Looks like he's talking to someone so there's at least two of them.”

“Neither of them are Sweeting,” Rin said. “None of his vehicles have returned.”

“Be quiet for a moment,” Burk said. “Listen. I hear a weird humming noise like they have equipment of some kind running in there.”

Splitting up, they moved in on the driveway and building in a three-pronged approach, and once they found the parking lot clear they sent Rin around the side to the back to see if it was clear. A few minutes passed then he returned. "No one's back there but there's a light on in a shed down a path in the woods. Possibly someone in it. I didn't go down."

A tossed rock went through the window of the one lit room and a second later Burk's flash grenade followed. San averted his eyes but failed to avoid the loud bang. Flying glass came as the rest of the window exploded. One of the men inside got off a shot but no more followed. Burk burst through in the lead and they found two men inside, both struggling to hear and see. Rin grabbed the automatic pistol from one man's hand and San got behind the other one, put him down and disarmed him. While they waited for the two men to come around enough to talk, Burk rifled a closet and came up with some plastic bag ties, the kind that lock, and used them as makeshift hand and foot cuffs. They were soldiers in unmarked military camouflage clothing and they carried no identification other than military issue weapons and communications devices.

Burk rubbed sweat from his brow. "Not much to ask here. They're from Deep River; they're commandos and obviously working with Nev Sweeting. He's been in on some secret federal operation all along."

San opened a bottle of water he found in the fridge. He took a sip. "They wouldn't be here unless they're protecting something. Sweeting could've left just one ranger if he wanted the grounds guarded."

"There might be something out in that shed," Rin said. "I've been watching the window but I haven't seen anyone move out there. Might be no one but if there is they're creeping up or hiding."

The two soldiers were groaning now. One had spittle on his lips and was trying to talk. "You watch these two. San and I will go out. Be ready to act if any trouble starts or we don't come back in a few minutes."

The darkness out back was thick as oil but they could see a faint light. Crossing an open lawn, they found the beginning of a path through the woods. Again, they only used a penlight to avoid tripping as they walked a short distance on the soft pine-needle duff. They came out in an open area out front of a storage hut. A wrecked car sat in the weeds there and there were a couple of wheelbarrows next to a pile of gravel. Listening they heard nothing other than night birds and insects. San crept up to the window and looked in. He ducked back immediately and turned to Burk with surprise on his face.

"I expected to see a lamp or light cell of some sort in there. But it's not a light, not a regular one. An object is glowing in there. I'm not sure what it is."

"Anyone in there?"

"Can't see anyone. I see one mostly open room, a table and chairs by a computer setup and that light."

"Think it's dangerous?"

"Probably is."

The door opened on hinges that needed oiling. A soft blue glow filled the room and it felt like they were entering a carnival fright house. But other than the light and a computer hook-up that was turned off, they saw nothing. Burk sat down in one of the chairs and lit a smoke as San cautiously circled the object. It was an orb and had been placed on a small stand in the center of the room. It was attached to a cube base of some variety of black stone. Its light had odd effects. Though the orb was subdued, even faint and easy to look at, its beams were blue and harsh to the eyes. It gave the feeling of manufactured starlight or a new kind of black light.

Burk shrugged his shoulders. "So what is it?"

"I don't know. The M-Scope is back at the car. The beams from it remind me of the light from one phase of that force curtain at the campground. We'll take it with us and study it."

"It might be dangerous, even radioactive. Worse, maybe it'll draw them to us. You want to chance it?"

"No choice. Those monsters are going to move to finish the rest of us soon. There is no outside help when the only people we can contact are in on this conspiracy. This thing is probably a transmitter or communicator that enables that weird energy they use. We might be able to use it to our advantage."

Before Burke could reply, a man burst in the door and slugged San with a gun butt. Burk had pocketed his own gun and didn't have enough time to draw it. San slumped on the floor, the attacker turned in the light and a familiar face showed. It was Sgt McKraken and he was out of uniform, dressed in an oversize flannel shirt and brown pants like a hunter. But a hunter stalking men as his weapon was a sawed-off scatter rifle with only close-range ability, but enough power to leave a man shredded.

"I'm afraid you boys won't be using anything to your advantage. This phase will soon be over."

"So you're in it deep now too, Sgt McKraken. What in the blazes are you locos up to, feeding Indian Falls to a swarm of monsters?"

"Some people are chosen to live. Some to die."

San slowly got up from the floor, feeling his head for a wound. "What sort of gibberish is that, McKraken?"

"I mean, it has always been that way. Even from the beginning in the Bible, when God killed off the perverse heathen idol worshippers so the chosen could live on their land."

Burk stared at Sgt McKraken. "Those monsters aren't God, and the people of Indian Falls aren't filthy heathens."

Sgt McKraken grinned. "I guess you fellows never spoke to the ambassador. We did. He comes only to the chosen. We aren't talking about Indian Falls only. Eventually it'll be the whole world. All but the chosen are to be sacrificed."

"I see," San said. "That's how it all ties in. Everyone with any power in this region has somehow been bought off by this ambassador. You're all under his control."

"Ah come on. What a poor detective you are. Do I look bought off? We tuned into a promise. A better world is coming and we'll be in control of it."

"You mean he didn't even show you the money," Burk said. "You're suckers, all of you. You talk about the Bible. That offering the whole world deal is an old devil's trick. You bought a better world where everyone will be dead."

"Yeah, and starting with you," McKraken hissed as he swung the barrel to fire. But the shot never went off as the top half of his head became flying splatter and blood gushed up from what remained as he fell dead to the floor. Rin stepped in the door. "So much for the chosen," he muttered as kicked one of McKraken's legs aside.

San took a quick look out the door. "Let's grab that alien device and get out of here before more of them show."

The base of the device wasn't quite as heavy as it looked. San took up the rear with it as they went back up the path. The three of them went back inside Sweeting's place. Burk did a check on the soldiers and they were about to leave when Rin swung his gun around and quickly shot both men, each in the chest, delivering instant death.

San stuttered as he attempted to speak. Burk frowned. Rin coughed and gave the bodies a disgusted look. "I heard what the sergeant said. They sold us out willingly. Think they're the chosen or something. Best that they're dead now so they can't kill us later."

On exit, they used a ranger flashlight on the jog back to the car. San had the device covered with a blanket and it was bulky to carry due to the base. Not knowing what it was exactly, he was afraid of dropping or shaking it in case it might explode. From the hilltop, they saw no lights or approaching vehicles so they figured they were at least in the clear if they headed back toward Indian Falls.

At the car, San got out the M-Scope and uncovered the device. He glanced at Rin. "Those two soldiers were disarmed?"

"They committed a capital crime. Being federal soldiers is bad enough, but going over to an enemy that wants to destroy us all is too much."

"Not us all. At least according to Sgt McKraken. The ambassador's job as I see it is gathering up betrayers on this side and supervising them. He must be promising them a lot."

Burk laughed cynically. "Only a fool would believe promises from monsters like them."

"Yup," Rin said. "So we got a problem. World is full of fools."

San ran over the scope's settings. He had the orb in the backseat and was trying to scope it through the open door. "Hum, I get GPS readings flashing and changing and nothing else. We'll have to study this later when we get the whole lab of Marco's moved into town."

On the ride in, they found a lot of activity on police and military bands that both San and the militia had cracked. There was plenty of movement on the perimeter of Indian Falls and over at Deep River, but they could not detect any troops moving inside other than a couple beacons from near Raven's. They were on the approach to the cottage

when a van suddenly tore out from some dark scrub and got behind them. Bullets bounced off the tail of the car but failed to penetrate.

“Fuck, it's soldiers in that van,” Rin said. “Hold steady. I'm going to fire on them.”

San's eyes were on the mirror. “Wait. I've got a surprise for them.”

The van was speeding up to rear-end them and maybe knock them off the road. San watched this in the mirror while he did a setting on the car's weapons system with his right hand. The van was right on them now, bullets whizzing off the sides of the car, then San fired, sending heavy calibre bullets from the rear right into the headlights. It dropped back right away, more bullets hit then it exploded and flew off the road. San kept driving. Rin looked back but all he saw was darkness.

Burk pulled a flask of whiskey from his pocket, took a slug and passed it to Rin. “Troops are going to move in on Raven's and Cedarwood. Already are. My guess is they're going to clean up the aftermath. They know most of us escaped and headed into town so we've bought some time. But the long night isn't over. We'll clean out the cottage and put the stuff in a pickup. Rin will go ahead into town and mobilize the militia for defence and supply detail.”

“What kind of supplies are you gathering?” San said.

“Armageddon supplies. Weapons, food that'll last ... everything you can think of. We've got underground bunkers all over this area. Even in town.”

Rin took a second slug of whiskey. “This is the big one brothers. Armageddon ... it's time for the final showdown with the feds.”

Back in town, preparations for Armageddon got into play. The dark sky was still blowing above, hiding any morning light or signs of Venus that might usually show. The small Indian Falls Hospital blazed with light and San stopped there first and talked to a militiaman named Carter. The town surgeon, Dr. DeBartolo had the hospital set up in emergency mode and three armed militia women and Carter were the early security. The falls hospital had been barely operational in the past except as an emergency ward that did temporary treatment and transferred patients out to fully equipped hospitals with government funding. It was now in full swing as there had been numerous injuries at the Campground and medical supplies were already being plumped up as Burk's girlfriend Laura had other militia women unloading a pickup full of stuff they'd brought up from one of the bunkers.

Jesse Milbrand and his armed farmers had been busy since leaving the campground and had commandeered nearly every truck in the falls area, including nearly all of Sweeting's ranger vehicles and some military trucks. Some older trucks and bags of everything from soil to fertilizer along with pylons, sawhorses and woodpiles had been used to set up roadblocks. The militia left only the north and south main entries to town passable through swing gates as they closed things up in case of an arrival by cops or military. Rin was already in town with three trucks loaded with his Armageddon supplies, which consisted of a lot of guns and ammo, packaged foodstuffs and necessary tools, tents and miscellaneous items. Many people weren't from town but the outlying area and others were too upset to go home. They had the park in the center of town sprouting a tent city and strings of lights and the town hall front barn-

style doors open with a crowd inside. The militia had one larger bunker hidden in the town core and they emptied it and designated it as a security location for small children.

As San drove slowly along he saw Deena dash down the town-hall steps, her hair flying and her arm in a sling. He pulled over and got out. Burk also got out and stretched his legs as he looked around.

“Is your arm fractured?” San said.

“No, just a sprain. I didn't even feel it back there but the pain is setting in now. I'm working on the town hall setup. We want the people all in main areas in case we have to make a run for it again.”

Burk walked up. “Nowhere much to run now. Unless we head into the wild. They're already prepared for us to attempt to get out convoy style. We'd be sitting ducks. I like this new setup. Makes the town look a whole lot friendlier, like another big campground.”

San nodded. “Where do you want to set Marco's stuff up?”

Burk pointed a ways down the street to a point where it got darker. “We set up there. Nev Sweeting's storefront town-ranger office. We'll put your equipment in the back room and use the front as our security headquarters. Except that this time the sheriff will actually be in town instead of playing with devils out in the woods.”

Deena huffed. “The sheriff, if that's what you are calling Nev Sweeting, has stabbed us in the back.”

“Don't worry,” Burk said. “He's got his dues coming. My feeling is he can't leave the area either. We'll be seeing him and his new friends soon.”

A faint wash of morning light arrived. Ashes were no longer blowing above but dark clouds, hot gray bellies but without rain had replaced them. The slate clouds stretched from horizon to horizon and moved like slow whales on a light breeze. Grainy light like brightened salt poured from the cloud splits in bleached beams that diffused long before hitting the ground. The park and town hall had become a somewhat quiet scene now as many people who didn't have any sleep during the night were grabbing it now. Jesse Milbrand's farmers had set up there and their trucks and militia vehicles were the only vehicles going in and out of town. Only armed townspeople and militia were active in the countryside now. No soldiers or police had been reported at the barricades on the town highway.

The immediate downtown blocks were still lit up as streetlights remained on and people with stores or residences in the area had opened them up. A few people were walking about; some of them still visibly confused. Other severely distraught people had been taken to the town hall and hospital. San still lacked sleep as they'd decided to set up Nev Sweeting's town ranger office with Marco's equipment right away. Together with some militia with technical skills they put it all together in the back room and when powered up San attempted readings on the strange orb they'd found. It was still under debate as some felt it was not safe to keep it in town. The M-Scope had more or less frozen in attempted readings and when fed into the main system the only

message was Processing Conglomerate Information. A reading that stayed on the screen relentlessly and after an hour San fell asleep. But it was short sleep as it was barely noon when he was awakened. A prisoner was being brought into the station to the lockup.

Rin, now wearing fresh denim clothes and a toss-over flak jacket, carried the prisoner in a rather rough manner to the lock up and threw him on the bench. But he wasn't in there long as Burk came in and ordered that he be brought out and placed in a wooden chair. The man was in military uniform and rather dishevelled. His hair and the front of his uniform were wet and grimy.

"Where'd he come from?" Burk growled.

Rin gave a non-committal smile. "Jesse found him wandering on the road. He's been here for a while. Carter had him over at the hospital. They gave him some treatment. He's all wet because Carter questioned him. He water-boarded him."

"Water-boarded him," San said. "That's illegal."

Rin replied. Displaying a sidelong arrogant glance. "I would've shot him, and that's illegal too. Assuming there are any laws in Indian Falls now. At present I believe we are the law, and that's the way it always should have been."

Burk pulled up a chair and sat facing the prisoner. "Interesting point there Rin, but we won't be the law for long if the outlaws of the state and their ugly pets eat us. What did Carter get out of this guy?"

Rin grabbed a note from his shirt pocket. "A lot of babble. He's from Deep River. Name is Sean Seaman. He was part of the military operation and got lost in the confusion. A logistics expert and a dumb one because he stumbled through the bush and went the wrong way. They found him near town."

Burk ordered the man's gag removed. The guy was young, a bit bug bit and messed up. Unusually wide nose. Bulldog soldier face. "You must be brighter than you look. But you're just what the doctor ordered – a logistics man. I want to know exactly what the hell is going on and why this town is blockaded ... 'cause we can't see any logic in it."

"I was never able to find out exactly why?" he choked.

"Don't give me that crap," Burk said.

Seaman cleared his throat. "OK. They told me a dangerous experimental microorganism has infected this area and that the quarantine is top secret. Infected people are a threat to the entire planet. Logistics, military and police movements have been based on that for some time. Even local media people think that and are keeping quiet on the promise of a bigger story later."

"What's the bigger story?" San said.

"For the media, none. They've already killed some of them for getting in too close. Any others that get wise will also disappear. Killings are covered up. Logistics is keeping this operation moving while nearly everyone involved has no real meat on what the

truth is. Every branch is in a compartment. I was involved in developing that brand of logistics.”

Burk was unimpressed. “Sounds like you're putting us in a compartment, too. So what happened to you?”

“I was with a number of men; we were supposed to be dumping some top-secret stuff in a bunker in the conservation area. Your town ranger chief, Nev Sweeting was there at the time. When we got there, we found out the top-secret stuff they were burying was us. The men with me were shot in the back. They made me do the work of dragging the bodies down. They believed we'd learned too much, that's why it was done. The last man out was supposed to shoot me, but he didn't want to do it. He fired in the air and then closed me up down there. I got out in the night and was disoriented and confused. I went through woods towards lights I saw. The lights turned out to be Raven's private beach and I got there just as the wave of killing started. I knew very little when they threw me in that bunker, but after seeing those monsters at Raven's I definitely know too much. I saw what must have been you people escaping the other way in a convoy. Of those that tried to flee my way in the brush, I think I'm the only one that got away.”

San sighed. “Who was in command, and I mean in top command of the whole operation?”

“That part was bizarre. Perhaps they thought I knew too much because I questioned that. There was an intelligence agent, Mike Nelson. And Major Kowaleski. What didn't make sense was military men much higher up landed at Deep River and they were taking orders from the Major, and believe it or not, Nev Sweeting. For some reason your town forest ranger is bossing people way above him in the pecking order.”

San turned to Burk. “The commander of it all is the ambassador, that's why the pecking order is out of whack.”

“Who?” Seaman said.

“Never mind.” San said. “Were there any plans on the table for the military to come in against us?”

“No. The military was supposed to be facilitating a special force. Which I've now figured out isn't military at all – the special force is those horrible things that killed everyone at Raven's.”

“Okay,” Burk said. “Take Mr. Seaman back to the hospital. Put a guard on him for now. He's not going to do anything, as he has nowhere to run. They'll kill him if tries to return to base or leave the area.”

“Wait a second,” Seaman said. “I'm about recovered and I can't go back like you said. I might as well go down fighting with the rest. I've seen those things in action, just like you, and unless we find some weakness in them we don't have a chance.”

Burk thought it over then nodded in agreement. “Take off his cuffs. Let's do a review of the situation. Now, we could try to get someone to the outside world for help. Problem is no one would believe anyone we send. A number of people got that massacre at the campground recorded on various devices, and in the replay, nothing shows but swirls

of colored light. Most of our electronic devices don't function correctly close to those force fields of theirs. We're lucky our weapons worked. Even they might fail close up. Most bullets turn to slag. The regular beam gun has some effect and San's special gun at least does some damage, but not enough to put a beating to them when they come on strong. We've got that device we captured ... is there a reading on it yet?"

San suddenly woke, as he'd been near asleep on his feet. He stepped in the back room to find the display lit up with a text reading scrolling by. After hours of processing, the message was very simple. Multiple Location Device, Existing at the Current Visible Location and Seventy Five Unknown locations. Power Reading Unknown, Energy Source Unknown. Security Reading: Dangerous Due to Unknown Status.

San stepped back out in the office and found Seaman speaking. "A number of missions were run to various locations in the area. Those were top secret but I planned the logistics. I was never told what they were for but if you say you've captured a device of theirs the missions may have been to place them in various locations. You may have discovered one of many. Question still is; what do they do?"

Rin paced the floor, weapon in hand. It was clear he didn't fully trust Seaman. San put his hand on Rin's shoulder as he stepped back in the circle. "I have a reading but it's not much and something to figure out. I believe we have one piece of alien technology. It may be dangerous; it may help us. That energy field of theirs and they themselves don't come out of thin air. It must be a transport beam to ferry them here and there. The orb we captured is part of the puzzle. I need to do more studies on it. We also know how Marco got so far on the development of his equipment. He must have found something else, back at the beginning. Something that told him stuff happening here was beyond the supernatural effects he studied. He knew that real beings, not ghosts, were appearing in Indian Falls."

Leon Ottawa and Jesse Milbrand had entered the room. "Maybe that device should be studied a ways out of town," Jesse said. "If it is theirs they may be able to explode it like a bomb."

"They don't work that way," Leon countered. "If it's valuable they'll come for it and they're coming anyway. They don't kill by blowing people up; they feed like devils."

Burk stood up to stretch his legs. "Good points. They've got us trapped and according to previous visitations, they don't show nightly. If we have something that's important to them, they might want it back right away. In which case they'd send maybe some soldiers or Nev Sweeting or that ambassador into town."

Rin looked spooked. "They send Nev Sweeting into town and I'll burn him down. What about Seaman here? Hasn't he sort of magically appeared?"

"Nev Sweeting ain't here yet," Burk said. "If he comes we'll play along and see if we can learn anything. As far as Seaman goes, he'll be stationed on perimeter watch and under the guidance of our people. They didn't send him or that would have come out when Carter tortured him."

The long gray day stretched to the horizon on a sky like a cocoon; San found himself too fatigued to work and got some rough sleep. Later he toured the town with Deena. The militia was running the hospital and was now the police force and perimeter guard

while Leon Ottawa and some of the people living directly in town had taken over running the town hall. Jesse Milbrand's farmers and a gang of young people were running the park tent city while campground rangers that escaped had been mostly demoted along with Cedarwood owner Stu Pooler. Randy Giffen and some of the Cedarwood kids who had been little more than grounds workers dressed as rangers had simply changed to civilian clothes and were active setting up a makeshift stage in the park.

Evening came with darkness falling fast as the horizon remained blotted out by clouds. A huge barbecue was organized in the park and with music playing and other people off in the trees playing their own guitars and drums the town took on the airs of a new Cedarwood, almost as though they'd simply moved the place into town. Trailers and the rest of the wreckage of course remained out at the lake; Burk had not permitted anyone to leave for daytime excursions or searches for survivors out there. A couple militiamen who had escaped the other way from Raven's reported no survivors there or if there were any they'd gone deep in the bush. News on the campground was about the same ... all the last people to exit, and San was one of them, reported that any stragglers had run into the jaws of the enemy. So other than attempting to retrieve some property, trailers and vehicles, there was no reason to go out to the lake. And real reasons not to as the military could be moving in. No one wanted to be captured by them as word of Seaman's report and burials of murdered men got around.

The town hall became the focus of a late evening meeting that mostly adults that attended. Younger children, teens and those up to early twenties stayed in the park or cruised around town. They were the most resilient, adapting to change or Armageddon as the militia called it, as though it were an interesting change of scenery and new domain they could live with for a while. People openly distraught, injured or in shock remained at the hospital walled in behind the protection of armed militia. Anyone with even rudimentary medical or psychiatric knowledge was placed there with them. The hospital was now in fact crowded as a number of elderly people had been driven in from around the area by Jesse Milbrand's men during the evacuation of the nearby rural route.

With darkness over town and no lights showing anywhere in the sky to indicate an imminent attack, the town meeting took on the format of a big unruly discussion. Mayor Buckley Harris' lame address to the crowd caused argument as the mayor still had hope the military would intervene on behalf of the town's people. His supporters were a few area residents that hadn't seen the devastation and didn't believe it could have happened that way the militia reported it. They were overruled by those with direct experience; those that had seen the soldiers attempt to seal them in at the campground.

The debate deteriorated to a head banger over socialism and capitalism as some stores were selling goods at inflated prices while commandeered or militia supplies were free. In the end, stores were ordered shut; no freedom meant no free market could exist, so everything was considered in storage, as it could be needed later. Burk argued that he didn't support socialism but he also didn't support some people profiteering while others had suffered huge losses. That debate continued through a couple hours of disappointing tongue wagging. Nagging stress and headache left San

walking out hand in hand with Deena and heading over to the park. The scene over there was a calm one and perhaps more sensible as in this situation they were simply trapped. Town democracy could provide no solution other than to give people a chance get out their frustration and hostility in verbal scrapping. Human reaction to the catastrophe varied with some people hospitalized with shock over what had happened while others responded with anger and frustration over not being able to fight back, not being able to even bury their dead or comprehend any explanation for the sudden and overwhelming victory of an explainable evil. Alongside them were people who wanted to argue about capitalism and socialism and other unproductive issues. The betrayal by Nev Sweeting and authority figures was another electro jolt that had left people gasping with much talk about how to execute him when he was captured.

His sleeping patterns disrupted, San awoke at 2.30 am. He was on the north side of the park in a double sleeping bag with Deena. A snoring militiaman with a rifle beside him was at the nearest tree and a raccoon was stealing provisions out of his pack while he slept. Off at the edge of the park he saw a huge pack of town dogs running down a side street. The weather was a little cooler and damp but not much of a late night chill had settled in. Seeing that all was mostly silent, he walked through the park and back to the newly arranged security office and Marco's equipment. Rin was inside sipping coffee with another militiaman. San poured himself a cup then went in the back to work through some more modelling on the device they'd found. Again, readings went across the screen and the orb remained lit. It had never shut down though nothing could be read on it as to the power source ... or rather; it was itself an unknown power source and transmitter. An hour passed and San ended up stumped again, his brain tied in knots. He couldn't crack this thing and wondered if was even possible. He felt defeated and weak and as he turned his chair away from the screen, Rin walked in. "Got some lights, weird ones showing, and right inside town."

"Place guards on this place," San said as he walked out with Rin. They stood in the open street and San watched as Rin waved over some men and sent them inside. The sudden appearance of lights had brought about a quick reaction of the people. The dogs were barking and they were all awake now. San saw many retreating deeper into the park and people with nearby houses and stores were moving out and in the direction of the town hall to safety behind the militia there. But not everyone was fleeing as many armed residents and teens remained. A number of men in the older than teen category were forming the beginnings of a mob by the first alley off the block from the park. The startling aspect was that the light was right over town and giving rise to the feeling that the barricades were useless.

All eyes were on the sky and the expectant looks were a sure indication that something was about to happen. San felt his body hair prickling along with his scalp. This light was faint and high up and it had those ominous purple tints. The enemy tribe was showing its colors again and if so, the gang would probably be arriving soon.

San and Rin were closest to the light. A minute later Burk, Deena, Laura, Carter, Leon and Gill came up the street in a tight-knit group. Behind them, Jesse and a gang of about twenty farmers formed a line to guard the front of the park. The light began to spread like a fearful disease in the low clouds above. It suddenly expanded to large oval and sent a faint beam down. A glance over at the town hall and San saw the big

doors being sealed. Another small group remained on the steps and moments later walked over. It was composed of Sean Seaman, Mayor Buckley Harris, Stu Pooler, Randy Giffen and Donnie. The mayor walked to the front and spoke with Burk.

“How serious is it?” the Mayor said to Burk.

“Very serious because I'm pretty sure we're about to have visitors. No multiple lights yet. A smaller show usually means the visitor will be none other than the ambassador.”

Ten minutes passed with lights strengthening overhead and passing through phases of purple and mauve. A hole showed in the clouds but not one that revealed the sky; it touched the eyes painfully like a burn hole and the feeling of electricity in the air added to the certainty that the ugly swirl high above marked the descent of something not at all divine but sinister. A wide swath of air at the front of them glowed and took on shades of amber and they were certain it was a new form of the force curtain. It formed a wide oval on the street that slowly knife-edged down the road away from them in a line of light. In the distance, some militiamen moved aside quickly as the edge of the light touched the barricade there. Seconds later a section of it exploded into a slow rise of sand bags and wood fragments. The debris fell softly in thickened air and the small opening revealed nothing but darkness of night on the other side.

No one moved; everyone watched impatiently. A couple minutes passed in suspense then two figures appeared out of the darkness, walking into and down the line of light. They came clear as the ambassador and Nev Sweeting and as soon as the militia realized who it was they all opened fire up by the barricade. The hail of bullets exploded to fireworks in the light and when the rattle of guns ceased and the last sparks fell to the ground the two were still walking, now approaching the oval of light spilled at the front of the crowd.

The natural reaction was for everyone at the front to step back and San followed the others, but they didn't go far as it was clear that they had to face them and see what they wanted.

No bubbles or obvious protection this time other than the haze of amber light beamed from the purple hole above. A new form of the force shield and one that worked effectively; San was certain that he, Burk, or the others could step right into it, but if so be at their mercy. Bullets, weapons likely wouldn't function inside of it. Of that, he was sure. It was also abundantly clear the ambassador had been fine-tuning the technology, and probably had a smoother way of bringing in an attack of his monsters.

Mayor Buckley Harris stepped forward, showing unusual courage. He had seen the ambassador before at the haunted hotel so it wasn't all new to him. Nevertheless, Burk seized his shoulder and pulled him back. Waving San along with him, Burk stepped forward and they stood at the edge of the light facing Nev Sweeting and the ambassador. Both had nasty grins on their faces, but San had the desire to sock Sweeting most. A desire he didn't allow to find action.

Burk spoke. His question terse. “Looking for something?”

A vocal answer was expected but none came. Only Burk and San heard the answer and it was as a voice in their heads. It was from the ambassador. Some form of telepathy. “I am looking for something,” the ambassador said.

San focused on his slick form. He'd never had a look at the ambassador up close and in fine detail. He saw flaws. The smooth outfit, neat hair and features had a grainy look like they were a projection of sorts. Perhaps more telepathy or energy field. And as he viewed the handsome face and full lips, a sudden shift of perception hit him. The man he saw now was bald and with sunken cheeks; a face that was masculine but wicked and for some reason humanoid but not human. Perhaps it was the eyes, and Nev Sweeting's eyes, too; they were dead yet reflecting fire of some cold type, revealing an inner being like that of an android but not a human soul. San knew the ambassador was also looking deep into him, but he didn't know why. Perhaps the ambassador had no understanding of human beings. San wasn't sure what it meant; he only knew that if these two were present at all, neither of them were human in any earthly way. The ambassador of course had been that way from the beginning, but Nev Sweeting hadn't.

San answered truthfully. "We know what you want. We aren't handing it over."

"Hum," Nev Sweeting mused. Then he addressed the ambassador, but not telepathically. "Doesn't matter. They can't go anywhere with it and we can take it back soon when we bring the others in."

It was at that point that Mayor Buckley Harris rushed up, so upset that spittle formed on his lips. He gave the ambassador a look of disgust but spoke to Nev Sweeting. "Is that all? You come here for your evil toy. Don't you think you owe the people of this town an explanation? You killed more than half of the residents of this area, betrayed us to alien devils. You swore as a lawman to protect the people of this town."

Nev Sweeting's expression turned to irritation. His brow ruffled. "You want an explanation. You're all going to die. Put that with your last words on the town record."

The mayor rose to a sudden outburst. "Curse you!" he yelled, and then he pulled a militiaman's knife from his suit jacket, rushed into the light and thrust it into Sweeting's chest.

An explosion of light knocked Mayor Harris right off his feet. San, Burk and the others staggered back, hit by the energy blast. Nev Sweeting opened his arms and looked to the sky, and then he reached down and pulled out the blade. There was no blood on it though it was red – red from extreme heat. A grimace on Sweeting's face showed that it had done some damage but not a lot. He remained paused there for some moments as he healed.

San feared the militia and Jesse's farmers were going to unleash a hail of bullets and cause death everywhere. But that didn't happen; people just stared like they were in shock. And as they stared, the ambassador began to flicker with flames. In moments, he was burning, but instead of flesh cooking it was an illusion that wilted away like the dropping of a snakeskin. What remained was the horrible bald and wicked humanoid thing San had seen. It flew forward like it was shadows and liquid darkness. At incredible speed, it seized Buckley Harris and dragged him screaming a ways back into the oval of amber light. What happened there was more like a hallucination or movie special effect than anything real ... in the whirl of shadows blood exploded and

there was spatter that ballooned up then imploded to nothing as bones fell to the ground.

The slick form of the ambassador reappeared standing at Nev Sweeting's side. The metallic odour of fresh blood drifted on the breeze. People were fleeing deeper into the park. Most of the crowd up by San and Burk melted away in retreat. A couple women screamed as they were carried away and Leon Ottawa began gibbering like he'd lost his mind. Carter had come down from the hospital and Seaman had come up from left of the barricade remains to watch. Deciding against any attempt at a surprise attack, they walked around and stood beside Burk and San.

At that point, Nev Sweeting decided to talk. "Sean Seaman, well, well ... so I'm not the only one come back from the grave."

"You never got me in it," Seaman growled. "I escaped. So you're dead are you? Is that what it is? The mayor there was at least right about one thing. If you're going to kill us all anyway, you might as well tell us why. Who in the hell is this ambassador and what are you? You join them somehow?"

Nev Sweeting smiled but it was a vile smile, highlighting the fact that even his ugly whiskers were retained in his new form. "What am I? I am Beelzebub!" he cried, and as he did, his body exploded to a rising fountain of shadows that buzzed like flies. Sean Seaman stumbled off to the left, expecting to die. But there was no attack as the flies suddenly took form as shadows and then Sweeting again. "I pity you," Sweeting hissed. "But I say, fair enough. You want an explanation. I'll give you one."

Burk lit a cigar and tossed away the match. "So what is it?"

"You call my friend the ambassador. Well, the name is perfect because that is what he is. He comes from another world, another reality so to speak. He's the last of his kind. Our hungry friends that you met back at the campground destroyed his world. Now he works for them. We work for them."

"Lovely explanation," Burk said. His tone calm. "You just happen to be helping them destroy our world."

"Oh-no, definitely not. That's the beauty of it. They learned from the ambassador, and they learned from us. They don't destroy whole worlds any more. In the beginning, they gained access to the technology of superior beings and used it to destroy them. Because our friends can survive only by feeding on other life forms, they killed whole planets. That is of course not sustainable. The ambassador came here with an offer to save Earth. Your friend Marco almost ruined things when he learned too much. But we overcame that. You see, it takes time and planning but the power is there. All the ambassador had to do was get to the right people to set it all up."

"I get it," Seaman said. "He got to certain higher ups. These monsters have traitors in our military."

Nev Sweeting openly laughed. "Certain higher ups. Try nearly the entire global elite. Earth is an overpopulated dying planet. What do you think they would do if an offer came in to depopulate most of the earth, yet keep them and much of the environment remaining in great prosperity with new super technology?"

Burk blew out some smoke. "The bastards took the offer."

"They certainly did. Indian Falls is the opening showcase folks. The whole world is watching. I mean most of the power brokers that have been watching it all along. They are watching this area become depopulated. After Indian Falls, there will be three larger experimental efforts including a city, and then it moves worldwide. A win win situation. A race of aliens survives feeding on the excess population and keeps it intact for long-term use. The chosen ones survive on a beautiful green earth."

"You better check the record," San said. "The other planets these beasts visited are dead and deserts."

"Perhaps, but it is different this time. I am after all dead. Dead yet alive. I've really more in common with our hungry friends. Like their leaders I'm an energy being, a transmission to the physical. I need the energy of a biological being every once in a while to bind my atoms and survive. It is all rather complex. I arrived here by instant transmission just now. That means the old Nev was copied to energy, so the new Nev, though an exact copy, is not the old Nev who died. The new me is a new construction or energy child. A new form of evolution, what humankind has striven for ... immortality, you live on through your children and each child is exactly you."

San frowned. His mouth took on a sceptical slant. "That's not what humankind has striven for ... to become soulless devils. Nev Sweeting is dead and you are not his child or even a biological being any more. You're a copy of sorts, a tremendous fraud just like the monsters you are championing as saviours of the Earth."

"Don't be too hard on him," Burk said. "I would expect about as much from Nev. But the others, the global elite, buying into this harebrained scheme to save the Earth by killing everyone and most likely it."

Nev Sweeting took on a more serious expression and the ambassador showed interest. He'd been listening intently. "It does pose interesting philosophical questions. But the deal is done. Unfortunately, you people will be perishing as we have those we need on board already. Now at least you have time to make your peace before you die. So you are lucky, as most of the rest of the planet will have no such opportunity. Terror and death will be their lot as they die so superior beings can prosper. Hasn't it always been that way?"

San knew it hadn't always been that way or any certain way. Death, under the name and disguise of the aliens was in town. Should the ambassadors and alien beings delivering it be respected in any way? Obviously not in the face of recent murder and grief. Yet Nev Sweeting was truthful in that all through human history the wicked had killed off opponents and often the masses and prospered. Burk and his people believed with faith that the unnamed elite had always done so ... they believed it had always been a conspiracy of control. Given the way the world worked at present, nearly all people loved their own delusions as enhanced by silver-tongued deceivers.

In any plan to save the planet consideration had to be given as to whether the beliefs of humankind were worth saving. Nev Sweeting thought he was saving something, and the rest of the traitors likely thought the same. But the monsters were the power here and if they saved any of the Earth, it would be so they could feed longer on it. A future

where humans might remain and be bred for slaughter, with the planet a base to launch attacks on more worlds.

Light blazed through shades of amber and Nev Sweeting and the ambassador walked away as if they were classic. Where did the argument exist that the greedy human race deserved to live on? In the terrible light, and in the blinding brilliance of the end about to come, was humanity's guilt contained in the knowledge of the endless sin against nature and animals that encompassed all human effort? In the final judgment, there was perhaps no genuine justification for humankind to remain. Having failed in stewardship of the Earth, what moral answer could be provided to aliens and an ambassador with other ideas? Perhaps the answer that self-destructive humanity was the lesser of two evils was the only answer.

Chapter Five: THE POWER STATION

The exit of Nev Sweeting and the ambassador led to a temporary return of the canopy of darkness. Lights glowed in the center of town and the park but outlying areas were dark and empty and no one had any desire to venture out there. Even the people that had returned home mostly came back in to the park and town hall where it was supposed to be safer. San doubted if there was any safe place and those doubts increased an hour later when they got a report of distant lights from Jesse Milbrand. Again in the unmistakable mauve and purple colors but high in the sky from the direction of Deep River.

A small group gathered at The Big Nail, most of them drinking liquor confiscated by the militia. Others were sober and with a report of new activity, the initial depressed atmosphere became lively conversation.

Burk was the first to speculate. "Maybe they had to kill a lot of soldiers over at Deep River and unleashed the monsters on them."

Seaman nodded. He was cleaned up now and wearing military garb with a militia-style jacket. He still looked tired and drained. "That would be the case. Expecting cooperation from men guessing the truth would be a lot. After the campground a good number would have known something more than weird was happening."

San had been sitting quietly, playing around with the scope. "We're still missing a couple of key players. Nothing has been seen of that federal intelligence agent, Mike Nelson, and they mentioned Marco, but not whether he is alive or dead."

Carter stood up and paced across the old wood floor. He stood by Leon Ottawa at the counter and began to rap his knuckles.

Dr. DeBartolo grimaced. "That rapping of yours is giving me a headache."

"I'm thinking," Carter said. "Thinking that we should get that device of theirs out of here. Feeling I get is they like it being here. They could have demanded we hand it over after what they did to the mayor. But they didn't. That also brings to light agent

Mike Nelson. I think they have other hidden locations, not just Deep River. I think those lights tell us something just went wrong over there.”

Rin stood up. “I was thinking the same thing. Nev Sweeting and the ambassador came in with power. I think that device we got has something to do with that power. They may have a lot of them hid somewhere and put them near where they are about to attack. Which means we don't want it here. They're likely coming tomorrow night for sure.”

San's eyes lit up. “You've given me inspiration. The crazy readings. GPS and all those locations registered as unknown. I want to set up a final test. We're going to put that thing in a vehicle and move it out of town. But I'm going to record how the readings change when it moves. I remember the weird mapping of those monsters; like the picture Deena drew of where they would appear in Indian Falls. I think nearly all of those early appearances were tests as they arranged their technology. I bet they placed those devices where they would appear. They fine-tuned it over time and brought more stuff in from wherever it is they come from. It's a key reason for using the military in the first place. I mean so they can move stuff around and run their tests.”

A decision was made to leave things until daybreak. Morning was again gray but warm, the weather still summer though the sun refused to shine. The farmers and out-of-towners got together with the downtowners for another big cookout in the park, so San joined it with Deena and most of the militia. With the atmosphere festive, only a few people were left at the roadblocks and theirs was an easy job as not a single vehicle came through on the roads. There was a line of vehicles waiting to move out as people wanted to check on their farms and properties. One vehicle, an ATV, already had a package hidden on it, and the driver was to be Carter. He was to be the first to leave, taking a spin around the area while San took readings, and then stashing the device in a militia bunker not far from town.

The sun almost broke through for a moment as San talked with Deena about where they might go next if they escaped Indian Falls. San favoured hiding underground in Toronto for a time and Deena agreed. They walked over to The Big Nail where San picked up a 40-inch wall screen; a job that wasn't easy as Leon still had the idea of being paid for items. Burk cinched the deal and they walked out and over to the office. The screen was extra as San was using a feed to track Carter's movements or the movement of the device on an image map of the falls area. He had it all working in a few minutes, but as Carter was still over by the park, all they saw was one stationary point on the map. A second large screen was below it and all that flashed on it was the other seventy-five numbers the scope always read from the device. Locations that didn't exist or existed maybe in some other dimension or world.

When Carter was fully prepped on the mission Burk watched him drive off then he locked up the office at the front. The rest of town had not been told about the experiment. Only San, Deena, Burk and Rin knew exactly what was up. They didn't even have to look out the window to watch Carter leave because when he did go the dot began to move ever so slowly on the map. And numbers on the second screen run through from the M-Scope also began to move, all of them ... but at first glance not in

any real way. They appeared to be alterations of numbers with huge decimal ends changing in amounts that were infinitesimal.

Rather than stick to the risky highways, Carter began to move in a pattern radiating outward from the town, following trails he'd learned in younger days and as a militiaman. If the military did decide to target him, he knew he'd be safer on the trails where he could take cover with the Lift ATV. Using the built-in technology, he could blind most tracking methods like motion or infrared with the new jamming signals. As far as drones went, his screen showed no reading on any and he was outfitted with a bank of the new sparrow stealth missiles. They varied in size from about as big as a human thumb to some shaped like birds ... and drones, if they detected them at all, registered them as birds for that final second before they exploded.

The trails were empty, gloomy ... no vehicles and nearly all birds and animals, even insects, were out of sight, perhaps hiding from an enemy that they could detect long before human beings or current technology could. Bouncing to the top of one of the larger hills, he used his field glasses and spotted a military barricade far off on an exit road. Though the vehicles were parked, he saw no soldiers out on the road. He could only assume they were inside the vehicles, though he couldn't see clear enough to tell. It was even possible that the barricade was a dummy, just vehicles left there, while the soldiers had been killed in that action the light hovering near Deep River through the night indicated.

Carter turned on the approach to the lake; he'd been ordered to stay out of Raven's and the campground as they suspected soldiers were stationed inside. The highest close ground, a huge dune, revealed nothing human. Mostly he saw the swaths of trees, a bit of lakefront and beach, and some burned out areas and buildings inside Raven's. He realized that either the soldiers had put the fires out or more likely luck had saved them from a bigger forest fire.

Turning back from Raven's and the view of some devastation, Carter got the feeling of being in a dead world. The quiet forested routes were eating at him. If it weren't for the sounds of his engine, it would've been unnerving. Fortunately, he was now approaching the river for a long run along it and he knew the rush of water would fill his ears and cast out the silence. A doe flashed through the trees and a hawk suddenly took to the sky as his wheels thundered down a soft sand embankment to the river's edge. He went right to edge of the water then accelerated as he drove the riverside. This was a downward run and the river was deep here though breaking in plumes of foam as it rushed through large boulders and down ledges of stone. Carter figured he'd done most of the circuit out and calculating the wind of the river, it occurred to him that he would cover most of the rest of the territory following it back in.

Carter was definitely feeling better doing a run of the river. He'd done it so many times in the past he could roar along knowing about most obstacles before reaching them. A swamp area appeared; one of his favourite fishing spots, then he pulled off on a side trail for a bit and parked for a minute under the hollow of huge and nearly hidden sand cliffs. It had been one of his best hiding spots during militia exercises. Perfect in that with the vehicle under the overhang one could look out and check the sky without being spotted by any approaching copters, drones or light planes. Hell, the military

even had fairly quiet jet packs nowadays and if you didn't watch out you could be nailed by a grunt dropping down from treetops.

After a moment's rest, Carter flipped open his militia communicator, then he flipped it closed. He figured he was close enough to town to be safe, but orders were orders. They were tracking him from town but allowed no direct communication. Still, he wondered whether they had gleaned any info from his drive around.

The bunker he was to stash the package in was close by so he prepared to move out. Then, as he was about to pull the engine up from silent idle, he saw a blip on the screen. A drone and a small one. And looking out from the overhang he saw it pass by near the treetops. It circled a couple times but didn't detect him in his hiding place.

Shutting the engine and all systems off completely, he waited. The drone circled a few more times; he could've fired and destroyed it but he didn't because that meant whoever was tracking him would probably send out more. This was a bird-style drone, too. Not military issue but more like something Nev Sweeting would use to track things in the various nature reserves. Possibly, it wasn't even armed, but with weapons modules so easy to add he couldn't take the chance. He simply waited and watched until finally it faded through an open area of trees and went toward the ground. Carter knew the location, the old hydro building. It had been closed for decades and was practically buried in scrub, but since it wasn't far from the bunker he had to reach, he decided to stealth drive over for a peek at the place.

The Lift ATV moved out with the engine near silent, but a vehicle of its type still made noise going over gravel, sticks, even on asphalt. The trail down to the bunker also ran near the decommissioned hydro station, and it was rough and close to invisible as it ran through a narrow gully with heavy foliage. He kept his tracker on but got no further readings on the drone. Figuring he would have got a least a faint signal on it he got the idea that perhaps something was hidden at the station, like troops or more of the alien technology or weapons to be used in attacking the town. Stopping by the hidden bunker entrance Carter thought about stashing the device first, and then he changed his mind and pulled away. His plan was to take a quick run through the brush and use the field glasses for a look at the station. See if anything was visible on the outside. Perhaps they had a small pad for drones there and he could report it to Burk.

Replaced decades ago by the Indian Falls Electric Project, the old substation was close to buried now. There were trails by it and one access road about the quality of a cattle path. Carter moved slowly down a trail heavily choked by everything from fallen rock shelves to vines. At one point, the wild grapes were so thick it looked like a vineyard had taken over a section of forest. And there was wildlife here, an abundance of it - sparrows and songbirds flew, he saw a fox, two racoons, chipmunks in the old growth and even a couple deer. If animals were comfortable here, it didn't indicate a human presence. He figured his hunch had been wrong and the drone had simply flown off low and vanished elsewhere. At least he did for a few minutes, but when he got to the old road, he changed his mind. He could see that it had been regularly traveled in the last while ... though still mostly weed-choked there were tracks, even truck tracks cut in the moist earth. He could see a portion where gravel and wood chips had filled in a boggy area.

The road took a few turns; he couldn't see any vehicles or the station from his position. He followed it down slowly until a view of the station showed and halted there to study it with his field glasses. It had been opened up, at least at the front entry. A few parking spaces had been cleared but there was only one vehicle. It was a compact military truck. Not the sort of equipment you'd see at any big military operation. Even the trucks out at the roadblocks were bigger than it. The entire building front remained overgrown with tall weeds while the station itself was really a number of buildings. Old concrete structures, some with portions of crumbled walls replaced by chipped yellow and red brick. There was a square silo for something rising smack in the middle and it was hard to tell what any of the buildings were originally for – they were each wall-marked with a large letter and number, but of no sequence. The one where entry had been made was J1, a building with a small, corrugated entry door. Beside it, a similar building had a large green-painted barn-door entry that was closed. Far to the right an old brick structure sat atop a solid base that ran down into a gully that twisted off south. It was deeply overgrown with marsh, as it had once been the riverbed. The river had been diverted a good ways south of this passing a long time ago, so unless the place was being used for storage or some secret operations it had no use other than resting in peace and looking condemned.

He only had one building to check out and its windows were boarded up. A quick look couldn't hurt, he figured, so he shut down the vehicle and hiked quietly down. Didn't seem to be anyone around. He checked the truck but found nothing of relevance in it. Approaching the building was a spooky affair and he started wondering why he was investigating. Someone could easily watch him through a hole in the boarded windows so it was risky. Yet he didn't hear any human sounds or noise. And at the door itself, he listened but heard nothing. But he got a surprise when he tried the handle; it turned but didn't open. A check and he noticed it was an electronic lock and the newer kind where he wouldn't be able to find the receptor panel because it would be hidden and too small. It was a rather fancy security device for a building with boarded windows, and of no use from his perspective. It only took a minute for him to get out his combination army knife and use the fast cutter to take out a board at one of the windows.

Carter entered a dark cobwebbed room. He could see little via the faint light beaming through the hole so he put on a small flashlight. The room was full of old dusty decommissioned junk, mostly obsolete electronics. He moved through the cluttered room to the far door. Switching off the flashlight, he checked the crack. There was indeed light on the other side, and the door was not locked. He opened it slowly, peeked out on a dim hallway, saw no one and stepped out. Turning around he saw the door he'd been unable to enter behind him. It led to nothing but this long hallway. In the other direction, the hall ended at another door and it was strange. He walked up, stared at the vault-like construction and wondered why it would be here. And while he was wondering, it detected his presence and opened with a panel whooshing to either side so that it disappeared into the wall. Carter was afraid to step through but did look, seeing a long lit tunnel ahead. It ran down at a slant going somewhere either into the gully or under it.

Hearing a creak, he spun around but was too late. He found himself facing Mike Nelson. The special agent had a hand beam-type weapon pointed at him. Carter decided to go for it and draw his own gun; a beam hit him hard, sending him through the door opening and tumbling downhill. He saw fire, his head screamed with intense pain and a rush of burning. Swinging to his knees, he vomited up some liquid; barely able to see he heard the sound of Mike Nelson's boots as he walked up behind him.

Nelson stopped. "Well, who have we here ... Carter isn't it? I'm afraid you'll have to answer some questions. Like how did you know we were here and who else knows?"

Carter spat up some more liquid. "I don't answer questions for feds."

Other footsteps rose from below. Carter's vision began to clear on a figure walking up to him. It was Nev Sweeting, and he had the ugly grin on his face he'd shown in town.

"You don't answer questions for feds," Sweeting said. "Well. Bring him along Nelson; perhaps he'll answer questions from Beelzebub."

Carter found himself walking slowly down a long square tunnel. Mike Nelson kept his gun at his back, though Carter couldn't see much reason for it with Sweeting or Beelzebub present and probably thinking about exploding into a hungry swarm of flies. The walk was longer than expected and Carter's head stopped spinning long enough for him to ask, "How far underground does this damn place go?"

Mike Nelson responded by jamming the gun in his back. "You're the one that's answering questions, not us."

"What difference does it make," Nev Sweeting said. "He's at our mercy now. The answer is a long way, pal. This is a tunnel to other worlds. We may even have a job for you. A companion for Marco. You can help him help us."

"So Marco's a traitor, too. Well count me out. I'll never help you people."

Nelson laughed. "You will if we want it that way. Once the ambassador returns. Remember that telepathy of his. In one-on-one situations he can put you completely under his control."

"Who is the ambassador exactly? It is said he's the last of his people. He sold them out to the invaders."

Nev Sweeting decided to reply. "No, the ambassador wants to save life. Without him, our hungry friends would destroy everything. So he is the ambassador not only from them to us but us to them. The Alpha Centauri system is where he hails from ... so he's our nearest neighbour. Though his planet has been mostly destroyed. The invaders as you call them come from far off, a star cluster hundreds of light years away. I'm surprised you asked; no one else ever did so I guess you and Nelson are the only people who know the ambassador's origin. He likes things like that ... people who ask about him and see him as more than a monster."

Sweeting's voice caused Carter's body hair to prickle. "He is like a monster," Carter said. "He has powers a lot like them, though you try to paint a pretty picture of him."

"Do you think humans aren't monsters? Imagine what we would do if we captured the technology our friends have."

Carter didn't reply. He felt a wave of fatigue wash through him. The strange downhill walk and the knowledge that he'd failed a simple mission wounded him. He'd been sent to hide that device but instead he had to play curious cat and be captured. As a militiaman, he was supposed to do what was necessary to survive, but that didn't include surviving as a brainwashed human tool of the ambassador. Confusion had him wondering whether to attempt suicide, then the tunnel widened and a massive door appeared out of the dim overhead lighting. They'd arrived at a vault door, a structure that gave the impression of solidity and power. Its metallic surface gleamed silver and tiny sparkles showed everywhere on it. A few feet from it, they stopped and the effect was strange. Carter looked up, the door stretched out of sight. When he looked down, he saw the same and wobbled on his feet. He felt Mike Nelson seize his shoulder and if he hadn't done so he would have collapsed. A shaky moment passed then the door was replaced by a curtain of brilliant purple light. Nev Sweeting stepped through and Carter moved forward through it as Mike Nelson roughly shoved him from behind.

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San had Burk clear the back office so they could concentrate on Carter's journey with the orb. As he drove out of town, his vehicle became a slow bug moving on the map. Since mapping of the area had been downloaded in detail long before the town had been sealed off, the map was rich in detail. A sort of cute satellite view overlaid with sign markers of the area. Only Carter's vehicle was live information as his militia communicator sent in a steady blip. And a blip was all Burk would allow; no communication by voice or video that the enemy would track. As far as the military possibly watching via satellite or drone surveillance, that was expected and a chance they were taking.

On the second screen, San watched the play of numbers shift. All of them slowly changed as Carter's remained constant. Of course, the other numbers were readings on nothing, as the locations didn't exist. All San knew for sure as he ran the numbers through various programs, was that they meant something. Something was being read but perhaps since this was alien technology, on Earth the readings were distortions of some kind and not the real thing.

As Carter moved about the area, stopping here and there, it was becoming a long sleepy day at the screens. Burk made strong coffee and San sat back twisting his brain for a couple hours, trying get a grasp on what the numbers could be. Even coffee wasn't enough and Burk was becoming irritable, cursing every time Carter stopped for a while. Finally, Carter was close to the bunker and burial of the orb when he stopped again and for a long time.

Burk cursed. "What in the hell is he doing, taking a coffee break?"

San got up and paced the room. "I think he's hiding. He may be being followed."

There was nothing they could do but wait, bite nails and pace the room. Finally, he started moving again. He was nearly at the bunker then he veered off and went down for a run through bush to a part of the map with the tag – Derelict Buildings.

Burk's face washed over with immediate anger. "He's disobeying orders. I'm going to call him."

“No, don't. You might tip them off. Wait and see where he goes. What would he be doing in an area of overgrown derelict buildings?”

“Can't say as I know. That's the old hydro station. He wouldn't be there without a reason. Must have seen something. The bastard could have at least come back first and notified us. Now we don't know what is going on.”

Another long wait nearly overcame them ... it wasn't actually that way, but seemed like it because they were now nervous about what might be happening. They saw the blip slowly enter the area of derelict buildings then it was gone. At that point, Burk turned to San.

“His communicator is blocked. Now what? He's on foot. You can't drive in there. We're going to have to go in. It's not that far. I'm going to pack up some stuff right now.”

“Okay, but let's think ... what might we be up against? If we go now we might be in there after dark. And that's trouble.”

Burk didn't get an answer out; the numbers screen was flashing like San had become an instant prophet. And they did indeed have trouble. The numbers were all altering to long digits then back to simple combinations. As San stared in wonderment, one of his software programs came up with a reading. Eyes tired from the screen San had it printed out and together with Burk, they stared at the paper. According to the software program the other numbers weren't GPS locations on Earth, they were star map readings.

“Holy hell,” Burk exclaimed. “What did Carter do in there?”

“I don't know. He stumbled on to something. We have to go out there now.”

Plans were made to leave but the idea of rushing to Carter's rescue proved easier said than done. Everyone from Rin to Seaman and Deena demanded they stay in town. Some like Leon and Jesse were actually relieved when they heard that the alien device had been lost along with Carter. They didn't want it in town and nearly everyone expected an attack after nightfall. Either the monsters or military or both. The visit of Nev Sweeting and the ambassador had convinced everyone that time was nearly up. San and Burke they wanted in town. Too easy to be picked off outside of it and commanders were needed for the expected showdown. After a short meeting at The Big Nail, it was decided that they'd go back to the office for some more studies on the data and to put together a town defence plan.

Walking past the park they noticed that the people in that area had become somewhat disconnected from those in the hospital and town hall. People tended to stay put now, the more fearful at the hospital and hall, the younger and braver out partying and playing games in the park. The militia did constant patrols and kept an eye out for defections. So far, no one had fled that they knew of ... some teens had broken into and taken over nearby houses but they weren't leaving. Everyone was taking their chances in town rather than attempting any risky escape via the river or the bush. The river really was the last hope if a full invasion of town happened. They could get some people down river a ways on boats; maybe a fair crowd ... but knowing the speed of the enemy, the injured and slow would have no chance of escape. Because of this the

militia had been very quiet in setting up and then canvass covering boats prepared for a last minute escape.

Back at the office, it was mainly San and Burk hashing things out with Rin pouring coffee.

San spoke first. "The people mistakenly think we only want to rescue Carter. In addition, they don't want us to bring that alien piece back here. It's not about that. Whatever happened there Carter caused a burst and gave us new information. This is probably the source, where their power emanates into Indian Falls."

"That makes sense," Burk added. "It would be a hidden location, not Deep River. They'd never fully trust the military."

Rin pursed his lips after a sip of bitter coffee. "Obviously they don't trust the military. Seaman told us that. They have commanding officers under control and kill smaller fish that learn too much."

San turned away from the screens. "If it is the source, we're the only people positioned to go in. Maybe two of us. I'll go with Burk. We go out the back way, and leave undercover."

Burk nodded. "Rin will be in charge of town defence. We'll leave him your experimental gun set to fire. Plus, he has our beam guns. If military men come in, we've enough armed people to hold them back for a while. Maybe we can get into that hideout there and find something that stops them before shit hits the fan."

Rin rubbed his whisker stubble. "I'll set up a vehicle; put it out back a street over. It'll be outfitted and waiting in thirty minutes. I'll have a patrol pull people out of the way and open that smaller west barricade for exit. It'll be the same as with Carter. I can track you from here but don't try any voice or visual communication, just use a signal that appears as random noise."

Half an hour later San was outfitted in militia camouflage clothing and driving with Burk through the opened barricade in one of the militia's special Jeeps. Burk was at the wheel and San had turned in the seat to inspect one of the packs prepared for them. Everything he could think of was in them, including about enough food rations for two weeks. Taking a quick look back to the road San saw Burk about to head downhill on a run over to the river. In spite of the bumpy ride, he went to work lightening his pack.

Burk glanced over. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking stuff out of my pack. Rin outfitted us with way too much. Enough ammo, plus guns and stuff under that tarp to fight a small army. I'm not sure I need any of it. I need my scope and that's about it."

"Lighten mine too. Guess at what we'll need to go in and maybe have to shoot against a few people. The packs and this Jeep have everything because they were prepared that way ... for the coming Armageddon."

"Yeah ... but if we make it to Armageddon it'll be an act of God, because we don't have much chance of seeing anything more than the final end of Indian Falls. Armageddon will arrive if things don't change. But that'll be after we're dead."

San was almost finished when water suddenly splashed over him and the ride got rough. He'd finished setting up the packs to his liking and he turned quickly and looked. Burk was driving right into the foaming river. San wondered if the man had lost his mind. But the Jeep didn't sink. The wheels found traction and went right across the river at a thirty-degree downstream angle, and then the vehicle bumped onto the rocky shore and up a path cut in the bank on the other side.

Burk noted San's confused glance. "We went over a fallen bridge. It never went completely under."

Accepting the explanation San remained silent, picking up on the fact that birds and insects were active here and not silent. They were running along a faint trail. Apparently, Burk knew it and could follow it easily. It never went that far from the river, but into deep brush, and at about the deepest spot Burk suddenly braked and shut off the vehicle.

San looked around. "I don't see any buildings."

"We aren't there yet. I got a reading, drone in the air somewhere near here. We go the rest of the way in on foot."

And on foot, they went, but only after cutting some brush and covering the vehicle. It turned out they weren't far off but had to do some tortuous climbing up a long embankment. San reached the top in a sweat and pissed after tripping on roots three times. At a copse near the other down run, they paused and looked. The buildings of the old hydro station rested in near gloom below and one building had one stone wall running way down out of sight in a gully. Burk went through the sky with field glasses but didn't spot any drone.

San scratched his itchy head. "Why did we do this high climb when could have easily followed the trail around?"

"They'd expect us to come in that way. The drone would be watching that trail."

"Okay, no one's there so let's descend."

"Wait, I see something. Someone's coming out of that building. Look who it is."

Burk passed the glasses to San. A door had opened far below and he saw a man walking over toward an area of brush, about where the trail would be. The man was special agent Mike Nelson, outfitted in semi commando gear.

Burk took command. "I bet his drone landed down there and he's picking it up. Carter parked in there too. I remember the map. The way it is I go straight down and you work around so one of us will be at his front, the other his back."

A problem with the plan was that San was not trained in the bush like Burk. As he walked through the dry gloom, trying to figure his way around thick scrub, the pack became a burden always catching and threatening to make telltale noise. Everything crackled on the dry ground and recent rains of ash had killed leaves and increased deadfall and duff. He ended up going a bit higher to a band of evergreens that he could get through. In spite of the difficulty it didn't take long, but as he came to an opening near the field and end of the target trail he expected that Burk would already be there

waiting for him. He also couldn't be sure if Mike Nelson was still there. In the passing time, he could have gone back in or simply left on the trail.

San found the ground in front of him too dry; it would be hard to cross it silently. Too many matchstick twigs, cones and deep grass. He could see the end of the trail so he waited and listened, hearing bird cries then a slight bang. It sounded like someone rummaging around somewhere. Deciding to take a chance, he crossed the opening and got behind an oak. A glance down the trail and he saw Mike Nelson. He'd pulled the some scrub away from a vehicle and was searching the inside of it. It was Carter's vehicle of course.

Carter wasn't present and San wondered where Burk was ... but not for long because Mike Nelson suddenly turned and looked in his direction. San kept behind the tree. He was sure he'd been well hidden and wondered if the guy was psychic or something. Turned out he was because footsteps began to move up the trail. San had a gun in his coat, but he'd have to look around the trunk to fire it. If Nelson already had his drawn, he'd get the best shot. Since San knew Nelson was a trained agent he didn't want to test his shooting skills. Better to play cat and mouse so he crawled through the deep grass to the edge of the bush and another tree. He heard Nelson running now and as he turned to duck behind the tree a shot fired and almost got him. But it wasn't a bullet, it was a heat beam that took off a section of tree bark and left curls of burning wood smoke.

This was big trouble and where was Burk. With Nelson's silent beam, he could already be dead. Another deadly beam hit the tree, this one so fierce it slashed the trunk just above San's head and left the tree about to fall. And it did go over with San attempting a dive in nearly the same direction to escape Nelson's gun.

The tree went down with a big crunch in the dry brush, the force of the trunk causing a share of thunder. San rolled up right next to branches that almost crushed him and barely managed to hold back his trigger finger. He couldn't fire because at that moment Burk was flying through the air. Nelson still had his weapon up ready for the kill shot, but the beam flashed off and caused some destruction in the bush at the same time as Burk took him down in a hard tackle.

A brawl was underway in the long grass opening with Burk laying fists into Nelson and a hard boot as Nelson snaked away and got up. Nelson lost his gun and pulled a blade but he wasn't quick enough. As he turned with the knife, he got a boot to the breadbasket. The knife fell; he staggered back but recovered and got into a karate stance. Burk moved in like a street fighter. Nelson never got any karate blows in ... he was taken down hard in scrub and Burk was pounding him now like he was going to murder him.

Burk dragged the beaten Nelson up by the hair and threw him down. "I'll kill you, you bastard fed traitor," he rasped ... then he went at Nelson with a flurry of hard kicks.

San ran to his side and pulled him back. "He's out, can't you see that. Don't kill him now; we need him to lead us inside."

Burk's face was red and smeared with dirt. Momentary confusion filled his eyes. "Okay, let's handcuff him good. That's Carter's vehicle he was searching. No Carter present

though. He's likely already been captured. Guess it was Nelson running the drone. The pieces of it are on the ground up there. I busted it before he spotted us.”

They took a rest and drank some water. They had Nelson chained to the vehicle and San brought him out of a semi coma by splashing his face with some water. Burk was taking a leak. He looked around then zipped up and walked over.

“Lucky you ain't dead, Nelson. Where's Carter?”

“You got the wrong man. I tried to help Carter. I told him not to go in there alone.”

“Bullshit,” Burk roared. “I just saw you try to blow San away. It's you that was running that drone too. So I'll ask you one more time. Where's Carter?”

“Okay, he's alive. He's inside. I'll take you to him.”

San tapped Burk on the shoulder. “Our alien device is still in the back. Carter must have hid the vehicle and gone in. They spotted him, shot him or captured him.”

“Who are they?”

San grinned. “I mean guards. Likely military. This is a secret location. Must be more soldiers. Probably Nev Sweeting, the ambassador and some of the invaders are inside somewhere too. My guess is that their real command center is here.”

Burk nodded. “All right special agent man. You're guiding us. Any tricks and you die instantly. I don't particularly need you. Only San wants you alive.”

San checked to make sure Mike Nelson was securely bound wrists and legs to the vehicle, and then he got the scope and had Burk come down the path with him. Burk pointed out the smashed drone over by some pines. Darker clouds were above, turning late afternoon to early nightfall. San had the scope and what he wanted to do first was check the door. The beaten path led to one locked door; they saw a board pulled away at a nearby window.

“Strange,” Burk said. “Having the one door with a new lock on it, yet the building has boarded up windows anyone could use for entry.”

San thought it over while he scoped the door. “The drone guarded the path and area. This door must lead through to something like a security post. Wait, the scope registers pretty much nothing other than a door. Must be an empty hall on the other side. Whatever is in there is in deeper. They could easily close off the corridor inside and have motion detectors or cameras behind the boarded windows. They'd know if someone entered. Carter likely entered through that section pulled away there. Let's see, altering the settings to read deeper I do get a corridor, no booby traps or anything else though. Problem is the lock.”

“We'll get Nelson to open the lock. He came out so he must be expected to come back in.”

Nelson was in pretty rough shape from Burk's beating. San freed him but kept him handcuffed. They took another slow walk to the door and Nelson informed them that his lighter would open it. San pulled in from a pocket hidden in Nelson's jacket. It

scoped as an electronic device. It also had a thumb impression in the metal surface so it only worked on Nelson's thumbprint.

The door opened unexpectedly from the center with two panels sliding in ... San and Burk stepped to the side leaving Nelson to face any music. But there was only silence and dim lights. Pulling up the scope San pointed it down the corridor but nothing registered but a corridor so he assumed it must go in quite deep as it also angled downward. A reading suddenly flashed. Energy bursts, but not from the corridor but over by the gully.

“Know what Burk. This is tunnel goes in a long way. I'm getting a reading from over there so let's take a look.”

The three of them picked their way over. It was the spot where the largest of the old hydro buildings had a deep stone wall dropping way down into the gully. They couldn't see the bottom for the darkness.

San faced Nelson. “What's down there?”

“Nothing that I know of. The entrance is over there.”

“Yeah,” Burk said. “What does the entrance lead to?”

“Another door, but I can get us through it. You're really wasting your time here. We have a small military post there, that's all.”

San had his eyes on the scope. “Nelson says nothing is down there. So that means something is. The three of us can't climb down there, but I can. You go through to door he's talking about. If it's clear wait there until I come back up. If energy bursts are coming from down there, I have to check it because that's what we're looking for. A military post is of no use to us. A source I might be able to disable is what we want.”

Burk's sceptical look indicated disagreement. “Carter is in there. We need to rescue him. Splitting up is dangerous.”

San thought it over. “If they have the ability to overpower us in there, two of us won't make a real difference. Let me do the run down.”

Burk watched San begin his descent into the gully then walked back over to the entry door with Mike Nelson in tow. The door remained open and didn't close until they were inside. The dim overhead lighting and its faint bluish coloration reflected as a strange gloss off the walls. Metallic paint had been used to cover the wall surfacing and it appeared that any other doors had been sealed off. Only one was visible in the side of the wall a short ways ahead and if weren't for Burk's sharp eyes he would have missed it. Only a faint crack showed. The sight of it spooked him. It reminded him of a surprise door in a fun house, set to be invisible so someone could pop out. So as he prodded Nelson ahead, he took the safety off his machine pistol, all the time wishing he'd kept Nelson's burn gun instead of giving it to San.

“What's that door for ... what's behind it?”

Nelson halted and replied after thought. “It's an old storage area. We left it there in case we need to store anything near the entry.”

“Who's we?”

“My soldiers. I told you, there's nothing in here but a little observation post so we can watch Indian Falls.”

Burk rammed the gun in hard. “Open that door.”

“In case you haven't noticed, I'm handcuffed.”

Pulling out his hunting knife, Burk put it in the crack, shifted it and pried. It popped open and he stepped back leaving Nelson standing in the opening. Burk peeked in; saw piles of junk and faint light from a distant boarded window. It was the window with some boards taken off they'd seen earlier. No one was inside so it appeared Nelson was telling the truth. It was only a storage place or a door they could pop open and hide behind if someone got through the entry.

Closing the door Burk had Nelson begin moving on. It was a long walk down and the light was giving Burk a headache. Frequency of it, he figured. His mood shifted to one of mild depression. From the high of hoping to pound Nelson to death to this journey down to some dungeon, the contrast didn't agree with him. It was also becoming clear that he should have had San stay with him. This wasn't any minor military post. It was too far down. They were now well below the ruins of the old station and San was going way down lower. Any bunker that large and deep would have strong defences. He began to think about going back.

So far, the coast had been clear. He could probably stop somewhere and wait for San to come back up and down the corridor. They wouldn't have to return to the door because San could simply burn it down or come in the window that they suspected Carter of using. Best to keep moving, Burk thought, his mind adrift. It came to him that Nelson, even though cuffed, was expected to make a go at disarming him. Maybe check him into the wall to knock him out or something. But Nelson was cooperating and that was a bad sign that meant he was confident that something waiting ahead would free him.

After a final downward run the corridor levelled out; something loomed ahead. Lights came on and brightened as they approached. A minute later, they were facing a huge heavy metal door. If it was metal, Burk wasn't quite sure what it was made of. He didn't expect any honest reply from Nelson either so he forced him to sit down then approached the door on his own.

Burk remained wary, if Nelson made a move to get up he'd turn and fire on him. Finish the job and tell San he had no choice. Moving closer the door seemed to alter in appearance. He looked up and blinked his eyes. He could see no top of the door. It rose forever. Pulling his gaze away, he was struck by vertigo and wobbled on his feet. Before he could recover, Nelson made his move by rising and charging at him. Burk got half turned around but no shot off; Nelson ploughed into him and they fell into the door ... and right through it. The substance had either been an illusion or something had changed instantly to allow them through.

Burk tumbled like he was falling downhill. Darkness consumed him like a closing glove, and then he was blind. Landing in something soft, he rose to one knee and put his hand to his eyes. Nelson wasn't on him so he expected he'd been blinded too. Burk

shook his head and hair as long moments passed. Sparkles began to switch to a view of something tangible. But what he was seeing wasn't believable. His eyes told him he was in a vast vaulted room facing a series of tall arches that were a ways across a stone floor. These arches showed contrary visions and none of them were much like Earth. They were entries into other environments; some with odd sunlight and foliage, other barren desert and others still, wind, water and ice. Burk continued shaking his head; something swirled and took form in front of one of the arches. At that point, he passed out.

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San descended the steep side swiftly through a rough-and-tumble of weeds, rocks and broken bank. A ways down only the sheer side of the main building remained visible. Though the top square of the building wasn't very big, the stone side stretching down out of sight amazed him. There must have been a dam and a small reservoir here at one time. It had all been taken out; a big job that told him natural disasters of some brand had been a catalyst that led to directing the course of the river elsewhere. He was also descending into deeper gloom as the hidden sun was falling above and to the west. Its final glow disappeared leaving him in the halo of his light. The militia had prepared well for Armageddon, the portable light being surprising in its ability to light the distance without blinding the user. It almost failed him once as he came to a sudden steep area but he halted in time. Studying the steep bank of hardened clay below he knew he was in the old riverbed and even it was deep in this spot. Off to his left the wall still stretched down, but he thought he could see the bottom or the shadows of it.

San worked his way along the side and found a deep crevice that angled down through the clay. Here he did some quick jumps as disturbed snakes flashed in front of him and into the dark. The snakes worried him and he hoped there wouldn't be more. A poisonous snakebite at this point would be very bad. Wickedly bad, but he only saw one more then he came to the bottom level. Though it wasn't very level. Using a play of the light he saw weedy undulations in front of him like furrowed ground had been overgrown. He decided the best course would be to get near the wall and check its bottom, but the downward run had taken him in the other direction so he had a ways to work over. And it wasn't a pleasant walk in the dark but more of spook stroll. When he looked up, he could see dark mist and more undulations ahead.

After ten minutes of picking his way ahead, he came to a change of scenery. He got over the last bank and met a flat plane that stretched ahead in the direction of the wall. Stepping down he touched it tentatively with his foot. It was hard as stone with a look of cracked black glass.

San took some steps ahead feeling some warmth come through it to his feet. Pausing he took the M-Scope out of his pack and took a reading. The simple text message was burn area. He didn't bother to adjust the settings to find out exactly what had been burned. Mud of some sort. The real question was how it would get burned. There was nothing down here to burn anything.

The wall appeared in the distance, the light shining across one dark surface to show the outline of another rising straight up. He walked ahead, noting nothing of interest on

the ground other than some loose stones. As he came closer to the wall he saw what at first appeared to be a stained portion, some more steps and it appeared to be an inset portion of the stone. Mist so dark it was like drifting shadows blocked part of his view but when he was close enough he saw that it was a large arch and it was more than inset; it tunneled right into the stone. A quick scope of it revealed it as the energy source and that periodic dark flashes were occurring inside of it.

San walked up as close as he dared; he felt entering it would be too risky. Even being near it was too risky. It had to be energy that had at times poured forth from it that had turned clay and loam to a substance like black glass. Still it was like a volcano in one way; it had been active but wasn't active now. Its entry was right at ground level so he took a chance and went inside a few steps. Beyond the thick metal ring inset in the indentation, he saw an interior, the ceiling of which was ribbed like he was entering the belly of a monster whale. Electricity or light suddenly flashed high in the ribs farther down, causing him to turn and run outside and quickly get away from the open arch.

He knew this was it; the source or exit point where the incredible power of the alien technology emanated out into Indian Falls. Since the energy was unknown, he had no idea what it was ... something beyond anything human science had ever engaged.

Going across to the far side of the arch entry, San picked along the wall. He figured there had to be another entry into this thing. Maybe one for access. It was also hard to grasp how it had been created; no road down into this gully, no sign of vehicles ever being present. Something vast had been constructed with this old power plant as a cover, perhaps very long ago.

Finding an indentation, he held the light up then stepped back. It was the outline of a door, it was the same color as the stone, and it opened on the inside. The outside was completely smooth. Putting down his pack, he went through it. A small case of pliable explosive was inside. He hadn't removed it earlier because it was light and he didn't want to leave it in the vehicle. Taking his time and rolling over a small boulder, he placed it in the four corners of the outline, set the tiny detonator nibs and got well out of the way. It blew with very little noise; a hiss and snap like he'd broken a seal, then the whole piece fell outward releasing a draft of stale air.

With the entryway open, he switched the light to beam mode and flashed it inside. Just behind the blown door, a mass of sticky cobwebs had survived the explosion. So much dust was floating in the light beam, he couldn't see anything. A tall stiff weed grew out of the blackened ground not far from the opening so he pulled it and used it to sweep away the cobwebs. As the dust settled, he noticed a small panel set into the interior stone and little else. A corridor ran back a long ways and the walls were smooth though stained.

He put the light on the panel; it appeared to be only an interior control for the door. No security devices and a very old model technologically speaking. Stepping inside he walked slowly ahead, with it in mind that this exit – he termed it that because it didn't open as an entrance – was much older than the other huge cavern-like tunnel.

San noticed he was going downward even deeper and not up toward the power station. He walked for about five minutes and guessed that he was now a ways below

the deepest foundation of the station and the old reservoir bed. Smooth square walls ended and he was suddenly walking in a cave. But a smooth-walled one, no stalagmites or moisture or slime. It was in fact quite dry, dead, and even cobweb free. The walls began to curve like he was corkscrewing farther downward, then they suddenly straightened and he found himself approaching a large opening. The air was still and musty, all ahead was dark. He began to think he'd found a tunnel to something else that had nothing to do with the forces above he was trying to investigate. A large cavern was beyond the opening and on stepping into it, he became almost convinced he was on the wrong track. With the light on glow it lit the whole area, showing walls painted with Indian art; looked like ancient Iroquois stuff, and a huge sculpture right in the middle of the cavern. It was a totem of sorts, but thick and squat. It rose to the ceiling as a pillar and was composed of three large heads. One a bear, the other Raven and the top head an animal that did not exist on earth. It was a cross between a big bear and humanoid being in representation.

San moved to the perimeter and studied the walls, if an escape route ran from here there had to be another hidden door. And there was ... he found the outline and again it was one way from the inside. The cavern seemed quite sound so he again planted explosives in the cracks. A very small amount but the detonation proved enough. It didn't fall out this time but opened. Again a panel on the inside but a cave not a tunnel. A flash of the light showed a turn not too far in so he entered and began to follow it. This time the cave melted away into a square man-made tunnel that went upwards to a solid vault-like door. Stepping up he studied it, finding it to be steel. It had a large metal wheel handle on the outside this time so he grasped it and attempted to turn it. It felt seized so he grabbed a strap from his pack and put it over to get a better grip and used all his strength. It moved a tiny bit so he played it back and forth until he finally got it to spin left a couple revolutions. Again using all his strength, he attempted to pull it open. It moved very slowly; he got it open just enough to maybe push his pack through and squeeze through himself. But he didn't do that; instead he reached through with the scope and tried to get a reading. Pulling it back up he saw the composition of the stone walls on the display, which was of no use to him ... so he sifted through the full reading seeing 'bunker or cave, no relevant life forms present.'

The reading was enough to go on; he pushed the pack through then squeezed in himself. The light brightened a dusty corridor. He walked down it to a green door and opened it quietly; he illumined the inside and found himself entering a guard post of sorts. Very old and abandoned. There was an enclosed area cut right out of the stone and empty gun racks on the wall behind it. Other doors led to more rooms, some large and all of them stripped completely. He found one room that still had some paneling on a wall plus a flag and an old framed photograph. The tattered flag was Canadian and the yellowed and shrivelled photograph was of a general. He placed the uniform as old World War Two style.

San found it all rather baffling; caves obviously led here from somewhere else ... this place had been a place of Indian worship, a hidden military base and a power plant, all at different times. The secret military base made the least sense. World War Two was overseas and nothing was happening here ... or was it ... San realized that likely something had been discovered that led to closing the plant and even moving the river.

That would be something top secret but not the first opening he'd found because that appeared to be a new construction.

A lot of this old base if not all of it had not been dug but was concrete that had been smoothed over an old cave system's floors. Other than the odd musty relic here and there, this place was empty, but it led to something else because he heard a growing hum. Similar to an electric power hum but deeper; a base thrum at times that could be felt in the floor like an impending earthquake. He turned out his light; complete blackness ... continuing ahead he went down a corridor that had a strong salty fragrance. Then something caught his eye, he put out the light again and saw blue light spilling through a distant crack. It was in the wall at an apparent dead end. This time it did not mark a door and the humming noise from the other side was strong. Looking around he found an exit. He'd walked right past it; a tiny slit in the wall one could just squeeze through. Piece by piece he went through, light then scope, pack and himself. The light revealed a storage area and right above the crack he'd come through there was a sign. It was lit in a phosphorescent way and said Emergency Exit. And this told him the long way he'd entered past the totem and old base was a way out if there was a catastrophe inside.

This storage area had a main entry door and looking around he saw mostly new and modern items. It took a moment to hit him because when he turned off his own beam the natural style light that came on threw off his vision. This light was from tiny cells in the ceiling and used almost no power. Generation would be bacterial; a common form of lighting underground now because it never failed and could be set to come on via movement. A look around showed cases of tools, everything from advanced bio-electronic replacement panels to ordinary hammers and screwdrivers.

Whatever was humming down here apparently needed maintenance; he went to the door, noticing it had a high quality handle and lock fixture, but it wasn't locked. He opened it a crack, bright light streamed in and he closed it. Listening for a time, he waited for any sound, but there was nothing but the ubiquitous humming.

San poked his head out, got a brief view of a corridor and pulled it back in. He hadn't seen anyone so he took a chance and stepped out, finding himself in brilliant blue-tinted light. And this was no cave; it was more like a transport tube. A huge copper-toned cylinder leading down to brighter light at a turn in the tunnel. Behind him, the tube also ran to a turn, but no one was present and he saw no surveillance equipment so he walked down. The turn took him to an opening into an observation bubble. Again, no one was present; but this time what he was observing was incredible. He was at the end of what had to be the arched entrance he'd seen outside. Looking down through transparent pieces, he could see the vast arch. The same flashes of light were occurring in it as he'd seen on entry but now he could see they came from large silver plates all along its back at the top. These were hatches of some type and likely what was being serviced from the room he'd been in. He looked down and directly below him he saw something familiar –orbs, a mighty array based on the same orb he'd been scoping. They were built around a huge gun-like projection like this thing was an apocalyptic weapon.

San's feeling was it had to be a weapon of a different type, not one that blew things up but one that transmitted. And the transmission was planet destroying because it brought in hostile life forms. This was the space ship the ambassador and his invaders used. Not one that flew through space but transferred them across it somehow.

Lifting the M-Scope San was about to try for a reading. A sudden clanging noise behind him distracted him. He lowered the scope and turned, certain a door or hatch had closed back there. Another dinging noise echoed up the corridor through the hum, convincing San to move. At this location, he was trapped. He had to get back in the service room door before whatever was coming saw him.

He attempted to run with silent feet but the hiking shoes he had on weren't very soft. He could hear his footfalls, his heart, and an almost drumming noise.

Chapter Six: THE ALIENS

It was bad news, there was likely more than one of them. He reached the door and was about to open it when something came around the distant corner. And this thing was ugly; a man-big insect of sorts, but one that looked made of metal. It had feet like a centipede and multiple arms ... sickly eyes with heavy green lids opened wider like it was amazed to see him. Then its mouth opened showing lines of sharp silver teeth and it roared.

San was momentarily frozen; the thing came alive, shook its back, and emerged from a larger skin or coat, which clanged to the ground. It had a flashing collar on its neck like it was under control by a master. Tools came to San's mind; this was the repairman and he wasn't human and he was about to spring down at him. In the flash of a second, he raised the scope and pressed the general read button, and then he flew in the door and slammed it as the thing sprang toward him. Inside the storage area, he moved quickly, heading across to the narrow space where he'd entered. The thing behind him was fast and it took down the door with a big crash. San was just pulling his head the rest of the way through the crack when he saw it charging for him.

It hit the wall with a dull crash and sent dust flying. San was already running through the old empty base, flicking his light on as he moved. Then the light flickered and failed; he heard the thing tooling away the stone behind him and now he was running in the dark.

A tiny sliver of light appeared; he managed to find another smaller light in the pack. It glowed and he found a door he'd missed. Again barely visible and of the type that had to be blown out. He had the explosives in fast and blew it. It swung open; another entry, this one to what looked like a living area but not for humans. He was likely going right into the lair of the monster repair creature, but since it was smashing through the other door and by now running down to him, he went inside and quietly used force to pull heavy door back into the seal.

Moving quietly across the room, he studied the odd setup. A moment later, he heard the thumpa, thumpa of the creature passing. For the moment, it was on a wild goose chase into the old base. San sat down on what was either a shelf or a long workbench and looked at the reading on the scope. Three lights were now blinking at the top of the screen and the text readout had altered to italic and dark blue. At the bottom, a blinking message said full processing mode engaged, while the tag text or the M-Scope's initial find of what it had looked at said, Potential Alien Life Form.

San raised his eyebrows; he'd been using the scope for a while but only now did Marco's reason for designing it come back to him. Marco was a spook hunter. A lifelong hobby. He must have spent decades designing this scope and its technology. It was also questionable as to whether all of the technology was from Earth. The processing power seemed beyond even current military technology. The hidden database inside the thing would be of stupendous size. It was a device that used the magnetic spectrum and who knew what else to label something. The final purpose was to find something that couldn't be labelled, something that didn't exist on Earth in any scientific sense. A spook or in this case a life form that didn't match anything existing Earth.

San put the scope in his pack, leaving it working on what it had found. Another door showed in a distant haze of light. His guess was that it was another entrance to the corridor, and he was correct. He stepped out in it just as the hum suddenly sank down to silence. No one was in sight, but the new quiet atmosphere was not desirable. He could hear himself breathe.

The corridor led to a vault-like exit door; one that apparently didn't discriminate because it opened as he walked up to it. Yellow-tinted light showed on the other side; there wasn't much he could do other than walk through. He found himself in an immense underground area the size of an airport hangar. A white marble floor stretched flawlessly in front of him to a bubble-shaped building at its center. Along the perimeter, he saw arches, a number of them, and all darkened but showing flashes of light.

The view was so overwhelming he had no idea what to do next. And that decision was made for him. Three figures were running straight for him over the floor. Two were human soldiers and he wasn't sure what the third was ... though his guess was that the scope would read it as humanoid but alien.

San took advantage of the charge by tossing his pack into the center soldier and swinging around to engage the man on the left. San quickly tossed him to the floor but the larger humanoid was on him with crushing strength and a bad odour that took his breath away. He managed to free himself and get one soldier with a hard punch that took him down, but the other two were back on him and wrestling him down. In moments, he was handcuffed and being led off to the bubble station at the center. The alien repair creature appeared at that point and skittered ahead of them to a large blue door.

That door opened; a shadowy form stood just inside and it came clear slowly like a grainy hologram, becoming Nev Sweeting. Sweeting had a confident grin on his face as he waved them inside. The motley crew went through a short corridor and were in

another smaller room of similar design to the large one. At the exterior were views of the arches and in the center was a bubble shape. The arches were opaqued by mist-like flows and when a door opened in the bubble, it revealed a circular room – a command post.

Nev Sweeting had San brought over and his cuffs switched to the front as he was placed in a chair. The last of the crew, the multi-legged alien, didn't stay but exited, apparently headed back to his job deep in the complex. Nev Sweeting also took a chair but kept the soldiers standing. San glanced at the large almost-human alien soldier, studying six-fingered blue hands and ears big enough to be weapons. The humming was present even here though faint and Sweeting seemed to take a rise in it as his cue to start talking.

“You're late, the ambassador and his top boys have already left ... a bit of business having to do with the final destruction of Indian Falls.”

San said nothing. Nev Sweeting did a wave with his hand and the entire bubble structure they were in went transparent. But not quite because arrays of screens and controls floated in the transparency. Beyond the bubble, San again got a view of the encircling arches and their strange flows of mist.

“I'm a bit bored,” Sweeting said. “Nothing much to do until I go into town. Everything here is automatic and nearly all controlled from the source.”

San decided to get Sweeting talking. “You mean from Deep River?”

“I'm afraid not. There was a touch of disaster over there at Deep River. We had a few betrayers in the top echelons. Had to feed them to our friends. The actual control is from another world.”

San smiled. “One in the Alpha Centauri system according my findings.”

“You know too much but it's too late for it to do you any good. The system is already primed ... that's what Indian Falls is about. Getting the game rolling on this planet and that is already done. We can pinpoint any location now and thousands of our friends ride in on the magic carpet. The great cull of the deserving human race has begun.”

Disgust imprinted San's face. “I wish you'd stop describing a horrendous crime as a solution. And yes, I've already guessed what Indian Falls is about ... this setup and that huge exit arch out there; it's what transports them in from another world. No space ships to detect, no war in the air. Control of needed people at the top. Decades were spent on this setup. The ambassador came here long ago too, using spooky happenings as cover while it was all put in place. I suppose at that time you're friends were taking their sweet time devouring some other planet.”

Nev Sweeting raised his right eyebrow and took on an arrogant look. “They do always populate the current host world. They'll be populating Indian Falls. Sort of their hometown on Earth. But you are wrong about other worlds. They don't devour everything. Many are kept alive.”

“Yeah, you said that before. But I don't much believe it.”

“Really, take a look.” A wave of Nev Sweeting's hand and a semi-transparent control panel took shape next to his chair. The controls were a touch screen and an image that looked like a puzzle. Sweeting moved a few pieces about, light flashed, and suddenly the mist flowing at the entrances of the series of outer arches vanished, revealing what was inside.

San looked about slowly. Various levels of light lit long deep chambers; each arch contained its own environment ... plant life, furniture of different types. And strangest of all each arch was a prison cell, though the prisoners were not human beings. Directly in San's line of sight was a blue-skinned humanoid creature, completely naked and staring with large oval eyes. In the next cell, a large bird-like creature slept in a bed of sand. One cell contained a ghostlike form that shifted shape from humanoid to that of a large floating blot.

Awed, San slowly studied the other occupants, and Sweeting became impatient. “Look behind you,” he said.

San obeyed and saw that the cell directly across to his rear contained two humans. One of them was a rather hypnotized Burk McCraw and the other was Marco. Marco did not look hypnotized; he was watching intently and appeared to be in good shape, though he was wearing full body suit that appeared to be prison garb these aliens had come up with for humans.

San turned back to Nev Sweeting. “You mean your friends kept the odd prisoner here and there from the worlds they ruined. If they're here I'm sure you have a use for them.”

“Of course. They work for us. All except your friends. Burk will be around until we question him fully and decide what to do with him. Marco will be around longer; he will be working for us, or we'll find a way to rob his brain. One or the other. Your future is the same as Burk's. Questioning and death, unless Marco for some reason needs a human assistant.”

“Really. I thought you said this stuff was all self-operational. What are workers for?”

“Perfection of course. Don't forget it's stolen technology. The creator race is dead. In decades to come we have some long leaps to make to other worlds. Marco's value is in his ability to grasp the technology. No one on earth detected the ambassador other than him; he even had the audacity to break in here and steal things for the improvement of that system of his. My personal interest is of course as a conservation officer. I will be in charge of preserving the animal life forms of Earth. To me it is the perfect solution. Eliminating the human scourge that is destroying this planet, handing the human heritage over to other species.”

“Yeah, and eventually you'll leap to the wrong world and that'll be the end of you.”

“Enough talk. Mike Nelson is returning and I'll be off to Indian Falls to destroy the rest of the idiots there. You get to wait with Marco ... and the longer we take the better it will be for you.”

At Nev Sweeting's hand signal San was dragged off by the soldiers and over to the cell; it was the alien soldier that opened the cell, using a thin hand panel to

momentarily fade the near invisible force wall. The M-Scope and San's pack remained over at the command centre. They threw him inside with a rough toss and Marco caught him and pulled him over to a spot on the floor. The distant entry door to the complex was opening and San glanced over and saw Mike Nelson walking in. Inside Nelson exchanged some words with Sweeting and the soldiers and a minute later only Nelson remained as Nev Sweeting and his men went out the door, presumably on their way to Indian Falls to play their part in its final destruction.

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Darkness fell as a bit of deep red sun died, giving the impression of blood seeping into the gloom and finally becoming the black color of the grave. Rin had been puttering around with San's equipment and hoping that eventually Burk, Carter and San would return. Now he'd put it off too long and would have to address the militia and the people. The day had passed without anything exceptional happening in town. A team of militiamen and women had played an exciting soccer game in the park. The hospital situation was under control as most people had been released and they had only five people left that could be listed as near critical. Over in the town hall, people were playing card and tablet games and many people were drinking. More than a few people in the park and out in the street were somewhat intoxicated but it hadn't been a problem. Lucky thing because there wasn't much to be done about it anyway. There really was no point in walking about telling people to keep sober so they could face up to monsters most people would bolt from anyway.

Walking to the window, Rin looked out; no mist just darkness in the sky above, like the clouds were a black sponge up there blotting everything out. Downtown looked quite bright on the ground; the streetlights were on in this section. He could see over to the lights of the hospital and the park was brighter than usual as the sparse streetlights there were now enhanced by the many glow orbs people used for camping or in the yard these days.

A slim figure walked up the street from the direction of the hospital and the bounce of long glossy hair told him it was Deena. She ignored some catcalls from a few young men drinking at the park's edge and came across the street to the station.

Rin sat down and waited for her to enter and she walked in slowly and looked around. "No stoned end-of-the-worlders in lockup yet."

Nope. Looks like people here don't really believe in it yet."

"Well. I don't. Haven't taken up any offers for last day sex."

"I didn't get any of them offers. Guess people expect all work and no play from me."

"No word from San or Burk?"

"No. Nothing. Can't even get a track on the militia communicator Burk carries."

"So, are you just going to sit in here by yourself? Shouldn't we be preparing for the arrival those things?"

"I don't see anything in the sky out there but darkness. But I suppose you're right. How about rounding up the group for me. Go out and get Sean Seaman, Randy Giffen,

Leon Ottawa, Jesse Milbrand and the main group of militia leaders I left supervising the barricades. We'll set it up in teams – the militia is the main army, Jesse's armed farmers second level. We got many teens in the park so we'll arm them all now. Put Randy and maybe Donnie in charge of them. Last line of defence is armed civilians but we aren't arming all of them yet.”

Forty-five minutes later Rin had his command group assembled on the street out front of the office. Most of the preparations had already been made. The hospital and the town hall were boarded, barricaded and defended. Stores like The Big Nail were also boarded and barricaded. The park was now sandbagged into a series of tent streets and they had planned retreats to use if necessary. Rin knew there was no genuinely workable plan. They'd decided to defend the town in pieces as putting everyone together in a large group could mean being quickly overrun and slaughtered. Dealing with the absence of Burk, San and Carter had already been thought out as Rin had already passed the word through Deena that they were on a guerrilla mission targeting a hidden enemy base. Any final escape would be in vehicles hidden in a warehouse to the east or on boats prepared and covered at the south river pier. Others had gone independent and were holed up in houses around town. They would be on their own in any retreat or escape.

The group faced Rin and he appeared to be looking off into some bleak picture in the black sky. “As soon as this group breaks, start the watch at your respective barricades and designated areas. So far I don't see anything out there but night. No sign. But they're expected tonight.”

Leon Ottawa took a step forward and was about to speak. Rin's eyes went to three of the militia coming up the street at a fast pace. All other eyes turned to them. The lead man, a long-haired and bearded man named Jake, walked straight through and up to Rin. “We've got a strange humming noise. North barricade up by the riverside. The men are spooked. The devil dogs may be approaching there.”

Everyone heard. Rin glanced up the road with trepidation. “Okay people, let's walk up and take a look.”

The brighter light orbs from the park spilled a high haze over onto the street and people in observation points saw them walking down a long arch of light toward the corner and the distant barricade. Rin, Deena and Jake walked three abreast in the lead followed by the others. They rounded the corner into faint light as the streetlights had been turned off at possible attack points for better cover. Ahead they saw militiamen and women positioned back of the barricade at the side of a military truck they'd stolen. The hum Jake had mentioned was already coming clear in their ears ... long and eerie sound waves that gave the feeling of some impending event. Rin understood immediately why Jake felt they could be coming that way but he couldn't see anything visible to prove it. Not a damn thing but darkness and the odd moth and insect swirling out into the light.

Rin figured that in most ways it was just another summer night, though a dark one. Armageddon if it was coming was arriving with a low growl. The hum created a certain sweaty feeling like something terrible was about to happen but not quite the end of the world. He supposed that even his most devoted militia folk didn't really believe this was

the end. Hell, even the kids in town didn't ... just a bit of drinking and drugging. Everyone still somewhere inside believed in either escape or victory ... that's why they'd turned the town into another campground. And one somewhat subdued due to grief over the dead. Still people had rebounded fast. Rin was sure that those who could would put up a fight. It was like they'd been waiting for it ... saving energy rather than wasting in on end-of-the-world party antics. Rin even had some hope himself; he'd been forcing himself to believe that Burk's failure to return meant he'd tracked Carter and got on to something. Maybe they'd found the mother lode of motherfuckers and were cooking the ambassador in a freak's stew pot already.

After about a minute of listening to the humming and looking about, Jake spoke to the men at the truck. "I thought I told you to hold the barricade. Why are you hiding behind that truck?"

The answer came from a bony biker type with thick locks of frizzy hair. "The sound rose when you were gone. We got the idea it might be a bomb or missile coming in at the barricade."

Muttering in the group started to create confusion. Rin turned and held up a hand for silence. "Wait here while I take a look."

There was no reply but they all watched intently as Rin walked into the shadows blowing from overarching trees and up to the barricade. There was a seat at the peak made of some sand bags and canvass and Rin climbed up to it and stood there looking off down the dark road with his field glasses. He could see nothing but felt bone-knocking vibrations come up from the sand bags to his knees. He wondered what in the hell kind of hum it was as he'd heard nothing like it before. It was an earthquake of sorts and it carried another almost hidden sound in it ... like some big dragon was letting out a roar somewhere underneath Indian Falls.

"We got lights!" Jake yelled, causing everyone to study the sky. Most of them seeing nothing. Then it came clear. Not much of a light but more of a flashing stain moving in the clouds like a plane was doing a slow run over Indian Falls. It passed in the west and Rin turned to get down off the barricade. He believed something was coming but likely later on ... so for now he'd put men back on the barricade here and return to the center of town.

He took a step down but halted when he saw Leon Ottawa pointing west. The faint light was returning; it grew brighter and flashed through blue shades. Then it stopped, its location now being in the clouds directly down the highway from the barricade. Queen's Hotel was up that way but it wasn't quite that far ... Rin looked with his glasses. The light flared, blinding him. He let the glasses drop on their neck chain and staggered slightly as he covered his eyes. He heard shouts from his rear; they wanted him to get away from there. But he stayed as his vision cleared, and when it did, he was sure he was hallucinating. He was seeing a bright blue star fall through the clouds right down to the roadway. And when it hit it thundered. That noise was followed by a horrible rise in the humming. It became more like a metallic screech. Rin's hands were on his ears, but he had to pull them away as he turned and dived off the barricade. At the bottom, he rolled up and ran to the others.

What he'd seen they hadn't seen because it had been at ground level sheltered by the barricade ... and that was a flaring blue fireball shooting right up the road toward him. Rin was still running and he saw the others turning to retreat. At that moment, the fireball hit the barricade, the force of impact blowing it apart into a fiery arch of flaming debris. Fire licked down the road like a red tongue emerging from the blue flare. But they had retreated enough to avoid all but some scorching heat.

Rin realized that the men had been right to disobey him and abandon the barricade. It was now a blazing explosion with the asphalt below split and curled aside. The contact energy of the explosion had been enough to toss nearly the entire barricade off into the dark. He felt a hand on his shoulder pulling him back and had a hard time taking his eyes off the blaze. Turning, he saw Deena and retreated farther back with her. The faces of his men were lit with awe and flashes of light. He could still feel heat at his back and when he looked again to the barricade, it was gone. A blazing blue arch was in its place and the roadway now had the texture of scorched black glass. He could see through the arch and down the road. Nothing was on the road but he could see that the arch itself ran back as a shimmering hood or force field over the road. In the distance, it all ended at some turquoise lights and he noticed the sound had dropped back down to the faint hum they'd heard on arrival.

Donnie and some of the teenagers had arrived and they were so awed they'd dropped their weapons and were walking closer for a better look. Jake ordered them back and Rin ordered everyone back farther. He looked around; the nearest natural defence if anything more came through was to retreat to The Big Nail where the street narrowed.

They all gathered under a huge maple not far from the end of The Nail's parking lot. Since people couldn't seem to take their eyes off the arch down the road Rin put his back to it as he addressed them. "Seaman and I are going back to get the beam guns, grenades and other stuff. Jake will remain in charge and you'll all obey him if anything comes up that road."

Deena gave him a somewhat disturbed glance. "This attack is different than what they pulled off the other night. How can we fight stuff like this? I wish we knew where San and Burk are."

Seaman nodded in agreement. "We have big trouble ahead. They've learned and gained power too. Who knows what to expect. Looks like they are coming in under a force arch. They'll have some shielding. Be prepared to retreat."

Rin shook his head. "Like I said. Wait until we get back. We aren't starting by retreating. We might retreat right into more of them."

Rin walked off as another of the militia's stolen military trucks pulled up. This one had some boxes of refitted grenades; a style Burk thought might be effective on the invaders. But those were the monsters of yesterday and Gill Ottawa wondered if they'd be of any use now as he passed a box to Randy Giffen. Jake's idea was to arm the teen brigade with a lot of them since most of them couldn't shoot worth a crap and had already left their weapons here and there on the ground. Aside from grenade boxes, the truck was empty and Deena, Laura and another militia woman sat on the open

back while the militiamen drifted about, some smoking dope, others drinking the odd shot from their flasks.

Some idle chatter developed and some talk about where San and Burk might be. But it was cut short by a bright flash down at the end of the road through the arch. Deena's friend Jenny was the first to speak. "Shit, something's coming already," she announced as she popped around the side of the truck.

Jake choked on the drink he was just swallowing. Donnie stopped juggling grenades to say, "Holy shit, it's a man." And Jesse lowered his shotgun to mutter, "Unless my eyes are tricking me that's Carter coming up the road."

Jake looked behind. "Where in the hell is Rin? That him coming? Fuck no; it's that idiot Stu Pooler."

On the other side of the fiery arch, down the force-rimmed road, the man walked forward at a slow pace. As he came closer, he came clear as Carter. He was still outfitted in his special militia gear, same as when he left. Only he wasn't carrying a weapon, and he hadn't left on foot.

The crowd was silent, Stu Pooler walked up, light from the arch highlighting the confusion on his face. He spoke to Randy. "What's Carter doing on the other side of that thing? He looks stunned."

"You're right," Randy said. "I better run out and pull him through."

Stu Pooler tapped his shoulder. "Go and get him, boy."

Jake suddenly seized Randy and pushed him back. He turned to Stu Pooler, rage on his face. "Nobody goes out there. How do we know that's Carter? He ain't saying nothing. He ain't even waving, he's just walking."

No one moved. Carter continued his stroll up to the arch. They could see his face now and his usually intense features and tightened forehead were calm. He was a man out for an easy walk in the night, only under the bizarre circumstances it all looked more than wrong. Perhaps unbelievable, and the people seemed to grasp that now as everyone was just watching and wondering.

Carter reached the blazing arch, put his right foot up like he was about to march through then kept it there and froze like he'd suddenly turned to stone.

Then everyone spoke at once. "What in the hell," Jake said as Pooler shouted, "He needs help!" And that shout was over Deena's quiet voice as she asked, "Anyone sure that's him?"

But the voice everyone missed was Donnie's as he quietly said, "I'll get him."

Before anyone could react further, Donnie was dashing right for Carter, and Stu Pooler was hurrying forward just behind him. But neither of them got to the arch because at the same time Carter exploded into action. A tongue of flame flew up at the mouth of the arch. Carter was running out of it, and then it became hard to see, except that everyone saw Carter flying toward Donnie so fast that he left a trail of ten images of his body behind. And none of those images faded.

They also saw that Donnie was really quick because he threw himself down and rolled, leaving the leader of the line of Carters racing rocket fast right into Stu Pooler. Then Carter wasn't Carter anymore and some ghostly black humanoid thing was tearing at Stu Pooler. Blood was spurting up and the other nine Carters were now monsters running forward.

Donnie was doing a rising leap to the side of the road. Jesse Milbrand fired his shotgun, Randy threw one of his grenades, and the others were backing off and then turning to run. Deena got around to the front of the truck and looked back as the grenade went off ... a yellow flash that blew the explosion of blood that Stu Pooler and the thing attacking him had become into another explosion of fire. Donnie had tripped but he'd escaped the explosion and was running up the road with the nine other warped ghost humanoid things pursuing him. He fell again and as he did Deena saw someone step past her. It was Seaman with one of the militia's beam weapons. He fired, letting an expanding beam sweep down the road. It flew just above Donnie and took out the monsters flying through the air to him. They went up in tongues of flames, leaving no remains other than scorched air.

Hair smoking, Donnie reached the truck. Rin stepped out of the darkness and stared ahead at the arch. Again, nothing was happening. Only Donnie, Seaman, Jake and Deena remained. The others had retreated back past The Big Nail.

"Guess that's their way of saying hello," Rin said.

Deena had a tear of grief and rage in her eye. "Whatever that thing was it wasn't Carter."

Seaman put a hand on her shoulder. "Sure looked like him. They must have got him earlier."

Rin nodded. "They got Carter. Maybe they didn't get Burk or San. Maybe they would have been coming down that road with more than Carter if they did."

Seaman lit a smoke. "Jeez. If they show now we won't know if they're real or fakes or possessed. The boys will shoot them."

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Inside Marco's home cell, Burk appeared to be subdued, an unhappy look on his whiskered face. Marco had long-term stress imprinted in his pained expression and lines of premature aging on his forehead and eyes. His beard was thick and dark but trimmed and his curly dark hair long and combed back. Beyond the arch, the cell stretched back to a few hundred feet of living space, but Marco had chairs scattered around up near the exit, like he preferred to spend time there looking out and hoping to find a method of escape.

After their rough arrival, Marco had offered them chairs, and the three of them now sat looking out across the central area at the activities of agent Mike Nelson and the three soldiers. Considering the beating Burk had given Nelson outside the station, he looked remarkably good now.

San didn't bother to ask Burk how he got overpowered. Instead, he asked about Carter.

Burk took a sip from a glass of water and wiped some grimy sweat off his forehead. "Marco keeps it hot in here. Carter, well, he's in the heat too. They took him somewhere before I arrived. Marco says Nev Sweeting was laughing and talking about an experiment. I don't hold out much hope of him being in one piece now."

San's nose twitched like he smelled something foul. He turned to Marco. "What exactly is going on? I mean what is Nev Sweeting now?"

"He is a copy of the original Nev made in various energies. The ambassador is similar. Some of the prisoners here are that but not most. Our hosts can shoot themselves across space in original form because they aren't carbon based life but energy beings. They have various body shapes; one for their original home planet and those they use for worlds they invade. They feed on all the energies produced by biological life, especially higher forms. Here they feed on human beings."

"That's about what I thought," San said. "How did you discover them?"

"Through my hobby. I investigated the strange happenings, eventually found this base and even stole some of their technology for creation of the new scope. The ambassador's race visited over a period of hundreds of years. Initially arriving via space ship. They brought many of the aliens that are prisoners here now. The ambassador is best described as his home planet's Nev Sweeting. He is a traitor the invaders turned into an energy being. Part of this base is an old Indian temple that existed when alien contact first occurred. Another old military base was constructed decades back when the government first got involved. Then the power station became a cover for an underground base. It all would have continued as beneficial contact with other worlds, had the invading monsters not destroyed the ambassador's people and used the technology to begin targeting many other planets. All of the original agencies on Earth that knew about alien contact and this base were killed off, leaving only those approved by the invaders in control."

San interrupted. "The other prisoners, other aliens. Why are they here?"

"Originally because the ambassador's alien race worked with others. Now it is for the same reason I'm here. They have skills that can be used to keep the space=travel system working and expanding. I don't do anything physical. I'm forced to do theory for them. They keep me alive because they haven't discovered anyone else that understands the technology enough to steal from it."

"Oh-oh. We're about to be rudely interrupted," Burk said.

The three soldiers were approaching, the bigger alien fellow walking confidently out front of the other two. Across the court, Mike Nelson was switching the centre dome back from transparent to opaque. It glossed gold and took on a sense of solidity. On arrival at the cell entrance, the alien held up three thick fingers and gestured for them to come closer. San and Burk rose from their chairs, Marco did not.

San stepped in front to face the lead soldier, the barrier suddenly vanished and a stun beam flashed. They fell to the floor and as they were dragged off San could see but not move. Two of the soldiers had Marco by the arms, and he assumed it was the alien pulling both him and Burk back to the central dome and Mike Nelson.

San spun in and out of consciousness and finally the room came clear. He found that they had been placed in three chairs not far from the command circle. Special agent Mike Nelson was sitting there, studying them astutely, and the three soldiers were now standing guard at the entrance. San tried to move and found that he was strapped to the chair with a wide flexible band. The strap seemed to have life of its own, pulling him back into firm upright position when he attempted to adjust his position. He saw that Burk and Marco were held the same way.

Seeing that all three men were now alert, Mike Nelson held out open hands and said, "Welcome to the ambassador's new show."

Burk was groggy but he was the first to answer. "Only a crazy fed could call this whole thing a show. It ain't the ambassador's show either. Marco told us he's just another slave of the invaders."

Mike Nelson smiled, but it was a half-smile and ugly. "Crazy fed, I don't think so. Take a look at this. A window appeared in the dome wall off to his left. Images swirled and scoped closer. One of the arches appeared and the view went through the door. The environment was rather lush with insects similar to yellow butterflies flitting about. A rather bulbous green-skinned creature sat in an open area on a bed of flattened grass. It had a number of fine-tipped appendages, and had four of them converged on a tiny item held in a vase.

Like Nev Sweeting, Nelson was able to make control panels appear out of thin air with a sweep of his hand. "Let's take a look at this creature's home world," he said.

The dome window enlarged to oval shape and the view held extreme clarity. Open space and the breathtaking feeling of sweeping across it under the light of brilliant stars ... a planet loomed ahead and grew fast with the zoom going right down to it like they were landing a spacecraft. The view swept over oceans torn by immense waves. A jungle world appeared. Earth-like and rich with plant life and insects, but much different with filtered gold sunlight and odd effects of the light everywhere that made individual plants and life forms hard to discern.

Mike Nelson turned for a casual look at San; the display continued. "This is an actual view of that being's home world in real time. We can see many other planets from here. But this particular one we can't reach by travel."

"Lucky for them," Burk said.

The comment didn't amuse Nelson. "Ah, but their luck will run out eventually and we'll reach them with the system."

"To destroy their planet," San said. "What's in this for you?"

"You have to ask. I'm human and alive for one thing and nearly everyone else won't be. I'm not like Nev Sweeting though, not altered. Earth is my domain. Think of it this way; in the quickest time possible I've risen to the top of the food chain. Call me the head of Corporation Earth. I work for the interplanetary bosses of course, but everybody does or will in time."

San sighed. "You mean as prisoners like the ones here."

“Prisoners?” Nelson said. “The ones here have been captive a long time. They know no other life, really.”

Marco gave him a nasty glance. “Don’t speak for me.”

Agent Nelson ignored the comment, turned and rotated his hands in front of him. A circular set of buttons and fingertip control pads appeared and took on semi transparency. His right hand moved adeptly on the controls and the large image they were watching altered. The view panned down to an image of Carter. He was in a large open room with a smooth floor of emerald stone. An amber glow circled him a couple yards out and San recognized it as the same glow of one of the force fields that had shown at Raven’s Private Beach. Carter was sitting on the floor with his chin in his hands, so it appeared he had been there a while and knew there was no escape.

As the image expanded, it showed the room around Carter to be vast and cavernous, and San wondered how big this place really was ... if the ambassador’s race had been here long ago as they said then Indian Falls must have always been the place on Earth of alien contact.

There was no sound and a whirl of fine almost imperceptible black dust began to circle outside the force field holding Carter. At first, it moved slowly like a carousel and then faster and faster. It slowed and pockets began to jell out of the dust; irregular shapes began to take ghostly form. The shifting ghosts brightened to ebony and their forms blew about like they were empty scarecrows filling with wind. A half minute passed in this phase then they solidified from the head down; dozens of blurred humanoid forms, still ebony black and with long distorted faces and flashing teeth. Their feet were bare and multiple toed, appearing as they hit the floor and took on full weight. Not much distinguished one from the other and they had the same common look or imprint of evil. More and more of them hit the floor and the ones at the front were already walking up to the edge of the force field and Carter.

They stared at him with blazing eyes. Then Burk suddenly addressed Nelson forcefully. “Don’t do it! Don’t lift that field!”

A flash caused them all to blink, the view vanished, the inner dome solidified and they were facing Mike Nelson. Nelson slowly looked the three of them over. “That was the past you were looking at ... some of our friends arrived early. They had a use for Carter. Perhaps we should take a vote. Who wants to see what they did with him?”

Marco slapped his palm on the chair. “You’re a bastard,” he said.

“No one will want to see what we do to you,” Burk said, and before Nelson could reply, an alarm began to shriek and the three soldiers ran into the door of the central dome. Nelson stood up to face them. The alien soldier spoke in a voice with far too much wind and bass in it to be human. “It is an interior security alert. We have never had that before. One of residents has triggered it. Perhaps attempting an escape.”

In an instant Nelson had an oval shape control panel spinning out of the air. As it whooshed and the center dome became transparent, Nelson’s cleft jaw dropped a little and he appeared to be thinking. His adjustments created a magnifier in the air and one by one he began zooming in on the arches, fading the entries and swooping inside for a check.

One of the human soldiers spoke. "I think it is something Nev Sweeting did. I have already warned the ambassador about his lax attitude."

Marco laughed openly, causing Mike Nelson to halt what he was doing. He turned away from his controls and pulled a hand scattergun from his jacket. His expression was deadly. "What are you hiding? You had better talk. Attempted escape is a death sentence."

All eyes were glued to Marco. "Sure, I can talk if that's what you want. It's rather amazing. I mean all the time I have been prisoner and I've never seen a mistake made. That was with the ambassador, the controllers and you, I guess."

Nelson waved the scattergun. "Get to the point."

"Well, that was before Nev Sweeting came along."

"Out with it or I'll shoot now!"

"Okay. What if a worker here didn't escape, but one of you guys let him out without fastening the neck control collar correctly, and were even so dumb that you didn't lock him back up after the job was done."

Mike Nelson stared dumbfounded. A human soldier answered. "It's that beast from one of the ambassador's planets at Alpha Centauri. Nev Sweeting put it out for a job and forgot to notify us when it was supposed to go back into lock up."

Nelson fired the scattergun ... from his shoulders to his pelvis the entire body mass of the soldier fused red and vanished. His flaming remains fell to the floor.

The second human soldier gaped as Nelson turned the gun on him but the alien soldier never flinched. Instead, he spoke through the stench of burnt flesh. "This is the first error we've made here, but it is correctable. That particular alien is practically domesticated. It's just a matter of finding him and putting him back in the lockup."

"Do so. But put these men back in lockup first. I don't want any more mistakes. The ambassador won't be happy about this."

With Marco in the lead, they were forced to walk in single file back to the lockup. Once they were secured, the two soldiers left the main area. Across the court, the dome was in transparent mode and they could see Mike Nelson using a burn beam to evaporate the rest of the soldier's remains. When that was done, he sat down, used a panel to bring up a window, and began to search the complex. He had a view passing in carousel style as he looked into every arch and verified the presence of the alien occupant. At the empty cell, he paused and looked it over then he began to pan the complex looking for the soldiers and the missing alien. San and Burk moved right to the front of arch to watch this while Marco sat down as though he had no interest. From their perspective they could see Nelson's screen but not in any full clarity.

The sheer size of this underground complex and some of the areas Nelson was scanning amazed San. He did not track the repair alien right away but did track the location of the neck collar it was supposed to be wearing. The screen suddenly panned in on the alien soldier standing in a long corridor radioing Nelson with some info. Then there was a view of the two soldiers running and a pan ahead of the multilegged alien

fleeing them. It was faster but it was coming to a dead end at one of the overhead view areas that looked down on the huge power arch that opened down in the gully. At the end of the line, the creature quickly opened a service tunnel door. The entry was to a transparent tunnel running along the top of the arch with open areas around the huge plates that ran like a spine along it.

The alien soldier was in the lead; he fired a high beam that glanced off the creature and it halted, pressed something at the top of a plate and dropped down to the floor of the long arch. As the soldiers reached the now closing plate it halted down in the tunnel and waited there. Deciding on pursuit the alien soldier opened the plate and dropped down for a faceoff with the creature. He pulled his weapon up and gestured for the creature to obey and come to him. Instead, it disobeyed and used its multiple legs to run up the wall and around the arch and back through the plate. It popped straight through, catching the human soldier off guard, and before he could react, the creature jumped him. What followed was an uneven match as the creature tore the man open with its legs and pounced on him as he fell.

Grotesque intestinal damage and a slit throat left the soldier dead but the alien soldier proved skilled and was using some kind of magnetism in his boots to come back up to the plate. But he didn't make it as the creature touched something to seal it and release a charge. The alien soldier fell back down and the creature was tapping out something on the plate. A moment later charges sparked on the lower plates and energy like a ball of fire shot up the tunnel. The soldier raised his arms defensively as it slammed into him and shot him down to the exit.

Another alarm began to sound and Mike Nelson was on his feet with a number of control panels floating in the air around him. Many of these panels had appeared just before the death of the soldiers, and invisible fingertips, not Nelson were operating them. San knew what they meant; the game was in play. The invading monsters were transmitting with full force, as the attack on Indian Falls was underway.

Some dust snowed in the air as the whole complex shivered under earthquake force and it became clear that Mike Nelson was putting his central control area under lock down. It went opaque and glossed with a hard-as-stone look and there was more this time as mist began to flow around the small dome and form more layers like hardened skin that added further protection.

San turned to Marco. "What's your read on this?"

"It's the highest power ratio I've seen them use yet. They are transferring thousands of the invaders in for a feeding on Indian Falls. Mike Nelson is obviously locking himself in for protection against that escaped repair beast. His plan would be simply to lock it out of the main control area until this phase is over and have the ambassador take care of him when he returns."

Burk walked up close and faced Marco. "Come clean with us. All the time you've been in here and you work on their stuff. You must know a way out of this cell."

Marco was taken aback. "If I did I wouldn't be in here. I did escape, twice ... but I couldn't escape the complex and ended up back in here."

Excitement lit Burk's usually gloom-shrouded features. "Give us the details quickly."

Marco was about to speak; there was a sudden crash and they looked out to see the entry door to the large court warp inward like it had been hit by a giant's fist. A second bang perforated it with a large rough-edged hole and fire and sparks flew in and bounced on the stone floor. Some tense moments passed then something burst through the hole, dropped and skated across the floor. It was the armoured repair alien and it was running on its multiple legs toward the sealed inner dome. Coming to a stop about three yards from it the creature began to move around it looking for something. Then it ducked as a flash of fire flew from the dome's surface. The alien beast dodged, ran quickly about then it jumped right to the top of the dome and rose up in the air on its rear padding. Its legs began to weave about in circles and shot out string-like white webbing down the side of the dome. Slowly it turned about, releasing the webbing on all sides of the dome, and then it took a long leap to the floor and backed away as far as possible. A blue flash flew from the dome and this time struck home, but the creature was tough; it tumbled on the floor but appeared to be no more than singed. And it fired a flash of its own, rising on its short tail again and releasing the charge from its extended stomach. That charge went straight to the top of the dome and dispersed as fiery drops that hit the web and set it aflame.

Agitated, the creature began to run around the dome at high speed to avoid more fire. The charges missed him, striking the floor as the webbing on the dome began to burn into the shell. Suddenly agent Mike Nelson's protection was gone; the dome went transparent and fiery glass-like shards were falling to the floor and shattering around him.

[Chapter Seven: THE ENDGAME](#)

Silent fireworks streaked the rolling gray clouds over the north part of town, putting a colored haze into the ebony night. The militia and other townspeople were in defensive positions at the hospital, the town hall and the park, while only Rin and Jake remained watching the blazing barricade arch from a pocket of shadows not far from The Big Nail. Leon and Gill Ottawa and three others were looking out from behind boarded windows at The Nail. Now there was a whirl of dust at the mouth of the arch and light as bright as a blue moon showed down the road above the location of the empty Queen's Hotel. The hum was back, shaking their bones like ultrasound that could be felt and rattling skulls and eardrums with a dull headache massage. The sound rose from obscurity to a feverish pitch with the dust swirling at the barricade igniting to fire streaks as that area heated up. Rin could feel the heat coming up the road like a forest-fire wind. The breeze stank like a foul boiling witch's brew.

A blurred human-like form appeared out of the dust suddenly and Jake was about to step out and fire when Rin pulled him back. They waited silently and watched as more of the ebony forms appeared at the arch and moved slowly forward. There was a lot of light here and it told them why the uglies had been near invisible at the campground. They were black as shadows, faded into any other shadows and were rough at the edges. Through field glasses, the clearest portion was their faces. Rin studied them ...

warped and feral, always shifting through expressions, all of which were hungry or hostile. The eyes were bare reddish slits and evil, as were the thin-lipped mouths. They definitely seemed to be taking on a more solid form now where before they'd seemed more like ghostly energy beings; this he assumed was because they had everything tuned right, had fed some and were ready for their world-shaking debut as the invaders who came to eat the planet alive.

“When are you going to fire that thing?” Jake whispered. He was referring to the SNX beam weapon which San had set in an experimental beam mode he thought would do the most war damage.

Rin whispered back, his voice barely audible in the hum. “Once I shoot they'll be tipped off. Wait until there are a lot of them. If we can't hold them back run for The Nail.”

The hum reached a crescendo and there was a sudden explosion of congealing forms appearing on the roadway out front of the arch. Rin felt creeped out, his skin crawling with a dirty itch. If they continued to arrive in sudden numbers like that Indian Falls had no chance. The place was more like a sacrificial puppy, and he could feel their eyes looking his way, like they could see his blood.

It was enough to force him to move; he stepped out and fired the SNX beam. It expanded as it blew down the road and hit the enemy with a blast of white light that took out a couple dozen of them in a burn where their bodies lit like red jelly and then evaporated into a cloud of rising steam.

Those remaining were now moving his way and more were already coming through the arch. Rin sprinted toward The Big Nail with the weapon under his arm, and then Jake stepped out and fired a blast with the militia beam gun. Jake's blast knocked up wave of asphalt chunks and dirt that slowed them. At The Big Nail, they ran around to the side and waited a few seconds for one of the men to unbolt the door.

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Mike Nelson faced chaos inside the command center; a falling shard singed his face and he spun on his heels as he tapped a code out on some buttons. A moment later an amber force field rose in place of the shattered one. Behind him, the banks of control panels shifted in and out of transparency, and on the outside, the repair alien was still running about looking for a way in. Nelson rubbed the burn on his cheek, his face reddened to fury. He had his scattergun, looking out beyond the force field at the hurrying alien. His firm-set jaw was now unhinged and his eyes were wide. The unexpected event had left him in a murderous rage. He obviously wanted to fire at the creature but didn't want to lower the force field.

Nelson walked across the floor a ways. The circling alien decided to stop and face him, chattering in some odd insect-like language. This pissed Nelson off even more; he shook his curly head like he was trying to shake away a hallucination, then he waved a hand in the air, hitting an invisible button. As the force field blinked, he fired a shot that missed as the alien popped right up in the air. It hit the floor again on running feet, ran into the shield and bounced off. Nelson fired again and in that instant the alien unexpectedly sprang with a rearward jump and got most of the way through the field.

One front appendage got severed but it was inside with Nelson and on him in a second.

Nelson fared better than the creature's last opponent, managing to throw himself away from it and fire a couple wild shots. He swung the scatter gun around for the kill shot but the alien was faster, producing a sharp front claw from the folds of its flesh that whipped out and severed Nelson's wrist. His pumping heart caused a spray of thick blood from the wound. He stumbled backward, horror on his face, falling to the floor. A quick skitter and then it was over. The repair alien was on him driving nail hard legs through his abdomen, neck and skull.

Rushing away from the dead body, the armoured alien expelled sweat from its pores and shook itself furiously to clean itself of Nelson's blood and bodily fluids. Then it sat on its hind legs and pulled up a round plate with a series of buttons. Immediately the force field locking their cell vanished and San, Burke and Marco hurried out.

They went right into the command center with the alien and San turned to Marco. "Tell that creature to free all of the others."

"Hold it a minute," Burk said. "Let's think this over. This deadly brute appears to be on our side, but we don't know how dangerous the others are."

It was the repair alien that replied, chattering out a message of sorts as its severed front appendage sprouted back to form.

They turned to Marco for an interpretation. He'd stepped back from them all and now they saw he'd picked up Nelson's scattergun. Raising the gun, he held it on them. His eyes were wide like he was hallucinating.

San couldn't believe his eyes. "Marco. What in the hell are you doing? This is your chance to escape."

But Marco didn't answer; he pulled the trigger, hitting the alien with a heat beam. It lit the creature red hot and it fell over stunned, but it didn't disintegrate."

"Damn it all," Burk muttered.

Marco ran his left hand through his beard, a look of deep satisfaction now on his expressive face "You must realize that the ambassador wanted a failsafe, in case this sort of thing happened."

San sighed with disappointment. "Not another person with a mad reason for working with him?"

"I have a genuine reason. I spent years attempting to detect other life forms. It was my life's work. I found them. The universe is abundant with life and the ambassador controls the technology to reach them. Why would I bet on humankind; the best we'll have is a warp drive of sorts that puts robot ships across space. It doesn't come near the power of this technology. And the human race, so to speak. Who needs billions of humans? A small number is best. After the feeding is over I plan to create a new Earth, populated with life forms from around the galaxy."

San didn't find Marco convincing. "You want an Earth that develops unnaturally, with the worst moral examples of humans on it remaining alive while the others die."

“No, it is natural. It's the law of nature. Predators survive feeding on others, but they don't destroy everything or they destroy themselves. I have the future Earth well planned. So what if a predator alien race is the controlling power. I can use them. With my new equipment, this will be the hub, the library of life. I will scope and document everything, all life. When I get too old to be flesh and blood, I'll join Nev Sweeting as an energy copy of myself. Trust me; it's the best way for the Earth to live on.”

“Huh,” Burk said. “Isn't it amazing how the best way always happens to be the one that furthers the life, personal goals and chosen career of the one naming it.”

Anger, even disgust marred Marco's bearded face. He swung the scattergun for a direct shot on Burk's belly and squeezed the trigger. But the gun hummed and failed to fire, and at the same time, the hum of the arch reached a mighty crescendo and the underground system shook with a small earthquake. Marco turned to flee but he wasn't near fast enough. Burk tackled him before he got five steps, taking him down hard on the floor. Marco struggled and Burk threw out two hard punches to the head that stilled him. He was out cold.

Panting, Burk looked up at San. “Now what?”

Rather than answer, San took the seat Mike Nelson had used and imitated the hand sweeps he'd seen. Some controls immediately appeared out of transparency. “Going by the info we have, the attack on Indian Falls was pre-set and can't be stopped. It's all automatic. I'm going to try something else.”

“Like what?”

“I want to figure this system out enough to open those cells. We're going free the prisoners.”

Burk grinned. “Well. At least you're someone who thinks about someone other than himself. During all this I only had one beef with those guys and their brave-new-world plans?”

“What is the beef?”

“They didn't include me and my people in the planning, and it didn't really sound all that hot anyway, so we probably wouldn't have gone for it.”

“Their plans all suffer from a fatal flaw. If you believe an invading enemy and cross over to their camp, you are fooled by their propaganda. No great new Marco or Sweeting world would come about. Only death will happen, unless we stop it.”

“You got the feel of those controls?”

“I've got a bit of it,” San said as he punched out a string.

Warning tones echoed; they looked across to the nearest arches and saw the pouring mist fade. Force fields showed and then blinked and in an instant alien features showed as some of the occupants began to emerge from their cells. “We'll leave all these open. They may not all be able to leave their respective environments for long. The arches appear to keep their atmospheres contained inside. Drag Marco back over to his cell, though. We'll lock him in until we decide what to do with him.”

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Only eight people were in The Big Nail - a couple in their forties having a drink at a polished table as though nothing was happening; Leon Ottawa looking out an open slit in the boarded windows; Gill Ottawa and the others behind him by a barricade made of overturned tables and piled supplies. Leon suddenly moved back and attempted to swing a heavy interior board back into place to complete the seal on the front windows. But the ground was suddenly shaking and the floorboards shifted, causing him to slip. He fell with the board and groaned. They could all see a brilliant glare of light outside the long slash of exposed glass, flickering light like flames then suddenly faces. Long distorted ebony faces, almost like a wave of shadows pressed along the surface of the glass. Slit red eyes showed, scanning the room with feral intent, and the building kept shaking like wind or pressure was pushing in from all directions.

Rin remained at the rear with Jake beside him. They weren't quite sure what to do. They couldn't fire strong beams from inside or they'd take out walls and collapse the building, though the feeling was the boarded windows were about to explode at any moment.

A decision was made for them. The faces blurred and light flashed and Gill Ottawa reacted by cursing and firing a blast of automatic weapons fire just over his father Leon, who was rising from the floor. The glass shattered, but instead of flying outward, some shards flew inside and slashed into Leon's legs. The others turned to retreat back to where Burk and Jake were standing, but it was too late as the entire section of boarded windows blew out and inward in a spray glass and splinters. The retreating men caught the worst of it. The couple at the table suddenly rose against a slashing wind, blood flew, and Burk, Jake and the man who'd opened the door for them ducked behind the rear row of high shelves. From there they felt hot wind and Rin saw through a space to what was happening up front. A whole section of the front wall was gone, the door had blown down, and a crowd of darkened forms were moving in incredibly fast. They hit Leon first but reached the rest so quick they never got off any shots. A blood-and-organs bomb exploded as the monsters fed. Rin, Jake and the remaining civilian hurried out a back door and ran across an alley in the dark.

They ended up in a small weedy lot looking back toward The Big Nail; the hundreds of dark forms that had spilled off the road by the arch looked surreal in the streetlights over The Nail parking lot. The front of the building had torn away like these beasts absorbed everything through the sheer force of their attack. A familiar figure, that of Nev Sweeting, stood on the road out front and the ambassador was at the front of a massive crowd of monsters farther south by the side road to the hospital.

The lone surviving civilian from The Big Nail spoke. "We've got to get over to the hospital, they're going there next. I'm supposed to be helping Dr. DeBartolo."

"Who are you?" Rin said.

"I'm Tim Wong. I'm the orderly responsible for interior hospital defence. Dr. DeBartolo put me in charge."

Jake gave him a nasty glance. "You shouldn't have been hanging out at The Big Nail."

Rin studied the hospital, its higher portions showing in gaps in the tree line. "Let's go. We'll cut around to beat them. Try to fire at them from the front. I've got militia there. We'll pull them out and retreat to the park if necessary."

Tim was upset. "We can't leave everyone in there to die."

Rin's lips became a snarl. "We do what we can. Maybe we can't save anyone. Not even ourselves. One thing's sure. We don't have time to evacuate a hospital, even if there aren't that many people in it."

A path ran through darkened deciduous trees and flowery scrub; beam guns in hand they jogged over and entered the hospital grounds at the side. Rin whistled as they came out of the trees, and a militiaman moved out to meet them. They entered at the back and moved through the ground floor to the front lobby. At that point, Tim Wong left them and went upstairs to the doctor and the patients, all of which were on the rear third and fourth floors.

At the window, Rin and Jake gathered with four others of the militia. They could see the ambassador and an army of the monsters coming up the rise to the front grounds. Here mauve lights were exploding silently in the sky, and there was some screaming from patients above who had looked out the window and spotted what was coming.

Jake's look was one of semi shock. "This place is a cooked goose. We'll be lucky if we can get out of here ourselves."

Rin lifted the beam gun and did some programming on it. His decision was to keep Jake and one militiaman with a flamethrower with him. The others he sent to the back to go up the elevator, find Tim Wong, and see if there were any people that were well enough walk out the back in a quick evacuation.

"What's the plan?" Jake said, as the ebony monsters closed in under the lights of the blue hell at the front.

"This lobby is only two floors high with the main tower of the hospital behind us. We're going to fire through the windows, retreat, throw grenades and burn the whole front with the flamethrower. Got that?"

The other two men nodded. Rin and Jake raised their weapons and aimed at the light distortion on the huge glass sheets at the front of the lobby. They fired simultaneously with sustained bursts that took out the entire lobby front in a big kick of blast, smoke and sparks. The debris flew in a wave at the crowd of invaders, the front of the wave being the revolving left front entrance door now flying like a reaping machine over the bushes into the parking lot.

They lowered the weapons and all three of them threw grenades, and as they landed to explode, the militiaman with the flamethrower fired a stream and swept it across the front landscaping. The roar of the bang was deafening and a sudden inferno ran forward as a giant ring of biting flames and roaring hot debris. The force of it died down in seconds, leaving the entire area running out to the road a burning landscape of Hades. Charcoal was raining down and Rin wondered how much of it was the remains of the dozens of monsters they'd fried. But he didn't wonder long because the whole front lobby was collapsing and he could see the ambassador and the rest of the

approaching army shielded by the amber glow of a force field as they prepared to renew the attack.

With concrete and dust pouring through from the roof it was time to flee. They ran down the long lobby to the back of the building and as they got there, the two elevators opened and Tim Wong and a group of bandaged hospital patients emerged. Rin signalled them to follow and they hurried out the back and over the lot to a path through the bushes.

“What about Dr. Debartolo and the rest of the patients?” Rin asked.

“They're bedridden. I told him it's too late but he insisted on trying to get some on wheels for an evacuation. He's still inside.”

Rin knew they couldn't go back in for more and as he thought that, the lights went out at the hospital. All power down. Running into the back lot, he shone a bright beam up the windows and spotted someone standing there. Tim ran up beside him.

“It's the Doctor. I think he's signalling us. What's that in his hand?”

“Oh-no,” Tim said. “That's a bag of syringes in his hand. We've got to go in and stop him?”

Jake came alongside of them. “Syringes ... what's this about?”

“It's about going down with the ship,” Rin said as Debartolo disappeared from the window. “The Doc is going to inject everyone quickly, including himself. The inky bastards won't find anything in there but dead poisoned bodies.”

Tim had tears in his eyes and he was visibly shaking. The other militia folk and the patients had already headed off down the path, attempting to reach the town hall. Rin and Jake each took one of Tim's arms and moved off into the trees. Behind them, a big lick of flame rose in the sky as the main building began to burn.

They were moving in a half circle over to the main drag as Rin wanted to get a look over at the park. Before they got that look, a series of explosions, automatic weapons and shotgun fire shook the area. The entire section of street they were about to emerge on became a tornado alley of flying debris that forced them to retreat. Rin knew what it was ... the teenagers had grenades and a lot of them were stationed on rooftops and in high windows. They'd thrown their bombs in an attempt to halt the enemy advance.

At that point, Rin decided he needed a clear look. He told Jake and Tim to stay where they were but to escape if required. He ran out of the trees into the rear of a squat municipal office building. Power was out in this building; he hurried up a rear fire escape and reached the roof ... there he ran across a flat bed of tar and gravel to a ledge overlooking the street. Everything was well lit by the alien lights in the sky and the initial blasts had receded to floating dust motes, small fires and heaps of wreckage. The view down toward The Big Nail and the hospital was breathtaking. It was swarmed, an army of hundreds of the monsters, and more still streaming in a black flow out of that arch. The other direction gave him a view of a group of fleeing teens heading toward the line of armed farmers and militiamen guarding the streetfront of the park.

There was still time to get to the town hall, which was safer due to heavy barricading at the front and sides. Rin turned to leave then turned back as he saw something out of the corner of his eye. It was movement below; Jake and Tim had abandoned his order to stay put and were emerging on the wrecked street. Jake was attempting to carry both beam guns and pull Tim Wong along at the same time. Less than half a block back the monsters were streaming into the street like river of dark wolves headed for dinner.

Rin could see that it was too late; he pulled a grenade and tossed it down. As it exploded, Jake looked back. The vision staggered him and he tripped with the guns. Tim broke free of him and stumbled in shock over to the shattered windows of a clothing store.

Rin threw a second grenade; Jake saw that he couldn't get to Tim in time and stumbled away carrying the beam guns ... the grenade exploded and in Rin's mind, the debris settled in slow motion with the monsters flashing through it straight to Tim. His mouth opened in a silent scream that may as well have taken place in another world because they were on him and ripping him apart before any sound escaped his throat.

Rin raced back over the tarred stones and down the fire escape. On the ground, he sprinted around and came out of the alley by the park and the town hall. He saw Sean Seaman and Jake holding the beam guns, about to face off with the rush of monsters. They weren't coming for the town hall yet. Nev Sweeting and the ambassador were at the front of them and they were gathering in a monstrous mob, readying for a run at the park. Jesse Milbrand and some armed farmers and teens were still guarding the park; it appeared that nearly all of the remaining militia had entered the fortified town hall.

Glow lights that were still on began to pop off across the park. Rin could do little but watch some volleys of fire then run off and around to the back of the town hall. He got a glance out before he got there and saw Randy Giffen, Donnie and some other teens being overtaken by the monsters as they retreated deeper into the park, then blinding blasts from the beam guns swept the area. By the time, he reached Deena and the militiamen guarding the rear, horrifying screams of dying people were echoing over from the park, and the sounds of grenades and gunfire were dying down. It was mostly over now but the killing as they'd sweep through the park and pursue all who had chosen that venue. Ironically, many people had thought it would be better to be there in case a fast escape was needed. Yet it looked like few could escape and he heard no roar of vehicles fleeing the scene, just a couple crashes that sounded like some people had attempted to drive off and didn't make it. Dogs were howling far off so it looked like they'd escaped and in the end would be the only park survivors.

The town hall had its own generator on the inside so it would remain with power even if the rest of the town power went out. Deena looked flustered and drawn as she led them in the back. From an alcove on the climbing staircase, Rin had an overview of the packed central hall. A lot more people were now huddled in the hall. Hundreds were there, so many people must have decided to retreat to it when the shooting started. At present, he was more interested in the park and the rest of town. He wondered exactly

how many people had hidden in houses and guessed that probably a lot thought they would be safer away from the big crowds. He went up and over with Deena to a higher crow's nest they'd set up in an empty room near the rooftop. Two militiamen and Deena's friend Jenny were there. Jenny was in a corner weeping, the men were pale, and red-eyed from lack of sleep.

Rin immediately went to the view slit in the boarded window and looked down. Sean Seaman and a number of armed militia people and townsfolk were below behind the massive barricade at the front. Fires were now burning all over town and were far worse in the park as all the tents had caught fire. Heavy white smoke from them was shrouding the area so that all that could be seen was flashes of the fast moving black invaders and the odd person running for cover in the distance. Torn asphalt and bones littering the street running along the park told the story of a fast massacre there. Rin gathered that Jenny had been unfortunately watching from the window when this began and it was the reason she was now in shock. It wouldn't have been pretty; they'd swept the street and park like a stampede of reapers. The weapons and grenade fire killing off only the leading edge of the endless flow of hungry demons.

The first big wave of them had swept the park and was now returning; their forms like an army of shadows in the smoke. Hundreds more were coming from the arch, and when Rin looked back to the park, he saw the ambassador and Nev Sweeting emerging from a cloud of sparks and smoke by a flaming tree and tent. The whole gang was now converging and congregating for the last major assault. The attack on the town hall. After that, they would go house to house.

"We're going to hit them with a lot more fire from here than they got from the park," Rin said.

"Yeah, but how long can we hold them off?" Deena said.

"Not long without help. We can burn a couple charges of them down then they're going to break through."

"Hey," one of the militia guys said. "Come here, look at this."

Rin hurried to the window. Below Nev Sweeting and the ambassador had emerged on the road but they weren't coming the rest of the way up to the barricade. They had turned and the army of dark invaders was parting for them as they walked back up the road in the direction of the arch.

Deena nudged him aside and peeked out. "What does it mean?"

Rin grinned. "I think it means Burk and San are still alive because the leaders are leaving. It'll buy us some time. Something has happened and they got a report they don't like ... it's the only reason I can come up with for them leaving during a battle."

Thirty minutes passed and if Nev Sweeting and the ambassador had left, none of the others had tagged along. Shades of deep purple bruised the clouds and brighter lights flared as the monsters continued to arrive and gather. There were so many of them they poured into the park, filling it with a black sea of shifting demons. They'd come over the curb now and were up at the barricade; a crowd of fast zombies, but perhaps brighter as none of them touched the barricade. Though their slit red eyes and twisted

faces showed a ravenous desire to attack, they waited. Many of them turned faces to the sky like the strange light rained down their commands or intelligence. In rushes of air odd moans drifted from them as though the night was full of ghosts.

Rin, the militia and townspeople also waited; they huddled and terrified inside while those armed were in high places or behind the barricades and entry doors. They all knew the moment of attack would come soon, and with the signal from Rin to hit the enemy, all guns would be blazing.

When it began, there was a brighter flare in the sky and an instantaneous rush, like they'd all received the mental command to attack at the same micro instant. The force was incredible, flashing forms hitting the barricade with the power of a bulldozer and about to both break it open and ride over it. All sound rose in an ear-slapping series of whams and bangs then Rin gave the signal and the town rocked under the force of a thunderous explosion.

There were thirty-eight human-big road cones that had been placed along the entry road up by the park and down partway to the barricade. All of these had been set up as large nail bombs and the detonation blew them all at once. Everyone in the town hall had dropped down for better cover and everyone cringed at the fierce blast and the following wave of thumps, bangs, smashes and nearly every other nasty sound a wave of about a million projectiles could create. As soon it was over Rin looked out ... even the higher portion of the town hall was embedded with nails and metal riveted into the stone like porcupine quills. Nothing was left of an entire section of the monsters. They'd been obliterated out on the street, halfway across the park and as far down the road as The Nail. There was still a large crowd of them right at the barricade and they were streaming around to the sides of the building.

Not wasting any time Rin gave the second signal and used the beam gun on wide beam to burn the invaders coming around the south side. Another beam was fired by Seaman along with a hail of gun blasts, grenade bursts and automatic fire. It only took a minute and the first attack had been repelled. Yet it wasn't a cause for optimism. Hundreds more were coming up the road and across the grass to the obliterated section at the front of the park and barricades. They looked completely like an army of ghosts now, or the returning dead as they walked through the smoke of fresh bomb-crater hell.

The stand down order was given; all gunfire ceased. Rin heard Deena breathing either sighs of relief or taking deep breaths to fend off a heart attack. The militiamen below were pulling back to near the boarded doors and he could see a section at the front where the barricade had been pierced. An area small enough to slip through, and a person was slipping through it. It was Sean Seaman and he had the beam gun.

Deena grabbed Rin's shoulder and dug in her nails. "Shit, Seaman's lost his marbles. He's going out there to fire on them."

Rin watched like he couldn't believe his eyes as Sean Seaman walked out into the plumes of smoke of the recently devastated area. He was walking right up to the approaching monsters, and then he turned and fired at the ground in front of the barricade, sending up a wave of debris that closed the opening. Turning again, he

faced the monsters and prepared to fire. A suicide blast; he'd get a good number of them, but there would be no escape.

The black wave surged toward Seaman. He fired, and Rin fired from above. Jake had run up the barricade with a prepared sling of grenades, set to release all the triggers when thrown. His arm was good and the first blast propelled the bombs even farther so that they exploded well beyond Seaman, took out a small host of monsters and gave him time to rethink his suicidal actions. Seaman didn't have time to return and climb the barricade so he ran south, where the street was cleared. The invaders were rushing in on the street from the arch direction and across the smoking park. Seaman made it a ways down the road and turned off away from them, dashing down an alleyway. After that, Rin could see nothing other than pursuing invaders heading that way about ten seconds behind him.

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The huge vault door shimmered, there was a rush of bright white light and air and out of it two forms appeared. This time the ambassador and Nev Sweeting didn't find themselves in a locked-down underground prison and command post. They found themselves in an open and altered one populated by their own escaped prisoners. Prisoners that had left them in the dark as to the reason they were called back.

The central command area was under a new transparent force shield, with San and a group of the most vulnerable aliens inside. Some of them were in their own small environmental bubbles, as they required atmosphere and temperatures Earth did not provide. At least not outside of the arches.

Burk was on the other side, unarmed and facing off with Nev Sweeting. The ambassador's surprised face showed beads of sweat, expanded pupils and stress as he used telepathic communications and attempted to renew mind control over everyone present. But it wasn't working now as he was facing too many opponents, some of them harnessing similar powers.

Metallic-skinned reptilian men from the Altair stellar system were the bosses of other amphibian-like aliens and bubbles of amoeba-like creatures. Their immediate guards were chameleon reptilians with a glowing human likeness. The chameleons could also move like fast shadows, having shape-shifting capabilities like the invading monsters.

Ghostlike creatures named Tahs moved freely at the perimeter and were barely tangible and unsettling like the shifting demons of nightmares. Cetians were also outside of the bubbles as they were human-style beings with tan skin and lithe naked bodies. They were interspersed with Zeta Reticulans, beings that kept a gray shimmer around their vulnerable bodies. They were considered dangerous by everyone, as they had no emotions and did not necessarily prefer biological life over mechanical creations.

As well as being shielded from the ambassador and Nev Sweeting, a number of beings were protected from each other due to differing temperaments and predatory instincts. Small green aliens like the bug-eyed ones long shown on alien visitation video were from the cavernous depths of an earth-like planet and at home in this complex. They were from the constellation Taurus and quite strong as they had done much of the

physical labour in the early days of the complex after the initial rebellion of robotic and cybernetic workers. Two other species hailed from Orion. The first tall and pale blue humanoids, and the second also humanoid but with orange fur and stocky builds.

Almost a full minute passed before there was any real action other than the ambassador attempting to back away. The usually talkative Nev Sweeting didn't say a word but instead studied what had happened like he couldn't quite believe it. The faceoff ended when a seven foot, blue visitor from a deeper part of the galaxy stepped up and seized the ambassador. He attempted to shape shift free, but that was blocked and he was dragged unceremoniously over and locked in with Marco. Nev Sweeting remained facing Burk and his form shifted into darkness like he'd decided to strike and kill, but the attack never took place. A Zeta Reticulan floated up beside Burk at that moment and screened him. The Zeta lifted a misty arm. Its gnarled hand held a gold cylinder and as it was raised, a cloud of green mist hissed out and enveloped Sweeting, causing his bodily form to suddenly writhe and disintegrate. It faded to a peel of shifting dark forms that vanished in razor edges of vanishing blue light. Mouthing a final scream Sweeting disappeared like a ghost.

With Nev Sweeting obliterated, Burk looked around with grim satisfaction. He returned to San feeling cheated. These two enemies had been taken care of too easily, leaving little joy in the trap and kill.

They were fortunate that releasing the aliens had not caused chaos and more murder. That had been prevented only because the Tah ghosts had full telepathic abilities and had established communication between all the disparate life forms. Some important decisions had been made quickly, like not to kill off each other but rather to survive and kill off the monsters or as many as possible. The rest were to be imprisoned on their home world, as they'd be left no way to travel from it. Judgment had also been passed on Marco as he wouldn't be returning to the human world, but would remain as their prisoner.

Many of the aliens gathered out front of the closed cell, looking in at the ambassador. San had risen now and was standing quietly as telepathic communication circled the room. Various arguments were going on in all of their minds and it would continue for some time. A number of the aliens broke off and left for other parts of the complex. They were ones like the many-legged repair alien with the expertise to shut the system down and set up the new plan for the complex.

The estimate was now a matter of minutes and then the invaders in Indian Falls would be without a transport and energy feed system. They would be trapped on Earth with no means of renewing their energy once it was expended. Daily feeding on humans would be their only remaining method of survival.

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A riot of purple hues rode the clouds like a canopy over the town. Rin had still not descended but he was about to ... it was down to the last stand. They'd held the barricade at the front with heavy fire but the monsters had broken through on the north side and delivered fast death to the militiamen there. Rin's gun was now only firing weak blasts, as the nano recharge engine couldn't work fast enough. A crowd of black

invaders flashed forward, tearing at a heavily boarded window. Then he saw Sean Seaman reappear and fire a beam shot, taking out those in the lead with a flash of flame and smoke. It was his last shot as this time invaders flew in riding a fast blur of motion and turned him into an ugly explosion of flesh and bones.

Rin scanned the park and the street; gangs of the devils were moving in ... and now he heard screaming in the hall as the shielding was torn away and the beasts began to enter.

It was time to descend and face the end; he fired a last shot down from the window that smoked some uglies going over a barricade, then something brightened in the sky and he looked up. It was raining blue fire that vanished before it hit ground. Toward the perimeter of town, the sky took on a bright yellow glow. So bright, he thought the sun had somehow risen. The arch and the highway were down that way, and on fire and bursting up with light so bright Rin had to turn his face away. A flash like something nuclear followed, then there was absolute darkness as all lights and fires went out.

Strange silence came like a dream and lasted a couple minutes. Faint blue light appeared in the dark sky. It was enough to see below and to see that the invaders were still there. There but moving away from the town hall. They were retreating; he saw Jake toss a grenade and a large clutch of monsters explode in the flare and burst to a smoking mass. In a moment, they were down and dead, nothing but heaps of charcoal on the road.

Whatever had happened the aliens were now vulnerable, slower, and retreating. He was sure the arch had blown, meaning no more would arrive. And with that certainty in mind, he ran over and began to descend. Hunt and kill time had arrived.

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San had screens of surveillance imagery floating in the air around him and one of the ghost aliens had three other sensory ports open that allowed aliens that had no eyesight or that favoured other senses to get a picture of the ongoing operation. It was moving along swiftly and with fantastic coordination; Burk was located way down by the arch exit in the gully, entering there with the repair alien from Alpha Centauri now that it had cooled and drained of residual energy and radiation. The other aliens had already done their jobs and were moving from various parts of the huge complex center and converging on the command area.

San leaned back in his drifting chair; he wanted to get out and make a fast run back to Indian Falls, but he knew his arrival now would make little difference. If anybody remained alive in town, it would be up to them to finish the remaining invaders. He'd viewed a simulation of the technical feat they had just accomplished as the work was in progress. Along with two of the aliens, he'd done adjustments at the main panel while the others had programmed the big interstellar gun. San called it a gun because in simulation it had that look. It involved extremely complex molecular engines, other levels of sophisticated chemical reactions, atomic releases and visible plates, electronics and of course the chamber itself. In some ways, it was reminiscent of Earth's attempts at warp engines.

When fully activated, rather than it moving through space the impression was of space moving through it. In past decades, a few nations on Earth had sent robot craft deep into space; this advanced device channelled living beings right across the light years. Breaking the beam when it was already in play was incredibly dangerous because if done wrong it would destroy the planets at both ends of it.

What they'd done was sever it for a fraction of a second in a remote part of space; meaning hundreds of the invaders were delivered to cold empty death in space. Remaining energy rode a loop back to their home world as a deadly blast to destroy the connection complex at that end. At the Indian Falls end, they'd beamed the remaining energy coming in, sending it up through the atmosphere to space.

That meant Indian Falls had a chance but they'd still have to battle the monsters already present. Those beasts couldn't return from Earth or gain the constant strength of the beam. They were weakened and could be killed off almost as easily as human beings could be killed off.

Lights flickered, the patterns hypnotic, then there was a last trembling of the complex and the bone-shaking hum eased and faded. The whole exercise was nearly over and Burk and the repair beast had arrived back at the main door, a host of aliens behind them. They could now leave for a fast run into Indian Falls. Once gone they would not be able to return here. A new force field was coming into play. One that would seal this complex off from the entire world. Its entire physical area would be rendered undetectable to all current technology. The only travel from here would be to the home worlds of the aliens as most of them returned to see what could be done to restore their dead planets. Perhaps they'd keep the base here as a permanent fixture, perhaps they'd shut it down in the end. It didn't matter as it was beyond the military power of any nation on Earth to penetrate it or even find it.

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The remaining militia were locked in a firefight with some invaders that had arrived out front. Rin took the time to pass a key set to Deena and marvelled at her speed as she dashed off and down some stairs. Long before the battle, they'd installed an armoury in the basement storage of the town hall. It was time to arm more of the people inside the hall. A plan that had been nixed earlier because of fears inexperienced locals would use the weapons for the wrong purpose ... to commit suicide or disrupt the chain of command and kill one another before falling prey to the alien invaders.

He pulled a militiaman aside. "Follow her down and be fast. Don't give guns to anyone unless they know how to shoot."

Deena suddenly returned, wanting to know which key it was. She remained silent, then her slim figure faded into the shadows and the militiaman followed as she hurried down to a door. Rin moved with speed too and quickly got to a waiting guard and went out a side door and along the inner barricade. The barricading had many holes in it now but the enemy wasn't coming through. Jake and a group of militia and townspeople had driven them back.

Coming through a gap, Rin spotted Jake and three others out front with irregular groups of men and women off to the side rattling off automatic weapons fire. The hail

of bullets had taken down numerous invaders and many more were fading into the dark pools of shadow in the park. The monsters were still ghostly fast but slower than before. Halting by a couple dead ones, Rin studied the corpses. They were black, pocked by fungus or decay and shrivelling. He didn't want to touch them but the texture looked like hard rubber leaking blood like oil, and their outer skin had gone loose and flabby in spots. Rot was setting in so fast they were almost visibly melting. Portions of skull protruded from sunken faces, the bone beneath having a silver sheen.

Most of the lights had gone out but Rin studied the darkness with his best eye. He saw a fair amount of motion in the areas ahead. There were still quite a few of them but he had the feeling they'd take them down without losing many more people. The invaders were now invaders no more but dispirited and on the run, unable to regroup and make a coherent survival plan.

Startled by a sudden crash, he turned and saw a portion of the barricade split and Deena emerge with a group of armed people. He waved them over and turned back to his militia, and then he was blinded again. An incredible flash lit the entire sky. It was like the opening of a full nuclear explosion and everyone automatically hit the ground. Rin's vision began to clear in about thirty seconds; flurries of light snowed; he saw through them to a distant beam shining like a beacon up into the sky. The nuclear death blast he expected to follow never came. Instead, blue flares exploded from east to west, creating cold fire in the heavens. All of it was silent; he didn't hear a sound other than the shouts of the others as they rose. Then more weapons fire as the battle began again under a slowly darkening sky.

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At daybreak, Jake stood with Jenny at a scorched clearing deep in the park. The schoolgirl and store clerk he'd once known outfitted in tight dirt-stained denim and looking like a female warrior. The bones of the dead were visible but now most were the rotting silver-tinted remains of the enemy. Sporadic gunfire still echoed in the town but the fighting was nearly over. The cloud cover had broken up like a shifting ice flow and for the first time in a long time golden beams of dawn were a mantle on distant rooftops. This beautiful light carried a welcome message. It was now clear why the monsters only showed at night. The freshly dead bodies of four of them lay crumpled by a nearby tree trunk. Black hardened forms; their limbs dark and gnarled like the roots of some evil tree. Hissing mist rising from the deadly effect of a sunbeam that had just swept over them. They were decaying fast.

Jake calculated that those that remained, now being pursued in other parts of town by militia, would likely die on their own. But he had no plan of calling his forces off the hunt, as there was always the possibility that like vampires some might hide in dark buildings and wait for another night. He marvelled at the power they must have been harnessing, traveling between worlds and back nearly instantly, always when it was nighttime at Indian Falls.

Jenny's usually bright eyes were tired and damp, her mood somewhat vacant. Exhaustion rather than joy, and deep confusion over what this had all been about worked as a downer. If it had really happened at all, where was the meaning? Even long after, nightmares would haunt the sleep of the town survivors. Not to mention the

distrust they would have of all authority figures. A crowd of them were out in the street by the front of the town hall, milling about in the devastation, not quite sure what to do next. Jake looked back that way and decided to go back and take charge. At the same time, he heard the roar of a convoy of vehicles headed into town. A militia party that had gone out on a scouting mission was returning.

Coming out of the park, Jake stepped over the road and talked to the lead man. A wiry guy named Bozzo.

Bozzo's long face carried a look of perpetual surprise. This time he had a good reason for it. "Deep River's gone. The entire military base is a crater. We didn't go all the way in. Just looked with the glasses. Those missiles we heard a short while ago all hit there. Looks like the feds or some other nation's military blew the place to hell."

"We're lucky they pinpointed Deep River as the source of all the trouble. One of the fears. A fear I still have. Is about bombs hitting here."

"It's not going to happen," Bozzo said. "We have contact with the outside now. Rin told us that Deep River wasn't the alien invasion HQ but we're to leave any feds or military thinking that way. We dropped him off at the meet-up with Burk. Rin is coming back into town later but Deena is leaving with San and Burk is tagging along with them for a time. They're going to move bunker to bunker then out of the area undercover in the bush. The whole story on how the attack got stopped is for militia ears only. I'll give you the details later."

"So we tell the feds it was all from Deep River and they killed them off with their bombing raid. We do whatever we have to, to keep their investigation short. Otherwise they'll never leave town."

"That investigation is going to begin real soon. They're already moving in a military convoy on the far side of Deep River. One of those new super tanks in the lead."

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Burk turned to the bunker entrance and lumbered down below to gather some vital supplies. San stood above with Deena, both of them fascinated by the first brilliant morning sun in a long time. A sunbeam gleamed off the edges of the silver soap-bar size object in San's hands and he closed the lid as the communication ended. The connection through to the underground base and the aliens was still good and they could also covertly read communications from the approaching military convoy out by Deep River. Turning to Deena, he bathed in her calm smile the same way he bathed in the sunshine. Hers was a romantic smile.

Burk suddenly stepped out with a full pack and closed up the bunker. He swept some loose brush in front of it and turned to San. "Figure I'll stay in Toronto about a month before coming back. Rin will close things up with the military here. Officially I wasn't here during any of this."

San smiled and Deena winked. "Neither were we," San said. "I need the cover, and the cops and secret agents that met me on the way in are all dead. I had my system set so I was registered as being in Toronto during this trip. That works in my favour. I have no time for a government investigation. We still have work to do."

“You must mean dealing with the list of names we pulled from the ambassador's files.”

Deena turned to Burk. Surprise on her face. “What list of names?”

Burk grinned and San answered. “Ugly names. We have the full list of military and government VIPs that were working to aid the invasion. What we're going to do is study the news and see what the government propaganda on this deal is. Then we'll secretly send them the names along with some key pieces of evidence. It'll mean a crowd of people will be swept up worldwide. They'll be imprisoned ... likely never released. Spending the rest of their days under torture, questioning, suspicion.”

“Damn,” Burk said. “Sometimes torture is a happy ending.”

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=====The End =====

[Bonus Tale: IT](#)

By Gary L Morton

San telescoped his pocket Emerald and frowned as he strained to see the blurred video and hear the muffled voice coming through the static. “You've really got to know what the Nestle Cops are up to this time,” the man said. “The chocolate cops have a powdered corpse over in Springhill Park and they're involved in a cover-up. You'd have to see it to believe what I did to the guy. I made him so ugly he makes people scream. The dude couldn't stand it so he killed himself. He was a sap from the Downtown Business Technological Improvement group who thought he could screw around with the wrong people.”

San didn't get a chance to reply. He heard a click and the airwaves went dead. Punching in his hidden code for a trace, he got a reading on a public courtesy phone – this one at Union Two Station. The caller had obscured his identity on a public phone that demanded user info and the identity of the lost corporate wireless device that made a public call necessary - a nearly impossible feat. Pocketing his Emerald, San thought it over and decided to run down the tip. The park was a few blocks to the south, about a five-minute walk. He read it as a tip full of lies but with something genuine in it. Many people hated the Nestle cops. Maybe this was a union guy tipping him.

A peculiar tint on the city's inner air bubble cast the sky as a dark green ocean. Sunset flares fizzled behind western buildings as San turned and crossed the road to Nestle Square. He stepped to the curb and halted beside a world CallNet booth, feeling the cool breeze from a couple cars speeding by behind him.

A blue glare from the booth's chat screen lit his fine brows, intensifying his gray eyes with rings of shadow. He gazed at a nearby theatre marquee. Shaped like a huge Nestle Chocolate Rush Bar, the marquee glowed with garish effect. A few elegant ladies strolled beneath it as they exited. They were beautiful - glamour being a quality that belonged to all women in UN year ADSC2000-37 +.

San smiled warmly at them as they passed and for a moment, he perceived something different. The glitter of the neo neon lights gave him a glimpse of something repulsive beneath their skin - like beauty had been nothing more than an illusion of makeup. A blond lady with full red lips and loose curls glanced at him brazenly, her dress revealing the rosy skin of her calf as she walked. Normally the come-on would stimulate him, but tonight it fell flat. She seemed like a doll - nice but plastic - not a real woman at all.

The feeling touching him carried unsettling emotional undertones and left him slightly disconnected. San shook his head and shivered in the warm night. The sensation vanished but his hands felt sweaty as he took out his TSCF palm connector. It read his print, allowing him to query the city grid for a direct route to the crime scene. The answer came back a moment later as a soft female voice playing through the tiny amplifier in his ear, giving directions to a specific park location a couple blocks away.

Passing the theatre, he headed down a narrow side street. He encountered a couple office people strolling, and not much else - just the glow of lights in the high towers. It was quiet with soft rushes of wind that made it hard to believe a murder scene could be ahead.

The sun was crashing fast as he hit Queen Boulevard, just a few final rays shooting up like spotlights through cloud breaks and mixing with night lights and a purpled sky up ahead. The boulevard took a sudden curve there as it wound around Springhill Park, and now traffic could not get through. Spinners were flashing on four emergency vehicles and uniformed city police were routing cars down a side street.

San reached the corner and squinted into the glare. He could see a lot of activity and scores of Nestle private police moving through the maple trees in the park. Most of them had Glock Speedguns drawn and appeared to mean business.

Remaining on the curb, he studied the area. A jungle of office and shopping complexes ran east on the boulevard side to the area of Toronto policed by the Downtown Business Tech Improvement Group. Pedestrians in that area wore those new two-piece body suits common to office workers. The circular park contained a duck pond, fountain, monuments and a solid sprinkling of mixed forest - mostly maples and willows. Residential buildings towered over it, and beyond them, he could see faint spotlights flashing in the sky from the Nestle complex.

San crossed the road, aiming at cutting over the grass to the scene of the crime - an area surrounded by police and mobile floodlights. But before he could step to the curb two burly Nestle officers emerged from the bushes and blocked his path. Their silly chocolate wrapper hats and uniforms had lent them a degree of invisibility in the shadowy areas of the park. Silver lettering flashed on their badges.

“Sorry pal, you can't go in there,” said a tall brown-skinned officer. His badge name, Lonny Baxter.

San stared the two cops down for moment - rookies but with the heavy muscles that came with a steady diet of Nestle Rush Bars. Taking out his wallet, he opened it to his police ID. “I'm San Michaels, Chief of Detectives for the Toronto Security Coordination Force. Otherwise known as the real police.”

“This is a matter for the Nestle police,” Lonny said. “Our orders are nobody gets in to the murder scene.”

“Yeah, well you must know that corporate nations like Nestle have reduced police powers in city states like Toronto. And I got a call on this one. The victim has been identified as a key official in the Downtown Business Tech Improvement Group. He is or was entitled to a higher level of protection. It apparently wasn't provided here or he wouldn't be dead. The public will want to know why.”

Maples fanned their leaves gently overhead. Shadows and momentary confusion softened the cop's brutish face to a boyish blush, and San saw fear grow in his eyes. Fear that was justifiable considering what would happen to him if the Security Coordination Force decided he was at fault in the security breach or in blocking the investigation of it.

Shrugging his shoulders, the Nestle cop gave a nod of permission and gestured to his partner. Walking in the lead, San headed into park. Just behind him, the two cops wagged their speedguns as their eyes darted about in a paranoid fashion. It was dark now, the trees heavy and cloaking with high lamps creating little more than foggy circles of bug-filled light. A silver P-11 forensic robot was moving slowly in the grass in the cordoned off area, and they could see the body at the centre, covered by a yellow sensor sheet. A stocky plain-clothes officer was in charge. San recognized him as Bill Broad, chief of the local Nestle force. A gaggle of reporters surrounded Mr. Broad and they held only police notepads and pencils. Cameras, video and any other equipment small or large for live filing had not been allowed inside.

San stopped just behind the reporters, listening as Broad told them bluntly what they were to include on the news. “The crime is murder,” he said, “but murder of a different sort. A ray of some sort was used and it caused severe burn damage. Photos of the corpse will not be released as the emotional health of the public would be affected. We are confident that we will apprehend the killer. Don't expect a public trial on this one. It looks like a hit, possibly engineered by a business rival.”

Immediately the reporters pressed forward, a number of them trying to question Broad at once. Saying things like, “Who are the suspects in this murder? Is it certain that organized crime was involved? Can we see the corpse? Why no public trial?”

It all became dead noise in San's ears as he walked around and studied the sheet-covered mound under the spotlights. He wondered what they were hiding this time. He doubted the body was burned or that a special beam had been used, and he was getting tired of corporate police covering things up. If the body really was a mess, Bill Broad did have a point in that the emotional health of the public could be affected by revealing it. This was a society of physical beauty. A world of people who enjoyed

genetic perfection. People that couldn't face up to ugliness and death. It was also true that someone had to be culturally conditioned to face up to it. People needed to realize that they had not risen above nature yet. Death and its final chapters of ugliness were still a reality and some things could not be censored. Not even by corporate nations like Nestle.

Disappointed with the lack of credible answers from Broad, the reporters were slowly turning to their notebooks to jot down what they had. Broad was staring at them intensely like they were some brand of undesirable genetic rodents or insects, and a few seconds later he gave the signal. Uniforms suddenly muscled in and began to force them from the park.

Seeing Mr. Broad alone, San chose the moment to step into the fray. He faced the surprised Nestle chief in the summer dark and spoke deliberately loud, saying, "Bill, I want that corpse uncovered and photographed right now."

The effect being immediate chaos as excited reporters wormed and ducked around the stunned Nestle officers.

"You can't do this, Michaels!" Bill Broad shouted. "It's crazy. Nestle will have your badge if you uncover that corpse!"

"The hell they will!" San said. "Nestle Security isn't in charge of this investigation anymore. I know this was some kind of hit and at the TSCF we intend to find out how this breach of security occurred. Public cooperation is going to be needed to catch this killer and they won't help Nestle so the way to get it is to frighten them with photos of the corpse."

"No, you don't understand!" Broad said. "That thing is too horrible to reveal."

"I am doing it," San said, stepping over the ribbon. "Any officer who tries to stop me will be taken in for questioning at headquarters."

Broad's forehead grew suddenly wet with sweat. His men froze, obeying San's command. The rest of the crowd, mostly reporters, watched in stunned amazement as San walked over to the corpse. He stared at the forensic cloth then stepped over to the humming P-11 forensic robot and removed its shoulder-plate controller. His fingerprint allowed him command rights and on seeing the light flash, he spoke, ordering the robot to remove the sensor cloth.

Floating over on silent jets the robot touched the sheet, sucked it back into a roll and placed it in a canister. A dark area beneath it contained a corpse-shaped mass, yet the details of it were something indefinable. It shivered like dark jellies one moment and seemed to solidify to coal hardness and textures the next.

There were a few initial gasps behind him then none of the witnesses said anything more. San assumed this to be due to confusion caused by the lack of a realistic body. "What sort of beam could turn a human into that?" he said, shifting his gaze to Bill Broad.

But Broad said nothing, and San noticed that he wasn't speaking because he was as stiff as a post. He looked back at the circle of people and saw that the entire crowd of

journalists, investigators and cops had turned to stone ... faces transfixed and gorgon-struck as they stared at the quivering black mass.

Dangerous confusion, a fast feeling of near panic swept over San. He didn't quite know what to do. Then one big Nestle cop suddenly inhaled deeply, turned blue and fell face first like a board to the grass.

San saw others losing their composure and balance as their expressions unlocked and transformed with terror. Jon Weston of the Post went to his knees and vomited. A hair-raising scream followed. Other deafening shouts caused him to bite his tongue. He saw Ann Tilger of ATV Net News clutch a constricted throat and go down. Within a minute, all of the people had succumbed.

Stepping over and doing a fast check on Ann Tilger, he found her to be alive. She had fainted but otherwise seemed to be okay. The others were in a similar condition, yet he had no idea what had done it to them. He couldn't see anything all that shocking there on the ground.

Addressing the forensic robot, he told it to scan the people and administer first aid, and then he turned back to the corpse and looked at it long and hard. It hadn't changed but after some moments, he saw mist rise and vanish -- an effect like a magician's trick. A body lay in the shallow depression of earth below.

As one of the few people who'd seen death in all its horror, he knew this wasn't a corpse - not a human one at any rate. The body had humanoid structure of a fantastic sort and a raw form of ugliness that was close to being incomprehensible.

An invisible acid worked to etch the image into his mind. The facial features grew strong and gripping with hideous details that stabbed at his thoughts like needles of pain. This thing had the most revolting characteristics of humans, predators and insects; whiskers or feelers surrounding a mounded mouth and hooked fangs. Its nose was triangular in shape, armoured and indented with pulsing membranes. It also had bulbous fly-like eyes, a mat of flattened tentacles on the crown and grotesque protuberances covering the naked flesh.

The creature appeared powerful and strangely natural, like a genuine product of the wild and not some genetic freak. The cause of its demise was a huge gash to its chest - a wound that oozed blue gelatin-like gore and appeared self-inflicted. A hunting knife resting beside the creature's open hand appeared to be the weapon used.

San watched spotlights swing beams through the clouds above the distant Nestle complex. The breeze had died and the trees hung over him heavy and motionless in the summer dark. He was alone in the park now, remaining to consider his error in surroundings where he could think.

Nestle Chief Bill Broad had been taken away to one of their psychiatric facilities as a second exposure to the hideous corpse had snapped his mind. The others had recovered but most of them couldn't remember what they'd seen. Those who did all had different descriptions of the corpse and San believed that only his personal

description was accurate as it matched the description made by the P-11 forensic robot.

The forensic robot's report had been straightforward - the creature was dead through suicide. It had been human but an unknown genetic key had caused a hideous transformation and it had occurred while the man was alive. Broad's madness and the general collapse of witnesses were cultural phenomena. Society was genetically perfect and nearly all traces of human physical flaws had been eradicated long ago. Most people used pheromones and visual stimulation devices to make their beautiful bodies even more attractive. A sudden dose of hideousness was more than any person could comprehend. San was the exception because he'd been culturally conditioned to view things that were unpalatable. But even San had not been able to readily see the features of the corpse because the power to see ugliness had been partially removed through genetics.

Pursing his lips, he watched the rising moon paint the grass with pale gold. He supposed he was alone on this one ... only the robots working with him, as he couldn't use security officers that would collapse. It was almost like one of those recent alien-encounter double-D movies, only in this fantastic episode you got to see the horrid thing instead of just hearing a bunch of spooky ghosts. An unknown genetic key had done it, according to the P-11 forensic robot. Yet the call he'd got earlier seemed to be from a clever but otherwise fairly ordinary criminal. Obviously, the guy had powerful scientific backing; he was not sure exactly what he was up against here.

It was very late, but he rose from the bench with it in mind to go downtown and see if the lab had anything further. His phone tone suddenly sounded in his mind so he answered and when he heard the voice of his chief suspect, he sat back down and listened carefully.

"I guess you know what ugly is now," the man said. "So it's time for stage 2."

"Stage 2," San said angrily. "You bastard. What did you do to that man?"

"It's not what I did to him but what we did to him."

"I see. This is the work of organized retro-end terrorists."

"Terror is a tool we sometimes use, San. It isn't our vacuum-pouch bread and butter. Haven't you ever thought about it? I mean, how do you think organized crime exists across the world when the technology used in crime prevention is so sophisticated?"

"Through corruption and bribery. That's what I've always assumed," San said. "And it hasn't existed here. We wiped it out."

"You wiped nothing out and there isn't any bribery. There is only terror and control. We're relocating in this city. That corpse was a demonstration done specially for you. Because if you don't cooperate with our organization you will die in the same manner."

"I have no intention of cooperating, and it'll only take me a short time to find you."

"Well, that's good because you only have a short time. Mere hours to be exact. That IT you just saw was a man infected with a certain genetic spore, and just a few short hours ago we infected you with the same microscopic bug."

“What are you saying? What do you mean?”

“We mean that we want total retro control. Over the next while, you will become totally hideous. We can provide the antidote at any time provided you agree to join us and grant us control of security for our operations out of this city. And you will agree. We know that. No person has ever lasted more than 16 hours without begging for the antidote that only we have. Keep in mind that if you tell anyone else we'll just leave you to die. You might be interested in knowing that what you are becoming is a creature called an ogre, though those who've seen it call it just a monster. An expedition in the Arctic dug one of the things up 25 years ago - the last of its kind mummified in ice. There are some things to be appreciated about it. The creature is a branch of man and genetically superior to man in some areas. It is unfortunate that it will remain extinct - it relies on mutating men into its own kind and as you know modern man can't bear any transformation involving physical ugliness. For you it means that you will cooperate or die screaming in terror of your own revolting face.”

San resided in the Scarborough suburbs with his wife Karen Brookes, and he also kept an apartment downtown that he used mostly as an office and crash pad while working through high priority cases. A massive residential hive on the waterfront contained the downtown digs, and as he walked toward it, the building glowed softly in the night. Its thick portal windows revealing colorful blurred snapshots of a thousand personal worlds.

Transient night-lights winked in the hybrid trees overarching the dim park path. A spiral parking complex hulked in the dark to the north - massive beams of a gray ash color, blending into the night. Faint odors of algae, fish and mud carried in the cool air blowing off the quiet lake and his eyes caught the long gleam of the moon on the slick surface of the water. It was a gentle scene and it gave birth to schools of strange ideas. His thoughts flowed to a great depth like the lake, and in the primeval bottom of mud, something vicious lived. Something that had been forgotten now returned to memory; a great bulking monster that had always been stirring there in the murky deep.

Peace will come with our surrender to beauty - San remembered those words as his gaze drifted on the water. Variations of the peace and surrender sentence formed the doctrine of most new religions. San had never been a believer and like most people, he enjoyed daily existence in a rich social order. He had no use for fairy tales of heaven, and he believed the politicians that claimed Earth was the only heaven. His wife Karen did entertain religious beliefs. She went to a sort of nature church based on the old Wiccan religion. Being a cop through and through, San did not attend, and the thought of it curled his lips into a momentary expression of bewilderment. Perhaps there was nothing stranger than the continued existence of religious faith. On an Earth where through genetic manipulation people were far more intelligent than ever before, the most common religious theme was belief in the Garden of Eden. Of course there had been attempts to genetically eliminate religion, but they had failed - creating either robotic humans or individuals with suicidal tendencies and a lack of artistic drive.

Eradicating religion seemed impossible, as even atheism, to a small degree, had to be labeled as an article of faith.

Nowadays the public became irrational when notions of beauty were challenged. Genetic changes in favour of splendor meant the fabled Garden of Eden was magnificence and an addiction they could not stop themselves from believing in ... they could not tolerate disturbing images. Pitted against rational thought, fear won out nearly every time. The old theory of evolution had been mostly forgotten among the general public as the image of mankind rising from slime and with apes was a revolting thing of sleepless nights and shivering nightmares. It existed as secret and sanctioned science while the general public believed Humankind had arisen from Eden; near perfect creatures with genes designed to be rearranged. In the words of the wealthy men, women and transgendered of faith and beauty - to believe anything else was to torment oneself with emotional hellfire. Hell was believing in it and that it could possibly exist. God had created Earth in beauty and left, and now the beings of Earth were following as angels spreading that perfection across the universe as they pursued the ultimate love of the Almighty they could not find. Yet San believed differently and it didn't torment him. He knew that the great hulking beast might be the truth. It lurked like a terrifying giant in the mud and primeval soup, threatening to rise at any time to drive humans insane with terror.

Picking up a flat stone, San tossed it and watched it splash on the silver water. If the destiny of humankind was to live in a fairy tale and to believe in beautiful princesses, then Eden and perfection had been attained. If not then real history was an IT and a behemoth waiting to tear the columns of human psychological support and humanist genetic science asunder.

A day would come when it all tumbled down. Humans were not superhuman at all and they were blind to that fact. A façade of perfection blocked the view of the truth. Everything was sugar coated like Nestle had made the world, but it was only sugar and it could be washed away by harsh experiences and trauma in a person's life.

Radiant light rising from ten thousand tiny embedded cells illumined the main entrance. He crossed to an area that was busy even at this time of night. Luxury cars rushed in and out and hurried people paced from the swift elevators. Fortunately, the main stream of the crowd remained distant and no one noticed him. He passed a teenage boy who gave him a startled glance and quickly ducked away. That worried San so as he entered the corridor he turned and stared at his reflection in a metal plated wall.

A dim image stood in slight distortion. There was a stained greenish cast to his face and tiny lines and splits appearing in his features. It was as though his body had been suddenly segmented into tiny portions and was about to swell. The sight threw him off balance and his mind swam with rushes of dreamlike fright. He turned on his heel and staggered forward into a swarm of bodies that seemed otherworldly, like they were ants or aliens. San felt like he'd been some creature of a hive all of his life, and was only now detached from its controlling mind to see its inherent features.

There were gasps and shocked faces. Jamming his hat down over his face he pressed on, deliberately keeping his head down and staggering even more. Feigning

intoxication proved a good cover as people always turned away from drunks - leaving them as something dirty the police were to sweep out of the public areas.

Small planes rushed along their pathways to the night sky outside the field of the rising elevator. He was alone and glad of it as the experience dizzied him. Exiting the elevator, he stepped slowly down a radiant hall, his blurred vision spotting a faint trail of greenish liquid oozing and spattering from his soggy shoes.

Brilliant overhead lights came on as he stumbled into the apartment. San thrived on strong lighting, but now it blinded him. His eyes ached and throbbed with hangover misery so great he was forced to dim the place to the illumination level of a cave. He found the soft jazz he'd set for automatic play to be offensive noise, like he now owned a canine's ears and could not bear the squeaking of reed instruments.

Nothing would do but silence so he imagined it and then he walked to the centre of the spacious living room and looked around. The drugged feeling was impossible to shake; he considered the possibility that the gangsters had somehow hit him with hallucinogens. It seemed plausible but a stark memory of the corpse killed the idea, as did his reflection when he stepped up to the mirror.

The thing staring back was shocking - green cast skin of a leathery reptilian texture. Brutish features - an expanded forehead and popping eyes that seemed to be reeling in self-terror. His whisker shadow grew denser by the moment, almost tufts and his once firm mouth had widened to something freakish.

He heard a horrified scream begin inside his head, and he grasped a chair to keep himself from falling. Shaking and choking, he fought the feeling off, and the scream failed to gain the use of his vocal cords. Then very slowly, he steadied himself, forcing his mind to accept what it saw.

That worked for a moment, but to bear up against it he decided it would be best to avoid looking at himself. Walking back to the light panel, he set the room for darkness, finding it soothing as he could now see in the dark. Alert lights flashed from his personal phone so he walked over and checked the messages.

There was only one message - an alien sounding voice saying 'hit the hello button to surrender.' And San did just that. "Congrats," he heard the man say. "Seventeen hours, San. You've set a new world record. No one has ever resisted for this long. Just say the word and we'll arrange things."

"Go to the hell no one believes in!" San said, the thickness of his throat and the gross tone of his hoarse voice strengthening his intended effect.

Clicking the phone shut, he staggered upstairs. From the study he could see the sky, stars and a hypnotic moon - a force of heavenly light so powerful it threatened to possess him. This was an attunement to nature he'd never known before. In spite of it, he fought off the potent alien sensations, sat at his connection workstation and tried to bring his powers of reasoning to the forefront.

Concentration did work. In moments, he was thinking things through. It became clear that he was transforming physically a great deal, but the brute he was becoming was not lacking in intelligence.

The special search machine powered up. He adjusted the headset to his new skull shape and thought most things through. The enemy had made three vital mistakes - He had been told that the transformation would not cause death. The end would come through intense fear of the hideous transformation. He also knew that the transformation could be reversed via an antidote and that in the transformed state he would be a creature called an ogre.

Documentation on such a creature would not be in any legal library so he used his search machine and got through a police hookup to get into classified historical files. As he made the switch over, his default settings for environment suddenly lit the room with images of a quiet sunlit library - a change that caused him agony. Shielding his eyes, he went through the settings. Nature scenes were another common background, but the beauty of nature was an overwhelming distraction so he ended up sitting in simple darkness and silence reading a dim screen.

San skimmed through an incredible amount of data on the ogre. But it was all information on a fairy tale creature of the old forbidden literature. Generally, it was a large monster of the forest, and it ate human flesh. Genuine scientific information on the creature did not exist. And this left him at a disappointing dead end. It seemed like there was nothing more he could do, and then on an off chance he searched using the word IT that he'd got from an old book on fairies.

San expected little or nothing and got a lot. Listings on a long novel by Stephen King bearing the title came up. The book being of the variety called horror or dark fantasy - highly illegal material in civilian society. He really had no time to read huge novels or other related fantasy works so he narrowed the search to the factual and came up with an essay titled "The power of Monsters." The introductory blurb listed the work as written by an insane novelist of the past - and the man was again Stephen King.

San felt thick slime moving in his mouth as he pursed his lips, and he thanked Eden that he didn't have to look at himself. He wondered about the classification of King as insane. King lived in a period when all people were inferior and mad so it was possible that good old modern man feared him for other reasons - that was usually the case when it came to history.

He read through the essay, and he realized that the author was really a clever fellow of that period. Bright enough in fact to make San appreciate something that should have been obvious but hadn't been only moments ago. Everything written about monsters and ogres painted a picture of them as hideous but powerful creatures. Here he was being blackmailed, supposedly into submission, all on the theory that he couldn't psychologically bear up against the transformation. But what if he managed to control the horror just a little longer - long enough to gain the strength and power of this creature? If he got lucky and it was enough, he could fake surrender, and kill his foes when they arrived with the genetic antidote.

Thoughts of murder caused blood to race in his temples. Veins pounded and a crushing power seized his mind. A taste like venom ran in his mouth and spots of red whirled in the darkness. He pushed the chair back and felt his shirt tear from the expansion of his muscles as he rose. There was an incredible desire to lash out and kill something, but there was nothing so he thundered across the room and went down

the stairs. His feet took him to the bedroom and he fell across the mattress and lay there as his thoughts settled. Several deep breaths helped to calm him down. Then he sat back up and stared at the dresser and an old photograph of himself as a boy.

As he stared at the photo, a tiny scar split open and grew to a long gore-oozing gash. The pulsing tissue swallowed his mind and a sunny day flooded into memory. He was nine years old and playing in High Park, using a remote control app to fly a miniature FN22 race plane through the mix of trees. It ascended, looped, swung down and dodged through the leafy boughs. San brought it in for a close approach, dogged some chipmunks and suddenly his piloting skills failed. It rose, caught a branch at high speed and broke up. Shards and sparks rained down, and a large chunk of debris glanced off of his cheekbone.

San tumbled in the deep grass and rolled up to his feet. He'd thrown himself back, trying to duck and that softened the blow. His right hand flew to his injured face and came away covered with blood. Shock settled in as he watched the thick liquid drip from his fingers, then tears welled in his eyes and mixed emotions rose in his breast. He let out one sob, then confusion swept him and he began to laugh. More tears poured as he laughed insanely and ran back to the picnic table, his parents and their friends.

San tore at his face as he ran, smearing blood across his forehead, hair and down his shirt. He burst in on the peaceful picnic scene, a gore-soaked sight that inspired much panic and no sympathy. Soda got spilled and food tumbled as the adults scattered with screams on their lips and horror on their faces.

In memory, their screaming came as a long fading echo that ended as a vision of Doctor Cleeson rose - his face cocked half sideways as his disdainful frown appeared. Cleeson removed San's scar using a painless laser technique. In the end, the huge gash was no more than a tiny scar that could only be seen through a magnifier.

The operation didn't make San happy. Losing the scar was like losing a pet frog. At nine years old, the wound had been a great thing that allowed him to terrify his friends and take time off school. With the surgery, it was all gone - and something much worse came about. His mother's introduction to the new modes of plastic surgery became something close to a living nightmare. She had never been satisfied with the face she'd selected for him before birth and now she began to change it the way she changed her hair. As San suffered through operation after operation, she reviewed faddish magazines and lectured him on the necessity of it all. If they would work long enough and hard enough, she said, eventually they would find that special combination of features and expressions that would make him stand out from his peers.

After two years of compliance only loathing for his parents stood out, and another change had gradually taken place ... He spent so much time at the clinic that staff let him roam unsupervised. San entered forbidden rooms and toyed with taboo objects. Plastic surgeons used models, busts and photos of all types of people in their work. The images Cleeson surrounded himself with in his private office were varied - beautiful, plain and some of them outright creepy. San's favourite was a huge photographic record of girls and women who were quite hideous by modern standards. He often bit his tongue and grimaced as he went through these photos, and they

fascinated him to the point that he removed some pages and hid them under his mattress at home.

This led to discovery, a confrontation with his mother and five years of forced psychiatric treatment under Ms. Jane Alboe. San hated her. She existed as a miserable and filthy-minded psychotherapist who often twisted her lips in a fashion of disgust and accused him of masturbating while studying sick pictures. She demanded a full confession and that he open up in regards to all of his perverse sexual fantasies. At that time, he hadn't known what masturbation was but soon learned as Ms. Alboe forced him to strip and masturbate while touching her "perfect body." In his further therapy, he was to be taught to love beautiful women.

San felt a grimace form on his face and his eyes left the photograph and went to the mirror. The immediate sense was one of disbelief. Most amazing was that there'd been no pain. He'd undergone a near total change without feeling a thing. And he wasn't horror-struck this time, but drawn to himself to the point that he got up and went over to view himself in full-length pseudo glass.

Eye contact worked to create acceptance and a genuine self-image or feeling that the new appearance was also the new him. He'd unmistakably become a gruesome fanged being of ancient forests. A monster with soft branch-like tentacles on its head, and shining eyes that were oval, ruby tinted and pushed to the sides by a nose and mouth reminiscent of the snouts of predatory creatures pictured in forbidden fantasy books. His skin was scaly with brown and green camouflage patches below the eyes and on the cheeks. In fact, all of his skin was a lizard-like blend of pale chalks.

His neck, arms and legs had thickened. Taut with muscle and tendon they were as sturdy as tree trunks and they blended well into his barrel-shaped torso and armour-plated chest. Gnarled hands and feet were attached with wrists and ankles far more flexible than those of a man ... standing out like the crown of his new appearance was a serpent-like penis.

San stared at himself for a full five minutes, watching the amazing change complete itself with brush-like touches. He was managing to cope with the new appearance and enjoyed the feelings of great physical strength that came with it.

His mood stabilized to one of confidence and clear thinking and he decided it was time for the call. He picked up the phone and hesitated. It seemed like a toy he could easily crush. A moment later, he put it down and tried to talk. "Hello," he said, noting the hoarse nature of his voice. Then he said it again a few times, adding weakness to the tone. When it sounded just right, he hit the saved number.

"Guess it must be you, San," he heard the man say. "Damn, you really have put on a show."

"I know, but I'm ready to surrender," San said meekly. "You've got to meet me now before it's too late. This transformation has turned me into a walking corpse."

"Just relax, San old boy ... or should I say, very ugly old boy. Listen up. We can reverse it and there won't be any pain. You'll just have to do a few things for us to keep it from happening again. Meet us in one hour at"

Fully transformed and animal naked he left the apartment and went down the long hallway to a second bank of elevators humming at the rear of the complex. The first car to open carried three male passengers and they stared at him briefly and blankly. He didn't enter but waited for an empty car to arrive. Recognition appeared to be the same as with the corpse in Springhill Park; he was now so ugly by society's standards that his appearance did not fully register when people first looked at him.

As he rode down, he looked through the transparent barrier tube at an umbrella of starry night and decided that the ugliness factor gave him a distinct advantage. He would always be a partially invisible being as long as he didn't let human contact last very long. Socialize for any length of time and people would be sure to start fainting and screaming.

The doors rotated silently open on an arched exit ramp leading to a nearly empty public court. Moonlight spilled down generously, glistening on broad rubbery leaves, a mosaic of stones and a bubbling fountain pool. Breathing in the fresh night air was like decompressing a rush drug in his throat. He felt an incredible boost of strength and arousal, almost like he was the guy in the beam commercial for Nestle Rush bars, but not quite since he was a lot stronger and much of the feeling came from his vastly improved hearing and sense of smell.

He was about to go down the sweep of steps, then he gave way to an errant animal impulse and leapt up the boundary wall. His claws seized clumps of ivy and he went straight up for 12 metres and over to land softly on his feet in a quiet parking bay. It had all gone so smooth he felt certain that he could probably climb a mountain with similar ease. Walking between some large Chase delivery trucks he headed for the exit ramp, then the situation suddenly changed as an armed guard appeared from a booth and confronted him near the gate. The guard was unduly large for a person of Chinese extraction and he had his speedgun drawn as he stepped up.

Stopping a few paces from San, the guard wiped his tired eyes, like he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. His hand left his face, and San remained still, engaging him in solid eye contact. A deadly chain reaction followed as the guard's face became a mask of fright and he swung the gun into place and fired. San ducked left and the shot went wide. It grazed the side of a tanker, ringing it like a bell. The bolt went on to pop the tire of a Sun transport. The projectile, composed of a nearly pure form of kinetic metal, transferred its blast force, rocking the tanker and shattering all of its windows and headlights.

As the guard swung the gun for another shot, San moved in with the liquid speed of a lion. He dove and came down on him hard, mauling him with his claws as they went to the concrete.

The force of impact knocked them apart and they both rolled up. Blood oozed from the guard's torn face and chest, but he still had the gun and was about to fire. Since San had come up within reach he simply swung his long arm in and turned the weapon back on the guard, and the motion was completed as the weapon went off. The fire of

the blast tearing the guard's head and chest from his body and sending them and trails of exploding flesh into the Plexiglas window of the guard post.

As the rest of the body crumpled to the pavement, San found himself frozen, staring down at blood and moonlight and finding the scent of raw flesh very appetizing. Without a doubt, the hunger for human flesh was in him now and it disturbed him. He wasn't ready for it yet, so he backed away slowly, terrified of what he had done and looking around to see if the noise had drawn any more guards.

Some fast agile leaps got him out and a street away. Sucking in a deep breath, he turned down an alleyway that ran a quarter kilometre over to the next major avenue. The narrow space contained spongy ground, exposed earth tufted with deep grass and weeds that his new feet found to be much more soothing than concrete. Beside him, the walls of a residential complex rose into shadow and ebony darkness, nearly reaching the smudged light of the stars and blue satellite conglomerate carpeting the sky.

Fragrant odors lingered on the damp grass and touched his nostrils. There was subtle detection of the metallic content of loose earth. Fumes laced with the smells of spent fuels drifted to him as he passed a puddle. He found his psychological state to be sound and he felt far more in tune with the night world as the creature than he had as a human being. There was a sense of great power like he could tear ten men limb from limb and enjoy doing it. All of the predatory instincts that had been genetically removed for the good of society had been returned to him. They flowed as new blood in his veins, yet he felt fully in control. His mental balance could only be described as the superior state of a superior being. And with the euphoria came the realization that scientists had been trying in vain for a century to do what nature had done long ago. The hideous ogre was the true genetic leap - superior strength, senses and intellect.

In tune with nature and not dependent on technology, San believed the ogre branch of man could build a far better world than his artificial rival. Genetically improved man had built a great technological society, but there were always bugs and glitches spoiling the smooth operation of the hoped for perfect world. Too many items important to culture and freedom were considered messy and left out of the equation. An army of government and corporate employees swept them up. San supposed that on some future day humankind would sweep up and exterminate itself. Clean moneymaking android machines would claim the great eternity of the flawless corporate technocrats and planners ... all of it for the glory of nothing and no one named or unnamed that had a real face. Just some idea out there in a cube of how the world could be better and more profitable for fate and the monster scabs it brought along to rule.

A couple more fast and dark shortcuts took him to a rubbish-strewn road that was an unusual scene in the modern city where vacant space was a luxury. It was a trail thick with freak weeds - huge shivering mistakes that had never been completely eliminated. Ruts and spill erosion had chewed into the main track to a depth that would make an all-terrain vehicle necessary for any person wanting to drive it. San's rendezvous with the gangsters was to be at the end of this gopher path at the wall and gate of an abandoned Nestle industrial complex.

He could see much farther as the creature, and even through deep darkness. The wall of the complex was a short distance ahead. Cracked and dripping with vines it rose high in the night. At its top, a force shield resembling smoked glass flashed and glittered ominously, and beyond it stood a gleaming onion dome and a tower.

A faint haze of yellow nightlight filtered through the black web of boughs overhead and as he grew closer, he spotted some fresh tire tracks in the earth. They ran parallel to the gate, meaning the gangsters hadn't used the road but had come through the bushes from the south. He knew they were using a big hydrogen vehicle because he could smell traces of the acrid exhaust. There were also odors of alcohol and human sweat drifting in the air from some willows to the right of the gate.

A cloud of insects suddenly swarmed down and then away nearly as quickly as his body emitted a defensive odor. San was close now so he perched on a huge rut in the dried mud, and with some concentration, spotted two armed men standing in the darkness under one of the willows. One had his hands in his pockets and the other appeared relaxed but watchful. Obviously the men were backup for the person he was about to meet. They couldn't see him yet and wouldn't until he stepped out of the deeper darkness into the open moonlit area near the gate.

Due to the bright moonlight spotlighting the gate, he decided to walk toward it but stand at its side in the shadow of the wall and foliage. Putting his head down and hunching his shoulders, he moved into the light and went over to a post on the left side of the gate. There he was visible to the men but only vaguely so.

He kept watch on them from the corner of his eye. They didn't see him but he noted that they had drawn their weapons. Clearly, they were waiting for some signal or for someone else to show.

The arrival of a third man came with movement in the bushes and the rustling brush automatically triggered San's night vision. It instantly turned the darkness into a form of faint colored light. Shadows vanished like mist and he saw the man clearly. He had a combination of rugged features and a strong gaze that added up to a look of handsome though somewhat sinister ferocity. His suit was loose but the collarless shirt beneath the jacket was tight; the clothing being all in gray tones that camouflaged him neatly. An ordinary man would not be seeing him yet, but San saw him so well that he noticed him doing a pat check on a weapon he had shoved down his belt under his jacket at the back. Packing a gun that way meant he had prepared for a possible fast draw.

As the gangster moved out of the bushes, San lowered his head and shuffled back and forth. Then when the guy got closer, he looked up, feigning surprise. This worked to disarm the criminal and he walked up confidently. He stopped before he got too close to San and pulled dark wraparound glasses from his jacket pocket and put them on.

Tapping the right lens he said, "It's easier to talk to you when I can stand to look at you. My name is Daniel Grant, and you'll be taking orders from me from now on."

"You got the stuff?" San said, an urgent tone in his voice.

“Patience, patience. It's in my pocket. It's never been used on an advanced case like yours, but our scientist says it will work. The reversal will go as smoothly as your current transformation has.”

“So how long did you last before you cracked and begged for the reversal?”

“Seven hours. You knew it happened to me? I'm surprised”

“Most people can't see me or look at me directly, even with tinted glasses on, so you've had some experience. You're also a military genetic type and old enough to be an officer of some sort. Obviously the gang wanted agents in the military so they recruited you in the same cruel way.”

“I'm glad you're observant. You've saved me a lot of talking. It is true that I didn't volunteer, but I'm at the top in this region now. One reason I'm here is to tell you that it isn't bad at all – you'll easily adjust and you can't beat the benefits. You'll not only get to call the shots in this big town, but you'll be able to exercise power in a way you couldn't as a cop. We don't see ourselves as gangsters. We're a sort of hidden police force. The state doesn't pay us of course. We take care of that ourselves.”

“I'm sure you do, Daniel. In sending you, your masters have also picked the right man for my notions. I might as well tell you straight off that my mission is similar to yours. I'm here to recruit you.”

“Recruit me,” he said, chuckling quietly. “Don't tell me you're still trying to play cop at this stage of the game?”

“Not cop, but criminal. I want you to join me and create a new organization?”

“Ah, a man with ambition. But no, it doesn't work that way. We take you in and you work your way up. Attempts at a takeover would fail.”

“I'm not a man with ambitions; I'm a monster with certainty. I passed the test you see, and I'm the IT or the ogre. What I've discovered is that the full change creates a superior being. Our society attempted to create the master race using our notions of beauty and strength, and failed. Nature makes no such errors.”

“It looks like nature's error is madness or a form of mania. Do you really expect me to help a thing like you? I underwent that change partially. It was the most terrifying experience of my life. Maybe you always were some kind of undetected freak - a genetic misfit who can somehow tolerate the grotesque. But others can't. Your plan would never work. You really have no choice other than to do what we say.”

“No. I can't return to my former human self. And once I have the spore I can select people who have a chance of making it. I need you in human form, because you're good at what you do. You can organize for me. My plan is not to destroy all men or transform everyone - just a select few. An organization controlled by us would have incredible power. No one could fight us and win.”

Putting his hand to his chin, Daniel thought it over, not knowing that San could see through his dark lenses. The mood in Daniel's eyes was at first supportive, then his thinking shifted to the contrary and San detected very faint movement. He knew Daniel was going for his gun with his other hand.

Striking out with cat speed San raked a claw up Daniel's chest, cutting cloth and flesh and sending him tumbling back onto the rutted road. Then as Daniel rolled, San did a quick turn and leapt for the wall, bullets from the backup gunners spraying in a trail behind him as he moved like a blur. He went for the top on all fours like an animal running and when he was high enough he jumped straight to the trees.

The force of his leap sent him flying through the leaves; he connected with a sturdy bough and swung up even higher. Suddenly the whole tree shook and a glance down showed him that Daniel had been smart enough to shoot the trunk, causing a force transfer to the tree. The other two weren't as clever; they were spraying bullets up through the leaves.

The trees arched over the road making it easy for San to race out on a limb and leap across. From there he circled in other dark treetops, positioning himself high in the second tree back from the open gate area.

Below Daniel moved into the shadows near where they had met while the other two gangsters were in the open moonlight and looking up. They conferred then stepped back and again sprayed a tree with projectiles.

While the guns rattled, San busted off a piece of branch and tossed it lightly over to the first tree. It dropped down through the limbs and on seeing it land, the men quickly changed their aim.

Random fire was getting them nowhere so they held off and moved forward slowly, looking up and shifting their gaze from tree to tree. Daniel had not joined them; he was slowly climbing the ivied wall to an open portion in the force field.

One of the men was directly under him and in shadows now, so San decided to make a move. His skin brushed the bark as he slid silently down the trunk to the lowest limb. There he wrapped his feet around the branch and swung down hard, coming out of the darkness to rake the gunman's neck with the full force of his claws. It was a blow so deadly that it ripped most of the man's throat away and sent blood pulsing out in a spray of dark rain.

As San scrambled back up the boughs, he heard the other gunman gasp and then a rattle as bullets pounded the branch. Daniel was on top of the wall now. He'd removed his jacket and was using it to stop the bleeding from the claw wounds on his chest. His gun had been holstered. It looked like he planned on seeing if his men were successful and if they weren't he was going to escape over the wall and into the abandoned complex.

Luck came as the remaining gunman suddenly ran out of ammunition and began a quick and desperate reload. It wasn't fast enough as San dropped to earth five metres from him and charged. He tackled the man, knocking the wind out of him, and he held onto him as he ran into the brush. From there he dragged the guy through the thorns and went up a maple tree.

Daniel had not attempted to shoot him and he remained standing at the top of the wall. San decided to test his strength. Locking his feet into the tree trunk, he lifted the limp body and threw the man. It took every ounce of his strength. The body arced out over the boughs and into the force shield, a few metres down from Daniel. It was like hitting

a spike or powerful magnet. The shield held the body, lit it up like transparent neon, super-heated the flesh and sent organs and blood showering out in a boiling explosion. A cloud of hissing steam rose, the bones burned and the skull shattered like pottery. Moments later wisps of smoke and dust remained. A dark stain ran on the ivied wall.

Daniel turned toward the opening in the shield and went halfway through, then he turned and yelled back to San. "The spore's in the tower, inside the complex. The scientist and a couple other men are all we need. The rest we can kill."

San watched as Daniel disappeared over the wall. Then he leapt, went through the opening and dropped down to a weedy field. He spotted Daniel ahead of him. He'd halted on a path leading through the brush, and was looking ahead to the tower.

San studied the structure; it rose amid industrial wreckage - a powerful engine of the past. He felt his chest muscles contract like a second potent engine. And at that moment, the genetic changes became complete. His mind rose with super intelligence. He knew the spore could be obtained easily and that Daniel would remain as his partner.

The new world would be a Garden of Eden ... a jungle ... but mankind and all of old earth would remain or be reborn. Ogres would rule the world, but it had always been that way.

---- the end ----