

Earth Raiders

A Novel By David Wayne Conklin

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Part 1 originally published as *Arrival of the Eye Creatures*

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To the memory of Ralph and Helen

Author's note: Regarding my unique writing style: To each his own, but one of the biggest distractions for me, reading books, has always been the obvious structuring of the story by the author simply to avoid repetition. For example, it is common for an author to drop the use of speech tags during long conversations between two people. The author does this to provide a change of pace, under the idea that designating who is speaking becomes redundant when it should be obvious. The problem is, in order to prevent the reader from getting lost, which I often do anyway, the author then has to be careful what words he places in the mouths of the two people speaking. This is only one example of several I could offer, so I decided to see if I could come up with a writing style that would require much less alteration, for the sole purpose of solving repetition, by the author. In other words, the characters could always say whatever they wanted to say, and both the narrative and the dialogue would hopefully structure themselves—repetition free—with minimal afterthought. In this I believe I have succeeded with a simple rule that I arrived at through trial and error: Something like a screenplay or TV script, all quotes are preceded by the name of the person speaking unless a question has just been asked and it is obvious to whom the question has been directed, or the quote was written in a conventional way.

Contents

Part 1 Arrival of the Eye Creatures

1	The Sculptor.....	1
2	Mr. Blanchart.....	19
3	The Stakeout.....	35
4	Answers.....	53

Part 2 Ruck's Plan

5	The Real Target.....	XX
6	Ruck's Acquisition.....	XX
7	Return to the Moon.....	XXX
8	The Unraveling.....	XXX

Part 3 The Raid

9	A Monster's Revenge.....	XXX
10	The Remote Operators.....	XXX
11	The Think Tank.....	XXX
12	The Turning Point.....	XXX
13	Battle of the Eye Creatures..	XXX

Thyme weights for knowman.

Part 1

Arrival of the Eye Creatures

1 The Sculptor

Anwaar Abd al-Jabbar was a world-renowned sculptor. His parents had emigrated from Qatar to the UK when he was a child, so he had lived there most of his life. Presently, he was in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government had invited him to Saudi Arabia to be present at the unveiling of a special glass-and-stainless-steel sculpture that Anwaar had been commissioned to create for a newly constructed government complex. After arriving at Riyadh, however, he would soon learn that there was another reason for his invitation. Shortly after the unveiling, he was shuffled onto a business jet by several uniformed men and flown to Mecca. While on the plane, he was forced to take an oath of secrecy, even though he wasn't sure exactly what the big secret was. Upon arriving at Mecca, he was taken to the Grand Mosque, where he met one General Nasir Hassan and learned the real reason he had been summoned. After being led into a small room inside the mosque, one of the priests of the Grand Mosque pulled back a linen curtain, revealing the Black Stone, Islam's most sacred artifact. However, the stone being presented to Anwaar was not black, rather a translucent reddish brown in color, and missing was its effeminately shaped silver frame.

“What is this?” Anwaar whispered.

“The Black Stone,” said General Hassan. “Is this the first time you have seen the Black Stone?”

“Yes, I have never made a pilgrimage. That does not mean I am faithless. But this does not resemble the Black Stone as I have heard it described.”

General Hassan: “What I am about to tell you is one of the best kept secrets of the Muslim world, something known to only a select few. Centuries ago, after the Black Stone was shattered and later stolen away by the Qarmartians, the priests of the Kaaba decided to duplicate the stone. The copy they created was eventually positioned on the Kaaba, the original stored nearby in a secret compartment. It was a wise decision that has protected the Black Stone over the centuries; only now, the copy is, essentially, crumbling.” The General paused while continuing to look Anwaar straight in the eyes.

A moment passed before Anwaar realized what General Hassan was asking him to do. “You want me to create a new duplicate.”

General Hassan: “The priests would like to keep things the way they are, and continue to let the stone be touched without having to worry about further damage to the original. I have been authorized to procure whatever materials or tools you might need.”

Anwaar: “General, I think the best way to do this is let me take some photogra—”

“No photographs,” said the General. “The priests won’t allow it. You must do it here. The priests will provide you with a room and nourishment for however long it takes. Now listen closely . . . There is only a handful of people who know what you are really doing, including three priests here at the mosque and myself. As far as anyone else is concerned, you are here to reset some of the pieces and apply a coating to the stone to prevent any further oxidation. So the duplicate must be so good as to even fool some of the priests. I trust if you care about the stone, you will never tell anyone.”

Anwaar: “The secret will be safe.”

Anwaar began his work early the next day. Even though his task was to create a copy that duplicated the fake Black Stone’s aesthetics, the priests allowed him to keep the real Black Stone in the room until a cast could be

made. It wasn't long, however, before Anwaar could no longer resist the temptation to investigate the authentic Black Stone. One of the first things he did was to carefully pry out one of the broken pieces that had been cemented together with bitumen centuries ago and test its density. One of the legends regarding the stone was that it floated in water, and sure enough . . . Anwaar also ruled out the stone being volcanic pumice, a chunk of obsidian, or a piece of dark amber—his first assumption. In the end, Anwaar never did conclude exactly what kind of mineral it was. Anwaar found the fake to be an even greater challenge. It proved to be a true conglomerate—a delicate, pieced-together mass—of what was probably an agate, held together by a crude cement, the silver frame, and a prayer. Centuries of handling coupled with modern air pollution had clearly taken its toll. It would take every trick that Anwaar knew to recreate the duplicate Black Stone's overall texture and surface color, including the black, polished area that had been worn smooth by the millions who had visited the Kaaba.

As time passed, Anwaar began to change. The more time he spent in close proximity to the authentic Black Stone, the more he seemed to understand what the stone was. He began to have unworldly visions and dreams dominated by a rectangular shape with very specific dimensions. He kept the odd experience to himself as he toiled, sometimes for many hours each day. Finally, after three weeks of grueling work, he felt he had fulfilled his obligation and unveiled his creation to the priests and General Hassan. All were very pleased with Anwaar's work. Anwaar was paid well for his accomplishment, and he wasted no time in returning to the UK. Anwaar, however, brought something back to England with him besides a nice paycheck. Packed in with his belongings was a rectangular rough-cut reddish-brown piece of stone measuring about three centimeters by eight centimeters.

The Moon Mission

Some time later, near Oppenheimer Crater, on the far side
of the Moon

Mission LRE-12 (Long Range Exploratory #12) was approaching the rim of a tiny (by Moon standards), rather ordinary appearing crater some eight hundred and fifty kilometers from Moon Base Camille. It was the farthest that any manned mission had ever ventured onto the far side of the Moon. Pilot Alex Furman was driving, while mission specialist Wesley Furste was sitting in the central part of the large six-wheeled rover, monitoring a large flat-panel computer display and an array of other small scientific devices. The rover was a rolling science lab, designed to allow a two-man crew to study the geology of the Moon with a minimal amount of exposure. Only occasionally was it necessary for the astronauts to leave the rover in order to gather rock samples. A large robot arm mounted on the back of the rover made it possible to break apart boulders, scoop soil, or take core samples by remote control. The rover was even equipped with several thumpers that could be released from the underside and remotely activated to study subsurface topography. Wesley was a geologist, and had been working for NASA for many years in preparation for establishing the first permanent Moon base. Wesley was studying an image of a slice of Moon rock from a sample they had picked up earlier that day, when he happened to notice an unusual light flashing on the main transceiver unit.

Wesley: "Hey, Alex, there is light flashing back here on the transceiver; says, "link disconnect."

Alex: "Yea, I've got the same thing up here. Alex grabbed the forward transceiver mic. "Camille, this is Seeker One. Moon Base Camille, this is Seeker One, please respond. Huh, that's weird." Alex stopped the rover so that he and Wesley could begin troubleshooting the problem. After about a half an hour had passed, they agreed that the drive mechanism for the dish antenna was inoperable. If worse came to worse, they could try and

maneuver the rover so the dish pointed in the right direction, however, there was more to it than just turning the rover, as there was always the vertical axis to consider.

Alex: "Looks like one of us is going outside for a while; want to flip?"

"No, I'll do it."

Alex: "C'mon, I just got a little disoriented."

Wesley: "In my opinion, Alex, we're too far from base to take any unnecessary risks. And you did get a little funny on that last walk."

Alex: "It was probably a little too much oxygen."

Wesley: "We'll talk about this later; help me with this suit, will you?"

After helping Wesley into his suit, Alex exited the airlock and began monitoring the decompression procedure. About twenty-five minutes later, including fifteen minutes of actual decompression, Wesley began to feel a grogginess overtake him.

"Alex," said Wesley, in a voice that was slowing down almost word for word, "something's . . . wrong. I . . ." Wesley slumped to the bottom of the airlock.

Forty minutes later

Alex Furman stood on the rim of a crater roughly 220 meters in diameter. He reached into a tool pouch Velcroed across his abdomen and pulled out what appeared to be an ordinary remote control unit that might come with any modern television set. While pointing the unit towards the crater, he depressed one of the buttons with a blunt stylus. Nearly the entire floor of the crater began to rise up, and in only a matter of seconds, an enormous, perfectly circular slab at least 15 meters thick had risen smoothly above the rim of the crater, where it hung with no visible support. Alex climbed down the slight incline that marked the rim of the crater and peered down a 180-meter-wide circular shaft that led to pitch-blackness. Looking away from the Sun to the other side of the crater, where there should have been a shadow cast by the disc along the crater rim, Alex could only detect

the slightest hint of a shadow. The disc had a tapered edge that was larger at the top than at the bottom. The surface of this bevel had the ability to change its reflectivity from dull gray to a highly polished, chrome-like surface. The side towards Alex was dull, but the side away from him was reflective. Sunlight, being first reflected off the surrounding hilly terrain, was being reflected again by the disc to help eliminate its own shadow. Alex attached himself to a wire line that was in turn attached to a winch located on the rover. He depressed a button on his spacesuit and descended a short ways into the shaft, stopping just beyond its tapered edge. He again reached into the pouch, this time pulling out a spherical object about seven centimeters in diameter that connected to a small cylinder via a short tether. Writing on the spherical object read: "EMERGENCY LIGHTING, Insert cylinder to activate." Alex activated the light ball, which gave off a bright 360-degree white light, and dropped the ball it into the shaft. The light continued to fade for what seemed like an entire minute before becoming undetectable. Taking a deep breath, Alex disconnected his wire line, and fell away into the Moon.

About three hours later

Wesley awoke in his drop down bunk inside the rover, feeling like he had just been hit by a ton of bricks, and soon realized he had an oxygen mask on his face and an oximeter clip on his right index finger. He could hear Alex stirring towards the front of the rover. A few minutes later, Alex walked by, his head being just above Wesley's eye level.

Alex: "Hey, look who's back among the living. Do you know who I am?"

"Major Alex Furman."

Alex: "Do you know where you are?"

"Mobile Exploration and Research Laboratory, Seeker One."

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

“Two, I think.” Alex took a small penlight and shone it into Wesley’s pupils.

Alex: “Good, you gave me kind of a scare there, cowboy, but you’re fine.”

Wesley: “What happened?”

“Your rebreather, that’s what happened. You ran out of air.”

Wesley: “I don’t understand, everything worked perfectly the other day.”

Alex: “I know, I’m starting to wonder if the suits we got don’t have serious design problem with the primary mixing valves.”

Wesley: “So did I miss anything while I was out?” Wesley looked at his watch. “Damn, why was I out for so long?”

“Yea, I got the transceiver working and already reported our situation.”

Wesley: “What did you do?”

“Rebooted the computer.”

“Shit,” said Wesley, dejectedly. “You have got to be kidding me. But the computer wasn’t locked up or anything.”

Alex: “Computers—who knows? A cosmic ray or something passes through your RAM, and the next thing you know . . . Yea, I got you out the airlock and out of your suit as fast as I could, put you on oxygen, and once I got you stabilized, figured at that point it would be best to try and finish what we started. By the way, the mission is over. We’re heading back to base.”

And so, Seeker 1 headed back to Moon Base Camille. Wesley never suspected any kind of foul play was involved in his airlock accident. And he never bothered to conduct a blood test on his own blood, which would have revealed traces of anesthetic agents. Alex piloted Seeker 1 away from the small crater so quickly that Wesley never discovered the footprints leading away from the rover. And Wesley never suspected that a storage cubicle containing some of Alex’s personal belongings, a cubicle that he would sleep next to, work next to, and eat next to for days to come, contained mankind’s only link with the universe: a device so precious that if damaged

or lost, it could set mankind back perhaps thousands of years before ever making contact with another civilization.

The Cabin in the Hills

One year and three months after the Moon mission

It was a foggy mid-summer evening in upstate New York when a vanload of teenagers from Long Island turned off the highway and headed west, away from Lake Champlain. Brian Walker and his friends thought they were in for a weekend of fun hanging out at his dad's cabin and doing some water-skiing at a nearby lake. Fate would prove otherwise.

Graduation was behind them, and all of them were planning to attend a university in the coming months. This was their last hurrah; their last chance for the five of them to bond before going their separate ways. Or, perhaps in a less melodramatic sense, it was just another excuse to party.

Night fell as Brian turned the van off a paved highway and onto a gravel road that meandered through the Adirondack wilderness.

Brad: "You sure you know where you're going?"

"I've only been down this road a hundred times."

Steve: "Turn your brights on, dude, we haven't met a car since we turned off the highway."

"How about no lights?" said Brian, who then proceeded to turn off the van's headlights while the van was still moving.

Steve: "What the hell?"

Brian turned the headlights back on, momentarily. "Look, you don't even need to steer on this road. The ruts are so deep the van steers itself." Brian took his hands off the wheel and put them behind his head, then reached down and turned the headlights off again. "See? No hands, no headlights necessary."

Rebecca: “Brian, turn the headlights back on or I’m going to kick your ass.”

Brad: “Please maintain control of the antique, fuel-consumptive locomotive.”

Brian: “Aw, ye of little faith. We’re only moving about twenty miles per hour.” Brian put his hands back on the steering wheel and turned the headlights back on, only to jam the break pedal, sending everyone lunging towards the front of the van. “Did you see that?!” he shouted.

Steve: “No, what?”

“I don’t know what the hell it was. Did anyone see that?”

“No,” replied the others in unison.

Brad: “Tell me you didn’t just run over Bigfoot.”

Brian: “I’m telling you, it was the strangest thing I have ever seen in my life. It . . . well . . . it had . . .”

Rebecca: “Are you just trying to scare us? Next you’ll be telling us it was wearing a hockey mask.” Brad, Steve and Steve’s girlfriend, Diane, all laughed.

Steve: “Come on, let’s go. I’m not camping out in this van all night; you can tell us about it on the way.”

The next day, the five retrieved the Walker’s boat from the local marina and spent most of the day on the lake. Driving back, they passed by a nice black drive that branched off the highway. The drive was blocked a little ways back by a tall black gate.

Brian: “That’s the house I was telling you about.”

Steve: “Oh yea, where the Rockefellers live in a missile silo.”

Brian: “No, dumb-ass! The old guy that lives there; he married a Branson. Adrian Branson was a big silver magnate around the turn of the century. My dad told me the story, but I have kind of forgotten it—something about Tom Blanchart’s daughter dying in a car accident and then his wife died of cancer a short time later. The house was given to her by her father as a vacation house. Now old man Blanchart lives there. That’s what my dad calls him. The house is awesome, though. I guess he went through a

rough time after his family passed, and he turned into an alcoholic and almost lost the property. Some people in town stepped in and staged what I guess you would call an intervention and turned the house into a bed and breakfast. He eventually got back on his feet financially and then, a while back, bought some adjacent property that had an old underground missile silo on it—a leftover from the cold war.”

Steve: “Cool.”

Rebecca: “Is it rustic? If it is I want to see it, the house that is.”

Brian: “I guess you could call it that, but it’s not a bed and breakfast anymore. The backside of the property line is adjacent to our lot, though. I can take you there, but it’s rough going. We might have to trespass a little ways to the edge of the woods so, you know, keep your head down.”

After supper and a card game, the five proceeded through the woods to the Blanchart house, with about an hour left until dusk. They hiked for nearly fifteen minutes until crossing the property line, their progress severely hampered by areas of thick deciduous undergrowth. They had only made it about a hundred meters past the property line, when someone shouted, “Hold it.” It was Tom Blanchart. He had a hunting outfit on and was carrying what appeared to be a small-caliber rifle slung over his shoulder.

Tom: “I going to have to ask you kids to go back the way you came. I set out some traps around the property, and God forbid one of you should step on one.”

Brian: “Mister Blanchart, it’s Brian Walker. We met down at the lake a few years ago.”

Tom: “Oh yea, your dad bought the old Meyer cabin.”

Brian: “So what are the traps for?”

“Old black bear that’s been getting to bold for his britches. He hasn’t attacked anyone that I know of, but I would stay out of these woods. He seems to prefer this area for some reason.”

Brian: “We’re probably only going to stay for a few more days, anyway. Say, Tom, you haven’t seen any really bizarre looking animals around have you?”

“Bizarre, in what way?”

Steve: “Brian thinks he saw some kind of monster with eyes all over its body.”

Tom: “No, sure haven’t seen anything like that.”

Brian gave Steve an unappreciative look while adding, “I saw the butt end of something on our way in. It looked to be hairless and tail-less, and although it might have been the angle, its upper body looked larger than its bottom end, like some kind of hairless great ape. Strangest thing, though, it looked back as it was running into the brush, and I could swear it had three eyes—one huge cat’s eye in the middle of its head with two smaller eyes above it kind of widely spaced.”

Tom: “My best guess is, it was a bear; probably outfitted with a radio collar by the park service. They hang under the bears chin and some are cylindrical and pretty reflective. As for the hairless part, I don’t know; could have had wet fur from diggin’ up crawdads in the creek or something, I suppose, which might have looked like bare skin in your headlights. Or maybe it was a diseased bear that’s lost its fur for some reason too, you know?”

Brian: “Yea, that’s probably it. There *was* a bit of mist in the air last night. By the way, if you were planning on shooting the bear with that gun, I think you need a bigger gun.”

“Oh, yea, you might be right.” Tom said, grinning a bit sheepishly, then turned and walked away. The kids turned around and started back.

“I can’t believe we ran into him like that,” Brian whispered. “This property is huge. The odds must be incredible.”

Rebecca: “You should have asked him if we could drive back and see the house.”

Brian: “You ask him. Or, we could try the back route tomorrow.”

Steve: “The back route?”

“Yea, there is an access road off the highway back to the missile silo. We will have to follow the fence around the silo and then cut through an old apple orchard. We should be able to see the back of the house from there.”

To top the day off, the group climbed one of taller hills in the area to a scenic lookout. After witnessing a spectacular magenta sunset against the backdrop of hills, and watching the entire Pikeville fireworks show from afar, they made their way down the trail, flashlights in hand. Of course, every odd sound or reflection from a small animal's eyes became the subject of a running joke regarding Brian's eye creature. Brian did not bother to respond, knowing that to do so would only encourage them, and kept his nervousness to himself.

Despite Steve and Diane not being too keen on the idea, Rebecca had managed to talk them into trying Brian's "back route." The five ate breakfast the next day and drove to the access road. They started up the access road, only to discover the road blocked by a large embankment of dirt some distance before the main gate to the missile base. They left the van, climbed over the mound, and continued up the access road on foot. About a hundred meters beyond the access road, they discovered the carcass of a young deer lying on the road about a meter from the right berm. It was badly mutilated and had been partially eaten, but did not have a particularly pungent odor or signs of bloating, and it was obviously a fresh kill.

Diane: "Aw, the poor thing."

Brad: "A classic example of the natural order, often insalutary in its execution. Suppose Tom's bear did this?"

Brian: "Could be. Honestly though, I have never seen a bear kill before. Even if it were road kill, you're still talking something the size of a bear to drag it this far. I was always told that bears try to hide things, though."

Steve: "Look at those long claw marks on its back. Why would a bear do that?"

Brian: "That's probably nothing abnormal; the marks do look a bit widely spaced, though."

Rebecca: "I don't know about you guys, but I'm thinking maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

Brian: "Awe, come on, we have all been back in these woods before. We all know what comes with the territory. Besides, it's very, very uncommon for a bear to attack someone merely walking through the woods, let alone a group of five people. You have to understand bear psychology. Black bears are skittish when it comes to things unfamiliar to them. When they do attack people, it is probably because they have had the chance to study their prey—like some kind of "master thief." While Brad was talking, Steve had wandered over to the ditch running along the access road.

Brad: "What are you doing?"

"Looking for soft ground."

Brian: "Great idea, I'll look on this side."

A few minutes later, Steve shouted, "Brian, take a look at this." Steve had found a patch of mud on the other side of the ditch a little ways down from the deer carcass. Brian had spent more time up in the Adirondacks than probably the other four combined and had seen many bear prints, but he had never seen anything like these. There, in the mud, along with a cluster of other smaller prints probably belonging to wildlife that had visited the carcass the night before, were two fairly large prints, one about forty-five centimeters in front of the other. The impressions were of something much more elongated than a bear paw and appeared almost hand-like, with three large forward appendages and one prehensile "thumb." Sharply pointed claws on all four appendages had dug small channels into the mud. Brian noticed two other strange prints paralleling the footprints. Each was, in essence, three oblong depressions side by side, spaced about two and one half centimeters apart.

Steve: "Well, what's the verdict?"

"Has anyone here ever seen an old movie called *The Island of Doctor Moreau*?"

Rebecca: "Based on the book by H.G. Wells?"

"Um . . . yea. Anyway, I don't know what made these, it looks like some kind of four-toed ape went through here, or—"

“Or maybe it was your eye monster,” added Steve. Brian offered no reply.

Rebecca: “I say we come back later on today with some plaster and make some casts. We’ll take them back with us and show them to Mister Ashby.”

The five continued walking up the access road towards the silo. When they arrived at the silo, they discovered that the security fence had been removed. The grass around the silo had been mowed recently, and a gravel road led away from the silo towards the orchard. The silo did not prove very interesting to the group, which only amounted to a small stairwell entrance rising above ground level, a large slab of concrete off to one side that marked the silo itself, and a few small shacks and odd pipes sticking out of the ground here and there.

Steve: “So where did you go in it at?”

Brian: “One of those grates over there, I think it was those on the left. It’s an air duct for the ventilation system.”

Diane: “What are you talking about?”

“My cousin and I kind of snuck into it about six years ago. That was back when the security fence was still here.”

Diane: “So how did you get past the fence?”

“We found a hole where someone had already cut it.”

Diane: “So what did you see, anyway?”

“Oh, it was awesome really. See, not too many people know about this particular silo. Back when they were building these silos, there was a minor earthquake right in this area. The soil shifted and the control center became misaligned with the silo. The Air Force decided it no longer met specifications, so they abandoned it and it became one of the first silos to transfer into private hands.”

Diane: “How do you know all this?”

“A relative of mine worked at these silos as an electrician. He’s deceased now, but according to what he told my dad, the Air Force removed most of the stuff for the rocket to use in other silos; but trust me, there is still a lot of stuff down there, or at least there was six years ago. Anyway, we discovered

that someone had rigged an escape route, for whatever reason, from the silo itself by welding some eyebolts onto the bottom of one of the grates and then fastening the grate with some cable to a pin that attached to the wall of the pit down below. We would probably never have discovered it if it wasn't for this bright-as-hell halogen lantern that we brought with us. To make a long story short, we came back with a couple fishing poles, stuck them down through the grate, and managed to slide the pin out. We removed the grate, climbed down into this pit, then waded through a bunch of muck until we discovered a tunnel leading into the silo. Apparently, it was an air duct that used to have a heavy blast door covering it until someone removed it. We crawled out of the air duct onto the top level, and were checking out the pistons that raised the doors up and down, and the elevator motors and stuff."

Diane: "There are elevators in there?"

"Oh yea. There was big one for the rocket and a smaller one for the people, and they looked to be in pretty good shape. After that, we went down this spiral staircase that just kept going and going. I never thought we would reach the bottom. And then when we got there, at least I think it was the bottom, a motor came on and scared the wits out of us. I think it was probably a sump pump. We took the spiral stairs back up to a tunnel that led to a staircase, and we just walked out. We must of passed through four or five of these huge steel blast doors on the way, which were pretty cool, and passed by a couple passageways that must have led to the control room, but it was getting late and we had to start heading back to the cabin."

Diane: "Sounds interesting."

Brian: "Yea, but let me tell you, we came out of there so filthy that we had to jump in the creek with our clothes on before we headed back to the cabin. And there was so much rusty metal in there, it's lucky we didn't both contract tetanus."

The group hiked past the silo by following the tree line and continued on through the orchard. The end of the orchard marked the start of some very tall grass and weeds, with an assortment of small trees mixed in as well.

Brian: “Well, I thought we could probably see the house from here. This used to be nothing but mowed grass. Looks like he is letting it revert like the old access road.”

Brad: “If we keep our heads down in this stuff, no one is ever going to see us.”

Brian: “Dude, you do not want to go crawling around in that. You will come out of there with every kind of nasty biting-ass bug known to man.”

Rebecca: “How far are we from the house, do you think?”

Brian: “Not very far.”

Rebecca: “Hand me the binoculars.” Brian handed over the binoculars. “Now raise me up.” Brian and Steve cupped their hands and held Rebecca up while Brad and Diane tried to steady her.”

Brian: “Well, what do you see?”

“I can see the house—sort of—but I can’t keep the binoculars steady.” Steve and Brian let her down. “There is a small garage or something over there to the left just beyond these weeds. If we took the woods over to it, we could come up behind it and view the house from the woods looking past the corner of the building.”

Brian: “Have you ever seen a leg trap big enough for a bear? That is, assuming that is what old man Blanchart was referring to.”

Steve: “Didn’t they outlaw those things or something?”

Brian: “I thought so.”

Rebecca: “I will lead the way. I will poke the ground with stick every step of the way, so just step where I step.”

Steve: “Brian, your girlfriend is nuts.”

Brian sighed. “Whatever, we come this far, let’s go see the house. Just everyone be quiet and step in the same place as the person in front of you.”

When they arrived at the structure that Rebecca had described, they found it to be a large garden shed that was immediately adjacent to the tree line. The thick underbrush forced them to pile up along the outer wall of the building, and each took turns peering around the corner. The two and a half story house proved every bit as grand as Brian had described, with its rustic

stone-and-log architecture. The entire house was surrounded by fieldstone for about the first two meters, changing to log above that. A gable-less roof, commonly known as a hip roof, made the large stone chimney, which rose up the right side of the house, stand out rather majestically. A single dormer faced the chimney; three dormers faced the rear of the house; and on the left side of the house, a larger extension of the roof extended all the way to the left wall, where a large double-window door opened onto a large terrace. The terrace was, essentially, the roof of a two-story extension to the house. A gravel drive ran past the right side of the house about thirty meters beyond the large chimney. The drive eventually passed through the orchard and continued on to the silo. A large plain-white delivery truck was parked on the drive, about even with the house.

Rebecca: "This is what some people call a vacation house?"

Brian: "So, was it worth it?"

Rebecca: "Yea, I think so." As Rebecca was speaking, a loud thump came from inside the shed, followed by a loud electronic-sounding voice, which abruptly stopped after several seconds. Brad tried to stand up, but was pulled back by Steve, as there happened to be windows along the back of the shed. They were therefore trapped until whoever it was in the shed, left the shed. After sitting there for nearly fifteen minutes, however, not another sound came from the shed. It was at this point that Brian decided to try and have a look inside. Ignoring the other's protests, Brian crawled on his stomach around the corner of the shed and peered through the gap in the double door. From his vantage point, he could see nearly the entire floor of the shed. After lying there for several minutes, the others began to get anxious.

"What are you doing, man?" Steve whispered, "You're going to get us busted."

Brian was completely preoccupied by what he was seeing inside the shed. The shed, on one hand, appeared vacant. On the other hand, Brian could see items in the shed seemingly shift position. The effect reminded Brian how rising currents of heated air can blur and warp objects in the distance on a hot day. Brian's curiosity got the better of him. He slipped

into the shed and quickly shut the door behind him. He looked over the inside for a minute, before noticing an old dusty transistor radio lying on a workbench at the back of the shed. As he walked towards the back of the shed, past a large tractor with a pull behind mower deck, something else caught his attention along the wall on the other side of the tractor. A fuzzy, distorted area was slowly moving towards the front of the shed as he moved towards the rear. He jumped on the mower deck and approached the fuzzy area while making back and forth movements with his head, trying to determine if it was the fuzzy area that was moving or something caused by his own perspective. He moved back towards the double doors and got between the fuzzy area and the door. The fuzzy area began retreating. Brian followed it and eventually cornered it in the back of the shed. He stooped over, stuck out his index finger towards the mysterious undulations, and touched something soft. At the same time, directly in front of Brian's face, a large eyelid almost seven centimeters wide opened, exposing a vertically slotted cat-like pupil. A large set of teeth followed baring canines that could rival a grizzly bear's, and the creature began emanating a low-pitched growl. Brian turned and leaped for the shed door only to catch his left foot on the mower deck and go down face first. As he was pushing himself from the floor, he felt the creature grab at his legs. Brian hardly noticed it at the time, but one of the creature's claws had snagged his right pants leg as he was getting to his feet. And as Brian pulled his leg away, the claw ripped through his jeans creating a fifteen-centimeter tear. Brian bolted from the shed and surprised the others with the facial expression of a complete madman. He grabbed Rebecca by the forearm and nearly pulled her arm off, shouting, "Run, run!" The two ran straight into the woods. The others tried to follow, but soon fell behind.

2 Mr. Blanchart

Rebecca: “Brian, the traps. Slow down, please slow down.”

Brian: “No, don’t slow down. We’re going straight for the van and getting the hell out of here.”

Rebecca: “What about our stuff? My purse is in the cabin; it has important stuff in it. What exactly are we running from, anyhow?”

Brian: “Just trust me, we don’t want to stick around here.”

“Brian, wait up, dude,” Steve shouted from about fifteen meters away. “We don’t know this place like you do. You’re going to get us lost.” Brian paused to let the others catch up. “Why are we running, there’s no one following us?” Steve asked while trying to catch his breath. It was then that he noticed Brian was shaking uncontrollably. He also noticed Rebecca’s face had been scratched on both sides from running through the underbrush.

“You don’t know that for sure, trust me. You do not know that.”

Steve: “What was it? Who was in the shed?”

Brian: “Listen, there is something going on around here, and I think it has something to do with old man Blanchart. There was something in that shed, and whatever it is, there is nothing remotely human about it. It has one huge cat’s eye in the middle of its head and teeth like a lion. And it has skin like a cuttlefish—it can blend in instantly with its surroundings.”

Brad: “Uh, Brian, what exactly happened to your pant leg, anyway?”

Brian pulled up the flaps of his split pants leg to reveal a bloody scratch on his calf perhaps four inches long. "It was the creature. Now do believe me? Didn't you hear it growl?"

Steve: "Now this is all really starting to freak me out."

Brian: "You're freaked out? Let's go back to the car. We'll head for town and I'll tell the police what I saw and—"

Steve: "Whoa, wait a minute. What do you expect to achieve? All the police are going to do is laugh at us and accuse us of pulling a prank. Let's think about this. I say we go back to the cabin first; we call the police and report seeing a large bear or mountain lion or something. We'll tell them that the girls were a bit concerned and that we just wanted to check and make sure there had not been any wild animal attacks in the area."

Diane: "Hey!"

Steve: "Okay, we were all a bit concerned. My point is, if everything has been more or less normal around here, maybe it isn't worth getting too excited about right now. After all, you are the one who had to go messing around in that shed."

Brian: "I disagree. We have to tell someone about this whether they laugh at us or not. We will stop at the cabin and get our stuff, but we are still leaving. I would never be able to sleep a wink tonight in that cabin. Maybe I'll never sleep again for that matter."

The five awoke in the cabin. Diane and Steve awoke in their chairs in front of the large stone fireplace. Brad and Brian awoke at the breakfast table with their heads down on the table. Rebecca awoke in the bathroom.

Brian: "Brad, wake up."

Brad raised his head and looked up bleary eyed. "What the hell?"

Brian: "Look at the time, it's almost two thirty."

Brad: "No way!"

The five of them had awakened in the very places they were that morning before embarking to the missile silo. None of them had any distinct memory of their trip to the missile silo, and all the indications were that they had simply fallen asleep for some strange reason shortly after 10am.

There was, however, plenty of confusion. There were the strange marks that all of them had on their faces and arms that itched and looked like partially healed scratches. Then there was Brian's torn pants: Brian claimed he had caught them on a tree branch earlier that morning, which the others might have accepted without much thought in any other circumstance. Gradually the five became more and more suspicious that they had not been asleep for four hours. The van was in the driveway, but a purse that Rebecca had sworn was in her bedroom the night before was found in the back of it. The van's gas gage, however, read half a tank—unchanged from the night before—and the engine was cold. Brian climbed under the van and swore he could feel some residual heat coming off the catalytic converter, but seemed to be the only one could feel it. Little did they know as they tried to figure out what had happened, that not only were they being watched, they were being listened to. And that night, while they slept, and during Rebecca's 11 o'clock trip to the outhouse accompanied by Brian, who stood outside the door and peered nervously into the dark woods, there were eyes looking back at them from the trees that did not belong to any of the indigenous wildlife, and they were tracking the kid's every move.

The next day, everything seemed to be going according to plan, which was a run into town to do a little grocery shopping and then, later that afternoon, a visit to a local museum. While in town, they stopped into the local ice cream parlor. Rebecca was pondering over the list of flavors.

"Uncle Tom?" exclaimed Rebecca to the man behind the counter, "What is that?"

"Oh," said the man, "it's chocolate and strawberry swirl. It was named after local friend of mine named Tom Blanchart—no racial pun intended. He—"

Rebecca: "Oh yea? We have met—sort of. I'll try one, let me have a medium please."

The man: "You know Tom? Him and I go back a long ways."

Brian: "She wants to see the house, but I really don't know Tom that well outside of meeting him a couple times." Rebecca jerked her head towards Brian, in surprise.

"I could probably set you up on that," said the man, who reached over to a wall phone and began dialing numbers. Brian's facial expression turned to sheer panic, although he wasn't sure himself why the prospect of actually visiting Tom's house gave him butterflies. Rebecca seemed a bit anxious about it as well. "Hey, what's up? Nothing really, got someone here that has an interest in rustic architecture and would like to see your house if it is at all possible. They're here with one of Bob Walker's kids. He bought that little cabin up there . . . Yea, uh-huh, okay." The man turned his attention towards Brian. "Are you headed back in that direction?"

Brian: "Uh, yea, probably about another forty-five minutes to an hour or so."

The man: "About forty-five minutes to an hour. Okay, I'll tell 'em—by." The ice cream man hung up the phone. "You're all set. Just pull up the gate and press the buzzer."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," Rebecca said while extending her hand over the counter."

"No problem, my name is Sam, by the way," Sam said, and shook Rebecca's hand. "I used to work in the kitchen there at the old Branson place when it was a bed and breakfast."

Rebecca: "So how's come it's not a bed and breakfast anymore?"

"Oh, it's kind of a long story. Business was never too outstanding, for one thing, and Tom didn't need the income anymore so—"

Rebecca: "Brian was telling me about some of the tragic circumstances in Tom's past, it was nice of the town to step in like that."

Sam: "We're a pretty small community. We try and look out for each other—rich and poor alike, I suppose. Yea, I was here the night Carolyn, his daughter, was killed—frikin' drunk driver—on that curve just before the highway crosses the river. That's a night I would like to forget; hard to believe it was twenty-five years ago. Pamela Branson, his wife, was driving and swerved to miss the guy and struck a tree on the passenger side. Pamela

wasn't injured—not on the outside—but . . . When it comes to things like that, you have to give it time. If you don't give it time, it will take the time away from you, you know?" The kids worked on their ice cream cones for a few minutes before heading for the door.

Rebecca: "By, and thanks again."

Sam: "Take care, and don't let the eye creature's get you." The comment brought the group to a dead stop.

Brian: "Eye creatures?"

"Oh sorry, just something silly us locals started saying. There was a widow named Eloise Carmichael who lived alone up near Lookout Ridge. She—"

Brian: "You mean up by us?"

"Yea, only a little closer to town. She came running into town one night last fall dressed in her nightgown and carrying a shotgun. She was completely hysterical and kept ranting something about how a three-eyed devil had broken into her house. She claimed to have shot it with a shotgun at close range and blew its forearm clean off. The creature took off, but when she went to grab the hand and throw it in the fireplace . . . it grabbed her."

Steve: "Brian, tell him about—"

Brian interrupted Steve in a voice just loud enough to drown him out. "So where exactly does this woman live?"

"Well, she bounced around there for a while. Last I heard she was at the Pikeville Nursing Home right up the road here about a mile. The police went to investigate and found the house engulfed in flames; determined it was arson. I wouldn't worry about any 'eye creatures,' though, if I were you—she just flipped out is all."

The five climbed into the van and left the ice cream parlor for the local grocery.

Steve: "Why didn't you tell him about the creature you saw the other day?"

Brian: "I don't know, perhaps because he knows Tom Blanchart."

Steve: "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Tell me this, why didn't Tom Blanchart tell us about Eloise Carmichael after we told him about the thing I saw? He had to know about it. And you remember when we ran into him the other day, and he theorized about the thing I saw being a bear with wet fur in the headlights? How did he know it was dark when we drove in? We never mentioned what time of day it was. By the way, we are definitely not stopping at Tom Blanchart's."

Rebecca: "The hell we're not."

"We're just going to have to tell him that something came up," Brian said defiantly.

Brad: "It was a bear with a radio collar, just like Tom said! You saw one cross the road that night, and it was a bear that broke into Eloise Carmichael's house. She freaked, shot the bear, and an oil lamp probably got knocked over in the fray."

Brian: "And how did you cognicate, incogni—oh forget it. What makes you so frickin' sure?"

"I think you mean, how did I excogitate such a conviction. Probably because it makes sense."

"Fine!" said Brian, angrily. "We'll stop at Tom Blanchart's, but we're stopping somewhere else first."

After visiting the grocery, Brian pulled the van out onto the main road opposite the way home.

A few minutes later, Brian pulled the van into the parking lot of the Pikeville nursing home.

Steve: "You have got to be kidding. Now we're visiting crazy little old ladies that burnt down their house?"

Brad: "Derangement unprecedented in the annals of neuropathology."

Brian stepped out of the van. "Be back in a few."

Rebecca: "Mind if I tag along?"

"Not at all."

Brian and Rebecca walked in the front door of the nursing home, which appeared to be a fairly new one-story construction located on a small

elevation just off the main road. A number of residents were gathered in the common areas at the front of the facility.

“Can I help you?” asked the nurse at the front desk.

“I’m looking for an Eloise Carmichael,” said Brian, as an elderly gentleman exited a hallway off to their left and shuffled past the front desk while pretending not to eavesdrop.

The nurse: “Relationship?”

“Um, my name is Brian Walker. My dad owns some property not too far from where she used to live.”

The nurse: “If this is about the property, you should see her son Nathan. He is the caretaker of the property these days.”

Brian: “Um, no, it’s kind of a private matter, if you don’t mind.”

The nurse: “I hope it has nothing to do with the night her house burnt down. Whatever you do, just don’t—”

The nurse was momentarily drowned out by some kind of commotion coming from down the hall. Apparently, one of the residents was in a tizzy about something and was shouting profanities at one of the nurses at the top of her lungs. “Get your hands off me,” shouted the woman. “I’m going to the rec-room and watch TV.”

Brian heard the nurse the woman was arguing with say something in a quieter voice to the effect of, “There is a TV in your room and you know the rules you agreed with to stay here.”

Brian had turned his attention back to the nurse at the front desk, when he overheard the woman shout, “You’ll be sorry you didn’t listen to me. The demons are coming. Mark my words.” This prompted Brian to walk over and peer down the hall. The argumentative woman he saw standing in hallway did not fit the picture he had in his mind of Eloise Carmichael. The woman standing in the hallway was younger than he had envisioned, in her early sixties perhaps, healthy and physically fit. Still, he instantly knew it was Eloise and walked towards her despite a displeased look on the face of the nurse at the front desk.

Brian: “Eloise? Eloise Carmichael?”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Brian Walker. My dad bought some land up by Lookout Ridge a long time ago.”

Eloise: “If you are looking to buy my property, it’s not for sale.”

Brian: “No, nothing like that. Um, it’s about something I saw the other day when we were driving in on Creek Road. Um, I can’t stay very long, is there somewhere we can maybe have a seat and—?”

“We will have to go back to my room. I’m only allowed out of my room at certain times; they’re afraid I’m going to run away.” Brian and Rebecca followed her down the hall.”

Brian: “This is my girlfriend, Rebecca, by the way.”

Eloise hardly glanced at Rebecca as she led them both into a small private room. “Okay, now what is it?”

Brian: “Well, I heard that you had a run-in with . . . some kind of animal, and I was just kind of wondering if you could describe it for me.”

Eloise: “It was no animal that came into my house. It was a demon, an apostle of the antichrist. I tell you, the time of revelation is upon us.” It was at this point that Eloise started becoming unstable. Her eyes grew wide and she started to visibly shake. Brian was confused as to just why, but he could empathize with her anguish, and some of it seemed to be rubbing off onto him. “The devil has been loosed from his prison and is sewing the seeds of evil. They are the fallen ones. It is all here in the Book of Enoch. Repent for your sins before it is too late.”

Brian: “Eloise, Misses Carmichael, what did the demon look like, can you describe it?”

Rebecca: “Misses Carmichael, would it be any easier to draw a picture of what you saw? Why don’t each of you draw a picture and compare them?” Rebecca noticed a writing tablet lying close by on a small dresser and picked it up. Before handing the tablet to Eloise, she tore out a blank page and handed it to Brian along with a thick periodical she had also picked up off the dresser. “Now all we need is a pencil or two.”

Eloise: “Over there, on the bookshelf.” Rebecca handed each of them a pencil and they each began scribbling away. After about five minutes, Brian announced that he was finished. A couple minutes later, Eloise handed the

tablet back to Rebecca. Rebecca took a quick look at each of the drawings before turning them around for Brian and Eloise.

Eloise: "I told them a thousand times, I am not crazy. The demons; they burnt down my house. Then the police put me in a mental institution. My insurance company won't pay for a new house because they think I did it. You have to tell them I'm not crazy."

Brian: "I will, Misses Carmichael, but I want you to keep this to yourself for the moment. Can you do that? Eloise gave no reply, and seemed to be mulling over Brian's suggestion. "I'm going to take these back to Long Island with me and show them to my dad; he'll know what to do. I just want to get as far away from Pikeville right now as I can and try and sort this all out." Brian and Rebecca left the room and started for the front entrance.

"You won't forget, now, will you?" Eloise shouted from behind.

"We won't forget," returned the both of them.

As Brian and Rebecca were walking out the front door of the nursing home, Brian folded the drawings and stuck them in his back pocket. "So, do you still want to stop at old man Blanchart's?"

"We told the man we're coming, so we're going."

Brian: "Okay, but I think it might be best if we keep all this to ourselves, too, for now, don't you think?" Rebecca nodded in agreement.

As they were nearing the van, Steve shouted, "What the hell took you so long? So what's the verdict, is she a Looney Tune?"

Brian: "Uh, she's pretty old. I don't think she heard half of what we said to her."

Steve: "Waste of time, huh?"

"More or less."

About a full hour after leaving the ice cream parlor, they pulled off the highway and up to the gate across Tom Blanchart's drive. Brian reached out the van window and punched a black button located on a box beside the drive. "Tom here."

"Yea, Tom, it's Brian Walker."

Tom: "I'm opening the gate now." The black gate swung open and Brian drove the van up a black topped drive that wended its way up hill for what seemed like a half kilometer or so until the ground leveled off and they came to a turnaround in front of the house.

Steve was the first to speak up. "Man this place is giving me the creeps; feels like I have been here before. I'm beginning to agree with Brian, maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

Brian: "Me and my big mouth, huh?" As everyone was pilling out of the van, Tom Blanchart walked out of his front door and down the steps of a large front porch made of stone.

Tom: "Brian, so who's got the interest in rustic architecture?"

"That would be my girlfriend here, Rebecca."

Tom: "Nice to meet you—again."

Brian: "This is Steve, Diane and Brad." Tom nodded.

Rebecca: "So here is one thing I'm curious about: I have been to several of the 'great camps' and I am wondering why this place was built so far back from the lake."

Tom: "Well, that is a good question. The place was built in nineteen twenty-five by Adrian Branson's wife, Michelle, you might say. They had already built a large cabin down on the lake designed to accommodate about forty people, which has since been torn down, but Michelle wanted a more private place, and she liked the view from up here on the bluff. So, instead of a cabin with ten bedrooms, this one only had about five. Then we converted a few more rooms into bedrooms during the bed and breakfast years, which I have since reverted and so on and so forth."

Rebecca: "The view? All I see are trees."

Tom: "In nineteen twenty-five, there weren't any trees out front here. I have some photos taken of the view, and you could see the lake and the hills surrounding it. I'll show you when we go inside. Some of the town's people wanted me to cut them down when we converted the place into a bed and breakfast; thought that it would help business, but didn't do it—the pines are a good shield from the winter winds."

"Rebecca: "Oh yea, had one of your ice cream cones."

“All right, you and I are a team,” Tom said with a wink. “Now, the design of this place was based on some of the earlier Coulter lodges. It’s typically called the ‘half log’ style. Coulter was a . . .”

Tom continued showing them around the outside of the property and offering history lessons about the local architecture. It was when they rounded the building to view the backside of the property that things began to get a bit strange. They were all hit by a powerful feeling of déjà vu. Everything seemed to have aura of familiarity about it, including a white delivery truck with a lift gate and sixteen-foot box parked on a gravel road that ran towards the back of the property. And things would only get stranger as they moved inside. Moving inside, Tom first took them into a large parlor with large forward-facing windows that once looked out past the front porch towards the lake. The walls of the room were knotted pine, with the centerpiece of the room being, of course, the massive stone fireplace highlighted with a large moose head above the mantle. Tom was busy explaining how the moose head was merely something he had dug out of the closet back when they were redecorating for the bed and breakfast, when some portraits hanging on the wall caught Rebecca’s attention. Tom noticed her interest. “That one there is my wife, Pamela, she passed not too long after our daughter was killed in a car accident.”

Rebecca: “Sorry to hear that.”

Tom quickly moved on. “This fireplace . . . usually when you think of rustic architecture, you think of large fieldstone chimneys. The Bransons chose to cover the face of this one with various stones they had collected from around the world. He didn’t leave any sort of list, however, describing what came from where, so I have kind of made it a hobby of mine to figure it out. Let me take you up to the third floor and show you the view from the terrace.” Tom led the group back towards the center of the house to the staircase.

As they were heading up the stairs, Brian said, “So, Tom, ever give any tours of the silo?”

“No, I’m afraid not. The place is just still too hazardous. I have done some work on it, though; maybe one of these days I will get it to where I

can show it off.” From the third floor landing, a hallway took them toward the left side of the house. Tom opened a door at the end of the hallway. “This is my office. It was converted into a deluxe bedroom for the bed and breakfast, but I have since converted it back.” Tom led them through a fairly large space, complete with bookshelves that contained hundreds of books, and a large desk off to the side with a large flat-screen computer monitor on top. Tom opened the window doors to the terrace and took the group outside. The terrace itself was surrounded by a wooden balustrade, and was mostly bare except for a couple patio tables, some large empty planters and, of course, a couple rather weathered-looking Adirondack chairs. “Nice view, huh? Still can’t see the lake, but you can see the valley a little better from up here.”

Rebecca: “Looks like a nice place to sit and read a book.”

Tom: “Oh, you’re a reader, huh? Anything good lately?”

“Right now, I’m working on some of the classics—Dickens, Poe, Shelley—that type of stuff.”

Tom looked a bit surprised. “Good choices. Yea, this was meant to be a place for small get-togethers, but it is a nice place to sit, have a cup of tea and read the newspaper, until the bugs find you.” As they were making their way back through Tom’s office, Rebecca happened to notice a door next to the one they came in.

“What does this door lead to?” asked Rebecca.

“That’s a bathroom.”

Rebecca: “Um, mind if I use the facilities?”

“Uh, no,” Tom stammered. “There is another door in there leading to the bedroom next-door; make sure you come out the door you went in; wouldn’t want you to get lost.”

Rebecca: “Gotcha, you guys can go on, I’ll catch up.” Rebecca stepped into the bathroom and shut the door behind her. The others headed back downstairs. After the others had left the upstairs, the room became much quieter. Anxious to join the others, she jumped up hurriedly, flushed the commode and turned on the water in the lavatory. Little did Rebecca know that the sound had caught the attention of someone in the adjacent bedroom.

Eyes opened in the darkened room and focused on the bathroom door. The creature arose and moved towards the bathroom door. It was within a meter of the door, when Rebecca decided to take a quick peak into the bedroom before leaving to join the others. She opened the door to see a large shape lunge across the room, away from her direction, and duck behind a large bed. Although she could not see any detail to speak of, she got the impression that it had a human-like form. And judging by the way it made the floor shake beneath her feet, she knew it must have been fairly heavy. Rebecca gasped and shut the door quickly. She had a brief moment of indecision, not knowing whether to shout an apology or run for her life. She opted for a quick exit. She made her way back through Tom's office and opened the door to the hallway, only to notice there was a closed door on the left side of the hallway, which she figured must belong to the bedroom that she had just peered into. She slowly inched her way out into the hall while hugging the wall to her right. Her heart began to beat a bit faster as she neared the bedroom door, with her eyes transfixed on the door for the slightest movement. The door thrust open quickly and Rebecca screamed, loud enough that the others heard it down on the first floor. A man appeared in the bedroom doorway—a bearded and stocky man, wearing a menacing scowl. The man said nothing to Rebecca as the others came bounding up the stairs. As the others started down the hallway, the man moved into the hallway and shut the bedroom door. Brian was the first one down the hall.

Brian to Rebecca: "What happened?"

The man answered first. "We surprised each other."

Brian: "Who are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm Buck, I'm doing some work for Tom. That's my truck out back. I was doing some electrical wiring in the bedroom, here, when 'Alice in Wonderland,' here, about scared the jeebs out of me."

Rebecca: "You do electrical wiring in the dark?"

"I was checking for arcing in light fixture that has been causing trouble," Buck replied with a bit of an angry tone.

Rebecca: "Yea, okay, sorry for startling you. I didn't realize there was anyone else in the house."

Buck: "Apology accepted."

By this time, Tom had made it up the third floor landing. "Everything alright up here?"

Buck: "Everything's fine, think I'll go ahead and replace that old light socket."

Tom: "Will you need in the attic for any reason?"

"No, no, I already replaced all the wiring up there last fall."

Tom: "All right, we'll let you get back to your work." As the six were arriving on the first floor, Tom turned to Rebecca and added, "Sorry about that, Buck is a local fellow I hired to do some odd jobs around here. I thought he was in the basement doing something."

Rebecca: "Yea, he's certainly odd, all right."

Tom chuckled. "Yea, Buck kind of has a way about him, I suppose."

It was about this time that Brian explained that they should be getting back to the cabin. Tom insisted on showing Rebecca one last room, which he referred to as the great room. Tom led the five into a single large room that occupied the space underneath the terrace they had just visited. It was an impressive space with a high ceiling, and well lit by numerous tall windows. A large Steinway grand piano sat off to one side. Most of the remaining floor space was occupied by roundtable and chair sets. Tom explained that the room was a later addition to the main house, that it had been converted into a dining room for the bed and breakfast, and that he had simply left it that way. Afterward, the five each thanked Tom for the tour before departing the Blanchart residence, driving down the winding black drive, and passing through the tall black gate.

Buck came walking down the staircase as Tom was watching the kids pull away. His expression was an unhappy one, to say the least.

Tom: "Did the girl see anything she shouldn't have?"

"What do you think? Why was she using one of the upstairs bathrooms, anyway?"

"A bad decision on my part. I apologize."

Buck: "The room was dark. I heard some kind of commotion in that east bedroom, and made it across the hall, apparently before she had time to go

around. This isn't good, but I don't think she could possibly be sure it wasn't me."

Tom: "Do you think one of us should inform Ruck that we screwed up again?"

"It ain't gonna be me."

3 The Stakeout

Later that evening, after arriving back from Tom Blanchart's, the five began remembering small parts of the silo trip. After much discussion, they could not decide on the particulars, but they became all-but-convinced that they had driven back to the missile silo and returned to the cabin. It was dusk and the five had gathered around the fireplace in the main room. A fire was crackling away, and its warmth was welcome after a rather brisk summer day, which was not at all uncommon in the Adirondacks. The five had begun discussing the episode of missing time they had experienced the day before, when Brian spoke up.

"Can we talk about something else?"

Rebecca: "Why?"

"I just don't want to discuss it anymore."

And so the discussion changed direction, and the subject did not come up again until the following day.

Day 4

The next day, the five had gotten the idea to pick up the boat and head over to Lake Champlain for the day. They were out on the water in the little tri-hull, when Brian brought up the subject of the missing time."

Rebecca: "I thought you didn't want to talk about that anymore."

Brian: "Call me paranoid if you want; it just suddenly occurred to me that maybe we shouldn't discuss it anymore around the cabin."

Steve: "I think we should go back."

Brian: "Go back to the silo? Are you crazy? I think we should just take the boat back to the marina, pack, and head for home."

Steve: "You want us to just go back home and pretend nothing strange ever happened? And what if we find out later that there was something really sinister going on, like an alien invasion or something, and we did nothing to warn people about it? We need to at least try and get some kind of evidence."

Brian: "All right, I'll show you some evidence when we get back to the cabin. I didn't want to tell you about it because you are all blabbermouths, so don't get on the phone and say anything to anybody. I say we go home and I'll tell my dad about it. He can always tell when I'm being honest, unfortunately. He knows people, too."

Steve: "What does it matter if there *are* weird creatures running around at night? So far, there have been no reports of anyone being harmed in any way. And we are in bear country at that."

Brian: "So far."

Brad: "I'm with Steve; I'm not letting some old bear with a radio collar or practical joker in a freak costume ruin my vacation; they find a body somewhere—then I'm out of here."

Steve: "And whatever this 'evidence' you have is, it better be good, or no one else will ever take us seriously. Didn't you ever see *Fire In The Sky*, where these guys see a UFO, and a lot of people still think it was all a hoax to this day? We need something physical, or at least a decent photograph."

Brian: "So what do you suggest?"

Steve offered up a plan to stakeout the missile silo the following day, but Brian would have no part of it, as neither would the girls. However, Brian did suggest, on a hunch, that it might be better to move in during the day and stay through the night. He also pointed out that it would probably be cold and they wouldn't be able to build a fire for warmth and to keep the

bears away, or “whatever else,” but it didn’t seem to deter Steve and Brad. Neither showed much reservation until Brian suggested that it would be a good idea to choose a route to the silo that they had not used before. Based on the assumptions that they had indeed been to the silo and had driven back the old access road to get there, Brian suggested the two follow a creek back to the property. While the girls sunbathed, the guys spent the rest of the Lake Champlain trip forming a rather elaborate plan to stake out the silo and fool anyone that might be watching them. Towards evening, the five winched the boat back on the trailer and headed back to the cabin. Upon arriving at the cabin, Brian disappeared into his bedroom a short while before emerging with a blank expression. “They’re gone, the drawings are gone.” Brian proceeded to tell the others about the drawings and their striking similarities. He swore he had put the drawings inside his suitcase and locked it the night before, but a lengthy search turned up nothing. The whole thing made the five rest uneasy that night, especially Brian and Rebecca, but it did little to dissuade Brad and Steve from their plan.

The following afternoon, while Brian was fooling around inside the boat, Brad and Steve grabbed a large cooler from the cabin and carried it to the van. Diane followed with a roll of carpeting, which was one of the rugs from the van floor.

“Get that stain out?” Brian shouted.

“Most of it,” she shouted back.

After a considerable fiasco getting the van turned around with the trailer still hitched, the five drove off down the gravel drive.

Steve and Brad quickly started putting their backpacks together. Each was equipped with a sleeping bag and contained—among other things—a pair of binoculars, a compass, a can of bear repellent, and a little bit of food. The two did not bother packing any cell phones, as the hills surrounding the Blanchart and Walker properties did a rather good job blocking cell phone transmissions. They did take a nice high-end digital camera with them, however, that had a zoom lens and an open-shutter feature. Steve taped over the flash as an added precaution.

“Packed you some ‘Scooby snacks,’ said Rebecca, enthusiastically, as the van jostled towards the main road.”

“That’s very funny,” Steve replied indignantly.

A short time later, Brian stopped the van along the highway near a drainage culvert that funneled a small creek under the highway. Steve and Brad jumped out, and the van drove off leaving the two standing on the side of the road. Steve pulled out a map of the area that had some rather esoteric directions written on it, and into the woods they went.

After crossing almost every kind of terrain known to man, it seemed, from craggy rocks to flat swampland, they eventually arrived at the silo. They found themselves on the side of a hill overlooking the silo complex. A rocky outcrop below them, devoid of trees, offered a clear view. They crawled up to the edge of the tree line, laid out their sleeping bags, and quickly covered them with pine needles and twigs.

In the meantime, the others had driven back to the marina, with the intentions of dropping off the boat, only to find it unexpectedly closed. The three killed some time by driving into town, doing a few loads of laundry, and putting away a few ice cream cones, but decided to head back to the cabin, as the trailer made finding places to park in town slightly difficult. Arriving back at the cabin, the three of them implemented a rather elaborate plan to attempt to confuse anyone who might be watching them into thinking that all five had returned to the cabin. At first, all three of them got out and walked into the cabin. A short time later, Rebecca and Brian came out, got back in the van, and changed into some of Steve and Brad’s clothes. Emerging with Rebecca’s hair tucked under Steve’s baseball cap, the two walked back and forth a couple times. Then Brian changed back into his clothes and walked back and forth a couple times, and so on.

By dusk, both Steve and Brad had fallen asleep, but were awakened by the sound of machinery coming from the direction of the silo. To their amazement, a concrete and steel door five meters wide and seven meters

long by eighty centimeters thick was rising from the ground. It took the forty-five-ton door about ten minutes to open just past vertical. The other door then followed. The two doors were hinged across from one another and created a rectangular opening of roughly six by nine meters. Light poured out from inside the silo and reflected off the shiny, polished pistons of the large hydraulic rams that had just lifted the doors in place. A short time later, the loud machinery hum died down and was replaced by a quieter whirring sound. A platform about five meters square with railings around three sides rose up from inside the silo and stopped flush with the concrete that formed the top of the silo. It was the original launch platform for an Atlas F nuclear missile that had been modified to transport items or people. The arrival of the platform cut off most of the light from below. It was dark now, and all Steve and Brad had to see by was the light from a bright half-Moon. A short time after this, the six-wheel delivery truck, which they presumed to be the same one they had seen next to Tom Blanchart's house, appeared on the gravel road. It turned around and backed up to the silo doors. Two men got out, walked to the edge of the silo opening, and each grabbed the opposite end of a long metal plate perhaps sixty centimeters wide, which they used to cover the gap between the launch platform and the silo opening. Next, one of them unfolded the truck's lift gate even with the bed, climbed in the back, and began pushing things onto the lift gate. After transferring the items to the top of the launch platform, the two men removed the metal plate before walking over to the silo entrance door and going inside.

Steve: "I'm going down there, man."

Brad: "Are you crazy? Even if you don't get caught, you will probably break your neck on the way down. And Brian said to stay low."

Steve: "Brian said, Brian said; it's dark and there are no cameras. If I stick to the trees and come around there to the right, I can sneak up behind that silo door and maybe get a picture of the inside. And besides, I've got to get up and take a whiz, man."

Brad: "There could be cameras we just couldn't see from our vantage point."

Steve: "If I don't return, stay here until it gets light and go tell the others." With that, Steve took off down the hill.

About five minutes after Steve left, the launch-platform-turned-freight-elevator disappeared down into the silo. About fifteen minutes later, Steve reached the tree line near the silo. The thick silo door that Steve was aiming for turned out not to be perfectly perpendicular with the entrance, therefore—not offering a perfect block between him and the silo entrance door. Not seeing anyone around, he ran in a crouched position across the twenty-three meters or so of grass to the silo door and hugged the edge farthest from the entrance door. Peering around the edge of the silo door and across the interior of the silo, he could see inside the back of the truck, which was blocking his view of the entrance door. This meant that if some one happened to walk out the entrance door, he would probably not see them until they were coming around the truck. He took out the digital camera and snapped a picture towards the back of the truck, then reached around and took one straight down into the silo. When he reviewed the picture on the camera's view screen, however, it was mostly dark. Looking downward for himself, he discovered that he had taken a picture of some elevator motors and not much of anything else. It was obvious he would have to leave the protection of the silo door in order to snap a picture down the missile shaft. While doing so, he heard the sound of approaching voices and jumped back to the silo door just in the nick of time. The elevator motors for the missile platform started up, and a short time later, the platform arrived loaded with what appeared to be full load of miscellaneous rusted junk. The two men began shifting the items over to the truck's lift gate, just a few meters away from Steve, who was still hugging the edge of the silo door.

Meanwhile Brad, who was watching the whole thing from up the hill, could not believe the predicament that Steve had gotten himself into.

While the two men were working, a third man exited the silo entrance and joined them. Steve never looked around the corner, so therefore never saw the man, but Brad got a clear look at him when he got inside the back of the truck to move the items off the loading platform. The inside was well

lit, and the man had a darker complexion than the other two men. Steve could hear everything the three men were saying, but most of it sounded like small talk. After getting everything into the truck and raising the loading platform, the third man walked back to the silo entrance, while the other two climbed in the truck. A few minutes later, the launch platform sank back into the silo. This was followed by the sound of a hydraulic pump as the silo door across from him started down. The truck drove off. After the door across from him had closed, Steve's silo door began to close and his cover began to shrink. Steve decided to just lay low before bolting for the woods, until the door had closed and shut off the light from below. However, not only did the light get shut off, the noise from inside the silo was suddenly shut off as well, and everything was suddenly much quieter outside the silo. Steve took several strides, when he was surprised to hear someone shout, "Hey" from somewhere off to his left. Steve headed straight for the woods as fast as anyone could run in near total darkness and on unfamiliar terrain. Once in the woods, he discovered trying to hurry through the woods in the dark to be total hell. Steve struggled to put as much brush between him and the silo as he possibly could, but after tripping multiple times and having his face scratched raw from tree branches, he fell to ground, exhausted.

We're so busted, Brad thought to himself while watching the whole incident unfold. About fifteen minutes later, he heard some twigs snap somewhere in the woods behind him. Brad heard odd sounding footsteps—a sort of galloping sound—moving swiftly down the hill in his direction. He assumed it must be a deer in full stride and tensed up inside his sleeping bag in anticipation of the worst. The creature passed by only about six meters away. A few minutes later, he peeked out of his sleeping bag and was startled to see what he thought to be person standing in the clearing a little ways down the hill. At first, he assumed the subject was wearing some sort of shiny polyester clothing that was reflecting moonlight. However, as the subject turned back and forth slowly—apparently scanning the surrounding tree line—something about it seemed very queer, which made Brad recall Brian's eye creature story. Whatever it was, Brad breathed a sigh of relief

when it continued on down the hill in a slow walk. Another fifteen minutes passed and Brad again heard footsteps coming in his direction, laterally—along the tree line. Brad's heart began to thump as the footsteps got closer until whoever or whatever it was stepped on Brad's right thigh. Brad had told himself to stay flaccid if he got stepped on, but he flinched from the pressure. He yelled and jumped out of the sleeping bag while shining a flashlight at the attacking creature and waving a can of bear repellent.

"Turn it off, turn it off," Steve whispered as urgently as he could.

Brad: "Steve, you scared the piss out of me, man. Why didn't you say anything?"

"I heard twigs snap and stuff on the way up. I think they are looking for us. Did you see what happened?"

"Yea, I did. And someone or something came out of the woods—fast—like it was daylight out to them or something."

Steve: "Grab your sleeping bag; now that you flashed that light, we need to get the hell out of Dodge; I'm freezing, too, man."

Brad: "Your face is scratched up, too."

Steve: "So what else is new?"

Steve and Brad threw on their backpacks, grabbed their sleeping bags in a heap, and took off through the dark woods. The two didn't make it very far, but figured it was better than staying in the same place as they were. They settled in without trying to hide their sleeping bags or backpacks. They were cold and it was too dark to see what they were doing, anyhow.

The next morning, the two rendezvoused with Brian and the girls at the drop-off point.

Diane to Steve: "What happened to you? You look like hell."

"It was a rough night."

Diane: "Did you even make it to the bomb shelter thing?"

Steve: "You mean the missile silo? Yea, we made it to the missile silo. I might have gotten a picture right down the shaft."

Brian swung his head around from the driver's seat, "You what?"

“Yea, dude, the silo opened up—I mean the hole where the missile was supposed to shoot out of.”

Brad: “They saw Steve.”

Steve: “They didn’t see my face.” Steve pawed through his backpack looking for the camera and eventually dumped the entire contents out on the floor of the van. “The camera is gone. I swear I stuck it in my backpack.”

Diane: “You jerk, my parents are going to kill me.”

“Oh well, I may have lost the camera, but I’ve got the card,” Steve said while pulling a memory card out of his shoe, which he then handed to Diane.”

Diane: “Yuck. Anyone got some Lysol.”

Rebecca: “I have a reader for that type of card back at the cabin.”

Brian: “What do you mean, they? What was going on?”

“We’ll tell you about it later. Basically, this truck backed up to the hole, at dusk, and some guys unloaded some stuff onto a platform that went down into the silo.”

Brian: “I don’t know how we’re going to deal with this back at the cabin. If it’s being watched—only three of us got into the van; and if they saw you and then see five get out—”

Steve interrupted: “I am not staying in this freaking van, I don’t care who sees us. I think you’re being a bit paranoid myself.”

The Trap

The five arrived back at the cabin. While Steve and Brad were grabbing something to eat, Rebecca turned on her laptop and transferred five photos from the card. The first two were zoom shots that Steve took from the hillside of the truck as it was parked at the silo. The next shot was a good shot of an empty box truck. The fourth shot was mostly dark, with a bright

band of light down the left side. The fifth photo was a beautiful shot straight down the missile shaft.

Rebecca: "Great shot, Steve. Guys, come here and check this out."

The five of them gathered around Rebecca's computer. There was plenty of light inside the missile silo for a decent picture, and the top of the missile platform could be seen about fifteen meters below the silo doors. Rebecca zoomed the image full size and started panning over the missile platform. They could see an assortment of boxes, an object that looked like a small pump of some sort, the head and shoulders of a man in a white jumpsuit, and the tops of what appeared to be several oxygen tanks.

"Stop!" Brian shouted. "Go back a little. There, look there." Brian pointed to an oxygen tank that was tilted on a two-wheeled cart. The handles of the cart were just out of view. However, the top of the tank itself was visible and was being grasped by a large gray hand with four long claws. The hand was connected to a thick gray-skinned forearm. Whatever the forearm was connected to—was out of view. The others were, at first, not quite sure what Brian was so excited about until he pointed it out to them.

Brad: "Holy shi—"

Brian: "Shhhhhh. Brad, turn on some music." Brad walked over to the fireplace mantle and turned on a small stereo system to satisfy Brian's "bug" paranoia and theoretically drown out their voices.

Brian: "Rebecca, can you put the photo in an email and send it to yourself?"

"Of course. It might take a while to send over this telephone connection, though. If only this place wasn't so primitive."

Brian: "Said the girl who prefers real books over the electronic ones. Just send it. And then we need to get out of here—quick."

Everyone left Rebecca and started gathering their personal items. Brian went out the door and proceeded to back the van up to the boat, which they had intended to drop off at the marina later that day. After getting the trailer hitched to the van, Brian came back inside.

Rebecca: "My computer won't connect, and there's no dial tone."

“Brian: “No way.”

Rebecca: “Yes way. There is only one phone in here, right?”

Brian didn’t answer Rebecca’s question, and instead began herding everyone towards the van.

“My books, I left my book bag in the cabin,” Rebecca said, after everyone had piled into the van.

Brian: “Leave it, we’ll buy you more books.”

Brad: “I would concur, this is no time to be dilatory.” As it turned out, though, Rebecca needn’t have bothered worrying about her book bag. The van’s engine would not even turn over. A few minutes later, a figure appeared a little ways down the drive and approached them while holding something out in front of his face. The kids didn’t know it, but it was Tom Blanchart. The kids, in a near panic state, jumped from the van and headed towards the cabin, but did not get very far before falling to the ground, unconscious.

“Sorry, kids,” Tom said, “I’m afraid you are about to join the ranks of the missing . . . for a while, anyhow.”

Brian slowly regained consciousness while lying on his back in a room that was clearly almost half of a round space some twelve meters in diameter, with the other half being partitioned off. The room was three meters from floor to ceiling. To the left of his medical cot was a curved railing that followed along a curving concrete wall. About half way along the curving wall, between himself and a door-less entranceway, was a strange vertical bottle-like apparatus that he at first took to be some sort of medical equipment. He quickly surmised that this was probably not the case, as it was literally attached to the concrete ceiling and disappeared through the floor. In the space between him and the entrance was another medical cot and three smaller cots with his four companions, all of them with their heads toward the wall and their feet towards a hundred-and-twenty-centimeter-thick concrete pillar that marked the center of the round space. About midway between the floor and ceiling, the pillar expanded at a forty-five-degree angle until it was some three and one half meters in

diameter where it met the ceiling. He noticed a sign on the pillar reading: "For Emergency Escape Only . . . Releases Four Tons Of Sand When Opened." Above the sign was a handle attached to a cable. He followed the cable to a pin holding a release mechanism for an escape hatch located in the ceiling of the structure. He had no idea how he had gotten there, but figured he must be in the control center for the missile silo, as the room was not big enough to be part of the silo itself. Everyone else, Rebecca, Diane, Brad and Steve, appeared unconscious, except that Rebecca—who was closest to him on the other medical cot—had an IV in her arm, while the others had on strange metallic headbands. The room contained two racks of medical equipment, one to his right and one further down between Brad and Steve. The racks were tall and narrow and more closely resembled racks of audio gear rather than what one might expect to see in the average intensive care unit. He began to wonder why he was the only one awake and then noticed that he also had an IV in his left arm and that it had become kinked underneath his arm. He folded the IV tube in his left hand and slid over the safety rail of his cot. While holding on to his own cot tightly with his left hand to steady his wobbly legs, he managed to stretch out his right hand and put a fold in Rebecca's IV. An oximeter clip on his right index finger did not make the task any easier. He covered her arm with the blanket, got back in his cot, pulled the blanket back in place, and tried to slow his heart rate back down by taking a deep breath, along with sheer concentration. A few minutes later, a woman walked into the room and over to the first monitor rack, looked it over for a minute or two, and then began walking towards Rebecca's cot. Just as the woman reached Rebecca's cot, she became distracted when someone else entered.

Anwaar: "So, has Ruck made a decision, yet?"

The woman: "He has already decided not to duplicate them. I just removed the inducers from these two a little bit ago and have already begun the suspension process."

Anwaar: "Did they wake up at all?"

"No, Brian thrashed around a bit, but that was all."

Anwaar: “Catherine, could you help me with something out in the silo real quick? I need some help with that circulation pump that has been giving us trouble. It’s rather important and it will only take a minute.”

“I really don’t have a minute, so it better be quick. I’m trying to take care of five people at once here. Can’t Tank help you with that?”

“With the pain medication you gave him, he moves slower than a snail on Sunday.”

Catherine: “I never thought I would say this, but I will be glad when Buck and Jared get back here from their “mission.”

The two left. Brian jumped off the cot and tried to wake Rebecca. Rebecca stirred and finally, after a minute of slapping her cheek, looked up at Brian. She sat up on her elbows and looked around in a stupor. “Where are we?”

“The control room of the missile silo, I’m pretty sure. Can you stand up?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Brian: “Well, get up anyway. We have to get out of here.”

Rebecca: “What about them?”

“We don’t have time. Let’s try and get out of here as fast as we can and find help.”

Rebecca: “I really don’t know if I can stand up yet, let alone make a run for it.”

Brian: “Come on, you can do it.” Brian proceeded to pull the IV out of the catheter in his arm and did the same to Rebecca. Next, to keep any alarming sounds from going off, he pulled the plug for the monitor rack that he and Rebecca were both plugged into. Lastly, he removed both of their finger sensors before running over to the escape-hatch release and pulling the handle. The pin came out of the release mechanism, and the inside hatch dropped down. No sand fell from the escape tunnel, however.

Brian: “Rebecca, help me get this ladder, it’s too heavy.” Rebecca tried to stand up, but collapsed to the floor. “You okay?” Brian asked.

“Not really.”

Brian then took it upon himself to strain at the metal ladder that had been stowed a meter or so from the hatch, managing to lift it over to the hatch and set it in place. Brian shot up the ladder and through the escape tunnel, to the outside hatch, but found it would not budge. The original release mechanism was missing and had been replaced with a remote activated mechanism. By this time, Rebecca had managed to stand up. Brian came back down the ladder, threw Rebecca's arm around his shoulder, and started towards the room entrance.

"Hold on," said Rebecca, "What if it's cold out? Where are the rest of our clothes?"

"I don't know. We need to make a run for the highway—we'll live." Rebecca backtracked under her own power, grabbed the blanket from her cot, bundled it up under her left arm, and then rejoined Brian. They found a stairwell just outside the control center and proceeded up a short flight of stairs. They passed through an opening for a massive steel blast door, then another open blast door to their left, before yet another left turn brought them to a locked security door. A meter before the door, there was a large crack in the concrete, which ran through the floor of the narrow corridor, up one wall, and through the ceiling. The crack had been filled with what was probably hydraulic cement, and was a leftover from the earthquake and soil shift that occurred shortly after the silo's construction.

Rebecca: "We're trapped."

Brian: "Come on." Dressed in only a shirt, underwear, and socks, the two backtracked down the stairs, past the upper level entrance to the control center, until they came to the door-less entrance for the lower level of the control center. They cautiously peered around the corner of the entrance into a dark room—dark except for an assortment of tiny lights scattered about the room marking various control panels and electronic gear. They took a chance and darted past the entranceway, then down another small flight of stairs until they reached the bottom of the stairwell. They didn't know it, but as they were peering around the corner of the entranceway, something else was indeed peering back at them from the darkness—something that could see them all-too clearly.

At the bottom of the stairwell, they entered a round, lighted tunnel with ribbed metal walls. As they moved cautiously through the tunnel, the temperature became noticeably cooler. Brian found a small section of pipe stored in one of the cable trays that lined both sides of the tunnel and prepared to use it if he had to. At the end of the tunnel, they came to a small vestibule and then passed through two more open blast doors before emerging on level two of the silo crib. The silo crib was a steel-framed structure inside the silo that originally extended from the very top of the silo to almost the very bottom forty-two meters below. Designed to protect the rocket and its support systems from the shock of a nuclear blast, the entire structure was suspended on eight long struts that were attached in pairs to four wall brackets three meters wide. The silo itself was sixteen meters wide and almost fifty-five meters deep, with only a small clearance between the crib and the silo wall. Completely outfitted, the crib would have originally contained an incredible array of support systems for the rocket. Now, virtually none of the support systems for the rocket remained. There were, however, other systems on the upper levels, including the launch platform drive motors and the ventilation system, which only allowed for several aisles on each level in which a person could walk freely. Brian was completely disoriented.

“Look for a large pipe,” Brian whispered, “one that goes into the silo wall.”

Rebecca: “Up there.” Rebecca pointed to two large air ducts entering the silo wall just above the door they had just entered.”

Brian: “I don’t think they’re the right ones. I think we came in on the top level. Look for a spiral staircase.”

They found the staircase opposite the entrance, on the other side of the missile shaft, which was enclosed in a wire mesh cage covered with foil backed insulation panels. Arriving on level one, they found a short section of new flexible pipe that was connected to another duct leading into the silo wall. They could hear voices echoing through the silo, which they assumed was coming from somewhere down below.

Brian: “This is it, I think. This is where we came in.”

Rebecca: "How are we going to get through it?"

"I need something to cut with; look for something to cut with."

Rebecca: "There's nothing. I think I saw a toolbox down below."

Brian: "Stay here, I'll find it."

Rebecca: "No freakin' way." Rebecca followed Brian back down to level two. They located the toolbox; Brian opened it and retrieved a retractable utility knife. It was about then that they heard the elevator doors open for the personnel elevator, which was situated beyond a large exhaust plenum for the ventilation system. The two ducked behind some boxes and control panels located adjacent to the exhaust plenum just a second before Anwaar and Dr. Catherine Mittman exited the elevator. After Anwaar and Catherine had entered the tunnel leading to the control room, Brian and Rebecca ran back up to level one, where Brian began hacking away at the large flexible air duct with the knife.

Rebecca: "Come on!"

Brian: "The inner layer of this stuff is tuff; I'm going as fast as I can." It took Brian several minutes to cut halfway around the duct. He then pulled the duct open to allow Rebecca to crawl in. Once in, Rebecca returned the favor. A short distance in, they came upon some rather flimsy wire mesh that had been added to replace the original varmint screen. Brian pulled it aside with little effort, and the two proceeded to the end of the duct, which passed through the nearly three-meter-thick upper silo wall. The duct ended in total darkness. Brian felt for the ladder that was there once before, but only felt a bare concrete wall—the exterior of the silo wall. "If I remember correctly," said Brian, "it won't be too much of a drop if we hang on the edge. Here, you go first, and I'll lower you down. With Brian grasping her left wrist, Rebecca lowered herself over the edge until she was hanging by her fingers. Her feet touched the bottom of the exterior duct about two meters below the lip of the circular duct. Rebecca felt her feet sink into a cold, damp goo. Brian threw Rebecca's blanket down to her, and after making it down himself, the two began feeling their way through the duct, which followed the curving outer wall of the silo. They had made it perhaps six meters, when Brian stopped suddenly. Something was blocking his path.

Brian felt something spanning the duct about a hundred and twenty centimeters above the floor. It was cold and smooth, and Brian assumed it must be a pipe of some sort, although he didn't recall a pipe being there the last time he had passed through. He ducked down to pass underneath and started to say something to Rebecca, when he ran into another one about thirty centimeters lower than the first. It was about then that a string of work lights suddenly lit up the inside of the duct. After the few seconds that it took for his eyes to adjust, Brian discovered that the "pipe" he was holding onto was actually an arm—a long muscular arm connected to a hideous, yet very familiar, creature. The creature was turned towards Brian and was looking right at him with all three of its eyes. Brian was struck with such a powerful feeling of *déjà vu* at the sight, he forgot for a split second to be scared. The two smaller eyes were widely spaced and, at first, appeared to be two upward protrusions of the creature's forehead nestled in between two cat-like ears. But then, both eyes rose up in unison from the top of creature's head, which was probably no more than five feet from the floor, and pivoted on stalks that hinged towards the rear of the creature's head like a pair of tiny upraised arms. The creature bared its teeth towards Brian and started making a low-pitched growl. Without moving its head or taking its large eye off of Brian, the creature's two smaller eyes pivoted around until they were looking straight at Rebecca. Rebecca let out a shrill scream that bounced off the concrete walls of the duct so well that it never seemed to stop. In a reflex action, she threw the blanket at the creature, which covered its entire head. Brian tried to grab Rebecca by the arm, with the intention of trying to push the creature out of the way and making for the exit, but Rebecca turned and ran the opposite direction. Brian had no choice but to follow her back to the round duct. He slipped on the way, sending himself face first into the muck. He picked himself up and rejoined Rebecca at the end of the concrete duct as the creature approached them with a slow wobbly gate that resembled a walking ape's. For a split second, Brian got a good look at the creature's bottom half. Its overall physique was indeed apelike, with broad shoulders resting on a slim torso supported by short legs that bowed outward slightly at the knees, and clawed feet that were more

hand-like than a human's. Brian could imagine the creature climbing a large tree with ease, or moving swiftly across the ground using its large forearms as a great ape might. Brian also noticed that the creature's chest area appeared bandaged, as one might treat a rib injury. It otherwise had no clothing and, as far as Brian could tell, was sexless. There was nowhere to go for Brian and Rebecca except back inside the duct leading to the silo. The creature was about three meters away, when Brian boosted Rebecca up into the tunnel. Brian jumped up, caught the ledge of the tunnel, and was pulling himself up, when he felt the creature grab at his feet. Brian was fully inside the tunnel, when he felt a large clawed hand latch onto his right ankle. The creature began pulling him backwards and he yelled out to Rebecca. The width of the tunnel allowed Rebecca plenty of maneuvering room to scoot down and grab Brian's hand. The whole situation then turned into a tug of war between Rebecca and the monster, with Brian as the proverbial rope. Rebecca won. Thanks to Brian's earlier stumble into the muck, there was enough slime on his ankle to keep the creature from maintaining a grip, and Brian's ankle popped free. As they were scurrying back through the tunnel like a couple scared sewer rats, Brian thought for a second he could hear a gruff laughter coming from behind him.

4 Answers

Rebecca crawled out first, followed by Brian. Both were utterly filthy. Rebecca was clearly terrified and shaking uncontrollably. Anwaar and Dr. Mittman were both standing a few feet away in a rather indignant, but unconcerned, manner.

Anwaar: “Back so soon?”

“What is that thing?” said Brian, to the dark-complexioned, Middle-Eastern-looking man with the British accent.

Anwaar: “You didn’t hurt him, did you? Follow us, we’ll get you cleaned up.” Brian and Rebecca followed Anwaar and Catherine for several steps, before Brian lunged towards Catherine. He grabbed Catherine in a chokehold with his left arm and put the utility knife, which he had stored away in his grimy underpants, against her throat.

Brian: “Listen, you’re going to take us to the nearest vehicle. Don’t try anything and no one gets hurt.”

Anwaar: “First of all, Brian, you’re bluffing. And you are not getting out of here, so you might as well make the—”

“Let’s go!” Brian shouted, trying to appear as determined as he possibly could, while motioning towards the spiral staircase. Anwaar complied and the four made their way down to the second level. Just as they were passing the exhaust plenum, Buck jumped out and grabbed Brian’s right arm away from Catherine’s throat. As he and Brian wrestled with each other, Rebecca

noticed a section of pipe lying on the floor. It was the pipe that Brian had picked up on their way through the connecting tunnel. Rebecca picked up the pipe and swung it, hitting Buck squarely in the back of the head. Buck fell unconscious. Brian, Anwaar and Catherine all looked at Rebecca with stunned expressions. It was about this time that another man entered the connecting tunnel. When he saw what was going on, he ran back into the stairwell and closed a heavy blast door behind him, which caused a thunderous sound to echo through the silo. Looking through the connecting tunnel from the vantage point of the second level, the far end appeared somewhat out of kilter with the silo—another leftover from the earthquake. Catherine bent down to take a look at Buck.

Rebecca: “I didn’t kill him, did I?”

“No, not yet anyway. I need to get him back to the control center, and I also need to check on your friends, but now we’re stuck.”

Anwaar: “Listen, you two, no one here is out to harm you. We were just going to let you sleep for a while until we are done here. I’ll call Jared and try to negotiate something.” Anwaar walked over to an ancient looking wall phone with a rotary dial and dialed a single number. After several minutes, Anwaar shouted, “If you discard any weapons you might have down the shaft, he will open the door.” Anwaar hung up the receiver and proceeded to open a door to the missile shaft. Brian and Rebecca were both reluctant to do so, at first, but eventually made their way over to the door. Brian tossed the utility knife into the shaft. Rebecca followed suit by tossing in the pipe, which landed with a loud bang on the missile platform that had been parked even with level three. Anwaar retrieved a gurney from the control center, and the four of them carried Buck, who by then had regained consciousness, back to the control center.

“What the hell happened?” Buck asked as they were carrying him along.

Anwaar: “You hit your head.”

Buck: “Like hell. Someone hit me, who was it?” Buck looked at Rebecca. “You, you must have been the one who hit me; you are the only one it could have been.” Rebecca did not offer any confession.

They managed to get Buck to the staircase, where they set him on the floor. Anwaar and Brian then grabbed Buck by the arms and helped him up off the floor, with the intention of helping him up the stairs.

Buck: "I'm okay, just get away."

Catherine: "You might not be as okay as you think. I am ordering you to the prep room."

Buck: "I'm going! Geez woman."

Catherine: "Why don't you let Anwaar and Brian help you?"

"I said get away. Damn kids," Buck muttered as he started up the steps.

Upon reaching the upper level of the control center, Brian and Rebecca were both greeted by Jared, who pointed what appeared to be a 9mm semi-automatic handgun directly at them. "You two—over there; sit down and don't move." Both Anwaar and Catherine appeared a little concerned over the situation. Only Jared knew it at the time, but the gun was not loaded. Brian and Rebecca proceeded to sit on the cold floor over by the central column.

Brian: "Wouldn't it be a bad idea to shoot a gun in here?"

"Only if the bullet missed." Jared said, trying to appear rough and tumble.

Rebecca: "Could we have some clothes, please?"

Catherine: "Hold on, let me take a quick look at Buck, here, and then we will get you cleaned up and get you something to put on." Catherine had Buck sit in a chair and proceeded to examine the bloody patch of hair on the back of his head. "Looks like you might need a couple stitches. I'm going to run some tests first, though, before I get into that."

Brian: "So, is anyone going to explain what the hell is going on around here before you knock us out or whatever you plan to do to us?"

Buck: "You want to know what's going on? Come on, I'll show you what's going on." Buck got up from the chair and motioned for the two to follow him towards the stairwell.

Catherine: “What do you think your doing? You have a hole in the back of your head?” Buck only muttered something unintelligible as he started down the stairs.

Catherine: “What are you going to do?” Catherine shouted from the control center entrance.

“I’m not going to do any harm to them, if that is what you think. They want answers, so I am going to give then answers.” Buck led the two of them out into the silo and into the personnel elevator, which deposited them down on level seven of the silo crib. Walking out on level seven, Brian did not see anything of much interest except a set of nice dive gear. Walking to the edge of the missile shaft, which was completely open, the very bottom of the launch platform blocked the view upwards beyond level six. A dark pool of water just beneath the floor of level seven reflected the overhead lighting. A metal stairs disappeared into the water, and a large pulley hung over the water just beyond the edge of the missile shaft. A chain threaded the pulley and also disappeared into the pool of water. Looking downward, over the threshold of the missile shaft, Brian could see a circle of faint light directly under the chain at some depth but could not really tell how far down the light was. Buck walked over to the south wall of the crib, to where a bunch of scuba gear was stored, and picked out a couple scuba suits.

Buck: “Here, put these on. The water is cool.”

Rebecca: “I’ll take anything, I’m freezing. But I’m not scuba diving today, thanks.”

Buck: “Oh yes, you are.”

Rebecca: “No, I’m not. Why don’t you just tell us what is down there?”

Buck: “Too easy. I think it best you see for yourself, then I will explain later.” Rebecca and Brian got into the suits. Buck strapped some ankle weights on Brian, handed him a diving mask, and then wrapped a cheap looking weight belt with a lot of exposed lead weights around his waste. “This belt isn’t very comfortable, but we generally don’t bother with fins around here. We just strap on some weight, sink to the bottom, and ditch the weights to come back to the surface.” Buck then turned to Rebecca and proceeded to strap an ankle weight around her left ankle.

Rebecca: "I told you I'm not going down there."

Buck: "There is nothing down there to be afraid of. There are no monsters down there if that is what you are concerned about." Buck strapped another weight on Rebecca's right ankle, handed her a diving mask, and then wrapped a weight belt around her identical to Brian's.

Rebecca: "Ahh, that's heavy. How much does that weigh?"

"With the ankle weights, I would say about twenty-one pounds. This buckle here isn't sticking very good, let me find something to fix it." Buck walked over to a mechanics toolbox and picked out a pair of large channel lock pliers. He put the jaws of the channel locks over the buckle, which was tight against Rebecca's stomach, and squeezed the sides of the buckle inwards so that the release tab could not flip upwards, effectively disabling the release mechanism. Brian, who was watching the whole thing with a jealous eye, knew immediately what Buck had done, and started towards him."

Brian: "What the hell are you doing?" Buck, seeing that Brian was approaching him, shoved Rebecca into the water. Brian jumped to the edge of the missile shaft, but Rebecca had sunk like a stone. "You bastard."

"That, girly," said Buck, "is for bludgeoning me with a steel pipe."

Brian was beside himself with rage, but knew he had only moments to grab a tank and get in the water. He ran towards the scuba gear in a state of near panic. Buck proceeded to head him off and jumped between him and a row of air tanks.

Brian: "Get out of my way."

Buck: "You don't need any of this. Look, see that light down there? You have between now and the time your girlfriend takes a breath to get into the light. Jump into the light and you will both be fine. Trust me," Buck said, with a laugh. Brian was caught in a moment of indecision on whether or not to try and fight Buck or simply jump into the water. Brian chose the water.

Brian found Rebecca fourteen meters below the surface, struggling desperately with her weight belt. Brian could feel the pressure pushing the mask to his face. Over thirty seconds had passed since she had entered the water. Brian grabbed her and pulled her towards a shaft of light coming

from a large hole in the floor. Brian only had time to glance at his surroundings, but noticed that they were in the center of a large, mostly empty space. The walls and floor were dark and mucky, but the water was fairly clear and visibility was good even with the low light levels. At one time, the space they were in would have been packed with an array of tanks called the tank farm, which held enough rocket fuel and other gasses to launch an Atlas rocket into space. Now, it was only water. The shaft of light was illuminating the underside of what looked like a large barrel suspended about three meters above the hole in the floor. The barrel was about a hundred and twenty centimeters in diameter—the same size as the hole from which the light was emanating. Brian did not quite realize it at the time, but what he was looking at was the bottom of a sump pump assembly that could be lowered into place on a moment's notice. Its size and shape mimicked the original sump pit that was located in the center of the bottom of the silo. They were literally standing on a false bottom.

When they reached the hole, they both sunk some three meters farther down. The hole closed up above their heads, and air began to quickly displace the water, starting from the top. At least it certainly looked like air. Brian and Rebecca both jumped upwards towards the air pocket and took a deep breath, but instead of air, they were both surprised to have inhaled a warm fluid into their lungs. The experience was an uncomfortable one, to say the least, and both became racked with panic. After a couple minutes, they began to realize that they were still alive and breathing an oxygenated fluid a bit lighter and less viscous than water. As the last of the water was purged, an oval-shaped opening appeared in the side of the tube. The space they were gazing out on was surreal. Everything from the white support beams in the three-meter-high ceiling to the gray floor appeared to be made of a translucent, plastic-like material with varying degrees of opacity. Everything in the room seemed to blend and flow together, creating the look of a single mass, with some areas emitting a diffuse light. The round space of the silo was divided in half at the central column. The walls that extended to their right and left, away from the column, each had round ports about a hundred and twenty centimeters in diameter half way between floor and

ceiling. Also to their right and left, beginning where the dividing wall met the silo wall, were upright rows of capsules, each containing a single nude human body that was visible behind an oval area of transparency. The rows were set against the curving silo wall and were actually part of a single row of perhaps twenty-five to thirty capsules that extended fully halfway around the silo wall. About four and one half meters directly in front of them, the trunk of a very large display panel grew out of the floor into a large flat rectangle that was transparent except for a slight bluish tint and an array of translucent flickering images. The images were hiding a human-like form, which appeared seated on the other side of the display. They left the central pillar and walked towards the left row of capsules. The bodies all appeared to be in some sort of stasis. Upon reaching the fourth capsule, they looked at each other in complete astonishment. The body in the capsule was an exact duplicate of Dr. Mittman. What they did not know, of course, was that they were looking at the real Dr. Mittman, while the person they had met a few minutes before was the duplicate. After several seconds of standing in front of the capsule with his mouth open, Brian felt a sharp jab in his left shoulder, which was Rebecca's way of informing him he had spent enough time viewing Dr. Mittman's twin. As they continued on, they were startled by a loud, deep voice, which originated from behind the large display panel. "Yes, what is it?" Brian and Rebecca were now at a vantage point to see around the edge of the panel. As they inched forward, in an effort to see exactly who (or what) it was seated behind it, the head of a bizarre creature looked up at them. The closest thing that came to Brian's mind was a sea horse. The creature had a slender, elongated face with an exceptionally high squared-off forehead. Its skin was a pale green in color. It seemed as surprised to see them as they were to see it and immediately began fumbling with a control panel located behind the display. What started out as a circular ripple in the floor surrounding the display grew quickly upwards until it had encased the entire display panel, along with the creature, inside a translucent sphere. Brian could not resist walking towards the sphere and running his hand across its solid surface.

Rebecca: “Brian, what are you doing?” An area on the backside of the sphere momentarily turned fluidic, and the creature exited swiftly. The exit point then reverted back to a solid. The creature was about two and one half meters tall with a physique reminiscent of a human body builder, only with an extra set of smaller arms tucked under its armpits. All four arms ended in five digit hands with two digits opposing the other three. The smaller arms ended in long, narrow digits, while the fingers of the larger arms were more robust. The creature was wearing a tight-fitting light-gray suit. What was also fascinating about the creature, besides its appearance, was the way it was moving through the fluid. The creature seemed to travel through the fluid more quickly and effortlessly than its body movements would allow. Strange, dark rings were forming at the neck hole of the suit and passing rapidly over the suit towards the creature’s webbed feet. Whenever the rings would fade, the creature would stop, indicating that the suit itself was somehow aiding the creature’s motion, controlled perhaps by direct mental command. The creature approached them and stopped about one meter in front of them.

“Who are you and how did you get in here?” the creature bellowed. His speech was very clear and articulate, but loud enough as to be uncomfortable to their ears. The creature’s elongated face was divided by a segmented central ridge, which extended up and over the head from just above a lipless mouth. Its two somewhat human appearing eyes were set about six centimeters apart. The creature did not have any visible ears.

“My name is Houdini,” said Brian, in an almost unintelligible gurgle—trying to talk while passing a fluid over his vocal cords for the first time. “I’m here to steal some of your magic tricks.”

The creature: “In all my days, and they have been many, I have never seen a creature with such gall as the juvenile human. You do not seem to be capable of taking a hint.”

Brian: “At least I’m not some sort of freaky ‘fish-man.’ Anyway, we were forced to come in here.”

The creature: “By whom?”

“Buck, I believe is the guy’s name.”

Before Brian could say anything else, the creature shouted, “Stay where you are.” The creature then turned away and swam back to his transparent bubble. The creature was only gone for a minute, but that gave Brian and Rebecca the opportunity to look over a few more capsules. Rebecca motioned excitedly to one capsule in particular, which contained a body of a woman in her early thirties. The woman was the spitting image of the portrait they had seen hanging in Tom Blanchart’s house of Pamela Branson. Another capsule contained the torso of a creature identical to the one that had just chased them through the air duct; however, this one’s arms and legs were mere stumps that ended perfectly flat like some kind of alien department-store manikin. The creature’s three eyes were all closed, and it appeared to be unconscious, if alive at all. Curiosity got the better of both of them, and they moved in for a closer inspection. Brian noticed that the flat ends of the creature’s four stumps were a somewhat darker shade than the rest of the creature’s skin. It suddenly dawned on him what the dark patches represented—nano technology. The creature was being manufactured right before their eyes. It was just then that Ruck—the four-armed sea-horse-looking creature—returned, wrapping Brian with one large arm and Rebecca with the other, and lifting them from the floor. He took a deep breath and expelled a forceful jet of fluid from his nostrils. At the same time, the rings reappeared on his suit and he made several kicks with his webbed feet. Even with the extra drag that Brian and Rebecca must have provided, the three moved more quickly towards the central column than either Brian or Rebecca could have swam to it. Brian and Rebecca could both feel the fluid they were in being pulled along their bodies by the mysterious forces of the gray suit. They did not realize it at the time, of course, but Ruck was not only expelling fluid through the snout on the front of his face, there was a nearly identical passage on the back of his skull and an “intake” located on the very top of his large head. A complex set of nasal passages directed the fluid (or water) to and from his large lungs to aid in his under water motion. The jet propulsion aspect, of the three modes of propulsion Ruck used, was especially useful for aiding sudden movements. Ruck carried them into the transfer compartment. The door shut and

multiple jets of water began rapidly filling the compartment from the bottom up.

Ruck: "Please remove your weight belts and leave them here."

"My belt won't release." Rebecca said, straining to make her vocal cords work with a fluid as opposed to air. She began to panic as the water level climbed. "That stupid Buck guy sabotaged it." Ruck took one look at the buckle, and while grasping it in the palm of one of his large hands, used the fingers of his other large hand to force the buckle open as easily as one might open a pull tab on a can of soup. Brian and Rebecca got their weights off, and each managed to take a deep breath of oxygenated fluid before the water rose above them. Ruck held onto them again as the hatch opened, and the three swiftly rose to the surface, where Buck was still sitting on level seven. Ruck climbed the metal stairs while still holding onto the two and gave them one last squeeze, which forced a spout of oxy-fluid from their mouth and nose, before he let go. Ruck also expelled the fluid from his lungs, and to the astonishment of Brian and Rebecca, it flew from his head in several different directions.

"What's the meaning of this? Ruck belted in a loud, deep voice that would make Darth Vader envious; a voice so rich in overtones that it sounded like several voices in unison.

"The girl hit me with something and they wanted answers, so I thought I would give them some answers."

Ruck's only reply before diving back into the water was, "Take them back to the control center and prepare them for suspension."

The Real Answers ?

Again, Brian and Rebecca found themselves on level one of the control center. They were huddled together, sitting on one of the medical cots with a single blanket wrapped around the two of them, trying to regain some body heat after a cold trip up from the bottom of the silo.

Anwaar: “Okay, I suppose after all you have been through, I could at least fill you in on a few things. The creature you ‘met’ in the silo goes by the name Rucktawzee. He works for an under sea farming company on his home planet, and specializes in genetics. And he is an aquatic—obviously—from a civilization perhaps ten thousand years more technically advanced than our own. They call themselves Chasians. They have populated a star cluster some five hundred light years from Earth, and from what I have gathered, there are very few individuals left in his race, at present, who resemble their original form; that is, their form before they began altering themselves through mechanization and genetic engineering.”

Brian: “Yea, that’s interesting and all, but what is he doing here on Earth?”

“Ever hear of a phenomenon called quantum entanglement?”

“Uh, no, not really.”

“It is a phenomenon where two particles created at the same time can become eternally linked with one another irrespective of distance. Apparently, about five thousand years ago, one of the thousands of automated probes that the Chasians had sent out by that time found Earth. The probe made contact, allowing a transfer of information to begin between the probe and a master control facility back on Chasia.”

Brian: “Using the linked particles.”

Anwaar: “Correct. The probe contained a sample of linked matter. The sample was not only linked to another sample back on Chasia through quantum entanglement, the entire molecular structures of both samples were arranged identically. To make a long story short, a research team was ‘duplicated’ here on Earth, only in human form to blend in with the

population. Eventually, let's just say, they became 'too comfortable' here on Earth. They broke off contact with Chasia, and one of them destroyed the probe. The pieces that were left were scattered, with most being lost to history—except for one,” Anwaar said as he looked down dejectedly at his crossed palms.

“Rebecca: “Where was it?”

Anwaar: “It was the Black Stone, an Islamic relic kept at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.”

“Brian: “I've heard of it.”

“Anwaar: “I am afraid all of this—Ruck, the eye creatures, the people in the silo—it's all my fault. I took a piece of the Black Stone. Apparently, the Black Stone emits a sort of signal or vibration, if you will, that affects neurological matter. It has a compounding effect on the mind that can eventually establish a telepathic connection between two beings no matter how far apart they may be. I began seeing images in my head; receiving . . . instructions, you might say, on a sort of emotional level telling me that I needed to carve a piece of the Black Stone into a shape with very specific dimensions. Later, I was compelled to try and recover a small cylindrical device, about the size of a box of Kleenex, from the far side of the Moon and couple it with the piece that I already had. So I actually convinced a NASA astronaut to recover the device for me. At the time, I was sure I was doing something right and just.”

Rebecca: “How did this device, whatever it was, get there?”

“The device was a critical element of a machine that could process information sent across the linked matter ‘bridge’ and ‘teleport’ people or items across any distance by duplication. You might think of it as a very sophisticated computer processor—an interface, so to speak—that needs a chunk of linked matter and gaggles of computer memory to make it work properly. It got there on a follow-up probe. The renegades were eventually disbanded and a new outpost was set up, only this time it was not placed on the surface of the Earth. It was placed on the far side of the Moon, where it is maintained by a squad of robotic beings and administrated by a single malevolent being. Or I guess I should say, ‘was’ administrated by a single

malevolent being. I told Alex Furman that I had found an ancient manuscript describing an evil being who stole the secrets of the universe away from humanity and hid them away in his lair. I even had a very convincing looking ‘ancient manuscript’ to show him and a whole spiel to go with it about how I had managed to decode certain instructions from the text showing how to defeat the evil being and recover the “ancient gift to humanity.”

Brian: “Alex Furman stole the device?”

“I’m afraid so. But you have to understand; he thought he was doing a great service to his country and the world. After Alex got back from the Moon, I set the device in a machine that I had spent months constructing. It was essentially a large metal tank filled with purified, oxygenated water. The tank was sealed, isolated from any sort of external influence such as vibrations, radiation, or electromagnetic interference, and had a bunch of hoses running to it, which dispensed purified elements. The first thing I saw was a plastic-like material, like the stuff Ruck’s lab is made of, grow and mold itself to the shape of the tank. Then, it was truly amazing to behold, but after a day or so, a body began to take shape. After several days . . . well—”

Brian: “Frankenstein’s monster, huh?” Anwaar nodded introspectively.

Brian: “Well, that explains how he got here, but you still haven’t told me why he is here and why you are encapsulating people under fifteen meters of water in the bottom of an old missile silo.”

“I’ll tell you why.” Ruck said as he walked into the control center, his voice a little more subdued than it was earlier. “I borrowed some money from someone I shouldn’t have, and they are going to break me in half unless I pay it back. Let this all be a lesson on how not to manage your life.”

Brian: “So what? You are going to hold hostages for a load of cash or something?”

“No silly man, Ruck laughed, I need gold—lots of it.” Ruck continued to speak while walking over to the first rack of monitors and looking them over. “The Chasian that I borrowed the money from: He had purchased a

relic tossed out long ago by the Chasian Science Council at what might compare to a flea market here on Earth. It was a chunk of matter linked to other matter here on Earth through a phen—”

Brian interrupted: “Yea, Anwaar was telling me about that.”

Ruck: “He and a scientist in the field were working on a way to ‘recycle’ the linked matter and perhaps communicate with human kind. Once they did make it work, guess who got the job of being duplicated on some little planet five hundred light years out in the boon docks? Of course, the real mystery is how he acquired the security deactivation codes for the Moon outpost—probably through blackmail or something nefarious. That is supposed to be highly classified information. The people you saw in the silo are in a state of suspended animation. They have all been cloned. The clones were grown by me from genetic and neurological samples gathered secretly from them. When the clones were complete, the brain structures of the original persons were imprinted on the clones, who were then exchanged for the originals. The clones are all identical to the originals . . . except for a few genetic changes I made.”

Brian: “Changes?”

“Yes. The clones are only designed to live for about three years. That is why they are going to help me get what I need, because I am the only one with the knowledge to bring their original bodies out of stasis successfully. The clones are all currently living in-and-around New York City and Cape Canaveral, Florida.”

Brian: “Wait, New York City, gold . . . not the Federal Reserve?”

Anwaar: “You catch on fast.”

Rebecca: “Do you know what you are up against? I went on a tour once through the Federal Reserve. The vault door itself is like ten—”

Anwaar: “You are forgetting that Ruck here probably knows a few tricks that we don’t.”

Brian: “I’m sorry Anwaar, but the whole thing sounds ridiculous to me. How do you know that he is not deceiving you? How do you know this . . . guy is not something more than just an intergalactic criminal and this whole thing is not merely the beginning of an invasion?”

“Well, uh, like I was . . .”

Brian: “And if he has cloned people to do his dirty work, what are these eye monsters doing here?”

Ruck: “The ‘eye monsters’ are biologics that I and my original persona designed to be my eyes and ears around here. We based their design on a creature that was discovered on a planet orbiting a red dwarf star only about one hundred light years from here. I send them out into the surrounding hills before dusk if we need to open the silo doors that evening. I decided to fabricate them after some input from Tom Blanchart. Tom felt that if any word got out that there was an Atlas missile silo in existence with functioning silo doors and a functioning launch platform, it might attract unwanted attention, as virtually all the other silos have long been scrapped.”

Brian: “Why not a surveillance system?”

Anwaar: “Also too conspicuous.”

Ruck: “I gave them a strong upper torso to climb trees, telescopic vision to see long distances, and a light sensitive eye to find the way back at night. They have excellent hearing and skin that can blend them into their surroundings. And, they are cold blooded, which means they can lower their body temperature to the ambient temperature if need be to avoid infrared detection. Or, they can maintain a warm body temperature by directly warming the blood using an external power source and an internal heater. Form fitting clothing that can duplicate the camouflage abilities of their skin helps retain body heat in the winter months. This makes them much more mobile on a cold night. I can also communicate with them and even exercise a certain degree of mental control over them via an implanted device.”

Brian: “I get it, security where there is seemingly none. All that, yet here we are. I guess no security system is perfect, huh?”

“Ruck can control them,” said Anwaar, in a smug tone, “because he didn’t give them much brains to speak of. In my opinion, the creatures are flawed because they tend to be a bit ‘accident’ prone.”

Catherine, who had kept to herself during the conversation, spoke up. “Shhhhhh, Tank might be downstairs.”

"I was not attempting to create a group of intellectuals, Anwaar," Ruck said, sounding a bit annoyed. "I needed to give the creature an advanced visual cortex, which reduced cranial space for higher brain functions."

Brian: "I can't decide if I'm trapped in a nightmare episode of the *Honeymooners* or a silly twentieth-century cartoon."

Anwaar smirked, then added, "Ruck has promised that as soon as he gets the gold, he will turn everything back to normal and then some."

Ruck to Catherine: "I will not be duplicating these individuals. Doing so could jeopardize the mission, as their knowledge of recent events would be passed on to the clones. Please begin preparing these two for stasis. It looks as though we will have to sacrifice one of the two sentinel replacements for its chamber and perhaps fabricate some more growing chambers at a later time." Ruck turned and started for the entrance.

"It would spare our parents a lot of grief," Brian shouted. Ruck hesitated for a moment, but kept walking.

Catherine walked over to a tray and returned with a catheter. "Sorry you got tangled up in all of this. If it is any consolation, I'm one of those people out in the silo. Hopefully, this will all be over in a few months." Brian almost blurted that he knew about Dr. Mittman's twin, but instead glanced over at Rebecca, who seemed to know what he was thinking. Catherine inserted the catheter into Brian's left arm, injected something into it, and then turned her attention towards Rebecca, who appeared almost shell shocked and ready to fall asleep without the anesthetic.

Rebecca: "A few months? I'm scheduled to begin classes in five weeks."

Catherine: "You poor thing. I apologize for all the weird monsters and so forth; things got a little out of hand today."

Rebecca: "But this isn't the first time things have gotten out of hand, is it?"

Catherine ignored the comment. "Try to look at the bright side, you can always reschedule. And don't worry, when you wake up, it will seem as though no time has passed at all. The process freezes all neurological activity. The technology is beyond me, of course, but Ruck has a device that will scan your brain's synaptic connections and then periodically refresh

those connections during stasis, something like refreshing a web page on your computer. All your synapses will be just as they are now. And given the fact you will be respirated with a liquid as opposed to a gas, you can be instantly brought up from the silo at any time without the need for lengthy decompression.”

Brian: “So, Anwaar, did he put you in the ‘dungeon,’ too?”

“Nope, uh, I’m the only one. I don’t know why he trusts me. I guess he figures I wouldn’t do anything to put all of those people’s lives in jeopardy.” Catherine fit a breathing mask onto Brian’s face.

Brian: “You hesitated before you said, I’m the only one. Why is that?” Anwaar ignored the question. “Do me a favor, Anwaar,” Brian said in almost a whisper, “and wake me up before Ruck climbs into his fish tank with his gold bars and disappears; I want to see that.”

Anwaar: “I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way; all the elements have to be in place at the other end to teleport something.”

Brian suddenly began feeling drowsy and his speech began to slur. “How then is he—?” Brian only heard Anwaar reply something about NASA and a spaceship.

Brian: “How . . . do . . . yous . . . plan . . . get . . . past?” Those were Brian’s last words as he was losing consciousness. Anwaar knew what Brian was trying to say: How do you plan to shoot several tons of gold into space without NASA knowing about it? The only detail Anwaar knew of Ruck’s plan was that the rocket was merely to get the gold up into orbit around the Moon. Anwaar did stop for a moment to ponder why the Chasians were going after something as cumbersome as gold, and not something with more rarity. But then, deep down, he knew the whole thing was a farce. As time went by, Anwaar was losing his familiarity with a creature that he once understood so well. He tried to have faith; parts of Ruck’s story sounded right, but Anwaar knew Ruck was keeping him out of the loop regarding certain things, and he was even feeling a bit resentful over it. Oh well, thought Anwaar, I guess we will find out when the time comes.

The Last Visit

Robert and Sarah Walker's SUV pulled up to the cabin in the hills. It had been six weeks since their boat had been found partially submerged in Lake Champlain. Despite a massive search effort, the bodies of their son, Brian, and his four companions were never found. The cabin, once the focus of fond memories, was now only a reminder of the apparent tragedy. Thinking they could never enjoy staying at the cabin again, they had decided to retrieve some of their belongings and put the property up for sale. As they were approaching the front door, they noticed a note taped to the front of the door. The note was legible, but rather crudely written. It read: Dear Mr. & Mrs. Walker, we are not dead. We are all fine and we will be back in a little while. Love Rebecca.

Robert reacted angrily at the note and pulled it off the door. "What kind of sick person would do such a thing?"

Sarah: "Don't touch it, you fool, maybe the FBI can conduct some sort of test on it. Hold still, let me get sandwich bag to put it in."

Robert: "Sarah, do you think for a moment that Brian would actually pull some sort of disappearing act. It's a fraud. Look at the handwriting, it looks like it was written by a first grader."

Sarah: "It was Rebecca! I know it was Rebecca!"

Robert: "How do you know?"

"I just know!"

Robert: "Okay, it was Rebecca; here." Robert inserted the note into a sandwich bag that Sarah was holding out.

Sarah: "Don't patronize me, Robert Walker. Now, look around and see if you can find any footprints while I call the police, but try and not disturb anything." Sarah took the note inside.

Robert sighed and started looking around the path leading from the driveway to the front door. He heard a twig snap high up in the trees, and thought for a moment he could see movement in a tall spruce only about a hundred meters from where he was standing. He tipped his head to the right

and left a couple times, but couldn't see anything too unusual. Must have been a squirrel, he thought, nothing but a squirrel, and then turned his attention back to the ground.

