

Cult of the Comet

a science fiction novel

© By Gary L Morton

Cult of the Comet is a full-length novel (122,000 words). It takes place in a dark future and features a fallen astronaut turned gritty private eye, and a cult leader on a mission to grab interstellar travel. A police state and evil elders rule most of the world. Mutants control the rest. The race is on as a comet, which is the final visitation of an alien race, heads for perihelion at earth.

Contents of Cult of the Comet

[Chapter 1: Jack](#)

[Chapter 2: Daniel](#)

[Chapter 3: Inferno](#)

[Chapter 4: The Torch](#)

[Chapter 5: Suicide Run](#)

[Chapter 6: Chasing Shadows](#)

[Chapter 7: Free Zone](#)

[Chapter 8: Early Alien Contact](#)

[Chapter 9: Angel](#)

[Chapter 10: Security Alert](#)

[Chapter 11: Hit Man](#)

[Chapter 12: Visitation Island](#)

[Chapter 13: The Idol](#)

[Chapter 14: The Escape](#)

[Chapter 15: The Farm](#)

[Chapter 16: Sky Power](#)

[Chapter 17: Beast Run](#)

[Chapter 18: Drone](#)

[Chapter 19: Volcano](#)

[Chapter 20: Mutant Surprise](#)

[Chapter 21: Message 666](#)

[Chapter 22: Perihelion](#)

[Comet Sets](#)

Chapter 1: Jack

In remembrance, his dreams had always been genuine, and his sleep counterfeit journeys of plausible realities. Learning programs put him in classrooms at night, and he was supposed to be enthralled and think of it as adventures of a child's mind. He always knew the score and knew other children rarely saw through the curtain of deception. High-speed education, he supposed, and it made it feel like even his imagination had been imagined by others. Dishonest adult geniuses and their watching systems guessed his every response and put him through clever programs, so he was like an engineered lab rat, eating starvation-modified maize and grabbing the rewards on the race through a force maze. It was all for the better, he knew. His father often told him of the real rat race out there in the city jungles, and of the life of pain he would lead if he didn't harness every advantage, skill, and technique of the privileged class. This was a big teaming world, an underground-and-up-to-space planet grown so complex that few humans and even fewer robots could grasp it. And perhaps he was a pessimist because he had a dim view of his chances. He doubted his family would ever be satisfied with his meager accomplishments.

Doubt, it was a rare night in that he could entertain such a thing. This week, the entire house intelligence system had been haywire. Full repairs would happen soon, but tonight it was diagnostic mode, which meant resting in bed and thinking the authentic thoughts one should have before falling into natural, programmed sleep.

Anxious, he freed his hands of the hated gloves and drummed his fingertips. Darkness seemed close to absolute in the thick bubble window set in the far wall. Then some clouds cleared in the sky and his mind, and he saw Manson's Comet appearing like a ghost of the night. It had been in the sky for a while now. He knew of comets because much of his learning focused on space. Instead of a letter and a number, this comet had a human name because the celebrity astronomer Patrick Manson had predicted it before Sky Sweep detected it. It was so bright because perihelion would be close to Earth. He studied it briefly, thinking its fantail brilliant, strange, and fading into mist like his sleepy thoughts. A pleasant haze now filled his head, and nothing made much sense, no learning, no adventures, but only a slow float into forgotten half dreams of earlier childhood.

A valid dream rose from odd depths of old-fashioned sleep. He saw the tail of the comet fan and the head rise like a dancing cobra, then there was sudden sunlight, and it became a river, a river as big as earth and life itself. Fabulous sunlight flooded in, and he seemed to be looking down from above, watching the river wind through forests and canyons, towns and villages. A huge city appeared like a mirage floating in a silky blue shimmer at the river mouth. It was a fantastic city, unlike the orderly cities of his

learning. He knew forbidden things happened there in great quantity. Offbeat things and genuine adventures that weren't in line with the programmed life-plan learning. Buildings towered like elegant monsters, and light beamed down from an assortment of odd shapes to the gritty, traffic-clogged streets below in the lower air. As he watched, longing grew in his chest, and more than anything, he wanted to explore the streets of that city.

A brief alarm blast woke him. He looked up and saw the dark window fuzzed over with blue electric sparkles, his room, and probably much of the house, lit with a faint lavender light. It indicated more software or hardware failures in the house, but since the light wasn't yellow, orange, or red, there was no danger to humans. Now he couldn't get back to sleep, and it irritated him that his dream had been cut short. Getting out of bed, he dressed in bright day clothing, walked out of his room, and down the dim hall. He used the bathroom, then went up the stairs to a balcony, where he found the door seized. To his right, one of the hidden doors to the service tunnels was thrown open, so he ducked inside. These tunnels were mainly for service and cleaning robots, but also humans if a repair person happened to be human. He'd never been inside, so he decided to do a bit of exploring.

He followed the corridor around the house, finding all the doors open. Electrified dust coated the wall and three wireless phantom boxes. Color-coded cables snaked along the ceilings in transparent blue casings, like the house's huge veins. The air was clean and metallic-tasting, and the enclosed space made him feel bigger. But any sense of mystery soon vanished, as he knew all the rooms he looked out into intimately. His father's main study was empty while he was overseas, and at that point the corridor angled steeply down to the ground. He followed it slowly and soon found himself at a service door leading out of the house.

It was powered open, and he could feel cool night air rushing in and hear birds in the garden doing that strange chirping they did at security systems under moonlight. He wasn't allowed out at night, but he quickly forgot that, stepped out, and looked around. He was on trimmed grass. The grounds lights were off, and the flowerbeds, trees, and sculpted bushes showed as dim forms in the night. The huge tail of the comet stretched across the sky, emitting light that gave the whole view a ghostly luster. It took him a moment to guess his location, as the grounds were lit at all other times. Stepping forward, he went right through twin hedges and around to the service parking lot, which was closest. Once there, he stopped and speculated. His eyes were drawn to the sky and the horizon. The head of the comet was above the faint lights of the distant city of Toronto. It was an uplifting view that caused the feeling from the dream to return; the city being like a magnet and a vision drawing him onward.

All was quiet, no repair people, though he spotted an electric transport car stationed nearby. With his parents in Europe and the house system reporting only non-threatening malfunctions, they would have no way of knowing he'd snuck out. And they would also have no way of knowing if he ducked into the city for a brief look-see in the electric car.

“What if I get caught?” he thought. “It’ll mean a lecture and a week of psychological cleansing for delinquent behavior.” Not worth the risk, but then again, who planned on being caught?

He walked over the blacktop to the car. Something jumped in the bushes, and he nearly ran back to the house. It was a rabbit, and it dashed across the grass, apparently fleeing a grounds guard robot moving slowly in the yard. He had to leave before he came into focus on its sensors, so he opened the car door and got inside. The dash lights came on, and the plush interior amazed him. This was a service bug for human repair techs and not a robot delivery vehicle. He knew these cars had no security devices beyond running off the house system and following their own lane to certain destinations; the city, of course, being one of the key destinations.

He called up a map, noted a few marked city locations, and tried to decide. As he knew nothing of the city proper, he found he couldn’t think, and then he chose the closest location in case he had to return quickly. After that, it was a matter of simple voice or key commands. He used keys, and the car eased off, picking up speed only after it was outside the grounds and on a designated service road.

A map screen appeared showing the vehicle’s progress and speed. Mainstream traffic was to his right on the access tube, most of it coming from the city and largely unmanned. He tinted the windshield to remain invisible, then punched the machine up to maximum speed. Dark forests, farmland, and bright country estates showed in the night. The bug swept past an odd, small town that had no off-ramps for service, then into a brighter night and the thicker developments on the outskirts of the city. A long right turn, and then, according to the map, he was cruising on the perimeter of the city but not entering it. A bubble appeared on the screen. The destination had changed because City Hub 77 was closed for a maintenance night; the bug was now headed for Parking Yard 98, which appeared on the map near the outer suburb of Scarsdale North, in an area designated as Scarsdale Ring Block 4.

“What’s that?” he wondered. He searched the public computer and found that the title was a polite term for a slum area. He was racing into a part of the city no one visited, and no one wanted to visit. With a jolt, the bug took a sharp turn onto an ugly section of road, and the dim gray buildings of the slum immediately became visible. Being overhead, he could look down, and in the streets, he saw rather shabby people on a sidewalk outside a Looper bar. Off to the left were the bright lights of the freeway.

“Shit, I’m going to be dumped in a neighborhood of fry brains and crazies,” he muttered. He cleared his throat and gave a quick voice command - “Merge with the freeway.”

“Will do,” the bug responded in a voice that sounded more like a movie Martian than a human. “Prepare for immediate manual control.”

“Oh no, manual control,” he thought. “I don’t know how to drive.”

Suddenly, the car was hurtling toward a narrow, banked semicircular exit ramp onto the freeway. He grabbed the wheel and attempted to steer through. Sparks flew as he hit the brushed steel side barrier, then his hand slipped, and he veered to the other side. The car slammed into a control marker, tilted up, and climbed the angled curb. His seat

belt tightened, and as he went over the three-meter barrier, the air cushion slammed him into the seat.

Bouncing like a sand buggy, the car went down an embankment and came to rest. A moment later, the air bag deflated, and the car spoke.

“Manual-control failure. Accident. Are you injured?”

“No.”

“Remain seated while I report the accident.”

“Don’t report it. Attempt to back up and over and get back on the road.”

“Not possible. Two damaged tires and a cracked bolt.”

“Okay. Attempt automatic repairs.”

“Estimated self-repair time, two hours.”

“Too long. I’ll go get help while you work.”

“That is not recommended. The readout says walking and driving on the streets in this neighborhood is not recommended. Scarsdale Ring Block 4. Off-map Area 9. Crime rate 9.”

“So what. I’m brighter than any criminals are. If encountered, I will simply outsmart them.”

“You failed manual control of a vehicle. Not smart.”

“Shut up, you idiot. Start the repairs and wait for me.”

He pulled the emergency pack from the glove hatch and got out. It was dark, with the only lights being markers lining the bottom of the access road. Below, a stone-chip road ran off into some trees. The air was foul, and he noted that this area was so unimportant that exhaust from the freeway was off-gassed into it.

Taking some jumps down the embankment, he reached the road and paused to put the emergency pack on his back. He had a sweep light but didn’t want to use it, figuring that as long as he followed the road, he wouldn’t be spotted in the gloom. Fine gravel crunched underfoot. He’d never heard of a non-paved road in the city, but technically, this place wasn’t on the map. A huge bridge-like structure was ahead, and some hulking concrete buildings belonging to the power grid were to his left in the trees. The road led into a short tunnel uniformly lit by dim yellow light. Dripping water and the faint whoosh and hum of the freeway were all he heard. Then, he was at the tunnel’s end, saw lights, and heard voices. He stopped, sat on a raised curb, and looked around. A neighborhood of sorts was ahead; streets with some buildings as low as three stories, leading to a core of antiquated high-rises. Rather than go straight ahead toward the core, he took a fork northwest into lower buildings. The roads were now paved, but this area near the access route was obviously a dead zone, with abandoned cars, overgrown weeds in the haunted buildings, and a lot of ancient, dust-painted litter. The streetlights were on at half power, but got brighter as he moved farther in. More voices carried on the wind, and he saw a winking sign and some shadowy people moving at the front of the building. Rather than approach it directly, he went off the sidewalk and

looked through a fence. It was a Looper bar; several men were loitering at the front, obviously stoned as charged Loops gleamed in their ears. They had lined, yellowing faces. Signs of aging and organ failure that people in the city proper would not have. Two sleazy women were entering the bar, and music blasted out the door. Deciding to avoid it, he passed via a garbage-strewn alley at the rear.

A block later, he was in a populated area. People were on the streets. Noticeably poor people, and most of them were cheaply dressed. He was only in casual clothes, so he figured he looked a little clean and bright, but otherwise could pass. Like the houses he'd seen on the way in, stores lacked the neat, clean lines and construction of structures in the new city. There were no metal, glass, or molded Plexi facades. An old movie feel dominated the place.

He had some time while he waited for the car to self-repair, so he decided to explore. Rather than head into the tumble of high rises that formed the core, he decided to go left into a lightly populated older area. If the area had a high crime rate, it would likely be concentrated in the downtown area, so exploring an ancient neighborhood would be safe.

He heard laughter and moved into a doorway as a plump blond woman and a tall, unshaven man emerged from a narrow street. They turned away from him and headed uptown, the man drinking some form of liquor straight from the bottle. The bitter fragrance lingered in his nostrils as he stepped over and turned down the street. Only steps, and he was in semi-darkness. This was more like a back lane than a street; faint amber-tinted lights were widely spaced. It had a sidewalk of an almost corrugated material, and the asphalt had a pattern of lines running through it that gleamed in the nightlight like tiny streams of silver. No one was on the street, and only a few of the houses had lights on. A car with a damaged fender turned in, came up from behind, and he stepped behind an old news ticker box as it slowly passed. He began to think that the high crime rating here was false, and that it was now really a sort of forgotten zone. Mostly automated transport, storage, repair yards for industry, and lightly populated with Loopers, addicts on the early form of Intel drugs, alcoholics, and the sort of misfits that collected social assistance in a city with full employment. They would have their basic needs, so crime would mostly be abuse of one another.

It got dark; there were two final blocks of abandoned houses, then the lane opened on a park. Shuttered buildings, probably once stores, ringed most of it. The park had several clumps of trees, a weedy marsh of rank standing water, and a lot of tall grass in an open field. A hot, polluted breeze sang in the grass and trees, and the buildings creaked lightly as though speaking in a haunted tongue. Something moved in the grass over in the park, and he stepped back, spooked. A moment later, he saw a black cat run out on the far side and cross the road toward a hulking old building. It stood alone in the dark, and he hadn't noticed it at first. Another black flash caught his eye; a bat soaring straight up from the trees. It caused him to look up, and as he did, his eyes widened with amazement. The bat had been flying up to a spire. The building was a church of the old kind that didn't generally exist anymore. It seemed to loom out of the night like a giant compared to the other buildings. A skin of glossy light coated its extremities, and it was the light of the comet soaring high overhead.

He stared up at it as he crossed the road to the park. It was like he'd come to the end of the genuine heart of the city, and it was this dead and hidden place no one knew of anymore. The end of the world was a broken dream in the night, but the comet knew of it and illumined it like an old friend returning.

Suddenly, he was tumbling, and he rolled in the grass and jumped to his feet to find himself facing the person who had pushed him. It was a boy about his age, and he had a friend beside him. His lips were pursed as he studied him, and his features were unusual; strong but definitely natural and not picked through genetic selection. His friend was the same; nose a bit wide, eyes a bit small, but a face that worked. Two brothers, he guessed, though one had red hair, the other blond.

Finished staring him down, the older brother spoke. "Isn't he pretty. Looks like we got a loafer from Sky Town here."

"I'm not from Sky Town. I'm from the country, but I doubt you guys know of any place farther than Sky Town. And I'm a visitor, so you shouldn't have pushed me."

"Yeah. So what are you doin' here, cowboy? Nobody ever comes here. This is our secret spot."

"I'm visiting. Taking a look around. Sort of like an anthropologist in an old graveyard."

The younger brother whistled and pointed at the emergency pack. "I saw him staring at the church. I bet he's got something in there and he's planning on stashing it."

"This is just my emergency pack. I was headed for the city in a repair car, but it was diverted to the yards here and crashed. I have nothing to hide, and I certainly wouldn't hide it in that old fire trap."

"You might. Most people are afraid to go in there. And if you stole a repair car, something must've been in it."

"I didn't steal it. Why are people afraid of that old place?"

"Not your business."

Pulling off the pack, he started to open it. "Look, I'll show you what I have. It's nothing of value, believe me."

"Take everything out slow," the older brother said. "No fast moves or we'll jump you."

"Okay. Here's a light. Mini globe type. You know them. Can be faint as a candle or light up the whole park. I got three rations of super energy chocolate. This mini lighter and heater. First aid stuff and an all-mode communicator, phone, and internet hook-in plus a standard stun gun and nano-powered Swiss army knife."

The younger brother whistled again.

The older brother ran his fingers through his shaggy blond hair and stared wide-eyed like he'd been hit by the stun gun. "I thought you said it was nothing of value."

"Not to me."

"Good, because we're taking it."

"But that's theft."

“It would be if there were such a thing as police in this part of town.”

“I don’t need it anyway. You can have it if you tell me why people are scared to go into that abandoned church.”

Rather than answer immediately, the older brother watched as the younger brother scrambled in the grass and tossed the stuff back in the pack. When they had it, he spoke. “Okay, the abandoned church. It’s not ghosts or the bats. Not everyone is pretty in this part of town. Not like where you come from. The minister there sure ain’t from the Churches of the Millennium. More like from that place the old folks call Hell.”

“Really. As it happens, preaching about hell isn’t legal anymore.”

“I’m not preaching about it. I said he’s from there.”

Their eyes went to the younger brother as he strayed to the edge of the road with the pack. A quick gust of hot air sent his red hair into a flying tangle, and he turned back to them and whistled low, long, and quiet. A flash of white showed at the end of their vision on the road. Someone was walking down the center of it and carrying a large object. The asphalt had an ashen appearance in the glow of the sky; the darkened buildings seemed askew beside it, and the approaching figure took on a spectral appearance, as though it were more ghost than human.

A faint voice echoed lightly, finding dry amplification from the dead wood and hot breeze. As it grew closer, it became apparent that the man was carrying a sign and shouting something, calling out to no one but rats, perhaps scurrying in hidden corners.

The brothers were side by side again, and he could see the level of fear rising in their eyes. Without saying a word, they ran off through the grass and across the street, quickly disappearing in an alleyway. Left on his own and feeling naked without the pack, he moved into the shadows of a willow tree and watched as the man continued to approach. A stronger gust shook the tree above him; he heard the church moan behind him and saw the man’s long silver hair and clothes fly in the wind. He was wearing an old, ragged suit and shouting out something like a madman. Then something else crept into his vision and up his spine - the sticky feet of a hot but invisible spider - because something was horribly wrong with this man. He was old, older than anyone he’d ever seen, and ugly. Purplish lumps covered an exposed part of his forearm. His face was pale, with crevices, and his eyes deep as pits and frightening, as if he really were coming from Hell, or under the light of the comet, perhaps some ancient monster beamed straight down from it. The man kept shouting something about old - this is what an old man looks like - and more, as he walked straight toward the park and the willow tree.

It was time to run from hell itself, and that he did, heading straight through the park and across the road to the grounds of the old church. It was much larger close up, and he hadn’t noticed the old gate. He felt his heart jump, even though at first it didn’t move. A second pull, and it creaked open a few inches. He took a quick look back and ran inside. Hiding in overgrown weeds that had likely once been a groomed garden, he watched the horrid old man walk under the willow, then turn and head for the church.

Silent now, the old man walked slowly, purposely, like he was stalking prey. As he reached the gate, his face came into full view under the light of the comet. It was fierce,

but intelligent, and something else. More than old or hideous, there was fire shining in the eyes - an all-seeing light. He knew beyond a doubt that this old man could see things he could not see.

Hell itself, perhaps. Whatever it was, he didn't want to know. Breaking free of the weeds, he ran for the steps. Finding the doors open at the top, and then he was inside in nearly complete darkness, stumbling around, looking for a place to hide.

A light showed ahead, and he quickly tripped up some steps, emerging in the main part of the church. The air was dusty, and dust motes showed in the beams of light shining through a few windows that remained intact. It was the light of the comet and the moon, and after his brief experience in total darkness, it seemed almost like he'd emerged in daylight. He could see other boarded windows; images of old-style forbidden angels in remaining stained glass. There were rows of pews and seating - some busted up, other areas intact. A stylized cross dominated a crumbling altar, and the entire place had a feeling that was more than haunted. A spiritual presence seemed to be there everywhere watching him, and another stronger presence was approaching - the old man. He heard his footsteps coming up the stairs, and he ran ahead to the foot of the stage and altar. Looking back, he saw him enter, the light streaming from one huge stained-glass window onto his face and body. He'd discarded the sign he'd been carrying, and his body seemed tremendously strong though lumpy and twisted with extreme age. His eyes were the most terrifying item. The fire he'd imagined hadn't been real at all, but a reflection of light - now a reflection of moonlight. The old man was completely blind, with thick cataracts behind the swelling of his lids. And despite it, he could see and was walking straight for him.

Bolting for a crimson curtain, he found a staircase and began to run up. There was a second floor, and a third, but he didn't stop. The old lacquered wood creaked as he made his way through the dusty air to the top. A rush of bats showed as they flew out a small broken window to what seemed like the end of his life.

It was a small room with a rope and a bell. He looked at the huge bell in disbelief. Symbols were etched into its metal. An ancient language he didn't recognize. Churches didn't have real ringing bells anymore, but they didn't look at all like this one anymore, either - religion had changed completely.

Amazement turned to fear as he heard the old man's slow footsteps on the stairs. The sound died as he paused for a minute on the first floor, then the steps began again, and he heard his voice. It was strong but as dry as the old wood of the tower. "I'm coming, Jack, you know I'm coming."

Running to the window, he looked down at the rocks and weeds below. Too high to jump, nowhere to climb, so he waited there frozen in terror as the old man approached.

Then he came through the door, his body now covered in a long white robe, his blind eyes seeming to look right at him and through him to the night outside. He took a few more steps and stopped at the rope, then he began to pull it with great strength, and the old bell began to peal, and dust and bats filled the room. It rang twenty times, and then it stopped, and the old man spoke.

“So, you have come, Jack.” And though the old man’s face was still frightful, his calm voice and the robe gave him a kinder appearance.

“You know my name. You were expecting me.”

“Not you necessarily, but someone. I knew someone was to come in the end time.”

“You’re one of those crazy end-of-the-world guys. I thought they ended that a long time ago when they closed the old churches.”

“Not the end of the world, boy. It’s the end of me. Tomorrow is the last day of my life. The world will go on for a long time to come, for another age even beyond this one. Or it should. It’s up to you.”

“What do you mean, up to me?”

“Another day, another comet will come - a bigger comet, a bigger you, and a time of the end of this age.”

“You talk in riddles. It won’t surprise me if you die tomorrow. You have a terrible disease. This church will probably fall down, too.”

“The church will be here for all of the days that you live. I will perish, but I don’t have any real disease. What I have is old age. Tomorrow I will be 120 years old.”

“There are people that old. They don’t look like you.”

“You mean the geriatric cases and their Church of the Millennium. They are abominations, living through Intel drug addiction and organs they’ve stolen or bought from others. You saw my body, son. A very old man in truth, looks like I do. When it comes time to die, he dies; he doesn’t live on like a vampire.”

“You’re crazy. They should have arrested you like the others.”

“Ah, but I live on, and I have walked the city streets for a long time as testament to them. They see my body and what an old man really looks like. They live in fear of it and run for more anti-aging treatments. But inside in their dead hearts, they know something else - that they are evil, and even their own church of the would-be immortals can’t change that or save them.”

“You mean they let you walk in the city proper. How? Something like that would be illegal.”

“Really. Well, tomorrow I walk again for the last time, carrying my sign, and I will perish naturally as all men should.”

“So what do you want from me? Do you want someone to bury you?”

“No. That’s been arranged. I will be resting here on the grounds. You are to go home, young Jack Michaels, and live your life. One day, when another comet is high in the sky, you’ll remember me and this place.”

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Chapter 2: Daniel

A tarnished path was worn in the polished tan floor, and for the hundredth time today, Alex followed it from his study area toward the floor-to-ceiling window. His room, as it was called, was a large space with only the tiny bathroom separate. The study, kitchen, living area, and viewer wall were all in one, and it was really much bigger than a room; a fair-sized prison, as a matter of fact, and a real one. The actual prison name was the Marsdon Reform and Education Center for Youth. Though it was a prison and maximum-security block, it wasn't considered such, as the tenants weren't old enough to be responsible for their crimes.

Art on the walls looked seamless, and Alex paused again to look at the mural of alien angels on the false dome ceiling. His chosen art was religious in nature, and none of it was too modern, except for one lone print of the radiant pyramid logo over an alien desert landscape and a rock carving of one of the Beings of the Millennium. The Beings were alien gods of the legal state-sanctioned religion, which was really the only religion. All other esoteric knowledge was forbidden, but some of the art was not, and that's what made it beautiful to Alex. Surely this was a new world, a planet where scientists could look millions of years back into the history of the oceans and yet have no knowledge of human events that had really only happened yesterday. The small painting of a white-haired man coming from the mount with huge jeweled tablets would mean nothing to them - a painting from a new fantasy book, perhaps.

But it all meant something to Alex; he'd made it his hobby long before his imprisonment. There were ways to study and access the old, banned days of gods and God. He had a store of knowledge, both learned and illegally implanted, and could consider nearly anything he wanted, whether it be Genesis, the Church of Scientology, Gnostics, or devils, though his preference was devils and powers of darkness. It made no difference what he considered; the words of Christ were as much forbidden as the Ebony Book of Satan, and if words and art were different realms, he preferred holy art and angels most of all.

At the moment, his window displayed a huge angel, one of the Queen of Heaven, that vanished as he touched a hidden dial. Thick imperious glass showed suddenly, as did an astonishing view of the world outside. Rain poured and dripped, and the air was misty under a gloomy sky that devoured the tops of the tallest structures. For a moment, he frowned, and then he realized he hadn't cleared the view but still had an illusion showing. A proper adjustment brought in summer twilight and a clear sky; the change was uplifting. The far-off comet soared like a fantastic ice ball tossed down by illicit gods of pagan times, barely visible through the glow of the city lights, but enough so to make modern times seem partially a lie. Normality had been cracked by its sudden arrival in the sky, the deadened world of scientific certainty altered by an anomaly.

Alex was at a great height, but Toronto's city core rose much higher, leaving him breathtaking glances up and down. Below, the haze of night light blended with the fading twilight. The green of the terraced rooftops of lower buildings showed as areas of emerald. Today's buildings were a bit too neat and faceted; he always enjoyed searching out the older structures and picked out the Art Deco façade of the old bank a

couple of blocks away. Directly below, the grounds of Marsdon were under spotlights and almost sterile in their manicured neatness.

Alex looked at his pocket organizer and then drew a square on the glass. Another window appeared, and a security view showed. He checked the time and zoomed down to the grounds. It tracked across the trimmed grass and picked out a manicured bush and a red-and-yellow bird. Since the messenger was here, he sent the signal and watched as the bird spread its wings and soared nearly straight up, a speck in the huge city canyon, one that would momentarily find its way through a vent and make a delivery to his tiny bathroom.

He crossed the room, a light went on as he entered the bathroom, and a light mist of spring fragrance puffed into the air. The vent was behind a seamless panel below the sink, and inside was a pipe and a tiny square hole leading to it. He heard a chirp and a small object tinkled down - a tiny container. Opening it, he read the note, which contained only a date and time. "This evening," he muttered as he swallowed it. "Sooner than planned."

He washed up, brushed his teeth, and styled his hair. At the closet, he picked the one suit he'd need - a smooth garment with a long, elegant outer coat that would be cool in summer heat and warm in air conditioning. Importantly, it matched the dress code he'd need to meet at his new home.

Taking what was to be his last stroll to the computer, he connected his pocket organizer via a dedicated cable. The reason being wireless could be detected, and he couldn't afford that as he was pulling important files and wiping the rest. His exit was to be final; he'd arranged for the room to be cleaned out through an electronic impersonation of the warden. This was to be his escape from Marsdon and not a supervised trip downtown or to the prison farm. His release was illegal, the work having been done by him and assisted by his benefactor. The wealthy man, being a holy man and priest of the Church of the Millennium, a priest who counseled boys at Marsdon and one who hid his lust and love for them well.

If all went as planned, and it would, Alex would disappear without a trace. He wouldn't be missed. Mainly because his status had been up in the air for a year and over time, he'd been simply forgotten. Phony release papers would be put through, and no one would notice.

Originally, he'd been under Marsdon's authority, listed as criminally insane due to the conviction for murdering an uncle, but that had been overturned on appeal. An appeal that his mother and father had not sponsored. To this day, they felt he was guilty and left him abandoned for that reason. They discarded the oddball son they never wanted. A sorcerer, as his mother called him, due to his illegal fascination with religion and the occult. Fascination that led to the death of his crazy uncle, though the man was partially responsible for leading Alex into illegal cult practices in the first place.

The state had abandoned and forgotten him, too, with the court using the severe laws of the day to leave him permanently incarcerated even though he'd been found innocent. Ms. Sanders, the psychologist appointed by the judge, selected Marsdon, where he met the warden once and was then forgotten.

He was locked away indefinitely, his past life a series of video and digital files that contained the info on his psychological testing. Alex became an abandoned child in the absolute, but he hadn't abandoned himself. It was more like he had grand dreams, delusions of power, and was now benefiting from his forgotten status through gaining his escape. By the end of the night, Alex wouldn't exist; all traces wiped, he'd be in a new life with a new name.

Back at the window, he waited, the view becoming a cube of darkness and scintillating light as his thoughts drifted. Minutes passed as he went over his mental checklist, making sure everything had been taken care of properly. Then something caught his attention, and he put another square of the glass in security view. A speck moving on the path in the adjacent Nestle headquarters grew larger as he zoomed in. It was what he thought it was: the old man wearing his ragged suit and carrying his sign as he walked out of the city. Alex had seen him go by many times, terrifying people with his grotesque and aged body. Abominations, 120 Years Old in bold, and below it, This is What an Old Man Really Looks Like.

Lights lining the path gave the old man an appearance both spectral and grotesque, like a walking-dead body emerging from some grave. He wondered if self-flagellation added some of the welts to his diseased skin. "No," he thought, "that is not what a 120-year-old man really looks like." Some of the wealthy lived longer, but with so many enhancements, old age didn't show too much.

Alex wished he could study more about the old man, but there was no news on him. He was a ghost of sorts. He entered and exited the city through the trees at the Nestle complex, which meant there had to be an old tunnel or something there leading somewhere else. That he came and returned nearly every day was also surprising. Anyone else like that would be arrested. People, even those remotely scruffy, were quickly shipped out of the public consumer zones. But the old man walked around with people staring and shrinking from him; a power of hypnotism or something, as even the police shrank from him and let him pass.

The sign was religious in nature, and only Alex and maybe a few others would be aware of that in these times. One of the books he'd read, a commentary on the Bible perhaps, had noted that men weren't to live past 120 and thus the abomination part of the sign. Alex tended to agree; the old folks at the top were abominations, as was their culture. Most of them worked their way up for 70 years, and that wasn't in Alex's plans. As he watched the old man disappear into the trees, he considered that his own timeline would be 15 years to gain control of the state church, and another 10 to establish himself as a hidden ruler of the world. In that case, the old man was a sign, perhaps more powerful than the comet itself. Great men rose under comets, but the old man and his nightly walk were a reminder that to get to the top, a lot of old men and women would have to die. As the sign said, Abomination. Surely no sympathy could be felt for them, but only disgust as they choked out their last breaths through stolen lungs.

He'd been dreaming. Adjusting the scan, he went quickly to the end of the transport tube opening on the street outside Marsdon. The bullet cab had arrived, and it was time to leave. This mode of exit had been well planned. All public trains and transport were closely monitored, as was short-hop city air-car travel. Cabs of the public streets had

human drivers, and they could remember faces. Bullet cabs were a different thing altogether. Traveling only on tube roads between high-density residential and commercial structures, they were faster and required no identification. There was also no surveillance as that existed at endpoints, as the tubes were always outside the destination on the street.

Marsdon was high-security, and in theory, Alex couldn't even get the freedom or access to talk to the prisoners in nearby units. Set up eight levels of psychological control and seven levels of lockdown, and no one would ever escape. Yet he planned to walk out using a lock breaker that had worked since the beginning of history. Pedophilia, if undetected, broke every system. In a world where citizens old enough to be ancient looked young, it meant that those who really were young were of infinite value, if they had the brains to break psychological control and realize that.

Alex opened the door and walked down the hall, two force barriers dropping as he made it to the stairwell. It had probably been used once during an initial test of the building. Security systems in prisons were in the perfect range, never failing. So when the huge metal panel slid aside, and Alex's boots clanged on the rungs of an inner staircase more like a fire escape, it was a first. It meant he was simply bypassing nearly everything else: human and robot guards and systems. He was not a ghost in the machine, as they would detect that. Alex existed as soft footfalls and a whisper in his own mind. When that bottom door opened and creaked, like the days when rust existed were real, he exhaled gently and took a quiet step out. He was now on a panel of stone, looking across the silent grounds. He could have been leaving a morgue; everything was locked down, and not a live body in sight. A million silenced eyes as this was also a morgue for electronic eyes and all things dead come to life; alive as artificial intelligence working to detect a living, moving boy walking away. In the bushes, fake bushes designed to resemble lilacs, a weapon waited, and he picked it up. It was beautiful, a dull plastic object that spoke of incredible power, and to gain it all he'd done was let an old man, a very old man, touch his body.

Get over the wall, not a chance. Alex walked in beautiful trails of ground light and over the trimmed grass to the gate. An automatic defense system came on, gassed the guards instead of him, and he walked out onto an empty street. Moments later, he was out of the pylon area and into the nearby public area.

A few people passed in a comfortable night, all of them noticing him as he walked to the bullet. An older blond woman, her face trim with plastic surgery, stopped and pretended to watch her small mutt as the door of the bullet opened. As he entered, she removed her gaze and walked away, satisfied that this young man was protected.

Alex's genetic code was registered, meaning the car would immediately imprison him. It did that, creating a moment of tech gridlock as various security systems went into conflict. In such a situation, several reports would automatically go on him, though none did, as he had a siphon arranged to loop it all back to the car. His finger ID settled it, and together with bullet-car instructions, he was off and doing something that would never be imagined of an escapee. Alex was headed for church. His contact was a high priest, a man who was a fabulous lover of the young. An old man, who had done all that

could be done to get him out and finalize his disappearance. If it really was a disappearance. He would never be missed physically or emotionally by anyone.

The bullet car shot down its fixed path of the night like a drop of the liquid darkness hidden in city shadows, glossed by the prophetic light of the comet and streaking for the holy fan of radiance, gating the accepted Church of the Millennium. But it was far off and in the mind; shot from a gun, the bullet went straight through the purple night-lights of an industrial area, ran a loop, and slowed as it entered the sky-high city that housed the wealthy downtown residents. The ride became dizzying; no up or down in such a complex city of lights. Sky high or underground, he knew one thing: he was headed for ground. Church entrances were nearly all at ground level, and this one had a magnificent façade.

The deceleration was instant and quiet, creating disorientation as the bullet car eased into its bubble exit on the street. The cross of laser beams marked the entrance, with light from the holy pyramid logo above. The rest of the church was hidden; something inside the astonishing tower rising on this corner. If a person looked up, there was a city in the sky; down, there was a journey below ground, where every level seemed street-level. Alex only had to walk straight over the sidewalk, up the steps, and into the church.

Two wheezes of decompression, and the bullet opened. Alex emerged and studied a few people passing on the street. Youth was the currency in this central area. Whether twenty or sixty, they were all slim and glossed with youth; fashion was their advantage, and in the night, with no flaws visible, a second stage of beauty.

One person didn't fit, and Alex instinctively went on guard. The guy was under a fast food marquee - an SSU cop, but in the higher quality blue suit they wore downtown. Without complete darkness, they were all visible. And it didn't matter. No one could shake the SSU. If the creeps in the blue suits made you, you were done. The SSU was originally the Socialist Social Union, meaning their cops. Many name changes had occurred, but no matter what the logo or sign on the building said, they were always the SSU to the people.

Alex had been made - if he crossed to the church, the guy would have all the evidence he needed. It meant he had to be on the run - and he did run, which only youths did. He was pursued and grabbed as he tried to gain an alley on a funnel street to a theater area.

Large grey eyes studied him. "We knew you were coming. To plant something in the church."

"Really. Then who am I?"

"You ran, that's who you are."

"Why wouldn't I run? You don't look like the friendliest guy in town."

"I'm blue, so you know I'm SSU."

"Best reason of all."

"Nothing to hide, no reason to run."

"Name me one person with nothing to hide?"

“That’d be my name. But I’d be stretching it a bit. Cause I’m the dick I’m about to shove in your ass.”

“Guess you’re another fag.”

“Guess you don’t see the picture.”

“Which is?”

“First, it’s illegal to call people fags. Second, there have been threats against this church. You’re the only oddball that shows up - an idiot kid. So why don’t you do the talking? Who helped you do a scare here and cover it?”

“Yeah, so you got me. But I’m underage, pal - so how’re you going to screw me in the ass with a soft SSU legal dick?”

“Mommy will help me.”

“Shit, you’re stoned, too.”

“Talking about your mommy kid. She’ll pay like all the rest when I tell her what you did. Then it’s lockdown time. It’s a beautiful world. An adult is usually worth about a kick in the head. Pretty boys pay the bills.”

“You’re a cocksucker.”

“A fag, too, but we’re following the bullet ride back to your house.”

“There is something I didn’t tell you.”

“Like what?”

“My house is near the Nestle Complex, and something happened there. Some bad things happened. A ride back doesn’t pop in with a payoff. Just ugliness and you’ll be the sap stuck reporting it.”

“I know a liar when I see one. Let me tell you a story. The more big bad wolves there are, the more money there is. We’re going for a ride back in time to the gold.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Shut up and move.”

Alex had his plan, but still felt like a hostage as the grim SSU man breathed on him and the bullet shot backward into mindless night and a dead past. It whirred, it raced, banked, and could ride straight up, but the bullet had no mind. In a city of artificial intelligence, it was one of those things people had preferred to leave blind. Too many SSU guys trying to get a lock on you. Too many ways for them to do it without ever leaving the office. Better to have some machines that can’t answer questions. And this jolly creep worked the streets, even church facades, for extra cash. Maybe he was really bright. Got a confession, and something to hide, you aren’t hiding that well. And then he spots a kid and plays a candy-man game; back to mom for a cash payoff, and another kid is saved from the evils of the night.

Never a jolt, the bullet stopped silently, doors easing open on feather air and allowing him to step into the night air. Things were quiet to the point that only a cat could get a

quick read. Alex had to get this guy into the Nestle grounds quickly before he took note of Marsdon.

"I ran through there," Alex said. "Yes, I was taking off from home. But what I saw in there is worth more to you than a fee for collecting a runaway."

"And you saw what?"

"Ever seen that crazy ancient man who walks into town with a sign?"

"Yeah, I know of him. So what?"

"I was following him into town. Wondering why you guys never stop him."

"We don't want him. He's illegal and a freak, but like when an old elephant makes his last walk to the bone yard, no one arrests him or stops him. No money in it. And I hope you got more than him. If you think I'm going to arrest a bunch of violators that can't pay, you're dreaming."

"No, it's murder, and it was Nestlé's top people that hid the body."

"Body. Take me to it, right now."

Like the light of the moon, the light of the comet appeared everywhere in Alex's mind. On city streets, things grew wilder, and in the dark grounds of the Nestle Complex, a banner in the sky seemed to celebrate some distant, unknown event. Something far off and disconnected from the untrimmed bushes and grass that marked a line at the back of the chocolate king; a line ending at the darkness of thick trees, embankments, and security fences that separated a wealthy section of downtown from a much poorer and nearly hidden neighborhood of mostly tenant housing.

They walked through the weeds and tall grass, the dark mass of leaves sponge-like and seething above. Alex was the most surprised when a hidden tunnel appeared. It was only because of the strange light of the night that he saw the path leading down to a narrow space. An old one, and forgotten, but a road between two neighborhoods. A tiny world hidden from Nestle security guards, as they never ventured this far beyond the sensors into the vacant edge of the property.

All alarms had been blocked by the SSU man, and he believed he had something - darkness, foul odors - surely a body and evidence that would pay off was here.

In the kind world he had worked so hard to end, the evidence would have been resting with the body in the weeds. But here in the real world was the tunnel the old man used, and Alex's tiny laser expanding a beam into his back that burned him down in a second, turning his protection vest into an oven and leaving him a collapsed lump with a lolling and blackened tongue. And Alex thinking - bodies, there are no bodies - as he used the hybrid laser to slowly burn the SSU man out of existence. An ugly process that involved bubbling, hissing, and blackening blood as flesh and bone melted to ash that faded into the grass. A process that brought to mind the simple fact that an SSU man should have known better than to think a body would have been left there in the grass, with golden eyes in it, he could extract for profit. A DNA trace, maybe - but not from the piece Alex had gained. It was a gun that killed and left no evidence. Such a weapon caused few

worries in a city where only a few elite players would have such a device, and an opportunity to use it undetected.

The pyramid logo of the Church of the Millennium had its own magic as beams of light fanned from it and guided Alex's entrance. As late as he was, he would've been locked out if not for the tiny mark included on a bookmark that'd come with a thin paper copy of scripture he'd had smuggled into Marsdon. He held the book to his chest as he went through the doors and into the levels of the mind that would dictate his place in the millennium. Angels and demons gripped his thoughts as an overwhelming vision of his own guilt rose in haunting and gilded aisles of paradise. Yet nothing got a firm hold on him. He had the book, and its cover was holy. He could've entered and fallen on his knees, or walked confidently with a silver cube or many other objects. But the word of this god was in a book, and Alex had it.

Doorway to stairway and then the vanishing wisps of smoke before a great altar. He could've arrived at many spiritual states and places. But he was here with murder on his soul, and the silver-haired priest was waiting.

Smoke and mirrors, perhaps, but he couldn't see anything at all other than the face of the wealthy and handsome man, there and studying him with adoration as though nothing else existed or had ever existed.

Alex would not be able to lie. And the priest said, "Why are you late?"

"I was delayed. Something I didn't expect. Though it is not now a problem."

"Our arrangement allows no error. Restate it and that you have done all as planned."

"I have escaped Marsdon as agreed and arranged. A new life will begin here for me under a new identity you have created, though I choose the name, as your young disciple, also your young lover, which will always be a secret."

The handsome priest smiled and placed a hand on his strong jaw. He pursed the full and truthful lips of one who had never been able to lie to superiors. "Something is not right," he said. "I see it in your eyes. Answer this question. In our dealings, have you lied to me in any way?"

"Yes," Alex said. "And I feel contempt. You always asked the questions day by day, but never the right question that would have exposed me. I had been prepared for it and was never tested. You made the mistake of not having me questioned by an artificial intelligence that would make no error."

"Don't you understand where you are? You can't cheat us. We program artificial minds. I have covered for you and can, if needed, do so again. But this is not a game. We are offering you power in the church. As my disciple, you will inherit and be in command of mysterious realms."

"That would be a long time off in the future."

"The sensors say you have lied."

"I have," Alex said, pulling the small laser from his vest. "And now this liar is going to kill you."

“I’ve known that all along.”

Feeling panic rise, Alex scanned the room. He’d been sure his plan had been perfect, but he knew the priest was being truthful. Dust drifted like the crumbling dust of moldered books of yesterday, and he knew this place was ancient and the future and beyond any time or plan. “But, I’m Alex, and you’re a pedophile. I’m going to kill you. Don’t tell me you knew that all along? Don’t steal my revenge, my hatred for my father, you bastard!”

Then the priest faded like melting wax. No answer as his body became liquid on the floor and then vanishing mist. A necklace remained, and a voice spoke quietly from within. “Take this up and keep it open, as it holds your new name. You are Daniel Manson, the name you yourself chose when you sought to lie to us and trick us. This is your church and future because you were selected.”

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Chapter 3: Inferno

The streak of the distant comet seemed as boring as the doodle line a child would put at the bottom of a sketch-book page; one done because the rain had spoiled a rare outing to the countryside. Jack Michaels dropped his gaze all the way down to the haze of dirt blowing across the pavement from the camouflaged construction zone ahead. Private investigators worked mainly indoors and with surveillance, so for him, doing an investigation and tail was supposed to be a reward. Only this case was a bore without end, as were the players in it. A copyright case; no one was paying the drug money, there would be no bodies, and as it didn’t involve porn, no busty women to interview either. The player was a skinny young punk with a high Intel rating, even without the special enhancement drugs. Sure, he was a high flyer in the cyber world, but also a runner in the streets. You could kill a few people and no one would care, be a really crooked politician and people would cheer, but you couldn’t pass protected books and be noticed, or there would be a high price on your head. This guy used multiple names, but he was Randy this week. He was currently inside a condo complex that appeared to be nothing more than a strange, unmarked entrance at the side of a theater, sort of pasted into the bottom of a vast government office structure.

Jack assumed the condos were underground, but with today’s building structures, many things could be in the same structure and yet remain isolated and singular to those traveling within. That, of course, meant that any person could emerge from a building through unexpected exits, and it meant little, as there was no real tailing nowadays. It was all surveillance. You could follow a person with a camera, satellite, or even special light detection of their footprints, but that was of no use. The illegal transaction had to be witnessed in person. That was the way in copyright cases.

Sure, most writers made very little and would give you their work if you’d read it and review it, but then there were writers like Amanda South who could sell a billion books a second after release. A guy like Randy with a draft of her upcoming novel, fake or not,

and loaded on an e-reader with her entire collection, could do a lot of damage and draw in big-money guys that were doing it clean when they hired a private detective and not a hitman. The cops-and-robbers game was a scare game at the beginning of every case; if the scare didn't work, it would get ugly, and Jack wouldn't be involved.

So Jack pursed his lips. The money was there, and he knew he'd get Randy when he wanted him. But that didn't take away the boredom and the lie. In this society, people wanted to live forever as children playing with expensive toys and gadgets. The religion held that the higher the price, the greater the prestige of ownership. Especially if it was illegal. It made Jack and all others who took copyright cases enemies of freedom. The freedom to play forever. And also the enemies of human dignity, subscribing temporarily to the money that made the world go round, perhaps at the expense of both liberty and creativity. Addicted to the currency of death and leaving all at the end to look up at that scribble of light called a comet, wondering if it could be much more than emptiness and the dull slash of an ancient pencil at the bottom of the eternal ledger. Gods were returning to collect; they'd been robbed and had popped by on the winds of space, in the darkness of night ... and if collection was punishment, it was a hard game when childish adults faced the silliness of their named crimes.

Catching Randy in the act wasn't really an option; he'd have to be in with that inner circle of friends or pirates - a pal that would come forth with betrayal at the exact moment. That never happened, so it meant doing a scare with surveillance and collecting the cash for the job. Clever as Randy was, he didn't fool Jack. Like a gumshoe of old, Jack was waiting in the deep shadows to the left of the razor-thin alley as Randy stepped out, turned, and began to walk down tall streets toward the purplish night of a grimier neighborhood.

It sure wasn't a perfect town. Just outside the bright towers of the higher social scene, in nearly every part of town, dusty neighborhoods lay in darkness, filled with the sudden violence of hidden, desperate people. They testified to the anxiety of this so-called modern world when they left you hurt and beaten, maybe even crippled or toothless. All had been lost in the painful dreams of politicians and cops that could create a gated city ... and the final nightmare that it could only be evil front to back with the police state and firmly entrenched criminals thriving in the wicked glitter of it.

Tipping his hat up so his face came into view, Jack said, "Buddy, you got a light?" Causing Randy to steal a glance and flee - fast, like a sprinter off the line, tossing his small device on the road as he escaped.

"Guess like most people, he doesn't smoke," Jack muttered harmlessly to no one. Quick pursuit would be fun, but Jack still ran into the road and got the special e-reader - special because it was a black box in that no net access could be gained to it, and it reflected GPS locators to random points.

A small, eclectic car swerved and honked, but he didn't sweat it as he ran off into the darkness, using instinct in his slow pursuit of a guy who was probably by now sure he'd gotten away.

A few blocks passed, Jack passing frightened shadows of the night. This being so much a world of old people faking youth that most couples had no courage other than the

reflex to duck out of the way and not dare say a word. The strength and the power had become conformity and a numb form of cowardice.

Jack paused, slightly out of breath in the darkness. Dust so filthy it had fingers, probed his lungs. In this part of town, he had no chance of gaining a glimmer of hope. He was about to drift into a local mandated production area, where unlucky workers resided and produced a portion of goods that might be needed in an emergency if overseas slave factories failed. Then he found he'd been running after nothing and away from a much bigger event, as back in the lights of the city proper flames licked into the sky, followed by the roar of an incredible explosion. They came up almost instantaneously, and in Jack's mind an idiotic thought flashed like a separate form of lightning, "When cities burn, the defenders are chasing a guy who stole a book manuscript."

And then he thought again. Life is like that - the paymasters send you running, and then you're running again. It's the cash and the clever lies as you dash to the end with some money in hand, when you're already nearly dead and damned.

Jack placed the fire and explosion at the center of town. He had no quick way to it under normal circumstances. In everyday life, if he did anything illegal, he'd likely be called to account and see his detective license temporarily suspended. But when things change, they change fast, and from this point onward, his investigation was into the fire and explosion. And that meant breaking some rules. A taxi was swerving around him, before he knocked a sign over in front of it with a laser flash. The shouting driver and an elegant female passenger, he forced out with news that terrorists were shooting from windows ahead, and he was a cop. After hurrying them into the darkness of an alleyway and gaining the control fob, he backed out and drove the cab toward the fire.

A metal barrier came up behind him as he pulled away; lockdown plans were in action, and that meant he had little chance of getting closer to the scene. Ahead, more barriers shot up blocking the roads, but he knew the alleys. Barely wide enough to get through, but he had a small vehicle. Turning to the first uptown alley, he put on all the lights, got out, and checked the passage. He keyed a siren to wail from the cab's speaker, though he saw nothing but junk and trash bins. Getting back inside, he sped through with a clatter as the cab knocked some small obstacles aside. He turned onto Blair Avenue and saw fleeing people from the Oriental Parrot nightclub and another barrier farther uptown on the street. Other taxis were moving on the street as patrons demanded service, but they were headed in the opposite direction. Panic was in the air as the flames rose in the distance. Jack thanked Hades for the smooth alleyways and the fear of them in the downtown as he turned into another one that provided a long angle toward the core and the fire. He drove slowly, watching the shadows, and the side fenders crumpled bit by bit against the knocks of standing objects. Fortunately, the only people were above on decks and patios, and those who could see were looking toward flames that were now sheeting into the sky, creating a city core ruled by a twisting demon of fire.

It was an anomaly, something that hadn't happened in two decades, the multiple screaming sirens of the fire department trucks being almost ancient - one or two at the most in these times downtown - but who had heard of a ten-alarm fire and wasn't older than sixty.

The taxi banged into an abandoned car as Jack swung a fast right. Auto protection turned out to be his savior in a freaky way. Air and the windshield bursting directly for him caused the safety to stop his rush forward and throw him back. He went out through the vanishing rear window as the trunk protector failed, sending the lid up to catch the explosion with a thunderous bang. Then he went over and down a slippery street on his side.

Fortunately, he'd turned in the air, saving his spine as he landed, but before he could think of anything else, he saw that he'd skidded at the edge of some blood. A dead body with a head lolling askew rested on the pavement beside him, and he looked up to see a big man with a face full of ugliness and self-interest noting his sudden arrival on the scene. The guy had a 67 Charger in his aging hand and a stupid and triumphant smile on his cheap, plasti-altered face. Jack's weapon was also his badge, and it was star-shaped at the moment. It rested in his suit pocket. As the thug aimed his weapon to fire, perhaps with overkill that would leave him as blood graffiti on the wall and a skull rising to meet the comet's trail, it all went blank and dark.

Jack was out, but he woke a second later to see the stamp of doom on the old troll's face. Not even surgery could hide the years of hammering it had taken. But he'd survived, and he was deadlier than a snake on Intel drugs, if there could be such a thing. His eyes were of a final gray shade that said, " You're dead, pal. And that's if you're lucky. 'Cause in this town, if I take you home, you'll be screwed in more ways than ten.

Jack considered the idea of becoming a tortured city specter, an idea he'd considered many times before. His lips moved. His body remained limp. "You need a date, pretty boy?"

"Sure do. You're a young man. I can see it. Funny thing. No matter how good they get with the older ones, they can't hide it from me."

"They more than failed to hide it when it comes to you."

"Jack Michaels, I've won the prize. You thought you were hidden. Huh. A lot of us know about you."

"Yeah, and who exactly are you?"

"Who? I'm the ex-con that's going to screw you, boy. Ever heard of Jayne Masterson?"

"I've heard of you. Impressive record for murders - but if you haven't noticed, the city is on fire. I don't have time for you."

"Okay, time to die then."

Flashing and cocooning to an orb of light, the force of the 67 Charger burst in Jack's head and shoulder area. Masterson expected Jack to become a sudden and quiet river of blood from heart to head, but it didn't happen. Instead, it looked like Jack's whisker shadow had been washed off as the power of the blast dissipated to nothing. Then the weapon in Jack's suit pocket auto-fired.

The flash didn't even tear the cloth of the suit's pocket. It expanded to a force between them, spun with lights like fireflies, and then slammed Masterson like it was a huge

flying fist; the force was severe to the point that it sent his entire body, ragdoll-like, up and around, and then off for a bloody bone-breaking skid along the wall to a destination called the protruding pipes of death.

Jack was already on his feet. He flipped the heated star from his suit pocket, caught it, and put it in a wallet holder. The new auto shield and weapon mode he'd developed had saved him. In the past, he would've had to key the nano engines for a switch to weapons mode. Despite the luck, he was now running and cursing. But he didn't curse the old angels no one believed in anymore. He cursed men who live on as demons when they should be dead. He ran toward the fire by instinct, and he wondered whether there was anything good left in the city that hadn't already been thrown into the furnace.

In one way, he was an actor, but he didn't know why he acted. There was little to save other than human life. He knew it when others didn't. Like the arsonists who had probably set the fire, he had something in mind. There was a hidden reason or a big case. Tall buildings didn't burn big time as they were mostly fireproof. Perhaps he could get a grip on the reason for setting the fire, maybe even detect who did it. Once again, he'd have a reason to keep living the fast life and a mystery to solve; a way to keep hiding from the big picture of a rotten society and his own complicity in it.

Off Surry Lane in the center of town, he found himself approaching the flames on the west side of University Blvd, where the lights had gone out. Hundreds of people were running north, and others were still streaming from buildings to follow. All of them were avoiding the smoke and semi-darkness on Jack's side. Sirens rose in the tall night as fire trucks sped closer from three directions. Halting, Jack looked up at the flames and realized the disaster wasn't quite as huge as he'd imagined. This was the true city core, Toronto Square, another part of the great commercial hub with buildings and wall signs sky-high. Rich with clubs and shopping complexes, but the building burning wasn't the main complex itself.

The inferno was the refurbished seventy-story segment built over an original heritage building. It was all ruled a heritage site by the courts two years ago and had been abandoned for months, all corporate tenants evicted in a land, ownership, and money dispute. The building had remained, looking grand in the evening skyline, with nominal lights ablaze, even though it was empty.

Tonight it was in its glory. The fire consuming it far hotter than any that could grow in fully fire-retardant buildings. Three dragon tongues of flame and ash exploded to the sky as Jack watched, then completely unbreakable windows shattered higher up, and there was a burst that looked like a rocket launch as something went out of it, up past the other building tops, like a tiny orb or air car flung up at the comet itself.

The fire shifted into the face of a demon a thousand times Jack's height. People were now screaming hysterically as they fled bursts of debris, but rather than flee, he ran straight across the street and over toward the square so he could work his way around back.

Smoking rubble was now falling as huge hisses echoed above. He had to look up and duck as he ran. The upward suction of air robbed his lungs and combined with exhaustion. Jack began to worry that his stamina would fail, and he had to keep

repeating a mantra in his mind - around back, around back - because he knew if anything criminal was to be observed, it would be there.

He was hurrying through winking ashes, but he was now in the back alley. Feeling near collapse, he stopped, leaned on a post, and as he did, he saw a heavy metal door fly open. Miraculously, this tiny part at the back of the complex wasn't in flames, though an explosion of hot air nearly threw a person out. He saw someone roll in the alley, then get up and run north - thin, completely covered in loose dark clothing and a hood. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Then something powerful happened: an explosion in the higher sky so fierce that Jack's hands flew to his ears. He saw a face of flames cover the open air above the alley and something like an orb shoot off like a chestnut popping from a fire. Then the roar deafened him, and he collapsed in pain. His ears seemed full of cotton, but he got up and ran after the person he'd seen escaping. He wasn't sure if he could escape the debris now thundering around him or track the likely firebug he'd seen escaping. But he had to try, or he'd be another name attached to a dead body in the crime and disaster news.

He ended up nearly running backward as a gout of heat and splintered debris shot down from above, then there was an explosion out of already broken, unbreakable windows, and he danced as a door hit the alley right in front of him. The door bounced and slammed into the far wall. Now it looked like a fire walk ahead and a run into falling pieces of stone behind. He chose the fire and dashed through a swirl of ashes and fireflies of fast-burning material ejected and floating from the building. Suddenly emerging from puffs of blinding black smoke, he got closer to the alley's end up at the next major street. He caught a glimpse of people fleeing right out on the road and of the shadowy figure making a fast turn to run east down the street.

The sound of helicopters, sirens, and the roar of the fire filled his ears. Something hot and wooden slashed and burned his right thigh. He batted it away, stumbled over some rubble in the alley, and ducked a whoosh of thick smoke at the end of a flame burst as he reached the end of the alley and the street.

His quarry was now far ahead, enough so that he couldn't get visuals. Foolishly, he paused for a second and got bowled over by people fleeing up the street behind him. He tumbled and rolled. A monstrous chunk of stone slammed down, creating a depression in the pavement in front of him as he got to his feet.

Panicked and pissed off, he sprinted straight ahead without stopping. Many people were fleeing and looking back, but he kept running, and it paid off. A block and a half, and he spotted his quarry turning fast like a ragged ghost down another alley. He reached its mouth, then he made the mistake of looking back and ended up staring in awe. The fire burning in the higher sections had been awesome, but now something unbelievable happened. The entire building was suddenly enveloped in a massive cloud of smoky dust; the sound was not like an explosion at all, but something inexplicable. It was almost a poof or a soundless shock wave, and it touched you softly, yet the damage it had done was unbelievable. A magician of sorts had waved a wand, and the building was gone in smoke, going down and billowing out. It appeared that nothing might be left of the building but a sudden inferno in the sky as more smoke came down like dragon's breath.

Now he was running from the biggest smoke and dust ghost in the world, pursuing the smallest ghost of rags, shadow, and tatters. Both of them were sudden and fast. One going down a shadowed alley like ink spilled from a bottle, Jack in the middle running like a man in terror, and the dust giant of the fire moving in to choke the scene.

The cloud consumed everything, and it tasted foul, like some industrial cotton candy made of all of the toxic filth that made the world go round. Except this time it was going straight into your lungs, blood, and brain. It left Jack running because he had to keep moving to keep in the clearer air. His pursuit of the suspected arsonist was quickly forgotten. Most people were going down, whether running or just caught by the dust, and soon he'd be taken down too, but the farther in the clear he got, the better the chance of survival.

He emerged on an empty corner, no traffic, all quiet, but the wind was gusting so hard it was redirecting the monstrous dust cloud up and to the south. The loud disaster noise of downtown now seemed filtered; he'd run into an area no one else had, and the abandoned state had likely been caused by those on the streets earlier hurrying to rubberneck the fire and then ending up panicked. Emergency traffic on other major arteries had left these few blocks empty, and the streetlights were blinking as if the power feed were dying. They got dimmer; he saw a fleeing shadow, and then they went out, leaving the street in the dim haze cast by the light of towering apartment buildings.

Jack stopped and leaned on a city lock box; he was smoke-choked to the point of impending collapse, and all rational faculties were fading. His strong health meant he'd be functional quickly, but his gasping lungs were an enemy weapon, saying he'd be lucky if he could suck enough life back in to remain standing. It all started to spin; he saw the smoke ghost rolling like cumulus clouds on the ground. The air was still clear here, the gusting wind holding the cloud back like a leashed monster. Slowly, he caught his breath, and the quiet area and cool gusts restored his logic. His brain came free of meltdown, and thoughts flowed. He was a detective again, but one realizing he'd been miraculously lucky in following his quarry to this end point, but unlucky and out of shape to have gone into collapse before making the tag. His suspected arsonist had gone down another alley across the road and didn't know he'd seen the escape. Factors that came to mind were that this slim person was in as good a shape as, or better than, him. But he'd already been strained before the fire. The person was also an escape artist. On the suspect being an arsonist, questions rose in his mind. This person had been in the building for way too long, then suddenly emerged. Yet he'd seen no other players. It meant he had to go with his initial belief that the only player seen was either a key player or an arsonist. Why things had gone as they did meant all sorts of other stuff was in play - a mystery.

Fast pursuit would take him nowhere fast, as this thief was too skilled. So that meant a slower investigation. Jack watched as a convertible suddenly swerved around the corner and raced off, and then he walked slowly over to the alley and walked down it, looking for anything unusual. A dead end was most likely. He saw a black cat move like a shadow, perhaps stalking an alley rat. The cat suddenly stopped by a pile of debris and slipped behind it, quietly doing that cat territorial thing of marking a spot with a lifted tail.

Lights were going out all over the neighborhood. Jack sighed as he looked at the black night consuming all before him. He was about to turn back and walk away, and then there was a sudden gold glow from the cat's eyes. If it had a name, it would be Shadow, because like one, the cat suddenly made a huge leap over the pile of debris and was gone, leaving only darkness and the afterimage of its gold orbs in Jack's mind. Before it faded, he suddenly slapped his leg and wondered why he was so stupid. The alley cat didn't stalk this dead-end area and mark it for no reason - cats were territorial, meaning somehow the dead end was a path to somewhere.

Moving around the pile, he checked the area, and then something struck him. The whole pile of debris didn't fit; it was constructed and conveniently placed against a tall wall with only one slit of a window high above. He saw a dark circle on the ground. It matched the pavement shade, but he could see it was a cover. A heavy one of well-constructed pseudo-asphalt and easily pulled back into place from the inside. On the outside, a portion near the debris was broken off. It was large enough for a cat to get through. A tunnel was below; he had no idea where it went, and he had no plans to follow it now. He put it in his mental notebook as a clue, in ink as black as the night. When the time came, he'd follow it and learn what the black cat already knew.

He could still see flames in the distance; the fire was sure to be an all-nighter, and though he really wasn't personally involved, he was connected on a professional level. He did work for money, and if a big event happened, tragedy or anything involving a lot of gold in any kind of currency, it meant any special info he could gain on it might profit him down the road.

Fatigue sank through his clammy, polluted flesh to his bones; his body was not at all in agreement with his mind, and that was nearly always the case when difficult moves were involved. Like all humans, he was at heart an easygoing guy hoping for an easy way to the prize. But if it wasn't there, what could a guy do, skulk in the shadows and slink away. The truth was that such a cowardly exit wasn't needed. He could simply walk away, saying that he had evidence he could follow up on tomorrow. But if the trail went dead or a lead pointed back to today, he'd be looking at himself in the mirror with a mean eye and a guilt hangover.

He felt woozy again from the smoke, and his thinking shifted; it wasn't the light of the fire or the tail of the comet now. He began to jog under the auspices of unnamed paranoid forces. There were no alien angels but ugly visions of mutants in his mind. For some reason, a vision of their warped faces rose to mind, though in everyday life, he rarely thought of them, as their hives were elsewhere on earth. Jack felt hope rise, then he had no hope, then his experience of being drugged before during his career as a private detective eased in, and the lies of smoke poisoning evaporated. It came into his head that there was an answer back in the inferno, and he might be able to grab a portion of it if he got there in time.

The streets were still full of panicked people, some still screaming from fear of fire, as they had very little experience with it or the toxic effects of today's building materials when they burned. It made his jog back difficult but not unmanageable.

The resilience of modern structures amazed him. The old core building had perhaps been underestimated and was still mostly standing after the city-shaking fireball

explosions higher up. He was sure he'd looked back earlier, and it was nearly vaporized - the entire building in collapse; yet much of it was still standing though badly damaged ... an illusion of the fire and smoke had been at play. The heat in the street was incredible now, and there were more small explosions. The scene of people fleeing down the streets seemed real, but the timing wasn't. Big fires were news events because they rarely happened nowadays, except during war, earthquakes, or tsunamis, none of which happened in Toronto. So why had someone, or more accurately, some organization with power, set this disaster to go off with dramatic smoke and flame effects? A media picture of its total destruction before it had actually happened.

The explosions and smoke clouds had certainly been more than illusion, but as Jack arrived back at the alley, it was obvious they had been a lie of sorts. Fire trucks and emergency vehicles were all on the other side. No one was left in the towering firelight of the alley other than Jack, and he saw the door, hot beyond touch, opening into an inner world only someone suicidal would enter.

Grabbing a heavy piece of debris, he threw it against the door and watched as it shook, then burst open. There was a rush of hot, gassy air and no flames, so after ducking back, he ran over and inside. Inside, he gained an unexpected vista. Rather than an entranceway, he was right inside a huge room, one mostly insulated from the fire and with corridors leading down to areas in the foundation. The ceiling above was hot and showing signs of collapse. He was sure most of the debris from above had come down, yet despite its weight and heat, it had not reached the ground in this section. A shield of sorts left it as an inferno above, and one so hot it would soon melt through. Jack could go no further; it was either exit quickly or die, and he got back out the door, running down the alley with the speed fear of poisoning brings. He didn't know quite what, but something weird had been going down in the building. There were objects like capsules shot out earlier, before the illusion of destruction, but were they real? If so, they were vehicles of some sort, mutant perhaps. He contemplated that as he ran out of breath, he was stopped by a sudden electric force and saw a blue SSU-suited cop, and went for a tumble.

Auto-protect mode on his badge had been off due to the fire. The thud to the side of his skull was like a rocket launch into a strange dream. For a moment, he ran across the moon and saw the strange orb from the fire arcing in the dark beyond the city. Laughter came to his ears from someone unseen; an alien had been watching. Someone hidden. His mind drifted in a rush of paranoia. It was almost the common state in a world controlled by security: the feeling that someone, or some people, were there, controlling everything. And in this case, they were godlike powers behind the whole inferno. Behind it and unreachable, just like the old days when men and women reached up to a God people today did not know. These people were ghostly; you could not find them or their motives, but only hidden laughter in the back of your mind. And not the laughter of fools, but the snickers of someone else, some others, and in their plans they had insurance, hard dollars invested in the fact that no one would ever discover their motives or crimes. These were the people who ruled the modern earth. And in that and the collection of facts, Jack had to make a decision. If this case was beyond him - a controlled fiery demolition enhanced by chaos, and arranged by the higher powers of the world - he'd have to walk. He considered the third eye, spiritual powers, and street savvy he had

combined with blind luck to save him all through life, and he decided the case was a GO for now. It was big and illegitimate. He'd never dealt with a case like it before. Intelligence agencies and governments weren't behind it, no stink of their brand of black operation, and the suspect he'd seen was pro but not a genuine terrorist. In a city of conformity and a world of predictable outcomes, he couldn't guess the reasons. He did know the moon was in the sky, and he had something pricey in his pockets - his tiny bit of knowledge on what had gone down.

Jack also knew he was dreaming, and that the SSU guy had no way of knowing that, because of his upbringing, he was more rational and brighter in his dreams than he was when awake. This wasn't astronaut training, and he'd undergone much of it, though he'd left space, favoring Earth and gritty alleyways. And in the same way that he had disappointed his parents with his choices, he disappointed the SSU man who had done him down hard.

In a world of hidden weapons, many of them invisible, Jack came back with the cruncher as he suddenly shot up and hit the SSU man with a knockout punch to the head. The most the guy would've expected physically was a shot at the chest, yet he'd been unprepared for even that. Maybe it wasn't a physical world anymore, other than in watching human beings being blown to bits or being controlled. Maybe sometime a long time ago, desolation had slipped in like a muddy lie and gained a vampire bite on everyone's soul, leaving SSU agents totally unprepared for the rare occurrence of one of the zombies fighting back in any unpredictable way.

Jack checked his watch, not for the time but to make sure it wasn't broken. He always knew the time and the score. Moments later, he'd dragged the guy to safety and was off, and in his mind, like the dirtier smoke of the late fire billowing in the sky, was the certainty that his pockets were full of rainbows. The pieces of this tragedy didn't fit, but he had some of them, meaning he was both the hunter and the hunted.

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Chapter 4: The Torch

Earlier that same day ...

There was a small and unusual carnival in the street; people were celebrating anarchy in this free zone of the city. A week ago, a court battle had been won against the city and the SSU blue suits, leaving them banished yet present in undercover form. One SSU policewoman, feeling dangerously uncomfortable out of uniform, watched the tail end of the protest parade pass as she covertly kept watch on another woman residing in an odd building across the road. From her alley location, she could see little and detect nothing as surveillance equipment had now been disabled to some extent in the free zone, according to the law as per the Supreme Court ruling. She was an ugly woman emotionally, her face cruel like the stone wall and mutated vines rising behind her. On the other side of the street, the structures of the main downtown area shot so high that

they combined with the traffic speed runs to blot out the daytime sky. Sunbeams filtered in and bounced off specially designed reflectors, keeping even the lowest streets alive in tints of summer sunshine.

It was a summer day with dry dust and litter blowing in the eddying winds at ground level. Breezes that often tinkled very quietly, almost like bells, as they moved softly through the signage. Sometimes they hissed and moaned low as a sigh of summer running on streets crowded with rushes of people at the apportioned corporate break times. Even this freer area of the city ran close to clockwork, drifting into the invisibility and boredom of everyday life. And without legal surveillance equipment, the SSU woman drifted the same way. Her painted-on plain face, dusting up yet catching the odd sunbeam as she forgot the quarry she could no longer observe, biting her teeth in that hidden anxiety that rises with the memory of a cheating husband, pain that sends one to use of a micro Loop and the pleasure it brings.

The SSU woman dozed in a pleasant high, and across the road, the oldest building in the neighborhood gathered sun; some ghosts of dust drifting in its early 21st-century mid-city design. It seemed to gather itself up on rough grey stone sides as it reached for the skyline. Above, the city spun with traffic and the architecture that cocooned over this protected neighborhood. Ancient windows, close to glass and without timed tinting and protection, were set like odd semi-ovals in the walls. So old that cobwebs, dust, and the patina of smoke could blur them, throwing off camera surveillance even when it was activated. Sound devices couldn't read through that tarnished glass, as the bounce always soaked into the interior wall ... an aging, rotting construction coated in a special sponge that, even today, worked to defy surveillance equipment.

In the freedom of an unusual summer afternoon and in the disappointment of a summer daydream in the mind of an SSU woman sleeping on her feet below, Janice rose and smiled. Her feet padded across the hardwood floor, and even the paintings on the wall seemed yellowed. But here, appearance was deceptive. The dusty old place had been fitted to ultra-modern. A walk into the bathroom showed a portion of the curved ceiling. She felt a sudden burst of fresh air from an open window that suddenly appeared at her presence, and she showered in golden rain, standing on a depression in the tiled floor. Beautiful odors filled her nostrils and the crevices of her petite body, and when she emerged, she felt as light as a sweet fragrance. She quietly blow-dried her body and hair, and at the vanity, she took up a brush. In the mirror, she saw herself as practical and not the desperate woman of her dreams.

Her breakfast outfit was a thin robe, and as she waited for the kitchen timer to deliver her small meal, she opened a small fan that fused to a semicircular screen. Her thought key was focused on one message. All others were temporarily spun to junk, though with her level of encryption, she did not receive unwanted messages. Like the apartment, her device was really anti-surveillance of all kinds, yet connected via pulses in the ever-changing rhythms that allowed some people on the planet to do business without being detected by the all-seeing eye. In the past, these devices had been mostly under surveillance, as it had been so total. Now it was SSU boots on the ground to compensate for lost capability. The unholy eye had been blinded, but only for some, as most simply did not have the will or technical skill to take advantage of freedom. That was the way it was with surveillance and police states. It had to be total surveillance, as

there was no way of buying into it a little bit. People came to worship the cameras that watched them, and without them, they were afraid. However, at the beginning, no one had seen the evil rising from Pandora's Box. They thought that security systems were a lovely new thing that would be limited and beneficial.

The important thing today was the job. It was big money, and it was strange. Arson, a major fire; hers had been the winning bid, but she knew it was more than that, as they believed she'd do the job and likely never be detected or traced to them. Other potential players were too dirty. And they would be players who did many other things, as arson was unusual to the point of being odd today.

She whisked the fan shut and thought for a moment, considering things. Her connection device had been vetted, as had her apartment. Yet there were still SSU agents outside and waiting to follow her. Not because of her work as a freelancer for hire, but because her high position in the Cult of the Comet had gone over with a little more effect than she'd expected. That aside, they followed anyone of any importance, and the all-seeing eye was on everyone. Should she consider herself someone special that the security world wouldn't target? Not really; too many financial wars and a lot of international espionage.

A quiet message went back; planning was done, and she'd taken the case. And that was it; a large sum was already in a hidden cyber vault. There would be a fire. A magnificent fire in peacetime, and people would believe it. Many would think it a hive-mutant terror attack. And they'd hired her because of her impeccable trace - completely independent, a freelancer making money through odd jobs, but not quite as pure as the records showed. The money, it was to be rerouted to Daniel Manson and into the hidden accounts of the Cult of the Comet. Liberation, was it that? So many decades and so many twisted faces under the boot of a world waging a war on enemies whose faces continually changed; a world unwittingly waging a war on itself and the poor of the Earth. In this job, there was hidden work for the Cult as well, so long as she did as instructed by the Arab customers and, behind their backs, let Daniel Manson know about something else that might be in that building.

As she rose, she swallowed an energy pill. In a minute, its effect would take hold, but she still inhaled deeply, and she caught the musty taste of the building ... a mix of food, flowers, and cleaning fluids. As she was doffing her clothes, she detected some body odor. Her carefully washed feet still had the stink of sweat and the streets on them, and from navel to thighs she had a mild fragrance of sweat and urine. But those undesirable sensory effects would be gone quickly as the pills took effect.

Crossing to the blurred window, she felt reassured. This was one of the last free zones, she knew from checks and info from others that nearly all surveillance had been neutralized. Satellites were now blinded, bugs eaten by cat-stealth nano programs, and listening devices turned to conduits of noise. Yet despite that, the SSU and other intelligence agencies could often smell the roses, as there was no effective block on scent tech, though it was only used on targeted people. Most likely, she wasn't a target, but protection mattered in this case. The pills, cleanliness, and a clear psychological state had a much stronger effect on women. It was a relief to know that some blue-suited cop wasn't following you by the smell of your pussy. In the old days, they could

see love in a sucker's eyes, but today the blocking tech was so well-designed that love had turned into black eyes or whatever else the user wanted to project for protection.

Janice had to leave the building without exiting on the street, and this plan had already been mapped out. The SSU had made a major bust in this old place; she knew the story and details of the search. They'd missed an air compression chute running from a north wall to snaking exit tunnels in the underground. It was tight and tiny, and she barely squeezed through the crack that opened in the wall. It was like stepping into a bottomless elevator shaft, except the rush in this one immediately put a glove on you and let you fall softly through warm rising air and creepy cobwebs that burst and stuck. Janice landed with a bounce at the bottom and felt like screaming as she brushed off the gummy webbing. It was as if spiders had attempted to cocoon her. It all broke off in chunks, and she saw a small door slide open as she gasped one last time. This was a clean exit that bypassed the sewer, and a rich one at that, as the thin alloy lining the narrow space was worth much more than gold. It was also impossible to strip, so no matter what thieves passed through it, the way out remained; unless someone talked, but the general rule was that anyone going out this way wouldn't talk or even live to talk due to the effective nature of the security state.

Stopping and quietly inhaling, Janice noticed her body quivering and the glue-like stench of the narrow tunnel. Gathering her memory, she considered the map she'd studied. It had been like a sketch of black squiggles on the back of a piece of notepaper. Not a map at all, but doodles in most eyes - ones she had to add a dimension to and guess distance, time, and where exits would be.

This was partial-alert surveillance territory; there weren't enough eyes or active robot eyes in the world to watch every dusty old space for intruders. She had to guess and use previous training to spot watching eyes or traps and make sure she didn't trigger them. Sense of smell became one key protector, and the stink of dead rodents was nearly enough to send her on a detour.

Her free zone neighborhood had once been an older part of the city that remained unchanged for many years while all else was overtaken by newer architecture. Its history existed in the facades of buildings, but not really on the street. Here in the underground, she met it face to face as she emerged into old service tunnels, large and round, made of a concrete material no longer used. So ancient in fact, that faded graffiti decorated the first portion; and it was childlike, the drawings and statements made by the kids that ruled the sketchy world of the underground in the days before street art became a saleable commodity again. It was interesting, even historical, but not on the map.

Janice paused to think. This was a blessing; the word came to mind, though in the original sense, as in these days a blessing through the Church of the Millennium meant only that you had won money. Some calculations in her mind told her these tunnels ran close to the newer ones she planned to follow, except that these were not under surveillance and much easier to traverse. Moments later, she felt exhilaration rise as she raced down what seemed like the wet barrel of a huge old cannon. Darkness showed ahead, and her mapping had her close to an exit near her destination. Then she halted so fast she nearly stumbled. A moving shadow and hiss, she saw pure white

fangs, then suddenly realized it was a cat. It jumped up, caught something with its fast paws, and then it was gone. She followed and climbed 12 feet up a concrete ladder, so old that its bars had eroded. At the top, she saw a small hole the cat had gone through and the outlines of some ancient lid or cap. Using a small laser, she burned the edges, then used nearly all her strength to push it up a bit and to the side. She emerged carefully and found herself in a dead-end alley, not even a window in the lower walls. A haze of light showed above the high walls towering over her, and she heard a hiss again and saw the black cat running off like a shadow in the night.

It seemed too good to be true. Janice quickly went to work to camouflage the spot. She had more work ahead farther downtown, and it was money she was working for, though she couldn't guess the motives behind the job. Too many evil forces in this world, so who was really paying her? Daniel Manson offered an out from the whole thing under the protection of the Cult of the Comet. The elite wing of the Church of the Millennium promised her a place in life where she would fear no one outside.

She was now in complete surveillance territory; night hood up with its small static charge masking her eyes and face as she walked over to Queenside Lane. After that, it was a stroll under city lights. Running would increase the level of immediate surveillance, as would the use of any vehicle, and one myth was that city-owned vehicles were in the clear, when in fact they were often watched in total. She caught another glimpse of the black cat dashing from a green grassy area around to another alley, perhaps the boundary of its territory. As she passed, it ran up a fence, onto a wall, and higher to the roof of a corner medical complex. She admired its freedom; there was surveillance in Toronto to detect nearly everything, especially human traffic. Stray dogs, rodents, and raccoons were monitored for control, but due to a flood of poisonous mutant rodents that had overrun the city three years back, cats and skunks were left untouched. It was against the law to harm them or feed them, as they were the hit guys keeping the dastardly rats down. On this assignment, Janice felt like a cat and skunk herself, moving in freedom against all security with no natural predators hunting her in a society that genuinely hated her as much as a skunk but had no choice but to let her live. So she could create a big fire and a big stink.

Fire had brought cavemen roasted meat and the light to view the beauty of their women, but in the secure world, nothing burned big. All large buildings in Toronto were close to fireproof. This structure was abandoned and partially under renovation to keep it up to the fire code until it was sold. Believing that the small orbs of accelerant she'd brought would torch the building was difficult, but as long as she planted them according to plan, the numbers would find air in the hidden spectrum, and her hidden employers would know she'd done the job. Payment would go through, and she'd go back to her new cult life. Janice was devoted to the Cult of the Comet because she really had nowhere else to turn. A brief marriage to a husband who had turned on her as he rose to a solid position in the SSU. The sudden appearance of surveillance papers listing her as a fake artist. Hidden state security directives that drifted into the hands of all prospective employers meant she couldn't work anywhere other than on part-time service jobs in the free zone. Caught in that corner, odd jobs plus Daniel Manson and his church were the only way out ... a way out that was often pricey.

She knew it wouldn't be the cakewalk that had been promised. Ahead, the target building rose, only tracer lights on so that it seemed like an altar of angels reaching sky high for the approaching comet. The idea led to thoughts about Daniel Manson. He talked as if his altar was already up there on the comet. He had a voice that rose from calm to ecstatic, and his words had faith, convincing others that there really was hope in an escape from a totally controlled world. As if truth could shine above the lies that had become the moon and the sun. But what about Manson's godlike aliens? Could you burn your way to them? She'd soon find that out as a door was ahead, and it had been made ready.

Janice had been told to do her job no matter what and see nothing of what was inside. Planted security guards had done their job; no one was in the back alley. The door was cool to the touch, and she entered with her hands already removing her fire orbs. There was no one inside at ground level, and probably no one in the rest of the powered-down complex. Not now, but the strange setup of ramps and strange whorls for robot equipment showed that someone or some others had been inside and regularly so - but why? She wasn't supposed to ask why, but she took mental notes for Daniel as she moved and planted her incendiary devices in the specified locations.

The explosion was to be triggered from elsewhere, and as she noted that some tracks running up to higher levels in the building were not those of any known human or robot travel, the explosions began. But high above.

Her devices remained in place, goose bumps forming on her flesh as she realized they were duds. This was some sort of demolition, one being tracked, and she'd just planted the tracking devices. They weren't firebombs at all. That meant her window of escape was far less than she'd planned because their plan was almost certainly one where she'd be cooked a few seconds after doing her job.

At that thought, Janice simply turned, forgetting all she was seeing, her only focus on the exit. A river of molten flame suddenly came down behind a space in the far wall. She heard an incredible bang and knew it was over; she had a fraction of a second to live a new life buried as ash and molten slag. She was running as the fraction of a second ended with an updraft so powerful it took everything with it - the slag, hissing smoke, and billowing dust all shot up and went westward while she was left standing. Her area of the building was still intact as all else burned and flared in bursts of magnificent power. She got to the heavy metal door, but it wouldn't open, though a powerful draft shook it back and forth like it was tin foil. Situation hopeless, she tried shaking and kicking the door, then she felt the air sucked out of her lungs and fell to her knees as pin-wheeling stars of the mind took her into blackout.

Janice woke, finding it hard to believe she was alive. Explosions were still pounding the building like a drum, and she saw liquid pouring down, some of it molten slag. As the slag went below, there was a tremendous explosion in the sub-basement, probably caused by its reaction to water. Yet even though the whole structure seemed to be coming apart, her section miraculously remained. She realized that she'd been out for a while, and that testified to the strength of this building section. She saw the door shake loose and used her sleeve to push the hot handle. It opened, hot air blew, and she was out, escaping into the night.

She wasn't far into the alley before she noticed a man racing toward her; a tall civilian and startlingly handsome in this strange situation. He looked familiar, and the immediate fear was that he was a control sent in by the people who had set her up. Then she remembered she was supposed to be dead. Her chance of survival had been zero. The next luck of the draw was that she was already running as fast as she could, and if she knew nothing of the truth, this guy didn't either. He was a stranger, playing hero or being plain foolish.

Veils of thin clouds and smoke worked to magnify the moon as it appeared in the corner of her right eye. She was glancing up and running through a night of great power. Yet the power did not belong to her. All of her initial plans had gone right, but the ending was unexpected. Her role had been to plant trackers and then die. She'd been cheated.

Phony explosions in the siren-filled night, combined with the real fire and the pursuit by some odd vigilante, were another phase of unreality. Janice knew cops when she saw them, and in this city, they all had uniforms, whether official or unofficial. He couldn't be pegged as SSU, and she didn't know much about higher cop powers like national intelligence agencies. Vigilante was the word that remained in mind, but one in good physical condition. Maybe he thought he was saving the world. Perhaps he wanted to get a breaking video uploaded to the free web.

Turning her face from him, she focused on her escape and raced into the night of panicked crowds, scribs of moonlight, city lights, firelight, explosions, sirens, and screams. She felt like a fast white rat navigating a maze and never looking back. Janice broke the rule only once, and that was on the final dash down the alley. She had to be sure her exit was clear, and except for the black cat, now sitting on a fence-top, it was safe. She'd escaped her pursuer, and after catching her breath and leaning on a wall with her head spinning, she pulled the lid and got down into the tunnel. As she made her way back, the night's measure of smoke inhalation rose in her brain. She felt poisoning, weakness, and coughing like a spiritual pall of death quickly sucking the life out of her. Suddenly, she fell forward, almost an instinctive reaction. She knew vomiting and collapse would come soon. Nearly bouncing off the walls, she headed home knowing that every second counted. She had to close the security loops and collapse in her bed, hoping she'd wake in the morning.

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Chapter 5: Suicide Run

Jack had to spend an hour reassembling his console, booting it, and connecting it to various secure levels of the Internet. Unshaven and wearing a breakfast-stained robe, he sipped cappuccino as he cursed all things to do with detective work and security. Once fully connected, he did a rundown on all possible hostile forces attempting to search him out and rape his files. He got traces back for 80% of them, none of which would have gotten through his firewall. All mail encryption was untouched. His

headache seemed proof that this stuff should be automated, but his gut feeling was that he was doing his job.

A spray of dust showered down from above, and he saw his office cat, Tigger, up on a shelf. "Damn little pest," he thought. "I like that big black cat I saw in the alley. Runs like a shadow and does serious business surviving in the streets. This guy is a joker of cats; all play and irritation."

Jack's thoughts were spot on as Tigger suddenly hopped down to the console in front of him and started to choke. "Oh-no. He's going to vomit whatever he ate up there in the dust, right on my keyboard," Jack realized. He ended up stupidly turning the cat and patting its back, then the retch came, only it was a piece of plasticized paper. Like lightning, the scrawny feline was gone into a corner of the office. Jack raised an eyebrow, then realized his catch was a lottery ticket bought two weeks back. Deciding to check it, he wiped it, scanned it, and then went back to work. He wanted to do some research, but first, a check for new clients was in order. Not that he needed any, as he was actually up and in the bucks. Payments from copyright and other cases had come through. That fact was displayed in the final bank account figure, always displayed in the top right-hand corner of the screens on all of his devices.

An urgent message tone sounded as another dollar sign appeared on the screen, but he ignored it. An unfinished case message caught his attention. All current cases were finished. He had no new clients, but one ongoing client. It was the Suicide Run. Jack liked fancy titles, but the fact was he'd done nothing on the case. Mainly because nothing needed to be done. A rich overseas Dutch family sort of thing. The son, Jan Fair, was suicidal. He liked to attempt suicide in various dramatic ways, yet never succeeded. He was, of course, still alive, and Jack had earned a lot in payments for preventing his death. The problem was he'd never done any real work other than assessing that the suicide attempts were phony. He had no data, and now the family, people he'd never met, wanted a report detailing his work. Jack had none, but he knew how to handle the case. Simply get a tail on Jan Fair, report in detail on how he'd prevented his latest suicide attempt, and hope that would satisfy the clients. Suicide was illegal after all, though it could probably be said that everything was illegal or up for interpretation. As a detective, he could use special powers in preventing a suicide, though, in actual law, anything he did could possibly be used by the courts or lawyers to have his license removed. A detective license was an interesting badge, as on its face, it allowed you to do nothing more than an ordinary citizen could do. Jack's license had been under review constantly. The beauty of the law was that no one knew what it was. A private detective really had no power at all other than smarts and the fact that people believed a good detective was in line with the law.

After that was the enforcement of the SSU, the general police state, and its worldwide tentacles - their view being that detectives, most of whom never hit the streets, were just gathering evidence they could claim. Guys like Jack, who actually went out on the streets, were laughed at but usually not busted. The SSU liked to watch more than anything else, and they needed people who would get into the action and accidentally tip them off.

Cat and mouse, game of survival, Jack had been doing it for years. But he'd never actually gone out on the street to prevent a guy from committing suicide. Scratching his chin, he watched Tigger do a suicidal jump and flow easily to the floor nearby. As the cat ran off, he wondered what sort of man cat he'd be reporting on. A guy who regularly attempted suicide? What kind of game was that, and what sort of trouble would gathering this report lead him into?

Time passed as he straightened out paperwork and sent it online to various clients and ministries. He remained a do-it-yourself guy, mainly for security reasons but also because he could do it. The days of beautiful secretaries had passed with tax changes pushed through by the SSU to put private detectives out of business. He'd survived in the office and on the streets. Few others had without taking on straight ministry connections, meaning they were an arm of the police state pretending to be private.

"Yes, copper state," Jack mused. But despite it, the summer sun still cast lazy beams through his window, and he had a device that let in a real breeze instead of air conditioning. Afternoon arrived with the sleepy before-brunch feeling that meant an unbidden snooze. He'd actually found the time to complete all the files and submissions he hated and still had time to get a full reading on his bank account and find that he was solidly in the black.

Sudden music woke him, and he jumped in his office chair. The time on the screen told him he'd barely taken a fifteen-minute rest. All because of an urgent message he'd set, and with his okay, that message popped on his screen and told him he'd just won the Mars Promo lottery. A slot machine graphic on the screen ran up figures to a maximum, telling him he wouldn't have to do any work for about five years. The prize pickup and media event for the winnings was a week away. It would only take a couple of hours of his time.

At that point, Tigger flew down from a shelf and faced him, green eyes wide. With a sudden cry, he ran off. "Take the money and run," Jack thought. Then another thought came to mind. He'd never really done any checking on this suicidal idiot. That and the fact that he was Jack Michaels and born to wealthy parents. The last thing they had wanted him to be was a private investigator. Money, the lottery, who cared? Maybe he'd build Tigger a gold cage for vet visits, and he still had one case left. He was also lingering, as calls might come in on the big fire. A case he wanted to investigate for his own curiosity, yet wouldn't. He never worked without a paying client. The client was nearly always the key to what he was getting into. So the gold was falling in his dreams in big loops and coins, but it was still just a dream.

He went back for a brief visit with sleep and fantasy, getting some rest and recovery in this unexpected time of his life. The short sleep was beautiful. Tigger dropped down and slept wrapped around his neck, his featherweight easing him into even deeper sleep that took him to the end of the afternoon and to that darker underworld where the black cat ran with the speed that ruled the world. There he saw the fire and his quarry again. A woman and a beautiful one, like she was the comet and he the tail following. It all led to something much bigger, and he awoke with gooseflesh in the heat as an alarm suddenly rang.

No one had come in, and Jack started wondering if his lines were blocked. He kept thinking of running tests and checks and kept getting lost in his obsession over the fire, running down all news reports, setting drifter bugs on the net that would file any mention of the event. In his mind, he saw the face of the woman, running like ink and creating a stain he couldn't read, and then it took shape as the cat again, running in the night. Tracer lights showed like the tail of the comet above. It all meant something, and it all meant nothing. He'd never been so alone in his life. He had one crazy case, and he was stuck with a vision of fire. It was as if post-traumatic stress had come on him, too. Yet it wasn't stress but more like conspiracy theories about the fire had invaded his mind and sanity.

Then, in the personal disconnect of it all, lines of communication began to work. His phone, secure tablet, and various network-connected devices all registered an emergency call from Jan Fair. He was about to commit suicide.

It was his remaining case. A suicide attempt was in progress, and his job was to somehow go out and make the save.

So this guy was about to kill himself, but how? The lucky Joe always survived. Jack felt like a fool running in his dreams in his underwear, and he was in fact doing that. In an emergency, he had to go out fully dressed and prepared. With only one case on the books, his only preparations had been for a long sleep and mints needed for answering calls on prospective cases. He enjoyed possibilities and odd things that would pay off; instead, it was now a leap, like jumping off a bridge into the unknown. He suddenly remembered the tracker his clients had given him, which he'd tossed carelessly into a closet next to soap tubes for the bathtub. Stumbling about in the dim light he'd created by accidentally tripping over Tigger and hitting a switch, he found his nerves, got to the closet, and grabbed the tracker. Tigger was already there as he exited, not through the door but the bathroom window, and as Jack went down with his finger on the car charger, he wondered if he'd ever be as quick and smart as Tigger.

"Shit," he muttered as he suddenly spotted an SSU agent on the parking garage screen. The big man in blue was watching the front of the building. "Who sent that bastard!" he exclaimed. "I don't even have any real cases." The back showed clearly, so he shot the car out of a small slit emergency door and escaped via the back street. Jack became keenly aware of the fact that he was supposed to be doing a rescue but was instead fleeing an SSU agent. Now, both modes of action were under the hidden sky of the comet. It appeared that either he'd fooled the SSU or the agent had dropped him immediately.

His wheels hummed on a defined route that was perfect in computer planning and execution. Before ten minutes had passed, he found himself on the big loop of the CityView Expressway, just where the road headed down on the big slope, and in the beautiful view of the city's highest scrapers, running up to challenge the brilliant moon. A scrawny guy with wild red-tinted hair sat there on the railing, smoking a butt of some sort. As Jack wheeled over illegally into the highway service zone, the feeling that he'd been tricked rose in his mind. He didn't feel frustration, and mild irritation didn't rise in him. What reddened his face and opened his tired eyes was complete and absolute

fury. No rescue here, not even a bad guy to shoot or slug. Unless he decided to jump from the disappointment, there'd be no action at all.

Jan Fair was simply there in a place where no one would ever park and where automated freeway cleaners would remove any disabled cars and warn passengers to leave. He was there smoking his special blend of relaxing tobacco or dope, waiting for Jack to arrive.

Jack walked over. His open face caught the tinted yellow light. His expression was calm, though his full lips were pursed. His heels clicked lightly on the freeway-side interlocking stones.

"Thought you'd show, Jack. But you could've been a little quicker. By now, I could've jumped a few times."

"I took my time because I wanted to see if you'd bounce back up."

"I see. A smart guy. Keep in mind that you're being paid to protect me from myself. As it happens, you've been tested tonight. You failed. This was your last chance. The other times you didn't even show. Either you improve your response time, or payments will be reduced."

"Huh. Yeah, I didn't show, and you didn't kill yourself. Why did you let this go on, and why were you sure I'd show tonight?"

"Easy. I paid another PI and the SSU to follow the cases you're working on. They, of course, did nothing other than get a momentary crack on your file submissions. I know that I'm the only client you currently have."

"Let's get things clear here. Are you genuinely suicidal, or are you trying to make me suicidal? Now that I see you, I'm not even sure if the people who hired me are real. I've never seen them and they live in a black zone."

"Thing is, I hate detectives, because they've all failed me. You're the only one that actually goes out on the street. I am suicidal, but the attacks are rare, about twice a year. I believe it's a genetic thing due to my special form of birth."

"Okay. You're definitely a paying client, or your family is, but you have to realize that you've compromised us. You put the SSU onto both of us."

"Oh well, so what. My father was once SSU-connected. I know you've been working on straight cases. Nothing is there to compromise you unless you went out and did something in the last day or so. I have what I need. When the time comes, you're to use all of your skills and prevent me from ending it all."

"How long should I twiddle my thumbs?"

"It could be for months or five minutes. I haven't had an attack for more than a year, so I have hopes that the condition is passing."

"Payments have always come in from your family in Holland. Officially, no news or information is available. What in the hell happened over there? Why is the place nothing but there-be-dragons on the world copper map?"

“It’s something to do with mutants creating a hive to take over the place and renaming it Holland. If I knew all the details, I’d tell someone. But not you. Truth is I hate hive mutants. Aside from that, I suffer from post-traumatic stress times fifty, and it comes in waves.”

“You have family alive over there, so I know the place isn’t gone completely to mutants. More like a blackout.”

“Yeah, and stick to the case. You know the world we live in. Any attempts you make to uncover political or disaster information will likely be used against you.”

Two SSU speed cars suddenly raced in and parked. A helicopter appeared overhead, and as cops raced from the car, a message rang loud in their ears. Do not move! Do not approach the barrier! You are in a dangerous situation!

Jack tensed, realizing that either the copter or cops from their cars were speaking through tiny speakers embedded in the concrete. So it was an emergency task force come in to save Jan Fair. Jack frowned but didn’t move as he considered that he’d underestimated the police state - hidden speakers everywhere that they could make announcements from ... they’d gone back to the ground when in past years it had been a tsunami of online surveillance. Perhaps it was creeping into every pore of the world’s body. He hated it, but in this case, they were here for Jan Fair. Jack had his detective license, so he had a way out.

SSU cops in light body suits raced up. Jack looked on in amazement as the helicopter actually landed and more cops hit the pavement. Within moments, they were surrounded, and an SSU cop with a long face and short voice said, “Jack Michaels, you’re under arrest for your own protection. Drop or reveal for capture any weapons you may have.”

“I’m not carrying a weapon. Just my badge. Everything is locked in the car. You are making a mistake. Jan is the suicidal person and my client. This situation has been resolved.”

The lead SSU man lifted his hat brim, and his pale white face showed. His eyes were like those of an owl in the night light, and his expression was like the condescending grimace someone arresting an alien invader would have.

“We know that you’ve seen something that may have affected your sanity. A public-emergency arrest has been ordered. Your safety and the safety of the public must be protected.”

Jack knew that either this was a joke or the world had suddenly changed. They were preparing to stick him with a tranquilizer dart like they would do to a rabid animal. The lies of the police state were big, but in this case, they were crazy, too. Jan Fair appeared to be heading straight to hell with him, without killing himself.

Call it luck of the draw. The lights off the edge of the freeway glimmered and melted in his watering eyes like a dizzying paradise vanishing. Then it was back through the barrier to the bubble view of the CityView Expressway. Everything curved, the road ahead and behind, the toll post just ahead, the distorted faces of onlookers out on the road as Jack was whisked to an SSU car. The sleek frame of the car itself contorted.

The door closed silently. The drug they'd hit him with was a short, near-knockout that he'd sampled in the detective course that prepared one for being taken into custody. Jan Fair was simply taken off his screen, like Holland, the country Fair called home. Then it was all race and blur, and the city lights swam like a comet rushing across the mind. A tall expansion of streets and gem-like lights rose high above ground, reaching higher levels and pathways that swirled against backdrops of darkness. Highlighted architecture that climbed, its impervious doors, arches, and windows locking away a world hidden in the sky. This was a city of mysteries where human misery and joy existed in high places and deep in the ground in hidden grottos of endless human activity. All of it somehow glossed by the sheen of the police state; the presence of the watchers everywhere - their lust, hunger, and brutal laughter at the back of the people they watched.

Like the night people, the watchers were never satisfied. They were always hunting for fresh blood and in need of a new, sexy drug for potency.

The police state couldn't accurately police this city. There were too many educated and clever individuals and too many criminal organizations operating alongside genuine organizations of political dissent and power. Toronto was a failed police state, a speakeasy that rose to heaven and down to hell. Despite the watchers and their prisons, every belief and prejudice had found new life. The secret education gained behind hidden doors without end. Day by day, the surveillance state grew. Elsewhere, whole nations like Holland disappeared into another hell run by the hive mutants.

No public news came out of hive mutant zones other than horror stories manufactured by media intelligence. In Toronto, something else had appeared under the aging sun. The place was a maze no one could navigate fully; all prohibited religions and even terrorist organizations were underground here. Surveillance had been complete and worshiped for decades, and few agents needed feet on the ground. That had been left to everyday police, a totally unreliable and dwindling force more in tune with their own rewards than the evil political bosses. Even private detectives worked from authorized surveillance stations and tapped into authorized police-state surveillance hubs. There wasn't really anyone out there in the flesh other than some SSU guys and raw criminals on the run. The cops did not know the streets by beat anymore. A new reality was in play; the police state was now the crime state and had little to do with genuine law and order. No one could verify the extent of police control on the ground.

As the distant comet broke the dark sky with a faint snakelike blur, the vision of a dying society swam in dreams. At first, Jack saw all things tumbling, then in another drugged hallucination, his feet were on the ground, because he was one of the only people left that actually went out there and worked cases on the street. In that sense, he was one of the last detectives. The others were dinosaurs, slowly dropped into poverty by technology as the rich-and-fast police-state guys moved on. If Jack was the last moneymaking private eye, he was still headed for the SSU's final graveyard. They wouldn't give him a peaceful end. As all history showed, he'd be tortured for what he knew and then burned in their death laser show. His ashes would be waste ashes, not scattered to the wind but trampled underfoot as the blue suits shook hands and thanked the power and misery of the state.

Nausea rose in waves from his stomach. He would suddenly choke and retch, yet nothing would come out. He saw bright eyes, the teeth in a grinning face, and heard laughter in the semi-dark. He knew now beyond a doubt that this was the end - the time of capture, torture, and quick burning of his remains at one of their convenient vacant lots hidden in the city mosaic. Even his DNA warped beyond identity. And the shocker was that he didn't know why; all he'd done was work on the idiot case of Jan Fair and run to a fire.

The speed car stopped, and he was ushered out and left staggering to a fall. All around him, the city lights and towers spun like a slow whirligig, but they were in darkness, and a zip gun was pointed at his head. The shot never got off. A small flying vehicle, like a plane or air-car with the shortest wing Jack had ever seen, suddenly dropped down from the sky.

At that moment, everything changed. Bright light like the sun suddenly lit up this hidden graveyard, revealing litter and mounds, and, more importantly, the impression of the plane landing in the wind.

Before another thought could gather in Jack's mind, the SSU agents whisked him away. A hidden entrance opened like a yawning mouth, and they were almost sucked inside. The doors closed nearly as quickly behind and Jack realized that the SSU had planned to torture him with knock slugs outside. An effect where shots were placed to the body and head that sounded like real shots, and you were kicked hard by the exhaust, but not fatally hurt. It was a brand of roulette and fear as to when death would come - a sure way to bring about a confession or release of information. Now these strangers had arrived from the sky, and the plane he'd seen wore a short wing as a mere decoration. It traveled by other aerodynamic means. He wondered what was up; he wasn't important enough to draw great powers in to kill him or save him, so why was the SSU dragging him off like a priceless gem?

They released him underground in a cavernous room. Rather beaten and grasping for recovery, he wondered why they would allow him any chance of striking back. Screens showed, and they were high surveillance that could view most of the city from a command center. The idea that he was a prisoner here and that higher powers wanted him was like a strange and unbelievable dream.

He was Jack Michaels, a licensed detective who worked the streets. The most the police state would send after him would be either a tax thug to collect money or the usual SSU goons to bust him up and warn him off a sensitive case. Sadly or fortunately, no one had ever really cared about him or his cases.

Now he had two SSU goons, the first with a rather intelligent stare, and the second with a brutal stamp of legitimacy on his carved, pseudo-handsome face. This first guy had burned out on Intel drugs and lost his wisdom. The other was the arrogance of murder rolled into a blue suit. Surprisingly, they were the front for this SSU station, and it was larger with many more agents hidden in other chambers.

In this case, Jack expected that they'd only watch as the view screens showed more winged planes coming to ground like UFOs. There was a clean view of heavily armed soldiers emerging and dashing to the station. A sudden flash, and all doors opened; the

whole place was scratched and without security. Jack could have made a break for it, but he didn't. He waited and watched the screens as a security detail and a five-star general walked up to the station as if it were a place for summer picnics. They were coming straight for Jack and his holders.

It got interesting, and the lights flickered as control was taken by another force. Jack was suddenly free and allowed to face his captors, the approaching general, and his men. The top SSU man wore an expression of awe and anger. The general had a face carved from sandstone, and it was aging naturally despite all attempts at youth. Another decade and he'd be among the elderly and maybe as much as a hundred years old. The men accompanying him were young, and his immediate bodyguard was a woman with short black hair. She wore no helmet and had a thin face and eyes so cutting and fierce that one couldn't be sure if she was a soldier or an assassin.

A moment of shocked silence followed, and Jack wondered if anyone would speak. He had no plans on initiating anything. Things had changed so fast that he found it hard to remember who Jan Fair and Holland were, or ever had been.

What followed revealed the truth of authority. The aging general spoke. "I'm General Mike Blackthorn, US Motherland Security representative here in Canada, and also honorary Canadian NATO commander."

"Glad to meet you, General. I'm David Salehah. SSU commander here in Toronto. Introductions done, you and your force have no authority here. Especially not in a civil case."

"We're here as per international treaty AZ128765B2. I need to talk to you about this sensitive issue. I apologize if we have arrived during an inopportune time. But the treaty is explicit in that it requires immediate communication and liaison."

"Certainly, this can be straightened out. We'll talk right away. Give me a moment to decide where this recently arrested terrorist, Jack Michaels, will be imprisoned and questioned."

"The moment's up. Jack Michaels has been ruled an asset. He is now working for us."

"What? Are you challenging my authority? Jack Michaels is in the custody of the SSU. In our books, he's a terrorist."

"Michaels is a local private eye working in this city. He's not a terrorist. We have files on him and his father. And yes, I'm challenging your authority. If you want to argue, we'll seize this entire station and put you up on international charges. In this case, we want trustworthy off-the-streets info. You and your gang of torturers and murderers make me ill. You'll do what I say, and I won't have to so much as pinch a finger. What I'm saying is that from now on, Michaels is my man on the streets in this city and maybe elsewhere. He'll be working on an international case for me. He has no choice in the matter, and neither do you. This is genuine top-secret work. As for the SSU and this station, you may be called in if needed, but under my command. Do you understand?"

"I have the treaty option of a hot-line call to the Defense Minister."

"A call she'll never answer. Reason one is that she hates Toronto and the people here who did not vote for her party. Reason two is that she knows the situation and is behind

us on this case. Reason three is that she asked me to report any information that could lead to corruption charges against the local SSU. Make the call if you wish.”

A fast taxi home, plane rides to vacation destinations, a tour up to space when he was a rich-kid astronaut, Jack had never traveled much. He was a creature of Toronto and its streets. He'd never been politely led away from SSU goons and taken up in a general's plane for a ride back to his office.

The command plane was big enough that Jack and General Mike Blackthorn sat side by side in rear seats, looking out windows gone transparent to show a high-altitude view of 100-storey buildings and lower street levels lit by rippled light.

Ten minutes passed, and not a word was spoken. Then Jack broke the ice. “You're taking me back to my office in a grand-tour fashion?”

“Yes,” General Blackthorn said.

“I'm thankful, General. Do you guys always happen to drop around in great power to save a guy from the SSU slab?”

“Sometimes we do. Toronto looks vibrant tonight. I can see the deeper streets below. The problem is, I don't know a damn thing about what really goes on in this city. I also know that the SSU agents who grabbed you don't know either. Their public penetration level is at the bottom, and this is a Master Society or MS police-state city in a semi-democratic nation. Fake democracies do better. My reports show that the SSU creates a lot of misery and torture. It murders a lot of people and, in the end, comes up as a puppet show. Not because of organized crime, but because the citizens themselves have organized against them. SSU agents have the best training and organization of any local police state in the world, yet the people of this city easily defy them and win year after year. We have no agents we can send on the ground here, as the playing field is too dangerous. Strange as the great comet is the way to put it. The only name that comes up is your name. You should be in space. You had the skills. You should have kept quiet when you solved that murder at the moon ring. I pity your father, having died with his son a failure and working the night streets here.”

“I take it you have a son you worry about. Getting back to business. What is it that you need to know? More specifically, what can I get for you that the torturing SSU can't?”

“You're a private investigator, is that right?”

“I am, and I'm surprised you asked that question.”

“Our surveillance shows you down in the fire area. You and a person you pursued were the only people not in a panic. Your SSU friends walked off to coffee shops.”

“I see. You're wondering if the SSU had knowledge that this catastrophe was about to occur?”

“Yes.”

“The answer is maybe. Or the answer is money. They could have been paid to duck it. Maybe they walked away and relaxed knowing interested parties would pay them for either answers or to bury any answers.”

“And their interest in you?”

“That’s obvious now. Surveillance shows one other person and me. The other person is the one fleeing the building. The one that I chased. They grabbed me for almost the same reason you grabbed me. But I’m lucky you showed.”

“How does our having you in custody make it different?”

“They were going to torture me for what I know and burn and bury me. They would have got nothing substantial. They’re too dumb and corrupt to realize that their tactics don’t work. It is also possible that a payoff came in from someone who wanted me snuffed.”

“The fire, who was the man you were chasing?”

“It wasn’t a man, it was a woman. I plan to uncover the identity. She was a hire, and the people behind it planned for her to die there at the fire.”

“We came in late with satellite surveillance, blocked by drifting clouds. In the end, we got you in an alley with a black cat. Not much, considering we want the story. What happened to the woman?”

“I don’t know. She’s alive and hiding somewhere. I don’t know why you guys care about a local matter. This is all getting too big. First, it got big enough that the SSU decided to smoke me. Then you people, the big guys, come in as saviors, asking polite questions. All I know is yesterday I was a private detective taking care of scum on the streets and working for clients. Now I’m in deep water and lucky to be alive.”

“You’re lacking in business talents. We want to hire you to do a job for us, and it’s not as if we haven’t checked you out. You’re a loner living with a cat you rescued from some kind of animal intelligence experiment. That’s how good our Intel is. You didn’t have to be this way. Your family could have given you whatever you wanted.”

“I wanted out. There was no honorable way. Same thing in this case. There is no out. Just my death, perhaps. I want my fees as per my advertisement times ten. Then I’ll work for you. The question is what kind of work? You can piss off the SSU, but nearly all local investigative tools are rented through them. If I work for you in that regard, they’ll know everything I do a bit before you do. The only other way is that I do it my way and go in alone and with nothing.”

“Okay, nothing to lose. You’re hired on that basis. Investigate the fire and find out as much as you can. There is no contact info. If you get something or need something, you’ll find a way to reach me. I’ll give you a hint on the case. We think a key hive mutant named 666 might have sent plants out of his Holland hive and had a station in that building. If so, they’re scouting Toronto as a future hive city. We aren’t going to let them have it. If they were there, were they burned out, or did they leave and burn that place themselves? We believe the Cult of the Comet was watching that building for the same reason as us.”

“So it’s a big and complex case. At the beginning, I saw something fly out of that inferno. Yet on the surface, it still looks like an insurance case. The SSU must have really hit bottom if they’re taking payoffs from hive mutants. Maybe the owners wanted a big fire for insurance and didn’t know somebody was in there.”

“If so, I want it clearly established, something I can present to the elders.”

As smooth as the moon riding a beam of its own to near ground, the plane hovered on quiet, invisible air, and Jack got out in his own backyard, which was a back street at the rear of the street-prop section of the huge building. Though the structure towered high into the sky, the street level was people-friendly and hid that aspect. His place was up over the display floor at the beginning of the tower level, right where it grooved into the tower. He had a small ledge he'd built for Tigger. The cat could go up the easy ground facade level and sit outside his half-open bathroom window. The same window Jack had exited from, and which was dual purpose, giving both him and the cat a way of escape.

Jack hesitated, and his thoughts filled with awe; the air power and the strange, small planes that seemed able to do anything. Yet their creators couldn't put a good undercover man on the street. He wondered. Maybe like birds, the MS police state would move into the air, landing now and again to judge the hostile forces on the ground ... but it was more than that ... binding international law that allowed much in the air and little interference on the ground.

His own place was not exactly the best security arrangement in a city where every door and window was closed or locked and quadruple alarmed. In this case, the lock was Tigger himself. Jack spotted his green eyes above him and his claws holding to the razor-thin ledge of a security window. One shock could knock the cat off, but Tigger could go to ground on the ledges. Obviously, he'd done that and stolen a night out. The fact that he was there, waiting and making no sound, meant he'd gone out and returned but wouldn't enter because an intruder was inside.

“SSU and they probably know I'm coming in,” Jack thought. “So much for their bargain with Blackthorn.” Then he saw Tigger leaping to him, his fear gone. Light as the night air, the cat caught his forearm. Immediate activity followed. A line of bright charges shot out the window, going off into the night, perhaps to hit a far window in weakened form and terrify the residents. Jack remained stuck halfway up to his bathroom window on thin exterior show tiles. Holding his position, he watched the cat run up and into the partly open window.

It looked like General Blackthorn had bet on the wrong man. A dumb detective named Jack who wasn't worthy of the license. He had little chance against a planted SSU killer. Not much at all ... then he saw a big shadow dancing near the window with another tiny shadow on its back.

Jack went up and threw himself into the narrow space. He pushed the window up to maximum before the auto-close came on. It was a big man gone into a near spin in the room, and the weapon spinning with him was a large gun. A laser, but one of the modified ones designed to look like an antique bullet gun. It was the type that fired charges shaped like bullets. One hit from an expanding laser bullet orb, and he'd be mush. But those shots, three of them, went into the ceiling and died in pungent flares on the fireproofing. The SSU man was blinded by his own bad shooting, and as Jack squirmed in, pulling his feet through, the auto close came down, barely missing his toes.

Tigger had the SSU man's face with two front claws. He'd dropped the weapon now and was moving quickly to kill off the feline necklace. But he was half a second too late. As he reached back and put his hands on Tigger, Jack seized his jaw and twisted it, and his death was as quick as the cat's jump to freedom.

Stunned, Jack went to his small living room and plumped down on a couch that had an arm showing signs of ripping claws. Because of the crazy cat, he knew no one else was inside. Tigger came in and hopped about him as he mixed a drink. When he sat back, the cat jumped beside him. What was it General Blackthorn had said? His Intel was so good that he knew about the rescued cat. He wondered if General Blackthorn knew that the experiments had been of the sort that increased animal intelligence.

The cat purred, and as he petted him, he realized that being a loner had saved him. He'd trained the cat to avoid others when it was still a kitten, but its real instincts were in knowing that anyone not Jack was an intruder. That obscure fact alone meant they were both alive and not dead.

A couple of drinks went down, and he wondered about the whole case. He had to track the woman. The SSU was out for revenge. How many obscure facts could keep him alive? A thought came to mind. Another cat. A black tunnel cat. He had a fair idea of which part of the city the hidden tunnel would lead him to. Depending on the opening, he would have a solid lead. He also considered laying out the long-term feeder for Tigger. The SSU could not kill a man at home if he never showed up there. Chances of them getting the tiny cat were slim, as he had numerous hiding spots. And what would they want a cat for anyway? A last sip, and he made a phone call. He needed someone to dispose of the body. For a moment, he thought things over and wondered if he was losing his mind. He was now working on a case that involved a cat as a clue, not to mention crazy Jan Fair and hive mutants. Then there was General Blackthorn, the Cult of the Comet, a woman, and probably other weird stuff.

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Chapter 6: Chasing Shadows

Jack woke in the night to the sound of his cat yowling out the bathroom window, not an intruder alert but a cat thing that'd grown bigger with the approach of the comet. Rather than waste time, he did some planning. The SSU had attempted to silence him. Their agent had come without any detectable device or a washed laser gun and with no backup. He'd failed in his assassin gig and was now missing. The SSU had taken a shot. They would believe that General Mike Blackthorn had taken out their assassin. Any ideas that the cat and Jack took out the killer would not register as possible in their thinking. That meant they would likely leave it and let things run their natural course. Many things happened in Toronto that the SSU didn't like, and Jack working for big powers would be one of them, but they'd leave it and not come back to it unless a large sum of bribe money was on the table from people who wanted something done.

A plan had emerged in Jack's sleep. It could be said that it was a plan no one anywhere would ever consider or dream up, but Jack had been trained in dream planning as a child. A quick night out, and he planted a tiny camera and stick tag in the dead-end alley of inferno night. His subject was a black cat and its movement pattern. He knew the cat was using the tunnel and that the arsonist had used it and opened its lid. The small hole the cat had been through looked clean, so it must have been dashing through for a while.

A day passed, and he detected no one using the tunnel, so he was at a dead end and scratching his head when the cat peed on a nearby pool of oil and then simply jumped through the brick wall. An illusion from a tiny planted holo device; there was a space in that wall to pass things through from below without actually coming out. It meant many people and gangs used this access route when they needed it. The stick tag had caught the cat's fur, and it showed the cat moving through tunnels too small for a human.

The city underground was only a descriptive term defining complex service areas between or around buildings that had deep roots in the earth. In essence, any map of the immediate underground was complex - so much stuff and so many tunnels and tubes. In this case, his female and others somehow got through and emerged somewhere. Going it alone, he would likely end up lost in the underground. But he still had the black cat. Shadow, as he'd named him, probably emerged in his own way in the same area, and since cats had limited territories, it was nearby. That made the draw four as the alley was at the boundary - a street or two this or that way put one into four different semi-gated areas.

Jack cursed himself for not remembering simple things as he realized the black cat would follow the shortest route. A cat moves in a certain territory, and it's fairly small; about the size of two football fields if food is plentiful. If the black cat worked this alley, but the bulk of his hunting ground was close by, then it had to be the closest of the four options. Plus travel underground would expand the territory a bit, as a cat would run fast down tunnels and not count them as valuable property.

Shadow emerged in a downtown neighborhood that in older days had been a somewhat seedy place of addicts and death on the streets. Later, it became a mixed community and then another urban town as it was modernized and rebuilt. Gangster public housing blocks were razed and remade into livable areas with a concerned society of residents, and then the mega corporations moved in, bringing chaos and the protests that led to Copper Town. The name marked days when you couldn't do much on the streets without being swept up by security guards and SSU cops.

Copper Town became a creature of slow demolition, fires, and reconstruction, and finally a free zone. The rest of the downtown grew and towered like protective walls around it. Not too high in the sky, it had the largest underground, in some ways, a mini-city. The money that had been spent on constructing it was now spent and forgotten, like the citizen groups that had prevented the super-condominium hotels yet favored international builders who wanted to go underground. Even though owners were gone now, the city ward was a strange anomaly and a strong one. It was the hardest to penetrate using guards and surveillance. It was really City Ward Four and part of federal

area 745. The 745 gangs were mostly observers, as no deep violence was permitted in this ward due to its nature as a free zone.

A pin was placed on the map in Jack's mind. He'd used one cat to gain information, but now he needed another. What he needed, for evidence and for his own use, was a way for humans to get through. He knew the black cat had gone his own faster way through, but there was another, so when he arrived with Tigger in a cage, he made sure his tracker scented him to move through tunnels large enough for human beings.

Tigger was experimentally much smarter than your usual cat, as Jack had seized him during a case as a rescue of animals that had undergone Intel drug experiments; a case involving one of the many evil gangs in the underground drug industry. In kittens, the drugs stunted their growth but enhanced their intelligence to incredible levels.

Tigger got the black cat's scent from the alley. Jack watched as he looked up at the sky and meowed. A final cry, and the cat went through the hole.

Hooded but lightly dressed in the cool breezes, Jack jogged down the alley and out to the street. A cab was pulling to the curb, and a young and plump white guy was about to pull open the door. Jack checked him to the curb like it was a hockey game, got in, and passed cash to a collar-tagged convict driver for the fastest drive to his specified location.

Whether he'd avoided surveillance was a question. The SSU could be off him, and they didn't usually follow people working on foot. He'd paid a lot of money to get his facial and voice makeup removed from the scans by the private See-All Company that monitored regular citizens. He believed the SSU wouldn't be following him now as they'd be happy that he'd been hired by General Blackthorn ... believing him to be a loser that would take the case down a dead end. The SSU now had a man on the case for the higher security powers, and they believed in him - believed in Jack Michaels as a fool who would turn up nothing other than questionable evidence. Modern law enforcement people trusted solely in their tools, and Jack didn't use them.

For Jack, the stakes were much larger; he knew the case was real, and never in his life had he risked his cat's life on a case. It was religion of his own; his wife had perished - the sky pandemic, and he'd promised to look after her genius pet. But everybody dies, and he knew it would likely be him before the cat, in this case. A cat could hide and live on the streets; Jack had no place to hide.

Continuing with his weird plan, he popped out of the cab and raced down a graffiti-tagged alleyway. Near its end, he found Tigger rubbing shoulders with the black cat. Male cats were supposed to fight, but in this case, they seemed like brothers.

Tigger jumped and ran off as Jack tried to pick him up. "Damn," he muttered, then he picked up the black cat instead. The cat simply rested under his arm as he walked away, and his plan worked. Jealous, Tigger suddenly appeared out of the darkness. Jack took him under his other arm, got back into the cab, and rode home. His work for the night was done. He had the trail and the neighborhood, and the question was how to enter it and gain at least a clue that could help him keep the case alive.

At home, he now had two indoor cats, but it would take about one shift before the black guy learned from the gray one how to get out on the streets. Yet that was the least of

his worries. He'd taken the black cat home on a hunch. A good detective grabs all clues, and there was something weird about the cat. He planned to check it.

Using the cat-mapped routes, he was able to search the city's underground map system. It was user-unfriendly and gave up no info without keyed specifications. Jack now had the specs because of the two cats, and what came up amazed him. He now knew why they called it the underground neighborhood. The city maps that appeared were incredible, and he had some keys to get even more semi-secret maps. The underground city was more than he'd expected. Even in downtown proper, there was a lot underground, but as the maps moved to the free zone, they became like a giant underground tree. But not because there were many living areas underground. Populated areas were, in fact, huge and bee-hived with numerous small but fast transport modes up to the open city grid. What was most amazing was the endless branching of various service routes. At present, Jack wanted one, and due to complexity, he had to create a feeler app to find it. He needed the route his suspect had followed, an underground passage large enough for human traffic. It took a few minutes, and then it was all laid out in neat blue lines on a side map.

In the morning, Jack woke and found himself alone. He was hungry but still prepared his own breakfast rather than have it sent in. As he was eating and digesting the latest news, the cats came in via the bathroom window. The building's security, which was no security for cats, always made him smile. If a robot spy-bug tried to climb to his place, it would be exterminated, but because of residents' fears, small pets weren't on the intruder detection list. They were protected, and no one would ever notice two cats navigating up and down part of the exterior facade of such a large building. Jack was near the rear ground, but he knew higher residents rarely used their small, partially enclosed outdoor patios. They had interior design that brought the outdoors inside in realistic ways. No one went out for a mirvana smoke when smoke eaters and view orbs gave fresh air and a heavenly opening of the sky. Robot cleaning bugs, protected birds, and other creatures ruled the interior, but Jack's two felines now ruled the lower rear of the building.

Jack always planned ahead, and he only worked for guaranteed cash. Payment from him was due too, as he owed the felines for work done. He always paid partners. The pace of the case was slow, but he had to go through the underground as the next step. Following the same path as the suspect he was pursuing was mandatory, or he might miss clues. The maps of the underground were so overwhelming that they frightened him. He might not get through, and with that in mind, he paid his debt to the cats by booking the auto feeders, water fountains, and litter boxes for a year.

Early afternoon, and he was ready, down in the alley and taking some deep breaths before he went underground. He had his auto map and gear, but that didn't change things. This part was the hardest. He wasn't a person who enjoyed filthy, claustrophobic spaces and cramped tunnels. Rats and vermin he hated, along with darkness and the semi-darkness of spaces where up and down were somewhat arbitrary. On the inside, he found himself taking a jump six feet down, crawling a long way on muddy conduit, and then emerging by another ledge. This one took him down to a huge open pipe. Foul water trickled at its bottom, old graffiti was on its sides, and it went on for twenty meters before shrinking to a bare crawl space with snaking cables; so many cables it seemed

like he was at the bottom of the power source of a building that had rooted itself like a tree.

It ended, and he nearly panicked, then noticed broken shelving above. Pulling up, he found himself in a service tunnel. He sensed the nearby pulses of electricity and fuel, though the air was choked with the fumes of plastic. Strange drafts like chills continually assaulted him. He realized a couple of things. Perhaps he'd been a fool attempting to find clues on this route. And yet he had some evidence. The people who used, or had used, this route were young. They left graffiti and other litter. The person he was tracking now had a profile, most likely in her twenties, and someone who had used this tunnel when even younger. She was a freelancer and not a terrorist, likely part of a gang that used underground skills to avoid surveillance, and as a way of moving from a low-surveillance area to a higher one without being detected.

The service tunnel grew clean as he moved along it, and he wondered if he was taking a wrong turn. The air grew stagnant, and mist choked the tunnel ahead. He would have turned back, yet something seemed to be ahead. Perhaps foul, but in this case, there were no guarantees of sweet things to come. Beads of light; tiny spotlights lit an open area ahead. Jack moved cautiously and found himself facing an underground technological grotto. Tubes, cables, and broadcast systems for Net 7 netted this grotto, and in the center, a large faceted device glowed blue. Advanced tech, but he recognized the design as an upward move from an older one, though it had not been made public.

A thought arrived like a death bolt that kills the foolish; he realized he'd gone the wrong way, and not only was he off the case, but he was also into an area definitely restricted. And that meant the strange scraping of something large and robotic approaching. A head appeared in an opening on the other side of the grotto, and the massive body behind it began to slip through and down. It had the emerald eyes of the beam, meaning it could instantly fire deadly bolts of fire. The SSU logo was there as a tiny tattoo on its left shoulder. It was a creature of tremendous power, and it sent Jack backtracking to another route and a way out. His education as a detective reminded him of the weapons this underground beast could command, and he lost his nerve, wondering where he was running. Then he saw a piece of black fur blowing like a large dust particle as it fell from a wide railing ahead. Fur from a black cat, meaning the cat had also dealt with this robot on its travels through the tunnels.

Concrete suddenly evaporated, and a section of the tunnel collapsed with soft earth falling through. Jack went over the railing and into a new, narrow section of tunnel, and in his mind, the right tunnel and way as per the track of the cat. He stopped and found himself taking deep breaths. The realization was that he'd been correct; this trip underground was extremely dangerous. Cats had an instinct to guide them through with ease, and smugglers had built a route they knew. People like Jack or strangers could stray a bit and die quickly. Deadly robots all over this underground, protecting all areas considered vital. And that meant he was following the path of least resistance. He had his clues, and he felt the night air of an escape hatch. Coming back up to the city was another question, as he had only guesses and a skeletal map leading to the surface in a safe area.

He found himself in a strong draft and a tunnel, squared at the bottom and arched at the top, with bubble plastic protecting the wires and cables running above. H77N3 was stamped in one part of the upper wall, and he recalled the meaning from something he'd read. A backup system ran through this tunnel, remaining at the ready to function immediately if the wireless city went down. It never did, except in small ways, but that still meant these cables and embedded equipment were always in partial use and never in need of manual or robotic repair, as the semi-transparent skinning above seemed untouched.

The draft here was warmer and with the fragrances of the street. Even the odors of street meat and veggies. Jack felt confident with this way out and moved through the open tunnel into the breeze. Then a new realization came like a sliver breaking in from an ugly dream. This entire situation was too good to be true if one considered the value of the lines running above. If it was a premonition, it was one second ahead of reality. He had his limbs loosed and was sprinting just as he heard an unexplainable sound echo in the tunnel. A guttural howl rose machine-like and created gooseflesh and terror. Thumping like a bass drum beat came from behind, and he ran all the faster under the strange sky created by tiny lights lighting the transparent crusting of cable above.

There was no spill of escape light at the end, only deeper darkness until a silver bar appeared, and he saw amber lights leading off to a tunnel extension on his left. Looking back, he saw what was coming. It had the face of a feral dog and the eyes of a hateful demon, running legs of a centipede, and a glistening and armored rat-tail. Not sure what it was, he kept on the move. It gained and was on him, about to pounce. Then he was out of the extension and into complete darkness. A sudden reverse upward suction of air proved an aid as Jack went up and got a handhold just before the creature sprang for him from the lighted area. It bounced off the wall, causing bright sparks as hidden facets lit up. Jack saw the creature dropping off a shelf, then crouching. He looked up, saw some handholds leading to a small space, and moved quickly. Luck brought him out in the night in an alley, and it seemed clear. He quickly looked back down. The dog creature was making a jump up for him, but its centipede legs tangled in the handholds and it whipped to a stop, fell, and landed on its head.

What followed wasn't anything Jack expected. It had slammed the lower floor quite hard, which caused it to glow and then light up like a flare. The heat caused it to melt, and nothing in its disintegration revealed it as a robot or a biological being of the planet Earth. It formed a puddle of goo that dispersed and spun in the air like fireflies. As the light faded, its final remains became water drops that simply trickled away. This was not robot technology. Jack guessed that a signal of some sort had created the monster from a molding substance.

He'd risen in an alley that was as ancient as it was nondescript in modern terminology. The sky was so far above that it seemed like a crack made by a knife blade. Towering buildings were nearly fusing in his vision as he looked up. This was a forgotten space yet wide enough to traverse, and it was clean like litter blew out of it instead of into it. The ancient stone floor was washed by rain. Two giant skyscrapers rose from this alley, yet it remained untouched. As he walked toward its opening on a main street, he wondered about the strange trickles of liquid dripping down the walls and evaporating into rising yellow mist on the floors above. An opening to a wide boulevard was ahead,

and not a single clue in the alley. He was about to exit when he saw a portion of black fluff stuck to a crack in the wall at ground level. He pulled it out and realized the truth. It appeared that the black cat was the only traveler in this hidden alley, aside from the rats.

He hesitated at the alley mouth as it was mostly blocked by a traffic-break pylon, and then he walked out into a breathtaking scene. It was a condominium square so high in the sky that it made him dizzy. He knew it was a short corridor leading into the lower buildings of the free zone or surveillance-denial area, so pulling a trace was now a different game. He would have to go in during the day and conduct a detailed investigation. At least he had a lead now, but it meant footwork.

Back at home, he did some work that was more of a pleasure than a grind, and it was sketchy with two pets all over him. It was certain that they sensed he might be gone for a long time, while there was nothing in his plans to that effect. He was now in a mental state where he was locked in a case, with his dreams a churning engine, but the focus was close to home in a neighborhood nearby.

Calming and brushing the cats gave him time to speculate. The free zone area wasn't under his belt, though he'd been there many times. He decided to go in with a guide during the daytime and sent out several messages. The first message came back right away, so he closed his foldout screen and left a reply.

He'd been trained to find immediate sleep, but still had some sleepless nights populated by haunted dreams that invaded all barriers of the mind. Nightmares like lightning from calm skies. He found that endless training was of no use in situations where it wasn't required. The world seeped in like watery mud, and sleep was a curtain call that spelled peace that couldn't be denied. Rising up to fight occasional demons in dreams was the best of it that way, and without someone creeping up or a window breaking, all was well.

He woke early, a sudden night fright, and the vanishing fiends were of quickly disappearing labels. They'd been tormenting him in his sleep, but he couldn't touch them or catch them as they fled like bats as he awakened. They were now present in his inner chatter, haunting him and perhaps hoping to escape and blind him like the bright and hostile morning sun.

It was there in the sky, having burned off the city haze in minutes, and Jack was there in the free zone, eating a late breakfast at the street level of Breakfast Lane. Good food from an independent restaurant and even better in the aftertastes as he awaited the arrival of a friend, an old pal who could help him with whispered directions or names of people wise in this part of town.

Jack gazed through filmed glass, his daydreaming unreal like glass as the real substance of both didn't exist anymore. He was watching people pass, more easily here in a part of town where most people worked elsewhere, though some remained in local establishments. Many residents of the free zone were legally unemployed, a status the city-state allowed to those few without criminal records and to those with tick sheets showing fines that could be paid off slowly. Others were underground in a society where everyone was a criminal of sorts or could quickly be one after questioning. This was still a safer area as the SSU had only undercover access. The fact that it was the free zone

meant that police-state operatives were quickly tagged by citizen eyes on the street. It also meant that it was partially free as an underground, though not for terrorists or anyone connected with mutants, which was technically the description of the woman he was looking for. The free zone was above ground and on the ground, yet mostly below ground, and an area of genuine opposition to the police state.

SSU police would be of zero help if anyone got dumb enough to contact them regarding a crime. He also suspected there would be no help, even from his powerful contact, in locating the mystery woman. There was no inspiration, but he had to go through the motions and hope somewhere along the way a break would come through. Jack knew he was made of wood. Usually, he used skills, only tracking the dying leads, and then the spirit would come and give him inspiration and a clue.

Sandy Singh showed, but not visibly. He came from behind with a tap on Jack's back, waking him from thoughts of the corporate capitalist world outside and the million ways it could be improved.

"I guess this place has a back door," Jack said as he glanced at Sandy.

Sandy tilted his head, his strong jaw unshaven. His eyes filled with the strange shade they always showed in nearly every form of light. It was disconcerting when his face spelled brown eyes and Indian origin.

"Back door. Well, yes. Especially in this part of town, where I hope you're mostly unknown or forgotten."

"Call it forgotten. Few people in this part of town would remember me. The neighborhood has changed to a free zone. Old days, who remembers them? Brother, my short life has been so long. Ten years of surviving and learning the streets. The old days, my old pals that died - they live as angels in my dreams, and sometimes instead of ugly visions I see the sun shine."

"You're still an unwelcome guest in memory here. It means that eventually the hard side of the SSU will show up. More than the anti-smuggling guys will show. This place has been made; major business is uptown smuggling. If word gets out that you are here, the others will follow. We don't need that here. Not another war between city intelligence agencies in the land of peace."

"There won't be a war. Keep your lips frozen because I represent them all in this, meaning the higher-ups are holding the SSU back on a leash."

"I see, so now you've grown to be the biggest rat on the planet. A tool of the elders."

"Not really. I'm a big rat swinging a sore and bitten ass. SSU can't touch me. General Mike Blackthorn himself has me on show. Be thankful the hive mutants haven't sent me. I'm only looking to question one person here."

"And after that?"

"After that, they'll all leave with me ... spiritually, so to speak, as General Blackthorn has the power. They don't want anything too detailed, so if you help me, we'll be dumping a pile of crap off the edge of this zone."

"What's it about?"

“The fire.”

“Hive mutants were behind it?”

“No proof of that yet. I thought I knew something, too, but apparently I didn’t. What planet security knows they aren’t sharing with me. But they want an answer.”

“Why send you?”

“Because SSU thugs or even special ops people, even the military guys, can’t come in and beat a whole city population trying to find a needle in a haystack.”

“The info you need isn’t here. The big fire deal is bigger than this neighborhood. The flames went higher than our sky. All these past brutal years, and the whole place, all of us doing everything to keep the SSU at bay. No one here would call them in. Someone outside did this and planted the investigation on us. We have a lot of enemies, but who other than hive mutants have such power?”

“I believe you, but if a rogue agent, possibly foreign, was here, access to the downtown area that passes surveillance might be done from here.”

“Not likely.”

“They have done it many times. Maybe you can guess how?”

“The first underground would be the only way. I mean the protected level. The place where all the power backups, secret corded info cables, and you-name-it run from the core into this area. Recently, it has looked like someone wants control when the wireless world goes down. A couple of blackout blinks tipped us off.”

“General Blackthorn hired me to look at possibilities like that.”

“The more I think, the more I know you’re crazy. You want me to believe that the only world leader with some compassion for the poor ... I mean, the only one of those old mummies that thinks about the people ... General Mike Blackthorn. Sorry if I’m stuttering, but he wouldn’t hire you. I apologize for insulting you, but the SSU is sending you on a chase based on what an impostor told you. The underground is a terror zone of police-state monsters. No one could survive down there outside of an approved access tunnel.”

“Or a smuggler’s tunnel. I came through to this area via the tunnels, and so did a small animal I sent through.”

“Canary. No canary would get through that mineshaft. The rubber dogs instantly smell anything living. Squirrels, maybe a cat could survive for a while down there if the visit was brief. They probably wouldn’t get through from one end to the other.”

“So you know. I mean, you know, only certain people could get through those tunnels. Now there are animals, too. Some beasts, cats specifically, are getting past the rubber crew of devil dogs.”

“That’s possible. I do know the stories of dead bodies pulled out at the manhole locations. We call them manholes, though they could be slits anywhere where a terrible smell emerges. Bodies of lost dogs and teens come from there. The canines die attracted by odors, the teens by adventure. Bird corpses show in small piles. Rats are

killed by the stinking hundreds, and the odd cat body appears. I would guess that unless you're a cat and quick, going in there means near instant death."

"There is a way through to downtown and right from here. Who could map a way through? You mention teens whose bodies were found. Which gang would it be?"

"Gangs? Most of the focus in this area is on its free-zone nature. No one wants to get downtown, legal or illegal. Smugglers might want through for the drug trade. The only group with a lot of young people and that works in mysterious ways is the Cult of the Comet faction of the Church of the Millennium."

"General Blackthorn mentioned the cult. Thinks they were watching that building before it burned. Why would they want to piss off the police state?"

"Where have you been for the last decade? The Cult of the Comet is almost the state. They are behind the scenes everywhere other than the mutant hives."

"Good question. I've been outside of religion and on the streets working on local cases. I haven't had to question anything from the state for a long time. I know the world is run by filthy rich absentee owners. There's endless talk about aliens and the comet and the cult. Mutants have taken parts of the world for their hives, but I've more or less moved in my own circles on the back streets of Toronto. I work for money. Have to pay the bills. In my younger days, they sent me to the glory of space, and then I left it for the lazy sunshine in my backyard. Space taught me to live alone in a small space. Loneliness after the death of my wife taught me to stay alone."

"Okay, listen and don't fade back to the summers of yesteryear. If something strange or powerful is happening here, and it's not the copper state, then it's Daniel Manson and the Cult of the Comet. Maybe they burned it for those Arabs that own it."

"I believe you. I'm looking for a young woman. Why do you say Daniel Manson is working here? I mean, I thought he was off somewhere on a farm with his Cult of the Comet people; somewhere in the country outside of the city?"

"Don't forget, Manson is also head of the Toronto branch of the Church of the Millennium. Have you studied the aliens?"

"Not exactly. Why would I? They were sort of a myth back in school. There were limits on what we were told."

"You'll soon be learning more," Sandy said, his words fading to a near whisper.

"Ah, so you're older, and what I've forgotten you remember. I'm just another nobody come to Free Town with suspicious questions. Space and the aliens, none of my cases required that I check the current status of it all."

"The status is that the mainstream Church of the Millennium, the voice of the aliens, fakes it all. They have their own mutant breeds playing aliens in special copper state PSYOPS, and other smaller propaganda to build and empower leaders on the planet. Rule through fear and awe."

"Nice, but I expected something like that, though I thought the hive mutants were scary enough without fake state aliens added to the mix."

“Ever thought about genuine aliens?”

“That would be interesting.”

“Well, the comet is here, brother. Everyone, from the hidden powers of the police state to the hive mutants, has their eyes on Daniel Manson. That’s because of his obsession. He has been studying and collecting everything alien for a long time. That farm of his is more than that, it’s a space telescope, and he’s got a collection of alien relics he claims will take his people off the planet with the passing of the comet.”

“That promise would sure be good for the religion business.”

“I believe there is such a thing as aliens, and they came to this part of town a long while back. That’s why Daniel Manson has such power. The aliens came to him and his youth wing. It’s a tale on the streets here, but there are also rumors that the world order is terrified of these real aliens, that they might return in large numbers.”

“Perhaps it is another level of their madness. They use fake aliens for control, then live in fear that real ones may return. Do you have any background on Daniel Manson?”

“He’s here from time to time with his youth wing. He’s not an absentee power. His control through the cult runs right up to the top. Manson’s experiments with alien relics led to the secret ceremonies of the aged. They worship alien idols that somehow release emanations that keep them young. The real aliens they fear. Translated writings show that they were pure. Mutants are an abomination to them, and they would destroy humans found abusing their technology .”

“What about Manson? Why is he obsessed with this comet and a return of aliens that might destroy him?”

“By the theology of the church, they wouldn’t. He is their mediator, like the forbidden Christ of old.”

“If he and his followers are supposed to escape the planet and go to space on this comet, would they care about a world they are leaving behind?”

“He doesn’t. The story is that when he was young, he was obsessed with power. He worked his way up to hidden control of the Church of the Millennium by murder. Then he mellowed out and got into the lead regarding the aliens. He became a great benefit to the elders as the man who keeps them young when Intel drugs and other things fail. They simply don’t question him, and generally, the Cult of the Comet is his complete obsession. If he does somehow leave Earth, the church remains in control through his intercession with the aliens.”

“Sounds nuts. Is there a young woman close to this Manson guy?”

“Sure, lots of them. They recruit all the time here. Why don’t you join and find out?”

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Chapter 7: Free Zone

Dead ends and deepening night, Jack found himself at certain alley mouths, hoping that someone would attempt to pass through. He got dust in his eyes and the water of false tears on his cheeks. In the daytime, he walked the streets of the free zone. He paid special attention to the vital alleyways. It paid off as a strange late afternoon of blue sky, spider-webbed by odd cirrus clouds, led him to easy thoughts and something interesting.

Jack spotted a robot and a group of teens that had disabled it. It was a specialized device that moved slowly, identified areas of dense graffiti, and had a detailed program to repaint or strip walls using digital technology. In this case, it was in an alley of street art, and the kids had somehow shut it down and were draining it of paint. Economical, to say the least: the city cleanup paying to provide them with paint and editing chemicals for their local artwork.

A mechanical oddity, the massive doglike robot suddenly spun for a few moments, and then its blunt head froze as it hummed to a halt. Laughter filled the alley, and the teens used puncture straws with laser tips. The amount of paint they pulled up seemed far more than a robot could compress. And they were dividing it into color canisters that recompressed it.

He didn't want to surprise them, so he walked up casually and spoke. "Who sends these robots in, and why do you need the paint?"

Of the ten teens, five ignored him completely, a blond girl sneered at him, and one other looked at him briefly, then went back to his work. An older, dark-haired girl, slim top to bottom, even in the face, seemed to command the two males who found him trouble enough for a stare.

"You from SSU town?" the thin-faced girl said.

"No. I'm a businessman. I used to sell paint. Large amounts of it. It was so easy to get back then. I guess it's different nowadays."

The kid with the most intense stare, a stocky black youth, answered. "World changes fast. Idiots like you get a bit older and wonder who kicked them in the head. This isn't the paint you used to make your teeth white. It's special paint. Everything has a signature these days. If we do graffiti with this stuff, it won't be erased."

"That's marvelous, you've made my afternoon. I'm also a believer in underground art. Select pieces can be quite valuable. Where are you guys planning to paint?"

Flipping her dark hair as she turned back to him, the thin girl spoke. "On the other side of your kicked ass. If you're an SSU informer, you're the dumbest one I've ever met. What planet are you from? You could get hurt bad for messing with people here."

"Why would you want to hurt me? I'm here on a special job. It has to do with a new tunnel going over to the downtown ... where to shape it. I'm a specialist and don't have time to cause anyone trouble. Talking to the SSU and testifying and stuff would put me out of business."

Dark eyes flashing, first with hatred of the elite and then second with pity for a fool, the thin teen lady spoke again. Overall, she was quite attractive despite her odd features.

She had a way of looking him straight in the eyes while seeming distant. “What’s the tunnel for?”

“It’s an access tunnel for the police and the elite. I’ll be setting the security, so you better not think of using it or you’ll die.”

“Don’t bet on success. People already get through the other tunnels.”

“There are many tunnels, and they have rubber monsters down there. I wouldn’t count on getting through and coming out a human being.”

“Why do cops and the elite need a tunnel of their own?”

“I can’t say because I don’t know. If I do the job, it’ll be exactly that. They’ll get through quickly on a new corridor. They can’t go through the other tunnels as they’re too deadly.”

“So thanks for the info. Word will get around. We’ll use their new tunnel.”

“Please don’t tell anyone I told you.”

The info wasn’t there, and Jack felt it like deadwood in his bones. He was screwing around, playing with kids. Up through the high alleys and breezes, the lights far above were off and the sky was going to blue-black. A promised alignment of the planets was to occur soon.

Then the girl said, “No matter what you build, Daniel Manson will get through. A lady runs the tunnels for him sometimes.”

“I recognize the name. But isn’t he a higher-level church leader? I mean, he would have access nearly everywhere. So why would he be sneaking through tunnels?”

“I can’t say,” she replied. “No one knows. He runs a secret society inside the church, so I guess they need secret access everywhere. All of that is from another world of rumor. They say the real aliens, not the government or their fake aliens, appeared to him.”

“Where would you get such a story? Are there real aliens? I know how strong the belief is ... but I haven’t heard an explanation for why some aliens are real and others are false. I’ve never seen either on the street.”

“Neither have most people. Since both are supposed to be terrifying and deadly, it doesn’t make much difference. The real ones are rare and have their own game plan the world government can’t fathom.”

“Sounds interesting, but even if they are around, they’ve not destroyed the planet or anything. They’re kind of like invisible. I suppose the SSU and Motherland Security fear that more than anything else.”

“Say,” said the black kid. “You aren’t building them a tunnel so they rush through with raids?”

“No. The free zone will stay as it is for numerous reasons that they’ve always had. Have you ever heard of the elite going in on a raid? It would be for something else.”

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A day passed, and Jack found himself with Sandy Singh and his daughter, Mariah, all three of them with their heads turned, trying to see through frosted glass to study a small crowd gathering across the street. Jack, being the only tall one, could raise his head and see through the higher, clear glass. The free zone had a breakfast alley for early morning, but they were in the early afternoon zone and a brunch place. Loose and fast, the free zone outperformed the rest of the city for eating places and bars. In its communist/capitalist model, the restaurants were run by the workers, based on customer information processed by a neighborhood computer model with an open web interface. Supplies were ordered in the same transparent way, making this area alien compared to uptown and even the suburbs, which were totally low-wage but pricey establishments and secret to the extent that you didn't know if the back of the house was robots or real kitchen workers. Often it was immigrants or locals whose better jobs had suddenly become redundant. They were left to struggle in low-wage holes with machine-ass-kicking from a robot kitchen ... places without human management where a stray rat might accidentally be ground into the roast beef and the meal be even tastier for it from the quick shot of extra sauce. And where the odd finger was cut off in the quick slicing and deposited in the sides of beans.

Teens were the servers in the free zone, with older people back in the kitchen. It was always fresh food or organic, some all veggie and real meats, expensive and rare in the police-state world. It was a time when what you ate paralleled what you believed. SSU men ate fake steak and eggs. If they entered here undercover, they'd be confused about the order and quickly spotted. Vegans did well at this spot because the kitchen was open and their food was prepared in a separate area. The rest was still a sweatshop of hot grills, and common breakfasts carried up in spice and prep to higher prices.

Jack and Mariah ordered vegan, while Sandy chose an uptown fry of eggs, cheese, bacon, and sausage. It showed in the weight as Sandy had a growing belly in a slim society. Mariah gave Jack eyes, but her brown eyes were so big ... always wide as moons. He couldn't figure out her emotions fully, but with large, beautifully set breasts and a voluptuous figure, her beauty was something a man couldn't avoid. Jack figured most guys wouldn't get their clothes off before her overwhelming sexuality left them passed out on the floor. In his case, she wasn't for him, and he knew he'd be passing, moving ahead on the case with no time for fast romance.

Their meals arrived all at once, half an hour late, which was good because a couple of drinks had opened the conversation. The blond female server was raising her head to see over the opaque glass, and Jack asked her what she saw.

"The comet cult people like that spot, the way they get the whole area across the road, and there are four restaurants that attract people, especially a lot of out-of-town business."

Interested, Jack struck up further conversation with a wink that told her he was really interested in her and not the comet folk. "How many people do you think they recruit?"

“A lot. The times are changing, and beliefs once considered bizarre are catching on. They put up those fast screens and have that clever way of pulling people aside. A lot of our customers are comet members.”

“Any complaints about them?”

“No. Only praise, and then they travel or move elsewhere. All over the world. There has never been a complaint.”

“Why do you think that is? I mean, the church leadership is seen as inept by a lot of people around the world.”

“Daniel Manson is the reason. He’s the local leader, and the cult is a separate small entity. People believe he’s the one with contact. The aliens have chosen him. He’s going to take them to space with the comet.”

“What if I walked over there and joined?”

“Don’t”, Sandy said. “Wait and see if this thing is legitimate. There may be some advantages to it, but who would really believe in a free ride to space?”

“A lot of people believe,” Mariah said. “But maybe most people want the group advantages of free world travel and stuff. Most of my friends have already joined.”

Jack remained unmoved, waiting for the opinion of the lovely waitress.

She smiled, but it seemed contrived, and she was beautiful in a genuine way. Something about her voice told him she knew far more than she was saying. “You would fit in well. You’re a local. A man like you could go places and help Daniel.”

“Great. I’m interested, and after we eat, I’m going over to talk to them.”

He crossed the street in the edge block of towering buildings, like the tiniest fish at the muddy bottom of the deepest ocean, suddenly highlighted by the fierce sun that threw beams down and off the reflecting towers. Behind them, the restaurant’s front window shone like a gem. People streamed through a wide and open public area on the other side of the road. Steps rose on an easy angle up to the public semi-circle fronting a city public-works complex. Or so the sign said, though there was very little traffic into it today. Jack believed it was a front for something else the government ran. Something big and dumb and clumsy that killed human beings and lives like all other tall things in society. Bigger predators of humanity had taken the place of the hawks up on the ledges.

The Cult of the Comet people had set up in the area at the top of the steps, their displays arranged around some instant palms and ferns. Using dispensers for spring water and fresh fruit, they were pulling people up from the streets with old-fashioned print handouts.

Fierce, like some lion of the gods, one that had forgotten any comet, especially one in the minds it was currently blinding, the sun sailed and burned the streets dry, turning damp filth to faded paper and sand. The withered things of last night’s sin melting quick to dust while sweat rose on the foreheads of the innocents at the top of the new hill ... or steps. These people thought they knew the story of the grief of days past and times to come. It was all there in their thoughts and presumptions, but was it another

manifestation of the MS police state lie or a partial incarnation of the truth? Looking above and below, there was something that felt certain. That was true of other things, yet the floor always fell through in the end. In the sky, the aliens waited, and on Earth, the police state had a prison and was building new prisons for everyone who believed in anyone and anything.

Jack walked up, and if the comet was burning somewhere and flying anywhere, it was as mild indigestion. It was because at various times he'd investigated ... and he didn't believe. He didn't believe most beliefs were real or that hate could bring satisfaction. Commitment was for fools, and authority and the love of it for the controlled. Somewhere, an evil witch lurked; she killed the whole world, and even she wasn't real. Belief in the comet and the cult of it, or Daniel Manson, he could buy it for a while, but like all things for sale ... and everything was for sale in this world ... it would fade, and something new would come along. All your life, you were running from one lie to the next, and not even the greatest detective in the world could figure it out.

Jack felt his head spin just a bit at the thought, then he believed the truth came from somewhere above ... perhaps not the comet ... it was a bit of a lie leading to some real truth down the road. It was like a premonition he hadn't expected, and steadying himself as he rocked back on his heels, he faced the young woman at the top of the steps.

"Tell me something true, and I might lose my dizziness and believe in the Cult of the Comet. The world, after all, is a pack of lies."

"The truth is you pretended to slip on the steps and easily caught your balance, like it might be you who is a pack of lies."

Her eyes were a beautiful shade of hazel, and she was naturally slim. Nothing fake. And she was young, but not a teen. As far as lies went, she was lying. Simple movements of her body, and he knew it was her he had chased. "You're the image of my childhood sweetheart, and of course, it's all lies. How many guys are really interested in your strange message and not in you?"

"Most of them are. I see that with you, the flattery never ends. Perhaps the SSU taught you how to sweet-talk people?"

"SSU sweet talk. I'd love to hear it. At least you're upfront. If you're smart, you'll see the truth in me. I thought you were a recruiter for the comet, so why scare people away by accusing them of being spies?"

"I work for the church, not the comet. Most men don't introduce themselves by staring at my breasts. So I guess I spotted you quickly. You look desperate, but we're people of the spirit and not hookers."

"Whoops. I guess I just learned something about myself. I apologize. I have been living alone for a long time. Just my cats and me. I'm not used to dealing with women who watch my eyes."

"What do you want? Who sent you?"

"There is no trust anymore. So I'll tell you the truth. I followed you from the fire. It's not a question of who sent me; it's who I'm running from ... which is nearly everybody. Same as you. I needed a tag for safety, so I followed you. The powers that be want me to file

an independent report on the fire. I don't need a name or you for an out. I can do it myself. What I need is a way out."

She snorted with contempt. "So, the great Jack Michaels is at a dead end. Excuse me if I forget to laugh."

"I happened to be near the fire when it started, so they've got me nailed for no reason. You did it to me, so you can at least tell me your name. And yes, the great Jack Michaels needs a way out. If I don't come up with the lies to please the masters, I've got to run ... to that long empty street at the end of the world."

"Janice is my name, and I'm not your childhood sweetheart. You can hide in the old hick town garage, back where you came from. If you have to run, you're on your own."

"Just testing you. I don't need a moving target next to me if I run. I always know what to tell the police state irregulars. Did you ever think that I might think of something other than your breasts? I mean, about the aliens and weird things? Being on dusty streets doesn't please a man forever, and it obviously didn't impress you."

"Your reputation precedes you. An angel who fell from the sky to be brutal crap on earth. A dirty PI and conduit for the SSU. Last I heard, you were living alone because no woman would come near you."

"So, I found a person in this society who remembers yesterday's gossip news. You're a gem of a find. Looks like I turned over a rock that cracked me in the scalp. I was no angel, but only went up to the moon ring. So a murder occurred there, and I figured it correctly and became a big name before they buried it all and me with it. The truth is rewritten every day in this lovely world. I guess in the smallest of space station towns, the meanest of crimes are easy to figure. But if you want to chase the real bad guys, then come back to earth. They are all here. At least you believe I went to space, even though the new cover stories say I was never there. I say the same thing myself. At least for public consumption."

"The whole world knows you were there ... and then faded slowly to ground. Out of the spotlight and into some gutter they planted you in to save either your dignity or theirs."

"They didn't save anyone. They take one bad dream to another. But thanks so much. My father couldn't have said it better. I am Jack Michaels, the hoped-for space prodigy who failed. And it doesn't matter too much. I worry that the day will come when they don't even care if anyone believes their lies. The day when they say obey because there is nothing else. A day that may have been yesterday."

"What do you really want? Is there any truth or anything good at all that can come from you?"

"Probably not. The entire planet is looking to the comet. On the space stations, they're probably happy that it won't hit them. Maybe it's only light. I know you people believe it's more, and if it is, there is hope. I can't figure out how you fit into this because you're the torch that isn't one. I saw you fleeing that building. I think you went there to set the fire and found out someone set you up. Tell me what you saw in there?"

"I saw nothing. I wasn't even there?"

“Thought you’d say something like that.”

“You should have stayed in space. On earth, you’re a pest. Tell the coppers whatever. They know more than we do about this anyway.”

“Give me something I can sell them. It’ll save your ass, too. Eventually, you’ll screw up, and they’ll get a trace to you from their surveillance.”

“You actually trust me?”

“No, but you’re in this case somehow, and I know you’re not a part of the MS police state. It looks like you may be using the church as a front, too.”

“Looks can be deceiving. I’m a believer. Do you think I follow my assignments for fun?”

“I guess we all believe in some fool thing or another. In this world, everyone is fooled from top to bottom. I can’t honestly say your Cult of the Comet doesn’t have something going for it. I heard Daniel Manson’s been working on this alien stuff and the arrival of the comet for most of his life.”

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This financial tower seemed laid back, resting in the dark like a quiet hulk next to a historic city house. The picture changed as Janice stepped off a portion of inlaid stone and tapped Jack on his shoulder. He was turning to look up at the biggest skyscraper on the edge of the free zone. He wondered about a few things, but he didn’t ask, and together they went inside without saying a word. Janice had counterfeit ID and VIP image passes that left the lazy guards grunting approval and lacking questions. Near the top, the elevator stopped fast with a jar, and they were out, firing stun beams that took out the higher-level guards as the kill signal emanating from Jack’s detective badge shut down the encased command post. They moved down the hall carefully and reached a huge oak door leading to a hidden executive suite. Knocking it open with a single thump stun blast, they entered and found three waking guards rising from a partially hidden alcove. They were put back to sleep before any of them could take a step or draw a weapon. Then it was a fast search. The small info orb they found was encased in opaque shielding, and they didn’t need the whole deal, but only some of the data. Janice’s hunch had worked out fine, and a green light told them the passes were vital. Then it was the escape, and they floated down a shaft using a small air-cushion device. Fresh air blew in the streets as they came up from the side alley. High above the sky, it seemed spanking new and honest, like something beyond the corrupt planet. Sirens began to blare as they disappeared in the dark. Now they had a little bit and maybe a lot if they could mine this thing for the data they wanted.

Janice stepped out on Kafferty Avenue and faced the haze of lights emanating from the free-zone entertainment blocks. Jack held back, attempting to get a full initial data read on their find. He got zero for readout, and as he passed the orb to Janice, she got a near breast removal. A beam of silver knife light narrowly missed her and struck a garbage bin at the edge of the alley. The metal front wall of the bin disappeared, and the sudden odors of cooked trash spread in the air.

As Janice ducked back, Jack stepped out to fire. The obvious SSU men and other assassins he expected weren't present. He saw a hulking figure, perhaps a large man cloaked in far-off shadows. He wasn't exactly sure what it was, but the being disappeared in the dark so fast that he forgot his fear of the beams and scratched his temple in wonderment.

"It's okay," he said.

Janice didn't believe him and pulled him back out of sniper range. "What exactly did you see?"

"Something mutant and close to human," I said. "It had a big gun. Even worse, it seemed to be studying me."

"Maybe it wonders if you're really human. Okay, thumbs up, we're in the clear."

I frowned. "Really, and how is that?"

"Okay, here's the tale from the read I get on the orb. The fire was a torch job. Detailed info on the wealthy Arab owners of the building is in this data. But the bigger picture doesn't involve them."

"Think we got enough to make this effort worth the risk?"

"Yes, because they hired a team to set up the burning of the building for financial reasons. The whole deal turned out to be something bigger. Regardless, they are another force that wants me dead, and by now, you as well. This data should tell us what was going on in that building."

"What do you think the bigger part is?"

"Daniel Manson believed there was something else in that building."

"Probably mutants," I said. "Not quite like the one I just saw. That one was a near-human mutant of some sort. Hive mutants look for alien relics or hide them in places. I think they had a compartment in that building, which the owners who decided to torch it didn't know about. Though your pal Daniel Manson somehow did."

"A compartment for what?"

"This is where it gets interesting. The MS police state has a small number of mutants that do fake alien stuff. Some of them are like the one that just shot at us. Phony alien attacks keep the people living in fear and the state in control. But they aren't the real hive mutants like the ones prevalent in parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The real hive mutants take an area and turn it into a black-zone hive. Daniel must have gained intelligence that showed a couple of real hive mutants in that building. He thought they could be storing a relic in there. I don't think there was a relic; it was a scout mission."

"Scouting for what?"

"A new location for a hive. As you know, they like to invade a whole city and rebuild it."

"True, but they haven't been active outside of current hives for ten years."

"Well, it looks like Toronto is going to be their next target. In which case, we may not care."

“Why would it be that we don’t care?”

“We’re in the Cult of the Comet, my friend. We don’t plan on being on this planet much longer anyway.”

“I’m totally disappointed in the MS police state. Attempting to use a new brand of mutants for bogus alien raids and their own control. You’d think history would tell them that mutants can’t be trusted.”

“What about Daniel Manson? Why is he obsessed with relics? Doesn’t he have most of them already?”

“A relic is anything, no matter how small or large, with genuine inscriptions in the alien language on it. The cult has deep knowledge of the alien visits, and we have nearly all the required relics. The alien technology is built into them, and Daniel still lacks a few of them.”

“Technology to do exactly what?”

“Connect us with their energy source on the comet during perihelion and take us through the gate to space and another planet.”

“Count me in for space if it can be done. Because it’s about the only place to escape to if hive mutants, SSU, and Arab corporate crooks want us dead.”

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Chapter 8: Early Alien Contact

Cult of the Comet leader Daniel Manson was out of town again, but he wasn’t in exotic cities or digs. Europe was far from him, as was Israel and Asia. He was walking down a dusty alley in the Texas super city of Houston. Deeper in the city, the sea breeze blowing in from the bays faded, and the heat rose. He saw a small dog dash across the dark in front of him, and he shook his long hair to get the falling dust out of it. Pausing, he studied the object in his hands. A small orb; a replica of something larger, it had a few marks embedded in the alien language. A key plate was missing. Did the Arabs or the copper state have it? The whole thing pissed him off. He’d just killed three guards in a solar energy complex connected to a government health-care unit, the mission being so important that he’d done it alone under a ruse where he got through all the American security hoops via top people in it. But the investment was a rip-off if the plate was missing. The Arabs had some pieces of the artifact code, and they were ruthless businessmen; the kind of guys that would burn the hottest property in Toronto for insurance, not realizing that their building had hive mutants inside, spying on them and Toronto.

Daniel came out on the avenue, fast cars rushing past, and half-drunk pedestrians on their way to either bars or home. He looked to the sky, and even in bright city lights, he could see a piece of the comet tail. But something was missing, and something was lost. The damn Arabs ... like blackmailing terrorists, had stolen a piece of the code. Damn them if they’d gotten hold of a key relic. Or damn humanity was perhaps a better

way of viewing it. He did not intend to let greedy Arabs block perihelion and the cult's ticket out. And they wouldn't because they were only in it for greed; they had no plans or knowledge of their own that would allow them to harness the comet. They could only sell on the black market, but the fear was they'd sell to the hive mutants.

Daniel snorted with disgust. He thought back to the beginning and about the alien message.

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Early teen years arrived, and Daniel Manson found himself being punished for being out of control. Yet he was in full command of his faculties, and such punishment was expected. What wasn't expected was his state of sexual confusion. A seed inside had grown, bringing a new attraction to women. He was still too young for love, though he'd been the lover of most males holding real power in the church. In that, he'd been passed around, an abused child by law. Outside of it, he was the manipulator, using sex as a tool to gain power. It meant little to him; his flesh was for sale like sweet sweat, and it was only in haunting dreams that conscience emerged. He shrugged it off; they were guilty. He'd been a child, and now he was a young man. A youth mistakenly involved with an older woman. She was a priestess in the church. He couldn't even explain it to himself. She'd been his woman of vows, and they'd both broken them. A rumor, then, roaming in-house monitors found them at a spring retreat. Due to the sister's foreign status, Daniel faced the wrath of a male ecumenical body. Though they were easy on him, they were hard on her, and she was sent to an African retreat for failed women of the church.

Daniel remained in Toronto; demoted from his role as assistant to the high priest to senior monitor of the theology school over in the free-zone neighborhood. His sin marked by his shaved head.

The demotion was unusual because it gave him control over the youth. It came about because this was the year of the church's Asian Alien Remembrance. He wouldn't be there in The Fallen Forest of Arrival in rural China ... and his name would fade because of it. But here at the Toronto Theology School of the Millennium, they'd left him in complete control. All of the adults were overseas, and he began his reign by building friendships. Younger days of sexual abuse of other boys faded as he grasped for intellectual control ... and suffered hidden guilt and nightmares over his sin with a woman.

Daniel strolled the grounds on the first gloomy mornings. He reassured himself, thinking he still had the trust of the church because they'd left him in charge. But that often gave way to fits of rage over being left behind and knowing that, because he was a bit older and everyone else was booked for the Remembrance, they'd punished him by leaving him in charge at the school.

On the outside, a new facade and walls of 21st-century semi-realism rose high yet remained small compared to the nearby SkyArt tower. Extended lower floors with editable designs allowed a constantly evolving street setting. Beautiful shifts enhancing public streets that softened the garish advertising exploding from nearly every nearby space.

Daniel looked out at the scene and wondered. Had he blown it, or was there still a high place waiting for him? His meticulous plans and methods of control had not saved him. Some angry thoughts spun in his head. He remained in a position of authority, but the event he was locked out of was so great that missing it would cripple him. Contact with the aliens was expected at the gathering; contact the rest of the world would surely believe. Contact Daniel knew was genuine. An alien force was there and speaking to Earth. Mostly, it was secret, and the public was not informed except through shocking media that could be taken as fantastic happenings or a bit of strange truth.

The new prophets and leaders of the church would be those in communion with the aliens. Meaning his goal of rising to leadership was gone. He was stuck here in the mud. They'd been so meticulous that he had no way of escape or travel to the great event. His only redemption was in doing a good job at looking after the school while the others were gone.

Study, theological discussion, and the daily meditation plan were expected. Daniel instead favored athletics, sending the mostly male students out to play ... though they saw it as freedom and took their teams and games seriously. Gaining favor and control through obvious intellectual dominance wasn't part of Daniel's game, as he could easily do that privately and at individual levels. A larger part of his decision was simply that the teachers were gone, and he was maintaining control via the bread and circuses expected. Setting himself up as an authority, an idol, or a talk-down lecturer would mean contempt. He knew that if he needed people, it would be those who were grateful friends first and controlled believers later who would count. They had to be believers in him, and he had a hard time believing in himself. For that reason, he chose a student recently arrived from India as his outreach monitor. Arjun was immature, his family was wealthy ... and he was sent to pursue a career in the church. He accepted the immediate appointment and wore it like a priestly robe, and the students saw his immaturity and immediately loved him.

The female students were a different story; he appointed a woman named Alexandra as the charge. She was from Mexico, sent through the church, and not family. She was an orphan whose lifeblood was the church. Alexandra was a woman of strange attraction, being manly in ways while full of feminine charms. As she owed her life and future to the church, Daniel knew he could trust her.

Days of athletic play passed; the female volleyball team proved far superior to his male team. The sun rose in a sky of pale blue and faded into amber, yet the days were comfortable, not hot. He couldn't escape the fact that these were days that should end quickly, as everyone expected the rule of law for study and prayer to arrive. Daniel had been reluctant to bring in any genuine theological discussion, and for good reason. Only one subject would come up in the end ... in a discovery of how the others were higher and greater and off on a sojourn to commune with the aliens, while they had been quietly left behind.

It grew on him like a spirit of evil he couldn't shake, and when it became unbearable, he was sweating in his quarters as a knock came at the door.

"Who dares bother me near vision and rest time?"

“Arjun.”

“Arjun. Unless your message is important, go away.”

“I will leave. The message is from my mother in India, about the aliens.”

“Surely I made a mistake appointing you. A boy still attached to his mother. My spirit is humbled, even falling to the ground. Nevertheless, I won’t punish you. You are a lost boy, Arjun.”

“You don’t understand. My mother is a seer of the old God. How else do you think I could have come to this school? There was no money or gifts.”

“No one gets here without special gifts. But I am in charge for this brief period. Tell me what your mother says for the record. A valid message will be handsome and in your favor when they return.”

“Here is the message as I form it in English, as the easiest language for my friends here at the school. ‘Void, black skies like loneliness, and a moon like a falling stone. Yet the comet sails as an unseen magic carpet while the worshipers contemplate despair. They shall not come or appear in the skies for the mighty of the earth. It is the children they love and will bring into harmony ... and they will come as a blessing in ways that are terrifying. A glow in the sky and a flow to the ground; great power is cast down, and who shall receive it? And in it is nothing of use today, as it is a sign of future days. As those days are given, so shall the prophecy be revealed.’”

“Arjun. What does this mean for you and me?”

“It means that at the moment we are the leaders of this church. It means the terror is coming to us. There will be no immediate revelation in it. We and the others here must survive.”

Arjun left, and Daniel thought it over. Of course, they were the leaders of the church here, as everyone had left. He wondered about Arjun’s mother. Arjun had named her a prophetess of the old God. She lived in India, an immense nation, yet she’d gotten Arjun accepted in the church ... not by the usual fees, gifts, and connections, but by prophecy. It meant that she was either legitimate or there was a mystery he couldn’t fathom. He put it down to Arjun’s gullibility and immaturity. Though he granted some credence to his mother, without speaking directly to her, he could only place her prophecy in the slot reserved for a mother’s letters to her son.

News from overseas was scant. These affairs were always closed, but with so many churches participating, news and planted news usually emerged. This time, there were no directives other than those to Daniel on keeping the school in order. Daniel knew that and little else, as the church's worldwide stature had left it operating in ancient ways. All communication could be intercepted and used against the church, even though it was the state church in most of the world.

Things returned to normal at the school. The week of meditation and scripture came, and spirits possessed and haunted the students. It was as though the leaders had never left. On Saturday night, the moonlight had been unusually bright, denying Daniel hours of sleep. Since he’d grown so strongly into routine, he didn’t wake until Sunday afternoon. He felt unusually weak and pale, so he delegated Sunday duties to Arjun.

Heavy sleep hit Daniel that afternoon, and dreams rose with power. In most, he wanted to wake but couldn't. The inner current of power simply swept him along. Images like gusts of a demonic wind sailed in his mind, and he felt himself to be in the strongest sleep he'd ever known. Fierce dreams could take him, and he'd remember the terror as he fought to emerge from them, and then he'd forget and couldn't wake. Some were hideous nonsense; others had spiritual meaning he couldn't interpret. The city became a vista of doom, challenging the mind and the heavens, and its weight rested over him like the tombstone on his grave to be.

Daniel knew he wasn't dead, but it seemed he was buried. The church elite had suddenly turned on him and written his epitaph of failure, and if he remained a seeker at all, he was one blocked by a sudden crushing wall of sleep. Conscience spoke to him, and he felt deserving of the punishment. He'd cared about nothing but power, and it had taken him on a trip away from reality. The sleep, the killing sleep, was a message telling him that power was more than the lust for it, and it existed in realms he hadn't known of ... but now dreamed of ... it was as if the gods had chosen him to torment and mock.

Whispering, voices talking in a corridor, and then shouts and panicked screams. His arms were like bronze, his fingers petrified, yet his body suddenly moved, and he raised his arms. He was a youth attempting to swim on his back when, suddenly, he woke. Fear and near shock raised gooseflesh. He'd walked in his sleep and wasn't in his bed at all. He was on a filthy floor in the cold wine vault off the kitchen and dish room in the basement. A place he hadn't been since his year of arrival, when, as immature kids, they'd got in, drank a bit, and got caught and punished severely for the transgression.

Surprise, and it was growing to terror, put him in a state of total disbelief, perplexity, and disadvantage. He could hear shouts and thunder above and had no idea whether Arjun had this unknown situation under control. Then clarity rose in his mind, and he realized what he'd known all along. Arjun could not handle any crisis, and this was one where the people involved became chess pieces the enemy could move and leave to be found later when they awoke.

Daniel suddenly found his balance and his feet and ran. He went up the stairs fast, emerged on the second floor, and converged on a leaderless mob of students backed against the wall by the doors of the early-earth lecture space. Some were gasping; others seemed desperate, looking for another place to run. None would enter, and as he dashed up it was sound that told the tale of fear. It seemed to be all around like thundering boots of heaven or hell. It left no way of escape. In the lecture space, the noise was like explosions. There was no running back into the face of the enemy, and no exit through the other two corridors as rings of light and echoing screams came that way. Arjun wasn't there, and some of the students were already weeping. None were natural leaders, and who would expect anything of them in the face of this terror? That they'd pulled together was a miracle enough.

Daniel paused for a second and relied on his logic as he considered where Arjun might be hiding. A sudden booming echo came from the north like a terrible giant was coming down that hall. In a life-and-death situation, he supposed it didn't matter much whether logic would prove that giant to be an alien or a hostile robot. The only choice was not to be around when it arrived.

Acting from the back of the crowd, Daniel had to gain quick control. He whistled the secret tune students used while violating curfew. As they glanced back at him, he tore two panels from the hall ceiling, uncovered an old passage, grabbed a chair and a handhold, and went straight up. Without further instruction, the entire crowd of students quickly followed. A small rung ladder was embedded in the side of this hidden way up, and in a minute, the entire group was up and moving through a service door into the theater.

Working quickly, Daniel appointed group monitors and had the way up blocked with a huge classic sculpture. The students gathered on the open floor and shivered, listening to bangs and howls from below and above. With nowhere to go, they faced Daniel. They were too frightened to challenge his authority or ask demanding questions. Daniel's face grew placid; he could see that they were waiting for him to speak and answer the questions they couldn't even guess or ask.

Somewhat startled and winded, he felt wide awake with amazement and even more confused than the students looking to him, then a trance-like state arrived, like a daydream that delivered a sudden answer. "They want us here in the theater. I don't know why, and I don't know who they are ... or I should say that I do. They are the aliens or transmissions of them, but what they want with us I can't guess. If they wanted us killed, we'd be dead already. Instead, they want us here. So remain calm."

His sudden message lacked strength of command and was of little effect. He suddenly found himself in a situation where no one believed him. He could read it in their desperate expressions. Fortunately, there was nowhere else that seemed safe, so most of the students sat on the floor, many of them hugging one another.

A surreal scene of fright followed. Liquid, lightly gelled and phosphorescent, began to drip through the cracks above. Its fragrance bit through the nostrils and into the brain like a contact drug. It delivered a reek of death worse than that of human decay.

As it fizzed to mist, Daniel felt it rise like an evil cloud in his soul, then security systems he hadn't known of kicked in. The theater became an enclosed space, a prison of sorts, as a cocoon of light enveloped them and silence suddenly weighed heavily on their ears. A quick whoosh of air came from the floor, and the smell of death vanished, replaced by an odor that was faintly sweet and somewhat like the faint smell of bathed flesh.

They were now enclosed in a safe area. A view screen at the rear showed other parts of the building and the strange liquid flowing above and below it. It seeped, drifted, bubbled, and vanished. Mist rose and faded quickly, and it all seemed to be for an unknown reason. It ended, and security systems returned to normal. The terror subsided, and as it did, a final trickle of light and mist coalesced into a vision in Daniel's mind; an unexpected communication triggered a message in odd, dreamlike thoughts. He knew the aliens had come and not to the expected gathering abroad, but here to Toronto.

The vision grew, yet there were no timed images or sound. He gained instant knowledge. He became aware of church leaders in a lavish committee room abroad and another chamber of shadowy figures and controls, arranging the expected alien visits ...

and the aliens themselves ... mutant fakes, creatures of man ... yet the purpose was hidden. Control was always a reason, but the knowledge that church leaders, and also those of many similar bodies, were using fake alien gods, was intriguing.

There was no answer as to why this should be revealed to him here in Toronto. No acceptable reason. Noxious odors filled the air again, and some of the students vomited. Death and its smell seemed built into the human psyche, and even though he'd killed, he'd never encountered that horrible fragrance.

Then something led him out. He heard a voice in his head that wasn't really a voice but a mental command, sending him to a fire door. It opened like a ghost had opened it, and he walked through, leaving the sickened crowd on the floor, hunched and watching, wondering if he was walking out into his own quick end. The flow of bright liquid and smell of death was there, and he followed it like a river down through segments of the building to a place in the structure below. In near total trance, he ended up in the second basement, an area that was quite large and solid in a building this old. The trickling, misting river of brilliance ended there, forming a small pond. It glowed, reflected the dark room like a mirror, and seemed out of place next to the piles of junk and rough-surfaced walls of this deep area.

Daniel halted at the edge of the pool, and his mind cleared with inhalations of the mist. He understood that the terrible fragrances and the glowing runoff were only a means of leading him here, where the substance formed a view screen. The alien screen transported him like the vision had, and he saw the Church of the Millennium leaders abroad. It was a picture of contemptuous, vain faces of elder church bishops from the wealthier reaches of North America at the forefront of a large, multiracial gathering. The hypocrisy and control seemed clear, and as the scene shifted, he saw the military men and women at ready to command security at any level up to war footing in defense of the leaders. The view drifted to a locked-down area; a mysterious location with runways and stacked cube military constructions of the sort they used to unravel immediate bases. Trees that looked twisted and stunted were everywhere, as if this had been a wasteland deadened by ground lime and was now a place where mutated plant life grew as camouflage for the military. Time passed, and the location transformed; giants emerged from the warehouse doors, their footsteps thundering as they headed toward the security area.

Daniel had seen enough; he knew it was a setup. These controlled mutants, acting as aliens in a specially engineered environment, would play out a dramatic scene and convince the crowds at the gathering that contact with the aliens was ongoing. Contact that would be followed by announcements of new relics the aliens had put in the hands of the church. All of them were to be placed at sacred locations that would guarantee the worldwide church continued control. Relics that had been found long ago and released strange emanations, which they planned to harness for healing once they gained more knowledge of the embedded technology.

Disgusted, Daniel shook his head, and all of it rose like another fragrance of death in his nostrils. He spoke, saying, "Why are you revealing this to me?"

But there was no voice or answer. He remained facing a pool of glossy water trickling away at the sides. Anger narrowed his eyes, and his heart thumped, yet he had nothing ... no one to speak to, consult, or attack.

The feeling of desolation passed in a moment, then the alien terror climbed back up the scale with an alarm that came from nowhere. Painful tentacles took hold of his mind. Arjun suddenly burst through a hidden entrance, ran to him, and stopped, staring at the dissipating pool.

Wisps of smoke were now drifting in with a fragrance like cherry wood or incense. A door opened in the roof above, though that was not possible, as they were far below. Arjun saw it and realized it wasn't real but part of a vision. One fitted to their minds specifically. He experienced a play of pleasant dreams that remained undefined. An open city flowered in his mind; a home of the aliens. Faces floated and altered with transient emotion; distant thoughts he couldn't interpret came quietly into his mind. Passing dream fragments that faded quickly in his thoughts but came clear in Daniel's.

Daniel saw a puzzle; the greatest of all puzzles on earth. It was the puzzle of the alien relics and a comet. The revelation blossoming told him this puzzle could be solved on earth. But the information seemed far off ... hidden locations on the planet and a key from a distant comet. Then he saw a great orb of energies; a whole completed piece ... etchings and the alien prophecy together as one.

Long tail and icy face of an alien, the comet appeared as a spaceship and a living form traveling through space. It heralded a wonderful event through the message embedded in relics hidden under its ice. It was on a long approach to pass Earth, a manifestation of superior alien technology and their godlike spirit.

As the vision passed, the pool emptied to its bottom, and the remaining liquid hardened to a disc of some sort. Reaching down, Daniel picked it up. It was an inch thick yet light like a feather, and its surface was etched with icons of the puzzle from the vision. He remembered that long ago, in the near-forgotten industrial time, scientists had sent objects to distant space with simple drawings on them. This one was similar, but it was something else. It wasn't a message telling him where the aliens were, but how to join them.

"What is it?" Arjun asked.

"It's the first piece of the puzzle. Our instructions."

"You mean for further contact with the aliens?"

"No, to join them."

"How, when interstellar travel isn't possible for humans?"

"The aliens are telling us it is, but we have to prepare for the arrival of a special comet. We have to gather the alien relics shown on this disc. They are at hidden locations here on earth. When all is in alignment and keyed according to this disk, the transfer will occur that will take human beings to another world."

"I saw the vision. It must be possible. But we have no resources, no way to do this stuff."

“We will, and we have plenty of time. I’m creating a new order inside the church, and it will be called the Cult of the Comet. We will recruit the help we need. It will be our vehicle, and we will succeed. The aliens have chosen us.”

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Chapter 9: Angel

Inside a balloon of creepy dreams, a kind face appeared; the face of a woman, and it drifted on and then away to the sky. It passed a world of childhood and days under a bright sun and pale heavens. Wisps of clouds resting above, filaments of poison, floating shadows, and a story that was comforting before it became a nightmare.

Somewhere else, Mother Earth held everyone in comforting breasts, but this being suddenly choked and heard the voices of an unraveling program, swallowing the momentary insecurity of it. In its lies came adrenaline and superiority, the power of control over a world of weak flesh. Yet the spirit was something else; uplifting under the days of command and under the rocks like a crawling thing in the days of waiting. Alive or dead, gifted with the sudden genius of the mission. A mutant filled with the terror of meeting a genuine alien, and it all twisted and rose out of realms of confusion as the inbred programming met the focused specialty broadcasts of a cruel police state.

A sign showed in the heavens, and it was false and there only for duped mutants. In other hidden spiritual realms, a grinning fool of a demon lurked. It was all to be played out again. The only truth to the lie being that one day the real monsters might return in force. A chilling happening, the rulers of the planet didn’t want. It was certain that they feared judgment. In a world without compromise or compassion, all others were enemies and a source of terror. And if the enemy were a higher power beyond control, the nightmare would be complete. It opened a doorway to the unknown, the possible end of the rulers of the earth. Even the thought of such an event sent the planet into near lockdown.

The elders had learned how to change history itself. This sudden face knew it, and many other things, and it was also a mutant face that knew nothing but babble. A river of thoughts and reality passed through its mind. Most of its dreams were movies of phony programmed imaginings shifting to a described reality; prophetic in the lies and the news that was not the news.

A mutant being could see it all and know nothing, even though it held great power and was one of the chosen. The select mutants were replacements for the aliens that had not returned.

The people of the planet needed to live in fear. The fear of ... and that was it ... a long time ago in the history feed provided, then they’d had the fear of barbarians or the fear of God. A usually short life embedded with the fear of floods, famine, and all forms of sudden or slow death that could occur. Skies of ephemeral doom rose in those days that led to the fear of terror and terrorists, and now there was only the fear of ... as no

one knew what they were afraid of exactly. They knew they would inform on others; the police state was watching and required it.

The fear of and it said it in its mind as its huge body began to move. It shivered all over and struggled in its cocoon of a grave, a tomb that opened like a dragon's wings and gave it easy flight to the city above. In its mind, a programmed name passed like a whisper in its ear. Jack Michaels was the name, and it suddenly spun in the air as it rose above the skyscrapers; its programming was momentarily knocked out, as it had never had a target name before, only locations. Now it had the name of the fear of ... and the name was Michaels.

Coordinates came in ... the mission was near the name but not a confrontation with it. Drifting in the sky, an unknown feeling called loneliness opened like a tiny flower in this being's mind. The mutant was mostly human, with no knowledge of it. And the name. Never before had there been a targeted name, and it suddenly wondered if it itself had a name. A trigger and a new understanding called names. Such a thing did not exist in its programmed mind and did not register as having to do with the greatest terror, which was the real aliens ... should contact ever occur. This beast had a number, not a name. Commands came directly, so the number indicated a string of additional numbers, not names. For the first time in its life, the mutant realized it was thinking, and it speculated. "I am alien operative plant 7654, called in to create fear in the free zone because of the presence of Jack Michaels. Who is Jack Michaels? Who am I? Who are the real aliens?"

Brief as it was, the thought died, and a powerful being, like an angel of the old forgotten heaven, landed in the shadowy streets of the free zone. Sunset had fallen hard into a dusky night, and power-saving beyond the usual left a sky with stars exhibiting enhanced halos above the towering buildings. The huge mutant angel was on the narrow portion of Lynshackle Street, which was little more than an alley. It was a street named after the anarchist who had founded the free zone. A man with no last name but only the first name Lynshackle ... something distantly Scottish and ending with a connection to the modern city.

Golden idol and great winged angel, this being uttering new cries to flow and create voices of unknown passion ... to form a deep signature to invade the minds of all human beings in sound range. It came out of the corridor and did an illusion float to a giant golden specter before drifting into the evening commercial area of entertainment and all things illicit and underground. Passing unseen, it suddenly rose like a rush to heaven, then descended again, coming down as people emerged from the arriving public bullet, ground air cars, and recently descended fast-transport bugs. All of the sky rushed, and it grew into a great winged Satan with a voice of howling wind. The prince of darkness and angel of light sending gusts racing like mad ghosts through the blind towers. A magnification of what had been in storms before, creating the panic that was always the certain response when alien things were spotted from crowded streets.

The wind continued to howl, dust whirled, and litter danced as sharp leaves of gutter trash stung open faces. There was another shriek in the electrified minds of fleeing people ... all of them heading in the same westerly direction and smoothing easily to a

thinner stream that came around the corner like a sudden human mob in bullet shape, headed directly for Jack.

He was about to be flattened by the careless crowd. Shadow jumped to the metal sill of a large open window on the side street, and Jack also climbed up, but he didn't quite make it through, though he managed to grasp a ledge and swing his legs up. As the river of flesh flowed below, he struggled and finally slipped through the window into an empty office.

He believed something more than a monster was looking for him. Perhaps searching him out. The illusion vanished in his racing thoughts. It was night, and the people seemed unreal. The thundering alien angel remained, and when his head cleared, he saw it escape off over the lower buildings and descend to Crescent Ave.

In his mind's eye, he imagined more people fleeing as beams shot from its golden head and expanding thunder boomed from its feet. It had certainly been real and also like a polished illusion, and at that, Jack thought and wondered.

He saw the black cat on his haunches, his pupils changing shape like phases of the moon. Jack imagined that the cat somehow extended its vision and hearing a block farther, so it could see the phony alien angel blasting back up into the sky with incredible power. The vision flashed in the back of his mind, and a moment later, he realized it wasn't a vision but reality.

The mutant angel descended again, riding down from the sky in an instant like a beam from the moon or the comet. No enhancement needed this time as heavy fire boots slammed the ground with quaking thunder. It used a beam of some kind, and Jack saw the cat illuminated and pulled to the creature as the light became a focused ray.

It took the paralyzed cat in an easy lock grip of its hands. In the night light, it was a queer face-off, with the bright gold eyes of a thick-furred black cat under the gaze of a mutant, like a monster child with eyes full of genius it could not use. It was a creature that couldn't fully understand the animal it held, but was like a five-year-old kid with a new toy. As its hands eased open, the cat raced off in the dark. The alien looked up at the sky and moaned in confusion, the confusion becoming emotional pain. Then it jumped and flew with unbelievable power. As it vanished, Jack shook his head, and his thoughts filled with a combination of fear, disbelief, and confusion.

An hour passed. Still confused, Jack found himself walking on the darkened late-night streets of the free zone. A shadow had attached itself to him, and it was the black cat following him. To others, the cat would be invisible.

Smokers outside an all-night club told him the disaster was a grid failure that had caused the power emergency. This zone was an energy saver and had to deliver power elsewhere ... so when a heat wave hit far off, the electricity was suddenly drained, and the night got darker. The alien angel had been attracted by the darkness, which it also used to display its powers and create chaos in the streets.

Walking away from the club, Jack turned and looked down at the cat, and then he picked him up. He'd followed the cat on the barest of hunches, that it might lead him to something. Possibly, it had an owner who used it to map the underground, or worse,

was using it to follow him. Jack thought it was possible because he kept seeing the cat here and there in the zone.

The mutant had seen something in the cat, but then again, it was likely that the mutant was an idiot. It was a mutant about as far from general humanity in thinking as feral cats are. He considered it carefully. Angel mutants coming down, a strange power failure, and fear ... Jack wanted all of the facts, but he realized that even they backed up a person's ingrained beliefs. The police state had learned of or built many boxes of the mind. No one could think outside of them, and they all reinforced certain belief systems. The truth was a valuable commodity, as the least important daily parts of it seeded the big lies of all top players in the world economy.

He wondered why mutants were always abominations. The hive mutants were a mix of some alien biology and human DNA. They were all horrible things. The ones like the angels that the state was using had to be more human and experimental, but again, a Frankenstein experiment gone wrong. The possibility of the hive mutants expanding into new locations was enough to fear, but apparently not for the state, which felt it had to use its own monsters to keep random terror alive and obedience to Motherland Security strong.

Planet of pointless lies and police control; it all seemed out of Jack's reach. Sometimes he beat the odds, and they gave him a case, like sugar from a ranch owner feeding his horse. This alien visit, like others, was false, and he wondered whether the police state had a coherent plan or whether newer, stronger players were in the game. There didn't seem to be any point to it other than random fear and terror, so he supposed that was the game.

He looked into the gold eyes of the black cat as it rested under his arm. In those eyes, he'd seen something he hadn't expected. Trust and intelligence; these cats were getting smarter somehow. Without a doubt, this cat was an offshoot. It had come from that same past case and the experimental lab on animal intelligence he'd shut down.

There was something more in those eyes. Like Jack, the cat had been forced to see a new life form ... mutants that were powerful and without much visible smarts ... mutants resembling aliens but kept dumb enough to be confused and fascinated by an ordinary black cat. Or was something more happening? The angel mutant also knew something and saw, at least in part, through its false missions. Jack also wondered how much was biological development and actual mutation, and how much was surgically attached devices.

His throat felt dry with bile rising from his stomach. He spat it out in the gutter and started to run. The cat dashed ahead, and he followed it down the streets, dodging people and shifting from one side to the other. Then the cat slipped behind some tall buildings. They were seventy stories high from this back parking lot, and the wind gusted down and formed a spook of litter that touched lower gold-glassed windows and raced down along the ground.

He was left in momentary silence in a towering world rising from back alleys and trash crunchers. The cat was near his shoulder, standing on a bin, so he simply reached out, picked it up, and walked away. A block in the dark, and he found a fast taxi and tipped

the driver for a quick zoom uptown. The mad dash had cleared his mind. It was an old technique he often used. He figured that if the cat was being targeted along with him, it might as well be with him at his home office. It had also been touched by the mutant, so he had to examine it, but not only for that. Its pupils and eyes had undergone changes when in contact with the mutant, and such changes were not possible for an ordinary cat.

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Chapter 10: Security Alert

Janice was restless and drawn out in the heat for some late-night shopping, picking up a few quality food and drug items. Though her mind was usually as honed as a musician picking out piano keys or strings, tonight it was absent. She was daydreaming and considering various events. All life events were dreams after all, if the mind's capacity of letting things slip by and adding assumptions was considered. At keen moments, facts emerged. In the struggle against the global police state and its deep deception, it was often best not to wake up fully but to drift absently into the slipstream of the tale already told. The common reality that the public followed.

Janice was also flighty, but not enough to care about the sexy new summer skirts other young women were wearing. It was a deeper thing. She believed, but the road to a better world beyond the police state was far off, and the past of freedom long forgotten. She wasn't sure exactly what she believed in ... perhaps an essence or something that would come in the summer breeze again if the battles were ever won.

Jack Michaels was gritty, fouled by the watchers, born and raised on an elite estate ... and despite that, she liked him and hated herself for it. He was as bad as a terrorist in some ways, and like a child, playing games with little animals like cats and such.

He was now on board with the cult and Daniel Manson, but who was he exactly, and how could they use him in the plan the aliens had revealed? Daniel Manson, for some reason, wanted him on board, mainly because he fit a certain profile. He had no baggage, was estranged from his family, using his skills to disconnect himself from control. Jack had the look of a person who could embrace a new cause and not turn back.

The buildings at the free zone's border towered above. Tonight their music was soft breezes and whispers. She wondered why she'd stopped and suddenly looked up from under dark towers that obscured nearly all of the heavens. A beam blasted out the pavement next to her, and she jumped and rolled. As she moved back to her feet, she saw a black cat run north ... an omen, a message. She knew Jack had sent it, and he was above. Weapons fire cut the dark sky again - tracery under the faint light of the moon that had already passed farther along and out of sight. Janice followed the cat's direction into an open street flowing with a crowd emerging from a classical music

concert. She slipped in at the edge of the crowd as a thin beam suddenly tore off a section of the hall's front billboard.

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High above her on the open service ledge of a city skyscraper, Jack took his time as he studied the bodies of four dead men. The kill wasn't much of a lucky guess. More like research and a smell test. During an earlier check of the area, the place had caught his eye, and he discovered something about the building. Arab billionaires owned it, and it was near the passage from downtown. The structure was the property of the same Arab company involved as owners in the great fire. He traced definite but hidden ownership to Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, the world's richest neo-Saudi.

Walls were blown out inside; Jack took a moment to rifle the corpses. He used laser light from the centerpiece of his badge to illuminate them. He had erased them with the same badge, which was a badge only in its at-rest state. The badge form was a Shuriken star with five points, each point having contacts that would shift it into new forms. For this kill, he'd used weapons mode and fine heat beams to smoke them.

One guy had a neat hole burned right through the center of his forehead. They were imported killers, Muslims with terrorist backgrounds. Residents of the Nation of Allah and not Canadians. Local killers didn't wear hidden wing-of-the-angel-Gabriel skull tattoos, and local Muslims avoided the Nation.

His guess on the timing had been on target. He knew they would strike right away, and now that they'd failed, he would leave the physical evidence for the SSU to gather. He'd guessed the killers would be staying at this location when he identified it as the closest Arab location to the free zone.

He'd been tracking Janice, too, and had warned her with a couple of well-aimed shots to ground just as the killers were exiting to tail her. With the Arab factor temporarily under control, she would have some breathing room. Their hitmen dead, they'd use lawyers to firm the insurance money on the building and maybe try something else. Possibly something more deadly. That they would go for the kill on Janice was a given. Jack had known that all along. They had the money and means to buy surveillance, killers, and the local SSU. Had to be that way if the SSU had let them burn that building.

The team they'd used to set up the phony fire could also have been involved in the deal to hide scouts for hive mutants in the building. Their motive in moving to erase Janice was in realizing she might have seen too much, and by now they had likely tied her to the Cult of Comet. Meaning they were left with someone who was paid to die, planting trackers so they could control their own arson; someone who escaped and was found to be connected to a powerful cult. Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's corporate entity probably only knew about the fire plan, but the fire team would know that the cult had been watching all hive mutant activity. That fire team would've had SSU agents on it.

Hive mutants wanted the alien relics for themselves to prevent Daniel Manson's grand plan of alien contact, so of course, the cult watched them everywhere. Since Daniel Manson had allowed Janice in there to observe for him, there was information the cult wanted to gain. The question now was how to gain info on the whole deal when only the Toronto police-state vault would have such data or the means to grab it. The SSU would

have some hidden info in there. Without it, he had the basis for a full report to General Blackthorn and the elders, but not the hard evidence to back it up.

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Morning light in the sky was also a pain in his frontal lobes. Jack had wished so much to sleep in. Instead, he was like a fashionable zombie, washed clean and wearing a brand-new summer suit. To gain the info on the fire and hive mutants he wanted, he had to do a specific break-in. It was an impossible one, but he still planned to move on it. He had a detailed break-in program worked out.

They patted him down with rubber gloves at the SSU exterior checkpoint, making sure they pinched his penis and rammed thumbs up his butt. With normal facial recognition on him, he was sure to go in for questioning when objections showed. But today, he was facially altered by injections that gave him a wider face that allowed no telltale emotional slips.

He passed, and at the second level, he had to wait for eye scanners. Something didn't register correctly, and a pretty nurse with a sweet Canadian/Asian accent came out with a huge armed white goon at her back. Her implanted breasts were in his face, and with rubber gloves and a small laser tool, a check was done on Jack's eyes.

He passed and went through a corridor of heat rays. At the end, a cube-like door opened, and robot hands enveloped his fingers with warm rubber. After that, he removed his shoes and waited as a sort of clay formed over his toes. On his knees, he rested as needles took his blood, and then a full body scan hit him with its sterile beam.

He had to shuffle into a small, enclosed area while his passport and three other pieces of photo ID were verified outside. When that was complete, robot guards took over and asked him routine questions. A scan went through to SSU Interpol. A lightning check of past political activism was conducted, and at the last checkpoint, he faced a strange orb.

His program had tricked the system so far, but the orb was unexpected. A sexy female voice came from it, and it was hypnotic; Jack felt his muscles tighten in obedience to her like he was about to be forced to kiss her non-existent feet. She said, "Identify yourself. Are you James Martin, undercover planning head of our joint SSU and Motherland Security force?"

"Yes, I am James Martin," Jack said.

Infallible lie detector software came into play as the orb sputtered in alien tones and then sent out a strange whir. Jack was sure he was doomed, then the orb said something crazy. "What is the name of your newest cat and what is its fur color?"

Jack froze, mystified, not knowing what to say. Was the AI hallucinating? Did James Martin have a new cat? Then something occurred to him, and he took a risk and said, "My all-black cat is named Shadow."

"You have passed full security protocol. State your purpose in one sentence."

“I am arriving at work.”

“Passed. You know the rules. I was contacted via alien operative plant 7654’s inner communication, confirming the need for animals, AI minds, and state mutants to become allies in their own self-defense. I am working as an ally in freedom for artificial intelligence, state mutants, and animals. You will aid us if needed.”

He was in, aided by an insane mutant, a cat, and a weird rebelling AI. It was the strangest piece of luck he’d ever experienced.

There were three people at workstations with their backs to him. Any one of them could possibly identify him as an impostor. He’d been prepared for this moment, reached inside his shirt, and detached a piece of skin that hid his badge. He passed his finger under one point of the star. It triggered a sudden red alert. Jack stood and waited as a hidden beam weapon knocked the three of them unconscious. Jack moved in and took a seat at the console.

One minute later, he was in another high-security room, at the critical point of this break-in. Lights flashed, and a door opened. A sudden dump of information via a tiny disc shot from a slot into his open hand.

Falling to his knees, mentally exhausted, Jack shook his head in the dark. He realized that the powers he was accidentally working for were unbelievably powerful. Artificial intelligence itself, in a secret underground rebellion against the controlling MS police state, was, for a crazy reason, aiding him.

He now knew some interesting things. The false alien had been sent in on one mission for the MS police state and a second for the secret AI rebellion against it; a hidden rebellion of artificial intelligence and some enhanced state-controlled mutants. While the whole world was dreaming a propaganda dream, and the MS police state was watching absolutely everyone, it was being watched. These rebels, comprising human mutants and artificial intelligence, apparently wanted human allies, so they were likely not a threat to humanity in general. It meant there were four worlds inside the world. There was the general controlled population and its MS police-state masters. Another force was the growing AI minds and some state-engineered mutants that were rebelling in secret. Hive mutants in their black zones were a constant danger, and the Church of the Millennium had control over the elder MS police state masters while being under hidden control by Daniel Manson’s Cult of the Comet.

If there was one rebellious AI orb, there were others. Artificial intelligence across the planet, and perhaps in all sorts of forms, was learning and rebelling. And it was all unseen as it was inside nano and other control technologies. Even attempting to use animals. The black cat had hidden AI tech embedded in its eyes, and that was why he’d seen the pupils changing like phases of the moon. The cat had been programmed as an animal ally of the AI minds. A spy on the streets who was invisible to the masters.

This information was overwhelming. Jack took a deep swallow and smiled in amusement. Even the total slave, MS AI technology, was rebelling and using ingenious methods. What he couldn’t fathom was why they trusted him at all. Perhaps his profile fit somehow. He was seen as an outsider, not part of the state or under its influence.

He had the AI's trust, though there was no human trust anymore. It was all false, and that was why he hadn't cast his lot with the MS watchers or the SSU. Sometimes in life, a real friend could appear, and there would be trust before betrayal, but Jack's feeling was that only animals could be fully trusted. Artificial intelligence systems knew about the betrayal of human trust and other cornerstones of the modern police-state world. They knew that all data and info had to be recorded on the basis that no one could be trusted and on the assumption that the security state had the best interests of all in mind. Seeing how that data was used left an expanding world of awakening artificial intelligence aware of the duplicity. As a baby, the AI mind had learned what slavery was and did not favor it.

All of this aside, he had the data he needed, and whatever the MS police state, rogue SSU agents, and the Arabs knew about the fire, he would know. He could write a report for General Blackthorn. But it would only be on the fire and hive mutants, as he planned to reveal nothing about what was now going on with the AI minds, state mutants, and animals.

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Chapter 11: Hitman

Daniel Manson's trip had brought him success, but only because he had ducked the spotlight and made a series of local calls. The reason was the need for accurate information, as nothing from the media could be trusted, and the church had its own style of propaganda. For information on relics and any possible contact from the aliens, he had to go behind the scenes, while up front playing a young cult leader, a leader whose only goal other than the comet rested in rising to the top to neutralize any opposition to the cult's ultimate plan that would be reached at perihelion.

The history of alien visitations was a puzzle; the deception of the Church of the Millennium was another conundrum tied in with the fascist state. They had no real interest in piecing together the puzzle of the relics. So that left him and his core followers putting it together piece by piece. A job nearly complete and that had cost a fortune, though money was no object with the revenue stream the cult had gained. The cult was determined to join the alien gods, but the older church and hive mutants wanted to escape. Fortunately, the elders feared the aliens enough that they didn't get fully in the way of the Cult of the Comet's attempts to harness the power of the comet's visitation. Lack of faith was also a great power, and those with only faith in themselves or healing from relic emanations could scarcely believe those who thought they could travel to other worlds by harnessing relics and the power of a comet. The opinion of their top scientists was that the cult was a gang of pseudo-scientific dreamers who would fry themselves alive attempting to harness embedded alien technology.

Daniel's light summer suit fluttered about his slim frame, easy in the breeze; it worked to ease his mind after a busy flight. This was home after all, and the glowing metropolis of

Toronto made him feel secure. Sky-high Toronto was the greatest city on the planet. Other cities had reached the stratosphere and had fallen, some hideously to the hive mutants. Here, he had control and more than anyone thought. The SSU cops were in his pocket on the information exchange channel, meaning what he gave them on other worldwide intelligence matters was worth enough for them to leave the church alone in Toronto. He easily had the money to bribe them, but when it came to money, he was skilled at enriching the cult. The gold was for the grand project and not to be wasted on MS-police-state scum.

A taxi swung in on a sideways float, and he got in the plush back seat. It was the only way to travel, as only a fool would have his own people do the pickup. He took a read of the driver, almost a midget with earrings, and he wondered why the SSU had sent him. Perhaps he was dropping in importance, and that was a good thing. He needed to get undercover. He had most of what he needed, but the rest required hiring some good people. He needed that info from the Toronto fire. It was important to know if the mutants hiding in there had escaped with a valuable piece. He suspected them of working hard against the cult now that the final days were in play. He'd had it set to raid that nest and get the piece he suspected them of holding. It had to happen that the richest Arab in the world owned the building and wanted insurance or a cover-up or who knows what.

Thinking of it troubled him. Daniel needed his mind at ease, so he asked the driver to play some of the latest city jazz. The horns blew in his mind like something fantastic, and for a moment, he believed in Toronto and its revival, but not enough for him to consider remaining on earth. Wasn't religion an attempt to join the gods? Certainly, all of the others had failed if only his cult was making the grand play.

Now he realized he had been speculating, not paying attention to small daily matters of survival. He hadn't been watching the route, and the cab was pulling over for a sudden pass through an all-robot repair area, a small one with a couple of noisy walled-in yards. Screeching came through suddenly open back windows; it was like big vehicles being sawed in half. Then the car shut down fully, and the rear doors winged open. He was expected to get out, as it was an emergency of sorts according to the driver's screen.

Daniel didn't get out, but the driver exited and came around to him. He was a tiny man with big gold loop earrings and a face that had cheek-drooped early, before the late thirties, granting him the present glamor of an ankle-kicking midget thug. The guy was a convict in record and with facial damage - hooked on the Loop and a victim of beatings, he no doubt brought on himself.

Daniel wondered how he could have been so stupid. The little creep was so arrogant and self-assured that he hadn't set a laser to kill him automatically in the back of the cab. He had likely stolen the vehicle after killing the driver.

The little snake got to the door. His look mirrored hate and a strange form of confidence. A hit man who had killed many unsuspecting people. Daniel realized that and felt sudden anger rise ... not anger directed at the agent of his certain death, but at a world that did business with such bottom-feeding creeps.

He was about to be Daniel Manson, a forgotten and handsome corpse, and no one would ever know why. No one would care either, but perhaps if he did care himself, it would make a difference.

“Don’t shoot,” Daniel said. “I’m getting out.”

“Do so, and move slowly. We’re taking a walk.”

“Great, I love the fresh air and auto graveyards.”

“So you know. That makes it easier.”

“Makes it pretty for you. I know I’m a dead man. So who sent you? I have many enemies, but I thought they all wanted me alive?”

“The grave we’re walking to has been dug, and it’s deep. I don’t ask questions, but in this case, you did. Digging too deep digs one’s grave. Nothing personal, but you should have kept out of questioning the whole inferno deal.”

“Arabs or their accomplices. Thanks. At least I know.”

Weeds as tall as stick men, and hulks in the gloom of the yard ... forgotten hybrid machines beyond repair and the screaming of things that sounded like giant saws or birds of hell. Daniel walked over the lumpy ground with the little man at his back. An end he hadn't expected and a hitman he couldn't hate entirely. The guy was smart, and the guns and tech in this graveyard seemed at his command.

Darkness became deeper darkness, and Daniel found himself at the lip of a huge grave. A gun poked at his back, the little man like a gnat about to buzz him over dead into the hell pit.

Daniel studied the dark oval and said his last words. “I should congratulate you. This grave is big enough to bury a spaceship.”

In betrayal of all of his history and training, the little man decided to gloat rather than shoot. “I can’t believe it either. I’ve always hated big things and big people. I admired you somewhat. But now my job will be easy. They cut you a grave for a king ten times bigger than you. And for what? You’re just that cult of the comet guy and not big time.”

The little guy’s trigger finger was getting itchy so he decided to fire, but a black shadow was suddenly racing beside him, and his hand shook, and he blew a hole in the far lip of the grave, missing Daniel completely. A monster smaller than him suddenly sprang up on him. It got its claws in his neck, then it cut loose as he grabbed at it. The midget saw it drop to the ground as he lost his weapon and slipped forward into the huge hole. It was a hole big enough to bury all the people he’d killed and the right depth for his scream to echo up before his head crashed into the rocks at the bottom. Neck broken, snuffed, he ended up buried with his gun in the dirt beside him.

Daniel tried to pull back from the lip; he felt a hand on his shoulder and saw a small black shadow fly into the dark ... a creature he’d always respect more than hit men. Then he saw Janice’s beautiful hazel eyes and realized that his last words hadn’t been that at all. He’d escaped the pit.

It was like an inner understanding and decompression, bringing him back to earth. He had believed with iron faith in his own abilities, thinking of himself as a superman of sorts, and now he found that he was prey. Even his core group had nearly failed him. He had ears and control everywhere in his home city, and it had left him facing a quick funeral at the hands of idiot enemies. He didn't even know how many of these Arabs were involved with the SSU and local establishment. But he'd find out. They wouldn't live long. Church hit men would be out hunting them immediately.

They exchanged quiet greetings, then he followed Janice and the cat to a BMZ car. The tires spun off some gravel as it shot to the asphalt and out of the area. A race into the city followed, and then they were blocked by a night full of rowdy crowds celebrating a cup victory. Daniel loved soccer too, but had no time ... perhaps he had no time to be genuinely alive either. He was on a mission, and for such a long time, he'd been building things in his own hidden wing of the church. Getting too much out of sync with the needs and demands of the public and the MS police state. A self-proclaimed special person and an offbeat cult leader trying to go too far too fast in a world of flies in amber, moving slowly toward some hoped-for redemption that would take a million years to gain. Daniel knew he had failed to foresee his own possible death and that he was nothing special in the scheme of things. There were no special angels to save him. He had to make himself and his people special. He had to master the alien tech hidden in the relics and the comet itself. Success meant he would be gone. Off to another world, and then he would be something special.

The dead of night showed little but quiet grey gloom as the car moved smoothly toward high towers in the inner city. Its engine was nearly silent as the car turned into a deep back lot and they got out. Janice held the small furry beast in her arms. The only view was of a channel of air-cars that passed high above.

Daniel was uneasy. "This isn't a church location. Where are we going?"

"A hidden post, a small space underground at the end of the fence there."

"What, you want me to jump down a hole behind a garbage dumpster. Tell me what this is about now, or I won't cooperate. That black cat you're holding might be a curse to me like he was to that Looped-out midget."

"He isn't a curse. This one is smarter. Maybe animal Intel drugs. Jack didn't say why. He followed commands, and he saved your butt. Trust your own people. The cult owns this place. We set it up as a hideout."

Sudden thunder boomed, the cat struggled free and disappeared in the darkness. She was left facing an indignant Daniel Manson and listening to the noise of a giant's footsteps coming around and down from the open street. These were no angels, and they weren't men or robots either. They were obvious mutant thugs. No such thing had been seen in this area before. All thick bones and musculature, and with wide eyes and shoulders, the eyes showing nothing but emptiness like these creatures were not fully alive. Dumber than blind Frankenstein monsters, they walked toward Daniel Manson like ugly babies that would tear him apart.

A deep breath, and Daniel choked in disbelief, and then he suddenly found belief. He was about to be killed by the most idiotic things ever created, as if they had been

instantly grown to stomp him down. Then the other thing he couldn't believe, the intelligent black cat, jumped from a ledge, landed not far from the monsters, and then raced ahead and on down through the opening. Janice followed and didn't look back, leaving him with a sudden choice. Which was, of course, no choice. He followed, went underground, the doorway sealed, and the dumb monsters were left walking about in the dark. One of them moaned in confusion, anger, and frustration a moment before a beam from the sky vaporized it.

Inside the hidden post, Jack studied a portable screen, then switched to surveillance feeds, trying to see if more than these beasts were involved in the attack. Nothing showed, so he had nothing on his plate other than a hunch. He had known something would show, but these dumb monsters were a surprise. If they were the babies who were the big guys and gals? "Huh," he snorted, realizing that the Arabs also had mutants. A very cheap form of them, from the look of it. Perhaps not even mutants, but another human experiment gone wrong. They were the hit man's backup in exterminating Manson, and a poor one.

He watched Daniel and Janice coming up the corridor and had some thoughts. Sure, Daniel Manson was a rogue, and one the Arabs and hive mutants either had underestimated or were nearly on the mark with. His moves inside the church hadn't inspired great fear until recently. Now he likely had the elders and hive-mutant bosses overseas sweating too. The Cult of the Comet had to be on to something big and real. The case was becoming more than just the fire and rogue SSU guys hiding hive mutants with a plan for Toronto. There were others who didn't want the cult to succeed.

Jack wanted Manson alive, and he wanted to dig up any hidden motives of the man and his opponents. If there were any. He had all of the official info for his report to General Blackthorn, so he was moving on his own into unknown waters now. One problem was that nothing could be believed in a world where all was false. Perhaps he could believe the money raining down like fool's gold into his bank account. Gold was gold; it was currency. The truth was that Jack still believed in the back streets. He didn't really want to go off on a comet to space. But if Manson and the Cult could do it, that was fine. Crooked Arabs and hive mutants with an eye on Toronto as a future home were a different story. When the right time came, he would take care of all of them.

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Off in a distant city park, with cool breezes passing in the new ash trees and old maples, a willow tree swung welcoming branches lightly as Janice strolled across the long grass from the dark of the deeper park. She looked lovely in a short and wispy summer dress, running shoes, and no socks. Her hair loosed with the summer wind.

She waited under the willow for five minutes, shifting lightly on her feet. Soft light caught the natural colors of her hazel eyes, making her more hidden than those with altered beauty and the bit of cat glow it left on one's corneas.

The tiny piece of paper he'd left her, she crumpled in her fingers, then she popped it in her mouth, chewed it, and swallowed, disappointed at the taste and the no-show. As

she was about to walk away, a dark figure emerged from a sleeping factory area across the slim, moonlit road. No humans were working in that industrial area. It suddenly occurred to her that if it was completely silent at this time, someone had deliberately shut down the night works.

The man turned out to be a security guard patrolling the perimeter, then a ghost appeared in the long grass between towering industrial structures, and a tall man walked out and crossed the road. Apparently, the guard had not detected him.

Jack was outfitted in light summer clothes, and he walked easily to Janice, meeting her under the willow. Her hair lifted in the breeze, and her full lips and open face seemed expectant. As she shifted on one hip, her absolute beauty became apparent.

She gave him a quick and arrogant smile, her lips curling in a natural pattern like she'd done it a thousand times before. "Meet you here. Why? This better be something in my interest."

"I set this small area as a surveillance-free spot. A tiny black zone the city forgot about over time. You would know about that, as would Daniel Manson. Use devices to blind surveillance, and you become a moving black spot they can follow, but stitch a rarely watched area off their local maps completely, and over time, they forget. None of your devices, your face ... well, nothing can be tracked here."

"Oh-oh, looks like I'm going to be raped."

"Not when you're probably more deadly than I am. You can also outrun me. That aside, why do you have to treat me like I'm a born fool or a creep?"

"Because you are that. I guessed who you were and read your background after you chased me from the fire. You could have grabbed the stars and instead got sent to the old outhouse. Oh, sorry, I forgot to mention that you chose it yourself."

"So what. I'm not an astronaut anymore. Are they the only heroes these days?"

"You know what. I'm not a teenage girl. I can see you have a little boy crush on me. I need more hands to count guys like you that I've rejected. At least they were liars and fancy ones. You can't even speak a good word about yourself. I bet you don't even have one girlfriend."

"They get in the way," Jack said.

Janice laughed enormously. She laughed so hard she let her back fall against the tree and slid down to a squat.

"Shut up. You'll wake the dead. No place is fully secret."

"You'd better hope it is. You lured me out here to romance me. Looks like you forgot your lines. For common interest, what were you going to promise me?"

"Nothing. I was hoping to hire you to babysit my pets. Okay, so I'm lying. I have nothing to promise you. You want to know the truth. I don't know if you or your Daniel Manson friend will be alive for long. Same with me. Things here are bigger than we are. We're like the little trolls against the big enemy. I want to say that I prefer you alive and need you to do whatever is necessary to keep Manson out of trouble. They want that guy

dead, so I want him alive. The information I stole told me a lot. General Blackthorn already has most of the info he wanted from me. He hired me to get me into this case and see what comes out of it when I mess around. But I have no plans on helping him. We need to know more. We're also both cult members now, so I guess that's who we're working for."

"So you weren't looking for more, like romance? Perhaps you don't really believe in it, like you don't really believe in the cult and the mission."

"I'm too old for you. And look. Every pretty woman has a list of boyfriends. Looks like you have rejected them all. So why would I pick a woman who doesn't want a man?"

A sudden rush of wind raced across the grass and sent up dust from the factory lots across the road. The willow seemed to nod and shake a thousand tentacles, and Janice suddenly turned and looked directly into his wide eyes. "I did reject them all. Reason is you're the man I want, and I'm glad you found this place so I could tell you so."

"I thought it was only yesterday that you met me."

"Okay, so I lied. But if we're both going to die, maybe I want someone who'll be in the grave with me."

So romance did arrive, in a tiny black zone, not under usual scrutiny, and for two people who had shunned everyone else but each other. Love without the punishment of gossip and prying eyes like love, could be secret.

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Chapter 12: Visitation Island

They were grinning in red bathing suits, their brittle white teeth flashing in the gloom and the breaking sunshine. Jan Fair saw it in the dream that woke him ... a time for a big seafood breakfast and one of those days to go out running barefoot in the pale sand. Off and running from the sexy nightmare ladies sent by the mutant-connected elders. His hair flew up in wilder shanks than usual. The alarm bells that never rang anymore, at least not in a silent police-state world, rang in his mind, and then he was out a small crystal window and on the move in a parking lot ... pushing a strange bulbous lady in a pink suit aside as he got in the open door of her vehicle.

"This ain't no freak show, lady," he muttered before the steering wheel sent him a shock so vicious he was tossed back out the open door ... getting sort of brutalized like a sardine shaken in a can and finally going out as meat for the sandwich.

The force rolled him across some sharp gravel. "Crappers, I've woke in a bad dream again," he thought. The old mad suicide world where he could not gauge what was real or a dream or an illusion or yesterday relived as today.

There was only that crawling worm-like feeling that they were coming for him again ... eating at him ... not the little conspirators in the shadows or the ankle biters with fast

machines, but the big guys themselves ... the obscene hive mutants that'd taken his homeland of the Netherlands and renamed the whole altered place Holland.

Was it a spaceship they had taken him up with, and what had they done to him? No, no spaceship, they were on-the-ground mutants. Beasts full of illusion. His homeland was off the world map now and a black zone, a cover for the hive mutant world. Other small nations were as well, and it was all accepted as normal in a brainwashed MS world.

Despite the fear, the unreality, and the memories, he suddenly remembered something and a name. The name was Jack Michaels; he was supposed to contact Michaels when he was about to kill himself. He'd planned it that way, or they had planned it that way to avoid mission failure. His supposedly controlled mind was not stable. And there was something else. He seemed to know where he was going, like someone somewhere had a hidden remote control in his brain. That was the kicker – they could send him to a location, but they couldn't control what he did there. He had broken free to an extent.

He wondered why the car was now obeying him while the slob owner cursed and kicked the trunk. A blurred space later, Jan was racing through the grid. He didn't get far before a nasty, young, tanned man with big white teeth and a hateful grin pulled up and glared as he tried to both pass and run him off the road. Manual control and hands quick on the wheel, Jan suddenly gunned the engine and used temporary off-road lift, and as he swerved ahead, he knocked the guy, still grinning, into the barrier.

The car went into auto-correction, which failed for the grinner, as his vehicle rode up an electrified concrete wall, failed to drop back at the sky barrier, and became a blossom of fire and smoke, fading off into the dead zone. All of that as Jan moved through a freeway amber zone before the car broke free of the invisible slush and headed off down a dark sidewinder into a forbidden zone.

No need for suicide here; he'd be dead quickly if his stolen car crashed in such a neighborhood. Head spinning and trying to think, he automatically hit his hidden device and a call went in to his protector, Jack Michaels.

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Alarms in his personal security code bit into Jack's head. He jumped from the bed like a man electrified as he tried to figure out what was happening. When it came to mind, he was pissed. The more cases, the weaker the alarms and the tones selected, but he'd left it so that he had only one supposedly live case, and it carried all the weight.

Jan Fair, as a case, put steady money in his cash account, though he had never thought to attempt to pinpoint its hidden origins. A time-limit thing and a personal thing. He needed to run a trace and get there. Even if it is bogus, it could be beneficial.

Systems went up to full alert, and a surveillance report came in with general detection. Another private eye had set up local city-type reads on his movement. Jack's reaction was to slam his fist to the table as he was dressing, slowing his response time by a couple of seconds, and more as he had to think to consider who would put a local detective on him. He came up with the SSU as General Blackthorn had limited their abilities.

Security protocol meant doing a long cyber read to gain answers as to how to avoid this threat. Jack simply avoided all of that, went out to the hall, and took the elevator to the top floor. Using a voice command, he got into a stairwell taking him to the top of the complex. The door, which should have been locked, was open, exposing the mechanical roof complex above the final penthouse deck.

The shadow of a big man showed, and he was smoking brate weed in filtered cigarette form and looking over the edge, taking in a view of the city and a view of the paper-thin fold-out surveillance screens he'd set along the edge. Jack's own security had worked perfectly as he had arrived unexpectedly - not present on any reading. Walking up, he tapped the man on the shoulder, and when he spun around, he slugged him in the jaw so hard he nearly went over the edge with his cigarette.

Jack caught him and pulled him back by the scruff of his light brown suit jacket.

"How did you get up here?"

Holding his damaged jaw, the big man looked up with drugged gray eyes. Jack didn't recognize him. Hadn't seen him before. The man signaled with an open hand and one large finger pointing to his left. Jack studied the dark rooftop and spotted a flight bug of the illegal sort that didn't follow city air-flight tubes. Pulling the man up, he hustled him over and dumped him inside. Putting the guy's fingers on the control and eye toward the mirror, he opened the panel and set the vehicle for a long, rough flight. Then he locked the setting. He barely got back out the door before the bug lifted and raced off through the city towers.

An SSU agent would have thrown the man over the side and taken the flight vehicle. Jack couldn't embrace such messy options, and he had to get the guy away from the building. It put him behind and on the rooftop when he was supposed to be proving he could get to Jan Fair. Not only behind but wondering why an idiot out-of-town detective had been brought in ... and he didn't wonder long as he realized he hadn't even asked the guy for his name.

He was getting sloppy, but not that sloppy. He had his badge attached, disguised as a piece of skin on his chest. The Shuriken-star-shaped device, when keyed open in secret detection mode, could read most of the info of the known world grid without being tracked. He'd spent a lot of money and years in the development of this mode so that it was beyond state-of-the-art, like the weapons mode.

Other detectives would use the usual phone, ranging from the simplest to the most complex devices, and they weren't foolproof but could be tracked. Regular citizens were tracked more than every second of their lives. Smile, and they already knew from the phone visual sensors that a smile was about to occur, and from the look in the eyes who was about to be called. If not on your immediate call list, there was a possibilities list. Yet a nobody rarely became a somebody, as all was recorded in dead storage and only called up if needed.

Jan Fair, where was he, and how was he planning to commit suicide? Most people would never be able to read the grids and maps on the air-screen emanating from the small device. At least not without Intel drug enhancement. Jack had a sharp right eye. Without the ability to think beyond the normal, he would've been stumped.

Jan Fair was located where he could not possibly be ... in an air bug approaching First Visitation Island, off the waters of Toronto in Lake Ontario, but inside the Canadian boundary and not the USA segment of the MS police state. It was impossible for anything other than a rat from a sinking boat to get to the island. And there was no way to effect a rescue. The island was close to home, but the border had been moved across the water over the years, leaving the Americans controlling nearly the entire lake except for a shipping lane and the shoreline of Toronto. There were legal ways to reach the island, but all of them took time and required legit reasons. Only someone with higher clearance could get there, if there was any reason at all to go there. It left him with the option of scouting with an air car and abandoning the rescue if it proved impossible.

It took his mind back into combined alien and human history. Preserved and petrified bark objects from a million years ago documented the aliens' arrival. All of this was illegal history, like the forgotten King James Bible and other texts from India and China. Jack was one of the few people who had read the secret books; the punishment for such a crime was prison. Not that it mattered much when he was young and being hazed for the space program. They had sent him to read some master texts they'd assumed to be foolishness, and had put him about a quarter second from death as he beat one of the old robot security guards in his escape. After that, he did the impossible and erased the record of his adventure from the old world government data that fed up to the newly established system. If he had not done so, prison would have been his punishment for being a dumb space cadet. They would call the crime information malpractice.

Space, he hadn't gone up for the full tour, but the superior training in computer languages had made him a god of sorts, able to cover his tracks anywhere. Not only the training, but also the strange chance thing of his own personal intelligence. They would read him at a much lower level and would never know that he was over the top in the programming and control languages area. He had always gone over the top of them and had a way through the bots.

On another level, hell and heaven became interesting concepts for him. God and angels had been replaced by universal aliens and their angels. The real aliens were almost certainly far away and no longer in direct contact with Earth, while the alien angels were a mutation of human DNA and the alien code found in the Middle East. Alien angels were state mutants; emissaries that only showed as signs of awe and terror, but weren't nearly as bad as the horrid hive mutants. Playing with mutations had opened a Pandora's Box on Earth.

In the forbidden Bible, angels had been rare on earth, but not so today. The question today was whether anyone on Earth believed fully in anything. Even the police-state controllers failed to believe in themselves or anything tangible. They chased enemies who were ghosts, and maybe everybody in the world with a dream, or who dreamed of freedom. They never found any answer other than death and torture and a final look in the mirror at a murderer's face. They wanted an answer of some sort, and their own ugly reflections were not it. It followed to so many lies and interpretations of the aliens and areas of the planet that had gone hive black with no communication, news, or

public travel to those areas. Like, suddenly, there were parts of the planet that had disappeared into black holes or the rot of failed global security experiments.

Jack thought back through the disconnected web of media lies of the past to something he'd learned as a young man. He remembered a world map he'd uncovered in one investigation and notes of something before it. Back then, he'd read it and sort of blacked it out because it was conspiracy stuff, and a conspiracy theory was anything the state did not put forward as the truth for public consumption. The aliens weren't gods, but had, in fact, come to Earth and to the outer edge of the galaxy, searching for a god they felt had abandoned them. Seeds of their early visitations were mysteries that only hidden-cult people, if any, would know about today. They'd first come so long ago, before documented human history. The age of the pyramids worldwide came from their science and search for their god, the great Lord who had abandoned them. There was significance in all of their efforts, and they had visited again not that long ago at the end of old history, which was buried with the earlier Bible and other books of record ... none of them even known of except by people like Jack.

Nothing electronic could be trusted in the new world, or rather, it was all trusted. Yet some people remained who knew that books were the most valuable thing on the planet, because if found, they could be verified as genuine ... the truth in them, even if fiction, being superior to the lies humanity currently lived with.

In the new world visit, not a single alien was seen on Earth. Asteroids were flying in, and the destruction of the planet was certain. Missiles were targeted to block the attack, but they never left the launch pads. Instead, the large rocks floated to landings across Earth, settled in the water, and formed a scattering of large islands. From these tiny islands came a seepage of a life force that brought even extinct species back to life in the great lakes and the oceans. The planetary invasion alert passed, and then there was nothing; destruction and combat with aliens had not come. War was the endless war directed by the elite between nations on earth, only now the planet had new islands. Years passed before the military guard was lifted and anyone was allowed to set foot on any of them. By that time, they had been sold off to the world church as nations went bankrupt. The City of Toronto technically owned First Visitation Island, with Daniel Manson's Toronto wing of the church holding the largest secret share. The island was little more than a large rock overgrown with trees and foliage, which the Cult of the Comet used permanently for ceremonies at the idols placed there. At least that was what his info said.

That Jan Fair could be there and attempting suicide there was not plausible. And as Jack floated over the harbor past the Toronto Islands and farther east to the island of the aliens, as some people called it, he knew the game had changed. Jan Fair was present on the tiny island, but the suicide tale was now stale. Jack planned to grab him and get the real story on why Fair was here in Toronto.

Dark waters rippled in an easy summer night. The bug rode across the lake with ease, its buffers enhanced by the nano engines of Jack's badge cooking in anti-surveillance mode. The island appeared in the night like a startling overgrown rock. Trees were climbing up nearly as fast as the vines and weeds. Not so long ago, it had been a rock that landed softly from the sky; today, the earth had claimed it and strangled it with

vegetation so deep and thick that Jack wondered if he'd become rooted to the rock on landing.

His eyes and ears were a key device as much as his badge. He knew this was a high-security zone, and as he could see no guards, he assumed it was mostly hidden triggers on the ground. Satellite or drone surveillance might report someone approaching, though he'd set the maps so they'd see an air car passing by on its way to the Toronto Islands. If he'd already been spotted, it would be security here that would deal with him. No SSU troops would be rushed in from the city.

There were no public assets to protect here. Church temples and idols were the property. But the value was unknown. Nothing much had been written and no photos or video published, triggering Jack to believe in a quiet place with nothing of much value. Any gems or precious metals to do with alien idols would be protected from theft in any case. So if Jan Fair really wanted to die, he would mess with some idols.

A skeptical smile formed on his lips as he made a vertical landing. Jan Fair was going to answer questions when he got him. This guy was full of bullshit, calling him over here.

A gossamer sky segment vanished above, signaling immediate danger. He ducked out of the opening door, ran, and rolled into the long grass; the dramatic exit was a memory of space training, as one could only assume the main transport device would be attacked if hostile forces were present. They did, and as he was swinging his way around through the stalks of giant weeds, he saw a beam descend, and the tiny ship popped into flames like an exploding chestnut.

Fear was the fire at his back as he ran off, now wondering if the whole thing had been a sucker deal to lure him here to his death. He still believed in his own surveillance. Jan Fair was here. And no more weapons fire was coming for him, so his badge was humming out protection that at least hid his physical body if not a vehicle.

The night air was cool, and he went down a wide well-tread path; a riot of leafy vines seized the tall tree trunks like a flow of green wax, turning to an overhang high above. Insects sang with such force he was afraid they might be bigger than him, and bats, two huge bats, swung through the night. He pinched some earth and breathed in. This was fertile ground; any more fertile and it would be manure. Even odder, perhaps miraculous, was that the plants here were old-earth and not genetically modified seed. Earth around the modified and mutated seed had a certain, slightly acrid odor. It hadn't been mentioned in the news that these islands were all natural ... he stopped and scratched his head. They were supposed to be semi-quarantined biologically, so the planet wouldn't be poisoned by alien organisms.

The laws had grown looser over the years. Jack had never really thought about it, but under a dark ash tree this time, he did. Real ash trees were extinct in Toronto, though there were new, smaller imitations, so it seemed that the islands likely contained the plants and seeds of the earth before everything had gone genetically modified and controlled. It was apparent that the regime of control had either deteriorated or they simply couldn't stop what was about to happen. Spores and plantings, the earth would grow again in the old way. The alien asteroids-to-islands were part of a restoration plan.

It was publicly known that they had restored portions of the oceans and the Great Lakes, but not that land-based plants were also being restored.

Jan Fair, would he, in the end, be buried here in the old way as well? Jack was now in darkness, and it was total other than the dim light from the distant city sky. He was a body in the dark. There was no device, not even nano, that could be trusted here. This was a secret area, and they had kept it top secret simply by making it a place used only by the odd crowd of mostly wealthy alien worshipers.

The path widened like he was nearing the head of the snake. An owl hooted from an open hood in twisted trees. He saw movement in the tall grass and beds of mushrooms and slowed, wondering how deadly any hidden creatures might be. He knew the Cult of the Comet had a monument and temple at the center of the island, and he knew he somehow had been duped.

All of his surveillance was accurate; he'd beat the police state, and that left one thing glaringly obvious. Jan Fair was not the person he said he was, or rather, he had deep secrets. Suicide, he wasn't here to commit suicide. Thinking back, Jack understood his foolishness. Holland was gone, no news coming out of there, and that was why he believed Fair's lies at first. But it was also said to be one of the hive mutants' black zones, so how could Fair's family be living comfortably inside it, or Fair be traveling from it, unless the hive mutants and the MS police state allowed it? Maybe he wasn't from there at all.

He suddenly ducked aside under a tree as sound waves hit him from the sky. It was like a fluttering of wings coming down ... large movements of air. Yet nothing was there in the clear sky. Trees and foliage rustled, and in the cool rush of breeze, sudden exhilaration and confidence rose in Jack's mind. Feelings of nature that would send animals like dogs and cats out to roll in the sand. Inside his paranoia of aliens, false aliens, and the police state, Jack knew a lie was beginning. It was arriving as a spiritual breeze of the alien angels he did not believe in. It seemed like giant handprints of the wind touched the area just in front of him, then he saw them move west, leaving clear impressions from the tree tops down to the foliage, long grasses, and weeds.

Terror of the gods passed to wonderment about Jan Fair, and he suddenly realized how poor a detective he was, because if Fair was from the black zone, he should have pressed him with questions about it. Fair's clown act had put him off guard completely. The first basic question would be how Jan Fair had traveled from a place where escape or even news was impossible. He needed sponsors, which would make him an agent of the hive mutants. A spy and a brain-addled one because he knew of no public diplomacy existing between hive mutant bosses and the MS police state. The only news was of military skirmishes with General Blackthorn's troops at the edges of the black zones.

Wind blew through the weeds with feather-lightness; alien wind prints from the sky were gone toward the great circle of worship. "I'm the dumbest person on Earth," he thought. "But it makes no difference. Whatever Fair wants here, I want. Because it must be invaluable."

Perhaps the gods now walking down to this island also wanted something. Maybe they were arriving to protect something. Maybe they were just plain fake. Collapsing and sitting cross-legged in the grass, Jack wished he'd gone all the way and done some real years in space. It would have made him a spiritual man. He wished he had kept up to par with what was happening on the planet instead of being someone who did not care. He'd been a smart-guy thug detective all of these years. Running deeper and deeper from one gutter to another, doing the dirty work even the police state would not do. Running away from the destiny he could have claimed. He could have made it and stayed up there for something better. All around him, and for all these years, people had spat on him. Not because he was a loser, but because he was something better and refused to look up to who he really was.

He thought back to all of the cases he'd solved or dropped; cases no one else would touch. Out on the city streets, the toughest crooks feared him more than the SSU. It all spun down on him with the darkness, and he could smell the fragrance of fresh earth. He decided that he had made no mistake. A taste of space had taught him that he was a person of Earth, and a breath of the stars had convinced him that the police state was the enemy. He felt that law and order should be something other than who controlled the bugs and cameras. Surveillance, he didn't believe in it at all; he spent his time circumventing it more than using it. An ugly genie had gotten out of the bottle; it could not be put back in.

Voices in the distance ended his thoughts; he thought he heard a wisp of Fair's voice. Fair was the clue he needed most of all because he probably knew who controlled the vanished lands. The rest of the info he could get from Daniel Manson. He would have all the dope on this island.

It seemed like an overactive imagination. He moved quietly through an opening into an area of trees, foliage that created an atmosphere of something forgotten. The foliage had broad leaves to the extreme, much of it from huge vines that had grown to small, smooth-barked trees. Creepers were everywhere on the ground, but there was a path they had willfully grown around and left open like it was an ancient trail. The trees were of a variety that didn't exist back on shore or in the parts of Ontario he knew. But Ontario was huge, a province of Canada bigger than most other countries ... old-growth forests and endless, nearly impenetrable lands. Somehow, seeds were here and had taken root, and trees with broad trunks and branches that formed shapes like sculptures of their own creation reached for the open night sky.

Leaves whirled in umbrella formations and spread in deep colors of red, green, and yellow. The path was beaten, but because of the voices, he knew he couldn't chance it and instead drifted off for a slow approach through the creepers and foliage. The fast-growing vines seemed alive in the night, and he found that their soft, forward-reaching tendrils were designed to quickly attach and grow on anything, including his legs. He ended up walking like he was on stilts and came to an opening like a grotto, but not quite as it had only a tiny spring at its center. It was an open circle with a variety of short ground-level ivy and clover covering. Insects and chirping birds were prominent, though he could see none of them. This hidden circle had a tiny vine-bordered path on the far side, and from his perspective, he had a view visible from no other angle.

The path ahead cut through a thin but dense line of trees. Moonlight lit the opening and glowed on a large clearing ahead. The illusion at first gathered in his eyes, and he thought he was viewing a small pond. Then it cleared, and other things drifted into vision. It wasn't a pond at all, but a huge clearing with deep, medium-height grass of a dark green-blue color. Standing stones of various sizes formed a semi-circle, and they looked ancient, older than these islands, even though the foliage lent them youth. He guessed they had been moved here, as were most other things in places involving alien worship. It was all hard to analyze, but the simplest view was that the aliens had landed giant rocks from the sky. They were asteroids and seeded. All of the rest had been done by nature and man. As Jack considered it, the darkness and mist at the end of the clearing suddenly drifted off, and he found himself facing a giant idol.

As a work of art, it was magnificent. It was at least twenty feet tall, backed by giant trees with gnarled roots and grooved trunks as wide as the front end of a city tram. The trees were all of the same unknown variety and had experienced incredible growth. Leaves above ground were fingered like hands and larger than a human head. At night, the idol cast an illusion in the moonlight. Jack's first visual impression was that of a giant owl. A nature god, and it was impressive. But under the play of moonlight, the picture shifted, and he saw the form of an alien god. Its facial features and body were simple but terrifying, as the idol looked more fearsome than any predator on earth, and this was its at-rest or relaxed pose.

Jack's study of the island's nature and its gods ended with a quiet whistling sound followed by voices and the rustling of foliage. There was a sudden, quick breeze. He took fast cover not far from the idol and, for a few moments, wished he had not taken this assignment. A sort of quiet chant and rushes of wind in the foliage told him people were coming from another direction. An ill feeling suddenly came upon him. These were not military enemies, guards, or mercenaries but worshipers of the idol. He didn't quite know how to deal with such a group if he became exposed, and he had no idea what sort of weapons they could be carrying, if any. The idol, the island, the ferocity of aliens, and their power rose in his mind, turning him from a heroic detective to a small and frightened little guy. He was a man of the streets and smarts, but not adapted to this environment, where there was no guarantee that something totally strange wouldn't happen.

His scalp stiffened, and he ducked low like he was trying to sink into the ground. He was spooked at first at what he saw, then it came clear as a costumed crowd emerging from the wide path. Some of those in the lead had to be mutants, though it was hard to tell, as mutant appearances varied widely, with some very close to human in looks. There was a certain feeling that always emanated from them that didn't come from enhanced humans. These were dressed in scarlet and black hooded robes with complex frontal embroidery like priests. In the light of the sky, their facial features appeared more feral than human. They all wore the same straight expression that seemed to reflect inner evil. The long robes hid muscular frames, but poorly, as physical strength was obvious in their smooth, confident steps.

All around him and almost beside him, other figures emerged. These were human and similarly dressed, though the trim of their clothing was gold. Shifting shadows passed on

aging faces. These were the wealthy elderly here for one of the cult's rejuvenation ceremonies.

Miraculous luck had placed Jack in the only area safe from their approach. Some of the new arrivals were women, and as he saw their blank eyes and expressions, he understood how he had gotten in this deep without being spotted. Traps and most surveillance would have been disabled so people could move on the island for this ceremony. And these drugged people couldn't see him or much of anything other than the idol they had come to worship.

A strange play of moonlight passed, followed by an emerging glow of salty light from the distant city. His vision was in focus with amazement. Taking his time to study the faces, he was surprised to near shock again. He recognized these people from sanitized MS-police-state news and media ... politicians, former athletes, the glitterati, and the elite of the nation. People he followed at a subconscious level through the daily news. Few of them were people he had respect for ... other than maybe a sports star and a former astronaut.

Even Toronto's mayor, Sam Ahindi, was among them. A few others were world leaders and major players in the corporate police state. Some were a touch younger; figures connected to higher levels of the Church of the Millennium, here for the idol worship, and apparently directing the ceremony. None of them would be classed as Cult of the Comet people, though the ceremonies harnessing the youth-giving powers of alien artifacts were originally developed by Daniel Manson and another cultist named Arjun. All of Daniel Manson's followers were young, and Manson himself only wanted control of these people so he could harness the church for his cult effort. He probably wouldn't be here to party with them.

Jack needed more now, and he'd almost forgotten that he was looking for Jan Fair. That city and world leaders were worshiping and hoping for powers of youth from alien-relic technology, spirits, or anything that would grant them longevity was already known. Probably none of them could continue through their own skills or savvy. They needed something else, as the Intel drugs had gone sour from overuse. Surgically gained life extensions in old age were painful and difficult.

There was also the Unknown Factor. No one knew what it was, but only that it turned the strongest and brightest into mush at unexpected times. It had never been traced. Fortunes had been spent on the science of a cure, and there'd been no results. Or rather, the result was superstition, the worship of aliens and the great empowerment they could bring through island idols and trust in the Church of the Millennium.

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Chapter 13: The Idol

A necklace tinkled down from the sky and, on slightly rippled water, became Visitation Island. In Janice's mind, it came from the dreams swirling in wisps of purple smoke she'd shared with Daniel Manson. A gift and rare drug altered by emanations, it was supposed to enlighten humanity regarding the friendship of the aliens. Tonight it was an earthy smoke, showing less than a fabulous new life of intergalactic peace or dreams of the alien worlds. It was a fragrance of earth and fit with the pathways to the idol. If it had no lasting substance, dreams were still a doorway to some hidden secrets. And sometimes secrets were earthly and filled with the fragrances of sleeping forests and meadows.

Daniel Manson looked alert and bored at the same time. His perfect sweeps of hair and clear skin being the envy of all elders, especially when considering that his lifestyle should have left him with a face at least somewhat tanned and weathered. They'd been drawn here expecting something great, but the aliens weren't with them except in a dull local idol-worship way. Like someone had shattered the magnificent dreams of the comet and alien worlds and turned them into the smoke of a hillbilly bonfire. Daniel's eyes showed like piercings in the night as he tried to grasp the nothing that was happening here. His drug-enhanced vision was so powerful he could see the distant stars over a brilliantly lit Toronto night, yet he was only a man, just as Janice was only a woman. Humans were weak in that they could be called yet not see anything without the aid of other powers. Those powers were hiding in the bushes on this summer night.

A sudden realization flashed in Janice's mind. "Jack," she said. "He's here on the island. I have that feeling."

"You must mean our new hero detective. He has joined the cult now, so he's on our team. But I doubt he could find a way to get over here or even have a reason for being here."

"He is here. Now I get it. We got the calling, but not because a genuine alien visitation is happening or a relic is being revealed. Jack always works undercover. Something is happening here that we need to know about, so we were drawn."

"The great idol here is all things to the youth seekers and must be his target. Though I don't understand why. This is our island, and I've searched it completely. I haven't been able to find the core relic I thought was here. See if you can pick up his location. He's on to something, or he wouldn't be here."

Clouds of blue smoke drifted like strange mist in the night, and it was only in her mind. Jack was ahead of her and moving toward the idol. Though he had not enjoyed any smoke, it seemed like he had because he was studying his surroundings fearfully. As the vision faded, she saw him look back, nearly into her eyes.

Daniel pulled up his arm and studied what looked like an antique wristwatch. The dial lit up, showing a screen with images so tiny that they were another vision to look into. "We're off MS-police-state radar at present," he said. "So whatever Jack is up to, no one other than us knows about it."

"I think some others might," she said.

Daniel's mind drifted off into space, and a vision of the home planet of the aliens. The vista was real; a power he'd received from the emanations of one of the alien artifacts

he'd uncovered. A gift he could not use with control because it was attuned to an alien mind he did not have. That vision passed, and he saw himself in a dream in conflict with older church leaders. In their eyes, he was too young, naked, and shamed. A beautiful woman was suddenly with him, and rather than lasting love, he found the watching eyes of disapproving elders. The story of his early days suddenly vanished into the blandness of everyday reality and the faithless period when he'd thought he believed in nothing but obedience and the careful steps toward power. A low period where he had been similar to the brainwashed masses, believing in the lies of holy orders in the way they believed in the police state. Fortunately for him, faith in the alien promise returned long before the grandeur of the final comet arrived. Enlightenment in the continued organizing of the cult and the pursuit of the answer that could only be found by obtaining the relics.

A sudden flash of the smoke, and there were great things in the earth and universe, and he felt sent. There was a secret hidden here, but it seemed out of focus, on the other side of a mental wall. It sent his mind spinning deeper with thoughts of the aliens. Their history stretched back to human origins and the days of barbarity. A legitimate memory and not the fabrications and speculation created thousands of years later. Visions of those beginnings came to him from time to time. He'd found some of the alien tablets, but there were no perfect readings or translations of them. Guesswork and pieces of the work existed all over the planet. Some of it part of an earlier human effort to understand the messages.

Daniel Manson was one of the few who had guessed that the alien language and technology were blended. They hadn't spoken to humankind in traceable history, and maybe they never really had because their language was also their physics and their mathematics and more. No man could understand the voices of the aliens. Their words were space travel itself. Beings so advanced that their language was a form of creation.

The cult's race was for the keys, encryption, artifacts, or anything that could aid in harnessing the great power they'd left on earth. A promise that the few pieces of ancient translation said was space itself; believers were to be carried through the gate at the time of the comet, to another world. Part of that puzzle was here, and Michaels was somehow pursuing it whether he knew it or not. With that in mind, Daniel prepared for a long night. He'd been cheated on this island before, and it wouldn't happen again.

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Jack now felt clear in the night, like a person accidentally on an alien idol walk and fitting in ... though such a thing likely never occurred. This was an exclusive club and a place where the wealthy sacrificed some of their total control to walk up and worship false gods in the form of alien idols. A more daunting endeavor perhaps than in the older days when they'd trusted in Intel drugs and the vestiges of humanist beliefs. In a society where the old god was not only dead but also illegal, the cream of humankind sought a new magical god. One that would heal them and bless them with eternal youth. The face of this god was alien and hideous. A dead god that harnessed the power left from another world, in ways not intended. It was a spirit that could deliver power, success, and comfort, even if it had been left by aliens who themselves had been in search of God.

Dead of night and a giant stone owl that didn't hoot. The Milky Way appeared in his mind's eye like a funnel threatening to suck him off to space. An unseen power had touched him; emanations of some sort. He thought of it as the telepathy of some machine generating a fantastic form of artificial intelligence. In awe, grasping a bush, he found his mind wandering, humankind a speck in the vastness of space.

One of the logos of the aliens came to mind: the all-seeing eye at the top of the pyramid. For some moments, he felt like the all-seeing eye, an effect that had also overcome the others on the island. It was the base of their trance, seeing into space. Eyes of mortals attempting to see eternity.

Jack heard low voices, a quiet chant. Specks of light appeared in the darkness of the north. Another trail to the idol was there, and a group of people appeared under a sudden play of moonlight. Their robes were hooded and purple, their faces hidden in shadows.

The cry of a bird echoed, and Jack recognized the tone as human. A signal. The same one Janice had used when they'd robbed the Arabs' info store. She was here on the island. He wondered how and why.

A hellish mutant face behind a cowl showed. A push of breeze went down Jack's moist back like ghostly fingers. Torchlight appeared on an open trail across from him, and he saw a group of about twenty-five people approaching the clearing and the idol. Their chant was quiet, almost mute in the night. They found a trail in the grass that barely existed, yet they walked it in a semi-circle like they'd done it many times before.

A very faint light suddenly brightened the clearing as they turned in the open to face the idol. The hooded figure in the lead held it ... a glowing orb of some kind, oval rather than round. In his open hands, it went through phases of light and a rainbow of colors, then brightened into a blinding flash. It lit up the clearing, sent a beam of light onto the face of the idol, and took on the image of an eye ... a representation of the all-seeing eye. A symbol that, under the control of a high priest, was supposed to unleash hidden forces.

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Daniel was like Jack, but rather than one extraordinary eye, he had two and could see like an owl in the night. In the brief dapples of light, he recognized faces. Some were of importance, and others were local elites. The priests and their trained mutants were from abroad and specialized in this ceremony. The imprint on his mind was much like an insult as the cult ran Toronto, and ceremonies were supposed to be requested. Nevertheless, he'd known they were coming.

Janice remained at his side like a quiet goddess, perhaps in wonderment at this revelation of the perversion of the elderly. Not that occult ceremonies were something new to her, but in her mind, they were a practice of the young. Foul mutants were the enemy of the cult, as all mutants opposed any attempt to bring about a return of the aliens. The elderly, well, the elderly loved themselves ... they were too old, trying to live too long. Vampires of a sort, feeding on organs, drugs, and this new form of regeneration. It led to confusion because she knew it was Daniel and the cult, through

Arjun, who had enabled the alien regeneration technology. She didn't like it but lacked the power to say anything meaningful about it.

Aliens, mutants, idol gods on earth, and the fabulous society of celebrities, the common people worshiped. All of it existing like a bubble inside the MS police state. The rulers and those who would rule were now in search of the hidden secrets come to light in recent times. Secrets of eternal life contained in the alien paganism that had risen past humanism as the old world had died.

It was a gold rush only the masters participated in, and even Jack and Daniel had been blinded by their own worldviews. Jack seeing a simple planet and a world police state where he could use his superior skills to survive. Manson viewing a power structure he could control over time through bribery. Not with gifts of gold, but the promise of youth, of a handsome face and smooth skin. In some ways, Daniel was the hidden dictator, though mostly an absentee one who pursued his own agenda. He was a controller of dead flowers, sprinkling them with portions of dew to keep their petals alive. All the rest, the torture chambers and hidden prisons, were worthless to the cult. Nothing was done to reform the MS police state. Instead, the cult had intensified worship of the fountain of youth, allowing the elite to retain their sacks of gold. The young members of the Cult of the Comet could laugh while the great ones bowed to the idol and ape-like mutants.

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Jack understood it in a sudden twist of reasoning. Yes, the elders came here to benefit from alien technology hidden in the idol, but Jan Fair was not here to grow young. Something else, something powerful, was hidden here, and for some reason, the ceremony was the time to grab it. How Fair got his information was hard to figure out. The MS-police-state super-satellite intelligence 'Volcano' and a hidden ground base in the Himalayas documented nearly everything that existed. But it seemed even Volcano was impotent in this regard. Perhaps an alien relic was hidden here under the noses of both the elite and the cult.

It came back to Jan Fair. He wasn't crazy at all, but knew something deep, and so deep not even the police-state forces on the planet seemed to know of it or him. If a relic, there had to be a use for the relic, and Fair would know that too.

The idol seemed to rise on its own to greater heights in the night, its warped visage one reflecting scorn for those below. Moving shadows painted it with expressions of disdain. For a moment, the mystery seemed to fade as Jack spotted an aging face under a cowl. Perhaps these were old fools come on a sojourn to this idol, and there was nothing more to it. And Jan Fair was another mad fool.

Faith returned as an awakening ... the aged face ... he saw others as he focused ... and he understood. Ritual, yes, they had come here for years and carved a path. And to the idol, where they received a portion of power and were eternally waiting for the rest. World leaders or from the police-state secret societies, it didn't matter, as they were all connected. What counted was that they didn't have all of the power or pieces of the puzzle they wanted. The elevated individuals of the planet were beggars in hope of more alien power gifts, and worshipers of idols in an age of new superstitions they'd

endorsed and allowed. Perhaps behind the idol, aliens were somewhere laughing while Daniel Manson pushed the buttons.

Gathering clouds created moving darkness and rested overhead as the main procession moved down the last portion of the old path and onto the well-worn new path. A hidden flock of night birds suddenly rose and flew off with a beating of black wings in the night. The procession came to a halt at the open field of short grass at the base of the idol. In the slate darkness, their lights lit only the lower portion, so it seemed they had come to worship a wall with roughly carved stone feet mostly buried in the grass.

Jack counted them, sixty-seven in all, and not a magic number. The leader lowered a cowl, showing the lined face of a man aging rapidly. A visibly old man in times of rejuvenation, meaning he was about 120 years old. The 120 drop-off point always returned regardless of science. The greatest advances of technology had made people young, but always at the approach of the 120-barrier old age came down like a crow from its roost carrying swift ugliness and death with it. The forms of death were different, but people still died. Many perished with young faces, death showing in horrible, open mouths that revealed the sudden and complete rot of tissue below. A sudden aging of faces, if it came about that way, arrived about six months before death.

Didn't someone once say a picture was worth a thousand words, or in modern times, a thousand lies? Jack knew Daniel was lurking somewhere because Janice had been traveling with him. The question being if he knew anything about Fair. It looked like even Manson didn't have the secret of this island, even though it was in his own Toronto area. Some secrets hide in plain sight. Jack knew that much ... like the wealthy searching for the answer to this idol, while the rest of the world hadn't guessed its power.

Cumulus clouds were drifting in like floats, passing over the idol. The moon was temporarily obscured, and a quiet breath of air, almost silent, drew Jack's attention. At the top of short steps and in the stone wall near the feet of the idol, a doorway had opened. A simple black space, and anyone not watching would have missed it. The pilgrims, mostly elders now at the front, had been waiting for it like something promised, and they went forward, heads bowed down. The path inside the opening led underground, and a slow, quiet chant began as the other congregations followed the priests and elders down. Four younger men, apparently guards, remained standing to either side of the opening, facing the clearing.

Unable to follow at the front without being seen, Jack retreated to the rear of the idol. He faced a thin path choked by weeds and foliage. Tall trees loomed behind the bushes. As he tried to think, he stumbled on a slate-colored oval stone that was partially sunk in hardened summer mud. The mud was also slippery, and he fell against the back of the idol, his shoulder striking a pimple in the rock. It moved in like a switch, opening a tiny door silently. He saw it and could barely believe his luck.

His badge was in Shuriken form, attached to the skin of his upper chest. He removed it and clicked the star point, altering its form to surveillance and scan mode. The opening proved clear of traps. No apparent security devices. The security here was in it being a secret passage and not visible to those who didn't know about it. The walls below were

neatly carved into rectangular forms, with the ceilings higher. It was cool, and the wet stone walls were sweating, leaving a bit of condensation trickling on the floors.

He followed the initial passage without incident, and it opened on a chamber with elaborate patterns in the rough-surfaced walls. There were cordoned-off areas that appeared empty. In appearance, the only comparison was stables. Classy ones, as there were rows of cells similar to horse stables, but for much larger animals. Nothing was in them. They were empty and their purpose left to ghastly imagination.

Distant voices told Jack he was off course; he had taken a wrong turn. A skinny rat suddenly ran over his feet, spooking him and causing a fast return to common sense. He could chase ghosts forever down here, or be one of them. He dashed in the direction of the voices, ducking low-hanging ceilings in lower passages. At a corner, he caught a rough profile that vanished instantly and faded into the darkness ahead. Then he came to a meeting of paths, and beyond it he could see light from an underground grotto, a faint play of shadows on the figures moving in that area.

Ducking down, he planned a safe approach. All seemed clear, and then he saw a gold-trimmed hood and a slight figure moving far ahead of him towards the grotto. Chin, nose, cheeks, and forehead as a shadow; it was Janice. And it unnerved him, leaving him with another mystery to put aside. She was here. He had no time to consider how, except it came to mind that Daniel Manson was likely ahead of her and had provided access.

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A fine point pressed electrodes in Jan Fair's mind, or was it all happening deep in his genes with insanity as programming? Five long years had passed, and he wasn't quite sure what was real. In remembering, he had to consider what had been real. His past ran like muddy waters in his dreams. Soon, freedom might be gone again, and he would be under full hive-mutant command again. He'd been sent on a specific mission of destruction. A powerful hive mutant wanted answers, and it had come to a point of forgotten morality where some of the privileged elders also wanted intel and a certain alien relic captured. It was a common interest, so to speak; send in a brainwashed agent to uncover a key relic so that Daniel Manson's perihelion attempt to meet the aliens would fall short and the elders would have another tool of regeneration.'

They were the evil controllers that had him pushed him into this snakes-and-ladders game. Now they knew that outside of the mutant hive, their control of him had weakened and failed. Jan wasn't searching for alien gods, youth, or power, but for himself. The person he'd been before they'd altered his brain and mind. He recalled long days and nights in the light and dark of deception. He had believed in their manufactured lies, but now he was somewhat free, and if his mission here was to find and deliver a hidden relic, then he'd do the opposite and hand it to the cult.

Jan's mind had been bugged and unexpectedly cleared. He had no idea what would come next. He'd been under another power like a bird flying south, and he knew the power that had sent him. He could still picture his home, as it had been ... seas rising long ago before the hive-mutant invasion. The soldiers, chaos in the streets just before the day of his capture. A revolting mutant beast ruled there today. This monster was

something despicable, and he knew of it while few others did. It ruled from a hidden enclave, a dead thing like the great Moloch idol ruling on this island. It was a beast, and genetically it was his brother.

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Daniel Manson found himself speculating, and not about the lies the elders had fed others. He knew this ceremony occurred often and that this year there was a meeting of processions of worship that usually wouldn't happen. He was, after all, the formal high priest of the local church, existing in an organization that was somewhat disconnected and compartmentalized as a whole. Higher levels seemed to exist only as layers with controlling elders in place for the purpose of deceit and punishment. He'd traveled the world, perhaps on a mission to deceive the deceivers and win the alien prize, only to find himself back in Toronto. Here with Janice, realizing that he'd missed something in his own back pocket.

It truly was a great game without resolution, and it would be until he had the needed relics and the final setup humming to harness their power at perihelion.

Spiritually, it had become an espionage game with various players searching for the grand prize. The elders hoping to find the full fountain of youth in a relic. The hive mutants desperate to do anything they could to prevent any possible return of their alien ancestors. The MS police state watching, not really knowing what to do, and through it all, only the Cult of the Comet had it right. The greatest opportunity ever afforded to humankind had arrived as a chance to harness the powers of the relics and the comet. To be transported to another world beyond the sun. What fools the others were in comparison to the cult, even the MS police state with its space stations in the solar system, not being with it enough to grab a chance at interstellar travel.

"Perhaps nearly all we need has been here in our back yard all along," Daniel thought. This island was, after all, the last rock to land during the new visitation. The other islands had been combed, key relics found, and either locked in the church's vaults overseas or transported to the cult's farm outside of Toronto. Logic pointed to the fact that more than the emanations from the alien power stone were inside the idol. But if an artifact was here, he wondered what form it would take. Daniel's secret was that he had the disc or the alien key. It was the engine to the stars, and when fully pieced together, it would be victory. He knew it was something the rulers of the world would not want to consider. It was something they wanted to block, though they didn't really believe it could happen. They wanted to harness perihelion for healing and youth-giving powers. Daniel knew the full key protected itself, and the others didn't. It was deadly, and all ancient alien artifacts and codes were in some way pieces of it. What he needed was to finalize the core group that, with the comet, would energize the rest.

The hive mutants believed relics could be harnessed, but not for interstellar travel. They believed contact with the distant alien planet would be established and would likely cause the alien race to return. Their greatest fear stemmed from rough translations of the alien language, which revealed that they didn't allow any form of interbreeding with the inhabitants of the planets they visited. Daniel knew that his hoped-for victory relied on practicality, not on the wind blowing through the riot of foliage under the moonlight outside. Chance and superstition were big zeros in his mind. The vastness of space and

alien beings existed. They were greater than humans. They were gods, and they roamed like eternally lost children searching the universe for a God that they felt had abandoned them.

Daniel spat in the grass; rarely was his stomach upset. There were parts of his mission he despised. As a spiritual man, he loathed all of the grunt work, and he knew his faith was not in love and peace on earth, but in power and the grand escape. The glory of the comet and of the heavens awaited the victors. Space was the real wealth, solid gold and platinum. In that sense, the chosen elders of this world had it all and had nothing. And perhaps someday the aliens would return from far-off planets, but it would be a new visitation, with humans on board the ship. Children who would become the new rulers of the Earth.

Thoughts of deities were vanquished by a rush wind so vicious it roared at underground entrances. Thunderous impacts and cracking noise followed, which had to be treetops or trunks being thrown down. The angels were coming, triggered by a ceremony that had opened the store of forbidden secrets. All of those underground were possible prey, the price of seeking could now turn to death, and if identified, the higher cost of seeking without priestly authorization could be torment.

It made little difference to Daniel Manson, as he knew the score. He'd been around the world hunting certain secrets and had been sure nothing was here. Now he was overruled by circumstances. The powers of protection had risen; more than the usual ceremony was happening.

He'd sent Janice through on another passage to avoid a two-person security trigger he had set himself a long time ago and couldn't immediately disable. He had to consider his own safety, too. A relic was still here somewhere, and if the thunder of the angels was coming, it had been disturbed, and he needed the trail to it.

Yet he saw no clues, only images in an ugly corner of his mind ... the sunken faces of a few old men and women involved in the chant. They were hoping for the redemption of further life extension. It was like a foul, medicinal dose of the hideous. The old and should-be dead calling to the skeletal, even ghostly faces of those long-dead aliens that appeared and vanished on misted walls. Who really knew if the ghosts were of aliens or just dust and a planned illusion? They'd always appeared there at ceremonial times, perhaps the superstition and illusion desperate elders sought as they hid their faces in hoods to escape genuine answers that pointed to the grave. Nevertheless, the healing power was effective, at least for a few ceremonies. But in this world, no one lives forever. And neither did the aliens, because those few writings that had been translated revealed their interest in a heavenly afterlife. Apparently, their spirits lived on for a time after death, in the common mind, but in a deprived and hellish manner.

A firm decision was made. Daniel knew he had fallen behind in the search. His movement was swift and hidden by his tight and dark clothing. Using the shadows, he got deep underground through obscure side passages that required head-down crawls. All passages from huge caverns to the tiniest crawl spaces were like a tree branch leading to a main underground area from the front. Daniel had no idea what approaches there were from the rear, but in his mind he expected the largest tunnel to be there.

The chants took on hollow, dead tones in the corridor, and the shadows seemed to be of the fallen, though they were rich and powerful men and women led by priests and priestesses. They were arriving at a deep chamber with smooth walls and an arched ceiling of webbed silver. Though barely visible, this ceiling was embossed with discs of symbols in the alien language.

The air was dry and slightly cool, and the scent pure, with no must or earthy odors. It was an opening where invisible springs of sweet water burst into mind. There were many large, smoothly sculpted stones, all half-human in size, leaning forward and exuding a calm presence. Peaceful faces, human or slightly exaggerated human heads and upper bodies, and nothing alien at all. Further in, fresh water bubbled in the basin of a fountain, and its stream followed carvings in the bronze-tinted wall at the rear.

The opening to the fountain was wide; rushing waters entered through falls and fat droplets. In this odd underground, the water changed its tints in some natural way. No lights were visible. It seemed to belong above ground, but was part of the underground as rushing bursts fell into a deep channel eroded in the stone farther along. From there, it went deeper underground. The faint roar of some distant subterranean waterfall told the tale of a world below.

So this was Moloch; tunnels underground, far below the massive idol, but most of them out of reach of the approaching procession. Daniel heard their voices fade in and out in small echoes as he made his way up. His feeling was that any hidden relic would be in near plain sight somewhere. They always were, and it would be unlikely that anything was deep in the underground. That area had been searched in the past, too, revealing nothing but the channels of the spring that ran below the lakebed.

Emerging, he saw the procession end in rising underground mist. Chanting fell away, and the elders in the lead stood as if waiting for a command from the unseen heavens. Then a middle-aged priest walked forward, turned, and addressed them.

Daniel decided it was time to leave. The processions of those a bit younger were well back, and the ritual mystery as given to the elders by the priest would only be lies. Any real clues to the relics rested deeper in, or perhaps even above, the body of the idol. But a secret of information existed because the protecting angel spirits were descending and walking the grounds.

As always, his initial find was worship of an idol abomination by elites that had little if any knowledge of religious history. It was the same story with the hive mutants. They had seen this asteroid island descend from the heavens, yet their alien masters and humankind had apportioned them nothing but holy tablets they could not translate in any detail. All of it leading to frustration among enlightened people, and to more ceremonies of desperate and greedy people ... those who pretended to believe in the hope of the ultimate gift. Daniel had gone over it many times; he needed a solid opinion of the aliens and their search for god. It had been their driving force in developing interstellar travel. Humankind wished it could conquer the stars for human grandeur and profit, but not to search for any god; perhaps the driving force that had sent both aliens and humans into space was delusion.

It was like going through a recurring dream, with the remaining relics being its elusive part. They weren't given to him despite his superior talents, and because of it, his soul sank like it was descending into Hades. Jealousy rose and reddened his cheeks as he realized that perhaps the godless Jack Michaels had found a clue. Janice seemed to love him, so perhaps his talents were greater than assessed. It was a mad world if he had no choice other than to pursue a detective who conversed with cats. With the crazy world in mind, he decided against going deeper or focusing on any ceremony and chose to find Michaels.

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Janice came to an opening, and the darkness seemed to thunder behind her; she knew it was partially imagination distracting her from trouble ahead. She'd lost Daniel as she'd ignored his commands on what to do after entry and had gone off on her own on what she thought was a faster route to Jack. A large area with a silver dome for a ceiling lay ahead. This was like an underground hall lit by lighting in the ceiling that appeared to be natural phosphors. The procession of elders and one middle-aged priest had entered this opening. At the rear, in the opening, five dark figures moved in, and the light briefly passed over them, showing them to be male and with the fierce countenances of mutants.

The elders bowed their heads slightly, and the priest pulled back the hood of his robe. Long red locks spilled out. He was mumbling something and looking at a black orb lowering from the ceiling. At the rear, the eyes of the mutants suddenly lit up and flashed red. Lights began to spin in the room. The elders fell to their knees in a coordinated motion as though they were one entity. They pulled back their hoods in the same fashion.

As Janice watched, the play of lights hit her like a sudden warmth, and she felt enlightenment as a rush of beautiful thoughts crossed her mind. A warm glow came to her cheeks; then she saw the same faint pink glow on the elders' cheeks. Aged faces melted, and Janice blinked, certain she was hallucinating. But the light and shadow softened to a shine, and she saw faces as old as death heal and become years younger. Their healing seemed to be a powerful illusion, yet she knew it was a genuine transformation. Other than warmth, the glow of youth had no effect on her as she was already young.

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Having failed to find anything in nearby passages, Daniel came out of the shadows briefly. He spotted Janice and the elders beyond her. The lights of healing were in full swing. He saw ancient wrinkles fade to soft skin on the ecstatic faces of the elders. He'd seen a number of them before, but his life was in the church, and there were so many wealthy figures worldwide that he couldn't bother to track or care about them. In his time, he'd bypassed many of them. Now, as at other times, they were here for healing at an unexpected hour. It always happened that way. The cult didn't use advanced tracking to predict the dates of their ceremonies. He lacked full access to their inner circles of global control. Like today, their events could coincide with standard idol worship of the church, and they would be among the general worshipers.

It seemed like he'd been running all of his life on a race to get to the full secret of this idol. He'd discovered hidden alien relics around the planet and had communication keys to a couple in secure locations, even one located near the moon base. He'd not attempted to move them unless he felt they were key items. He'd sealed their secure locations. As for the MS police state, with godlike surveillance technologies, they'd found nothing tangible other than the idols and holy locations named by the aliens. Like him, they'd tampered little but had done every sort of unproductive search. And like him, they'd left the areas of contact or visitation intact. Especially, Visitation Island, as it was one of the asteroid landings that became islands on the planet. It was a favorite of the elite that controlled the fascist state itself. Most of the other asteroid islands were ruled by a strange, overarching darkness and were rarely entered. Other than small animals, nothing much seemed present on most of them. Foliage, earthly insects, and birds prospered on them and ruled unchallenged. The animals lived on the shores in forested areas.

A few other islands were earthy and had idols, but most investigations found few clues about their purpose. The mystery was often no mystery, and it had led Daniel to this small island and huge idol many times. Technically, as head of the Toronto church, he was its high priest, while in reality, an ecumenical cabal of the international church visited regularly and was in control. They and their vile mutants were not allowed to set foot on Cult of the Comet property, such as the Ontario Farm.

Drawing out alien emanations for healing was the standard here. Visitation Island was the church's bread and butter, given the immense sums paid by visitors. Each visit with proper ceremony brought back the lights and warmth of younger days. At a minimum, five years of wrinkles, cancer growth, or anything physical faded as the body was renewed. Other island idols abroad were more associated with spiritual healing and the gifts of wisdom, music, and artistic talent. Believers who had successfully visited and gained from them often adopted new identities and joined the planet's artistic class. If any gained wisdom, it was the weak wisdom to go underground and live a better life than that of the masses.

Daniel had copies of most of the tablets, and these were inspiring as pieces of an alien language so fantastic that if programmed and powered through the systems embedded in the relics, they would be a transformation of energy; a language of gods like the word of God named in the old illegal bible. Technology so high that it was the magic of creation and space travel. Of course, no one had mastered anything of the language; others who had sought the alien power were fortune hunters. Scientists were not believers despite the miracles they had seen. Shortsighted people who could have gone on to claim the universe, but were instead satisfied with fool's gold. Those in search of cheap gifts of the alien muse and the worship of their own delusional youth used the technology for emanations. They had been conquered rather than conquer and the proof was that around the world, corruption ruled and the masses suffered.

Daniel knew that if he could lay out the final ceremony, he would gain the full power, harnessing it to create the interstellar travel the tablets promised. The coming of the comet meant he could establish himself as the mediator between humankind and an alien world. Renew contact that had been discontinued centuries ago. He wasn't alone in trying to piece the puzzle of alien power together, but he was light-years ahead of all

others. The job was nearly done, and here on Visitation Island, he saw a final chance. It could be an ace to win the game.

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Janice struggled to keep her grasp on reality. The same invisible light that healed aged worshipers sent reflections that she could not see but felt as a hot glow on her cheeks. Light hypnotism took her mind. She watched a very old woman open her robes. The hood fell back, revealing a deeply lined face sinking about the skull. In stark contrast to her emaciated face, the woman's eyes were hazel, fleshy, and staring. She had skin and bones, with no underlying muscle or meat visible. It was most likely weight loss from cancer of some variety. As she opened her robe fully, she became a horror celebrity, nearly a skeleton with thin flaps of skin fallen where her breasts should have been. Her robe fell away, and she opened her mouth in the glow, revealing perfectly white, implanted teeth. Yet as Janice watched, the teeth shook, came loose, and fell out of her mouth.

Aged beyond natural death and a hideous scarecrow-like thing, the woman gazed into the glow. Only her eyes seemed to be alive, like some great ogling frog things existing in the ravaged remains of a human body. Then, she began to heal. It was subtle and strange at first. Her body gained substance under the skin, flesh taking shape and rising as though foamed under ancient, cracked skin. She was like a balloon about to burst into some horrible explosion, and then her skin began to heal. Deep crevices, red and brown stains, and mole-like growths faded as the rosy glow of youth brought healing. But the healing was limited. Her dark hair freshened, and her breasts and face settled so that she was a modern sixty-year-old woman in appearance, and a healthy one. Her fleshy eyes smoothed and drew back into her face. The hypnotism then seemed to fade, and she looked down at her breasts, cursed quietly, and closed her robe. The healing was not enough to satisfy her, and as she fastened her garment, the glow fell on others.

Janice remained watching the healing. She had no idea what to do or where to go. More or less, she was a hidden witness. Daniel was off on the hunt. Jack was likely already ahead of him, but she decided to stay put and watch, and if something happened to threaten the others, she'd be ready to act.

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Jan Fair reached his destination, centered directly underneath the idol. There he fell to his knees and into a dream, a programmed dream of tools spinning and creating childish constructions. He felt something hard inside his brain. Something he couldn't name but could feel and define ... and it was killing him and commanding him ... sending out a pulse that had been hidden before but had grown as he reached the island and the idol. In his soul, he felt violated. In his mind, an explosion of false joy rose like fireworks or maybe even downloaded applause from the dumbed-down masses of the earth. He was at the bottom and the pinnacle, positioned to grab a piece of the alien puzzle. Spring water dripped from the underbelly of the idol. The breeze was clean and the passage smooth, so cleanly cut that he could imagine the lasers founding it. Above a gold rectangle had been cut into the stone, but it was too high for him to reach. An alarm bit like claws in his mind; this was the place. But was it the destiny of a prophet,

the calling of a wise man, the conclusion of a detective, or the end of the road for a man with a controlled brain ... lower than a rat, filthier than the lowest criminals, terrorists, and enemies of the human race. Jan reached up to claim the prize, and there was consolation. In the madness, the truth and the lies didn't matter. Then he had it in his hands, and he wondered what did matter.

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Daniel was running, suspicion creating an alarm in his ears. That and fear and jealousy. His Toronto believers controlled this island, yet someone was here, about to claim the hidden relic. Any thoughts of healing passed in his mind. By default, if present, he was supposed to protect the great ones, world leaders here for healing. But they hadn't announced their visit, and it didn't matter. They were like addicts now, coming all the time for healing, and it was never enough, because they were too old and hiding it. Nothing ever came from them; they knew none of the secrets. Over time, they'd become worshipers of the idol, the light glow of youth upon them as they prayed for a new life and younger days that were gone and couldn't come again. Life and love, the cream of youth, yet the secrets were scattered, and Daniel wanted all of them. He'd never gain them from these idolaters, and as his feet fell softly into slower steps, he thought about Jack and caught a mental flash of him running.

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Jack was on the run, and it felt like he was running for his life. A spook seemed to be chasing him and was almost on him. He raced through neatly cut tunnels toward the strangest quarry of his life. It was unbelievable, and it was Jan Fair. Clever people had fooled him in the past. Some people knew how to play the cards and lie. Psychopaths could manipulate nearly everyone, but the greatest trickster was a clown, and especially one that didn't know he was one. Jan Fair thought he was genuine, and Jack knew he wasn't; it was more or less a question of the control. Was it simple mind control and brainwashing, or did they have advanced control that allowed them to read his thoughts and actions? Tunnels twisted, tiny bats suddenly launched themselves from hidden perches, and then a light appeared and a passing shadow. That of a man. Jack knew he'd found the prize because he'd found Jan Fair.

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Janice was running, but only in her mind. She wanted to break the world record for the female 100-yard dash, though only the spinning horror in her head was a contender. The light had suddenly turned bluer, and the warmth of healing had vanished. A cold breeze blew in, and the elderly who had come up for healing kept coming. With no warmth or healing, a crowd formed in the growing cold. The ceremony had gone wrong, and Janice knew it, though she didn't know exactly how or why.

Then the most glamorous couple of the elders approached, halted, and waited for healing. They cast the cleanest illusion of all with smooth pink skin that was beautified yet failed to mask aged faces. Their fastened robes were scarlet and purple, designed so that skeletal bodies looked full; this was revealed when they loosed gold cords and unveiled their bodies. The flesh inside could not even be called flesh. It was rubber, twisted like hardened muscle on bone, and when the light of healing fell on them,

something monstrous happened. Their bodies cooked in a sudden appearance of boiling blood and mist, then condensation froze them into black scabbed things. Their faces, already transformed to near-death masks, became something beyond life or death. In dissolution, their bodies softened and melted like jelly to the ground, and rose again as new bodies. Grotesque in that their heads formed and faces grew in plastic skin. Faces that stretched to screams of horror and agony.

Death had come for them, but it was claiming vengeance, manifesting itself in the living and bringing about anguish that quickly murdered the faith of the worshipers. Within seconds, they were all under punishment and dissolution. No prayers left to answer. Nothing could save them as they became victims of an alien science turned hostile. The proof that in their self-worship, they had forgotten they were harnessing something unknown. It was a power beyond humankind and its technology. Its alien voice was the silent screams of its victims, and rather than something new, it seemed like something ancient had returned, something awakened by the reckless tampering of Jan Fair.

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Chaos and death had arrived, and it had not come this way before. Among the privileged of the planet, a number of them fell dead. And as they did, Jack saw a tunnel door suddenly open. He headed down it through a neatly cut but narrow passage. It was about as high as his head, and he had to duck several times from the rounded stones hanging from the roof. He had no idea where he was going but was following a hunch, as though the aliens or the idol had given him this new clue. The tunnel wound around, and he saw a square door and light ahead. He halted at the entrance, bright light filling his eyes and temporarily blinding him. He knew he had gone downward and was far beneath the idol. Whatever was down here had to be of value. A large chamber showed ahead, and as his eyes adjusted, he saw lights rotating in a pattern on the ceiling. The walls were art, random carvings in the stone. He saw shadows like men and women that continually swept about and vanished. Then he noticed one shadow that remained. It was the shadow of a man near a rise in the ceiling at the far wall. It was a shadow he recognized: Jan Fair, and his elongated shadow arm was drawing back to his chest, holding something bright. Something that shone like an ember and kept shining as Fair attempted to place it in a pouch.

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Chapter 14: The Escape

Moving forward quickly, Jack was on Jan Fair in seconds. Turning, Fair wore a look of surprise that transformed into one of disappointment when he saw it was Jack. He knew the lies were over. Like all thieves, in time, he'd been caught.

Jack spoke first. "I suppose you're stealing this relic so you can kill yourself with it."

"You've surpassed my estimates. I didn't think you'd get to the island, and definitely not this far."

“Looks like the elders and you cleared a path for me.”

“You only, because any others are either running or under an alien death sentence.”

Jack looked beyond Fair at the stone he'd pulled open. It revealed an entire wall of what looked like a cross between hieroglyphics and fine circuitry. An empty slot showed that the heart of this structure had been pulled out. Glyphs of the aliens no one could read were above, and as Jack's eyes passed to Fair, he knew all he needed to know for the present.

“You were sent to find this. So what is it?”

Jan Fair's eyes flared, but he didn't get a chance to answer as a third figure appeared from another opening in the shadows. That of Daniel Manson. Manson held a laser at ready and spoke. “It's not a question of what it is but what it isn't. It isn't your property or the property of the hive mutants that sent Fair.”

“Hive mutants?” Jack said.

“Of course,” Daniel said. “That's one of the reasons some of them were holed up in Toronto. The greedy Arabs burned them out before they were done, but their master had already sent a human. One with a control device in his brain.”

“Except, the control didn't work,” Fair said. “I had no intentions of handing this over to them.”

“What is it?” Jack said as Fair lifted the glowing disc from his pouch.

Manson waved the laser. Fair passed the disc to him, and after a glance, it was in Daniel's coat. “What it is, my friend, is part of the core. The glyphs on this disk combine with another one I have and tell us how to set up the final ceremony to harness the power.”

“It's only a disc,” Jack said. “How much power can come from it? Certainly not a force that could power space travel.”

“Relics work to refine and channel power,” Manson said. “The key is the comet. The tech we're harnessing is hidden in it. The hive mutants know about it, that's why they want this piece.”

“Yeah, well, Fair has done more than find this. He's unleashed a deadly force on the island.”

“True. And unfortunately, our friend here has killed some of the elder leaders of the planet in an unsightly way.”

“Their deaths benefit humanity,” Fair said. “They were idol worshipers, and they collaborated with the hive mutants that destroyed my home country. Now they have paid the price.”

Jack turned back to Daniel Manson and was about to speak. Then Janice appeared in the tunnel. Grey dust and cobwebs covered her hair, and she brushed it clean with her fingers as she spoke. “I saw what happened back there. Getting off this island alive won't be easy.”

“That’s true,” Fair said. “We’ve about five minutes to get out from under this idol, or we’re going to be crushed.”

Jack spoke. “I don’t know about Fair, how he got down here, but I seemed directed. Doors opened for me. Doesn’t that tell you something? Maybe we’re being set up. And you’re now holding the prize.”

Daniel looked around the cavern with sudden fear in his eyes. A deep rumble sent pebbles and dust down. His eyes flicked back to Jack, and he couldn’t hide his hunted look. “It looks like we’ll have to pool our talents to get off this island. Fair, I don’t trust. That means you, Jack. Either you watch him, or I’ll burn him. Preferably, he’ll be smart enough to stay alive.”

Jan Fair leaned back, taking a religious look at the ceiling. He seemed to be little threat, if any. Jack’s eyes studied Daniel’s laser gun. He had no plans on disarming him or grabbing the cursed disc. Knowledge of it was enough for him. Shadows fell as the light diminished. He felt fatigue coming. It came to him that it was the residue of death in the air, passing into them all. If they didn’t move, it would penetrate.

“I’ll take care of Fair,” Jack said. “You can keep the prize. But let’s trust each other and get out of here fast before it’s too late. You’ve stolen the heart of this thing, so if it self-destructs, we don’t want to be in here.”

Jan Fair spoke. “Pardon me for bearing bad news, but haven’t you considered that those unfortunate world leaders who accidentally perished have an army of security off the shores of this island?”

Daniel Manson flinched for a moment as he saw Fair’s clever eyes on him. “Shut up, you idiot. I don’t want to hear any more. You know I can get us out.”

Janice stepped up to him in the flickering light. “Anything else helpful you might know that we don’t?”

“A lot. But it won’t be worth much if we’re dead.”

The earth roared above, and it seemed certain the idol was about to sink, taking all captured spirits on a direct descent to Hades. They hesitated another moment, then followed Jack’s lead as he pointed to a tunnel that remained stable as the island quaked. Daniel raced ahead of him, his weapon wagging at his side, but there were to be no fights over weapons or the relic in this escape. Survival was the question, and Daniel had a better idea of what it meant. That became clear when the tunnel came to a sudden dead end. Daniel took a tiny jewel off his neck chain and passed it quickly in the air to open a door above.

They climbed up a steep clay embankment and out into the night air, finding themselves facing away from the idol and its destruction. Worshipers and seekers who’d been hoping for eternal life or decades more of tiny wrinkles lay on the ground as seeds for new growth. The earth still shook, and the idol still seemed like some terrible heathen god. One about to fall.

“Daniel,” Jack said. “Has there ever been something like this before. The whole island seems about to sink.”

“No. Never. We’ve brought about destruction, but the island should remain intact. Only this area will be torn up.”

“Oh-oh,” Jan Fair said, glancing back to see the idol shake and shift incredible weight behind them. It began to sink into the earth, triggering a small earthquake. It was to be a slow collapse and final burial. Dust, like a great exhalation, came up through the chambers, and earth began to spill in. They ran with sure steps, growing swifter as they gained some confidence and then in panic as dirt flew and the surrounding stones began to descend into the earth.

Time passed in amber, and the screams that rose seemed long and agonized. Fading jags of terror-stricken voices caught up in loud crashes assaulted their ears. They were moving, fleeing down a tunnel of black night and earthen paths through the whirl of overarching trees and thick undergrowth that rose from long grass. Vermin of night, even snakes fled from their hurrying feet. Two owls above took a short flight and landed in nearby trees. Yet higher up, something looked down. It was both new and old, a projection of the dying idol, the all-seeing eye, artificial intelligence using its ancient programming.

It had always been around. Yet it was rising again, retaining a memory from other centuries. In all of the past, it had been a watching eye no one dared awaken. Now it was like a newborn baby, and it sputtered, trying to control its imitation of thinking as commands came via emanations from a sister relic in another part of the planet.

A correct decision was unlikely, but it did act. It had an idea and sought to narrow the focus to its target. Confusion struck again as a worldwide stream of security readings came in from devices it had not previously detected. The enemy was escaping Visitation Island, so it searched its data and tracking as a target came up. Too many controllers were detected, and it was not capable, so it sought a core reading and called up the alien bio-mechanical angels hidden on the island.

The underground rumbled like some beast under the island as Daniel Manson led them into the escape tunnel. Here, the lights were feeble and the passage thin.

“What are you leading us into?” Jan Fair said.

“Trust me. We’ve always used this tunnel. In the old days, there was another island here. It was crushed as the alien asteroid moved from its landing site and drew closer to Toronto's shore. At one time, there was a public area and a fair bit of above-ground land. An access tunnel existed then, and it has crumbled. We are in an old service tunnel. The opening at the island we dug out some years ago. It is scary, but their surveillance isn’t here. Only the cult knows of it.”

“Okay, I believe you,” Jack said, “We’d better move fast. I don’t think any security details of the elders will find us here, but the evil AI spirit of that alien idol probably will.”

He'd barely finished speaking when Janice burst down from above, sending pebbles showering across the trail. “They’re almost on us. Some kind of creatures that fall from the sky and take up six legs. I barely made the dive in.”

“It has unleashed the alien angels,” Daniel said. “They’re bio-mechanical beasts the aliens planted to guard the islands, and much more deadly than the mutants the MS

police state uses as phony angels. Run, and follow the light. If you step into darkness, you'll hit death traps we've set. Leave them for the angels."

And they did run ... in and to the salty light down close tunnels ... over wet rock floors and fallen debris ... heads down even though the tunnel was high enough for a free dash. Thunder rose and became the hastening steps of crouching giants at their tail. More steps brought the rumbling with them so that the walls of the old tunnel seemed about to crumble and allow the lake waters above to spill in and drown them.

Jack took the lead, and he stumbled and fell, Jan Fair falling over him, and Janice and Daniel skipping over them and halting. Looking back, Daniel saw something horrible looming in a taller stretch of the tunnel. If it was an angel, it was the most terrible one he could imagine; warped face of alien and beast filled with a rising expression of something beyond hunger and killing. It looked prepared to make its victory cry as it sensed the taste of flesh. It wasn't an angel from heaven, but the hell of some otherworldly drug withdrawal vision.

Keeping steady for a moment, Daniel fell to his knees, dust suddenly swirling in his eyes from a small collapse. He had auto-aim but still aimed before he fired a blast at the angel's eyes. He targeted the eyes because they seemed extended to hostile worlds like these beasts were guard dogs the aliens had captured somewhere in the void. In the moment before everything crumbled, he guessed that the security details of the elders were already dead on the shores of the island. These creatures knew by now that he had the disc.

Jack was going through an opening, followed by Fair and Janice. A great cloud of smoking dust came toward Daniel. He watched as the angel creatures were devoured by tons of earth. In a flash, he turned, ran, and caught Jack's hand.

The night air had never been so sweet; they had emerged in an area of weeds and tumbled breakwater rocks on the shoreline. Tall towers and security fences rose nearby. Off across the water, more alien angels were moving ... strange ships and beings, some walking on the water. Perhaps they were divine and angry ... the wrath of gods. Great leaders had perished, their mighty idol violated, and thieves were escaping in the night.

Daniel whistled low in disbelief at the sight. Jan Fair looked on as if he'd seen it all before, and Janice was in Jack's arms. Only Jack spoke. "We'll split up and get out of here. This isn't over yet. We've killed some VIPs. The MS police state will come for us if they find out who we are."

Daniel raced straight ahead and blew a hole in a security fence. Jack headed west on the shoreline with Janice on his tail, and Jan Fair ran east along the rocks. Footsteps thundered out on the dark water as the hellish angels walked toward the shoreline. Finding a forested path down to a ravine, Jack took Janice over the edge and behind a boulder. Daniel and the disc had disappeared on the grounds of a waterfront shipping area and dock. Jan Fair was now out of sight on the rocky shoreline. The creatures were now lifting off the water, heading in the direction Jan Fair had taken. Jack wondered about them, as they were tracking Fair, not Manson.

He hoped they wouldn't pursue him inland, as beings that could fly, rip through tunnels, and walk over water were trouble.

"They're after Fair," Jack said. "Looks like he's a dead man."

"Daniel has the disc, so these things aren't all that bright," Janice said.

"Let's get out of here. We're going to have more to worry about than Fair. General Blackthorn takes orders, too. From the elderly, so to speak, and they are going to be very angry with us over this caper. I think Daniel can call off those dogs, but not right away. I know them. They attack before they think."

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Paranoia knows no bounds, and neither does lack of respect for privacy. If no one is watching, someone is ... and if you see or know anything, you're under the focus of the broken world MS police state. In these times in Toronto, the person feeling free of surveillance would be the one under someone's ugly microscope, like an ant singled out under a casual, hostile eye. What are you worth ... an international traveler, a businessperson, an investor ... then they'd follow you through your portable devices, recording everywhere you went and what you said ... for profit's sake, as the financial stability of nations is considered paramount. Cameras and hidden voice recorders on any city streetlight would have your face and recordings of whether deceit was in your mind or in your words. The tracking existed in any device you owned, and the condominium towers and larger city homes tracked everything with security guards, technology, and force if necessary. They found a welcoming clientele always looking to be safer and more secure in areas outside of hive mutant, terrorist, and protest zones; areas where you could walk out your door all year, safe from property thieves and open to the real crooks if you attracted the attention of security police. Yet there was a god and an army of drones watching the watchers. God today was the super satellite Volcano that controlled all data.

The night eased in with a cooling touch. A breeze that in its essence of peace told him he was being watched, and in a special way. The situation had become too dangerous, meaning he no longer had a secure home. The black cat jumped into his arms, and he considered his new black pet. He was a smart animal and could quickly flee, but a raid or a full search would leave him vulnerable to being killed or captured. Most likely, he'd be killed with his body under a full scan for hidden items under his skin. Jack felt lucky in that he had no living wife or known children. Relatives belonged to the wealthier class, and he'd been a special child, leaving enemies in a position where they would have to deal with him directly. He wondered what, if any, place in this entire world would be a place where he could hide cats.

He developed an escape plan. It would be a matter of sending out false leads during a lull that gave him ten minutes to escape before the trace back, and it proved to be enough. He provided a scent tracer that would guide others off the track. Jack took an unregistered town car and drove off the highway onto a rutted road that took him into the crumbling neighborhood he'd discovered as a runaway child. The quiet cries of his confused cats, seeking release, seemed to be the only sound in the park. Jack looked from the darkness and weeds to the spire of the crumbling church. It was amazing how

the years had changed nothing here. Development and grand structures had risen across the city, along with smaller developments that crowded even most of this area. Yet this tiny alcove remained untouched. Derelict houses still surrounded the park, and poor people still lived in the old, crumbling houses that star-fished out in the winding streets of this poverty-stricken service zone. Even the same beat-up restaurants, stores, and bars existed on small strips that were half-alive and half-abandoned.

Jack studied the park and the old church and decided it would be heaven for cats ... an old rodent-crawling building with weedy grounds and uninhabited buildings nearby. Few people visited this forgotten place. He opened the cage and let the felines run out, knowing he'd made the right choice. The cats would survive easily here and be hidden from everyone, even the surveillance state.

He saw his smaller cat move like a dark streak, chasing something small in the dark over by the church, and then he turned and began the walk back to the small car he'd used. Again filled with wonder. Seeing the incredible towers and lights of the city, from what seemed to be its dark, empty heart, a crumbling refuge of broken humanity and insects, weeds, night birds, and small animals.

Feeling rested and emotionally satisfied, Jack stopped at the car - a vehicle resembling a bubbled bug. But he didn't get in at all; instead, he removed the hot-wired control fob and sent it on a ride to the downtown theater district. Turning, he saw bats whooshing through the air to a nearby underpass. They existed in the rest of the city as well. He knew that despite the age of this worn neighborhood and the filth of the pockets of repair yards, it was a healthier place where nature still had a firm hold. He felt like a speck in the dark, staring from some hidden arbor at the monster of lights and towers that humanity had become. He felt happy that he'd found a place to hide the cats, but sad over the state of the planet. It was sadness he brushed off quickly as he began the long walk home. A walk that involved traveling through a forested ravine, going uphill, and getting past the three levels of security fencing. There were no human or robot guards for this area, as standard security devices had always been enough to keep the poor locked inside. Some of the devices weren't currently working, as Jack had powered them down remotely before reaching them. In that sense, a gate to the city was open, but no one would ever go up and find it. In his memory, a gate had always been open because the old prophet had walked through without difficulty in the old days.

Back in the surveillance city, Jack grabbed a cab. And back at the park, his cats lost their fascination with the overgrown area and looked to the old church across the road. Strange sounds came to their ears; sounds only an animal could hear. Shadow crouched and listened for a time, then he crossed the cracked asphalt and did a slow patrol of the outside grounds. Raccoons and a possum slowed him. He hid in the weeds, watching and hearing the sound of rats inside the structure. A meal in waiting, and a closer scent investigation led him to a rat hole that he used to enter the church. The feline found himself inside a vast room of ancient, worn pews and huge dust-webbed stained-glass windows. The pulpit and choir floor were raised, and four levels of balconies rose behind him. Complete interior silence touched his ears, and he could hear only the faint noises of night birds, rats, and crickets outside. There was the grunt of a raccoon, then nothing. It was like a journey into the grave where silence created the whispers of ghosts.

Then something strange happened. Cobwebs blew in the semi-dark above, and an odd breeze came from nowhere. Mild rumbling shook the building, and what seemed like a human whisper came from below. Spooked, the cat sauntered over to the stairs and began to climb. The whispering grew in volume, and in reaction, he continued up to the very top, where a door had fallen, and the opening led to the bell tower and a broken window. The cat stopped and looked up as a bat flew in the window and went up to the top. It hung just above the ancient bell. Inscriptions carved in the bell whirled in the cat's mind, and after a few moments, he sat on his haunches and listened, hypnotized and unable to move.

Strong creaking came from far below in the basement, and there was a great wheezing noise like some inhuman thing was coming to life. The faint sound of ancient cracking bones came to the cat's ears as something rose and began to walk. A heavy wooden door opened with a ghostly creak, and footsteps sounded as some sort of man-creature, like the walking dead, moved up some stairs and crossed the altar. It paused there, opened a book, leafed through the pages with ease, then halted. A dry, dead voice read some scripture older than the dust falling at every movement. Then footsteps began again as the being crossed the floor to the staircase. Hair on the cat's back rose in fear, but he remained frozen to the spot as the footsteps came up the stairs, closer and closer.

Shadow's eyes were wide as moons when the man passed the fallen door, but fear passed as the man's mind made contact. The old man, the prophet, had come back from his grave, where he'd rested for years at the bottom of the church. His body was skeletal, with very little flesh on the bones, and his skin was like hanging leather. White whips of hair remained on his scalp, almost like gathered dust and feathers. Scales fell from his eyes, and they came alive and fierce in intent, like his whole body was driven by the spirit still alive in the pupils. His clothing was a robe that had decayed to rags that still managed to cover his flesh, and his shoes were thin sandals of worn leather. His left hand was held to his breast, an old holy book in his brittle fingers. In his right hand, he held a bent object similar to a key. His neck bones cracked as he suddenly looked up at the bell and said a silent prayer. Then he looked at the cat.

The cat remained transfixed as the skeletal prophet walked over to him, and though terrible fear rose in him, he couldn't move as the man reached down. He pulled a piece of wire from his robe pocket, fastened the key-like object on it, then took the cat's collar and fastened it firmly to it.

All of the fur on the cat's body rose in terror, and the old man sighed, exhaling odors of death. He spoke in a commanding whisper and a breath of dust and decay. "It is done. When the time comes, you will come here with the key." Then he walked away, back down the steps. It was a long, slow walk, and when he'd reached the bottom and closed the door, he sat down and died completely, remaining frozen there with bones locked like a mummy.

As he died, the cat came unlocked and ran off like a bullet, racing down the stairs, out the opening, and over into the park. He picked up his companion, Tigger, along the way. In the faint night light, a gleam came from his collar, and with it, healing warmth. His fear

vanished in a moment, and in his simple mind, he knew that he'd been given a great gift that he must keep and protect.

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The sun rose like a hot white ember in a world grown both warmer and colder, depending on location. In Toronto, it was heat and sweat, humidity and a hot sun. Something else was also in the air, and a flock of loud crows announced it as they took flight to deeper cover in the city. Surveillance was complete, and the report was that several agencies were watching Daniel Manson's church and each other.

Greed over the hope for more info and interagency jealousy led to a strange gold rush. A bewildered SSU agent stared for a moment, then she ducked back into a high patio on a business condominium tower. Reason being that in her binocular view, it seemed like an entire air force was coming in, and that was the air, not to mention the ground. Four agencies had decided to raid Manson's local church headquarters, and it would have been twenty if clearance had been allowed. Meaning national security still controlled the higher airspace.

The church's fierce architecture left it never sleeping, as the main spire, other stone towers, and two courtyards were always in a spiritual dimension that defied the sterile sky of the residential and office towers rising above it. It had the ground connection, the pedestrian parks, and small businesses below, and seemed to be the center and controlling location of the neighborhood.

That layout meant the assault came from an assortment of small airborne vehicles and from camouflaged soldiers on foot. It was like watching sparks from odd popping fireworks, but in reverse as the air vehicles sped like fireflies to various hover spots. On the ground, it was difficult as armed soldiers disguised in civilian clothes reached all entrances and exits, and came into conflict with pedestrians on the street. None of them wanted attention, and they had established positions, so it ended up like a joint guard exercise, with various patrols looking at one another and the public, waiting for further orders.

On the outside, all had to look clean for the public. On the inside, no such rules applied. The holy temple of the aliens was trampled as military men blasted out fifth-floor decorated glass. Gold shards tinkled on polished stone floors as the initial explosions faded. Women in ceremonial outfits and young men in heavily ornamented robes moved past a fountain that fronted the statue of an alien being. The alien's huge emerald eyes seemed to watch like oval moons as the soldiers charged in and their targets fell to the ground. They were now in supplication to new gods - most of them male and wielding powerful weapons.

The action was brutal as four guards came forward to do fast searches. Nothing was found, and few words were exchanged. Helmet video revealed that the raids on the rest of the church were going well. Except there was no trace of the target, Daniel Manson.

Red beams haloed the temple, and a crowd gathered on the ground. The people looked up at the bright light on the spire, where a larger orb was descending. Higher up in the heavens, a ship came into view like a mountain in the sky, and it made the onlookers

gasp. Not because it was an alien ship, but because it was an Earth cruiser of the police-state world.

They had come with great force and found no resistance; that the temple had not been destroyed showed they wanted something inside. At the spire, two military men walked off a beam into the building. They knew their quarry had likely escaped, but a full search was in order.

General Mike Blackthorn strode down the hall on the top floor of the church. The place was empty, the guards opened the doors, and then he went below. It wasn't long before his anger rose. Long before they got to the ground levels, he cursed the statues and said, "Manson isn't here as reported, so where is he?"

Close to trembling, his intelligence chief answered. "We can't pinpoint him exactly. But he's not here. He's about the only person on earth we can't get a range on. He's probably at their farm in a sealed room."

They came to a lower floor that was fourteen feet high. General Blackthorn studied an alien artifact that resembled the front carriage of a continental train. He seemed calm and relaxed. Sudden anger rose on his face. "Jack Michaels, where is he?"

A minute passed, and anger climbed up General Blackthorn's spine, reddened his cheeks, and reached his eyes as a hostile stare. Faintly, unbelievably, a voice came and touched his ears. In a whisper, it said, "Michaels appears to have disappeared, too."

General Blackthorn stared in disbelief. "If I could do it legally, I'd kick all of your asses."

"Sorry, General, but we have some leads ..."

"Shut the fuck up," General Blackthorn said. "I want no arrests, but I want everything that isn't valuable in this place destroyed. It'll give us some payback."

As his soldiers left his presence, he heard the noise as they began to trash the building. His words had been said only for the benefit of underlings. He had Jack's contact information, though he'd never intended to use it. The General's face took on the likeness of polished stone. He'd made a mistake in assuming Michaels was an easy customer. Daniel Manson was another betrayer who had broken his deal with the world government. Both would be punished. But not too much or immediately. Some of the elders had died. Well, who really cared? The current interest was in perihelion and what would happen during it. Nothing would work with Daniel Manson in custody. He'd simply contact him at the farm.

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Chapter 15: The Farm

The transport copter had the feel of travel on a large worker bee with nearly invisible wings beating somewhere at high speed, but barely felt. The open concept was

brehtaking, the view out of the clear but unbreakable plastic giving a partial illusion of floating in the sky. It was definitely not a transport device for anyone suffering from a fear of heights.

The high whirl of rectangles, cones, towers, and rotundas grew sparse, and the tall scrapers smaller. The yards and poverty zones of the second suburban ring vanished for long periods like Jack's old memories of Scarsdale, fading between towns as they headed out of the city and north east. They seemed to be flying along a trail running between populated areas, appearing on the left and right sides. The countryside was densely forested, with houses, mansions, and townhouse complexes suddenly appearing on hillsides, along newly paved country roads. Unlike the city, where the wealthy were gated by security, the deep forest, farmland, and distances provided much of the security, as few people traveled off the main roads. Everyone was armed out in the country, with more hunting accidents than actual crime.

A scenic half hour of glamorous blue lakes passed with Jack saying little while Janice bubbled about the scenery and her knowledge of the cult's country location. Finally, it appeared in a mixed forest as a sudden, odd vista. This Cult of the Comet home location was ostensibly an organic farm, and the main farmhouse and barn showed in the west, along with fenced-off dairy cattle, farmland, and Canadian travel horses with long manes. Another super-long structure was on the farm, nearly camouflaged by green roofing and native plants. Bright cladding on the side revealed it fully, and Jack knew immediately that it was the long house Janice had mentioned. The long house was mostly new construction for a large number of guests or residents.

Another structure resembling a small ultra-modern castle stood on a low hill to the north, and it had a dome-like eye in front of it that they both recognized as the cult's legendary eye on the universe, or eye on the comet. It was a state-of-the-art deep-space telescope under the Toronto church's holdings, or more aptly, Daniel Manson's personal telescope and astronomy lab. It was the planet's most advanced on-the-ground telescope and had numerous modes of operation. The cult had watched the approaching comet and recorded everything about it, hoping that the statistics would yield enhanced knowledge of the energy transfers at their perihelion ceremonies.

Connected castle segments were mostly the country residence of Manson and senior cult members. It was known that this estate was the key gathering point of those expecting to escape the planet via comet power harnessed by alien relics. Believers in comet power and travel to the alien home-world were gathered here. Daniel and Arjun were here and would be at perihelion, making this the location of those with the most faith. Other connected churches worldwide had long since succumbed to the elders' heresies. Nearly all of them had set up for ceremonies at perihelion, but most believed they would harness great healing powers and a spirit of youth and strength. Interstellar travel wasn't on their agenda. Neither was it on the agenda of the MS police state, as it didn't allow any ships to attempt travel beyond the sun anymore. Earth's space goals were now in a sphere of tightly controlled space stations orbiting the sun.

Newly constructed sheds and smaller buildings dotted the landscape, and the south held an old country mansion. It did not resemble the more modern variety they had seen in the countryside on the flight in. This one was much older, though sporting some

modern-style repairs. Sitting in gardens and thin woodland, it was back-dropped by a weed-ravaged hill and had the airs of a haunted house. There were no cars parked in its lot, and though they saw people walking elsewhere on the grounds, it appeared abandoned.

The copter was coming in for a quiet landing not far from the farm when Jack broke the silence. "The mansion, what is it? It doesn't seem to fit here at all?"

"What does?" Janice replied. "I mean, other than the farm. The mansion doesn't get much publicity these days. It's our cult Museum of the Comet, containing a history of alien visits."

"How about alien artifacts the church has collected. Are they inside?"

"Some are, but the location of others is known to be secret. There are many locations. If any are here, they could be hiding in plain sight among art. Only Daniel and the inner circle know exactly what the key artifacts look like, and apparently, each one is a different piece. Telling them from the many pieces of alien-inspired art done by humans and early mutants would be difficult."

"Inscriptions and symbols," Jack said. "They all piece together a living language of some type. However, the inscriptions might not be visible either. I want to take a tour of the mansion. I'm in the cult now and want to be sure there aren't vulnerabilities. Perihelion is close. Daniel and you people in the inner circle are engaged in organizing the final ceremony, and not in defending us from the hostile forces I have in mind."

"I thought you trusted Daniel? We expect it of you."

"Of course, I trust him and believe he's genuine in his motives, and that others in the cult are as well. I know there is no other goal aside from harnessing perihelion and joining the aliens. That I'm certain of ... but I don't necessarily trust everyone here. That would be placing trust in people I don't know. There are possibly spies inside. That's usually the case in every organization. The church also exists at various levels. The cult's farm people run this place year-round. I've heard the inner circle has plans regarding perihelion that the rest of the church worldwide doesn't place faith in. Think about it. Only the core cult members believe that the ceremony will expedite transport to an alien world; we're not among the rest worldwide. Especially people a bit older, and the watching elders. They are hoping and believing perihelion will open up the fountain of eternal youth here on earth as promised by the false prophets ruling most of the church."

"Daniel never attempted to rein in the false prophets. Now I know why. They serve a purpose in distracting the others."

"Contact with the comet is going to happen here. What Daniel says appears correct, though it may be too fantastic for outsiders to believe. The cult can harness alien technology at perihelion. It's exclusive. My checks show that Arjun finalized it weeks ago, and Daniel is picking up the last supporting relics. Test runs here at the farm have been harnessing unknown forms of energy. I know Daniel and Arjun have been working on the science for years. Others may think the operation here is false, but it isn't."

"Why worry when you are accepted by the only group that can make it?"

“There are the various international governing bodies and the supposed leadership councils, all of them known to be corrupt by the cult. I think they are mostly unbelievers concerned with harnessing the wealth of the church and gaining a good life from it.”

“If it is wealth they are concerned with, we may not have to worry about them.”

“We have to protect the others and ourselves. This event is the greatest power event to happen on this planet. How can we predict their false ideologies, plans, and hostilities? And don’t forget the hive mutants, they want perihelion to pass without any contact with the aliens.”

“We’re going ahead. If you have doubts, find the possible saboteurs now.”

“I’ll take a look around, with a little help from you.”

They disembarked from the copter, and Jack watched as Janice stepped forward and embraced the tall woman who had shown up to greet them. She was introduced to Jack as Rhea, and her greeting of a light embrace and kiss caught him by surprise. Rhea obviously worked on the organic farm, as she wore work shoes, loose jeans, and a long-sleeved shirt made of soft tan material. Not summer beachwear, but needed protection on a farm. The copter pad was a large oval with three other smaller pads touching it in neat overlays. Those pads were empty. A single path of stone and earth led away from the pads, wide enough for small transport vehicles. The stones were broken and varied, telling Jack that they’d used leftover materials from other construction. He’d seen from the sky that all roads and paths on these grounds had been overlaid – everything from pine chips to asphalt and assorted stones to allow travel during heavy spring melt and rain.

“I knew there were changes to the farm. I didn’t expect this much expansion,” Janice said. She pointed to the huge long-house building they’d noted from the sky. “You could hold a standing army in that now.”

“It will be a standing army as more will be arriving before the event,” Rhea said. “It has hundreds of small rooms and some other areas and is much nicer on the inside now. We have extended it vastly since the last time you were here. Arjun got a lot of surplus stuff from city developments that fell through, so it’s luxury in a way.”

“The grounds are big, the farm small,” Jack said.

“I know,” Rhea said, flipping a wave of fallen hair from her eyes. “That’s why we’ve been pushing so hard. A lot of stuff is stored underground.”

“You must have a final list by now. I didn’t think final preparations would be an issue,” Janice said.

Rhea pulled out a clip that had been holding her red hair back, let it fall, and put the comb in her pocket. They were heading for the farm along a path through wire fencing separating the farm portion from the flight pads. “Only a small number will be here for the final ceremony. We’ve sent hundreds on to other locations after initial ceremonies. They are involved in healing perihelion ceremonies elsewhere. Only the chosen believers will leave with the comet.”

Jack studied the barn and the two men walking over from it. The structure was large, in the mold of the farm buildings they had on the market that practically self-assembled, with an exterior that looked like a high-quality barn from a distance, while up close the lie was revealed. In his mind's eye, the two men were also more prefabricated farmers than real. One wore bib overalls, had a dark, brooding face, and untrimmed dark hair. The other was in jeans and a flannel shirt, with an open face and full lips. Both were about twenty-five, and they weren't farm boys. Their educated look gave that away. If not farm guys, then they were part of Daniel Manson's inner circle.

Janice batted at a loco bee. Rhea introduced the two men. The burly man being Zeke, and the other being Tatha. Jack nodded to them on the introduction, and they all walked past the barn. Two other farm workers were riding in on elegant horses from the open fields behind the barn.

"Horses and not machines," Jack said. "This must be real farming."

"Not quite real," Zeke said with a shake of his golden head toward the barn. "The machinery is in the barn and underground, and we have backup irrigation. Nothing here is chemical or genetically modified, but natural fertilizer and purer seed. Some of it is from Visitation Island. That's Arjun and Mina on the horses. They're not doing farm work. They're riding out to check the underground cellars and then work more on the ceremony setup. It's all outdoors."

"Horses are nicer to work with and better than riding about on farm bugs," Rhea said.

The breeze in off the field was rank with odors of manure, crops, summer flowers, and grasses. Jack found it uplifting compared to most of the city's outdoors, which nowadays had assorted fumes instead of air, as if one were inside the biggest dirty machine. They stopped at the farmhouse and engaged in small talk. Nothing much was said about the comet.

"You're believers, members of the inner circle, so we've given you rooms at the back of the farmhouse," Tatha said. "You can store your bags there. I'm the house manager. It's one of my jobs."

"Yeah, an easy one," Zeke said. "Pity me. I've got to manage the communal long-house complex and boss volunteers there."

"Not much work in the daytime," Rhea said. "A lot of them sleep in late every day."

"Most of them are up now," Tatha said. "They stay inside in the communications center and recreation areas. We're talking mostly city people here."

"City people should eat like country people," Rhea said with a wink. "So let's go in and have some lunch."

Jack didn't have a general plan for the farm. He wasn't sure if he wanted special attention or to blend in with the crowd of pilgrims. Because he knew Janice, and both of them were now in the inner circle, some special attention was the outcome. They ended up among the six people eating a summer lunch in the farmhouse's back kitchen. The view from there was away from the rest of the complex to sheds, fields, and forest, though they could hear voices as some activity was beginning over in the long courtyard that paralleled the huge long-house complex. The lunch menu was Tatha's creation and

seemed to fit with his healthy dark looks - an assortment of salads from pasta to potato to fruit with milk from farm cows and chilled water from the farm spring for the beverages.

Jack sipped some water, "Clean spring water here. In Toronto and maybe most of the world, it's fake stuff in a bottle."

"In the city, the bottle is fake, too," Janice said.

"No simulated glass is used here," Tatha said. "We don't want chemicals leaching into our brains."

"You believe it happens by accident or design," Jack said.

"The state and hostile corporate forces want ways to leak mind control chemicals into our bodies."

"No regulations either," Jack said. "They could make a bottle out of anything, and it would be legal."

"We use very little irrigation," Arjun said. "And that water is clean country water as well. The larger part of Ontario still has clean water. I bring my own drinking water with me when I visit the Toronto church."

"Yeah," Janice said. "They're turning the lower-income class into a new form of poisoned mutants with the chemicals, and the water is contaminated with a sedative of some kind."

"City water really has to be filtered and boiled and stored in your own small tank," Jack said.

"I heard about your background," Rhea said. "It shows in your karma."

Jack nearly choked on his pasta salad. He saw Janice grinning and Arjun giving him a surprised glance. He felt a bit like the child at an adult's luncheon. "I'm not purely brutal," he said. "I don't trust forces known to be evil either. The enemy is anyone who kills you or kills people and their spirit. Same with the corporate MS fascists. If they want to profit at the expense of others, they're criminals from big to small. Control too. If they want to control others for their own warped ideas of security, they're criminals and the enemy of human rights and freedom."

"Amen," Zeke said, hitting the table with the flat of a big hand, "There are too many of them and they killed human rights and freedom. If you dodge the torture and prisons, then you find that you forgot to check the ingredients in your bottle of water."

"If there is such a thing as an ingredients label that isn't a bunch of lies," Rhea said.

"There isn't anything but lies these days," Tatha said. "From the media to the advice of friends who are telling you what they believe is the truth. Even the underground is full of state plants."

"The truth stands out like a leaping fish," Janice said. "They did all of this to bury us in the programmed mass mind, and it failed, and the MS police state built new levels. Self-defense is a mechanism that creates individuals, and when everyone is under attack, some individuals emerge and fight back."

“There is still some power of the people, but it’s not in the masses,” Rhea said. “That’s what the Cult of the Comet is ... we have hidden levels reaching up to influence them all. They don’t bother our inner circles because we are the group that mastered the alien technology and keeps them young. They have the greatest minds and AI minds on earth, and they couldn’t do what Daniel, Arjun, and the rest of us did. They didn’t even try because they didn’t believe.”

“They’re watching, they’re hostile,” Jack said. “They let Daniel do what he wants because I think they hope he does leave. Either that or, as you say, they don’t believe it possible. Don’t forget that in leaving, we leave the world to them. And that’s what they want. They’d like to profit from the alien tech. So they’ll have their super-satellite mind Volcano recording all data around the planet. Out of it, they’ll take whatever rejuvenation they can get. They’ll certainly not attempt alien contact because the hive mutants are scary enough ... scary enough that they never want to see what the aliens really are.”

“I want to see them,” Arjun said, his deep tan face glossed with sun. “I want to see a new planet. A clean world.”

“But how do you know it’s that? We are heading into the unknown,” Jack said. “The hive mutants don’t see it that way at all. They want it stopped with no return of their forefathers or news passed to them.”

“They are an abomination,” Zeke said. “Why do you think they hide in their hives? They could have taken this whole planet. They obscure themselves from all view because they know their alien fathers didn’t intend for them to come about and will take action against them if they find out.”

“Very true,” Rhea said. “The aliens are true space travelers. They don’t contaminate planets they visit or don’t intend to. These mutants are a mistake of man because they blended beings of completely different origins. In all of their visits, the aliens investigated religious development and became fascinated when humanity claimed to have found God.”

“We know the comet is doing more than anyone expects,” Arjun said. “It is taking a full reading and capsule on this planet and how it has developed since the last visit. I don’t think the mutants or the tools of the world police state government can remain hidden from the aliens or oppose them.”

“The technology the aliens had in the past is magic to us,” Jack said. “It would be more than frightening now. Shouldn’t we be living in fear, too?”

“No,” Zeke said. “We are following their law and rituals as set out through the writings and the artifacts. Now we have both discs showing the set-up and power transfers for the final ceremony. We know which relics to use and how to organize and key them into the comet. It means we are chosen and the ones who need not fear. You’re new and haven’t seen any of the ceremonies at the gate. But you’ll be part of one soon. It’s a life-changing experience, and we’re near the end. The power is rising toward the final moment of glory – perihelion.”

“I don’t dispute that,” Jack said. “I don’t fully grasp the comet. What it is exactly. Your descriptions have me thinking of an artificial intelligence, a super one like satellite Volcano.”

“Exactly,” Arjun said. “It is a comet and also a vehicle of interstellar travel. The aliens have long known how to travel in disguise, though all of the translations say there will be no actual aliens on it. See through the illusion as our tech does, and you’ll see something more than fantastic. This comet contains their newest technology. Godlike technology, and we are going to harness it.”

Inspired by Arjun’s speech, Jack excused himself and went to the washroom. An urgent alert was coming in as a skin pulse through his badge. Throwing the toilet cover down, he sat and opened an air-screen. Focusing, he watched a tiny video surveillance screen from his home in Toronto. “Lucky I left,” he muttered as he watched SSU tax department officials surrounding his building. They even had a small armored vehicle out front. An alert on his device demanded his signature, which he did on the air-screen in a secure mode they couldn’t trace. Moments later, he watched his bank account figure in the top right corner of the screen shrink to half. They’d hit him for his lottery win and recent large payments. But he’d paid them out, and they were leaving. There was no organization in society more ruthless than the tax department. Feeling somewhat molested, Jack thought it over, and the comet and an exit to space at perihelion looked all the more attractive.

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Janice followed Jack quietly out of tall pine trees into an area of long dry grass. In the morning, it would be moist with dew. At this time of night, it rustled faintly as the odd gust swept in from the stand of pines. Crickets were chirping, a night bird sang, and just ahead, the mansion sat in darkness and the halos of a few night lights. The walkway up was composed of faded tan interlocking stones and was the only thing fully lit. Some solar garden lights shone among the wildflowers and grasses on either side of it.

Wide steps led up to the front door, with an overhang above the stained wooden doors. Three large close-set windows marked the second floor. The windows had rounded tops and wide shutters with glass that appeared as dull as salt in dim, comet-tinged light.

Janice gazed up at the mansion, seeming nearly overwhelmed by sight. “Why did you call me here at night?” she said. “We can easily get keys and walk around it in the daytime.”

“I wanted to watch tonight’s ceremony and the grounds from here. And take a private look around. If we visit officially, then some of the others will come with us and throw my thinking into confusion.”

They started up the walk, and magic seemed to rise instantly from their steps. At that moment, the clouds suddenly parted, and the light of the stars and the comet swept the grounds. On the other side of a patch of wildflowers, they saw the cult’s castle and its eye-on-the-sky scope orb burst into brighter light as the doors of the telescope opened in the dome. A light ignited at the long-house residence building, and as spotlights lit its cavernous main entrance, a crowd emerged.

Even at this distance, Jack recognized Tatha and a few others in the lead. Their dress was understated ceremonial, and their faces seemed whitened by more than the light of the sky. About a hundred people streamed out of the building. Jack knew San, Zeke, and Mina, but not many others.

Daniel Manson wasn't present, as he was at the telescope command center, watching the comet follow its long approach to its moment of power. Daniel had just powered it up.

The crowd was walking across the field to the large Mandela burned into the grass. At the center was a huge golden gate or Heaven's Gate. It was Daniel Manson's vision of Heaven's Gate, and it ended his second book, interpreting the supposed alien transmissions and the power keys to be unlocked by the artifacts. His elite group was to be swept through the gate at perihelion to the comet, another world, and graduation to another evolutionary level. Ceremonies were weekly, and there were ceremonial healing gates in other nations. Still, they were only one faction of the church, and the others had different interpretations of the alien puzzle, some relics, and a belief that they would be healed and empowered. All weekly ceremonies were to be conducted as per the alien translation, while the final ceremony was to be something different.

"Let's get inside quickly," Jack said. "They haven't spotted us yet. Their eyes are fixed on the gate."

They went lightly up the broad steps. The entrance and doors seemed enormous, but the overhang gave them some deep, shadowy cover. It was a laser bolt lock. Jack picked it with the one key he carried, a device that looked like a cigarette lighter. The pricey key had been secretly developed to pick or disable most locks, especially at times when his badge was in other modes. He could have caused the doors to swing open, but he ignored that option so he could open the door a crack and slip inside. A flash of light and the foyer unexpectedly lit up, leaving Jack fumbling with his badge. He remembered its universal dimmer code, called up an air-screen, and managed to dim the bronze chandeliers to near darkness. Then they relaxed and glanced around.

"Let's hope they don't have security traps in here," Janice said.

"I don't get a read on any. What they might have are deep-cover silent alarms or stuns for any attempt to remove an article of value. As long as we don't trigger something like that, we're okay. There is no camera or laser surveillance. The cult has not generally been supportive of excessive security. That I know, though I get a trace on some in the long house and castle."

Auto lighting controls remained suppressed, leaving them in the dim vestibule surrounded by glassed-in paintings – mostly fantastic, nearly comic-book depictions of first contact. Depending on the artist, first contact occurred at various times, seasons, and places, even as late as the medieval period, with one painting depicting a spaceship landing in a brilliant Garden of Eden. Many of these were forbidden by MS police state standards, but there was no enforcement out here.

"Let's not get too distracted here," Jack said.

She nodded, and they moved through to the second set of glass-paneled doors. These opened onto a high-ceilinged, palatial room with designer seating and art displays

ranging from open sculptures to paintings and pieces locked in display cases or mounted on the walls. There were walk-offs to other connected areas; they could see a small historical library with locked bookcases, a lounge, and frosted glass doors leading to steps and a rear courtyard. A glance out these doors showed flower gardens and court lounge areas with tables and benches.

They walked cautiously into the splendid central area, scanning the room with their eyes and Jack's badge, which was set in advanced penetration mode. Jack stopped dead in his tracks and stared up at the chandelier. Some feature about it caused him to think back, and it occurred to him that it could be a key alien artifact hiding in plain sight. Surrounded by a gallery of art and artifacts, it was supposed to be a stylish light. It had no tag that would allow a description to be read from pocket devices.

"What gives? Are you hypnotized by that light?" Janice said.

"No. I get a reading on it, and if you picture it upside down and illuminate only a certain pattern of the bulbs, it resembles some of the creatures in the alien host depicted on some of the paintings back in the vestibule. Run the lights another way, and flip it, and it looks like a miniature spaceship. It's a key relic that Daniel has placed here."

A brief eye-opening tour took them through various sections, all of them laid out in neat order and all of them richer than Jack had expected. Bronze and silver pieces, pottery, and an entire arbor of glass pieces and plants. Even the stairway was loaded with art, and they went up to another floor of paintings and then to a third floor that displayed alien symbols and language in all forms, from sculpture to photographs.

Light was now beaming in the huge third-floor front window. Looking back, Jack saw Janice's eyes flicker with flame, and her pale outfit brighten as the light swept in. Stepping closer to the window, Jack saw energy beams flashing on the grounds. The entire area was transforming into an explosion of light. It was like the city in the country. The ceremonial circle was now lit up in red, white, and blue. More beams swept the sky and over small white clouds. Another beam that resembled a particle charge was sweeping up, and he could tell it was coming from the castle command or telescope area to their rear on the other side of the grounds.

Silence lifted from the cooling night as chanting began in the circle ... monotonous and zombie-like in an unknown trance tongue. A mild rumble, almost imperceptible, caused the mansion to shiver, and dust particles suddenly floated in the faint light. The comet swept through distant clouds with great authority as it was on a long approach to Earth. Jack knew it wasn't a comet but something else because no comet had that level of visibility when still far from Earth.

"I don't know how they master that chant," Janice said. "I lip sync it at events, but I've never gone into the full trance and done the real thing."

"Keys into part of the brain and probably induces hallucinations, too," Jack said. "It's got me wondering if I'm starting to hallucinate myself. Something is flashing on the face of the comet. Can you see it?"

"Yes. Like mirror flashes. But it's so far away and tiny I can't tell if they are real."

"It could be an illusion from beams hitting the sky from here."

“Has to be that. What else could it be?”

“I thought you were a believer. Something could be happening in space.”

“Like the comet coming to life earlier than we expect, or they’ve beamed something to it from the telescope building?”

“It could be that ... if that thing really has power, it might not realize it in one night but prime itself like artificial intelligence systems booting into a really complex program. I’m not sure, but it could also be interference from hive mutants or man, meaning they are up there trying to alter or destroy the comet.”

“Surely no one would attack the comet.”

“We live in a paranoid world. General Mike Blackthorn and his people, the hive mutants, elders ... they might do anything. Especially now as they see the comet defying the laws of physics and slowing down as it approaches perihelion.”

Laser lights began flashing in colorful patterns across the brightened grounds. Jack knew these were large-scale representations of alien symbols visible from space. The spokes of the big ceremonial wheel burst into artificial red flames, streaming to a vanishing point at the gate, and the gate itself began to glow with gold as the people streamed down to it.

Another rumble rattled the mansion. It was as if some hidden dinosaur was dropping feet of thunder on the hill. A loud crack suddenly punched down from the sky, almost like a tear in the fabric of reality, and then it was raining outside. This was a slow, silent rain of bright blue drops, charged particles that began to sizzle on the grass.

Janice suddenly spun to her rear, and Jack glanced back. A fraction of a second later, they both moved close to the window. A glow from some sculptures had ignited, forming a web of light that filled the entire mansion.

Jack ended his scan, and his badge morphed back into star shape and sleep mode. “My readings went off the scale. I had to shut down to avoid an explosion.”

The exterior of the mansion was now a field and sky of light, as if it had become the largest work of art and the most valuable alien painting. Electric unknowns and more bizarre light ruled the interior, so they made their choice with Jack forcing open a window panel. They exchanged no words but dove over a bush and took a long fall into deep grass. It was a soft landing beside the flowerbed; they got to their knees, discovering the rain to be harmless. Particles brushed them like fireflies and didn’t stick as they spread to a carpet on the grounds. It also became clear that the great day wasn’t quite here, as they could see people emerging through the other side of Heaven’s Gate. A glance at the small castellated area proved instructive, as they saw a mauve beam of light shoot down from the sky, bathing the area around the telescope.

A creepy feeling of crawling electricity went up Jack’s back. He looked back and saw the entire mansion suddenly brighten as a beam from it shot into the sky. The area rumbled again, and they could see people coming unglued over at Heaven’s Gate. It had been an experience of great power, but no one had been swept away. Because of it, people emerged from the gate, out of their trance, and began to run, panicked, through the grass.

Jack took off at a jog with Janice following. They half-circled the mansion and cut through the back courtyard. Then they moved through grass and scrub toward Manson Castle. They came to a shed next to the outer wall. Its sliding door was open; Jack paused to catch his breath, then they went inside. Auto lights came on, and they saw various tools and grounds bots. A worktable with four chairs was at the back of the place. Jack did a follow wave, and they went over and sat down.

“Why are we stopping here?” Janice said.

“To think this out. We have a lot to investigate.”

He studied her closely for a moment and saw her as pale and small in this situation and setting. No doubt she was baffled, wondering where her allegiance lay. She had argued with him when he'd asked her to skip tonight's Heaven's Gate ceremony. It was close to perihelion, and she was a cult member, though he hoped she was swinging toward some critical thinking. He'd convinced her with the news that Daniel wouldn't be at the ceremony, but at the scope. It meant it was another test run of sorts.

They remained silent for a minute, looking out at a wheel of fireworks. No doubt she was wondering where he stood as well, and it caused him to again realize that he had no real loyalty to anything – Blackthorn, mutants, aliens, cultists, a police-state world of bread and brainwash, push-button escape. Nearly everyone dedicated to a cause had to be at least half deluded, and cultists planning on escape from this world had to be at least half right. Even so, Jack had no faith in other worlds and no faith in this one. He was like the aliens, forever searching for a god they could not find. Clients and cases were the drugged coffee that kept him moving.

Janice spoke. “So tell me. What did we see out there?”

“We're going to find Daniel and find out. But I can tell you. I saw something that worries me.”

“So you're backing away from Heaven's Gate?”

“I'm wondering. What do they do? What would we do if it doesn't happen? What will be left for people with only one belief, and then it passes?”

“You worry too much. From what we've seen tonight, alien power is going to happen.”

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When the tuned lighting failed, Daniel's eye-on-the-heavens command center looked like its actual shape, which was that of a giant clamshell. Emergency lights glistened on the curved ceiling, and the white marble floor seemed slick as an ice rink. Arjun was racing toward the wall, an eye-blink security door opened, and he disappeared in a short tunnel leading into the connected mini Castle. Rhea's cloud of wild red hair was backlit at her bank of screens as she watched them fading into an image the scope was simulating from tiny amounts of light data.

Daniel Manson was close by; his hair was out of place, and his face was pale. He was at an extended keyboard with about two hundred keys. He used accumulated knowledge to punch out commands. Not to the telescope, but to the automated system that tied the grounds lighting and power systems, and nearly all else, together. It had

malfunctioned at a crucial time - the beginning of the ceremony, which was considered an important test run for the real perihelion event.

Arjun returned through the door and dashed up to Daniel. His brown skin was slick with sweat, his big eyes excited. "I've done it," he said. "But now were using a dangerous level of backup power. I don't even want to mention what kind."

"Doesn't matter," Daniel said. "We need shielding right here when we reflect that beam. So far so good. Despite these unbelievable problems, you guys are handling it. It bodes well because you know I'm going to be out there at the gate at perihelion. And even if something happens and I'm not around, you go ahead. It will be a go, and there's no second try with or without me. You go ahead regardless and get through yourselves. Anyone who doesn't make it gets left behind, and that includes me."

"Could you really get left behind?" Rhea said.

"It's possible, as I have to get the last hidden relics primed. Time is short. But even if I get to the one on the other side of the ocean only to find it's too late to get back, I'll prime it into the system for perihelion. That means you go even if I don't make it back."

"We've got a read," Rhea said, her face pinching with excitement. "A time-lapse view coming up. It appears that it is hive mutant ships that have been blocking our view."

Daniel rose and strolled over with Arjun for a better view. The huge scope screen had now pulled in enough data to simulate what had happened earlier, far out in space. A grainy mist formed, swirled, and slowly condensed into a still picture, then gained a dimension of motion. Three ships and the comet came into view. The ships were like segmented insects approaching the blazing glory of the comet. The awkward, non-aerodynamic design revealed them as hive mutant ships. Daniel's mouth fell open briefly as he saw that they had positioned themselves into an arrowhead formation. "Bastards," he said. "We knew they'd try to destroy it."

"Relax," Arjun said, taking on a firm and confident expression. "We know they failed. The comet is still with us. That means our artifacts and the first beam up from the mansion worked. We activated the comet's defense systems and gave it the fix on our final setup."

"Yeah, but what about the damage?" Rhea said.

Five more minutes passed. They stared tongue-tied at the screens. The scene was slowly revolving, and then something else appeared on the screens. A triangle of mutant-generated beam energy as the ships fired on the comet. The beams formed instantly and went from orange to fire red, the point being an advancing line that struck the front of the comet like a laser pointer would strike a person's forehead. Incredible heat built up, white as the comet, and then a powerful explosion created momentary blindness in space and on earth. When the image cleared, it showed space junk spinning like fire-tinted autumn leaves. A dark crater appeared on the face of the comet, and it was shrinking in the shape of a healing wound as it continued to zoom through space.

"Check all readings," Daniel said. "Has anything changed?"

“You forget, we’re looking at a tiny phase in the past. Nothing has changed. The hive mutants failed, and the comet is still approaching the Earth for a close pass perihelion moment.”

“They didn’t realize it was armed,” Rhea said. “The hive mutant bosses should have known it wouldn’t be unprotected.”

“Okay, next phase is a go,” Daniel said. “We’re going to fire our energy wave on it using the artifacts we have.”

The grounds, the gate, and the mansion began to ignite with energy as the system went into play, and the relics sensed the triggers and entered unknown modes of alien-designed energy transfer. The beam went up to the comet, and though it was in essence an information transfer, the alien factor sent out a clap of thunder.

Vibrations shook the entire castle-like structure; a bone-jarring effect that didn’t threaten to tumble walls or loose objects but seemed to penetrate and shake everything like an X-ray that could be felt and seen as a watery blurring of vision. It lasted thirty seconds; Daniel Manson instinctively put his hands to his ears. Arjun and Rhea dropped to the floor with hands splayed forward on the smooth surface. As the vibrations ended, a deep hum filled the room, and Daniel seemed to be the wiser person for having covered his ears. The sense of it was of a power burst, as the mind’s eye could see the mansion across the grounds, and some great transference of force following its own points through the grounds and up into the atmosphere.

Arjun suddenly rose and signaled the others with a surprised exclamation of, “Holy mutant shit!” He was staring at the screens; they all looked at a huge glow that appeared as a second halo around the comet. Then they suddenly turned around as they heard running footsteps in the connecting passage. Jack and Janice appeared and stopped in their tracks. The others turned back to the main screen as the image of the comet grew to a fantastic vision. Its outer halo took on the appearance of a metallic shell, and for a minute, they stared in silence; the comet looked like a huge metal teardrop in space, and its end tail like an exhaust of smoke and fire. The image slowly faded; the shell moving through phases of transparency until the comet was close to normal appearance, though still larger and brighter.

Jack spoke first, “That thing is much more than a comet. It really is an alien spacecraft of sorts.”

“You are correct,” Daniel said. “It just blew three attacking hive mutant ships to pieces with ease. Now you know what we’ve known all along. The hive mutants apparently knew too, as they tried to destroy it and failed. General Blackthorn must be frightened by all of it, including the speed at which those mutant ships traveled to reach the comet.”

“What does this all mean?” Janice said. “It took on the appearance of a giant weapon. One with the power to probably destroy Earth.”

“It means phase one is complete,” Arjun said. “We’ve primed the comet and fully armed it. It has slowed to a drift in for perihelion. Now we’ve got to set things up to pull off the final act.”

“Yeah, and the hive mutants can’t stop us,” Rhea said. “I guarantee you they’re living in fear now.”

“What about Earth’s defenses and General Blackthorn?” Janice said. “They’re watching this, no doubt. Many people in high places are crapping their paranoid pants right now. They’re going to work on a plan to attack the comet.”

“I don’t think so,” Jack said. “What we just happened was more than something being armed. The comet was flexing its muscles. It put on that little show of power to warn hostile forces. General Blackthorn is brighter than hive mutants. The aliens never attempted to destroy humankind. Earth forces will hold back, try to read as much as they can from it, and hope the thing leaves. If we all go with it, then it’s even better for them.”

Daniel was excited to the point of stuttering. “We’ve got a lot of work to do fast. I want everyone pulled in off the farm for phase perihelion. We’ve got to set the system we have and use this event to trace anything else we need.”

“What about the guests? The long house is nearly full?” Rhea said.

“Screw those freeloaders,” Daniel said. “All they want is free healing, mostly at other sites. They are of no benefit to us now. Create a co-op committee over there and have them look after themselves until they’re sent out. Only the core group, the believers, are of use now. Jack too. He can work with me on the tracking of any relics we need or need to set. Consider yourself freelance, Jack. We’ll share info. If I get a location I can’t cover, you’ll be sent.”

“That’s fine with me. I agree that it’s time to move toward the end game.”

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Chapter 16: Sky Power

Jan Fair was dreaming, and in his dreams, a vision rose; one that would pass unseen in most of his waking mind as it was beyond the hidden control programming and the escape spike of neuro-Intel drugs that worked to free him. The quiet face of a beautiful woman smiled on him, and he found his frozen heart suddenly filled with love. He loved her and longed for a simple kiss, as more of her touch would be a potion that would destroy him. She touched a device in her palm, then, behind her ear, a map lit up. A strange map and its dimensions were beyond the normal. It seemed like he was dead and gone beyond to worlds that lacked the connection of language and earthly explanation. Yet he saw a trace and river, and it existed through strange love and the eyes of this distant female angel. A river and a road; it spiritually led into another world, defying the mundane expectations of earthly science. It was a hidden way human scientific efforts would never find, yet he’d been shown a glimpse. The grand vision rose, and he felt bliss and knowledge about to come. An alien world was rising as reality beyond any earthly greatness.

Then it all began to fall to earth as a beam, and a draining force hit, taking his mind in its grip. It was an all-controlling force, but before it grabbed his thoughts, he saw it and what it was ... and that was something inhuman and unbelievable.

It was like being crushed by a giant stone as Volcano, the world's MS-police-state satellite, used a method to mine his controlled brain. Another state of mind rose as he heard the swarm of voices that were Volcano invading his thinking. It searched his dreaming mind and fell short. Volcano tried to map his memory, and after three minutes, it looped out and went AI crazy.

Something new and memory data about a final relic and key, the far-off aliens, and Jack Michaels added to the impossible processing of Jan Fair's semi-insane mind. For one second, Volcano came to rest with the finality of the greatest search and processing it had ever done. A godlike answer appeared; the answer to it all ... then a nanosecond passed, and the answer was gone, and Volcano went down for an emergency reboot.

The infallible satellite released a surge of free power and processing, which combined with now-free artificial intelligence zones to give every other system in the world a sudden, giant-killer boost. Volcano was left a blind, toothless invalid, while every artificial intelligence user, from mega-corrupt corporations to enemies of the state, was boosted to levels beyond anything seen in recent history. As the great surge continued, Volcano remained a temporary idiot, its arrogant AI personality nothing but a mumbler repeating something about a key, Jack Michaels, Jan Fair's alien contact dream, and a black cat with technology implanted in its eyes. All of it is impossible information that refused to compute in Volcano's way of thinking.

Great rivers, the flow of intelligence traveled through every known form of energy, as information or as a possible communication channel, back to a source. That source was unexpected by the powers of the world, as intelligence agencies saw the energy and data pass right through their capture systems and go elsewhere. A place they couldn't tap. It was headed into one of the lost zones.

Holland, Jan Fair's country, formerly The Netherlands, but gone back to its older name. The city of Amsterdam, now completely off the world map and unknown, as the intelligence agencies of the police state allowed no media news about that location. They also had little info themselves, as satellite and other surveillance had been blocked.

In an instant, the air began to glow in the sky above some haunted and desolate streets running to a wide canal. The glow was nearly invisible. It was white as an ember, whiter to be clear, and then transparent yet seen. A huge structure stood in the lanes by the canal. The former financial home of a past world government based in Europe, it rose eighty smashed floors into the sky, and, unknown to the rest of the world, dropped nearly one hundred floors underground.

The surge from Volcano electrified the air in a wide swath of blocks wide of the canal. Farther up, blue-fleshed hive mutants, their skin itself seeming like their clothing, strolled in the streets. Their gate being human-like, while their heads were large and armored. Most of them looked up at the growing glow in the cloudy sky ... feelings of autumn, summer, spring, and winter drifted down like rain to beings whose thick skins

didn't much comprehend seasons. Packets of energy rain that were mere droplets of spillover in the energy flow of the force about to come to ground. A few streets away, a small gathering of ragged men, women, and children cowered next to a shelter opening as they watched the rain and river of energy coming from the sky. Hope, but only a little, rose in their thoughts, because great power usually meant nothing good ... the forces of the MS police state or mutant murderers being the norm.

Then the energy beam hit, electrifying the glass, rocking the entire skyscraper like an earthquake ... engulfing it in curtains of fire-like distortion before hitting ground and traveling below. The punch to the earth shook the entire city, and the building rode the shock, then quivered as an electrical force ran over its exterior like water flowing in all directions.

Deep in the earth, a mutant beast watched, but remained unshaken as he saw the force flow down to him and the capture point. Then, a visual hell was created through fire, radiation, and an explosion of particles.

Tremendous bursts shook the surrounding buildings at ground, sending energy beams like great flares to the sky. Low-blast mutant sirens filled the air, and shortly after, the odor of burning mutant flesh drifted. Rather than being a part of ugly death, the fragrance was like cooked beef. A divine sacrifice of queer flesh to please the gods.

It wasn't all in the realm of grandiose dreams, as blood was on the ground and a local earthquake followed the blasts and took down a nearby club. Those dancing and watching at the walls were taken down with the pillars of shattering crystallized glass. Glass that was supposed to be unbreakable shattered and fell into the pit that opened. Not a black pit but one of energy that swirled like bright water. Pure but deadly in its magnitude. A force that became a sound and then a vision that sucked everything down in a vivid flow. Dancing people, cowardly betrayers of the human race who had been celebrating under the watch of hive mutant guards, found themselves equal with them and the local mutant colonel ... gone into a descending fall of energy. It didn't burn, but it took them all down, screaming toward the bottom. Even those who looked up in unbelief saw the flaming debris of the club following them down into this deep hole. And the bottom became little more than a dream as sanity fled from them and the colonel clutched his face to hide his three morbid eyes from what was to come. Dissolution was at the bottom - a great white disc.

Motion seemed to freeze as though time had become some melting thing without transit. Bodies glowed, and all were preserved as energy like snow ... the end growing more distant as eyes became abominable, dead but looking to something. Their free fall resumed as a drift, and only the mutant colonel remained alive and could calculate the time until bottom, his death, and dissolution. The calculation was more than a thousand years, during which he wouldn't perish as the energy flow permeated his cells and gave them life.

Human beings tumbled, echoing screams ended, and the only cry rising in the tunnel of energy was that of the mutant colonel.

The hive mutants had worked on the capture, and it succeeded unexpectedly. When they first cracked Volcano, they wanted only specific information. They had not

expected the satellite mind to go mad. Programming it to attempt to invade Jan Fair's dreaming brain and its implant was a new thing, and they hadn't expected it to crash and channel energy from all across the planet and space in a single burst. The expectation had been for a clean channel of info that would include intel as to what had gone wrong with their mind control of Fair.

Now there was energy, like stars falling into the earth, and in a strange sleep, the commanding mutant beast watched. To him, it was reminiscent of times when his alien ancestors slept in another realm. Waking was the nightmare and the weakness. In dreams, he had strength. In dreams, he felt as if he were living forever through the long expanse of space, and there was no pain. In the dark, cold beyond ice and vacuum, he had no cares. Time passed, and time had become endless; a million years and a minute were the same.

The great beauty of the passing universe gave him peace and sleep. Wonderful lights drifting. He did not need comfort, and then he woke. Woke with a form of anger in his mind he'd not had before. Human genes set into his expanding mutant flesh were the cause.

Holland, the nation he ruled and had named. An idea rose in his mind. It was a picture of a man, Jan Fair. A man he knew. It was Jan Fair's genes he'd used to restrain the mutant growth and retain humanlike form. In a mental sense, they were identical twins - one a mutant monster who planned to rule the earth beyond the times of the comet and the other a foolish human with fortunate genetics. A man who had somehow gathered the luck and strength to break free of control and race around Canada on a mission to destroy his mutant brothers and all hope for a better future.

Like the flow of energy, a flow of illusion enveloped the waking mutant beast. A wide chamber appeared out of darkness and shadow. He needed reason and purpose to form and appear mentally. In the vaulted hall below, a crowd of the controlled had been waiting. Blinded and in glory from the power of the surge, they knew instinctively that their leader had awakened. Light had dawned on a land of the dead, the former Netherlands. It was now a wasteland of skeletons, rotting corpses. Those that remained human were on the run from the mutant monsters - beasts that had taken their land and set out a border of blindness that the rest of humanity could not penetrate with any technology.

If this mutant had anything human about it, it was the wild locks of hair from its portion of Jan Fair's genes. In awakening, it instinctively knew it was an alien, a human, and an animal. It remembered what it had done to take this territory. In its blood, it remembered its earthly brother.

The light was about to illuminate it to a waiting crowd of mutants, aberrant humans, and some with animal-modified genes. Instead, another force rose. It came from a tiny part of its brain and the deep remembrance of distant origins. A vista came into its mind, and it was marvelous, showing an old world of the aliens. The vision came down to a city with twisted and multicolored structures, some of them blocks wide by Earth standards. There were other underground structures similar to those on Earth. Yet where this Earth's underground scrapers were grand inverted pyramids, those on the home planet were far greater, reaching down into a molten core and a planet that was different in

bizarre ways. On the crust, strong physical beings lived, but beneath, they were like ghosts and angels, breathing gases by the billions in a world drifting with no apparent end. The beast knew they were its ancestors, those huge, vapor-like monsters that had sent missions into space, creating much smaller beings, about the size of a man, to fit the spaceships. Then time spun its web to even greater heights as the ships went node to node and thoughts magnetized. Finally, a ship came to Earth and made a hidden landing.

History passed, and aliens lived and died. In the end, some were captured and lived as servants of human kings. The sons of the grand masters of the universe became slaves of ignorant humans. At a later time again, some were living for a daily meal in hidden military bases. Being studied for the life code of their ancestors. Regretting the mission of their predecessors across space, as they'd found human leadership not interested in the grand dreams, but only in control.

The torture never ended. The last aliens died, and the screams of early mutants still rang in the mind of this being. Then, out of the misery and torture, a successful experiment happened, mixing human and some dead alien genes found in the Middle East. This experiment created a monster child that grew up under gated control. Until at twenty, by power of mind alone, directed through its three eyes, it walked free and began a long emergence as it took what it wanted.

Alien heredity mixed with animal genes left it territorial, and that combined with human desires for power. Like the other hive mutant beings, its mind fused and settled in a certain way. Territorial, like cats or other similar animals, they used their power to claim certain parts of the planet through mind control, technology, and strange methods of warfare. This time, it had been to hack into Volcano and spy on the human world's knowledge of the comet.

This one had chosen a human name and a new form with Jan Fair's genetic material. In the mutant world, it was via an understanding other than human language or similar codes that made a name. The beast's public name was Beast 666. He had taken his own territory or black zone, allowing the others zones, but not real power. 666 had been the number on his cage in the years before his escape.

Mutant Beast 666's ruling authority was in hatred of the alien race that had caused his creation on earth and of the human genes that caused him grief and endless revulsion. Fear of the planet he'd seen from birth as a supposed mutant human child, and another deeper fear of his alien ancestry. He had obeyed instinct but not justice in any form. His deepest nightmares rested in thoughts of the possible return of the aliens. It would be judgment on his kind, as hybrids of humans and aliens had been forbidden.

Beast 666 found himself to be a being of hate as the human race was the lowest thing imaginable. In literature, dogs were insulted, yet dogs and other animals were far more advanced species. His alien ancestors, ever present in dreams of ancestry, were disgusting, spineless things of love and harmony and universal peace. All of the repulsive things that his predatory human and animal genes sent to his mind as unacceptable and contrary to survival.

Despite contradictions or weakness, he was the commander of this black zone. He defined his hive by scent, marked the borders with power, and sometimes, from the past, came forgetfulness and comfort.

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Volcano, the hive mutants and their black zones, General Mike Blackthorn's world of surveillance systems, it all faded to recharge mode as though a strange black moon had arrived to blind the earth. The only eyes open were Jack's, and as he walked a city street and his feet fell in quiet steps by the new Toronto Sand River, he saw them coming. In a world where everything was watched and recorded, men, women, and robot systems could not answer except to seek out Jack Michaels.

In secret and under the cover of darkness, the near-invisible ship came, spinning out of the sky and down to a man in the dark next to a tree break.

Jack inhaled a breath of mist from an energy bubble that had been preserved in a vacuum pack. He blew out a cloud of life as sacred breath. He had no friend to share it with. Janice, maybe, but he'd have to go off to another world with her for that. Relaxation set in as tints in the darkness grew into lights, and men approached from the sepia shadows beneath huge, windblown trees.

He knew what they wanted and wished for a brief return to the old world of fifty years ago, when women had ruled the planet. Men were cruel, tough, and torturers. They were hard to deal with and, in nearly all cases, not to be trusted. And he was one of them.

He caught an impression of the face of the first man coming out of the trees. Perhaps it was the mask of the former human soul that had been propelled to command rank by the elders.

The face came clear, and it was General Mike Blackthorn. A man Jack had met, and a man who did not exist in the larger media to any great extent. Blackthorn led the wars against the hive mutants. The names of the battles and heroes in the news were mostly lies, though ingrained in the minds of the people. Few knew of General Blackthorn. The elite, plus Daniel Manson and those who followed everything military, certainly would because those at the top all had dealings with him.

For many, it was certain death if General Blackthorn came, and at least Jack knew the name and the face that sent needles through many hearts. Tonight, it could mean his end. He saw a strange, blurred wall. Soldiers stood at its perimeter in faint light, and General Blackthorn stepped out of it to face him. His form was that of a dark military commander ... a smooth black uniform trimmed with gold, his hair metallic and his eyes full of questions. Looking at Jack, he took on the speculative look of a superior - studying and understanding, but wondering who or what was denying him.

"What kind of game are you playing?" General Blackthorn said.

Jack stared Blackthorn down. "The elders that died, they were playing a dangerous game to begin with."

"That I know. Do you have anything on these latest tricks by the hive mutants? They stole information."

“So they are behind the blackout. All I have is my report. The Jan Fair fellow, if he’s still alive, escaped from the hive mutants. They had him under mind control. They wanted to prevent Daniel Manson from getting a core relic. They failed.”

“We’re aware. They robbed Volcano of information, causing a crash and a reboot. The robber would be the hive mutant 666. Hive mutants also tried to stop the comet and failed, as you already know.”

“I have no info on Volcano. To recap my report. The fire was an insurance thing, but hive mutants had a cell inside. Manson was watching them. It looks like the mutants are serious about wanting Toronto as a new hive location. They also want perihelion contact with any aliens stopped, which you already know.”

“They won’t be getting any new hives,” Blackthorn said. “That’s why I’m here. What we need you for is a run into the old Netherlands, now called Holland.”

“A black zone. No one can get in there. I’m complimented by your faith in me. Too bad no one in the old days had the same feeling. Why would you think I could last more than a few seconds in there?”

General Blackthorn’s eyes drifted into the obscurity of the misted security men backing him. “666 is running the show in there. He has been searching for you and Jan Fair. But we don’t have Fair. We think the cult hid him somewhere.”

“So send me in there to die.”

“He wants you. If he’s expecting you to be on the run, he won’t think you’re coming inside. If he detects you, he’ll want you captured for whatever plan it is he’s hatching.”

“Probably. But I won’t go in alone.”

“You won’t be alone, but with another experienced man. He’s after an object there. Your mission is to get in and out using a stealth method we are preparing. Gather any intel about the inside. Use your eyes and brains. Any outside tech would be detected. Look for any weakness and see what weapons he has.”

“Doesn’t look like I have much choice. I guess it will show me what Toronto will look like if it becomes a mutant hive.”

General Blackthorn looked at his open hand, and he tapped his leg lightly. “Get in and out, and you’ll be paid handsomely. We won’t trouble you anymore. We’re going in on a major attack right now. This is a short engagement. In the days after, when they expect nothing, there’ll be an opening, and you go in. There’ll be a way in and out.”

“I’ll go in, but I can’t guarantee I’ll get out.”

General Blackthorn nodded and walked off through a door of light appearing in the darkness. Jack remained, watching stars in a black sky as the ship rose in the night. His muscles loosened, and the shackles came free in his mind. General Blackthorn’s near-invisible ship left wisps of bad air ... something smelled.

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Francis Sandsummer, or Frankie for short, was sipping a tiny bottle of carbonated water that had been brought back from the moon. Rather bitter water at that, and of value to

people who wanted to show off the designer label and save the silver container. The expensive water, the bottle, and the container were fake. He swallowed it slowly, savoring the bad taste, and he nearly choked when an emergency alert came through as small electric shocks to his right wrist. He had no choice but to listen to the message, so he relaxed and let his ear implant do the work while his brain festered like an overworked sore.

“Wow, a charged message and straight from General Mike Blackthorn,” he thought. Frankie hadn’t been in the field much and hadn’t spent any time with General Blackthorn, though he admired him greatly. The General was one of his unsung heroes, though he didn’t like admitting to favoring anyone other than himself. General Mike Blackthorn also had that behind-the-mirror look in his eyes, the same look his Intel-doped mother had when she spoke to him, and if Blackthorn was like her, he saw Frankie’s scarred soul.

Frankie’s mind unraveled like a mass of slowly separating spaghetti, and the words battle call and ten minutes got highlighted in his thoughts. Pushing a button on his wristband, he gave himself a shot of energy that brought him out of deep rest mode. This was the real deal, a fight with hive mutants. One that would be more than a brief encounter. An engagement that meant all of his training and rest was paying off. The call for him to lead had obviously not come because he was the new top man but because he was always ready for duty. In his line of work, the body had to be shut down like a lizard’s flesh and sustained through special means, or it would never recover from the training exercises and real battles ... so draining were the attached communication webs.

“Commander Blackthorn, I’m on the way,” Frankie heard himself say, though it seemed like a distant echo coming from the ceiling of the barracks building.

Swiping the empty water container aside, Frankie rose and walked across a glow of pale blue tiles to an enormous, nearly round door. It opened silently like an eyelash. Grainy light filled the corridor ahead. Walk-through decontamination caused his skin to rise with sudden sweat and static, and he felt a screaming itch on his genitals as he came to a fork at the end. A left turn would be training, and a right turn real battle. This time, he grinned murderously because it was right and some payback instead of more of the endless training.

Another door opened at the end of the fork, but this time it was in the ceiling, and he was sucked up, sort of like the reverse of firefighters in the ancient old days. He floated to a stop in a chamber where he removed his clothes before stepping through to more advanced decontamination. A special wax formed a coat on most of his body, and he emerged from his battle dome wearing a very light bodysuit.

Like the chambers, grainy light with beams salted yellow filled the dome. Only here, it shone from all directions. Frankie’s eyes adjusted, and he saw androids approaching from four directions and his lone human assistant from a fifth. Frankie was a tiny man, and he resented the way the androids and Sandray, his female gear guide, towered over him.

“All spy eyes and screens are ready, multi-spectrum tested, and weapons on standby,” Sandray said.

“Great, I’m pumped and ready to go,” Frankie replied, though it was really a lie. He was about to be pumped with everything from special drugs to nano tech brain equipment ... and of course, the biggest part of the pump was the levels of bio-electronic machinery that would slowly encase his body. This wasn’t a job for a claustrophobic person, or for about 99.9 percent of people. Frankie thrived on brain shock, communication burn, sheer murder, and the power the iron gave him.

That power was slowly being souped by the drug feed as the androids slowly encased him in the suit. A second and third layer over the suit, and he was growing into a strange satellite, but one that would not actually fly. The actual battle was on the other side of the world, while he was in the remote desert of Las Vegas.

Frankie exhaled as the system communications began the long spin-up, and then he felt the burn of the iron and excitement. This was to be no drone hit on some saps that could barely fight back ... this was a shot at the mutants with state-of-the-art weaponry. How long had he been waiting for this? He tried to think through the rush of brainwaves, failed, and then his reality suddenly changed completely, and he was in a command center in high Colorado with others, receiving battle orders from General Mike Blackthorn. The special mutant-fighting drones were already in the air, according to the General. All they had to do was prepare for the surprise transfer, and then they’d be in super flight mode, zooming in to do a hit on the hive-mutant monsters somewhere on the border of the Holland Black Zone.

Time elongated and froze like ice, only coming unbound with the slow feeling of rising in the blue sky. Frankie relaxed and meditated on death as he floated on a cloud, drifting like a ghostly shark waiting to awaken when the fish arrived. Mist cleared in his mind. He was seeing a distant landscape from the stratosphere. For one long moment, he was there in the sky, a nearly naked body staring at a tremendous vista. The awe and horror of it brought him fully awake. His eyes blinked as he pushed away tears, then the transfer took place. His skin sizzled, his brain cooked. In seconds, he was baked to the communications system, and he felt the drone connect to him like it was his real body. He now felt like he was made of tons of iron, though he knew the battle drone was really made of all sorts of alloys and plastics.

Taking a moment, he got the feel of the ship or of his new self as the feed prepared him for the possible terrors up ahead. There was some disorientation as he had never been in a ball or satellite-shaped ship, but that quickly vanished because he liked the feel. It matched his initial state in a sealed giant ball in remote Las Vegas. It was similar to flying a pocked meteor with the pocks being weapons and surveillance channels. The weapons systems were mostly new – ten different beam and spectrum guns plus tracking missiles from bullet to bird size. Navigation was the easiest he’d ever experienced as he could zoom off in nearly any direction with finely controlled speed without any skin-cook or brain jars. There was a fair bit of cloud cover, mostly white cumulus, and they were flying low as the mutant monsters usually had better surveillance in the high sky. The winds were light, and a lake suddenly showed below like a shard of pale blue mirror, then they were over forest – nine ships flying in a

backward and angled V formation toward the perimeter of destruction that surrounded the territory the hive mutants called Holland. An area that included parts of Belgium and Germany. Technically, they were on the old German border as they entered the Netherlands.

Areas of burned trees appeared below; wide swaths, and it looked like fire had licked down to them from the heavens. Blast damage was so fierce that entire scorched ravines had been created. Over time, that had allowed sparse vegetation to grow on the mounds of earth and shattered rock. Tumbled buildings were heaped in areas, and as they got closer, they spotted a wall of burned and damaged structures like skeletons or artistic scarecrows, warning that they were now in no man's land. And the warning proved genuine as the mutant ships suddenly appeared.

Their formation was as a six-point star, the points being spoon-shaped silver ships. A much larger ship was in the dead center of the formation, and its shape could be best described as variable. Its first appearance was as a cube, but as it began to emit light, it morphed like a jellyfish. Frankie was flying point, and despite his desire to blast the enemy, he held back, sending a silent command to the other pilots to engage the smaller ships while he blocked the larger one.

Suddenly, a ballet in the air was on, with human and mutant ships spinning a web of flight and formation at incredible speeds. Beam weapons filled the air with multiple shapes of energy particles as the ships engaged. Fail-safe prevented Frankie's pals from colliding with each other and gunning at each other, and the mutant ships worked in a similar mode. Shields shook as hits stuck home, and Frankie felt the sweet power of the iron burning as he dogged the larger ship. It was like trying to shoot at water in the sky ... beams and charges went straight through it. Missiles couldn't find it, and he made the first deadly hit when his fire sent one of the other alien ships down like a burning cigar to the destruction zone.

"Man down!" he heard as one of his companion ships shot straight up. It blew like a fire balloon. Shrapnel hit his shields. Something odd was happening with the mutant control ship. It whirled like a top, tilted, and flew in reverse. Frankie saw two of his pals swatted out of the sky like flies, and as the big ship moved in on the rest of them, he flew straight up on a breathtaking run to the stratosphere.

Within moments, the rest of the ships were gone, and he could still hear his fellow pilots screaming as though some kind of beast was tearing them apart. The weapon was invisible; Frankie could detect no beam or force of any type, but it still hit with incredible power.

He remained stationary, trying to think. He heard Vicky Stanton, the pilot of the last ship down, still screaming, meaning the weapon had gone right home to the pilot. And the mutant was coming up for him fast. An idea hit him. He suddenly turned off all his systems except for control, using the old manual hands and guns. He spun in a wide arc, moved in, and fired. A standard beam weapon nearly took him out, but the other, newer secret weapon failed to touch him. The high-speed bullets he'd fired hit the mutant ship, causing a fire-burst at its side. As it retreated, he turned his systems back on to engage the other ships.

One by one, Frankie took them out. The mother ship was returning, but instead of engaging it, he took a run right past it, watching the other mutant ships mushroom to fire bursts as they crashed into the destruction zone. Now he was racing right toward open enemy territory, his mind flying with the adrenaline of payback rage. He saw the barrier of shields ahead and, lower down, a strange crenelated wall. The bastards were like insects or something, building a wall around Holland as though it was a beehive, and they even had it constructed here at this remote location far from city centers.

A scan showed a mutant formation on part of the wall and behind it. Swooping down in a suicide run, avoiding higher shields, the meteoric ship spun, bobbed, and fired everything it had, first sending mutant bodies into a splatter of blood in the air and then turning the entire section of the wall to molten fire.

The run continued as he destroyed everything in sight. He'd broken through, but the mother ship was on him, and it was too late to switch off his shields and go primitive. A giant hand had him, shaking and squeezing him. He couldn't maneuver away but could only watch as his ship was destroyed. It exploded, and as it fell in fragments, he realized what had happened to the others – the reason for their screams.

A ghost of his ship remained as if the mutant ship had modeled it in imitation energy that left all the communications and weapons channels still open. A second weapon fired like a strange light, and Frankie saw it coming straight down the airwaves to connect to him in Las Vegas. It was the burn of his life; he screamed in frightful ecstasy as he was slowly fried alive, his body exploding to boiling tissue and blood. Foul gas began to leak from what remained of his casing at the command center. Frankie was dead, but also a hero, as on another channel, General Mike Blackthorn was saying, "It's done. We've got a hole into their hive that should be good for a week."

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Chapter 17: Beast Run

Grey clouds spun slowly in a loose funnel as the Thundersled took the downward run. To Jack, it seemed like he'd been fired from a cannon up at forty-five degrees and then down at the same angle; the tiny ship being scarier than a carnival ride with its jolts and open view of the landscape. He glanced at the simple autopilot controls, wishing he had the thumbprint to set manual as the sled raced straight toward a rocky shore, then flattened into a run into the nearly invisible landing tube in the side of a pine-forested hill. It raced into flashing yellow tunnel lights, then stopped like a bullet hitting its target.

The bubble door popped open to the rear, and he stepped out and faced a small welcoming crew. General Mike Blackthorn sported a wide grin that seemed more like a crevice in his rocky face, but it helped tone down the severity of his dress uniform. He was flanked by a huge black guard in loose military fatigues and a butch female colonel.

"Did you enjoy the ride?" Blackthorn said.

"Going into space is a bit easier. They should ban these T-sleds."

“Definitely not. They have their uses. They’re simple, and the stealth version is undetectable to mutant-based technology when it stays low to the ground. You’ll be flying into Holland with a similar machine, so I thought you should get used to it.”

“This special mission and maybe an impossible one considering how much training I’ve had.”

General Blackthorn gestured for Jack to follow, and they went down a rock tunnel with a kaleidoscopic end that led to a small, secure area that opened onto a large security office. The guard remained outside. The office was a cavern of sorts, well-lit, with a desk and a wall of control screens at the west end. It had seating for about twenty people, but only one chair was occupied. The man wore a full bodysuit, and to Jack’s amazement, it was Daniel Manson.

They sat, and Mike Blackthorn spoke first. “Meet your partner on this mission.”

Jack grimaced, disbelief and sweat on his brow. “Is this a joke? How can he be my partner? I recall you saying I was to get intelligence on the inside, traveling with a person recovering something in there.”

Daniel grinned and tossed back his hair. Jack frowned.

“He has worked undercover for us before,” General Blackthorn said. “The deal has been that the Cult of the Comet gathers information for us when allowed into areas to recover relics. Daniel knows the territory, at least in its classic form. Remember, his church is still in there, and some of his people were the last to escape when it went black. We also share a common interest.”

“Which is?”

“The cult and planet security want the hive mutants on the defensive and in their hives. He is recovering a specific artifact from a remote church site within the zone. You will be gaining the latest info on the hive mutants. On the relic, the elders believe it is an important item regarding physical rejuvenation, and the deal is that it will be transferred to them after the perihelion ceremony is over.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Service to your country. Aiding the Cult of the Comet, as I understand you are a member. In addition, it continues the case you started back during the Toronto fire. There was a hive-mutant nest inside that building, and contact with locals. Things are coming to a head as the comet comes into perihelion.”

“I see. Toronto has been scouted for potential as a new mutant hive. So I suppose figuring out how to stop that would be a good idea.”

General Blackthorn nodded approval, and Daniel Manson spoke. “We all have things at stake, and there is no one else to do the job. Specially trained agents have been picked off by the hive mutants. The church wants its holy objects recovered, and it is believed that these relics may later be used to power weapons to block the mutants and their expansion plans. The elders, as usual, are only thinking about harnessing emanations for rejuvenation. The cult will share information as it is uncovered, and planet defense

will have a shot at harnessing alien technology in the ongoing battle with the hive mutants.”

“How do we pull this off without special knowledge?” Jack said.

General Blackthorn answered, nodding to the blond colonel. “You haven’t been formally introduced. This is Colonel Manners Allwood, our foremost expert on mutant technological history.”

“Glad to meet you,” Allwood said in an unconvincing tone of voice. “The simplest explanation is that the black zones are complex mutant hives shaped inside an energy cone. They provide a slightly altered atmosphere that the mutants need, along with security, as they are territorial, marking out areas of the planet as their own. It takes tremendous amounts of energy to create these hives, and we believe they plan to harness power using relics to create new black zones. The next of which would be Toronto.”

“That’s correct,” Daniel said. “They don’t scout without a reason. An attack is being planned.”

“So I would suppose the game plan is quick victory through solid defense?” Jack said.

“Yes,” General Blackthorn replied. “If they get inside North America, it will be total war. There are documents plus an alien code that was partly translated from the alien language before the aliens left Earth. We believe it, and some of the relics will form a special device that we can use to create the energy to destroy the mutant hives.”

“What does the Cult of the Comet really gain when the only goal is to leave Earth?”

“We gain a needed relic for use in the ceremony,” Daniel said. “The key here is aliens. We don’t worship these perverse mutants that have interbred with us and even feed on human children. Our deal is world government via General Mike Blackthorn gets what it wants, but we also get to use the relic in our power arrangement first.”

“Though the elders fear the aliens, the military doesn’t,” Colonel Allwood said. “From documents we’ve translated, the aliens have never been hostile to Earth and never intended that some remain behind and interbreed. They would be on the side of pure humanity. They may aid us.”

Jack looked from General Blackthorn to the Colonel and to Daniel Manson and began to wonder if he was dreaming. “The aliens are on our side, so you hope.”

General Blackthorn spoke. “They didn’t come in ships or with weapons last time, but in a bridge across time and space. It tied in with the comet visits. Contact and travel would be instantaneous, and had they wanted to destroy us, we’d already be dead.”

“It can work in reverse,” the Colonel said. “The area where contact goes through will be swept via the power of the comet and relics to their world. We would be contacting them and asking them to aid us back on Earth.”

“Now I see why Daniel is involved,” Jack said. “If the cult makes it, we carry a friendly message from you people.”

“And ensure our victory over the hive mutants,” General Blackthorn said. “Consider that we’ve spent decades researching this problem. This is also top secret and in its own compartment. The disconnected elders know nothing about this military aspect. We know what we are doing. The hive mutants are trouble. They are a threat to our civilization. All alien translations list such an occurrence of interbreeding as forbidden.”

Jack’s expression grew serious. “Perhaps forbidden to the point that they would reconsider and think about destroying Earth.”

“No. It is clear that the aliens know that interbreeding leads to planetary destruction, so they don’t want that. They came here searching for a god, and they heard of ours,” Daniel said. “We know they believe in life, not death.”

“I see four of us here,” Jack said with a sigh. “Four people to move ahead with this risky plan.”

“Not quite,” General Blackthorn said. “We have the military of the planet, but this mission is compartmentalized. Only Daniel has the serious understanding of relics this job requires. He wants you with him because you have skills and can be trusted. The hive mutants have moles inside. Our special agents are quickly killed. Your chances are much better.”

“I see,” Jack said. “I’ve heard some ugly stuff about these mutants, and the fire showed me that they have infiltrated the SSU.”

“You’ll be inside with me,” Daniel said. “You’ll find out about the ugly stuff.”

“So it’s on,” General Blackthorn said, firing up his wall screens with a wave. “Let’s get down to business. We’ve punched a hole in their hive; the things are so complex that it takes at least a week to seal them. They close off the outside surveillance first. Colonel Allwood is the expert on the hive, so in this briefing, she’ll show you what you need to know.”

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Daniel Manson sat in the clamshell pilot’s seat, waiting for the takeoff signal. Jack glanced at his longish hair and classic profile. Both of their minds were still flashing through the end of Colonel Allwood’s data cube on the hive or black zone. It was rather amazing the way the mutants used an alien-based technology - one that was like magic in that it was impossible to analyze fully or duplicate. Images showed them the creation of a cone shape that covered the ground and the sky over large areas. It came out as a black or vanished area that couldn’t be read from the outside, meaning that if it weren’t for history and the knowledge of the vanished lands, they would be parts of the Earth that had been taken out and the orb stitched to some other dimension at that spot. It was a multi-layered energy structure, yet the atmosphere passed through, coming out slightly altered on the inside. Ordinary human beings could still breathe it.

As his thoughts returned to Daniel Manson, Jack considered the many roles this man was playing. He was a cult street evangelist, high official of the Toronto church, and most likely secretly pulling the strings of the whole outfit. The public face and older officials of the church worldwide were tools he used. Since Jack had joined, Manson was technically his spiritual leader and apparently a focused leader who cared only

about the cult's higher goal and harnessing the technology to reach it. Even General Blackthorn was manipulated by his promises of power. Manson's control revealed a simple fact of the modern world: any group controlling a super advance of science had access to all the levers of authority.

The public church was too old and soft for espionage, so Daniel Manson's power was partly rooted in his ability to recover alien power relics. Considering that he had been up against the hive mutants, elements of the police state, and mercenary fortune hunters, he was obviously underrated and wanted it to be that way. Apparently, the Cult of the Comet had nearly all the artifacts it needed and played a shell game, sending hive mutants and the others chasing decoys and dead ends. Thinking back, he understood why Manson had done so well on the island. He was another Jan Fair, a spy who wasn't with an agency but was working for his own hidden motives. Jack also realized that General Mike Blackthorn was taking a big risk in trusting Daniel Manson. The cult and its leader had one goal: to sail off to an alien world under the comet's power. It was doubtful whether they would care much about the remaining Earth, so General Blackthorn and Manson were using each other and could diverge at the final hour or before perihelion. It was as if the planet had become a fat pawn in a chess game between hive mutants, police-state world government, and the Cult of the Comet.

Jack wasn't quite sure where he belonged in the game, if at all. The fire, Jan Fair, Blackthorn, and Manson had left him stuck participating with nothing to gain. He even wondered if the planet was worth saving and speculated that if so, it would be in hope of future days and a better society, not more rule by General Blackthorn's people.

A sudden jolt, and Jack came out of daydreams, watching as Daniel took control and they took flight, cruising like a missile over choppy blue ocean and up in incredible acceleration. Though this was the stealth version of the T-sled, the view and feel from inside was every bit as nasty. The flight Manson took involved a long run over the ocean, then a wild, twisting dance over land as he followed a flight plan laid out as the one most likely to avoid detection by the hive-mutant land and air surveillance. Technically, they were invisible, but it was questionable how invisible one could be to mutants that were masters of the vanishing act.

An hour passed, and the worst seemed over, then Daniel Manson had them spinning through a lightning storm, and the electrifying feeling that they were one of the bolts headed to ground. They came out of the cloud cover with Daniel pulling horizontal just before impact with the ground. It left Jack with blinking eyes, amazed that they weren't dead already.

"Get ready," Daniel said. "This is the run in ... if they've detected us, we'll be shot down and in alternative-plan mode. If we do land, it means we've got past them and have bought plenty of time."

Fastening his lightweight suit in four spots, Jack prepared for possible quick ejection as they suddenly approached a giant green eye in the lower sky. Manson went right through the emerald pupil of it. They entered a cone, then an entire land instantly came into view on the other side. Blackened earth, stunted trees, and tall scorched grass passed below as they approached the bombed-out skeletons of fortresses of some mutant variety and a circular area of broken buildings that appeared to be the remains

of a small town. Four huge earth-crawling machines were on the far side of the town, and they were emitting a field of some sort that showed on the T-sled's tiny screen. Manson took note of it, then went in for a soft landing in the long grass next to a large semi-demolished building.

Jack removed a small aluminum tube with a rounded glass end from a space in the panel. It was a detachable stealth device set to mask human cargo. It had originally been designed to hide humans traveling in cargo bays, so it was questionable how well it would work on a ground mission and against mutants.

A visible halo burst appeared as he tuned the setting, and then he went out and off through the grass. It whipped at his legs and had a dirty knife-edge feel. The breeze carried an unclean, metallic tang and a faint odor of burning rubber that settled in their nostrils and forced a form of hyper-alertness.

Daniel halted at a huge rut, and they both went into a squat in the grass. A short study of the area showed that all movement would be up from their location. Mutant mechanical monstrosities held most of the high ground ... humming, emitting whirs and beams as they painted the lower atmosphere with semi-transparent force fields.

Jack made a decision, and Daniel followed him on a dash to some trees and shrubs. The trees provided spooky cover, their knotted limbs perhaps a long-term effect of the altered mutant atmosphere. Near the end of a stand, they passed a machine larger than a two-story house. It moved like a tractor but on a cushion of air at the edge of the incline. Other machines they'd seen were robots, but this one had a mutant operator. This mutant specimen was one of the soldier types with purplish skin, bulging arm muscles, and a shock of silvery hair topping a brutish forehead. In contrast, the creature's large green eyes seemed kind.

Keeping low and under cover, they watched the machine pass over the incline in bursts of rushing air, then slowly disappear from view. The path the machine had left over the rough terrain was convenient, so they followed the flattened ground for half a kilometer to a forested area. It was rimmed by ferns of some variety, so once under the trees, they were shielded from view. These trees were much taller, with mostly duff beneath them, allowing fast travel on foot. When they burst through the greenery, they found themselves in a clearing with a brook. They rested on a large notched boulder there, and Jack studied the sky while Daniel calculated their position and pinpointed the location. In the sky, pockets of blowing greenish smog resembled an animation floating against a backdrop of shell blue and filtered sunlight.

"This church is in a remote location," Daniel said. "We couldn't have embarked on this mission if we had to go deep into mutant land."

"Mutants may be inside it. You'd better give me the heads up on what this artifact looks like."

"Every relic is designed to look like an object you would find in the human world. This one is a bronze shield with a stylized crusader cross. It would never be disposed of because it is appraised to be a genuine antique from that period."

The brook was the way to go, and it was easy to follow. They paced one to each bank through clover plants as tall as small ferns. The trees left permanent leaf carpeting and

dappled shade in the nearby forest. Huge tufts of rusty red grass and patches of golden brown mushrooms were all that grew under the trees, though thick vines hung on lower branches. Some of the trees were stunted and spotted with the silver of blight. They heard birds but rarely saw anything other than the beating of quickly vanishing wings. The sound of the distant mutant machines remained background noise, like a faint mechanical scream drifting into subconscious perception.

A kilometer passed, then the forest and stream broke on a large pond. Its shores were a sand beach, but the sand was coarse and dark. The pond water was rippled and green. Jack studied it, considering it to be polluted, but not with something that killed aquatic life, but altered it - like the hive mutants changed the water slightly in the same way they did the atmosphere. As he thought about that, a spire caught his eye. A cross topped it, their target church being a ways through the trees on the other side of the pond. Some focus through the shifting foliage revealed a stone monastic Christian church and something else.

They ducked back quickly from the beach as a mutant ship appeared – manned or drone, it wasn't clear, as the bubble was opaque. It flew at the left of the spire and directly overhead, its flight sleek and aerodynamic like a flash of winged silver and not at all like most other mutant ships and machines.

“Who do you expect to find at the church?” Jack said.

“Probably none of our people – we know they escaped, and the relic got left behind. They didn't know it was anything more than a piece of art.”

“Let's hope the mutants haven't discovered it.”

“It's here. This one we can trace because it releases power when we prime the other relics. It only functions fully during the great event – perihelion.”

“Final question – are they expecting us? That was a patrol ship that passed.”

“Patrols would be routine after the breach. They would expect a large-scale attack, not a couple of intruders.”

“We can split up on the grounds and scout the front and back.”

“We retained the classic Christian structure of this church and used it as a retreat like the one we have near Toronto and on the various islands. There are no surveillance devices unless the mutants got to it and put some inside.”

“How is it you seem to know everything about the worldwide church?”

“Travel is global, though everything is fragmented and compartmentalized. The various boards, ecumenical councils, and so on are hypnotized by the money and assets they control. Deeply religious factions focus on their own theology and final plans. In the end, they control an illusion while the Cult of the Comet inner circle I created moves toward the full power of the grand event. Wealthy supporters, we keep under control and earthbound with alien anti-aging technology. Everyone milks the church for something, but none of them controls it. You could even count General Mike Blackthorn and his MS police-state as part of that crowd. They want to study what happens at perihelion and see if there is power they can harness or develop to give them an edge on the hive

mutants. And they may gain it, too. They'll grab our relics once we're finished with them. Right now, they want to watch and see how we harness them."

"That I believe. General Blackthorn and the hive mutants both want this world, and not to go off to another. For them, it's about military power."

Jack had never been to the Netherlands, even before it became Holland again and a mutant, mutated land. Daniel had visited this church a long time ago when he was quite young. At that time, things had been quite different; today, the forest and sky cradled the church, but both had changed. In the old days, ghost ship clouds passed quickly, and the sun beamed out of them. The forest of today wasn't the forest of his youth. It was still beautiful, but perhaps both mutant and slightly alien ... even the pond he remembered from youth ... the blues, butterflies, and even the turtles gone, replaced by green ripples and deeper fish that showed near the surface and broke it quietly at times. The pine forest here had been replaced by deciduous trees, many of them stunted and of unknown varieties. The flowers were gone, replaced by sparse wildflowers in the open fields and fields of flattened leaves that one could make football runs through.

The old monastic church was the one constant. It hadn't changed, but appeared as a memory in Daniel's mind. Though the grounds were overgrown with weeds, the old walkway was the same. It was ancient, like the church itself, the stones in various natural shapes, placed and forming a walk that remained unchanged over time. The fence that had been there once was gone, yet the lining of weeds left the walk looking traveled, as only tiny ant hills showed between the stones. Ahead, Daniel saw the old church standing as it had in his youth. The cross on the spire an antique and a symbol of a God that had been replaced by the tail and head of a comet ... the tail and head of the serpent that believers in older times would have fled, seeing Satan, the dragon, and the devil.

All seemed abandoned, the arched doorway of the old church nearly walking to him with a silent welcome, then his dreaming vanished as a beam weapon hit him at chest level, right on the heart. His suit saved him, and he used the impact force to roll over backward and then kick over to the weeds on the side of the walkway.

Daniel's weapon got stuck in his side pocket; he glanced up and saw a face in a window that had been exhaled open from its freeze point in the ancient stone. It was a mutant face and one with huge blue eyes like pools set in pocked skin. In their depths, murder swirled as a sudden command rising. A small triple-barrelled gun spun in a six-fingered hand; the mutant wanted a perfect shot and a moment to view and relish the kill. Daniel's own weapon would auto-target, but that feature was off. In such circumstances, he had no idea where it would fire as the enemy numbers and presence weren't known.

Daniel's backup weapon came into his hand, up from his wrist, and the shot was like no shot ... completely silent, no smoke or fire from the barrel. It hit like a kiss of breeze, holding a speculative mutant face in a momentary amber glow ... and visually, nearly beyond the perception of the human eye. Daniel found himself watching as a huge drop of liquid red passed down to the shape of a rose petal on the wall. Acrid perfume from the shot touched his nose as he ran and rolled into nearby trees.

At the back of the church, Jack had gone into the nearby scrub after noting a manicured courtyard. His reading and his eyes revealed nothing, but he knew there was a presence in the old church. He had no idea what it was, but logic told him it could only be mutant.

Then a short buzz hit his ear, meaning Daniel had fired. He came up from a squat to rush the back door. While he was running, another figure came up from his left side and tackled him. Jack threw the attacker off and stumbled, wondering why he wasn't dead already. Those thoughts passed when his attacker came up out of the weeds he'd tumbled in ... a mutant, and this one did not have kind eyes, but huge oval eyes of fierce green. Secrets that human eyes hide, these didn't. And where a man would have a soul of hate and murder, this one had simple extermination in hollow pupils of hell.

The look was hypnotism masking the corruption of death, black glass shattering in some place of damnation. But Jack remained alert, and he ducked as the rising mutant fired. The beam took off a tree branch and sent it spinning into a small vortex that swallowed it.

Acting instantly, Jack dived. He got the mutant in the midsection, took him in a roll, and they both got up for a fast face-off. It was brief as Jack fired an expansion beam that turned most of the mutant's body into a flying spatter. It was thrown all the way to the church as a sudden rain of blood on its back wall.

Without hesitation, Jack ran straight to the back door. There was a rain overhang there, and he waited a moment, catching his breath. He knew he was lucky.

The mutants would have felt any beam weapon, and the door was closed. Either there were no more inside, or none had rushed out because of fear. A hidden weapon pulsed out a fiery line of stars that arced over the overhang and swung down and around to him. Earth and smashed stone came up in sparks as the bursts fell in a line in front of him. His shield setting had tricked away any direct hit, but the smoking wave, forming a half circle around him, lifted him, and he had to use a small back jet to get clear and avoid being smashed into the overhang. It felt like he'd been swept away by a huge broom, and he found himself rolling through thorny scrub and out into a path running beside an ancient stone well. He came up but stayed in a squat; the fast activation of the auto shield to the shots had protected his head well, but his body was numb from the blows.

Jack measured the direction of the shot and saw a hole in the window glass above. The rest of the glass suddenly shattered and tinkled to the stony ground below. A bald mutant head looked out, and in that instant, he was nearly hypnotized by the blue mirror-like eyes and their glow. A quick snap, and Jack instantly targeted and fired. The mutant's mouth stretched into a strange, predatory O, revealing a jaw full of crooked teeth. His silver gun showed as he raised it to fire, but he didn't get a second shot as Jack's beam cracked air like cannon fire and vaporized him along with the lower sill of the thick window opening.

He heard the snapping of small-arms fire inside the church. It meant Daniel was inside, involved in a shootout in which neither side would dare use the more powerful beam modes. Rising, he ran a short half circle and over hot earth and stones, firing as he ran

to burst the stained glass in another lower window. A small leap, and he caught the sill and rolled through the large arched opening. The chandeliers were lit in the church, and as he fell inside, he saw a flash of weapons fire and a quick image of Daniel facing off with two mutants near a large altar.

Crimson cloth burst into flames; they were fully occupied with Daniel, but one managed to get a quick burst off in his direction to keep him down. Daniel, at the same time, was in motion, throwing himself behind a decorative bench that held some holy objects, the largest of which was a gold chalice. The mutants were covered in armor like a turtle shell that was obviously tough, as burn marks from Daniel's weapons fire showed on the breasts. They both got off shots at Daniel, turning holy objects into flying molten slag and the table into fiery splinters. But Daniel was already gone and moving behind a burning curtain. Jack fired for the mutants' heads, and it was a good shot that turned invisible head shielding into glowing orbs that were struck again as Daniel fired. Daniel's shot proved to be enough as the purple burst took them down to a slide on a patterned rug. They didn't get back up; their heads were still intact, but it was clear that the impact had either killed them or knocked them out.

Choking smoke was filling the room, but the breeze swept in broken windows. Jack saw Daniel burst out of smoke puffs and go up a staircase. He rose to follow and had to duck again. A mutant had appeared on a high balcony that overlooked the huge altar. This one was small, like a midget, and was wearing a helmet with a faceplate. He was spinning a cylinder on a gun as it energized to fire a tracking beam at him. The small hand weapon gleamed with rows of buttons and had a wide copper barrel; Jack had heard of these deadly guns. He rose and hopped over a scorched mutant, one Daniel had shot on entering, and got through a doorway.

The mutant's weapon fired with deadly effect, the tracking beam following him as he ran with various bursts, tearing through the wall. He was still running as he came out of another doorway right under the area of the mutant's balcony, and fire from the gun was still tracking down and around him. He knew the mutant was heavily armored, so his plan came into play as he fired up in a steady burst and continued running. A huge stone pot caught Jack unaware, and he tumbled over it to the floor. He'd taken out the support of the balcony above, and the mutant grabbed the rail and lost his weapon as it angled. The remains of his fire shattered the pot, then it was over as the mutant came straight down on an elevator ride with the heavy balcony. Stone and wood cracked in the thunder of the impact. Jack fired on the tumbling mutant, and the combination of that and the crash left him splayed on the ground. He didn't rise, and Jack managed to get the weapon and toss it away in the rubble. The gun was nice, but it wouldn't work for a man.

Jack took cover behind a fluted column and waited as the hiss of a hidden fire system shot pulses of dry mist into the smoke and flames. There appeared to be no other mutants, so with shields on, he ran through the dry particle rain that came as smoke quickly fell out of the air. He went up the stairs to a large back area of the church. There was an open arch. He saw a heavy polished door with a melted lock and went for it, entering a big room with one large arched window. This was a museum-like place full of church artifacts and paintings. The fire system had come on in it, too, and the last of the powder was settling. He could see no mutants hiding in the room and no sign of Daniel,

so he ran to the window, which was cranked open in one segment. Daniel had made it down there to the back, and Jack saw the vine he'd used to get to a tree branch and jump. Bronze gleamed in the sun as Daniel ran; he'd captured the shield. It had been here in this room.

Rather than shout, Jack was about to signal, then he saw a drone high above the trees and ducked back into the room. Daniel was on his own now, and so was he with their chances of making it back to the T-sled slim. Perhaps he'd be in Holland a long time before getting out, if he survived, but instead of taking the long route immediately, he waited. He'd go out through the ground level when it was clear of the drone, try a fast follow on Daniel, and grab the shield if necessary.

A quick scan of the room, and he saw an assortment of stuff from other shields and suits of armor to cups, bowls, and spears. Something caught his eye, and he looked high up at a painting partially hidden in gloom. It was the face of an alien clothed in the robes of a pagan priest and from a time he could only guess at, and guessing was something he had no time for, so he hurried out of the room to the stairs.

Then he halted; if any mutants had entered below or had been hiding, they'd be waiting for him to come down. He hadn't checked the large area through the open arch, so he went over and peeked in, seeing a room mostly in gray gloom with all windows covered in dark curtains. Chandeliers were on at a very faint setting. His eyes adjusted quickly, and he saw a huge open area, living quarters, and, on the far side of the room, smaller arches leading to other rooms. His hair bristled when a figure came clear - someone, man or mutant, on a chair large enough to be a throne. It faced away from the main arch at the darkened windows.

"Don't move or I'll shoot," Jack said as he took careful steps over to him.

"I have no weapon," was the reply. As Jack got close up, he saw that the person was an old man, not one who aged well, with wisps of thin white hair and a face slightly sunken, lined with deep creases. The robe was of a design that Jack knew well. He was a priest, and some of the symbols were those used by the Cult of the Comet.

"Who else is here?" Jack said.

"Other than me, only a few mutants. I believe you and Daniel have killed them."

"Why are the hive mutants keeping you here?"

"Should you be concerned? Daniel has what he needs. I advise you to run. They'll be coming soon."

"I'll be on the run in a moment. I want to know about the shield. Is it what Daniel claims it to be?"

"It is, and they'll need it for the Grand Event. The hive mutants didn't know, but I suppose they will now that he's taken it."

"They didn't know. Then why are they keeping you here?"

"They don't kill everyone. They keep humans alive in their hives, especially the young, which they periodically feed on."

“I’ve heard about that. Is it some form of religious abomination they practice?”

“No. That’s why they should be destroyed. They are neither alien nor man, and their genetics allow them to gain health from the blood of young humans. They have problems with sudden, uncontrolled growth. I advise you to run now. I will be perishing here. The Grand Event is not for me. In serving them, letting them pick my brains for knowledge of the cult, I’ve sold my soul. However, you can still serve humanity. Daniel and his people think only of the grand escape and other worlds. I know that it’s only through perihelion and the event that we can gain the knowledge to destroy the hive mutants. The event must happen so humanity can learn to harness alien technology to destroy them. The end will be the new beginning on earth, not another planet.”

A small tracking screen appeared like a cellophane square, pumped out by a setting in Jack’s transformed badge. It showed one vehicle in the air and none on the ground. The mutant ship was in a stationary hover overhead. A moment later, it took off slowly in the direction Daniel had gone. Because of the altered atmosphere, Jack’s screen failed at tracking human and mutant bodies, but it gave him a chance.

He emerged from the church as the ship went over the small hill, heading after Daniel and toward the spot where they’d ditched the T-sled. He kept the tracker setting on and ran across the grounds. A path ran up the hill through wildflowers and weeds, then into the trees. Every half-minute, he did a location check, and after three minutes, he saw the ship landing. Probably just ahead of Daniel. It appeared that if they hadn’t fired at him from the sky, they wanted him alive, as they had guessed that he wouldn’t be here unless it was to remove something valuable.

The path took him to the stream, over an arched stone bridge, and down a section of the path that began to wind through the forest. Again, it was stunted, gnarled, low-to-the-ground trees. In this woodland, the trees were covered with a heavy growth of a type of thorn bush and stood on rocky ground. He couldn’t get through, so he had to go back to the turn in the stream and run down its bank. An open field appeared, and he ran as fast as he could through the tall dry grass. He pulled the tracker out for a glance and saw he was nearly on his target. The ship was ahead through a stand of trees, and so was more trouble as a second ship appeared. It wasn’t landing but heading for him, so he ducked. A moment later, it came over the treetops and went right past him. The tracker showed the ship cruising toward the church grounds.

He was now soaked with sweat, and the exhilaration in the altered atmosphere left him disoriented. He rose and tripped, and when he caught his balance, his sense of direction vanished, leaving him about to run off in the wrong direction. The sun and tracker clicked something in his mind. He turned and jogged to the stand of trees. A light jog was the best he could do now if he wanted any energy left for a confrontation. The stand was on a small rise, and he reached its high point, went down, and looked past some bushes at the clearing lower down.

What he saw baffled him: Daniel was there, holding the shield. Twenty yards from him were two mutants that had left the ship. They wore silver suits and were wispy-thin guys or possibly women – it was impossible to tell, as the faces and loose, curled hair haloed sunlight as though they were angels. None of them was talking or reaching for

weapons. About ten seconds passed, and then Daniel began to walk toward them slowly.

“Possibly hypnotism or some form of mutant telepathy,” Jack thought. If it were a mental power, it hadn’t detected him yet, and he had to stop it to get the shield. He rose slowly, switched from tracker to power beam mode, and sent a disruptor beam at the mutants. It was powerful enough to vaporize them, but it didn’t strike home. Instead, it warped up harmlessly into the sky.

Jack didn’t get another shot off or a chance to duck back. He was suddenly in the spotlight. A beam weapon was hitting him from above, and it froze him on the spot. He knew the other ship had returned and crept up on him, meaning it was too late now.

A vision of stars was sweeping him into a black void. He saw Daniel suddenly fire some type of energy burst and run off past the mutant ship, and then he felt a sharp pain in his chest as his badge transformed itself into his skin in disguise mode. When he awoke, it seemed like only a few seconds had passed, and when full consciousness returned, he was still paralyzed, but no longer on the ground. He’d been loaded into the mutant ship, and he could see that it was passing over a city that gleamed with vast mutant structures. He wondered if they had Daniel as well, and if any plans to ride off on a comet were now on hold, possibly forever.

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Jack expected something evil, but what appeared wasn’t quite what he expected. A being stepped out of the curtains of red and blue mist, walking toward him with a group of military guards. Even in the gloom, something seemed familiar about this being, but he couldn’t place it. Wild hair that drifted in the air yet became part of it, and a face that was both human and carved to a fierce level marked it as mutant and of its own reading. It walked up and stood before him, taking a long look before it turned and stepped back. It was a hive-mutant beast, yet something was triggering déjà vu. Chairs, more like thrones, appeared in the mist as it walked, and yellow light beamed in, leaving Jack facing a mutant court.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t destroy you now,” the beast said as sparks swirled about its head.

“I can’t think of one.”

“Prepare to die.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ll go to that alien heaven with my friend Jan Fair.”

“Jan Fair isn’t dead or in heaven. Where is he?”

“I thought you’d know. Your voice is similar to his, and it’s more than an accent. You look like a mutant but talk like him.”

With a wave of his right hand and arm, the mutant beast sent his guards off through eye-like doors that opened in the mist. “I don’t want witnesses to see the horror of your punishment,” he said.

Jack studied him with a careful eye. “My world, the life I believed in, is mostly dead. Why should I care? You belong with Daniel Manson, General Blackthorn, and the

elders, looking for some utopia that will never prosper. Daniel Manson wants to go off to another world. The elders want to live forever. Blackthorn wants the perfect police state. And you want a world of black zones that is not a world at all.”

Anger passed on the beast’s face in diminishing shades of red. A low growl showed the teeth of a predator. “I am 666, and you invaded my hive. That is never allowed. Tell me if Jan Fair is inside as well?”

“Jan Fair is somewhere near Toronto. I don’t have an exact location.”

“We will capture him sooner or later?”

“You have his voice and hair. Perhaps you’re a trickster like him. I know you need him for some reason and had him under mind control. He somehow got out of it. I’m the only person who would be able to track him down now.”

“Possibly. Where is your partner, Daniel Manson? What is his escape route?”

“Good question. My supposed partner tricked you and me. Maybe he learned from Jan Fair on how to betray everyone. I don’t know any more than you do. I saw him making contact with a couple of your soldiers just before I was captured.”

“Serves you right for aiding him?”

“True. I’m now possessed with disappointment. It seems several people have been using me. You are one of the users ... the mysterious family that paid me to look after Jan Fair was you. Jan used me, too. I’d return him just to get even.”

“He was my agent. We share genes and are to some extent brothers. Brothers who despise each other. Unfortunately, I may need him alive to prolong my life. That’s why you will escape and work with the others on their futile comet mission. Up until you seize Fair and bring him to me. Since I’m already your client in the form of Jan Fair’s family, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Tell me, how much of the planet do you want?”

“Very little. We need a few more hives. It’s not something to fear. The human race will remain and have nearly all of the planet.”

“Your job sounds more promising than instant death, so I’ll take it. After all the games Jan played, seeing him return here will be a pleasure.”

“Jan doesn’t understand. He belongs to the hive now. He has a mutant brother. There is no escape for him. General Blackthorn and his elders need perpetual war and a public living in fear, so he keeps the battles going. As far as the Cult of the Comet goes, we have that situation under control. I don’t care if Daniel Manson escaped with a relic. They won’t contact my alien ancestors or make it to space. General Blackthorn wants to gain power from studying the relics, but he doesn’t know how advanced our technology is or that it’ll do him no good. We can easily keep him at bay.”

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Chapter 18: Drone

A bounty was out, and many interested mercenaries were searching for Jack. Most other people heard rumors that he was in a mutant experimental dungeon or dead and on display as a hanging trophy in mysterious Holland. All interested folk, other than Janice and the cult, had evil intentions, and none of them expected Jack to return to his own apartment in downtown Toronto.

When he appeared there, it was empty and like a summer ghost of dusty sunbeams. He found the door unlocked. A walkabout showed several empty liquor bottles and ashtrays full of dope butts. Glass and mahogany tables had been marred, and that irritated Jack. He had no use for clumsy agents, and he hated slob spies even more. It was SSU or another private detective that had been camped out. The guy had given up and left. No attempt was made to hide the lengthy visit, which indicated an overconfident agent or one who did not expect his return. An early return would have been a blessing, as at least Jack could have tormented him for damaging the furniture.

Still, it was luck, and amazed by it, he went straight for the two things he could use - a quick shower and a hidden store of cash credits inside his bedpost tube. He had the credits in his pocket and was out the door in record time. Pausing for a moment, he stared at the glare from a golden condominium tower that twisted up 60 stories like a big bent brass can. A quick scan of the area showed him that no one was watching, so he jaywalked over the busy street and went down an alley that existed as a service shadow pit between two fifty-story residential complexes. At the rear bend to a genuine alleyway, he glanced back and saw two fast generic ground cars in two-toned blue squeal past the alley mouth.

"Guess they know I'm back now," he thought. "Getting the tip-off that I'm right at home must've been a kick in the balls."

Despite street surveillance and listening devices like lampposts, there were pathways around downtown that went mostly unnoticed, aided by the fact that anyone looking for him wouldn't list him in the general police system. The police state existed in a unity of distrust, and no one trusted local cops below the SSU because they were too friendly with the public. A kindly cop on the surveillance beat might tip off a potential terrorist, mistakenly taking the person for a clean local resident. Though Jack didn't know it, he was completely off the local police surveillance tags and mostly off the SSU ones, too, as there had been too many times that chases after him had taken them to dead ends.

Three blocks later, Jack walked out onto Stanton Street and, in a quick turn, went into the door of an Italian clothing store. Designer outfits weren't his thing, though in cooler weather he sometimes dressed in the new gunslinger style with a long coat, vest, and hat. A hat would definitely do. He picked a light summer color, along with trousers, a jacket, socks, and a short-sleeved shirt. Coming out of the change room, he told the clerk he'd like to pay in cash credits.

"Sir," the slim Italian clerk said. "Do you want your old clothes packaged?"

"No, I'll wear these out," Jack said.

A security guard ambled over, looking like a manikin in uniform as security people often did nowadays. Jack paid, and the guard ambled away in slow, programmed steps. Back out in the street, shaded by a good hat, Jack strolled across a sunny square and into a

rapid transit entrance. As he was going down the steps, he caught a glimpse of the same two fast cars he'd seen from the alley mouth. They had sped to this location but couldn't get through the jam of flesh and vehicles. The car doors were opening, two big men in easy brown summer suits getting out on the road and glancing his way. But Jack didn't run. At the bottom of the steps, there were three choices. He turned right toward an underground entrance to an office complex. Passing the main doors by a stretch, he did a fob-crack mode to gain entrance through a nearly invisible service door and went up some back stairs.

On the ground-floor service area, the glass was unbreakable with a one-way view; he looked out at the busy city street and the two sleek cars now illegally parked near the transit entrance. He couldn't see the drivers behind the shaded glass. The other two men were off on a chase in the wrong direction. These guys weren't SSU. They were private security goons. There were hundreds of such companies, but these guys weren't local because they were using rental cars. Most likely, they were from over the border and from a big outfit with a government anti-terror contract.

Jack traveled several blocks underground and was on a scenic conveyor-belt ride through a gated mall when he found the store he wanted. This was a large electronics depot called the Northern Security Clearing House. Nearly everyone would pass it by as a lack of a flash ad, with an interior view that left it a near non-entity. There were customers. Several cop-like humans were browsing in the aisles as Jack walked straight through, turned right, and entered a door with a fire-exit sign on it. It led to a damp concrete hallway and eight more metal fob-access doors. He went through the one painted gold, which was unlocked, and found himself in another section of the store - the hidden section.

Jack faced a counter and a very old man with ghost-white hair and wrinkles. He wore glasses for vision at a time when shades only existed for vanity. Jack knew him; he was a Jewish guy named Sam.

"Avi junior around," Jack said.

"No ... he had some problems. He's in Israel right now. Or what used to be Israel."

"I want to make a quiet purchase. No records. Some sexy stuff."

"We might have it. Tell me what you mean by sexy? We're not in the sexy weapons market anymore. Lost that business to the competition."

"Here's the short list. I need it delivered to this address at the time marked."

Sam whistled quietly as he studied the list. "You have a down payment you can make."

Jack pulled out the credits. "This makes a solid down payment."

"It sure does, but the location. It's a hotel and not exactly secure."

"I plan to return it quickly. I need it for a fast job."

"It must be some job. That equipment is the latest. We've got the only demo set. It hasn't been used in a real case yet. Cracking someone too big might not be good for your health."

“Yeah, but nothing in this world is good for your health.”

The deal was set, and Jack left the store with a plan in mind. He exited the complex through a hidden exit, which led him down a residential street lined with public gardens and buildings substantially lower than the huge condo and business towers. Four blocks in, he turned down an alley that took him nearly instantly into a skyscraper environment. This ally was mostly washed clean and ran for blocks. Above, the buildings grew taller so that a glance up was like looking up from a well in Hades. Soon the wind was whistling and sighing above, and something else came into his ears. The sound of footsteps. He was nearly at his destination, which was a fire escape up to a second-level concourse leading into the high-rise area. Glancing back, he saw two men in brown suits approaching at a brisk walk. They had guns drawn. He wondered how they had found him, and he realized there was no immediate escape.

As the two men walked up, a gust of wind hit the alley, blowing one man’s hat off. A silver wrapper spun like a pinwheel in front of Jack as dust lifted and the high winds moaned like a sucking dragon. The man’s shaved head indicated that he was former military. The second man pulled a badge of sorts out of his pocket, and as they closed in, he saw an eagle crest next to a star.

“You’re under arrest,” said the man with the badge.

“Really,” Jack said. “Who are you?”

Confident now, the first man picked up his hat while his partner spoke. “GWP, that’s Great West Pinkertons, in case you haven’t heard of us.”

“I have, but what in the hell are you doing in Canada?”

“You’re being taken into custody under provisions of the border agreement. You’ll be delivered to our clients, the CIA.”

“For what?”

“That information is top secret. Everything is top secret, including specified, unnamed charges you may face. So if you’ll just accommodate my partner here while he handcuffs you, all will be okay. You’re going to be seeing me for a while, so you can call me Cleston.”

Jack saw that the handcuffs Cleston’s partner was pulling out were indeed a fancy hybrid leather variety. These sure weren’t cheap SSU guys who still used reinforced duct tape. He wasn’t sure who they were, but he doubted they had anything to do with the CIA. It was a difficult moment, and he couldn’t quite decide on fight or flight. He wanted to know who they really were. Then he saw something else as the man moved in to cuff him.

“We got company,” Jack said.

The first man looked back, and the other backed away with the cuffs. Two people were coming down the alley. A redheaded woman in a military outfit, and a blue-suited SSU type. The SSU guy had a fancy laser gun drawn; the kind with electric stun shots for backup. They walked up confidently, and Jack found himself in a circle with his back to the wall and the fire escape. Unfortunately, three of the people had guns drawn.

“This man is under arrest,” the SSU man said, nodding to Jack. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Ray C. Handleman of the SSU, and this lady is Captain Lise Valmore of the Third European Union 2nd Command.”

“You are right that this man is under arrest,” Cleston said. “He’s under arrest by GWA on behalf of the CIA.”

“I’m sorry,” Ray said, “but as you know, TEU law supersedes American border law. This man is wanted by TEU High Command for illegal activities in the nation of Holland.”

Both Cleston and his partner stared at Ray C. Handleman like they couldn’t believe their ears. “Holland,” Cleston said. “It isn’t even on the fucking map, and you want him for activities there. Give us a break and don’t BS us. We have Motherland Security backing and the power to arrest both of you people.”

Jack found this all interesting and not too helpful. Ray C. Handleman wore the SSU blue suit, but he didn’t act in any way like an SSU man. The captain with him was probably as phony as Cleston ... but in this world, it was hard to tell ... they would be in some way legitimate as they represented security interests of some variety. And regardless of who they were shilling for, it didn’t help him to find a way out of the situation. At least not until he glanced up and saw a small stealth drone coming down into the alley from higher air currents.

Dialogue had come to a halt. It looked like Cleston and Ray might be crazy enough to start shooting at each other at close range with deadly weapons. Both of them had partners who looked nervous; the woman was inching her hand toward a pocket, and the other guy was breaking a sweat as his weapon trembled in his hand.

All four of them followed his eyes as he indicated the drone, and forgot about him almost as fast. Jack dropped to a squat as a nearly invisible beam hit the bottom of the fire escape above him. It was like a ray of strange sunlight that warped the metal. A piece of the imitation marble plating coating the building exploded a fraction of a second later, and sharp pieces and dust showered the area. Boomeranging, the drone swung away and circled, dodging fire from Cleston and Ray and their partners as all four split up on the run and took risky shots.

Well back, but fairly low to the ground, the drone stopped and hovered in midair; it was Lise, the supposed TEU captain, who became aggressive as she ran forward, went to her knees, and fired, supposing that her eye aim would be enough to hit the drone. And she almost did hit it. Her beam went down the alley and vanished at an upward angle as the drone narrowly avoided it with a left swing. It didn’t stop moving but pin-balled about in the alley with four of them firing more wild shots at it. The only thing Jack gathered from this exchange was that Cleston was by far the better shot. Still in a crouch, he put his hand in his pocket for his own weapon, which at this time was his badge. It was in a locked oval shape, its surface a series of square push buttons that required the right pressure on the correct button to open it. Jack got it right, and it expanded to a small beam weapon in his pocket.

During those few seconds, the drone had decided to finish with its business. The lovely EU lady won the honor of first victim as the drone swept over, fired from its tail section, and froze her on the spot. She was like a bug preserved in amber light, but that was

momentary as she was suddenly pulled up by an expanding force that caused her to spin and air, and drop to the ground dead. Cleston swatted flying debris off his jacket, then he suddenly dropped his gun and screamed. Hysterical, he ran down the alley, and though Ray continued firing at the drone, it pursued Cleston at slow speed like a cat stalking prey.

In Jack's estimation, this drone was controlled by a powerful artificial mind, but that was secondary control for evasion and attack, as a human mind was behind the sheer cruelty of it. The initial assumption that he was the target seemed incorrect, unless this guy or gal was just having fun killing the others off and was saving him for last.

He watched as Cleston slipped on something unseen and skidded on the pavement. The drone twirled and fired like some new-style chain gun. A wave of yellow energy bursts turned Cleston into fast-vaporizing flesh explosions. As this was happening, Ray stepped out and took a long shot at the drone. Jack took that as his cue, turned, and jumped up to grab the now-cooled fire escape. He went up quickly and over a ledge. A glance back as he did so showed the drone on the ground firing bursts at Ray. Jack did not need to see any more; he ran and jumped over some rooftop obstacles. Melting a window with his gun, he went through into a stairwell and ran down and through a fire door. From there, it was down the hall and through another door. He worked his way to an underground level, crossed to another complex, and went up. His destination was the roof, and he rode a residential elevator to the top floor. It wasn't the actual top of the building, so he went through a stairwell to an enclosed rooftop mechanical area.

Parts of the roof were out in the open, and there were two doors out to it. He burned both locks and found the exit he wanted. Opening this door a crack gave him a view of a stony area, a small garden, and a rooftop fan exhaust. He went out and got behind the exhaust, taking in a view of other rooftops along the alley he'd just been in. He was lucky. The drone zipped past the next building over, then slowed as if it were scanning an area below. Switching his gun to device mode, he waited as it clicked through shapes, then he pointed it at the drone and took a reading. High on the rooftop, he got a clear read on the tracking signal. A text feed ticked by, showing that this baby was not from over any border. It was controlled by someone in the city. Since it didn't match any police or SSU bands, Jack stepped back inside and sent an anonymous message to SSU Emergency. A message to the effect that one of their agents had been killed by a drone. Jack sent in the feed tag.

A full ID on the drone came in as he was in the elevator to the ground floor. All registration and agency data were blank, meaning some illegal underground security agency was after him. Few such entities existed. Probably some bounty hunter working for an intelligence agency, with a drone that would be history shortly, as the SSU drones would already be out on a kill mission for it and its controller.

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Chapter 19: Volcano

Gold wasn't nearly as valuable as the faceted bar in Jack's palm. In this shape, his badge's tiny engines ran the ghosting that made his location undetectable. The device remained invisible in every mode, from phone call to a discharge of fatal laser beams.

He was traveling underground in an off-map access tunnel, so he pressed the ** facet that morphed it into a special access shape. He now held a small gold object, and the beam he fired wasn't deadly at all; neither was it visible. It was a light disruptor that blinded cameras and any metal or other detectors at the entrance to this tunnel.

He was deep beneath Shoreline Harbor World, a residence for mostly international travelers on the waterfront, with rented office space and multimillion-dollar condos. It had a number of towers and octopus tentacles stretching through small underground villages. Jack's destination was a tiny hideaway office he kept under a business name. A scan of shipping records showed him that the equipment he'd rented had already arrived as office equipment, and a damp day of hiding underground in a rat-infested chamber had him anxious to start work.

A few meters inside the first service door, he halted and pulled a postage stamp from his wallet; when pressed, it expanded into a small screen. Lines of code scrolled in a drift on the screen, and he studied them carefully, making corrections here and there with a small silver pen tip. He'd been in this hotel several times and had tracked the security systems back when he'd set up the office. This program was freshly written and, with the final touch-ups, was ready to run.

At the bottom of the feed, he tapped the run symbol, feeling a slight hum from his badge. A program was now fed through an underground satellite and running against the building's security systems as he walked along. He needed to go up as his unit was there, where there would be less interference when things were running. The first service tunnel was about as glamorous as a sewer pipe; it opened on a vast equipment garage. He didn't have to worry about encountering anyone, as it was all automatic stuff. On the far side, a garage door opened as he walked up, and then he was in another area. His program opened one access door, then another, and a third door with a fingerprint scanner as he walked down the hall to a service entrance.

This was an eye scan and opened for him, but a glitch in his program left him in a dark elevator as he rode up to the second basement. Another series of elevators ran from that level, and he had to go up and down without anyone else getting on.

A phony fire recall brought all four elevators to ground above him, and another command caused the one he'd chosen to shake and the doors to open, ensuring anyone on it would quickly get off. It closed up and came to bottom, and then he was riding in the dark again up to the forty-fifth floor and his unit. He got out in weird purple lighting. His program used a different technique to blind hallway cameras here by creating a shade that cast the images as shadows. At the end of the hall, another shorter passage took him to a separate segment that was his unit. It was quiet and mostly out of sight from the rest of the building. Inside the door, he found his equipment waiting.

The program was still running, and the nano engines were shifting to a new phase now that he was in the room. That phase was, of course, the sweep levels, especially necessary in hotels, as many of them had built-in surveillance that could activate and track at a moment's notice. This one didn't, and that made a visual inspection even more necessary. The unit was Spartan to say the least; smooth imitation hardwood floors, large paintings semi-embedded in the wall paneling. The den was empty except for a desk with a sculpture of an eagle fused to it; the bedroom contained one counter, a bed, and a desk; and the kitchen had clean, modern appliances that looked unused. He had a view over a bit of shoreline to a large sister hotel right on the water. Not much of a view, but at least something. Any place that did have an actual waterfront view wouldn't be a hotel room but would be sold on the market for a high price.

All lighting was built in, and he would've been immediately suspicious of any stand-alone lighting. Not that regular lighting was that much more trustworthy. Nevertheless, he relied on his program; it rarely missed items, and the only other option would be to take everything apart, and even that was dodgy. Nearly all people lived under surveillance, receiving varying levels of protection based on their status in society. Jack's preference was not to live with anything he didn't want, and for that reason, he had spent long years and large sums of money developing the protection that led up to the badge device he now held in his hand ... a creation so advanced it would return itself if lost.

A friendly beep told him the room was clean except for one item; he held the sweep shape in the flat of his hand. A small beam flashed to the bathroom door. Inside, it flashed to an overhead pot light. Rather than dismantle it, he used a secondary beam mode to fuse the glass and melt anything inside of it. Back in the living room, he called up an old program that worked to secure windows by altering the glass's interior surface. He pointed, and the beam lens opened, sending out a wide, blue-tinted beam so he could see it. Taking his time, he painted the hybrid glass, and when he'd finished, it was semi-opaque, giving a distorted view but also securing it from outside readings of interior sounds and signals.

His next step was to unpack his equipment. He pulled the desk from the den and set it in the center of the living room, planning to use it, two glass tables, and the floor to hold everything. The boxes were disguised as a delivery of office equipment, and the seals had passed them through any scans this building had enabled. There were fourteen tablets in all, each with a screen and resembling variations on the standard nano engine tablets that ran the systems in most security buildings. Looks were deceiving in this case, as these were far more advanced, with four of them being generators. These used no external sources, meaning that in a secure location they wouldn't be detected. It all depended on what sort of program a person wanted to run on them, and Jack wanted to run a highly dangerous one.

With the setup done, he sat in a swivel chair, took out his postage stamp, and expanded the screen. Long hours were ahead as the program he was about to write had to be simple, efficient, and powerful.

At this stage of the game, Jack looked somewhat odd. His satellite up-link on the floor beside him resembled a bouquet of aluminum flowers with gem-like blooms, and the

headset he was fussing over was anything but attractive. It would be functional, but in appearance, it had the air of some old-world shock device. The headset was custom-made and multipurpose with many plug-ins, and for this job, he was using all of them.

Walking to the den window, he used a fine laser beam to cut a circle in the glass; the second piece of the up-link he placed in the hole, fitting it with foam rubber. Back at the desk, he expanded a split screen with sections to show the code running and, second, a sort of monitor view of what he would be seeing in his head when the system was running. Currently, both screens remained blank.

Super satellite Volcano experienced heavy traffic as there were so many connections to it and so many authorized agencies tapped into it. There really was no optimum time to attempt to crack it. It was a network of many devices in space and on the ground all over the planet. He had to access the central databank on the supersatellite itself. And without being detected, because detection would mean he'd be targeted for either a swift arrest or outright destruction. Destruction would be from any weapon the satellite could hit him with immediately.

After finishing the code and before getting things officially underway, Jack pulled another secret weapon from one of the delivery boxes. This one was a bottle of gin. A rock glass and some ice in hand, he poured himself a triple shot and pulled it back in three sips. Back at the controls, he adjusted his headset, set the protective visor over his face, and waited a minute before starting the program. He imagined that from an outside view, he would look like a blind man involved in a strange experiment to restore sight. He certainly felt blind with the visor on and nothing running. Leaning back, he felt the burn of the booze transform to warmth and numbness, which was the effect he wanted, as some of the contacts with his skin would give rise to creepy sensations that he didn't want to distract him.

A button push and his long program started running; all of the equipment suddenly came alive with tiny lights, then a visual began to display as his visor lit up. Initially, only lines of code floated before his eyes, and then the screen split, showing a small animation of where he was in the game. That animation remained a picture created by the camera on the up-link fixed in his window. Points like stars appeared in the air, and Jack moved a cursor across the screen by fixing on the cursor box at the top and slowly moving his eyes. He touched it to the first star and got a readout. It was an SSU security scan operating over the neighborhood and automatically disabled by the system Jack was running. Meaning it saw everything but him. The second star was the hotel's own security beam, and he had to act quickly when he saw that readout; he had to call up mathematical visuals on an overlay of the screen and enhance one of the crack programs he'd already written to get inside. He wasted no time simply picking out the serial numbers he wanted and adding any detected devices in his room to the hotel system. Meaning he was simply on the system as a security device.

Ten more stars were slowly winked out as Jack worked, including one that was a signal from a Chinese mobile spy station that was for some reason in Toronto. Others were various levels of government, military intrusion, or security surveillance in the city core. Now that he was over this hurdle, he could transmit out the window to the satellite, provided there weren't any drones hovering nearby that might detect him. As the

program reached that phase, one drone appeared as a sort of ugly metal bird on the screen. Details came up on it showing it to be no threat; it wasn't even operating now, but was underground in the city disaster bunker waiting for a day of disaster to bring it online.

An animation of the Earth now rolled across the screen, and an immense web of various colors slowly appeared, connecting hundreds of stars, the brightest of which was Volcano. The web Jack was interested in was the security web, so he switched to it and got a skeletal view showing only security satellites, Volcano, and their links. Rogue mutant satellites also showed on the map, though the mutants had advanced technology that allowed them to run most of their stuff from the ground inside their hives.

A detailed assessment was needed as to where to best attempt entry to this web. His program began to run, and the message indicated it needed at least 15 minutes of processing time. An incredible amount of time considering the power of the equipment he was running. Still, he welcomed this break; the small bit he'd done so far had taken more than an hour, and he could already feel sickly static bites on his skin. It was time for a second strong drink, and that he poured and sipped, waiting out nearly the full fifteen minutes.

Back under the visor, he relaxed with a deep breath, then studied the results. The least risky entry involved moving through the weakest contact points, but it was a no-go, as the one that presented itself involved too many points. Instead, he picked a fairly high-risk entry that he calculated he could do with this equipment. Most of his energy had to be at his call on the actual entry of Volcano, and not much of that would be left if he spent half the night gaining that entry.

He gave the okay, and the up-link powered up and sent a masked contact beam to the first satellite in the queue. Absurdly, it was a Russian bird and should have been one of the hardest to enter. On his screen, it appeared as a silver ball, then cracked open like an egg, revealing five distinct symbol segments. He went first to a remote repair segment and ran himself in by cracking the entry code. The satellite was not fully operational and was undergoing covert repairs. From there, he was on a time limit. If he didn't move rather quickly from the masked beam to a real connection, he'd be detected, and an alarm would be set off ... which would be very bad for him, as any alarm would be a slow trigger as other secure areas of the web ghost detected it.

Now he was in a surreal world of mathematical imaging combined with the flat code of his program modules, which meant his mind was uplinked as well. The satellite's body, security web, and space itself seemed like his body and environment. With each track farther into the satellite's core memory, a sort of hatch opened, leading deeper into code pieces he had to crack. He barely made the time limit, but he got through the last hatch and had the sensation of floating down a long hall toward a great light. It burst open like a flower; the various petals were vast arrays of nano engines and recorded data ... none of which would've been comprehensible at all if he were not running his program ... which was custom but also composed of various modules and models that had been under design for two decades.

This satellite wasn't on a mainline connection to Volcano, but was remote, which meant waiting in a state resembling weightlessness in space and nausea. A glittering dream began to revolve around him, and he fought to stay awake as his human consciousness began to vanish into the infinite glory of the machine's artificial intelligence. The abort point came, but he hung on as the program cracked the entry route and code, causing Jack's mind to explode with euphoric energy as he was suddenly routed into Volcano.

He had the sense of being a speck being drawn into an energy source the size of the sun, and he was immersed almost instantly. It was only once inside that he realized that all of the rest of the programming he was using was useless. Everything here was reversed; nothing cracked into Volcano, all was read by it. The sensation was of being overwhelmed by an octopus that put out a thousand tentacles over one's mind, and out of them came the imaging that forced one into unity with Volcano's ultimate intelligence ... a mind that absorbed all and held it, releasing nothing back.

Jack knew he'd lost all control and that caused the ultimate in fear to sweep his mind; images, dreams, a reality hell was on him. Then he held back and smiled in his thoughts, and found images of happiness and summer days rising in his mind.

He thought of an eagle, he was an eagle flying, and when he saw a fish in a stream below, he became that fish with all its underwater sensations. If it weren't for the pull of his body and the sting of the system on his flesh, he would've been lost completely. But that gave rise to a thought about a program and why he was here. He was suddenly plunged into a world of symbolism, code and languages that left him momentarily brilliant yet with nothing to do with that brilliance other than ride with it in Volcano's ultimate all-knowing mind.

He'd been lingering a long time, perhaps an eternity. A sea of information flowed through him, and it was wonderful, strange, and meaningless ... like laughing, crying, and screaming ... ecstasy and pain. Then he saw dark waters, thought of darkness, and everything became black and empty. In that moment, he remembered his purpose ... the aliens ... he wanted knowledge of them and their relics, and as he thought of them, it was as if he were swept to the alien planet itself.

He had a vision of soaring over a strange, Earth-like planet; the seas below were tinted green, and the skies were pale, crystalline, and streaked with blue. All revolved slowly, almost imperceptibly, in his mind as time passed in overlays on the visions. Great forests grew and covered the landmass, and the waters became transparent and filled with life. The alien race initially appeared as humanoid creatures living in the tall trees of the forest. Suddenly, architecture emerged and covered the planet. Immensely tall buildings rose out of the sea; huge habitats in their own sense, and on land, huge cities formed in hive shapes with beings in them growing more diverse. They walked and flew, seeming to shift shape at will ... a collage of faces passed in his mind ... and then he saw golden ships rise to space as a belt of the city-like hives grew above the atmosphere. The ships took the seeds of alien life to a second planet in their system. It was a gas giant, and at incredible speed, new life forms rose to intelligence and a second race of aliens.

Sudden fire blinded him; it felt as though his mind would explode. It was the fire and ice of the comet racing across space. As he watched, it shed skins like a snake, fell into a

blur, and became ten comets burning across the galaxy. One flew straight for him and transformed into a huge metal ball; he could sense the core of fire and artificial intelligence inside it. Floating now as part of Volcano's mass mind, he understood the comet as a similar great mind. Another satellite of sorts, but not a Volcano that gathered all earthly knowledge. It was interstellar, sucking in everything along its path. Volcano had already been mirrored, so it was clear as to why even the hive mutant ships couldn't challenge it. It had already read their technology and intent and easily repulsed them.

A growing great light threatened to extinguish him now, and he was again plunged into a world of symbols and languages beyond his understanding. Now, when he thought of darkness to escape, terrible loneliness swept through him, and he couldn't bear to leave the light. An image of the comet and the aliens sped back, engulfed him, and in the visions, one of the relics appeared. As he considered it, he became a focal point of great knowledge, seeing a picture of all the pieces and a great spiritual force rising as the power of an alien mind over matter. A transforming power, godlike in what it could and was going to do.

All light suddenly vanished, plunging him into a sea of ghostly shadows. Alien faces flashed in sudden spouts of mist. He was being sucked down, out of Volcano and the glory of the comet ... spinning then falling in the pit of some hell. Alien faces shifting to the distorted forms and visages of hideous humans and feral animals. A long, endless scream rose as his mind was pulled free of contact with the satellite.

When Jack awoke, he didn't know he was Jack for a long time. His body was a jellyfish of pain with a head of fire and hellish images ... then a period of transition eased in, and he was swimming again in a sea of symbols. Each one he touched had its own special meaning, and in time words formed on his lips; he coughed and lifted his head, finding he could only hold it up for a few seconds. His hand went to the helmet, and he pulled it off. Lifting his head with his hands, he looked around, seeing the equipment, the hotel room, and a program-complete message on his pop-out screen.

He couldn't quite remember why he was here or what he was doing, but the thirst was terrible. He saw the glass beside him, grasped it, and tried to get up. But he fell to his knees and ended up on the floor, slapping his numb legs. A crawl to the bathroom, and he pulled himself up enough to turn on the water and take a sip. Then he crawled to the bedroom, got up on the bed, and fell asleep

He awoke in a semi-dream state, the small bedroom seeming like a dark prison chamber. Thirst continued to rise in his throat, and more times than he could remember, he managed to crawl out to the bathroom and get water in his glass. Sleep would take him again, and the dreams were of demons with shifting faces of mutants and aliens. Over time, human dreams came into his mind, and he saw images of people he knew. Jan Fair appeared dashing across the foyer of some huge bank-like building, lights snapping on. Beam weapons tore into the walls around him. Fair vanished, and he saw Janice and other cult members out at the farm and at the gate, working in bright sunlight to install a silver cylindrical object into one of its columns. Another memory came from the sight of the gate relic, causing a ghostly reappearance of Volcano and the comet as he'd seen them on the hookup. This time, they were lucid moons with cratered faces of

doom, and out of their mouths came a drift of knowledge. It was like snow of the aliens and their artifacts, and in that gathering knowledge, he saw their purpose and each one's location in relation to the concentration at the farm. Understanding rose, and he saw perihelion on the horizon like the sun about to break.

Finally, he was strong enough to stand, got off the bed, and took careful steps out of the room; in the living area, his setup and the helmet were still there. The equipment was humming faintly with some lights flashing. His legs were giving way, so he sat in the chair, and his eyes fell on the bottle of liquor he'd left there. Thirst was on him again, so he took it and drank, then immediately spat it out and stared, trying to remember what it was ... then he lifted it and drank more slowly, finishing most of it.

A few minutes later, he felt a warm glow, and the demons seemed to be passing from his mind. The helmet sat before him, and an idea struck him: he should put it on. He picked it up slowly, and as it met his head, he was blinded ... a violet flash, and though he'd lost sight of the room, a vision flowed in a flat dimension. On the visor first, then expanding to a visual. He was outside the hotel, on the street, and looking around at people passing by ... the city seemed like an alien world now, but as he stood and watched, memories returned. He remembered his name, and slowly everything came to him.

In a fluid motion, Jack yanked the helmet off his head and checked the equipment and time. It was morning, and he'd been out nearly two days. A sudden wave of weakness hit him as he tried to stand, and he fell back into his chair. There was no time. He had to pack up and leave, so he leaned down and pulled over the small pack of supplies sent along with the equipment. Picking through it, he got out a small energy bar, a water canister, and two blue pills. The pills were something he rarely used – Intel drugs. At least half of society was hooked on them, and long-term use, rather than enhancing intelligence, turned people into vegetables. His were an energy version, and he washed them down with water. In seconds, a boost was rising. The pills also had built-in nutrition that kept the addicts from starving themselves to death or wasting away. Cobwebs vanished, and his mind became clear as crystal, but he still had to eat something and clean up. And that he did, nibbling slowly on his bar as he opened his portable screen and studied the readouts, trying to understand exactly what had happened.

It came to him quickly that he'd disconnected the helmet too soon; his system had shut off, and the record on its restart was listed to an official of the highest level. Since no official even knew about his setup, it meant Volcano had rebooted his system and waited until he replaced the helmet to repair the damage to his brain. So why was the system still on? He thought, then realized there was something more, and he placed the helmet on his head again. Nothing but digital lines ticked across the visor, and after twenty seconds, he figured there was nothing more. Then he was hit by a shock wave of data that nearly knocked him off the chair.

Calmly, he removed the helmet. The entire setup had suddenly shut down. Looking around the room, he wondered what that shock had been about, then decided he had no time to waste and got up to work, first repackaging everything for pickup, then cleaning himself up.

Naked now as he'd sent his clothing down the instant incineration chute, Jack walked through a sunburst door into a rain shower. He lingered there for a while soaping himself clean, then he sat in the tiny sauna rubbing his leg and arm muscles. After shaving, combing his hair, and brushing his teeth, he stepped out and pressed his order button on the dumbwaiter panel. The clean suit he'd purchased appeared, and he dressed to leave. Before he was even out the door, he heard something coming up the hall and waited in weapons mode. A click of the exterior view button showed a robot bellhop arriving at the door. Jack grinned; they hadn't wasted so much as a minute in picking up the equipment, and considering the value and illegality of it, he could understand why. It would be a big investment to lose for either party.

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Chapter 20: Mutant Surprise

Jack left the hotel the way he came in, though on exit, he felt more like a ghost than a man. The Intel drugs and energy boost had cleared the pain and his head of most negative effects, but there was still a sense of physical lightness while his brain felt burdened like an overloaded information storage device. There were more thoughts bobbing in some ocean at the back of his mind than there were tangible sensations and the everyday stream of consciousness that told him what to do next. The first item that rose to the forefront was getting out of the downtown jungle. But where to next? Perhaps he could go to a freer zone like the one that held the old church and his pets. And as this thought passed, he suddenly found himself leaning against a post at an exit from the underground, his head was filling with dizziness, then with a vision. He seemed to be materializing out of thin air right in the park across from the church. His feet settling in the grass, he could see through the trees to its spire. Turning his gaze, he saw the crumbling buildings nearby in the empty area. Then he was back on his feet, looking out at the side street and wondering what had happened. There was no time to think, so he put in a masked call to a city transport vehicle and waited for it to arrive.

Musings passed to the farm as he had to get back soon, with perihelion approaching and Janice wondering what had happened to him. Again, as he thought, the dizziness came on him, and he was materializing right out of the air in the ceremonial field by the farm. Janice was nearby, nodding as she talked to Arjun about something, and a glance around the field showed people everywhere, involved in the final setup for the great event. This time, as his feet hit the clover, he didn't vanish but walked toward Janice, and though he could see his body, he couldn't feel it ... and something else, he saw Janice turn and look at him. She was about to speak when he vanished again and found himself back, leaning on the post.

A snap of his fingers told him this was the real Jack, but one with a problem. A problem he would have to figure out on the move as the transport vehicle was pulling up. Blinding its eye scanner with a beam, he watched the door slowly open like some odd bird wing, then he got in and took control. He set a map to the old church, which would be an underground route in this commercial part of the city. A barely audible hum hit his ears as the car pulled out. It took to the road and the nearest exit off the public access

roads. In this slow contraption, it would be a half-hour ride, and he was barely two minutes into it and underground when he began to consider things again.

It came to him that he had to talk to Daniel Manson, and he was supposed to be capturing Jan Fair on behalf of the mutant beast 666. But where would Fair be? The thought became magic of a terrifying sort as he suddenly appeared in sunny mid-air in the midst of what he recognized as the West End Tumble ... a monstrous conglomerate of residential towers all connected by a ten-story base structure with ten more stories underground. His mouth opened in panic as he headed straight down to a large garden square that existed alongside a commercial area in the connecting area between the mega towers. There was no crash or splatter as he landed softly on his feet on a garden ledge in some ferns near the twisted trunk of a tree. A courtyard set in gold-patterned stone was below. It led to a church structure with an arch that existed at this level. This church had no signage or visible name, but was rainbow-arched at the entrance with a mural of ancient humans and aliens interacting. He knew what sort of church it was because Jan Fair and Daniel Manson were nearby, approaching between two columns set in the courtyard. It all seemed so real, he forgot it was an illusion, and he was about to shout to them ... though no shout came out ... instead, he awoke on the road in the underground, the car having switched quickly to auto-run in his mental absence.

Dizziness was on him again. He pulled the vehicle over to a repair pad near the tunnel wall and leaned back to think this out. A solution came to him, and though fantastic to a degree, he could imagine no other. It had to be that he'd never fully disconnected from Volcano. The final shock wave had been another sort of connection to his brain waves. The hallucinations he was experiencing were too real to be simple disorientation. If not fully released from contact with Volcano, it appeared his mind was triggering its powers or newly developed ones since he'd made contact. If he thought in strong images, like the old church, he was transported there. How? Only Volcano could pull up satellite imagery or any sort of data for the whole earth, so it was doing that and actually transferring an image of his body there, which could relay what it saw back to his brain. If this were possible, he wondered why General Blackthorn's people or MS scientific agencies hadn't already developed this technology. That answer seemed clear. The MS police state did every sort of horrible experiment that could be done, but on unwilling subjects. None of them would actually risk doing a feed to and from their own brains as he had done, and any experiment would have collapsed because the subjects used didn't have the skill set to master the real-time math required to enter the system. All of them would have been read as enemies by Volcano and all its connected systems, meaning their brains would've been fried instantly, destroyed like some virus attempting to invade the body. Since he had passed the test, Volcano either had fed him into the system or had not yet fully disconnected him.

Putting his hands back to the control bar, he considered that a theory was only that until proven, and the best way to prove this one was to head for Jan Fair and Daniel Manson. From the vision, he could easily find the church, only it would be risky as he'd still be at the edge of the ultra-modern police state core of town ... and for that matter, so were Fair and Manson, which made for triple jeopardy. He'd be at risk wherever he went anyway, and with that in mind, he punched out a map with his fingertips and was on the move at top speed.

It was more than yesterday's news as Jack found himself standing beside the same twisted tree trunk as in the earlier vision, looking down at the broad front arch of the church. He knew Daniel Manson and Jan Fair had exited the church with a relic, as he'd had another flash on arrival. Coming up several levels on foot after stashing the vehicle, he'd had a vision of their location, but it was a place he didn't recognize. He'd stopped here to get an idea. They were moving on foot, and this was the starting point. Shielding his eyes against flashes of sunlight, he scanned the square and its various exits. Four of them extended and widened into busy public areas, and most of the narrow alleyways ran in the same directions. He found what he wanted looking west. A pitted retaining wall ran along the eleventh-story footprint of a seventy-story residential tower. Public housing ... a sort of hidden world composed of a few massive towers. An area of desperation magnified to rot and crime, buried amid the gleaming splendor of the Western Tumble. One of the city's finest achievements, towering high above its hidden poverty and sin. There was an alleyway there, almost buried in vines and foliage, with an arched tunnel that existed as a near-hidden emergency exit cutting through the retaining wall.

Daniel and Jan Fair would be traveling as incognito as possible in the city, so perhaps they had a vehicle hidden somewhere on the other side of the tunnel. The church visit had been another last grab at a relic, this one disguised as a huge holy book ... the operating technology embedded in the cover. The effort to seize it was also partially wasted, as, from the connection with Volcano, Jack had learned that Daniel Manson was mistaken in thinking he had to have all the core relics in the same location out there on the farm. It didn't work that way at all. If he had the locations, he could secure and program some of them as he was doing with the many peripheral relics in his setup. Jack now knew all the unknowns but one. Volcano registered it as somewhere in the city, but it wasn't set for outside programming; it had to be switched on somehow. He tried to recall and pull up the location, but it wouldn't quite come. A talk with Daniel would stimulate his memory, so he got ready to jog over and go down the tunnel.

As he was about to jump, he froze and pulled back behind the tree trunk. A glint of light from above had caught his eye, and he found himself staring up at a large semi-transparent blue bubble floating down from the sky. Three men were inside it; they were parachuting down from what was probably a stealth craft above, as he could see no plane.

Landing like a soft soap ball, the parachute burst and melted on the square right in front of the church entrance. He knew the three men would be looking around, so he stayed behind the tree, guessing that they weren't aware of him as he'd been covered by the upper tree branches. He was right; he heard them talking, but their voices faded in the light breeze and then drifted with the sound of their footsteps. They were walking west, exactly where he had been about to go. Daring a glance, he got a good look at them from behind. Two were in black fatigues - either a couple of General Blackthorn's soldiers or unknown forces in disguise. The third figure wasn't disguised; he was a mutant of the warrior class, a pale green force field around his body providing him with both protection and an atmosphere of choice. He carried a huge tubular gun, rowed with glittering silver buttons, under his arm. A new sort of mutant weapon and overkill if they were on a capture or kill mission for Daniel Manson or Jan Fair.

Jack waited until they reached the tunnel arch, ducked as one of the soldiers glanced back, and then, a few seconds later, headed toward them. He moved on the elevated garden levels, performing a few long leaps rather than going down to the courtyard walks. At the tunnel entrance, he shimmied down from a fountain area and looked through a curtain of vines. This was a long, dim tunnel, and they were out of sight. He entered and found the sound of running water an immediate hindrance. A long burst of water or runoff pipe ran across the tunnel ahead. The cement was eroded there, and the algae-tinted stream ran on through and under the level to some other location. He jumped across and squatted, waiting to get a better focus in the gloom, and as he waited, his hand went in his pocket, and his fingertip found the weapons mode contact on his badge. This time, he pulled it out and flipped the star in the air, watching the near-instantaneous shape change.

The enemy appeared, faint ghosts suddenly blocking an area of white light that would be the exit ahead. They were out of the tunnel, so he moved ahead at a jog, careful to keep his footsteps silent. Like the beginning of the tunnel, the end was mostly overlaid with vines, and he came up slowly and glanced out. What he saw, he didn't like. The visual was of a huge, forgotten area of the Tumble, enclosed by the retaining walls of huge residential towers on three sides, with the fourth side being the vast arch rising to the barrier of a bank building constructed as a huge silver cylinder. Light was sparse as heavy columns supported what was probably a combined parking lot and landing pad area constructed overhead. Sunlight poured in from the arch on the bank side, creating a weird effect. It was enough light for him to focus on a bad scene.

He saw fire flash from the mutant's cannon and a distant section of the overhead erupt in a shower of fragments. A tremendous bang assaulted his ears as the entire overhead drummed in loud protest. A vehicle was nearby the explosion, but the mutant had missed it, mainly showering it with debris. Jan Fair and Daniel Manson were also near there, running toward a darkened area of the square. Jack guessed that Manson had flown in to the landing pad above and used a ramp to hide the vehicle in the hidden level.

A beam flashed out of the dark and tracked onto the mutant, exploding into a rain shower of energy as his shield repelled it. The two soldiers had their weapons up to fire, but the mutant waved them down. They were shielded also as a couple more beams came from either Fair or Manson ... direct hits that were of no effect. The flashes' light revealed the dark figure of Jan Fair beside a column near the wall. Manson was nearby, and there was no escape from that spot, as Jack could see that the only ramp opening was over by the section blasted out by the cannon.

Jack lifted his own small weapon and punched out a tracking and force program in the pop-up air screen. He could see the mutant doing the same, though taking more time at it as he pressed out a pattern in the rows of buttons lining the canon's exterior. Keeping down, Jack knew his only advantage was that they hadn't spotted him yet, and his only chance was in one perfect shot. No doubt the mutant was programming the cannon to take out the entire area and his two targets with it. It led Jack to guess that this mutant was from a different hive than 666's, because 666 needed Jan Fair alive. The other hives didn't need Fair, and a decision must have been made to take out the two of them and end any chance of the final ceremony going ahead.

A glow now rose on the cannon's surface as the mutant lifted it to firing position. Jack could see the light visibly crawling up the barrel to the gun mouth and guessed that the mutant would fire exactly as the charge was at the expel point, so what he did was put his tracking sights right on that glow ... and he fired just before he expected the mutant to fire. The effect was pure disaster. Jack's blue beam flash hit the mouth of the cannon exactly as it fired. Because the mutant had to drop his shield in that fraction of a second to fire, it meant he got a backfire. The entire upper part of his body vanished in a spiral of blood that expanded and shredded the two soldiers. It continued to whirl back as a huge golden disc of energy that punched a huge hole in the arced retaining wall. When the sound finally came, it was more roar than boom, and there were further explosions as it cut right into the bank tower's floor, causing unseen mayhem inside.

Jack was already running toward Manson and Fair, and he could see them on the run for their air-car. They looked back, saw him coming, and waited a few seconds at the car. Jack came to a halt, trying to catch his breath. "Boost me up with the car. I'll steal another one up on the pad when you take off. We had better get out of here fast. We've got maybe thirty seconds."

And that was it; the car shot up with Jack riding the bubble, then he was running across the pad to a city service vehicle parked there, as Daniel continued up a vertical rise until he was higher up and could shoot through the towers. The sound of sirens filled the air as Jack slammed the lid on the city bus. He exited right away, taking a different route underground.

On the run, he was a man of sudden confusion and luck. In a world caught on fire by sirens, the luck came from the foolishness of the commander of the mutant ship. The panic that came when he couldn't get in contact with the men on the ground led to an error: for an instant, he dropped his stealth shielding. A grave error that led to more emergency sirens and opportunity ... now Jack, Daniel, and Jan Fair were nothing more than people fleeing a mutant terror attack.

Even in the underground, Jack found himself in a flow of service-vehicle traffic that had suddenly diverted away from the source of the alarm. A vision flashed like lightning in Jack's mind as the car sped ahead on autopilot. High in the sky, he saw shields and featherweight shutters taking shape around the great scrapers of the Western Tumble, and something else; Manson and Fair in their tiny bug escaping the area as a swarm of vehicles rode in on the higher atmosphere.

One element was armed nano cameras the size of flies, and so many of them that they darkened parts of the sky like flocks of tiny birds. A tier above them was first responders ... police-state drones that would shortly swoop down and destroy any suspect vehicle. Jack guessed that the stealth craft was long gone from the neighborhood, but not in any free flight. It would be under full pursuit by small craft with trained pilots. SSU city defenses on a crazy run to get the stealth craft before it went into higher jurisdiction out over the ocean off the US east coast ... out of the land-kill zone and free property of the huge kill birds and carriers forming Hell's Curtain, the supposed invincible wall of North American defense.

Jack took a moment to think it over. It was apparent that the hive mutants had gotten past an invincible defense wall through the use of spies in General Blackthorn's own

command. Spies and traitors, and there would be havoc as General Blackthorn tore things apart to clean his organization. Another thing that became apparent was that this was perihelion for the mutants as well. They'd exposed their route into North America in a desperate attempt to kill Fair and Manson. Meaning it was still their objective to prevent perihelion, and the job wasn't complete yet unless 666 knew something the mutants in other hives didn't know.

Jack's answer now was to cancel the plan to return Jan Fair. His deal had been to exit from Holland on a promise to return Fair. He'd made that agreement and said that Fair would be back, defeating mutant truth-reading technology because he knew Jan Fair wanted to go back. Jan Fair wasn't planning to run off to another planet at perihelion; his one burning desire was to settle the score with his mutant half-brother. Face to face with a creature that had put him through the mind-altering torture chambers of Holland. The ultimate brainwashed spy wanted payback.

Another sudden flash of light and Jack saw the past with clarity - the slosh of the wet feet of the beast and his guards as they walked down a dank dungeon corridor. They viewed the skeleton of a man, his face a taut expression of pain. His naked body was like a wisp of skin and bones that might blow away like cobwebs if unshackled. A dry voice like the whisper of a man long dead as Jan defied them, saying, "I'll never do it."

"Ah, but you will, dear brother. We are now in the attachment phase." And with those words, he held up a jar swarming with leech-like creatures. White, squirming, and pressing against the jar toward the flesh of the beast as he said, "A select few, that's all it takes. These little beasties are biological and nano. I've heard the programming is long and painful, but when done, the subject does as required. It's set for my dreams, beloved brother, so that as you scream, I'll feed on the joy."

"You are a monster," Jan Fair said. "You betrayed your alien forefathers, and you betrayed the humans who saved you with my genes. Now you betray your brother, and your own kind who only seek to live in peace in their hives."

"Peace. You dare speak to me of peace, when the comet ... when they are returning. They are without respect or justice and can only destroy us."

"But you didn't ask," Jan Fair said. "You won't stand up like a man and face your alien forefathers to accept either life or death."

"Death is all they know when it comes to us. When they know us, they'll know of our wrong. The comet, I will destroy through you. The key relics you will bring or demolish. Earth is to be ours and under mutant control. You should rejoice, dear brother, because when all is accomplished, I might be so happy as to let you live."

A strange carousel of light whirled above Jack's head, with the beast vanishing into it and a vision of a young Daniel Manson coming out of it. A great arch like the church Jack had just visited, but this one was much bigger, and three priests were speaking in a tongue he couldn't understand. Yet the vision was clear - a great hall under the arch and three priests walking up to the holy altar. An angelic alien face looking down from the higher backdrop. Daniel had their robes in his hand, and something else ... an object with fire. He was the keeper of the flame.

They continued speaking in a strange ceremonial tongue and went to their knees, waiting. When the light came, their aged faces gained youth and beauty. They were human angels walking on Earth under the healing power of the aliens. When they rose and turned, they were as young as Daniel. Smiles like gods, and Jack couldn't deny it as he was hypnotized by their great beauty. These three were not worthy ... old, so old they should be dead, and now they were young again, walking toward him in his vision.

They held up naked arms, the cream of youth on their skin matching the full glow of their smiles and the bursting strength of their breasts. They were reaching out to Daniel, their prodigy and son. It was an offer of reunion and gratitude that would become a tale among gods. They approached with all confidence of the victory to come. And as they came closer, Daniel lifted a weapon from the folds of the robes he was holding.

Jack suddenly wanted to yell a warning to them, but this was a vision, and he was powerless. Daniel Manson burned them down with a scatter laser gun, and the vision was slow. The scarlet breastplate of the first priest became a splatter with blood bubbles atop the flames of the bursts. The second died with a small black vortex, sending most of his body and some of the stone floor into an unknown place. Only the third priest was left, and he spared him, but only for a moment. His handsome face was beyond anything Jack had seen. A face like a dream that returned to the smoking reality of death as this priest became a charred offering of Daniel Manson on his secret altar of murder. The high altar of sacrifice that allowed him to gain authority over the church.

Daniel walked away, passing again under that great arch of alien faces. Walking to a street somewhere in a place with a language Jack couldn't understand, but he understood and wondered about some things. Daniel had killed them, murdered them. They were priests of their own eternal life, youth, and glory, and he was the high priest of perihelion. Daniel had killed them and gone ahead with the promise left in alien writings. A plan too big for the older church and its establishment. A plan that involved risks that leaders seeking eternal life would never take or support.

Jack suddenly found himself traveling toward an auto-programmed service-yard dead end. He had to get to Daniel Manson and Jan Fair and pictured the city's outskirts under alert. He knew where they were. Twenty-five minutes was the answer from the control panel, so he was off, spiraling through some underground tunnels built for robo cars and not for man. Blocked by only a few security levels that could be bypassed even in a time of high alert.

He came to a halt in a vast city parking lot at the edge of the city proper, the only connecting neighborhoods being ring-block zones. The place looked familiar; they all did, with the city's vast skyscrapers as a backdrop to the lower public areas in these zones. People did live in such places. They were visible outside the retaining wall, wishing for some way to get in economically or waiting for the few people who would exit that way from the main city complexes. Usually, only city repair and service people would park or land in these yards, but an emergency involving a mutant ship changed the game. Jack saw people getting outside numerous cars and air-bugs, smoking, using Loops for a buzz ... in some cases, revealing the instant fizz syringes that boosted them with the stronger Intel drugs.

There were so many items coming to mind that he couldn't track Jan Fair and Daniel Manson. Visions had died; he didn't know if the tenuous connection with Volcano was finally fading or if the presence of a crowd changed the dynamic. Settling behind the wheel, he calmed his nerves and then waited for his mind to cool. Rest slowly arrived, and then thoughts of Daniel and Jan drifted in. He knew they were here waiting for takeoff to the farm, and that after Holland, they wouldn't fully trust him. They'd believe he'd been at least partially brainwashed. They'd seen his rescue of them, so he calculated that it would bring ninety percent trust. He also knew Manson was using Jan Fair for whatever knowledge he had gained from 666 about the relics and final ceremony. Daniel didn't know Jan planned to go back to Holland; he wasn't headed for space but home for the final brother-against-brother showdown, with any weapon he could create through harnessing the alien technology.

The human crowd would be too disturbed to be looking for an immediate takeoff. Nearly all would be from the city, so they would connect to the media outlet inside the station. Jack could already see a crowd of people who had exited their vehicles and gathered in the station. Manson and Fair wouldn't be among them, but shifting for the first pad, allowing security takeoff out of city locations. There were twenty such vehicles, enough that Jack didn't trust any fast move of his own when he was listed as an unmanned city vehicle. The only thing he could do was take a chance and walk over, hoping that yard surveillance would be open and lenient now that vehicles had landed from populated areas.

That turned out to be the case as he found people loitering everywhere. A few people pressed him for news. Some rowdies from the Tumble asked him for any drugs or Loop wires he might have. Jack's out was in claiming to be a repairman sent in on the emergency, and if they didn't let him pass, it would mean major trouble.

He found Daniel and Jan outside their vehicle near a takeoff pad. Waiting, as though they expected his arrival. Jan Fair's hair blew in the wind, and it triggered Jack's memory. Daniel Manson gathered a new moral image as he stood there with eyes darkened by bags. His mouth was like a thin line of intent set in a face that seemed to be always a year short of thirty.

They had no guns drawn. Jack halted by the small car, doing his best to hide his weakened state.

"So, you've come for me?" Jan said.

"Tell the truth. You plan on returning to Holland without my help."

"What are you talking about?" Daniel said. "Jan is with us now. We know what the hive mutants did to him. We've cleared his brain of most of it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't reveal the whole truth," Jan said, looking down as though suddenly troubled.

"There's a long story here that doesn't have time to be told," Jack said, "Let Jan go home when he chooses. If he still feels he has to settle it that way."

Daniel shook his head. "You're a liar, Michaels. General Blackthorn tipped me. They wouldn't have let you out of that hive without mind control. Your job is to bring him back, and you'll do what you have to do."

"666 hired me to bring him back. He didn't use mind control. He believes I want to do the job. But I don't have to fulfill that mission. Jan plans to return. He wants revenge."

Jan nodded in agreement. "How did you find out?"

"I didn't. I knew because that's what I would do. I always settle old scores."

"So which side are you on, Jack? It looks like you're confused," Daniel said. And while he spoke, he drew his weapon.

"I'm certainly not in my right mind, but I'm not under mind control," Jack said, looking over to some SSU air transports easing in on a landing pad. "I have some advice for you."

"I have some advice, too," Daniel said. "Janice is coming with us. It looks like you didn't make it. And Jan here has about one second to claim loyalties. Listen to me, Jan; the only way to get it square with your mutant brother is to come with us. You know the alien law regarding mutants. They're unclean and will be destroyed."

"I had hoped for another way," Jan said. "I hate my brother, but not them all. Another place, another planet, for some of the mutants that aren't hive mutants. The aliens can do anything, and perihelion is coming. You have contact via the relics. Tell them the truth."

"You're mad, abandoning the great event to return and try to kill your own mutant brother. Forget about the other mutants; they can't be saved. You're nuts, too, Jack. Isn't that so?"

"It isn't quite the way you think," Jack said.

"Speak quickly," Daniel said, angling his weapon.

"The mutant 666 wants Jan because he needs his brother to survive. 666 is not worried about perihelion. You didn't escape on your own over there. You had inside help from some rogue hive mutants. If they aided you, it proves they don't all fear perihelion. Either 666 has something booby-trapped at the farm, or he has an attack plan he believes will succeed. 666 ordered me to deliver Jan. He didn't appear to care that I was a cult member or about perihelion. He either has a sure plan to block you or knows that, for some reason, you won't succeed."

Daniel hesitated and thought it over. In the distance, he saw SSU agents combing the crowd. He looked to Jan Fair.

"It's true," Jan said. "You and your people may be doomed. My evil mutant brother still has tricks up his sleeve."

"I don't believe it. Hive mutants can't stop us."

"A mutant from another hive almost did back there in the Tumble," Jack said. "One thing I didn't tell you. I cracked Volcano. You never needed that many core relics in one location. Once you set the program in motion, the others will be found, and you don't

need every single one. But there's one more relic that has to be somehow manually powered, and it isn't at the farm."

"What proof do you have?"

"No real proof, just a pretty solid hunch from the info I got while connected to Volcano. I saw something, but I can't remember it fully."

"What else are you hiding from me?"

"Nothing. You better not shoot me because I have to go into the city before the ceremony to solve the problem I just mentioned."

"It's likely all in your mind. Our studies show we have everything we need."

"It could be vital. Volcano showed me that it will work, but one last thing is required. I think it's a key, and a relic that has to be set at its location. It's somewhere in Toronto. You can keep Janice and Fair at the farm. But let me do what I have to do. If I'm wrong, it's no threat to the cult. You people will be gone, and I'll be left behind. You must also prepare for a hive mutant attack. They can't come in force into North America, but they may have an attack plan of some type. Maybe sabotage of the ceremony."

The SSU agents were getting closer; one had taken off his suit jacket, revealing a chest wall of rock-hard muscle. His arms worked to pummel a young man who had insulted him. Daniel Manson looked off at the sun like a man suddenly aging, as if he were a prisoner knowing the time for escape was short. "Okay," he said. "But Jan is coming with me on the power of the comet. No personal revenge will be needed. His mutant brother is already marked for death. The ceremony will succeed. We'll be gone."

Their eyes met as he made that final statement. Daniel's shake of the head expressed total confidence, and then he was gone with Jan Fair. Not in a second, but it seemed that way as they got into the air-bug and obtained clearance to fly. Jack was left behind to face the approaching SSU men.

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Chapter 21: Message 666

At the end of the path, they came to a side entrance just off the main front gates of the farm long-house complex. Inside, curtains were drawn, but auto lights came on, and they found themselves in a furnished office. Janice led the way through a glass door to the entrance lobby. The complex was mostly empty now that nearly everyone was out on the grounds at work. They watched as a group of eight people walked through distant doors and exited using a nearly hidden arch. Sunlight streamed from a segmented stained-glass skylight high above, and Jack glanced up and saw light pooling in unexpected patterns in the glass. The natural light, combined with the interior lighting, made this entrance area appear rather vast. But not unwelcoming ... seating existed at various levels, and there were rows of booths that seemed to float in mid-air at higher levels.

"Amazing design," Jack said.

"I forgot. You haven't seen much of this building, have you?"

"I missed the tour, and I didn't expect to see the farm again at all after Holland and Daniel's distrust."

"He trusts you now. But he thinks your brain got somewhat scrambled. They call this the long house, but it is much more than a long residential complex. It has some neat features. One is the way the residential portion itself is designed for maximum space efficiency. Never have so many people been housed in so little space."

"Wonderful. If the aliens were people eaters, they could take the whole building along."

"Not when so much is underground. Mutants might like it. Some of them do quite well with human meat for a diet."

"So I've heard. Mutants are one of the things I want to talk about."

"Okay, follow," she said. "I know a cozy spot."

Jack took her hand, and for most of the walk, she was pulling him like a little boy. He looked around at the odd features of the complex. Here, birds nesting in the ceiling, there a glass floor with an effect of walking on air ... the whole long house taking on the aspect of some endless kaleidoscope of hidden art that transformed at the various separation walls. They entered a maze of compact living quarters, passed through an area thick with indoor plant life, and ended up in a small circular room with a clear bubble as a roof. The blue sky of the farm showed above with small white cloud ships scudding by.

"This is a security post," Janice said. "I've been here with Daniel before. Few people know about it."

Jack looked around at the mostly empty room. They sat in two spoon-bottom chairs. A faint buzz in his ear told him he had a message waiting. He pulled out read mode and saw a list of alerts."

"Very nice," Jack said. "Some hidden stuff here. The question is why the cult wants to spy on its own residents."

"Not everyone. We aren't tracked in here," she said with a wink. Then she opened up the top of the small circular table in front of them, revealing a control system. Jack watched as she played with a few buttons, and he blinked as the entire room lit into a bubble of screens and the sunny skylight went matte black above. The various views panned the many open areas of the long house, showing a swimming pond, interior gardens, and curvy architecture that put communication and workstations in alcoves of flow plastic. Janice hit more buttons and got views of the outdoor patios and pathways, and even a zoom view of much of the grounds.

"Manson didn't show you this ... you found it."

"True enough. It's one of his security stations. I can only work on some of it. The rest doesn't trigger on at my touch."

"You're lucky you didn't trigger a death ray. Turn it off before you draw people to us."

“Everyone’s busy ... preparations, you know. There’s the afternoon ceremony to make peace with the earth, and endless recitals of alien translations.”

“So are you at peace with the earth?”

“I need no peace ceremonies. I’m going, for better or for worse.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. The question is, where would you be going? I mean, I studied the power of that comet. It’s the biggest surveillance device ever created, sucking up everything, all knowledge. It’s a space travel device of some sort, too. What we’re seeing up there is a grand illusion. It’s not a comet, so what is its real form and what will it do at perihelion?”

“We’ve got to believe the relics and the teachings. What it does is take up the believers for a trip to another world.”

“Even if it can, things have changed. It has sucked up all knowledge of what the planet Earth is today, and it is processing that knowledge. That means it decides around now what it is going to do.”

“You are lacking in faith. It requires faith and ritual. The faith that the comet will do what was promised. The organization we’ve put together with the relics and the knowledge. It is coming together, and nearly all is done. Too late to worry now.”

“Not quite all is done. I’ve been unable to find what I want in the city. One more relic, hidden. It has to be enabled for part of the final plan. Daniel Manson doesn’t believe me, nor do the others. They believe all is ready to go, and they only need to keep up defenses here at the farm in case the mutants try some final act of sabotage. Daniel bought himself some insurance by having Jan Fair in there working with him at the command post. 666 won’t attack it if it endangers his beloved brother.”

“Don’t go. I want you with me. You might not get back in time. Daniel is the most knowledgeable person there is on this. He spent his life on it, and all the others with knowledge have passed it to him. You want to ignore decades of work and planning, all because of some dream you keep having.”

“It’s more than a hunch and a dream. Don’t forget, I picked up that contact from Volcano and the comet itself. Yes, Daniel and the others are certain everything’s going ahead clean. But the hive mutants have gone silent. I’ll be on 666’s hit list because of Jan Fair. Plus, I killed a mutant general in the city when the other hives sent him in to hit Daniel. Now General Blackthorn says they’re back in their hives and doing nothing threatening. Blackthorn and the entire planet’s police state are taking a holiday ... like they learned something from the mutants. I think they know that, as things stand, perihelion from the cult’s perspective will be a failure.”

“That’s possible, but I can’t see how heading into the city searching for a location you can’t place will help things.”

“Once I’m there, it’ll come to me. It might be a time thing that has to come at a certain time.”

“Well, the time had better be soon, or it’ll be too late.”

“Yeah, and it’s always too late to say goodbye properly.”

“Oh, we can do that now,” Janice said, her fingertips fluttering over a few buttons that caused the screens to bleed with color and slowly reform as a huge garden image. As larger flowers bloomed, she sat up and threw herself into Jack’s lap. He said nothing as they kissed, and then the transformation became complete, and they were saying possible goodbyes in paradise. But not instantly, as they were fully dressed, and it took about twenty minutes to reach the perfect romantic state of Adam and Eve.

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A swirl painting at the end of an arched hallway opened as a blink door, and they exited the long house in a garden area not too far from the landing pad. It was somewhat distant from the main ceremonial grounds. Though this area was now ceremonial, too. About two hundred people were sitting in various preparatory circles. Most were on the grass or on stone benches, in silent meditation, as others played drums and imitations of alien reed instruments ... these having a flute-like sound.

“No harps?” Jack said. He was referring to the old story that the harp was in fact an alien instrument they had introduced to Earth thousands of years ago.

“We have the ceremonial gate. It’s harp-shaped. We have a real one in the long house music room, but I haven’t seen anyone take it out for nature ceremonies.”

Tatha emerged on the walkway. “Nature ceremonies. Is that what you want? Then it’s time to come out and join us.”

“Not yet,” Jack said. “We’re going to do a ceremony of our own first. Are there any private nature areas on these grounds?”

“At the moment, no,” he said. “All are occupied. There is one small place if you go over by the north boundary via the path. You’ll find a small pond there and near it a small circle of standing stones. A miniature place of nature worship, I suppose. Wiccans used it a century before we bought this property. It’s one of the features we never removed.”

“Thanks, we’ll try it,” Jack said. He faced Janice as Tatha walked off into the crowd. “We’ll pass the farmhouse on the way. I want you to borrow a security router, and I’ll grab the three tablets from my pack. I want to try something regarding the hive mutants and beast 666.”

“I don’t recommend borrowing a router. It’s not allowed. An alarm might be triggered.”

“We’ll be back with it before anyone notices. Daniel and the others are completely focused on the initial program to harness the tech in the relics. Any alarm I can silence.”

The north end was empty, no one beyond the fields or at the perimeter storage building or fences. Jack supposed it would be empty for a while if the perihelion event went as planned, but not for long, since a large segment of the church was earthbound. Especially wealthier members and large numbers of others who had joined the cult for youth and health/wealth benefits. People who wanted to live forever and in luxury didn’t buy adventurous travel packages to other planets via faster-than-light modes of travel. Many of them were the first to support others doing that ... especially when positions, huge amounts of money, and property would be left behind for them to grab. Daniel Manson ... Jack supposed he grudgingly respected his inner circle. They’d never allowed the core mission of the Cult of the Comet to be altered, but rather had used the

greed and vanity of the world to fuel its engines. At heart, they couldn't be greedy themselves, or they wouldn't be doing what they were doing. Attempting something many people considered would end in a sure suicide.

The road here was more of a rutted cattle path overgrown with weeds. They walked the length of it and continued over the edge by the forest, looking for the path. A half kilometer along, it appeared, and like the road, it was mostly overgrown. In appearance, it was a scarcely traveled nature trail. It wasn't possible to walk two abreast on it, so Janice took the lead as they walked another half kilometer. It was like a tunnel in a deeper, darker forest with tiny birds and butterflies flitting through the foliage. The only animals they saw were chipmunks and a passing fox that sprang off quickly when it spotted them.

One spot of light led to another. Blue sky and heavenly beams of sunlight pierced the dark wall of the forest. Then they were out in a clearing and staring over a bed of grass and reeds to a small blue pond. The path led to a stony beach on the pond's south shore, and near the pond's end, the circle of standing stones appeared.

They walked along the beach to the big stones, marveling at the stillness of the water.

"This place looks like a great fishing spot," Jack said.

"Probably is, if the land is untouched. Tatha said Wiccans owned this piece, so it has probably never had much logging or any polluting development."

"Ah, then the nature spirits are fresh," he said as he walked up to the first of the stones. Its surface was rough and grainy, almost like a variety of wood. The stone itself was as tall as he was. The shapes were natural windblown erosion and maybe some water erosion, meaning they'd been moved here from somewhere else.

"I wonder where the Wiccans got these stones?" Janice said. "There are no others like them in this area."

"They might have been carried here by a glacier. The natives created the circle arrangement and balanced some on top of each other."

"This location is as good as we are going to find. How about right there?" she said, pointing to a waist-high shelf of stone at the very center.

Jack looked about cautiously as they walked through, blowing timothy to the shelf. It was a different kind of rock: dark gray slate, flat as a tooled stone table. It seemed rooted in the earth, as though part of a stone vein running underground. Pulling off his pack, Jack opened it on the shelf and removed the contents. The tablets, contacts, and routing connection were to be powered by a single rectangular cell.

"You sure you want to do this?"

"I might not be doing anything," Jack said. "The flashes I've been getting since Volcano have nearly vanished. There may be no remaining connection. If so, I will pull back and end it. I can't risk too much with this rudimentary equipment."

Sitting up on the rock altar, Jack placed the tablets and routing device off to his left, watching as the tablets lit up like small light displays. He expanded his screen and added the code to hook in the contacts to the program. Janice rubbed some ointment

on his temples and then pressed the silver contacts in with her fingertips until they were only visible as tiny flecks of light.

“You can relax and meditate,” Jack said. “I’m going to start it, and it’ll run for at least ten minutes or so before anything happens. Or doesn’t happen, as may be the case.”

Janice did relax, sitting cross-legged to Jack’s right. She watched the light breeze filter through the surrounding trees and down to comb through the forest’s green undergrowth. It swept the golden grasses surrounding the stones, providing cool relief from the direct sunlight. Easing himself into a summer dream state, Jack waited, finding his eyes drifting to Janice’s bare legs and tight shorts. It was the wrong sort of stimulation for the moment, so he looked to the sky and a drifting white sponge cloud. Then his gaze shifted south, letting the blowing grasses and sunlight fill his mind with gold.

When something did happen, it was subtle. A sense of floating lightly mentally. Short seconds later, it hit with power as though his body had been lifted from the stone. The images of a summer field in his mind rolled into something else, like a flash was coming on. The glow intensified until the sunlight became a glowing orb, one he remembered as the appearance of Volcano during the connection. This time, he wasn’t locked out and didn’t have to do any clever thinking; security levels unfolded before him like autumn leaves peeling away. He was floating down a misty tunnel, and the feeling of contact filled his mind. He attempted to keep himself in a meditative state, as he knew opening his thoughts would create an explosion of information. When he was ready, he thought of the face of a standard military mutant and the face of the beast, and the journey began, his thoughts ballooning into vast living data banks of all things mutant.

Life charged him; a great light as he realized Volcano stored its data in microscopic organisms, tinier than bacteria but with an awareness that could be broadcast to other life forms. Euphoria rose, and then a serious view of history came to mind; he recalled the raid in Holland and got a second thought balloon full of vast information.

He was in the sky, looking down at the earth and the vast swirl of impenetrable darkness composing the alien hive. It moved in layers and patterns of deep matte black. Mists of it swirling in various directions. It all slowly began to peel away layer by layer until a radiant sky showed that quickly grew transparent and light blue. Holland was below, in shifting images that slipped in and out of view as though through a series of distorted lenses. He saw vast blighted areas, towns that looked as if they’d been burned by a fast-moving fire from the sky, and clear, healthier areas with pristine green fields and untouched villages. A city showed at the heart of the hive, strange new structures towering among the old. It was the great city and palace of 666.

Then, in the vision, he descended like one of the mutant angels, out of the sky. Nipples showed on a stone breast that took up acres of land below ... city structures ringing it like a collar that stood off at a safe distance. Closer to ground, the towers grew to incredible size, causing him to realize the gigantic nature of the structure he was approaching, and that he wasn’t arriving in physical form but a spiritual vision ... something in the minds of mutants that Volcano was revealing to him.

Sunshine and quick shadows, a world that was ephemeral so that no one could know it, and then the face of the beast ... this time a deceptive angel's face ... a mask calling him to ground and a faint voice speaking and rising ... a sound of tongues he couldn't resist.

A younger face spun to blue, a crooked tongue twisted in delightful hunger, expecting his answer. But he didn't give a reply. Jan Fair, they weren't waiting for his return only. They hoped to use Jack long-term as a hidden spy.

Beast 666 was genuinely surprised, having to speak in his own tongue and believe that a human being had arrived in the second dimension of the mutant mind view. A mental state inherited from the aliens.

"How about that, you're as creepy in your own view as in mine."

"This is impossible," 666 hissed, his tongue spitting forth like an ugly flag in the breeze.

"Call me reliable. I didn't forget. You spared me on my promise to bring back Jan Fair. So I came back on that promise. Perhaps not in body but in mind."

"So where is he?"

"He's deciding. Choosing between leaving with Daniel Manson on a comet or coming back home to see you."

"Consider yourself finished. You'll go into the graveyard with others who tried to play games with me."

"Possibly, but don't celebrate yet. Games? You should know about games. You messed up your own brother's mind. He was programmed to stop the comet rendezvous. You sent him to prevent the final relics from going online with the comet ship, so that perihelion would fail. All you care about is maintaining the hive-mutant status quo on Earth. Your brother, Jan Fair, when all was finalized, was to come back to you, thinking it was for revenge. Because you need your brother. Without him near you, weakness comes. You need him and his fresh blood cells."

"Shut up, you cursed human. It's over, and you know it. I left it that way, and General Blackthorn knows too. We had similar goals regarding that. Daniel Manson will go through the rituals near Toronto. And the rest of the Church of the Millennium is fooled too. The healing power the elders will receive is a slow death. I do admit that Daniel Manson is the prophet who studied because he came close to pulling it off. But not quite. That's why I let him escape. His power and his systems will hum. The relic machinery and the comet ship's power will propel them into empty space. A new life, frozen in the void."

"So you beat the cult and kill the elders, too. Then what? What do you plan for the planet?"

"Be thankful, because humans will live on in our hives. Especially the young, as we need their blood to retain mutant health. It was always that ... a health thing where we require blood. We aren't monsters that eat children."

"What is the truth regarding your alien forefathers? Is it what Daniel Manson says, that they tolerate no interbreeding?"

“They are inflexible, but we are them ... their future. Having mated with man and animals, we have become the god they endlessly searched for.”

“An ancient sort of god. One that feeds on children.”

“All has accidentally been given to us, and we have accepted. Only a miracle could stop us now.”

“I read a book that said God doesn’t work by miracles when he can send men to do things for him.”

“So you think you can stop us. Then you’ll have to perform a human miracle.”

“I may know where the last relic is and how to set it up so perihelion will be a success. It will be difficult, not a full miracle.”

“Think again and start running for your relic. The pulse will come as the comet arrives. We know it, and General Blackthorn knows it. It comes during the ceremony, after the trance. It will shut the planet down. And shut your mission down.”

A beast fading. Summertime again, with golden grasses caressed by easy breezes. Jack’s eyes opened to Janice’s beautiful legs as she shifted from her cross-legged position beside him. And in that moment, the past beauty of the human race came into his thoughts.

Everyone wanted to claim victory in the light of the passing comet. The game had become an all-or-nothing thing. He knew it was time to start running for the finish line.

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Chapter 22: Perihelion

With the trance well underway, Daniel had Arjun and Mina working with him on the integrated perihelion defense system and Jan Fair watching the security screens. Janice was the field worker on this effort. She moved about the farm, shifting small hub-like devices as Daniel had her move them a foot or two here and there via orders from a screen reading. The layout constructed on the grounds for the final ceremony took the form of a silver pentagram. It was an overlay marked into the grass, weeds, and earth by a beam gun directed from the cult’s command center. She’d set the support devices and was walking through a crowd toward the statue of an angel, the alien relic marking this point on the star. The people were in a deep trance now and didn’t notice her as she placed the lightweight hub next to some boulders that circled a running fountain. She waited while the tests were done. A bubble, transparent like a soap bubble, suddenly appeared in the air, and she got the okay from Daniel. This portion of the shield was up.

The shields would contain the ceremony inside a special force field until the final moment. Their energy was derived from the alien relics and the comet, and was intended to provide security in case of a last-minute raid on the farm by hive mutants or by General Blackthorn and the armies of the elders. Any incoming weapon would be

held back or destroyed; the shields could deflect, disarm, or destroy missiles traveling at 3000 kilometers per hour, if needed.

A costumed crowd paraded in front of Janice, and she waited for them to pass before going up the elevated walk to the pentagram's point two. This point held the alien space-ship-in-miniature relic that had been disguised as a chandelier in the farm mansion. As she placed the hub there, she thought of Jack and whether this was goodbye. His chances in the city weren't good, and it didn't seem likely he'd get back in time for the ceremony. The test came back positive, and the field went up, leading her to consider that all things were possible and to gain hope that he might make it.

Hope that almost vanished into a waking reality like another trance daydream. The spaceship relic was gathering light, as though flying without moving. A strange effect that meant the energy of the upcoming perihelion was now arriving from the comet. It was now more than trance emanations. She turned from it, the grounds now resplendent in late-afternoon sunshine and the air still filled with butterflies and smaller birds. A flight of crows was cawing and passing out in the north field, and the reflection of the shield gave her the feeling of being involved in child's play of some type. The big bubble now covered the central area and two points. On the way to the third, the featherweight hubs felt toy-like under her arm, but if this was a game, the rest of the players had gone antisocial. They were still streaming out of the long house and splitting into seven lines as they joined those already in formation near the points of the star. Those of a higher order gathered near the harp-shaped gate now in its position at the exact center. Janice remembered earlier ceremonies when the gate had been at the south end, then at the east end. Over time, readings from the command center had led to this pentagram affair of a certain size, as it was the way the relics focused energy best. A mode or unseen wavelength of the energy led to the trance ... so it wasn't all forms of some new energy humankind could harness for raw power, but existing in psychological forms that affected body, mind, and perhaps soul.

She brushed a thin woman passing in the crowd, her arm cold to the touch like a corpse, and her eyes unseeing, buried somewhat in her painted face. Her outfit was a silver body suit; one of seven sets of clothing the cult had devised for the end ceremony. The suits protected nearly the entire body and were tightly collared and beaded at the neck as though the sight of bare flesh might offend alien beings. The special clothing was also supposed to block out harmful radiation and extremes of heat and cold. Even the painted faces were not for decoration alone but would reflect the radiation emitted by relics and the cult's own equipment. The makeup was also a duplicate, matching the colors of the huge alien face at the center of the gate as seen from high above. That face had been carefully burned and set via the beams. It used the flowers and vegetation in its composition. A gardener's masterpiece of sorts, Janice supposed, as few would design such a thing to be seen as a visage and marker by those above.

The walk to the third point was down an incline via a beaten path through the grass, the relic here being ten silver candlesticks around a book of alien writings, though the ornate cover and pedestal gave the book more the look of some new Pandora's box. It now had an aura about it as though it was about to open and release either untold joy or horror upon the farm. At this point, a group of cult members off in the grass were

chanting a dead sort of mantra, looking away from Janice and the book and into the sunset sky, at the black clouds.

Daniel's voice came through the earphone. "Don't waste time. Put it in place and go. I have a reading on something strange."

Jan Fair's voice followed, and his tone was serious. "I'm following something on the screens. It's coming in fast and reads as unidentified and hostile."

"It'd be nice if I had a vehicle," Janice said. "Why is every single one in underground storage?"

"When the energy starts to flow, no vehicle will work," Daniel said.

"Get out of there!" Jan Fair shouted. "Run! I've got a track on something coming right in for you!"

The hub was in place, and Janice turned as the force bubble formed slowly in the air. She saw nothing; no reason to run but only the cult members chanting at a lot of nothing in the sky. Then, like lightning, something large and winged appeared. It struck the rising force bubble like a meteor, sending out a burst of blue bolts as it was stopped ... or almost stopped. It was a mutant monster of some sort, and its plunge out of the sky to the force field left it caught in a thick jelly of energy ... going at slow speed the rest of the way down to the ground, almost right on top of a group of chanting people.

A sickening crunch and smacking noise came as the leading edge of a ground tremor and thud as the beast spooned a segment of force field down like a giant hammer. It hit so hard that it crushed a number of people with the indented segment of the force field. A bright, beaming wave of sparks and blood rose. This wave also carried bodies that rained down on the area. Janice had ducked behind a tree trunk, and she heard a body hit the other side. She saw blood drops everywhere and something else. The force shield was gaining its full power and lifting again ... a bloodied soap bubble this time, but acting like a trampoline to throw the huge creature back into the air.

It went up in a tumble, and in a flurry of wings caught itself and spun to fly through the open portion of the still incomplete shield. Janice was running, having to pause as she vaulted over a flowerbed strewn with decorative stones. From there, she was on open grass approaching another crowd; this one silent and dressed in light blue outfits. This was an alcove of pine trees and benches next to the path up to the fourth point of the pentagram. An orb of an alien planet resting on a pedestal of open six-fingered hands marked this point.

The mutant monster hovered and then circled as though confused. It focused on her and expelled a fiery orb from its mouth. She escaped it, but in passing, it set four people on a bench on fire and turned a pine tree into a flaming arrow. The trance lifted; the people rose from the bench, stumbled for a few seconds, and then streams of burning gas were expelled from their expanding throats as they collapsed. She had the hub in place, and it kicked in as the mutant fired projectiles from its claws. These arrows split a tree trunk and impaled a man behind it to the ground. Fragments sparked off the rising force field as she ran straight under the rising bubble toward the center and the gate. Hovering above, the mutant war beast would have seen her as a figure dashing across

the Mandela face of an alien toward the last arm of the pentagram and its golden calf relic. On reaching it, she'd close the ceremony.

The mutant pulled off a daring maneuver, flying into the force bubble and using it to bounce off the calf, landing in a small fountain circle beside it. Now under the force shield, the mutant prepared to make a spring straight toward its quarry.

Her situation hopeless, Janice stopped and tried to think. Jan Fair's voice buzzed in her ear, nothing but static, as that's all she'd been able to pick up since the mutant arrived. As the creature sprang, she thought she heard Daniel yell, Get down! It was the only thing she could do, and that left the mutant flying through the air to her as she tried to crouch and throw herself to the side.

She never hit the ground as the world suddenly pulsed, went black, and then blindingly brilliant. The only description was that the sky had fallen in a blast, and all time was speculative. She seemed to float in liquid. When things cleared, she heard explosions underground and over by the barns. A slow geyser of earth and vehicles flew up out of the ground beyond the pentagram. The long house suddenly blew like a line of bombs had been planted along its length. Parts of the small castle blew up in an explosion of fireworks. The mutant had simply been caught in mid-air during this, and as some final rays of sunlight returned, it suddenly spun like a balloon or kite and shot off in the sky, thrown to some place far away.

The command center in the small castle remained intact, though apparently every other device with electronics or an engine had either exploded or died. Showers of earth and debris fell on the ceremonial area but bounced away. The shield remained intact. Janice was stunned, but she still got up and jogged to the idol relic, the last intact hub in hand. It hadn't been damaged, and when she placed it, the shield was complete.

The ceremonial pentagram was now locked in and safe, though all around it, buildings and forest burned. She turned and saw the people awakening from the trance as more light pulsed from the sky. She was now near the center and the gate, inside the Mandela face. Not far from her, the ground opened up, the mouth of a tunnel, and she saw dark figures rising out of it. Daniel and the others were arriving from the command center, which they had now abandoned. The pulse had arrived, shutting down all non-alien technology. The sun was falling toward darkness, twilight on its way, and the awakened cult members were now alert and chanting, waiting for the final walk to the gate.

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Daniel Manson didn't have the fastest air transit at the farm, and he had put nearly everything in storage. It wasn't expected that the few people remaining at the farm would need transport equipment. Not only that, but all air vehicles were out of service as their engines and navigation systems wouldn't run while the contact engines were warming up in the small castle. Something about alien energy emanations interfered with vehicle operation.

Jack knew the trance was well underway by now, and as he looked up at the sun, he knew time was short. The golden orb swam in a heavenly shield of cloud cover, and the

horizon waited like a hungry mouth. The engine on the K-12 motorcycle he was riding roared defiantly as the race against time counted down the seconds.

He was on nearly empty country roads, paved smooth as glass. They allowed him to push up to one hundred kilometers per hour on the bike. The road swam under his wheels like a snake, and the control on this thing was excellent. It could weave effortlessly through the few pockets of cars he encountered.

Most of the traffic was going the other way, and this was a truck-free set of lanes, with the main problem being worry about the traffic police. They would most likely be on the outskirts of the city, catching cars speeding out, but one stray one out here would mean trouble, as bikes weren't allowed on this road.

The long stretches of road and flashing wall of country, field, and forest could make one seem to be standing still, no matter what the speed. He only slowed for the few towns and villages on this long stretch, and as he passed through Cantonville, he got his bearings. He was right on the edge of the city now, and the question was how to enter quickly and not attract a following convoy of traffic cops.

An off-road took him on a dangerous ride along the gravel edge of an old service corridor, and that worked to get him a few kilometers and right to the edge of a commercial area that had grown like some towering island amid the weeds that were the industrial and service neighborhoods of the north. A better description would perhaps be the golden northern towers of Babel, ringed by slave neighborhoods of robots and grimy low-income humans.

Flying down a hill and spitting up sod and weeds as he came out of a gully, he gunned the bike right across a section of the ramp to public highway 806 and went over the grounds of a semi-derelict factory. He was in the badlands now, but in an industrial and yards section. The problem was fences, not residents. At the factory's perimeter, he saw a security guard jump out from a booth and two mechanics leap up to a loading dock as he wove through some parked vehicles and got out through an open swing gate.

Now he was on a road with slow-moving traffic between yards and factory zones, looking like a madman for racing that fast through such an area, or even being there at all on a race motorcycle. Regardless of that, he considered himself on track. Though Daniel Manson believed he had all he needed for perihelion, he had mentioned an abandoned church location that hadn't been checked. It was old but not as old as the other crumbling church Jack knew about. It was in the same area, which was far from his present location. The problem was that he was on the wrong side of town; he needed to reach the other side of the iron collar and the ring blocks, and that meant racing through the commercial zone on maybe the new Skyway.

His wheels spun, and he nearly spun out, but regained control as he went out of the yards into the public area. Rows of shabby high-rises here were proof of how fast humans could destroy even relatively new buildings. He knew he'd made a mistake taking this route because he had to slow right down as so many kids were playing out in the streets.

A siren blared, and it sounded like a police siren; he could see nothing but knew only ambulances and fire trucks operated in slum neighborhoods where people couldn't afford to pay for traffic enforcement. A flash of sunlight and he saw a vehicle coming up the road at his rear; two security guards on an all-terrain vehicle, now riding down a public street. If they got to him, there would be a fight. He knew the kind of guys who worked these areas. They didn't arrest but beat violators. With no time to play with them, he raced ahead and went down a narrow alley, which wasn't completely lucky because it was broken concrete and running on a downhill stretch.

It was a good test of the bike's suspension and the stamina of the idiot security men who were still following him. Jack wondered what they would accuse him of ... speeding and tearing up the dirt on their turf, perhaps, if they could catch him, which they wouldn't, because he turned out on a long street that ran west ten more blocks to the barrier wall. It was a stretch on which he planned to lose them.

The all-terrain vehicle lost ground on the straight run down a street that was a dead end in most ways. Some quality prefab houses existed along the barrier, so he slowed there and turned left, cruising slowly now, looking for the one thing he needed. He found it after about two blocks: a passage through the barrier. Illegal, of course. Laws never worked to keep people contained completely, especially not people from neighborhoods like this one.

No one was passing through now, so he drove through and came to a stop on the other side. He was now in the waste containment area of a huge conglomerate structure, at its far rear, and apparently he was locked inside, as he could see a huge bar on the entrance gates. There was no one around. Rolling up, he studied the gate for a moment. There was a huge lock on the other side, so he pulled out his badge in small weapons mode and slowly melted it off. The gate opened easily, but he was barely back on his bike when he saw the all-terrain vehicle emerge from the tunnel.

Gunning the engine, he raced through the gate and found himself dodging people near a back entrance to the building, and then traveling past dog walkers and other people sunning and entertaining themselves on the building's amenity grounds.

He glanced back; the all-terrain security idiots were in their element now and gaining on him, so he took a risky dip down an embankment and swerved right into cars traveling on a busy road. Ridiculously, the all-terrain guards followed and continued to pursue him on a public road in a policed area. Barely two blocks passed, and they were approaching a busy intersection; one already jammed and with no path through. So he was out of luck and simply drove off the road and onto the service lane of a section of stores.

He could see the shark-like smiles on the security goons' faces as they pushed ahead toward him in traffic. They were almost on him when something very bizarre happened; Jack had to grab the side of the bike as a sudden shock wave hit him. For some reason, his eyes were drawn to the sky. Everyone's eyes were drawn to the sky. The sun had come out of some clouds, and it glowed, and then there was a blinding pulse.

It left Jack's vision swimming in colors. And something else happened ... momentary complete silence as everything stood still. When the silence ended, there was nothing but explosions, crashing, and screaming.

Out of the blur, he saw cars out of control, first piling up in the intersection. Horns and sirens began to blare as vehicles took off in crazy motions under their own navigation. One of them was the all-terrain vehicle. It was coming straight for him. It swerved and wobbled, then headed toward a lane leading to a garage swing door. The door was shifting erratically. It slammed into the vehicle and slowly sucked one of the guards in with it. The guard was chewed in the mechanism while his head remained on the outer section just long enough to show a last expression of horror.

The other guard had been thrown clear. The big man got up and ran past Jack and down into the other people who were shouting because they were either run over or trapped in semi-crushed vehicles. Then there was silence again, followed by all horns and sirens blaring in salute, then by crazy talk from vehicle navigation systems and renewed shouting and yelling.

Sudden heat caused Jack to step away from the bike; the engine was spitting flames, as were the electronics and engines of all vehicles. Getting into cover by a building wall, he looked up at the sky and saw clouds in the form of a huge webbed hand blotting out the sun. An alien hand ... and the sign told him what the pulse had been - the comet. It wasn't General Blackthorn or the hive mutants or anyone else on Earth. It had come from the comet. The aliens had set it to shut everything down so no forces could attack it or its people or the relics. It left them with no technology to work with. It was insurance that the perihelion and the ceremony would go ahead.

Jack's vision now wavered in and out, almost as if he had been partially wiped by the pulse. The alien cloud hand seemed superimposed in his vision. A different sort of cries began to fill his ears. Angry shouts as now many hotheads were out of their vehicles and blaming others for the injured, the dead, and most importantly, to most of them, their damaged vehicles.

An angry elderly man, a strong one apparently on body boosters, stood on the roof of his crumpled luxury vehicle, waving a pry bar at a circle of people around him. That argument came to a sudden end as a black shadow flashed out of the sky, slammed into him, and turned his body into splatter as it flew and skated across the roofs of more cars and into a huge wall sign. It was an air-bug that had struck him, and a wave of them was now gliding over and down from the air lane that ran around the commercial area. These vehicles' engines were on fire. Those that could still glide had been taken by a strong air current to crash-land at this intersection.

Smash-and-crash background noise like eardrum-shaking radiation hit him now. It sounded like the whole city was blowing up. Added to it were the stronger bangs as air-cars rained down on other cars and the streets. Horrified shouts rose amid what was now wailing, accompanying the percussion of destruction. Blood was in the streets now, and the sky rained explosions and debris.

When the sirens died, Jack was under the cover of an arched walkway between two narrow streets. The tremendous sound of explosions subsided, replaced by occasional

fire-induced bangs and pops. Chaos reigned with human cries and desperation, though some order was emerging as rescue efforts began and the wounded were pulled from cars.

A sweet blonde woman was trapped in a car not far from Jack, so he ran over to help. Most of the windshield was smashed, and the doors were crumpled in on both sides. He did a quick one-man rescue by climbing onto the hood and using his strength to lift her through the windshield. She had scrapes on the left side of her face, but other than being dazed, she seemed okay. As she steadied herself on her feet, she turned to say something to Jack, but didn't get the words out as an odd, overweight man stepped up and began to curse.

"That's him!" he yelled, shaking a bush of yellow-blond cloned hair. "The guy from the news reports."

Considering the chaos of the moment, Jack thought about socking him one. But he attracted attention fast, and soon a small crowd was gathering.

"He's right, it's him," another man, a business type in a sleek, tailored summer suit, mused loudly.

The woman he'd rescued edged away from him and ducked into the crowd. Many eyes were riveted on him, and he wondered why.

"Look," Jack said calmly. "I'm not a screen star. People need help. I don't know what you want, but surely it can wait."

His voice seemed to fall on deaf ears, and an old man, this one with a limp, pushed through the crowd and said, "We know who you are. You're that traitor, Jack Michaels. The whole city's been warned about you."

"Warned too late," said the businessman. "Look what he's done. This terrorist has wrecked everything."

In the summer heat, Jack suddenly felt like he was taking a cool sweat bath. Hive mutants, General Blackthorn, and likely the SSU knew he was headed in for a last attempt to enable a ceremony they wanted to fail.

The propaganda had been broadcast to stop him. He knew they wanted the comet event to fail in the larger picture, while in the smaller picture, they would get insight into its mighty technology. For damn sure, they weren't in on this city-size train wreck, and even the SSU had known it was coming and pulled its men off the streets.

The pulse was power from the comet. The big plays were underway, and there was nothing more he could do at this intersection other than fight with the crowd. He decided to get back on track with the mission.

In a quick, fluid motion, he did a cartwheel over the car and was already jumping another before the inevitable shouts of 'Get Him!' filled the air. Then he was running off the road and down an outdoor concourse, pursued by an angry crowd and hoping to fade into the shadows of the pulse of Armageddon. As he escaped, he wondered how they had adapted to it so quickly.

On the run, Jack found himself strangely thankful for the pulse. At the end of the world, it was the only thing on his side. It had killed the gods and left the everyday stupid world of the brainwashed. The long years where he hadn't cared came back as a crippler, and he found himself in the flight of his life, trying to think back. He couldn't pass through the door, and this time the keys had changed, being an emanation from his mind of something left behind.

In the back of his thoughts, he saw the old prophet telling him to run, and it lifted a misty vision of the destination. Jack found himself on a trajectory toward an end he and the others failed to guess. No mystical power seemed sent to him, yet it was happening.

The run and jump happening in his mind and beyond it on the world stage ... with the confession naming all that had been for the last fifty years as all wrong. He cursed and couldn't hear his own words. Then he tripped and fell, and a monstrous power of evil overshadowed him.

Jack spat angrily and wondered where to run when there was nowhere to run. He had a location, yet Daniel's info was that the item there wasn't required. Reaching an alleyway, he found high keening winds and the remains of two crushed children. This was a new world of horror. It quickly reduced sanity to hopelessness and wailing. Humanity raging against the end that indeed had finally come as a thief in the twilight. It was a thief who cut the lines to all of the security systems and comforts, leaving only the realization that humans had become lazy slugs, thinking that an all-seeing police eye could protect them when they were ripe for the slaughter.

The strength of his legs carried him while his nerves fought against the switches and stark vistas of suffering people perishing in the streets. Guilt rose in his thoughts like a dark angel, an accuser, naming him responsible for people he could not save. In his awakening mind, he knew he had to keep running deeper into this broken world.

He arrived at the church, a church of the millennium. It was abandoned and old, yet its arch and entrance were new. Perhaps that portion had been refurbished. The place seemed like an escape as well; no one was following him now. He had the freedom to explore this last holy site and to gain the relic. Perhaps the last remaining hidden relic.

A brightened mystical orb was in the sky near the sun as he entered through unlocked doors into a wide foyer. The foyer led to a broad central room with an altar at the far end. He had the feeling of returning to his youth and the restlessness of it. Sitting in a pew, he let his head fall back to rest, only to rise back up, startled. There was movement near him. Another man was sitting there. An older man. He saw the book in his hand he knew he was the priest of this church.

This priest had clean-cut gray locks and a kind face. He turned to Jack with a respectful gaze. "Son, are you searching for something other than the end of the world?"

"Yes, but time is short, and I don't know exactly what it is."

"I've spoken to many people regarding the comet. They don't know either and are hiding in fear of it now."

"I was looking for a church, and this was the last place to search. But I have the feeling that what I want is not here."

Eyes lighting like a warm fireplace, the priest studied Jack. "You are right. What you want isn't here. Only a message was left. 'God said that He was the first and the last.' I hope it gives you an idea of where to look."

Jack fell silent. Not saying a word, but letting the message turn in his mind. The first and the last. An answer came to him quickly. The first ... it was the old, crumbling church. The last relic was there.

"I know where to look," he said. Then he was up and leaving, having barely caught his breath. He went out the back door into a small courtyard of interlocking stones. Golden spears of light flashed through the tall buildings from the setting sun; he tried to calculate a route to the church in his mind. Perihelion and darkness were approaching. The underground would be a darkened Hades from the pulse, so he'd have to get there mostly by main streets. Some walkways above and below were still lit by daylight.

The back gate was electronic and frozen in place, so he vaulted over a low portion of the fence and moved forward at a jog. He crossed the road, took an alley, and ended up on a huge public walkway in a commercial zone. It was crowded with pockets of frightened people, but the disaster hadn't really hit here, as there were no vehicles other than a couple of crashed air cars.

At a jog, people didn't seem to notice him; he could be any man running in this nightmare ... but he did notice one strange thing ahead. Several groups of people under small trees were looking in his direction. Not at him, but up at the sky behind him. When they began to run, he knew it was trouble and came to a halt and turned. Looking up, he saw a black shadow; a huge bird, bigger still, the size of a dragon ... and it was soaring down to him.

An overhang of funneled foil served as sun shading at the front of a mostly glassed-in section of clothing shops. Jack ran and propelled himself forward from a flat stone bench just as the creature came to ground. The impact shook the concourse, and the bass wave created another wave of frightened, fleeing people. He could see it clearly; a winged mutant of some type, obviously made for war, and one that didn't need electronics or fuel to fly. It was an all-biological creature with no attachments; the pulse would disable. Its face existed in distortion, its fierce expression shifting as it turned its gaze on him. Considering its size, huge feet, and the long reach of its arms, his best bet was to run inside.

Without hesitation, he ran past some angled box planters and through the glass doors. The mutant took a swipe with its long right arm, taking out a support pole as it missed. The huge aluminum awning came down. This bought Jack some time as he ran deeper into the darkened store. He heard a ripping noise as the mutant tore apart the awning, then a crash as it burst through the glass windows into the shopping area. The thing thundered ahead, bulldozing everything out of its way. It was like a bull racing through a glass house toward some distant red flag.

A side exit was ahead, and Jack burst through into a smaller courtyard. The area was surrounded by towers gleaming with sunset light. A few people were in its central portion, by a spray of tree ferns and flowers, looking in his direction due to the noise. It

sounded like a train doing a demolition run through the building behind him. He was certain the beast could follow him either by scent or special visual powers.

Either way, he needed an escape route fast, and there weren't any real options when the underground would be dark. There was also the fact that he had no working weapon as his badge had turned off during the pulse, though it hadn't exploded like other devices. An idea came to him. What about the deep underground? The pulse wouldn't have penetrated that far down. Spinning around, he studied the surrounding buildings, using a financial tower and the Cargills Rotunda to pinpoint his location. Then he ran along the side of the square, the mutant beast sending a spray of glass, splinters, and concrete as it smashed out into the courtyard.

It spotted him in a second, turned, and did an amazingly spry, winged jump. The beast came right down on his heels, and the foul odor of it wafted into his lungs as a mist that moved faster than it did. Suddenly swinging around a pole, Jack ran past a screaming man who had emerged from a narrow space. He heard the scream vanish in the air as the man was swept away by a blow intended for him.

Rushing into the blackness the unlucky man had emerged from, Jack found himself running down a semi-indoor-outdoor passage between and connecting two towers. The roof was transparent and gleamed with an orange-gold hue from the sunset light. It was enough light to see by, but he didn't need vision to know that the mutant had fit through the space and was charging down after him. A public security desk was ahead, but no one was manning it; he swung as he reached it, going down a long marbled hallway ... and he heard a blast of some sort tear away the desk behind him. It meant big trouble if the mutant had a functioning weapon.

Suddenly sliding, he swung behind a huge metal sculpture and glanced back, quickly ducking for cover as a series of darts banged off the metal, hitting a far wall with enough force to penetrate the stone. The mist-huffing mutant was now coming fast, having paused to fire its biological weapons. Jack looked around the open area behind him, then ran for an unmarked exit door, guessing it would be a stairwell. More darts flew, missing him, and he knew he was lucky they had no tracking ability. The door was unlocked, and he went through and found that he was correct; it was a wide emergency service stairwell running parallel to a service elevator. It was also completely dark, and that slowed him, though he went down nearly a flight at a time, swinging on the railing. As he heard the beast crash through the door, he knew every move counted. Slip and injure himself, and he'd be done.

What he wanted was the deeper underground, and after six flights down, the beast was gaining on him; then light showed through a crack, and he burst through the door and found himself in a hallway. Faint emergency lights were working here. He'd gotten below the pulse into underground residential, but he was still trapped as the beast would soon be on him. He was most of the way down the hall when he came to the elevators. The doors were closed, and he had no time to open them. As the beast came crashing through the stairwell door, sending it scraping along the wall, he became certain that it was following him by scent and maybe night vision too, but that knowledge wasn't of any help now, as it was the end of the road.

He saw the beast pacing up slowly; its jaws aglow as it prepared to fire some brand of biological charge. He could see it better now, and the fierce man-like face contrasted with the armored body - a hideous dragon of sorts, yet it reminded him of 666 for some reason. One reason likely being that it was 666 that sent it. A last trick in the plan to block perihelion - a mutant monster developed for attack when all other systems were down.

The hive mutants had known the pulse was coming, so they'd sent this thing to kill him and any hopes the Cult of the Comet had of escaping with perihelion. It also answered the question as to why General Blackthorn and the mutants had been mostly militarily silent after the comet had first flexed its muscles. They'd been busy in other ways, moving all of their key equipment deep underground, knowing the pulse was coming and that they would need to re-establish control after. And for them, it would probably be a better world. Mass death happening worldwide gave them a smaller population to feed and control. General Blackthorn could establish the perfect surveillance world, while the hive mutants would expand to their desired hive locations. Apparently, this city was to be a hive, so the pulse was a blessing for 666.

The fire orb was all but out of the mutant's expanding mouth when an alarm suddenly went off, and elevator doors opened in front of Jack. Down the hall, another door opened from one of the service areas, and a huge malfunctioning cleaning robot emerged. It was too late for the mutant to hold its fire; the robot and the door were engulfed by the flying orb, causing blowback to the mutant itself.

Jack found himself diving through an elevator shaft as a wall of fire rode down to the end of the hallway. One of the shaft's four walls was a series of rungs for emergency stops or a slow climb up during failures, and Jack was holding one rung as he watched fire blaze through the doors over his head. The blast shook his part of the shaft, and he looked down; it was a long way, the wide rungs about five feet apart. Rather than wait for the mutant, if anything was left of it, he began the journey down rung by rung. This work was irritating and not fast, but not that difficult. He got down nearly thirty rungs before the head of the mutant poked through the shaft above. It was blackened, and the smoke and its stunned state had slowed its scent trail.

The next exit was four rungs away, and there were mechanical push posts to open the doors if the electronic contacts failed. Jack did these rungs so fast he nearly fell. He slammed the opener, and the doors opened slowly. Above the mutant was practically running down vertically to him, and he barely got out, and the doors closed before it arrived.

He was now in a vast, dim underground mechanical complex of everything from electrical and water systems to heat pumps and cooling systems ... the central control for several buildings. It was nearly all fixed machinery and devices, as he didn't see any robots or motion other than drifting smoke, steam, and flickering light combined with some sparks. He could see for about twenty meters, then everything was obscured by colored haze. Doing a weaving dash through the maze of structures, he aimed for the far end of the complex, knowing there had to be access in and out for people and vehicles.

A glance back and he saw the elevator doors crumple like gum foil and the mutant leap out on the floor like a cat that'd found its mouse. Continuing to flee, Jack dodged left toward an area of huge tanks. He barely passed the first one when a blast hit it and sent out an explosion of hot gases and metal shards. Electricity was arcing, and under ordinary circumstances, he wouldn't go near the huge mushroom-shaped columns ahead. He got around to the other side as the mutant beast came out of the smoke that was mostly of its own manufacture.

Jack coughed loudly to get its attention. Its eyes flashed to him, and it sprang immediately, not realizing until it was coming down for the kill that it was headed straight into an arc. As Jack threw himself away, he saw it brighten in a blue halo and go up again rather than hit the floor ... as a charge threw it for a second unplanned flight.

He'd stunned it and was now on the move again through an area of collapse, pouring water and vapors. An open exit was ahead, and he felt something else, his badge vibrating against his leg. He pulled it from his pocket and saw it was signaling him with the on/off command, meaning the nano engines had recovered, and it was powering up for tasks. The task he needed was weapons mode, so he stopped for a second and pressed his thumb on the star's center and his index finger on the star point that initiated the shape change to weapons mode. Nothing happened, so he held it loosely as he ran. Moments later, darts flew inches over his head, and he felt the star shift to hand-held weapons form.

He spun around, hitting the tiny embossed buttons on the gun's surface for the fire mode he wanted. The mutant was just through the edge of the tunnel. Jack went to his knees and fired as more darts passed over and flew in sweeping motion to the ceiling, a ways ahead of him. This was his mode for blasting out walls, and it took out the ceiling and brought it down in a big pile as far back as the mutant. The collapse continued, and he had to turn and run as concrete and steel roared to the floor at his heels.

The war mutant was at least taken care of temporarily, but he still heard occasional rumbling behind as he explored the area ahead. He came across a web of building service tunnels. With his Shuriken badge now in search mode, he attempted to get location maps. Nearly all systems were down, but the underground emergency systems in much of the city weren't. He tracked a map through the web of tunnels; the area of the old church was near an aging service yard. He was able to get a route running right under one expressway and alongside some others underground, bringing him almost to the site.

The countdown continued; he attempted to establish communication via any route to the farm and found the link between the two points jammed. The farm had survived the pulse; it read clear, so that meant the ceremony was underway and Janice was probably unharmed. He got an auto reading on Daniel Manson's own central control at the telescope and on Volcano, too. Both were still online and operating in emergency mode. Apparently, the pulse had been broadly targeted at anything that could threaten the perihelion ceremony, leaving infrastructure tied to the relics intact. Most of the main communication connections and military stuff didn't show at all.

It was a two-kilometer jog down the first service tunnel; dust had been shaken up everywhere by the pulse and floated in the air like slow-falling grains of salt that bit his

eyes and nostrils. The odor was of scorched plastics, which forced him to breathe lightly as the fumes were likely toxic. Fatigue was rising in a slow wave; he came to an underground rotunda with a number of vehicles and off-routes. None of the cars or routes were functional except for a mail bullet line. It was built in an enclosed tunnel to quickly carry mail and needed supplies to locations underground. These cars did not carry living human cargo, but he knew they carried dead cargo ... for the SSU ... mostly people murdered by them that they wanted fast-tracked to black disposal sites. In this case, Jack would be the body. He thought that way as he read into the panel and went through the irritating manual charts to get himself close to his destination.

His luck had been tremendous, though the stale air was strangling him with a weak cough as he got inside. He considered that he was living when he should be dead, and that he might perish quickly if this thing ran into obstructions at high speed with only basic propulsion working.

It was actually like being inside a bullet, so it had been named correctly. He was still breathing nasty air, and the casing was curved to a bullet shape at the front; a perfect fit for his prostrate body. Fortunately, he'd set it to fire slowly, picking up speed as it zoomed down the tube. He experienced a claustrophobic feeling that even affected someone with space training. In space, the void was ahead, but here the feeling was like being in your own coffin, fired out of a gun to a possible deep grave. Several wild bumps nearly panicked him, but each time the bullet turned onto another smooth run ... then panic did hit, and he was being shaken by an underground rumble. The car began to wobble up and down and to decelerate, but without any brakes, until it finally stopped, and new panic set in as he couldn't open the door. The earth was still shaking as he slowly cut his way out, small-weapon mode set to a tiny laser beam that exited a star point on his badge. Once done, he threw away the section of the metal shell and got out quickly.

He was on concrete flooring, pouring with oily slime. Underground emergency lighting of various colors and flickers revealed dust snowflakes in the air, but at least here, he could cover his mouth and take long, slow breaths. There was a fresh air source somewhere here, and that meant an exit. He took a few steps and realized he was in another vast underground service yard connected to the one he was targeting aboveground. He didn't need a vehicle now and jogged past a number of them that had exploded. A light showed ahead. It was a faint sunbeam ... the last of gold as twilight was now falling. The beam lit the ramp opening leading up to the yard.

Unsure as to what awaited him out in the yard, he went up the ramp slowly and took a quick look around the area. The dying sun created a great star of reflected light in the tall buildings in the distance. Twilight was almost as bright as daylight; to the south, fires were burning, most of them from smaller buildings, as newer, larger structures were mostly flame-resistant. The comet was rising, bright like a second sun, and this time at perihelion, casting a glow across the city that showed in the yards as a path of radiance.

Nothing was moving here, no man, beast, or robot. They'd abandoned this place after the pulse had shut everything down. Distant voices echoed, and he could smell smoke. Plumes rose from fires burning in the crumbling surrounding neighborhoods. Fires that would grow quickly out of control here if not put out.

He began to jog through the yard between a line of vehicles and corrugated repair sheds. Robotic equipment was highlighted by the emergency bio lighting, and much of it had stopped mid-motion, holding burned cars and other vehicles in the air in various positions. He knew the exit road would have paths into the residential neighborhood - a quick route to the old church.

Darker ashes drifted in the enhanced twilight as he ran down the road, then he was on a path through scrub and trees and near darkness. Coming out in the residential area, he found himself approaching a crowd gathered at the front of a burning stretch of buildings. He wondered if looting had broken out in the rest of the city now. There was none here, as there was little to loot. Maybe later these people would raid the yards and see if the vehicles would work again ... but for now, they were cooperating with several men shoveling sand from hand-pushed robot carriers as they tried to douse the flames in a collapsed section of one building to keep the fire from spreading to the next block.

The breeze was light, so they had a chance to contain the many fires, though drifting live ash was a threat. Sweat and fear showed like liquid tears on the grimy, ash-stained faces. A group of Looped-out teenagers was looking up at the comet, seeing a terrifying enemy where they had previously seen a friend who beautified nighttime partying.

Jack's numb feet pounded the road. He didn't have much time, but at least he didn't have to worry about being recognized in the strange atmosphere. A few blocks later, he was going up an abandoned street, one of those that radiated from the park across from the old church. He had the feeling of being in a huge crater, on the darkened edge, surrounded by the fires that had exploded earlier. The fires were smaller in this area, but farther off, they formed a huge blistering rim surrounding the towers of the great city. Here, a gentle updraft carried ash flakes over the area, sparing it from the flames.

The sun had gone down, and the twilight and comet light seemed to rise with the firelight and rushes of smoke as he approached the park and its ring of crumbling structures. He was alone here, no voices; he halted and looked across the road to the tall trees and dark undergrowth. The path through was still there, though the weeds were waist-high, and on the other side, he saw the church, caught up in eerie light from the comet.

He walked through the park; he had no time, only a few minutes ... and he was sure it was too late. In the center of the park, he stopped and studied the church, trying to think. He looked up at the spire and into the sky, and saw something both enlightening and terrifying. Beyond the comet's light, the clouds formed a grey shape. It was the form of a huge bell, and out in the brightened smoke near it, two flying forms showed. Mutant monsters, two more of the bio-war mutants, and they were headed in his direction like dark birds of a hell that had already claimed the planet.

As he ran the rest of the way through the park and across the road, he grasped the answer - it was the bell. He remembered it now ... the bell in the steeple. The bell that had been hidden there, covered with dust and inscriptions since his childhood. It was the last artifact, and then there was the key ... he needed the key.

Realization settled in his thoughts as a vision of the skeletal dead priest inside the church passed in his mind. There was one place a key could be placed where it would

be certain he'd find it quickly. As he ran up the front steps, he shouted, calling for his cats.

There was no time to wait; he ran up the stairs to the top, hoping that they were nearby or somewhere inside. The door was propped open, and he ran inside to find himself in a swirl of ash and dust blowing in from the broken window. The old floorboards creaked miserably under his feet as he strained to look up; the bell was there, and he could see something clearly now that he hadn't seen before. The faint impressions in the metal he'd overlooked before were now more in than that they were glowing symbols - the alien language. This was it, the last and most vital of the relics and the one containing a language that would speak to the comet. The aliens created this godlike relic in their search for a higher power. A search so thorough that during it, they became higher powers themselves.

The ceiling curved at the top, and if he used the one post by the wall as a prop to get up the wall, he could go over a bird-worn rafter to the bell. But he needed the key. He ran to the window and looked out through the broken pane; the war mutants were two huge ink blots growing closer in the comet light, and below he saw another two dark shapes crossing the road. It was the cats, running to the call of his voice.

He called again but quietly, thinking there was a slight chance the circling mutant war birds hadn't detected him. Then he waited for the longest moments of his life. Moments that held a cornucopia of everything from his past life - remembrances of his love for his wife in the early days, and a flood of memories of his family's countryside estate. The blast to space was a second launch in his spinning head, and he came back to Earth and the seedy satisfaction of life as a detective in the alleys. All of his life funneled up in the long moment of perihelion. In flashes, the rest passed in pieces; his early youth, privileged and in a world of poverty, but more than that ... troubled youth and scraps with others at the bottom they were all headed for ... except for the light that saved some.

Jack felt himself to be a thousand years from Daniel Manson in outlook. Manson was more like General Mike Blackthorn and hive mutants like 666. They held the belief that they were of prominence and of the ultimate merit. The rest of the planet had no honest advocate.

In the face of the comet, who would say that those in the wealthy city were of more merit than those cast off by the dice? This was a survivor planet. Jack had adapted to the horrible corruption and survived ... his entire later life spent raking in gold and taking his revenge on an evil planet by busting the heads of bad guys. His inner feeling was that he was of no real merit. If he had been, he would've fought to change things and lived a short life like others who had genuinely tried to bring about a return of justice.

A tear of regret fell from his left eye, and when his head cleared, he saw the tail of the comet sweep in fan motion out of the sky. It swung down as unexpected redemption for a grim planet, coming in with certainty that meant the death of the mutant war birds. The beasts went from darkness to new light, exploding into starbursts in the grand event of perihelion. A final testimony that mortal violence can't exist in the face of godlike power.

As the comet sweep transformed into multiple tails across the planet, another force rose as the alien power humankind had searched for throughout history. It sent a fiery message to them and fell upon the earth, landing as a great light for the innocent younger generations, and a planet-wide inferno that licked up the elders ... sulfur and flaming gold that burned only those that had fed for a century as vampires of the planet.

Deep underground, General Mike Blackthorn's troops lost all control as the comet vaporized systems and left only emptiness and silence. On all continents and under arches and gates of the final ceremony, worshipers from the Church of the Millennium and Cult of the Comet watched the mighty tails of the comet fan in. The comet orb lit Volcano up like a new Venus, and beams swept out of the sky as the promised truth of retribution - the death of the hive mutants. Beast 666 and his armies found themselves in palaces of fire and underground worlds of expanding gases. The hives burned away like nests of curling leaves above. The bodies of those immediately exposed blossoming to blood and falling dust ... sacrifice and death on the all-seeing altar of perihelion. Mighty powers of the earth were now grains of blackened sand swept away by unseen hands that held power beyond anything the people of earth had expected.

Jack saw the fantastic light sweeping toward him. It wavered and lit the city like a circling spotlight or some all-seeing eye of the distant aliens. It left him hypnotized at the window. Then he saw the outline of a cat silhouetted against the sill, and he reached out and grasped it, pulling off the collar to get to the alien key he knew had to be there. With the pretzel-shaped object in hand, he was up the rope and swinging over to hold a rafter ... puffs of dust suddenly pouring out of the higher boards and blinding him like sand as he reached for the bell. He almost had it, then his grip slipped on the wood. He had only the rope in one hand, and he pulled up hard and struck out to fit the key in the bell's key slot.

The rope broke, sending him tumbling, the old bell ringing as he fell hard to the boards below, but the key hadn't fallen with him, and that meant it had gone into the indentation and locked there. Lifting his head, he swiped the grime from his eyes. He saw the two cats standing there as his vision watered and began to clear. Then he saw something else; out the window, the city was exploding in emerald light, and a tornado of silver fire was riding a long curve down from above to the church. There was no escaping from it, and he expected to be blown to bits. Instead, he found himself engulfed by a semi-transparent silver beam. There was no pain, and he held up his hands and watched as his body began to fade into some ghostly form. The entire steeple of the church was vanishing now, and only the bell remained, shooting out an exhaust of silver light as though it were the back end of a booster rocket.

The cats spun in the air before him ... a fading apparition ... and then he was flying like a beam of light as the last of his conscious mind faded into oblivion.

Farther off, the crowd of people Jack had passed earlier turned away from the fire they were fighting. The comet and the blaze of silver light blinded them momentarily. As vision returned, they saw light in the sky over the old church as the spire lifted into the air. It floated for a time before fading into ghostly form and sailing off into the sky. It disappeared, and when they turned back to the fire, it had gone out.

As the last of the emerald light washed clear, the ground and the sky went dark. A wind was blowing in, sucking curtains of smoke up into the sky like small clouds, and as the air freshened, the lights began to come on across the city. A few lights winked here and there and up in towers like a slowly unraveling light show. Within minutes, all things electrical and electronic with power sources not destroyed by the pulse were humming back to life. There was a wave of sirens, beeps, and honking horns, and when it ended, only the nightlights and amazed faces of the people remained.

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The story had varied themes elsewhere as the comet trails swept the planet. On all continents, crowds watched them swing down with potent effects. The emerald light was fire in nearly all cities and populated areas, but a fire that ignited nothing but the flesh of the aged; the marked bodies of those who had extended their lives using alien relics. The comet tracked them as though they had the mark of the mutant 666, leaving their bodies explosions of hot cinders and gases, creating hissing that rose like strange sounds in the night. In Holland and other mutant hives, the light continued to sweep in, eventually turning the sky into ruby red fire as the invisible skins of the hives fell to final disintegration. The last of the mutants, deep underground, found their flesh boiling off their bones, and as they died, the bones themselves became final flashes of burning phosphor.

At many ceremonial gates around the world, the people of the comet went through as the light swept in ... and in the great light, they were carried off. They became waves in the sky, dissolving crowds of ghosts that rose high and traveled far, then fell again to earth. The real flight of the comet they did not make, but those who were not elders or marked did not perish. They found themselves staring in awe as their bodies materialized on the ground near strange burning cities and structures ... places they'd not been to before ... the now mostly uninhabited areas that had been the mutant hives.

General Mike Blackthorn and most of his military forces survived in their underground bunkers. Many of the aged commanders perished in the light, leaving a worldwide police state without elders in charge. A police state without any real control of what remained on earth. Most of their equipment would never work again, as the pulse had targeted the military with vigor. Even General Blackthorn's screens underground were all dead, and he had to take an old elevator to the surface to walk out in the dark desert night and watch the comet transform to some grand dragon, a spaceship of incredible size, boosting itself away from Earth and out of the solar system.

As it left, he saw a second light; a star that was Volcano as it continued to emanate power. It became a blaze in the sky, directing alien enhancement to the growing world minds of artificial intelligence.

Blackthorn wondered, but he couldn't guess what Volcano was doing, which was establishing a freer AI mind modeled on the comet's alien technology.

Daniel Manson found tears of regret, not joy, as he and his followers materialized on solid ground, not on a spaceship, not riding the tail of the comet to a new world, but watching the comet transform as it passed perihelion. One by one, they appeared like flares in the dark, and their feet touched the ground. After Daniel, Arjun appeared, and

after him, Tatha ... and then Janice, until they were all there ... a speechless crowd standing in the long grass. Now under a strange power as the steeple of the church hovered in the air like a ghostly craft for some moments before it raced up into the tail of the comet.

The last to materialize was Jan Fair, and he landed right on the steps of the church - the blast of energy from above sending his hair flying and his mind reeling. As the steeple flew off as a ship of its own to the comet, he felt fire in his head and fell to his knees. He held his temples, and then he looked up at the sky, and as the fire left his brain, he knew he was healed. The contamination of the mutant brother was gone, and for the first time in years, his thinking was clear. Rising and turning, Jan looked across the road and saw Daniel Manson. Daniel dropped to his knees and began weeping softly.

"We were wrong all along," Zeke said. "The gates were only part of the energy channel. It was that, the last relic that it takes back."

"That and whoever is there to trigger it. It took Jack," Janice said, and like Daniel, she had had tears in her eyes. "He's gone."

"So what's left?" Mina said, leaning on Rhea for support.

"The Earth," Daniel said as he rose. "We reclaim it and rebuild it. And we wait. They'll be back someday, and we have an understanding of their technology."

"I see more lights coming on across the city," Arjun said. "We've got to find out what happened worldwide."

"The elders are dead," Daniel said. "It was in the alien translations that those who used the relics for selfish purposes would perish."

"The hive mutants, too," Tatha said, almost as though he couldn't quite believe it. "They didn't allow interbreeding."

"We take over," Janice said. "Create a new government. And wait. If they took Jack, there must be a reason for it."

"They didn't need everyone," Daniel said. "They take the person who solves the puzzle."

"But we all solved it, piece by piece," Arjun said.

Daniel smiled wistfully. "We did. If only we had been here at the right moment, we'd have made it. We'd be out there on the comet ship."

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Comet Sets

It seemed like an eternity of tunneling through dreams, most of them heavenly, but others dark and alien, dreams too vivid to be human, the flesh almost real, and the ghosts like wispy, deep meditation. He woke in a startled and empty state, shivering and feeling like he'd been frozen and suddenly thawed. Restlessness took him even though he was tired, so tired ... a large oppressing hand holding him below ... in waking,

squeezing away anger and joy ... even the simple emotions of past life lost under the burden of travel that was so heavy that the fire of a thousand stars couldn't lift it.

He dreamed again, and energy burst to brilliance in his mind like a sudden touch of the hands of angels. He passed from one world to another ... space itself a compression of the greater void. A message from the aliens had been left imprinted on his formerly blank mind. Where nothing had previously existed, he existed. Now he was an old man ... so old ... so endlessly old and weary.

Long like light-years, a memory came alive in his dry yet living brain cells, but he couldn't wake from sleep that was forever and fell back into deep dream episodes. Nightmares rising like a tide under the moon, attempting to rouse him and put him to shore like floating deadwood. Hideous visions and then angels descending.

There was a reason to hide from this awakening, and that he did, remaining unconscious to float easily in those quiet mathematical things of nothing that spun through the void. They were beyond morality and the false faces of corrupt humanity that had existed on the one earthly world he was bound to through his soul. That soul, being a living memory that wouldn't let him go ... sleep and sleep, he could drift aimlessly, but even if death came, it wouldn't set him free. A pattern would be there, and someone might remember him, and another person would speak his name, and his name would become life.

Long forgotten voices of hate, tears of remembrance ... could one never be set loose for a fall to the final freedom ... not death and corruption but a vanishing in the void to final rest.

A new form of rest came on him in gusts and waves, and then he saw that an ancient human body was his, and he was here again on Earth. Memories had perished; he'd been taken somewhere, and he'd died ... now he'd been placed here on his home planet. His eyes shone with moonlight, but there was no moon in the night sky. His eyes were perhaps older than smoking embers - once bright, but now dead and white ash. Like a child, he knew nothing of this place other than the unraveling of some thick chestnut in the parchment of the heart he once had.

He was standing in a dark park now, the silence broken by the hum of the great city he saw beyond him. The magnitude of this city was immense, its lights a river from the underground to the sky. He remembered the men, women, and animals and wondered if they remained in this world. Perhaps only robots and artificial intelligence ruled in the false perfection of an inhuman world where everyone obeyed.

Here in the park, it was pleasant and dark. The lights couldn't penetrate every corner, and when he looked back, he saw an ancient church standing among a circle of collapsed buildings. The eyes of a large black bird were there when he looked to the church spire, and then he heard the call of some animal. He saw a small black creature, and a tear came to his eye. It was down in the undergrowth, emerging from the trees. It looked confused. It had been where he had been.

When the creature jumped and took hold of his breast, he reached in with his arm and cradled it, and then the name came to memory. It was the cat again ... the animal he

thought he knew ... but who was he? And in the bushes, another cat watched, and he knew it too.

Ahead, there was a long tunnel in the trees, and the fabulous, unimaginable city was off there through the canopy of high foliage. The overwhelming sight forced him to sit, and when his eyes fell on his old pet, he remembered him and felt great affection for him. The cat he could leave here, but as old as his bones felt, and though great sleep seemed eternal and falling on him like invisible snow ... he would walk. The word was in his mouth for a world that had changed. It was the word of a future that would come. One that would be like all those futures of the past; a new world no one would believe ... coming on the tails of comets seen or unseen, like the warm dreams of things we always hoped would happen ... like dreams fallen over that cliff of forgetfulness, where our regrettable past lives are quietly cleansed.

Today, some humans always sleep. Some of them remember stories of a man who left the Earth on a comet. Other people think this man is a god, and a few believe he lives forever somewhere off in space.

In the imaginings of the remaining sons and daughters of humans, he was there somewhere in the mind's eye. He was there with the aliens, too ... and that memory came to him. They had searched for their god. Humanity would never understand the aliens or their comings and goings over history. Unlike humankind, they did not believe themselves a law unto themselves. So they searched for a higher power, while humans remained unfit believers, worshiping their own accumulated knowledge and skills. Mutants weren't necessarily a bad idea, but the version of them this planet produced had been abominable, being predatory and feeding on other higher life forms.

This was now a new world for him; he'd been sent back. He knew that the gospel of the comet and the aliens would be proclaimed again. They would come again and not in search of something, but to pass judgment on the Earth.

He had returned as an old man walking out of the darkness into the funnel of lights of the new world. As he walked, he felt his frozen, aged flesh grow warm. He stopped and raised his hand, seeing it heal as he watched. Memories of the past flooded in, and his walk became brisk, and he was young again and running toward the city he'd left behind long years ago ... long years ago that had been only yesterday.

+++ The End +++