

An excerpt from
FORSAKEN

By Michael McBride

PROLOGUE

Six Months Ago

*Antarctic Research, Experimentation, & Analysis Station 51,
Queen Maud Land, Antarctica*

The Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk streaked across the ice cap and came in low over the mounds of snow at the edge of the cliff. The ferocious gusts from its rotors filled the air with the accumulation and revealed the red arctic vehicles buried underneath. It battled the brutal gales screaming through the Drygalski Mountains until it was steady enough for the men inside to open the sliding side door. Several lengths of rope slithered down into the blizzard. Four shadows disgorged from the chopper and rappelled blindly through the white out. The moment they hit the ground, they unclipped and staggered away from the chopper through the knee-deep snow.

Special Agent Rand Morgan signaled to the pilot and the Black Hawk banked away, buffeting the men with one final gust before thundering back across the frozen plains. He unslung his custom SCAR 17 semiautomatic assault rifle and tromped toward the arctic research station, its massive garage doors rimed with ice. His men were nearly invisible in their snow-camouflage GEN III ECWCS fatigues as they advanced.

He knelt and brushed away the upper layers of the accumulation until he found what he knew would be there: an amoeboid pattern of pink ice, which crumbled with gentle pressure. He rubbed a piece between his gloved fingers and sniffed it through the holes

in his neoprene balaclava. Stood and wiped it on his pants, leaving a faint reddish smear on the fabric.

Morgan nodded to his men, who fanned out in search of any sign as to where their quarry might have gone. Less than half an hour had passed. It couldn't have made it very far, not with as much blood as it was losing.

The door between the garage bays stood wide open and nearly concealed behind a drift of snow, which extended halfway into the building.

He paused, lowered his thermal vision goggles over his eyes, and switched on his laser sight. The narrow beam cut through the darkness, which revealed itself in shades of gray. His beam reflected from the frozen concrete inside. The droplets of blood were spattered and congealed to the consistency of paint. They retained just enough heat to stand apart from the ice.

"I picked up its trail," he whispered into his com-link.

Morgan entered the garage with his assault rifle seated against his shoulder and swept his laser sight from one side of the building to the other, absorbing everything he saw as quickly as possible. He created a mental overlay of the garage over the blueprints he'd committed to memory.

His rubber soles squeaked when he stepped from the ice onto the bare concrete.

He stopped and waited for any response to the sound. His breath formed a cloud around his head and toyed with his thermal optics. The delicate skin of his lips and the mucus membranes inside his nostrils were already starting to freeze.

Another laser passed over him from behind and passed over the work bench against the back wall, beside which lay an overturned tool cabinet, its contents scattered across the floor.

The trail of blood led straight toward it.

Morgan stepped sideways, one foot over the other, to get a better view of the area behind the toppled cabinet. The access hatch to the sublevel was flush with the ground beside the hole in the floor, the rim of which glowed faintly with the residual warmth of the transferred blood.

“It’s gone underground,” he whispered. “Pair off. Allen. Fitz. You two head down the opposite side. Ryan, you’re with me. If it’s still down there, it’ll be trapped between us.”

“And if it’s not?”

The reply was tentative, nervous. Morgan had neither the time nor the inclination to coddle these men. They were supposed to be professionals. The problem was they’d seen the live feed from the security cameras inside the station and knew what this thing was capable of doing to them.

“Then we’ll have our work cut out for us, won’t we?”

Morgan leaned out over the access hatch. An iron ladder materialized from the darkness. The rungs were smudged with blood and the wall behind it dotted with expiratory spatter, which meant that their prey’s lungs were filling with blood. A pool of it stood apart from the cold floor at the bottom of the ladder like a beacon.

Hinges squealed from across the room as his men removed the lid from the hatch on the other side.

“In position,” Allen’s voice whispered through Morgan’s earpiece.

“On my mark.” He straddled the orifice and aimed his weapon down between his feet. “Go.”

Morgan slung his rifle over his shoulder, gripped the side rails with his hands and the arches of his feet, and slid straight down into the depths. Braked ten feet above the bottom to make sure there was nothing underneath him. Let go and dropped into the darkness. Landed in a crouch and shouldered his rifle.

The quarters were tight and limited his movements, but he was able to maneuver his weapon so that it was aimed back underneath the garage. The ground was smeared with blood and patterned with distinct handprints, which led to an industrial fan with a broken blade, behind which was a discrete source of heat—

His laser reflected from a pair of eyes.

A frenzy of movement and they were gone.

“It’s coming your way,” Morgan whispered into his transceiver.

A blurred heat signature scabbled through the tunnel in the distance.

Screams erupted from his earpiece. He instinctively ducked out of the tunnel as the man at the far end shot his rifle straight at him. Another scream nearly deafened him. He yanked out his earpiece and shouted up at the man descending the ladder above him.

“Move! We can’t let it get out the other side!”

Morgan slung his rifle over his shoulder and clanged up the ladder. He broke the surface on Ryan’s heels and propelled himself into a sprint toward the other side of the garage.

By the time he reached it, the floor surrounding the access chute positively glowed with the heat from the blood all over the concrete. Footprints led back into the corner, where the glass bridge to the main complex had broken off. They reminded him of those of a bear, only the toes tapered in length from medial to lateral.

He glanced down the ladder. Allen and Fitzpatrick were heaped on top of each other in a rapidly expanding pool of warmth.

“*Jesus,*” Ryan whispered.

“Stay sharp,” Morgan said.

He advanced into the ruined corner of the garage in a shooter’s stance, his laser exploring the dark gaps between the toppled shelves, fallen cabinets, and the crumbled sections of the walls and ceiling.

“*We’ve got it cornered.*”

“A cornered animal is infinitely more dangerous.”

The footprints led to a narrow gap beneath where a cabinet leaned against what almost looked like a makeshift gurney. Blood covered the floor inside as far as he could see.

Ryan crouched and used his laser sight to explore the rubble.

Plip.

Morgan stepped backward and surveyed the scene.

Something was wrong.

He could feel it.

“*Should we go in after it or try to flush it out?*” Ryan asked.

A white blur streaked through Morgan’s peripheral vision and struck the floor.

Plip.

He retreated another step and readjusted his grip on his rifle. He was only going to get one shot at this.

“Just stay where you are,” he whispered.

Ryan must have heard something in his voice. His posture stiffened and he quickly stood—

A white streak struck him on the shoulder.

Plat.

He looked straight up toward the source—

The creature fell from the ceiling. Struck him squarely on his head and shoulders. Drove him to the ground.

Ryan screamed, which only served to expose his throat to the creature. It buried its face into his neck. Shook its head back and forth. Released an arterial spray that turned its entire face and chest white in Morgan’s thermal night vision.

He targeted his laser on its exposed ribcage, beneath its left arm.

It rounded on him and bared its teeth. Its elongated head appeared too heavy for its thin neck. It swayed when it leaned forward onto its spindly arms and tensed to attack.

The tranquilizer dart his man had fired from the helicopter during the extraction of the scientists was still embedded in the meat between its neck and shoulder and issued a steady stream of blood. They’d used enough etorphine to drop a charging rhino. There was no way it should have still been conscious, let alone functional enough to take out three of his men. Surely it wouldn’t be able to withstand another dose from his retrofitted assault rifle, which had been modified to replace the carbine with a pressurized gas accelerant and the twenty-round magazine with a clip that held eight ballistic syringes.

It hissed and sprung at him.

Morgan fired.

The dart struck it squarely at center mass. Its legs went out from underneath it. The impact knocked it backward into the puddle of Ryan’s blood.

Morgan cautiously approached and stood over it. He couldn’t be entirely sure what it was, let alone if it was still breathing.

BOOK I

MODERN DAY

MARCH 24

1

BARNETT

*Subterranean Ice Caverns,
Forward Operating Base Atlantis,
Queen Maud Land, Antarctica*

“This way, sir.”

Director Cameron Barnett fell into stride beside Special Agent Rick Donovan. The earthen walls of the tunnel were smoothed by eons of running water, which had taken a serious feat of engineering to divert so they could drain these passageways. Residual puddles splashed underfoot and echoed ahead of them beyond the range of sight. LED lights were mounted to the ceiling and spaced so far apart that they had to walk through walls of darkness between the glowing auras, but they were already taxing the limits of their ability to produce enough electricity, especially with the increased demand provided by the discovery of new tunnels seemingly on a daily basis.

“What do we know about it?” Barnett asked.

“Nothing at this point.”

The two men veered to the left and into a narrow corridor. The outlet was so small they were forced to crawl more than a dozen feet, which was made even more awkward by the full-body isolation suits. The Plexiglas shields covered the better part of their faces and upper chests, revealing only a hint of their black fatigues.

Barnett stood and checked the seals around his wrists and hood. Such precautions might have seemed like overkill, but with everything he’d seen in the years since cofounding Unit 51, he’d learned to never leave anything to chance.

“How much farther?”

“Maybe a hundred feet through that tunnel to the left.”

Barnett didn't wait for his escort, who carried a SCAR 17 semiautomatic assault rifle slung over the shoulder of his yellow suit, and headed directly toward the passage. He hadn't been this deep into the warrens before, but he made it his business to commit every new inch of the map to memory as they discovered it. As with each new cavern they explored, they'd placed a small black mousetrap in an inconspicuous place, just in case they got lucky and finally caught the escaped rodent belonging to his former microbiologist, Dr. Max Friden. Assuming it wasn't dead already, which he sincerely hoped. It had been infected with the same alien microorganisms as the creature responsible for the deaths of their earlier scientific team, but they hadn't seen any sign of it since first penetrating the research complex, following the extraction of the survivors.

The sloped ceiling was spiked with stalactites that grew longer and longer until they became columns where they reached the ground at the back of the chamber, leaving barely enough room between them for the men to squeeze into the rugged hole at the base of the rear wall. The light on the far end shimmered from standing water so cold that Barnett's entire body clenched when he slid down into it.

He cleared his mind so as not to form any preconceptions. If there was one thing he'd learned on this job, it was that an open mind was critical when it came to rationalizing the inexplicable.

The tunnel terminated at the base of a crevice so narrow he could barely force his shoulders through. He emerged into a frozen cavern the size of a two-car garage and paused long enough to gather his bearings. He was roughly a quarter-mile southeast of the main entrance beneath the pyramid and seventy feet below the bed of the drained lake.

Donovan sloshed from the orifice behind him.

“Through that crevice over there,” he said

The walls were coated with a layer of ice so thick it appeared almost blue and refracted the brilliant glare of the lighting array in such a way as to grant it the opacity

of diamond. The nature of the running water and the pressure at this depth combined to keep this cavern relatively dry and just warm enough to cause the ice to grow incrementally thicker with each passing year. His team hadn't even been able to enter the passageways concealed behind it until their third day of going at it with flamethrowers. Even now, the ice created an illusion reminiscent of a hall of mirrors, which made it appear as though there were no way through, until he found himself standing in the mouth of a tunnel so tight he had to turn sideways.

He was barely five feet in when the muscles in his lower back tightened and goosebumps rippled up the backs of his arms. He stopped and scrutinized his surroundings. His primal instincts had been honed to a razor's edge during his years as an Army Ranger and an intelligence operative with the NSA, and served as an early-warning system he trusted with his life.

"Sir? It's—"

Barnett raised his hand to silence Donovan.

Something wasn't right.

The sound of dripping water echoed from ahead of him with a metronomic *plink . . . plink . . . plink*. He could feel the heat from the adjoining cavern even through his isolation suit.

"Who's in there?" he whispered.

"Berkeley and Jonas."

Every one of his men had been selected as much for their mental prowess and discretion as their physical abilities, which was the reason they'd been brought to his attention in the first place. Not only were they all highly trained intelligence officers, they were battle-tested under conditions that would have broken lesser men. Berkeley had survived in the Koh-i-Baba Mountains outside of Kabul for more than a month after his platoon was ambushed and Jonas had single-handedly kept a half-dozen wounded soldiers alive under a collapsed building in Fallujah for three days while he tunneled through the rubble to freedom.

Barnett had memorized the dossier of every man in his unit for this precise reason, so that when placed in a situation of complete uncertainty his actions would be

appropriately measured. And he knew, based on his observations, that both men were already dead.

“Give me your rifle,” he whispered.

“Sir?”

“Now.”

Barnett reached behind him, without taking his eyes off the sliver of light at the end of the crevice, until Donovan thrust the rifle into his hand. He braced it across his chest and sighted over his shoulder as he inched sideways, one silent step at a time.

The isolation hood dulled his senses. He couldn't smell anything and worried it masked the sounds at the lower range of hearing, but the last thing he wanted was to end up like Dr. Dale Rubley, or his former partner, Hollis Richards, whose remains they had yet to find despite six months of exhaustive searching.

Plink . . . plink . . .

The view into the cavern widened with every step. There was no sign of movement, at least not from what he could see, although an inestimable amount of the cavern remained hidden from sight. His position was too compromised to risk a direct confrontation, so he hastened his advance.

The ice abruptly gave way to a cavern smaller than the last, although it was hard to accurately gauge its size since the ice had effectively sealed off the back half. His men had widened the existing passages through it with their flamethrowers and essentially cleared out enough space for the body strewn across the ground. Its isolation suit was torn and the flesh underneath it rent by such deep lacerations that Jonas's face was nearly unrecognizable behind his cracked, crimson-spattered visor. There was so much blood that the pool underneath him had yet to freeze all the way through.

Two rifles lay beside him. Neither appeared to have been fired.

“What in the name of God . . . ?” Donovan said.

“Call for backup.”

Barnett tuned out Donovan's voice as he spoke into the transceiver and focused on the carnage.

At a guess, his man couldn't have been dead for more than twenty minutes. He knelt and examined the remains. Jonas's wounds looked like they'd been inflicted by a wild animal, although he could think of no species capable of overcoming two highly trained soldiers without them being able to fire a single shot in their defense.

Indistinct tracks led deeper into the cavern. Most were smeared by what he assumed to be Berkeley's dragged body.

Barnett stood and seated the rifle against his shoulder.

Whatever animal did this might still be in there with them.

He followed the passage deeper into the ice until it became too narrow for him to pass.

The bloody tracks on the ground were sloppy, smudged, and already frosted white. Those leading straight up the sheer wall of ice were even less distinct, although the punctures and gouges from what appeared to be claws were readily apparent. As was the hole leading up into the frozen ceiling, through which he could see only darkness.

2

EVANS

Teotihuacan, 25 miles northeast of Mexico City

Dr. Cade Evans squirmed through the earthen tunnel, which was barely tall enough for him to raise his head. He was beginning to feel as though he lived underground. Six months ago, researchers at Teotihuacan had only known about two of these subterranean tunnels. It seemed like every day now they discovered a new branch in this warren they had taken to calling Mictlan, the Aztec name for the underworld, although it reminded Evans more of a primitive subway system. How anyone could have conceived of such an ambitious project so long ago, let alone convinced other human beings to excavate these tiny, suffocating tunnels, was beyond him.

He had to turn his head sideways to squeeze into the southwest cavity. There were four main chambers, much like a giant heart, buried at the precise center of the sprawling

primitive complex known as Teotihuacan, the name given to the once formidable Mesoamerican metropolis by the Nahuatl-speaking Aztec warriors who discovered the ruins hundreds of years after their desertion. It meant “birthplace of the gods,” although to this day no one knew who built it or where they went, only that something terrible must have happened during its final days for more than a hundred thousand men, women, and children to abandon it seemingly overnight.

The lights mounted throughout the network of tunnels were fueled by a solar generator on the surface. While it might have been green-friendly and less costly to fuel, it barely powered the LED bulbs, which cast a bronze glare across the bare earth.

Evans’s sweat poured through his brows and stung his eyes. He smeared it away with the back of his wrist, leaving a muddy smudge across his forehead and the bridge of his nose.

“If it were any more humid down here, I’d have to wear a wetsuit,” he said.

Dr. Juan Carlos Villarreal glanced up from where he painstakingly cleared the dirt from a mural featuring a stylized rendition of the feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. It appeared to have been painted onto a chunk of plastered adobe, but as far as Evans knew, they had yet to encounter anything resembling a wall down here.

“That might not be a bad idea, anyway,” he said. “At least not where you are going.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Villarreal merely smirked in response and resumed his task.

The main corridor between chambers was tall enough for Evans to rise to his full height. He stretched his back as he walked between the four chambers, where various other researchers and graduate students excavated the gridded floor, sifted through the dirt, and catalogued their findings. Like the main road above him, colloquially termed the Avenue of the Dead, the tunnel was arrow-straight and aligned precisely fifteen degrees east of true north. They speculated it ran from the main gates of Teotihuacan all the way to the Pyramid of the Moon. Together with the Pyramid of the Sun to the east and the Temple of the Feathered Serpent to the south, the three structures were arranged in the exact same pattern as the stars in Orion’s Belt, a fact Evans believed was of no small significance.

On September 20th of the previous year, an earthquake had struck this area with enough force to cause sections of the road and the surrounding structures to collapse and reveal these hidden tunnels. And yet, strangely, the event went undetected at monitoring stations in Mexico City, a mere twenty-five miles away. Coincidentally, similar seismic events had been reported in Egypt and England, where the Pyramids of Giza and the Thornborough Henges of North Yorkshire, respectively, had been built in this exact same configuration. These seemingly unrelated events all occurred within minutes of the activation of the pyramid under Antarctic Research, Experimentation, and Analysis Station 51, which Evans did everything in his power not to think about.

Of course, the presence of Dr. Anya Fleming served as a constant reminder. She poked her head out of the circular hole in the ground ahead of him. He had to shield his eyes from the light on her hard hat.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming,” she said.

Anya was one of the sweetest people on the planet, but she reminded him of the Energizer Bunny after a six-pack of Red Bull, which at times could be a little overwhelming. He envied her the exuberance of her youth, just not at six o’clock in the morning.

“What did you find?”

She grinned and ducked back into the hole.

Evans walked to the edge of the pit and watched her headlamp flash across the bare walls as she descended the aluminum ladder. The hole had been concealed beneath several feet of stone and dirt. They had only recently finished clearing the rubble at the bottom to reveal the passages fifteen feet straight down.

The ladder shook as he descended, his clanging footsteps echoing from the depths. By the time he reached the bottom, Anya was already flat on her belly and slithering into the arched orifice. Her light silhouetted her prone form, which was considerably smaller than his, and even then she barely fit inside the tunnel. She spoke over her shoulder as she crawled.

“All of the rain we’ve had during the last few days softened the ground enough that we were able to break through the end of the tunnel without nearly as much effort as we

expected. And what we thought was just rubble was actually stones mortared together and sealed behind a wall of lime plaster.”

“Have you been down here all night?”

“Is it morning already?”

In its heyday, every building in the entire city had been plastered with lime and painted bright red. In fact, they’d required so much lime to keep the buildings looking new that they’d consumed the entire surrounding forest, burning it day and night, to fuel the fires required to make the plaster, effectively altering the landscape. The mysterious rulers of this advanced civilization even commissioned murals of their gods and sacred events to be painted on the walls inside every home, in what researchers believed were the first overt examples of statist propaganda.

“The seal. Is that what I saw Juan Carlos working on up there?”

“Did it have a really pissed off-looking Quetzalcoatl?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the one.”

Evans’s helmet scraped the dirt overhead. His heart leaped into his throat as clumps of dirt and rock rained down on his extended arms. The ground was disproportionately muddy. He glanced up and realized that Anya was positively soaked. Her jeans were so wet they were almost black. He recalled what Villarreal had said and shuddered at the prospect of encountering standing water in such tight confines. The San Juan River cut straight across the Avenue of the Dead. If they accidentally broke through and tapped into it, they could flood the entire subterranean labyrinth. That is, if it didn’t collapse on them first.

Anya’s light dimmed as it diffused into a much larger space, from the depths of which he heard the sound of dripping water. The temperature steadily dropped, causing his skin to prickle with goosebumps. It smelled damp and musty, like a cave, which was exactly what it was.

A splashing sound from ahead of him.

He wriggled from the tunnel and found himself staring out across a circular pool. Anya bobbed several feet out, her head barely breaching the surface.

“Careful,” she said. “It’s deeper than it looks.”

Evans twisted his torso and slid his legs down into the cold water. His feet sank into the sediment, all the way past his ankles. The mud released bubbles that burst around him and released the vile stench of rotten eggs.

“Sweet Jesus. What’s in God’s name is that awful smell?”

“Decomposition,” she said. “Watch out for all of the bones around your feet.”

“Oh, is that all? I was worried it might be something gross.”

Their lights reflected from the brown water, creating golden sparkles on the stalactites above them. Stone heads protruded from the rounded walls like the numbers on a clock. They had the same faces as those adorning the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, only somehow more realistic and unnerving. Each featured the head of a dragon jutting from what looked like a giant daisy. Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god, who throughout history had been worshipped by such disparate Mesoamerican cultures as the Teotihuacan, Maya, Aztec, and Inca.

“Juan Carlos said the Teotihuacano believed that man was born from the dark waters beneath a mountain,” Anya said. “He thinks this chamber was designed to replicate their creation myth and that they conducted sacred rituals in here.”

“The kind of sacred rituals that require human sacrifices?”

“Is there any other kind?”

“I was hoping you’d found the burial chamber of one of their kings.”

Archeologists had found graves throughout the ruins, and yet based on the relative dearth of grave goods in a city that prospered from the trade of obsidian, they’d yet to find the remains of any high priests or rulers.

“This just might be even better,” she said with a smirk.

Evans tripped over a long bone and barely managed to keep his chin above the water. He was in no hurry to find out how it tasted.

The dripping sound originated from the far side of the pool, where water dribbled from the mouth of one of the Quetzalcoatl heads and onto a stone platform. Anya climbed onto it and shined her light into a recess in the wall that had been so well concealed by the shadows that Evans hadn’t initially seen it.

He pulled himself out behind her and ducked his head under the stone creature's mouth. Cold water trickled through his hair and down his neck as he crawled into a hollow barely large enough to accommodate both of them and the sheer quantity of discolored bones congealed in an amber crust of adipocere.

Evans traced the skeletal remains with his light. There were twelve distinct individuals, all of them with their ankles bound, their arms tied behind their backs, and their jaws hanging open as though they'd died screaming.

"What in the name of God happened here?" he whispered.

3

ROCHE

4 miles north of Salisbury, Wiltshire County, England

The rising sun turned the frost on the onion field blood red. The plants were barely eight inches tall, but that was more than high enough to show the clear delineation between the upright and flattened sections, even this long after the event. The affected leaves were brown and wilted, the hard ground underneath them frozen and beaded with microscopic grains of silicon dioxide.

Due to the diminishing profitability of independent family farms, an increasing number of farmers were forced to grow both summer and winter crops in the same soil. By late May, these onions would make way for barley, assuming enough survived to harvest and the crop circle hadn't damaged the soil, which was why the landowner had been more than happy to lease his back acreage, for an exorbitant price, to Martin Roche, who considered it a sound investment, because if his theory was correct, this parcel of land was special.

Mapping the locations of all the known crop circles in England had been the key. Nearly seventy percent fell along an ancient route known as the Icknield Way, a trail that had been in use for more than four thousand years and at one point connected the English Channel with the North Sea by way of Stonehenge. Its course was dictated by the

topography and defined by a distinct demarcation between chalk cliffs and greensand, a type of sandstone that got its name from the high concentration of iron-potassium silicate that gave it its telltale color and had the unique ability to absorb ten times as much moisture as ordinary soil. The combination of the two strata created the perfect conditions for agriculture. Rain fell upon the chalk Downs and the greensand soaked it up like a giant sponge, allowing the excess to pass through the porous sediment and accumulate on top of the underlying layer of impermeable clay, forming a giant aquifer that ran diagonally across the entire country, a veritable river beneath their feet. Further comparison against hydrogeological maps offered the first real breakthrough: ninety-five percent of all known crop circles had formed in areas with significant groundwater.

This particular acreage was special because it was adjacent to a plot of land that had been an active stone quarry a hundred years ago. The War Department had commandeered it during World War I and converted it into a storage depot for ammunition and TNT. The Royal Air Force assumed control of it during World War II and crammed more than thirty thousand tons of explosives into the manmade caverns. All that remained now was a rusted hatch in the middle of a field gone to seed, overgrown by bramble and the signs of disuse. And the twelve acres of tunnels that passed directly underneath Roche's leased land.

It was really Kelly Nolan who had put the whole thing together during the countless hours they'd spent brainstorming via Skype. At first he'd been reluctant to share any details about his work. While he firmly believed in the importance of what he was doing, especially after what happened in Antarctica, he knew that people still thought of the study of crop circles as a joke. The marines and the NSA had taught him to trust no one, so opening up to anyone, especially the younger woman with the red and green streaks in her hair, was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

She'd rewarded him not just with her support and friendship, but with a plausible explanation that had the potential to blow the roof off the mystery surrounding the creation of crop circles. And if everything went as planned, within a matter of hours they'd know if she was right.

Kelly was sitting in the center of the design when Roche reached it, her head buried in the hood of her jacket and her frozen breath trailing over her shoulder. She glanced up and plucked her earbuds from her ears. He raised the thermos in one hand and the bag of croissants in the other.

“Did you remember the marmalade?”

Roche transferred the bag to his other hand and fished the jar of fresh bergamot jam from his jacket pocket.

She clapped her gloved hands and squealed in delight.

The fruit was too bitter for him, but it made him feel good that such a simple thing could give someone else so much pleasure. He wondered what she was going to do when the citrus fruit was no longer in season, although if everything went as planned today, it was only a matter of time before she returned to the States anyway.

The mere thought of her departure brought with it an intense sadness, which totally caught him off guard. She was a full eight years younger than he was and came from a world he could hardly believe existed anymore. He’d spent so many years sifting through the depths of mankind’s darkness that it seemed impossible that there was any light left.

Kelly loaded the thermos and rolls into her backpack, shouldered it, and struck off toward the adjacent field. The barbed-wire fence was broken in places and snarled with tumbleweeds in others. Roche held down the upper wire so she could climb over, then stepped across himself. He glanced back at the design and shivered. There was something about it that made him uncomfortable on a primal level.

“Are you coming or what?” Kelly called.

“Yeah,” he said, and turned away from what almost looked like a map from where he stood.

The briars left burs in his socks and jeans, no matter how hard he tried to avoid them. Most of the weeds were as tall as Kelly, and were it not for the dead oak tree that marked the entrance to the mine, they might never have found it. The majority of the other entrances had been sealed off by order of the Ministry of Defense, who missed what must have been a late addition by the RAF that wasn’t on the original blueprints.

The hatch was a rusted sheet of iron with hinges that squealed so loud the sound echoed clear across the plains. The ladder inside was little more than iron rungs bolted to the bare limestone for the first twenty vertical feet, after which Roche and Kelly were forced to use their flashlights and an extreme amount of caution to pick their way down a steep talus slope lined with chunks of nearly petrified wood that could only loosely be considered stairs. The walls were resplendent with artwork, from designs with a strange, haunting beauty to graffiti featuring the kind of language that could make a sailor blush.

Roche and Kelly were a hundred feet down by the time the ground leveled off and tunnels took form. They were smooth and solid, a feat accomplished by early quarrymen who took an inordinate amount of pride in their work, or at least that was what the librarian who first told him about this place had said.

It was frighteningly easy to lose their bearings in the darkness, but they'd been down here so many times during the last week that they'd learned their route by rote. Left, right, left, left, right. Kelly had once said that the echo of their footsteps sounded like the ghosts of the people who'd worked down here a century ago. The image was somehow comforting and became how he chose to think of the scuffing sounds that terminated in the dead end ahead of them, where the cases filled with Kelly's equipment were stacked under a tarp.

They'd used ground-penetrating radar to detect the hollow space underneath the crop circle and had spent endless, grueling hours hammering through eight solid feet of stone with pickaxes. They first broke through last night, but had decided to wait until this morning to finish the job and explore what they believed to be a cavern of decent size. The idea had been that they could do so with clear heads after a good night's sleep, yet Roche was certain Kelly hadn't been able to close her eyes any longer than he had.

"Would you care to do the honors?" she asked.

"You trying to get out of working?"

"I figure this is your moment."

"You're going to wait until I get all the way through and then you're going to run in there ahead of me, aren't you?"

She smiled, unscrewed the lid of the marmalade, and dipped her finger into the fruit. Slurped the bergamot from the tip of a fingernail with yellow and pink polish.

“You know me too well.”

When she lowered her hand, her fingers unconsciously tapped against her thumb. It was a nervous tick of sorts, which, now that he really thought about it, she'd hardly exhibited at all over the last few days.

He hefted the pickaxe and drove it into the wall. Cracks radiated away from the small hole they'd made last night. He struck it over and over until the broken rock was shin-deep and he'd created a passage easily large enough to crawl through.

True to her word, Kelly was already halfway through by the time he set aside the tool and flung the sweat from his brow. He might even have said something snarky had he been able to think clearly. As it was, he felt as though he were watching himself enter the cavern from a great distance, somehow a witness to the moment rather than a participant.

Kelly stood at the bottom of the slick stone slope, silhouetted by the beam of her flashlight, which reflected from something metallic. He heard what almost sounded like whispering, but by the time he grabbed his own light and followed her into the darkness, he recognized the sound for what it truly was.

Running water.

The aquifer was barely visible through a manmade hole in the cavern floor, above which someone had installed a water wheel carved from a single piece of stone. The subterranean river was so far down that his light barely reflected from its smooth surface. It would have to rise a good ten feet to be able to spin the paddles of the water wheel, which was connected to a series of cogs that rotated a massive lodestone ring around an iron post that terminated against the stalactite-riddled ceiling. The copper wire wrapped around it was bluish-green with oxidation.

“It's just like the machine inside the pyramid in Antarctica,” Kelly said.

Roche studied the ancient contraption. In many ways it seemed even more sophisticated than the power source that activated the gene-altering chamber. The height of the water wheel suggested it would only spin under specific environmental

conditions that caused an absurd rise in the groundwater, rotating the lodestone ring around the iron post and inducing an electrical current in the copper wire. Flowstone had accreted over the toroid at the top, absorbing it into the roof of the cavern. In fact, the layers of minerals were so thick that he could barely see the copper design radiating outward from the giant silver ring.

“The electricity passes from the copper wire to the toroid,” Roche said, “which distributes it across the design wired into the ceiling.”

“That charge is then conducted to the surface by the silicon dioxide in the greensand and the sheer volume of water retained in the limestone, producing a ton of heat and essentially steaming the crops directly above us.”

“You’re saying that someone built this down here thousands of years ago with the sole intention of producing an image on the surface that could only be seen when the aquifer was running at the exact right height.”

“Of course it sounds silly when you say it like that.”

“It sounds ridiculous no matter how you say it.”

“More ridiculous than using these designs to activate an ancient pyramid buried under the Antarctic ice cap?”

She smirked and spun the water wheel to make the lodestone ring turn. A faint current crackled in the copper wire.

“Do that again,” Roche said.

She spun the water wheel, faster this time. Bluish bolts of energy rippled through the ceiling.

“Keep going,” he said, and sprinted back toward the entrance.

The walls blew past in the darkness as he nearly outraced his light. Right, left, right, right, left.

Up the slope and the ladder.

Out the chute.

The briars raked at his face as he sprinted toward the onion field. Hurdled the fence. Hit the ground running.

The heat from the electricity coursing through the greensand formed a carpet of fog, through which he watched the exact same design reform in the crops before his very eyes.

This time there was no doubt.

It was definitely a map.

4

JADE

Benue River Delta, 15 miles south of Musari, Nigeria

Dr. Jade Liang slogged through waist-deep water that reeked of sulfur and rot. She kept her emerald-green eyes on the banks and the overhanging palm and fern branches for venomous snakes. The Benue River Delta was positively alive with them, and the nearest treatment facility was in Kaltungo, so far away she'd be long dead before arrival. The jungle was so dense she would never have been able to pick her way through it, even if it meant sparing her the scourge of the mosquitoes humming around her head. Much as she loathed them, she vastly preferred them to the black flies that had been the bane of her existence for the last week. They didn't sting, but after crawling all over the corpses, their little feet transferred all sorts of vile germs and the products of decomposition onto everything they touched.

Upon returning from Antarctica, she'd taken a sabbatical from her teaching position at the University of Colorado Medical School, sold her townhouse, and volunteered her services on a full-time basis to the United Nations' International Criminal Court and its investigation into crimes of genocide by Boko Haram, the de facto western branch of the Islamic State. She justified the decision to herself as doing her part to combat evil and injustice, but when it came right down to it, whether under the auspices of the U.N. Criminal Court or not, she'd still be wading through this swamp in search of answers to the questions that had plagued her for the last six months.

When she was first dispatched to Musari, Nigeria, she'd arrived with a full contingent of U.N. peacekeepers to find the village still burning and its inhabitants piled in a mass grave. Among them she'd discovered the body of a young woman with a strangely elongated cranium, which she'd written off as a product of artificial cranial deformation of the kind practiced by many primitive societies, until she encountered the same mutation on a living specimen in Antarctica, caused by what she now believed to be the spontaneous evolution of mankind. The activation of the machine inside the pyramid submerged beneath the ice had triggered a process by which their chief engineer, Dr. Dale Rubley, had undergone a frightening physical transformation when microscopic organisms of extraterrestrial origin infiltrated his isolation suit, altered his DNA, and subsumed his physical form. The resultant creature would have killed them all were it not for the intervention of a quasi-military group called Unit 51, about which she still knew next to nothing.

Several weeks had passed before she was able to compartmentalize the events that transpired in Antarctic Research, Analysis, and Experimentation Station 51—AREA 51—and she realized what should have been painfully obvious the entire time. For the girl she'd found in the mass grave to have exhibited the same characteristics as Dale Rubley, she either needed to have undergone the same physical metamorphosis or have descended from others who had, which meant that somewhere out here in this infernal jungle there was potentially an alien species capable of unlocking the secrets of human evolution.

It was while investigating the murder of sixteen missionaries outside of Lafia that she first heard the rumors. The victims had been “necklaced”—a horrific means of execution by which the victim's hands were tied behind his back and a tire filled with gasoline was hung around his neck and set ablaze. It sometimes took as long as twenty minutes for the poor souls to die as the flames ate through layer after layer of flesh, which must have felt like an eternity to the lone survivor, who battled through unendurable pain to tell investigators about the nineteen women who'd been abducted with him and the abuses to which they'd been continually subjected. When pressed on where they'd

been taken, he could remember only that his captors had referred to their camp as “near the bobbies,” but he’d died before he could clarify what that meant.

It took peacekeepers forty-eight hours to find the abandoned camp, along with the remains of thirteen of the girls, in a clearing near the Ankwe River. While examining the victims and documenting their horrific wounds, which suggested that their last twenty-four hours on this earth had been a living hell, she’d overheard her U.N. escorts discussing which way the caravan of perpetrators might have gone while studying the most recent satellite imaging. Several of the aerial views had shown stone mounds nearly concealed beneath the thick canopy that she might have dismissed were she not able to extrapolate their contours into perfect circles. It wasn’t until that precise moment that she understood what the dead missionary had meant by “bobbies.” Most Nigerians spoke a kind of Pidgin English not unlike the Creoles in Louisiana. The term was slang for a woman’s breasts.

Local authorities in Yola had tracked the movements of the Boko Haram contingent into the Mandara Mountains, which suggested they were either holing up in the volcanic range or trying to outrun their pursuit into Cameroon. The peacekeepers had been dispatched that very evening, but she’d elected to stay behind in hopes of getting a better look at these so-called bobbies.

Jade was beginning to think she’d either misread the map or misinterpreted what she thought she’d seen. She’d been navigating this maze of channels for more than four hours now and was starting to wonder if she’d somehow lost her way. For the structures to have been visible through the canopy, they had to have been at least fifty feet—

A crackling sound from the underbrush lining the bank to her right.

She drew her hijab across her face with one hand and thrust the other into her jacket. Closed her fist around the grip of the Ruger LC9 handgun in the sling under her armpit. The semi-automatic pistol was almost comically small, but fit her tiny hand, barely bucked when she fired it, and could punch a hole through an attacker large enough to toss a softball.

A crocodile slid from the bushes and vanished into the murky water. It reappeared several seconds later, maybe twenty-five feet ahead of her. She held perfectly still and watched it drift away from her on the weak current until it rounded the bend.

She realized she wasn't breathing and gasped for air.

What was she doing out here? There were any number of things just waiting to kill her and there wasn't a single person on the planet who knew where she was. And why *hadn't* she told anyone? Because no one would have believed her. She was starting to wonder if she believed herself.

Jade nearly had herself convinced to turn around when she saw it through the trees. At first it looked like little more than an outcropping scoured in places to the bare granite by the wind, but she was able to push through a stand of tree ferns and onto dry ground to get a better look. It was easy to see why they were called the bobbies. There appeared to be six of them in all, although only two of them clearly stood apart from the jungle, which had grown over them in such a way as to conceal all but their shape. Each was built from concentric rings of stacked stones that grew smaller and smaller until they reached a peak reminiscent of a nipple. The levels had eroded through the years and now formed what could have been mistaken for oddly terraced piles of rock had she not known exactly what she was looking at.

They were pyramids.

She was only peripherally aware of the Nsude Pyramids, built by the Igbo people far to the southwest. Many archeologists speculated were even older than those in Egypt, but that definitely wasn't her field of expertise. All she knew was that she was a hard day's walk from where she'd found the remains of the girl with the elongated cranium, standing at the base of a pyramid hidden in the jungle, and didn't believe in coincidences.

Jade skirted the bank of crocodiles sunning themselves on the bank and rounded the far side of the pyramid. It was only when she noticed the crunching sounds of her footsteps on the detritus that she recognized the complete and utter lack of birdsong.

She looked up into branches so still it seemed as though even the wind held its breath. There were no lizards staring down at her or monkeys chittering from their enclaves. No

warblers or sunbirds flitting through the canopy. Not even a viper camouflaged among the dangling leaves.

A faint buzzing sound beckoned from somewhere ahead of her. She knew exactly what it was.

Jade ducked underneath a fallen tree and fought through saplings and vines all vying for the same light gap. Her pulse thumped so hard in her temples that she could barely hear the flies.

The muddy ground became choppy with what looked like footprints, and a path of sorts formed where there had been none before. The vegetation grew so thick she had to crawl, and for the first time she caught a whiff of the awful stench lurking beneath the intermingling scents of blossoms, moss, and stagnant water. The puddles in the muddy tracks were brick red and roiling with mosquito larvae.

The path led to a twisted tree trunk that angled up the slope of the concealed pyramid. Some sort of animal had excavated a burrow underneath the trunk and tunneled beneath the crumbled granite.

Jade removed the Maglite Mini LED flashlight from her jacket pocket and shined it into the hole. The beam reflected from standing water that terminated against a rock abutment nearly a dozen feet in. The smell emanating from inside was more than she could bear, even with the hijab covering her mouth and nose.

She took a deep breath before she could change her mind and squirmed into the burrow. The water was startlingly cold and filled with organisms flagellating beneath the surface. In her mind, they were all snakes preparing to strike her, but she could only move so fast while keeping her light and gun above the surface. The tunnel ended at the base of a vertical chute maybe five feet tall, above which was a space reminiscent of the inside of an igloo. Spider webs covered the domed ceiling, although not so completely that she couldn't see the intricate pattern of stars carved into the granite. She contorted her upper body and managed to get her legs underneath her. Cautiously stood and shined her light into the inner sanctum.

The flies took flight from the remains on the ground and cast amoeboid shadows across the walls. The body was still articulated and undeniably human, unlike the

majority of the bones heaped against the walls, which were so jumbled it was impossible to tell where one ended and the next began, let alone to which species they'd once belonged. Judging by the pelvis, the body was female, and likely one of the missionaries left behind at the abandoned camp mere miles away. It had been stripped of muscle and flesh to the connective tissue and knots of tendons at the joints.

The engorged flies ignored her and returned to their meal.

"We . . . know . . . you," a deep, disembodied voice said from directly behind her.

Jade screamed and spun around. Her flashlight reflected from a pair of eyes before they retreated into a dark recess.

She was breathing so hard she feared she might hyperventilate.

A shuffling sound to the left of where she'd last seen the eyes.

The clicking of nails on stone.

"We . . . still . . . live."

The words seemed to originate from all around her at once, the hollow intonation as much a sensation as a sound.

"Show yourself," Jade said, but the tremor in her voice gave lie to her bravado.

Scratching, from even farther to her left.

It was circling around her.

Jade swung her beam toward the sound and caught a glimpse of bare, grayish skin as it scurried into a narrow tunnel. She crawled toward it and shined her light inside just in time to see a blur of movement at the farthest reaches of the light.

"Find . . . us."

The voice echoed from out of sight.

A scraping sound preceded the sudden influx of light.

She realized with a start just how vulnerable she was and how easily she could be sealed inside the pyramid. An animalistic panic took hold of her. She threw herself into the hole and crawled toward the light. She hit her head and scraped her knees and elbows. The sound of her breathing was too loud in her own ears, as though she were in a coffin. She twisted and turned until she crawled through a gap where one of the structural

stones had been pushed away from the pyramid and into the undergrowth, through which she could barely see the brown stream.

Movement through the maze of trunks. Something scurrying away from her, low and near the ground.

“Stop right there!” she shouted, and aimed her pistol through the trees.

The pale, skeletal form vanished into the thicket.

Jade dropped her flashlight and ran after it. Branches swatted her face, forcing her to shield it with her forearms. She burst from the jungle and onto the bank of the river where the crocodiles had been basking when she arrived.

The creature crouched naked at the water’s edge. It looked up at her from beneath the ridged brow of its elongated head through wide, alien eyes.

“Release . . . us.”

It rose to its full height, turned, and waded into the murky water.

The crocodiles attacked with unbridled savagery, and, in a flurry of snapping jaws and thrashing tails, dragged it down into the depths.

Blood rose to the surface and diffused into the current.

5

BARNETT

Subterranean Ice Caverns,

FOB Atlantis,

Queen Maud Land, Antarctica

Barnett scrolled through the map of the honeycomb-like passageways on his iPad while he walked. The sonar scans left considerable gaps in the digitally reconstructed data, but there was more than enough to demonstrate that whatever took out his men could be positively anywhere by now. He passed the tablet back to Morgan and quickened his pace toward his destination. His men had widened the stone corridors and cleared all the ice from the chamber preceding the one where his men had been ambushed. The ice

cavern itself had been chiseled in such a fashion that his team was able to reach the hole in the roof, while leaving the evidence largely undamaged. Only Jonas's body had been removed and his blood scrubbed from the floor, pending formal analysis by Unit 51's scientific wing, operating under the auspices of the United States Research Institute for Infectious Diseases. So far, they had discovered nothing out of the ordinary, but like the archaea that had subsumed the body of Dr. Dale Rubley, it was always possible that the life cycles of any potentially pathogenic microorganisms were highly dependent upon environmental factors and weren't readily apparent under normal conditions.

Of course, they had more urgent concerns than the possible risk of infection. At this very moment, something capable of slaughtering two elite soldiers was down here in the tunnels with them.

"Did she tell you what this is about?" Barnett asked.

"No, sir," Morgan said.

They'd installed thermal imaging cameras in the main junctions of the tunnels, but there were so many smaller passageways and side corridors that there was no way they could possibly cover them all. Most of them were too small for his men to search anyway, even with the sonar and LiDAR scanners at their disposal, both of which were capable of imaging enclosed spaces they couldn't physically explore by mapping points of data using rebounding sonar waves and laser beams. While both technologies formed three-dimensional representations of the tunnels and caverns, the only way either could detect the presence of something living was if it moved while they were actively scanning.

The halogen bulbs had been replaced by black lights and every surface sprayed with a fine layer of Luminol, a chemical that reacted with the hemoglobin in the victims' blood to produce a bluish glow that stood apart from the ice like fluorescent paint.

"Tell me you've found something remotely useful," Barnett said.

"And good morning to you too, director," Dr. Moira Murphy said. Her bulky isolation suit was like a hot air balloon over her diminutive form. Barnett had plucked her from the grasp of DARPA—the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—not just because of her skill in forensic investigations, but because of her expertise in a wide variety of fields ranging from computer and bio technology to mechanical and genetic engineering,

a consequence of being raised by nomadic academics who regarded the pursuit of happiness as secondary to the quest for intellectual enlightenment.

“I’m in no mood, Dr. Murphy.”

“Then I suppose it depends upon how you define ‘useful.’”

“What do you have?”

“Thanks to the Luminol, we’ve been able to isolate a few distinct tracks, and, utilizing a program of my own design, have been able to digitally reconstruct what we believe to be a fingerprint.”

She removed her tablet from its protective thermal casing, turned it on, and handed it to Barnett. The screen showed an oblong blue design set against a black background. It had the same general shape of a fingerprint, but instead of the familiar whorl pattern, it featured curved horizontal bands that reminded him of ripples and a triangular tip he assumed was a claw.

“So there’s no doubt we’re dealing with some kind of animal,” Barnett said. While he’d suspected as much based on the nature of the wounds it inflicted and its ability to squeeze into such a small space, he’d privately held out hope that at long last they’d discovered where Hollis Richards had been hiding.

“Not just ‘some sort of animal.’ We’re dealing with a species that was able to survive being frozen in solid ice for millennia. A higher order of animal specifically adapted for an extended period of cryobiosis, one capable of essentially slowing its heart rate and metabolism to such an extent that it barely qualified as living.”

“Nothing could have survived down here for that long.”

“And yet we’re surrounded by evidence to the contrary. Let me show you something.”

Moira led Barnett to the other side of the cavern, where his men had first breached the ice.

“Look at this right here.”

Barnett stared at the solid ice, and through it, at the ancient bones crammed into a recess in the stone wall.

“Are they human?”

It almost looked like a man had been folded into a ball with his knees to his forehead, his arms pinned between his ribcage and his thighs, and wedged into the hole.

“Undeniably, but that’s not why I called you down here. Try running your fingers across the ice. Right there in the cavity where his abdominal contents were.”

Barnett looked at her curiously for a moment before doing as she asked. There were distinct ridges in the ice he hadn’t been able to visually appreciate. They almost matched the contours of the internal margin of the ribcage.

“So what is it?”

“What we believe to be the physical outline of this miraculous species. The majority was melted by the flamethrowers, but we were able to create a plaster mold from that section you just felt.” She looked around the room. “Desmond? Can you grab the mold for me?”

Dr. Desmond Bly was their resident speleologist. He was barely five feet tall and skeletally thin, which had helped him map some of the largest and most dangerous cave systems on the planet. As one would expect from someone who spent the majority of his time alone in the darkness, however, he lacked certain social graces. Fortunately, Barnett hadn’t recruited him for his personality.

Bly sighed and made a grand show of how put out he was to have to set aside his laptop and the digital maps he painstakingly pieced together, and removed the white mold from the insulated case he’d been using as a stool. He tossed it to Morgan, who was marginally closer than Barnett, and plopped back down with his computer.

Morgan passed the cast to Barnett, who turned it over in his hands. The bottom was coarse and uneven, while the top was relatively smooth, save for the same distinct ridges he’d felt in the ice.

“It looks like an armadillo’s shell.”

“Carapace, technically,” Moira said. “Although if we were to use the distance between the armor-like bands and the degree of curvature to extrapolate its size, we’d be dealing with an armadillo that was roughly three feet long from its nose to the tip of its tail.”

“Armadillos can’t take down full-grown men.”

“Nor are they able to climb straight up vertical sheets of ice, which brings us back to the fingerprints. Those horizontal flanges are called lamellae, and, if I’m correct, function like those on a gecko’s toes, which are covered with microscopic structures called setae. Each of these microscopic bristles further splits into nano-sized tips called spatulae that create van der Waals interactions with surface molecules strong enough to support a disproportional amount of weight.”

“But none of that tells us how it killed my men.”

“I was saving the best for last.” She looked at Bly, who rolled his eyes and once again set aside his work. He opened the thermoprene case and removed another plaster mold. “Based on my analysis of SA Jonas’s wounds, I concluded that they were inflicted by teeth. The subject’s jaws are dorsolaterally flattened in such a way as to create a rostral shelf, and the teeth are interdigitating in orientation.”

“In English, doctor.”

Morgan retrieved the mold from Bly before he could toss it. When he turned around, his expression told Barnett everything he needed to know.

“This animal—for lack of a better term—has an elongated snout with interlocking teeth designed for gripping and tearing.”

Barnett took the mold from Morgan. There were only six teeth, two on one side and four on the other, but their configuration was unmistakable.

“The fourth tooth from the front, as you can clearly see, is longer than the others and designed to inflict the most damage,” Moira said. “I’ve studied similar wounds, although not in person, caused by—”

“Crocodiles,” Barnett finished for her. He handed the mold to her and headed back toward the tunnel to the main complex. “Good work, Dr. Murphy.”

“I wish I could tell you exactly what we were dealing with.”

“So do I, doctor, but I think I just might know someone who can.”

TESS*The Cage,**FOB Atlantis,**Queen Maud Land, Antarctica*

It had taken Dr. Theresa Clarke several months to acclimate to working in the faint glow of the red bulbs, which were so dim she might as well have been trying to function in total darkness. She'd had no choice in the matter, though, not that anyone around here cared much about her opinion anyway. She'd basically utilized her skills in satellite archeology to leverage her position in Unit 51, despite not being entirely certain what it actually was. All she knew was that reality was even better than her dreams and she couldn't wait to get down here every morning when the motion sensors triggered the alarm by her bed and the cameras started recording.

They'd originally mounted overhead lights in the adjacent chamber, but the occupant shattered them every single time, even after they covered them with those metal cage thingies. The night vision cameras had fared little better. It wasn't until they installed the thermal imaging that they'd been able to actually tell what it was doing in there, which was where she came in.

The wall that divided the tunnel from the cavern on the other side was composed of a foot of reinforced concrete to either side of a solid steel core and sunken eight feet into the surrounding limestone. The inset window was the sole point of vulnerability, although it would basically take a nuclear detonation to so much as crack the lead-lined glass. The lone egress was hermetically sealed, utilized the kind of door they used for the vault at Fort Knox, and featured a mazelike chute that allowed them to feed the creature on the other side.

Tess leaned across her console and spoke into the microphone.

"Are you hungry?"

Her voice echoed back at her from the speakers inside the cavern. She watched the heat signature of the subject stiffen on the monitor and turn toward the window, through which she could see only darkness. The thermal imaging didn't provide the sharpest images, especially since she'd narrowed the temperature gradient window level so that everything below seventy-eight degrees appeared black and everything above one hundred degrees appeared white. The twenty-two degrees in between were represented by a spectrum from blue and purple at the lower end to pink and red in the mid-range to orange and yellow at the upper limit, which meant that other than the pinkish clouds of radiant heat emanating from the electrical warmers in the ceiling, the entirety of the cavern served as a black backdrop limned with just enough blue to create texture and depth. The creature stood apart from it like a blazing beacon. Its outline was formed of a purplish-pink that brightened from red to orange to the golden auras that defined its face and chest. Its elongated head cocked first one way, then the other, like a predatory bird. As irrational as the thought was, Tess couldn't shake the feeling that it could see her through the monitor.

The creature had been formally classified as Subject Z—represented by the sixth letter of the Greek alphabet, Zeta—as an allusion to the 1965 newspaper report describing the abduction of Betty and Barney Hill by aliens that would later be described as Grays, the stereotypical physical expression of which looked identical to the mutated form of Dr. Dale Rubley. The article printed a drawing by Mrs. Hill, detailing the route the spaceship had used during her abduction, which an amateur astronomer recognized as the Zeta Reticuli star system, leading to the quasi-official designation of the species as Zeta Reticulans.

Tess had heard the being speak on the audio files recorded inside the research station last year, when it had been responsible for the deaths of nearly the entire staff, but it hadn't uttered so much as a single syllable since being caged down here. It was her job to establish communication with it, and the powers that be were running out of patience.

“Would you like to eat?”

Subject Z stared at her through the camera for several seconds before making a sound she could barely hear. She would have to play it back and enhance the track, but she could have sworn it almost sounded like it said, “Yes.”

“Oh, my God,” she said, and clapped her hands over her mouth. She turned to face the armed agent guarding the door to the cage. He wore black fatigues and stood so still that she often forgot he was there. “You heard that, didn’t you?”

His only reply was a slight shrug of his shoulders, upon which he wore the red insignia of Unit 51: an upside-down triangle offset on top of another upside-down triangle, both of which were enclosed inside of a third. At the very center were the Roman numerals LI.

“Well? What are you waiting for?”

The guard—whose name was Carson, although she didn’t know if that was his first name or last—spoke into his transceiver. A horrible squeal erupted from the depths of the earthen tunnel behind her.

She hated this part more than anything in the world.

A silhouette pushed a cart toward them through the unlit corridor. Its wheels squeaked, and the cage on top of it rattled. The squeals became frantic, turning into screams that sounded almost human. The man pushing the cart looked just like all of the others, which she figured was why medieval executioners wore hoods. His name was Les Dutton, and everyone claimed he was the best cook to ever enter the service, but Tess couldn’t even look at him without hearing those awful screams.

He lifted the cage from the cart, hooked it to the slot in the door, and pressed a series of buttons on the wall panel. The cage and the seal in the door simultaneously opened with a hiss of pressurized air.

The pig stood frozen in the cage, its cries echoing off into the silence.

“Go on,” Carson said, and nudged the cage with the toe of his boot.

It scurried forward and Dutton resealed the opening behind it. He set the empty cage onto the cart and pushed it back down the hallway without a word.

The feeding chute utilized a series of baffles to guide the pig through the maze. They closed behind it, one-by-one, until it made the final turn, which caused the inner seal to disengage.

It emerged from the left side of Tess's screen as a vaguely piggish shape of pink and orange. She hadn't so much as heard the creature move or noticed its thermal signature disappear, presumably behind one of the flowstone columns.

The pig squealed and issued an orange stream that quickly faded into a blue puddle around its hooves. It took several tentative steps into the cavern and raised its snout. She could hear it sniffing the air through her console. Its ears pricked and it held perfectly still.

Tess looked away, but not before catching a blur of color from the monitor to her right as the creature emerged from an entirely different hiding spot than she'd expected. She closed her eyes and tried not to hear the pig's screams, which, fortunately, didn't last long. When she opened her eyes again, the cavern walls were decorated with golden arcs that darkened from orange to red as they trickled down the granite.

A voice crackled from Carson's transceiver. He made a curt reply and holstered his communication device.

The savage crunching and tearing sounds from the other side of the wall abruptly ceased and the creature turned toward the window. It dropped the squirming carcass to the ground and slowly approached the glass, its facial features clearly delineated by the sheer quantity of warm blood on its face.

"The director's on his way down," Carson said.

"What does he want?" Tess asked.

"You'll have to ask him yourself."

He'd barely uttered the words when the sound of footsteps materialized from the darkness behind her.

The creature crossed the cavern and pressed its bloody palms against the window, almost like it knew.

"Give us the room," Barnett said before he even entered what Tess liked to think of as her office.

“Yes, sir,” Carson said, and headed back into the dark corridor.

“I know it’s taken longer than any of us thought,” Tess said, “but not five minutes ago I was finally able to get it to speak—”

“I need to talk to it,” Barnett interrupted.

The creature appeared to smile on the thermal monitor. They couldn’t even see its outline through the reinforced glass. The expression was the only thing even remotely human about it. The physical transformation had continued unabated, each passing day distorting more and more of the characteristics of Dr. Dale Rubley and forming something new, something entirely alien.

Tess climbed from her chair and gestured for Barnett to take a seat. He slid behind her console and studied first the monitors and then the window, which offered little more than an uninterrupted view of darkness.

“Jesus,” he said. “You can’t even see it standing less than two feet away.”

The dying pig kicked at the ground with the clacking of hooves, which did little more than push it in a half-circle through its own blood.

“Just push the button there,” Tess said, “and speak into the microphone. I have to warn you, though . . . don’t talk for any length of time or it will be able to isolate the speakers and tear them out. Like everything else.”

“Duly noted,” Barnett said and pressed the button. A clicking sound echoed throughout the inner cavern. “Can you hear me?”

“You have to release the button if you want to hear the microphones inside,” Tess said.

She reached for it, but he swatted her hand away. She’d never seen Barnett like this before. He was ordinarily so collected and almost charming, albeit in a rigid kind of way. Right now he was wound so tightly she could see the vein throbbing in his temple, even in the dim red glare.

“Tell me what else is down here,” he said, and released the button.

The creature looked almost contemplative for a moment before the blood on its face cooled to such a degree that its expression once more faded into a vague mass of colors. For the briefest of moments, she almost thought she’d seen a spark of recognition.

“I need to know what else could have survived down here, frozen inside these infernal tunnels.”

He released the button and Tess heard a sound from inside that could have been heavy breathing or perhaps throaty laughter as the creature retreated from the window and returned to its meal.

“You know, don’t you?”

The creature crouched, gripped the struggling pig in both hands, and buried its face in the poor animal’s neck. A sharp crack and a spurt of gold highlighted its elongated skull. The pig stopped moving.

“Two of my men are dead, and we don’t have the slightest idea what we’re up against.”

Tess opened her mouth to say something, but Barnett silenced her with a glare that made his face appear positively demonic in the red light.

“If we die down here, you die down here, too. You understand that, don’t you? You’ll be trapped in this cage until you starve to death. Or maybe until whatever’s out there finds a way to get in there with you.”

The creature rose from its meal, its features once more glistening with the fresh application of blood, and approached the window. It wiped the blood from its gaunt cheeks and bony chest and smeared it onto the glass.

Tess thought it was trying to paint over the window so they couldn’t see it until a pattern started to form. It traced over the lines until an intricate design took shape.

She glanced at Barnett in time to see comprehension dawn on his face. As quickly as the expression appeared, it was gone.

He stood so fast he nearly knocked over her chair.

“Not a word of this to anyone,” he said. “Do you hear me?”

He hurried down the corridor before she could respond, leaving her alone with the echo of his footsteps, the sound of chewing from inside the cavern, and the knowledge that something so terrifying it could scare even Barnett was lurking in the darkness with her.

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