

An excerpt from
MUTATION

By Michael McBride

PROLOGUE

Six months ago

EVANS

Mosul, Iraq

The skeletal remains of Old Town intermittently appeared from the black smoke churning against the horizon. The ground trembled from the distant airstrikes, and the air crackled with automatic gunfire. U.S. Army Sergeant Luke Carmichael led the procession on foot through the ruins of the once-great city. The roads were filled with the rubble of the collapsed buildings, making them impassible by vehicle. Dr. Cade Evans followed closely behind him in his borrowed desert camouflage fatigues. A crust of dust had already formed on his lips and around his nostrils, and his skin felt like sandpaper. He'd never been to Mosul and couldn't picture how it must have looked before first the Islamic State and then al-Qaeda seized control.

A pall of concrete dust hung over the entire city. Power lines had fallen, their wires snaking lifelessly through streets where the charred husks of abandoned vehicles rusted. The front façades of the few buildings that remained standing offered glimpses into the lives once lived inside them. There were no people on the streets, nor any sign that there ever would be again.

"How much farther?" Dr. Anya Fleming asked from behind him. She'd refused to don a burqa and instead wore her auburn hair tucked up underneath her helmet and fatigues

that were way too large for her slender form. Her eyes stood out from her dirty face like emeralds stomped into the sand.

“It’s just up ahead,” Corporal Brian Lewis said. He brought up the rear so silently that Evans had almost forgotten he was there.

Carmichael moved through the haze like a specter. Evans followed him over a mound of rubble from which rusted lengths of rebar stood. Forty-eight hours ago, he’d seen a single picture of what awaited them ahead, and it had been all he could think about since.

A fighter jet screamed across the skyline a heartbeat before the ground shuddered and rubble rained down all around them. The shadow of a drone passed over him, but it was gone by the time he looked up.

The sergeant guided them through the framework of a building burned to the bare girders and into an alley clogged with debris.

“This used to be a school,” Carmichael said of the demolished structure before them. It now looked more like a parking garage, with bare concrete floors and walls. Only the blackened metal frames of chairs and desks hinted at its former purpose. “There were children inside when they torched it.”

Evans’s boots left tread marks in the carpet of soot and ash. The rusted sprinkler pipes were still bolted to the ceiling, for all the good they’d done. Charcoaled wall studs framed corridors that funneled them deeper into the dark structure. Their military escorts switched on the LED lights mounted to the barrels of their M4 carbines and swept them through the vacant building. Carmichael offered Evans his mini Maglite and waited for him to turn it on before advancing.

The foundation was cracked in some places and entirely absent in others. They ducked in and out of what had once been classrooms to avoid pits that had to be a good fifteen feet deep. The sergeant stopped at the fractured edge of one maybe six feet across and shined his light down upon a ladder descending into the earth.

“You’re on your own from here,” Lewis said. “They don’t pay me enough to go back down there.”

“We’ll stand guard up here,” Carmichael said. “If either of us so much as senses anyone coming, we’re out of here. All of us. You hear me?”

Evans stared at him for several seconds before nodding and starting down the ladder. Anya followed. The echoes of their footfalls on the aluminum rungs preceded them into the depths. The cool air was a welcome change and chilled the layer of sweat under his fatigues. The dirt floor at the bottom was hard and smelled of a bygone age.

He shined his light up the ladder until Anya reached the bottom and stepped down. There was an arched orifice behind him, near the ground. Not the traditional ornate Islamic pointed arch, but rather one chiseled from the bedrock itself. He crouched and peered inside. When he looked back at Anya, he couldn't hide his excitement.

"That good?" she asked.

"You have no idea."

Evans rolled onto his stomach and slid his legs through the opening. He pushed himself backward until he could duck his head under the arch before letting go and dropping into the ancient tomb.

There were only so many places in the arid Middle East suitable for habitation. As such, countless civilizations had risen from and fallen on the very same land, with new societies growing from the carcasses of their predecessors. Discoveries like this weren't uncommon, especially along the Tigris River and in what was known as the Cradle of Civilization, although finding intact human remains was an anomaly of the highest order. Entire peoples had come and gone without leaving any posthumous evidence, at least not that the eternal desert was willing to give up.

This part of Northern Iraq had been ruled through the millennia by the Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. While this necropolis could have been used by any one or even all of them, the primitive stone arch likely dated to ancient Sumer and a culture that thrived thousands of years ago. The petroglyphs carved into the walls appeared to reflect the Assyrian style, which reminded Evans of primitive Egyptian hieroglyphics, although it was hard to tell for sure through the eons' worth of dust that had accumulated on them. And upon the bones scattered across the floor amid the fallen boulders that had once sealed the entrance of the necropolis.

A single opening branched from the rear of the antechamber. The passageway was ten feet long and led them into the room where the picture had been taken. There were

skeletons in varying stages of articulation all around them. Sprawled across the ground. Slouched against walls adorned with elaborate carvings. All plastered with dust and ravaged by age, despite which he could clearly see the shapes of their elongated craniums and deformed facial architecture.

“Classic abandonment context,” Anya said. “They were sealed in here and left to decompose where they fell.”

She drew her shirt over her mouth and nose, crouched, and brushed the dust from the most complete set of remains she could find.

A narrow opening led to another chamber. Evans took in everything around him as he walked toward it. There were no stars carved into the ceiling as he’d seen at every other similar burial site. No gouges in the stone where the creatures had attempted to claw their way out. It was almost as though they’d acquiesced to their ultimate fate without raging against it, which was totally out of character for this alien species.

There was another body wedged in the passageway. He estimated that brought the total so far to nine, although there was no way of telling how many of them were primary and how many were drones. He could only imagine the horror the people who’d lived here must have felt with so many of these monsters out there at once. They must have existed in a constant state of terror.

The adjoining chamber was considerably smaller and strung with cobwebs as thick as ropes, which nearly concealed the stone plinth in the center. And the hominin remains resting upon it.

Evans parted the webs, which made crackling sounds as they fell away. For there to have been spiders in here, there had to have been a means by which they entered. Some sort of crevice or hole that reached the surface. And any orifice, no matter how small, meant an influx of fresh air, and yet the creatures had been unable to exploit it to escape. There was obviously something he was missing.

“Cade?”

Anya’s voice echoed from the chamber behind him. He couldn’t find the words to respond as he stared down at the body on the plinth.

The dead man had to be close to seven feet tall. His skin was so desiccated and shrunken to his underlying skeleton that Evans could see all of the places where his bones had been broken. The tibias and femurs. The radiuses and humeri. The pelvic girdle and ribs. Whoever he was, he'd been beaten so savagely that he wouldn't have been able to so much as crawl, and yet still he was bound by frayed ropes that had eroded through his parchment-like skin.

"There's something wrong here," Anya said.

Evans swept the cobwebs away from the man's face and revealed an eagle mask, painstakingly constructed with real feathers and the hooked beak of a giant raptor.

Anya tugged on the back of his jacket.

"We have to get out of here right now."

He turned to face her and saw the fear in her eyes.

"What's wrong?"

She took him by the hand and pulled him back through the crevice and into the outer chamber.

"The bodies," she said. "Look at the way they're contorted. At the way their spines are bent backward."

Evans glanced at them as they hurried past. She was right. They were all twisted, with their knees bent and their upper extremities curled to their chests.

She hit the ladder ahead of him and scampered toward the surface.

"We need to seal the entrance!" she shouted.

Carmichael shined his light down on her.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hurry!"

Anya crawled from the hole and ran toward where an intact section of scorched paneling remained attached to the studs. She jerked on it until the nails pried loose and jumped back. It crashed to the floor at her feet.

Evans emerged from the hole and looked at the two soldiers, who could only shrug in response.

"Talk to me, Anya," he said. "What's going on?"

“Don’t you see?” She positively trembled as she dragged the heavy sheet of wood across the room. “That posture is a result of contractures. I should have recognized it from the start. Every muscle in their bodies constricted. At once. *Before* they died.”

“Okay. I’ll bite. So what causes something like that to happen?”

He helped her slide the makeshift barricade over the pit. They dropped it with a booming sound that reverberated beneath their feet. She was so pale when she finally met his stare that the freckles on her nose and cheekbones stood out like constellations, even through the dirt.

“Disease.”

BARNETT

Pali-Aike National Park, Magallanes Region, Chile

The landscape was like that of an entirely different planet. Rugged lava fields gave way to sparse grasslands lorded over by towers of metamorphic rock. Green and orange lichen grew from jagged formations reminiscent of coral reefs. It had to be one of the most desolate regions on the planet, and yet still their prey eluded them.

Cameron Barnett, Director of Unit 51, crunched over the sharp, uneven ground. There were no trees or manmade structures, nothing at all to obscure his view of the horizon in any direction. If the creature was out there, he would have been able to see it.

He bellowed in frustration and listened to his voice echo across the plains.

There were only so many places it could have gone. The airplane upon which it had hitched a ride from McMurdo Station in Antarctica had crashed near Rio Grande, Argentina, seventy miles to the south of their current location. He and his team had arrived within fourteen hours of the incident, the aftermath of which they’d watched on a live news broadcast. The pilot and co-pilot had been killed before the Basler BT-67 hit the ground. They’d found the cockpit spattered with blood and the seatbelts severed by the same implements that had been used on the men themselves, whose bodies had been thrown through the shattered windshield. There had only been two passengers, researchers returning to the States, and it was anyone’s guess as to whether or not they’d

still been alive when the rows of seats slammed forward upon impact and compacted against the rear wall of the cockpit.

Barnett didn't need to wait around for the National Transportation Safety Board's investigation. He already knew what had happened. He'd seen the damage to the door separating the cabin from the cargo hold. The passengers had never known it was back there and had surely been taken by surprise when the door suddenly opened and death came for them.

The few surviving footprints in the surrounding forest had led to the northwest before being lost to the bare stone and windswept snow. Remote tracking by satellite and drone had turned up nothing. It was as though the subject codenamed Zeta—after the sixth letter of the Greek alphabet and in reference to the alien species unofficially classified as Zeta Reticulans, but more commonly known as Grays—had simply vanished. There was only snow and ice to the south. To the east, the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. And to the west, little more than a maze of frozen islands. North was the only direction the creature realistically could have gone as it led to the South American mainland, where if it could reach the deep Andes or the dense Amazon rainforest, it could potentially hide from them forever.

They couldn't let it get that far.

"Should be just over the next rise," Special Agent Rand Morgan said from behind him.

Barnett looked toward where a craggy formation serrated the skyline and nodded.

His men hung back from him. Not that he blamed them. He was in a vile mood and took it out on everyone within range. Or perhaps they simply wanted to have someone physically between them and Subject Z if they stumbled upon it.

Their black fatigues blended into the volcanic landscape, save for the red insignias on their shoulders, which featured the superimposed inverted triangles of Unit 51, the clandestine organization responsible for the investigation of arcane and inexplicable discoveries and events that potentially threatened national security. The unit was co-financed by the estate of the late Hollis Richards—a venture capitalist who'd become obsessed with the alien phenomena that had ultimately cost him his life—and the Department of Defense. It was personally overseen by Grady Clayborn, the Secretary of

Defense, who answered only to the President of the United States, a man who was growing increasingly distraught at their inability to find the creature responsible for slaughtering more than fifty men and women in Antarctica.

Their deaths weighed heavily upon Barnett's conscience. He wasn't sleeping and looked as though he'd aged a decade in the last week alone. Silver had crept into his dark hair at the temples and flecked his stubble. The lines on his forehead and around his ice-blue eyes were even more pronounced. There was a part of him that resented being burdened with this kind of responsibility, but there was no one else capable of bearing it. He hesitated to even consider the implications of failure. There were some things that the world at large could never know about and it fell upon him to make sure they were able to sleep at night without ever learning of the horrors that lurked in the darkness.

Golden tufts of grass grew from soil as hard as stone. The blades were crisp and frosted and crackled underfoot. They formed a pattern like stepping stones clear up to the point where the black escarpment jutted from the hillside.

Morgan caught up with him as they climbed over the sharp formation, from the top of which they could see nearly to the end of the world in every direction. There was no movement, no sign of life, least of all from the guanacos lying downhill in the weeds. The long fur of the orange and white camelids, which reminded him of a cross between a llama and an antelope, ruffled on the frigid breeze.

Barnett's team back at The Hangar, Unit 51's base of operations in Hampton, Virginia, had detected the dead animals by satellite and forwarded the coordinates to them in the field. He'd known the correlation between the dead animals and Subject Z had been a stretch, but they'd simply had no other leads.

They picked their way down the steep slope, through prickly groundcover that left burs in their laces. The two special agents bringing up the rear—Troy Brinkley and Saul Sheppard—drew their automatic rifles and pulled the charging handles. Of course, had Subject Z still been around, they would have already been in the same position as the guanacos, whose long necks had been opened with such savagery that it was a miracle their heads were still attached. They'd been cut from pubis to sternum and their abdominal contents disgorged onto the flattened weeds. Their carcasses were frozen to

the ground, and a layer of frost had already formed on their distended skin. The dirt had soaked up as much blood as it could hold and cradled dark puddles layered with ice. Their eyes were sunken and their noses gray and dry. At a guess, they'd been dead for somewhere between two and three days, which meant that Barnett and his men were rapidly losing ground.

"I've got something over here," Morgan said.

He knelt beside a carcass downhill from the others.

Barnett crouched beside him and followed his stare to the ground, where the mud had frozen and preserved a track he would have recognized anywhere. It was just the ball of a foot and the teardrop-shaped impressions of clawed toes, almost like the track of a bear, only rather than forming an arch, the digits tapered from medial to lateral. There was no mistaking Subject Z's footprint.

"There's another one over here," Sheppard said.

Barnett hurried to where the agent was already taking pictures of the track. It was a partial at best, but clear enough that he could see that it belonged to someone other than the creature, someone startlingly human.

"Zeta's not alone," Barnett said.

He stood and turned in a circle, hoping to see any indication as to where their quarry might have gone. The idea that someone was traveling with Subject Z through this wasteland made him uneasy, but not nearly as much as the prospect that the print belonged to someone who'd been dead for thousands of years.

JADE

U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command Headquarters

Fort Detrick, Maryland

"Let's start with a T1 sagittal," Dr. Jade Liang said. "I want a good look at what we're dealing with here."

From where she sat at the control console in the MRI suite, she could see the technologist's monitors to her left and the circular gantry housing the 3.0-Tesla magnet

straight ahead through the soundproof window. The brain of Subject A—or Alpha, the codename given to the drone that had once been Hollis Richards—had been extracted and stabilized using a phosphate-buffered formalin fixating agent, chemopreserved with osmium tetroxide and epoxy resin monomers, and housed in a clear plastic casing shaped like the head inside of which it once resided. The MRI technologists had attached a series of electrodes designed to stimulate different areas of the midbrain, cerebellum, and cerebrum to determine the functionality of the various sections, assuming they remained viable this long after death.

U.S. Army Radiology Specialist Victor Dupuis used the scout images of the brain in three planes to program the system to virtually slice it, like a loaf of bread, from left to right in five-millimeter cuts. The mere fact that he was in the room with her meant that his security clearance was high enough that she could count on him not to tell anyone about what he saw. Jade had to wonder what all he'd dealt with through the course of his work that he had earned the trust of an agency that didn't trust anyone. He hadn't batted an eye when she arrived with the clear plastic head on ice. Neither had his partner, Jill Ervin, who positioned the phantom head in the domed electromagnetic coil and waited inside the room by the transcranial direct current stimulator she would use to deliver the electric shocks.

The MRI machine issued a throbbing techno beat as the changing magnetic fields caused the brain tissues to release characteristic signals that were then captured and translated into gray-scale images. In this case, cross-sections of the elongated brain in profile. It looked like a football made of convoluted folds of putty, inside of which were structures completely different from those found in a normal human brain.

The brain stem, which regulated autonomic functions like heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing, was somewhat similar in appearance. The baseball-like cerebellum, responsible for motor functions and coordination, was wider and longer and cradled the brain almost like spread wings. The cerebrum had grown to fit the mutated skull, although it retained the same relative amounts of white and gray matter. She could tell right away that the pituitary gland and hypothalamus were easily twice their normal

size, which made the corpus callosum look less like an inverted Nike swoosh and more like a tilted horseshoe.

“Look at the size of those temporal lobes,” Dupuis said.

“Can you get me some T2 axials through them?” Jade asked.

“I can do anything you want.”

He winked at her and set to work.

The increased dimensions of the pituitary gland and hypothalamus didn't surprise her. They produced the growth hormones that were responsible for the obvious deformations she'd noticed upon physical evaluation and subsequent autopsy. While the lab seemed to be taking its sweet time with the results of the blood and tissue assays, she was confident they'd show elevated levels of human growth hormone, HGH, and the insulin-like growth factor produced in the liver, IGF-1, which was capable of stimulating proliferation in a wide variety of tissues, most notably the osteoblasts and chondrocytes responsible for bone development.

Even with the lab results, she feared they wouldn't be able to determine the mechanism by which the skull elongated, the orbital sockets widened, and the jaws reformed to accommodate the shark-like configuration of sharp teeth. These weren't random mutations, but rather specialized physical adaptations that followed blueprints coded into the RNA of the microscopic alien organism, which, like a retrovirus, replicated inside of an infected species and inserted its genetic code into the host's DNA.

“Check out the amygdala,” Dupuis said. “I've never seen anything like it.”

“That would definitely explain the aggression,” Jade said. “And the increased size of the hippocampus and temporal lobes supports our theory about its long-term memory storage, if not its genetic memory.”

“You mean like the way a monarch butterfly knows the exact route to take during its migration without ever having flown it before?”

“Essentially.”

“In a human?”

“Trust me,” Jade said. “There's nothing human about this thing.”

Of course, that was a lie. She'd been with Subject A when it died in the field. In its final moments, it had spoken in the voice of Hollis Richards, who had warned her that it was up to her to stop the end of the world. There was a part of her that wanted to believe that conversation had never happened, that her mind and ears had conspired against her, and not just because the prospect of Hollis being trapped inside his own mind while the organisms used his body to commit horrible atrocities made her sick to her stomach. The idea of somehow being responsible for the fate of the entire world terrified her, especially considering she didn't have the slightest idea what she was supposed to do or where to begin.

"Can we move on to the functional imaging?" she asked.

"Give me a second."

Functional MRI, or fMRI, was a relatively new neuroimaging technique used to measure brain activity in response to various forms of stimuli, thus showing which parts of the brain were responsible for each function, like the temporal lobes and their increased activity in response to trying to recall childhood memories or the occipital lobe and its ability to distinguish visual phenomena. While a clinically dead brain wouldn't demonstrate actual functioning, electrically stimulating the corresponding parts of the brain allowed them to visualize the neural pathways that were already there. She needed to figure out how the parasitic organisms interacted with the host brain if they were going to find a way to prevent them from doing so.

"That's odd," Dupuis said.

Jade leaned closer to his monitor. He tapped the sagittal image, near where a blob of color had formed. It was gold in the center and faded to a deep red near the edges, and covered the thalamus, hippocampus, and vestibular nuclei.

"Which electrode did you stimulate?" Jade asked.

"That's just it. We didn't stimulate any of them."

"What are you saying?"

"That area of the brain is responding to the static magnetic field itself."

Dr. Kelly Nolan, Jade's colleague who had solved the mystery of how Subject A had been able to travel from Antarctica to Mexico, believed it had done so using some sort of

internal sensors that allowed it to detect the elevated magnetic fields aligned along the borders of tectonic plates. Not only did this prove her hypothesis, it potentially gave them the means by which to track Subject Z, assuming Barnett and his team hadn't already found it.

"Do you want to try to stimulate that area first?" he asked.

"Seems like a good place to start."

Dupuis brought up the visual representations of the electrodes surrounding the ghost image of the elongated brain on the monitor and programmed the system to acquire the images. He leaned forward, pressed the button to activate the speaker inside the exam room, and spoke into the microphone.

"Ready to get this show on the road?"

Jill turned toward the window and gave him the thumbs up. She wore powder-blue surgical scrubs and her blond hair in a ponytail.

"Target electrodes nine and eighteen," he said. "Let's start at one-point-five milliamps and seventy megahertz."

She set the system as requested and looked back at him expectantly.

"On my mark," Dupuis said.

He started the scan on his console and the machine on the other side of the wall started to thump. He held up three fingers so she could see them. Two. One.

Jill triggered the electrical stimulation and the brain on the monitor lit up. The golden aura raced outward from the central focus and struck like lightning bolts throughout the brain.

"What's happening?" Jade asked.

"I don't know."

A flash of light from inside the MRI tube. Jill shielded her eyes.

Dupuis attempted to terminate the scan.

"Make it stop!" Jade shouted.

"I'm trying!"

Arcs of electricity snapped and crackled from the plastic head inside the gantry. Jill rushed to the control unit and attempted to manually drive the table out of the magnet.

The entire head glowed bluish-purple before suddenly shattering. Plastic shards and brain matter struck the window right in front of Jade, who flinched and pushed her chair backward from the console.

The thumping slowed, and the image on the monitor faded from gold to deep red to gray.

“What in the name of God was that?” Jade asked.

“Was there metal inside there?”

“No.”

“There had to be.”

“I’m telling you—”

“Well, something caused an electrical arc.”

Jill stood with her back to them, her hands pressed to her face. Dark fluid spattered to the ground at her feet, but it wasn’t until she turned around and Jade saw her face that she understood that it was blood pouring through Jill’s fingers. The plastic shards had shredded her skin, exposing bone and embedding themselves in the soft tissue. She screamed and fell to her knees.

“Oh, my God,” Jade said. She lunged to her feet, ran out of the control room, and into the hallway. The door to the exam room was closed and magnetically sealed. She jerked on the handle to no avail. “Open the door!”

An alarm klaxon blared and emergency lights flashed. Dupuis remotely drove the table out of the gantry.

“I can’t!” he shouted. “It automatically locks if the sensors detect a biological contaminant!”

Jade ran back into the control room and watched helplessly through the window.

Jill tried to push herself up from the floor, but only succeeded in smearing bloody palm prints on the white tile.

There was a drumroll of footsteps from the hallway as the emergency response team raced toward them.

Jade pressed the button and leaned over the microphone.

“Try to remain calm.” Her voice echoed from inside the exam room. “Help is on the way.”

Jill looked up, her wide eyes like beacons set into the mask of blood. She struggled to her feet, staggered to the window, and leaned against it. Her molars were visible through a hole in her cheek. Her eyes sought Jade’s and held them.

It wasn’t fear Jade saw inside them, but rather something that raised the goosebumps on the backs of her arms.

An almost placid smile formed on Jill’s face. Jade couldn’t hear her when she spoke, but she was able to read the words on her lips.

Hello again . . . Dr. Liang.

“No . . .” Jade whispered. She stumbled backward and nearly toppled over her chair. “Please . . .”

The footsteps converged outside of the exam room. She heard barked commands. Dupuis rushed to join the rescue efforts.

Jill cocked her head first one way, and then the other, like a vulture. Jade could almost hear the deep, resonant voice of Subject Z inside her head when the woman spoke.

We are . . . free . . . thanks to you. Jill’s pupils widened until they nearly eclipsed the irises. The vessels in her sclera ruptured and flooded the whites. *You will . . . live . . . this day.*

A pair of men in biohazard suits hurried past the doorway. Pressurized air hissed as they inflated the containment chamber outside the exam room.

Jill planted both palms against the glass, pressed her bloody forehead between them, and smiled.

But you will . . . die . . . with the rest . . . of your species.

She abruptly turned away from the window and walked across the room to where the shattered casing containing what little remained of Subject A’s brain rested on the patient table. Shards protruded from the base of the broken cranium.

“Don’t . . .” Jade whispered.

Jill looked back at her, smiled, and slammed her chest down onto the jagged plastic.

Jade turned away as the woman's blood overflowed the table and flooded onto the floor.

BOOK I

Modern Day

1

ROCHE

The Hangar, Unit 51 Base of Operations

Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Hampton, Virginia

The events of the last year had changed Martin Roche, or maybe they'd simply served to return him to the path he'd been meant to travel. Either way, he didn't like it. He'd left the intelligence community and the national security apparatus because he'd lost faith in what he was doing and grown resentful of being made to spy on his own people, and yet here he was now, standing before a wall of monitors upon which played satellite, drone, and surveillance footage from all around the world.

He'd been trained to see the patterns that no one else could see and detect threats hidden in the chaos by the elite cryptanalysis unit of the U.S. Marines, from whose pocket he'd been picked by the NSA, who'd honed those skills to a razor's edge. Had he believed there was anyone better equipped to handle this job, he would have gladly declined Barnett's offer and walked away with a clear conscience. He'd seen glimpses of the fate that awaited them all if Unit 51 failed to prevent it, though, and couldn't abandon those he loved to it, even if it meant throwing away the life he had made for himself in England, the countless hours of research he'd invested into deciphering the mysterious crop circles, and the burgeoning relationship with the woman who occupied his every waking thought.

Roche cleared his mind. He couldn't afford to be distracted or he might miss something crucial.

"Transfer monitor six to the main screen," he said.

Three digital information specialists were seated at the terminals in the front of the room. Each of them was responsible for acquiring and screening the incoming footage from various locations around the globe. In a perfect world, there would have been a single technologist assigned to each source, but after losing nearly twenty percent of their total ranks to the feathered serpents beneath the Antarctic ice cap, their numbers dwindled by the day. They were running on a skeleton crew and until they secured anything resembling an actual victory, they weren't going to be able to lure quality applicants away from any of the other branches. Assuming they even still had funding by then. As it was, Clayborn claimed it was becoming increasingly difficult to appropriate any kind of budget for his discretionary projects at the DOD, which was his not-so-subtle way of saying that either they showed some positive results or they were on their own.

Roche couldn't allow that to happen. Not with Subject Z—and Lord only knew what else—out there on the loose.

An aerial image appeared on the central monitor. A jagged range of sharp, icy peaks rose from a seamless field of white. It was all that remained of the ice cap above the subterranean lake and Forward Operating Base Atlantis, from which only a handful of them had managed to escape with their lives. With the feathered serpents able to breed unchecked and with nothing to stop them from reaching the surface, a decision had been made to drop a bunker buster with a thermobaric warhead straight down the elevator shaft to collapse the entire ice dome. In theory, the detonation had sucked all of the air out of the caverns and used it to generate a high-temperature explosion that incinerated everything inside before dropping two vertical miles of ice onto the ashes, but if he had learned one thing during the past year, it was that nature always found a way to persevere.

"Give me a thermal overlay," Roche said.

The specialist toggled some keys and the image became pixilated. There were no heat signatures whatsoever.

“It’s been six months,” the specialist said. Lucas O’Reilly was his name. Or maybe just Reilly. That Roche didn’t know the man’s name spoke volumes about the situation and his state of mind. “If anything survived the blast, we’d have found it by now.”

“We’re dealing with an extant species of dinosaur capable of surviving for tens of thousands of years in a state of cryobiosis. You’ll have to indulge my paranoia.”

“Why don’t you get out of here for a while?” a voice said from behind him.

Roche turned to find Special Agent Marc Maddox standing behind him with his hands clasped behind his back. He had brilliant blue eyes, wore his blond hair buzzed, and his broad jaw cleanly shaved. He wore the scars along the sides of his nose and from the corners of his mouth to his ears with pride. He’d earned them in Afghanistan, undoubtedly in a manner he’d rather not recount. The plastic surgeons had done such a miraculous job that what could have been a disfiguring injury merely added character to his face. With Barnett and Morgan in the field, he was in charge of operations, while Roche served as team lead for the scientific branch. They shared responsibility for tracking Subject Z and its traveling companion—officially classified as Unknown Subject, or UNSUB X—who continued to elude their pursuit.

“I was just about to check the drone footage from Colombia,” Roche said.

“Do you really think it’s possible that Subject Zeta and UNSUB X made it that far north?”

“We can’t afford to assume they didn’t.”

“You and I both know that they could easily hide in the Amazon rainforest and we’d never find so much as a trace of them.”

“If hiding is their goal,” Roche said.

“What else could they possibly want? The moment they stick their heads out of that jungle we’ll be right there to rain fire down upon them.”

“They wouldn’t have risked leaving Antarctica if they didn’t have a destination. All signs support a steady northward advance.”

“We’ve beaten this horse to death,” Maddox said. “Have we heard from our men on the ground?”

“Both teams checked in right on schedule.”

“And with the same reports, I’m sure.”

“The northern unit will reach the coordinates first,” Roche said. “Special Agent Staley estimated sometime around sunrise. Barnett said his team acquired a boat and shouldn’t be more than four or five hours behind.”

“You know as well as I do what they’ll find when they get there.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Unfortunately, at this point, that’s what it’s going to take.”

“We will find them,” Roche said.

“But not if we spread ourselves too thin. You should get some sleep. You look like you just crawled out of your own grave.”

“That was the style I was aiming for.”

“Go on, Martin. You’re no good to anyone like this. We need you on top of your game if we’re going to find them.”

“It’s a matter of *when*, not if.”

Roche glanced back at the wall of monitors, nodded to himself, and clapped Maddox on the shoulder on his way out. The satellites would still be there when he returned and there would be even more footage to evaluate. They would find Subject Z, whether tomorrow or ten years from now, and he would personally make sure that when they did, they obliterated it, right down to the molecular level.

He caught his reflection from the mirrored glass of The Arcade, as the drone room was known, and saw what Maddox meant. His hair was shaggy, his face unshaved, and his clothes were too loose. He’d let himself go and still hadn’t accomplished a blasted thing, save for driving away the only person who truly mattered to him, but he couldn’t bring himself to take a step back and let someone else do the job. He simply couldn’t afford to trust anyone. As recent events in Mexico had clearly demonstrated, a shadow organization they’d taken to calling Enigma, because of how little they knew about it, seemed to always be a step ahead of them, which could mean only one thing . . .

It had somehow managed to infiltrate Unit 51.

The office Dr. Kelly Nolan shared with Dr. Tess Clarke was near the end of the hallway. He stopped outside the open door and looked inside. Kelly had exchanged the

red and green streaks in her hair for a completely new color, which appeared silver in some light and purple in others. Barnett had arranged for her to finish her doctorate at Oregon State via a remote-learning platform. After developing a system that predicted seismic activity and modifying the design from the ancient machine they'd discovered under the onion field in Wiltshire to produce a limitless amount of energy from flowing water, it hadn't taken a whole lot of convincing. She'd only just returned from defending her doctoral thesis and visiting her mother, who had begun demonstrating symptoms of Parkinson's disease. She'd asked Roche to go with her, but he hadn't even been able to do that for her.

She obviously hadn't arrived very long ago, as she was still wearing her jacket and hadn't even opened the bag of croissants on her desk, and yet she was already working at the digital touchscreen monitor mounted to the wall behind her desk. On the screen was a program of her own design that featured all of the tectonic plates with various overlays, from vague continental maps to precise images from Google Earth, which allowed her to evaluate seismic and volcanic activity, as well as the fluctuating magnetic fields they generated, in real-time.

After the MRI revealed that Subject A had accelerated growth to the same parts of its brain that a homing pigeon used for magnetoreception, she'd set about isolating every single variation in magnetic field strength from the southern tip of Argentina all the way north to the Arctic Circle in hopes of determining every route Subject Z could take and every conceivable destination along the way. The problem was that there were simply too many possibilities. If the creature was as sensitive to subtle magnetic variances as a homing pigeon, it could utilize fields as small as fifty microteslas, which wasn't a whole lot stronger than the field generated by standard overhead power lines.

Her left hand fretted at her side. It was an unconscious tic that made her look like she was playing an air guitar. She was incredibly self-conscious about it, yet most of the time didn't even realize she was doing it. Roche wanted to go in there and take her hand in his, to reassure her that everything was going to be all right, but he was no longer sure that their relationship was such that he could. Nor did he believe that everything was going to be all right ever again.

She paused what she was doing and cocked her head.

Roche ducked out of the doorway before she caught him looking and headed toward the end of the corridor, where he'd taken to sleeping in the conference room outside of Barnett's office while the director was in the field. Roche couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the world above the underground bunker, which had been built as an emergency relocation center for the National Military Establishment—the precursor agency to the Department of Defense—in case of a nuclear attack, let alone the inside of the apartment he'd rented. He wasn't even sure if his key would still work in the lock. He'd sacrificed everything for the greater good and what did he have to show for it?

“Martin?”

Roche turned at the sound of Kelly's voice. She stood outside her office with an expression of concern he could read from twenty feet away. He offered a half-smile and a wave, ducked into the conference room, and curled up on the couch.

Several seconds passed before he heard her footsteps retreat into her office and the door close behind her.

2

STALEY

Reserva Extrativista do Rio Jutai

State of Amazonas

Brazil

They were closing the net; he could feel it.

Special Agent Shane Staley and his team slogged through the flooded jungle, negotiating the snaking roots of the mangroves, keeping to the cover of the rubber trees, and pushing through curtains of strangler figs. The soft mud sucked at his feet and released them with the vile stench of flatus. The shrieking of parrots and chattering of monkeys masked the sounds of their advance, at least until the racket suddenly ceased.

He held up his fist to halt his men, who were concealed so well that he could barely discern their silhouettes from the shadows and the whites of their eyes from their camouflage face paint. He stared up into the canopy. Everything was silent and still. No breeze ruffled the leaves and no birds jostled the branches. Even the sun, it seemed, was barely able to penetrate the upper reaches with more than the most ambitious columns of light. Only the mosquitoes whined around his head, their efforts intensified and frenzied as though somehow sensing their window of opportunity was closing.

Something brushed past his calf beneath the brown water. He turned around in time to see the furry body of a dead simian breach the surface before submerging once more and continuing its migration on the weak current.

Staley felt the weight of his men's stares upon him. They sensed it, too. The rainforest didn't fall silent without a good reason. It took something truly ferocious to quiet an environment accustomed to going about its business while jaguars hunted from the trees, crocodiles lurked in the shallows, and venomous snakes slithered invisibly through the detritus. He feared that they'd finally found exactly what they'd been dispatched to find, only suddenly he wasn't entirely sure that was a good thing. After all, he'd seen what their quarry was capable of doing.

He slowed his breathing and lowered his fist. No matter how vicious Subject Z might be, a bullet through the brainpan would put it down like any other animal, for that was how he had chosen to think of it. Calling it what it truly was only served to grant it a psychological advantage. When he had the animal in his sights, he would not hesitate. It was time to take this monster off the board, once and for all.

He seated the butt of his SCAR 17 assault rifle against his shoulder and started slowly toward the Rio Solimões. His men followed his lead, as he knew they would, with only the slightest hesitation.

The upper section of the Amazon River announced its presence with a thrum he could feel through the earth.

The brain trust back at The Hangar had discovered a method, however unscientific, of tracking their prey by satellite. While the satellites couldn't technically see the creature, or even the faintest hint of its thermal signature, through the impenetrable

canopy, they could detect concentrations of carrion birds in the upper reaches and wheeling above the treetops. They were also able to extrapolate a line connecting documented signs of its passage with real-time imagery to plot the theoretical course of the creature's northward migration.

Staley and his team, who'd barely been given time to exchange names, let alone train together, had been airlifted to a point nearly twenty miles north of their current position with instructions to follow the winding course of the Amazon until they encountered Barnett's team. Or the creature. Whichever came first.

The rumble of the mighty river intensified from a subtle physical sensation to an audible one. The current against his legs grew stronger by the second, forcing him to work his way toward shallower water and the spotted stretches of dry ground from which dense thickets of ceibas grew. He crawled into the weeds and caught his first glimpse of the distant river—

A shrill scream erupted from somewhere ahead of him.

His men sought cover in his peripheral vision. The barrels of their rifles carved through the shadows as they attempted to get a bead on the source of the noise, which had sounded almost human—

Another cry echoed through the rainforest, pitiful and resigned.

Staley removed his global comlink from his backpack, but as expected, there was no signal. The satellite was generally only in range for a handful of hours every day, and even then they were often forced to find an unobstructed view of the sky.

They were on their own.

He caught the attention of Special Agent Todd Simmons and signaled for him to circle around to the right. A heartbeat later, the former marine was gone, leaving little more than shivering leaves in his wake. SA Ed Darling recognized what Staley planned to do and was on the move the moment their eyes locked through the underbrush. A glance confirmed that SA Don Koish was already falling back into containment position behind him. They would drive their prey ahead of them and flush it out into the open on the riverbank, closing in from three sides as they approached, forcing it to either stand its

ground or attempt to get past them. Koish would serve as the last line of defense. If it somehow eluded the three of them, it was up to him to put it down.

Staley moved stealthily through the maze of buttress roots and vines, never once taking his eyes from the jungle in front of him, despite the damp palm leaves and fern fronds that grazed his face.

It was too quiet. Even his soft breathing and the faint slurping sounds of his carefully placed footsteps in the mud threatened to betray him.

He scanned the canopy for any sign of movement, but the jungle might as well have been dead. Save for the infernal mosquitoes. He focused on anything other than the sensation of the wretched insects crawling on his skin and the instinctive desire to slap them.

Crack.

Staley froze.

The sound had come from maybe twenty feet ahead of him, somewhere on the other side of a stand of rubber trees, between the trunks of which he watched the brown river racing past.

He lowered himself to all fours and crawled as close as he dared before flattening his body against the ground to minimize his profile. Although he couldn't see them, the subtle crunching of dead leaves and twigs announced the arrival of Darling and Simmons to either side of him.

Staley used his elbows to drag himself through the mud and studied the bank of the river down the sightline of his bullpup rifle. He saw some sort of animal. Four of them. Golden-brown fur, positively crawling with flies. Capybaras. Judging by the horrific smell and the bones protruding from beneath their pelts, they were already in advanced stages of decomposition, a state rarely seen in an environment like this with the preponderance of predators and scavengers, which never let a single morsel go to waste.

He suddenly recognized the implications.

The creature had used the carrion birds to lure them here.

Another cracking sound, barely audible over the rumble of the river.

It was a trap.

A shadow passed through the gaps between the leaves.

Staley swallowed hard. Concentrated on regulating his breathing. He was only going to get one shot at this. And if he missed . . .

He suppressed the thought and squirmed closer in maddeningly small increments. A gentle breeze ruffled the branches and he caught a glimpse of movement. A dark shape. Little more than a shifting of the shadows. It passed through a pinprick column of light, revealing a hint of pale gray skin. And then it was gone.

Crack.

Another few feet and he could clearly see the muddy bank, bristling with wild grasses and ferns. The branches of the trees on both sides of the river grew so densely over the water that they shunted the sky.

Crack.

Staley looked to his right, through the proliferation of leaves and vines, and saw it clearly for the first time. The creature crouched at the edge of the forest with its hunched back to him, balanced on its toes, its elongated skull seemingly too large for its spindly form. It leaned forward and braced itself on its slender, sinewy arms. If ever there had been anything remotely human about it, it was long gone.

The creature stiffened. Raised its conical head. Cocked it first one way, then the other. It knew they were there.

Staley sighted down the base of its skull. A triple-burst from this distance and its cranium would simply vanish in a red cloud.

The creature rounded on him, revealing a face out of his nightmares. Its eyes were bulbous and round, a shade of black so dark they appeared fathomless, and stood apart from mutated features glistening with blood. Broad cheekbones tapered to a narrow chin. Its mouth formed a hideous expression reminiscent of a smile, only the teeth resembled needles and were arranged in uneven rows.

Spread out upon the bloodied leaves and grass below it were the carcasses of dozens of dead monkeys and vultures, their necks broken at obscene angles, their twitching appendages clawing and scratching uselessly at the ground. A black howler monkey with its mane torn away from a hideous gash on its throat looked up into the trees, its lips

writhing as though trying to produce vocalizations that wouldn't come. It turned toward Staley and its spine realigned with a sickening *crack*. A rush of blood washed the whitish film from its eyes. It opened its mouth and issued an awful scream.

Subject Z spoke in a deep, resonant voice that seemed to echo from all around it at once.

"Have you come . . . to die?"

Staley shouted and pulled the trigger.

The creature moved in a blur and vanished into the foliage. Bullets pounded the bodies of the animals he was certain were dead, even as they struggled to rise from the ground.

Simmons yelled and fired a fusillade that shredded the vegetation. His war cry metamorphosed into a scream that abruptly ceased as his blood-spattered helmet rolled out from beneath the ferns.

"Fall back!" Staley shouted.

He turned and sprinted into the rainforest. Branches slashed at his face and chest, making it impossible to see. His foot snagged on a root and he went down hard. Pushed himself up from the slick mud, only to fall again.

Gunfire crackled from somewhere ahead of him, but when he looked up, it wasn't one of his fellow soldiers he saw.

A pair of long, thin legs protruded from the muck, their skin pallid and psoriatic, almost like the scales of a dead trout. The thighs and hips were corded with muscle. He followed the sculpted abdomen over a pair of bare breasts to the head of a stag. The deer's eyes had been removed, leaving ragged holes through which reptilian eyes with slit pupils stared.

A crashing sound from the underbrush beyond the figure. Koish screamed. His rifle clattered to the ground.

The woman looming over Staley had to be nearly seven feet tall. She reached up with her massive hands, curled her long fingers around the antlers, and lifted the mask from her head.

Staley's cries echoed through the jungle until, once more, only silence remained.

I hope you've enjoyed this extended preview of **MUTATION**.
To continue reading, return to my website and click the link to purchase the full book.