

THE HARVEST OF AREA 51

**By
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Science Fiction

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THE HARVEST OF AREA 51

The desert air held a winter chill as the sun fell below a horizon of dust-refracted orange. The night came alive with the impatience of a sensation poisoned city and the luminescence of all disgusting manner of nocturnal life entered Fremont Street with the tourists. When the flash flared from a digital camera, Dekker Barnes turned away to avoid being filmed. He checked the pistol in his belt as he passed bright stores full of cheap affectations being sold as mementos and waited for his signal over the static in his ear, lost in the sea of pedestrians on the old strip. At the end of the block he saw his contact, a man who was too small for the cigar he was puffing. The aging fellow kept his receding hair unnaturally colored and stood with a look of paternal responsibility over the citizens admiring the canopy of lights.

Dekker put his hands in his coat as he approached the diminutive loiter. “So what kind of genetic mutation are you?”

“Call me Dominik,” the short man replied without taking his eyes off the oblivious civilians. “I assume your handler told you to comply with the men I’ve assembled to investigate the Pattern?”

“But not how many of you I’m complying with. How many teams are independently investigating this now anyway?”

“At least eight, but few are efficient. They say you erase problems like ethanol dissolves bacteria.”

Barnes noticed at least three other agents blending poorly with the crowd. “Are you aware of what kind of animal we’re chasing?”

“Two families murdered. The target has eaten and he still keeps hunting. You tell me what kind of animal does that.”

“The ego hides as many things, innocence is one of them. I understand that the target used to be NSA?”

“He was exposed to something, don’t ask me what. You’re the best tracker out west, they say, but the NSA doesn’t live with the same insanity as we do. They are left in dark basements to untangle meaningless chatter, so when they followed a wire-tap reference to its source in the abandoned industrial area near the copper mines in Arizona, an agent named Felix Milton was the one who –”

Dekker nodded. “Returned from the mission and ate his family.”

“And the next door neighbors when he was finished. We don’t know how many he killed on his way here since he travels at night, but he leaves his victims mutilated. What have you heard from other agents?”

“That the Pattern is growing more insistent and we are as blind as ever. We have reports of an unknown vessel submerged in the Atlantic Ocean with a distress signal creating electro-magnetic radiation that alters compass readings and distorts radar near the Bermuda Triangle. Agents are investigating more UFO abductions in small town Alaska, with continued incidents of indelicate mental probes. Unfortunately moral evolution isn’t as absolute as technological growth, and for this specific alien race they apparently don’t mind invasively torturing us with their memories to see how we react. There’s also an institute studying translocation that is rumored to be on the verge of advanced quantum teleportation.”

“How advanced?”

“Not just particles now, they’re transporting mice through the superposition of wave-forms, or so they say. We also have a serious cult growing in Utah called the ‘Sons of Darkness, Daughters of Light.’ They profess to believe that they can manifest a spiritual gateway between worlds through sacrifice but the ethical deterioration is always the same. They start with animals and when the value of blood is quantified logically they move on to humans, virgins, and finally children. Their orgies gather a certain type of follower, loyal to the bone, but as always they have no concept of self-sacrifice, the only real path to enlightenment. We are all perverts in desire but rarely in action, and the resulting determination for self-control is the sacrifice that society makes to ascend. Happiness is the unconscious disavowal of the false limitation of duality, it is elusive specifically because it has no structure. Everyone seeks it as a mirage in the desert, but the central fault of cults is the lie that we are ever truly separate from the light of the source.”

“What else? It seems that the Commission is busy.”

“There’s a serial killer in Montana hiding the brutality of his murders as wolf attacks. One of our agents thinks he was inspired by the psychopath who hid behind crimes committed by the Beast of Gevaudan in France in the 1760s, but they are close to reeling in his insanity. Other successes are minimal yet distinct, we caught a hypnotist in New Jersey who started thinking of himself as a psychic vampire, feeding from the terror he could instill in his patients without their knowledge. He had to put the trauma somewhere, so during his sessions he created a recall mechanism in their fear to perceive a vision of an ethereal demon, historically known in that area as the Jersey Devil. Hysteria did the rest, but he eventually crossed the line and became a monster stepping from the nightmares he created.”

“I heard about that, though you never know what to believe in this career.”

“The Commission also closed a case for the lead scientist running a study to test astral projection for use in regenerative medicine. As a brief exercise, she was determined to see if they could pinpoint the Whitechapel district of London in the late 1800s to discover the real Jack the Ripper. Unfortunately she dug so deep through sensory deprivation and psychiatric manipulation that she came to believe that she was the reincarnation of the Ripper himself. After a few sleepless nights for our agents and three of her colleagues dead and disemboweled, we finally caught up to her. She still claims to have no recollection of the events.”

“Either way, I haven’t gotten used to these assimilation cases yet,” said Dominik. “I knew Felix Milton, our daughters went to the same school. Even if he’s a monster now, I want him taken down with the respect he deserves.”

“Our worst unsolved case is proving to be the result of a man we’re calling Frankenstein. While our government debates the alteration of mitochondrial DNA to cure a range of preventable diseases, the world is pushing forward regardless. As this doctor unleashes his modified creations, we’ve been tracking his considerable funding to a shadow group who believes that there should be no boundaries on advancement. They deliberately neglect the morality of the mistakes that must be made on the path of progress, and we think that they abhor the notion of creating a genetic upper-class of humanity, but Frankenstein himself is known to be following a procreative instinct to experience pregnancy and give birth. Perhaps all developments in science and technology are the same, a way for men to know what it’s like to be a creator, we just use the word god instead of mother as a result of arrogance. When something like the thing we’re hunting tonight breaks through, their bloodlust becomes degenerate, but fortunately this specific type of target is the easiest to track. If his condition gets worse he won’t be able to hide in public like he’s doing now. You have three agents with you, as far as I can tell, lingering across the street. Send the order and I’ll help you bring a net around the beast in Felix Milton.”

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The agents followed the signal of a cell-phone left carelessly in the clothes of the creature crossing the line into ‘deformation,’ but even his coworkers failed to recognize him as he left the old strip in the direction of the California Hotel. Milton was mutating faster than his cognition and the part of his humanity that kept him in survival mode was quickly fading into what would soon become a psychotic dog unleashed upon the streets of Vegas. Barnes left Fremont Street alone in close pursuit of the target, a man buried in the shadows of his hooded sweatshirt while stalking a female tourist who had wandered from the herd.

When the ceiling of lights over them ignited in a colorful display and lifted everyone’s eyes, Felix waited for the speakers to explode with music before he took the woman off her feet. Dekker circled the corner with his silenced pistol in hand to discover Milton leaning over a pile of garbage and sinking his teeth into the girl. He opened fire with muffled pops into the creature’s back and it turned with eyes sunk deep under spotted pupils. It growled to claim its meal as specialized rounds spit from his muzzle and shred its clothing, and when it ran away it was barking under its breath.

Barnes went to the frantic woman, who was crying and holding her bloody forearm with a wound resembling a mangled shark attack. “He bit me,” she said.

Dekker put his phone to his ear. “Send medics to this signal.” He slipped on his sunglasses and tapped the rim on the lenses, altering the photon-receivers to detect a trail leading away from the puddle at his feet. He ran his fingers through the target’s blood and smelled what he was hunting. “Exoskeleton,” he said to himself and pulled out a clip of red capped cartridges. He advised the woman to keep pressure on her injury. “The cops will arrive soon. Tell them you were bitten by a psychopath.”

She gave him a confused look. “I was?”

“They won’t believe anything else,” he said, and left her sitting in garbage.

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The elevator reached the eighth floor of the hotel and Barnes stepped out still wearing his glasses. He took his hand off his holstered pistol when a playful couple walked by and he crossed the padded carpet while peering down the empty hallways. A window was broken and a trail of fluorescent blood was displayed in distorted footprints that ended at the door to the stairwell. Every monster manifested differently, but the creature called Felix Milton was purposefully coaxing him into an ambush. He stopped and listened to it chuckling with a sound like stones being knocked together, and beneath his feet he saw a puddle of metamorphosis excretion, a common bi-product of a mutation’s altered physiology. The chemical was merely a viscous fluid on a scale of human sight, but his sunglasses contrasted a deep purple of swarming microbes. A few floors below, Dekker could hear the noise of children playing with small plastic men who were constantly dying and being resurrected for another war.

He followed the marks until they went vertical up the wall, proving that the thing called Felix Milton was deteriorating and when the final loss of self was complete it would resort to the sadism attributed to an Otherworld assimilation gone wrong. At that point, it would see all living beings as objects to dissect. The cannibalism that ended the Milton family was the original break, when Felix’s love became a perversion of absolute ownership. After all, to digest them was the closest a father could be to his kids. The family next door likely happened later, after it got hungry again and started looking for fresh meat. While it was still cognizant, the tragic creature then considered Fremont Street as a readily accessible buffet.

Barnes was near the roof and wondered if he had lost the creature when claws scraped his cheek and Milton let go of the pipes above them with prehensile talons. As the monster pinned him under snapping teeth, Dekker shoved the barrel of his gun into its dripping mouth and blasted three holes through its face. After they crashed down the stairwell, Barnes bounced off its exoskeleton, and with skin feathered like scales on its bald head it clasped the bars of the handrail and pulled itself up, climbing to the roof and tearing open the access door.

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Dekker was glad that the monster was not where it could dig a hole in the ground, as they often did to wait for the alteration to be complete. He walked along the upper terrace of the hotel and shot into the protruding ventilation system where the target was hiding, according to the fluorescent splatter. Sparks danced with bullets through the thin metal, forcing the creature into the open, and when it tried to escape to a lower tier balcony, Barnes adjusted his aim with the wind and shot it clean through the shoulder. It fell hard and landed on its back, giving him enough time to pierce its eyes, and the thing once called Felix Milton sprayed vibrant circles of blood in a sudden flare before it died with a pathetic screech.

Dekker said into his cell phone, “Cleanup on my signal.”

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The following morning, a black sedan riding low with armor pulled into the suburbs of Las Vegas and men in black suits from the government vehicle rang his doorbell. After they spoke the word ‘contingency’ they left the crowded city and traveled into the desert where the sky was dotted with clouds that broke over the wasteland of parched earth. The ride north was quiet until they turned off the highway onto a dirt road stretching to scattered hills in the distance. With military helicopters in constant flight over a sign that read, ‘No Trespassing – Use of Deadly Force Authorized,’ they reached a roadblock of diligent military security.

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At the foot of the largest mountain, a military base had been established with hangars dotting the grounds. It looked empty until they reached the external fence and another military checkpoint, this time with personnel who waved them in and told them where to park. Barnes stepped into the cool breeze and checked the sky when a helicopter hovered over the mountain and lowered in a fog of dust. As the doors slid open, a group of civilians stepped out, and a blonde woman with strawberry shades lifted by the wind composed herself in business attire. While they were quickly ushered to the nearest hangar, Dekker joined their procession to waiting soldiers who pushed open a heavy door and moved aside without expression.

Inside the sterilized atmosphere, they were guided through pearl-white hallways branching out in an indistinguishable maze and a freight elevator with three buttons on the panel allowed them all to stand comfortably inside when they began their descent. The appearance of a somber and empty base fell to a room full of bustling scientists, and the civilians tempered their astonishment as they walked into the underground facility and were guided by an officer through an outer ring of cubicles. At one side of the complex they were led into a conference room where they took their seats. After a tense silence, a high-ranking officer in full military uniform entered.

“Welcome to Area 51.” He walked to the front and loaded the relevant files on the console. “You wouldn’t have been called here unless the situation was urgent, so let us work through the formalities quickly. I am General Thomas Andronicus and everyone in this room has had at least brief military training. The seven of you are the top minds in your respective fields, from biology to computer encryption.” Andronicus fixed his gold-framed spectacles as the shaded lenses caught the light of the projector. “Some of you are aware of the details surrounding alien activity on earth, but most of you are new to this. The alien crash near Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 brought media attention to a phenomenon we used to exploit the natural ignorance of citizens by inundating them with fantasies about extra-terrestrials. The public at the time was more practical but they were altogether naïve, and while they would have bought a lie that secrecy was a matter of national security in opposition to Communism, our government had the foresight of downplaying the threat.

“As disinformation watered down reports about aliens and the fear of a nuclear attack was placated by having students hide under their desks, civilian life continued with more immediate and insular concerns during the prosperity that followed from the

military/industrial complex. From Project Sign to Project Grudge, and then to Project Blue Book, the government's task of disavowal became less and less conspicuous until its dissolution in 1969. The group of military rank and scientists who controlled the crash site at Roswell and subsequent studies, the Majestic Twelve as they were called, moved to more necessary avenues of culture before science caught up with our discoveries. The crash in Roswell afforded us a few pieces of next level technology, but it also brought us the scorched bodies of three small hominids, making our best minds assume that evolved aliens were traveling to where complex biology existed, following the obvious conclusion that the rarity of life makes it precious in the Universe and that these beings would hypothetically never do anything but observe to insure no change to what they studied.

"After atomic testing began, humans effectively broadcasted the evolution of our species and attracted the attention of more advanced alien cultures. Essentially without conflict in the depths of space, they view nuclear capabilities as marking a landmark of higher order civilization. Our species is now the most compelling in history, and with First World nations existing near Fourth World tribal cultures we represent a specific paradigm of intelligent life. As we study animals in their habitats, therefore we are studied." Andronicus took a breath. "Technology from the Roswell crash gave us a handful of useful technology, most of which provided advances for NASA during the space race. Over decades, the Cold War was fought by proxy nations over a scale of continents, but it wasn't total war so our citizens only discovered these inventions after they were declassified."

The General flipped through his files to make sure he covered everything. "City life is so self-absorbed and desensitized that a few alien races have crossed the line of cohabitation to blend in, but any real scientist understands the danger of altering what they seek to classify. Anomalies result when these hyper-intelligent creatures are broken by unforeseeable influence until they exhibit behavior without the balance of conscience, and our government was forced to start a Black Ops program to investigate this pattern of interruption. Human crime is pervasive enough and we do our best to stop these aliens from procreating, but something from the darker realm always slips through.

"During the last half of the century we have employed this military installation for advance technology but recent discoveries with genetic engineering have given us a new level of research and development. A few years ago we found a damaged aircraft in Oregon and upon careful observation it turned out to be the same species that crashed in New Mexico in 1947. At the site we also retrieved stores of genetic reference, a library of DNA taken from animals across our galaxy, and at that moment we knew that we held before us a key, all we had to do was decipher it. That was the first and most arduous phase of Project Harvest. We delineated the dynamic of each animal with the intent of finding how certain species overcome common ailments, then we singled out a handful of those genes to be created and we built a zoo to raise them."

Andronicus turned on the projector and a large hologram appeared. It was a tactical layout and schematic of Area 51 with distant hangars attached underground to the hollowed mountain. The other soldiers in the room handed flatscreens to the scientists, allowing them to scroll through the engineered aliens from each display. "We were diligent in extracting problem genes and altered them to survive in the pressure and atmosphere of earth. We began by knowing that only a small percentage of the animals cloned would provide any useful information, so we worked endlessly to analyze the

genetic library, extract any relevant DNA, and then engineer the animals in mock habitats to study them. The first sub-level has five sections.” The hologram turned in dimensional space to show the declassified portions of the base. A long elevator shaft dipped below ground at an angle, leading to a laboratory of intricate construction that branched off in five directions. “In this wing, plant life is grown. We receive most of our health focused data there. In the opposite wing we have insects. In the third we have reptiles, the fourth is a marine habitat, and lastly we have mammals. You have to understand that these classifications are loosely based at best,” the General warned. “So don’t expect the insects to be small or all the plant life to be inanimate.” He showed them the underground research facility. At ground level, an emergency access corridor jutted out from a heavy door and curved back to the lab. “If all goes well, you can enter through this reinforced entrance and travel down, assuming that the aliens haven’t gravitated there.”

He scrolled through, showing a similar corridor between the first and second sub-levels separated by steel blast doors. “The crash site that provided us with this genetic library also gave us an incredible resource. The same as with Roswell, we found the bodies of three small hominids. This time, however, one was still alive.” Some of the scientists sat up in their chairs as Andronicus continued. “The alien was injured, so we stored the dead ones in preservation chambers and Phase Two of Project Harvest proceeded with our study of biological forms. For the research applied on the second sub-level, we required the top minds for analysis to reveal the usefulness of this species.”

“Human testing,” Dekker guessed. “That’s always where this leads.”

“Of course,” responded the General. “The last stage in Phase Two had a two-fold purpose. On one end we trained a group of volunteers with standards as stringent as NASA before we injected them with a fragment of the genetic structure of the alien by using a retro-viral delivery system. To test the capacity of the human mind we sought to provide a bridge between us and the advanced species, but the results were horrific. We are barely out of the jungle and nature does not disappear from our psyches very easily. Examination chambers quickly became holding cells for the madness that twisted each volunteer as their cognition overreached their ability to contextualize basic sense response. The second and simultaneous purpose was the re-creation of the alien through cloning techniques. We spliced our two species and developed hybrid individuals of this higher order intelligence with slight physical variations to allow better mobility as terrestrial beings. To our surprise, their cell-structure caused them to age exponentially as a result of the gravity on our planet.”

“What was the purpose of them originally?” asked one of the scientists.

The General appeared to reach a classified barrier that he would not overstep for the uninitiated. “We are bringing the human race to the next level and we’re doing it by taking shortcuts and manipulating mutation to bypass unnecessary progress.”

“You were messing with something that is beyond us,” said Dekker.

Andronicus nodded. “As always, the fault is human. To insure secrecy, Area 51 is a closed core. During the course of an individual project, no information lines travel in or out, especially not phone lines. With the computer network encrypted, our senior technicians and high-ranking military officers were given special frequency satellite phones to connect them to ground level. For the first time in this base’s history, last week we received a distress call from the lead scientist working on Phase Two.” The

General touched the panel on the hologram unit and a profile of a disheveled man appeared. “This is who we were told caused the emergency. He has a history of obsessive behavior and manic depression but he’s one of the most brilliant minds in his field. The lead scientist who alerted us before we lost contact said that this man, Horatio Somers, was responsible for the breakdown in security. Knowing that he was prone to an unbalanced temperament, he was essentially secluded from the beginning and never had access beyond his lab, but the last message sent to us revealed that he was opening the holding cages of the unstable volunteers.

“At that point, the limited number of personnel we kept underground became a liability. Seven days have passed and this problem, however contained it might be, has escalated beyond our knowledge and we need to begin a reconnaissance mission before chaos theory in practice ruins one of the most well-funded laboratories in the world. The army has secured the outside of this base and we have two special teams of Marines to protect you. Since the electrical systems and automatic feeding units are still operational, movement should be easy on the first sub-level. Central control has automatically shut down, so you’ll need to enter each of the five sections separately to upload the data. Our computer storage units are heavily armored and contain all the useful information gathered from Project Harvest. You’ll be given non-lethal weapons to subdue the herbivores if any have wandered from their enclosures, and you are summarily authorized to destroy anything that endangers you.” Andronicus looked to the two programmers among the scientists. “Our primary need is to override the failsafe encryption. We will give both of you consoles linking you to the surface for information to be transferred directly and securely. Project Harvest was months from completion and this mission only exists to retrieve data that can be analyzed.

“Once all five sections have been uploaded, you’ll proceed to the second sub-level, where Phase Two can be transmitted from a single computer.” The hologram deactivated and the image disappeared. The General then ordered in an austere tone, “Study the animals you’ll be interacting with as you get suited up, and when you’re ready Colonel Black will meet you at the primary blast door with his Marines. Right now, I need to speak to the computer programmers alone so we can update you on the encryption codes you’ll need to transfer the information. The rest of you can follow these officers to get your supplies.” General Andronicus offered the finality of their debriefing and the scientists were led back into the hall.

The blonde with curious eyes waited for the others to file out and introduced herself as April Setterlund. She squeezed the laptop against her chest as if it were the buried treasure of her career and glanced at it occasionally as they were led through monotonous white corridors.

Barnes surmised, “You have an unusual fascination with obscure creatures.”

“Xenobiology and Cryptozoology were merely hobbies until now. We know so little about the ocean and life inside our jungles, it’s ironic that our ignorance is what stops us from searching.”

Dekker admired the spark of her intellect. “Did that debriefing surprise you?”

“You mean did I believe in the unknown before?” she asked. “Human consciousness is a self-ratified tautology so weak that it can be broken by something as simple as the placebo effect. Humans stick to what they know and disavow the spectacular quite often, incapable of understanding how false limitations put on the world sadden us the most.”

“People accept what they can handle. I don’t judge anyone for that, I’m just a hunter with unusual game,” he replied. “But I guess I do take a certain amount of solace in the notion that anything is possible, even if this fact is proven by the presence of unimaginable monsters. In my experience, all things are sacred but few things are divine, and my knowledge of divinity has come from my experience with women most of all.”

They came to a tunnel and the soldier standing at the controls said calmly, “Please step into the transport.” On the metallic track, an oblong car stood like a movable waiting room, and while they traveled on magnetic waves the scientists were told to brace themselves over the intercom. The tunnel was lit with equidistant bulbs to keep them out of darkness until they came to a stop in a wide room.

“Nice to meet you,” said April as her eyes lit up. “If I ask your name will you give me a fake?”

“A man is only as good as the work he does.”

“This all seems like a dream, doesn’t it? To be able to see these animals, to touch and smell them...”

“Animals smell like animals,” he said.

She smiled. “You know what I mean.”

“Sure I do, but who would go into a zoo where the predators roam free? Everything about this situation is unnatural.”

April spoke softly. “You mean the hybrids?”

“No, I assume they’re docile. An observer species of alien should theoretically contain an extreme form of your own scientific curiosity.”

“But what if they have the same visceral desire as well?”

She gave him a shy glance and looked away to hide her undertone when the escorting officers led them into a massive hangar and the intense quiet gave way to the discord of engineers working without concern for what was occurring in the depths of the base below them.

“I’m Dekker Barnes,” he said as they crossed the threshold, and after he shook April’s hand she held it like a little girl being taken to the circus.

A triangular aircraft was stationed at one end and several carts were covered in reflective sheets to camouflage them with an illusion of transparency that shimmered like moonlight on the ocean. April was staring at the access elevator while Dekker’s intent was fixed on the blast door in the corner. The service corridor to the first sub-level was open and Marines were running preliminary scans for life forms, especially microscopic.

The team leader, with short gray hair and sharp features, stood nearby as he watched the newcomers arrive like children to their first day of school. “I’m Colonel Black,” he said in a booming voice over the sound of humming mechanics. “You’ll find a duffel bag for each of you and a room to change into the clothes we’ve provided. We will be proceeding into the tunnel soon, so leave your personal belongings and I’ll meet you for a quick debriefing on the weapons you’ll be carrying.”

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After the scientists were shown to the barracks, they went to their separate rooms to change. Along with boots they were given dark blue camouflage with various electronic devices in the pockets and a thin armor-plated vest. Barnes stood in his room alone,

affixing his handgun to a hip holster before going through his pockets and finding an earpiece, a medkit, and an oversized watch with a tracker to monitor his movement. He scrolled through a map of the installation and found a compartment in his vest that allowed him to carry the flatscreen with documented aliens. He finished dressing and followed the others to the corner of the facility while sliding ammo clips into velcro slots on his shoulder.

He walked beside April, who was engrossed in the natural wonders. She had pulled her hair back into a ponytail and gave him a nod, "You look good in uniform."

"And you glow with the radiance of an open mind," he commented while she admired the genetic library of information.

"I understand the danger we're in," she said. "But thank you."

The Colonel waited for everyone to meander to multiple tables that held their armament and he was patient with them, despite his orders. "I was told that you all had basic military training before becoming scientists in the private sector, so before we go through a quick introduction I'll show you what weapons were selected for this mission." He walked to the table and the scientists stepped closer. "Each of you will be given a standard nine millimeter MP40 sub-machine gun with alternating hollow tip and armor piercing rounds. This is a secondary firearm and will be strapped across your backs unless absolutely necessary. We take precautions seriously but our orders are to attempt to incapacitate the animals without harming them. With the herbivores this might be reasonable, but with predators we'll have to wait and see. For non-lethal combat we have voltaic rifles containing a rechargeable electrochemical cell. With an internal sulfuric acid distillate and hydrogen converter, this weapon will discharge tempered waves of electrons to incapacitate a target without killing it.

"We've also added a single chamber air-compression dart gun that will release an instantaneous dose of a sleep inducing chemical. A single drop of this refined melatonin will put any biological form to rest for at least a day, regardless of its size. We have extra clips for each of you, along with utility tools, a serrated boot-knife, and a rebreather unit if my Marines need to use gas. We'll back you up with flash and concussion grenades as well, and a net-rifle strong enough to secure a rhinoceros. After you all take a moment to collect your firearms, we'll proceed down the access corridor to the first sub-level. We've finished our preliminary scans after opening the blast door and are assured that the path is clear. Take time to introduce yourselves and find out who's an expert on what, then I'll meet you at the entrance to the hot zone." Colonel Black nodded to the soldiers near the door before he left.

An Iranian woman with a sad smile introduced herself as Luma Sharaz as she went from person to person, apparently a botanist with a background in fossilized plant life. A tall redhead with hair that hung to her waist in a single braid said she was an entomologist with the Museum of Natural History in New York and that her name was Amanda Evans. The biologists were Larenz and O'Neal, a meditative middle-aged Portuguese fellow and a white-haired Irishman, with backgrounds studying reptiles and marine animals respectively. Larenz spent his time in equatorial areas cataloguing new species, and O'Neal worked for rescue operations on the west coast for the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Dekker walked to the two computer programmers chatting beside the group. The tall one was Zalas, a twig that a strong wind could topple, and the timid one with glasses was Parker.

As he shook hands with Barnes, he gave a nod towards April. "She's an expert on rainforest biological systems. If I knew that lab geeks looked like her now, I would've gone into a different profession."

"You both have the consoles Andronicus spoke about?" Dekker asked them.

Zalas nodded. "The technology they're entrusting us with is far beyond the consumer market. If they'd just let us establish their integrated network we wouldn't need to be here, but the extremes of closing this base off from hackers would be immeasurable."

"We're going to experience creatures that go beyond what anyone can handle. You should stick together, to complete the mission only one of you is expendable."

After Barnes walked away, Parker whispered, "The Fed's got a sense of humor?"

April left the group during their primary introductions and appeared to be more comfortable when Dekker was near. "So what kind of wisdom are we working with?" he asked of her impression.

She shrugged. "The same as I've always felt when dealing with brilliant people. Curiosity by definition is arrogant and we're all children of the same delightful lie that we understand as much as we think we do."

"Perhaps only perfect humility can bring us into a better world, as it has always been the way," he noted. "Only a handful of prophets provided the ethical structures followed by all human civilizations."

"You're a cosmic cop," said April. "So of course you have an open mind."

He shrugged. "It does take a strong stomach..."

"That's the main reason I could never go into medical science, I'm not strong enough to become dispassionate about the suffering of people. I guess that's the path that leads doctors to become coroners and medtechs who only deal with biological organisms after the life-force has vanished. We're so afraid of being responsible for someone's death that we end up being surrounded by it."

"At least you want to help," said Dekker. "Why Xenobiology and Cryptozoology as hobbies, though? Do you enjoy the sound of laughter from your colleagues?"

"If what we know hasn't saved us so far, by definition the answer must reside elsewhere. This scientific field would exist as far on the fringe as the mainstream believes if not for the repeated discoveries of animals once thought to be mythology. Speculation runs rampant in all forms of imagination, but what kind of ego would actively seek to limit their understanding of how pathetic our knowledge really is?"

"I'm not a scientist. I only work to obstruct the violence of animals, from our planet and elsewhere."

"And you never thought of the deeper meaning of your work?"

"There is none," Barnes concluded. "Dust settles upon what we already knew and the truth of prophets has to be reiterated to fit the evolution of culture."

"But stagnation is inhuman," she said. "There is always another step to take."

"Happiness is stagnation to you?"

She shrugged. "Contentment is. You might be searching forever, but you have to set new goals to define yourself. Even if science is the language of the future, death is still the measure of life."

They met the Colonel at the blast door with the other civilians. "Once we have achieved our mission, we can use the elevator from the second sub-level to return here." He looked over their faces and saw the doubt he expected. "Is everyone ready?"

* * * * *

The steel door rested wide like an open mouth waiting for a meal. The scientists paused at the sight of the dark corridor until the Marines went in with tubes of neon light, bathing the shadows in glowing green. Colonel Black walked in front of the group with his rifle strapped in ready position and they turned at the elbow of the passageway before reaching the entrance to the first sub-level. Most of the electrical systems had been shut off, leaving unused areas blacked out, but the central workstation was alight with backup generators. The soldiers surveyed the main lab and sent scouts ahead to scan the halls branching from the upper balcony.

The Colonel read the schematics on his flatscreen until a scuffling sound made everyone jump. The Marines triggered the flashlights at the end of their weapons and centered the beams to reveal semi-transparent shells hanging in the corner. The redhead named Amanda pushed past the others when one of the cocoons dropped from the ceiling and cracked against the tile floor. Something inside was struggling to break free and the pod soon opened along the side as it crawled out, revealing intricate markings on the light brown body of the giant insect. While the wings stretched, the soldiers started getting nervous, shining their flashlights through the hall to see if they were facing a swarm. After it fluffed its untested appendages and lifted a fine cloud, it took to the air and Amanda pushed the Marines aside to let the bug fly over them.

"It's like a moth," she said with an anxious laugh.

The Colonel ordered his men forward and they followed him into the central workstation. From the section used for botany, plant life was overgrowing and much of the lab was hidden behind thick greenery and hanging vines. With more winged insects dangling from the roof, the scientists stepped to the railing and looked across the logistical center for the first phase of Project Harvest.

At the first intersection, Dekker stopped in his tracks when he and the Marine beside him saw an inquisitive head poke around the corner. The leopard-sized animal was white with black stripes but it seemed harmless as Barnes took a few steps and kneeled. To the kind gesture, the eight-legged mammal came into the open, revealing its long body. The soldier watched it nervously and gripped his weapon, but the graceful creature reached them with a sign of submission to pet its soft feathers.

"Something has scared this animal to near starvation," said Dekker, and he heard the others fervently whispering before he joined them.

In the main lab below, pounding footfalls arrived before the beast that made them. It had a bony protrusion covering a large skull-plate that fanned out in small spikes and it instinctively let out a moan to call its herd to the foliage it was eating off the walls. Unfortunately it only managed to alert a stalking hunter and the soldiers visibly tensed when they noticed it, pale in color like a lion but with bright red spots and numerous claws running up its legs. Obviously built for holding on to heavy prey, it walked around the computers and lifted its head above the desks, sniffing at the air and curling its upper lip to reveal protruding oversized interlocking fangs. The herbivore caught its scent and

started snapping its wide mouth defensively before it lowered its head and ran towards the threat, intending to trample it.

“Now,” Black ordered and his Marines responded, shooting a dart into the plant-eater that made it instantly drowsy. They used the net-rifle for the salivating predator, trapping it against the floor with metal prongs sinking in, and after they descended the stairs together, the Colonel made certain that the lumbering herbivore was unconscious before issuing orders. “Ms. Botanist?”

Luma Sharaz’s tanned Persian skin escalated the shine in her eyes when she said, “Call me Luma, or Mrs. Botanist if you wish.”

“My apologies, Luma, will you please enter the Botany Wing with Mr. Parker to upload the data?” said Black, and out of nervous habit the young hacker fixed his glasses. “You have everything you need to begin the mission. Jonze and Patanos will keep you company.” He looked to the harmless eight-legged creature behind Barnes. “You can put that thing in the break room down the hall before you join them. The feeding machines are timed for automatic use but we were warned about the possibility of large congregations around their food source, where predators would have a better chance of ambushing prey. Perhaps Ms. Setterlund can provide her unique expertise as well.”

* * * * *

Dekker led the timid animal to the employee break room while the Colonel sent three of his men to gather reconnaissance for the Reptile Wing, then he said, “Gibbs and Waverly, override the emergency lock and open the elevator. We’ll need an easy exit from the second sub-level.”

Barnes turned on the lights and opened the fridge, but the food inside was moldy. He looked to the creature that licked its lips and sat in a docile position. “You were treated like a pet, weren’t you?”

He opened the cabinets and poured a box of crackers to the floor, then he filled an empty bowl with water before he left. As he shut the door to protect the animal, he came face to face with someone who wasn’t entirely human. Since it was never his first instinct in dealing with an unknown being to go for his gun, he observed the man wearing hospital scrubs and its large eyes seemed to be begging for help when it said, “Black has come to kill us. He’s going to kill you all.”

* * * * *

Dekker returned to the Colonel on the walkway, who watched his Marines trying to open the elevator by resetting the system at the electrical circuit. “Why did you order the blast door to be closed?”

Black gave him a look that was derived from rarely having to explain himself. “The plan is to leave using the elevator, we can’t risk letting anything reach the surface.”

After sparks shot from the control panel and the elevator slid open, the Marines leaned into the shaft and tossed neon tube-lights into the shadows. Gibbs studied the emptiness and turned to the Colonel to say, “It’s clear, sir,” before webbing splashed against his cheek. The others saw hairy insect legs and the waiting mouth of a massive alien arachnid as the soldier went screaming down the angled shaft and was dragged into

the darkness below. Waverly tried to delineate a target but was lifted off his feet by pincers that tore into his arms, and he fired his weapon at the innumerable glossy eyes until the bug secured its grip on him with hooked feet.

Without a clear line of fire, the Marines shot bouncing bombs off the tile floor that rolled into the shaft. When the first flash detonated, high-pitched squeals came from the arthropods scattering away from the intense light and the concussive force blew their armored shells to pieces. Waverly was dropped to the floor, and while still bleeding heavily he crawled to the circuit panel and closed the electrical current before he was caught in the throes of the injected poison. The elevator doors shut with muffled explosions pounding inside and the Marine vomited blood with melted organs as toxin twisted his nerves, running its course through his central nervous system until he died.

Colonel Black told Barnes, "Go help the others."

* * * * *

The entrance to the Botany Wing was open and the walls were covered with vines stretching towards the artificial light in the hallway. The entire lab was covered in moss and only segments of machinery could be seen through the indoor jungle.

"Where's data storage located?" asked Parker.

Luma scrolled through the schematics on her flatscreen and pointed to the far end. Patanos and Jonze held their rifles tight after she said, "For your sake, don't get curious and touch something." She pushed away hanging vines to reveal the control room as repeated explosions echoed down the corridor. Dekker came in soon after.

"What happened?" Patanos asked him.

"The elevator shaft was infested with insects, Gibbs and Waverly are dead. Did you make sure this wing is clear?" said Barnes, and the Marines split up to scout the confined rainforest.

"Can I stay near you?" April wondered.

Luma wandered off on her own path and within moments they were out of sight, hidden by leaves that created doorways in the lab. She noticed a display of flowers growing beyond its containment and some of the plants seemed to be backlit, so she pushed them aside to reveal large atriums where the basic electrical system still worked and a digital clock timed the flow of water for blossoms reaching outside their cages.

Patanos came to a section drowned by lichen with large yellow flowers swaying without wind. He touched the petals with his gloved hand and the flower reacted as if being tickled. He laughed at the strange movement and tried again, and it repeated its coy reaction. When he touched it a third time the plant coughed a cloud of pollen in his face and Patanos wiped his eyes while spitting to clear the taste of stale coconut off the back of his throat. His eyelids felt puffy as the haze of particles drifted, and after his vision cleared he found himself engrossed by the dynamic color of his hand. He watched the tracers vibrate with a residual dance and wiggled fingers that appeared to grow with veins bulging and skin melting to the floor.

* * * * *

Parker's focus was buried in the digital workstation, relaying encryption codes to access the internal network and transfer files, and Dekker waited patiently outside the data storage room with April.

"Perhaps this is why Mark Twain said there's no laughter in Heaven. I was surprised by what you said about sacrifice," she said, thinking about the two dead soldiers. "It's a powerful human trait to not only cling to that which is dying, but that which is already dead. From the species who make it off their worlds to visit ours, I've always wondered about the phenomena of lights as portals of energy. I never believed rumors of aliens from backwoods Moonshiners telling tales, but from the generation of military pilots during World War 2 and what they experienced, even the government only denies ninety-eight percent of possible encounters, leaving enough room for speculation about the others. Still, who knows? I have an astrophysicist friend who has a theory that streaming portals of energy across time are being viewed by us as two dimensional floating spheres. Technically when we start spreading through space it will be with machine probes, but that would be easily detected by other sentience. Psionic observation is out of the question unless aliens are selectively empathic, otherwise the pain of the human race would be overwhelming."

"Most of us do a good job of ignoring it," said Barnes. Luma stepped from a lush jungle in the back, captivated by the plants covering the ceiling, and he asked her about the others. She looked to him and snapped out of her fascination.

"I haven't seen the soldiers since we split up." She pointed to the roof. "Do you know what those remind me of? A collecting place for lampyridae and their photoelectric cells." She uncovered the switch on the wall and shut it off. Other than the light in data storage everything was dark, and oversized flying insects swarming around the plants on the ceiling began to trigger their mating ritual as they sparked like stars in the night sky. April stood next to Barnes and they stared at the display zigzagging against the backdrop like a meteor shower.

"It won't be much longer," said Parker. "The transfer is almost complete."

Jonze walked into the room and Luma turned on the lights. "Have you seen Patanos?" she asked, but he nodded that he hadn't. She told him to be careful of a leafy bush before the soldier stepped forward and caught his armor on one of its thorns. The wiry branch wrapped itself around his forearm and was digging in, so he reached for his boot-knife and hacked the annoyance. "Defensive mechanism," Luma informed him. "Try to be more observant."

As Jonze gave a chuckle at the strange plant, Patanos came tripping through the verdant overgrowth and raised his rifle with a detached sneer. After smashing the affixed battery unit against the wall to disrupt the output regulator, he pulled the trigger and hit his fellow Marine with a blast of electrified sulfuric acid that seared his skin and threw him over the lab equipment. Dekker pulled Luma from her frozen shock and urged her into the storage room with April, breaking Parker's attention from his computer screen. Patanos started firing into the door with his sub-machine gun, and with the bullets sticking deep enough to poke through the metal, Barnes pushed the women back and told Parker to complete his task.

"Are you kidding?" yelled the programmer.

After the feral Marine's clip went dry, he growled in guttural confusion and pounded furiously on the door with the stock of his gun. When the upper hinge broke from the

frame, Dekker slammed his shoulder against it and charged out, taking the soldier off his feet with a heavy tackle. They rolled over a table before banging against the cold tiles, and as they came to a stop the insane soldier noticed a boot-knife shoved through his collarbone. In the silence he heard a loud whine emanating beside him from the hydrogen energy-cell of the damaged rifle until it burst open, shredding Patanos with an expanding wave of light.

* * * * *

“What was that?” the Colonel demanded when he saw Dekker leading the others into the central lab. “Were you successful with the data transfer?”

“Yes,” Parker answered. “But my console was destroyed.”

“We can get you another,” said Black.

“Jonze and Patanos are dead,” Barnes told them, but none of the remaining six Marines asked how.

“My scouts have informed me that the Reptile Wing is clear,” said the Colonel, who ordered his men to aid the distraught scientists. “Some of the cages are empty, however. At this point we should go to the Aquatic Wing where everything is sure to be confined and limited to water.”

“I’m not needed here anymore,” Luma realized. “My task in the Botany Wing is finished.”

“The blast door is still shut,” said the Colonel. “So unless you want to take the elevator, we’re all in this together.”

As they started towards the Aquatic Wing, Dekker pulled April aside to reveal that the Marines would likely administer low doses of tranquilizers upon the scientists to help them relax.

“We need their expertise to be precise,” she said. “Pharmaceuticals are not capable of opening someone’s mind to reality.”

“I know, but this has gotten too rough and they are useless as non-combatants if they fail to handle the stress.”

“So why did you tell me?” she wondered.

“Because I have my doubts about the Colonel’s mission and we need Parker to discover the truth.”

* * * * *

The Aquatic Wing contained daunting aquariums but everyone seemed comfortable in the timid surroundings. The Marines slid the desks together and gave the scientists pills to relieve their tension.

“Parker needs a new console,” Barnes said as he stopped the programmer from taking the dose. “Then we can head to the Reptile Wing.”

“You’re kidding,” Parker stuttered in disbelief.

The Colonel mulled over the risk, knowing that if Dekker was killed they still had a second programmer to complete the mission. He motioned for the others to supply them with extra equipment. “Splitting our forces is a risk but it doubles our chance for success. If you think you can manage it successfully, Lieutenant Hearn will go with you.”

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