

THE
EXODUS
GATE

STEPHEN ZIMMER



SECTION I

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THE ABYSS

Auras of shrouding blackness encompassed the forms of the towering figures, standing with heads bowed reverently in the midst of the vast, featureless expanse of ebon murk. Girded against light, their appearances were composed of uncountable small flames that never ceased to burn with a dynamic intensity. The proud sigils that they often displayed to herald themselves elsewhere in the nether regions had no place at this momentous instance, and they were universally absent among the mighty throng.

The great wing-like extensions sprouting from their backs had a translucent grace, which was currently subdued as the gossamer appendages were carried close to their non-corporeal bodies.

Far away to all sides of them a swirling umber maelstrom flowed with vigorous force, shielding away all awareness of the vast realms that were themselves merely miniscule elements of even greater expanses within the utterly immense Ten-Fold Kingdom.

The innumerable multitudes of laments, wails, and sorrows from regions surrounding that epicenter alone were as nothing. Neither could be heard the roars and shrieks of the nightmare terrors that raged with voracious appetites throughout that same vicinity. All the cacophony fueled by anger and lost hope were as sprinkles into a measureless ocean of the blackest hate, all governed by the supreme intelligence in whose court the cadre of titanic figures stood in obedient reverence.

The ranks of High Avatars, giants among their own lofty and exalted kind, were diminutive in comparison to the Ten Eminencies who were enthroned in their dedicated attendance to the One Entity that they all served. The Ten Eminencies held names that resonated with power and authority all across the Ten-Fold Kingdom; Gamaliel, Sathariel, Thaumiel, and seven others who were the greatest among the Avatars beholden to the Shining One.

The purpose of the Ten was as singular as the massed gathering of High Avatars in their immediate midst. All attention was focused upon the featureless image of a human body that stood before them all.

Comprised of an incomparably dense blackness, one that would devour all light that came into contact with it, the image was as much in the likeness of the Shining One as the Other had been for Adonai; The Other who had already been sent to the mortal realms in a past age, carrying Adonai's purpose.

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The image was far diminished from what it had previously been within the infernal court, as the long-awaited transfer that superseded the powers of time and space was well underway. A body of flesh and blood now walked and breathed within the world of humankind, taking on ever more essence from the ebon likeness at the heart of the Ten-Fold Kingdom.

The day would come when the worldwide Convergence would be embodied in this one singular figure. It would be the heralded day that this image in the nether realms would dissipate entirely, as the fullness of it was realized in the mortal world.

As the mystery of light had been made present in the Other in harmonious communion with Adonai, the Other who went unnamed and vehemently hated in the vast reaches of the Ten-Fold Kingdom, so would the dark mystery manifest in the fullness of time and space. A union of a similar, albeit inverse, nature would occur with the incarnate likeness walking the surface of the world that Diabolos, the Shining One, so hungered to destroy.

The time was drawing very close, and power was flowing in abundance as never before to all authorities within Diabolos's Kingdom. The consciousness of millions who were still possessed of free will were turned increasingly to the paths that led to the bottomless Abyss, empowering the growing darkness to an unprecedented scale.

Unfathomable might was being gathered and coalesced in anticipation of launching the final war. Only one outcome was envisioned within the deep blackness; A war that would result in throwing down the ramparts of the White City, laying wide open the realms of Adonai for the insatiable hunger of Diabolos and the countless fell spirits inhabiting the Ten-Fold Kingdom.

Each single High Avatar represented immense legions and hordes that had been formed to serve the Shining One's will, but each also had specific roles to perform in the myriad of events that would bring about Diabolos's grand design.

Belphegor, Mammon, Ares, Semyaza, Baal, Rofacale, Rimmon, Ophis, Nergal, Moloc, Mashith, Set, Dagon, Belial, Beelzebub, Azazel, Sammael, and the many other mighty High Avatars attended to their distinctive tasks tirelessly, some ages long in development and others implemented only more recently.

For some, an appointed task in the intricate design was imminent; Beleth's tremendous force containing several infernal legions was now prepared

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and at the ready, about to create myriad distractions and entangle hordes of Adonai's servants at a very crucial time in the mortal world.

On another front, Belphegor's latest intricate crafting was about to be put to its intended purpose, foiling Adonai's act in the past ages of the world when Diabolos had been on the verge of victory.

Force, deception, intrigue, illusion, guile, and all manner of strategies were being simultaneously employed in the final stages of the great struggle.

In the present instance, the High Avatars had been called to witness to the Shining One as the finality of the grandest design was impressed upon each of them. The will of Diabolos had an unshakeable hold upon all of them, but in such moments it was as if the will of their master was emblazoned freshly upon every last element of their being.

As if to accentuate that reality, each and every one of the mighty Avatars were compelled to raise their eyes upward. They all gazed beyond the human likeness standing at their forefront, to the majestic and dark immensity that the image purely reflected.

Layers of obscuring blackness began parting and gradually pulled back, letting forth a blinding radiance of such intensity that the senses of the High Avatars, and even the Ten Eminencies, were instantly overwhelmed. Beings that were elsewhere unrivaled in their passions, furies, and strengths were reduced to an awed stupor as they gazed into the searing light. To all appearances, the tiny white flames were unblemished and pure, though there was a coldness to them that had not been present before the Great Rebellion.

Nonetheless, the being that was revealed to the Avatars had lost none of the beauty and majesty of that distant age. To all of the Avatars, the vision of their Lord was another foretaste of the Remaking, the glorious, forthcoming age when the mortal world would be destroyed and made anew in the likeness of Diabolos.

It did not matter how one referenced their Lord, whether as the Light Giver, the Shining One, Diabolos, or even as the Lord of the Abyss. Their Master held uncontested preeminence, and it was indisputable that the incredibly vast realms of the Ten-Fold Kingdom had all been set into motion the very instant that the Risen Throne had been erected by Diabolos following the terrible Fall.

After that first Fall, when vast multitudes had been confused, wounded, and without hope, it had been Diabolos whose unshaken defiance had burned



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the greatest, as it empowered a new semblance of creation. Diabolos had not brought anything into being out of non-existence, as only Adonai alone had demonstrated that ability, but the Abyss's greatest power had learned to shape and create out of the essence of darkness, which existed in an infinite scope within the bottomless pit.

Adonai's own design had resulted in the lightless, fathomless prison for the rebellious hordes becoming an unceasing reservoir of new strength and unholy designs. In the depths of that bottomless darkness and unending fountainhead, a new realm had grown without boundary, and a hope had been rekindled.

Much had been learned since the early stages of the Great War, and tremendous power had been gathered. It was all about to converge in a day of infernal glory.

BENEDICT

'You are about to witness the fall of an empire.'

The caller's voice echoed in his mind. He remembered his own response clearly enough.

He had replied with an incredulous tone, 'Come on, we are a republic. Simply a republic, not perfect, but not an empire.'

'It isn't as it says it is. It is as it is,' was the caller's firm response.

He had thought often about the sentiments expressed by the caller over the past day. Politics was only a minority of the content on his broadcasts, but this interchange had struck him particularly hard. He had been having his own doubts about the world around him, and wondered whether, perhaps, his own show was starting to get into his mind too much.

It had not reached a crisis point yet, as he readied himself for yet another program that would take him via satellite and online networks all across the world. The broad reach of his show continued to amaze him, even amid the many cultural and technological changes that had occurred within his own lifetime.

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Fast changes were possible, even if they were foreboding.

“Maybe the world is about to change in a fundamental way, and I’m not sure I’m quite ready,” Benedict muttered aloud to himself as he casually walked across the living room, the caller’s words echoing once again within his mind.

He picked up his long overcoat from where he had draped it across the high-backed, cushioned office chair in front of his computer desk. He slid his arms into the coat and adjusted himself until it flowed comfortably, before starting towards the short hall that led to the apartment’s front door.

He paused for a moment and took a deep breath. He shook his head and smiled again to himself, knowing that if he were to look right then in the mirror his round, slightly pudgy face would likely be reflecting his increasingly anxiety-ridden inner state.

Yet there was still an invigorating sense of thrill left within him. A large reason for that remaining vibrancy was found in a special device that he now had in his possession.

Pleasant memories returned to him from his afternoon session with the device, chasing away the flock of troubling thoughts. He found himself pondering the place that the device now had in his life, a quick rise to importance.

The quest for a bridge to other realities, or higher planes of consciousness, through the medium of technology had always intrigued Benedict Darwin. It had often been a subject of his overnight show, though at times he had to keep a restrained politeness towards some of his more outlandish guests.

Despite the wild tangents taken by some, his thoughts were fixated upon the intriguing possibilities, which beckoned to an escape within a world both free and without limits. He wondered why a device that so engaged the senses could not open up new sensations or explorations.

At the very least, that was something that he really wanted to believe.

He had so often mused that technology was dampening and dulling the best aspects of people, yet he had always argued that the medium itself was not at fault. It would not be impossible that the opposite could be made true by the right technology, one that truly inspired or stirred the soul rather than being another path to mere convenience or complacency.

He had found that using the device was not unlike delving into a living and breathing magical experience. The stunning evidence of progress made in

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the field of virtual reality had Benedict musing that the word “virtual” could soon be replaced by something as momentous as “alternate,” regarding the technology of the device itself.

He found that he was not getting more used to it. Instead, his mind was becoming increasingly stimulated by it.

The effects of it were incredibly life-like. In fact, while using the device, there was nothing artificial about the environment that he could readily identify. Every sense of his being had been accounted for and vividly engaged, in a display of technological wizardry that he would have once thought impossible. In many ways, the exhilaration that he felt surpassed that of a substance-induced state, a state he had experienced many times over the course of his forty-two year life span.

Conceivably, it was just as addicting.

For Benedict, the blurred and transcended boundaries between reality and fantasy provided an interesting base of interest, even for some conjectures of a more mystical nature. Long a casual student of philosophies and dabbler in various religious traditions, Benedict strongly believed in the powers of the mind and the internal doors waiting to be unlocked. Those were among the more interesting topics gracing his nationally syndicated radio show.

Benedict was far from being uncritical. Privately, he felt that many of his guests were indeed delusional or even masters of fabrication. There were those, however, whose sincerity and stable demeanor led him to entertain the possibility that they might not be lying or misguided. In a minimum sense, they believed strongly that they had very good reason to take the positions that they did.

The thought of the unlocked potential of the mind had always fascinated him, and he always approached his guests and research with the open-minded hope of an adventurer or explorer. The notion that humankind only used a small percentage of their minds was obvious proof to him that there was still much more to be discovered.

He felt that the realm of spirituality, in the centuries of stories about miracle workers, visions, and happenings that defied the laws of nature, was where the extended abilities of the mind were sometimes manifested.

Even when it came to religious faith, Benedict saw the mental doors beckoning. An element of faith, Benedict reasoned, might be the key that allowed some persons to bridge the gulfs in their minds and tap into the wealth

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of potential that remained within. To him, that was what had really created the miracle stories that had been woven into human history and were even continuing in his day.

The medium of the device gave him a realm by which he could explore the impossible. It also gave him a means of challenging the understanding of reality that had been driven into him throughout all his life. From the point of childhood, the belief in the fantastical had been slowly bludgeoned deeper and deeper into the mists of the subconscious. Despite the constant onslaught, Benedict had managed to retain a faint taste of the sort of child-like imagination that knew few boundaries.

Benedict was prepared to accept that the device could turn out to be nothing more than incredibly intricate and extravagant entertainment. That was how it was going to be marketed and anyone learning of his musings would have likely found them irrational at the very least.

It was a trial that he would have to undertake alone, even amid the more accepting members of his radio program's audience. He had kept the device secret from his friends, even those in his innermost circle. He knew that they would think him to have lost his senses, if they ever knew that an entertainment prototype device was the medium by which Benedict would try to unleash the mind's dormant powers.

Nevertheless, the other side of him hoped, even if it was the slimmest of possibilities, that this perfect simulation might allow him to suspend his conscious mind just enough to open some of the inner doors that he had so often theorized about.

Whether it bore fruit or not, the experimentation was exciting for him. More than once in his life he had been reminded that the journey itself was often the most rewarding part of an endeavor. It was the idea that something was possible, or could be discovered in an increasingly frontierless world. It was the same idea that inspired his audience. Even if it had not been shown to be true or not, the potential was present.

For him, that potential alone was enough to keep motivated.

He could not help but laugh again over the seeming absurdity of the whole idea as he continued to the front door and opened it. When he had stepped beyond the threshold, he slid his Citizens Identification Card down the side slot of the keypad in his door, punching in his personal security code afterwards. He walked down the hall and took a short ride down the elevator

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to the first floor of the apartment building. Walking across the tiled floor, he opened the glass door in the front and stepped out onto the bustling streets of Troy.

Skyscrapers loomed ominously around him, reaching up into the gray skies that passed darkly overhead. His eyes watched the churning clouds visibly creep across the sky. The sky threatened inclement weather, though hopefully not before he reached the shelter of his studio facility.

Approaching the later stages of fall, gusts of air whipped through with an icy tinge. These gusts, which some affectionately termed “The Hawk,” always impacted unexpectedly and often with considerable force, like a diving bird of prey.

The prospect of sudden blasts of air kept locals alert when walking in the city streets, and provided many humorous moments of amusement when newcomers encountered the gusts for the first time. He had seen more than one ill-secured hat go flying.

He gave a momentary glance up at the camera eye that peered impassively down at him from the top of a nearby street-light. Like the others ubiquitously placed around the city, it was networked with the increasingly invasive Citizen Safety Department. Most people had come to ignore them to the degree that they deftly sank into the fabric of normal life. Benedict never ceased to consciously take note of the monitoring implements. Snickering, he found himself wishing that the wind would blow the intrusive surveillance device right off the light and dash it to the asphalt.

“I’m so glad you are watching out for my safety,” Benedict muttered, as he adjusted his coat tighter and started off down the avenue.

Nondescript pedestrians passed by him in large numbers. A life-long urban dweller, he had long ago mastered the art of moving through crowds while concentrating on something else, almost as if he were on a human form of autopilot.

The relative success of the radio show had rendered him monetarily comfortable. He counted himself very lucky, as the economy had been tightening for years, and most people had been greatly affected. Few, if any, children would boast of feeling that they would automatically do better than their parents had. Those sorts of hopes had died off in the populace long ago.

Doing well while most were struggling was nothing he felt guilt over. He had chosen and pursued his interests, and had achieved success after much

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hard work and sacrifice. He was not about to buy into the mantra of adjusting to the new global order and economy. Most politicians and pundits tried to spin that explanation to offset the discontent that people were increasingly expressing. He had one life to live, and he had found his way to living a pretty good one. There were no apologies for that, or for the kind of work that he did.

His work, as he came to increasingly realize, served an ever greater purpose within the pressure of the modern times. While he sometimes questioned the veracity of some of his guests, he knew that he had something to offer a public that lived increasingly in fear and anxiety. He dealt with the paranormal and the supernatural in a serious fashion, allowing for parameters beyond the accepted mundane world to be explored. In effect, he was selling hope, and hope was what kept everyone in the world moving onward. His listeners hoped for the usual desires, such as better jobs, new loves, health, more money and a host of other wishes, but deep down they also hoped for that which was beyond the mundane and natural.

To his view, it was the fuel behind the organized religions, that there was a hope; of something that could transcend the chains of a physical, dispassionate, biological cycle that all-too-often seemed to hold everyone in its unforgiving and random vice-grip.

At the very least, he knew that he kindled at least a notion of that kind of transcending hope for his audience. It made their daily lives a little more exciting, and to some a little easier to bear. He believed that the thin barricade of hope was what kept a delicate order in place during harder times. It was the hope that things might yet get better, that there was a better world to come, and that something divine might possibly intervene in a person's own life. The days he was now living in were certainly one of those hard times.

If that barricade ever collapsed, it would do so at a tremendous and violent cost to all.

To him, that was justification enough for occasionally entertaining some obvious fakes.

He paused for a few moments at a street corner, and waited for the light to change. A cluster of nondescript people gathered around him, while two large, broad-shouldered police troopers stood at post, chatting idly while they casually looked over the crowd. The visors on their helmets were down over their faces, yet another sign of the changes that had crept in since the

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terror-laden threats of several years past.

Security was more omnipresent and hardened in appearance than ever, though its manifestations were felt most by those that justified its presence the least. It never seemed to slow those angry or zealous enough to cast aside caution for themselves, and wreak havoc in one form or another. Sometimes they were domestic, and sometimes they were foreign, but if they disregarded their own safety they were not about to be deterred by mere law enforcement.

Benedict's cynicism rose up, as he mused that these visible safeguards were simply there to make most people believe that something was being done. Again, it was the belief that was important, but not the reality, which ironically had rendered them far less safe from the expansive powers of the government itself.

The light changed and he started across, his eyes flickering across a host of somber gazes coming towards him from the other direction. A businessman with a face streaked with worry lines frantically uttered instructions into his satellite phone. What was probably a man of the streets, with a weather-beaten face, tattered clothes, and thin gray hair, walked just a step behind. The downtrodden-looking man's face was heavily laden with worries, a countenance whose nature was in sharp contrast to that of the businessman.

Both were passed by a youth on roller blades, her stone-faced expression nodding in rhythm to the beats on her headset. A woman in the uniform of a delivery service company pushed a few boxes on a metal dolly, her demeanor pensive and impatient.

He perceived that he could have interchanged their expressions with no practical difference to the final result.

There were times when he walked down a street such as this one, that he regarded the masses around him with a look of detached pity. It was not born out of any sense of superiority or arrogance. It was simply an observation of a fact.

Most of those observed never paused a moment to question why they did what they did each and every day. For many, he knew, the experience would turn out to be frightening. For his own self, the thought of enduring a continuum of going through routine motions from day to day without serious question was infinitely more terrifying.

In some selfish sense, he wondered whether it was good that they did not question. A mass of critical minds would quickly shake the foundations of

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the nation itself. A world that demanded results and held leaders accountable to their promises would be altogether unforgiving towards the current politicians and corporate leaders. The displeasure certainly would not manifest in calm fashion.

The thought made him shudder, and he admonished himself to think more of positive things as he stepped onto the curb of the sidewalk of the next street block. Another broad smile crossed his face, prompting one of the passers-by to look at him as if he was a lunatic about to become unhinged. He had not been able to walk out of his apartment and down the street for even a few minutes without contemplating the heights of politics or the breadth of the paranormal.

‘I am pretty weird, I suppose,’ he thought lightheartedly, echoing an assessment that his friends had often concluded.

He could not help but smile as he thought of them, as he had the treasure of having a couple of close friends who were willing to tolerate and indulge his quirks and idiosyncrasies. In fact, it was one of these very friends who had entrusted him with the device that had so obsessed and occupied his thoughts these days.

Juan Delgado worked for one of the companies which was at the forefront of higher technology developments, including virtual reality simulators. The company was Babylon Technologies, and their name was known amid a worldwide mass of military and civilian clients.

Babylon Technologies was practically setting the pace when it came to the virtual reality field. They specialized in areas ranging from military applications to home entertainment, and their stock prices had long reflected that in consistent growth and splits. Their top executives mingled regularly with the leaders of governments and multi-national corporations, and Juan had bragged about a host of highly distinguished visitors that had visited the main headquarters in Troy.

Benedict’s interest was far removed from those lofty heights, and it was in the entertainment department that Benedict had found his compelling interest. It had happened when Juan had excitedly showed him a new prototype project that he had been supervising the hardware development for.

It had taken some coaxing, but Benedict was able to convince his friend to let him try it out before it was finalized for the entertainment market. It was a complete system, with full body suit, sensory helmet, and even suspension

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gear that connected with a very innovative, state-of-the-art environment Juan had been assigned to perfecting.

Juan had figured it would not be bad to have a good friend as a beta tester, and had finally relented, though not before getting Benedict to allow him to sit in on some of the more prominent interviews of his radio show.

While his friend was working on the technical side of the device, Benedict could try out the environment created within it. The subject matter underlying the world created by the device was extremely interesting to Benedict, both in a mystical and historical sense.

The device took the user into a world set far in the past, in an ancient time set just before the Great Flood alluded to in many cultures and religions.

The scenario was based upon a theological theory that the Creator had sent the Great Flood not only to deal with unrepentant humans, but also to address the problem of a special progeny of beings mentioned in the first book of the Savioran faith's scriptures.

The progeny were the result of unholy unions between mortal humans and fallen immortals of great power. These immortals were referred to in the scriptures as the "sons of God" and their offspring were deemed to be legendary beings of exceptional might.

The progeny had been endowed with immense abilities, of a level that their existence threatened the very fabric of the intended divine plan for humans. A derivative of this perspective purported that the many creatures of legend and myth, throughout all ages, were the results of some remnants that had somehow managed to escape the destruction of the Great Flood.

The whole premise fascinated Benedict. While using a theory not often discussed seriously by theologians, it did embrace an event that was historically documented by a great number of ancient societies.

Within just the past week, he had ventured into that world six times. Though his friend had explained the premise, with the idea that the device was going to become some sort of intensive adventure game in its final form, Benedict had yet to find much of anything fantastical in the rocky, desert-like terrain of the game environment. He had not encountered any of the creatures, though he became more determined to do so with each passing session.

Juan had found the reported lack of creatures to be quite surprising. The core designers had informed him that it was going to be a vibrant, action-filled game. He had thanked Benedict for the feedback and noted it for the

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programming group.

“And now you know I’ve arrived to work safely. Thank you for watching out for me,” Benedict quipped at the new camera that was fixed to the street pole near the front door of the high-rise office center where his show was broadcast from.

“I’m still not used to them either,” a low voice remarked. “Never seemed to need ‘em in the old days.”

Benedict turned and grinned towards the old security guard. He laughed, with a slight flush of embarrassment. “You caught me talking to inanimate objects again. I promise, I’m not crazy...yet, at least... and no, I can’t get used to them either.”

“Well, they say you never know if there is going to be a security threat. How many have we had in the six years that I’ve been here? Strange world these days,” the old man commented, with a nervous smile on his face.

Benedict nodded, biting back the responses that would have come from his musings just a few moments earlier, when he had passed the helmeted police officers. It was probably best, as people seemed to become more and more tense whenever a critical comment was made about the status quo.

With the cultural hesitancy to any dissent, it was, of course, a great environment to be powerful in. The thought almost prompted the iconoclastic Benedict to go ahead and make some of his thoughts known to the old man.

“Goin’ to have an interestin’ show tonight?” the old man asked politely.

“Sure am. Going to talk about some holes in the earth that you can’t find the bottom to. You going to get a chance to listen?” Benedict asked.

“Every once in awhile, I do,” the old man said, “but them holes sure sound pretty interestin’.”

“Hope you get to listen in tonight. You take care of yourself,” Benedict said as he stepped by the man and went through the revolving doorway.

After a short trip up to the 10th floor, he spent the better part of the next two hours ordering pizza, reviewing possible stories, analyzing scheduling, and contacting future guests. Night draped down on the city as the show hour neared.

The radio show went smoothly, with guests and topics focused upon the stories and accounts of the deep, seemingly bottomless holes in the earth. The listeners’ theories ranged from the science fiction to the supernatural. Some of

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the callers believed the mysterious holes had been caused by aliens, and others believed that they were actually portals to the depths of hell itself.

The guests themselves had no absolute findings on the matter, despite having done thorough investigations. Their attitude and serious methods of inquiry convinced Benedict that these were the kind of guests who really believed in what they were talking about.

Even though the subject matter was interesting, and despite having the serious type of guest that he enjoyed most, Benedict often had to catch his mind from wandering back to the device in his apartment. Though he finished a full shift, time seemed to race by in a flurry. There was just over an hour left in the night when he stepped back into the chill reigning on the streets.

There was still some traffic and a few pedestrians going about their business at the late hour. A major city never seemed to come to a stop. It was a welcome level to Benedict, for the streets were infinitely more tranquil than in prime hours. Fighting off the first signs of fatigue, Benedict yawned broadly as he looked forward to getting back to his apartment. His pace picked up as he traversed the sidewalks and streets leading up to his home, speeding the blood in his veins and sharpening his awareness. The sky above had just started to lighten from the deep black of night when he finally crossed the doors to the high edifice containing his dwelling place.

Sliding his ID card and punching the code, he entered the apartment. He tossed his overcoat back in its usual spot across the office chair and fixed himself a glass of water. Five minutes later, he was in his bedroom and had changed into a pair of sweats and a long sleeve jersey. A moment beyond that, he was setting his alarm for a few hours' nap.

When he awoke, he felt refreshed, was in a fully relaxed disposition, and was eminently ready for some digital adventures. After a brief pause to use the restroom, he continued into the second bedroom where he had set up the amazing device.

A tall, open, rectangular frame nearly filled the room. It had been surprisingly easy to assemble, and Benedict had been relieved when he found that he had just enough square footage to fit it into the room.

Cords from the frame attached to a type of advanced body suit, in which there was full pressurization technology to reflect the sensations of weight and gravity, while holding the wearer in suspension. A small, motorized platform allowed the wearer to get into the suit, and dropped away when the device was

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engaged for use.

A very intricate helmet accompanied the suit. The visor over the eyes could track his eye movements with stunning accuracy and provide a vivid, realistic display that encompassed his full peripheral vision. The helmet was even equipped with advanced olfactory effects that generated the sensation of scent in response to different stimuli encountered in the device's world. Almost unnoticeable, but no less effective, was an integrated technology that managed electric currents through his ears, aiding in the realism of balance and equilibrium.

Acute sensors derived from nanoscale technologies all throughout the bodysuit and helmet read tensions in his muscles and converted them to full movements in the virtual world, without having to fully replicate them in the real one. The initial flex of a biceps muscle translated into the bending of the arm in the virtual world without a hitch. The lining of the suit and helmet simulated feel and touch to a staggering degree, whether it was the texture of a rock held in his hand or the warm sun beating down upon his face.

Sight, sound, touch, and hearing had been expertly addressed. Taste was about the only frontier that remained to be visited. Juan had joked about the good nutritional value of virtual meals, as he indicated that taste simulations had already entered the design phase.

Once in the environment, Benedict found that it was fairly easy to forget that he was even in a suit. Everything had been designed for ultimate realism, and the designs were stunningly effective when coupled with cutting-edge, ultra-fast bio-processors capable of smooth visuals that looked as real as they possibly could be.

Truly, it was a pinnacle of achievement in both art and technology.

Turning the device on, he got into the suit, rode the platform up, attached himself to the cords from the frame, and placed his helmet on.

He uttered the basic initiating command, "Begin Simulation." In a moment, the visor screen was filled with an image that blotted out the mundane world and engulfed him.

Benedict found himself standing on dry, hard ground, looking towards a group of rocky foothills. A host of short shrubs interspersed with light grasses dotted the arid landscape.

While still bright, the sun overhead had noticeably begun its descent to the western horizon across a vast, nearly cloudless sky. He grinned as he

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saw the long shadow of himself. It was so close to reality that he “felt” the heat of the sun beating down on the back of his neck and had to squint when he turned around to glance towards it. The last vestiges of a hot day made him appreciate that the game did not mirror the time in his own world, and place him in late morning where heat would have been on the ascent.

With his back to the sun, he set off across the hard ground. The large rocky hills ahead beckoned to him, as he had found little wandering the broader plains on his previous visits.

He turned towards the rocky hills and started forward, hearing the sound of his work boots as they brushed the grasses and crunched on the harder ground. The sun continued to bathe him with its warmth, and his mind truly lost the sense of what was real and what was illusion.

A movement to his left caught his eye, and he looked just in time to see a small herd of gazelles bound away. He watched the graceful creatures head into the distance, regretting that he had startled them.

He returned his attention forward, realizing that it might not have been just him that had startled the little herd.

Some distant movements drew his eye, as he carefully regarded some shapes that were moving boldly out in the open on the edge of the horizon in front of him, with no regard for any sort of stealth. They were headed directly at him.

“Finally!” he exclaimed out loud to himself, excited at the prospect of a new wrinkle in the presentation around him.

It was time for him to go into invisible mode for observation, one of the more unique game features of the device that he had been wanting to experiment with. With other creatures around, he finally had a reason to do so.

“Invisible,” he said firmly.

If it worked like he thought, he could be like a ghost, an invisible spectator of any beings in the environment of the game.

The shapes continually drew closer, and they were gradually revealed to be a cluster of quadrapedal figures racing across the landscape.

In just moments, the creatures were much closer, running at terrific speeds towards him. Benedict could now see their deep, dark fur undulating over pulsating, rippling muscle. Their bodies worked in perfect unison, a true harmony of motion.

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Upon first impression, they looked like huge wolves. Their size was far greater than any wolves that Benedict had seen pictures of or read about. Their strong backs high off the ground, they could be ridden by a child or smaller adult human with little difficulty.

They showed no sign of recognizing him, though their close presence caused his heart to race and his nerves to tingle. He felt fear rising in him as they slowed down to a halt just a few feet from him. There were over twenty of the imposing creatures around him. They started sniffing around and circling about the area that he stood in. Even though he reminded himself that it was all just part of the game, the fear of discovery was real and sweat began to bead on his forehead.

A few of the beasts let their tongues loll about as they panted, exhibiting the gleaming, ferocious set of teeth within their long, powerful muzzles. Their feral eyes often seemed to stare right through him. A couple of times, it seemed as if one might bump into him.

He stayed silent and still, his breathing becoming short and stilted as he did not wish to make the slightest sound. He thought about exiting the device, and had to remind himself over and over that everything before him was all part of the design.

From their sudden and shifty movements, it was clear that they sensed something amiss. For several minutes, the creatures combed the area over and over. There were a few times that Benedict had to step to one side or the other to avoid impact with the creatures.

Their heads level with his chest, his mind pictured the short distance it would take for one of the massive wolves to grip his throat within its jaws. The thought brought an instant chill over his body.

His anxiety heightened quickly in the next few moments, as the chill became a freezing, paralytic fear.

One of the wolves near to him started to rear up on its hind legs.

Benedict watched, mesmerized, as the joints in its knees shifted form. With the knees inverting, the rest of the legs thickened, with many pulses along the surface of its skin. Its upper body started to expand in size, swelling to a broad magnitude. Rotating and enlarging, front paws became extended fingers that ended in wicked-looking claws. Shoulders widened as elbows rotated about. The changes were accompanied by a disturbing series of cracks and pops.

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When the process stopped, Benedict found himself looking upwards at a massive wolf standing on two legs. It stood over seven feet in height, imposing and powerful in its build. The beast's very presence was more unsettling than anything that Benedict had ever been associated with, whether rooted in fact or in fiction.

His fear multiplied before him as the rest of the lupine group echoed the transformations of the first. A couple of them were now so close that he could easily touch them, their heads towering over him. He could vividly scent their furred bodies, and he could sense that there was still a noticeable tension in the creatures.

Suddenly, he realized that he was holding his breath as he felt the need to gasp for air. The experience was just simply too real and far too terrifying.

It was well past the time to break the hold of the device. The grip of fear was too tight for him to derive any enjoyment.

"End Simulation," he said aloud, his mind racing and his heart pounding in that instant as all of the great wolf-creatures whirled to look directly at the space where he was standing. He saw the fierce visage of the first, greater wolf, an image that burned into his mind as the environment around him mercifully faded away.

He removed the helmet quickly, completely breaking away from the illusionary world. The platform came up, and he detached the suspension cables and rode it down. He removed the rest of the bodysuit and stepped off of the platform, relieved to be looking around the high-ceilinged apartment room.

His forehead was matted with sweat, and his heart was beating at a furious rate.

"It's not real. It's not real," he said out loud, repeating the phrase a few times more for added reassurance. It reminded him of the times that he had great nightmares as a child, and how desperate he had been to find evidence that he was out of the dream world and back awake. His eyes wide, and sweat still trickling down his face, he walked away from the platform.

He shuffled out of the room and continued on to the front of his apartment. He sprawled out on a soft blue couch and pondered the recent experience. Benedict marveled at his extreme level of fear. While the device was a created world, the fear inside of him was real.

He realized that the emotions also seemed to have been magnified,

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each impulse being like that in a dream. He had wanted to see something vivid in the device, and he had gotten far more of an experience than he had expected.

After he had regained his breath and sensibilities, he got up and walked into the kitchen. Reaching into a cupboard, he retrieved a glass and poured himself some cold water. Taking a few gulps, he continued to let his breathing settle down further. The fear steadily dissipated, allowing him to think more critically about the experience.

In a strange manner, an urge to return to the game began to peck at him. His curious nature was now fighting its way back against the feelings of fear, which he knew were largely irrational.

No matter how real the game world seemed, he knew that the device had fabricated the place. He could have it turned on or off whenever he desired. In fact, it was much easier to depart the game than it was to leave dreams. At the very least, it was a solid power that he could confide in.

He had wanted to engage in the storyline of the game, and find out what kind of fantastical creatures there were within it. He had finally made some progress, only to get unnerved and turn off the game right away. Chastising himself for having the silly fears, he hardened his mind towards giving the device another try.

Within a few more minutes, he had forgotten much of his anxiety, and resolved himself to experiment a little longer. He set the glass down on the kitchen counter and made his way back to the second bedroom.

ARIANNA

Arianna crossed the road to where her yellow hybrid car stood in the shade of some trees, almost as if it were patiently awaiting her. The day had passed quickly, if not too swiftly for her tastes. The older maples, oaks, and other venerable trees of the national forest harbored a number of beatific images that she had captured over the past several hours. Her new digital camera was

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nearly limitless in its appetite, and she made certain it gorged on the feast of sights recognized by her eye.

A weekday, the various areas she visited were largely devoid of other human presence. The weekend would bring its usual wave of boorish pseudo-campers, who would succeed only in leaving trash and distressing the local fauna. She loathed those types of fools. Fortunately, they held no dominion on the weekdays that she cherished.

Carefully budgeting her time, she visited several of her favorite, prime locations. Her list included an overlook formed by a rock outcropping from an extended arm of one of the mountains. Another place held a waterfall that fell from a high ridge. A third featured a rock in the shape of a half-moon, which often served as a challenge to the local rock climbers. The shadows of the approaching evening formed another wave of opportunities for the camera eye.

Reviewing some of the images in the camera's small screen, she looked forward to getting back home and making prints of them. She had a new stack of high quality photo paper and her printer was primed.

Despite the enthusiasm, she feared that she might have to delay her prints until the next day. She sensed that fatigue would soon be determining her itinerary for the evening. The hiking had added up over the course of the day, tiring out her muscles' energy stores, while the peaceful solitude of the preceding hours had put her into a relaxed mood. Her roommate, Maureen, would probably be out for the evening and there was little chance of a disturbance.

Using the keyless entry, she opened up driver's side and got into the seat. She set her camera bag down on the passenger seat beside her, inserted the starter key, and brought the engine to life.

The reddish sun was setting ever lower as she navigated the winding roads running their course through the mountainous area. Arianna had the satellite radio set to a contemporary pop station. The channel sounded a little out of place after a full day where the only music was that of gurgling streams, breezes passing through foliated tree branches, and the exuberant singing of birds.

Taking a ramp onto the interstate, she was securely on the highway by the time darkness finally fell upon the land. She set her sights on the far glow of Louistown, the city lights casting their ambience on the horizon. Her head

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started nodding a bit, so she turned the air conditioner on to extreme cold and rolled down her windows. It was an extra precaution to the weariness that was beginning to claim her body.

Her mind drifted to the next day, when she would have had rested for the evening and regained her strength. About a six hour drive separated her from the city of Troy. The air would be a little colder there, but the trip would be a welcome diversion. She urged herself to remember to set an early alarm so that she could make some prints for the trip. Her uncle always seemed to enjoy her photos, his pleasure appearing to derive from both a purely aesthetic perspective as well as a sense of familial pride in her.

Her uncle, from her father's side, was one of the more entertaining people that she could have ever hoped to know. That he was a famous radio show host, albeit of quirky subject matters, was an added bonus.

She never resisted his invitations, if at all possible. She smiled to herself when she thought about how enthusiastically he had spoken of some new device that he had recently borrowed from a designer friend of his. He had promised her that she would find it to be one of the most exciting experiences that she had ever known. She also would have the privilege of being one of the first people in the country to use the device.

Though a grown man, she loved the fact that he never had lost his child-like sense of wonder and real hope in the impossible. That kind of sense was dulled to extinction in everyone else that she knew of her uncle's age, including her own father.

It almost angered her to see the patronizing looks that were born on the faces of the committed unbelievers whenever Benedict was espousing some new interest that he was researching. Though she had never openly spoken to him about it, she doubted that Benedict could fail to notice their condescending aspersions.

While she did not have a firm belief in the tales of ghosts, aliens, and phenomena that permeated her uncle's show, she was not so pompously certain as to discount the possibilities outright. There was nothing exciting about the mundane, and it would not disappoint her in the least to see her uncle eventually prove the doubters wrong. Ghosts and aliens were more than welcome in her world, as were any phenomena that would demonstrate that there was much more to the world and beyond. After all, as Benedict constantly reminded her, there had to be some truth to the legends that gripped the minds of humankind

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for century after century.

The thoughts brought a smile to her face, and she experienced a bit of a second wind that helped her to reach Louistown without further difficulty. Reaching her apartment, she paused only to get a small bite to eat and change for the night before setting her alarm and lying down in her bed.

Her mind was restless and she looked forward to the next morning. Despite the fatigue, it still took her some time in the silent dark of her room before she finally fell asleep.

BENEDICT

He swiftly got into the bodysuit and secured the attachments. Setting the game on, he found himself at about the same point that he had exited. The rough landscape with its fearsome, two-legged wolves surrounded him. As they came into focus, they whirled about to face him. Their muzzles crinkled as they bared their teeth and a chorus of angry growls came from deep in their throats.

Benedict realized that he had not put himself into the invisible mode, and the initial fears surged back up in him. Almost uttering the command to shut down the simulation, he reminded himself that it was just a game, but the reminders did nothing to lessen the realistic appearance of the creatures surrounding him.

“Who are you?” one of the great beasts thundered, taking a cautious step towards him.

The wolf-creature was the one that he had seen make the first transformation from four legs to two. While he heard the words in his own language on the surface, he could hear a deep, growling language uttered underneath the words themselves. It made sense enough to him, and he marveled that the device would take into account that he would not know of languages used in ages long ago. The detail of it simply was fascinating.

“I...am...” Benedict started nervously, his will to talk sapped by the

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fear that had rushed back into him and now froze him in place. He drew silent, stunned into inaction by the mere presence of the creature addressing him. His mind clung desperately to the thought that this was all part of the game.

“You are not from here. You are an outlander,” the beast stated.

“Yes...” Benedict replied in a near whisper. He could say little else, nearly mesmerized by the spectacle before him.

One of the other beasts, this one more massive and a full head taller than the one addressing Benedict, stepped right up to him. Benedict’s eyes remained riveted to the pearly white, sharp teeth behind the curled lips. The inhuman eyes regarded him, holding him firmly in their gaze. He felt the hot breath of the creature upon his face.

“You come into our lands. For what purpose?” the beast inquired in a hard tone, a snarl coming to its lips.

Benedict paused for several moments, unable to speak or move. The great wolf-creatures started encircling him, clearly agitated as their growls grew louder. After a few moments, he finally decided to play along with conversation as part of the game, to try and get into the spirit of the world of the device. “I ... come from a future time and place. Nobody sent me... I have no mission here... I...am just an observer.”

The great wolf seemed to consider his reply. “Future? I do not know your words. How can we know you are not of the Night Hunters?”

The words “Night Hunters” were said with a malevolent hatred woven into them, almost as if they were spat out. As if to accent the words, a drop of saliva dripped off of the tip of one of its massive canine teeth. Benedict needed no translation in his own language, to know the anger contained in the visage before him. The mere mention of “Night Hunters” caused the rest of the fearsome group to growl and snarl menacingly about him.

Benedict looked at the wolf with utter confusion. He had no idea what Night Hunters were. Juan had not told him anything of Night Hunters, nor any detail of these wolf-creatures, and he found himself hopelessly unprepared for the query. He decided to be as honest as he could, and continue to role play in the game.

“My name is Benedict, and I have come back to this time from the future...or years ahead of this one. I know nothing of Night Hunters, and I have no intentions to harm you,” he stammered, nearly tripping over the words with his tongue.

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The great beast leaned forward, its gaze seeming to bore right through his body. Its elongated muzzle was only inches away, and Benedict could once again feel its heated breath upon his face. He felt as if his heart would stop as he looked into the entrancing, golden eyes of the wolf-creature.

“You speak truth,” the wolf-creature finally said, after several agonizing moments of silence. The angered wrinkles in its snout smoothed, and the fiery look in its feral eyes cooled. Its triangulated ears, which were flattened to the sides of its skull, perked back upwards. The horrific jaws withdrew from close to Benedict as the creature rose to its full height. “I believe you. But you must come back with us to the Great Cave. You shall ride upon my back.”

The words were stated as if an order, and it was clear that the wolf-creatures were not going to allow him any other options.

Leaning forward, the beast shifted back with the accompanying series of pops and cracks. After it had regained the form of a giant, four-legged wolf, it looked back to Benedict.

“I am called Godral,” the wolf said in introduction.

Settling down, the beast indicated for Benedict to sit upon its back. Benedict tentatively stepped forward and carefully straddled the creature. With little effort, it stood up. Benedict found his legs picked up off of the ground, his feet dangling a short distance off the ground. The creature was even larger than he had first estimated.

“You may grab onto my fur,” the creature instructed him.

Dutifully, Benedict reached down and took a fist full of hair and skin in each hand from just above the shoulder joints of the beast.

With rippling muscle contracting, the large wolf leaped forth and was bounding at full speed in just seconds. It was all that Benedict could do to keep his posture and balance. The others in the group had shifted to four-legged forms as well, and loped alongside the great wolf.

Though a city dweller, Benedict had gained some experience with riding horses during his life’s travels. He knew without question that he was riding at an incredible speed, likely faster than any horse would have been able to achieve. The ground was a blur beneath, and he felt the air beat powerfully against his face.

A small part of him wondered at the amazing illusion created by the device, for he realized that his very senses had once again been tricked into genuine belief that it was a real experience.



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The strong paws dug into the dry soil and kicked up whirling bursts of dust as the wolves nimbly navigated the shrubs, demonstrating an incredibly smooth and dexterous agility.

Gradually, their course took them into new terrain as they reached the base of the rocky hills. There was no hesitation as they ascended a path along the slope of one of the hills. The sun had begun to lower on the horizon. The temperature had already dropped many degrees as they loped along in the relative shade of the large hillside, their path taking them on its eastern side.

The wolves eventually slowed their gait as they turned to surmount the steeper hillside, to a point higher up towards the crest. Reaching a thin strip of even ground that hugged the side of the hill as it meandered along its side, they picked up their pace again. Rounding the top of the slope, the fading rays of the setting sun fell upon them directly, causing Benedict to squint. The path then descended for a short stretch. After adjusting his sight to the glare, he saw that they were trotting towards the entrance of a large cave that stood about midway up the hill.

Reaching the entrance, the wolves came to a full stop. The wolf that he was riding lowered itself to allow him to dismount. Looking into the interior of the cave, he could see nothing for the outside light seemed to be sucked up completely just a few feet inside the gaping entrance.

The wolves around him reverted to their bipedal forms. Several others had emerged out of the cave to join them, their attentions drawn quickly to Benedict.

At the cave opening, several of the newcomers that had emerged parted to clear a path, which was taken by a very impressive specimen of their ilk. The wolf that walked towards Benedict was easily greater of mass and height than any around it. It was a presence that exuded great authority, reflected in the deference that the other wolves gave it.

The body of the wolf was very powerful in form, with muscle lines coursing from torso to legs. Its fur was mainly a deep, rich black that gave off a decidedly somber aura in the dimming twilight. The fur was sprinkled with some gray, as was evident around its muzzle and eyes, giving a sense that this wolf was of an older age. Golden eyes bored into Benedict, the gaze both mesmerizing and frightening. The eyes gave the sense of a deep wisdom, intelligence, and experience, a sensation that startled Benedict more than the inhuman nature of them.

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It spoke with a low, slightly menacing voice that made it quite evident that the creature had not decided whether Benedict was to be regarded as a friend or foe. The great beast fixed its attention on the wolf that had borne Benedict to the cave.

“Godral, who is this? Why have you brought him here?” the creature queried.

Godral paused a moment before replying. “It is a human. An outlander. Not like the others. We are sure. He is called Benedict. He says that he does not know of the Night Hunters.”

The larger beast regarded Benedict intently as Godral spoke, taking another couple steps closer and bringing its large muzzle to within just a couple feet of Benedict, as the other wolf had done out on the plain. It appeared to stare deeply into him for a few moments and, like the first, seemed to be satisfied in its inquiry. Finally, it broke the stillness, “Very well. Then, human, you shall come with me.”

The large wolf turned and strode into the cave opening.

“Follow him,” Godral said firmly at Benedict’s apparent hesitation.

Tentative, Benedict mustered his composure as best as he could and forced himself to take steps forward. The logical side of him would have argued that no image generated by an electronic device, no matter how real, could harm him. That part of him was now even further in the background, and it was with great trepidation that he crossed the threshold to the subterranean lair.

He stepped into the cool darkness of the cave interior. The beast ahead of him continued to speak, providing a sense of direction through its deep voice.

“I am Sargor, and chieftain of the North Clan,” it said calmly. “I do not know what land you call home, but others like you have come before. They have been different, these past outlanders. The sense in you is different. We could see that they were friends of the Night Hunters. You would not be here now if there was even the slightest scent of the Night Hunters upon you.”

The words were not stated as a threat, but as simple fact. Nevertheless, the words made cold beads of sweat emerge on Benedict’s forehead as his heart rate quickened.

The path sloped steadily downward, as they descended into the lower depths of the rocky hill. They walked in relative darkness for a stretch, and

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only the voice and presence of the great wolf-creature encouraged Benedict to step forward. Walking in full darkness amid such creatures was not reassuring, and Benedict's nerves began to fray once again.

Mercifully, a small glow became visible off in the distance, and Benedict could perceive that they were rounding a very large, gently curving bend. The air was crisp, and the inhalation of it reminded Benedict of days long in the past, by the lakes near his childhood home.

He and some other boys had once found a little cave and went exploring as the soft air of evening was starting to settle. As kids were, the experience was full of imagination and newness, and the textures of the visit, including the vivid sense of the air in the caves, had never left him.

The memories had merely waited for a simple suggestion to uncover them once again. The recollection was triggered in those moments that he followed Sargor. As they brought a pleasant time to mind, it brought a welcome sense of ease to counter the fears that he worked to stave off in his head.

The glow ahead increased as they rounded the bend, until he found himself in an expansive, lit chamber. Fires set atop small rock pillars, made of several broad stones stacked on top of each other, illuminated the space. The chamber was generally circular, with jagged walls of rock bordering it. The floor was worn smooth, forming a large, semi-circle out of half the small cavern. The other half consisted of a large pool of water, almost a natural cistern set deep into the earth. On the opposite wall, chiseled into the rock, there was a vivid set of images. Rising out of the water nearly twelve feet, the sight captivated Benedict's attention the second that his eyes came upon it.

The stone carving was of two non-human figures. Nearly intertwining, they engaged in a dance of war. Though not intricate, the nature of the figures was clearly represented. One was one of the wolf-like creatures, in its two-legged form. Its elongated snout was rippled around its mouth, its fangs bared in a snarling visage as it faced its opponent. Its pointed ears lay back flat on the sides of its head. One arm was stretched out, the veritable talons at the end poised to strike the other creature. The other arm was in the process of some type of motion, though the thrust was towards its enemy's midsection.

Benedict shuddered to think what the impact of that type of blow, from one of the wolf-creatures, would do to his own midsection.

The wolf-creature was fearsome enough, but it was the other creature that made Benedict feel extremely unsettled. It was something beyond his

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imagination. Slightly man-like in its structure, it stood a full head taller and almost half-again as broad in the shoulder as the wolf-creature. Its two arms and two legs exhibited a powerful, bulging muscularity. The head of the beast was extremely large, about twice that of its opponent. The top of its head was fairly flat, except for two semicircular protrusions, one on each side. The tips of the horns pointed back at each other over the top of the great cranium.

It had two large, bulbous eyes below an extended ridge that ran across its forehead. Despite the dim light, and the cool hardness of the stone, Benedict could almost feel the hateful animosity emanating from the creature's gaze.

Underneath the broad eyes were two small slits, which he took to be some sort of nose. Below that was a mouth that shook Benedict's psyche, for its open cavity showed off a fearsome array of three rows of teeth both upper and lower. The teeth were pointedly sharp, and were like swords to knives in comparison to the fangs of the wolf-creature.

At the end of each of its hands and feet were six extended digits that ended in dagger-like claws. The beast looked to be exceedingly formidable, and the portrayed combat looked to be an utter mismatch.

Benedict broke the silence. "Sargor, what is this sculpture of? And what is that thing on the right?" He pointed to the strange, horned creature to the left of the wolf-creature in the relief.

"The carving is a memorial, done by a human friend of our clan," Sargor said, his voice somber. His eyes rested reverently on the carving, their golden color flickering in the light of the flames about the chamber. "It is of a battle that once occurred between the greatest of our clan, Xiaten, and one of the Night Hunters that continue to slay our kind.

"I was young in those days. Xiaten was our clan leader. A Night Hunter discovered a cave in which our young were being kept. Xiaten fought the Night Hunter so that we could get our young to safety, and escape. He survived long enough for us to get away, giving his own life freely and willingly. A human, from a tribe friendly with our race, labored on this so that we would never forget Xiaten's sacrifice."

Sargor's voice seemed to carry him away to a time and place vivid in his mind. He grew contemplative and quiet.

"It will sadden me when we have to leave this behind, for no home is ours for long," Sargor stated heavily after a few moments.

"Are there more of those things?" Benedict said, referring to the Night

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Hunters.

The great wolf-creature turned to stare at Benedict for a moment, as if in disbelief at the question.

“They are out there in the world, but they have turned their attention to the human settlements. They come in many forms. Some mingle with humans, and they do not attack their settlements as they do ours. We know not from where they come. We have tried to warn the humans of the danger of the Night Hunters, but they do not listen.

“Often they worship the Night Hunters as gods. Sometimes, when we have tried to warn the humans, the Night Hunters then seek us again. Some human tribes have even given help to the Night Hunters in hunting for those of my race. There are times when our kind has hurt ourselves, as some clans have embraced violence and hunted humans and created fear among many. Ours never has, and has always befriended others of the family of the Creator.

“We do not know how to defend ourselves against the Night Hunters, for they have slain many of the greatest of our warriors and we have never seen one of them slain,” Sargor replied. “My own turn could come any day, for the strongest among us will sacrifice so that the others may survive.”

The tone of the wolf-creature’s voice, under the words that Benedict understood, was mournful though the clan chief was clearly resolved to the potential fate.

Benedict took a deep breath, his mind now completely forgetting any notion that what was around him was artificial. The tale unnerved him, and he feared for the wolves if one of the Night Hunters were to manifest. He felt a deep empathy of sorrow and frustration for the plight of the wolf-creature and its clan.

He offered Sargor another question, speaking softly. “If I came from without, and you do not know where the Hunters are from, then how did you truly know that I am not in league with them?”

“Our race can sense the natures in beings. We can sense the power of dark forces, as we can sense the power of those of the forces of light. It is a gift from the Creator, maybe the greatest gift which has helped my race to survive in these times,” Sargor replied.

The stated ability amazed Benedict, though he could not understand it fully. He looked towards Sargor with increased wonder.

“That is truly a gift. I wish I was able to do so in my own world. It



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is a gift that humans could really use,” Benedict replied ruefully, thinking of the intricate layers of deception that humans could generate over their true selves. In his opinion, if the wolves were masters of sensing, then humans were masters of obstruction.

“You are one of the only ones of your kind to say such words, and it shows that you have wisdom. Most of your race turns against us or do not desire our help,” Sargor said, his voice downcast.

“My race tends not to value wisdom,” Benedict commented, walking slowly over to the water’s edge. “And they fear and strike at that which they don’t know. You should know that my race has not changed that much in those ways, over the next couple thousand years from where you are now. Some things are never learned, it seems.”

“Those are not good tidings,” Sargor said. “Though I would like to know of your world, and the time that you speak of.”

“Maybe I should take you to visit my world,” Benedict replied, halfway jesting. “The story of my world is one that will take much time. I would like to share it with you later, but soon I must return to my own world.”

“I hope that you will come among us again. And I would like to hear your tales,” Sargor replied, his voice steady and strong. He paused for a second and regarded Benedict, “You are welcome among us.”

Benedict drew his eyes up to look at the clan leader, this time not so frightened at the gaze that met him. The eyes of the creature were not so untamed or feral, he realized. They held an aged wisdom and profound intelligence, and he found that he was already less afraid of the creature’s form.

“I will, Sargor. I will.”

As the clan leader looked on, Benedict focused and uttered the command that ended the session. The quickness of the cessation was disconcerting, as the coolness of the cave, and the flickering chamber with the wolf-creature chieftain vanished in a flashing moment.

Benedict removed his helmet and took a few deep breaths as he readjusted to the stark reality of the apartment room surrounding him.

The vivid realism had entirely captivated him once again, and he could hardly believe that the experience that he had just had was simply a function of the material device. He could not wait to tell Juan about his latest thoughts, and he longed to get rested so that he could soon revisit the wolf-creature clan

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leader.

He looked on the experience almost as if it was no game. For him, it had now become a means of teleportation to a far distant time and place.

Beckoning to him was the prospect that there was so much more to learn about that distant, past world.

AN ANCIENT TIME

The last of the creatures loped tired and exhausted into the narrow ravine. Their tongues lolled out between their long, sharp fangs, and their sides heaved with arduous breaths, as the remnant of survivors had been pushed beyond all limits.

Formidable hunters, they had been reduced to little more than a haggard group of relentlessly pursued prey. Fear and desperation pushed them onward, the only sliver of hope being that all the monstrosities involved in the infliction of the recent carnage were the only ones participating in the brutal attack upon the victims' clan.

Their young had been slain without mercy, torn apart by razor sharp claws and teeth that struck with blinding speed and immense force. The courageous and steadfast leader of the clan had fallen in the initial moments of the attack that had erupted out of the cold dark.

Only a scant few had escaped the horrific storm of violence, streaking into the darkness after seeing that all of their kin had already been slain. A few had hesitated as the horror of the scene overrode their instincts, and these had swiftly met the same gruesome and bloody fate.

It was not yet certain as to whether those that had acted or those that had hesitated had taken the more merciful path.

Slowing down into a labored trot, the beleaguered creatures could only hope that they could somehow find a place of refuge. Each would have considered it a tremendous miracle to simply make it through the night.

The tiny shards of hope were for naught, as no miracles were to come

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to them on this terrible night.

They barely perceived the enveloping shadows that abruptly fell upon them, just a moment before malignant and rapacious deaths descended out of the night skies. Their agonized cries echoed off the walls of the ravine, as talons slashed through their coarse coats of fur with remarkable ease, tearing deep into the flesh and muscle lying just underneath.

Even the strongest and most well-rested member of their clan would have been no match for the winged monstrosities plummeting down upon them from the upper skies. The strongest of their clan already lay bloodied and dead just a couple of miles back, all of their best warriors having rapidly succumbed to the withering, encompassing assault. As during other such lethal ambushes upon their kind, the fastest and mightiest of the clan had entangled the nightmarish attackers for the precious few moments needed for the others to get away.

A male and female at the very forefront of the hunted group lunged forward together, with all of the willpower that they could muster. The cold night air felt like the icy presence of death shrouding their bodies as they tried to break into a run once again. Desperation empowered depleted muscles, sparking a burst of energy that was far less than enough.

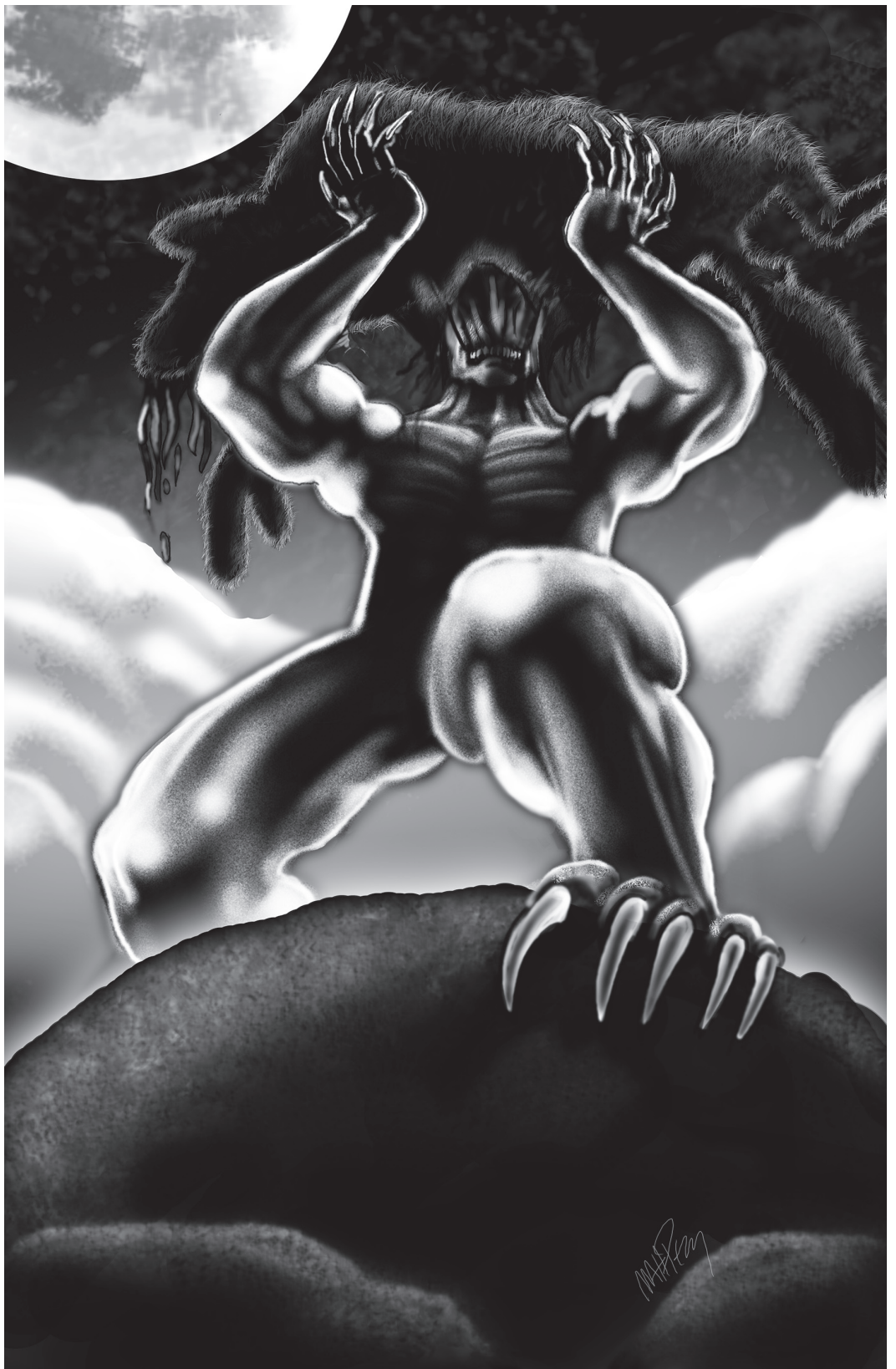
The female, named Kuram, had her back legs taken out from underneath by a vicious, raking slash that instantaneously crippled her. The male, Jathis, was forcefully pinned down to the ground, with four sets of long talons driving deep into his flesh.

Both rendered utterly helpless, each expected the killing blows to be imminent. To their great astonishment, their tormentors held back the final blows, seemingly content to leave them in their defenseless condition.

Jathis and Kuram did not have long to wonder about the strange development, as they felt the vibrations underneath them, coming from rhythmic, heavy impacts upon the ground. The thudding reverberations came from a series of heavy, ponderous steps landing upon the ravine floor, as two immense entities approached.

Jathis felt the heavy weight abruptly lift off of his back, as the sounds of flapping wings came to his triangular ears a few moments later. Jathis tensed and whined with the agony coursing all through his grievously wounded body, after the talons had disengaged from the deep punctures inflicted upon him.

Without anything hindering her further movements, using her still-



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capable forelegs, Kuram struggled desperately to pull herself across the rough ground toward her bleeding companion.

As the cruelty of fate would have it, Jathis and Kuram were life-mates. Overwhelming sorrow contested with the primal fears swirling in both of them, as they each perceived the plight of the other in the cold light of a hard and unforgiving truth.

Inhuman bellows then shook the ravine's walls as the two towering entities bore down upon the prostrate creatures. Powerful, immense hands roughly gripped the bodies of the wounded creatures without mercy, ripping forth agonized cries from the life-mates as they were effortlessly hoisted up into the chilly night air.

Kuram stared in abject horror into a huge, gaping maw, imbued with fetid breath from the flesh of many other living beings that the malevolent giant had recently gorged itself upon. The enormous being seemed to savor the helpless, half-paralyzed state of its victim, holding the forlorn creature before its array of spiky teeth for several torturously long moments. Its eyes glittered with a barbarous madness, even as its slavering jaws opened wider.

With her front legs, Kuram in the gargantuan entity's grasp flailed helplessly. The giant had her gripped firmly under the throat with one massive hand, and under one rear leg with the other. The giant slowly raised Kuram higher, rotating her body and bringing it in towards its huge jaws. The monstrosity clamped down with tremendous force upon the exposed midsection of the effectively immobilized creature. Blood splattered and poured forth with Kuram's entrails, as the giant ripped away at the hot flesh of its doomed victim.

Jathis was being held in a similar fashion. He howled out in agony, not at any physical wound but rather at the gruesome sight that he was being forced to witness. Jathis's eyes glistened with the sadness that consumed all of his remaining desire for life, helplessly watching the ferocious slaying of his beloved life-mate.

Had the ill-fated creature looked into the eyes of the giant holding it at that horrid moment, Jathis would have witnessed the undeniable gleam of pleasure that the vile entity took in his very emotive display of anguish.

Once the giant's comrade was beginning to feast upon the body of the still-living Kuram, the monstrous entity then lifted Jathis far above its broad head. With a savage roar, the titan hurled Jathis downward with tremendous

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force to smash his body against the rocky ground. Jathis's body shattered at once in the sheer force of the impact. In the explosive act of violence, a small degree of mercy had been inadvertently given to Jathis, in that death came to him very quickly.

When the very last breath escaped his shuddering body, it was the final exhale within the living world by a member of the once-proud and vibrant clan.

The first giant, named Hivvah, looked to his brother Hiyyah, his mouth spread in a wicked smile of joy. His teeth gleamed in the cold moonlight from the gore that coated them.

Hiyyah returned the malefic grin, throwing his head back and letting loose a roar of victory that shook the heavens. The high exuberance was mutual, as both of the titanic brothers knew that their exalted father would be very pleased with them.

As Hiyyah began to partake of his grisly meal, the sounds of flaps filled the air as the two other hunters that had temporarily departed returned. Though bearing no outward resemblance to the two brothers, they were all very close kin by their nature and lineage.

The ravine resounded for a long time afterward with the noises of the winged beasts and giants alike, as they all sated their voracious appetites.

ARIANNA

Arianna walked up to the familiar apartment door and rapped her knuckles firmly on its shiny surface. After a few moments, she heard the bolt being sharply drawn back. The door slowly swung open.

"Hi Arianna. Long time, no see," greeted her uncle, a smile on his face. "Good to see you again."

"Hi Uncle Benedict, it's good to see you too," she replied.

Since the last time that she had seen him, he looked a little worse for

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wear.

His frame, though always slightly on the heavy side, was bearing a little more weight than she had last remembered. His thinning brown hair, always unkempt to a degree, hung to just below his ears. The shadowy onset of a beard framed his lower face. Her uncle's brown eyes had a tired look about them, and she could tell that he was not getting much sleep.

After giving her a welcoming embrace, he led her to the living room and procured a cola for her from the kitchen. Pouring himself a glass of tea, he returned and flopped down on a plush easy chair, indicating for her to take a seat on the couch on the other side of a low, glass-topped coffee table.

"Nice television for just decoration," Arianna quipped, seeing a large painting leaning up against and obstructing a wide-screen high definition television set.

"Why bother," retorted Benedict. "Just more terror alerts, upcoming wars, and other diatribes to scare the population half to death. And there's hardly an iota of intellectual value in the rest of the regurgitated programming. No, I tend to pass and focus on my work."

"Which I hear is going fairly well," Arianna said, with a proud grin. "I do catch the show more often than you might think."

Benedict chuckled. "Then I shudder to imagine what you think of your uncle."

"Oh, I've always known you are absolutely crazy," she replied, in a matter-of-fact sense, before she could hold back her laughter no longer.

Her uncle shook his head, "No hiding from you, oh dearest niece. So, how did your ride go?"

"About as exciting as six hours in a vehicle can go," she said, while rummaging around in a canvas bag she had brought in with her. She pulled out a stack of prints and handed them across the coffee table to Benedict. "And before I forget, here are some pictures that I took recently. I know you prefer the hard copies over the digital."

Her uncle chuckled at her last words as he looked through the photos, nodding and smiling as he studied the assorted images. He paused for a few extra moments on some particular pictures, savoring the magical life that she had captured within the forests. "Yes, thank you for remembering that I prefer old-fashioned hard copy. And yes, it looks like you are developing quite a good eye, Arianna. I'm reluctant to pass these back."

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“Hang on to them. I can print more. I’m working at it bit by bit. Doesn’t happen overnight,” Arianna replied with an amiable grin. “But it gives me an excuse to get out in nature a little more often.”

“You probably have been making good use of that nice cabin house that your father has,” Benedict suggested.

“I go whenever I can spare the time. Secluded enough, which is best for me to begin with. I’m afraid I’m not entirely immune to the fast world of today,” she commented, before turning the subject. “So, how has the radio show been treating you?”

“Paying the bills well enough, I have to admit. I have a couple of particularly interesting guests coming up next week. One is a scientist with a drilling project working with the southern glaciers. Another is a spirit medium that seems to be pretty genuine to me, and I’ve gotten pretty good at ferreting out the nutballs. The medium is a lady from up north. You ought to listen in to that program for sure. It should be some pretty good stuff.”

“If you believe it, it must be something. You’ve heard it all by now, I’m quite sure,” Arianna said, grinning.

“I have certainly heard it all,” Benedict replied, chortling as he thought of a few guests that he had hosted over the years. There were times he had almost lost composure on the air and burst out laughing at some of the inanities spouted by various guests.

“What about this thing you mentioned to me on the phone?” she asked him.

“Well, you are in for a really nice surprise today. I do know that you keep up with the new visual technologies, or so I’ve heard from your quite informative father,” he said.

“I tend to, but I am finding it pretty hard to keep up with all of the new developments. Everything is moving so very fast,” Arianna replied.

“Yes, it does move fast. Perhaps everyone needs to be careful that it doesn’t move so fast that it suddenly controls us,” he responded. “But wait until you see this new device that I have. You won’t believe it. I can promise you that.”

The excitement in his voice could barely be contained.

“I probably won’t believe it, but I have been looking forward to seeing it. Anything that really grabs your attention like this must be rather unusual,” Arianna replied.

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Benedict regarded her face, with its angled cheek and jaw lines, and sharp nose. Most of her strong, angular facial features contrasted with her soft, blue eyes. He could see many versions of her in just one glance, as he had known her ever since the day that she was born to his brother's wife.

Her qualities mirrored the range of her physical features. Determined, ambitious, and intelligent, his niece was also empathic and had always exhibited a high degree of compassion for others. She had always been his favorite relative, and was one of the few in his immediate and extended family that had always taken him seriously.

"I'm very excited about this one. It is unbelievable. I can't believe how far things have come in just a few years. This device is a quantum leap beyond what there was five years ago," he observed.

"I know that feeling. My latest workstation is a leap over what there was just five months ago," Arianna joked, showing off her bright, white smile.

"Maybe so, but I don't think that your computer can fool your sight, taste, smell, hearing, and touch to a level where you forget you are not in a real world," he answered, his tone entirely serious.

"Now don't tease me about it unless you are going to let me try the thing out. You are being all too cruel," she retorted, her face scrunched up in a mock pout. Again, she could not hold her playfulness back for long, breaking into a laugh.

"That's me. So tyrannical," he replied to her sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

Benedict got up from the chair, albeit with a little effort, and went into his kitchen. By the counter on the stove, he picked up a set of keys.

"Since there are only a few more hours left in the day, I am going to be very mean and ask that you wait until later to try the device. What do you say to us going out, and letting you see what's new in the real world first?" he asked.

"Later? After all of your hype? You truly know how to bring agony to your poor niece," she returned, chuckling. "But I guess we can wait until later."

"Your patience is admirable, especially in this day and age," he replied, smirking. "But there is a company I would like you to visit while you are here this weekend. So at least you know where the device came from."

Arising from the couch, with a little more fluidity than her uncle had

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demonstrated, she responded, “Sounds good to me. So let’s get started on the trip.”

The two of them left the apartment behind a moment later, and rode the elevator down to the street level. The weather was rather balmy for the time of year, and the air currents calmer, conferring the blessing of a pleasant atmosphere for a walk through the downtown area.

Steadily growing as they headed towards it, the object of their destination loomed ever larger.

It was only a few blocks walk to the Troy offices of the massive Babylon Technologies corporation. Located in a prominent, ornately designed, modern edifice near the epicenter of the sprawling city, the offices served as the new Midwest headquarters for the rapidly growing, internationally strong high technology firm.

GODRAL

Godral and Sargor silently regarded each other for a few moments, their fearsome visages displaying the grim thoughts that they held within them. In two-legged form, the two towering wolves cast long shadows in the mouth of the large cave. The air had cooled considerably as night fell upon the desert hills and shrub-covered lands spread beyond. Aside from some sentinels and a couple of patrols, most of the large clan had retreated into the depths of the cave for the night.

The unexpected visit of the strange human had raised a number of questions in both of them, and the potential answers did not seem to be easy in the least.

As the high clan leader, Sargor was deeply concerned with any possible danger to the clan. Devout and loyal to Sargor, Godral strongly echoed the great sense of unease.

The old clan chieftain looked into the eyes of the younger, fiery warrior.

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Godral returned the gaze resolutely, searching the eyes of his mentor and leader for some indication of the direction that he wanted to take.

“Was he a Messenger from the Life Giver? Was he just a human, from a time other than ours...as he said?” asked Godral.

The other shook his great muzzle slowly from side to side. “I do not know, Godral. I did not sense the purity in him that a Messenger would have...I did not sense the Darkness within him, like a Hunter. I cannot say. His words may be true.”

Godral considered the chieftain’s words. He knew, without a doubt, that the one who had called himself Benedict did not have ties with the Night Hunters. If Benedict had the slightest scent on him of the Darkness that pervaded the Hunters, then the patrol would have set upon him at once, without hesitation or even the slightest fear for their own lives.

The clan had gone undisturbed at their current settlement for a few fortuitous years. The good fortune flew against the darker winds blowing across the surface of their world. In both human settlements and the tidings of other clans, the presence of Hunters and their powerful progenitors were growing ever more common.

With each passing day, many of the younger warriors showed a precipitous rise in apprehension. The Hunters, and their progenitors, pursued their race tirelessly and mercilessly. Each warrior knew that discovery could mean the imminent slaughter of their clan, the mere notion of which was enough to send them into a rabid frenzy.

“If it be your will, I will place patrols farther out. I can send some scouts to the human settlements, to trade and gain what word that they can,” Godral answered. “We will soon know if there is a threat nearing us.”

“We will learn what we can learn. I fear that a very dark time approaches. I shall wait for your patrols to return. I will remain now in the statue chamber, to reflect on our future paths,” Sargor stated solemnly. He turned and started back toward the far recesses of the cave, before pausing and adding, “If you learn of anything...send for me at once.”

“You have my word,” Godral said, with a reverent, slow bow of his head, in deference to the clan’s leader, as Sargor’s form was fully enveloped in the darkness of the cave.

With his wide strides, Godral started forward. Emerging from the relative shelter of the cave’s mouth, he eyed the final portion of the sun as it

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clung to its last life on the western horizon. His deep, golden eyes squinting in the dying rays, Godral could feel the temperature dropping ever further.

Soon, the darkness would saturate the hills and plains. The temperature would continue to drop quickly, transcending from the heights of the blazing heat of day, to the depths of the bone-chilling cold of night. It was a dynamic transition that Godral and those of his kind were long used to.

Off to his right, a small group of youthful cubs in four-legged form bounded about barking and nipping at each other. A couple of the more boisterous ones tumbled about in a ball of snapping fangs and fur, kicking up dirt and clouds of dust. The sight of the clan offspring innocently playing soothed his heavy heart, burdened with the constant worries that beset him as the leader of the clan's warriors.

A couple of the young male cubs paused as they recognized him, wagging their tails vigorously and lowering their own heads in respect. Both the youths and adults of the clan abided by a genuine respect for Godral. For his own part, he had always held their well-being deep within his heart.

He had quickly grown to be second only to Sargor in clan popularity, and all had come to understand by now that he had no desire to challenge Sargor for full leadership of the clan. It was a quality that went against the natural instincts of their race. Yet instead of derision, he was widely respected for desiring and preserving the benefits of Sargor's wisdom and experience.

There were others within the clan who would not be disposed, towards leaving Sargor unchallenged, if they were in Godral's place instead. These individuals were also not above challenging Godral for his own position. It was very fortunate that Godral's skills in combat, executed with controlled fury, efficiency, and valor, were more than a capable match for any member of the clan. It was commonly regarded that his formidable fighting ability would have been predominant within any known clan in the greater region.

Godral spared a few moments, watching the cubs in a relaxed amusement. He thought of his new life-mate, Mariassa, and how they would have their own little ones soon enough. He looked forward to the day that he could lie amid nipping, yapping youngsters of his own blood, new life born out of his deep love for his cherished life-mate.

It had taken him much longer to select a life-mate than was usual for most males of his clan. He had pledged long ago to make no such commitment unless he was entirely certain of his choice of partner, and knew without a

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doubt that his life-mate was the only one that he wanted to walk the paths of life with.

For Mariassa, he would have committed with absolute certainty a hundred times over.

The thoughts brought some warmth and lightness flowing back into his heart, as Godral walked onward towards a ridge that ran a short distance to the right. At the crest, keeping low to the ground in a four-legged form, were two of his better sentries. From the vantage-point afforded them, they held a commanding view of the surrounding areas. Their exceptional sight and patient attention would easily notice the approach of any other beings well in advance.

Godral subsequently dispatched one of the sentries to go forth and quickly muster any of the warrior class who were still in the immediate vicinity, and were currently off of assigned patrol duties. The sentry, a stocky, black-furred male, leaped from his position and raced off to fulfill the new order.

Shortly, a group of about forty warriors responded to his immediate call. Outside of the current sentinels and patrols, the ranks within the clan would now be very thinned elsewhere. Yet Godral knew that he would need as many as possible, if he hoped to cover greater perimeters and learn more from the reachable human settlements.

The incoming wolf-creatures gathered around the base of the hill, each in the four-legged form of their ardent summoner. Godral descended down the slope methodically in their direction, until he was at a point on the stone-ridden hill-side set just above them. His gaze slowly swept through the gathered warriors, directly meeting each of their visages before he started his address in their ancient language.

“We must scout the human settlements. We also must send some to trade and speak with the humans. We have had a visitor, who did not have the scent of the Darkness upon him. He was not from the settlements. We cannot say if he came from the Creator. We must learn what we can,” Godral instructed them, his resonant voice grave and authoritative.

Methodically, he proceeded to organize five patrols comprised of five wolves apiece, which he dispatched to scout out the territories surrounding the human settlements in the area. Two groups of five he then designated to patrol the outermost perimeter of the clan’s current hunting territory, to see if there were signs of anything encroaching upon their outer boundaries. The last five

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he ordered to go into the human settlements, to interact and trade with the humans, in order to glean whatever they might concerning any supernatural presence or activities near to the settlement's occupants.

Without question or challenge, the patrols and scouts headed forth with great urgency when Godral finally dismissed them. The appearance of the strange human had heightened the collective anxiety of the clan immeasurably, and one of the only outlets that could possibly be found for the unnerving tension lay within a hard-pressed physical journey.

Godral turned as the groups dashed away, heading back to rejoin the two sentries at the top of the ridge. He watched the dust kicked up in the twilight of the gloaming as the various patrols and scouts raced away from the main clan site in multiple directions.

The myriad groups continued to fan outward, streaking across the dry surface. Godral knew that if anything of a threatening nature existed within the remote vicinity, there would be little chance that their enemies would go undetected. If something dark had been generated due to the recent presence of the strange human, an alarm would be raised well before the threat's arrival to the clan site.

Godral was not one who was prone to entertain false hopes, but the visit from Benedict had been very different from other unusual visits that had been reported in the area. In his heart, Godral hoped that Benedict was a Messenger from the Creator, the mighty Spirit that had created the world and Whom the clan loyally worshipped.

He had heard the tales of the mystical beings that diligently served the Creator, but Godral had not seen anything with his own eyes over the period of his life. The occasional humans that purported to be prophets of the Creator spoke of such entities very convincingly, but Godral did not have a pervasive trust of humankind.

After all, it was the humans that were flocking to the service of the clan's mortal enemies.

Yet belief in those celestial beings was imperative, Godral strongly felt, as the Night Hunters were rumored to be the offspring of the spiritual beings' counterparts who served the great Adversary. In Godral's view, no good Creator would leave creation at the complete and utter mercy of the devout enemies of that very same creation. If the Night Hunters had arisen from the supernatural servants of the Adversary, then it stood to reason that the Creator would have

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servants active in the world as well.

It was even more widely believed that the truest account of the matter of the Night Hunters was that the union of spiritual beings of the Abyss and females of the human kind had resulted in their very existence. The unrelenting nemesis of Godral's clan, and all of his kind's clans, the Night Hunters, were therefore of a physical and supernatural essence, in their very nature and origin.

The result was creatures that were practically unstoppable, of a power that made entire clans run in fear and numerous humans openly worship them as gods.

A stark wilderness, and a constant struggle for food and safety, had gradually rendered his outlook over the years towards a rather severe, practicality-driven focus. Godral's world was one of safety and danger, threats and security, good and evil. The scent on Benedict, though, had confused him greatly, as it had been unlike anything that he had ever encountered before.

The unknown unsettled him more than nearly anything else could have, save for Night Hunters reaching the vulnerable heart of his clan.

His mind, chiseled by almost fifty long years of a honed, disciplined state of awareness, cautioned him to remain extraordinarily alert. Nothing could be a worse nightmare to Godral than to see a threat slip abruptly amidst the clan, all the while having been shrouded in an unanticipated and seemingly non-threatening guise.

Laxness had resulted in the brutal destruction of several other clans across the known lands. Godral had once seen the vile handiwork of the Night Hunters with his own eyes, about six years in the past.

The horrific incident had occurred when he was on a long-ranging patrol. He had been ordered to find out what had happened to another clan, from which his own had heard no word from in quite some time.

The gruesome remains of the slain clan, strewn across the blood-soaked ground, had been the birth of many nightmares. From the youngest cub to the oldest, most revered elder, there had been no survivors, and none had been spared a truly dreadful end. The sheer violence represented within the scene was deeply chilling and nauseating, staggering the minds of Godral and the stunned patrol.

The calamitous images had never left his memory. In the ensuing years, whenever he was tiring or thought about relaxing his vigilance in the slightest,

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he thought of those shocking and terrifying scenes.

The stark recollections quickly reinforced his fortitude and perseverance.

He was responsible for the safety of his clan. He knew that he could never live with the thought that a weakness on his own part had resulted in the same raging violence being visited upon those he watched over, cared for, and personally loved.

As in the present instance, it had pushed him to new heights of endurance. He relentlessly attended to his solemn charge of leading the warriors and protecting the entire clan.

The clan, he knew, was the same as life itself. Everything that mattered in the entire world to him was within the clan.

While the human Benedict had no scent of the Night Hunters, and could quite possibly be an ally of the Ones that Godral had never personally known, there could be no relaxation of the guardianship of the clan.

ARIANNA

“I can’t believe it! That was something else!” Arianna exclaimed with a delirious giggle, while taking the goggles off.

Benedict looked over to Nathan Morris, who was grinning exuberantly. His friend was basking in pride, not as much from Arianna’s impression of the game that she had just tried, as much as thinking of what her reaction would be towards some of his other projects.

“That’s just one of our more simple developments,” Nathan said, with a slight tinge of pomposity. He accepted the goggles from Arianna and placed them down on a table behind him.

Arianna’s heart was still pulsing quickly, her body still charged from the electric thrill of action. She pulled off the two gloves that she was wearing, handling them gently with the intricate electronics built into them, and added them to the table’s contents, next to the goggles.

The game that she had just tried was not vast in its complexity. It was a

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simple futuristic action game, in which a hero moved through a destroyed city and combated numerous opponents with an array of formidable weaponry.

Pressurized gloves adjusted as different weapons were used within the game. Each scenario had been a little different, with actions such as shooting from vehicles, street-level firefights, high-structure sniping, and much more. The visuals were perfect, as was the audio and pressure effects in the gloves. It was a game designed to be utilized in a small amount of space.

“I can see a lot of the kids playing with that one!” Arianna commented enthusiastically.

“That’s what we hope,” replied Nathan.

“So, what sort of technologies do you all work with besides games?” inquired Arianna, curious as to the other areas of application for such potent technologies.

“We’re moving into a lot of different areas, some of which will probably have a very large impact upon the way in which we all live,” Nathan said. “Unfortunately, some of the more mind boggling stuff is still in the developmental phase, and I am not at liberty to demonstrate it to you both just yet. Some of it is military in orientation, but some of it will be implemented in civilian areas.”

Nathan’s obstruction piqued her curiosity all the more. She knew that technology had risen to a level where she had started to question what she saw in print or on television. The perception of reality itself could easily be distorted, as the simple game had just demonstrated so effectively. Whatever Babylon Technologies was developing, in light of the gaming technology that she had just experienced, was bound to be very impressive indeed.

“Well, you’ve gotten quite some tour. I suppose that we should probably be going,” Benedict said. He gathered up his jacket from where it was draped over a nearby chair. “Thanks again Nathan, I appreciated the demonstration. And I owe you one.”

“I did too, it was extremely impressive, thank you,” Arianna added quickly.

“It was no problem at all, and I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Nathan replied. “And you’ve always been good to me with the radio show, Benedict! I always appreciate that.”

Arianna put on her overcoat and shook Nathan’s hand. It was a weak handshake, reflecting the sharp-minded man’s rather frail build. Balding, the

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man had a bird-like resemblance in his facial features. While he was not an overwhelming physical presence, she knew that mentally he was on par with most anyone when it came to technology.

“It was very nice to meet you, Arianna. I would love to have you back to visit us again,” Nathan said amiably.

“Nice to meet you,” returned Arianna. “Next time I am town, I’ll take you up on the offer.”

“You all have a good afternoon,” he said.

“You too Nathan, and thanks again,” Benedict said, passing by them and starting down the hallway to the elevators. Arianna had to walk fast to catch up with her uncle.

“So, how did you like that?” Benedict said as they stepped onto the elevator.

“Not too shabby,” Arianna exclaimed. The elevator started a fast downward descent, the smooth glide rendering the speed much more tolerable. “That stuff was incredible. What a place this is! You have some very good connections.”

Benedict looked quite pleased, as he was wont to do with the notion that he was a man with some measure of importance. Arianna had figured that aspect out about her uncle long ago.

“Yes, I guess I do!” he replied. “Or at least I get around a little bit.”

Arianna laughed as the elevator came to a tranquil stop on the first floor and opened up. Stepping out, they turned and headed towards the revolving door that led out to the street, sparing only nods of acknowledgment to the security personnel working at the entry-level reception desk.

Immediately, Arianna pulled her coat in tighter, in response to the chilly air that enveloped her. Checking her watch, she saw that they had spent a solid two hours within the heart of Babylon Technologies. It was getting later in the afternoon, and she was becoming very hungry.

“So what about some Troy pizza? I haven’t had that in quite some time,” she said. She could almost imagine the trademark, deep dish pizza, rich with cheese, set right before her.

Benedict replied, “A shame. Best kind of pizza in the country, and I’ll say it to anyone out east. I know just the place. In fact, it is recognized as one of the best pizza places in the entire nation.”

Arianna’s mouth watered at the mere thought.

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SETH

“What’s the matter with you?” Seth Engel exclaimed, feeling very exasperated as he ran his hand through his short locks of hair and paced back and forth within the room.

Jonathan St. George, sprawled back on his bed with his legs hanging lazily over the side, continued staring at the ceiling and said nothing in reply. The apathetic visage strongly echoed the disposition that Seth’s closest friend had displayed for almost a full week. He had skipped school twice, and had called in sick on two nights of work in the past three days alone.

The worst part about his aberrant behavior was that Jonathan would not talk openly about what was bothering him.

“Look, man, you are about to drive me up a wall with all of this crap,” Seth snapped, glaring at Jonathan.

He stepped over a haphazard pile of clothes on the floor, and pulled out the chair set in front of Jonathan’s computer desk. With a frustrated huff, Seth sat down aggressively upon the chair and spun it around to face his friend.

Jonathan’s shift in mood was the last thing that Seth needed. Seth’s own grades were noticeably down at school, and his parents were still simmering over the haircut that he had started off the school year with.

That matter had been quickly responded to, much to Seth’s irritation.

The first day of school, his head had been shaved bare all around, save for a circular patch of shoulder length hair sprouting out of the top of his head and cascading down the sides and back. One of the girls in his class had put some long red highlights into the naturally dark locks.

Later that same day, Seth’s head had little more than the stubble of a new beard. The red highlights and long locks had been sheared off together, at the immediate and irresistible behest of his parents.

The two events, plummeting grades and the unannounced, dramatic hairstyle change, had resulted in him losing his car privileges on the firm judgement of both of his parents. It had been agony to just make it through the week. Now that it was finally the weekend, it had gotten even worse, as he found himself at the mercy of everyone else.

The only silver lining in the morass was that he could still stay out late.

It often seemed that his parents were more concerned with how others

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perceived Seth, than with reality. He ardently tried to remind them that he was not into illegal substances, or involving himself in any activities different than he always had.

In Seth's view, his lifestyle was exceedingly tame, which should be acceptable to parents by most any standard. He hung out with Jonathan, played video games extensively, hiked in the nearby woods, and piped in digital movies on his or Jonathan's flat, wide-screened television. His online activity had lessened considerably, since the UCAS government had put in a whole new range of monitoring controls and database surveying, under the Guardian Act and the subsequent Citizens Security Act.

While the act had been allegedly used to control piracy of intellectual property and to combat crime and ever-rising terrorism, it had made much of the populace very careful about the trails that they made online. Seth's father had been adamant that he not visit any online sites that had content that could potentially come back to hurt his family. Browbeaten to a large degree, Seth was now extremely conservative in his online forays.

Currently, even that limited world was fracturing. Jonathan, in Seth's view, had been nearly invincible. He was a success on the high school debate team, was making above minimum wage at his job, had an attractive girlfriend, was sailing through classes at the top level, and had parents that did not give him any pressure about anything.

Sometimes, Seth found himself to be more than a little jealous.

"O.K., Jonathan," Seth ventured tersely, glaring at his friend. "Can you at least give me a clue as to what's eatin' you up? I mean, what has possibly gotten so bad?"

Jonathan lifted his head and looked over at him. His eyelids were half-shut, and his broad face looked fatigued. All that he could muster was, "Take a guess."

Seth looked around the room, with its walls covered with posters of rock bands and science fiction movies. Among the academic crowd, Jonathan was an unusual young intellectual. He was never caught up in the clouds of self-superiority, but neither was he simple to understand. Most times, Seth had no idea of where to start with his friend.

Seth took a deep breath, "Look, if I had a good clue, don't you think that I would have mentioned it by now?"

His friend replied in a low voice. "First clue, what year is this?"

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“We’re at the beginning of our senior year of high school.” Seth answered irritably.

“Good,” Jonathan remarked sarcastically. “What happens when one graduates from high school?”

“That varies, with the person,” Seth said, irked at the slightly edgy tone in his friend. “You’ll probably conquer a place like New Cambridge or New Haven University, while I take some time off and try to scrape up some money to go to the community college.”

With a little effort, Jonathan sat up on the edge of the bed. “Okay, just for argument, let’s say that happens, as far as me at New Cambridge at least. Then what, in my case?”

“You graduate Suma Cum Laude, and get a great job in this pathetic economy, marry one of your hot girlfriends, and live your life happily ever after. So, aren’t I good?” Seth quipped, lacing the words with his own brand of sarcasm.

Jonathan slowly shook his head, a sad grin manifesting upon his face. He stated firmly, “But that’s exactly it!... That is exactly it!”

Seth was confused, as his expression scrunched up in momentary confusion. “What?”

“The big picture. That’s just what happens over and over again. You grow up, get educated, get a job, settle down, retire, and then you die. I’ve just been thinking about that a lot, and it sure doesn’t excite me too much, Seth. Everyone does that. Over, and over, and over. Isn’t there anything exciting out there anymore? Or are we just endlessly repeating cycles?” Jonathan replied ruefully, before adding, “That’s all insects do, you know.”

“Over and Over and Over. Sounds like most jobs I get to look forward to. I’d even prefer the over and over and over of a factory job. At least those used to pay something, but nobody here makes anything anymore,” Seth began, smiling despite his self-deprecation. “But it seems you’ve given this some serious thought. I don’t know what to say about the last event you listed, but you don’t always have to retire, and you don’t always have to ‘settle’. You can do something you like.”

Jonathan glanced towards Seth, asking in a sincere tone, “What do I like?”

He had the look of someone desperate for an answer to a question that had lingered for quite some time.

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“You’ve always wanted to work in programming, and the demand for that is still there, even if ninety percent of the jobs have been shipped out of here. I know you can hold your own with the best of the East,” Seth said, referring to the technical wizards in the far eastern nations, such as Mandaria, who had helped propel their countries to a world lead in so many sectors.

“What’s the problem with that scenario?” Jonathan asked, in the kind of voice that let Seth know that he had an answer and wanted Seth to guess it.

“I don’t know, what is the problem? You tell me!” Seth replied, suddenly becoming a little exasperated, as trying to be empathic had its limits. “I’m probably the wrong one to talk to. Hell, I don’t even know one thing that I want to do when I get done with school! I’ll just be looking for any job. And not from a narrow list of choices in things I really have some interest in.”

“You know, I might be in the same boat, probably,” Jonathan replied solemnly. “It’s already conceivable that programmers will be heading out the door soon, even in the eastern countries, in large numbers. Artificial brains keep getting better, you know. AI is amazing. Compare artificial intelligence now to just ten years ago. Leaps and bounds, in just a few short years. I’m thinking its going to take a bite out of the current work force, believe me. A lot more than the off-shoring stuff did. Just think what that means for newcomers. So, you see? Even going towards something I really want offers nothing certain. Probably won’t be there for me when I’m ready. I...I just don’t know...”

Seth asked gently, “What is it?”

Jonathan did not answer for several long moments. He finally said in a low voice, “Won’t make much sense. Just seems everything is so formula. So predictable. So boring.”

Seth just stared at Jonathan for a minute. He still could not relate to Jonathan’s problem, nor could he muster himself to empathize. “That’s what’s eating you? You are bored and you make final assumptions about future things that haven’t even happened yet? And what if a meteor hits us in ten minutes? What if the next world war breaks out tomorrow? What if our overly orderly and safety-obsessed country falls apart tomorrow? What if the Devil himself is about to make his move in the last days? All bets are off everywhere, my friend. Sounds ridiculous, I know, but who knows what’s going to be happening or when? Who can? Sounds to me like you want to create problems where there

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really aren't any. I'd stick to the problems that are really there."

"Look, it's something I worry about," Jonathan replied firmly and earnestly. He turned his sullen gaze back to the ceiling above. He added in a softer tone. "I can't help how I feel about things, even if it really is stupid."

Seth's face slackened. "Sorry, man. I know it's a big deal to you if you say it is. And they say that teenagers don't think much about the future. You aren't thinking of anything drastic, are you? Like running away from school or something like that?"

"No way, Seth! Don't worry about that!" Jonathan responded quickly, looking towards Seth with an expression of conviction. "I'm not the type to give up, I'm just needin' to step out of the action for a little bit."

A low knock came at Jonathan's door.

"Yeah?" Jonathan called.

The door cracked open, and Jonathan's mother poked her head in. In her middle years, Jaenelle St. George had kept herself in good physical condition. While a little heavier than in her youth, she had strong, broad shoulders, muscled legs, and a fairly tight stomach. All were kept in solid maintenance three days a week at the fitness club in the shopping center around the corner from the St. George's house. Her greenish eyes seemed to sparkle within her cherubic face. As far as Seth could remember, she had always exuded a youthful and spirited vibrancy.

"Hi Seth," she greeted amiably, regarding him with an amused grin. "Didn't know you had slipped in. You're getting' pretty stealthy these days."

"Hi Mrs. St. George," Seth returned, continuing in a jesting tone. "You know me. Special Forces candidate, for sure. I'm just waiting on them to bump up their offer to me."

"You are quite the premier military candidate, Seth," she replied, smiling as she laughed lightly. Mrs. St. George then turned her attention back to Jonathan. "I just wanted to check in to see if you wanted anything to eat. Your father has made some steaks... and there's plenty enough for both of you."

"Sounds good Mom," Jonathan answered, "I'll be down in a couple minutes."

"And will you join us, Seth?" she queried.

A grin spread over his face, as he nodded emphatically. "What, me pass up a free meal? I think I can fit it in my busy schedule. Let me call my assistant

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and tell them to delay my next appointment a few minutes!”

The three of them laughed together.

“Alright then, I’ll set up a place for you,” Mrs. St. George replied.

“Thanks Mrs. St. George,” Seth said as she retreated and shut the door. He turned back to Jonathan. “Maybe getting out for awhile might do us both some good. How about we go down to the lakeside after dinner? Shouldn’t be too many people out. Call up Annika, and maybe some of the others.”

Garland Lake was a beautiful lake nestled within the borders of a substantial national forest.

Hundreds of thousands of acres of protected forestland spread far to the north and south of the lake, covering parts of many boroughs within Venorterra, one of the fifty provinces of the UCAS. The Frontiersman National Forest held an abundance of trails, camping areas, private and public property, hunting grounds, and served as a warded habitat for a wide variety of wildlife, including many protected species.

A person, even a large group, could lose themselves without much trouble in the sprawling tracts of vigorous wilderness.

The lake itself was one of the better man-made achievements in Venorterra, especially with regards to its being seen as an improvement in the rich natural features of the scenic province. A very dedicated corps of engineers, many years back, had labored long and hard to dam up a portion of the Garland River, creating the new Garland Lake in the process.

Garland had since given rise to a number of attendant communities and developments, one of which now included some friends of Seth and Jonathan’s.

Jonathan thought about Seth’s suggestion for only a few seconds. He shrugged his shoulders. “Why not? Can’t hurt. I’ll have to see if Raymond can get the lakehouse too.”

“Now you’re thinking,” Seth said with a grin, standing up and stretching. He slid Jonathan’s chair back over towards the desk. He gestured with a sweep of his right hand towards the door. “You first, good sir. Steak awaits. Then we head to the woods.”

“I’m with you all the way,” his best friend replied, smiling and getting up from the bed.

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Moving like the wisp of a fleeting shadow, melting with the night, the fearsome hunter moved just beyond the edge of the five wolf-like creatures' sight. The beasts that would soon be its prey were still a good distance away, trotting swiftly and eventually crossing its forward path.

There was no mistaking that the five creatures were not ordinary wolves, for their size was far too immense, and their ordered manner and alert glances among themselves signaled a far more progressed intelligence than their smaller, more feral cousins possessed. The deep red eyes of the formidable hunter, Jeqonadin, burned intensely with a violent, voracious desire, its powerful muscles twitching in malevolent anticipation as it closely regarded the newly found wolf-creatures.

The great eyesight of the wolf-creatures at night was bested only by a race of beast such as that of the malignant entity now observing the wolf-creatures from deep within the shrub-filled desert terrain. It would be relentless in its tracking of the five wolf-beasts, as it always had been when encountering others of their race. Its senses and physical dexterity far surpassed those of the wolf-creatures, known to it as the An-Ki. Even the sounds of its movements were imperceptible to the otherwise exceptional hearing abilities of the huge, wolf-like An-Ki.

After wiping out the remnants of a more distant An-Ki clan, the others of Jeqonadin's brethren had most recently been searching the broader lands in earnest, thoroughly and tirelessly, without avail. Most lands had long been rendered empty of the wolf-creatures due to their death, flight, or migration during the time of the Night Hunt. Unrelenting in their pursuit, the hunters were driven by the fires of their inner hungers, as well as fear of a power even greater than they; the power of the mighty ones that had fathered them.

It had long been ordained that the race of An-Ki was to be eradicated from the face of the land, hunted and driven to absolute extinction. The reasons for the commanding of the Night Hunt had never been given to those now hunting the An-Ki, but Jeqonadin's kind were not ones to ever question the stated wishes of their immortal sires.

Nor were they about to question the ominous Entity that their sires held allegiance to, an immensely powerful Being that was essentially an emerging god of the entire world. It was even said that the command to initiate the

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Night Hunt had come down to them directly from this massive, infernal Power, a Being whom even their mighty sires shuddered to face.

Since the last slaughter, in lands far to the north, dragging months had passed in which they had found no signs of another An-Ki clan. Despite the lack of signs, the delay in time was not devoid of its own merits and possibilities. As it was well past the usual breeding season of the An-Ki, the hunters knew well enough that many of the females would now be carrying new cubs within their wombs.

During the slaying of numerous clans, the hunters had found that there was nothing more satisfying to their violent hungers and urges than eliminating the young offspring or pregnant females. It was they who most visibly represented the physical future of both their respective clan and their unique species.

There was nothing more final or desperate than the look of older males gazing upon the slain bodies of younger females and offspring of the clan. Jeqonadin had beheld that horrified expression on many occasions. It was the look of one gazing into an eternal abyss, towards a coming fall that offered no hope of return.

It was also known that the males of the An-Ki usually stayed with a single female mate over the course of their lives. They were also very conscious of their young, in that they represented the future of the An-Ki clan. A loss of either mate or cub was equally devastating and irreplaceable, and the loss of both at once was dizzying in the sheer dismay that it brought to such familial creatures.

Jeqonadin's kind usually came upon male warriors first, when finding an An-Ki clan. They could have easily chosen to slay the males outright, for such was their physical superiority and incredible stealth.

Hundreds of An-Ki warriors had been spared throughout the course of the Night Hunt for a few moments so that they could witness such terrible, bloody scenes in the depths of night. Coming back from a patrol or hunt, the spared warriors found only gore and death where the heart of their clan, including its youth, females, elders, and even other warriors, had occupied a main den.

The killers, emerging boldly and pitilessly out of the night, caused only a moment's surprise to the horrified An-Ki warriors. Much of the astonishment derived from the sense that the An-Ki had been caught in such an unaware

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state. Such was the first of several harsh, final lessons that the grief-laden An-Ki were compelled to learn of the blood-soaked Night Hunters and the overwhelming force that they possessed.

Recovering from being startled, the torturous grief, coupled with the casual disregard and brutality shown by the slayers to their young and lifemates, had caused many male An-Ki to become enraged beyond all hope of reason or self-preservation. With no impetus to try to escape, and nothing more left to protect, many had blindly charged in fury to meet their rapid demise at the slaver's fangs, razor-sharp claws, and blinding speed of the hunters.

The hapless An-Ki, otherwise cautious and perceptive creatures, did not pause for a moment to wonder why the slayers would linger near the scene of the bloodshed, waiting for the An-Ki to discover the bodies before emerging to assault them directly.

If the An-Ki had taken a moment to consider the implications, they would have had a notion of the kind of creature they were up against.

Only a being of vast strength and murderous power would openly confront warriors of the wolf-creatures' race. To do so intentionally, right after the dead, mutilated bodies of their mates and young had been discovered, would take a beast that knew no peer.

Nothing else could have even hoped to face the onslaught of desperate rage that erupted from one of the wolfish beasts, cast into a feverish, ferocious state of mind that was well beyond reckoning.

The hunters such as Jeqonadin more than welcomed the frenzied, ill-fated attacks; they relished them as one afflicted with a great thirst that is finally given access to an entire pool of the smoothest, most satiating liquid.

The finding of an An-Ki clan, and encircling it such that there could be no escapees, was always the biggest challenge facing Jeqonadin and the other hunters. Upon finding a clan, the ensuing slayings were a certainty if there were no routes of escape. The only question remaining in such instances involved how much the hunters desired to indulge their sadistic tendencies and amuse themselves with their marked prey.

The amusements were not just limited to the selective killing of the young and the cub-bearing females. Sometimes, the murderous events generated even more succulent diversions for the hunters.

There had been many times that the hunters had pulled far back after slaying the occupants of a central den, withholding their final attacks on the

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An-Ki warriors even longer than usual. The slayers listened as the night filled with the uniform, forlorn howls that were repeated again and again by the surviving males upon discovering the hideous remains of the massacres. It was only in the midst of such horrid and shocking times that the An-Ki emitted the distinctive, mournful howls.

The howls were also a clear sign that the momentarily surviving An-Ki were well beyond caring about their own safety. As far as any An-Ki could remember, the musical, varied howls that they had once often used during hunts, in marking one clan's territory in relation to others, and still further uses had declined precipitously. The sonorous howls of the An-Ki were very rarely used in the present time, as the clans became increasingly aware of the Night Hunt. The haunting and beautiful night chorus that sang out to the far horizons over the passage of so many ages had been effectively silenced, for fear of drawing Jeqonadin's kind to an An-Ki clan's whereabouts.

The very circumstances that had suppressed and largely silenced the An-Ki's most beautiful and enchanting intonations now gave rise only to the cohesive, mournful laments that seemed to ominously herald the approaching extermination of yet another An-Ki clan.

The repetitive patterns voicing the greatest of sorrows were like a mesmerizing music to the ears of the hunters, a hellish chorus of loss and emptiness that appealed to the centermost core of their malicious spirits. There would be no reward for the singers of the song, for the indulgence was wholly on the whim of the pack of killers. The howling only delayed the inevitable, as when it finally ebbed, the killers moved in out of the surrounding shadows to finish their grisly, savored task.

Jeqonadin knew that the imminent presence of the five An-Ki indicated resolutely that the discovery of another An-Ki clan's area had been achieved at long last. The An-Ki had always been very territorial in nature, and Jeqonadin surmised from extensive experience that the five An-Ki just ahead were a patrol of warriors making a regular round of their clan's outer perimeter.

It also came as no surprise to Jeqonadin that the An-Ki clan's territory was not located very far away from some human settlements. Jeqonadin, as did many others of the Erkorenen, believed that there were important reasons for the Night Hunt that concerned the relations of the An-Ki with humans.

The matter of humankind was without a doubt one of the greater mysteries that continued to evade Jeqonadin.

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It was true that the An-Ki clans, Jeqonadin's brood, and the mysterious, powerful beings that had fathered Jeqonadin's kind all interacted with humans in their rapidly growing villages, settlements, and cities.

Of the various sentient races, the humans were by far the weakest creatures. They were very easy to subdue and control, as Jeqonadin's kind had discovered long ago.

Jeqonadin's kin and their celestial progenitors now enjoyed great influence over the entire race of humans, all across the surface of the world. Their predominance had grown to such a degree that most of the Erkorenen's sires, and closely allied ethereal beings of quite considerable power, not only held the highest authority within the extant human settlements and towns, but were often worshipped outright as gods.

Jeqonadin's own father, Jeqon, was one of the greater among nearly two hundred Guided Ones; once-ethereal beings themselves who had become incarnate to seduce the daughters of humankind.

Powers that remained otherworldly in nature, such as the mighty Immat, enjoyed such fierce devotion in a land farther to the east that he received a living sacrifice each and every year in order to retain his favor and avoid his ire. The sacrifice was comprised of a number of unsullied, desirable young maidens offered from a group of human settlements. The maidens, whom the rest of the village would have died to defend under any other circumstances, were willingly and enthusiastically offered up on the bloodied altars dedicated to the ravenous Immat.

The settlements in that land had already learned of the terrible price to be paid for disfavor, though it took little effort for one of such might as Immat to punish a population of humans severely.

Despite the devotion and ease of subjugation, Jeqonadin often wondered why his father Jeqon, Immat, and the other celestial powers would even want to rule over humans or desire their worship. The progeny of Jeqon's incarnate brethren, such as Jeqonadin, and even the race of the An-ki, were so much more capable and resolute. The humans were so easily bending their knee in meek submission to the celestial fathers and other powers of their kind. They were quickly, and quite willfully, abandoning their other gods, such as the Unnamed One, the one designated as the Great Enemy by Jeqon and the other Guided Ones.

The humans were also very irrational beings, such as one in particular

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that Jeqonadin had come across just recently during his widespread tracking of the An-Ki. The foolish man was ardently building a great ship of wood where there was no water and no means of getting such a massive ship to a large body of water. With few wetlands or rivers in the immediate region, only the occasional oasis marked where more significant quantities of water rested deeper beneath the dry ground's surface.

For once, Jeqonadin had found agreement with the region's human population, in that the ship-building man was quite simply insane.

Though water was relatively scarce, the lands Jeqonadin was now traversing were good hunting areas for either humans or for an An-Ki clan. The wide, open expanses were graced with many hills and ridgelines that the An-ki could use to track and hunt prey, setting up ambushes from above. The territory was situated to the west of two great rivers, between which were many of the humans' more powerful cities and where a greater part of their population lived. Each city had its distinctive temple dedicated to a patron deity, the identity of which now showed the increasing influence, prevalence, and authority of the celestial beings.

Great herds of the saber antelopes, with their prominent sets of long, ringed horns, roamed throughout the region. So did herds containing teeming numbers of a smaller, fast type of animal whom Jeqonadin had often watched with great fascination; many of their kind jumping highly up and down in a peculiar fashion as the herd moved and grazed.

Some large, thick-skinned, coarse-haired boars lived within the area, equipped with ferocious demeanors and razor sharp tusks that could mortally wound any careless predator. Huge, flightless birds that compensated for their lack of flight with great strength, speed, and potent kicks also ranged over the same region.

There were also sizeable herds of the tuft-tailed, hoofed creatures that the humans seemed to be increasingly gaining an affinity for. Fast and hardy, the beasts not only served as prey but were also used by the humans to pull their four-wheeled chariots.

Everywhere, there was food in abundance to richly support an An-Ki clan, even a clan of great size.

The detection of warrior An-Ki running in a likely boundary patrol told Jeqonadin much more than just the knowledge that an An-Ki clan's general territory had been found. It also told Jeqonadin, more specifically, that the

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highly sought-after main den of the patrol group's clan was likely within a close proximity. At least a few times during every turning of the moon, the An-Ki would send such patrols around the outer edge of their hunting territory, the den being located somewhere in the middle of the warded area.

The den would be where the delectable young and vulnerable females could be found, where the future of the clan truly lay.

Jeqonadin was not about to attack the nearby group of An-Ki outright. Like any other of its kind making such a welcome discovery, Jeqonadin delayed and considered the full situation with an icy, calculating clarity.

The cautious deliberation did not in any way reflect a perceived physical threat to Jeqonadin. Not even one hunter had ever been slain by the wolf-creatures during the extensive time of the Night Hunt. Jeqonadin's caution, and the need to alert and summon other Erkorenen, was simply to insure that not even one of the wolf-creatures would have a chance to escape the powerful jaws that were even now beginning to close around the neck of their clan.

At the present, there were relatively few of its own kind within the area, most lingering closer to the human habitations. Two in particular, veritable giants among men, were residing at one large settlement that was located just to the north and east. There they enjoyed the slavish attention brought on by their exalted positions among the humans as living and breathing deities.

A part of Jeqonadin envied those two, for though they were titanic in stature, their appearance was in general alike to that of humankind. Where humans regarded them as giants, Jeqonadin's own bestial form utterly terrified the mortals. The sheer terror that some human witnesses experienced transformed Jeqonadin and the others with varying, non-human forms into immediate monsters, set to occupy the nascent myths and legends of many human populaces.

Jeqonadin was also bound to a stringent, unwavering command. Upon finding an An-Ki clan, those of the Night Hunt were expected to swiftly bring word to any celestial powers that might be in the vicinity.

It was rumored that Lilith, one of the greater powers among the revered beings that had come from the sky, was currently very close to the region. An exalted queen of her kind, Lilith often assumed the form of a tall human female, voluptuous and strong, with majestic wings that enabled her to soar high and far across the lands. Lilith had often been sighted crossing the night skies that sheltered the broad, desert terrain beneath them.

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Lilith also would have understood the impulse of the Ekorenen towards slaying the young and child-bearing among the An-Ki, for it was well known that Lilith took a particular pleasure in the slaying of pregnant women and babies, especially males, among the humans. The humans who had encountered Lilith in her much more frightening visage during such terrors, and survived, had often fallen into a frenzied insanity.

The matter of Lilith was not to be taken lightly, and another part of Jeqonadin felt its nerves beginning to fray at the mere thought of needing to go to seek out Lilith. The mighty creature was on the boundary of true fear, a rare place in the Erkorenen breached by only two others.

Azazel and the Entity whom even Azazel feared.

The ominous Azazel exceeded Lilith's authority, and Jeqonadin's kind had been made to fully understand Azazel's lofty place on the pinnacle of the celestial hierarchy. Though Azazel had once manifested at a large gathering of Jeqonadin's kind and addressed them as a group, it had felt as if the vaunted being was speaking directly to each of the Erkorenen. It had been Azazel, at that same gathering, who had first spoken of the Night Hunt.

The brief remembrance of Azazel caused an icy sensation of fear to permeate Jeqonadin, a feeling that was virtually unknown to the powerful, formidable creature that willingly hunted entire An-Ki clans by itself.

It had been Azazel who had been among the first of the sky beings to come down to the mortal world, to incarnate and take mates from among the female humans. Others had followed, also taking fully incarnate forms as they ushered in Jeqonadin's race.

As a great power, Azazel traveled widely, and it was very possible that Azazel would be farther to the east. Lilith would know, and would expect Jeqonadin's tidings to be conveyed immediately to the lord of the sky beings that had manifested physically within the world.

Despite the anxiety and fears in Jeqonadin, there was no escaping the fact that all greater powers within the area would have to be alerted. Such was the tremendous importance with which they regarded any matters concerning the An-Ki. All available hunters had to be summoned together before a final attack could transpire.

Even so, the attack could not be hurried before the general location of the den could be ascertained. Well-executed entrapment would wipe out all members of the An-Ki clan. As hard as it had been to locate An-Ki clans in

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recent times, this clan might well be the last, and its total destruction could perhaps finish the given task of the Night Hunt.

At the gathering where Azazel had appeared before Jeqonadin's kind and called for the Night Hunt, another of the great sky beings, a very powerful entity named Semyaza, had spoken of the reward that final victory would bring. A new age would be unveiled upon the world and the great spirit-beings from the heavens who had chosen to become incarnate would openly rule over the destiny of mankind. The quicker that the An-Ki were driven to utter distinction, the sooner this new order guided by the Ekorenen's sires could be inaugurated.

The celestial beings' children, of which Jeqonadin was one of a fierce new legion, would find a hallowed, exalted place within this new world order. At the side of their fathers, they would dominate and rule the world itself.

The dream of the sky-spirits had become the dream of their offspring as Semyaza spoke, but the address by Semyaza had not yet ended.

Semyaza did not just speak of visions of power and victory, but also of their enemies and the heavy, terrible cost of failure.

There had long been knowledge of other celestial beings, who served the Unnamed One and were engaged in an ongoing war with those such as Azazel and Lilith. There were rumors of an even greater war in the past, in which countless numbers of celestial beings had engaged in a massive battle of such dimensions that a mortal mind could not even hope to comprehend.

Unlike the sires of Jeqonadin's brood, none of these enemy kin had taken on physical natures within the mortal realm. They had steadfastly remained in their original spirit-form, though not for the same reasons as their counterparts on Azazel's side, those that had also retained their original nature. Their choice had been made in dutiful obedience to the Unnamed One.

It was known that those who had bred with human females had done so in outright defiance of the Will of the Unnamed One.

Relations between Azazel's kind and humans were not only unintended by the Unnamed One, they were strictly forbidden. The bold transgressions were acts that were utterly blasphemous.

It did not take any further explanation for Jeqonadin and the other Erkorenen to keenly understand that their very race and existence was an abomination to the world desired by those that followed the Unnamed One. It took no great wisdom for them to discern that their very existence would be

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threatened in a world dominated by the Unnamed One's followers.

Semyaza had then sternly warned the Erkorenen of these celestial servants of the accursed, Unnamed One. They were formidable powers, whose might was to be respected no less than that of the sky beings like Semyaza and Azazel. Semyaza forewarned of how these beings would seek to support the humans as the stewards of the world, on behalf of the Unnamed One who intended humankind to fulfill such a task.

If their enemies were allowed to succeed, all would find themselves in a world ruled by humans observing the Unnamed One's authority. The sky beings, especially the incarnated Guided Ones, would be bound in subservience and their Progeny driven to the corners of the world, if they were allowed to survive at all. It would be a world turned upside down, where a feeble race would rule stronger ones, and an exceptionally mighty race such as Jeqonadin's would be seen as something to be destroyed or exiled.

Ultimately, it was the choice between being in an exalted position of great authority, and ceasing to exist.

For whatever reason, the An-Ki had clearly chosen to be on the side of the Unnamed One, and had shown no willingness to submit to Azazel or any of the other celestial powers. As such, they were also enemies who would also support the world order that placed humans as the high stewards and made the Erkorenen outcasts and abominations.

The An-Ki might have been willing to stand aside for humans, but there was far too much to be lost for the Erkorenen.

The sheer thought of the weak, fickle humans as the ruling class, with their own kind as pariahs, revolted and hardened Jeqonadin and the rest of the Progeny. They needed no further convincing to understand the absolute gravity of their situation, or with which side their interests truly lay.

As with the proffered dream, the nightmare of the sky beings spoken of by Semyaza had also become the nightmare of their offspring.

It was a climactic age, but it was one where the Erkorenen and their sires were finding much success. More humans than not vigilantly followed Azazel's kind, and the An-Ki were well on the way to elimination. The enemies that Semyaza had spoken of had not appeared to contest any of the progress, and the Night Hunt continued unimpeded.

For the moment, the Night Hunt was the only true concern of the Erkorenen. Once the wolf-creatures were slain to the last, full attention could

THE EXODUS GATE

be turned towards any remaining enemies of their sires, human or otherwise.

The cold night air brushed lightly across Jeqonadin's poised body, the area around the Erkorenen darkening considerably as the moon was masked by a relatively solid mass of clouds.

At that moment, to the eye of mortal man or even beast, the group of An-Ki being watched by Jeqonadin would have already disappeared into the enveloping darkness of the deep night. Jeqonadin's senses were more than capable for the task it needed to pursue. The movements and forms of the fast-moving wolf-creatures could not escape the steady, far-gazing eyes of Jeqonadin in any fashion. The hunting creature patiently waited, allowing many more moments to pass before finally deciding to move forward and continue following the An-Ki at a distance.

The great talons on the ends of its long, muscled, hind legs gripped the ground, launching the Erkorenen to a speed that far exceeded the swiftest An-Ki. For a creature of its considerable size, the lack of noise that the Erkorenen emitted was equally remarkable. Front and hindquarters undulating in a perfect rhythm, it almost looked as if Jeqonadin's dizzying pace was effortless. It was as if its huge claws did not even touch the dry ground, instead gliding steadily just above the point of impact.

In just a few quick moments, Jeqonadin had to slow its pace once again, as the distance between it and the group of An-Ki shrank rapidly. It did not want to draw close enough to incur any risk of being detected by the five An-Ki, for it would not be that much longer before the location of the den could be found. With that knowledge committed to mind, Jeqonadin could then move to alert Lilith, and summon other Erkorenen to assist in fully closing the trap.

As Jeqonadin stalked them, it wondered whether the An-Ki ahead were possibly among the very last of the accursed wolf-creature's race. It had been so long since any others had been found.

There truly was an eminent possibility that this was the last An-Ki clan, and that the entire race might soon be swept from the face of the world. The Night Hunt would then be brought to a victorious conclusion, and Azazel could bring in the new age that promised such wonders and glorification to Jeqonadin's kind.

An expression like a smile crossed Jeqonadin's face in that moment, revealing for a brief instant the front of three layers of razor-sharp teeth.