

The digital assistant on the television behind the desk looked up and attempted to make eye contact approximately every three and a half minutes. Bill knew, because after waiting an hour, he had spotted looping pattern.

It had been a weird, memory-filled drive to the new, valley-spanning Osirtek Systems complex - 438 acres of concrete and glass built alongside what used to be a dusty back road. Now it was all multi-lane asphalt running down the heart of the Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center (or TRIC). However, Bill still remembered it as the county cut-across his father took when they went hiking across the tawny, sun-bleached hills.

Times had certainly changed. Outside, northern Nevada baked in August heat. Inside, the mile-long(?) data center was as chilly in tenor as in temperature. The clean white walls were spartan, featuring only the “Osirtek Systems” company logo, with its generic swoosh and unoffensive font writ large. The air smelled faintly like ozone and carpet glue. The overhead lights buzzed in such a way that made him begin to feel like a bug under a lamp, and it was beginning to give him a headache. Either that, or he had been clenching his jaw too long.

Other than the generic, unoffensive gray couch he was sitting on, there was a desk against the opposite wall. The “assistant” seemingly sat behind it. If looked at straight on from the entrance, it might have almost passed as normal. However, with any sort of perspective the illusion evaporated.

What looked like a desk from the front was really just a facade, with the human simulacrum on an edgeless TV mounted behind it. The background on the edgeless TV carefully color-matched to the wall. From head-on, the presentation was almost perfect - it really did seem like there was a person diligently manning their station. But moving slightly left or right, the illusion evaporated.

And given how long he had been waiting, with the regularity of the ticks, Bill was now almost certain that what he was seeing was not, in fact, ever an actual person. This seemed much

more like an hyper-realistic software creation, albeit one passable for human; not some clever video mashup.

He shot a text off to Dominic. At this rate, Bill was going to be late for practice.

At the hour and thirty-seven minute mark, the assistant's idle state changed.

"Mr. Hoppert, thank you for your patience. Ms. Coeburn will see you now."

Bill thought about sighing a "FINALLY" as he stood, but thought better of it; something, something discretion and something valor. It felt good to stand. He had been sitting too long.

"Please step through the door and follow the lighted path on the floor. Ms. Coeburn is waiting in her office, down the hall and third door on the right."

What were the social norms here? Are you supposed to thank a screen saver? After a moment of hesitation, Bill thanked her anyway, checked that he had all his manila folders for the thousandth time, and crossed the threshold.

Ms. Coeburn rose to greet Bill as he entered her office. She smiled broadly.

"Mr. Hoppert, good to see you. I apologize about the wait. It has been an absolutely *frenetic* afternoon."

"Please, call me Bill." He shook her hand, trying to match the level of agreeableness, and then took the chair she gestured towards. "I was beginning to wonder if I had the wrong day."

Ms. Coeburn playfully scoffed, "Yes, well, at Osirtek Systems, we always try to make time for the county planning commission. We may be the nation's premier hyperscaler, but we're happy to meet with our partners." She paused, trying to remember something, and then the smile was back. "How is Peter, in economic development?"

"Mostly good, I think." That was an understatement. Last time Bill saw Pete was at Pete's "retirement" party. Pete left his government job as county economic adviser when SilverRange Partners, a private equity company, came calling.

"I hear he's really moving up."

“I’m *so happy* to hear that,” Coeburn said, with just a little too much relish. “We’re thrilled to be part of this community. Peter was one of the first to welcome us and we are so thrilled that the commission continues to play such an important role in ensuring both of our continued prosperity.”

Bill didn’t spend the last several weeks researching, pulling together charts, and waiting the last hour and a half to dwell on *Petie’s lame and obvious conflict of interest*. “Ms. Coeburn, I know you’re busy. I don’t want to waste your time.”

Bill tapped the folders on his lap.

“The county has been trying to reach someone here at the data center for the last several months regarding irregularities in your water metering. In fact, I thought I was meeting today with someone from your engineering audit team. Will they be joining us?”

“May I take a look?” Ms. Coeburn held out her hand. “Our engineers are so very busy, but I’m happy to help where I can. Let’s see what we have here.”

She opened the folder and began to skim.

“On top is the July usage report.” Bill opened his own copy and pointed to a line item toward the bottom. “We’re seeing July volume exceeding the drought contingency cap by at least 20 percent.”

Ms. Coeburn slowly turned the page next page, making a good show of furrowing her brow and looking thoughtful before moving on to the next.

“That’s after some odd aberrations in the month before, and another double-digit overrun in May.”

Ms. Coeburn continued to give a cursory glance at a few additional pages, making the occasional “hmm” sound while making a show of letting her finger linger on a line, then drifting to a different spot on the page, feigning interest.

“I think I see the problem,” she said, eventually looking up, “I can understand how that might look alarming if you’re not familiar with our systems. But Osirtek runs on a closed-loop

cycle. What we drew in May was primarily a one-time fill to balance the cooling lines. After that, the water recirculates. It's apples and oranges to compare May with later months."

"OK, that might be true," Bill began, "but residents don't care about that nuance when their taps are running brown. We're seeing unexplained pressure drops across significant stretches of our main lines."

Coeburn chuckled softly and leaned back in her chair. "That tough, I won't deny it. But, if I remember my history, the Reno-Sparks region has had rain shortfalls the last four out of five years. We didn't bring the drought.

"And you know as well as I do, agriculture in this valley uses thirty times what we ever could." She folded her hands in her lap. "Our footprint, compared to that, is a rounding error. Meanwhile we employed seven hundred people during construction, and another two hundred jobs on an ongoing basis. That's *real* prosperity for Reno families."

Bill gripped his folder so tightly, his knuckles were white. And the lights in this place really were annoying; his migraine was full on raging. He could barely make out the framed photo on the credenza behind Coeburn's desk; it was definitely Coeburn in a ribbon cutting ceremony with... is that... the governor?

"I get the jobs thing, but I want to stay on the water numbers. I've spent the last month reviewing the numbers."

"And I'd hate to see you spend another month chasing whatever this, *reporting quirk*, is." Coeburn closed her folder and pushed it to the side while keeping her eyes, and smile, fixed. "Rest assured, I'll pass this to our experts on the sustainability team. Until then, let's keep our focus on the bigger picture - growth, opportunity, and diversifying opportunities for everyone in Reno."

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"And then what happened?"

"And then," Bill said, knocking the dust off the base before putting it in the metal box

outside the dugout, “she starts gaslighting me on the county’s methodology on the way out the door. ‘Outdated’ and ‘Not fit for purpose’ she says.”

Dominic laughed and shook his head, ruefully. He leaned against the chain link backstop.

“Anyway,” Bill continued, “thanks for covering. I didn’t think it would take that long but between the wait and getting over here it took a lot longer than I thought. Probably for the best - meant I had a chance to cool down.”

“No problem, happy to get practice started” Dominic said. The other parents had already picked up their players and headed for home, but the coaches’ kids - their kids - continued throwing pop-ups to each out in center field. It didn’t seem that long ago that Bill done that exact thing, on this exact field.

Dominic broke his brief revelry. “Aye yai yai. So what’s next?”

“Next?” Bill closed the lid on the equipment storage and put the padlock on, “I’m not sure what you mean. I put together the report, I gave it to Osirtek. I’d think it was on them now.”

Dominic drawled out a “Yeahhhhhh,” slow and questioning. “I’m sure they’ll get right on it.”

Bill chuckled, shook his head, and bent down to gather bats and catcher’s gear.

“Bill, have you looked at your power bill the last few months?”

“Power?” Bill looked up, “No, Stace does the utilities. Why?”

Dominic crossed his arms. “Ours has gone up every month since the beginning of the year. And not by a little - by a lot.”

“It’s been a hot summer.”

“Bill, we’ve known each other since middle school. I’ve lived here for at least as long as you. I know summers are hot. This is something different.”

Dominic sat down on the bench which doubled as a dugout at the city park. He leaned in, elbows on knees. “I went back and looked, at least the last few years, man. Something’s off. *Way*

off. And nobody is talking about it.”

Bill could feel his jaw clenching again.

“Our water’s been fine, same as yours,” Dominic continued, “but my cousin lives over on that side of town, near Osirtek. I don’t know if they share a main or what, but they’ve had to start buying water, at least the stuff they drink. They don’t have the money for that! And they can’t do laundry or dishes in the afternoon; there’s no pressure.”

“And you think it’s the data center’s fault? Higher power, no water, cats and dog sleeping together, the whole bit?”

Dominic blew a raspberry and rocked back, looking back out to center field. “Listen, man, that place isn’t right. It’s making things worse, not better.”

“Dom, I’m not sure what you expect me to do.”

“You figure things out, remember? Like in high school, our senior year - homecoming? What was that guy’s name?”

“Jeremy Devlin.”

“JEREMY! That’s right.” Dominic whistled to get the girls attention, and waved his daughter in, “Guy was trying to steal the homecoming king election, and you caught him red handed. You noticed something that even slipped by the teachers. You pick up on things.

“And that place is miles long, like the size of a secret villain lair. And you’re telling me there’s nothing to see?”

Dominic shouldered his daughter’s softball bag.

“Anyway, we gotta go - it’s nugget night. Tell Stacey I said hi, and take another look!”

Bill waved goodbye, picked up the softball gear, and turned back to the outfield. Beyond the fence, the automated sprinklers hissed loudly, before settling into their evening water.

#

Bill pulled his Tacoma onto the rare level patch off the frontage road that locals used as a

parking lot. On weekends, the bluff was filled with BMX kids and dirt bikers getting their thrills riding the dusty, ashy-blond trails. But on a weekday afternoon, it was just him, the sun-blasted rock, and an unobstructed view of the Osirtek complex gleaming below.

He hummed the Mission Impossible theme to himself as he reached back into the rear seat. Next to the team softball bag was the black, nylon drone case. A gift to his oldest last Christmas, he had snuck it out of the house that morning for official county reconnaissance duty. Now, mid-afternoon, the heat was already starting to get oppressive, the shimmer snaking off the horizon's asphalt.

From the driver's seat, he flipped open the container. Inside, the tiny gray plastic lump was about the size of his fist, rotors balled up protectively.

"How hard can it be?" Bill muttered, examining the drone.

He got out, surveyed the surrounding hills to make sure he was alone, and then carefully unfolded the drone on the Tacoma's hood.

Bill had made sure to download the app at work, but he wasn't prepared for the litany of pop-ups that followed. Thankfully, it stopped just short of making him fill out a flight plan, although given all the legalese he clicked-through, who knew what he agreed to?

After twenty minutes of fiddling, the drone was finally armed and ready. Bill squinted at the data center below.

"Target acquired."

Bill eased up on the thumb stick. Each of the blades along the slender arms began spinning, lifting the drone unsteadily off the hood and into the air, holding position a few feet from the metal.

With a gentle nudge with his thumbs, Bill practiced rotating the drone left, then right. He then had it strafe along the edge of the overlooking ridge, almost hitting a boulder on the high side when he got aggressive and applied too much speed. Stopping just in time, it bucked with Bill's overcorrection.

Bill blew out his breath in relief, which he hadn't realized he had been holding.

He set the controller on hood and shook out his hands while the drone continued to hover where he had stopped it in a panic. He rolled his shoulders once, and picked the controller back up. Time to see what the public sector can do.

"By the power vested in me by the Washoe County Planning Commission," he muttered, as he nudged the drone's path over the edge of the cliff, "I hereby deputize you, Agent D."

As the droning plastic disappeared down the hill, he watched its camera feed in the app. The megacampus, with a roof spanning at least a dozen football fields, grew larger. It was an unbreakable expanse of white tiled off into the distance, its uniformity broken at regular intervals by massive HVAC units, each sprouting countless ductwork. Heat vented from several of these, causing their own shimmer.

Sheesh, it was hot. Was it the day or was he really that nervous?

Bill snapped a picture, then another. The drone was still outside the perimeter and if he could just zoom in a bit, he might be able to see something more conclusive. As he reached to pinch in the app, however, he bumped the thumb stick. The feed from the camera spun dizzily. Bill snapped his head up, trying to see where the drone had been.

He tried to regain control but with his lack of experience, he over-corrected, jerking left, right, and then diving directly straight toward the perimeter fence. A gust of wind finished the job, the distant buzz of the rotors whining slightly higher pitched for a second before cutting out completely. Only the sound of baking shale remained.

"No, no, no!" Bill shouted as he ran to the edge of the parking lot's rim, over-looking the scene below. "Shit."

"That was painful."

Bill snapped back toward his truck. Next to it was a kid astride a well-loved dirt jumper, scratched helmet in her lap, shock of pink attitude swept across her head. He recognized the look

from his own kids; a mix of curiosity and disdain that only a middle-schooler could manage, 12 or maybe 13 years old. With all his focus on the drone, he hadn't heard her roll-up behind him.

"Hey," Bill straightened, unsure of what to do with the controller.

"Hey, yourself."

"So you, um, saw that practice flight, huh?"

The girl looked incredulous, and walked her bike toward the lip so she could get a better look. "Practice for what? Crashing?"

She peered down the bluff while shading her eyes. Bill was still trying to decide how to answer when she suddenly pointed. "It's just on the inside of the fence, just on the edge of the drainage ditch, I think. There. You want me to go get it?"

Bill hesitated. "You can get down there?"

"Yeah. There's a service gap about a quarter mile down. Everybody rides through there to cut across the west end. Nobody cares. It's all empty. Expansion or something. The serious cameras and fences are further inside."

Bill squinted at her. "How do you know that?"

"Because I live here, dude."

Fifteen minutes later, the kid pedaled back up to where Bill had been pacing. She swung the drawstring off her back, producing 'Agent D'. It was a little dusty, and maybe scratched where it had skidded across the rocks, but otherwise in one piece.

"Wow, I can't believe it! You have no idea- Thank you!" Bill reached for his wallet. "I think I have a \$20. I really appreciate--"

"Nah". The bike girl reshouldered her bag. "Keep your money." She aimed her bike back down the hill. "Just.. Uh, maybe don't mess with Mordor unless you're serious."

Bill laughed, partly from the unexpected reference and partly because his intent has been so obvious even to middle-schooler. He gestured a thumb toward the data center. "Mordor, huh?"

“It makes noise all night. And the lights never go off. Makes sense to me.”

As the kid rode away, Bill turned to look again at the data center. Even from atop the ridge, he could hear the faint humming; an entire valley vibrating mechanically in time with the heat.

#

Bill drove his Tacoma down the road, carefully navigating the handful of switchbacks. “Because I live here, dude” echoed in his head. She lived here, Dom lived here, he lived here. Who didn’t live here? Osirtek employees.

A handful of t-junctions later, Bill was near the interstate on ramp and the industrial park’s only hotel. Finished in the last year, he suspected it was where Osirtek’s rotating cast of high-priced consultants and limited time project personnel likely stayed; it would be closer to work. And - for all the young, single men with too much money and too little sense- it was probably safer for the company to put their employees up here than in downtown Reno.

As he approached, Bill could see his intuition was right; at least a third of the vehicles in the parking lot had those cheap, temporary magnetic signs with the *OSIRTEK SYSTEMS* logo on the door. Other than that, there weren’t any signs of life, the heat making any lingering outside uncomfortable.

Bill parked and studied the hotel in his rear view mirror, considering his options. The drone had been a bust. Dom would be laughing a week about that one. But maybe if he could talk to someone? Or maybe somebody that worked at the hotel might know something? He didn’t know what he was doing; only that he had to try and *see*.

The hotel was a casino in Monaco, inside was the mission, and he needed to be Bond, suave and capable. The only problem was that, in reality, he was a middle-aged man, sweating through his JC Penny button down, incapable of flying his kid’s drone.

He did a quick check in the mirror, attempted his most convincing poker face, and crossed the asphalt that radiated like a skillet.

If you've ever been to a chain business hotel, then you've been to this one. A drive underneath an awning before a set of double, motion-detected sliding doors. As Bill entered, he was blasted with the lobby air conditioning, the artificially sealed interior, fleetingly, doing battle with the high summer outside. Like the Osirtek waiting room, the furniture here was all clean lines and unsurprising color pairings; not boring, per se, but safe in the kind of way only design-by-committee can be.

Bill was about to move to the reception desk when raucous whoops and hollers broke out at the far end of the room. The hotel bar was packed for an early evening. Behind the bar, several televisions were full on sporting. The room was full of twenty-and-thirty-somethings, most wearing Osirtek polos, chattering away excitedly. Their imported beers raised or were pointing at the center screen, while one of them - apparently the loser of whatever bet - glumly pulled out his wallet.

Their conversations rose and fell in inverse rhythm with the action on the screen, loudly talking to be heard over the commentators in one second and then hushed in reverence as the action played out in the next.

Bill gave the desk attendant an acknowledging wave, and headed to the bar. There was a seat at the end, where the viewing angle was the worst. He sat down and ordered an ice tea from the employee behind the counter. "This could be a thing," he thought, taking out his phone and pretended to scroll.

The Osirtek employees carried on like pledges at a frat house. There seemed to be lots of prop bets happening on the baseball game: whether the batting team would score a run this inning, number of strike outs in that time, etc. It made Bill nauseous how much money seemed to trade hands, only to be traded right back.

It finished after what seemed to be an eternity, and the conversation seemed to turn to work.

"Yeah, we're pulling 280 megawatts like it's nothing."

"Locals are freaking out about their water again, like their lawns matter."

“Bah, if it looks like the aquifer is drying up, we’ll just use the new LLM engineering is training to figure it out.”

That last one made Bill pause. He had been typing the most egregious statements into a text to himself so he could recall them later, but that one was beyond just tech bro bravado - it didn’t make any sense. If they sucked the valley dry their plan was... to have the computers make water?

He heard plenty of nonsense in county meetings, but this was something new.

Bill’s confusion must have have been apparent. An engineer, the glum bet-loser, had stopped nursing his imported IPA at some point and was watching him, curiously.

“Haven’t seen you before,” he said, turning slightly in his seat. “You with operations?”

Bill stiffened and set his phone face-down on the bar.

Several other people within earshot of the question were also now staring, expectantly.

“No, um.” The meeting at Osirtek; he had emailed with a specific division; what was its name? “Yeah, I’m with facilities compliance.”

There was a moment while they sized him up.

“You know - Coeburn?”

The glum engineer pulled a disapproving face. “You work with Coeburn?”

One of the guys - one with a shaved head and beard, who couldn’t have been out of college more than a few years, broke into a huge grin. He laughed as he blurted out, “*Then you’re drinking the wrong thing, man!*”

The room seemed to think it was the funniest thing ever, and exploded in laughter.

Bill lifted what remained of his iced tea and toasted the joke.

The assembled group returned to their respective conversations. Bill paid for his drink and left via the side door thirty minutes later; he didn’t know if anybody was paying attention, but, if so, he hoped the side door would look like he was returning to his room. It seemed to work - he climbed into his truck without encountering anyone else. Before starting, he doubled-checked his

notes.

There was some good stuff here. Other stuff he didn't understand. But there was one line he repeated under his breath:

“Redline burn-in - thurs. 10am.”

Whatever that was, he was going to be there to find out.

It was evening, and the sun was just beginning to set. As he went to pull away, he could see the canyon to the east, glowing unnaturally, the bright lights of the data center illuminating the valley like an artificial dawn.

#

Bill unzipped his hoodie, which had served him well before dawn, and now would serve as a cushion. He spent PTO to take the morning off. When he got up, before the sun, there had been a chill in the air. But the temperature had been steadily rising since then.

The gap in the fence had been right where the bike girl had mentioned it. The walk down the bluff in the dark had been a bit treacherous; Bill didn't want to use his phone to light his path for fear that it might give him away. There had been a few close calls, but he managed to make it without twisting an ankle (or worse).

Bill was surprised to find the drainage ditch, meant for storm water runoff, was wet. This, despite the fact that it had been at least a month since the area had any rain that amounted to anything. And, as Coeburn had mentioned, the area was still in a multi-year drought. In the growing light, he could see the slick discoloration, like this had been a regular occurrence for some time. It turned the concrete scar running parallel to the fence into a treacherous crossing - literally and figuratively.

He had found a patch of scrub. It wasn't the greatest cover, but it was better than any other alternative that he could see. And he waited.

The first surprise happened well before 10am. There was a regular parade of light trucks

starting their shift from 7 or 8, which was expected. What was a surprise was the large water tankers. Using his binoculars, Bill saw them being staged in a temporary area partially obscured by stacked shipping containers. Workers dragged hoses to and fro, coupling them to a row of valves along the data center's flank. And it was *potable water*; but from where were they siphoning drinking water from? When one truck finished, another would take its place - was this how they were attempting to bypass monitoring? It certainly didn't meet any definition of "closed loop" Bill understood.

He took pictures, noting the motor carriers and any USDOT numbers he could make out. That would be worth a follow-up.

The second surprise was how the air seemed to intensify well in advance of the event. The data center always thrummed, 24-7, with a certain amount of unnatural, low-end wobble, a noise pollution that was felt, if not heard, for miles. But, in the last hour, there had been a noticeable increase in pitched whine, a grating screech that gave an unsettling, shrill accompaniment that only grew with the temperature.

The rumble intensified. Bill, through the binoculars, could see steam venting across the roof. The ground seemed to vibrate like a plucked wire. It was like the entire valley was trembling.

This continued well after ten, the relentless cacophony setting his teeth on edge. But, as the humming, whirring, and crackling began to recede, there was a new sound. Bill heard it before he could see it - an rolling static, jets of white noise somewhere further up the drainage ditch. The water got louder and louder until he saw it splash around the bend, flying down the channel toward whatever watershed lied beyond.

At least he thought it was water. The speed made it hard to tell for sure, but it looked *wrong*. There was a pearlescent sheen on the top, as if there was oil in the mix. The chaotic release and sloshing was also causing a foamy scum on the edges. Leaning forward, on his hands and knees Bill could smell something faintly metallic or chemical.

There was no way this was storm water - or that it should be dumped without treatment.

This was it! This was his proof!

He'd analyzed numbers, filed reports, and attended hearings but he had never had a case so brazenly lie to his face before.

He grabbed his water bottle and hurriedly dumped the last of the contents on the thirsty ground beside his sweatshirt. Then, leaning out over the ditch, he reached down, taking care not to lose the bottle in the sudden rapids. A few seconds later, it was topped off.

He carefully screwed the cap back on, and recorded some additional video with his phone. The water was beginning to slow but he had more than enough, in multiple ways.

And then he heard the crunch of tires on gravel, above.

He crabbed walked the few feet to his scrub-shielded camp. He made out a light truck parked beside his own. A second later, both doors opened. The driver, walked around the front. He looked like security, with gray monochrome from head to toe broken up only with a high-vis vest. He looked out, across the valley, at some point at the far end of the data center, while reaching for the handset clipped at his shoulder.

Bill couldn't hear what was said. He still didn't see the passenger. The driver circled the front of his vehicle and then stood looking at Bill's license plate, for a moment, head arched to speak into his radio.

They'd know whose truck it was soon enough. And what if they did? Bill could feel his initial fear and embarrassment turning to anger. He had every right to be there! What were they even doing patrolling there?

Bill slung his bag over his shoulder and started up the faint switchback. By the time he reached the top, a second security vehicle had arrived, pinning his Tacoma. The two original uniformed employees stood near the open window of this new vehicle, discussing something as Bill crested the ridge.

“Hey there!” Bill said, a bit winded but determined.

The three private security employees looked up, surprised. One - the driver of the first vehicle, Bill thought - was first to speak.

“Sir, is this your vehicle?”

“Sure is. Is there a problem?”

The one to speak put his hands on his hips. “That’s private property. You can’t be down there. I’m gonna have to-”

Bill interrupted the guard with his upheld hand. He put his bag on the hood of his truck, rifling for a second, and then produced his county government lanyard. He approached the trio, offering his badge.

“I’m with the Washoe Planning Commission. As such, the entire community watershed, including the floodplain easement just over there,” Bill nodded below and to the west, “is my jurisdiction”.

The guards exchanged glances with each other.

Bill recognized the hesitation - he’d seen it in a hundred zoning hearings - and pressed his advantage.

“You folks had quite the morning here, huh? Documented case of metering avoidance? Unauthorized discharge?”

The other standing guard, the one yet to speak, answered. “We’re an independent contractor. We just provide security. They don’t tell us what they’re doing.”

“Uh, huh.” Bill put the lanyard around his neck. “Given what I just saw, you are looking at a half dozen regional and state environmental violations, not to mention your site covenants.”

The two guards standing shifted, uncomfortably. The third, still in the second security vehicle, visibly stiffened in his seat.

“And you say you had nothing to do with this? Otherwise, I should probably get your

names and any IDs for my report. Or - you'd probably make great collaborating witnesses if the state decides to launch an investigation."

The driver in the truck called the lead guard over and said something inaudible. Bill couldn't make it out, but the pickup started and then slowly backed up and left the parking lot, leaving the original two guards.

The lead motioned for his junior to return to their own vehicle.

"You'd best move on, sir," he said, the authority he spoke with before now gone. "It's for your own safety. We don't want to find you back here again."

Each guard carefully avoided eye contact as Bill watched them back out and drive further up the hillside.

It crested the next rise and disappeared before Bill unlocked and got in his truck. He shut the door and exhaled - a massive, shuddering sigh. Outside, the valley continued to hum; inside, however, he could hear himself over it. His hands, draped on the wheel at ten and two were shaking, but he started to laugh. He whooped, punching the ceiling.

After he got his breathing under control, he reached into his bag and retrieved the aluminum water bottle. Inside, he could feel the contents gently slosh.

Bill smiled. This was everything - not the proof itself, but the knowing.