

Otto nodded, then sat back.
They quietly waited.
A NICE HOT BATH

Perry raised the tiny flame to the rum-soaked hand towel. It caught instantly, bursting into flame with a loud whoof, singeing his hand. He whipped the flaming towel behind him like a horse flicking its tail to ward off a swarm of flies. The flames slapped against the bandolier towels wet spot.

It, too, ignited instantly, scorching the thin flesh above the Triangle. The flames caught Perrys hair, which disintegrated in a scalp-searing whoosh. The smell of rum, burned flesh and singed hair filled the bathroom.

Scalding pain raged against his back as flames scampered up the towel. He started to stand, his instincts screaming to MOVE, to RUN, to STOP, DROP and ROLL. His skin bubbled and blistered he let out a small scream but forced himself to sit back down on the tub. He switched the knife from his left hand to his right.

Letting loose a roar mixed of equal parts pain, fury and defiance, Perry stabbed the blade into his left forearm, right through one of the Triangles closed eyes. He knew it went all the way through, because he felt the blade tip dig into his own flesh on the other side. Blood and purple gushed onto his hand, almost making him lose his grip on the knife. With a primitive growl and a sick smile of insane satisfaction, he punched the knife tip in again and again, like a pointed pick into a bowl of ice.

His back continued to burn.

Face contorted with pain, he fell backward into the tub. There was a quick hiss as he landed in the cold water. The fire ceased, but the burning sensation continued. A wave of joy washed over him even as he writhed in agony.

How do you like that? How the fuck do you Howdy Doody like that?

His ravaged arm filled the tub with diluted blood, making the water look like cherry Kool-Aid.

Not done yet, kids, Perry thought. No bout-a-doubt-it, got one more round to go.

With his right hand, he squeezed down on his left forearm. He thrashed in the shallow red water, his face twisting into a gnarled mask of agony.

APARTMENT

Dew ignored his aching knees and crouched in front of the door to Apartment G-104. His thick fingers worked lock-picking tools with the delicate grace of a ballerina pirouetting across the stage.

The lock clicked with a tiny sound, and Dew silently turned the deadbolt back. He stood, pulled his .45, and took a deep breath.

Theyre gonna pay, Malcolm.

He opened the door and slid into an empty living room, devoid of any furniture. He did a fast check to make sure there was nothing in any of the rooms they were empty as well. He ran out the door into the hall, headed for the next apartment.

THE CHICKEN SCISSORS

Perry lurched out of the tub, bloody water sloshing all over the floor. He grabbed a clean towel, looped it into a granny knot, then bit back the screams as he pulled it tight against his mangled forearm.

He was in serious pain, but he could handle it. Why? Because he had discipline, thats why. His arm bled like a proverbial stuck pig. The towel quickly soaked through with bright red he didnt know if hed hit an artery and he didnt care, because hed punched through all three of the Triangles eyes. A thin, greasy black tentacle hung from the cut, blood coursing down it to piddle on the floor.

It didnt matter. Hed be in an ambulance inside of five minutes. He grabbed the towels ends, took a deep breath, and pulled the terry-cloth tourniquet even tighter. A fresh wave of pain erupted from his arm, but he bit back the scream. The Triangles awoke.

No, not Triangles, Triangle.

The one on his back was dead, burned to a crispy-crisp, and the one on his arm was sliced in half. Only one remained. Which meant there really was only one thing left to do.

No bout-a-doubt-it.

stop ST O p StoP

FucKEjer Fueklrr

a

Shwhoeld

The voice in his head sounded weak, thin, frail. He couldnt understand many of the words.

Shouldnt have fucked with a Dawsey, big dog. You understand that now, dont you? He shuffled slowly forward, resting against the sink counter.

bastar ty fucker t

fuckert Stope STOPE

Help hELP

Theres no help for you, Perry said. Now you know what its like. The butchers block sat on the sink counter. It called to him.

The bathroom door rattled violently. Tentacles slid under the door and squirmed like lunatic black snakes. In jagged

disbelief that cut through his hazy vision, Perry watched the doorknob turn.

He launched himself against the door just as it began to open, his right shoulder slamming it closed. He locked the door and took a step back, eyes wide with shock as the black, ropy tentacles continued to worm their way under the door.

He heard the clicks and pops of the hatchlings, but he heard more he heard their womanly voice in his head, not as strong as the confused pleas of his own Triangle, but strong enough, and desperate, angry. The voices were separate now. They all sounded the same, but were individual instead of the group they had been while still inside Fatty Pattys body.

So many words crushed together. It was like trying to focus in on one snowflake during a blizzard, but he picked out bits and pieces.

Stop! Dont do it! Sinner! Youll burn in hell!

Dont kill him dont kill him!

The tentacles pushed and pulled at the door, rattling it, trying to force it open, but they didnt have enough strength. Perry watched in horror as they slithered in, pulled at the door, slid back under too many to count, moving too fast to track.

He turned back to the sink. He ignored their pleading voices. They couldn't get in, and he had unfinished business. He looked at the butchers block.

Looked at the Chicken Scissors.

He shook his head, he couldn't do it. The doctors could cut it out, the doctors could fix it!

The sink's top was at waist level; he reached into his wet underwear to lift his scrotum and rest it on the counter, but when he touched it, his hand instinctively flinched as if he'd just unknowingly grabbed a rattlesnake.

It hadn't felt right. It hadn't been soft and pliant; it had been hard, crusty, swollen, with solid bumps that didn't belong.

sttttop S toP STopej

you cagt Do NO NOG

NO NO

The Triangle's voice wavered badly. Perry didn't know if it was the Tylenol coursing through his body, the fact that it was the only Triangle left, or a little bit of both. It didn't matter. He reached into his underwear again, ready for the horrid, stomach-churning feeling this time, and lifted his scrotum up to rest on the edge of the sink.

It was the most horrible thing he'd ever seen.

Tears instantly poured down his cheeks. Not the tears of pain that had sneaked out of his eyes once or twice during his self-mutilation sessions, but tears of frustration, tears of a man who's lost everything.

There wasn't a doctor in the world who could help him now.

He hadn't looked at this Triangle since the day he'd pulled that tiny white thing from his thigh. He hadn't examined his balls since then. Not even once. Had he looked, had he seen, he might not have fought at all.

The Triangle was huge. It was almost black under the skin of his scrotum. The center of the pyramid head pointed up as if his balls rested under a fleshy pup tent. Most of his pubic hair had fallen off, leaving his skin bald and unprotected. His left testicle was hidden somewhere under the Triangle. His right testicle was barely visible, the end of it pushing against the inside of his scrotum, stretching the skin. His dick jutted out at an odd angle the Triangle had grown right underneath its base. There was little room left for the tissue that connected the penis to his body. It looked as if it were on the verge of falling off, severed at the bottom by the edges of the ever-growing Triangle.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

The tentacles had grown under his skin, just as they had in Fatty Patty, right out the sides of the Triangle. One tentacle reached up and over his right testicle. Another spread from his scrotum down into his inner thigh, a cordlike infection pulsing huge and misshapen.

The last tentacle? The last one was the worst of them all.

The last tentacle reached right up the side of his penis, distending the skin, a thick, black vein that wrapped around and around, that reached almost to the end, as if it were pointing at the head of Perry's dick. Pointing and mocking. His naked body shivered with fear and dread. Dread because he knew he couldn't do it, he couldn't cut off his own dick and balls. The little fuckers had won they had won they had won fuck them all to hell fuck you all to hell! Perry leaned forward, his unit still on the sink, and yanked one of the steak knives from the butchers block. He laid his arm down on the sink, palm up, and placed the point of the knife at his wrist just below the hand. He'd heard somewhere that you have to slice down the length of your wrist, not crosswise, to do it right.

His father's voice: What are you doing, boy?

Perry's tears fell into the sink. Sobs racked his body. He looked up into the mirror, and once again instead of his own ravaged reflection he saw the tight-skinned face of his skeletal father. Jacob Dawsey's eyes glowed bloodred, his lips so taut they didn't move when he spoke he was nothing more than skin and bones, his muscles long since consumed by Captain Cancer.

I'm sorry, Daddy, Perry said through choked sobs. I can't do it. I'm gonna end it right here.

You can still win, son. You can still beat them all.

Daddy, I can't. I just can't!

You gotta do it, boy! Daddy's voice took on the harshest of tones. You've come this far you can't stop now. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do!

Perry hung his head. He couldn't do it, and he couldn't look at his father's face. He pressed the blade against his wrist. A drop of blood formed around the knife point. Two quick slashes and he'd be done.

Sorry, Daddy, but it's got to end here.

He took one last look at his misshapen, monstrous genitals, blinked back the tears and gathered his strength to . . .

He wasn't sure he saw it at first.

It happened a second time, and he knew he hadn't imagined it.

His genitals jiggled.

hatchuing timeddf

for hatfhueing timy

fort hatchfring

No.

No sir, no how, no way. If he killed himself right now, the Triangle would still hatch out of his body and join the others, do whatever hatch

lings do, dance around the dead bodies of the silly humans, play gin rummy, watch The Brady Bunch or whatever else they did he didnt know and he just didnt give a fuck.

Perry screamed at his genitals. Fuck you! Fuck you fuck you fuckyou! Its not going to happen, do you understand? The Triangle in his scrotum jiggled and twitched. He watched in horror and absolute rage as it started to bounce outward, pushing both to break free of the skin and to break the tail, the umbilical cord that had kept it alive all this time.

Perry grabbed the Chicken Scissors.

He cut his underwear twice, one snip on either hip, and the wet cloth fell to the floor.

He pulled his body away from the sink, just a little, so that there was a space between his hips and the counter, just enough of a space for the Chicken Scissors to slide, one impossibly thick blade resting atop his scrotum, one impossibly thick blade below.

hatCH ing Herwe We

CoME Heert Wer Comesfg

If Perry Dawsey had any scraps of sanity left, they slipped away, snapping like a bungee cord pulled past its limit, both ends recoiling back from the break at wind-whistling speeds.

At least the voices will stop.

The first sound was the metallic scraping of the Chicken Scissors. The second sound was a scream.

APARTMENT

No one had answered at Apartment 202, and Dew was halfway through picking the lock when he heard the horrible scream. It was a mans scream, and one that sent a wave of fear dancing at the base of Dews spine. There was something in that scream, something beyond pain or fear.

Dew jumped up, his knees popping loudly in the still hallway. The back staircase was closest. He sprinted up the steps, pulling out the cellular as he ran.

Otto, get them in here!

YA GONNA BURN . . .

Perry stumbled out of the bathroom, bleeding, coughing, crying, dripping snot and spit and blood everywhere. He was so far gone he didnt see the hatchlings scatter about the room, hopping out of his way as fast as their uncoordinated little bodies would carry them. They filled his head with nonsense words and abstract phrases.

Juggling an armful of stuff, Perry whipped the first bottle against the wall just inside the door; it shattered, spreading Bacardi 151 all over the wall and floor.

He saw one of the hatchlings dash toward him. He grabbed the bloody Chicken Scissors. The hatchling leaped for his leg, wrapped its tentacles around his calf. He felt a stabbing, cutting pain, but it was distant, like the sound of a shout from a mile away. He arced down with the Chicken Scissors and punctured the hatchlings body.

A five-part scream ripped through his head, a womans scream that poured from each of the hatchlings.

Why can I still hear them? Perry mumbled, his voice bordering on suffused hysteria. I got them all . . . why can I still hear them, goddamn it!

He lifted the scissors, taking a moment to stare at the jittering, wriggling hatchling impaled on the bloody blades. He flicked his wrist, flinging the hatchling across the room. It fell on the floor, broken, twitching, staining the carpet with purple goo.

Perry looked up and growled a primitive challenge, but the rest of the hatchlings stayed away. He moved to the door, stepping over Fatty Pattys body. He noticed that her lower legs and hands were gone, gnawed to bloody stumps. The hatchlings popped up and down in a sickening dance, chirping, clicking, filling his head with disjointed threats.

Yo ure going to pay Yo u bastard. You l l get your s. An d v e r y soon.

Perry ignored them and hopped to the entryway. He juggled his armload

of goodies as he unlocked the three locks, then opened the door. He smashed his last bottle on the door frame. Rum soaked the carpet.

Yo ure a b a d man. Wel l b e coming for yo u, w ere going to get you.

He looked back at the hatchlings, who stared at him with utter spite, black eyes gleaming with absolute hatred.

Perry said nothing, his mind incapable of articulating words. A thin string of drool hung from his lip, swinging in time with his uncoordinated movements. He dropped the Chicken Scissors to the floor.

In his arms he held two more things. One of the things was the lighter. He flicked his Bic.

Perry Dawsey stared at the room with eyes much older than his twentiesix years. He bent and touched the flame to the rum-soaked floor.

Flames shot up instantly, a warm blue at first, but quickly turning yellowish-orange as the carpet caught fire. He dropped the lighter. Now he held only one thing. The flames grew, crawling up the door frame, reaching for the ceiling.

Perry looked back at the hatchlings one last time. They ran around the apartment like some satanic version of the Keystone Kops, bouncing off walls, furniture and one another in a blind terror the fire quickly spread back from the door frame into the apartment proper, and there was no place for them to avoid the flames.

Yes you gonna burn, Perry said quietly.

He turned to leave, but the map caught his eye. Fire tickled the papers bottom corner.

Perry reached out and tore the map from the door. He left the apartment, went to his right and started hopping as the flames spread out into the hallway behind him.

APARTMENT

Dew came up the stairs just as the flames lashed out into the hallway, five feet high and growing fast. The place was going up like a dry Christmas tree. He stopped, looking for a target. On the other side of the hungry flames, he saw a huge naked man clutching something in each hand.

Through the distorted, waving heat haze, Dew saw that the man stood on one leg. The other hung limply, the foot a few inches off the floor. The man turned and hopped away, his bulk already obscured by the raging flames.

Dew started firing, emptying the seven-round magazine in less than three seconds. The lethal .45-caliber bullets disappeared into the fire Dew didn't know if he'd hit Dawsey or not.

And there was only one way to find out.

He popped a fresh mag into the Colt .45, hesitated for only a moment, then sprinted toward the raging fire.

HIPPITY HOPPITY

With a coordination born from complete lack of regard for safety, Perry leaped to the next landing, clearing six steps in one hop. When he landed, blood splattered from his crotch. Momentum slammed him into the wall, but he didn't fall; instead he turned and cleared the next six steps with one powerful thrust. When he hit the second-floor landing, the towel fell off his arm, leaving him completely naked save for his socks.

Anyone watching would have thought it was impossible, that he was sure to break his neck. But he kept hopping, not knowing that Dew Phillips was only a few steps behind.

The outside door burst open, swinging wildly on its hinges, slamming so hard the handle gouged a chunk from the brick wall. Perry, wide-eyed and screaming, hopped out into the snow, the cold hitting his naked body like the fist of Old Man Winter.

He hopped fast, remembering somewhere, somehow, that he was supposed to get a car, go to Wahjamega and finish this crazy odyssey. He also wanted to get to a hospital, because some stupid motherfucker had just shot him in the left shoulder. That had almost knocked him over, but hed been hit harder many times.

Oh, but he needed a hospital for a few other things, too, eh, DaddyO? A hospital to stitch up an arm that gushed bright, steaming blood onto the roads packed snow, a hospital to piece together whatever was sliced in his calf so he could walk with two legs again, a hospital to treat the huge burn blisters on his back and head and ass, a hospital to pull that bullet out of the back of his left shoulder, a hospital to suck the rotting black goo out of his shoulder and ass.

And, above all, a hospital to sew his dick back on.

ONE SHOT, ONE KILL

The front door to Building G hadnt quite closed when Dew Phillips smashed it open again. He raced out onto the snowy pavement, trailing smoke and flames behind him. He rolled once, twice, a third time, then stood, the flames defeated, his jacket a smoldering ruin of acrid polyester.

He was in that place again, that murderous place, the spot in his mind where he sent his feelings and emotions and morals when there was killing to be done. He wasnt Dew Phillips anymore; he was Top, the death machine that had taken more lives than he could count.

Dew dropped into a shooters crouch and brought up the .45 with the stone-still grip of a brain surgeon. He saw everything: the snow-covered dead branches of the winter trees, each iced needle on the frosted pines and shrubs, every car, every hubcap, every license plate, every slushy footprint. Police dotted the lot like dark blue alligators sunning on a riverbank. A trio of gray vans raced in: one from his right, one from his left and one on the far side of the hopping, blood-streaming freak.

Dawsey hopped across the parking lot, a sprint for freedom when there was no place to run. He seemed to notice the police cars, and he slowed. Dawsey stopped, then turned. With the desperate optimism of a madman, he hopped toward Dew.

Dew sighted in on a face contorted with fury, pain, confusion and hate. The massive man raged forward, huge and horrible, every muscle fiber twitching and visible even from a distance. He hopped on his blood-glazed right leg, covering amazing distances with each thrust. His left leg hung at an angle, limp and along for the ride. Third-degree burns covered his right arm. He had no hair left, only crusty black marks and blisters that perched lecherously on his skull. A long streak of black goo decorated his chest, goo that appeared to ooze from a softball-size purple sore on his right collarbone.

Blood streaked down both legs, pouring from where a penis should have been.

Nightmarish above all this were the face and the eyes, eyes that stared

straight out with both the cold, intense look of the predator and the wild, panic-stricken flight of prey. A mouth that couldnt decide between a snarl or a scream, a mouth that hung open, lips curled up to show teeth that gleamed a Colgate white in the afternoon sun.

Dew saw all this in less than two seconds. A brief instant where details stood out like raised letters on a brass nameplate.

That look. That expression. Just like Brewbaker. Just like the man whod killed Mal.

One .45-caliber slug and Dawseys head would evaporate in a cloud of blood and brains. Somebody had to pay for Mals death, and this crazy fucker would fit the bill just fine.

Dew aimed for that psychotic smile.

His finger tightened on the trigger.

Dawsey kept coming.

One shot, one shot . . . goddamn it, Mal, I miss you.

But Dew had his orders.

He dropped his aim and pulled the trigger.

The bullet smacked into Dawseys right shoulder and spun him around like a rag doll. He almost made a full spin before he crashed to the ground, his steaming blood melting into the dirty driveway snow. The map fluttered to the ground.

Dew lowered his weapon and started to move forward, then stopped short. He stared, disbelieving, as Dawsey scrambled back up to stand on his one good leg. His expression hadnt changed, not one lick, no surprise or agony visible among the tumult of emotions that rippled across his face. Huge muscles twitching, a grin of wide-eyed madness chiseled on his face, hopping on one powerful leg, Dawsey lunged toward Dew.

Dew raised the .45. There was one place he could shoot that the kid wouldnt get up.

You sure are one tough bastard, Dew said quietly, then pulled the trigger.

The round smashed into Perrys knee, the same knee that had ended his football career. The once-broken patella

disintegrated into a bouquet of splintered bone. The bullet ripped through cartilage before it bounced off the femur and exited through the back of his leg along with a misty cloud of blood.

Perry crumbled. He fell face-first onto the snow-covered pavement and slid to a halt only a few feet from Dew. This time he didn't get up. He stared at Dew, breathing heavily, the insane death-grin plastered on his face.

And his penis was still clutched in his fist.

Dew gently stamped out the flaming map, then picked it up. Keeping the barrel trained on Dawsey's grinning face, Dew looked at the map. It was burned through in places, but the red line running from Ann Arbor to Wahjamega was still clearly visible. Also in red, a strange, Japanese-looking symbol.

Dew looked at Dawsey the same symbol, scabbed over and bleeding in places, was carved into his arm.

Dew held the map so Perry could see it.

Whats here? Dew demanded. What the fuck do you want with that pissant town? Whats this symbol mean?

Someones knockin at the door, Perry said in a singsong voice. Somebodys ringing the bell.

FREE RIDE

Three gray vans closed in on Dew and Perry, sliding to a halt on the packed snow. Like ants rushing from a mound, biosuit-covered soldiers poured out. The police in the area moved toward the vans, but kept their distance from the bizarrely dressed men carrying the squat, lethal FN P90s.

Margaret and Clarence were the first to reach Dawsey and Dew. Clarence pulled his Glock sidearm and tried to cover the damaged man, but Margaret dashed in and knelt next to his charred body, her knee dipping into the steaming pool of spreading blood. She tore her eyes away from the severed penis clutched in his hand.

He was still breathing, although for how long that would last she couldnt say. Shed never seen a human being so messed up yet still alive. She didnt see any triangles on him, but with all the blood and the third-degree burns it was hard to tell. Yet he was alive, and that, at least, was something she could work with.

She almost jumped when he spoke.

Somebodys ringin the bell, Dawsey said. I gotta go to Wahjamega. Do me a favor, open the door, and let em in.

Margaret swallowed hard. She could barely believe her eyes this ravaged man, whose blood was turning the slush as red as a Slurpee, talked through a smile of sheer madness.

Open up that fucking green door, you fucking bitch! Dawseys thick hand shot out fast-fast and grabbed her Racal suit, pulling her down until his lips mashed against her visor, spreading blood and spit on the clear plastic. His wide, insane eyes were just an inch from hers.

Somebodys knocking at that fucking door!

Clarence smashed the butt of his Glock against Dawseys cheek, opening up yet one more wound. Dawsey flinched but kept snarling, his eyes burning with the fury of pure insanity.

Hit him again! Dew screamed.

Clarence whacked Dawsey twice more in rapid succession. The big mans grip relaxed, and he fell back to the ground, eyes half-lidded, the smile still on his face.

You okay, Doc? Clarence asked.

Margaret fought to regain her composure, her breath coming in irregular gasps. For a second shed been sure Dawsey would rip right through the suit and tear her throat out. He was so fast, and so damn strong.

Im fine, she said. She stood and waved over two soldiers who waited with a stretcher.

She could only imagine what that poor man had gone through. What kinds of thoughts could make a human being self-inflict that kind of damage? Margaret wondered if hed provide any answers.

She couldnt know what terrors awaited in the months to come. For Perry Dawsey, the infection was over. For the rest of the world, it was only the beginning.

THE JUMPER

It had all happened so fast that wisps of smoke still curled from the freshly fired .45. Dew had done his job yet again, but he didnt feel any better. He was no closer to discovering the parties responsible for this horror, for killing his partner. Dew said nothing, kept a grip on his weapon, watched Clarence Otto direct the rapid-response team as they set up a small perimeter around Dawsey.

A third-floor window shattered outward. Dew looked up, saw the flame tongues billowing out, greasy black smoke roiling toward the sky. But he saw something else, something burning, something falling. A brief flailing comet, whipping, ropelike extensions making it resemble a flaming medusas head.

The thing hit hard against the snow-covered pavement, flames seeming to splash outward before they roared upward again. He stared, disbelieving, the back of his mind already making a connection that his conscious thoughts refused to allow. The flaming thing stood, or at least tried to stand, burning, boneless legs supported a body all but obscured by jumping flames. There was a small screech, a pitiful thing, the sound a weak woman makes when she feels severe pain.

A thin trail of fluid shot from the thing to land in a steaming, boiling black streak on the dirty snow. The creature shuddered once more, then popped, flaming pieces scattering across the parking lot. The pieces burned brightly like wreckage from a crashed airliner.

Suddenly Margaret was at his side, her protective helmet gone, her black hair hanging about the biosuit, an ashen look of dread on her face.

Now it makes sense, she said quietly. Oh my God now it all makes sense. Dawsey, the others theyre just hosts for these things.

Dew let his mind make that connection, let himself accept the unimaginable. This was no time to start doubting the obvious, no matter how fucked up the obvious might be, and he still had a job to do. The sound of approaching men tore his attention from the dwindling bits of flame. Cops were coming on the run, local boys, state troopers, at least a dozen, with more probably a few steps behind.

Dew turned to Otto and the biosuited agents. All of them stood with guns at the ready, casting snap-glances all around the parking lot, looking to see if there were more of the nightmarish creatures.

Dew barked orders in his booming sergeants voice. Get Dawsey in the van! Squad Three, police those pieces and do it now! Move move move! The soldiers scurried to obey Dews commands. He turned to face the cops, who closed on the burning building. He stepped forward, thinking of what bullshit to say, thinking of a way to explain the creature, but the cops rushed right past the burning pieces and through Building Gs main door.

Bob Zimmer sprinted up to Dew, his eyes on the flames shooting from the broken third-floor window.

Did you get him? Zimmer asked.

Yeah, Dew said. I got him. Hes dead. The cops hadnt seen the falling creature. Or if they had, they hadnt made sense of it; perhaps they were too far away. Or perhaps, his conscience nagged him, perhaps they were too worried about the people in the burning building to care about something peculiar but obviously not human falling from the third-floor window.

Are there still people in there?

Probably, Dew said. I didnt get anybody out before Dawsey ran.

Zimmer didnt nod, didnt acknowledge Dews comment. He stepped toward the building, directing other cops inside, shouting orders to the first cops emerging from the building escorting confused and scared residents.

The biosuited soldiers were already dousing the pieces and scooping up what bits they could. Dew watched the last of them hop into the vans. Everyone was loaded up except for Clarence Otto and Margaret Montoya. She stared at the building, a blank look on her face. Otto stood by her side, waiting for Dews next command.

Dew pointed his finger south, in the direction of the hospital. Otto put his arm around Margarets shoulder and quickly guided her to the van that held Dawsey. Dew closed the doors behind them. The vans quietly pulled away, avoiding the confused rush of policemen, then sped out of the parking lot.

Somewhere in the distance, Dew heard the faint approach of sirens: ambulances, the fire department. He looked up at the third floor one

last time the window was all but obscured by the raging fire, flames shooting up at least twenty feet into the sky. There wouldnt be anything left in that apartment.

Amid the shouting chaos, Dew calmly walked to his Buick. He shut himself inside the Buick and stared at Dawseys singed map, at the strange symbol so neatly drawn there. The symbol matched the one carved into Dawseys arm. The words This is the place neatly written in blue ink. It wasnt the same hand that had scrawled This is the place on the map in Dawseys apartment. This writing was clean, measured.

The writing of a woman.

Fuck me, Dew whispered. Dawsey hadnt run randomly at all there had been another infected victim in that apartment, a victim that was likely still in the apartment and burning to a crisp. Shed sheltered Dawsey; they were working together.

It was very possible they knew each other before the infection. They lived in the same complex, after all. But if they hadnt known each other before contracting the triangles, then that meant victims could somehow identify each other, help each other.

And, more important, if they hadnt known each other, it was possible they had independently decided that Wahjamega was the place to be. And if that was the case, then the only possible conclusion was that they wanted to go there because of the infection.

Or, possibly, the infection wanted to go there.

Margarets words replayed in his head: Theyre building something, shed said.

Dew thought back to the burning creature that had fallen from the third-story window, then scrambled for his big cellular.

Murray answered on the first ring. Did you get him?

We got him, Dew said. Alive, exactly the way you wanted him. The stakes just went up. Listen and listen good, L.T. I need men in Wahjamega, Michigan, and I need them now. And none of those ATF or CIA commando wannabes. Make it marines or Green Berets or fucking Navy SEALs, but get me men, at least a platoon and then a division, as fast as they can get there. Full combat gear. Fire support, too. Artillery, tanks, the whole works. And choppers, lots of choppers.

Dew, what the fuck is going on?

And that satellite, is it redirected to Wahjamega yet?

Yes, Murray said. It already made a pass. The squints are looking at the images now.

Im going to take a picture of a symbol and send it to you as soon as I hang up. This symbol, thats what the squints are looking for, got it?

Yeah, I got it.

And I want a surveillance van punched into that satellite, and I want it there in thirty minutes. And a chopper better pick me up in the next fifteen minutes. I dont care if we have to commandeer the fucking Channel Seven Eye in the Sky, you get me transport ASAP.

Dew, Murray said quietly, I cant get you all that so fast, and you know it.

You get it! Dew screamed into the cellular. You get it right fucking now! You cant believe the shit I just saw.

88.

PARTY TIME

It was the third time hed seen that symbol, only this time it wasnt scrawled on a map or carved into human skin.

This time it was from a satellite image.

Four hours after hed shot Perry Dawsey, Dew Phillips stood next to a Humvee, his booted feet on a dirt road that was frozen solid. A map and several satellite pictures were spread out on the vehicles hood. Rocks had been placed

on the pictures to hold them in place against the stiff, icy breeze that cut through the winter woods. Trees rose up on either side of Bruisee Road, trees thick with undergrowth, crumbling logs and brambles. Bare branches formed a skeletal canopy over the road, making the dark night even darker. The occasionally strong gust of wind knocked chunks of wet snow from the branches, dropping them on the assemblage below: two Humvees, an unmarked black communications van and sixty armed soldiers.

Around Dew stood the squad and platoon leaders of Bravo Company from the 1-187th Infantry Battalion. The battalion was also known as the Leader Rakkasans, an element from the Third Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division out of Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The Rakkasans were the current Division Ready Force, or DRF, a battalion that stood ready to deploy anywhere in the world within thirty-six hours, regardless of location. The fact that the deployment location happened to be about 620 miles from Fort Campbell, and not thousands of miles across an ocean, made them that much faster.

A pair of C-130 Hercules transport planes from the 118th Airlift Wing had taken off from Nashville less than two hours after Dews panicked call to Murray Longworth. Those C-130s landed at Campbell Army Air Field thirty minutes after takeoff. Thirty minutes after that, loaded with the first contingent of the 1-187th, the C-130s took off for Caro Municipal Airport, an active airport not quite two miles from where Dew now stood.

Back at the tiny airport, more C-130s were landing. It would take fifteen or so sorties and several more hours to bring in the entire battalion

task force. But Dew wasnt waiting for the full battalion. With four sorties complete, he had 128 soldiers and four Humvees that was the force available, and those were the men he was taking in.

Most of those men wore serious expressions, some tainted with a hint of fear. A few still thought this was a surprise drill. These were highly trained soldiers, Dew knew, but all the training in the world dont mean jack squat if youd never been in the shit. All the squad leaders, at least, had seen serious action he could tell that by their calm, hard-eyed expressions but most of the men carried the nasty aura of combat newbies.

Their leader was the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Ogden. Normally a captain commanded the first company in, but the urgency, the unknown enemy, and the fact that they were operating on American soil demanded Ogdens direct attention. A gaunt man in his forties, Ogden was so skinny the fatigues almost hung on him. He looked more like a prisoner of war than a soldier, but he moved quickly, he spoke with authority, and his demeanor was anything but weak. His skinniness was also deceiving: he could go toe-to-toe with any of the young bucks in his unit, and they all knew it. Dew could sense that Ogden had seen action, and plenty of it. He was grateful to have a seasoned combat veteran in charge.

So why here? Ogden asked. Whats so special about this place? You got me, Dew said. All we know is that there were cases in Detroit, Ann Arbor and Toledo. Wahjamega is easy travel distance from all of those. And theres a lot of farmland and forest around here, huge tracts of space for them to hide in. We think theyre gathering, either the human hosts or possibly as hatchlings, maybe both.

On the helicopter ride from Ann Arbor, Dew had talked to Murray and filled him in on what little they knew about the hatchlings. Murray initially demanded that Dew keep the info from the ground troops, as they didnt have clearance, but Dew fought and quickly won that argument he wasnt leading men into battle who didnt know if they might be shooting American civilians or some inhuman monstrosity. Which of the two was worse, Dew couldnt really say.

Whats the story on our air support, Lieutenant? Dew asked.

Ogden checked his watch. We have three AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, ETA is twenty minutes. A company of the 1-130th Army

National Guard out of Morrisville was doing live-fire exercises in Camp Grayling, about a hundred and twenty miles northwest of here. Armament?

Each bird has eight AGM-114 Hellfire missiles with HEAT warheads, Ogden said.

Dew nodded. Twenty-four antitank missiles would make a really big

bang. Plus, each Apache had a thirty-millimeter chain gun that could

take out an armored personnel carrier from four kilometers away. All in

all, that provided exceptional air support for this mission. He had ground forces. He had air support en route. The Michigan

State Police were throwing a cordon over the area, evacuating residents

and keeping everyone else out.

Ogden picked up a satellite photo. It showed the warm colors of an

infrared shot. Most of the photo consisted of the blues and greens typical of a nighttime forest, but in the middle was a bright cluster of reds

with a strange pattern the squints had outlined in white.

The squints had also marked what measurements they knew: width approx 135 feet, length approx 180 feet, height unknown. Dew looked at those measurements and thought of Nguyens painting would it be made out of people parts?

Was the painting symbolic or literal?

Ogden tapped the photo. And thats what were going after? Dew nodded.

So what is it? Ogden asked.

Dew shrugged and tapped another photo, showing a different angle

of the strange construct. We dont know. We think it might be some kind of doorway. The victim was raving about a doorway in Wahjamega, and we found this.

Are you fucking kidding me? Ogden asked in his ever-calm voice. A doorway? Like a portal or something? Are we talking Star Trek shit here, Dew?

Dew shrugged. Dont ask me. All I know is that if youd seen what Id seen, youd know why were here. You have a

problem with that?

No, sir, Ogden said. A mission is a mission. He carefully examined the picture. Those four crossbeams, whatever they are, run directly east-west. Is that significant?

How the hell should I know? Dew asked. All I know is we've got to blow it up.

Ogden leaned closer to the picture. No telling how tall it is. You got a normal shot?

Dew produced a detailed picture of the same area, the resolution so fine it revealed individual branches of the bigger trees. The strange design was visible, but barely, its green and black shading blending into the natural ground colors. This one had been taken by aerial recon, not even an hour earlier. Intel guys had highlighted the construct. The area around it was a patch of exposed forest floor surrounded by the whiteness of the winter woods. Five yellow circles marked vehicles spread across the map three cars, a pickup and an RV.

That construct, or whatever it is, melted the snow, Ogden said. Its hot all right. Damn thing blends in so much it almost looks camouflaged. What are those marked vehicles?

Abandoned cars, Dew said. Local police found them, nobody home. We think that the triangle hosts drove them here, ditched them, then walked to the construct.

What about all these little red dots on the infrared shot?

Those are the hostiles, Dew said. He produced a sheaf of papers. Each held a composite artists rendering based on Dews brief glimpse of the burning creature that fell from the third-story window. He didn't know it yet, but the picture was a passable representation of the hatchlings. He passed the sheets out to the squad leaders.

The red dots are individual heat signatures, either human hosts or something that looks like these critters.

A soldier saw the sketch and laughed out loud. Dew fixed him with a death stare; his voice took on a new and dominant tone. He'd commanded boys just like these, and seen them die by the truckloads.

You think this is funny? Dew said. These things are responsible for the death of at least fifteen people, and if you don't get your shit straight, you'll probably be dead within the hour.

The soldier fell silent. The only sound came from wind hissing through the barren branches.

Ogden pushed the satellite photos out of the way and smoothed the map. If I may suggest, sir, we should break into a primary assault group of eight squads, which will attack from the west, and two containment groups of two squads each, one north and one southeast of the target.

Ogden tapped three spots on the map. Here, here and here. The woods are too thick to get the vehicles in, so it's all on foot. We have enough men in place for containment groups one and two. Containment group three is at the airport. They will move out shortly and can be in position in fifteen minutes. Artillery will be guns-up in thirty minutes. The Apaches will be here before the infantry sets up the full perimeter, so they'll stay on-station about a mile out. Once artillery is ready, we send in recon to take a shitload of pictures, then paint the target with a laser and have the Apaches blow the living piss out of it. After that the west containment group moves in and we clean up.

Dew stared at the map for a moment. Ogden had the west group moving in from a hill, giving them the high ground. If the hatchlings ran, they would probably follow the easiest path, a narrow valley that ran north to southeast and that would take them directly into a killing zone of dug-in squads.

That's an excellent plan. You tell your men to kill anything that moves.

What about the hosts that drove here? Ogden asked. They're civilians.

Dew looked hard at Ogden. Like I said, anything that moves.

Dew turned to face the men again. You've all seen the picture. Whether you believe it or not doesn't matter. We don't know how dangerous these things are, so assume they are dangerous in the extreme.

The looks on the soldiers' faces said it all. Half of them simply didn't believe they were about to go up against some movie monster; the other half did believe it, and those men had wide-eyed expressions of fear.

Keep your lines tight, Ogden said. Know where your man is on your right and left. Shoot anything in front of you. It doesn't matter if it looks like a critter or your Aunt Jenny, it's the enemy and you shoot it just like you would an enemy soldier. Now get your squads ready. We move out immediately.

The grim-faced young men hurried away, leaving only Ogden and Dew. You know what's fucked up here, Dew?

Dew nodded. Yeah. Just about every last bit of this thing. Besides that, of course, Ogden said. If this is some kind of a gateway, like they're going to bring troops in through that crazy thing or what have you, why the hell would they build it two miles from a landing strip?

Dew grunted once. He'd been so thrilled at the easy access, that question hadn't crossed his mind.

Maybe it's above their pay grade, Dew said. The only thing that makes sense is they just didn't know. Whoever they had run recon on this, that party either just plain missed the airport or didn't know what it was.

Ogden nodded. That's got to be it. Kind of weird, though they are obviously high-tech as hell, and they screwed themselves with location, location, location. I don't know what these things are, but looks like were kicking their ass on intel.

Dew nodded. The satellite images gave him total command of the area, images he wouldn't have had if not for Margaret Montoya's hunch. Without her demands they would still be trying to bring a satellite online, and might not know the exact location of the construct for several hours and Dew Phillips had a feeling that every second mattered.

The door to the black communications van flew open. A man ran out, a printout clutched in his fist. He slid on the frozen dirt road, regained his balance and slammed the printout down on the Humvees hood.

That thing just heated up in a hurry, the squint said. Heres an updated infrared.

The picture looked almost the same, except the squint hadnt outlined the strange symbol. He didnt have to. Its lines blurred into a smudgy mess of reds, yellows and oranges.

It just turned on, Dew said. Move your men out, Ogden, right now. Move containment squads one and two into position as planned. Were not waiting for the artillery or the third containment squad. We attack right now.

Perry moaned softly in his sleep. A dozen electrodes taped to his head and chest measured his every movement. Heavy canvas straps pinned his wrists to the hospital bed. His arms flexed and twitched every few seconds, pulling at the straps. An electrical beep echoed his pulse. The hum of medical equipment hung in the room.

A man in a Racal suit stood on either side of him. Each held a Taser stunner, but neither had any firearms or knives or anything sharp, for that matter. Couldnt be too careful. If Dawsey broke the straps, a feat that really wouldnt have surprised anyone staring at his huge musculature, they would stun him into submission with fifty thousand volts from the Tasers.

Theyd stopped the bleeding, but he was still touch and go; the bullets in each shoulder had been removed; his burns, including most of his head, were packed in wet bandages; theyd pulled the Triangle carcasses from his arm and back; the visible rot had been scraped from his collarbone and his leg, but the damage continued to slowly spread that one the doctors didnt know how to cure. His knee was slated for surgery the next day.

And his penis was packed in ice.

He moaned again. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his teeth bared in a wolflike predators warning. He was dreaming a dream that was both familiar and worse than ever.

He was in the living-room hallway again. The doors were closing in on him. The doors were hot; his skin blistered and bubbled, growing first red, then charring black, smoking with a putrid stench. But he didnt cry out in pain. He wouldnt give them the satisfaction. Fuck em . . . fuck em all. Hed go out like a Dawsey. The cancerous doors closed in, marching on their tiny tentacles, and Perry slowly roasted to death.

You beat em, boy.

In the dream, Perry opened his eyes. Daddy was there. No longer skeletal, but sturdy and solid and as full of life as hed been before Captain Cancer came a-courtin.

Daddy, Perry said weakly. He tried to take a breath, but the broiling air scorched his lungs. Every fiber of his being hurt. When would the pain end?

You did good, boy, Jacob Dawsey said. You did real good. You showed them all. You beat em.

The doors moved closer. Perry looked at his hands. The flesh seemed to sag, then melt into a flaming pudding. It fell from his bones and sizzled when it hit the ground. He refused to cry out. After you cut off your own cock and balls, all pain is relative.

The doors moved closer. Perry heard the creak of old wood and ancient iron, the low moan of hinges frozen shut with centuries of rust.

It was hard, Daddy, Perry croaked.

Yes, it was hard. But you did what no one else couldve done. I never told you this before, but Im proud of you. Im proud to call you my son.

Perry closed his eyes as he felt the flesh of his body sag and start to fall away. The tunnel filled with an emerald-green light. He opened his eyes Daddy was gone, and the doors were opening. There was something moving in there.

Perry looked inside . . . and started to scream.

They were almost here.

Dew and Charles Ogden lay flat on the snow-covered forest floor. It was cold as a bitch. Dew stared through night-vision binoculars, the green-tinted picture sending goose bumps racing under his heavy winter fatigues.

I dont know what the fuck that thing is, but it cant be good, he said. Got any more wise-ass cracks about Star Trek, Charlie?

Nope, Ogden said. Im good.

We getting any radiation readings?

Ogden shook his head. No, at least not this far away. Geiger counters show nothing. Dew, what the hell is that thing?

I got an idea, like I told you before, but I hope to all thats holy Im wrong. He couldnt shake Dawseys mad ravings about a door.

Dew glanced behind him. Two soldiers worked compact digital cameras, sweeping the lenses across the nightmarish scene. There were two such cameramen with each platoon.

You getting all this? Dew asked.

Yes, sir, the men answered in unison, both their voices small and filled with awe.

The hatchlings were bustling around a pair of monstrous oak trees that dripped with melted snow. The trees dead branches formed a skeletal awning reaching out and over perhaps as many as fifty hatchlings of various sizes, some as small as the one hed seen jump from the third-story apartment, some almost four feet tall with tentacle-legs as big around as baseball bats.

Jesus Christ. Fifty. And we thought wed got them all. How many hosts to make fifty of these things? How many

hosts went totally undetected until they hatched?

The hatchlings had built something strange. Something organic, maybe even alive. Thick, fibrous green strands some the size of ropes, some the size of I-beams ran in all directions, from the trunks to the ground to the branches and back again. There had to be thousands of them, like some monstrous three-dimensional spiderweb, or a modern artists jungle gym. At the center of all these strands, between the towering, sprawling oaks, was the construct that had generated the colored pattern on the infrared picture.

Made from the same strange fibrous material, the construct had the primitive, ominous aura of a Stonehenge or an Aztec temple. The four crossing lines, the ones that ran east-west, were high arches, the apex of the smallest one near the constructs center reaching just over ten feet. The tallest arch, the one at the open end, rose a good twenty feet into the night sky. The four arches looked like a framework cone half buried in the frozen forest ground.

He didnt know what the freakish thing was made of, but at least it wasnt people.

The two parallel pieces of the tail for lack of a better word stretched back some thirty yards from the arches. They were each as thick as a log and had a line of thin, spiky growths running down their lengths.

The hatchlings crawled about the massive construct, clinging with their tentacle legs, a moving mass scampering across the strand-maze with the ease of darting wolf spiders. They splashed through the suddenly muddy forest floor the heat from the construct had melted all the snow around the two oak trees.

Dew and Ogden were about fifty yards from the construct, staring straight into the cavern created by the arches.

How far out are the Apaches? Dew asked Ogden. Ogden waved to his radioman, who quietly moved over and handed Ogden a handset. Ogden whispered for a few seconds, then said, ETA two minutes.

The seconds ticked by. Dew heard the faint approach of the Apaches rotors. The hatchlings suddenly scattered from the skeletal green construct, some taking refuge in the sprawling oak trees, others staying on the ground.

Whats happening? Ogden asked. Did they hear the choppers?

Maybe so. Let your men know its go time. We might have to . . . Dews voice trailed off; the construct started to glow.

The fibrous arches illuminated the oak branches and the forest floor with a suffused white light. Faint at first, barely discernible, the glow quickly grew so bright that Dew couldnt look through the night-vision binoculars.

Dew, what the hell is going on in there?

Dew shook his head. I dont know, but I dont like it. Lets take two squads forward. We have to get a better look.

Ogden softly called out orders. Dew rose to a crouch and quickly moved forward, ignoring his popping knees. The snow crunched and dry branches snapped underfoot. He was painfully aware of how quiet the Airborne soldiers were in comparison, almost silent despite the noisy footing. Once upon a time, Dew would have moved through the woods without a sound getting old was a bitch-and-a-half.

He stopped after advancing thirty yards. The cover of night was gone. The constructs glow lit up the two oaks as bright as day. Long shadows radiated away into the forest. The very ground itself seemed to vibrate with an ominous rhythm, a rapidly pulsing heartbeat of some monstrous evil. Dew felt a sense of trepidation, of wrongness, like hed never known before.

This shits going south in a damn hurry.

Give me some normal binoculars, Dew snapped. Someone handed him a pair that were, of course, army-green. He stared into the depths of

the archway, where the light was brighter than anywhere else, so bright it hurt his eyes and he had to squint to see anything at all. Ogden, ETA on the Apaches?

Sixty seconds.

A blast of anxiety ripped through Dews body. Hed never felt fear like this, never felt anything like this. Even in the midst of the hand-to-hand fighting that had wiped out his platoon back in Nam, even when hed been shot, he hadnt been this scared; he couldnt say why.

The construct grew still brighter. One of the soldiers suddenly dropped his M4 rifle and ran, screaming, back into the forest. Several of the others slowly stepped backward, fear wrapped up in their young faces.

Hold your positions! Ogden shouted. Next man to run gets shot in the back! Now get down!

The bounce of long shadows betrayed the motion of the hatchlings sprinting toward the platoon. Their strange, pyramid bodies slid through the woods. Like swarming insects, theyd detected a threat and were rushing out to meet it, to protect the hive.

Ogden, weve got company!

Squads Four and Five, hold this position! Ogden shouted. All other squads move forward to support! Fire at will! Gunfire erupted before he finished the last sentence.

Dew didnt move. The constructs glow didnt fade, but it changed, sliding from the blinding white to a deep emerald-green glow. Suddenly Dew realized he was looking not just into the arch, but beyond it the field of green reached far off into the distance.

Stunned, he glanced up from the binoculars. The construct hadnt moved; neither had the woods behind it. He again peered through the binoculars. The field of green was inside the arch but stretched back for what must have been miles. But that was impossible, simply impossible.

M4 carbines and M249 machine guns roared all around him, but Dew remained steadfast. A mans scream filled the night as one of the hatchlings made it past the hail of bullets. Dew didnt flinch, or even notice, because he saw something in that field of green.

He saw movement.

Not the movement of a single hatchling, but movement so massive that it was the field of green. His eyes picked out individual creatures a

fraction of a second at a time, like seeing a single ant in the midst of a swarming, angry hill. It was an ocean of

creatures, reaching for the archway, pouring forward from some impossible distance.