

There must be millions of them, Dew muttered, the horror creeping across his skin like a coat of millipedes. A gun erupted only a few feet from his ear, shattering his trancelike focus. A hatchling rolled almost to his feet, flopping and twitching. Ogden had shot it dead just as it leaped to attack. The surrounding gunfire slackened but was replaced by more screams the hatchlings swarmed in. Were being overrun, Ogden said calmly, his voice raised only enough to be heard over the shrieks and battle cries of his own men.

Ogden, call a full strike now! Dew roared. Tell the Apaches to fire everything theyve got everything theyve got! Ogden grabbed the handset from the radioman. Dew drew his .45. A four-foot-high hatchling ripped through a patch of underbrush, its black eyes fixed with fury, its tentacles whipping forward as it closed for the attack. Dew fired five times at point-blank range. The black, pyramid-shaped body shredded like soft plastic, spilling great gouts of viscous purple liquid on the snowy ground.

Sounds came from all directions: gunfire, pounding feet, branches breaking, howls of pain, desperate pleas for help, and the horrific clicking and chittering noises of the hatchlings. He turned to see a hatchling closing in on a fallen and bleeding soldier. Dew double-tapped, firing twice, dropping the hatchling. As Dew ejected his empty magazine and loaded another, the wounded soldier drew his knife and threw himself on the hatchling, driving the blade in again and again until purple streamers arced across the white snow.

Eyes scanning for the next target, Dew backed up to Ogden, trying to protect him long enough to call in the air strike. Leader Six to Pigeon One, Leader Six to Pigeon One, Ogden said into the handset. Full strike, repeat, full strike on the main target. Hit it with everything youve got.

As if on cue, the gunfire suddenly stopped. Dew looked for an enemy and found none standing. A few hatchlings twitched on the ground, but their struggles were soon ended by shots from the angry soldiers. Men lay bleeding and moaning on the forest floor; the skirmish was over.

Dew raised the binoculars just as he heard the rapid-fire roar of the Apaches launching their missiles. The sea of green had reached the archway. For one brief millisecond, Dew saw something hed never forget, never be able to block out, for as long as he lived.

It was at least eight feet tall, an L-shaped, segmented red body covered in a strange green iridescent shell that must have been armor. Six thick, multijointed legs on the ground and four strong arms clutching what looked like a weapon. What might have been its head was covered with a helmet made from the same iridescent green material, a helmet that had no holes for eyes or mouth.

And there were millions right behind it, waiting to pour out. It was the only look he got. The first creature stepped out of the arch the impossible became a reality as the foot set down on the forest floor. Like watching in slow motion, Dew saw the clawed foot step on a twig.

The twig snapped.

Then the sky opened up.

Sixteen missiles smacked home in the span of three seconds. The roar of a dying god, a fireball so huge and violent it knocked small trees right out of the ground, roots and all. The concussion wave picked Dew up and threw him like a straw doll. Soldiers fell all around him. He hit the frozen ground hard but ignored the pain and rolled to his knees. The fireball rose into the sky, lighting up the forest with the glow of a late-evening sun. A chunk of arch rose majestically into the air, spinning wildly, one end trailing fire and sparks. Two of the arches were completely gone, one stood tall, and one was shattered but half standing, sticking out of the ground like a cracked and broken rib.

A fusillade of Apache chain-gun fire ripped through the site, each thirty-millimeter bullet kicking up a small geyser of mud. The broken arch, the one that looked like a rib, fell to the ground and shattered into a dozen pieces.

Dew stared desperately through the binoculars. Were they gone? Had the missiles hit in time? He cursed the smoke as he hunted for movement, the movement of a million creatures spreading out through the trees, attacking. The whistling roar of another missile barrage filled the air. Dew looked up in time to see eight more glowing smoke trails streaking toward the archway like striking ethereal snakes. The missiles slammed home, sending up another roaring fireball. Dew threw himself facedown on the ground as clods of dirt, sticks, and maybe even green strands sailed overhead with lethal speed.

And then it was over.

The last fireball floated up into the sky like a miniature dying sun. In a zombielike daze, Dew stood and moved forward.

The green light had vanished. Someone had shut that door, and shut it with authority. Daddy was gone as well, this time for good; he somehow knew that for certain.

Perrys eyes fluttered open. For the first time in a week, his thoughts were his own. The pain was gone, but he knew that was because of drugs. Pain is the bodys way of letting you know somethings wrong; but he was more in tune with his body now, and he didnt need the pain to tell him he was in trouble.

The voices were gone, but the echoes of some fifty screams remained. The hive at Wahjamega had been wiped out. He felt their absence. Like a fever finally breaking, their destruction released him from the madness. Some of it, anyway. He weakly turned his head enough to see the biosuit-clad men on either side of his bed. He was tied down, couldnt move his arms. The room was all white. Wires seemed to run off his body in every direction. A hospital. A hospital.

Hed done it, hed won.

A voice came over a loudspeaker.
Mr. Dawsey, can you hear me?
Perry nodded, slowly and dreamily.
My name is Margaret Montoya, the voice said. Im in charge of your recovery.
Perry smiled. Like anyone could recover from what hed been through. Its over, Mr. Dawsey, Margaret said. You can rest now, its all over. Perry laughed out loud. The drugs werent all that, apparently, as the laugh brought a stab of pain from deep within his right shoulder. Over? he said. No. Not over.
It wasnt over, babycakes, not by a long shot. Not a fucking Howdy Doody chance of that. The Wahjamega nest was gone, but they werent all gone.
Somehow he could still sense them. He could hear their calls, their signal to gather, to build. Far away and faint, but he could still sense it.
It was only beginning.
No bout-a-doubt it.
Blackened tree trunks burned in the aftermath, their branches ripped free by the force of the blast. The two proud oaks were devastated: one was completely aflame, its remaining branches a crown of fire reaching into the night sky; the other was split in two, white wood exposed to the winter cold.
Chunks of the green strands littered the ground, most burning fast with a sparking, bluish flame. A few soldiers appeared, walking slowly through the lifting smoke, their M4 rifles sweeping in continuous, cautious arcs. The moans of wounded men filtered through the air, mingling with the sound of crackling fires.
Fighting back the fear, Dew walked to the area where the archway had stood. There was no sign of the creatures, no sign of the green glow that had stretched outward into infinity.
Ogden approached him, moving through the smoke, his demeanor as calm as if he were strolling through his own backyard. He held the handset to his ear, the radioman following him like a lonely puppy.
We count fifty-six hatchlings, Ogden said. All dead. Some may have gotten through when we were overrun, but the rear guards didnt see any, so it looks like we got them all.
Fifty-six, Dew mumbled.
We lost eight men, Ogden said. Six from the hatchling attack, two from shrapnel caused by the rocket strike. Another twelve wounded, maybe more.
Fifty-six, Dew said again, his voice distant and strange.
Im going to check on the wounded. Im ordering the Apaches back a half mile and calling in evac for the more seriously wounded.
Fine, Dew said. Thats fine.
Ogden strode off, calling out orders in his calm, commanding voice, leaving Dew alone in the center of the obliterated archway.
Dew stared at the carnage, at the dwindling flames, and shook his head. If there were that many here, how many more are out there? How many more hatchlings on the way, waiting to build another one of these doorways? Dew didnt know the answer. For the first time, Malcolms death seemed insignificant, a small loss in comparison to the massive threat looming on the horizon. He was exhausted. Too much action for an old fart.
And there would be no rest, not for a long time.
Not for him.
Not for anyone.