

black inside

by

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the conclusion of the Michael Wenton trilogy

Draft III
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When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Revelations Chapter Twenty: 7-10

prologue

Dear Readers,

What follows is a work of fiction. Even though it is fiction there are certain truths that can no longer be hidden. One truth is that the Dead Sea Scrolls represent the oldest and most reliable version of the Old Testament ever written. The Scrolls date back to before the time of Jesus Christ and thus give us as near to the original bible as possible. Unfortunately, not all of the text recovered from the various scrolls has been made public – moreover, traditional versions of the bible have not reflected the legitimate changes the Dead Sea Scrolls would suggest.

The Convergence Prophecy is an example of a Scroll not officially recognized by most, if not all, religious organizations. Until now, it has never been made available to the general public and I wanted to reveal as much of the scroll as I could – as much as I could gain access to. Unfortunately, the full text of the Convergence Prophecy might never be known. Even if powerful religious organizations didn't actively suppress this scroll, time and decay has wiped out much of the original text. But at least some of the Convergence Prophecy will be known and that should help in the fight to bring the rest of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the light of the world. With that said, here is the Convergence Prophecy:

CONVERGENCE PROPHECY
(Scroll #57 found in Cave III)

*And days of black will follow when the land will feed
on itself. In those days the balance of the world will
be lost and the Almighty Creator will abandon what
was born.*

*These days shall be known as End Days – the time
of the final trials when all that was will be no more.
No man shall call his son nor woman call her*

daughter without fear of death. There will be no longer a balance of things that have been. All is alone. All is solitude. All will converge to evil.

The time of final omega will draw near when lights from heaven signal. That light which man makes will not burn through the power of imbalance and a great bursts of energy will mark each arrival of Lusus Naturae – preparing the pathway of destruction.

Six by six times will the beast enter the world preparing the way of final omega. In number the beast will be great only through the infection that spreads on each arrival.

And the beast will be known only by the guidance of the Holy. In the eyes of ...

[MISSING SECTION]

Know the third beast by way of immediate death. Through the soul of a woman weak and predisposed to death will enter beast four. The sacrifice of death will provide entry to a host of powerful leadership and control. Corruption will spread until violent death seeks too the host. Blackness will spread from this death to infect all who follow in the path of its false religion. A Holy War that is in no way of Holy origin will take the world further into convergence, separating East and West.

[MISSING SECTION]

When the violent orphan of incest's mind is opened, then shall the Beast come. The sacrifice of the orphan will be the Beast's first portal, as this innocent of damaged mind provides the greatest

step to the Omega. For I have already claimed the innocent's parentage through suicide and murder. The orphan will join me, and I will be whole again and enter the world, and the world will enter me.

[MISSING SECTION]

And the Beast shall claim those who are black inside and bring them forth in service. He upholds justice, but is corrupt. Men will bow before him or be forever lost in madness. In number he will be ceaseless. He shall rise out of man and number greater than grains of sand by the sea. The world will cry out in pain. The numbers of evil shall bring the world to the Omega.

[MISSING SECTION]

Those of pure heart, in the service of a departed Lord and Saviour, shall work to prevent Omega. Blessed are the men of few words. But their path shall be marked by death. The death of an innocent among them will signal an end and a new beginning in a tainted heart.

And so even as the Watcher stumbles in his first attempt, still shall he guide balance to the world. For he who destroys can also create. The key lies in the opposite of love. The key lies in the destruction of the Convergence. The tainted heart of God's hand will prevail. From evil comes good.

Keep watch for salvation through evil. Keep watch for a monster to stop a monster and allow a new Guide to be born.

[MISSING SECTION]

Take care in the confrontation of evil. Do not be lost in the blackness that hides beneath the still surface. Without strength or service, madness waits. Take care in the confrontation of evil because although you may seek, you shall not see. The Beast will not reveal himself to all that seek him. He is a master of disguise and will be where you do not look. Inside the innocent lurks the promise of eternal death.

The next beast of the six will come when as religion begins to die...

[MISSING SECTION]

one

The white van slid silently up to the gates of Christ Church Cemetery in Dartmouth. Christ Church is one of the older and larger cemeteries in the Halifax Regional Municipality and unlike many of the others, still had pauper graves.

The van parked along Victoria Road and immediately four men exited. Each wore long, dark coats over suits. Each had long hair neatly tucked into the back of their coats so that at a glance one might not even notice the length. Although it was intentionally not visible, each man had a perfect 8-pointed star tattooed underneath their left forearm. The men looked around the dark street, wary of any activity, any sign of life. It was a quiet evening.

The two men standing at the rear of the van reached back and carefully lifted a woman out. The elderly lady's body was rigid against their touch as she was set onto her feet. Her eyes were wild, darting back and forth and a line of spit hung down over her chin shining under the lone streetlight nearby.

As a unit, the four men and their elder companion moved to the wrought iron gate. A length of chain was wrapped around it, securing the gate for the evening. Visiting hours at the cemetery ended at nine PM. One of the men reached into his overcoat and retrieved long-handled metal shears. With a single clip he'd cut through the heavy chain and the group moved through.

It was dark night in Dartmouth. Cloud cover meant the moon provided no illumination. In addition, a thick fog has settled against the cool ground. Mist swirled as the group moved among the headstones. Two of the men had brought out flashlights and were sweeping the ground, guiding their passage.

And then they stopped.

One of the men turned to the old lady. She was held upright by a man on either arm. "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel."

The woman closed her wild eyes and began to sob. Her whole body shook with the effort and the men could be seen to visibly increase the strength of their grips on her thin arms to maintain her aloft. "I will," she whispered through tears. "I will."

With incredible effort she raised an arm. Her hand was covered in the brown splotches of age and the skin sank around each joint of her fingers. She turned slightly and pointed down the slowly sloping hill.

All the men followed her motion with great concern and nodded in unison. They spoke as one, "I will give thee thanks in the great congregation."

They moved again, following the directions of the woman.

As they moved the old lady stopped any attempt at walking. She allowed herself to be dragged by her guides on either side, her feet only slightly brushing against the ground. Her head slumped to the side and she kept her eyes closed. Tears continued to escape her at infrequent intervals and her breath came in ragged snorts.

They walked for a time and then stopped abruptly.

The old lady opened her eyes again, only enough to see that the men were waiting further instruction. She closed her eyes. "It hurts."

"The Lord will give strength unto his people," one of the men spoke.

"So shall it be done," she replied weakly. Her arm raised slowly and she pointed again. This time she pointed at a headstone very near to them.

The men turned to it.

The gravestone was marked only with a number: 334215. The mist rolled against the ground and turned away from the stone. Flashlights tried to cut through the fog but only left lines in the air that disappear after a few feet.

The men holding the old woman set her down to the ground, laying her onto one side. She made no attempt to resist, her eyes closed once again. Except for an involuntary shiver and a soft moaning, she was invisible against the shrouded earth.

The men reached into their overcoats and pulled out short, collapsible shovels. They each made short, sharp motions clicking their shovels together and then began to dig.

Their flashlights were positioned on nearby headstones or on the ground to provide some light for their job. It wasn't really enough and the black ground was almost invisible as their shovels struck into the earth. As the fog slowly turned and moved, light would sporadically sweep over the grave site.

The men worked quickly and evenly, not pausing for rest. Although the night was cool, they didn't bother to remove their overcoats. They simply dug.

...and dug...

...without a word between them.

And then they stopped and their shovels were dropped to the ground around the sides of the excavation. Two of the men hopped out of the hole while the other two bent to their knees and began clearing the top of the coffin with their hands.

"No," the old lady whispered from her fetal position nearby. "I can't be a part of this."

The men ignored her.

The two men still inside the grave stepped out and one of them reached back into the hole. A slight creak signaled the rising coffin door. The air was instantly filled with a stale, heavy odor that turned the very air around them an even darker grey.

Another man stepped to the side of the grave and two of them reached down, pulling a body up out of the earth.

In the dim light the corpse's skin shone. It was not the rotten flesh of something sliding through stages of decay nor was it the bones of a long buried skeleton. The body appeared very recently deceased even though it had been in the ground for almost a year.

Two men held the body up while the others lifted the old woman to her feet again.

They waited.

Reluctantly, the old lady opened her eyes just enough to peer through the fog at the corpse. "It is him," she whispered. "It's Edward Carter. The doorway of *Lusus Naturae*"

The men nodded and, as a unit, moved quickly back to the white van. Leaving no trace of their presence save for the empty grave site of Halifax's most notorious psychotic rapist.

two

Now approaching the age of 40, Dr. Michael Wenton, a once successful forensic psychologist, was living very close to the edge of complete ruin.

He was travelling south on highway 118 returning from breakfast at Inn on the Lake – an expensive Inn located in Fall River, barely 20 minutes out of Dartmouth. He'd not slept in close to 48 hours because recent events had left him with far too many questions and questions were offensive to him. To Wenton they seemed almost like doubt – doubt about his own sanity. He wouldn't allow that.

He'd ended up driving in his black Durango, trying to clear his head, trying to decide the most sensible course of action. His wandering had taken him out of Halifax and through Bedford, ultimately causing him to drift past the Inn on the Lake where he'd stopped to eat. Unlike most restaurants in hotels, the Inn on the Lake was noted for quality food. Wenton appreciated quality.

As he drove he absent-mindedly flipped on the radio, intending to start a CD. At the moment he had the Nine Inch Nails' *Downward Spiral* loaded. Before he had a chance to start the CD something on the news caught his attention.

"...Carter terrorized Halifax recently when it was suspected that he had the power to leave victims of his brutal assaults psychotic. The recent disappearance of Carter's body from the grave site has baffled the Halifax Regional Police and they are asking for the public's help in identifying the individuals responsible. Please call ..." but Wenton turned the radio off.

"Fuck," he muttered. Now things were even more complicated and he'd made up his mind. He needed to see Sergeant Mitchell Wa and start getting some answers for all the crazy shit that had been happening in Halifax for the last year not to mention the unusual experiences Wenton was still having. He pressed down on the accelerator as he rounded a bend in the highway and began down a slope towards the Burnside exit.

Wenton barely registered a flash of blue and red from the median as a RCMP highway patrol car pulled out behind his Durango. The RCMP frequently set a speed trap at this exact location and most frequently early in the morning to catch commuters trying to go to work. People with jobs are more likely to pay speeding tickets.

The officer quickly caught up to Wenton and stuck behind him until Wenton was forced to pull off to the side of the road. Wenton's knuckles were white with the force of his grip on the leather wrapped steering wheel.

The officer strolled up alongside Wenton's driver's door and tapped on the glass.

Wenton turned to look at him and had to look down, slightly. *A fuckin' midget cop*, he thought. He could smell the stink of the man. As he stared at the cop he saw the man's face distort. Suddenly it wasn't a man but a little kid, a little girl. And she was crying.

Wenton hit a button and let his window roll down. He knew who he was dealing with. He knew what kind of cop this was.

"Know why I pulled you over?" the cop drawled as he flipped open his traffic infraction notebook.

"Because you're a fuckin' idiot," Wenton answered flatly.

The cop's eyes sprang up. "What did you say?"

Wenton leaned to him. "I said the reason you pulled me over is because you're a fuckin' idiot."

The officer took a step back, his face flushed in anger. "Get out of the car. Right now."

Wenton opened his door and stepped out. The difference in his size relative to the officer was immediately apparent. Wenton stood an imposing six-foot-four with broad shoulders that made him look as solid as he was tall. The officer couldn't have been more than five and half feet tall.

"You picked the wrong cop to piss off," the officer said. "Turn around and put your hands on the truck."

"I thought even the RCMP had certain height restrictions around who could become a Mountie," Wenton said. "Your mom must have written some letter of recommendation for you to get in."

"You fuckin'..." the officer began and he put a hand on the butt of his gun. "Turn around right now and put your hands on the vehicle."

"Don't get your little dick in a knot," Wenton continued. "Why don't you climb back onto your booster seat in your cop car and go pull over someone else?"

"I'm not going to tell you again. Turn around and put your hands on the vehicle," he said through gritted teeth. He slipped the snap off his holster.

Wenton reached to his chin and rubbed the rough stubble. "I'll make you a deal. You'll leave right now and I won't bother to tell anyone about the 14-year-old prostitute you fucked last night."

"The what?" the officer said, the sudden change in his tone of voice instantly betraying him.

"Just one of the perks of the job, I guess," Wenton added, "but I don't think it's widely sanctioned by the RCMP."

"I didn't..." he stammered.

“Don’t bother, you little shit,” Wenton said dismissing him with a wave of his hand. “If you were more of a man you wouldn’t have to go to little girl whores.”

Wenton returned to his Durango and drove away leaving the officer still standing there with his hand resting on top of his gun.

Once on the road he punched his CD back on and turned the volume up. He didn’t want to think about what just happened. Recently, he’d been seeing things that he had no interest in seeing. He blocked out the thoughts and concentrated on driving. There was one other person who’d experienced most of what Wenton had and they needed to talk again, now.

three

Dr. Paul Caster would have preferred to be somewhere else. He had a rare day off from the IWK Children's Hospital and didn't want to be sitting on the MacKay bridge. His head was swimming as it was.

Dr. Caster was a renowned pediatric oncologist with the world famous Sir Isaac Walton Killam Children's hospital or just the IWK. Children from all over the Maritimes and indeed the rest of Eastern Canada made trips to the hospital specifically to see him. He'd established a reputation for diagnosing and treating some of the most difficult cases of juvenile cancer.

He glanced in his rearview mirror and saw his young daughter, Mallory, wiggling around in the back of the car. "You okay, honey?" he asked.

"Just looking for something," she sang back.

"Looking forward to seeing poppa and nanny?" he asked. He wondered if the words sounded at all slurred because they did to him. He regretted even asking the question as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

"Sure," came the reply.

He glanced at his wife, Linda and noticed she was staring back with a raised eyebrow. He hoped she didn't suspect anything of him. He smiled awkwardly.

"What do you think Richard and Sonja will be serving today?" Linda asked lightly. It was a tradition that when Paul brought his family across to Dartmouth to visit his parents they provided food all day. It was related to some guilt complex over the *inconvenience* or something.

He shrugged and stared back at cars in front of him.

Linda also looked out the window at the traffic jam in front of them. "What do you suppose this is all about?"

Their Volvo S-90 was just barely onto the bridge when traffic suddenly stopped. It looked as though traffic were stopped in both directions which was bad news since this was one of city's only two Halifax-Dartmouth bridges.

"I mean we should be going against the traffic at this time of morning," Linda added.

Paul nodded. She was right. They were currently trying to get across the bridge to Dartmouth from Halifax. Most of the morning traffic normally went the other way as commuters from the many residential areas of Dartmouth headed for work in downtown Halifax. He didn't bother to answer her though.

"There's something going on just up there," Mallory pointed. The six-year old was indicating a small group of people on the far edge of the bridge quite a ways further along.

It was unusual to see pedestrians on this bridge since there were no sidewalks like on the other bridge, the newly renovated MacDonald bridge.

"You're right," Linda said. "Something's going on."

Paul tried to focus on the gathering crowd ahead but his vision blurred over. "Probably just some idiot tourist trying to get a picture of the Bluenose."

Linda turned and frowned at her husband. "I'm going to go and see what's happening."

"No," Paul barked. "Stay here. As soon as you get out the traffic will start to move and then we'll be screwed."

She stared hard at him and then shook her head slightly. "I'm going." She turned back to Mallory. "Just stay here, sweetie."

Linda slipped out of the Volvo and starting making her way up between the cars.

Paul watched a moment and then sighed. Before he got out, he also turned back to his daughter and repeated the instruction to stay in the car.

"Linda," he called but she was already about five cars ahead and she wasn't slowing.

He started a slow jog to catch up. Other people were starting to step out of their cars too. Haligonians weren't going to miss something exciting.

When Paul caught up to Linda she was already at the edge of the crowd. Peering over the heads they could just make out a person seated on the opposite side of the heavy metal railing of the bridge.

"What's going on?" he whispered to her.

"Shh," she said holding a finger to her lips. She was trying to hear what was happening.

All around them there were murmurs from the crowd about whether the guy "was going to jump" and if "anyone called the cops". A small swatch of an opening was visibly around the bridge behind the man. It was obvious that no one wanted to venture too near to him in case the man got startled and fell from his precarious position.

Standing on tip-toes, Linda and Paul watched, trying to get a glimpse of the suicidal person. It wasn't long before the man made a slow turn to check on the growing crowd. His expression showed he was virtually indifferent to the attention he was attracting. The man was a slight but athletic looking Asian man in his early forties. The thin wire-rimmed glasses almost seemed a cosmetic afterthought. Without a word the man turned back to the water, preparing to jump.

four

Wenton expected traffic on the MacKay bridge. He didn't expect a parking lot.

All the vehicles had been stopped for almost 20 minutes. That was 18 minutes longer than Wenton had patience. He stepped out of his Durango between the aisles of cars and peered ahead. A slight crowd was visible against the edge of the bridge railing. He headed towards it.

There'd better be some major catastrophe, he thought. I don't have time for this shit.

He roughly pushed through the bystanders until he could see the problem. A man seated on the edge of the railing, his feet dangling out into thin air. But not any man. It was Sergeant Mitchell Wa.

"What the fuck?" Wenton said out loud.

As if on cue a siren wailed in the distance. Emergency vehicles at either entrance to the bridge, trying to get through the mass of cars.

"Wa," Wenton barked without concern that he might startle the man from his position.

Mitchell Wa turned slowly to face the familiar voice. "Go away."

"Get off the edge you idiot," Wenton snapped.

"Hey," a large man next to Wenton yelled. "Watch what you're saying. You might make the dude jump."

Wenton turned to the man. The burly, hairy biker type had a thick mustache that stretched past his mouth and joined equally unkempt sideburns. Dark sunglasses hid his angry eyes as he attempted to stare down Wenton.

Wenton smiled. "It's okay, sir. I'm a psychologist. I know what I'm doing." He turned back to the railing. "Get your ass back in here or I'll push you off."

"Don't, Wenton," Wa said quietly and turned back to the water beneath him. "It's too late."

Wenton had reached the rail and was leaning over next to the sergeant. "For what?"

Wa didn't answer.

"I want to talk to you. Come back over onto this side," Wenton said reaching down to his shoulder.

Wa spun on him again. "I'll jump if you touch me. You don't know what's going on with me. Just go."

Wenton paused for a moment and nodded very slowly. "I do know," he said finally.

"You don't know," Wa said dejectedly.

"I know there's something inside you, Wa. I saw it."

"What? How?"

"At Nick Stangos' house. When all the shit was going down."

"All the shit?" Wa questioned.

"You don't even remember do you?" Wenton laughed.

Wa shook his head.

"You don't remember your pastor buddy storming in at Stangos' house, wanting to kill everybody?"

"Nope, not really – I mean I've read the police reports on it but it doesn't seem real to me."

"Do you remember us trying to track down those bullshit electronic weapons. The extreme low frequency things at the pharmaceutical company?"

"Yeah."

"And we tracked it to Nick Stangos only it was never really about weapons or the drug company it was all about some religious shit. The apocalypse. Your crazy pastor, Gary Wrightland, was on some crusade to stop Satan from ending the world."

"Gary's not crazy," Wa interrupted defensively.

"He's locked up in the forensic hospital right now for murdering Stangos. I'd say he's crazy."

"Why'd he kill Stangos?" Wa asked.

"I'm not sure that's who he wanted. He might have been after you."

Wa shook his head again. "I don't care. I don't want to listen to all of this now. None of this has anything to do with what happened to me."

"It might," Wenton said softly. Wa didn't say anything and Wenton continued, "Because when all this shit was going on with Gary attacking people and shoving a knife into Nick Stangos – you came at me like you were some kind of, I don't know, demon."

"Don't fuck with me Wenton because I'm really..."

"I'm not. You even looked different – just for a second, mind you – but you looked bigger, uglier... I don't know."

Wa just stared up at the doctor, not knowing if he should believe him.

"It sounds like crazy shit. I know. And at the time I'm sure one of those damn Extreme Low Frequency weapons was hummin' but I thought I saw something. I really thought I saw something. Right now I'm pretty sure it was just some kind of hallucination but I was actually coming over the bridge this morning to find you and ask you about it. It sounds so stupid that I really wanted to..."

“Wanted what?” Wa barked. “You want me to tell you something like I’m not some kind of demon. That you were just hallucinating. That the world still makes sense.” He nodded at Wenton. “I can’t do that.”

“I don’t know what I want,” Wenton offered.

“Get lost then.” He turned away again.

“What about your family?” Wenton asked. “You just gonna jump and leave them to fend for themselves?”

“Don’t talk about them,” Wa said through clenched teeth.

“Why? Some guilt there?”

“My family is better off without me. I’ve been separated from Gloria and kids ever since that damn Edward Carter case blew up on me and to make matters worse I just found out my youngest son is sick.”

Wenton’s didn’t seem to react but responded, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Wa continued. “I’m sorry because it wouldn’t surprise me if he was sick because of me. Somehow, something nasty leaked out of me onto him.”

“Jumpin’ isn’t going...”

“Just go now,” Wa interrupted.

Wenton turned back to the crowd. There were keeping a slight distance but obviously trying to listen. He turned back to Wa and leaned on the rail close to him. “So jump.”

Wa didn’t respond.

“Jump,” Wenton repeated softly, out of earshot of the crowds behind him. “Don’t be a pussy.”

Wa stared at him. “You really are a bastard.”

“I think it would really clean up some loose ends if you’d just take a nose dive right now and get it over with.”

“Are you playing games with me? Do you think this is funny?”

“I think you’re funny. Just jump.”

Wa turned away and leaned further out into the empty space. The crowd immediately gasped. Wenton held a hand out to keep them back.

“Do it, Wa,” he urged. “Kill that thing inside you.”

And then Wa leaned forward and fell into the empty space. His arms and legs shot out as his body hung in the air.

But did not fall.

“What the fuck?” Wenton choked. As he held the back of Wa’s collar he saw a face lift out of the man. It was a monstrous thing with a gash down the centre of its forehead. It pulled up into the air above Wa raising thin arms out as though it would fly away. Wenton yanked hard on

Wa's jacket and pulled him up and over the railing of the bridge. The weight of the smaller sergeant posed no problem to the much larger Wenton.

He immediately dropped Wa to the pavement and turned back to the air where the monster had been. There was nothing there now.

"What?" Wa said, obviously disoriented. "What happened?"

The crowd was cheering. Wenton turned to them with a blank expression. *They couldn't have seen it*, he thought. He turned back to Wa with an odd expression of confusion.

"It's out of me, Wenton," Wa said. "When it thought I was going to kill myself and I jumped – it came out of me. I felt it go."

Wenton just stared at him.

"I felt it leave my body," Wa continued, tears filling his eyes. "I'm free."

Wenton nodded almost imperceptibly. "I know," he said very quietly as though he didn't want to admit anything. "I know."

And then the men were silent.

t h r e e m o n t h s l a t e r

five

Day One – Sunday Morning

Baron Harris checked his reflection in the mirror. He pulled below one of his eyes. They were really bloodshot. He shook his head and turned away.

“Little fuckin’ kids,” he mumbled angrily. “Fuckin’ little kids.”

He was in a utility room at the IWK Children’s Hospital. It was one of the larger rooms that kept miscellaneous medical equipment and supplies like swabs, bandages and so on. He knew that this room was busy in the morning and at shift change when unit cupboards were getting topped up. He felt reasonably sure that no one would walk in on him right now. Especially since it was a Sunday and there wasn’t a full staff on the floor.

“Don’t do it,” he whispered to himself. “Be strong.”

He leaned heavily against one of the industrial shelving units. He could feel the sweat beading on his back.

“Son of a bitch,” he grunted. “The fuckin’ kids aren’t dead. It’s just sex. I don’t need this. I don’t need any of this. That kid should never have talked back to me. He was asking me to hit him. Fuck.”

It was no use.

“Damn.”

He made a fist and held it up. His sleeve fell back and he stared at the scars. *Why?* he asked himself. His hand and arm shook badly and tears filled his eyes. “I can’t handle this anymore,” he moaned. He didn’t want to feel bad.

He took his other hand and used a finger nail to dig deeply into his wrist. It peeled away skin without breaking it. The scarred skin was easy damage and Baron bit his lip as he watched the raw line turn red.

The pain pushed away some of his panic but it wasn’t enough. He turned quickly to the shelving unit, looking. There was always something around. He scanned the shelves quickly and reached out to pick up a wooden tongue depressor. He snapped it in two and dropped one half. He brought the jagged edge of the side he still held to the back of his wrist. His hands trembled as he placed it against the red line he’d previously made. He dragged it down, pushing hard.

The pain was intense and he closed his eyes. The wood dug deeply and a trail of blood bubbled up behind the depressor.

He stopped when he'd made it almost halfway to his elbow. He continued to hold his arm up, watching the trickles of blood while he let his other hand drop to his side. He felt faint. It was hard to focus but his tension was lifted, slightly. He didn't feel the tremendous urge anymore. The sickening urge to do terrible things. Horrible things. Pain released him from guilt. Pain released him from sadness.

His breath came in gulps.

I won't do it anymore, he promised himself. I won't hurt kids again. No more. I can stop it. I don't have to be weak.

He slid down the wall until he sat on his heels. *No more. Not again.*

He looked at his arm again. The blood had circled around his arm and made the cut look like a spindly bug. But it wasn't enough.

He turned back to the shelving unit beside him. He reached behind it but pulled his hand back sharply. *No!*

Baron smeared the blood with his good hand, rubbing it down the length of his arm. The cut stung him with sharp bites of pain. *I can't.*

He turned sharply and reached behind the metal shelf. He found a little bag and pulled it free. Opening the bag he took out his needle and a small vial. With obvious practice he loaded a syringe with the clear fluid and then injected it into his good arm. Drops of blood splashed around him as he did so but it didn't matter. It wasn't unusual to see an orderly with blood on his uniform. It just made him look like he was working.

When he finished the injection he dropped both arms and slid off his heels onto the floor, his head falling backwards. He let the drug fill his system and could feel the forgiveness of a gentle fog cloud his mind. He smiled. Nothing mattered anymore. It never did.

For awhile his head swirled and churned with pastel shades of oblivion. Relaxation sought out every part of him. It was peace. It was something nothing could reach through. It was escape.

It didn't last.

An intercom blared. Breaking his stupor.

"DR. PAUL CASTER 5001. PAUL CASTER 5001."

Baron reflexively jerked to attention. It was his call. Dr. Caster was being paged to the OR nursing station. That meant he would need to leave too. He was assisting Dr. Caster before the next surgery. He couldn't upset Dr. Caster.

He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. He tried to focus straight ahead.

He shook his head again, harder.

"Fuck," he muttered, struggling to get up. He smoothed his green uniform as he moved to the doorway and glanced around the utility closet, seeing if there's anything that needed to be

tidied up, hidden. He dropped his drug bag back behind a shelf and then gave the room one more look. *It's clean.* He headed for the door.

Day One – Late Morning

Blood. We've got blood for the first fuckin' time, Wa thought. That stupid bastard.

Sergeant Mitchell Wa was staring down at a small brown patch on the ground next to a swing set.

The area around him, Crichton Park, was swarming with police. The park and the adjoining school, Crichton Park Elementary, were in a quiet residential neighborhood in Dartmouth, part of the Halifax Regional Municipality. All around Wa people were working. Fellow sex crimes officers were watching, forming opinions. Uniformed cops were controlling the scene – keeping spectators away. Forensic personnel were measuring, testing, and taking samples. There were cops everywhere. But Wa couldn't hear them. Couldn't see them. He was focused on the small patch on the ground. That small patch changed everything. Made everything worse.

Sergeant Mitchell Wa, only recently back at work, was one of the senior investigators on the sex crimes unit. He'd made the switch to sex crimes after a long stint with homicide that ended when his partner, Tim Dallons, became suicidal. The work gets to you. Gets to everyone. *The cops who say differently are liars, Wa thought, or stupid.*

Which means I must've been one of the dumbest cops on the force, he thought, shaking his head.

Finally he noticed that someone was tapping his shoulder.

"We need to do this area."

It was one of the forensic guys. Wa nodded and walked away from the swing set.

Wa had barely taken two steps before Constable Riley O'Neil matched stride with him. Riley was new to sex crimes, new as a member of major crimes. Wa, the veteran, was partnered with him.

"I guess this bastard isn't content with just sexually assaulting these kids anymore," Riley began.

"Guess not," Wa grunted, not wanting to encourage a discussion. He hated having to break a rookie cop in. It was more than he could handle but he didn't have a choice. It had only been a few months since he was suspended for physically assaulting a suspected pedophile. The suspension was lifted when the pedophile didn't show up at the internal affairs inquiry but the department was still keeping an eye on him. They thought he was unbalanced. His attempt to

jump off the MacKay bridge would have probably gotten him pulled off the force permanently but he'd managed to call in a few favours and had the incident swept under the rug but now he didn't have much say in who his partner was.

"What's the next step? Stake-out?" Riley continued.

Wa stopped and spun on the younger officer, "Stake-out what? Every fuckin' playground in the city?" His head pounded and he gripped his temples, massaging them.

Riley was stunned, "I just meant..."

"I know what you meant," Wa snorted and turned, walking away.

Riley was motionless, watching the sergeant leave and then he felt someone standing next to him. It was Sergeant Laurie Abrahms, another member of the sex crimes division.

"You'll have to give Mitchell a wide berth on this one, Riley."

"But I didn't say anything. I was just asking about what's next."

"I know," she said warmly, "but this hits pretty close for him. It's tough to be a cop and a dad sometimes especially when you've seen as much shit as Wa's seen."

"A cop and a dad?" Riley questioned.

Laurie stepped around to face him. "You married?"

He raised an eyebrow in surprise, "Yeah."

"Kids?"

"Not yet."

"Well Mitchell's married with three kids. Two boys and a girl. He and his wife have had a lot of problems over the last little bit and most of it because of his job. I think he and his wife even split up for a time. It was real hard on him."

Riley shrugged, "What's that got to do with this case?"

"Think about it. On this case we've had three boys, all under twelve, sexually assaulted at or near playgrounds. In all the cases the kids were unsupervised and approached by a man. The kid is lured away and assaulted before he's dropped off at the park again."

"I know," Riley interrupted. "It's the same MO every time except that this time the kid got roughed up more than usual. The pervert is starting to get nasty. Instead of sexual assault followed by some of the usual incoherent ranting, ravings, and threats the guy pops the kid in the mouth. Splits the kid's lip wide open. Damn near knocks the kid out."

"The degree of violence is escalating," Laurie nods.

"But what's this got to do with Sergeant Wa?"

"Mitchell's youngest, Nicholas, is soon turning five years old. His other son, Joshua, is eight. Both kids within the target range of this perp."

"Oh," Riley said softly, starting to see some connection.

"Not only that but I hear there's something wrong with Nicholas, the youngest. I guess he's been developing a pretty bad limp – some kind of bone thing. Mitchell and his wife have just started looking for a specialist. I think they've already seen a few doctors."

"Fuck," Riley swore, shaking his head. "I didn't know any of this."

"He's not much for talking," Laurie nodded. "I guess all I'm saying is that Mitchell really loves his family and would never let anything hurt them. Now he's in a position where his youngest is hurt because of an illness he can't do anything about. I think seeing these kids out unsupervised just upsets him. These parents must know there's a sicko out there and they're still sending their kids to the park. Upsets me just to think about it."

Riley nodded.

"So give Wa some room. He's a good cop. You'll learn a lot from him. Just give him some space on this one."

"But is he..." Riley started, hesitating. "You know, I've heard..."

"I've heard the same shit," Laurie said. "People say the Edward Carter case changed Wa, made him, I don't know, meaner. It was shortly after that when he was interviewing Messier – another pedophile – and he beat the shit out of him. Wa wouldn't even be on the force any more except that Messier jumped off his own balcony before he could testify at the internal affairs inquiry."

"Or was pushed," Riley said raising an eyebrow.

Laurie shook her head. "Stick to sex crimes. We need to find this guy before another kid gets hurt."

Riley nodded and looked back at the playground, swarming with cops...

...not a kid in sight...

Not now.

seven

Day One - Afternoon

Wenton stood in his spacious condo. The extra-high ceilings were a necessity if he didn't want to bump his knuckles every time he changed his shirt. He passed by the kitchen on his left and picked up his Durango keys from the counter. He stepped into the living room where a large screen TV dominated in one corner. At the end of the room balcony doors led to a concrete patio. From the patio he could see down Spring Garden almost to *The Thirsty Duck* – a popular pub in a city known for more pubs per capita than anywhere else in Canada. The apartment was only blocks from the best bars in town and Dalhousie University – where he used to be a professor until he quit.

He bent and picked up his remote, about to click the TV off but he realized he recognized the person being interviewed. On the screen were two people seated awkwardly in a fake living room. It was a local news show on Cable 10 and one of the hosts was interviewing forensic psychiatrist Dr. Georgia O'Connors. The show was notorious for bad journalism and Wenton wondered why Dr. O'Connors would consent to be there.

"Dr. O'Connors," the host began, "you must agree that whoever is attacking children in our parks is evil?"

"Evil?" She seemed surprised and somewhat awkward. Sweat was evident on her forehead. She wasn't a regular on the show.

Wenton stayed standing and watched with a hint of amusement.

"Well, yes," the host continued, "no matter how you define it, these acts against our children are evil, aren't they?"

"Well evil isn't a term that we generally use in forensic psychiatry. We prefer to take a more scientific, research-guided view of..."

He quickly interrupted. "So what would you say about this pervert? Is he insane?"

She laughed, nervously. "Pervert isn't a term we use either." She paused to indicate a shift in tone, "No, we're likely dealing with a pedophile – probably an exclusive homosexual pedophile. That particular type of offender is one of the most difficult to treat and has the highest rates of recidivism."

The host looked blank, an exaggerated look of confusion. "You're losing me, doc. Just tell me – is this a man we're looking for or some kind of animal?"

Dr. O'Connors just shook her head. She obviously didn't want to get into the emotions of the case. She was unprepared for this live interview.

The host was barely suppressing a smile, eager to push his guest into a difficult situation because the viewers would eat it up.

"I know, I know," he continued after an unwieldy pause, "animal isn't a *scientific* term. But can't we say his actions are evil? Evil exists, doesn't it?"

"Evil?" she said tentatively. You could tell she was beginning to entertain the idea of discussing this topic.

Wenton leaned in, listening carefully.

"You could say his actions are evil," she answered slowly.

"So evil exists," he returned quickly with a smugness that was almost palpable.

When Dr. O'Connors didn't answer he continued, "I won't force you to answer. Let's talk about the characteristics of sexual offenders. Are they always male? We keep referring to this person abusing the kids at our parks as a male."

"Most sex offenders are male," Dr. O'Connors answered with more confidence. "But a small percentage are female. It just depends..."

Wenton didn't hear the rest of her answer because his phone had begun to ring. Unless he was expecting a call he frequently just let it ring. He didn't have an answering machine because it implied he'd return calls.

Since he wasn't interested in Dr. O'Connors anymore he flipped the TV off and tossed the remote onto his leather couch. He went to the kitchen and pulled the cordless phone off its cradle. "Yep."

"Um, hello," a voice on the other end started passively. "Is this Mr. Wenton?"

"No, Mr. Wenton is my father. This is Dr. Wenton."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Wenton. My name is Allan Goudet with the disability pension office. I've recently taken over your case and I wondered if we could meet. I have a few questions."

"No," Wenton said flatly without any attempt at an explanation.

The phone was silent for a second as Allan considered that. He finally decided he must have misheard. "I'm sorry?"

"What are you questions?"

"Well, as I said, I've just taken over your case and I just wanted to have a chat..."

Wenton interrupted, "I'm not good at chats." He knew why the new case worker was calling. He'd recently started receiving his Canada Pension Plan or CPP disability money and the Government was obviously reviewing the application thoroughly. It didn't pay to have a lot of publicity around leaving his job at the university but it couldn't have been helped. Dalhousie was going to launch a formal review of Wenton because there'd been allegations of sexual misconduct with a graduate student but the official review was sidetracked because the graduate

student killed herself. After that Wenton had quit to avoid trying to deal with the aftermath of the whole incident. The psych department was full of whining crybabies.

“Well, can I ask you a couple of questions over the phone?” Allan asked tentatively.

“Go for it,” Wenton smirked. “Maybe you’ll amuse me.”

It took another moment for Allan to absorb that comment but he pushed ahead. “You recently applied for CPP disability after leaving your job at Dalhousie University?”

There was no response.

“Dr. Wenton?” Allan asked.

“Was that a question?” he asked derisively.

“Um, yes.”

“Is there a reason why you think the information in the folder you’re holding is inaccurate?”

“What?”

“I’m sure my case folder down there at whatever B.S. Government department you work for says when I applied and that I quit at Dal so if you’re asking me to confirm it then it must be because you don’t trust the file.”

“Well, yes. I guess when I took the case over I just wanted to be clear about a few things.”

“Let me save you a little time. There was a tremendous amount of shit going on at the university. I wasn’t the most well-liked professor there but unfortunately for them I was considered a world-authority in forensic research. I published frequently and brought in more grant money than the rest of the department combined. I was forced to quit under some ugly circumstances and the stress of it left me unable to work.” He stopped briefly to compose himself because he didn’t want to laugh on the phone. “At the time, my GP diagnosed acute stress disorder and chronic depression. My disorder has since progressed to a severe case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I’m numb all over and I can’t work so I want the government to pay me to stay home.” This time he couldn’t resist and he chuckled. He thought the disability system was so absurd – especially in Nova Scotia. The lackadaisical system encouraged people with the slightest infirmity to quit work. With a big break on taxes, going on a disability pension almost matched the salary a person would’ve earned if they’d stayed at work. *It’s ridiculous. Why does anyone work?*

“Um, is there anyway that we could look at you seeing another doctor? We want to provide you with as much support and assistance as possible and...”

Wenton cut him off again. “No. Just send the cheques.” And then he hung up. The little shit was starting to annoy him.

He scooped his Durango keys off the counter and headed downstairs to the lobby. He wanted to get the mail before going to the Forensic Hospital.

Once in the lobby he pulled his mail out and quickly brushed through the thick wad of mail. He normally only collected it once a week on the weekend. As he flipped through them there was only one piece that really caught his attention.

Before he could open the letter there was a noise at the front door and he looked over. An older woman was struggling with her keys. Two large grocery bags were in either arm and she couldn't find the right key for the front entrance. Wenton stared at her briefly and she smiled back at him and then nodded at the door, asking if he'd help her out.

Wenton quickly appraised her – *fat and old* – and turned away. She wasn't his concern. He decided to check his mail later and headed to the elevators leaving the bright, windowed lobby behind. In the back of his mind he knew it wasn't the idea of helping the woman as much as it was the prospect of idle chatter with her that pushed him away.

He boarded the elevator and hit the button for the parkade. This building was one of the few apartments in Halifax that included underground parking.

Once in the parkade he leisurely made his way to his Durango. It was the middle of the afternoon and he wasn't in a hurry. It was a switch for him. He'd been notorious for punctuality and brutal with those who weren't.

He threw the envelopes into the passenger seat and reached to start his truck but stopped. He leaned and picked up the mail again. He wanted to have another look at the intriguing letter.

It was hand-addressed to Wenton in a slanted printing that suggested someone who wasn't familiar with writing English letters. In addition, there was no return address.

He opened the letter and found a single sheet.

Dr. Wenton,

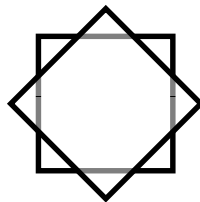
Your existence has come to our attention.

I think we should meet.

Thursday, Tim Horton's on the end of Queen Street near the Ferry Terminal at 11:00 AM.

Thank you.

There was no return address or signature. Only a strange symbol on the top left of the letter. It looked like two interlocking squares in an eight-pointed star formation.



Wenton laughed, an odd little derisive snort. "Bullshit."

He threw the envelope and letter back on the seat and started the Durango. *I guess there's some dumb shits out there who have nothing better to do*, he thought. He wasn't going to waste time on them. He wanted to go see someone. In the last year there'd been a lot of strange

events in the city of Halifax and it always seemed that Wenton was involved. One person who claimed to have answers was locked up in the forensic hospital found Not Criminally Responsible for murder.

Day One

Rome, the Vatican. One of modern-day religion's most powerful centres.

Bishop Greigan Syed Bashir stepped quietly to one of the many large ornate office doors of the Supreme Pontiff. This particular door had an elaborately scripted plaque affixed to it that read:

Cardinal Oleg Montessa
Office of the Holy See

Syed Bashir knew that he and his brothers of the Catholic faith were only called to this office when there was a problem. The Holy See was the office that acted in the "interests" of the universal Church and reported only to the Pope. Essentially, the Holy See were the Vatican's police when it came to religious controversy.

He knocked and stood back one step, his arms folded behind his back.

A rustle behind the heavy door indicated someone was responding. Soon, the door pushed open and a pleasant looking older lady smiled out at him. "You don't need to stand there, come in." She waved him through as she tried to hold the door with one arm.

Syed Bashir nodded and entered into Cardinal Montessa's secretary's office. The room was small but comfortable with a single desk, coffee table and leather couch. Another ornate door led into the inner office, Cardinal Montessa's office.

The secretary resumed her post behind her desk almost as though she'd forgotten that Bishop Syed Bashir was present. He stood, waiting for instruction.

When she finally looked up she seemed surprised to find him standing there. "Well go on in," she said sweeping her hand forward. "The Cardinal is expecting you."

Syed Bashir nodded and entered the back office.

The sheer contrast in the size of the waiting room versus the inner office was surprising. Syed Bashir had seen many of the inner offices but few rivaled Cardinal Montessa's. The ceilings soared at least 15 feet into the air and one wall was set to the top in heavy oak bookcases. A rolling ladder was affixed to the shelf and tucked against a far wall. The office held furniture for a complete sitting room which was set away from a massive mahogany desk behind which sat the Cardinal.

The elderly Montessa stood on Syed Bashir's entrance. His sharp, dark eyes swept over the Bishop, sizing up the slightly younger man. His long robe flowed down around him accented by his red cap.

"Please have a seat," Montessa said pointing to the collection of two chairs, a love seat and a large couch. "Let's talk."

Syed Bashir nodded and moved to a chair. Montessa ambled over to sit nearby on the loveseat.

"Would you like something? Coffee, perhaps?" the Cardinal offered.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Right to business, eh?" Montessa smiled. "It seems I've chosen wisely. I need a man of action."

Syed Bashir knew it was best to remain silent, wait for the punchline.

"We have a problem," Montessa began, leaning forward to emphasize the seriousness and delicacy of the "problem". "You are going to help the Church solve it – once and for all."

Syed Bashir felt that his concerns about being called to *this* office were going to be born out. It was sounding bad already.

"You've heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls," the Cardinal asked rhetorically, "and you likely know that they have caused the Church some concern over the years."

"Yes, Cardinal." Syed Bashir knew this was true. Some of the scrolls contained scripture that wasn't consistent with Catholic tradition. The Church needed to use its considerable influence to make sure only those portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls that were "truly the inspired word of God" ever made it into the public's hands.

"Well we have reliable reports that the great evil of the Scrolls has returned and is once again threatening the sanctity of our Holy Faith."

Syed Bashir nodded.

The Cardinal continued, "Sometimes the faith of the many must be preserved by sacrifice among a few disbelievers. Sometimes the Church must act in a strong manner in order to strike down evil and promote the true Faith. Such a time has come upon us."

"I serve the Church," Syed Bashir said.

"Thank you," Montessa said, smiling. "I knew I could count on you. The difficult mission I must assign you comes directly from the Supreme Pontiff."

"Yes."

"You must find the Silent Ones and ensure that they stay silent. They must not be allowed to disrupt the very foundations of the Holy Church."

"The Silent Ones?" Bishop Syed Bashir asked.

"Let me tell you a story of incredible corruption and moral decay. Let me tell you of the true nature of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the evil men who created them."

For the next two hours, Syed Bashir listened to an incredible story. By the end of it he was so angry that the Cardinal didn't have to convince him of the need for *extreme action*.

Day One – Afternoon

The Portland Estates home used to be his own. Pulling into the driveway now felt so familiar and yet awkward. During the aftermath of the Edward Carter rape case, Mitchell Wa and his wife, Gloria, had separated and now he lived in a run-down apartment in Halifax – far away from this residential suburb in Dartmouth. His visit now was only because his wife needed support – support that she just couldn't find in anyone else but Wa.

Block it out, he told himself as he walked to the front door. He'd only recently left the playground crime scene and he didn't want any lingering anger over the case to taint his visit home. He wanted a clear head. He couldn't afford any more slips with Gloria.

She met him at the door. "Come on in. Thanks for stopping by."

As they moved up the stairs of their split entry into the living room Wa asked, "Josh and Lisa at school?"

"Yeah, they'll probably be home soon. Nick's in his room having a nap."

They both sat: Gloria in her favorite chair while Wa sat next to her on the couch. He looked down at the floor and scratched his head. He didn't want to look directly at Gloria.

"Don't you want to know about Nick?" she asked, almost a challenge.

He frowned slightly. "Listen, I just want to help anyway that I can. Can we put our problems aside for just awhile until Nick's okay?"

"No we can't, Mitchell," she said flatly. "Now do you want to know about Nick's appointment or not?"

He hated when she called him Mitchell. Ever since the separation she'd deliberately called him Mitchell when she used to call him "Dad" or "Sarge". She only ever used his first name when she was angry – it sounded so awkward coming out of her mouth.

He relented. "How's Nick?"

"Nick isn't good. His leg is much worse and we have an appointment with a specialist at the IWK tomorrow."

"What kind of specialist now?" Ever since Nick started having pain in his leg they'd shopped around to a few specialists. Because of their difficulties, Wa didn't know everything that had been happening with Nick.

"Oncologist."

"Cancer?" Wa blurted. "Why?"

"They suspect he has a rare form of early onset cancer. Something like leukemia."

"Who suspects that? This is crazy." Anger had crept into his voice.

"Mitchell," she snapped, "I need you to help me with this. I need you to help your son with this. He's really scared and with everything that's gone on I can't do this on my own. My psychologist says that you should help..."

"You're still seeing someone?"

She stared at him, challenging the question. He nodded.

"Anyway," she continued, "that's where things are at. We're supposed to bring Nick to the IWK in a couple of days. I hope you can be there. It would really help Nick."

He kept nodding. He wasn't sure he'd still have a voice if he tried to speak. He felt as though he'd been punched in the stomach. His vision was suddenly blurry and he blinked a few times hoping it would clear. He started to stand.

"Mitchell?" Gloria asked, a note of concern rising.

"I'm just," he said and then fell back into his seat.

"What's the matter? Are you okay?"

He shook his head. "I don't know." And he didn't.

ten

Day One – Afternoon

As Wenton walked through the hall he was struck, as he always was, by the vague smell of urine and feces. The housekeeping staff had obviously disguised a patient's recent *accident* with disinfectant. But repeated *accidents* eventually left traces that couldn't be disguised. An inevitable feature of psychiatric units that dealt with the most acutely ill patients. Psychiatric units like the Maximum Secure Psychiatric Centre.

Most visitors were not allowed past the contact visit rooms located just past the main entrance into the facility. Wenton wasn't a typical visitor. His staff badge hung off a belt rung and gave him access to almost the whole facility. Since Wenton had technically quit from Dalhousie University his status in the community as a forensic psychologist and therefore his access to clinical settings was intact, for now. Behind the scenes, an investigation was being conducted with the Nova Scotia Board of Examiners in Psychology to try and have his license revoked.

One of the nurses recognized him and nodded. Wenton ignored him.

"Hey," the nurse called after him, "if you're going down to the pastor's room he's not there. He's in interview room three with Dr. O'Connors."

Wenton turned and headed back to the front end of the unit where the interview rooms were. Pastor Gary Wrightland was the only reason Wenton would ever set foot in the forensic hospital again. The pastor was on *South Bay* after having been found Not Criminally Responsible for the murder of Nick Stangos and Wenton was convinced that the pastor knew more about the situation than he'd shared so far.

As Wenton arrived at the interview room Dr. Georgia O'Connors, psychiatrist and clinical leader at the hospital, stepped out.

"Dr. Wenton," she said in surprise.

"Dr. O'Connors."

"What brings you here?"

"I need to finish some things with Pastor Wrightland."

Dr. O'Connors nodded. "I was working on-call this weekend and needed to clear up a few loose ends with our pastor, too. I just finished with him. We were having a talk about the end of the world." She smiled.

Wenton's expression didn't change. "Saw you on TV today – must've been a taped interview. You were saying that the pedophile loose in the city is evil."

"Um," she started and then seemed to reconsider. "I need to go."

He shrugged and moved past her and into the room. *Bitch.*

Inside the small room Gary was seated at the table staring at the wall. The pastor hadn't noticed Wenton's arrival.

Wenton glanced down at the man, already just a shell of the man he used to be. His gray hair and hollow eyes made him look much older than his 40 years. The shine of a string of saliva was evident across his chin.

"Pastor?" Wenton said quietly. "Mind if I sit down."

Pastor Wrightland finally turned and then smiled broadly. "Dr. Wenton. Please sit down."

He did and both men were silent for a moment before the pastor spoke again. "You want to know what's going on, don't you?"

Wenton shrugged. "I wouldn't mind getting s'more details."

The pastor leaned forward and looked both ways as though he was about to relay secret information. "I can't tell you everything because you must find the answers on your own but I can point you in the right direction."

Wenton nodded. He wasn't sure the pastor was properly medicated yet and there might still be active symptoms of psychosis. He would wait and see what the pastor had to say before he took much interest in the conversation.

"Lusus Naturae – it means monster. The world is so much more complicated than people think. So much more." The pastor paused and shook his head, reflecting on his own words. "I'm ahead of myself. I don't think you need to know that."

Wenton waited.

"I think you should know about the plague. Yes. That's where it starts. Do you know of the plague?"

Wenton snorted. "Which one?"

"Of course," the pastor almost shouted. "Which one? Exactly. The first one is the one, really. There were ripples from it but that was inevitable. People actually died later on but that was incidental. Completely incidental and unrelated to the original plague."

Wenton was tempted to ask a question and try to piece together what the pastor was saying but there was no point. The pastor was still psychotic. Wenton simply waited for him to continue. Sometimes just listening was enough.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" the pastor blurted.

Wenton laughed again. "It would be consistent with your current residence."

He frowned. "I don't care if you believe me but just listen to what I have to say. You can believe it latter."

Wenton raised his hands in acquiescence.

“And you will believe it latter. Things are going to happen very soon.”

“I’m listening,” he reassured the man.

“Two thousand years ago there was a plague that took almost all of the children on Earth. Very few men and women died – just the children. Doesn’t that seem odd?”

“Not really.”

“The world was devastated and had to rebuild after that. It was time of great stress and tribulation. Faith in God was one of the few things that kept people going. It was something that those in positions of power recognized: people with faith and hope work much harder.”

“Well that’s an interesting little tidbit from history,” Wenton smirked. “Now, I think I’ll come back in a couple of weeks and check on you again. You need to rest.”

“NO!” the pastor barked. His eyes snapped wide glowed as he addressed Wenton directly. “Answer me this.”

Wenton waited for the question.

The pastor simply started at him with unblinking eyes full of pain.

Wenton nodded, trying to encourage him. *Fuckin’ waste of time.*

“Answer me this,” the pastor repeated. He was obviously working out the exact question in his mind.

“I will. If I can,” he sighed.

“Why does the world suffer?”

Wenton frowned. “Suffer?”

“Answer me this!” the pastor screamed.

“I don’t know what you mean? That’s just the way the world is.”

“No! Why do some people experience pleasure?”

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly, it’s the same question. Pain and pleasure. Good and bad. All one in the same. None exist without their match.” The pastor stopped and watched for a reaction but Wenton gave none. “It is balance. The world is created from a balance. Everything is balance.” The pastor was rocking back and forth now. His agitation over trying to get Wenton to understand was obviously taking a toll on him.

Wenton wasn’t going to participate in the pastor’s psychosis any longer. He started to stand.

“And what happens if that balance is destroyed? What happens if everything leans to one side or the other?” The pastor asked quickly, realizing Wenton was going to leave.

“I don’t know. I’ll drop by and see you again sometime.”

The pastor continued to push. “What happens if the balance is disturbed?”

“I’m sure it would fuck everything up,” Wenton deadpanned.

The pastor slumped back in his chair. "That's right. Oblivion."

Wenton headed for the door but a voice stopped him.

"The silent ones are here. Qumran lives. You will find them under the road that is no road."

He turned back to the pastor. The voice had been a low, trembling one that filled the room with resounding resonance. The pastor looked like he was in a daze. Wenton turned back to the door and the voice spoke again.

"Remember this: In the end, Lusus Naturae will take the guide to the doctor's house."

"What?" Wenton almost shouted turning back again. The pastor continued to look out-of-it. It couldn't have been him speaking. Wenton watched, waiting for the voice again but the room was silent.

Finally he left.

Under the road that is no road? Lusus Naturae will take the guide to the doctor's house? What the hell? he thought as he made his way off the unit.

Day One – Afternoon

Another emergency call into the OR. Dr. Paul Caster had finished in surgery and was now standing at his locker in the men's change room after a hot shower. His hands at his side he was just letting his body adjust to the temperature around him before he dressed.

He threw open his locker and hung his towel over the door. He wondered, briefly, about some of the other staff who skipped the post-surgery shower and headed straight home. *They must not care about how they look*, he thought. He knew it wasn't because the staff locker rooms were inadequate. He liked them. *Or maybe*, he thought, *I just don't like to rush home*. He chuckled at the thought.

He looked at the picture of Mallory on the inside of his locker. She was posed on top of *Lucky* – the horse he'd purchased for her when she announced she was going to be an equestrian in the next Olympics. His home life was basically good with a few problem areas. Unfortunately the few problems were also big ones.

"Hey doc," a shaky voice behind sounded.

Dr. Caster turned to find Baron Harris standing close behind him. The orderly looked disheveled and nervous – his typical presentation. "Baron," he said and almost instinctively reached out to lean against his locker door and cover the picture of his daughter.

"Another save in the OR, eh?"

Dr. Caster checked briefly around the room to ensure they were alone. "I'm not in the mood for small talk. You got something for me."

Baron smiled through a mass of yellowed teeth. "Right to the point, eh doc? You're kinda a get-to-it kind of guy."

Dr. Caster turned back to his locker. "I'm leaving."

"Whoa, hold on there Dr. Perfect. I got something for you."

He pulled his underwear on, ignoring the orderly.

"You fuckin' think you're superior. I come to you with my problems coz I know you got problems too and then you think you're superior."

He shoved an arm through his shirt refusing to turn back.

Baron leaned forward. "That you're daughter?"

Now Dr. Caster spun back reaching out for his shirt. "You fuckin' pedophile – don't even look at..."

Baron shrugged him away. "Don't say that. Don't even talk to me. We've both hurt kids. You're no better than I am."

Dr. Caster's arms dropped away in defeat. "What do you want?"

"It's more about what you want." Baron held out his hand, fist closed, palm down. Dr. Caster automatically put his palm underneath and caught a small baggie full of white powder.

Baron nodded. "It's pure."

Dr. Caster wanted to throw it back in the man's face but he didn't. He glanced nervously around and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

Baron waited, his hand still extended.

"I don't have cash on me," Dr. Caster said, knowing why Baron hadn't left.

"Don't," Baron said shaking his head. "I need something. I'm low. I help you and you help me."

"Tomorrow then. It'll have to wait until then."

"The fuck it will," Baron yelled. "You think I'm shit and you can do whatever. You aren't fuckin' better than me. I know you've done surgery when you're high. I know kids have died."

"Shut the fuck up," Dr. Caster said quickly looking nervously at the door. "I'll bring the money first thing tomorrow. Just shut up."

Baron was shaking. He didn't like confronting the doctor but he was so desperate. He had no money – nothing. But he didn't want to push too hard. The doctor knew too much about him. "First thing tomorrow, then?"

Dr. Caster nodded.

"Better be," he mumbled and left leaving only an unpleasant trace of body odour.

twelve

Day One – Afternoon

Pastor Gary Wrightland slumped onto a sofa in the main living area of his unit. The meeting with Michael Wenton had exhausted him. He didn't know how to get Wenton to understand. He felt like his brain wouldn't work to give the right words. He sighed.

The main living area of the rehab unit of South Bay was essentially just the TV Room but it also had a larger table in the back corner where patients played cards. Most frequently they played a form of Wist – a scaled down version of the more complicated and elaborate Bridge. A few years ago it was popular to play Hearts but too many fights were happening and staff had unofficially banned the game.

Right now there were four patients around the card table, absorbed in their game.

Gary rubbed his temples. He wasn't sure he'd reached Wenton – made him understand. It was so crucial. He didn't know how to explain things better. He couldn't be more specific because he didn't have the answers. He just knew that Wenton was a big piece of the puzzle. Wenton was supposed to have a role in everything that was happening with the Dead Sea Scrolls and Armageddon.

It sounded silly – even to him. He shook his head, not wanting to let it bother him anymore than it already did. He glanced to his right looking for the remote control. It was normally on one of the couches. He saw it on the arm of the couch and leaned to retrieve it.

He clicked the TV on and the sound blared. One of the younger patients had left it on Muchmusic with the sound cranked up. He frantically searched for the volume.

"Turn that fuckin' noise down," came a voice from the card table. It was Goran Kuco, a patient of the Forensic Hospital for the last seven years. He was notoriously mean to the other patients – not having a clear psychiatric illness contributed to his lack of empathy for the others. Goran was one of the patients a forensic psychiatric facility dreads – an Axis II – or personality disordered offender with no obvious psychiatric issue to treat. Unfortunately, when inappropriate patients get into the system they sometimes end up trapped for years since their release depends on the management of risk for violence and not whether or not they have a mental illness. Goran, having murdered a neighbor in what later was discovered not to be a psychotic act but a drug-deal gone bad, presented as an unmanageable risk and was not being considered for discharge. This fact alone kept him on the verge of a temper-tantrum daily.

"Sorry," Gary called out finally locating the volume and turning the sound down to almost nothing.

Then Goran noticed who was watching TV. "Hey, it's priest-boy. What the hell are you doing watching Muchmusic anyway? You trying to get hip to the young kids?"

Without thinking he responded, "You go on back to your game. I'm sorry about the noise." The other patients knew that you never encouraged a conversation with Goran.

Goran stood, shoving his chair backwards. A quick glance confirmed that no nurses were within earshot or watching through the Plexiglas of the nursing station nearby. He threw his cards on the table and walked over to stand between Gary and the TV.

"I'm not one of your congregation. I don't take orders from a fuckin' fruitcake priest."

"No of course you don't," Gary began trying to back pedal. "I never meant anything about..."

Goran leaned over to speak almost into Gary's face. "Just what did you mean then priest-boy?"

"Come on," a voice called from the card table. "Forget him and let's play."

Without standing Goran raised a hand and his middle finger to the card table. His eyes stayed fixed on Gary.

Gary smiled slightly and started to stand. "I'll leave. I can see I upset you when that was clearly not my intention."

Goran looked up over Gary's shoulder to make sure he wasn't being watched and put a hand on the pastor's shoulder pushing him back onto the couch. "Oh, now I'm a fuckin' idiot. It was *clearly not your intention* right? You think you're fuckin' superior to me?"

"I never...", he started but didn't finish because Goran had taken a quick swing with his open hand slapping Gary across the cheek and leaving a stinging welt.

"What did you say?" Goran taunted.

Gary just shook his head. He knew there wasn't any point. He'd let Goran have his fun and hopefully the man would tire quickly.

Goran slapped him again in almost the same spot. "I asked you a question you fuckin' crazy man."

Gary closed his eyes.

Goran lifted his arm to slap the pastor again but this time his arm didn't swing. He turned and saw a monster next to him gripping his arm in such an enormous fist that it almost completely engulfed his forearm.

"Pastor Wrightland?" the monster said in a squeaky, almost child-like voice.

Gary recognized the voice immediately and opened his eyes. It was David White or as almost the entire rest of the hospital, patients and staff, called him *Lobster Table*.

"Why was this man slapping you?" Lobster Table asked in obvious confusion.

"You can let him go," Gary said rubbing his cheek partly because it hurt but also because he didn't want David seeing the red mark. "I'm sure he's sorry."

Lobster Table pulled Goran's arm back and almost lifted the much smaller man completely off the ground. Goran winced as his arm twisted unnaturally. "Is that right? Are you sorry?" he asked.

Goran nodded furiously. "Very sorry. Let me the fuck go," he hissed through clenched teeth.

The seven foot, 425 pound Lobster Table wasn't convinced. "You don't sound sad? Aren't you sad that you hit my friend?" This time he did lift Goran off the ground, still only holding him with one hand around the other man's forearm. "Why don't you say sorry in a nice way?"

"I'm sorry," Goran grunted. "I'm fuckin' sorry."

"Hey," a voice called from the nursing station. "What's going on out there?"

Lobster Table dropped Goran who fell awkwardly backward onto his behind, the wind knocked out of him.

Lobster Table smiled back at the nurse. "I'm good."

"Don't beat him up," the nurse said nodding down at Goran and then turning back into the nursing station. Few nurses would rush to help Goran. They knew how he treated the other patients and they knew any grief he got he gave out ten fold.

Once Goran caught his breath he moved back to the card table without another look at David or Gary. The few chuckles at the table were quickly silenced by Goran's icy stare.

"I don't like him touching you," David announced, squeezing to sit next to the pastor. Gary moved over until he was jammed into the armrest to make room. Their hips still touched.

"Thank you for your help, David," Gary said. He never called him Lobster Table – even though you rarely heard his real name from any other person. The childlike David White had been a patient of the forensic hospital since the age of 17 following repeated sexual assaults on children. At first social services tried to intervene but his size and intellectual impairment made it difficult to provide any management of his pedophilia. Eventually all other avenues were exhausted and Lobster Table was "dumped" into the forensic system – not able to understand that his actions against children were criminal and barely able to understand the criminal justice system – he was eventually found Not Criminally Responsible for his offenses.

"I'm going on pass this weekend," David announced proudly. "I finally got someone to take me to the movies."

"That's wonderful," Gary smiled. He'd never understood their alliance but ever since he'd been admitted to the forensic hospital, David had been drawn to the pastor. Gary thought it might have something to do with him being a pastor and maybe that somehow comforted the younger man.

"Yeah, I got direct community so I got to go with staff but that's okay, right? It's Kevin that's going with me."

"Of course. I'm sure you'll have a really good time. Kevin's a good guy."

David leaned back, smiling proudly. "I'm sure I will too."

Alex sat back down in front of the computer in the nursing station and reached for the mouse to continue scrolling through his emails.

"What was that about?" Milton asked. He was the other nurse on duty and was seated in the back of the room with a chart open on the desk in front of him.

Alex turned back to him. "Oh it was just Goran being an asshole again. Lobster Table chucked him on the floor and then Goran scurried away like the rat he is."

Milton laughed. "Was it Wrightland?"

"Yep."

"Boy that Lobster Table is sure protective of the old pastor. Good thing too because old Gary would have a rougher ride if it weren't for his personal bodyguard."

"Speaking of Lobster Table," Alex began almost thoughtfully, "where'd that name come from?"

Milton leaned back, resting an arm across the chart. "You've read his history right. You know his offenses?"

"Yeah. He's a screwed up kid from a screwed up family. His mother was a drug addict. His little sister's a prostitute and Lobster Table is a mentally retarded pedophile. But I don't get what's that got to do with the name?"

"Well I've never seen it but I guess when this guy gets all worked up – like when a little girl gets him excited – he goes completely blood red. From his waist to his forehead – red as a lobster. On his index offense he'd gone to this little girl's house, stripped naked in the backyard and watched through the windows for a while. By the time he went in he was red as a son-of-a-bitch. That combined with his size and the fact that his gut is the diameter of an average-sized kitchen table..."

"Lobster Table," Alex finished.

Milton nodded. "Lobster Table. Exactly the wrong kind of guy to meet in a dark alley or, in the case of Goran Kuco, to piss off."

thirteen

Day Two – Monday Morning

“Halifax Regional Police,” the operator answered, her finger brushing over the lit keypads so quickly it was hard to tell which line she’d answered.

Even though this was not the line for emergencies, a lot of calls were dialed directly to the main police station in downtown Halifax. As a result there was almost always staff taking calls, re-directing people, fielding complaints, and sometimes taking new evidence on unsolved crimes.

“Yeah, hi,” the voice at the other end of the line said. “I got an idea about the dumb shit who’s been touching the kids. I think you should..”

The operator cut her off, “Would you mind holding? I can redirect you to one of the officers in charge of the investigation.”

“Um, sure.”

More fingers moving over buttons and the operator’s headset rang.

“O’Neil,” Constable Riley O’Neil answered.

“Constable, can you take a call from someone who says they have information on the recent child sexual assaults?”

He sat up in his seat. They hadn’t been getting many calls on the case and it was making the investigation more difficult. There’s normally quite a few calls from citizens on any given case. The police solve a fair number of cases directly from information supplied by the public. “I’ll take it.”

There was a click and the operator said, “Go ahead.”

“This is Constable O’Neil, who am I speaking to you?” Getting the information is never as crucial as getting the person’s name. You can always get the information later as long as you know how to find them.

“Oh, um, Linda Merriman.”

“And you say you have information on the recent child sexual assaults?” Another cop-trick is to keep the questions coming quickly so the person stays off balance. It’s far more difficult to lie if you don’t have time to think. The truth is almost always on the tip of the tongue – lies take time.

“Yes, I think I know who it is. Or who it might be.”

“Who’s that, ma’am?”

"It's a guy I worked with. He and I worked at the Spryfield youth centre until it burned down. That was a few years ago now."

"What's the person's name?" O'Neil asked.

"James Outhouse. It was James Outhouse but ..."

"And what do you think Mr. Outhouse has done?"

"I think he might be involved with these recent things with the kids. You know, the ones at the parks."

"The sexual assaults?"

"Yes, like the one just yesterday at Crichton Park."

Constable O'Neil nodded. His voice stayed calm and authoritative even though he was furiously writing on a small pad in front of him, sweat creasing his brow. "What makes you think Mr. Outhouse has anything to do with that?"

"He got drunk one time after a day at the youth centre. He was crying and carrying on. It was just the two of us and he told me he'd been to jail for touching a kid before. I think he said it was a relative, maybe a nephew."

"Go on," O'Neil encouraged.

"Anyway, he was saying all kinds of dumb stuff about how he couldn't help himself and that it wasn't his fault. Then he said something about how any parent who lets a young kid wander around by themselves must not care anyway so why should he? He said that a kid, alone, at the park was just asking for it. Oh, I feel terrible telling you this but I couldn't forgive myself if it really was James and I could've helped."

"You're doing the right thing, Ms. Merriman. Where is Mr. Outhouse now?"

"I don't know. I know that he moved shortly after the centre burned down but I'm pretty sure he's still in Halifax."

"Do you have any idea where he would be? Where he might be working?"

"I know he wanted to work at the IWK. He talked about that every once in awhile but he wouldn't be able to with his criminal record. He mentioned that he might try and change his name. You should check with his old landlord. I have his name and number."

"That would be helpful. Thanks." O'Neil wrote down the name and number on a separate sheet as the woman rattled it off. "Anything else ma'am."

"No. That's it. I'm just trying to do the right thing."

"You are doing the right thing. The Halifax Regional Police appreciates your help."

He hung up after getting contact information for Ms. Merriman and turned to Sergeant Laurie Abrahms who was sitting nearby at one of the desks.

"What are you smirking about?" she asked. "Who was on the phone?"

"I think we've got a solid lead on the pervert." He held up the slip of paper with the landlord's name and number on it.

"Mr. James Outhouse. Good name for the fucker if he turns out to be the perp."

"Just like that," Abrahms said skeptically. "Someone calls and gives you the name and number."

"Actually, this is the number of the last known address for the guy. I'm going to check and see where Mr. Outhouse moved to. This landlord might know."

"You're not going to call," she responded flatly.

"The hell I'm not," he said picking up the phone.

"Wa left orders that everything goes past him first." She paused watching the younger constable. "Everything," she repeated.

He slammed the phone back.

"Give the name to him and keep working," Abrahms added.

Constable O'Neil folded the piece of paper into his hand and started towards Wa's office.

The prostitute folded the cell phone shut and handed it back to Dr. Caster. "How's that?" she smirked.

"Very nice," he answered. "I'll need that paper."

She handed him back the sheet with the name Linda Merriman written at the top. The rest of the page was the blow-by-blow answers she'd been instructed to give the police.

"This guy James really the pedophile the cops are looking for?" she asked.

He smiled. "He certainly is."

"That it?" she asked retrieving her gum off the back of her hand. "You got my money?"

He frowned. She was the pushiest whore he'd ever dealt with. He wanted so badly to wipe the almost permanent smirk off her face. He hated how nonchalant she was about everything. He handed her a \$50 dollar bill. "Can you come back to my car with me?"

She stared at him as if she didn't understand the question.

"A quickie?" he asked. He so badly wanted to punch in her blank face.

"No, not right now." She turned to go.

"Then what about this weekend," he asked quickly. Almost too quickly. He thought he sounded like a desperate school kid.

"Whatever," she said without turning back. "Call the service."

He watched her walk away. *I'm going to enjoy teaching you some manners.*

He knew he should go home but he couldn't now. Not yet. That whore wasn't the only one in the city. He started to feel more relaxed as he made his mind up.

Day Two – Morning

Halifax is well-known as a university town. In addition to University Campuses of Dalhousie, Saint Mary's, and Mount Saint Vincent there were numerous specialty colleges and vocational schools. Wenton drove south past Saint Mary's University towards Point Pleasant Park.

Before arriving at Halifax's most famous public park he turned off into the surrounding residential area. The affluent homes in this area lined the Northwest Arm – part of a peninsula that provided a port for yachts and pleasure ships of every variety.

Soon, Wenton turned his Durango into what could have simply been another side street in the community but tucked in among the expensive homes was the Atlantic School of Theology. Wenton drove down a small side road past the residence building that held the school cafeteria and some academic offices. Further down he passed through two massive stone pillars and found himself in the staff parking lot. He parked and stepped out. The territory was unfamiliar to him. Although he knew the school existed he'd had no reason to ever visit until now.

He looked around the campus. It was a beautiful site that overlooked the Northwest Arm. Further down the hill was the A-framed Saint Columba Chapel and Teaching Centre. A heavily glass-windowed building off to the left of the parking lot must have been the library. He headed in that direction, failing to notice the rented Ford Taurus that was slowing to park a few cars away from him.

He walked up the stairs to the main entry and noticed a short, stocky man with a unkempt curly hair and an oversized stomach that stretched the button-down shirt to the point that the fabric pulled apart between the buttons. The man was standing near the entrance billowing smoke from an ornate looking pipe.

The man jumped to attention when he spied Wenton. "Dr. Wenton, I assume. Pleasure to meet you. I'm Dr. MacIntosh." The shorter professor peered up at Wenton through thick, dirty glasses.

"Thanks. Thanks for your time."

Dr. MacIntosh busily started packing his pipe away. "You found the place okay, then?" Wenton nodded.

"Good, good, let's get inside. There's much for us to talk about."

Wenton had contacted Dr. Myles MacIntosh and arranged for the meeting. He'd gotten the man's name from the school's main line not having had any idea about where to look for an expert on biblical history. He wanted to learn more about Qumran and Dr. MacIntosh was apparently the authority in matters of theological history. For Wenton, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Qumran kept coming up and his knowledge of biblical matters was, not-surprisingly, wanting. Running the terms through the Internet hadn't impressed him. Even though the sheer quantity of information available was incredible – it was frequently impossible to separate out the garbage from the truth. He figured it would be easier and quicker to speak to the history professor directly.

The two men entered the main floor of the library. It was a bright spacious building. They'd only taken a few steps when one of the library staff called out, "Dr. MacIntosh, you aren't bringing that smelly pipe into my library are you."

Dr. MacIntosh grinned broadly. "You get off my back you spinster." He turned back to Wenton, "She's always on me about the pipe. She thinks I'll burn this building down."

They continued on to the back of the library.

"You said on the phone that you had questions about the Dead Sea Scrolls. I thought we'd go into the special collections room and have a chat about them. It's one of my favorite topics."

They soon came to a glass enclosed room set apart from the rest of the library.

Dr. MacIntosh waved a dramatic hand at the area. "This is our special collections. Ancient manuscripts and books. Priceless, simply priceless." He stared in at the bookshelves. "We need to keep the collection in a climate-controlled room to preserve the books." He spun back to Wenton, "Let's go in!"

Dr. MacIntosh pulled the door open and there was a whoosh as air rushed into the room. As Wenton stepped into the room he felt the cooler air immediately.

The professor pulled the door shut behind them. "Have a seat. Have a seat," he urged.

Wenton sat at the simple table in the middle of the room. Four seats were arranged around it and one old book lay in the centre.

Dr. MacIntosh gingerly picked up the large book. It was about the size of an atlas with a thick red leather cover. "Why is this out?" he scolded no one in particular. He carefully shut the book and read nodded at the cover – seemingly oblivious to his guest for the time being. He turned and moved to one of the bookshelves and slid the item back into its spot. "There we go."

He returned to the table and sat. "Now," he started, "the Dead Sea Scrolls." He paused again, staring in almost a blank fashion and then remarked, "Yes, the Dead Sea Scrolls are certainly a topic worthy of questions. Hmm?" He laughed as though it were an amusing joke.

Wenton had grown tired of the man's eccentricities. "What can you tell me about the scrolls?" he asked. He decided he needed to be direct since his growing dislike for the professor would be hard to conceal if the conversation dragged on.

“What can I tell?” he laughed again. “What indeed? What can anyone say with any certainty?”

“I’ve researched a little,” Wenton cut in, “and understand that the current thinking is that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written around the time of Jesus Christ – almost 2000 years ago.”

“Yes, yes,” the fat professor nodded furiously.

“And the best guess is that the scrolls were written by a group or sect that had split off from most of the rest of Jewish society at the time. The sect was known as the Essenes and were differentiated from the Pharisees and the Sadducees – two more common Jewish sects.”

“Right so far,” Dr. MacIntosh bellowed. “Who’s the theology prof here?” He looked around the office in exaggerated confusion and then laughed again.

Wenton ignored him and continued, “I understand that there’s also been a lot of controversy surrounding these scrolls. They essentially represent the oldest, and probably most accurate, version of the Old Testament ever found but some people have been reluctant to release them to the public.”

“Exactly so. There’s probably good portions of the scroll that the public doesn’t even know exists yet.”

“Why?”

“Ah, the controversy intrigues you,” he announced as though he’d just identified Colonel Mustard in the library with the knife.

“I need to know what’s going on,” Wenton said flatly.

Dr. MacIntosh nodded, ignoring Wenton’s response as he obviously rehearsed his next words. “The controversy of the scrolls strikes at the heart of the Church – all churches, in fact.” The professor paused expecting a reaction to the drama he wanted to build.

Wenton simply waited for him to continue.

“You are right about the Sons of Light and their scrolls. They were likely of the Essene sect – a highly religious, strict order that was well-respected and noted for their honesty, piety, and devotion to protecting the divine teachings.”

“Sons of Light?”

“The Essene were sometimes known as the Sons of Light, the Guardians of the Divine Teaching, the Silent Ones, the Great Healers, and so on.”

“Why the Great Healers?”

“They were grand scholars and gained a reputation for performing many medical miracles. They were also renowned for seeking perfect balance. They based their lives on the balance of all things. In fact they were often associated with the symbol of an octogram made of two perfectly inter-locking squares.”

Like the letter, Wenton thought. *The mysterious letter might have been from the Essene*. He nodded to himself and then asked, "So tell me more about this controversy with the Dead Sea Scrolls."

"Well, the Essene were also doom-sayers. They thought that Armageddon was just around the corner. Literally months or years away at the time when they began isolating themselves from the rest of society. The Essene believed that they needed to focus on exposing and eliminating evil to make themselves as pure as possible so that they would be ready for the coming apocalypse." He stopped and looked at Wenton as if expecting Wenton would blurt out the punch line.

Wenton shrugged. "And?"

"Don't you see?" the professor spluttered. "The most definitive version of the bible ever found was written by people who were entirely focused on the end of the world and yet there are very few references to Armageddon in the bible." He paused again but Wenton wasn't giving him any reaction. "There's missing chapters in the bible that spell out the end of the world in more detail. The church is hiding something from us – something that is either too frightening or too circumscribed. Something that would rob the church of the fundamentals of faith and hope. Something that would take away its power. We only see the version of the bible that suits the organized church as a whole."

"That's kind of far-fetched," Wenton smirked. "You think the Essene gave away the exact date the world is going to blow up?"

"The world isn't supposed to *blow-up*," he said indignantly. "Armageddon is just the time when God comes to reclaim the chosen ones. The world will still exist after the apocalypse."

"But how do they hide the scrolls? Wouldn't that stuff get out?" Wenton asked.

He laughed and shook his head. Even archeological digs are business. Everything is run by corporations and money. One of the largest corporate stake-holders in the Dead Sea Scrolls' dig was the Roman Catholic Church. They own about 55% of all the known scrolls."

Wenton grunted. He'd not come across all these details.

"Ever heard of the Copper Scroll?" Dr. MacIntosh asked.

He nodded. "I saw something about that on a web site. It's the treasure map."

"Yes. The Copper Scroll was one of the few strictly secular scrolls found. It was basically an itemized accounting of the Qumran's considerable wealth. It listed the exact location of a fortune in gold and other precious commodities of the time."

"And it was found to be crap – there was no treasure," Wenton announced.

"Not at all," Dr. MacIntosh replied in surprise at the suggestion. "Not at all. The Copper Scroll is as authentic as the rest – how could it not be? Why would the Essene of Qumran painstakingly write out the entire Old Testament in exacting detail and then make up a bogus list

of treasure on another scroll. No, if we believe in the biblical scrolls then we must accept the legitimacy of the Copper Scroll.”

“So where’s the treasure?”

“The treasure, exactly. Where is the treasure?”

Wenton waited. The professor kept nodding, his eyes glazed over like he was watching a re-run of a movie in his mind.

“The treasure,” he finally began again, “has either been claimed by the Roman Catholic Church or the Essene still have possession of their wealth.”

Wenton frowned, puzzled.

Dr. MacIntosh smiled. “Who do you think owns the Copper Scroll? The Catholic Church. They *investigated* the scroll and reported that it was bogus. Or was it?” He raised an eyebrow in a conspiratorial gesture. “Or had the Silent Ones relocated their treasure long before the scroll was investigated. I mean the scroll was written two thousand years ago so they had a little bit of time to move the gold.”

Wenton stared off, absorbing the details.

“Why the interest Dr. Wenton? If you don’t mind me asking.”

He sighed. “I’ve had a few strange dealings with a religious guy. Pastor Gary Wrightland and ...”

“Is that the pastor that recently got locked up at the forensic hospital for murdering someone?”

“Yeah.”

“I saw that on the news. Bizarre.”

“Yeah, well, Gary has some *bizarre* ideas about the Dead Sea Scrolls and the end of the world so I was just checking a few details.” He decided not to mention anything about Edward Carter or the subsequent concern that a beast had been loosed onto the world.

“Well there’s another theory about the Essenes that might interest you,” the professor said smiling. “This version has an even more interesting twist on the whole Catholic Church cover-up.”

Wenton said nothing.

“You see...” Dr. MacIntosh began but was abruptly cut-off by the blaring sound of a fire alarm. “What in the blazes?”

“This a drill?” Wenton asked above the piercing ring.

“Doubt it,” he called back. “I better see what’s going on.” He stood and the men both moved to the door. “Most unusual,” he kept saying. “Most unusal.”

As soon as they were out of the special collections room Wenton nodded at the professor. “That’s fine. Thanks for your help,” he said and headed for the exit. He’d decided he’d learned all he could from the professor. He could always go back later if he needed. He just

wasn't in the mood to listen to a fire alarm while the fat man shuffled around clucking like a chicken.

Wenton moved quickly not bothering to see what Dr. MacIntosh was doing. There were no obvious signs of a fire in the library – no smoke or flames. He didn't pause when he reached the main entrance and pushed right through the doors and out. He never even noticed the dark-skinned, Arabic man standing near a broken fire alarm next to the basement stairwell.

Bishop Greigan Syed Bashir snuck a quick look over his shoulder to watch Wenton making his way out of the library and then started after him.

Day Three – Tuesday Morning

The surgical unit of IWK Children's Hospital. Brightly coloured halls with trains, balloons, and clowns stenciled everywhere. Wa thought it seemed like a sick joke: the lively, bright walls as a backdrop for a steady stream of sick children. Children on crutches and in wheelchairs. Children struggling along with wheeled, portable IVs in tow. It was horrible. He didn't want to risk looking at his wife. He didn't know how she'd be affected by this scene.

They soon arrived at the nursing station, a circular desk set in the middle of adjoining hallways. Three staff were visible in the cramped space surrounded by files and carts with blue binders. It looked like a difficult place to be stuck all day.

Mitchell adjusted Nicholas in his arms before he spoke. "Hi, we had an appointment with Dr. Caster."

The nurse looked up in surprise. She was a large lady who's uniform showed the creases of the skin beneath. "An appointment?"

Mitchell felt his pulse quicken. The hallway was hot and Nicholas was getting heavier. "Yes, an appointment with Dr. Caster for Nicholas Wa."

The nurse shook her head in obvious frustration. "We don't do appointments here. Did you check in downstairs?"

Gloria leaned in next to Mitchell. He looked at her for the first time since they arrived on this unit. Her face was stern, controlled. It surprised him.

"I'm sorry," she said slowly, "we understood that Dr. Caster would see our son on this unit. If you'd be kind enough to check for us we'll take him where ever we need to go."

Mitchell smiled. He'd never heard this voice before. It was a voice of subtle anger and derision. It looked as though the stress of this morning was giving Gloria a different kind of strength. He nodded at her when she glanced up at him.

A tall thin nurse standing at a chart rack turned towards them. "Hold on there. Did you say Nicholas Wa?"

The larger lady turned her bulky head to look back at her colleague but Gloria answered, "That's right."

The taller nurse moved towards them. "Okay. I'm sorry. I'll take this, Annabelle," she said to the first nurse. "I'm Brenda. Dr. Caster told me that you'd be through. He's going to be here shortly on rounds. He'd asked to see you just before he starts."

"Great," Gloria said, smiling.

"Meet me around on the other side of this desk," Brenda said, pointing, "and I'll take you down to the examination room."

"Good morning Mr. & Mrs. Wa," Dr. Caster said as he swung into the examination room about half an hour later. He wore a lab coat over a bright, white dress shirt and expensive silk tie. His salt-and-pepper hair gave him a slightly older first impression but he may have been in his early to mid forties. He moved quickly and reached for Mitchell's hand before they could even respond to him. A slight sheen of sweat creased his forehead. "I'm Dr. Paul Caster." As he shook Wa's hand he was struck that he'd seen the man before but couldn't quite remember where. His mind was too clouded to think.

"Thank you for seeing us," Mitchell said, shaking Dr. Caster's hand. "I'm Sergeant Wa and this is my wife Gloria and our son Nicholas."

"Sergeant?" he said loudly. "As in the police?"

"Yes," Wa said without interest. "Halifax Police."

"I see. Okay." He turned to Gloria distractedly and held out his hand. "Mrs. Wa," he said and then looked at Nicholas who was seated on the examination table. "And this is Mr. Nicholas Wa. What a pleasure to meet you, sir," he barked in a loud, but friendly voice.

Nicholas smiled, slightly.

"I guess I'm gonna fix up that leg of yours, eh?" he announced. More sweat was evident on the doctor's brow and he wiped it away with the sleeve of his lab coat.

Nicholas looked down at his leg dangling off the edge of the table but said nothing.

"Let's have a look," Dr. Caster said and stepped towards him. He picked up one of Nicholas' arms and held, squeezing it lightly and turning it. "This leg looks okay," he said in an exaggerated voice of surprise. "It must be the other leg."

Nicholas frowned and looked up at him.

Dr. Caster picked up the other arm and examined it for a moment. "Nope. This leg looks fine too." He paused with a comical look of confusion.

"That's not my leg!" Nicholas yelled. "That's my arm!"

"You wait a second, mister," Dr. Caster shot back. "You wait just a second. Who's the doctor here anyway?"

Mitchell caught his wife's attention for a second and raised an eyebrow in concern. She frowned at him.

Nicholas smiled a little. The man had such a funny expression. "You're the doctor." He pointed at him.

"That's right," Dr. Caster announced happily. He glanced back at Mitchell and Gloria and winked. "Let me check something."

He moved over to the counter and picked up a thick textbook. He flipped through it, making loud noises like, "Oh, I see" and "There you go". He stopped in the middle of the book and held it up to compare to Nicholas. He looked back and forth between the book and Nicholas and then slammed the book shut.

"Nicholas," he virtually shouted, "that's your arm not your leg!"

"I told you," Nicholas beamed.

Dr. Caster turned back to Mitchell and Gloria, "Mr. and Mrs. Wa you have a very, very smart young man here."

They smiled.

"Okay," Dr. Caster turned back to Nicholas, "let's have a look at that leg."

The examination only lasted about ten minutes. Nicholas had already been through numerous other tests and examinations and Dr. Caster had access to all of the prior records and x-rays. He mainly had Nicholas rotate his leg one way then the other. Flex it and extend it. Stand and put weight on it and so on. When he finished he handed Nicholas a colourful comic about the hospital and moved over to Mitchell and Gloria.

His expression was serious now. "Well, there's hope," he began. "Nicholas is a great young kid and the spread of the tumor could be slowed."

Slowed, Mitchell thought. *Not stopped*.

"What can you do?" Gloria asked, still in a calm, controlled voice. Mitchell didn't know how she was doing it.

"There's a surgery that he should probably have right away. The current spreading appears quite aggressive and I'd like to see something done soon to slow it. I'm also concerned about the good leg. I think there might be evidence of something there too."

"Oh God," Mitchell whispered and put a hand over his mouth.

"What do you mean when you say slowed?" Gloria asked.

"Well, the type of cancer we see here might be exasperated by growth spurts and other changes. We need to be aggressive in treating it right off the bat. If we can control things now we might be able to save his ability to walk."

Mitchell glanced at his wife. Her chin quivered slightly and he knew even her strength was waning.

"Listen," Dr. Caster continued, "I'm dropping a lot of stuff on you now. Just remember this. He's a good, strong boy and I know more about this disorder than anyone else. I'm going to take care of him."

"Thank you so much," Gloria spat out, a tear rolling freely down her cheek.

"What are the chances he won't walk again?" Mitchell asked quietly.

Gloria turned sharply to him. "Don't even ask that," she scolded.

"I'm trying to be God-damn realistic," he hissed back. He felt as though he might cry and he refused to in front of his son and this doctor.

"Just be supportive if you can," Gloria whispered angrily and looked away from him.

He stared at her for a moment and shook his head. His son was still seated on the examination table engrossed in the comic, *Your Stay at the Hospital*. It was more than the sergeant could bear.

"I'll talk to you later big guy," he announced to Nicholas in a voice that nearly broke mid-sentence. Nicholas waved.

He frowned at Gloria again and strode out of the examination room he barely heard his wife quietly call his name to stop him.

As Wa pushed into the hallway he slammed into someone. Wa grabbed the man by his soiled uniform. "Watch it," Wa snapped.

The man stared back at Wa. His eyes almost unable to focus. "Sorry sir."

"What's your name?" Wa barked.

"Baron Harris," he stumbled.

Wa pushed him away and headed down the colourful hallway without another word.

sixteen

Day Four – Wednesday Morning

“A visit with a priest from the Vatican?” Milton Carlisle asked. Milton, an ex-prison guard and now veteran nurse, had recently been promoted out of the nursing ranks to team leader on *South Bay*. The position was essentially the Monday through Friday unit manager for the nurses and was responsible for fielding any difficult decisions. Today’s difficult decision was unusual even for the forensic hospital.

“Yep,” Rhonda Ott said holding a phone down at her side. The two were standing in the nursing station. “The priest is at the front right now and says he heard about the *plight of a brother* or something and is here to offer spiritual support.”

“Oh man,” Milton sighed. He knew that every time you thought you’d seen and heard it all on forensic unit a priest from the Vatican came along. “And he’s got credentials to prove he’s straight from the Vatican?”

“That’s what Dave says.”

“I guess if our pastor wants to see him – go ahead,” Milton said and then suddenly added, “But make it non-contact.”

Rhonda frowned. “All the non-contact rooms are booked.”

Milton shook his head. “Fine. I’ll take him down to a contact visiting room and stay with them. Let the staff know where I am.”

The non-contact visiting rooms were located near the front of the hospital before you got through to the more secure inner units. This allowed visitors to the facility to see patients without the need to enter the more secure inner envelope where patients moved about more freely. Each of the three contact visiting rooms contained a closed-circuit camera, table and four uncomfortable chairs. The rooms were functional, not cozy.

The security staff had escorted Bishop Greigan Syed Bashir into the room before Milton and Gary Wrightland arrived. The somber looking priest was seated and rose to his feet when they entered. He wore a long, dark jacket over a dark suit.

“Ah, Pastor Wrightland. A pleasure to meet you,” Syed Bashir said holding out his hand to Gary.

Gary took it and shook warmly. "Thank you. It is a pleasure to meet you as well, Mister ...?"

"Bishop Greigan Syed Bashir. Or just Greg. Please. Call me Greg." He turned to Milton and extended a hand. "You are?"

"I'm just here as an escort. I'll stay over here out of your way," Milton said and stepped to one side near the door.

Syed Bashir nodded. "Fine. That's fine." He put an arm around Gary and led him back to the table. "Let's sit. Please."

Pastor Wrightland sat, looking slightly confused. "I must say. I was surprised when someone said there was a priest here from the Vatican. It seems a little strange."

"Not at all," Syed Bashir said loudly as he sat. "We take an interest in all matters of God and God's servants."

"So you came to Halifax specifically to see me?"

He smiled almost in a condescending way although there was such warmth emanating from the man it was hard to tell. "No. Of course not. The Church is here on other matters but would not miss an opportunity to lend support."

"I see," Gary said when it was clear he did not.

"Of note to us," Syed Bashir continued, "was reports that you were very concerned about certain scripture. Certain prophecies. We wanted to speak to you about that."

"You mean the convergence prophecy? From the Dead Sea Scrolls?"

He clapped his hands as though a two-year old had just recited *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. "Exactly. The Scrolls."

Gary looked nervously at Milton but the nurse was pretending not to be interested in the conversation. He looked back at the Bishop and leaned across the table slightly. "I know that *Lusus Naturae* is among us. The end is near."

Syed Bashir almost laughed but held it to a broad smile. "*Lusus Naturae*? The beast?"

Gary nodded. "I've seen it."

"And how does this relate to the Dead Sea Scrolls?"

"It is just as the Convergence Scroll describes. The arrival of the beasts signal the beginning of the end."

"So you know the contents of this scroll, this Convergence Scroll?"

Gary nodded again. "Word for word. I memorized it."

Syed Bashir took on a serious expression and leaned to Gary. "Have you spoken to many people about it? This is important information – information that should not be kept from the world."

"Only a few. I've been speaking with Dr. Wenton and I know Sergeant Mitchell Wa is aware of most of it because ..."

"That's fine," Syed Bashir cut him short as he reached into one of the pockets of his long coat. "You've been an excellent messenger."

"Is the Roman Catholic Church going to stop it?"

"Stop what?"

"Armageddon," Gary said in surprise. "What else?"

"Oh," Syed Bashir said throwing his head back and pulling his hand from his coat. "It is the intention of the Church to stop an Armageddon of a sort."

Gary frowned. "Of a sort?"

"The destruction of the Holy Faith," he said matter-of-factly.

"I don't understand."

"That's fine," Syed Bashir smiled. "It will all make sense in time." He rose to his feet. "I guess that about wraps it up. I must go."

Milton started from the corner. "All done?"

Gary half stood, confused.

"Thank you," Syed Bashir said extending a hand to Gary. "God bless you and keep you."

Gary took his hand and the Bishop gripped him firmly. The pastor felt a slight pinch and jerked his hand back. The Bishop turned away immediately.

"And thank you for your time," Syed Bashir said to Milton who had turned to hit the intercom button alerting security that they were coming out.

Gary watched the Bishop moving to the door and looked down at his palm. There was a tiny spot of blood in the centre. He wiped it away with his other hand.

"Let's go, Gary," Milton said waving him out of the room.

Day Four – Morning

Wenton sat in his Durango outside the Tim Horton's on Queen Street. It was a relatively isolated spot just up from the remodeled Dartmouth Ferry Terminal.

He was staring down at the letter he'd received in the mail a few days earlier. In particular he was looking at the symbol: the two inter-locking squares that formed an eight-pointed star. Dr. MacIntosh claimed that was the symbol of the Essenes – the ancient sect responsible for creating the Dead Sea Scrolls. Knowing that bit of information made the invitation slightly more intriguing and so he found himself outside the Tim Horton's.

He stepped out of the vehicle and headed into the coffee shop.

Inside plastic booths and tables were scattered around columns and serving counters with everything leading you to the main counter in the back. A young couple full of piercings and tattoos, wearing black clothing were seated at the back and an elderly couple just inside the entrance. On the far side of the restaurant sat a lone man – the only prospect for Wenton's meeting. He headed towards him.

The man had been watching Wenton from the moment he'd walked into Tim Horton's. He was Arabic with dark hair that was pulled back tightly around the sides and top of his head. The slight sheen of his dark suit suggested it was an Armani. As Wenton approached he noticed that the man's hair was not only combed back but that it was long and tucked into the back of his jacket.

The man stood as Wenton neared the table. "Dr. Wenton. Thank you for meeting me."

His voice rang with an accent that Wenton couldn't place. He shook the man's hand but made no motion to sit across from him. "What do you want?"

"I may get you a beverage?" the man asked.

"Why am I here?" Wenton repeated.

"So that I might talk to you," he smiled. "We have much to talk about. Please, may I purchase something for you."

"Fine. Get me a large black."

The man looked puzzled. "That is coffee?"

Wenton snorted. The man was obviously not Canadian. "Yes, this is coffee," he said imitating the accent. "Large. No sugar. No cream. Just coffee."

Immediately the man headed for the counter. Wenton decided to sit. He figured that his time was worth at least a coffee even if the rest of the visit was pure bullshit.

The man returned shortly with the large cup and sat across from him. "Again, many thanks for meeting me. I am Abdullah Mezarhotti. I come on behalf of the Teacher of Righteousness."

"Where are you from?" Wenton blurted as he peeled the plastic drinking tab off the top of his coffee.

"Initially, the Judean Desert. Now, I call the world home."

Wenton took a sip and then asked, "What do you want from me?"

"With recent events, my brothers and I have taken an interest in you. We understand your indiscretions and want to bring guidance."

"Indiscretions? What indiscretions?"

Mezarhotti's serious expression didn't change. "Your moral struggles. The struggles with sexuality and alcohol. You are in an unusual position now and we feel it would be best to..."

"What the fuck do you know about me? Who the fuck are you?"

"I represent the Sons of Light. We are here in the interest of all humanity to..."

"Yeah right. You and the boys wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. You want to stop the end of the world. Blah, blah, blah." Wenton paused and took another drink of coffee. "But when you get in my face and start talking shit about my *moral struggles* you're asking for an even quicker end to your world."

"You are not understanding," Mezarhotti said reaching across the table to put a hand on Wenton's wrist.

Barely a blur was visible and Wenton was holding Mezarhotti's wrist. The man instantly registered pain.

"I think we're done," Wenton sneered. "Don't contact me again." He threw the man's wrist down onto the table.

Mezarhotti pulled his hand back, cradling his arm and wincing. "No, wait."

Wenton stood and left the table but stopped after a few steps, turning back. He went back to the table and took his coffee.

"Please, Dr. Wenton," Mezarhotti said.

He ignored him and went back to exit. The few other patrons were watching the spectacle with interest.

Wenton pushed out the door as another man was entering. The man was pushed to the side as Wenton left.

"Hey," the man called out.

Wenton turned back to him. His look froze the man who stepped into the restaurant. Wenton continued on to his Durango.

The man watched Wenton leave then looked around the Tim Horton's. He spied Mezarhotti and went to his table.

"Excuse me. I'm Dr. Caster I was supposed to meet someone here."

Mezarhotti let go of his arm and stood. "Yes. Thank you for coming. I'm Abdullah Mezarhotti."

Day Four – Morning

Filth.

Baron Harris lived in filth.

His salary as an orderly with the IWK provided him enough money to live comfortably, especially since he wasn't married and had no children.

But most of his money went to drugs. He needed the drugs to cope. His sexual urges for kids filled him with self-contempt. He could only barely stand himself when he was *medicated*.

His apartment was in an over-populated maze of buildings in Highfield Park in Dartmouth. He lived on the ground floor of one of the lowest-rent complexes although he hadn't selected the place because of financial considerations. He'd frequently visited the area to purchase drugs and eventually just moved into the neighborhood.

As he sat on his only real piece of furniture – a used easy chair he'd purchased from a *Buy N Sell* he was even now contemplating leaving the apartment to purchase heroin. He hadn't moved from the chair because of three considerations: 1) it might be too early in the afternoon to find someone; 2) he didn't want to move, and 3) he didn't have any money.

His head rolled to the side and his eyes slowly focused on the kitchen area – a mass of discarded food containers and empty cans. Then a noise sounded and shocked him to a sitting position.

He listened.

Ring! and there it was again.

A phone, he thought. *My phone's been disconnected*. He hadn't paid the phone company recently and was sure that he didn't have phone service any longer.

Ring.

He pushed himself forward to stand and hobbled to the wall where he could see the phone cord protruding from the jack. He pulled the cord and the phone slid out from under a pizza box knocking the receiver off the cradle.

He held the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

"Baron," a voice hissed.

"Who is this?" Baron asked weakly.

“You know who this is. Shut your worthless mouth and listen. You’re going to help with an inconvenience.”

“What?”

“When the cop’s little brat is in the OR you are going to make sure the surgery is not successful.”

Baron was silent. Trying to absorb what the caller said through the remnants of his chemically damaged brain.

The voice sounded again, “Do you understand?”

“The cop?” Baron asked.

“If you don’t you’ll suffer. The surgery is tomorrow. You will do this. It will eliminate the cop from the puzzle. He needs to be gone so that the work can continue.”

“But I...” Baron tried to protest.

“Facini entfaste blackened side,” the voice hissed.

Baron let the phone drop to the floor.

The entire apartment was suddenly filled with the moans and screams of children. He looked around frantically but saw no one. The screams continued.

“Stop it!” he shouted.

And then he saw faces. The faces of young boys pushing through the wall, just enough to scream and then fading away. He saw children in the filth on the floor. The garbage shifted to reveal a child’s body, flipping around in obvious pain before the garbage settled back to its original state. He clamped his hands over his eyes. The howls of the children continued to rage. He thought the entire apartment shook with the sound.

“Stop it,” he shouted again and dropped down to his knees. “I’ll do what you told me just stop it.”

But the voices didn’t stop. The room swelled with the frightened screams of the children until Baron fell backwards unable to defend himself any longer.

Day Four – Afternoon

David White knocked on the door of the nursing station. The door was open already but the patients knew to knock before they spoke.

Alex looked up from the computer. "What?"

"Have you seen the Pastor?" David White asked quietly, almost embarrassed at intruding.

Alex snorted. "I don't keep his schedule."

"It's just that we always meet at three o'clock. He's teaching me to read. We always meet at three."

Alex nodded. "Okay," he said slowly trying to get Lobster Table to the punchline.

"And he's not here right now?"

"Is he in his room?" Alex said slowly, raising his voice ever so slightly.

"I knocked but I didn't hear anything," David frowned.

"Go knock again," the nurse said flatly.

David turned away but stopped when Alex called to him. "And shut that door as you go."

Lobster Table pushed the nursing door closed and then shuffled down the hall, back to the Pastor's room.

He stepped softly to the door and knocked again, whispering "Pastor?" He thought that Gary might be sleeping and he didn't want to startle him. He hated when he was sleeping and nurses just opened the door and called his name – "Lobster – meds. Lobster – shower time."

There was no answer so he knocked a little louder.

Still no answer.

He looked back down the hall to the nursing station and then put his massive hand onto the door knob, turning it slowly. He pushed the door open and put his face to the crack. "Pastor Wrightland? It's David. I'm ready for our lesson."

No answer.

David leaned in a little further and saw that the pastor was laying on his bed. "Pastor Wrightland?"

From this distance he could hear the pastor's laboured breathing. He pushed the door open the rest of the way and stooped to walk through. He went quietly over to the bed. "Pastor, are you okay?"

The pastor's curtains were shut and the room was dark but even in the dim light he could see that the man was very pale. His eyes were shut tightly as though he were in pain and he sucked air in little difficult bursts.

"Are you okay?" David asked.

The pastor grunted a reply but David didn't understand. He leaned down. "I didn't understand. Are you okay? Are we going to have my lesson?"

"David?" the pastor moaned.

"Yes."

"They've killed me."

"Who?" he blurted. He was suddenly angry. "Was it Goran?"

"No," the pastor grimaced. "Nevermind. Just do something for me."

"Anything," the big man said, his voice still shaking. He could feel his face burning as blood filled him like a balloon.

"You must...", the pastor said and winced. "You must find your sister."

"What?" David asked. It was not at all what he expected. He was angry and wanted to hurt someone. He wanted to hurt whoever had hurt the pastor. "What do you want me to do?"

There was no answer.

"Pastor?" he called and put a hand down on the older man. His hand almost covered the pastor's entire chest. "Pastor?" he repeated and then he noticed he wasn't hearing the pastor's laboured breathing any more.

"Help!" he screamed, panic flooding him. "Someone help!"

Day Four – Afternoon

It had not been a success. Abdullah Mezarhotti realized this as he walked back towards the van where his brothers waited.

The men were not receptive to his words – to the words of truth.

“Let God open their eyes when the time is right,” he said, offering a prayer quietly.

He stepped down the stairs towards the Dartmouth Ferry terminal and then onto the train tracks that ran along the building between the terminal and the Aldernary Gate Library branch. It was a cloudy day and the shadows in the dimly lit corridor were numerous. It was only a small stretch of track before he would emerge near the entrance for the underground parking where the van was waiting.

He quickened his pace.

“And so comes the silent one,” a voice spoke.

Abdullah stopped. He looked around but saw no one. “Who’s there?”

“I would ask you a question or two,” the voice echoed again.

Abdullah’s heart leapt. The voice coarsed through him and made his legs instantly shake. He wanted to run but knew he would not.

“I am a servant of God.”

The voice laughed. “There is no God. Even you know that.”

“Be gone. You are an offense onto creation. An abomination onto...,” Abdullah began but did not finish. A force lifted him from his feet and moved him swiftly over the tracks until he was flung into the concrete wall. It knocked the wind from him.

“Don’t preach to me,” the voice scolded.

Abdullah struggled to sit where he lay.

Suddenly there was a face in front of his. It was a monstrous face of misshapen proportions. A large gash was visible in its forehead and bone and sinew was stretched across the gap.

“How do I see you?” Abdullah screamed. “You are *Lusus Naturae*.”

“All may see me who are going to die,” the thing answered.

“No,” he argued weakly.

“But I may also spare you,” the voice continued breathing a stench onto Abdullah that was worse than the thing’s appearance. There was the oddly sweet smell of rotting skin but laced with the sting of bile. “Tell me where I may find the Guide.”

Abdullah was silent. *Please God deliver me from the this evil.*

“Tell me where I might find her. You will die in tremendous suffering otherwise.”

Let me not be weak in this time of tremendous trial.

“Your constant meddling into business that is beyond you has become too tiresome to overlook,” the beast snarled. “Tell me where the Guide is and I will let you die quickly.”

Give my brothers strength in their battle that they might...

“Fine,” the beast said.

And then Abdullah began to scream uncontrollably. He felt the bones in his feet and ankles being stressed and then snapping. It was as though his body was tightly curling and crushing him as it went. His tibia and fibula began to splinter and he howled again.

“Last chance for a painless death,” the beast hissed into his ear.

But Abdullah couldn’t even hear the offer. The pain had overwhelmed him.

Day Four – Afternoon

“What happened with James Outhouse?” Constable O’Neil asked as Mitchell Wa walked into the operation’s room at the police station.

“Who?” Wa asked. He continued on towards his office at the back, not waiting for a response.

O’Neil stepped into pace behind him. “James Outhouse. We got the call a couple of days ago that he might be our boy.”

“Right,” Wa said without turning around. “Didn’t pan out. He’s not our guy. Keep looking.”

O’Neil kept walking. “Didn’t pan out how? Did you talk to the old landlord?”

Wa spun back to face the younger constable. The man almost collided into Wa but stopped just short. “Are you interrogating me, Constable?” Wa asked sternly. The entire room suddenly fell quiet.

“Not at all, sir,” O’Neil spluttered. “Just curious about the investigation.”

“Do you have any other names to follow up?”

“Sure, we got...”

“So then you weren’t just sitting around expecting that this James guy was the only suspect we needed?”

“No, I just...”

Wa held a dismissive hand up. “Get back to work.” He turned and went into his office slamming the door and dropping the venetian blinds.

“Shit,” O’Neil whistled when the door was closed. “Someone pissed in his Cornflakes.”

Sergeant Abrahms joined him. “Go easy on him. It’s the stress. Like I told you – his son is sick.”

“Take some fuckin’ sick leave then,” O’Neil spat and went back to his desk. He opened his middle drawer and pulled out a pad of *Post-Its* and looked at the number written on the top sheet. It was a copy of the note he’d given Wa with the phone number for James Outhouse’s ex-landlord.

Once inside his office, Mitchell Wa collapsed into the chair behind his desk. He briefly held his head in his hands before looking down at the papers in front of him. All around his computer were scraps of paper with details, names, dates, contacts, and so on. He found one with the name James Outhouse written in all caps across the top and three question marks after it. He stared at the paper as though trying to learn more about it by simply examining it.

A knock at his door shocked him out of his stupor and he barked, "What?"

Sergeant Laurie Abrahms opened the door. "Your phone turned off?"

"What?"

"They've been trying to call you from reception. There's some guy here who wants to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to anyone – you take care of it," Wa said tiredly.

She laughed. "I don't think so. Not on this one. You better go."

He looked up at her and saw she was smirking. "Why? Who is it?"

"They told me there's some guy here from the Vatican. Bishop somebody or other."

"As in the pope?"

She nodded. "As in the pope."

Wa started for the door, crumbling up the piece of paper and dropping it in the garbage as he went.

Day Four – Late Afternoon

Paul Caster sat in the driveway of his expensive home tucked among the rest of the expensive south-end homes. Being a medical doctor in Halifax meant that you had to have a house in the south-end. Any other locale meant you were cheap. Paul Caster couldn't imagine anyone calling him cheap.

Not only did Caster have a house in the south-end. He had a driveway. A real luxury on this old street that smacked of the days when these homes were first constructed, the 1900s – horse and buggy days. The streets were so damn narrow. He and Linda had purchased this house a few years ago and considered it a starter home. The IWK paid a specialist like Dr. Caster well. He didn't need to worry about payments or the costs of renovations. Hassle was the only concern. As long as the renovations didn't cause too much distress in his family he was fine with the cost. They'd ended up spending as much on the renovations as the original purchase price of the home. New insulation, hardwood throughout, new paint, complete bathroom and kitchen remodeling. The works.

Caster stared down at his shirt sleeves. Droplets of blood decorated his cuffs. He wished he could remodel himself as easily as the house.

He stared at the keys dangling from the Volvo's ignition. The car was still running and he was tempted to throw it into reverse and head off. He could go back to the hospital, get cleaned up, and return home late. So many times before he'd faked a hospital emergency and left the house. Being a doctor meant he could disappear for hours without anyone suspecting a thing. Especially not Linda. She never suspected anything.

And then motion at the front of the house caught his attention. Someone in the picture window – Mallory. His daughter was waving at him, trying to get his attention.

He waved back, forcing a smile to his lips. "Shit," he breathed. "Guess I'm going in." He got out of the car and made his way to the front door. As he walked he rolled his sleeves back, concealing the blood.

"Daddy," Mallory called when he walked in the front doors. "Is it true? Is it true?"

He frowned. "Is what true?"

"We're going on a trip? A vacation?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Mom," she called and danced away. "I've been packing all afternoon."

"Where is mom?" he yelled after her.

"Office downstairs," she said as she bounded away to her room.

He headed to the basement door, just off the kitchen. They'd spent considerable money taking the rough cellar and turning it into a small rec room with an office. Linda frequently was down there to work on the computer. He headed down the stairs, completing forgetting the stains on his shirt.

"Linda," he said as he made his way, "did you tell Mal that we were..." He stopped in mid-question. As he got to the bottom of the stairs he heard sobbing. Linda was crying.

"What is it?" he asked in concern, moving to her side.

She recoiled violently. "Don't touch me you bastard," she hissed through clenched teeth. Her face was red with the effort of crying.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I know about you. I know all about you."

"About what?"

"He called and told me. I didn't want to believe it but I knew it was true."

"Believe what?" he cried out. "Who called?"

She stood to face him and stared into his eyes. "Just tell me the truth. Have you been to a prostitute?"

He could feel sweat instantly crease his forehead. His mind raced for a story. "What do you mean?" He needed time for a convincing story.

"You bastard," she said and pounded her fists onto his chest. "Answer the question."

He held her wrists to stop the blows. "I don't know ... I mean, of course not."

"You bastard," she said again. "Don't lie to me. I know it's true."

"Honey, how?"

"Don't call me *honey*. You can't call me that."

"But," he started but stopped. He let her hands go and they fell limply to her sides.

"And the drugs?" she said quietly.

He opened his mouth but said nothing.

"I'm taking Mallory to my mom's place in Truro. Don't try to stop me and don't call us there. If I ever want to speak to you again – I'll call."

"But can't we..." He stopped. There was no point. He watched her make her way up the stairs and out of the basement.

He dropped down onto the couch holding his hand over his face. When he finally looked around the room he saw a digital picture on the screen of the computer in the corner of the room. It was a picture of himself, naked, with a prostitute. It was a picture from earlier that same afternoon.

"Someone followed me," he said out loud. *That damn Arab*, he thought. *It had to be them.*

twenty three

Day Four – Evening

Wenton pushed open the door of the *Great Wall of China* restaurant with his foot. In one hand he carried a plastic bag with his order and the other hand was still holding his wallet. He'd stopped off for salt and pepper squid and Shanghai noodles for later.

And then his pager beeped.

"Fuck," he spat and shoved his wallet in his back pocket. He'd parked right out front and he opened the Durango door and dropped his dinner on the passenger seat. The pager continued to whine. It was the emergency pager for his work with the Halifax Regional Police. He'd mainly stopped wearing it with all of the garbage that had gone on but he must have slid it back on today. Putting the pager on had become a part of getting dressed and the reflex was hard to break. Recent problems at Dal had convinced him there was no reason to try and keep a relationship with the police. They wouldn't want to work with someone who'd quit the University because of scandal. It surprised him now that it was beeping. He reached down to his belt and switched it off.

Wenton felt his jacket for his cell phone and pulled it out. Just before he dialed he pulled the pager off his belt and read it. He frowned. He didn't recognize the number.

It wasn't the police station.

Odd, he thought. This better not be a wrong number.

He dialed it and it was answered after one ring. A woman's voice. "Hello."

"Wenton here. You paged me."

"Michael, thank you for calling."

"Who is this?"

"Gloria Wa. Mitchell's wife."

"Why are you paging me on the emergency pager? How'd you even get this number?"

"I was his wife. I knew all his secrets."

He couldn't pick up any sense of mirth in her voice and shrugged his own question away.

"So what do you want?"

"I'm worried. About Mitchell. I think he's not well."

Wenton laughed. "You aren't just coming to that conclusion."

She ignored him. "I don't want to talk on the phone. Can we meet?"

"Sure," he answered. He was too curious to say no.

"My son is having surgery tomorrow and I'm going to be at the hospital mostly all day. Can we meet at the IWK sometime in the morning. I'll just be kinda waiting around anyway."

"That's fine."

"I'd really appreciate it. I think you're the only one who's seen everything that's been going on recently."

"I said that's fine. I'll see you tomorrow." He took the phone from his ear even though he could hear her still saying something. She was probably deciding on a meeting place. He knew he'd be able to find her.

He hit *end* on his phone and shut the passenger door of the Durango after making sure his Chinese food was seated solidly.

What now? he wondered as he pulled away from the curb.

twenty four

Day Four – Evening

People are easily lulled into complacency.

The people of Halifax are no exception.

Faroud Watanezzi parked his white van on North Ridge Road overlooking the MacKay bridge. The street was perfect since it was a dead-end with numerous apartment buildings and thus a high volume of traffic. A white van and its occupants were unlikely to be noticed with so much activity. He got out of the van and walked along a wire fence for a moment until he was sure no one was watching. He then slipped through the overgrown bushes and found a spot that had been cut out of the fence. It was a steep trip down rocks and bushes and he was at the base of the MacKay. He hiked along the road under the massive footings of the bridge until he came to a patch of grass and stood before an unusual site. Above him, a section of road was suspended just before the entrance to the bridge. However, this piece of road was unusual. It didn't connect to the road on either side. It was a discarded chunk of an older roadway that had never been demolished. The 100 metre long stretch of dead end was simply left standing between the new roadways.

If Haligonians weren't overly complacent they'd have probably investigated this stretch more thoroughly. It seems not only odd but potentially dangerous.

As it so happens, the Essene had paid the city a large sum of money to have the section of road left as it was.

Halifax is a war-time city. A lot of infrastructure was paid for by funds available during World War I and World War II especially since Halifax was a crucial port city. One legacy of the development was catacombs: a series of tunnels and bunkers located well-beneath the downtown streets. Many of the elaborate tunnels ultimately connected back to the Citadel – the hilltop fortress in the middle of downtown Halifax. The catacombs located under the bridge fragment were different. It was separate from the other tunnels. It was a private bunker for government. It was perfect for the Essene.

Faroud Watanezzi slipped beneath the ground through a concealed doorway and made his way down a wrought iron ladder bolted into the cement.

He was only halfway down when he heard a scream. It was the high-pitched scream of terror, or pain, or something unholy. He cringed at the sound but kept climbing. It wasn't a new sound to him.

He dropped the last few rungs to land on the floor. A slight illumination from down a cement corridor cast shadows around him but without this light he would have been in complete darkness. He headed towards the source.

His footsteps echoed through the musty chamber as silence was all around him. The screaming had stopped as it always did. The old lady could never cry out for long. She had no strength.

He stepped through a smaller break in the tunnel where it branched off. He took one of the corridors and soon stepped into a larger interior area. Sixteen men sat around the outside of the room. One man knelt in the centre. All wore similar attire. Long plain robes and sandals and each man had long hair neatly wrapped and draped down their backs.

Only the man kneeling on the floor turned to acknowledge Faroud's entrance. He spoke in ancient paleo-Hebrew. "And to serve Him with your heart. Testify now."

"Teacher of Righteousness," Faroud said and bowed low in respect. "Set before you life and death."

Another scream interrupted them. Faroud looked nervously down another corridor leading off from the room.

"Be of no mind to the Witness," the kneeling man said. "You speak with truth of our brother?"

Faroud nodded. "Abdullah Mezarhotti is dead."

The Teacher stood and addressed the rest of the room, "Let everyone who is Godly pray." All of the men dropped their heads with eyes closed. The room filled with the sounds of a prayer spoken as though it were only one voice.

When they were done, the Teacher spoke again. "Who took our brother?"

"God did not give me the answer. I know only that he was to meet Dr. Paul Caster last."

The Teacher frowned. "How prone these people are to evil. Blackness lurks in Dr. Caster. With him things will find their end."

Faroud was silent.

"Our mission does not change," the Teacher continued. "The consequences of Armageddon lay all around. We must be ever mindful of the final end, of final oblivion, of convergence."

A terrible scream sounded again echoing down the cement walls and choking the air from the room.

twenty five

Day Five – Thursday Morning

As Wenton parked along University Avenue in front of the IWK Children's hospital he realized he'd never been here before.

He'd seen patients in the QEII, the Nova Scotia Hospital, and virtually every correctional facility in the province but he'd never even set foot in the Children's hospital.

He walked through the revolving doors of the entrance to stand in the lobby. A reception / information desk was off to his right. He stepped to it and waited for the woman behind the desk to look up.

"I'm Dr. Michael Wenton," he said. "I'm expected in acute care. Could you direct me?" He didn't bother to mention his doctorate was forensic psychology and not medicine. He realized the staff person would assume he was an MD and be a little more prompt in responding.

"Follow the blue trains to the elevators around the corner. Up to the third floor," she answered pointing down the corridor.

Wenton turned to see that the walls were brightly coloured with trains. He followed the blue one.

He was soon on the third floor, Acute and Continuing Care. As he stepped off the elevator he saw Gloria waiting by a set of double doors. He went to her.

"Thank you so much for meeting with me, Dr. Wenton," she began.

He nodded.

"I didn't know who else to call but I've only got a moment right now. Nicky's going in soon and I want to get back to his room."

"I'm sorry to hear about..." Wenton began.

"You don't have to do that," she snapped back. "I just want you to know something and hopefully you'll help if you can."

She's a strong woman, he thought. He didn't know what he was going to find with a mother on the morning of her son's surgery.

"Mitchell isn't better. He told me he was but I don't think he is. I think he's worse. Ever since Edward Carter and you guys had all that nonsense going on." She stopped, her eyes welling with tears. "I just don't know. I think that Mitchell's going to lose it. There's been too much going on and with this surgery..."

"How do you think I can help?"

"I wouldn't normally bother you – especially you, but you're the only one who knows what's happened. More than anyone. I suspect you even know things about what's happened in Halifax that you haven't even told people yet. I don't care but I think if anyone can relate to my husband and help him through things it might have to be you."

"I'm not going to be his psychologist," Wenton said flatly.

"And I'm not asking you to be. Just show up. Anytime. I think if he gets away from us now it'll be too late before we find him."

"Show up?"

"Check on him. Drop by. Talk to him. Let him know that he can talk to you." Her eyes pleaded to him.

He shrugged. "I'll check on him. Where is he now?"

"That's part of it. I don't know. He called me last night and said he wouldn't be here. He sounded awful but I can't believe he doesn't want to be here when Nick's having surgery."

Wenton nodded. "I'll check on him."

"I need to get back to Nicholas." She started to wipe at the wet streaks on her face not wanting her son to see the concern. "Thank you Dr. Wenton."

"Mrs. Wa," a voice called from behind them. A man in a doctor's coat was approaching.

"Yes?" She turned dropping her hand away from her face.

The man stopped next to them. "Could you pop into my office? I need you to sign something for the surgery."

Wenton knew the man but couldn't place him. He smiled at Wenton and there was a flicker of recognition on his face as well.

"I'll be right there, Dr. Caster," Gloria said and turned back to Wenton. "Thank you again. Please call me."

The two left and Wenton realized where he'd seen the doctor. *That's the guy who was meeting the Qumran fruitcake after me. I ran into him at the Tim Horton's.*

twenty six

Day Five – Late Morning

The needle eased into his arm as Baron held his breath. He couldn't think. Ever since that call. Things were bad. Now they were worse. He'd never killed anyone before. Especially a cop's kid. *Fuckin' cops.*

The storage room walls throbbed as the drugs soaked his system. It was good. It was what he needed.

What's that cop thinking? Why'd he coming after me? I could do this and they might still be at my apartment after? Fuck.

Don't think, he coached himself. Don't think.

He laid his head back. He wanted to feel the drugs in his system. There was nothing like morphine to take the edge off. Especially when the edge was the fear of going to jail for the rest of his life.

No, no, no, no, no.

It wasn't enough. He'd shot the last of it and it wasn't enough.

"Caster team in prep," the intercom blared.

Fuck.

"Caster team in prep."

"I'm fucked," he announced to no one but as if in response the door pulled open and light cut through the darkness forcing him to shield his eyes.

"You fuckin' waste," Dr. Caster said stepping into the room and shutting the door. "Look at you – you fuckin' useless piece of shit."

"You should talk. You're doing this today. You want him gone."

"You're out-of-it. Don't even try to talk. After today you should go. You can't be around this hospital anymore," Dr. Caster spat in disgust.

"I can't do it. You'll have to do it. I'm not even supposed to be in the OR."

"Do what? – you fuckin' junkie."

"Don't do that to me now," Baron pleaded. "You need to help with the kid."

"The cop's kid?" Dr. Caster said. "I think you need s'more morphine. You sound like an idiot."

"Fuck," Baron almost yelled and grabbed the sides of his head. "It's all gone."

"Shut up," Dr. Caster said kneeling next to him and holding his hands out to quiet the man.

Suddenly Baron uncoiled and threw an arm around Caster's head dragging the man to the ground. With the doctor beneath him Baron brought another hand over and down to his eyelid. Dr. Caster blinked and struggled to pull away but even sedated from the morphine the thin doctor was no match for the heavy set orderly.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Caster urgently whispered. "Get off me."

Baron was crying now in great heaving sobs. "You can do your own dirty work. You can't order me around anymore." He jabbed a finger at Dr. Caster's left eye until he finally ran his pad across the man's eyeball.

Dr. Caster grunted and blinked repeatedly, trying to dislodge something.

Baron rolled off him and sat in the corner. "I was out of morphine," he said quietly, "but that's wasn't the only shit I had with me."

Dr. Caster's mind reeled as the acid soaked through the membrane of his eye and entered his system. Colours began to burst out in every direction.

twenty seven

Day Five – Late Morning

“Okay gang let’s be the team we know we are,” Dr. Caster said entering into the OR and clapping his hands together.

The head nurse, Beverly looked hard at him. “Dr. McManus is finishing up,” she said nodding back at the anesthesiologist who was leaning over Nicholas checking vitals.

“Good, good,” Dr. Caster said nodding in large loops. He was watching rings of colour streaming through his vision with each nod of his head. The lights were fantastic.

Beverly was watching Dr. Caster closely and noticed his bloodshot eye. “Is your eye okay?”

“It’s nothing.” He waved her away and stepped over to the operating table.

And then Beverly noticed Baron standing at the back near the door. “Baron,” she called in surprise. “What are you doing?”

His head was shaking as though he were listening to music and keeping tempo. “Just observing. Paul said I could observe one.” His head kept nodding.

She frowned and turned back to Dr. Caster. He was over at the table looking at the boy.

“Just stay back,” Beverly cautioned Baron and took her place next to the gurney.

“Done,” Dr. McManus said and stepped back. “He’s all yours.”

“Good, good, good, good,” Dr. Caster announced and then realized how ridiculous he probably sounded. He couldn’t help it. He could see his voice. It was beautiful.

“Dr. Caster,” Beverly said, “This is Abu Jazeer. He’s one of our new RNs.”

He turned and noticed for the first time an unfamiliar person in the room, fully suited up for the surgery. A tall, dark-skinned man. “Good to have you aboard.”

Abu nodded but said nothing. Almost instinctively, he held his left arm down against his hospital scrubs, concealing the 8-pointed star tattooed underneath.

“Let’s get started,” Dr. Caster said and suddenly the room was a flurry of motion, lights flashing, and monitors beeping.

“More suction in here,” Caster barked as he leaned into Nicholas’ leg.

Abu Jazeer moved in behind him with a thin tube. As he brought it inside the large opening in Nicholas’ leg it suddenly turned red. He was only there a moment and backed away

again. With his free hand he felt behind his neck to make sure his long hair was still tucked back into his surgical coat.

Dr. Caster's eyes followed the suction tube away. It was leaving marks in the air where it moved. It amazed him but his eyes snapped back to the leg.

Beverly felt someone near her and turned to see Baron Harris peering down at Nicholas. "Back," she shouted at him and he jumped returning to the wall.

Baron's eyes were wide. He wanted to puke. The operation room was spinning, ever so slightly. Baron wanted to puke. *That cop's kid is right there. His leg is fuckin' wide open.*

"More suction!" Dr. Caster barked again. "There's too much blood." He hoped there was too much blood. He wasn't sure he was seeing blood or shadows of blood.

Even though he wasn't involved in the procedure, sweat soaked Baron's surgical cap. He was drenched. He could barely stand upright anymore he felt so weak.

"Suction!" Caster yelled again. *Fuck!*

Baron looked around nervously. *I need to do it, he thought. I need to stop this.*

"God Damn It!" Dr. Caster screamed. "Get vascular in here. We've got problems."

The din in the operating room had swelled to almost an unbearable level. Nurses, technicians and newly arriving specialists all swarming around like flies. Each furiously working with equipment or sorting through medical instruments or checking readouts. It was chaos.

"We're gonna lose it!" Dr. Caster screamed. "We're gonna fuckin' lose it. Where's vascular?"

"On the way," Baron yelled into the crowd. "On the way." He smiled under his surgical mask and stepped out of the room unnoticed.

twenty eight

Day Five – Afternoon (Friday)

Wenton parked his Durango alongside the curb and stepped through the doors into the *Fireside Room*. Immediately inside a flight of stairs led down to the trendy bar just off Spring Garden Road in downtown Halifax.

As he walked he was reminded of his last meeting with Wa in this same spot. Wa had asked to meet with him and it was the first time religion had entered into the equation. Wa was talking about feeling tainted by evil and neither of them knew how close to the truth that suspicion actually was. At the time both men were more inclined to believe a large pharmaceutical company was experimenting with technology designed to create insanity.

Nothing's ever that simple, he thought as he spied Wa in the back room. He made his way over and sat on the big leather chair across from him.

"So," Wenton sighed. "What's going on?"

"You called me here," Wa grumbled over the top of his mug.

"Have you heard anything about your son? I know he was in surgery this morning, right?"

"Gloria called. I didn't call back."

"What's happening with you?" Wenton asked.

They were interrupted by a waitress. Wenton ordered a draught on tap.

Wa was staring at Wenton in a contemplative way.

"What?" Wenton asked.

"A rep from the Vatican came to see me," he said quietly.

Wenton laughed. "Here we go again. Last time we were here you were talking to Pastor Wrightland."

"Just listen," Wa snapped. "There's some serious shit going on and it isn't done."

Wenton nodded but a slight smile betrayed his skepticism.

Wa waited for the smile to disappear before he continued. "This guy knew about what was happening. Knew about Edward Carter. Knew about everything."

"What did he know?" Wenton asked.

"The Vatican has been watching Qumran for as long as the Church has existed. Apparently, the people of Qumran, the ones who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, were waiting for

Armageddon. They thought they were the chosen ones. They thought they and only they would be saved in the final days.”

“I’ve heard this story before,” Wenton nodded remembering his talk to Professor MacIntosh at Dal days before.

“Well did you hear that the Essenes, the Silent Ones, have remained together since the days of Jesus Christ? They were so sure that the end of the world was upon them they relocated to Qumran to wait for the Lord. He didn’t come. The Essenes were devastated but not defeated. They banded together and vowed to speed the world to the end. To them the world was full of hypocrites and sinners that deserved death. The Essenes felt justified in doing whatever they wanted to speed the coming apocalypse. Anything.”

Wenton nodded slowly. “And the moral of the story is…”

Wa frowned. “Don’t mock me. This is straight from the Vatican. They’ve been tracking the Qumrans, trying to make sure they don’t undermine Christianity. Trying to stop whatever plans they come up with to end the world prematurely.”

“I don’t think the Vatican is the best source of completely neutral, honest facts about anything. They’ve been at the forefront of suppressing large sections of the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

“That’s true,” Wa almost shouted and heads turned from around the bar. “That’s true,” he said again more quietly. “This Vatican guy told me about that. There are scrolls written exclusively about the end of the world – about Armageddon – that haven’t been fully released. The Vatican’s view is that such writings so badly undermine the true religion that they are dangerous. The Essenes essentially wrote these scrolls out of spite when they weren’t taken to paradise 2000 years ago.”

Wenton raised an eyebrow. “They made up prophecies about the end of the world?”

“That’s right. They gave all kinds of details that would throw the world into a panic. Chaos helps their cause. They want to bring about the end.”

“So what has this got to do with us?”

“Lusus Naturae,” he whispered. “As the end actually begins to draw near there will be monsters on earth. These creatures will live in us and begin to spread the evil that will eventually overwhelm the Earth.”

“I feel like I should shout ‘Amen’,” Wenton smiled.

“That monster was in me. It entered the world through Edward Carter. It’s probably out there in Halifax right now in someone else. Someone who was on the bridge that day I tried to kill myself.”

Wenton didn’t have a reply to that. He’d seen the beast inside Wa.

“And the Silent Ones are helping it.”

“Helping what?” Wenton asked.

“Lusus Naturae. That’s why we have to kill the Silent Ones.”

Before Wenton could respond a pager began to beep. He leaned back in the leather chair waiting for Wa to answer it.

Wa stared at him as the pager continued to beep.

“What?” Wenton said, growing frustrated at Wa.

Wa finally pulled the pager off his belt and felt in his pocket for a cell phone. He hit a few keys, speed dialing back to the police station.

“Wa,” he barked when someone finally answered.

“Sergeant,” Constable Riley O’Neil said. “We have a name on the pedophile.”

“Yeah, so.”

“It’s Baron Harris. He’s an orderly at the IWK.”

“Did you arrest him?”

“We checked with the hospital. Harris works with Dr. Paul Caster.”

“What?” Wa shouted.

“The hospital said he might be in surgery with Caster today.”

“My son’s in surgery...,” he started to say and then shut off his phone abruptly. He stood, reaching into his pocket. “I need to go,” he said to Wenton. He threw a card down on the table with a hand written note on it. “Call this man. Talk to him.”

And Wa ran out of the bar.

Wenton didn’t bother to watch him go. He picked up the card noting the official symbol of the Vatican embossed across the front and read the name of Bishop Greigan Syed Bashir. The handwritten note was a room at the Lord Nelson hotel.

twenty nine

Day Five – Afternoon

The OR was a blur. Light green scrubs moved in all directions at once around the small body on the table.

Dr. Paul Caster screamed, "Towel," and a nurse immediately dabbed at his forehead. He could barely see the woman's hand moving through the air. His vision was still messed up from the drugs. "Where's vascular? He's bleeding out."

Dr. Caster's hands were wrapped around Nick's leg trying to stem the flow of blood. Through his drug-induced haze he'd hacked a major artery in half.

"Damn it," Beverly screamed and spun on one of the nurses at the side of the theatre. "Get out there and drag Olsen in here."

"I can't see," Dr. Caster kept mumbling. "I don't know where the vein is."

Abu Jazeer leaned over, "Can I help?"

"Back!" Dr. Caster blurted. "Keep back."

In the hospital corridor, Dr. Olsen was sprinting towards the OR in answer to the emergency page. Suddenly a man stepped in front of him and they collided.

"Dr. Olsen?" Baron spat. "They need you in the OR – number 3."

"I know," he said urgently, gripping Baron by the shoulders and pushing him to the side.

Baron stood his ground in front of the doctor. "You've got to get down there."

"You need to move, Baron," Dr. Olsen said and stepped around him.

"It's OR 3," Baron called out again.

Olsen turned back, "I was told it was #2."

"I just came out of there. It's a zoo. It's definitely in OR 3."

Olsen continued down the hall while Baron kept moving in the opposite direction.

Shortly, Dr. Olsen burst into OR 3 and found the theatre completely empty.

"Blood pressure's dropping fast," Abu called out. The machine he was monitoring was barely registering a heart beat any longer.

"Dr. Caster!" Beverly screamed. She didn't understand what was happening. It looked like the little boy was going to die. "Dr. Caster!"

“Shut up,” Dr. Caster called back. His hands slipped off the boy's leg and blood shot up into the air again.

He's not going to make it, Beverly thought in complete shock.

thirty

Day Five – Afternoon

“What did he say?” Sergeant Abrahms asked as she and Constable O’Neil moved through the police station to the back garage.

“He’s on his way. He didn’t say shit – just hung up on me. I know he’s going over to the IWK to get this Barron Harris.”

“Shit, in his state of mind he might kill the guy,” Abrahms responded. “How’d you get the name anyway?”

“I followed up that Outhouse name. Traced the guy from working at the Spryfield Community Drop-In centre. He’s a lowlife druggie with a pretty substantial record and then I found the biggest bomb of all. He changed his name to get his job at the IWK. It’s a pedophile’s dream to work that close to kids.”

“Any sexual priors?” Abrahms asked wondering if Harris had a criminal record of sexual offenses.

“No record,” O’Neil frowned. “That was the only piece that didn’t fit.”

“Hey,” a voice shouted at them as they moved through the main floor.

They both stopped and turned back to one of the front staff, an older commissionaire.

“Nobody answering upstairs,” he stated flatly.

“Right,” O’Neil nodded. “We’re on our way out. It’s kinda urgent.”

“There’s a woman in the front there. Looks like she might be a prostitute. She got roughed up yesterday by one her customers and wants to lay charges against the guy. Thought one of you could take it.”

“We can’t right now. Call in an officer if there’s no one left around here but I’m pretty sure Taylor’s somewhere.”

“Fine,” the commissionaire said throwing his hands up. “I thought you were the special teams people.”

Abrahms and O’Neil kept going, ignoring the commissionaire.

“Thought you might have liked a prostitute ratting out some high-and-mighty IWK doctor for getting a little rough with his afternoon sexcapades,” he continued to mutter at their backs.

“Bout time the world gets set back on its ass before we all go to hell.”

thirty one

Day Five – Afternoon

Gloria stood in the waiting room in the surgery wing of the IWK. Her oldest son, Joshua, was sitting on a bench on the far side of the room reading a magazine while her only daughter, Lisa, was watching some daytime talk show on the TV mounted high in the corner.

She wanted to go back into the hall, walk back to the OR, but a nurse had already escorted her away from there twice. She didn't want to be a nuisance. She knew the doctors were doing all they could. Dr. Caster was doing everything he could – he was a good man.

And then she saw a person run past the room. It was just a blur in the small window on the door but her heart suddenly leapt. She moved quickly into the hall in time to see a tall doctor going into her son's OR theatre.

"No," she whispered. "Please God."

She took a step towards the OR and stopped. She went back into the waiting room. *They know what they're doing*, she thought.

"Everything okay, mom?" Lisa asked.

Gloria nodded and Lisa turned back to her TV show.

Minutes passed and Gloria thought she wouldn't be able to contain herself much longer. She needed to see Nicholas. She wanted to know everything was going smoothly.

"How much longer, mom?" Josh asked tiredly.

"I'll check sweetie," she said and stepped back to the hallway. She instantly convinced herself that she'd find someone and get an update on Nick's condition. It was only fair for Lisa and Josh. They couldn't be expected to be so patient. She was doing it for her kids.

As she stepped out she saw Dr. Caster coming down the hall towards her. His expression made her stumble against the wall, holding herself with one arm.

He quickly moved to her side in case she collapsed.

"Don't," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "Tell me everything's fine."

"Mrs. Wa," he started, "let's go back into the waiting room."

"No," she said sternly. "Where's Nicholas?" She looked past him but only saw a nurse with long hair wheeling away a blanket covered gurney. "Where's Nick?" she repeated.

"Please, let's go back in," he said putting a hand on her shoulder and trying to turn her.

She flipped away from him. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY SON?"

He backed away. For the first time she noticed that there were streaks of blood on his green scrubs. A mask was pulled down off his mouth and his forehead was streaked with fresh sweat. "There were complications," he began.

"Don't say this. Don't say this. Don't say this," Gloria moaned closing her eyes.

"I'm afraid there wasn't anything we could do," Dr. Caster continued.

"Please God."

"Your son didn't make it," he finished.

"Oh no," she wailed instantly. "Please God no."

Dr. Caster swallowed with difficulty. He could barely see straight from the effects of the acid he'd taken earlier. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Wa. We did everything we could."

"What the fuck's going on?" a voice called from behind them causing them both to turn.

"Mitchell," Gloria screamed falling into his arms.

"What the fuck did you do?" Wa barked at Dr. Caster. "Where's Nick?"

"He's gone," Gloria screamed. "He's gone."

thirty two

Day Five – Afternoon

Wenton pulled his Durango up to a parking metre on the street in front of The Lord Nelson Hotel. After Wa had stormed out of the Fireside Room he'd phoned the hand written number of the Vatican business card. Bishop Syed Bashir had asked Wenton to come to the hotel immediately.

For some reason the downtown hotel had become a landmark. Extensively renovated, the Lord Nelson is often home to visiting Hollywood celebrities filming their latest movies in Halifax. Wenton reached into his glove compartment and retrieved a pass. He set it high on the dash and patted the bright orange paper before stepping out of the Durango. The paper identified Wenton's truck as an official police vehicle. He'd gotten the pass at some point when he was working with them and kept it because it meant he wouldn't receive a parking ticket or be towed. It was a pretty handy piece of paper.

The grand lobby of the Lord Nelson was impressive. Once inside, Wenton turned left toward the front desk. A voice stopped him.

"Dr. Wenton?"

He found another Middle-Eastern man in a suit approaching him. Wenton had expected a flowing red cape or something more in line with the Pope. "Bishop?" he said extending a hand.

They shook hands and the Bishop smiled warmly. "I so greatly appreciate you meeting with me. Things have been," he paused, struggling for a word, "unusual."

"You've noticed that, eh?"

"Would you like to go into the *Victory Arm's*. It is reasonably quiet at this time."

Wenton shrugged and they headed up a small flight of stairs into the small, English style pub. Soon they were seated at a leather booth near the back of the establishment.

"I know this must all seem so terribly clandestine," Syed Bashir began. "I can assure that the Holy Catholic Church wants nothing more than to bring all of these matters to an end. There has been much taking place behind the scenes and Halifax has become the stage for the final..." he stopped, suddenly uncomfortable. "We dearly hope that Halifax is the stage for a resolution to all of the difficult things that have happened."

Wenton smiled. *Riddles*, he thought. "I'd prefer not to play games and dance around this 'resolution'," he said flatly. "Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind?"

"A direct man," Syed Bashir said. "It is as I had been informed. You are indeed a man of action. Sergeant Wa was correct."

The waitress stopped at their table. Syed Bashir ordered a coffee and Wenton a Clancy's draught on tap.

Syed Bashir nodded at Wenton and continued. "I assume you know about Qumran? The Essenes?"

"Why do you assume that?"

"You are a most intelligent man. You've followed up on recent events. I am sure."

"Pretend I don't know anything," Wenton said.

"The focus of the Holy Church's involvement is a terrible fallacy with hints of proof. The potential of serious harm to the fabric of society is enormous and we are dedicated to stopping it."

"Stopping what?"

"Stopping the Essenes from trying to end the world."

The waitress returned with their orders and left.

"I've never found this *end-of-the-world* fairy tale particularly believable," Wenton said over the top of his mug.

"The Essenes broke from society 2000 years ago. They were a very strict, conservative order that believed only they would survive Armageddon. They religiously copied the books of the Old Testament but also added and revised as they saw necessary. They were absolutely convinced that the world would end soon. Their references to the apocalypse were everywhere in the original scrolls and included entirely new books devoted to how the world would end and what role they would play in the destruction."

"The Convergence Scroll," Wenton said.

"Yes, the Convergence Scroll," Syed Bashir began but Wenton cut him off.

"The scroll that the Pope has tried to keep hidden."

Syed Bashir was silent for a moment. "That is partially true. What is written in that scroll would only serve to create fear and panic. It is not the Word of God."

"Fair enough," Wenton smiled. "The pope should be able to pick and choose what is and isn't the Word of God."

Syed Bashir shook his head. "That isn't what happens. Prayer and consultation with his ministry around the world guide his actions. Guide all our actions."

"Forget it. Go on with your story."

"The Essenes were ready for the end but the end didn't come. This was a blow but it was considered only a problem of miscalculation. The Essenes continued with their beliefs and slowly became a sect intent upon speeding the world to Armageddon. When the Pharisees and the Sadducees became aware of this there was friction. At some point the friction escalated to confrontation and the Essenes were forced to flee Qumran. The area of Qumran was declared

polluted by the religious elders of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and all people avoided it. This is how the Dead Sea Scrolls came to be undisturbed for so many years.

“But the Essenes were resourceful and in their initial separation from society they had brought incredible wealth. You may have heard of the Copper Scroll that was basically a treasure map of wealth. The Essenes collected this wealth and became a nomadic people. The Copper Scroll was left behind because it was meaningless once the treasure had been gathered. Today’s researchers thought the Copper Scroll was fake because none of the treasure existed but that is naïve.”

Wenton nodded but remained quiet.

Syed Bashir continued, “So the Essenes began to travel the world. Their numbers were not great and they traveled light, always obeying the strict ordinances of their sect. All the while they believed that the people they walked among were destined to damnation. They felt a supreme righteousness, almost a contempt, for the rest of society and felt almost insulted by having to live among the rest of the doomed world. They kept what they thought were secrets of the coming Armageddon hidden from the world. They felt only they needed to know the truth. The Holy Catholic Church knows that this is a *truth* only held by the Essenes so we have been only too happy to let them keep their *secrets*.

“But the Essenes have become dangerous. They walk a line between light and dark that puts the world at risk.”

Wenton banged his mug onto the table. “Riddles again. Talk straight.”

The Bishop frowned and looked around before leaning into Wenton. “The Essenes are slowly slipping away from reality. They travel the world looking for imaginary beasts and monsters and are doing unspeakable things to unsuspecting people – people they think are going to hell anyway so what does it matter.

“The Essene maintain elaborate telecommunications capabilities with their wealth that has continued to grow over the centuries. They monitor global communications looking for signs of the apocalypse – and they believe there are many clear signs. One of those signs is something they call a *burst from heaven* – basically some kind of electromagnetic discharge. The Essene believed there was such a discharge in 1978 on Bell Island – a small island off of Newfoundland. That brought them back to this region for a second time. Eventually they established their operations in Halifax in an abandoned war bunker.

“The Essene are waiting for the coming of the monster – the beast. In their prophecy Satan sends these monsters into the world to begin chaos, basically to prepare the world for apocalypse. The Essene believe they can speed the end by protecting these monsters. They guard them, watch over them, and prevent any God-fearing people from interfering in the course the world must run to find its end.”

All the talk about beasts and monsters should have sent Wenton back to his Durango but it didn't. His mind kept drifting back to Mitchell Wa. He'd seen something inside Wa, something that could only be described as monstrous. Seeing something like that sticks with you and makes you a little less skeptical of stories that should sound crazy. Wenton kept listening to Bishop Syed Bashir – at least for the time being.

“So the Essene want to inspire chaos. They will do whatever it takes to lead the world to Armageddon because they are awaiting their own reward in the paradise to follow. They will eliminate anyone they feel might interfere with their mission – anyone who knows too much about the Convergence scroll. They travel the world taking advantage of people, increasing their wealth to serve their own ends. And...”

“What?” Wenton interrupted. “What's that about taking advantage?”

“The Essenes view those outside their sect as meaningless – on par with animals. They feel justified in taking money from those they judge as Godless sinners. They will monitor a city for signs of potentially wealthy people who might be vulnerable to their mind games and blackmail.”

Wenton thought about his recent problems at the University and how his name had found its way into the local newspapers as a result. He was now pleased that he walked out on the meeting with Mezarhotti at the Tim Horton's yesterday. *They were going to try and blackmail me. That's why the guy was bringing up all the shit about sexual indiscretions.*

“But I have not informed you of the worst of the Essenes,” Syed Bashir spoke again.

Wenton nodded to indicate he was listening.

Again, Syed Bashir looked around before leaning forward and speaking in an urgent but hushed voice. “The Essene believe their direct progeny must greet the apocalypse. They haven't recruited members to their sect even after 2000 years.”

Wenton frowned. “So how have they survived all these years? Don't tell me they're all 2000 years old.”

“As I said, they think of the rest of the world as disposable. It is in this matter that they commit their most unforgivable atrocity. At intervals, the Essene kidnap a woman – normally a younger woman who is in the prime of her reproductive years. The Essenes have a ritual whereby the men impregnate her. This woman provides them with offspring.”

“What?” Wenton snapped. “You're saying they kidnap a woman and rape her.”

“Yes,” he hissed. “And not only a single time. Repeatedly. Their belief is that the woman must serve them until she can no longer produce offspring.”

“Shit,” Wenton sighed. “And when the woman can't give them any more kids?”

Syed Bashir raised an eyebrow with a sad expression. “Frequently they can simply dump the woman on the side of road. These women are held captive for years and years simply to produce children. It would be impossible for anyone of them to retain their sanity. By the end,

they are reduced to incoherent, psychotic woman who scream and scream without end. Once the sect is no longer working to keep her alive to produce for them, these women do not live long.”

“What do you want from me?”

Syed Bashir took a long slow breath. He adjusted the ring on his finger, being careful not to touch the point that faced out from his palm. He didn't want to die a mysterious death from an accidental poke. He prayed Wenton would agree to cooperate. He didn't want any more blood on his hands. He finally picked up his coffee and took a sip. “You must help Sergeant Wa stop the Essene. You must help save the world by ridding it of the threat posed by these animals.”

“Why Wa and me? Why doesn't the Holy Catholic Church do something? Report this to the police. Something.”

“We can't. We have tried to track the Essene. We've learned about them. With their nomadic lifestyle we haven't always been sure where to find them. We know where they are now. We know what they've been doing. They need to be stopped.”

“But why not go to the police right now? Why is the Vatican still sneaking around with this shit?”

It's no use, he thought. This man will not be moved. Syed Bashir reached out and grabbed Wenton's hand with a strength that seemed unusual for the slight Arabic man. “Why do you ask that Dr. Wenton? You know more than any man why the Church has come to you.”

Wenton wanted to recoil, retrieve his hand but he didn't move. His eyes continued to meet the Bishop.

“Because you have seen the monster,” Syed Bashir spat. “You know that the Convergence prophecy is true. The world is coming to an end but no one else can know this. If the world knows what you and I know there really would be chaos and the end would be upon us immediately. The Essenes would win.”

Wenton yanked his hand away and stood. “I'll be in touch.”

Syed Bashir watched him walk away and then he looked down at his hand. The poisonous point of his ring faced up. He hadn't used it on Dr. Wenton. A tear formed in the corner of his eye.

Wenton left Bishop Syed Bashir without a promise to help. The story of Armageddon and conspiracy was too much. Even after the things that had happened recently it was too much for him to accept.

He got in his Durango and started to drive. It was an unusual experience for him to be unsure of what to do. Much of what Bishop Syed Bashir said rang true and it explained many of puzzling things that were happening. But he still didn't know...

“Gary Wrightland,” he said out loud. *I should talk to the pastor.*

Wenton had suspected that Wrightland held answers – some advice that might help. More than that, Wrightland was the only person Wenton could talk to that had experienced some of the same bizarre events – the only person other than Wa.

He pulled his phone out of his jacket and dialed the Forensic Hospital, asking to be put through to the unit. He wanted to make sure Wrightland was up and ready to meet when he arrived.

“South Bay,” the male nurse said answering the phone.

“Yeah, it’s Dr. Wenton. Tell Gary Wrightland I’m going to be there to talk to him in about 20 minutes.”

The nurse didn’t say anything.

“You there? Did you hear me?” Wenton asked.

“Um, I’m sorry. Did you say Gary Wrightland?”

“What’s the problem?” Wenton barked.

“Pastor Wrightland is dead. He passed away yesterday.”

“Of what?” Wenton asked.

“No one knows really. He had a visit yesterday morning and then he was pretty tired and worn out after. He never really recovered and then he was found dead in his room. He’ll be sent for an autopsy but there’s no sign of an attack or anything. Probably some weird heart condition.”

“Who did he have a visit with?”

“Um, I’d have to check the chart but it was some weird religious guy. Why?”

Wenton hung up. *Those bastards*, he thought. *The Essene went after Wrightland.*

That was all Wenton needed. He made up his mind about whether he would help Bishop Syed Bashir. He wasn’t going to let the Essene run around Halifax anymore on their ridiculous religious crusade. He was going to put a stop to all this shit.

thirty three

Day Five – Afternoon

It took the strength of both Mitchell Wa and Dr. Paul Caster to move Gloria into a patient room down the hall. She had become hysterical and was threatening to destroy the hospital if her son wasn't brought back to her. She kept saying she didn't want to go through with the surgery. "I'm taking it back," she'd said, over and over. "I don't want this surgery. I take it back."

"Your son and daughter didn't need to see your wife like that," Dr. Caster said after they'd laid her down on the bed.

Wa nodded. He heard the doctor but the words seemed to come down a long tunnel, reverberating back and forth, before they got to his ears.

Gloria buried her face in the pillow and her body shook with her sobbing.

"What the hell happened?" Wa asked.

"There'll be time for that later," Dr. Caster said trying to put an arm over Wa's shoulders. He wanted to guide him out of the room.

Wa shook the doctor off. "You killed my son. How?"

Dr. Caster rubbed a hand over his face, trying to clear away the beads of sweat that crowded his eyes. Each second that ticked by seemed to open up more of his brain cells. The acid was slowly clearing out of him. Slowly. "Sergeant Wa," he began, "what can I tell you? There were unforeseen complications that..."

Suddenly Wa remembered, "Complications? Like Baron Harris? Was he a complication?"

Dr. Caster's heart leapt into his throat. He could barely speak. "Like what? Who?"

"You tell me," Wa sneered leaning into the doctor's face. "Was that worthless fuck Baron Harris any where near my boy during this *surgery*." He said the word *surgery* with such distaste it sounded profane.

He knows, he knows, he knows, Dr. Caster's mind screamed. *I'm fucked*. "Actually, um, yes. I think Baron was..."

"That child molester was in the room when Nick died?"

"Um, I think...I mean I'm not sure because there were so many..." He was starting to suspect that Wa had no idea of his connection to Baron Harris. Not yet, anyway. "Why are you asking about him?"

"He's the prime suspect in some attacks on kids. We tracked him to this hospital."
Dr. Caster took a big breath and released it. *It's the clue I dropped to them.* "Is that right?"

"Where is he? I want to see this guy right now."

"Um, the lockers. Probably he's gone to the staff room."

"Show me," Wa said and grabbed Dr. Caster by the chest of his scrubs, pulling him out of the room.

"But your wife and your son and daughter in the waiting room," he tried to protest. *I don't want to see Baron – he'll know I ratted him out. He'll sink me along with him.*

"Just show me," Wa barked.

Caster brought him down to the staff / service elevator and took him to the basement. There was a staff room at the end of the corridor and Wa half dragged the doctor to the door kicking it in as they entered.

An older, housekeeping staff jumped back against his open locker.

Wa released Dr. Caster and stormed through the area. Rows of lockers and a small washroom in the back but no other people. He turned to the housekeeper, "Has anyone else been in here? An orderly named Baron Harris?"

"No, sir," the man answered quickly, his face still pale. "But medical staff don't come in here."

Wa spun on Dr. Caster, "What the hell are you doing? Where's the lockers for medical staff?"

"I'm so sorry," he began. "I'm so sorry. I just wasn't thinking. I so rarely have anything to do with Baron I forgot he might have a locker upstairs."

"Take me there now," Wa screamed at him and the two men bolted out of the change room and back to the staff elevator.

As they traveled back up Wa turned slowly to the doctor. "Don't fuck with me. Don't even try."

"I wouldn't," he stumbled. "I..I.." The elevator doors opened interrupting him.

"Sergeant Wa," a voice called in surprise.

Sergeant Abrahms and Constable O'Neil were standing waiting for the elevator. An administrative staff person was with them.

"Get out of my way," Wa grumbled and tried to push past them.

"Baron's gone," O'Neil said. "We were just in the locker room."

Wa stopped. "Where?"

"Don't know. Hopefully he just went home and we'll pick him up," Abrahms said. She turned to Dr. Caster. "Are you Paul Caster?"

The doctor nodded.

"Ms. Deveaux here," Abrahms said nodding at the administrator, "says that you've worked the most with Baron – do you have any idea where he'd go right now?"

Dr. Caster's head spun. There were too many questions, too many stories, too many angles to work out. He knew he wasn't keeping track well enough. "I don't know. I mean I've got no idea what he does outside the hospital."

Wa turned to him. "Go fuck yourself," he spat at the doctor and pushed him back into the open elevator. The doctor stumbled and hit heavily into the wall.

Ms. Deveaux yelped and held her hands to her mouth as the elevator doors slid closed.

"What?" O'Neil asked looking momentarily at the elevator and then back to Wa who was moving down the hall.

"What's going on, Wa?" Abrahms yelled after him.

"That fuckin' doctor just killed my son," Wa said without looking back. "And now I'm going to go and kill Baron Harris."

Day Five – Afternoon

“Dr. Caster,” a nurse called out from the acute care nursing station as he strode past.

He kept walking.

She leaned out over the desk and called to him again. This time he stopped and turned back to her but didn’t speak.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

Moron. “A boy just died in the OR so I’d have to say no. Everything isn’t okay.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her face filling with sadness.

“What do you want?” he snapped pulling her out of her trance of sympathy.

“There’s a woman crying in one of the patient rooms but I bet that’s the…” Her voice trailed away.

Caster smiled and nodded in condescending way. “Call psychology and get them to send one of their touchy-feely little staff down here to do their grief shit or whatever it is they do.” He turned and kept walking but stopped again. “Oh yeah, and get social work down here too. There’s two kids in the waiting area who need attention.”

“There’s…,” the nurse started but then decided against it. She let him go and watched as he turned into his office at the end of the hall.

Once in his office he slammed the door with all the force he could muster. A picture slid free off the top of his cabinet and slammed down onto the floor sending shards of glass spiraling out across the floor. It was a picture of his wife and daughter. *How fuckin’ appropriate*, he thought suddenly reminded of how they’d left him yesterday.

He dropped down into the seat behind his desk and leaned back, closing his eyes. He waited. Waited for a revelation. Waiting for something that would set things right. He didn’t want that religious freak to be right.

That freak, he thought. He suddenly remembered meeting with the Arab at the Tim Horton’s. The guy had warned him that “an end” was coming and he could help stop it. “If I don’t act,” he said out loud mocking the man’s accent, “my life will be lost in the darkness.” But the Arab guy was insane because he had also been babbling on about the monster coming into him and needing something.

He sat up. "What bullshit. Everything is fucked up anyway," he announced to no one. "Nothing will ever be right again."

Almost as a reflex, with almost no conscious control, he reached and picked up his phone. He dialed a number he knew by heart.

The nurse returned to her computer after her difficult encounter with Dr. Caster. She wasn't about to get into anything with him. He was well-known for having moods when you just didn't approach him. She'd ask him later about the strange men who'd come in asking about Gloria Wa and the kids.

Gloria lay face down on a bed. Her sobbing was slowing but not stopping. She knew the only thing that could stop her tears was to have her son Nick back again.

She rolled over onto her back and covered her face with her hands. She felt somewhat disoriented since it had barely registered with her when her husband and the doctor had moved her into this bedroom. *What bedroom?* she suddenly thought. She opened her eyes.

It was one of the recovery rooms for the children coming out of the OR. The walls were coloured brightly and the sparse furniture was clean and comfortable looking. She didn't think it looked like any hospital room she'd been in before.

She sobbed again and rubbed the heels of her hands onto her eyes. Her face was slick from tears. She looked to the dresser next to the bed hoping to find a tissue.

"Mom?" a quiet voice from the doorway sounded.

Gloria sat up to find Lisa and Josh standing in the room, just inside the door.

"Are you okay?" Lisa asked. Both kids looked very nervous.

Gloria sniffed, not knowing what to say. *Am I okay?* she thought. *How could I be?*

"Something terrible has happened," she said.

Josh and Lisa nodded as though they knew.

"Did someone tell you about your brother?" Gloria asked.

"The men did," Lisa said and looked behind herself at the empty doorway.

"The men?" Gloria asked, confused. "What men? You mean the doctor?"

Josh shook his head. "No, the guys with the long hair."

Gloria frowned.

And then three men walked into the room. They were tall with dark complexions. They moved stealthily, calmly until they stopped near the children.

"Mrs. Wa," one of them spoke in with a thick middle-eastern accent. "We have come for you."

"What?" she said – a twinge of fear rising in her voice. "Who are you?"

The men smiled. "And we have come for your children. Let your heart be open. We will share with you the truth." They moved towards her.

thirty five

Day Five – Afternoon

The bus stopped virtually right in front of his apartment complex in Highfield Park. There was only one main road that snaked through the high density area and so the bus stopped in front of almost everyone's apartment complex.

Baron Harris got off the bus and went straight into his unit. His stomach was so empty it seemed to be chewing on itself and the sensation had made him swallow a dry heave more than once on the bus. As he made his way across the parking lot he was desperate to sneak around the corner and pick up a donair but he didn't.

He glanced back in the direction of the donair shop and froze. As he'd turned his head he'd seen something. A reflection in the apartment window nearest to him. It was a reflection of a boy – the last boy he'd assaulted. The boy had been standing still, watching him. He'd seen it only for a split second but he was sure. He spun around the courtyard searching for where the kid was. There was no boy. He looked back at the window. It was clear now – no reflections. He kept moving, half-running the last few steps to his apartment. *What the fuck's the matter with me?*

Once inside he shut and locked the door. It was an illusion of being safe and secure but he'd settle for that right now.

That was too much, he scolded himself. That was too close. This one won't go away. I need to get out of here. The police will be after me now.

He looked around the filth trying to decide if there was actually anything to pack. He suspected there wasn't. Anything he'd ever owned of value he'd sold for drugs.

He began to kick his way through the garbage. He vaguely remembered an old sports bag. He could at least take a few shirts and pants.

His foot found the phone and kicked it off its base. He bent and dropped the phone back on the cradle.

It rang instantly.

He jumped backwards, falling to the floor. His eyes never left the phone.

It rang again.

"No," he whispered. "Not again." No one ever called except for that last call.

Another ring.

"I won't answer you," he screamed at it and pushed himself back with his feet.

Another ring.

"Just go away."

Ring.

"Don't make me do anything. I don't want to do anything.

Ring.

He looked around himself. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. His eyes frantically searched the floor, the walls, everywhere.

Ring.

And then he saw something. A long cardboard tube like the kind from the centre of gift wrap.

Ring.

He leaned and could just reach it. He pulled it back towards himself. There was a green smear on one end and he remembered bringing the tube into the apartment last summer to kill a moth that had been flitting around bothering him. He could still see a wing ground into the end of the brown cardboard.

Ring.

"Stop it!" he shouted and got on his knees facing the phone. He swung the tube, striking the phone. In his mind he had imagined hitting the phone with such force that it broke against the wall. Instead, his glancing blow managed only to dislodge the receiver from the cradle and it rolled onto the floor.

He stared at it.

There was a slight hum in the room as though something electrical had just been switched on.

He could almost see waves emanating from the receiver, as though the air near the ear piece was rippling.

He squinted at it. The hum in the room was louder now. And words?

"Worthless."

"Shit."

"Face me."

"What?" Baron asked. He dropped the tube and held his hands over his ears. As he made out each word more words became clear. His head felt full as though hearing would make his head explode.

"You worthless shit, Baron. You've wasted everything."

"No," he said shaking his head. "You can't talk to me now. I won't listen."

"You will listen. You will do as you're told."

He squeezed his hands tighter against his ears. "Get out. Get out. Get out."

"They'll come for you now but they can't find you. Not you."

Baron sat back on his heels.

The voice continued, "You'll need to take steps now. Take steps of your own to avoid seeing them. Avoid seeing anything ever again."

"I can't," he argued weakly. "I won't."

"Facini entfaste blackened side."

Baron collapsed on the floor.

The voice continued, unrelenting. "Facini entfaste blackened side."

Baron's body shook with a slight spasm.

"Mister?" a soft voice spoke and the room was suddenly still.

Baron opened his eyes a crack and looked up from where he lay on the floor. He saw the thin legs of a young boy. Bare legs.

He sat up and was face to face with a seven year old. The boy was wearing small white underwear and nothing else. His bare chest was smooth and pale and he stood with his arms crossed over it.

"Mister," the boy repeated, "I can't find my mommy and I'm real thirsty."

Baron didn't quite understand but he couldn't peel his eyes away from the child. He was perfect. He looked so innocent, so small and delicate. He wanted to reach out, run a hand down the boy's smooth arm. He looked down at the boy's tight briefs and saw a slight bulge. He swallowed hard.

"Mister?" the boy said again. "Can I get a drink, please?"

Baron stood. "Sure," he said tentatively. He'd give the kid anything. He just didn't want the boy to leave. "Come on in the kitchen."

He started to walk and felt something snake into his hand. The boy had reached out and put his hand inside Baron's. The small hand was warm and soft. Baron held it tightly and led the boy into the kitchen.

"What do you want? Maybe a little water or something?" Baron asked.

The boy smiled. "Yes please."

Baron turned to the counter and heard the boy giggle. He turned back to him.

"Unless you have something else."

Baron looked up and down the boy's thin white body. He wanted to pick the kid up and run his mouth all over the perfect little boy. "Something like...something like what?" he stammered. He was so distracted he could barely talk.

"My mom never lets me do things," the boy said with a strange little smile. "Do you have anything stronger to drink?"

"Stronger?"

"You know," the boy smiled. "Stronger."

Baron couldn't believe what the boy was saying. "Like a drink drink?" he asked.

He nodded profusely.

"Oh man," Baron breathed. *This can't be happening.* He turned back to the counter and bent into the cupboard below. He desperately hoped he could find a little bottle of vodka or whiskey or something. *Please let there be something left. I can't believe this.*

He almost laughed when he saw what was in the cupboard. A bottle of vodka almost two thirds full. He grabbed it and pulled it out. He held it out to the boy. "This is stronger."

"Yippee," the boy shouted and jumped clapping his hands together. Baron eagerly watched the boy's tight little body moving.

"Let me get a glass," he announced.

"You drink too," the boy sang out. "You drink too."

"Oh I will," Baron laughed. "I will."

He spun the top off the vodka and poured two big glasses.

thirty six

Day Five – Early Evening

All evidence pointed to Baron Harris still being inside the apartment. Neighbors had observed him arrive there late in the afternoon and no one had seen him leave. There was a light on in the bottom floor unit but surveillance hadn't picked up movement – at least nothing conclusive.

"He doesn't know we have his name," Constable O'Neil told the ERT team leader, "so there's no reason for him to rabbit."

The Emergency Response Team was assembled near the Highfield Park apartment. O'Neil and Sergeant Abrahms had already knocked on the door to make the arrest but there hadn't been an answer.

"I'm sure I heard him squirming around in there," Abrahms added. "Little fuckin' rat in a hole. He's probably drugged up by now."

Sergeant Lawrence Hallie nodded. As team leader he liked to know as much about the situation as possible before he sent the ERT boys in for the entry. "You seem a little out of sorts about this guy Laurie."

She shrugged. "Another pedophile. I guess I'm still thinking about Mitchell Wa's boy. If it turns out this asshole had something to do with little Nick dying." Her voice trailed away and she shook her head.

"There's a chance of that?" Hallie asked in surprise. "Is that why Mitchell was pulled off this one? Why he's just out in the command van instead of in here?"

"That's why," O'Neil nodded. "Although he's not happy about it. He's gonna be one mean son-of-a-bitch to deal with."

Hallie was silent for another moment and then slapped the visor down on his riot helmet. "Let's go get this bastard."

The ERT squad took up positions around the apartment: four men at the front door, two at each of the windows in the back and at the window in the front. Each carried an assault rifle and were decked out in full riot gear. There really weren't different degrees of readiness for ERT when they made an entry – everything was always full-speed and full-gear.

Hallie took the lead at the door. As team leader he could choose to coordinate from the command bus but he never did.

He knocked on the door with a gloved fist. "Police! Open the door now or we're coming in."

No response.

Hallie knocked again, even harder. "Police, open the door now!"

No response.

He turned and made a quick hand signal to his teammate to indicate they would do a forced entry. He spoke quietly into a mic in his riot helmet as well, "Entry moving in on my mark."

Two officers came forward with a huge club. Words were scrawled down the side of it – names of suspects who'd shit themselves when the battering ram had punched through their door. The officers quickly took position on either side of the door and swung the ram back high in the air. With a whoosh it came down and popped the door off its hinges in one solid crack. Sergeant Hallie and the other ERT member were inside the apartment before the door fell completely to the floor.

"Police!" Hallie screamed as he moved. "Get down, get down, get down."

At the same time there were crashes from all over the apartment as officers were breaking through windows making entry into the other rooms. The dirty apartment was filled with noise and the screams of the men identifying themselves as police.

And then, as quickly as the entry started – the apartment fell quiet again. Each officer was moving in short, quick steps peering down the barrel of his rifle. It wasn't much of an apartment and the search wasn't long.

"Got em," Hallie said staring down at a lump on the kitchen floor. A chorus of "clears" was ringing out from the other corners of the apartment.

"This is the police. Lie on your stomach and put your hands behind your head!" Hallie yelled down at the man.

He didn't move. Hallie could see the man's chest lifting slightly and knew the guy wasn't dead. He kicked him with his steel toed boot. "Lie on your stomach, now."

The body rolled slightly but stayed in its fetal position. Hallie moved a little closer. The stench in the kitchen was almost unbearable. It was like a mixture of ammonia, lemon, and vomit.

Peering down he saw yellowish, red fluid draining out of the corner of the man's mouth. A pool of it had gathered on the floor. He could also tell that the man had shit in his pants as a stain gathered around the seat of his pants. At this point a few of the other officers had taken up positions around the house but most were standing near Hallie watching.

"Can you hear me?" Hallie yelled down.

No response.

He looked around the body for signs of drug paraphernalia. He noticed an empty jug of bleach. It wasn't unusual to find bleach in a druggie's house since it was frequently used to

sterilize needles. Right next to the bleach was a glass full of clear liquid. He stood and picked up the glass with his gloved hand and brought it close to his nose. *Bleach.*

He looked back down at Baron Harris and noticed that there were shards of a broken glass on the floor near one of the man's hands. Baron had obviously been drinking when he collapsed. Hallie crouched down again and the smell of bleach was very evident around the body.

"Son-of-a-bitch," he whistled. He turned back to the officer behind him. "Look at what this asshole had for a cockta..."

He didn't finish his sentence because the entire room exploded at that moment.

Officers screamed as the bloody, vomit-smearred face of Baron Harris had suddenly risen off the kitchen floor and his arms wrapped around Hallie's neck.

In an instant, Hallie was pulled off balance back down as cold fingers dug into his skin. He choked, reflexively grabbing at the hands.

The other officers were on Baron in a second, screaming at him to "drop him", "drop him".

Baron couldn't hear them. Couldn't even see them. Too much of his insides had been melted away.

Hallie twisted and turned finally staring into the misshapen face of Baron Harris. The eyes were so incredibly bloodshot that no white was visible. Blood, puss, and vomit streaked his face but mainly emanated from the shards of his lips. Stubbles of teeth were visible inside the mouth which seemed to suck air like a fish out of water – little short gasps.

And then the ERT members started to drop the ends of their rifles. Blow after blow hit Baron. Hallie finally rolled away but the blows kept coming and were now joined by frantic kicks.

You simply don't grab one of their ERT members. It was a rule. No perp was allowed to grab them.

Not only that.

These men knew that this useless druggie and pedophile might have hurt Mitchell Wa's son. Might have killed Mitchell Wa's son.

And you never, never mess with a cop's family.

Never.

And so the beating continued.

thirty seven

Day Five – Evening

“He’s bad,” Sergeant Lawrence Hallie said nodding at Mitchell Wa.

The two men were in an unmarked police car headed back to the IWK.

“How bad?” Wa asked.

“Let’s just say he won’t be fuckin’ around with anybody else. Not for a long time. Me and the boys knew what kind of fuck we were arresting.”

“He’s in a coma?”

“He’s in something. They took him to the QEII with 24 hour cops to watch the room.”

The car turned down University Avenue and then into the circle driveway for the front entrance of the IWK.

“So you figure Gloria and the kids are still here eh?” Hallie asked. “They wouldn’t have gone home by now?”

“I have no idea. Nothing really makes any sense but I needed to pick up my car anyway.”

“You want me to come in with you? I don’t mind.”

Wa stepped out of the car closed the door without a word.

“I take it that’s a no, then,” Hallie called after him. He watched Wa go through the automatic doors of the main entrance and then started the police car and pulled away.

The acute care hallway was quiet now. Wa had almost expected to hear the wails of his wife as soon as he set foot on the unit.

But it was quiet.

He headed to the nursing desk. The nurse had barely looked up when he arrived on the floor. She had her head down reading a newspaper.

As he got closer he realized it was a different nurse from the one earlier in the day. Shift change must have come and gone.

“Excuse me,” he said.

“Visiting hours are over. Come back...” she started but didn’t finish.

“I’m not here for visiting hours,” Wa barked harshly.

The nurse quickly looked up. “What?”

"I'm Sergeant Mitchell Wa with the Halifax Police," he said. He found people often paid more attention when he told them he was a cop. "You murdered my son in the OR earlier. My wife and my other two kids are still here."

"The what? What happened?" she stumbled.

He spoke in a short quick words. "Nick Wa died here earlier. My wife was very upset and stayed here while I had to go help arrest the pedophile orderly who might have been responsible for killing my son. I'm here to see if my wife is okay now."

"Nicolas Wa," she said as though she was suddenly clueing in. "I'm so sorry. I heard about that. I..."

Wa shook his head and walked away. He knew where his wife was.

"Um, Detective Wa, wait," she called after him.

"What?" he asked with disgust, stopping but not turning back.

"She's not here. None of them are here."

Now he turned. "What are you talking about? They went home."

"I... I guess so."

Wa returned and leaned across the nursing desk. "I guess... I guess," he mocked her. "What do you mean?"

"Some guys came and..."

"Guys!" Wa shouted. "What guys?" He could feel his head pounding again and almost on cue his vision became clouded.

"I don't know," she shouted back grabbing the sides of her head. "Everything was crazy. Your wife was so upset. Dr. Caster didn't tell us anything."

"Who took her?" he asked, pounding the side of his head, trying to clear his vision.

"Some guys. They had weird accents. They said they were friends. I guess they'd been in the room talking to your wife for awhile and then they left."

"That's crazy," Wa yelled. "You let her go with them. Why?"

"They said they were friends. They said they were going to help."

"Damn it," Wa screamed, slamming his fist down.

The nurse jumped back, almost tipping her chair over. "I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure and I asked them to wait but they just left with your wife and your two kids."

Wa dropped his head down onto the desk. He was dizzy now too.

"But I called security and asked them to check on them before they left the building."

Wa looked up.

"Security got down to the entrance just as your wife and kids got into a white van and then it was gone."

"A white van!"

"Yeah, that's what Jason said."

"Damn it," Wa said quietly. "Damn them to hell."

thirty eight

Day Six – Friday Morning

Bishop Greigan Syed Bashir looked out the window of his hotel room onto the Public Gardens across the street. He took a deep breath and turned back into his room to sit on the bed. He picked up the phone, his hand shaking.

Carefully he dialed a number. It was a long number and he dialed slowly. He was tempted to hang up but held the receiver to his ear instead. He listened to dead air for a moment until a familiar European ring sounded. The double tone buzzed once, then again before someone answered.

“Cardinal Oleg Montessa’s office,” the receptionist said.

He paused before he responded. He knew there was still time to hang up. “It’s Bishop Syed Bashir, can you put me through to the Cardinal. I really need to talk to him.”

“Oh, Bishop, hello,” the old lady said enthusiastically. “I don’t know if he can talk right now. He asked not to be disturbed.”

“Please put him on. I need to speak with him,” he said forcefully.

“Just a moment,” she said, the enthusiasm quickly draining away from her voice.

After a pause and a few clicks including a miss-pressed button during the transfer, another voice came on the line. “Bishop Syed Bashir, I am here.”

“Thank you, Cardinal. Thank you for taking the time. I really wanted to talk to you.”

“How are things? Have you found what you need?”

“I have, your Excellence. I’ve found what I need but I wonder about our mission.”

“My son?”

Syed Bashir stood up and held the phone down to his chest. He took a deep breath and brought the phone back up. “I don’t know if I can be a part of what you’ve asked.”

“I’ve asked nothing of you,” Cardinal Montessa answered.

Syed Bashir didn’t understand. “I’m sorry?”

“It is the Holy Catholic Church that has called you to service. You and I are both servants to the word of God.”

“I can’t,” he started and stopped. “I must be true to say that I have doubt.”

“We can’t have faith without doubt,” the Cardinal answered.

"But I wonder about pursuing something like this. I can't encourage others to resort to violence. I can no longer be a part of violence."

"The Holy Church must sometimes make difficult decisions but they are decisions that must be made so that the Church may continue to serve God."

Syed Bashir frowned. "Even if it means that people die? Even if it is the Church that takes life away."

"Watch yourself," the Cardinal said sharply and then fell silent as though stopping himself.

Syed Bashir waited and then asked, "Cardinal?"

"I am here my son but I think your heart has given you the answer you were seeking from me."

"My heart tells me this is not God's way."

"The Essene cannot be allowed to continue their dangerous game. They play with the future of the entire world. They must be stopped."

"The Church cannot be a party to violence. I must stop what has started."

A sharp knock on the door startled Syed Bashir.

"You cannot," Montessa said.

The knock sounded again.

"I will not pursue the Essene in this way," Syed Bashir said looking at his door.

"Do nothing. I will come to Halifax."

He hadn't expected that. "No," he said quickly.

The knock came again, more impatient.

"You need guidance," the Cardinal said.

"There is someone here," Syed Bashir said. "I must go but I will call you again shortly."

"Let the word of God guide you," the Cardinal said and then the phone went dead.

He let his hand drop with the receiver before he hung it up.

Another sharp rap sounded.

"Who is it?" he called out, somewhat irritated.

No answer.

The Bishop made his way to the door and looked through the peephole. It was black. Not as though there was a hand on the other side but almost as if there was no light in the hallway.

"Who is it?" he called again.

"It's me," came the reply. "We need to talk."

He nodded as he slid the security chain back off the door, opening it. "Come in."

The lights in the hotel room fluttered and went out. Syed Bashir frowned and looked back to the window, the only light that filtered in.

Suddenly the Bishop flew forward his head sharply jerking backwards. He hit the floor hard and started to roll but something hard pressed down into the centre of his back, pinning him to the floor.

The lights flickered and returned.

“What? Get off. What are you doing?” he screamed, half in anger, half in near-panic.

“Shut up,” the man sneered down. “I’ll ask the questions.”

The Bishop struggled but couldn’t move. He had no leverage from this position. He was helpless. He pushed against the floor again.

“Where are they?”

“Get off me,” he grunted. The weight on his back was choking off his breath and it was difficult to talk. “Why are you doing this?”

“You’re weak. You could ruin everything,” the voice answered. “Tell me where the Silent Ones are.”

“I won’t tell you anything. You’ve lost your mind. Get off me.” There were spots now. The weight on his back had increased.

“Tell me where to find those trouble-making shits or you will die,” the voice sneered from above the Bishop.

Syed Bashir wanted to answer but he couldn’t. Flashes of light danced across the floor through his line of sight. Things were pulsing in and out and then fell to darkness again. He felt as though he might vomit. It was as though the room had motion.

“Tell me you fuckin’ man of God,” the voice howled.

But Syed Bashir had faded away. His consciousness was lost.

The man screamed and brought his knee up and crashed it back down. He brought it up again and down. The Bishop’s body bounced ever so slightly trying to absorb the blows.

The man was almost in a frenzy. He looked up, howling into the darkness of the room. He reached down and grabbed a handful of the Bishop’s hair. He pulled the head back and slammed it into the carpet.

The man knew that Greigan Syed Bashir couldn’t help him anymore. But he wanted to ensure that Greigan Syed Bashir wouldn’t help anyone else, either.

Outside the Lord Nelson Hotel a white van sat with the engine running. Two dark-skinned, Arabic men sat in the front while a third was in the back, a large set of earphones over his head.

They were silent.

“And then no more,” the man in the back of the van said.

The white van pulled away from the curb and was gone.

thirty nine

Day Six – Morning

From his booth in the *Smitties* restaurant near the corner of Spring Garden Road and South Street he'd seen a few police cars go past with their lights spinning. He knew there was something happening. He felt the oddest twinge about it because it wasn't that long ago when an "incident" frequently meant his pager would soon sound. Before his troubles at Dal he used to be one of Halifax's only consultants to the Emergency Response Team. *Whenever a psycho grabbed someone and crawled into a hole they called me*, he remembered without sentiment.

That morning he'd decided to finish his conversation with Bishop Greigan Syed Bashir. He wanted to get a few more details but was convinced that the Silent Ones needed to be dealt with in a permanent kind of way.

He stirred his meat skillet – a specialty of *Smitties* that was more meat than scrambled eggs – and took another bite. Wenton never skipped meals.

Even though he'd skipped sleeping last night – he wasn't about to skip a meal this morning, especially when the Lord Nelson was so close to *Smitties*.

There was a constant din in the restaurant. A lot of families must have started their weekend early. Tourists and other people were filling up before they started the "stroll" down Spring Garden Road or through one of the parks nearby. At the moment an infant was giving her mother a very difficult time.

Wenton stared at the mom as he took another sip of coffee. *Take that little brat out of the restaurant. Show a little consideration for the people who came here to eat. No one wants to hear your little shit whining.*

He finished eating quickly. He would have eaten quickly even if the restaurant weren't crawling with noisy, whining kids and ridiculous parents. He just ate quickly.

After paying the cheque, with no tip, he left.

Smitties was located on the bottom floor of an apartment complex and as he stepped up the sidewalk back to the road he was immediately aware of the emergency vehicles crowding around the entrance of the Lord Nelson. *Fuck.*

He headed to the hotel, cutting across the street causing one car to slow almost to a stop. He ignored the angry driver and took the steps up to the lobby three at a time.

Two uniformed cops were coming out of the double doors as he entered. The massive lobby had groups of police and a few familiar detectives milling around. He went straight for the elevator in the back and punched the up button. *Whatever's going on isn't affecting the entire hotel*, he thought. He knew he wouldn't have made it this far if the hotel were cordoned off.

He arrived on the fourth floor, Syed Bashir's floor and stepped off the elevator. Now he was immediately met by a uniformed officer.

"I'm sorry sir but this area is currently off limits as a result of a police investigation," the man announced holding a hand out.

The action irritated Wenton and he pushed the cops hand away. "Don't play cop with me. I'm Dr. Michael Wenton – who's running this show?"

The officer had obviously heard the name before. He immediately turned to look behind and then back to Wenton, "Were you called down here?"

Wenton snorted at him and pushed past. *Fuckin' rookie.*

The cop made no effort to stop him.

Wenton strode down the hall to the group gathered outside suite 405 – Syed Bashir's room. He recognized two of the detectives.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Staff Sergeant Lincoln Whitley asked.

"What's going on?"

"Who called you in on this?" Whitley asked.

"Someone killed the Bishop – this is going to look bad in the paper."

"This is a secure site," Whitley said firmly and started moving towards him. "I'll have to ask you to leave."

"How'd he die?" Wenton asked, not moving.

Whitley almost pushed up against Wenton's chest and realized that Wenton had at least four inches on him. He took a step back.

"You know this guy – the Bishop?"

"Maybe," Wenton said. "How'd he die?"

Whitley nodded at the other men with him and they moved back inside the hotel suite. Whitley turned down the hallway motioning for Wenton to follow.

"Beaten to death," Whitley said as they walked. "It looks pretty ugly."

"Robbery?"

"Room looks fine so unless there was something specific our guy was after – I doubt it."

Wenton was quiet.

"So did you know him or is this just a happy coincidence?"

"I might have known him but I need to check some things."

From all of the cases Wenton consulted on, Whitley knew him and didn't bother to push. He knew Wenton only answered the questions he wanted to answer.

"I'm the lead on this one so contact me directly," Whitley said and held out a business card.

Wenton took the card, nodding and returned to the elevators. Whitley turned back down the hall to suite 405.

Once the elevator started down Wenton slammed his fist into the wall. The unit shook violently from the force but continued downward. *Mother fuckers. They think they can just stomp out anybody.*

The elevator jerked to a halt and he stormed out. He was going to find the Essenes and teach them a lesson.

"Wenton," a voice called stopping him in his tracks.

He turned and saw Mitchell Wa walking towards him from the far wall.

"You're on this one?" Wenton asked.

"No, but we should talk."

"About what?" Wenton didn't like the way Wa looked. His eyes were blood shot and he wore a jacket over a white t-shirt. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Wa without at least a sport coat on.

"We need to talk about the Essene. I think they've taken my wife and kids. Now they've killed the Bishop and I want them dead."

"Well, well," Wenton said, "we finally agree on something."

The two men headed out of the hotel.

forty

Day Six – Morning

Even in the daylight the catacombs of the bunker were dark. The members of the Essene gathered without words to call them and took seats in a circle around the Teacher of Righteousness.

A scream shattered the immediate silence. The voice was obviously hoarse and it slowly broke and was swept away as if by the slightest breath of wind in the dark cold of the corridor. The men ignored it.

The Teacher knelt in a position of prayer and then sat up. "What news do the brothers of the faith bring?" His question was addressed to specific members of the group even though he did not speak directly to them.

Faroud Watanezzi nodded respectfully. "He who sought seeks no more. The servant of the Pharisees has met his end."

The Teacher's eyes fell to the floor. "And so we prepare for the beginning of our end."

Another scream sounded and the group was silent waiting for it to pass.

"The beast calls to us," the Teacher said.

"And we will answer that call," the group spoke as one.

"The beast brings our pathways to the end," the Teacher continued.

"And with it all things good," the group spoke.

Another scream echoed across the concrete walls.

"Let us pray," the Teacher said and they all bowed low to the ground.

Day Six – Morning

Soon, Wa and Wenton were seated in his Durango down the block from the Lord Nelson.

“What makes you think the Essene have your wife and kids?”

“They were seen taking them from the IWK last night. I had to leave them there when I went out to arrest an orderly – a guy that might have been responsible for my son’s death. When I got back the nurse said some guys took them and got in a white van. I haven’t heard from them since.”

Wenton nodded.

“And now the Bishop is dead. I wanted to talk to him today. I need to find these bastards. I know they killed him.”

Wenton shook his head. “You know this whole thing is...” He struggled for the right word.

“Crazy,” Wa finished the thought. “I know it is but there’s a dead Bishop in that hotel back there and my family is missing. There’s only one group of people who have the answers I want right now and it just so happens it’s a group of fruitcakes who want to see the end of the world.”

“Yeah,” Wenton said, unconvinced. “What’s happened with all of that shit about the beast? Aren’t the Essenes here to help these monster bring about the end of the world.”

“It’s here,” Wa said confidently. “Closer than ever.”

Wenton said nothing.

“It might have gone from me to Baron Harris – that’s the orderly that was assaulting kids. He was probably responsible for the death of my son in the OR.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Dr. Caster told me he was there. He told me...”

“Caster,” Wenton interrupted. “Was that the surgeon for your boy?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Wenton reflected on this before he spoke. “The Essenes tried to contact me a few days ago. After a brief and unsuccessful meeting I left but I saw your doctor next in line to meet with this Essene guy.”

Wa’s face was blank. “Caster was in on this?”

"I don't know what the hell was going on but he was definitely meeting with this Essene guy."

"What did the Essene want with you?" Wa asked.

"Blackmail. They immediately started talking shit to me about *my indiscretions*. I didn't bother to listen for the punch line. I guess that's how these bastards keep themselves in business around the world. They find somebody who might have some money and they squeeze them with whatever dirt they can find."

"But you know how to find them now, right? You know where they're hiding."

"Not really."

"We need to find them. They have my wife and kids. That doctor might be there right now too. We have to find them." Wa shifted uncomfortably in his seat, staring at Wenton.

"All the Bishop told me was that they were in an abandoned war bunker in town. I was going to the Lord Nelson this morning to find out more about it. The bunker could be anywhere. There must be hundreds of them especially if you count bunkers in the old homes in the South end."

Wa dropped his head back in frustration. "Damn it – you were supposed to know where to find them. I have to find them."

Wenton turned to look out his window. From where they were parked he could see all the way down Spring Garden to the downtown high-rises. Behind the buildings was the harbour. He could just make out the top of a large cargo ship slowly sliding out of the bay back to sea. And then he had a thought.

"Unless," he said slowly.

Wa spun on him. "Unless what?"

He smiled thinking of Gary Wrightland. "Unless we believe a psychotic pastor."

"A psychotic pastor?" Wa frowned.

"A dead psychotic pastor, actually," Wenton said and started the ignition of the Durango.

forty two

Day Six – Late Afternoon

On the corner of University Avenue and Robie Street there's an imposing old home that holds the Province of Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management. The building warehouses historical and government documents among other things but also has an extensive collection of maps dating back to the 17th Century. Although the archives are advertised as public, Wa knew that there were still a few documents not available for general circulation.

Wenton parked the Durango at a meter on University Avenue and flipped his police credentials onto the dashboard. "Let's go," he announced.

The two men soon found themselves at one of the reference desks in the main area. A thin man with thick glasses stood behind a counter sorting through a stack of papers. Wa and Wenton approached and stood in front of him. The man deliberately finished the stack before he looked up. "Yes?"

"What have you got for maps of the old war bunkers in Halifax?" Wa asked.

The man just stared at Wa for a few seconds, his greasy forehead shiny under the fluorescent lights above. "Bunkers?" he finally asked, slowly drawing out the word as though it were new to him.

"Yeah, the system of tunnels and bunkers throughout Halifax. I need maps on where they are and the layout of each bunker."

"That kind of stuff is classified."

"What the hell are you talking about," Wenton chimed in. "Why would it be classified?"

The man slowly turned his attention to Wenton. "Because," he said deliberately, "we can't have just any riff-raff off the street trying to figure out where there might be a bunker or tunnel located. What if a criminal found out there was a tunnel under the Royal Bank building?"

Wa reached into his coat pocket and pulled the leather case for his badge. He flipped it out holding it very close to the skinny man's face. "I'm Sergeant Mitchell Wa of the Halifax Regional Police. If you don't start pulling maps in about two seconds I'm going to put you under arrest for obstruction of justice. Got it?"

The man jumped at that. He suddenly found he was able to speak at a normal pace. "I'm terribly sorry. What kind of maps did you want, sir?"

Wenton grinned.

"We're looking for a bunker somewhere in Halifax. It's probably pretty big but it's definitely not in use anymore – at least not for legitimate purposes."

"There's quite a few bunkers around," the man answered. "Including a few tunnels mainly to get troops in or out of the Citadel." Wenton and Wa knew, as did every citizen of Halifax, that the Citadel is the fortress located on a hill right near the heart of downtown Halifax. In the past it provided military operations a clear view of the harbour in a very defensible location. Now the Citadel was just a tourist attraction.

"What about a bunker near a road that is no road?" Wenton asked.

"A road that is no road?" the man repeated.

"Are there any bunkers near streets that aren't in use anymore? Anything like that?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean. Why would a street not be in use?"

"Nevermind," Wenton said.

"Let me pull a plot for you," the man said and turned back into the records room behind. He was gone for a few minutes before he returned with a large cardboard tube. He pulled a map out from the tube and unrolled it on the desk. Wenton and Wa helped hold the edges of the map.

"This is a relatively recent re-drawing of Halifax with some of the war bunkers marked in," he began running his hand over the plot. "The blue circles are bunkers and the red ones are bunkers that have collapsed or been designated unsafe."

Wenton and Wa peered at the large map scanning the blue and red circles. Dozens of circles appeared, most clustered near Citadel Hill but some scattered at intervals around the downtown core.

"Some of them have actually been filled in and are gone," the man continued. "I wouldn't say this map is completely up-to-date on each of the bunkers."

"What's this?" Wenton said pointing. Near the Halifax entrance to the MacKay bridge there was a red circle drawn onto the map. Right next to the red circle was a rectangular strip.

"What? You mean that little bit of road?" the man said peering over at where Wenton was pointing.

"Little strip of road?" Wa asked leaning to see.

"Yeah, you guys must have seen that. Right near the MacKay bridge there. It's a suspended section of road that should have been demolished when the new bridge went in but for whatever reason it never happened. Now it's just a section of road that doesn't connect to anything."

"A road that is no road," Wenton said quietly.

Wa stared at the map. "And this circle? Is it a bunker that's been condemned?"

The man nodded. "Yep."

"Get me a map for that bunker," Wa barked.

"I don't know if..." the man started but was interrupted.

"Go find it," Wa snapped.

The man quickly turned and moved back into the records room.

"A road that is no road," Wenton said again. "Son-of-a-bitch."

Day Six – Early Evening

Wa was seated next to Wenton in the Durango as they sped down Barrington Street. They were headed to the condemned bunker located beneath the partial on-ramp near the MacKay bridge – a section of road that led nowhere. He was staring at a badly creased blue floor plan. The illumination from the Durango ceiling light didn't help much in the creeping Maritime dusk.

Wenton glanced over at Wa. "You think that little city planner nerd will ever get his pants clean?"

Wa slowly looked away from the plot. "What?"

"I thought the guy probably shit himself when you threatened to arrest him if he didn't dig that damn map out of the archives."

"Obstruction of justice," Wa muttered turning back to the map. "Works every time."

Wenton circled around the end of Barrington to swing under the bridge entrance. With a jerk of the steering wheel he bumped up over the curb and set the truck onto a patch of grass. What little sun was left was now blocked by the slabs of concrete over them and it was dark.

"Here we are," Wenton announced. "You up to this?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know what we're going to find in there and I know you're pretty wound up."

"What are you saying? You think my family's strung up on the walls?"

"I don't know," Wenton said, resting his hands on top of the steering wheel. "You thought the Qumrans might have taken your wife and kids. I don't know what we'll see. I just want you to..." He didn't know what exactly. "...stay calm."

"Don't worry about me," he said flatly. He picked up a large flashlight, switching it on, and stepped out of the Durango.

Wenton followed and the two men were soon sweeping the ground with broad beams of light.

"What the hell are we supposed to look for?" Wa finally said as they were nearing the massive concrete footings of the misplaced section of road.

"Footprints. Unusual markings on the grass. Anything that doesn't look right."

Wa's beam stopped on a rise of dirt. "Like this?"

Wenton looked over. Wa used the flashlight to show a distinct break in the grass that followed an almost perfect square. It would have been easy to miss if you weren't looking for it.

"No, that's too obvious."

Wa turned sharply and then saw a hint of a smile on Wenton.

They crouched and began running their hands over the grass until Wenton said, "Got it."

They stood and Wenton pulled a handle out lifting a door behind it. Wa shone his flashlight into the dark hole and they could see a wrought iron ladder bolted to the concrete rimmed tunnel.

Wenton pushed the slab back and let it drop and bent to pick up his flashlight again.

"Let's go check out these bastards."

The old woman whimpered constantly as images wracked her. Thankfully, her eyes were no longer able to open. Although it was slight, it gave her comfort to think that the images of monsters that stung her mind may not be real. And then she screamed.

The members of Qumran were spaced throughout the rest of the bunker.

Somewhere, Samuel Ishab whispered into the darkness, "Teacher?"

The only answer was the echo of the old woman's moans.

"Teacher?" Samuel whispered again. Sweat rolled down his face and he swallowed with difficulty.

"Be strong in faith," a voice replied. "Now is the time of prayers."

"Teacher," Samuel continued, "we can't let them find her. She is too important to our survival."

"Be silent. Let God give you strength. Say nothing. Now is not the time to confront the evil."

Samuel tried to swallow but couldn't. There was dark all around him. He opened his eyes wider and then blinked. There was nothing. He wanted to see something. He wanted to see the face of the Teacher.

"Teacher?" he called again, this time barely even a whisper.

The utter black of the bunker seemed to swallow the beams from their flashlights as Wenton and Wa moved.

Somewhere deeper in the catacombs a noise rolled along the walls towards them.

"Did you hear that?" Wa asked.

"Sounded like a woman," Wenton answered.

"It wasn't Gloria," Wa replied confidently. "I'd know her voice."

Wenton kept moving without replying. He swung his beam across the floor to look for obstacles and then back up each wall. The air was heavy and damp and there was a still

coolness that made his skin moist. He shivered slightly. His beam swung back up the wall on his right and past a pair of eyes. He stopped. "There!" he shouted and moved the beam back.

Nothing.

"What was it?" Wa asked bringing his light to meet Wenton's.

"There was someone there."

Wa shone his beam around the area. "It's just a wall. There's nothing there."

"There was," Wenton answered.

"Don't let this place play tricks on you. They'd want that. That's probably why they set up camp in this shit hole."

Wenton didn't have a chance to tell Wa to "fuck off" because a scream shattered the quiet. It was a hoarse, awful scream of fear and pain.

"What the hell?" Wa said. "That must be the woman they torture."

They started moving in the direction of the voice but soon found themselves in a slight opening in the tunnel. From this area four tunnels led off in different directions.

They waited, listening into the darkness for another noise from the lady.

Samuel Ishab's hands shook and he tried to steady them against the cold concrete behind him. He shrunk back wishing he could move inside the wall and disappear.

The words of the Teacher continued to echo through his mind. "Lusus Naturae is coming. We need to be silent and let the beast pass."

He didn't understand why they invited the beast into their midst. Why would they bring the beast so close to their greatest secret?

He didn't understand why they were hiding. *Why couldn't they just destroy the thing right now?*

He didn't understand why the Teacher told them to prepare for death. What plan could there be that called for death?

Wenton peered down a corridor trying to use his flashlight to cut through the darkness. The light barely provided any illumination.

"These fuckin' flashlights are useless," Wenton snarled.

Wa came up beside him and shone light next to Wenton. "Wait," he said. "There's something down this one."

They moved cautiously. At points, rusted iron brackets and rebar stuck out from the walls and ceilings and they needed to be careful to avoid taking a hit in the eye.

Wenton ran his hand along the wall for extra support. The rough concrete was cold. His eyes burned as he tried to see through the blackness that seemed to suck the light out from every angle. He brought his free hand back from the wall to rub his eyes and then reached out again.

His hand fell right through, missing concrete entirely. Wenton toppled to his left and landed on something smooth and cold. His flashlight dropped away to the ground and both his hands rested on the slightly spongy surface. As soon as he touched it his mind sparked as though he'd been struck in the face. An image flashed in his head that felt like a physical blow. It was a picture of the monster he'd seen before. The same one he'd seen in Stangos' house months before and the same one he'd seen leave Wa's body on the bridge.

"Fuck!" he shouted and stood away, automatically bending to find his flashlight. The blow had shut the light off and he had to feel around his feet to find it.

"What happened?" Wa asked shining his light down to him.

"I touched something in the wall there," he nodded. "Shine your light in there."

The beam pulled away from Wenton and traveled up the wall. "Son-of-a-bitch!" Wa yelped.

Wenton stood quickly. "What?" But he followed Wa's beam into the ledge in the wall. "Fuck," he whistled.

Just then the hoarse scream sounded again from somewhere behind them. They both turned down the hall and then looked back at each other.

forty four

Day Six – Evening

Paul Caster stared across the room at the scrawny young woman on his couch. Her half shirt finished just past her smallish breasts and showed only the slight roll of a stomach above her skin tight blue jeans.

“You want another drink?” Caster asked.

The prostitute used a finger to swirl the ice in her tumbler. “Nah,” she mumbled in a haze. “If you’re done I’m gonna go.” Her cavalier demeanor seemed almost rehearsed and unnatural for how young she appeared.

Caster frowned. “We haven’t even started. What’s your name?”

“Mary. Now I ain’t even going to sit here all night for you or else you’re gonna pay my whole night.” She wagged a wet finger at him. She’d dealt with pricks like this one before. After only one year in the business she knew you had to set the men straight early on or else they’d waste your night. Not only that but there’d been times when she’d not taken control of a situation and paid the price. She refused to be taken advantage of again.

Caster finished his drink in one swallow. “Take your clothes off.”

She stood and lifted her shirt exposing her breasts. “No kissin’ on the mouth and you’re wearing a jimmy the whole time.” She took a breath in to unbutton her jeans. “And just straight sex – I ain’t doing no backdoor.”

Caster smiled. He thought *Sweet and Innocent Escorts* must have been near the bottom of the barrel to send this one out. He’d requested a young looking girl and she was definitely that but there was nothing sweet or innocent about her. He preferred the girls to be a little more naïve. He didn’t enjoy the more street-hardened ones as much. He could feel his face flush as he watched her drop her jeans. Her g-string panties puffed out slightly from the patch of hair beneath.

“How ‘bout you shut the fuck up and do what I tell you,” Caster sneered. *But even the street-hardened ones can learn a lesson or two*, he thought.

Mary froze with her jeans around her ankles. “What’d you say? I’m not putting up with any shit.”

He laughed. “Oh I think you’ll put up with whatever I tell you to put up with.”

She bent over and grabbed the waist of her jeans, pulling them up to her knees. Caster leapt to his feet and shoved her hard back onto the couch.

"I didn't tell you to put your pants back on," he screamed at her. *Fuckin' women*, he thought. *They think they can do whatever they want*. An image of his wife and daughter flirted through his head filling him with anger.

"You bastard," she yelled back. Her hand shot up and suddenly she was holding something. She hadn't been trying to put her pants on she was retrieving her pepper spray.

Caster didn't expect the stream that hit him square in the face. He screamed as his hands went to his eyes trying to rub the irritant away.

The woman was on her feet and threw a punch striking Caster in the side of the head. It was enough to shock him to act. He tackled her back, pinning her arms to her sides. Her slight size made her little match for him.

"You'll pay for that, you bitch," he whispered into her ear as she flipped and struggled like an animal. He blinked furiously. "You'll pay." He head-butted her and a thin trail of blood began to leak out of her nose.

Day Six – Evening

“That’s Edward Carter,” Wenton said looking down at the body on the ledge.

Wa didn’t say anything but held the beam of his flashlight on the body’s face.

“And the body isn’t rotting – there’s no signs of decay or anything.”

“Yep,” Wa answered. He didn’t expect Wenton was looking for a conversation about what they’d found. The body of Edward Carter lay there, only partially clothed but completely intact. There were no signs at all of decay. In addition, there were small wires looped around the body at regular intervals. If the body were tied to the concrete slab on which it lay it was tied down very securely.

“What the hell’s going on?” Wenton asked.

The old lady screamed again. The cry was even more faint than the last – the voice barely able to sound.

“We better find the woman,” Wa announced. “I don’t think Carter’s much of a threat.”

“What the fuck is the body doing here?” Wenton asked quietly as they turned to head back down the tunnel towards the hoarse scream.

As they moved Wenton tapped his light against his hand. His flashlight flickered and the beam returned but flicked out again. He hit it again and the beam was back. It was shorted from the blow it took hitting the concrete floor. *Piece of shit.*

They quickly found themselves back in the slight opening that provided access to tunnels leading off in different directions. They paused, waiting for the sound of the woman.

“You hear her?” Wa asked.

“Not yet.”

They waited.

A slight moan rolled off the walls. It was impossible to tell if it was the woman.

“Do you hear that?” Wenton asked.

Wa was still, trying to listen. “Yeah.”

Wenton pointed with the beam of his flashlight. “It’s either that tunnel or that one.”

“Yep,” Wa answered.

The moan grew slightly louder but remained impossible to localize.

Wa stepped towards the tunnel on the left. "I'll check this one and you do that one. If you find her, yell."

From the sound of the voice it seemed better to find the woman quickly so Wenton agreed.

He could hear someone approaching.

Samuel Ishab wanted to call out to the Teacher again but didn't dare. "Please God, protect me," he began to pray quietly and then realized how futile that was. There was no God to answer his prayers.

He blinked as sweat rolled into his eyes and he brought a hand back up to wipe his brow. His hand bumped something on the way. He froze. He'd hit something standing near him.

Suddenly a face was right next to his. "You little fuckin' coward. You meddling little freak."

"Teacher, help!" Samuel screamed but the words didn't leave his mouth. The man had put a hand over his face and shoved him roughly against the wall. His head struck the concrete with a dull thud and he instantly felt hot liquid drip down through his long hair. The hand tightened around his mouth and pulled his head forward and then slammed it back again.

Samuel felt dizzy. He knew he was going to pass out.

The man drew his head forward again and slammed it back. "You'll die just like your other little friend. You're all a bunch of meddling bastards. You should have never dug Carter out of the ground. That really pissed me off."

Samuel groaned softly as his head struck the wall again and then he felt nothing.

Wenton hadn't moved down the tunnel more than a few feet when he knew the moans were right in front of him. He shone his light across the back of the short tunnel and saw a bed tucked against the wall. An old woman lay on it, her head twisting one way, pausing, and the twisting back the other way. Every so often the woman arched her back and moaned in a terrible gasp.

The mattress was lined with elaborately detailed silk sheets that were a stark contrast to the grey of the bunker. There was a slightly sweet smell in the air as though incense had recently been burned.

It took a moment but Wenton finally realized that the old lady was tied to the cot. Strands of silk were wrapped around her wrists and pulled back on either side, disappearing underneath the bed. When the woman twisted she pulled at the bonds trying to get a hand to her face but she was bound too tightly.

"Wa," he called out. "I've got her."

He went to her side. "Ma'am, I'm here to help you. Can you talk?"

The woman continued to shift from side to side. Closer to her, Wenton realized the sweet smell in the room might have been coming from the woman. Her skin glistened as though she had been soaked in some kind of oil or massage lotion.

"Can you hear me?" Wenton asked more firmly.

At this the woman screamed in her horrible hoarse voice. As the scream subsided, her eyes bolted open and stared wildly upward. "Don't let the beast take me. Please don't let the beast take me."

"I won't," Wenton assured her. "Now, I'm just going to untie you so we can get you out of here."

"It is near!" she cried out when he tried to touch her hand. "Don't let it have me."

"Wenton?" Wa asked from behind him.

"Help me get her out here," Wenton said without turning around.

Together the two men held the old woman long enough to get the ropes off. Her slick skin made it difficult to get a grip and as soon as she was free of the bonds she fell heavily to the floor.

"We gotta get her out of here," Wa said. "She needs to see a doctor."

Wenton nodded and they each took one of her arms, draping it over their shoulders. They began to drag her quickly back down the tunnel.

"When we get out of here you've got to call the police and send ERT down here," Wenton said taking a quick look over at Wa. As he did he noticed strange spots on his face and shirt.

"I'll call the troops in here and they'll clean this place up like..."

"What's on your face?" Wenton interrupted.

Wa was still holding his flashlight but reached up to touch his cheek with the back of his hand. He looked down at the red smudge. "I met one of those bastards in the other tunnel. There's a bunch of them there."

"One of who? The Qumrans?"

"Yeah, he tried to kill me."

"What the hell?" Wenton said in surprise. "I didn't hear anything."

"There was nothing to hear. He jumped on me and I threw him back into the wall."

"How many were there?" Wenton asked.

"I'm not sure."

The old woman groaned. "Don't give me to the beast. Please."

Wenton stopped and Wa did too. "Can you handle getting this woman out of here?"

Wa frowned. "What are you going to do?"

"I want to go get some answers. I'm not leaving here just to come back in a half an hour and find everything cleared out. These bastards are going to pay for what they're doing."

"I don't know," Wa said.

“Take her,” Wenton replied handing the frail woman’s body to Wa. “Call the cops and send them down here and get this woman to the QEII. I’ll be okay.” He pushed his Durango keys into Wa’s hand.

“You sure?” Wa asked but Wenton had already started back down the concrete tunnel to find the rest of the Essene.

Day Six – Evening

Constable Parker Garrison yawned and stretched. He enjoyed the money he made off overtime shifts but he'd only managed a few hours of sleep from his last shift before he'd been called for this one.

He looked back at the hospital room door next to him. "Guess if you'd have died I wouldn't have been called in, eh?" he said smiling. Guarding a pedophile in a coma wasn't exactly exciting work but for double time it didn't matter. Baron Harris wasn't likely to give anybody a problem tonight. *Hell, Garrison thought, the way his face looks he might not give anyone troubles ever. Period.*

And the scenery isn't too bad in here either, he thought as a nurse went past. "Good evening," he said.

She paused, her short dark hair swinging slightly as she did. "Hey there."

Before she could keep moving he added, "Not too bad in here tonight, eh?"

She shook her head. "Seems okay."

"Guarding this scumbag," he said jerking his head back to the room, "isn't too exciting."

"Oh yeah," she answered.

He couldn't tell if she were bored or shy. "I'm Parker Garrison," he said, standing and extending a hand. If she ran off now he knew he'd have his answer.

"Rachel Smith." She shook his hand.

She didn't run. "So what kind of shift do they have you working?" he asked. He hoped their shifts matched so he could invite her for coffee.

"Off-shift," she answered flatly. "I get out of here at seven."

"Hey, I'm off at that time too. Why don't..."

He didn't get to finish. A loud scream sounded in the room behind them. Baron Harris was awake.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Garrison yelled. Instinctively he pushed through the hospital door into the room. The suspect was his responsibility. Rachel Smith followed.

The room was only partially lit. A light over the bed and one in the corner. The large panel lights in the ceiling were off.

Harris was sitting straight up, strings of wires trailing away from him on all sides to monitors and I.V.s.

Garrison froze. He'd seen the guy when he first arrived but now with him sitting up the full extent of the beating was obvious. Harris' face was swollen in patches that almost doubled the size of his head. One eye was swollen completely shut and the other was puffy with the pupil streaked in red. White splotches of bandage covered areas where stitches were needed to close wounds. His head was obviously shaved on one side, directly over his ear, but a white bandage covered the bald spot.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Garrison repeatedly, more quietly.

Nurse Smith wasn't as phased by Harris' appearance. She went straight to the side of the bed and pressed the call button that hung on the headboard rail.

"Mr. Harris," she said softly. "Can you hear me?"

His mouth was opening and closing like a fish sucking air.

"Yes," a voice crackled back through the intercom.

"Shelley? This is Rachel down in Baron Harris' room. Can you send the on-call over? I think he's coming around."

"You got it," Shelley answered and the intercom beeped as it disconnect.

"The doctor's coming, Mr. Harris. Why don't you just lay back?" She put a hand on his back and one on his shoulder to help ease him down. He remained rigidly upright, his lips still opening and closing.

"What's the matter with him?" Garrison asked, moving a little closer.

She didn't look at the constable. "Near as I can tell, the police almost beat him to death when they arrested him." Her voice was suddenly cold.

Shit, he thought, *so much for a coffee later*. He decided to avoid that topic. "What's up with his mouth?"

She glanced at his face and shrugged. "Maybe he wants to say something." She gave a little more pressure on his shoulder. "Please lay back Mr. Harris. You'll be more comfortable." She didn't want him pulling the I.V. out or stitches.

"You trying to say something?" Garrison blurted in a voice that was a little too loud.

"Where the hell is the doctor?" Smith asked out loud.

"I.. I.. I..," Harris said through swollen lips that now showed strings of saliva dripping down to his shirt.

Garrison stepped closer. "What's that? You what?"

"I.. I never.."

"Never what?" Garrison barked leaning over slightly. "Never what?"

"Just leave him alone until the doctor gets here," Smith scolded.

He frowned at her. "This suspect has something to say. I need to hear it." Now he didn't even want to have coffee with the little bitch nurse. She had no business telling him how to do his job. He bent over further, turning his ear to Harris. "What do you want to tell me?"

"I never..." he started and then suddenly he came alive and grabbed Garrison around the neck pulling him down hard against him. Both men rolled flat onto the bed and Harris held Garrison's ear to his mouth.

Nurse Smith screamed and bolted upright, unsure of what do to.

"I never wanted to hurt that boy," Harris spat into the constable's ear. "He killed his own son. He killed his own son."

Garrison recovered and quickly broke free of Harris' cold hands. "What?" he screamed down at Harris. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Harris fell back and lay quietly. His one visible eye closed now and his lips pressed together.

"Who killed his own son?" Garrison shouted. "Who?"

forty seven

Day Six – Evening

Kevin Davis glanced over at his companion. It was difficult to forget that he was seated in the hospital van next to a 7 foot tall pedophile. He'd been a nurse at the Forensic Hospital for 3 years and knew that patients weren't allowed privileges to go to a movie unless they were safe but even still, it was hard not to be a little nervous.

"How you feeling, Lobs..," he started and caught himself quickly, "David? You excited about the movie?"

Lobster Table nodded but didn't look over at his escort. In the dark, Kevin couldn't tell that David's face was pinched into concentration.

"Bit of a drive to get out here but it's worth it, eh?" Kevin asked as they pulled off the Bi-High onto the Bayer's road exit. The pair had traveled from Dartmouth to Halifax and then out to the Bayer's Park Industrial area where the gigantic Empire Theatres complex was. It was the only theatre in the Halifax Region that boasted more than 10 screens and wide stadium seating. Once off the highway they found themselves immediately lined up in traffic. The entire shopping and entertainment area was basically served by one small entrance and during business hours there was always a bad bottleneck.

"So what movie are we seeing tonight, Dave?" He wanted to keep them talking. It seemed less intimidating if they were talking especially since David had such a childish voice. It reminded him there was nothing to worry about.

Lobster Table shook his massive head. "Doesn't matter," he grunted. He desperately wished the nurse would shut-up. *I need to think, think, think.*

"Oh yeah," Kevin said, smiling. "Then how about a nice love story. Something real romantic."

David nodded. "Yeah."

Kevin glanced over again just before starting through the green light. "You like the romantic films, eh? I figured you for more of an action man."

"Yeah, action is good."

"Now you're talking. That's my kind of flick too." *Wake up, you retard. This is supposed to be a treat for you.* He sighed and rested his arms on the steering wheel.

Lobster Table turned his head slightly and looked out his passenger window. *So many people. So many cars. I wish I knew what to do.*

"Here we go," Kevin announced as they turned in past the Dairy Queen and into the parking lot of the Empire Theatres. Being a Friday evening the parking lot was full. It had likely been full ever since the matinees started at noontime.

"Whoa," Kevin said slowing the van to a crawl. "Looks like we weren't the only ones with the bright idea of getting out to a movie."

"Too many people," David muttered.

"Yep, there's lots of people but luckily there's lots of movies to choose from. Keep your eyes open for a spot."

They drove through the lines of cars until they reached the entrance to the theatre and then turned to head back down a different aisle.

"Guess we should've left the van back at the hospital and walked," Kevin said forcing a laugh.

Lobster Table didn't turn from his window. He didn't make a sound. He was worried that Kevin would notice the sweat on his forehead.

"There we go," Kevin said pointed off to the right through the windshield. There was a spot near the end of the row of cars, just before the back of the lot where it dipped down to Chapters Bookstore. "Bit of a walk for us now but at least we're on our way."

He wheeled the van in and threw it into park. "Ready, David?" he asked turning to the big man.

David was staring back at him.

"Are you okay?" Kevin asked, suddenly concerned. It looked as though David was having an attack of some kind. His face was bright red and soaked in sweat. He reached out and put an hand on David's massive forearm. "David?"

Almost as though a switch were turned, Lobster Table's arms sprang out and gripped around Kevin's throat. In one swift motion the nurse was lifted from his seat and his head smashed into the roof of the van. David then roughly swung Kevin foreword and cracked his head into the windshield. He released the much smaller man and Kevin body crumbled loosely back into his seat, sliding partially down over the pedals.

"I'm so sorry," David cried out and reached to stroke Kevin's hair. "You are a nice nurse. I'm so sorry but I had no choice. No choice." He brought his hand back and stared at it. There were streaks of blood across it. His hand started to shake so hard that he clamped it down on his leg.

His hand continued to shake as he gripped his leg and then he suddenly realized he was smearing blood on his pants. He pulled his hand away revealing red smudges above his knee. Bile exploded into the back of his throat and he punched open his door falling out onto the

pavement. He swallowed furiously trying to choke back the vomit but it was too late and it spilled out splashing onto the black gray parking lot.

I must go, he told himself. *I must go*.

He forced himself to his feet and wiped an arm over his mouth before he loped across the parking lot. The pastor told him to see his sister. He had to find her. There was a crumbled piece of paper in his pocket that Mary had given him. On the paper was an address and phone number of a man his sister told him sent her to see other bad men. He felt his face flush as he ran.

"I'll find her Pastor Wrightland," he mumbled as he loped along.

Day Six – Evening

The dark felt even more oppressive with only a single flashlight to navigate. Wenton didn't care.

"Get out here you freaks," he shouted as he pounded his way back into the bunker. "I know you're hiding like rats. I can smell you. I'm sick and fuckin' tired of all the shit going on around here."

He arrived back at the junction where he and Wa had split up the first time. He knew two of the corridors led to dead-ends. One dead-end held the bed where the old woman had been shackled. Another led to the body of Edward Carter. He chose one he hadn't traveled.

"Don't make me hunt you down," he called out.

He continued down the tunnel and caught a glimpse of something. He felt, more than saw, motion ahead of him. He waved his light towards it. This corridor was considerably longer than the two dead-ends. At the end of it there seemed to be a slight glow, maybe another light. His pace quickened.

As he moved he heard a scratch as though a chair slid across the floor. *There's definitely someone there.* His grip on the heavy flashlight increased. It was no accident that he chose a heavy, steel flashlight.

"Dr. Wenton."

Wenton stopped. Someone had called his name. He peered ahead and could make out a silhouette against the dim light at the end. It was a tall, slender man.

"Dr. Wenton," the voice spoke again. It was a confident strong voice with the ring of an old world accent. Having heard the voice a second time he knew it was the man standing at the end of the corridor.

"Join our fellowship. We have gathered. Join us in peace."

And then the man stepped away from the light and out of sight. Wenton continued down the corridor.

As he neared the end he saw a circle of chairs around the outside of a larger alcove. Men sat around the room. All appeared Middle Eastern with long robes and hair that flowed down their backs. In total, there were 14 men seated around the circle.

The room was illuminated by a single lantern in the centre of the room. Near it stood a tall man who watched Wenton enter as though he were expecting a late guest. It was the same man who'd stood in the tunnel and urged him along.

"By the grace of God," the man said.

Wenton laughed. "God has nothing to do with it."

The man nodded. "Blessed is the man whom God may guide. Your words ring with truth. A truth greater than I suspect you realize."

"Please," the man said urging him forward with a wave of his hand, "enter. Sit."

"I'm good," Wenton said.

"Your heart is filled with questions," the man said – his tone of voice remaining always at an even keel, never going up or down. "But before we begin, with your grace two of my brothers must attend to Samuel."

For the first time Wenton realized that the 14 men seated around the chamber were not watching him. The only one who looked at him was the tall person in the centre. Everyone else sat with their hands folded and eyes closed.

"I want everyone to stay just where they are," Wenton answered.

"It is the life and death of our brother. You hold it within your hands."

Wenton scowled. "What the fuck's the deal with the riddles? Can't you talk normally?"

"Dr. Wenton?"

"You've elected yourself the speaker so my focus is on you. You'll answer me. My eyes aren't leaving you. What these other fucks do isn't my concern right now since the cops will be arresting all of you in a second or two."

The man nodded and without another word two of the men from the circle rose and immediately left down the corridor Wenton had just come through.

"Please sit," the man said addressing Wenton again. "You must know the truth now. It is time."

"Just talk," Wenton ordered.

"The beast has taken the Holy Guide."

"What?"

"You found the Holy Guide. The beast has left with her."

"The old lady?" Wenton asked. "We came here to save her from you bastards. I know all about what you do with her. You guys kidnap some poor woman and rape her."

He shook his head, almost sadly. "I realize the Catholic Church spreads lies about us. They fear the truth. Into the hands of evil and so evil takes the hand."

"The Catholic Church is scared?" Wenton laughed.

"They fear the end of religion – the end of their profitable business. They fear the truth that the Essene represent and the spread lies of hatred to undermine our mission."

"This is bullshit. Just tell me if you have Mitchell Wa's wife and kids. Are they here?"

"In time."

"Why do you have Edward Carter's body? Has this got something to do with him?"

Wenton pushed.

"Everything. He continues the route to final omega," the man answered without emphasis.

Wenton stepped sharply towards him and grabbed him by the loose fitting robe. He snarled into the man's face, "You start answering me directly or we're about to have a real problem."

He only nodded. Wenton let him go, giving him a slight push to send the man back a few steps.

"The deception of Satan has clouded your mind," the man said, unfazed by the physical aggression. "We are not here to bring the world to an end. We serve to save the world and have the Lord God return. The Holy Guide, the woman, was our only route to hope in future salvation. The beast now has her and will certainly kill her after he tortures her. The beast still resides in Mitchell Wa."

"No, the beast left Wa on the bridge. I saw that."

He shook his head slowly, almost sadly. "The beast enters the world through a weak vessel. It can then make one, and only one, shift to another vessel before it leaves the earth. The beast will use up the second vessel as well – sucking the very life out of the possessed. The beast left Edward Carter and entered Mitchell Wa. This is certain. It remains in Sergeant Wa until it must leave the world. What you may have seen on the bridge was indeed the beast but it could not have left Sergeant Wa entirely. We know this because the flesh of Edward Carter's body remains preserved until the beast returns to it."

Wenton was silent for a moment.

"Well," he finally said, "that just raises a whole lot more questions than it answers. You better keep talking."

forty nine

Day Six – Evening

Habib Alikinder rarely made the trip into his Bayer's Lake "call center". It was one of his many businesses that he left to his dumb nephew, Roger. But Roger was sick and it was a Friday night when there was always a lot of business at *Sweet and Innocent Escorts* – all the out-of-town businessmen who were looking for "some fun".

He parked his Lincoln Continental in front of the nondescript length of warehouses and looked up into his rearview mirror. He smoothed the rough hair of his unkempt beard and smiled. "Still handsome," he told himself. There were frequently pretty girls around the office and he liked to look good.

He stepped out of the car and looked around, almost a reflex. He believed he had a sixth sense about danger. He liked to think he could tell if someone were watching him. Every time he visited his escort business he was vigilant for any signs of the police staking out his operation. He knew it was unlikely. He'd located the call center here in Bayer's Lake just past the main entertainment and shopping districts because it was hidden. All the traffic and commotion generated by the mainstream businesses of this area made his little operation almost invisible. To anyone it was just a small little warehouse shoved in among a row of other warehouses.

He smiled a broad grin of yellow teeth and gold. *The coast is clear*, he confirmed and walked to the doors of his shop.

He pushed open the door. The call center was two desks with business phones on each desk. Calls to the yellow pages ad were routed through a few different lines and ended up here where two of his older girls answered the lines. The back of the warehouse was a private office where Roger normally worked.

"I am here," he announced. He liked appreciative staff. The hollow stares of the two women did not strike him as very appreciative of his entrance.

"What is problem?" he asked, angry bringing out more of his accent.

The women continued to stare at him, unable to speak.

"I have booger?" he said wiping his nose dramatically. "My cock hanging out?"

"You are very bad man," a childish voice sounded behind Habib.

"What in hell?" he said, turning.

Lobster Table reached out with one hand and grabbed Habib by the front of his shirt. He pulled him forward until the man was pressed against Lobster's enormous gut. He leaned into Habib's face when he spoke, "Take me to my sister or I'll hurt you."

fifty

Day Six – Evening

"I am the Teacher of Righteousness," the man said as he and Wenton left the larger room and entered a smaller, adjoining room.

The room was filled with elaborate telecommunications equipment. Lights flashed on consoles but the room was oddly quiet as though the volume on all the audio equipment were off.

"Have a seat," the Teacher offered.

Wenton took one of the two seats available and the Teacher sat in the other.

"The Emergency Response Team will be here soon," Wenton announced matter-of-factly. He hoped if this guy had anything interesting to say that might prompt him to get to it quicker.

"I don't think so," he said in his same monotone pitch. "It wasn't Sergeant Wa that left here and *Lusus Naturae* would have no inclination to bring the authorities here."

"I don't think *Lusus Naturae*," he started, mocking the Teacher's use of the term, "is still in Wa." He remembered watching it leave Wa just before the sergeant was going to jump of the MackKay Bridge.

"*Lusus Naturae* enters the world through a vessel that cannot contain it. *Lusus nature* makes one corporeal change and only one change. It then must re-enter the underworld through the same portal that brought it. The Beast can only be in Mitchell Wa until it leaves him to return to Edward Carter and the netherworld."

"So a year ago when Edward Carter was raping women in Halifax – it was actually the beast doing it?"

"When *Lusus Naturae* enters the world it does so in a burst of anger and energy. It destroys the initial host. Edward Carter was strong and did not die right away. The beast used Mr. Carter for it's own selfish pleasure – forcing him to attack those women. The fury of the sexual assaults would have brought darkness out of the women – forced them to confront their own evil. No person could remain sane in the presence of *Lusus Naturae* at that stage. No one."

"This is all fairy tale nonsense."

He smiled. "Then why are you here with me now?"

"You've got one chance to convince me you're not psycho and then I'm breaking your nose and taking my leave."

"Search your heart, Dr. Wenton. The answers are all there."

"No riddles," Wenton spat.

He nodded and continued, "Do you feel God's presence?"

Wenton didn't answer.

"Do you see evidence of God's presence in the world today?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Do you think it is possible that the world is still in the hands of God as most organized religions try to convince us?"

"The point, please," Wenton sighed.

"God has left the world. This is no surprise. The bible predicted it would happen. The Holy Catholic Church knows it is true. The only thing that has been hidden from the world is that we are not a world waiting for Armageddon – we are a world struggling in the aftermath of Armageddon."

"What?"

"The historical evidence is that the world suffered a plague nearly 2000 years ago. At least 95% of the world's children died, quickly. The world was wiped out and had to restart. Only history isn't entirely correct about the plague. It was no plague that took the children 2000 years ago. It was the days of judgement. Just as the New Testament of the bible states, the Lord's only Son had come to walk on the face of the Earth. However, Jesus came in judgement of the Earth and it was His Holy judgement that only the children were fit to see the gates of Heaven. Only the children were to be saved. It wasn't a plague that took our children 2000 years ago. The Lord God took their souls out of their bodies on the wings of angels under the command of His only Son and the true King, Jesus Christ.

"So, in a way, some of what the bibles of today say is true. Jesus came to save the world but He also came to bring the world to an end. However, in the last moments of judgement the Lord God was merciful. After the judgement to save the children the world was spared destruction. It was spared destruction but left out of balance in the hands of the demon that lives beneath us. Left in the hands of Satan.

"And the world carried on. After Armageddon the world regrouped only this time without God to watch over it. This time the balance of good versus evil was lost. The world would slowly feed on itself until the time that Satan claimed it as his own."

Wenton couldn't listen quietly anymore. "You guys are insane. I know that you wanted the world to end 2000 years ago. You believed it would be the Essene, and only the Essene, who would be saved but you were wrong. Armageddon didn't come and your sect looked like fools. Now, you believe that the answer is to create an Armageddon because you think you'll be the saved again. Well, you're wrong again."

The Teacher shook his head. "That isn't true. The Essenes are guardians of the Word of God. We have spent our existence locked in battle against the coming of *Lusus Naturae* in the

hopes that we can slowly restore a balance to the world. In that balance we may one day garner the attention of the Heavenly Father who will then bestow grace onto this dying world.”

“What are you talking about, imbalance? What imbalance?” Wenton asked.

“It is all around us. The imbalance is proof that God has left us in the hands of Satan. Hell is found from inequity just as there is no evil without good.”

Wenton sighed loudly. “More riddles.”

“Who could believe that God still exists these days? Only the privileged. The only people who could possibly believe that the Lord hasn’t abandoned this Earth are the privileged minority of the industrialized countries – mainly North America. A tiny percentage of the world hold all of the wealth, all of the access to health care and education, all of the hope of a world not offered up to Satan and in this is the proof of our plight.

“Ask yourself – why does the advantage of a few, this tremendous imbalance, bring the world closer to Omega. For it is in the very imbalance that the greatest injustice, the greatest suffering takes place. Suffering is only so if there is an alternative. A person cannot be poor if someone else isn’t rich. The imbalance has become the thing that dooms the world. The imbalance shows us what has become of the world. You must see it.”

Wenton wanted to leave. He thought he’d accomplished everything he could from this meeting. Except for one thing. “So what are you trying to do about this imbalance? What’s it got to do with Edward Carter?”

“The prophecy predicts that the end of hope corresponds to the return of *Lusus Naturae*. Satan will send his messengers into the world to create pain and suffering – to wreak even greater havoc on a world already burdened by suffering and hatred. To speed convergence unto evil.

“We can disrupt those plans. We monitor global communications.” He waved a hand around the room they sat in. “Through stations set up around the world we watch for events that herald the arrival of *Lusus Naturae*. When he arrives we track him with the help of the Holy Guide. We follow those involved, keep an eye on them and wait to act. Only the Holy Guide can help us find the evil when it enters the world and only the Holy Guide can give us directions on the movements of the Beast toward the end. When the Beast possesses an individual it owns him. After it moves to its second host we are then in a position to trap it and send it out of this world. The beast uses up the person it enters. The physical body can only last a year before the beast will have to exit it. At the exact moment that the Beast leaves the second host to return to the original portal and exit the Earth – we can destroy the portal and strand the Beast.”

“It’s that simple, eh?”

The Teacher frowned. “Simple?”

“The Holy Guide tells you when the beast leaves a body and then you destroy the original body and also destroy the beast.”

He nodded. "Except that the power to see the beast made the Holy Guide lose her mind. By seeing evil, by being connected to that evil, it ate away her being – it corrupted her and made her unable to function normally. Recently we even had to physically restrain her to keep her from clawing her own eyes out. She could no longer bear the thought of witnessing the beast and yet she is the only Guide left. Without her we are lost in our fight to restore balance."

"This is ridiculous," Wenton snarled. "I'm going."

"The world will end, Dr. Wenton."

He stood and started to the doorway.

"Without the Holy Guide we are lost," the Teacher pleaded. "You must find her and bring her back. Time is running out for Mitchell Wa – it has almost been a year."

He ignored the man and kept going. *Where the hell are the police? What the hell is the matter with you Wa?*

The Essene in the outer room were all still seated, deep in prayer. They didn't react as Wenton moved past them. He stopped and deliberately stared at one of them to see if he would look up. He didn't. *I see why you idiots are the silent ones*, he thought.

As he started to walk again he noticed for the first time that every Essene was old. There wasn't a single one that looked under the age of 60. And now, as he thought about it, he would have guessed that the Teacher was also in his 60s or maybe even his 70s.

He shrugged it off and kept going to the exit.

Day Six – Evening

Dr. Caster stopped and blinked a few times. The pepper spray was still bothering him. He gripped the end of the scarf again and pulled it tight. Mary moaned in pain which made him smile. *Payback*, he thought blinking again.

He'd managed to subdue the struggling woman and now had her face down on the living room floor. He'd needed something to tie her up and the only thing close enough was a couple of old fashion scarves his wife had left.

The first scarf had gone in her mouth. Her steady stream of profanity and cursing left him little choice about gagging her. He didn't want to listen to her.

Her feet were still thrashing around wildly but at least he had her hands tied now. He finally felt he had control over the situation again.

Fuckin' bitch, he thought as he moved back to sit on her legs. "You should just calm down," he said. "All your antics are just pissing me off."

"Uck Uu," she grunted through the scarf.

He leaned over her and grabbed her by the back of the head. He jerked her head up and then popped it back onto the floor. "Show a little more respect," he barked.

Her long low moan told Dr. Caster that she was only semi-conscious which suited him fine.

He stood and kicked her in the side. She moaned a little louder but didn't return to flipping around. Satisfied, he headed to the closet to grab something to tie her legs. He remembered a big length of blue rope that he used last Christmas to tie their tree to the top of the Volvo.

He threw open the closet doors and reached up onto the shelf. The rope was right where he'd seen it earlier. He brought it down and headed back to the prostitute but suddenly froze.

There was a loud knock on the door behind him.

"What the hell?" he breathed out. No one ever came by the house unexpected.

He hurried back to Mary and quickly wrapped the rope around her legs, tying it and pulling it tight. Another knock on the door sounded as he was working on her legs.

"Hold on," he called out and instantly regretted it. He realized he didn't have to be home. It was probably a sales person and they would've just kept going if he hadn't said anything.

He grabbed the prostitute under the arms and roughly flipped her. He started to drag her and she weakly protested – obviously still dazed from earlier.

Dr. Caster pulled her into the bathroom just off the living room and dropped her onto the hard tile.

The knock at the door was more urgent now. The whole house seemed to shake with the force of it.

What's this guy's problem? he wondered as he stepped out of the bathroom, locking the door from the inside before he pulled it shut.

He hurried back to the front entrance just as the pounding started again. He was about to grab hold of the knob when the door exploded off its hinges throwing the doctor backwards.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Dr. Caster called out as he forced himself over against the closet to avoid being crushed by the door.

Mitchell Wa stepped into the house. Under one arm he carried the old lady. She was tucked under his arm as though she were rug he'd just purchased.

"What are you doing?" Dr. Caster screamed.

Wa smiled. "I'm going to need a medical consultation on this worthless bitch."

Caster looked around in a panic. At first he'd thought the police were here to arrest him for the botched surgery but now, seeing the old lady, he didn't know what to think. "What are you talking about?"

Wa walked into the living room and dropped the old lady on the couch. "I don't want this bitch to die yet. I thought she should see a doctor and maybe he could help her. That's when I thought of you. You're a doctor and since you killed my son I thought maybe you owed me one."

Dr. Caster was shaking his head, not because he wouldn't help but because nothing made sense. He couldn't understand what was going on.

"Don't you think you owe me one?"

Revenge. Maybe it did make sense, Dr. Caster thought. *He's distraught over his son. He's here for revenge.* "Who's the woman, though?"

"The old woman?" he asked, seemingly surprised that Caster would ask about her. "Why, she's the Holy Guide. She's the only one who can see into the netherworld and destroy me."

"What are you talking about?" Dr. Caster almost screamed, panic causing his voice to rise steadily.

Wa just smiled. He knew he'd won.

Day Six – Evening

Wenton stepped out of the bunker into the cool darkness of the night. Except for the occasional buzz of a car circling past and carrying on towards the MacKay bridge – it was quiet. The Durango was gone but there were no signs of emergency vehicles. No Emergency Response Team. Nothing.

He pulled his cellphone out and dialed.

“Halifax Regional Police,” a voice answered. There was no urgency in the person’s tone because he’d dialed the police station directly.

“This is Dr. Michael Wenton,” he announced. “Has anyone heard from Mitchell Wa tonight? Anything about something going on near the MacKay bridge?”

“Hold on,” the woman replied and Wenton heard the receiver drop onto a desk. There were muffled voices for a few minutes before someone returned.

A male came on the line. “Who is this?”

Wenton snorted. “Why?”

“This is Staff Sergeant Hamilton. Who’s calling?” The voice was more stern now.

“This is Dr. Michael Wenton,” he said, unimpressed by the tone. “Has Sergeant Wa called anything in tonight?”

“Dr. Wenton?” Hamilton answered, obviously recognizing the name. “I’m sorry, what’s going on?”

“Did Wa call anything in?” he asked again in slow, crisp words. *Idiot.*

“Sergeant Wa’s on a leave of absence. There was a death in his family. I haven’t heard from him.”

“So no one’s been dispatched to the MacKay bridge?”

“Is there something going on down there?”

“You should...,” he started and stopped. He was going to tell Hamilton to send ERT down to the bunker. He was going to get the damn Essenes arrested and thrown in jail because at least he’d know where to find them again. “Nevermind,” he finally said and hit *end*. He’d remembered something else that Pastor Wrightland had said. Something odd.

He quickly dialed another number.

“QEII Health Sciences Centre,” a voice answered.

"Emergency," Wenton said.

The phone clicked and another voice came on. "Emergency, Jenny."

"This is Dr. Wenton with the Halifax Regional Police. Did an officer bring an older female in tonight? She would have been in fairly bad shape, likely incoherent – possibly psychotic."

"An officer?"

"He was plainclothes so he may not have identified himself as police. Was an older woman admitted recently – like within the last hour?"

"I'm on the desk here and there's been no one like that."

"No older woman at all?"

"Not tonight – no wait," she suddenly blurted. "Our regular was back in but she's in all the time for panic attacks."

"That's fine. You'd know this one if she'd come in," Wenton said and pressed *end* again.

"Shit," he said. He'd suspected he wouldn't find anything before he even made the calls but he needed to go through the motions anyway. *Damn.*

He slowly turned and looked back at the entrance to the bunker. He realized what he needed to do. The last thing Gary Wrightland had said made sense now: "Lusus Naturae will take her to the doctor's house."

He stooped to pull the trapdoor up again.

Day Six – Evening

Dr. Caster bent over the old woman. Her body was still but shook violently every once in awhile as though she were having a seizure. As he watched her a drop of blood suddenly appeared on her cheek. He frowned and then touched his nose. It was wet, the blood had dripped off of him. He stood.

“I’m not equipped to help her – she should go to a hospital,” Dr. Caster announced.

Wa stared at the doctor from the chair where he sat watching the strange medical examination taking place on the living room floor. His legs were spread and he rested a hand on each knee. Without any obvious movement he simply rose to his feet.

“Give her something. Make her coherent if even for a moment.”

On cue, the old woman moaned loudly as though a spasm of pain had creased her body.

“Give her something like what?” Dr. Caster asked.

Wa moved across the floor until he was next to the doctor. “Something. Adrenaline. I don’t care.”

“Okay, okay,” he said and quickly moved away from Wa. “I’ll go get my bag.” Just having Wa that close to him made his stomach flip.

Wa slid backwards and dropped into his seat. Dr. Caster went up the stairs to the bedrooms two at a time and into the master bathroom. He kept a fairly extensive medical kit under the counter. He grabbed it and headed back down. *I’ll help this freak and then get him out of here.*

As he came down he noticed the old lady had shifted slightly. She looked as though she’d made an effort to drag herself in the direction of the door. He looked over at Wa but he was still seated in the chair.

He knelt beside the lady and opened his bag. He kept an epi-pen as most doctors did and he pushed other equipment aside looking for it. Then the old lady grunted something.

He looked down at her. She grunted again. He leaned to her. “Did you say something?”

“Don’t let it touch me,” she whispered hoarsely. “Please kill me.”

“It’s going to be okay,” he said automatically. “Don’t worry about anything.”

“Don’t talk to her,” a voice suddenly boomed through the room. Wa’s voice filled every empty space and didn’t seem to originate from one spot. “Just give her the shot.”

"Please, don't let him have me," the old lady said, the side of her face pressed to the floor. Her eyes searched upwards for him but she didn't have the strength left to move any more than that. "Please."

Dr. Caster closed his eyes momentarily and then reached back into his bag. "Where the hell is that epi-pen?" he barked and roughly flipped the bag over onto the floor.

Finally he saw it and grabbed it up, popping it out of its case. He leaned back to the old lady. "This won't hurt at all and you'll feel much better," he recited as he lowered the needle to the back of her arm.

Inside Dr. Caster's bathroom the prostitute lay motionless listening to the commotion in the other room. She'd been struggling with the scarves around her wrists when she'd heard the front door kicked in. She'd known there was serious trouble and she didn't want to draw attention to herself especially when she was so vulnerable.

Mary rolled her wrists inside the scarves again. There was very little give. She knew her wrists were starting to bleed and the blood was making the scarf slick. She tried her legs. Her ankles were so tightly pressed together she could feel the bruises forming.

She paused and tried to take a deep breath through her gag. She knew panic was close. She didn't want to freak out and kick and punch wildly but she was headed in that direction. She hated being confined. She felt so helpless and vulnerable. She refused to feel that way. She promised herself she wouldn't ever feel weak again after her first trick had turned out to be with a violent Dal professor who'd humiliated and beat her. Never again.

"It'll take effect almost immediately," Dr. Caster said putting the plastic tip back over the needle and dropping it into his medical bag.

Once again, Wa rose from his chair and glided to stand next to the old lady. "Put her on the couch," he said.

Dr. Caster gently rolled the old lady onto her back and then put a hand under her armpits. He lifted her slightly and pulled her closer to the couch. He lifted her and rolled her onto the sofa. She moaned softly through the entire production.

"Ma'am," he asked once she was laying back. "Can you hear me?"

Without warning, Wa was behind Dr. Caster. With a single swat of his hand he lifted the doctor off his feet and sent him through the air hard into the wall. The doctor grunted as his breath was forced out and he collapsed onto the floor in front of the entrance to the kitchen.

"Thank you," Wa laughed at the doctor and then bent to the old lady. "I need to know what the Essene know. Are you their only Guide?"

The old lady closed her eyes tightly and bit her bottom lip.

Wa slapped her face, just enough to turn her head. "Are you their only Guide?"

She opened her eyes wide and stared back at Wa defiantly. "I won't answer you."

He grabbed her around the shoulders and shook her violently. "You'll do as I tell you or you'll wish you had."

"Never," she whispered, "for you are *Lusus Naturae* – the beast – but you can never hurt me."

He put a hand on top of her head and started to squeeze. His grip suddenly seemed larger now, stronger. He could feel the bone of her skull beneath his fingers and he squeezed even harder. She cried out in pain and he stopped.

"Are you the only Holy Guide?"

"I know only of me," she finally answered.

"Do you know of the next entry?"

"In number they shall be six times. We don't know all of their entry to our world."

That seemed to please him. "And are there more of the *Essene* – others that aren't in Halifax now?"

"I will not betray them."

Wa struck her across the face, harder this time. "You'll answer."

She stared back at him, her face swelling with a red welt. "You'll get nothing from me."

"I'll," he started and slapped her across the other side of her face, "get" Slap! "whatever" Slap! "I" Slap! "want." With the final slap her head tilted back at an odd angle.

"Where do the *Essenes* live?" he asked.

The old lady was quiet. Her head hung back limply.

"Where?" Wa screamed.

"She's dead," Dr. Caster said from the floor. Blood was streaked across his face from a gash high on the side of his head.

Wa spun on the doctor.

"You broke her neck," he said nodding at the old lady.

"Fuck you," he said and moved towards the doctor.

Dr. Caster pushed himself back against the wall. His head still spun from the blow he'd taken and he couldn't get off the floor.

"What did you say?" Wa screamed down at him.

Dr. Caster looked away. He felt like he might be sick. He didn't know if it was being near Wa or his injuries but bile was quickly filling the back of his throat.

"You're the doctor – fix her," Wa ordered.

"I can't," Caster said, still refusing to look up. "I can barely move."

Wa kicked him lifting him off the floor. "You had the strength to kill Wa's son. Surely you can find something in you to help that disgusting old woman."

Dr. Caster stayed silent.

"You worthless shit," Wa muttered. "Look at me."

The doctor slightly shook his head.

"Facini entfaste blackened side."

The words physically struck Dr. Caster and he recoiled again.

"Facini entfaste blackened side."

"No," Dr. Caster moaned. "Don't." He turned to look up at Wa but Wa wasn't there anymore.

He screamed at what he saw. The room was suddenly filled with children. Each wore small hospital gowns and each stared at him with blank eyes. His eyes searched wildly around the room, trying to understand where they'd come from. But he knew. He'd known right away.

The child nearest to him, a 6-year old bent to him with one outstretched hand. The other hand was gone. Only a hideous stump poked out from the gown and the end of the arm looked as though it had been chewed off by an animal. Blood and tendons still hung around the freshly exposed bone. The girl whispered to him as she reached out.

He leapt to his feet and backed away. He immediately bumped into another child. This time a 10 year old boy. He felt the boy fall away crashing to the ground. He turned and saw a border of thick, black blood on the bottom of the hospital gown just at the level of where the boys knees should be only the boy had no knees. As he fell backwards his stumps flew into the air, waving frantically. Little droplets of blood sprayed off the newly amputated stumps. The boy had been balancing on these useless legs when Dr. Caster had bumped him. This boy too was whispering to him, a constant hiss of static.

He tore his eyes away from the boy back to the crowded room. "It can't be," he screamed. "It wasn't all me."

The room was filled with children in bloodied hospital gowns. Each with missing limbs or horrible disfigurements. Some were missing sections of their scalps, others had tubes leading out of their stomachs that constantly dripped a terrible thick yellow fluid.

Dr. Caster yelled again and backed through the doorway into his kitchen. He had to get away from the nightmare.

Thankfully, the kitchen was empty of children. He collapsed over the kitchen table, sucking in air. The hissing sound in the living grew louder and he could finally make out what the children were chanting. "Why?" they screamed. "Why?"

"Please don't," he whispered.

"Why?" the children continued to chant. "Why? Why? Why?"

There was a strange sound near him and Caster stood up quickly. On the floor near him was a boy. A small, four-year old boy had pulled himself into the kitchen, using two badly amputated stumps to drag his body. Blood poured from the wounds at the end of his arms and a

trail of blood led back to the living room. The boy looked up at Dr. Caster and smiled broadly.

"Facini entfaste blackened side."

In the bathroom, Mary tried to force herself in behind the toilet but there just wasn't room. The horrible screams coming from the living room were almost unbearable to listen to. She was convinced that Dr. Caster was being tortured to death. She pressed her ear against the floor, hoping it would help dampen the sounds.

And then she heard Dr. Caster screaming again.

Day Six – Evening

The door was broken off its hinges. That was the first thing Wenton noticed as he stood outside Dr. Caster's house in South End Halifax. Someone had kicked the door in and then propped it back up in place. He casually walked up the interlaced brick path to the front entrance. As he walked a scream sounded from somewhere inside. He had a vague feeling of déjà vu and almost expected to find Tim Dallons, an old cop who'd he worked with, next to him. It was Sergeant Dallons and Wenton who'd gone into a house a year ago tonight to capture Edward Carter after he'd escaped the forensic facility. He shrugged it off.

He stood next to the crooked door and listened again. The house was quiet which meant nothing. Wenton briefly debated a stealthy entry where he might catch Wa by surprise.

"Fuck that," he said and stepped back lifting one of his sizeable boots. He kicked the door and sent it back into the house with a bang. He didn't wait but followed in before the door had even fully settled.

As he looked around the main floor Wenton thought he saw shadows of children but they quickly evaporated as if made of wisps of smoke. He soon saw the man he expected to.

"What are you doing here?" Wa barked. He was standing near the entrance to the kitchen on the far end of the room

Wenton continued in. "Looking for you. Is everything okay?"

Wa smiled. *He doesn't know.* "Everything's fine I was just trying to get the old lady some help."

"And you figured it was better to break into a pediatric oncologist's house rather than take her to emerg, eh?"

Wa stopped smiling. "What do you mean?"

"Why'd you come here?" Wenton asked.

"This doctor owes me. He killed my son. I thought we could keep this thing a little lower profile until we figure out what's going on."

Wenton glanced around the room and noticed the old woman crumpled on the couch. He took a few steps and leaned to her feeling her neck. It was a formality since the old lady's neck was bent at an unnatural angle. "Good work on helping the woman. Who broke her neck?"

“Dr. Caster – he freaked out and attacked both of us. I think the beast had gone into him. That’s why he killed my son.”

“Where’s the good doctor now?”

Wa looked backwards toward the kitchen doorway and nodded. As he turned back he felt dizzy and had to catch himself. His head spun from even this slight movement and he staggered to the wall to steady himself.

“Any point in me going in there to have a look,” Wenton said holding his hands out in a gesture of questioning skepticism.

Wa didn’t answer but simply stared back at him.

“Guess not, eh?” Wenton said nodding.

“What are you saying,” Wa asked. “Did the Essene get to you? What’d they tell you?”

Wenton shrugged and walked over to the chair, dropping backwards into it. “Oh this and that. Blah, blah, blah – we aren’t trying to start Armageddon. Blah, blah, blah, the world already ended and they’re trying to bring God back. Blah, blah, blah, the beast can only move into one other person after entering the world through a defective person.”

Wa smiled again. He spoke again but this time his voice resonated through the room sending deep shock waves through Wenton. “*So you’re playing games with me – is that it?*”

“Am I?” he asked innocently. “Am I the one playing games?”

“*Facini entfaste blackened side,*” Wa said.

“Oh no,” Wenton said in exaggerated panic. “Not the magic words. Don’t drive me insane. Oh, help.”

“*You will face the blackness of the world. You will feel the weight of evil.*”

“Why don’t you go to hell,” Wenton smirked.

“You don’t know what you’ve walked into, do you?” Wa asked, his voice returning to normal. “You think you’re so smart but you don’t realize what the world has lost.”

“You mean the Holy Guide there,” he nodded to the old woman. “Trying to keep track of a piece of shit like you pretty much wore her down to nothing and then you killed her.”

Wa’s expression stayed neutral.

Wenton continued, “And you think that the world is now defenseless. The Essenes have lost their only connection to fight you.”

And then Wa’s expression did change. His head jerked to the side and then back to Wenton. He noticed, for the first time, that Wenton held something in his hand. He was trying to conceal it but Wa could see the outline of a black transmitter with a red button on top.

“You dumb fucker,” Wa screamed and went to the door. Parked along the curb was a white van with the back doors open wide. Two members of the Essene stood on the sidewalk.

Fuck, Wenton thought. He stood up from the chair, suddenly unsure of how to proceed.

Wa spun back to Wenton. "You dumb bastard. You can't stop me not even with those useless God-freaks." He looked down at Wenton's hand again. "And what's that? You think you can see me? You think you can be the next Holy Guide?"

"You're running out of time. If you aren't worried about me then go. I'm not going to stop you."

"That voice," Mary thought. She'd heard muffled voices in the room since the horrible screaming had stopped but now one of the voices had trickled through to her. "I know that voice!"

She was suddenly filled with rage. She started to struggle away from the wall. She wouldn't be helpless anymore. She kicked against the wall, shoving herself out. The new voice in the living room was the voice of the first trick she ever turned – the bastard who beat her up. It was that asshole, Michael Wenton.

Wenton didn't have time to react as Wa swooped across the room and collided into him. The sergeant, who should have been much smaller now seemed to tower over Wenton and he moved with a swiftness that was unnatural.

Wenton flew backwards, toppling over the arm of the chair and across a small end table to the floor. A lamp rocked precariously and then dropped to the floor next to him with a crash. He kept his grip on the detonator knowing that no matter what, the beast's time was running out and he would have to leave Wa's body.

"You can't help anyone when you're dead," Wa screamed standing overtop of Wenton. He lifted a foot to bring it down on Wenton's skull. Wenton managed to roll and just miss the blow.

Wa bent to grab Wenton but felt his strength drain again. He stood and kicked Wenton hard across the ribs. The blow flipped him into the wall.

"Beast," a voice shouted from the doorway. The two Essenes stood there defiantly. "It is our Father who arms us with strength. We find refuge in the Holy God and command you away."

Wa casually waved a hand back at them. "Your God betrayed you. Be gone." The heavy door suddenly flipped up back into place striking one of the Essene who stood too close. It instantly shattered his nose sending blood out in all directions. The man staggered back and collapsed. The other Essene went to his side.

"None shall enter," Wa announced and waved his hand slowly around the entire room.

"All is lost to evil," the man spluttered through blood that filled the back of his throat. "Leave me and help Dr. Wenton."

"In the service of the Father," the other Essene nodded. He made sure the injured man was seated comfortably and returned to the doorway. He put his shoulder against the door and

pressed. It didn't move. He took a step back and threw his weight against it. It still wouldn't move. He turned back to his injured partner.

"All is lost," he said. "The Guide will die."

The injured man, nodded slightly holding part of his shirt to his face to soak up the blood.

And then a childlike voice sounded behind them. "Have you seen my sister?"

fifty five

Day Six – Evening

Wa turned back to Wenton. “Where was I? Oh right.” He kicked Wenton again and sent him further along the back wall. This time the detonator did come out of his fist and spin along the floor.

The effort suddenly caught up to Wa and he quickly leaned against the wall trying to gather his strength. Another dizzy spell had absorbed him.

Wenton was virtually incapacitated on the floor, more of his ribs broken than left intact. Every breath he took was excruciating. He opened his eyes enough to see that the detonator was out of his reach against the opposite wall.

Finally Wa moved again. “My last act shall be the most satisfying. He reached down and picked up Wenton without effort. Wa’s body was swollen through his clothes, a monster bursting through the flesh of Wa’s original form.

Wenton cried out from the pressure of being moved. He felt the broken ribs shifting and poking through to his lungs and heart.

Wa lifted Wenton’s body over his head and was about to throw him to the ground when the front door violently crashed in. Wa turned but continued to hold Wenton high.

Lobster Table stooped and walked through the door. “Where’s my sister?” he cried out in a painful, almost hysterical scream.

“What?” Wa barked. He let Wenton’s body fall and it landed heavily on the floor behind him.

Wenton protected his shattered rib cage by dropping his arms below himself but the fall still drove what breath he had left out. He blinked and tried to use his feet to push himself away from Wa. He blinked again but his eyes wouldn’t open. His head slumped to the floor, unconscious.

“What are you?” Wa yelled.

“I want my sister,” Lobster Table screamed uncontrollably. His face was bright red and streaked in sweat. His hair was plastered over his forehead, glued with perspiration. He grabbed his shirt and pulled it open. “Where’s Mary?” he screamed again and charged into the house. His blood red gut bounced as he moved.

Wa's legs shook as he suddenly felt dizzy again. He held up his hands just before Lobster Table hit him and sent him backwards onto the floor.

Inside the bathroom, Mary finally pulled a hand out of the scarf. It had cost her a good deal of skin off her wrists but she was free. The blood had actually helped it slide off.

She was standing next to the door when she froze. Her heart dropped so hard she thought she was going to throw up. She heard her brother's panicked voice in the room – screaming for her. *What the hell's going on?*

She opened the door a crack but all she could see was a man collapsed on the floor against the opposite wall.

Shit! It wasn't just a man. *That's Wenton.* She looked more closely. She could see a thin line of blood trickling out of his mouth and pooling on the floor. *He's dead she thought.*

"Don't you hurt my sister you bad man!"

Wa rose to his feet in one motion. It startled David who took a step away.

"*Who do you think you are?*" Wa shouted in a voice that shook Lobster Table. "*Facini entfaste blackened side.*"

The big man raised his hands and covered both eyes in an attempt to hide.

"*Facini entfaste blackened side,*" Wa repeated.

"I don't know what that means," Lobster Table shouted as tears broke free from his eyes. "Stop saying it." He reached out with a huge hand and shoved Wa backwards violently.

It was so unexpected that Wa couldn't react. He flew backwards hitting the wall hard. He didn't even have time to bounce away before David was on top of him, pinning his hands up on either side. Even with Wa's increased size, Lobster Table was still much larger and Wa was trapped.

"Don't you ever touch my sister," Lobster Table sobbed. "I love her very much." His face glowed bright red and sweat glistened down his hairless chest and over his stomach.

Wa's vision blurred and he could barely see the man. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came.

Mary snuck out of the bathroom on her hands and knees. She could hear her brother screaming at someone but the other voice wasn't Paul Caster.

Each move she made left a smudge of blood off her damaged wrists.

She stared across the room at the two men against the wall. She could only see her brother's back and couldn't see who he was holding.

As she moved again her hand bumped something. She pushed it to the side thinking it was just the remote control for the TV.

And then she noticed that Wenton wasn't dead. He was staring at her from where he lay on the floor. She stared back, her anger at him suddenly gone. Seeing him badly beaten like that didn't make her feel any better – she just felt sorry for him.

She watched as Wenton slid a hand along the floor until he pointed at her.

She frowned but quickly realized he wasn't pointing at her. He was pointing at the TV remote. She looked back at it.

"Where is she?" Lobster Table demanded again and lifted Wa away from the wall momentarily before smashing him back into it. "Where?"

"NO!" Wa yelled and threw his arms and legs out. A burst of energy slammed David breaking his grip on Wa but not moving him back very far. "NO!" Wa said again and held his palm up to massive Lobster Table. "Stay away you freak."

The beast knew it was futile to continue in this struggle. He was too weak. He looked back down at Wenton to make sure he was still unconscious on the floor. He felt it was a shame he didn't get to kill the psychologist. "You see," Wa said, "you couldn't even stop me. You're nothing." It was time for the beast to return to Edward Carter.

Wa's head dropped backwards and he raised his arms. Lusus Naturae began to flow out of Wa's body. Lobster Table screamed and backed further away. The sergeant's body continued to slowly slip down the wall as though it were a balloon deflating.

As the body slid, Wa's head fell from one side to the other. And then the beast noticed something he hadn't before. With Lobster Table backing up he could now see across the room to a newly opened door – the door to the bathroom. At the same instant he also noticed that there was a woman crouched on the floor next to the open door. As the beast completely left the body of Mitchell Wa is registered one final thing – the woman on the floor was holding Wenton's detonator.

From his position on the floor, Wenton watched the last traces of the beast slip out of Wa's body. "Now," he screamed even though the pain shot through his chest. "Push that button."

Mary jammed her thumb down on the button and a loud pop sounded from somewhere outside. It was the sound of Edward Carter's body being incinerated in the back of the white van.

A high-pitched scream like metal on metal echoed in the dark and then faded quickly away.

"Fuck you too," Wenton said and then dropped his head back to the floor.

Day Seven – Saturday

Wenton woke in a bed in hotel suite. His ribs were bandaged but felt good. He carefully took a deep breath expecting to wince but filled his lungs without any trouble.

“There’s no pain, is there?”

Wenton turned to see the Essene Teacher of Righteousness standing next to the bed.

“Our medical techniques are fairly advanced.”

Wenton took another breath to be sure. “How long have I been unconscious?”

“Not long,” the Teacher answered. “It is only Saturday afternoon.”

Wenton nodded.

The Teacher looked down at him with a warm smile before he spoke. “You were right?”

Wenton raised an eyebrow. “About what?”

“You are the Holy Guide. You are meant to join us.”

“That’s not exactly what I said,” Wenton. “I just told you I could see this beast thing. I’d seen it already and knew I could tell you when it left Wa.”

He nodded. “Exactly, you are the Holy Guide. You destroyed Lusus Naturae – that which had stolen your friend Mitchell Wa.”

Wenton thought it sounded odd to hear Wa referred to as his friend. “Is Wa gone too?”

“He could not have survived what the beast did. It used him completely.”

Wenton nodded.

“Now you will join us in the fight against the next Lusus Naturae.”

Wenton laughed but that was too much and now his ribs did start to hurt. He winced and stopped laughing.

“You must be careful. I said our medicine was advanced, not that we did miracles. Lusus Naturae nearly killed you.”

“I never said I was going to join up with you guys. I just wanted to end all of the shit that was going on in my backyard. Signing up with the Silent Ones is not my style.”

“Whether you join us or not is not your decision.”

“What are you talking about?” Wenton asked.

“Look at your left arm.”

Wenton lifted his arm from the bed and rotated it slowly. There was a prominent tattoo of an 8-pointed star underneath his forearm. *The symbol of the Essene*, he thought.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Wenton growled. "Why'd you do that?"

The Teacher shook his head. "We did not. It appeared there after your confrontation with *Lusus Naturae*. It is not of our doing."

"Bullshit," he said but as he examined the tattoo he wasn't sure. There were no signs of blood or scabs that should have been there if the tattoo were only recently created.

The Teacher smiled at Wenton for a moment and then asked, "Would it be okay if someone said hello?"

He frowned. "Who?"

The Teacher turned to the door. Another member of the Essene was standing near the entrance to the room. He opened the door and leaned into the hall. When he came back in a woman followed behind him.

"Gloria," Wenton said nodding. "So these guys did kidnap you."

"Not exactly," she said smiling. She turned and they both watched as Lisa came into the room. Her brother Josh was right behind her trying to keep pace so that his steps fell almost on his sister's heels.

Lisa spun on her younger brother, "Grow up you little twerp."

"Nah, nah, nah," he said imitating her.

Immediately behind them, Nicholas ran into the suite and straight into his mother's arms. He limped only slightly.

Wenton looked over at the Teacher. "Advanced medicine?"

"We knew that there was something going on at the hospital. We weren't going to let the beast hurt this little one." He ruffled Nick's hair.

Gloria put Nick back on the floor, sighed, and sat on the end of the Wenton's bed. "They didn't kidnap me. They showed up at the IWK after I thought Nick had died. They told me about how they could help Nick and explained what had happened to Mitchell. I'm still kind of in shock but I knew a year ago that Mitchell was gone. He'd acted so strangely ever since the Edward Carter case."

"I'm sorry about Mitchell," Wenton said.

Gloria frowned. "Sympathy from Dr. Wenton," she said above the hint of a smile. "This is something new."

Wenton didn't have an answer. It surprised him too.

"Thank you," Gloria said to save him. "I'll be okay. The Essene have been very generous. The kids and I will be leaving Halifax for good, now. There's a lot of bad memories around here."

“We’ve provided Mrs. Wa with funds to be comfortable for quite some time,” the Teacher added. “We do not wish her to suffer any more ill-effects from what has happened and we do not wish the Catholic Church to seek her out. She and her family will vanish to a better place.”

“And what about the other two people who were at the doctor’s house?” Wenton asked. “The woman and that big guy.”

“They are with us now,” the Teacher smiled. “Your actions over the last year brought everyone together to a final purpose – God’s purpose. Events happened as they needed to in order to allow Lusus Naturae to meet his end. At least, this manifestation of Lusus Naturae. There will be others. You’ve begun your journey to restoring balance in the world. Together we will prevent the convergence of evil.”

Wenton shook his head as he watched Gloria stand and pick Nick up off the floor again. She hugged him fiercely as though trying to convince herself that she wasn’t dreaming. Nick squirmed to get free.

Epilogue

"I'm sorry sir but once again your ticket was purchased at the last minute and we couldn't guarantee business class seating," the flight attendant spoke through a rigid smile. "Is there anything I can do to make your flight more pleasant?"

The heavy set Cardinal Oleg Montessa shifted uncomfortably in his economy class seat. His face was an unhealthy shade of red that virtually matched the colour of the robe that flowed over the armrest and down to the floor in the aisle. The flight attendant shifted carefully trying not to stand on the robe. "I'm under very important directives from the Holy Church. I cannot be delayed in this," the Cardinal said sharply.

"Try to make yourself comfortable, sir," she continued. "We'll be arriving in Halifax shortly."

He snorted and turned away from her, wiggling in his seat and pulling his robe up from the floor. He took a breath and winced. The tight seating even made it difficult for him to breath – especially at this altitude.

The flight attendant smiled helplessly at the young woman seated next to the Cardinal. "Can I get you anything?" she asked, more as an apology than a question.

The young woman shook her head as did the older man seated next to the window. The flight attendant continued down the narrow aisle.

"We are caged like the animals," Montessa crumbled. "It is not a place where a man of God should be."

"You don't fly too often, do you?" the woman offered.

He stared back at her. "The world is my Church but I do not need to sit in every pew in order to be an effective minister." He took another laboured breath. It felt as though something squeezed the air out before he could draw the breath in.

"Are you okay?" the woman asked.

"No I am not," he barked. "This is intolerable." He pushed himself forward on his seat and struggled to stand. The woman reached for his arm to help but he swatted her hand away.

"Just let him go," the man by the window said putting a hand on his wife's leg.

She turned to him and shrugged. "We were supposed to be in business class too. This was one busy flight."

He nodded and turned back to his laptop computer. He was preparing for a meeting in New York later that day. This flight, with its unusual stop in Halifax was the only one they could get on short notice but he didn't have a choice. The investors were nervous and you don't take chances with billion dollar deals that could change the world.

The Cardinal had managed to stand and was slumping from seat to seat as he made his way toward the front of the plane. He was going to the washroom and he planned on using the one in business class. *If nothing else they can allow me that much dignity*, he thought.

Suddenly he felt something grip his body. A vice was wrapped around his entire length and pain shot white lights through his vision. He screamed and clutched desperately to the nearest seat.

"Sir?" the business class flight attendant called. She was serving drinks at the front of the plane and came quickly back to him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm...", he started and then slid down the seat to his knees.

The flight attendant reached up and flicked on the call button to attract the attention of the other attendants. "Sir?" she said again. "Are you okay? Have you been drinking?" She leaned close to him. "Sir?"

The Cardinal turned on her, his face suddenly right in front of hers. His eyes were hollow and black. "You dumb whore," he spat. "*Facini entfaste blackened side.*"

And then the Cardinal fell the rest of the way to his back. Dead.