

## = PART III =

### He Who Walks On All Fours.

## Chapter 42

As seven o'clock neared, a tangle of cabs and limousines formed outside the Museum's west entrance. Elegantly dressed occupants emerged gingerly, the men in near-identical dinner jackets, the women in furs. Umbrellas jostled as the guests rushed up the red carpet toward the Museum's awning, trying to avoid the pelting rain that was already turning the sidewalks to streams and the gutters to rushing rivers.

Inside, the Great Rotunda, accustomed to silence at this advanced hour, was resounding with the echoes of a thousand expensive shoes crossing its marble expanse between the rows of palm trees leading to the Hall of the Heavens. The Hall itself held towering stands of bamboo in massive tubs festooned with violet lights. Clusters of drooping orchids had been artfully fixed to the bamboo, recalling tropical hanging gardens.

Somewhere deep inside, an invisible band briskly played "New York, New York." An army of waiters in white tie threaded their way expertly through the crowd, carrying large silver platters crowded with champagne glasses and ranks of hors d'oeuvres. Streams of incoming guests joined the ranks of Museum scientists and staff already grazing on the free food. Spotlights, muted blue, caught the glitter of long sequined evening dresses, strings of diamonds, polished gold cufflinks, and tiaras.

Almost overnight, the opening of the *Superstition* Exhibition had become the preferred event among fashionable New York. Coming-out balls and fund-raising dinners took a backseat to the chance to see, firsthand, what all the fuss was about. Three thousand invitations had gone out and five thousand acceptances had come back.

Smithback, wearing an ill-fitting tuxedo with the twin faux pas of wide, spiked lapels and a frilled shirt, peered into the Hall of the Heavens, scanning for familiar faces. At the far end of the hall, a giant platform had been erected. Along one side was the elaborately decorated entrance to the exhibition, currently locked and guarded. A massive dance floor in the center was quickly filling up with couples. Once inside the hall, Smithback immediately found himself surrounded by innumerable conversations, all conducted at a painfully high volume.

“...that new psychohistorian, Grant? Well, she finally fessed up yesterday, told me what she’s been working on all this time. Get this: She’s trying to prove that the wanderings of Henry the Fourth after the second crusade were really just a fugue state brought on by acute stress response. It was all I could do to keep from telling her that...”

“...came up with the ridiculous idea that the Stabian Baths were really just a lot of horse stables! I mean, the man’s never even been to Pompeii. He wouldn’t know the Villa of the Mysteries from a Pizza Hut. But he’s got the gall to call himself a papyrologist...”

“...that new research assistant of mine? You know, the one with the enormous hooters? Well, yesterday she was standing by the autoclave, see, and she dropped this test tube full of...”

Smithback took a deep breath and made the plunge, cutting a path toward the hors d’oeuvres tables. *This is going to be great*, he thought.

Outside the main doors of the Great Rotunda, D’Agosta saw more rapid-fire flashing from the group of photographers, as yet another VIP came through the door, a wimpy handsome guy with an emaciated-looking woman clinging to each arm.

He stood where he could keep an eye on the metal detectors, the people coming in, and the throngs moving through the single door into the Hall of the Heavens. The floor of the Rotunda was slick with rainwater, and the coatcheck counter was stowing umbrellas briskly. In a far corner, the FBI had set up its forward security station: Coffey wanted a ringside seat from which to monitor the evening’s events. D’Agosta had to laugh. They had tried to make it inconspicuous, but the network of electrical, telephone, fiber-optic, and ribbon cables snaking out like an octopus from the station made it as easy to ignore as a bad hangover.

There was a rumble of thunder. The tops of the trees along the Hudson River promenade, new leaves still budding, were sawing about wildly in the wind.

D’Agosta’s radio hissed.

“Lieutenant, we got another argument over at the metal detector.”

D’Agosta could hear a shrill voice in the background. “Surely you know *me*.”

“Pull her aside. We gotta keep this crowd moving. If they won’t go through, just pull ‘em out of the line. They’re holding things up.”

As D’Agosta holstered his radio, Coffey walked up with the Museum’s Security Director in tow. “Report?” Coffey asked brusquely.

“Everyone’s in place,” D’Agosta said, removing the cigar and examining the soggy end. “I’ve got four plainclothes circulating in the party. Four uniforms patrolling the perimeter with your men. Five controlling traffic outside, and five supervising the metal detectors and the entrance. I got uniformed men inside the hall. Two of them will follow me into the exhibition when the ribbon’s cut. I got one man in the computer room, one man in the Security Control Room...”

Coffey squinted. “These uniformed men going into the exhibition with the crowd. That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“It’s nothing formal. I just want us to be at or near the front of the crowd as they go through. You wouldn’t let us do a sweep, remember?”

Coffey sighed. "You can do your thing, but I don't want a goddamn escort service. Unobtrusive, not blocking the exhibits. Okay?"

D'Agosta nodded.

He turned toward Ippolito. "And you?"

"Well, sir, all my men are in place, too. Exactly where you wanted them."

"Good. My base of operations will be here in the Rotunda during the ceremony. Afterward, I'll deploy. Meanwhile, Ippolito, I want you up front with D'Agosta. Get up there near the Director and the Mayor. You know the routine. D'Agosta, I want you to stay in the background. No glory-boy shit, don't fuck up your last day. Got it?"

Waters stood in the cool of the computer room, bathed in neon light, his shoulder aching from the heavy shotgun. This had to be the most boring assignment he'd ever caught. He glanced at the geek—he had started thinking of him as that—tapping away at the computer. Tapping, tapping, for hours the guy had been tapping. And drinking Diet Cokes. Waters shook his head. First thing in the morning, maybe he should ask D'Agosta for a rotation. He was going crazy in here.

The geek scratched the back of his neck and stretched.

"Long day," he said to Waters.

"Yeah," said Waters.

"I'm almost done. You won't believe what this program can do."

"You're probably right," said Waters without enthusiasm. He checked his watch. Three more hours until his relief.

"Watch." The geek hit a button. Waters moved a little closer to the screen. He peered at it. Nothing, just a bunch of writing, gibberish that he supposed was the program.

Then, the image of a bug appeared on the screen. At first it was still. Then it stretched its green legs and started walking across the lettering on the screen. Then another animated bug appeared on the screen. The two bugs noticed each other, and moved closer. They started screwing.

Waters looked at the geek. "What is this?" he asked.

"Just watch," the geek said.

Soon, four bugs were born, and they started screwing. Pretty soon the screen was full of bugs. Then, the bugs began to eat the letters on the screen. In a couple of minutes, all the words on the screen were gone, and there was nothing left but bugs walking around. Then, the bugs started eating each other. Soon, nothing was left but blackness.

"Pretty cool, huh?" the geek said.

"Yeah," said Waters. He paused. "What does the program do?"

"It's just..." the geek looked a little confused. "It's just a cool program, that's all. It's doesn't *do* anything."

"How long did it take you to write that?" asked Waters.

"Two weeks," said the geek proudly, sucking air through his teeth. "On my own time, of course."

The geek turned back to his terminal, and the tapping resumed. Waters relaxed, leaning against the wall nearest the Computer Room door. He could hear the faint

sounds of the dance band over his head, the thump of the drums, the low vibration of the basses, the whine of the saxophones. He thought he could even hear the sounds of thousands of footsteps, shuffling and sliding. And here he was, stuck in this psycho ward with nothing but a key-tapping geek for company. The biggest excitement he had was when the geek got up for another Diet Coke.

At that moment, he heard a noise from inside the electrical systems room.

“You hear that?” he asked.

“No,” said the geek.

There was another long silence. Then, a definite thump.

“What the hell was that?” said Waters.

“I dunno,” said the geek. He stopped typing and looked around. “Maybe you ought to go take a look.”

Waters ran his hand over the smooth buttstock of his shotgun and eyed the door leading to the electrical room. *Probably nothing. Last time, with D’Agosta, it had been nothing.* He should just go in there and check things out. Of course, he could always call for backup from Security Command. It was just down the hall. His buddy Garcia was supposed to be in there ... right?

Perspiration broke across his brow. Instinctively, Waters raised an arm to wipe it off. But he made no move toward the electrical room door.

## Chapter 43

As Margo rounded the corner into the Great Rotunda, she saw a scene of pandemonium: people shaking off drenched umbrellas, chattering in small and large groups, the racket of their conversations adding to the din from the reception beyond. She pushed Frock up to a velvet rope strung beside the metal detectors, a uniformed policeman standing watchfully next to it. Beyond, the Hall of the Heavens was flooded with yellow light. An enormous chandelier hung from the ceiling, sending flashing rainbows everywhere.

They displayed their Museum IDs to the policeman, who obediently opened the rope and let them through, checking Margo’s carryall as he did so. As Margo passed by, the cop gave her a funny glance. Then she looked down, and understood: She was still dressed in jeans and a sweater.

“Hurry,” said Frock. “Up front, to the lectern.” The lectern and podium were on the far end of the hall, near the entrance to the exhibition. The hand-carved doors were chained, and the word SUPERSTITION was formed by an arc of crude bone-like letters across the top. On either side were wooden stelae, resembling huge totem poles or the pillars of a pagan temple. Margo could see Wright, Cuthbert, and the Mayor gathered on the platform, talking and joking, while a sound man fiddled with the nearby mikes. Behind them stood Ippolito amid a gaggle of administrators and aides, talking into his radio and gesturing furiously at someone out of sight. The noise was deafening.

“Excuse us!” bellowed Frock. Reluctantly, people moved aside.

“Look at all these people,” he yelled back at Margo. “The pheromonal level in this room must be astronomical. It will be irresistible to the beast! We’ve got to stop this right now.” He pointed to one side. “Look—there’s Gregory!” He gestured to Kawakita, standing by the edge of the dance floor, drink in hand.

The Assistant Curator worked his way toward them. “There you are, Dr. Frock. They’ve been looking for you. The ceremony’s about to start.”

Frock reached out and gripped Kawakita’s forearm. “Gregory!” he shouted. “You’ve got to help us! This event has got to be cancelled, and the Museum cleared at once!”

“What?” said Kawakita. “Is this some kind of joke?” He looked quizzically at Margo, then back at Frock.

“Greg,” said Margo over the commotion, “we’ve discovered what’s been killing people. It’s not a human being. It’s a creature, a beast. It’s nothing we’ve ever come across before. Your Extrapolation program helped us to identify it. It feeds on the packing fibers in the Whittlesey crates. When it can’t get those, it needs the human hypothalamus hormones as a substitute. We believe it must have a regular—”

“Whoa! Hold on. Margo, what are you talking about?”

“Dammit, Gregory!” Frock thundered. “We don’t have any more time to explain. We’ve got to get this place cleared *now*.”

Kawakita backed up a step. “Dr. Frock, with all due respect...”

Frock clutched his arm harder and spoke slowly and deliberately. “Gregory, listen to me. There is a terrible creature loose in this Museum. It needs to kill, and it *will* kill. Tonight. We must get everyone out.”

Kawakita backed up another step, looking toward the podium. “I’m sorry,” he said over the noise. “I don’t know what this is all about, but if you’re using my extrapolation program for some kind of joke...” He prized his arm free of Frock’s grasp. “I really think you should go up to the platform, Dr. Frock. They’re waiting for you.”

“Greg—” Margo tried to say, but Kawakita had moved away, looking at them speculatively.

“To the podium!” said Frock. “Wright can do it. He can order this place evacuated.”

Suddenly they heard a drumroll and a fanfare.

“Winston!” shouted Frock, rolling into the open space in front of the platform. “Winston, listen! We’ve got to evacuate!”

Frock’s final words hung in the air as the fanfare faded away.

“There is a deadly beast loose in the Museum!” Frock shouted into the silence.

A sudden murmur arose in the crowd. Those closest to Frock backed away, looking at each other and muttering in low tones.

Wright glared at Frock while Cuthbert quickly separated himself from the group. “Frock,” he hissed. “What in bloody hell are you doing?” He bounded off the platform and came over.

“What is the matter with you, Frock? Have you gone mad?” he said in a vicious whisper.

Frock reached out, “Ian, there is a terrible beast loose in the Museum. I know we’ve had our differences, but trust me, *please*. Tell Wright we’ve got to get these people out. Now.”

Cuthbert looked at Frock intently. “I don’t know what you’re thinking,” the Scotsman said, “or what your game is. Perhaps it’s some desperate eleventh-hour attempt to derail the exhibition, to turn me into a laughingstock. But I will tell you this, Frock: If you make one more outburst, I will have Mr. Ippolito forcibly remove you from these premises and I will see to it that you never set foot in here again.”

“Ian, I beg of you—”

Cuthbert turned and walked back to the podium.

Margo laid a hand on Frock’s shoulder. “Don’t bother,” she said quietly. “They’re not going to believe us. I wish George Moriarty were here to help. This is his show, he must be around somewhere. But I haven’t seen him.”

“What can we do?” Frock asked, trembling with frustration. The conversations around them resumed as the guests near the podium assumed some kind of joke had taken place.

“I guess we should find Pendergast,” Margo said. “He’s the only one with enough clout to do something about this.”

“He won’t believe us, either,” Frock said, dispiritedly.

“Maybe not right away,” Margo said, wheeling him around. “But he’ll hear us out. We’ve got to hurry.”

Behind them, Cuthbert signalled for another drumroll and fanfare. Then he walked over to the podium and held up his hands.

“*Ladies and gentlemen!*” he cried out. “*I have the honor to introduce to you the Director of the New York Museum of Natural History, Winston Wright!*”

Margo looked around as Wright took the podium, smiling and waving to the crowd.

“*Welcome!*” he cried out. “*Welcome my friends, fellow New Yorkers, citizens of the world! Welcome to the unveiling of the greatest museum show ever mounted!*” Wright’s amplified words echoed through the Hall. A tremendous burst of applause rose to the domed ceiling.

“We’ll call security,” said Margo. “They’ll know where Pendergast is. There’s a bank of phones out in the Rotunda.”

She began to push Frock toward the entrance. Behind her, she could hear Wright’s voice booming through the PA system: “*This is a show about our deepest beliefs, our deepest fears, the brightest and the darkest sides of human nature...*”

## Chapter 44

D’Agosta stood behind the podium, watching Wright’s back as he addressed the listening crowd. Then he grabbed his radio. “Bailey?” he said in a low tone. “When they cut that ribbon, I want you and McNitt to get in ahead of the crowd. Just behind Wright and the Mayor, but ahead of everyone else. You got that? Blend in as much as possible, but don’t let them push you out of the way.”

“Roger, Loo.”

*“When the human mind evolved to understand the workings of the universe, the first question it asked was: What is life? Next, it asked: What is death? We’ve learned a lot about life. But, despite all our technology, we’ve learned very little about death and what lies beyond...”*

The crowd was rapt, listening.

*“We have sealed the exhibition so that you, our honored guests, will be the first inside. You will see many rare and exquisite artifacts, most on display for the first time ever. You will see images of beauty and ugliness, great good and ultimate evil, symbols of man’s struggle to cope with and comprehend the ultimate mystery...”*

D’Agosta wondered what that business with the old curator in the wheelchair had been. Frock, the name was. He’d shouted something, but then Cuthbert, the honcho of the event, had sent him off. Museum politics, worse even than down at One Police Plaza.

*“...most fervent hope that this exhibition will launch a new era at our Museum: an era in which technological innovation and a renaissance in the scientific method will combine to reinvigorate the interest of the museum-going public in today’s...”*

D’Agosta scanned the room, mentally spot-checking his men. Everyone seemed to be in place. He nodded to the guard at the exhibition entrance, instructing him to remove the chain from the heavy wooden doors.

As the speech ended, a roar of applause filled the vast space once again. Then Cuthbert returned to the podium.

*“I want to thank a number of people...”*

D’Agosta glanced at his watch, wondering where Pendergast was. If he was in the room, D’Agosta would have known it. Pendergast was a guy that stuck out in a crowd.

Cuthbert was holding up an enormous pair of scissors, which he handed to the Mayor. The Mayor grasped one handle and offered the other to Wright, and the two of them walked down the platform steps to a huge ribbon in front of the exhibition entrance. “What are we waiting for?” said the Mayor facetiously, drawing a laugh. They snipped the ribbon in half to an explosion of flashbulbs, and two of the Museum guards slowly pulled open the doors. The band swung into “The Joint Is Jumpin’.”

“Now,” said D’Agosta, speaking fast into his radio. “Get into position.”

As the applause and cheers echoed thunderously, D’Agosta walked briskly forward along the wall, then ducked past the doors into the empty exhibition. He did a quick scan inside, then spoke into his radio. “Clear.” Ippolito came up next, scowling at D’Agosta. Arm in arm, the Mayor and the Director stood in the doorway, posing for the cameras. Then, beaming, they walked forward into the exhibition.

As D’Agosta moved deeper into the exhibition ahead of the group, the cheering and applause grew fainter. Inside, it was cool and smelled of new carpeting and dust, with a faint unpleasant odor of decay.

Wright and Cuthbert were giving the Mayor a tour. Behind them, D’Agosta could see his two men, and behind them a vast sea of people, crowding in, craning their necks, gesturing, talking. From D’Agosta’s perspective within the exhibition, it looked like a tidal wave. *One exit. Shit.*

He spoke into his radio. "Walden, I want you to tell those Museum guards to slow down the flow. Too many goddamn people are crowding in here."

"Ten-four, Lieutenant."

"This," said Wright, still holding the Mayor's arm, "is a very rare sacrificial gurney from Mesoamerica. That's the Sun God depicted on the front, guarded by jaguars. The priests would sacrifice the victim on this table, cut out the beating heart, and hold it up to the sun. The blood flowed down these channels and collected here at the bottom."

"Impressive," said the Mayor. "I could use one of those up in Albany."

Wright and Cuthbert laughed, the sound reverberating off the still artifacts and display cases.

Coffey stood in the forward security station, legs apart, hands on hips, his face expressionless. Most of the guests had arrived, and those who hadn't were probably not going to venture out. It was raining in earnest now, sheets of water cascading onto the pavement. Across the expanse of the Rotunda, through the east door, Coffey could clearly see the festivities in the Hall of the Heavens. It was a beautiful room, with coruscating stars covering the velvety black dome that floated sixty feet overhead. Swirling galaxies and nebulae glowed softly along the walls. Wright was speaking at the podium, and the cutting ceremony would be starting soon.

"How's it look?" Coffey asked one of his agents.

"Nothing exciting," the agent said, scanning the security board. "No breaches, no alarms. Perimeter's quiet as a tomb."

"The way I like it," Coffey replied.

He glanced back into the Hall of the Heavens in time to see two guards pulling open the huge doors to the *Superstition Exhibition*. He'd missed the ribbon cutting. The crowd was moving forward now, all five thousand at once, it seemed.

"What the hell do you think Pendergast is up to?" Coffey said to another of his agents. He was glad Pendergast was out of his hair for the time being, but he was nervous at the thought of the Southerner wandering around, beholden to no one.

"Haven't seen him," came the response. "Want me to check with Security Command?"

"Naw," Coffey said. "It's nice without him. Nice and peaceful."

D'Agosta's radio hissed. "Walden here. Listen, we need some help. The guards are having a hard time controlling the flow. There's just too many people."

"Where's Spenser? He should be floating around there somewhere. Have him bar the entrance, let people out but not in, while you and the Museum guards set up an orderly line. This crowd has to be controlled."

"Yes, sir."

The exhibition was filling up quickly now. Twenty minutes had gone by and Wright and the Mayor were deep inside the exhibition, near the locked rear exit. They'd moved quickly at first, keeping to the central halls and avoiding the secondary passages. But now, Wright had stopped at a particular exhibit to explain something to the Mayor, and people were streaming past them into the exhibition's farthest recesses.

“Keep near the front,” D’Agosta said to Bailey and McNitt, the two men on advance duty.

He skipped ahead and did a quick visual through two side alcoves. *Spooky exhibition*, he thought. A very sophisticated haunted house, with all the trimmings. The dim lighting, for instance. Not so dim, though, that you couldn’t make out nasty little details. Like the Congo power figure, with its bulging eye sockets and torso riddled with sharp nails. Or the nearby mummy, vertical in a freestanding case, that was streaked with dripped blood. *Now that*, thought D’Agosta, *is a little overdone*.

The crowd continued to spread out, and he ducked into the next set of alcoves. All clear.

“Walden, how’d you make out?” D’Agosta radioed.

“Lieutenant, I can’t find Spenser. He doesn’t seem to be around, and I can’t leave the entrance to find him with the crowd the way it is.”

“Shit. Okay, I’m calling Drogan and Frazier over to help you.”

D’Agosta radioed one of the two plainclothes units patrolling the party. “Drogan, you copy?”

A pause. “Yes, Lieutenant.”

“I want you and Frazier to back up Walden at the exhibition entrance, on the double.”

“Ten-four.”

He looked around. More mummies, but none with blood all over them.

D’Agosta stopped, frozen. *Mummies don’t bleed*.

Slowly, he turned around and started pushing past the eager phalanx of gawkers. It was just some curator’s sick little idea. Part of the exhibit.

But he had to be sure.

The case was surrounded by people, as were all the others. D’Agosta made his way through the crowd and glanced at the label: “Anasazi burial from Mummy Cave, Canyon del Muerto, Arizona.”

The streaks of dried blood on the head and chest of the mummy looked like they had come from above. Trying to remain inconspicuous, he leaned as close to the case as possible and peered up.

Above the mummy’s head, the top of the case was open, exposing a ceiling crawling with steam pipes and ductwork. A hand, a watch, and the cuff of a blue shirt protruded over the edge of the case. A small icicle of dried blood hung from the middle finger.

D’Agosta backed into a corner, looked around, and spoke urgently into his radio.

“D’Agosta calling Security Command.”

“This is Garcia, Lieutenant.”

“Garcia, I’ve got a dead body in here. We’ve got to get everybody out. If they see it and panic, we’re fucked.”

“Jesus,” said Garcia.

“Get in touch with the guards and Walden. *Nobody* else is to be allowed into the exhibition. You got that? And I want the Hall of the Heavens cleared in case there’s a stampede. Get everyone out, but don’t cause any alarm. Now get Coffey for me.”

“Roger.”

D'Agosta looked around, trying to spot Ippolito. His radio squawked.

"Coffey here. What the hell is it, D'Agosta?"

"We got a dead body in here. It's lying on top of a case. I'm the only one who's spotted it, but that could change at any moment. We've got to get everyone out while there's still time."

As he opened his mouth to speak again, D'Agosta heard, over the noise of the crowd, "That blood looks so *real*."

"There's a hand up there," D'Agosta heard someone else say.

Two women were backing away from the case, looking up.

"It's a body!" one said loudly.

"It's not real," the other replied. "It's a gimmick for the opening, it has to be."

D'Agosta held up his hands, moving up to the case. "Please, everyone!"

There was a brief, terrible, listening silence. "A *body!*" someone else screamed.

There was a brief movement of the crowd, followed by a sudden stillness. Then, another scream: "*He's been murdered!*"

The crowd peeled back in two directions, and several people stumbled and fell. A large woman in a cocktail dress toppled backward onto D'Agosta, slamming him up against the case. The air was slowly forced out of his chest as the weight of more bodies pressed against him. Then he felt the case behind him start to give.

"Wait!" he gasped.

From the darkness above, something big slid off the top of the case and flopped onto the tight mass of people, knocking several more down. From his awkward angle, D'Agosta could only tell that it was bloody, and that it had been human. He didn't think it had a head.

Utter pandemonium broke out. The close space filled with screaming and shouting, and people started to run, clawing at each other, stumbling. D'Agosta felt the case topple. Suddenly, the mummy fell to the floor, with D'Agosta on top. As he grabbed the side of the case he felt glass slice into his palm. He tried to stand, but was knocked back into the case by the surging crowd.

He heard the hiss from his radio, found it was still in his right hand, and raised it to his face.

"This is Coffey. What the hell is going on, D'Agosta?"

"We've got a panic on our hands, Coffey. You're going to have to evacuate the Hall immediately, or—

"*Shit!*" he roared as the radio was knocked from his hand by the surging crowd.

## Chapter 45

Margo watched dispiritedly as Frock shouted into an internal phone set in the granite walls of the Great Rotunda. Wright's amplified speech poured out of the Hall of the Heavens, preventing Margo from hearing a word Frock said. Finally, Frock reached up, slamming the phone onto its cradle. He wheeled himself around to face her. "This is absurd. Apparently, Pendergast is in the basement

somewhere. Or at least, he was. He radioed in about an hour ago. They refuse to contact him without authorization.”

“In the basement? Where?” Margo asked.

“Section 29, they said. Why he’s down there, or was down there, they refuse to say. My guess is they don’t know. Section 29 covers a lot of ground.” He turned to Margo. “Shall we?”

“Shall we what?”

“Go down to the basement, of course,” Frock replied.

“I don’t know,” Margo said dubiously. “Perhaps we should get the authorization they need to summon him up.

Frock moved impatiently in his wheelchair. “We don’t even know who could give such authorization.” He stared at her, becoming aware of her uncertainty. “I don’t think you need worry about the creature confronting *us*, my dear,” he said. “If I’m right, it will be drawn to the concentration of people here at the exhibition. It’s our obligation to do whatever we can to prevent a catastrophe; we took that on when we made these discoveries.”

Still Margo hesitated. It was one thing for Frock to speak in grandiose terms. He hadn’t been inside that exhibition. He hadn’t heard the stealthy padding of feet. He hadn’t run blindly in the screaming dark ...

She took a deep breath. “You’re right, of course,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Since Section 29 was inside the Cell Two security perimeter, Margo and Frock had to show their IDs twice on their way to the proper elevator. Apparently, the curfew being suspended for the evening, guards and police officers were more concerned about detaining suspicious or unauthorized characters than restricting the movement of Museum employees.

“Pendergast!” Frock shouted as Margo wheeled him out of the elevator into the dim basement corridor. “This is Doctor Frock. Can you hear me?”

His voice echoed and died.

Margo knew a little of the history behind Section 29. When the Museum’s powerplant had been located nearby, the area housed steam pipes, supply tunnels, and the subterranean cubbyholes used by troglodyte workers. After the Museum switched to a more modern power plant in the 1920s, the old works had been removed, leaving a series of ghostly warrens now used for storage.

Margo wheeled Frock down the low-ceilinged hallways. Every so often, Frock would bang on a door or call Pendergast’s name. Each time, his shouts were greeted by silence.

“We’re getting nowhere,” Frock said as Margo stopped for a breather. Frock’s white hair was in disarray, and his tuxedo jacket was rumpled.

Margo looked nervously around. She knew approximately where they were: somewhere, at the far end of the confusion of passages, lay the vast, silent space of the old powerhouse: a lightless, subterranean pantheon now used to hold the Museum’s collection of whale bones. Despite Frock’s predictions of the creature’s behavior, the shouting made her nervous.

“This could take hours,” Frock said. “He may not be here anymore. Perhaps he never was.” He sighed deeply. “Pendergast was our last hope.”

“Maybe the noise and confusion will frighten the creature, keep it in hiding, away from the party,” Margo said with a hope she didn’t feel.

Frock rested his head in his hands. “Not likely. The beast must be driven by smell. It may be intelligent, it may be cunning, but like a human serial killer, when its blood lust is up it cannot control itself.”

Frock sat up, his eyes filled with renewed vigor.

“Pendergast!” he shouted again. “*Where are you?*”

Waters stood listening, his body tensed. He could feel his heart pounding, and he couldn't seem to gulp enough air into his lungs.

He'd been in plenty of dangerous situations before, been shot at, knifed, even had acid thrown at him once. Every time he'd been cool, almost detached, when he'd had to be. *Now, one little thump and I'm panicking.* He clawed at his collar. *The air's stuffy in this damn room. He willed himself to breathe slowly and deeply. I'll just call Garcia. We'll investigate together. And find nothing.*

Then he noticed that the rustling of feet overhead had changed its rhythm. Instead of the scraping and sliding he'd heard before, now he heard a constant drumming, like the sound of running feet. As he listened, he thought he heard a faint screaming. Dread flooded through him.

There was another thump in the electrical room.

*Sweet Jesus, something big's happening.*

He grabbed his radio. “Garcia? You copy? Requesting backup to investigate suspicious noises in the electrical systems room.”

Waters swallowed. Garcia wasn't responding on the regular frequency. As Waters holstered his radio, he noticed that the geek had stood up and was heading for the electrical room.

“What are you doing?” Waters asked.

“I want to see what that noise is,” the geek said, opening the door. “I think the air conditioner might have failed again.” He put his hand around the doorframe, feeling for a light switch.

“Wait a minute, you,” Waters said. “Don't—”

Waters's radio burst into static. “We got a stampede in here!” There was more static. “...All units, mobilize for emergency evacuation!” More static. “Can't hold this crowd, we need backup now, *now...*”

*Jesus.* Waters grabbed his radio, punched buttons. In an instant, all bands had been taken. He could hear something terrible happening right over his head. *Shit.*

Waters looked up. The geek was gone, and the door to the electrical room was open, but the light inside was still off. *Why was the light still off?* Without taking his eyes from the open door, he carefully unshouldered his shotgun, pumped a slug into the chamber, and started forward.

Carefully, he moved up to the edge of the door, looked around. Blackness.

“Hey, you,” he said. “You in there?” As he moved inside the darkened room, he felt his mouth go dry.

There was a sudden loud thump to his left, and Waters instinctively dropped to his knee and pumped three rounds, each one a flash of light and a deafening blast.

There was a shower of sparks and a gout of flame licked upward, briefly illuminating the room with lambent orange light. The geek was on his knees, looking up at Waters.

“Don’t shoot!” the geek said, his voice breaking. “Please, don’t shoot anymore!”

Waters raised himself on trembling legs, ears ringing. “I heard a sound,” he cried. “Why didn’t you answer me, you stupid shit?”

“It was the air conditioner,” the geek said, tears streaming down his face. “It was the air-conditioner pump failing, like before.”

Waters backed up, feeling behind him for the wall switch. Gunpowder hung in the air like a blue fog. On the far wall, a large mounted box of metal was smoking from three large, ragged holes in its front casing.

Waters hung his head, sank back against the wall.

With a sudden pop, an electrical arc sliced across the ruined box, followed by a crackling and another shower of sparks. The acrid air grew foul. The lights in the Computer Room flickered, dimmed, brightened. Waters heard one alarm go off, and then another.

“What’s happening?” he shouted. The lights dimmed again.

“You destroyed the central switching box,” the geek cried, rising to his feet and running past him into the Computer Room.

“Oh, shit,” Waters breathed.

The lights went out.

## Chapter 46

Coffey shouted again into the radio. “D’Agosta, come in!” He waited. “*Shit!*”

He switched to the Security Command channel. “Garcia, what the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know, sir,” Garcia said nervously. “I think Lieutenant D’Agosta said there was a body in ...” There was a pause. “Sir, I’m getting reports of panic in the exhibition. The guards are—”

Coffey cut him off and switched the bands, listening. “We got a stampede in here!” the radio squawked.

The agent switched back to Security Command. “Garcia, get the word out. All units, prepare for emergency evacuation procedures.” He turned to look across the Great Rotunda, through the east door into the Hall of the Heavens.

A visible ripple passed through the crowd, and the background chatter began to die away. Over the sounds of the band, Coffey could hear clearly now the sound of muffled screams and the low thunder of running feet. The movement toward the exhibition entrance faltered. Then the crowd surged backward, rebounding like a pressure wave. There were some angry yells and confused shouts, and Coffey thought he heard crying. Again the crowd was still.

Coffey unbuttoned his jacket, and turned toward the agents in the forward station. “Emergency crowd control procedures. Move out.”

Suddenly the crowd surged backward, and a frenzy of shouting and screaming broke from the open door of the Hall. The band faltered, then fell silent. In an instant, everyone was running toward the exit to the Great Rotunda.

“Go, you son of a bitch!” said Coffey, shoving one of his men in the back, holding his radio in his right hand. “D’Agosta, you copy?”

As the crowd began to pour out of the Hall, the agents collided with the surging mass and were forced back. Thrusting himself from the roiling mass of bodies, Coffey backed away slightly, panting and cursing.

“It’s like a tidal wave!” one of his men yelled. “We’ll never make it in!”

Suddenly the lights dimmed. Coffey’s radio crackled again.

“Garcia here. Listen, sir, all the security lights have gone red, the board’s lit up like a Christmas tree. The perimeter alarms are all coming on.”

Coffey moved forward again, fighting to stand his ground against the crowd streaming past him. He could no longer see the other agents. The lights flickered a second time, and then he felt a low rumble from the direction of the Hall. Coffey looked up and saw the thick edge of the metal security door descending from a slot in the ceiling.

“Garcia!” Coffey shouted into the radio. “The east door is coming down! Shut it off! Get it back up, for Chrissake!”

“Sir, their controls indicate it’s still up. But something’s happening down here. All the systems are—”

“I don’t give a fuck what their controls say. It’s coming down!” He was suddenly spun around by the fleeing crowd. The screaming was continuous now, a strange, banshee-like keening noise that raised the hair on a person’s neck. Coffey had never seen anything like it, never: smoke, emergency lights blinking, people running over other people, glassy panic in their eyes. The metal detectors had been knocked over and the X-ray machines shattered as people in tuxedos and gowns went running out into the pouring rain, clawing past each other, stumbling and falling across the red carpet and onto the soaked pavement. Coffey saw little flashes on the steps outside the Museum, first a few, and then several.

He yelled into his radio. “Garcia, alert the cops outside. Have them restore order, get the press the hell out of there. And have them get that door up, *now!*”

“They’re trying, sir, but all the systems are failing. We’re losing power. The emergency doors drop independent of the power grid, and they can’t activate the fail-safe controls. Alarms are going off all over the place—”

A man coming through nearly bowled Coffey over as he heard Garcia shout, “Sir! Total system failure!”

“Garcia, where the fuck is the backup system?” He forced a path sideways and found himself pinned against the wall. It was no use, he wasn’t going to get inside through the stampede. The door was now halfway down. “Give me the technician! I need the manual override code!”

The lights flickered a third time and went out, plunging the Rotunda into darkness. Over the screams, the rumble of the descending door continued relentlessly.

Pendergast ran his hand over the rough stone wall of the cul-de-sac, rapping a few places lightly with his knuckles. The plaster was cracking and flaking off in pieces, and the light bulb in the ceiling was broken.

Opening the bag, he withdrew the yellow object—a miner’s hat—adjusted it carefully on his head and flicked its switch. Tilting his head, he ran the powerful

beam of light over the wall in front of him. Then he pulled out the creased blueprints, directing the light onto them. He walked backward, counting his steps. Then, taking a penknife from his pocket, he placed its point into the plaster and gently twisted the blade. A piece of plaster the size of a dinner plate fell away, revealing the faint tracings of an ancient doorway.

Pendergast jotted in his notebook, stepped out of the cul-de-sac, and paced along the hall, counting under his breath. He stopped opposite a stack of crumbling Sheetrock. Then, he pulled it sharply away from the wall. The material fell with a crash and a great billowing of white dust. Pendergast's light exposed an old panel set low in the wall.

He pressed the panel appraisingly. It held fast. When he kicked it savagely, it flew open with a screech. A narrow service tunnel slanted steeply downward, opening onto the ceiling of the subbasement beneath. One floor below him, a thread of water trickled along like an inky ribbon.

Pendergast pulled the panel back into place, made another marking on the blueprint, and continued on.

"Pendergast!" came the faint cry. "This is Doctor Frock. Can you hear me?"

Pendergast stopped, his brows knitted in surprise. He opened his mouth to answer. Suddenly, he froze. There was a peculiar smell in the air. Leaving his bag open on the floor, he ducked into a storage room, locked the door behind him, and reached up, snapping off his light.

The door had a small wired-glass window set into its middle, grimy and cracked. Fishing in a pocket, he drew out a tissue, spat on it, rubbed the window and peered out.

Something big and dark had just entered the lower edge of his field of view. Pendergast could hear a snuffling sound, like a winded horse breathing heavy and fast. The smell grew stronger. In the dim light, Pendergast could see a muscled withers, covered with coarse black hair.

Moving slowly, taking short, choppy breaths through his nose, Pendergast reached inside his suit jacket and drew out the .45. In the darkness, he passed his finger across the cylinder, checking the loaded chambers. Then, steadying the revolver with both hands and levelling it at the door, he began to back up. As he moved away from the window, the shape dropped from view. But he knew beyond any doubt that it was still out there.

There was a faint bump on the door, followed by a low scratching. Pendergast tightened his grip on the revolver as he saw, or thought he saw, the doorknob begin to turn. Locked or not, the rickety door wouldn't stop whatever was outside. There was another muffled thump, then silence.

Pendergast quickly peered out the window. He could see nothing. He held the revolver at twelve-o'clock with one hand and placed his other hand on the door. In the listening silence, he counted to five. Then, quickly, he unlocked the door and swung it open, moving into the center of the passageway and around a corner. At the far end of the hall a dark shape paused at another door. Even in the dim light he could make out the strong, sloping movements of a quadruped. Pendergast was the most rational of men, but he barked a brief laugh of disbelief as he saw the creature claw for the doorknob. The lights in the hallway dimmed, then brightened. Pendergast slowly dropped to one knee, held the gun in combat

position, and took aim. The lights dimmed a second time. He saw the creature sit back on its haunches and then rise up, turning toward him. Pendergast centered on the side of the head, let his breath flow out. Then he slowly squeezed the trigger.

There was a roar and a flash as Pendergast relaxed to absorb the kickback. For a split second he saw a white streak move straight up the beast's cranium. Then the creature was gone, around a far corner, and the hallway was empty.

Pendergast knew exactly what had happened. He had seen that streak of white once before, hunting bear: the bullet had ricocheted off the skull, taking a strip of hair and skin while exposing the bone. The perfectly placed shot with a metal-jacketed, chromium-alloy-tipped .45 caliber bullet had bounced off the creature's skull like a spitball. Pendergast slumped forward and let his gun hand sink toward the floor as the lights flickered again and went out.

## Chapter 47

From where he'd stood next to the hors d'oeuvres tables, Smithback had a great view of Wright standing at the microphone, gesturing, voice booming out from a nearby loudspeaker. Smithback hadn't bothered to listen; he knew, with gloomy certainty, that Rickman would provide him with a hard copy of the speech later. Now, the speech was over, and the crowd had been eagerly piling into the new exhibition for the past half hour. But Smithback remained where he stood, oblivious. He gazed once again down at the table, debating whether to eat a fat gulf prawn or a tiny blini *au caviare*. He took the blini, actually five, and began grazing. The caviar, he noted, was gray and not salty—real sturgeon, not the fake whitefish they tried to pass off at publishing parties and the like.

He snagged a prawn anyway, made it two, followed by a spoonful of *ceviche* and three crackers covered with Scottish smoked cod roe with capers and lemon, a few paper-thin slices of cold red Kobe beef, no steak tartare. thank you very much, but definitely two pieces of that *uni sushi*... His gaze followed the array of delicacies that went on for fifty feet worth of table. He had never seen anything like it and he wasn't about to let any of it get away.

The band suddenly faltered, and almost simultaneously somebody elbowed him, hard, in the ribs.

"Hey!" Smithback started to say, when, looking up, he almost instantly found himself engulfed in a shoving, grunting, screaming mass of people. He was thrown against the banquet table; he struggled to regain his footing, slipped and fell, then rolled under the table. He crouched, watching the thundering feet go by. There were screams and the horrifying noises of bodies crashing full tilt into one another. He heard a few snatches of shouted phrases: "... dead body!" "...murder!" Had the killer struck again, in the middle of thousands of people? It wasn't possible.

A woman's shoe, black felt with a painfully high spiked heel, bounced under the table and came to rest near his nose. He shoved it away with disgust, noticed he

was still clutching a morsel of shrimp in his hand, and bolted it down. Whatever was happening, it was happening fast. It was shocking how quickly panic could sweep a crowd.

The table shuddered and slid, and Smithback saw an enormous platter land just beyond the fringe of the tablecloth. Crackers and Camembert went flying. He grabbed crackers and cheese off his frilled shirt and started eating. Twelve inches from his face, he could see scores of feet stamping and churning a loaf of pâté into mud. Another platter landed with a splat, spraying caviar across the floor in a gray mist.

The lights dimmed. Smithback quickly shoved a wedge of Camembert into his mouth, holding it between his teeth, realizing suddenly that he was eating while the biggest event he'd ever seen was being handed him on a silver platter. He checked his pockets for the micro-cassette recorder as the lights dimmed and brightened. Smithback talked as fast as he could, mouth close to the microphone, hoping his voice would come through over the deafening roar of humanity. This was an incredible opportunity. The hell with Rickman. Everyone was going to want this story. He hoped that if any other journalists were at the party, they were running like hell to get out.

The lights flickered again.

A hundred thousand for the advance, he wasn't going to take a dime less. He was here, he'd covered the story from the beginning. Nobody could touch his access.

The lights flickered for a third time, then went out.

"Son of a bitch!" yelled Smithback. "Somebody turn on the lights!"

Margo pushed Frock around another corner, then waited while he called again for Pendergast. The sound echoed forlornly.

"This is growing pointless," said Frock in exasperation. "There are several larger storage rooms in this section. Maybe he's inside one and can't hear us. Let's try a few. It's all we have left." He grunted as he fished in a jacket pocket. "Don't leave home without it," he smiled, holding up a curator's master key.

Margo unlocked the first door and peered into the gloom. "Mr. Pendergast?" she called out. Metal shelves stacked with enormous bones rose out of the gloom. A big dinosaur skull, the size of a Volkswagen Beetle, sat near the door on a wooden skid, still partially encased in matrix, black teeth gleaming dully.

"Next!" said Frock.

The lights dimmed.

No answer in the next storage room, either.

"One more try," Frock said. "Over there, across the hall."

Margo stopped at the indicated door, marked PLEISTOCENE—12B, noting as she did so a stairwell door at the far end of the hall. She was pushing open the storage room door as the lights flickered a second time.

"This is—" she began.

Suddenly, a sharp explosion resounded down the narrow hall. Margo looked up, heart pounding, trying to locate the source of the noise. It seemed to have come from around a corner they had not yet explored.

Then the lights went out.

"If we wait a moment," Frock said finally, "the emergency backup system will come on."

Only the faint creaking of the building pierced the silence. The seconds stretched into a minute, two minutes.

Then Margo noticed a strange smell, goatish, fetid, almost rank. With a sob of despair, she remembered where she had smelled it once before: in the darkened exhibition.

"Do you—?" she whispered.

"Yes," hissed Frock. "Get inside and lock the door."

Breathing fast, Margo groped at the doorframe. She called out quietly as the smell grew stronger. "Dr. Frock? Can you follow the sound of my voice?"

"There's no time for that," came his whisper. "Please, forget about me and get inside."

"No," said Margo. "Just come toward me slowly."

She heard his chair rattle. The smell was growing overpowering, the earthy, rotting odor of a swamp, mixed with the sweet smell of warm raw hamburger. Margo heard a wet snuffling.

"I'm right here," she whispered to Frock. "Oh, hurry, please."

The darkness seemed oppressive, a suffocating weight. She cringed against the doorframe, flattening herself to the wall, fighting down an urge to flee.

In the pitch black, wheels rattled and the chair bumped gently against her leg. She grabbed its handles and pulled Frock inside. Turning, she slammed the door closed, locked it, and then sank to the floor, her body rocked by noiseless sobs. Silence filled the room. There was a scraping on the door, soft at first, then louder and more insistent. Margo shrank away, banging her shoulder against the frame of the wheelchair. In the dark, she felt Frock gently take her hand.

## Chapter 48

D'Agosta sat up amid the broken glass, grabbed for his radio, and watched the retreating backs of the last guests, their screams and shouts fading.

"Lieutenant?" One of his officers, Bailey, was getting up from underneath another broken case. The Hall was a shambles: artifacts broken and scattered across the floor; broken glass everywhere; shoes, purses, pieces of clothing. Everybody had left the gallery except D'Agosta, Bailey, and the dead man. D'Agosta looked briefly at the headless body, registering the gaping wounds in the chest, the clothing stiffened by dried blood, the man's insides generously exposed like so much stuffing. Dead for some time, apparently. He looked away, then looked back quickly. The man was wearing a policeman's uniform.

"Bailey!" he shouted. "Officer down! Who is this man?"

Bailey came over, his face pale in the dim light. "Hard to say. But I think Fred Beauregard had a big old Academy ring like that."

"No *shit*," D'Agosta whistled under his breath. He bent closer, got the badge number.

Bailey nodded. "That's Beauregard, Loo."

"Christ!" D'Agosta said, straightening up. "Wasn't he on his forty-eight?"

"That's correct. Last tour was Wednesday afternoon."

"Then he's been in here since—" D'Agosta started. His face hardened into a scowl. "That fucking Coffey, refusing to sweep the exhibition. I'm gonna tear him a new asshole."

Bailey helped him up. "You're hurt."

"I'll bind it up later," D'Agosta said tersely. "Where's McNitt?"

"I don't know. Last I looked, he was caught in the crowd."

Ippolito stepped from around the far corner, talking into his radio. D'Agosta's respect for the Security Director went up a notch. *He may not be the brightest guy, but he's got balls when it comes to the pinch.*

The lights dimmed.

"There's panic in the Hall of the Heavens," said Ippolito, ear at his radio. "They say the security wall is coming down."

"Those idiots! That's the only exit!" He raised his own radio. "Walden! You copy? What's going on?"

"Sir, it's chaos here! McNitt just came out of the exhibition. He got pretty roughed up in there. We're at the exhibition entrance, trying to slow the crowd, but it's no use. There's a lot of people getting trampled, Lieutenant."

The lights dimmed a second time.

"Walden, is the emergency door coming down over the exit to the Rotunda?"

"Just a second." For a moment, the radio buzzed. "Shit, yes! It's halfway down and still dropping! People are jammed into that door like cattle, it's gonna crush a dozen or two—"

Suddenly, the exhibition went black. A dull crash of something heavy toppling to the ground momentarily overpowered the cries and screams.

D'Agosta pulled out his flashlight. "Ippolito, you can raise the door with the manual override, right?"

"Right. Anyway, the backup power should come on in a second—"

"We can't wait around for that, let's get the hell over there. And, for Chrissake, be careful."

Gingerly, they picked their way back toward the exhibition entrance, Ippolito leading the way through the welter of glass, broken wood, and debris. Broken pieces of once-priceless artifacts lay strewn about. The shouting and screaming grew louder as they neared the Hall of the Heavens.

Standing behind Ippolito, D'Agosta could see nothing in the vast blackness of the Hall. Even the votive candles had guttered. Ippolito was playing his flashlight around the entrance. *Why isn't he moving?* D'Agosta wondered irritably. Suddenly, Ippolito jerked backward, retching. His flashlight dropped to the ground and rolled away in the darkness.

"What the hell?" D'Agosta shouted, running forward with Bailey. Then he stopped short.

The huge Hall was a shambles. Shining his flashlight into the gloom, D'Agosta was reminded of earthquake footage he'd seen on the evening news. The platform was broken into several pieces, the lectern splintered and shattered. The bandstand was deserted, chairs toppled over, crushed instruments lying in heaps.

The floor was a maelstrom of food, clothing, printed programs, toppled bamboo trees, and trampled orchids, twisted and smashed into a strange landscape by the thousands of panicked feet.

D'Agosta brought the flashlight in toward the exhibition entrance itself. The huge wooden stelae surrounding the entrance had collapsed in giant pieces. D'Agosta could see limp arms and legs protruding from beneath the intricately carved columns.

Bailey rushed over. "There're at least eight people crushed here, Lieutenant. I don't think any of them are still alive."

"Any of them ours?" D'Agosta asked.

"I'm afraid so. Looks like McNitt and Walden, and one of the plainclothesmen. There are a couple of guard's uniforms here, too, and three civilians, I think."

"All dead? Every one of them?"

"Far as I can tell. I can't budge these columns."

"Shit." D'Agosta looked away, rubbing his forehead. A loud thud resonated from across the Hall.

"That's the security door closing," said Ippolito, wiping his mouth. He knelt at Bailey's side. "Oh, no. Martine... Christ, I can't believe it." He turned to D'Agosta. "Martine here was guarding the back stairwell. He must have come over to help control the crowd. He was one of my best men ..."

D'Agosta threaded his way between the broken columns and moved out into the Hall, dodging the upturned tables and broken chairs. His hand was still bleeding freely. There were several other still forms scattered about, whether dead or alive D'Agosta couldn't tell. When he heard screaming from the far end of the Hall, he shined his light toward the noise. The metal emergency door was fully shut, and a crowd of people were pressed against it, pounding on the metal and shouting. Some of them turned around as D'Agosta's light illuminated them.

D'Agosta ran over to the group, ignoring his squawking radio. "Everybody calm down, and move away! This is Lieutenant D'Agosta of the New York City police."

The crowd quieted a little, and D'Agosta called Ippolito over. Scanning the group, D'Agosta recognized Wright, the Director; Ian Cuthbert, head of this whole farce; some woman named Rickman who seemed pretty important—basically, the first forty or so people who'd entered the exhibition. First in, last out.

"Listen up!" he shouted. "The Security Director's going to raise the emergency door. Everybody, please step back."

The crowd moved aside, and D'Agosta involuntarily groaned. There were several limbs pinned under the heavy metal door. The floor was slick with blood. One of the limbs was moving feebly, and he could hear faint screaming from the far side of the door.

"Dear Jesus," he whispered. "Ippolito, open the son of a bitch."

"Shine your light over here." Ippolito pointed to a small keypad next to the door, then crouched and punched in a series of numbers.

They waited.

Ippolito looked nonplussed. "I can't understand—" He punched in the numbers again, more slowly this time.

"There's no power," said D'Agosta.

“Shouldn’t matter,” said Ippolito, frantically punching a third time. “The system’s got redundant backups.”

The crowd started to murmur.

“We’re trapped!” one man yelled.

D’Agosta whirled his light onto the crowd. “All of you, just calm down. That body in the exhibition has been dead at least two days. You understand? *Two days*. The murderer’s long gone.”

“How do you know?” shouted the same man.

“Shut up and listen,” said D’Agosta. “We’re going to get you out of here. If we can’t open the door, they’ll do it from the outside. It may take a few minutes. In the meantime, I want you all to get away from the door, stick together, find yourself some chairs that aren’t broken, and sit down. Okay? There’s nothing you can do here.”

Wright stepped forward into the light. “Listen, officer,” he said, “We’ve got to get out of here. Ippolito, for the love of God, open the door!”

“Just a moment!” said D’Agosta sharply. “Dr. Wright, please return to the group.” He looked around at the wide-eyed faces. “Are there any physicians here?”

There was a silence.

“Nurses? First aid?”

“I know some first aid,” someone volunteered.

“Great. Mister, ah—”

“Arthur Pound.”

“Pound. Get one or two volunteers to help you. There are several people who look like they got trampled. I need to know number and their condition. I’ve got a guy back at the exhibition entrance, Bailey, who can help you. He’s got a flashlight. We also need a volunteer to help collect some candles.”

A young, lanky fellow in a wrinkled tuxedo came out of the gloom. He finished chewing, swallowed. “I’ll help with that,” he said.

“Name?”

“Smithback.”

“Okay, Smithback. You got matches?”

“Sure do.”

The Mayor stepped forward. His face was smeared with blood and a large purple welt was emerging beneath one eye. “Let me help,” he said.

D’Agosta looked at him with amazement. “Mayor Harper! Maybe you can take charge of everyone. Keep them calm.”

“Certainly, Lieutenant.”

D’Agosta’s radio squawked again, and he grabbed it. “D’Agosta, this is Coffey. D’Agosta, do you read? What the hell’s going on in there? Give me a sit-ref!”

D’Agosta talked fast. “Listen up, I’m not going to say this twice. We’ve got at least eight dead, probably more, and an undetermined number of wounded. I guess you know about the people caught under the door. Ippolito can’t get the fucking door open. There’s about thirty, maybe forty of us here. Including Wright and the Mayor.”

“The Mayor! Shit. Look, D’Agosta, the system’s failed totally. The manual override doesn’t work on this side, either. I’ll get a crew with acetylene to cut you

guys out. It may take awhile, this door's built like a bank vault. Is the Mayor okay?"

"He's fine. Where's Pendergast?"

"I don't have a clue."

"Who else is trapped inside the perimeter?"

"Don't know yet," said Coffey. "We're taking reports now. There should be some men in the Computer Room and Security Command, Garcia and a few others. Might be a few on the other floors. We got several plainclothes officers and guards out here. They were pushed out with the crowd, some of them got messed up pretty bad. What the hell happened in the exhibition, D'Agosta?"

"They found the body of one of my men stuffed on top of an exhibit. Guttled, just like the rest." He paused, then spoke bitterly. "If you'd let me do the sweep I requested, none of this would have happened."

The radio squawked again and went silent.

"Pound!" D'Agosta called. "What's the extent of the injuries?"

"We've got one man alive, but just barely," Pound said, looking up from an inert form. "The rest are dead. Trampled. Maybe one or two heart attacks, it's hard to say."

"Do what you can for the live one," D'Agosta said.

His radio buzzed. "Lieutenant D'Agosta?" said a scratchy voice. "This is Garcia, in Security Command, sir. We got..." The voice trailed out in a burst of static.

"Garcia? Garcia! What is it?" D'Agosta shouted into the radio.

"Sorry, sir, the batteries on this mobile transmitter I'm using are weak. We got Pendergast on the honk. I'm patching him over to you."

"Vincent," came the familiar drawl.

"Pendergast! Where are you?"

"I'm in the basement, Section Twenty-nine. I understand the power is out throughout the Museum, and that we're trapped inside Cell Two. I'm afraid I've got a little more bad news of my own to add. Could you please move to a spot where we can speak privately?"

D'Agosta walked away from the crowd. "What is it?" he asked in a low tone.

"Vincent, listen to me carefully. There is something down here. I don't know what it is, but it's big, and I don't think it's human."

"Pendergast, don't patch with me. Not now."

"Vincent, I'm entirely serious. That isn't the bad news. The bad news is, it may be headed your way."

"What do you mean? What kind of animal is it?"

"You'll know when it's near. The smell is unmistakable. What kind of weapons do you have?"

"Let's see. Three twelve gauges, a couple of service revolvers, two shot pistols loaded with capstun. A few odds and ends, maybe."

"Forget the capstun. Now, listen, we have to talk fast. Get everyone out of there. This thing went by me just before the lights went out. I saw it through a window in one of the storage rooms down here, and it looked very big. It walks on all fours. I got off two shots at it, then it went into a stairwell at the end of this hall. I've got a set of old blueprints here with me, and I've checked them. You know where that stairwell comes out?"

“No,” said D’Agosta.

“It only has access to alternate floors. It leads down into the subbasement, too, but we can’t assume the thing would go that way. There’s an egress on the fourth floor. And there’s another one behind the Hall of the Heavens. It’s back in the service area behind the platform.”

“Pendergast, I’m having a hard time with this. What the hell exactly do you want us to do?”

“I’d get your men—whoever has the shotguns—and line up at that door. If the creature comes through, let the thing have it. It may have already *come* through, I don’t know. Vincent, it took a .45 metal-jacketed slug in the skull at close range, and the bullet grazed right off.”

If anyone else had been speaking, D’Agosta would have suspected a joke. Or madness. “Right,” he said. “How long ago was this?”

“I saw it a few minutes ago, just before the power went out. I shot at it once, then followed it down the hall after the lights went. I got off another shot, but my light wasn’t steady and I missed it. I went down to reconnoiter just now. The hall dead-ends, and the thing has vanished. The only way out is the stairwell leading up to you. It may be hiding in the stairwell, or maybe, if you’re lucky, it’s gone to a different floor. All I know is that it hasn’t come back this way.”

D’Agosta swallowed.

“If you can get into the basement safely, do it. Meet up with me here. These blueprints seem to show the way out. We’ll talk again once you’re in a more secure place. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said D’Agosta.

“Vincent? There’s something else.”

“What now?”

“This creature can open and close doors.”

D’Agosta holstered his radio, licked his lips, and looked back toward the group of people. Most were sitting on the floor, stunned, but a few were trying to help light the armload of candles the lanky guy had scrounged.

D’Agosta spoke to the group as softly as he could. “All of you, move over here and get down against the wall. Put those candles out.”

“What is it?” somebody cried. D’Agosta recognized the voice as Wright’s.

“Quiet. Do as I say. You, what’s your name, Smithback, drop that and get over here.”

D’Agosta’s radio buzzed into speech as he did a quick visual sweep of the Hall with his flashlight. The remote corners of the hall were so black they seemed to eat the beam of his light. In the center of the hall a few candles were lit next to a still form. Pound and somebody else were bending over it.

“Pound!” he called out. “Both of you. Put out those candles and get back over here!”

“But he’s still alive—”

“Get back *now!*” He turned to the crowd that was huddling behind him. “None of you move or make a sound. Bailey and Ippolito, bring those shotguns and follow me.”

“Did you hear that? Why do they need their guns!” cried Wright.

Recognizing Coffey's voice on the radio, D'Agosta switched it off with a brusque movement. Moving carefully, flashlights probing the darkness ahead of them, the group crept toward the center of the Hall. D'Agosta played his beam along the wall, found the service area, the dark outlines of the stairwell door. It was closed. He thought he smelled something strange in the air: a peculiar, rotten odor he couldn't place. But the room stunk to begin with. Half the damn guests must have lost control of their plumbing when the lights failed.

He led the way into the service area, then stopped. "According to Pendergast, there's a creature, an animal, maybe in this stairwell," he whispered.

"According to Pendergast," said Ippolito sarcastically under his breath.

"Stow that shit, Ippolito. Now listen up. We can't stay here waiting in the dark. We're gonna go in nice and easy. Okay? Do it by the numbers. Safeties off, shells in the chambers. Bailey, you're gonna open the door, then cover us with the light, fast. Ippolito, you'll cover the upward staircase and I'll cover the down. If you see a person, demand identification and shoot if you don't get it. If you see anything else, shoot immediately. We move on my signal."

D'Agosta switched off his flashlight, slipped it in a pocket, and tightened his grip on the shotgun. Then he nodded for Bailey to direct his own light onto the stairwell door. D'Agosta closed his eyes and murmured a brief prayer in the close darkness. Then he gave the signal.

Ippolito moved to the side of the door while Bailey yanked it open. D'Agosta and Ippolito rushed in, Bailey behind them, sweeping the light in a quick semicircle.

A horrible stench awaited them inside the stairwell. D'Agosta took a few steps down into the darkness, sensed a sudden movement *above* him, and heard an unearthly, throaty growl that turned his knees to putty, followed by a dull, slapping sound, like the smacking of a damp towel against the floor. Then wet things were hitting the wall around him and gobs of moisture splattered his face. He spun around and fired at something large and dark. The light was gyrating wildly. "Shit!" he heard Bailey wail.

"Bailey! Don't let it go into the Hall!" He fired into the darkness, again and again, up the stairwell and down, until he was pumping an empty chamber. The acrid smell of gunpowder blended with the nauseating reek as screams resounded in the Hall of the Heavens.

D'Agosta stumbled up the stairs to the landing, almost tripped over something, and moved into the Hall. "Bailey, where is it?" he yelled as he jammed shells into his shotgun, temporarily blinded by the muzzle flare.

"I don't know!" Bailey shouted. "I can't see!" "Did it go down or through?" *Two shells in the shotgun. Three...*

"I don't know! I don't know!"

D'Agosta pulled out his flashlight and shone it on Bailey. The officer was soaked in thick clots of blood. Pieces of flesh were in his hair, hanging from his eyebrows. He was wiping his eyes. A hideous smell hung in the air.

"I'm fine," Bailey reassured D'Agosta. "I think. I just got all this shit on my face, I can't see."

D'Agosta swept the light around the room in a fast arc, the shotgun braced against his thigh. The group, huddled together against the wall, blinked in terror.

He turned the light back toward the stairwell, and saw Ippolito, or what was left of him, lying partway on the landing, dark blood rapidly spreading from his torn gut.

The thing had been waiting for them just a few steps up from the landing. *But where the fuck was it now?* He shined the light in desperate circles around the Hall. It was gone—the huge space was still.

*No.* Something *was* moving in the center of the Hall. The light was dim at that distance, but D'Agosta could see a large, dark shape crouched over the injured man on the dance floor, lunging downward with odd, jerking motions. D'Agosta heard the man wail once—then there was a faint crunching noise and silence. D'Agosta propped the flashlight in his armpit, raised his gun, aimed, and squeezed the trigger.

There was a flash and a roar. Screams erupted from the huddled group. Two more shots and the chamber was again empty.

He reached for more shells, came up empty, dropped the shotgun and drew his service revolver. "Bailey!" he yelled. "Get over there fast, get everyone together and prepare to move." He swept the light across the floor of the Hall, but the shape was gone. He moved carefully toward the body. At ten feet, he saw the one thing he'd wanted not to see: the split skull and the brains spread across the floor. A bloody track led into the exhibition. Whatever it was had rushed inside to escape the shotgun blast. It wouldn't stay there long.

D'Agosta leaped up, raced around the columns, and yanked one of the heavy wooden exhibition doors free. With a grunt, he slammed it to, then raced over to the far side. There was a noise inside the exhibition, a swift heavy tread. He slammed the second door shut and heard the latch fall. Then the doors shuddered as something heavy hit them.

"Bailey!" he yelled. "Get everyone down the stairwell!"

The pounding grew stronger, and D'Agosta backed up involuntarily. The wood of the door began to splinter.

As he aimed his gun toward the door, he heard screams and shouts behind him. They'd seen Ippolito. He heard Bailey's voice raised in argument with Wright. There was a sudden shudder and a great crack opened at the base of the door.

D'Agosta ran across the room. "Down the stairs, now! Don't look back!"

"No," screamed Wright, who was blocking the stairwell. "Look at Ippolito! I'm not going down there!"

"There's a way out!" shouted D'Agosta.

"No there isn't. But through the exhibition, and—"

"There's something in the exhibition!" D'Agosta yelled. "Now get going!"

Bailey moved Wright forcibly aside and started pushing people through the door, even as they cried and stumbled across the body of Ippolito. *At least the Mayor seems calm,* D'Agosta thought. *Probably saw worse than this at his last press conference.*

"I'm not going down there!" Wright cried. "Cuthbert, Lavinia, listen to me. That basement's a death trap. I know. We'll go upstairs, we can hide on the fourth floor, come back when the creature's gone."

The people were through the door and staggering down the stairwell. D'Agosta could hear more wood splintering. He paused a moment. There were thirty-odd

people below him, only three hesitating on the landing. “This is your last chance to come with us,” he said.

“We’re going with Doctor Wright,” said the Public Relations Director. In the gleam of the flashlight, Rickman’s drawn and fearful face looked like an apparition. Without a word, D’Agosta turned and followed the group downward. As he ran, he could hear Wright’s loud, desperate voice, calling for them to come upstairs.

## Chapter 49

Coffey stood just inside the tall archway of the Museum’s west entrance, watching the rain lash against the elaborate glass-and-bronze doors. He was shouting into his radio but D’Agosta wasn’t responding. And what was this shit Pendergast was slinging about a monster? The guy was bent to begin with, he figured, and the blackout sent him over the edge. As usual, everyone had screwed up, and once again it was up to Coffey to clean up the mess. Outside, two large emergency response vehicles were pulling up at the entrance and police in riot gear were pouring out, moving quickly to erect A-frames across Riverside Drive. He could hear the wailing of ambulances frantically trying to nose their way through the steel grid of radio cars, fire engines, and press vans. Crowds of people were scattered around, crying, talking, standing in the rain or lying beneath the Museum’s vast awning. Members of the press were trying to slip past the cordon, snaking their microphones and cameras into faces before being pushed back by the police.

Coffey sprinted through the pelting rain to the silver bulk of the Mobile Command Unit. He yanked open the rear door and jumped inside.

Within the MCU, it was cool and dark. Several agents were monitoring terminals, their faces glowing green in the reflected light. Coffey grabbed a headset and sat down. “Regroup!” he shouted on the command channel. “All FBI personnel to the Mobile Command Unit!”

He switched channels. “Security Command. I want an update.”

Garcia’s voice came on, weary and tense. “We still have total system failure, sir. The backup power hasn’t kicked in, they don’t know why. All we have are our flashlights and the batteries in this mobile transmitter.”

“So? Start it manually.”

“It’s all computer-driven, sir. Apparently there is no manual start.”

“And the security doors?”

“Sir, when we took those power dips the entire security system malfunctioned. They think it’s a hardware problem. All the security doors were released.”

“Whaddya mean, *all*?”

“The security doors on all five cells closed. It isn’t just Cell Two. The whole Museum’s shut down tight.”

“Garcia, who there knows the most about this security system?”

“That’d be Allen.” “Put him on.”

There was a brief pause. “Tom Allen speaking.”

“Allen, what about the manual overrides? Why aren’t they working?”

“Same hardware problem. The security system was a third-party installation, a Japanese vendor. We’re trying to get a representative on the phone now, but it’s tough, the phone system is digital and it went out when the computer shut down. We’re routing all calls through Garcia’s transmitter. Even the T1 lines are out. It’s been a chain reaction since the switching box was shot to hell.”

“Who? I didn’t know—”

“Some cop—what’s his name? Waters?—on duty in the Computer Room, thought he saw something, fired a couple of shotgun rounds into the main electrical switching box.”

“Look, Allen, I want to send a team in to evacuate those people trapped in the Hall of the Heavens. The Mayor’s in there, for Chrissake. How can we get in? Should we cut through the east door into the Hall?”

“Those doors are designed to retard cutting. You could do it, but it would take forever.”

“What about the subbasement? I’ve heard it’s like a frigging catacomb down there.”

“There might be ingress points from where you are, but on-line charts are down. And the area isn’t fully mapped. It would take time.”

“The walls, then. How about going through the walls?”

“The lower load-bearing walls are extremely thick, three feet in most places, and all the older masonry walls have been heavily reinforced with rebar. Cell Two only has windows on the third and fourth floor, and they’re reinforced with steel bars. Most of them are too small to climb through, anyway.”

“Shit. What about the roof?”

“All the cells are closed off, and it would be pretty tough—”

“Goddammit, Allen, I’m *asking* you the *best* way to get some men inside.”

There was a silence.

“The best way to get in would be through the roof,” came the voice. “The security doors on the upper floors are not as heavy. Cell Three extends above the Hall of the Heavens. That’s the fifth floor. You can’t enter there, though—the roof is shielded because of the radiography labs. But you could come in through the roof of Cell Four. In some of the narrower halls you might be able to blow a security door to Cell Three with one charge. Once you were in Cell Three you could go right through the ceiling of the Hall of the Heavens. There’s an access port for servicing the chandelier in the Hall ceiling. It’s sixty feet to the floor, though.”

“I’ll get back to you. Coffey out.”

He punched at the radio and shouted, “Ippolito! Ippolito, you copy?” What the hell was happening inside that Hall? He switched to D’Agosta’s frequency. “D’Agosta! This is Coffey. Are you reading me?”

He ran frantically through the bands.

“Waters!”

“Waters here, sir.”

“What happened, Waters?”

“There was a loud noise in the electrical room, sir, and I fired as per regulations, and—”

“Regulations? You fucking turkey, there’s no regulation for firing at a noise!”

“Sorry, sir. It was a loud noise, and I heard a lot of screaming and running in the exhibition and I thought—”

“For this, Waters, you’re dead. I’m gonna have your ass roasted and sliced up like luncheon meat on a platter. Think about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Outside there was a cough, sputter, and a roar as a large portable generator started up. The rear door to the Mobile Command Unit opened and several agents ducked in, their suits dripping. “The rest are on their way, sir,” one of them said.

“Okay. Tell them we’re having a crisis-control meeting here in the MCU in five minutes.”

He stepped out into the rain. Emergency services workers were moving bulky equipment and yellow acetylene tanks up the Museum steps.

Coffey ran back through the rain and up the steps into the debris-laden Rotunda. Medics clustered at the metal emergency door blocking the east entrance to the Hall of the Heavens. Coffey could hear the whine of a bone saw.

“Tell me what you’ve got,” Coffey asked the leader of the medical team.

The doctor’s eyes looked strained above his blood-flecked mask. “I don’t know the full extent of the injuries yet, but we’ve got several criticals here. We’re performing some field amputations. I think a few others might be saved if you can get this door open in the next half hour.”

Coffey shook his head. “Doesn’t look like that will happen. We’re gonna have to cut through it.”

An emergency worker spoke up. “We’ve got some heat-proof blankets we can lay across these people as we work.”

Coffey stepped back and raised his radio. “D’Agosta! Ippolito! Come in!”

Silence. Then, he heard a hiss of static.

“D’Agosta here,” came the tense voice. “Listen, Coffey—”

“Where have you been? I told you—”

“Shut up and listen, Coffey. You were making too much noise, I had to shut you off. We’re on our way to the subbasement. There’s a creature loose somewhere in Cell Two. I’m not kidding you, Coffey, it’s a fucking *monster*. It killed Ippolito and ran into the Hall. We had to get out.”

“A *what?* You’re losing it, D’Agosta. Get a grip, you hear me? We’re sending men in through the roof.”

“Yeah? Well, they’d better have some heavy shit ready if they plan on meeting up with this thing.”

“D’Agosta, let me handle it. What’s this about Ippolito?”

“He’s dead, slashed open, just like all the other stiffs.”

“And a monster did this. Okay, sure. Any other police officers with you, D’Agosta?”

“Yeah, there’s Bailey.”

“I’m relieving you of duty. Put Bailey on.”

“Fuck you. Here’s Bailey.”

“Sergeant,” Coffey barked, “You’re in charge now. What’s the situation?”

“Mr. Coffey, he’s right. We had to leave the Hall of the Heavens. We went down the back stairwell near the service area. There’s over thirty of us, including the Mayor. No shit, there’s really something in here.”

“Give me a break, Bailey. Did you see it?”

“I’m not sure what I saw, sir, but D’Agosta saw it, and Jesus, sir, you should see what it did to Ippolito—”

“Listen to me, Bailey. Are you gonna calm down and take over?”

“No sir. As far as I’m concerned, he’s in charge.”

“I just put *you* in charge!”

Coffey snorted and looked up, enraged. “The son of a bitch just cut me off.”

Outside in the rain, Greg Kawakita stood motionless amid a cacophony of yelling, sobbing, and cursing. He remained oblivious to the pelting rain that plastered his black hair to his forehead; the emergency vehicles that passed by, sirens shrieking; the panicky guests that jostled him as they ran past. Again and again he replayed in his mind what Margo and Frock had barked at him. He opened and closed his mouth, moved forward as if to reenter the Museum. Then, slowly, he turned, pulled his sodden tuxedo closer around his narrow shoulders, and walked thoughtfully into the darkness.

## Chapter 50

Margo jumped as a second gunshot echoed down the hall.

“What’s happening?” she cried. In the darkness, she felt Frock’s grip tighten.

Outside, they heard running steps. Then the yellow glow of a flashlight streaked by beneath the doorframe.

“That smell is growing fainter,” she whispered. “Do you think it’s gone?”

“Margo,” Frock replied quietly, “you saved my life. You risked your own life to save mine.”

There came a soft knocking at the door. “Who is it?” Frock asked in a steady tone.

“Pendergast,” a voice said, and Margo rushed to open the door. The FBI agent stood outside, a large revolver in one hand and crumpled blueprints in the other. His crisp well-tailored black suit contrasted with his dirt-streaked face. He shut the door behind him.

“I’m pleased to see you both safe and sound,” he said, shining his light first on Margo and then Frock.

“Not half as pleased as we are!” Frock cried. “We came down here searching for you. Were those shots yours?”

“Yes,” Pendergast said. “And I assume it was you I heard calling my name?”

“Then you *did* hear me!” Frock said. “That’s how you knew to look for us in here.”

Pendergast shook his head. “No.” He handed Margo a flashlight as he started unfolding his crumpled blueprints. Margo saw they were covered with handwritten notes.

“The New York Historical Society will be very unhappy when they see the liberties I’ve taken with their property,” the agent observed dryly.

“Pendergast,” Frock hissed, “Margo and I have discovered exactly what this killer is. You *must* listen. It isn’t a human being or any animal we know. Please, let me explain.”

Pendergast looked up. “I don’t need any convincing, Doctor Frock.”

Frock blinked. “You don’t? You will? I mean, you will help us stop the opening upstairs, get the people out?”

“It’s too late for that,” Pendergast said. “I’ve been talking by police radio to Lieutenant D’Agosta and others. This power failure isn’t just affecting the basement, it’s affecting the entire Museum. The security system has failed, and all the emergency doors have come down.”

“You mean—” Margo began.

“I mean the Museum has been compartmentalized into five isolated cells. We’re in Cell Two. Along with the people in the Hall of the Heavens. And the creature.”

“What happened?” Frock asked.

“There was a panic even before the power went out and the doors came down. A dead body was discovered inside the exhibition. A police officer. Most of the guests managed to get out, but thirty or forty are trapped inside the Hall of the Heavens.” He smiled ruefully. “I was in the exhibition myself, just a few hours before. I wanted to get a look at this Mbwn figurine you mentioned. If I’d gone in by the rear exit instead of the front, perhaps I would have found the body myself, and prevented all this. However, I did get a chance to see the figurine, Doctor Frock. And it’s an excellent representation. Take it from somebody who knows.”

Frock stared, his mouth open.

“You’ve seen it?” Frock managed to whisper.

“Yes. That’s what I was shooting at. I was down around the corner from this storeroom when I heard you call my name. Then I noticed an awful smell. I ducked into a room and watched it go by. I came out after it and got off a shot, but it grazed off the thing’s scalp. Then the lights went out. I followed it around the corner and saw it grasping at this door, snuffling.” Pendergast flicked open the revolver’s cylinder, and replaced the two spent cartridges. “That’s how I knew you were in here.”

“My God,” Margo said.

Pendergast holstered his gun. “I got off a second shot at it, but I was having trouble aiming my weapon, and I missed. I came down this way to look for it, but the thing had vanished. It must have gone into the stairwell at the end of the corridor. There’s no other way out from this cul-de-sac.”

“Mr. Pendergast,” Frock said urgently. “Tell me, please: *what did it look like?*”

“I saw it only briefly,” Pendergast said slowly. “It was low, extremely powerful looking. It walked on all fours, but could rear upright. It was partially covered with hair.” He pursed his lips, nodded. “It was dark. But I’d say whoever made that figurine knew what he was doing.”

In the glow of Pendergast's light, Margo saw a strange mix of fear, exhilaration, and triumph cross Frock's face. Then a series of muffled explosions echoed and reechoed above them. There was a brief silence, and then more reports, sharper and louder, boomed nearby.

Pendergast looked upward, listening intently. "D'Agosta!" he said. Drawing his gun and dropping the blueprints, he raced out into the corridor.

Margo ran to the door and shined the flashlight down the hallway. In its thin beam, she could see Pendergast rattling the stairwell door. He knelt to inspect the lock, then, standing, he gave the door a series of savage kicks.

"It's jammed shut," he said when he returned. "Those shotgun blasts we heard sounded like they came from inside the stairwell. Some of the shells must have bent the doorframe and damaged the lock. It won't budge." He holstered the gun and pulled out his radio. "Lieutenant D'Agosta! Vincent, can you hear me?" He waited a moment, then shook his head and replaced the radio in his jacket pocket.

"So we're stuck here?" Margo asked.

Pendergast shook his head. "I don't think so. I've spent the afternoon down in these vaults and tunnels, trying to determine how the beast was able to elude our searches. These blueprints were drafted well before the turn of the century, and they are complicated and contradictory, but they seem to show a route out of the Museum through the subbasement. With everything sealed off, there's no other feasible way out for us. And there are several ways to access the subbasement from this section of the Museum."

"That means we can meet up with the people still upstairs, then escape together!" Margo said.

Pendergast looked grim. "But that also means the beast can find its way back into the subbasement. Personally, I think that while these emergency doors may prevent our own rescue, they won't hamper the beast's movement much. I believe it's been around long enough to find its own secret ways, and that it can move throughout the Museum—or, at least, the lower levels—practically at will."

Margo nodded. "We think it's been living in the Museum for years. And we think we know how and why it came here."

Pendergast looked searchingly at Margo for a long moment. "I need you and Doctor Frock to tell me everything you know about this creature, as quickly as possible," he said.

As they turned to enter the storeroom, Margo heard a distant drumming, like slow thunder. She froze, listening intently. The thunder seemed to have a voice: crying or shouting, she wasn't sure which.

"What was that?" she whispered.

"That," Pendergast said quietly, "is the sound of people in the stairwell, running for their lives."

## Chapter 51

In the faint light filtering in through the barred laboratory window, Wright could barely make out the old filing cabinet. It was damned lucky, he thought, that the lab was inside the perimeter of Cell Two. Not for the first time, he was glad he'd kept this old laboratory when he'd been promoted to Director. It would provide them with a temporary safe haven, a little breathing room. Cell Two was now completely cut off from the rest of the Museum, and they were effectively prisoners. Everything, all the emergency bars, shutters, and security gates, had come down during the loss of power. At least that's what he'd heard that incompetent police officer, D'Agosta, say.

"Someone is going to pay dearly for this," Wright muttered to himself. Then they all fell quiet. Now that they had stopped running, the enormity of the disaster began to sink in.

Wright moved gingerly forward, pulling out one file-cabinet drawer after another, fishing behind the folders until at last he found what he was looking for.

"Ruger .357 magnum," he said, hefting it in his hands. "Great pistol. Excellent stopping power."

"I'm not sure that's going to stop whatever killed Ippolito," said Cuthbert. He was standing near the laboratory door, a still figure framed in black.

"Don't worry, Ian. One of these speedball bullets would perforate an elephant. I bought this after old Shorter was mugged by a vagrant. Anyway, the creature isn't coming up here. And if he does, this door is solid oak two inches thick."

"What about that one?" Cuthbert pointed toward the rear of the office.

"That goes into the Hall of Cretaceous Dinosaurs. It's just like this one—solid oak." He tucked the Ruger into his belt. "Those fools, going into the basement like so many lemmings. They should have listened to me."

He rummaged in the file drawer again and pulled out a flashlight. "Excellent. Haven't used this in years."

He snapped it on and a feeble beam shot out, wavering as his hand shook a little.

"Not much juice left in that torch, I'd say," Cuthbert murmured.

Wright turned it off. "We'll only use it in an emergency."

"Please!" Rickman spoke suddenly. "Please leave it on. Just for a minute." She was sitting on a stool in the center of the room, clenching and unclenching her hands. "Winston, what are we going to do? We must have a plan."

"First things first," said Wright. "I need a drink, that's Plan A. My nerves are shot." He made his way to the far side of the lab and shone the light in an old cabinet, finally pulling out a bottle. There was a clink of glass.

"Ian?" asked Wright.

"Nothing for me," Cuthbert replied.

"Lavinia?"

"No, no, I couldn't."

Wright came back and sat down at a worktable. He filled the tumbler and drank it off in three gulps. Then he refilled it. Suddenly, the room was full of the warm, peaty scent of single-malt scotch.

"Easy there, Winston," said Cuthbert.

"We can't stay here, in the dark," Rickman said nervously. "There must be an exit somewhere on this floor."

"I'm telling you, everything's sealed off," Wright snapped.

"What about the Dinosaur Hall?" said Rickman, pointing to the rear door.

"Lavinia," said Wright, "the Dinosaur Hall has only one public entrance, and that's been sealed by a security door. We're completely locked in. But you don't need to worry, because whatever killed Ippolito and the others won't be after us. It'll go after the easy kill, the group blundering around in the basement."

There was a swallowing sound, then the loud smack of glass hitting the table. "I say we stay here for another half-hour, wait it out. Then, we'll go back down into the exhibition. If they haven't restored power and unsealed the doors by then, I know of another way out. *Through* the exhibition."

"You seem to know all kinds of hiding places," Cuthbert said.

"This used to be my lab. Once in awhile I still like to come down here, get away from the administrative headaches, be near my dinosaurs again." He chuckled and drank.

"I see," said Cuthbert acidly.

"Part of the *Superstition* exhibition is mounted in what used to be the old Trilobite Alcove. I put in a lot of hours down there many years ago. Anyway, there was a passageway to the Broadway corridor behind one of the old trilobite displays. The door was boarded up years ago to make room for another display case. I'm sure that when they were building *Superstition*, they just nailed a piece of plywood over it and painted it. We could kick it in, shoot off the lock with this if necessary."

"That sounds feasible," said Rickman eagerly.

"I don't recall hearing about any such door in the exhibition," Cuthbert said dubiously. "I'm sure Security would have known about it."

"It was years ago, I tell you," Wright snapped. "It was boarded over and forgotten."

There was a long silence while Wright poured another drink.

"Winston," Cuthbert said, "put that drink down."

The Director took a long swig, then hung his head. His shoulders slumped.

"Ian," he murmured finally. "How could this have happened? We're ruined, you know."

Cuthbert was silent.

"Let's not bury the patient before the diagnosis," said Rickman, in a desperately bright voice. "Good public relations can repair even the worst damage."

"Lavinia, we aren't talking about a few poisoned headache tablets here," Cuthbert said. "There's half a dozen dead people, maybe more, lying two floors below us. The bloody Mayor is trapped down there. In a couple of hours, we'll be on every late news show in the country."

"We're ruined," Wright repeated. A small, strangled sob escaped from his throat, and he laid his head down on the table.

"Bloody hell," muttered Cuthbert, reaching over for Wright's bottle and glass and putting them back in the cabinet.

"It's over, isn't it?" Wright moaned without raising his head.

"Yes, Winston, it's over," said Cuthbert. "Frankly, I'll be happy just to get out of here with my life."

“Please, Ian, let’s leave here? *Please?*” Rickman pleaded. She stood up and walked over to the door Wright had closed behind them and swung it open slowly.

“This wasn’t locked!” she said sharply.

“Good Lord,” Cuthbert said, jumping up. Wright, without lifting his head, fished in his pocket and held out a key.

“Fits both doors,” he said in a muffled voice. Rickman’s shaking hand rattled the key loudly in the lock.

“What did we do wrong?” Wright asked plaintively.

“That’s clear enough,” said Cuthbert. “Five years ago, we had a chance to solve this thing.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rickman, coming back toward them.

“You know very well what. I’m talking about Montague’s disappearance. We should have taken care of the problem then, instead of pretending it never happened. All that blood in the basement near the Whittlesey crates, Montague gone missing. In hindsight, we now know exactly what happened to him. But we should have gotten to the bottom of it *then*. You remember, Winston? We were sitting in your office when Ippolito came in with the news. You ordered the floor cleaned and the incident forgotten. We washed our hands of it, and hoped whoever or *whatever* killed Montague would disappear.”

“There was no proof anyone was killed!” Wright wailed, lifting his head. “And certainly no proof it was Montague! It could have been a stray dog, or something. How could we have known?”

“We didn’t know. But we might have found out had you allowed Ippolito to report that monstrous great bloodstain to the police. And you, Lavinia—as I recall, you agreed that we should simply wash that blood away.”

“Ian, there was no sense in creating a needless scandal. You know very well that blood could have been from anything,” Rickman said. “And Ian, it was you who insisted those crates be moved. You who worried the exhibition would raise questions about the Whittlesey expedition, you who took the journal and then asked me to keep it for you until the exhibition was over. The journal didn’t fit in with your theories, did it?”

Cuthbert snorted. “How little you know. John Whittlesey was my friend. At least, he was once. We had a falling-out over an article he published, and we never patched things up. Anyway, it’s rather too late for that now. But I didn’t want to see that journal come to light, his theories held up for ridicule.”

He turned and stared at the Public Relations Director. “What I did, Lavinia, was simply try to protect a colleague who’d gone a bit barmy. I didn’t cover up a killing. And what about the sightings? Winston, you received several reports a year about people seeing or hearing strange things after hours. You never once did anything about it, did you?”

“How could I have known?” came the spluttering response. “Who’d have believed it? They were crank reports, ridiculous...”

“Can we change the subject, please?” cried Rickman. “I can’t wait here, in the dark. Maybe the windows? Perhaps they’ll spread a net for us?”

“No,” said Wright, sighing deeply and rubbing his eyes. “Those bars are case-hardened steel, several inches thick.” He peered around the darkened room. “Where’s my drink?”

“You’ve had enough,” said Cuthbert.

“You and your damned Anglican moralizing.” He lurched to his feet and headed for the cabinet with a slightly unsteady gait.

In the stairwell, D’Agosta looked toward the dim figure of Bailey.

“Thanks,” he said. “You’re in charge, Loo.” Below them, the large group of guests was waiting, huddled together on the steps, sniffing and sobbing. D’Agosta turned to face them.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “We’ve got to move fast. The next landing down has a door leading into the basement. We’re going to go through it and meet up with some others who know a way out of here. Everybody understand?”

“We understand,” came a voice that D’Agosta recognized as the Mayor’s.

“Good,” D’Agosta nodded. “Okay, let’s go. I’ll get to the front and lead the way with my light. Bailey, you cover our rear. Let me know if you see anything.”

Slowly, the group descended. On the landing, D’Agosta waited until Bailey gave him the all-clear sign. Then he grabbed the door handle.

It didn’t budge.

D’Agosta gave it another yank, harder this time. No luck.

“What the—?” He brought his flashlight to bear on the handle. “Shit,” he muttered. Then, in a louder tone, he said, “Everybody stay where you are for a moment, be as quiet as possible. I’m going up to talk to my officer at the rear.” He retraced his steps.

“Listen, Bailey,” he told him softly, “we can’t get into the basement. Some of our shells ripped into the door and they’ve bent the jamb all to hell. There’s no way we can get the thing open without a crowbar.”

Even in the dark he could see Bailey’s eyes widen. “So what are we gonna do?” the sergeant asked. “Go back upstairs?”

“Let me think a minute,” D’Agosta said. “How much ammo do you have? I’ve got six rounds in my service piece.”

“I don’t know. Fifteen, sixteen rounds, maybe.”

“Damn,” D’Agosta said, “I don’t think—”

He stopped, abruptly shutting off his flashlight and listening to the close darkness. A slight movement of air down the stairwell brought a ripe, goatish smell.

Bailey dropped to one knee, aiming the shotgun up the staircase. D’Agosta quickly turned to the group waiting below him. “Everybody,” he hissed, “down to the next landing. Quick!”

There was a series of low murmurs. “We can’t go down there!” somebody cried. “We’ll be trapped underground!”

D’Agosta’s response was drowned by the blast of Bailey’s shotgun. “The Museum Beast!” somebody screamed, and the group turned, stumbling and falling down the stairs. “Bailey!” D’Agosta shouted, his ears ringing from the blast. “Bailey, follow me!”

Walking backward down the stairs, one hand holding his handgun, the other feeling its way against the wall, D’Agosta noticed the surface of the stairwell turn to damp stone as he moved below the level of the basement. Farther up the stairwell, he could see the dim form of Bailey following, gasping and cursing under

his breath. After what seemed an eternity, D'Agosta's foot hit the subbasement landing. All around him, people held their breaths; then Bailey bumped into him gently.

"Bailey, what the fuck was it?" he whispered.

"I don't know," came the response. "There was that horrible smell, then I thought I saw something. Two red eyes in the dark. I fired."

D'Agosta shone his flashlight up the stairwell. The light showed only shadows and rough-hewn yellow rock, crudely carved. The smell lingered.

He shone the flashlight toward the group, and did a quick head count. Thirty-eight, including himself and Bailey. "Okay," he whispered to the group. "We're in the subbasement. I'm gonna go in first, then you follow at my signal."

He turned and shined his light over the door. *Christ*, he thought, *this thing belongs in the Tower of London*. The blackened metal door was reinforced with horizontal strips of iron. When he pushed it open, cool, damp, moldy air rushed into the stairwell. D'Agosta started forward. At the sound of gurgling water, he stepped back, then played the light downward.

"Listen, everybody," he called. "There's running water down here, about three inches deep. Come forward one at a time, quickly but carefully. There are two steps down on the far side of the door. Bailey, take up the rear. And, for God's sake, close the door behind you."

Pendergast counted the remaining bullets, pocketed them, then looked in Frock's direction. "Truly fascinating. And a clever bit of detection on your part. I'm sorry I doubted you, Professor."

Frock gestured magnanimously. "How were you to know?" he asked. "Besides, it was Margo here who discovered the most important link. If she hadn't tested those packing fibers, we never would have known."

Pendergast nodded at Margo, huddled on top of a large wooden crate. "Brilliant work," he said. "We could use you in the Baton Rouge crime lab."

"Assuming I let her go," Frock said. "And assuming we get out of here alive. Dubious assumptions, at best."

"And assuming I'm willing to leave the Museum," Margo said, surprising even herself.

Pendergast turned to Margo. "I know you understand this creature better than I do. Still, do you truly believe this plan you've described will work?"

Margo took a deep breath, nodded. "If the Extrapolator is correct, this beast hunts by smell rather than sight. And if its need for the plant is as strong as we think it is—" She paused, shrugged. "It's the only way."

Pendergast remained motionless a moment. "If it will save those people below us, we have to try." He pulled out his radio.

"D'Agosta?" he said, adjusting the channel. "D'Agosta, this is Pendergast. Do you read?"

The radio squealed static. Then: "D'Agosta here."

"D'Agosta, what's your status?"

"We met up with that creature of yours," came the response. "It got into the Hall, killed Ippolito and an injured guest. We moved into the stairwell, but the basement door was jammed. We had to go to the subbasement."

“Understood,” Pendergast said. “How many of your weapons were you able to take?”

“We only had time to grab one twelve-gauge and a service revolver.”

“What’s your current position?”

“In the subbasement, maybe fifty yards from the stairwell door.”

“Listen closely, Vincent. I’ve been speaking with Professor Frock. The creature we’re dealing with is extremely intelligent. Maybe even as smart as you or I.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“If you see it again, don’t aim for the head. The slugs will just bounce off the skull. Aim for the body.”

There was silence for a moment, then D’Agosta’s voice returned. “Look, Pendergast, you need to tell Coffey some of this. He’s sending some men in, and I don’t think he has any idea of what’s waiting for him.”

“I’ll do my best. But first let’s talk about getting you out of here. That beast may be hunting you.”

“No *shit*.”

“I can direct you out of the Museum through the subbasement. It won’t be easy. These blueprints are very old, and they may not be completely reliable. There may be water.”

“We’re standing in half a foot of it now. Look, Pendergast, are you sure about this? I mean, there’s a mother of a storm outside.”

“It’s either face the water, or face the beast. There are forty of you; you’re the most obvious target. You’ve got to move, and move quickly—it’s the only way out.”

“Can you link up with us?”

“No. We’ve decided to stay here and lure it away from you. There’s no time to explain now. If our plan works, we’ll join you further on. Thanks to these blueprints, I’ve discovered more than one way to get into the subbasement from Cell Two.”

“Christ, Pendergast, be careful.”

“I intend to. Now, listen carefully. Are you in a long, straight passage?”

“Yes.”

“Very good. Where the hall forks, go right. The hall should fork a second time in another hundred yards or so. When you get to the second fork, radio me. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good luck. Pendergast out.”

Pendergast quickly switched frequencies. “Coffey, this is Pendergast. Do you copy?”

“Coffey here. Goddammit, Pendergast, I’ve been trying to reach you for—”

“No time for that now. Are you sending a rescue team in?”

“Yes. They’re preparing to leave now.”

“Then make sure they’re armed with heavy-caliber automatic weapons, flak helmets, and bulletproof vests. There’s a powerful, murderous creature in here, Coffey. I saw it. It has the run of Cell Two.”

“For Chrissakes, you and D’Agosta! Pendergast, if you’re trying to—”

Pendergast spoke rapidly into the radio. “I’ll only warn you once more. You’re dealing with something monstrous here. Underestimate it at your peril. I’m signing off.”

“No, Pendergast, wait! I order you to—”  
Pendergast switched off the radio.

## Chapter 52

They slogged into the water, dim flashlight beams licking the low ceiling in front and behind. The flow of air in the tunnel continued to blow gently into their faces. D’Agosta was alarmed now. The beast could come up behind them unannounced, its stench wafted away from them.

He paused a moment to let Bailey catch up. “Lieutenant,” said the Mayor, catching his breath, “are you certain there’s a way out through here?”

“I can only go by what Agent Pendergast said, sir. He’s got the blueprints. But I sure as hell know we don’t want to go back.”

D’Agosta and the group started forward again. Dark, oily drops were falling from a ceiling of arched herringbone bricks. The walls were crusted with lime. Everyone was silent except for one woman, who was quietly weeping.

“Excuse me, Lieutenant?” said a voice. The young, lanky guy. Smithback.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind telling me something?”

“Shoot.”

“How does it feel to have the lives of forty people, including the Mayor of New York City, in your hands?”

“What?” D’Agosta stopped a moment, glared over his shoulder. “Don’t tell me we’ve got a fucking journalist with us!”

“Well, I—” began Smithback.

“Call downtown and make an appointment to see me at headquarters.”

D’Agosta played the light ahead and found the fork in the tunnel. He took the right-hand passage, as Pendergast had directed. It had a slight downhill grade, and the water began to move faster, tugging on his pants legs as it rushed past into the blackness beyond. The wound in his hand throbbed. As the group moved around the corner behind him, D’Agosta noted with relief that the breeze was no longer blowing in their faces.

A bloated dead rat came floating past, bumping against people’s legs like a lazy, oversized billiard ball. One person groaned and tried to kick it away, but no one complained.

“Bailey!” called D’Agosta behind him.

“Yeah?”

“See anything?”

“You’ll be the first to know if I do.”

“Gotcha. I’m going to call in upstairs, see if they’ve made any progress in restoring power.”

He grabbed his radio. “Coffey?”

“Reading. Pendergast just shut me off. Where are you?”

“We’re in the subbasement. Pendergast has a blueprint. He’s leading us out by radio. When are the lights coming on?”

“D’Agosta, don’t be an idiot. He’ll get you all killed. It doesn’t look as if we’ll be getting power back any time soon. Go back to the Hall of the Heavens and wait there. We’ll be sending the SWAT team in through the roof in a couple of minutes.”

“Then you should know that Wright, Cuthbert, and the Public Relations Director are upstairs somewhere, the fourth floor, probably. That’s the only other exit point for that stairwell.”

“What are you talking about? You didn’t take them with you?”

“They refused to come along. Wright cut out on his own and the others followed him.”

“Sounds like they had more sense than you did. Is the Mayor all right? Let me talk to the him.”

D’Agosta handed the radio over. “Are you all right, sir?” Coffey asked urgently.

“We’re in capable hands with the Lieutenant.”

“It’s my strong opinion, sir, that you should head back to the Hall of the Heavens and wait there for assistance. We’re sending in a SWAT team to rescue you.”

“I have every confidence in Lieutenant D’Agosta. As should you.”

“Yes, of course, sir. Rest assured that I’m going to get you safely out of there, sir.”

“Coffey?”

“Sir?”

“There are three dozen people in here besides me. Don’t forget that.”

“But I just want you to know, sir, we’re being extra—”

“Coffey! I don’t think you understood me. Every life down here is worth all the effort you’ve got.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Mayor handed the radio back to D’Agosta. “Am I wrong, or is that fellow Coffey a horse’s ass?” he muttered.

D’Agosta holstered the radio and proceeded down the passage. Then he stopped, playing his flashlight over an object that loomed out of the blackness in front of them. It was a steel door, closed. The oily water rushed through a thickly barred grating in its bottom panel. He waded closer. It was similar to the door at the base of the stairwell: thick, double-plated, studded with rusty rivets. An old copper lock, covered with verdigris, was looped through a thick metal D ring along the door’s side. D’Agosta grabbed the lock and pulled, but it held fast.

“Pendergast?” said D’Agosta, removing his radio once again.

“Reading.”

“We’re past the first fork, but we’ve hit a steel door, and it’s locked.”

“A locked door? Between the first and second forks?”

“Yes.”

“And you took a right at the first fork?”

“Yes.”

“One minute.” There was a shuffling sound. “Vincent, go back to the fork and take the left-hand tunnel. Hurry.”

D'Agosta wheeled around. "Bailey! We're heading back to that last fork. All of you, let's go. On the double!"

The group turned wearily, murmuring, and started moving back through the inky water.

"Wait!" came the voice of Bailey, from the head of the group. "Christ, Lieutenant, do you smell it?"

"No," said D'Agosta; then "shit!" as the fetid stench enveloped him. "Bailey, we're going to have to make a stand! I'm coming up. Fire at the son of a bitch!"

Cuthbert sat on the worktable, absently tapping its scarred surface with a pencil eraser. At the far end of the table, Wright sat motionless, his head in his hands. Rickman stood on her tiptoes by the small window. She was angling the flashlight through the bars in front of the glass, switching it on and off with a manicured finger.

A brief flash of lightning silhouetted her thin form, then a low rumble of thunder filled the room.

"It's pouring out," she said. "I can't see a thing."

"And nobody can see you," said Cuthbert wearily. "All you're doing is wearing out the battery. We may need it later."

With an audible sigh, Rickman switched off the light, plunging the lab once again into darkness.

"I wonder what it did with Montague's body," came the slurred voice of Wright. "Ate him up?" Laughter spluttered out of the gloom.

Cuthbert continued tapping the pencil.

"Ate him up! With a little curry and rice, maybe! Montague pilaf!" Wright chuckled.

Cuthbert stood up, reached over toward the Director, and plucked the .357 from Wright's belt. He checked the bullets, then tucked it into his own belt.

"Return that at once!" Wright demanded.

Cuthbert said nothing.

"You're a bully, Ian. You've always been a bully, a small-minded, jealous bully. First thing Monday morning, I'm going to fire you. In fact, you're fired now." Wright stood up unsteadily. "Fired, you hear me?"

Cuthbert was standing at the front door of the laboratory, listening.

"What is it?" Rickman asked in alarm. Cuthbert held his hand up sharply.

Silence.

At length, Cuthbert turned away from the door. "I thought I heard a noise," he said. He looked toward Rickman. "Lavinia? Could you come here a moment?"

"What is it?" she asked, breathless.

Cuthbert drew her aside. "Hand me the torch," he said. "Now, listen. I don't want to alarm you. But should something happen—"

"What do you mean?" she interrupted, her voice breaking.

"Whatever it was that's been killing people is still loose. I'm not sure we're safe in here."

"But the door! Winston said it was two inches thick—"

"I know. Maybe everything will be fine. But those doors to the exhibition were even thicker than that, and I'd like to take a few precautions. Help me move this table up against the door." He turned toward the Director.

Wright looked up vaguely. "Fired! Clean out your desk by five o'clock Monday."

Cuthbert pulled Wright to his feet, and sat him in a nearby chair. With Rickman's help, Cuthbert positioned the table in front of the oak door of the laboratory.

"That will slow it down, anyway," he said, dusting off his jacket. "Enough for me to get in a few good shots, with luck. At the first sign of trouble, I want you to go through that back door into the Dinosaur Hall and hide. With the security gates down, there's no other way into the Hall. At least that will put two doors between you and whatever's out there." Cuthbert looked around again restlessly. "In the meantime, let's try to break this window. At least then maybe someone will be able to hear us yelling."

Wright laughed. "You can't break the window, you can't, you can't. It's high-impact glass."

Cuthbert hunted around the lab, finally locating a short piece of angle iron. When he swung it vertically through the bars, it bounced off the glass and was knocked out of his hands.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, rubbing his palms together. "We could shoot out the window," he speculated. "Do you have any more bullets hidden away?"

"I'm not talking to you anymore," Wright retorted.

Cuthbert opened the filing cabinet and started fumbling in the dark. "Nothing," he said at last. "We can't waste bullets on that window. I've only got five shots in here."

"Nothing, nothing, nothing. Didn't King Lear say that?"

Cuthbert sighed heavily and sat down. Silence filled the room once again, save only the wind and rain, and the distant roll of thunder.

Pendergast lowered the radio and turned toward Margo. "D'Agosta's in trouble. We've got to move fast."

"Leave me behind," said Frock quietly. "I'm just going to slow you down."

"A gallant gesture," Pendergast told him. "But we need your brains."

He moved slowly out into the hall, sweeping his light in both directions. Then he signaled all clear. They moved down the hall, Margo pushing the wheelchair before her as quickly as possible.

As they threaded their way, Frock would occasionally whisper a few words of direction. Pendergast stopped at every intersection, gun drawn. Frequently, he halted to listen and smell the air. After a few minutes, he took the chair's handlebars from an unprotesting Margo. Then they rounded a corner, and the door of the Secure Area stood before them.

For the hundredth time, Margo prayed silently that her plan would work; that she wasn't simply condemning all of them—including the group trapped in the subbasement—to a horrible death.

"Third on the right!" Frock called as they moved inside the Secure Area. "Margo, do you remember the combination?"

She dialed, pulled the lever, and the door swung open. Pendergast strode over and knelt beside the smaller crate.

“Wait,” said Margo.

Pendergast stopped, eyebrows raised quizzically.

“Don’t let the smell of it get onto you,” she said. “Bundle the fibers in your jacket.”

Pendergast hesitated.

“Here,” Frock said. “Use my handkerchief to remove them.”

Pendergast inspected it. “Well,” he said ruefully, “if the Professor here can donate a hundred-dollar handkerchief, I suppose I can donate my jacket.” He took the radio and notebook, stuffed them into the waistband of his pants, then removed his suit jacket.

“Since when did FBI agents start wearing handtailored Armani suits?” Margo asked jokingly.

“Since when did graduate students in ethnopharmacology start appreciating them?” Pendergast replied, spreading the jacket carefully on the floor. Then, gingerly, he scooped out several fistfuls of fiber and laid them carefully across his open jacket. Finally, he stuffed the handkerchief into one of the sleeves, folded the garment, and tied the sleeves together.

“We’ll need a rope to drag it with,” said Margo.

“I see some packing cord around the far crate,” Frock pointed out.

Pendergast tied the jacket and fashioned a harness, then dragged the bundle across the floor.

“Seems to be snug,” he said. “Pity, though, that they haven’t dusted these floors in a while.” He turned to Margo. “Will this leave enough of a scent for the creature to follow?”

Frock nodded vigorously. “The Extrapolator estimates the creature’s sense of smell to be exponentially keener than ours. It was able to trace the crates to this vault, remember.”

“And you’re sure the—er—meals it’s already had this evening won’t satiate it?”

“Mr. Pendergast, the human hormone is a poor substitute. We believe the beast *lives* for this plant.” Frock nodded again. “If it smells an abundance of fibers, it will track them down.”

“Let’s get started, then,” said Pendergast. He lifted the bundle gingerly. “The alternate access to the subbasement is several hundred yards from here. If you’re right, we’re at our most vulnerable from now on. The creature will home in on us.”

Pushing the wheelchair, Margo followed the agent into the corridor. He shut the door, then the three moved quickly down the hall, back into the silence of the Old Basement.

## Chapter 53

D’Agosta moved forward, crouching low in the water, his revolver nosing ahead into the inky darkness. He had turned off his flashlight to avoid betraying

his position. The water flowed briskly between his thighs, its smell of algae and lime mixing with the fetid reek of the creature.

“Bailey, you up there?” he whispered into the gloom.

“Yeah,” came Bailey’s voice. “I’m waiting at the first fork.”

“You’ve got more rounds than I. If we drive off this motherfucker, I want you to stand guard while I go behind and try shooting off the lock.”

“Roger.”

D’Agosta started toward Bailey, his legs numbing in the frigid water. Suddenly, there was a confusion of sounds in the blackness ahead of him: a soft splash, then another, much closer. Bailey’s shotgun went off twice, and several people in the group behind him started whimpering.

“Jesus!” he heard Bailey yell, then there was a low crunching noise and Bailey screamed and D’Agosta felt thrashing in the water ahead of him.

“Bailey!” he cried out, but all he could hear was the gurgle of running water. He pulled out his flashlight and shined it up the tunnel. Nothing.

“Bailey!”

Several people were crying behind him now and somebody was screaming hysterically.

“Shut up!” D’Agosta pleaded. “I have to listen!”

The screams were abruptly muffled. He played the light ahead, off the walls and ceiling, but he could see nothing. Bailey had vanished, and the smell had receded once again. Maybe Bailey had hit the fucker. Or maybe it had just temporarily retreated from the noise of the shotgun. He shone the flashlight downward, and noticed the water flowing red around his legs. A torn shred of NYPD regulation blue cloth floated by.

“I need help up here!” he hissed over his shoulder.

Smithback was suddenly at his side.

“Point this flashlight down the passage,” D’Agosta told him.

D’Agosta probed the stone floor with his fingers. The water, he noticed, seemed to be a little higher: as he bent forward, reaching down, it grazed his chest. Something floated by beneath his nose, a piece of Bailey, and he had to turn away for a moment.

There was no shotgun to be found.

“Smithback,” he said, “I’m going back to shoot off the lock. We can’t backtrack any farther with that thing waiting for us. Feel around in this water for a shotgun. If you see anything, or smell anything, shout.”

“You’re leaving me here alone?” Smithback asked a little unsteadily.

“You’ve got the flashlight. It’ll just be for a minute. Can you do it?”

“I’ll try.”

D’Agosta grasped Smithback’s shoulder briefly, then started back. For a journalist, the guy had guts.

A hand tugged at him as he waded through the group. “Please tell us what’s happening,” a feminine voice sobbed.

He gently shook her off. D’Agosta could hear the Mayor talking soothingly to her. Maybe he’d vote for the old bastard next time.

“Everyone get back,” he said, and positioned himself in front of the door. He knew he should stand well back from the door to avoid potential ricochets. But it was a thick lock, and he’d have a hard time aiming in the dark.

He moved to within a few feet of the door, placed the barrel of the .38 near the lock, and fired. When the smoke cleared, he found a clean hole in the lock’s center. The lock held fast.

“Fuck it,” he muttered, placing the muzzle of the revolver directly against the hasp and firing again. Now the lock was gone. He heaved his weight against the door.

“Give me a hand here!” he called out.

Immediately, several people began throwing themselves against it. The rusty hinges gave way with a loud screech, and water gushed through the opening.

“Smithback! Find anything?”

“I got his flashlight!” came the disembodied voice.

“Good boy. Now come on back!”

As D’Agosta moved through the door, he noticed an iron D ring on the other side as well. He stood back and ushered the group through, counting. Thirty-seven. Bailey was gone. Smithback brought up the rear.

“All right, let’s shut this thing!” D’Agosta yelled.

Against the heavy flow of the water, the door groaned slowly shut.

“Smithback! Shine one of the lights here. Maybe we can find a way to bar this door.”

He looked at it for a second. If they could jam a piece of metal through the D ring, it just might hold. He turned to the group. “I need something, anything, made of metal!” he called. “Does anyone have a piece of metal we can use to bar this door?”

The Mayor passed quickly through the group, then came up to D’Agosta, thrusting a small collection of metal items into his hands. As Smithback held the light, D’Agosta inspected the pins, necklaces, combs. “There’s nothing here,” he muttered.

They heard a sudden splashing on the other side of the door, and a deep grunt. A stench filtered through the low slats in the door. A soft thump and a brief squeal of hinges, and the door was pushed ajar.

“Christ! You there, help me shut this door!”

As before, people flung themselves against the door, forcing it shut. There was a rattle and then a louder boom as the thing met their force, then pushed them back. The door creaked open farther.

At D’Agosta’s shout, others joined the effort.

“Keep pushing!”

Another roar; then a tremendous thump heaved everyone back once again. The door groaned under the opposing weights, but continued to open, first six inches, then a foot. The stench became intolerable. Watching the door inch its way from the frame, D’Agosta saw three long talons snake their way around the edge. The shape felt along the door, then swiped forward, the talons alternately sheathing and unsheathing.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” D’Agosta heard the Mayor say, quite matter-of-factly. Somebody else began chanting a prayer in a strange singsong. D’Agosta

placed the barrel of the gun near the monstrosity and fired once. There was a terrible roar and the shape vanished into churning water.

“The flashlight!” Smithback cried. “It’ll fit perfectly! Shove it into the ring!”

“That’ll leave us with just one light,” D’Agosta panted.

“Got a better idea?”

“No,” D’Agosta said under his breath. Then, louder: “Everybody, *push!*”

With a final heave they slammed the door back into its iron frame, and Smithback shoved the flashlight through the D ring. It slid through easily, its flared end coming to rest against the metal hasp. As D’Agosta caught his breath, they heard another, sudden crash and the door shuddered, but held firm.

“Run, people!” cried D’Agosta. “Run!” They thrashed through the roiling water, falling and sliding. D’Agosta, buffeted from behind, fell face first into the rushing water. He rose and continued forward, trying to ignore the monster’s roaring and pounding—he did not think he could hear it and remain sane. He willed himself to think about the flashlight instead. It was a good, heavy police-issue flashlight. It would hold. He hoped to God it would hold. The group stopped at the second fork in the tunnel, crying and shivering. *Time to radio Pendergast and get the fuck out of this maze*, D’Agosta thought. He clapped his hand to his radio holster, and with a shock realized it was empty.

Coffey stood inside the forward security station, staring moodily at a monitor. He was unable to reach either Pendergast or D’Agosta. Inside the perimeter, Garcia in Security Command and Waters in the Computer Room were still responding. Had everybody else been killed? When he thought of the Mayor dead, and the headlines that were sure to follow, a hollow feeling grew in his stomach.

An acetylene torch, flickering near the silver expanse of the metal security door at the east end of the Rotunda, cast ghostly shadows across the tall ceiling. The acrid smell of molten steel filled the air. The Rotunda had grown strangely quiet. Field amputations were still taking place by the security door, but all the other guests had left for home or area hospitals. The journalists had finally been contained behind police barriers. Mobile intensive care units were set up on nearby side streets and medevacs were standing by.

The SWAT team commander came over, buckling an ammo belt over his black fatigues. “We’re ready,” he said.

Coffey nodded. “Give me a tactical.”

The leader pushed a bank of emergency phones aside and unfolded a sheet.

“Our spotter will be leading us by radio. He’s got the detailed diagrams from this station. Phase One: We’re punching a hole through the roof, here, and dropping to the fifth floor. According to the specs of the security system, this door here will blow with one charge. That gives us access to the next cell. Then we proceed down to this props storage room on the fourth floor. It’s right above the Hall of the Heavens. There’s a trapdoor in the floor that Maintenance uses for cleaning and servicing the chandelier. We’ll lower our men and haul the wounded up in sling chairs. Phase Two: Rescue those in the subbasement, the Mayor and the large group with him. Phase Three: Search for those who may be elsewhere within the perimeter. I understand that people are trapped in the Computer Room and

Security Command. The Museum Director, Ian Cuthbert, and a woman as yet unidentified may have gone upstairs. And don't you have agents of your own within the perimeter, sir? The man from the New Orleans field office—"

"Let me worry about him," Coffey snapped. "Who developed these plans?"

"We did, with the assistance of Security Command. That guy Allen has the cell layouts down cold. Anyway, according to the specs of this security system—"

"You did. And who's in charge here?"

"Sir, as you know, in emergency situations the SWAT team commander—"

"I want you to go in there and kill the son of a bitch. Got it?"

"Sir, our first priority is to rescue hostages and save lives. Only then can we deal with—"

"Calling me stupid, Commander? If we kill the thing in there, all our other problems are solved. Right? This is not your typical situation, commander, and it requires creative thinking."

"In a hostage situation, if you take away the killer's hostages, you've removed his base of power—"

"Commander, were you asleep during our crisis-control briefing? We may have an animal in there, not a person."

"But the wounded—"

"Use some of your men to get the damn wounded out. But I want the rest of you to go after what's in there and kill it. Then we rescue any stragglers at leisure, in safety and comfort. Those are your direct orders."

"I understand, sir. I would recommend, however—"

"Don't recommend jack shit, Commander. Go in the way you planned, but do the job right. Kill the motherfucker."

The commander looked curiously at Coffey. "You sure about this thing being an animal?"

Coffey hesitated. "Yes," he finally said. "I don't know a hell of a lot about it, but it's already killed several people."

The Commander looked steadily at Coffey for a moment.

"Yeah," he finally said, "well, whatever it is, we've got enough firepower to turn a herd of lions into a fine red mist."

"You're going to need it. Find the thing. Take it out."

Pendergast and Margo looked down the narrow service tunnel into the subbasement. Pendergast's flashlight sent a circle of light onto a sheet of black, oily water roiling past beneath them.

"It's getting deeper," Pendergast said. Then he turned to Margo. "Are you sure the creature can make it up this shaft?" he asked.

"I'm nearly certain," Margo said. "It's highly agile." Pendergast stepped back and tried once again to raise D'Agosta on the radio. "Something's happened," he said. "The Lieutenant has been out of contact for fifteen minutes. Ever since they hit that locked door." He glanced down again through the shaft that sloped toward the subbasement below. "How are you planning to lay a scent with all this water?" he asked.

"You estimate they passed beneath here some time ago, right?" Margo asked.

Pendergast nodded. "The last time I spoke to him, D'Agosta told me the group was between the first and second forks," he said. "Assuming they haven't backtracked, he's well beyond this spot."

"The way I see it," Margo continued, "if we sprinkle some fibers on the water, the flow should carry them to the creature."

"That's assuming the creature's smart enough to realize the fibers came floating from upstream. Otherwise, he might just chase them further downstream."

"I think it's smart enough," Frock said. "You mustn't think of this creature as an *animal*. It may be nearly as intelligent as a human being."

Using the handkerchief, Pendergast carefully removed some fibers from the bundle and sprinkled them along the base of the shaft. He dropped another handful into the water below.

"Not too much," Frock warned.

Pendergast looked at Margo. "We'll sprinkle a few more fibers to establish a good upwater trail, then drag the bundle back to the Secure Area and wait. Your trap will be set." After scattering a few more fibers, he secured the bundle.

"At the rate this water is moving," he said, "it should take only a few minutes to reach the creature. How fast do you expect the thing to respond?"

"If the extrapolation program is correct," Frock said, "the creature can move at a high rate of speed. Perhaps thirty miles an hour or greater, especially when in need. And its need for the fibers seems overpowering. It won't be able to travel at full speed down these corridors—the residual scent trail we leave will be harder to track—but I doubt the water will slow it much. And the Secure Area is close by."

"I see," Pendergast said. "How unsettling. *He that has a mind to fight, let him fight, for now is the time.*"

"Ah," said Frock, nodding. "Alcaeus."

Pendergast shook his head. "Anacreon, Doctor. Shall we go?"

## Chapter 54

Smithback held the light, but it hardly seemed to penetrate the palpable darkness. D'Agosta, slightly in front, held the gun. The tunnel went on and on, black water rushing past and vanishing into the low-vaulted darkness. Either they were still descending, or the water was getting higher. Smithback could feel it pushing against his thighs.

He glanced at D'Agosta's face, shadowy and grim, his thick features smeared with Bailey's blood.

"I can't go any farther," someone wailed from the rear. Smithback could hear the Mayor's familiar voice—a politician's voice—reassuring, soothing, telling everyone what they wanted to hear. Once again, it seemed to work. Smithback stole a glance backward at the dispirited group. The lean, gowned, bejeweled women; the middle-aged businessmen in their tuxedos; the smattering of yuppies from investment banks and downtown law firms. He knew them all now, had even given them names and occupations in his head. And here they all were, reduced to the

lowest common denominator, wallowing around in the dark of a tunnel, covered with slime, pursued by a savage beast.

Smithback was worried, but still rational. Early on, he'd felt a moment of sheer terror when he realized the rumors about a Museum Beast were true. But now, tired and wet, he was more afraid of dying before he wrote his book than he was of dying itself. He wondered if that meant he was brave, or covetous, or just plain stupid. Whatever the case, he knew that what was happening to him down here was going to be worth a fortune. Book party at *Le Cirque*. *Good Morning America*, the *Today Show*, *Donahue*, and *Oprah*.

No one could do the story like he could, no one else had his first-person perspective. And he'd been a hero. He, William Smithback, Jr., had held the light against the monster when D'Agosta went back to shoot off the lock. He, Smithback, had thought of using the flashlight to brace the door. He'd been Lieutenant D'Agosta's right-hand man.

"Shine the light up to the left, there." D'Agosta intruded upon his thoughts, and Smithback dutifully complied. Nothing.

"I thought I saw something moving in the darkness," D'Agosta muttered. "Must've been a shadow, I guess."

God, Smithback thought, if only he lived to enjoy his success.

"Is it just my imagination, or is the water getting deeper?" he asked.

"It's getting deeper *and* faster," said D'Agosta. "Pendergast didn't say which way to go from here."

"He didn't?" Smithback felt his guts turn to water.

"I was supposed to radio from the second fork," D'Agosta said. "I lost my radio somewhere back before the door."

Smithback felt another surge against his legs, a strong one. There was a shout and a splash.

"It's all right," the Mayor called out when Smithback aimed the flashlight to the rear. "Someone fell down. The current's getting stronger."

"We can't tell them we're lost," Smithback muttered to D'Agosta.

Margo swung open the door to the Secure Area, looked quickly inside, and nodded to Pendergast. The agent moved past the door, dragging the bundle.

"Shut it in the vault with the Whittlesey crates," Frock said. "We want to keep the beast in here long enough for us to close the door on it."

Margo unlocked the vault as Pendergast threaded a complex pattern across the floor. They put the bundle inside, then closed and locked the ornate vault door.

"Quick," Margo said. "Across the hall."

Leaving the main door to the Secure Area open, they crossed the hall to the elephant bone storage room. The small window in the door had long ago been broken, and a worn piece of cardboard now covered the opening. Margo unlocked the door with Frock's key, then Pendergast pushed Frock inside. Switching Pendergast's flashlight to its low setting, she balanced it on a ledge above the door, pointing the thin beam in the direction of the Secure Area. Finally, with a pen, she reamed a small hole in the cardboard and, with a last look down the corridor, stepped inside.

The storage room was large, stuffy, and full of elephant bones. Most of the skeletons were disassembled, and the great shadowy bones had been stacked on shelves like oversized cordwood. One mounted skeleton stood in a far corner, a dark cage of bones, two curving tusks gleaming in the pale light.

Pendergast shut the door, then switched off his miner's lamp.

Peering through the hole in the cardboard, Margo had a clear view of the hallway and the open door of the Secure Area.

"Take a look," she said to Pendergast, stepping away from the door.

Pendergast moved forward. "Excellent," he said after a moment. "It's a perfect blind, as long as those flashlight batteries hold out." He stepped back from the door. "How did you happen to remember this room?" he asked curiously.

Margo laughed shyly. "When you took us down here on Wednesday, I remember seeing this door marked PACHYDERMAE and wondering how a person could fit an elephant skull through such a small door." She moved forward. "I'll keep watch through the peephole," she said. "Be ready to rush out and trap the creature in the Secure Area."

In the darkness behind them, Frock cleared his throat. "Mr. Pendergast?"

"Yes?"

"Forgive me for asking, but how experienced are you with that weapon?"

"As a matter of fact," the agent replied, "before the death of my wife I spent several weeks each winter big-game hunting in East Africa. My wife was an avid hunter."

"Ah," Frock replied. Margo detected relief in his voice. "This will be a difficult creature to kill, but I don't think it will be impossible. I was never much of a hunter, obviously. But working together we may be able to bring it down."

Pendergast nodded. "Unfortunately, this pistol puts me at a disadvantage. It's a powerful handgun, but nothing like a .375 nitro express rifle. If you could tell me where the creature might be most vulnerable, it would help."

"From the printout," Frock said slowly, "we can assume the creature is heavy boned. As you discovered, you won't kill it with a head shot. And an upper shoulder or chest shot toward the heart would almost certainly be deflected by the massive bones and heavy musculature of the creature's upper body. If you could catch the creature sideways, you might get a shot into the heart from behind the foreleg. But again, the ribs are probably built like a steel cage. Now that I think about it, I don't believe any of the vital parts of the beast are particularly vulnerable. A shot to the gut might kill eventually, but not before it took its revenge."

"Cold comfort," Pendergast said.

Frock moved restlessly in the darkness. "That leaves us in a bit of a quandary."

There was silence for a moment. "There may still be a way." Pendergast said at length.

"Yes?" Frock replied eagerly.

"Once, a few years ago, my wife and I were hunting bushbuck in Tanzania. We preferred to hunt alone, without gun bearers, and the only guns we had were 30-30 rifles. We were in light cover near a river when we were charged by a cape buffalo. It had apparently been wounded a few days earlier by a poacher. Cape

buffalo are like mules—they never forget an injury, and one man with a gun looks much like any other.”

Sitting in the dim light, waiting for the arrival of a nightmarish creature, listening to Pendergast narrate a hunting story in his typical unhurried manner, Margo felt a sense of unreality begin to creep over her.

“Normally, in hunting buffalo,” Pendergast was saying, “one tries for a head shot just below the horn bosses, or for a heart shot. In this case, the 30-30 was an insufficient caliber. My wife, who was a better shot than I, used the only tactic a hunter could use in such a situation. She knelt and fired at the animal in such a way as to break it down.”

“Break it down?”

“You don’t attempt a kill shot. Instead, you work to stop forward locomotion. You aim for the forelegs, pasterns, knees. You basically shatter as many bones as you can until it can’t move forward.”

“I see,” said Frock.

“There is only one problem with this approach,” said Pendergast.

“And that is—?”

“You must be a consummate marksman. Placement is everything. You’ve got to remain serenely calm and steady, unbreathing, firing between heartbeats—in the face of a charging beast. We each had time for four shots. I made the mistake of aiming for the chest and scored two direct hits before I realized the bullets were just burying themselves in muscle. Then I aimed for the legs. One shot missed and the other grazed but didn’t break the bone.” He shook his head. “A poor performance, I’m afraid.”

“So what happened?” Frock asked.

“My wife scored direct hits on three out of her four shots. She shattered both front cannons and broke the upper foreleg as well. The buffalo tumbled head over heels and came to rest a few yards from where we were kneeling. It was still very much alive but it couldn’t move. So I ‘paid the insurance,’ as a professional hunter would put it.”

“I wish your wife was here,” Frock said.

Pendergast was quiet. “So do I,” he said at length.

Silence returned to the room.

“Very well,” Frock said at last. “I understand the problem. The beast has some unusual qualities that you should know about, if you are planning to, ah, break it down. First, the hind quarters are most likely covered in bony plates or scales. I doubt if you could penetrate them effectively with your gun. They armor the upper and lower leg, down to the metatarsal bones, I’d estimate.”

“I see.”

“You will have to shoot low, aim for the phalanx prima or secunda.”

“The lowest bones of the leg,” said Pendergast.

“Yes. They would be equivalent to the pasterns on a horse. Aim just below the lower joint. In fact, the joint itself might be vulnerable.”

“That’s a difficult shot,” said Pendergast. “Virtually impossible if the creature is facing me.”

There was a short silence. Margo continued her vigil through the peephole, but saw nothing.

"I believe the anterior limbs of the creature are more vulnerable," Frock continued. "The Extrapolator described them as being less robust. The metacarpals and the carpals should both be vulnerable to a direct hit."

"The front knee and the lower leg," Pendergast said, nodding. "The shots you've described already are hardly garden variety. To what extent would the creature have to be broken down to immobilize it?"

"Difficult to say. Both front legs and at least one rear leg, I'm afraid. Even then, it could crawl." Frock coughed. "Can you do it?"

"To have a chance, I'd need at least a hundred and fifty feet of shooting space if the creature were charging. Ideally, I'd get the first shot in before the creature knew what was happening. That would slow it down."

Frock thought for a moment. "The Museum contains several straight, long corridors, three or four hundred feet long. Unfortunately, most of them are now cut in half by these damned security doors. I believe that there's at least one unobstructed corridor within Cell Two, however. On the first floor, in Section Eighteen, around the corner from the Computer Room."

Pendergast nodded. "I'll remember that," he said. "In case this plan fails."

"I hear something!" Margo hissed.

They fell silent. Pendergast moved closer to the door.

"A shadow just passed across the light at the end of the hall," she whispered.

There was another long silence.

"It's here," Margo breathed, "I can see it." Then, even softer: "Oh, my God."

Pendergast murmured in Margo's ear: "Move away from the door!"

She backed up, hardly daring to breathe. "What's it doing?" she whispered.

"It's stopped at the door to the Secure Area," Pendergast replied quietly. "It went in for a moment, and then backed out very fast. It's looking around, smelling the air."

"What does it look like?" Frock asked, an urgency in his voice.

Pendergast hesitated a moment before answering. "I've got a better view of it this time. It's big, it's massive. Wait, it's turning this way... Good Lord, it's a horrible sight, it's... Flattened face, small red eyes. Thin fur on the upper body. Just like the figurine. Hold on... Hold on a minute ... it's coming this way."

Margo suddenly realized she had moved back to the far wall. A snuffling sound came through the door. And then the rank, fetid smell. She slid to the floor in the heavy darkness, the peephole in the cardboard wavering like a star. Pendergast's flashlight shone feebly. *Starlight*... A small voice in Margo's head was trying to speak.

And then a shadow fell over the peephole and everything went black.

There was a soft muffled thud against the door, and the old wood creaked. The doorknob rattled. There was a long silence, the sound of something heavy moving outside, and a sharp cracking as the creature pressed against the door.

The voice inside Margo's head suddenly became audible.

"Pendergast, turn on your miner's lamp!" she burst out. "Shine it at the beast!"

"What are you talking about!"

"It's nocturnal, remember? It probably hates light."

"That's absolutely correct!" cried Frock.

“Stay back!” Pendergast shouted. Margo heard a small click, then the brilliance of the miner’s light blinded her momentarily. As her vision returned, she saw Pendergast on one knee, his gun leveled at the door, the bright circle of light focused directly on its center.

There was another crunching noise, and Margo could see splinters spray into the room from a widening split in the upper panel. The door bowed inward.

Pendergast stayed steady, sighting along the levelled barrel.

There was another tremendous splintering sound and the door broke inward in pieces, swinging crazily on bent hinges. Margo pressed herself against the wall, forcing herself into it until her spine creaked in protest. She heard Frock shout in amazement, wonder, and fear. The creature squatted in the doorway, a monstrous silhouette in the bright light; then, with a sudden throaty roar, it shook its head and backed out.

“Keep back,” Pendergast said. He kicked the broken door aside and moved cautiously out into the hall. Margo heard a sudden shot, then another. Then, silence. After what seemed an eternity, Pendergast returned, motioning them forward. A trail of small red droplets led down the hallway and around the corner.

“Blood!” Frock said, bending forward with a grunt. “So you wounded it!”

Pendergast shrugged. “Perhaps. But I wasn’t the first. The droplets originate from the direction of the subbasement. See? Lieutenant D’Agosta or one of his men must have wounded it earlier but not disabled it. It moved away with amazing speed.”

Margo looked at Frock. “Why didn’t it take the bait?”

Frock returned her gaze. “We’re dealing with a creature possessed of preternatural intelligence.”

“What you’re saying is that it detected our trap,” Pendergast said, a note of disbelief in his voice.

“Let me ask you, Pendergast. Would *you* have fallen for that trap?”

Pendergast was silent. “I suppose not,” he said at length.

“Well, then,” said Frock. “We underestimated the creature. We *must* stop thinking of it as a dumb animal. It has the intelligence of a human being. Did I understand correctly that the body they found in the exhibition was *hidden*? The beast knew it was being hunted. Obviously, it had learned to conceal its prey. Besides—” he hesitated. “I think we’re dealing with more than simply hunger now. Chances are, it’s been temporarily sated by this evening’s human diet. But it’s also been wounded. If your analogy of the cape buffalo is correct, this creature may not only be hungry, but *angry*.”

“So you think it’s gone hunting,” Pendergast said quietly.

Frock remained motionless. Then he gave a barely perceptible nod.

“So who’s it hunting now?” Margo asked. No one answered.

## Chapter 55

Cuthbert checked the door again. It was locked and rock solid. He flicked on the flashlight and shined it in the direction of Wright, slumped in his chair and looking morosely at the floor. Cuthbert switched off the flashlight. The room reeked of whisky. There was no noise except for the rain splattering and drumming against the barred window.

“What are we going to do with Wright?” he asked in a low tone.

“Don’t worry,” Rickman replied, her voice tight and high. “We’ll just tell the press he’s sick and pack him off to the hospital, then schedule a press conference for tomorrow afternoon—”

“I’m not talking about *after* we get out. I’m talking about *now*. If the beast comes up here.”

“Please, Ian, don’t talk like that. It scares me. I can’t imagine the animal is going to do that. For all we know, it’s been in the basement for years. Why would it come up here now?”

“I don’t know,” said Cuthbert. “That’s what worries me.” He checked the Ruger once again. Five shots.

He went over to Wright and shook the Director’s shoulder. “Winston?”

“Are you still here?” Wright asked, looking up hazily.

“Winston, I want you to take Lavinia and go into the Dinosaur Hall. Come along.”

Wright slapped Cuthbert’s arm away. “I’m fine just where I am. Maybe I’ll take a nap.”

“The devil with you, then,” said Cuthbert. He sat down in a chair opposite the door.

There was a brief noise—a rattle—at the door, as if the doorknob had been turned, then released.

Cuthbert jumped up, gun in hand. He walked close to the door and listened.

“I hear something,” he said quietly. “Get into the Dinosaur Hall, Lavinia.”

“I’m afraid,” she whispered. “Please don’t make me go in there alone.”

“Do as I say.”

Rickman walked over to the far door and opened it. She hesitated.

“Go on.”

“Ian—” Rickman pleaded. Behind her, Cuthbert could see the huge dinosaur skeletons looming out of the darkness. The great black ribs and yawning rows of teeth were suddenly illuminated by a streak of livid lightning.

“Damn you, woman, get in there.”

Cuthbert turned back, listening. Something soft was rubbing against the door. He leaned forward, pressing his ear against the smooth wood. Maybe it *was* the wind.

Suddenly he was slammed backward into the room by a tremendous force. Cuthbert could hear Rickman screaming within the Dinosaur Hall.

Wright stood unsteadily. “What was that?” he said.

His head ringing, Cuthbert picked the gun off the floor, scrambled to his feet, and ran to the far corner of the room. “Get into the Dinosaur Hall!” he shouted at Wright.

Wright sagged heavily against the chair. “What’s that disgusting smell?” he asked.

There was another savage blow to the door, and the crack of splitting wood sounded like a rifle shot. Cuthbert's finger instinctively tightened on the trigger, and the gun fired unexpectedly, bringing down dust from the ceiling. He lowered the weapon momentarily, his hands shaking. *Stupid, one wasted bullet.* Bloody hell, he wished he knew more about handguns. He raised it again and tried to take aim, but his hands were shaking uncontrollably now. *Got to calm down,* he thought. *Take a few deep breaths. Aim for something vital. Four shots.*

The room gradually returned to silence. Wright was slumped against his chair, as if frozen into place.

"Winston, you idiot!" Cuthbert hissed. "Get into the Hall!"

"If you say so," Wright said, and shuffled toward the door. He seemed finally frightened enough to move.

Then Cuthbert heard that soft sound again, and the wood groaned. The thing was pressing against the door. There was another horrible *cra-ack* and the door split wide open, a piece of wood spinning crazily end over end into the room. The table was thrown to one side. Something appeared in the gloom of the hallway, and a three-tined claw reached through the opening and gripped the broken wood. With a tearing noise the remainder of the door was pulled back into the darkness, and Cuthbert saw a dark shape in the doorway.

Wright lurched into the Dinosaur Hall, almost toppling Rickman, who had appeared in the doorway, choking and sobbing.

"Shoot it, Ian, oh please, *please* kill it!" she screamed.

Cuthbert waited, sighting down the barrel. He held his breath. *Four shots.*

The commander of the SWAT team moved along the roof, a catlike shape against the dark indigo of the sky, while the spotter on the street below guided his progress. Coffey stood next to the spotter, under a tarp. They both held rubberized waterproof radios.

"Dugout to Red One, move five more feet to the east," the spotter said into his radio, peering upward through his night-vision passive telescope. "You're almost there." He was studying Museum blueprints spread out on a table under a sheet of Plexiglas. The SWAT team's route had been marked in red.

The dark figure moved carefully across the slate roof, the lights of the Upper West Side twinkling around him; below, the Hudson River, the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles on Museum Drive, the high-rise apartment buildings laid out along Riverside Drive like rows of glowing crystals.

"That's it," the spotter said. "You're there, Red One."

Coffey could see the Commander kneel, working swiftly and silently to set the charges. His team waited a hundred yards back, the medics directly behind them. On the street, a siren wailed.

"Set," said the Commander. He stood up and walked carefully backward, unrolling a wire.

"Blow when ready," murmured Coffey.

Coffey watched as everyone on the roof lay down. There was a brief flash of light, and a second later the sharp slap of sound reached Coffey. The Commander waited a moment and then eased forward.

"Red One to Dugout, we've got an opening."

“Proceed,” said Coffey.

The SWAT team dropped in through the hole in the roof, followed by the medics.

“We’re inside,” came the voice of the Commander. “We’re in the fifth-floor corridor, proceeding as advised.”

Coffey waited impatiently. He looked at his watch: nine-fifteen. They’d been stuck in there, without power, for the longest ninety minutes of his life. An unwelcome vision of the Mayor, dead and gutted, kept plaguing him.

“We’re at the Cell Three emergency door, fifth floor, Section Fourteen. Ready to set charges.”

“Proceed,” said Coffey.

“Setting charges.”

D’Agosta and his group hadn’t reported in for over half an hour. God, if something happened to the Mayor, no one would care whose fault it really was. Coffey would be the one that caught the blame. That’s the way things worked in this town. It had taken him so long to get where he was, and he’d been so careful, and now the bastards were just going to take it away from him. It was all Pendergast’s fault. If he hadn’t started messing around on other people’s turf...

“Charges set.”

“Blow when ready,” Coffey said again. Pendergast had fucked up, not him. He himself had only taken over yesterday. Maybe they wouldn’t blame him, after all. Especially if Pendergast wasn’t around. That son of a bitch could talk the hind legs off a mule.

There was a long silence. No sound of explosion reached Coffey’s ears as he waited outside beneath the sodden tarp.

“Red One to Dugout, we’re clean,” the Commander said.

“Proceed. Get inside and kill the son of a bitch,” said Coffey.

“As discussed, sir, our first priority is to evac the wounded,” said the Commander in a flat voice.

“I know! But hurry it up, for God’s sake!”

He punched savagely at his transmit button.

The Commander stepped out of the stairwell, looking carefully around before motioning the teams to follow him. One by one, the dark figures emerged, gas masks pushed high on their foreheads, fatigue uniforms blending into the shadows, their M-16s and Bullpups equipped with full-tang bayonets. In the rear, a short, stubby officer was carrying a 40mm six-shot grenade launcher, a big-bellied weapon that looked like a pregnant tommy gun. “We’ve gained the fourth floor,” the Commander radioed the spotter. “Laying down an infrared beacon. Hall of Lesser Apes directly ahead.”

The spotter spoke into his radio. “Proceed south seventy feet into the Hall, then west twenty feet to a door.”

The Commander took a small black box from his belt and pressed a button. A ruby laser shot out, pencil-thin. He moved the beam around until he had the distance reading he needed. Then he moved forward and repeated the procedure, shining the laser toward the west wall.

“Red One to Dugout. Door in sight.”

“Good. Proceed.”

The Commander moved ahead to the door, motioning his men to follow.

“The door’s locked. Setting charges.”

The team quickly moulded two small bars of plastique around the doorknob, then stepped back, unrolling more wire.

“Charges set.”

There was a low *whump* as the door flew open.

“The trapdoor should be directly in front of you, in the center of the storage room,” the spotter directed.

By moving aside several flats of scenery, the Commander and his men exposed the trapdoor. Undoing the latches, the Commander grasped the iron ring and heaved upward. Stale air rushed up to greet them. The Commander leaned forward. In the Hall of the Heavens below, everything was still.

“We’ve got an opening,” he said into the radio. “Looks good.”

“Okay,” came Coffey’s voice. “Secure the Hall. Send down the medics and evac the injured, fast.”

“Red One, roger that, Dugout.”

The spotter took over. “Tear out the drywall in the center of the north wall. Behind it you’ll find an eight-inch I-beam to anchor your ropes to.”

“Will do.”

“Careful. It’s a sixty-foot drop.”

The Commander and his team worked swiftly, punching through the drywall, looping two chains around the I-beam, attaching locking carabiners, a block and tackle. A team member hooked a rope ladder to one of the chains and dropped it through the hole.

The Commander leaned over once again, shining his powerful light down into the gloom of the hall.

“This is Red One. We’ve got some bodies down here,” he said.

“Any sign of the creature?” Coffey asked.

“Negative. Looks like ten, twelve bodies, maybe more. Ladder’s in place now.”

“What are you waiting for?”

The Commander turned to the medic team. “We’ll signal when ready. Start lowering the collapsible stretchers. We’ll take ‘em out one by one.”

He grabbed the rope ladder and started down, swinging over the vast empty space. The men followed, one by one. Two fanned out to provide suppressing fire as necessary, while two others set up tripods with clusters of halogen lamps, hooking them to the portable generators being lowered by ropes. Soon the center of the hall was flooded with light.

“Secure all ingress and egress!” shouted the Commander. “Medic team, descend!”

“Report!” Coffey cried over the radio.

“We’ve secured the Hall,” the Commander said. “No sign of any animal. Medic team deploying now.”

“Good. You’ll need to find the thing, kill it, and locate the Mayor’s party. We believe they went down the stairwell back by the service area.”

“Roger, Dugout,” said the Commander.

As the Commander’s radio buzzed into silence, he heard a sudden report, muffled but unmistakable.

“Red One to Dugout, we just heard a pistol shot. Sounded like it was coming from above.”

“Dammit, go after it!” cried Coffey. “Take your men and go after it!”

The Commander turned to his men. “All right. Red Two, Red Three, finish up and secure here. Take the grenade launcher. The rest of you come with me.”

## Chapter 56

The viscous water was now lapping at Smithback’s waist. Just keeping his balance was exhausting. His legs had long since gone numb, and he was shivering.

“This water is rising awful damn fast.” D’Agosta said.

“I don’t think we need to worry about that creature anymore,” Smithback said hopefully.

“Maybe not. You know,” D’Agosta told him slowly, “You were pretty quick back there, jamming the door with the flashlight like that. I guess you saved all our lives.”

“Thanks,” said Smithback, liking D’Agosta more and more.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” D’Agosta said over the rush of the water.

“Everyone okay?” D’Agosta turned back to the Mayor.

The Mayor looked haggard. “It’s touch and go. There are a few who are slipping into shock or exhaustion, maybe both. Which way from here?” His eyes searched them.

D’Agosta hesitated. “Ah, I really can’t say anything conclusively,” he said at last. “Smithback and I will try the right fork first.”

The Mayor looked back at the group, then moved closer to D’Agosta. “Look,” he said, in a low, pleading tone. “I know you’re lost. You know you’re lost. But if those people back there learn about it, I don’t think we’d get them to go any farther. It’s very cold standing here, and the water is getting higher. So why don’t we all try it together? It’s our only chance. Even if we wanted to retrace our steps, half these people would never make it against the current.”

D’Agosta looked at the Mayor for a moment. “All right,” he said at last. Then he turned to the group. “Listen up now,” he shouted. “We’re gonna be taking the right tunnel. Everyone join hands, form a line. Hold on tight. Stay against the wall—the current’s getting too strong in the center. If anyone slips, give a yell, but don’t let go under any circumstances. Everybody got that? Let’s go.”

The dark shape moved slowly through the broken door, stepping catlike over the splintered wood. Cuthbert felt pins and needles in his legs. He wanted to shoot, but his hands refused to obey.

“Please go away,” he said, so calmly he surprised himself.

It stopped suddenly and looked directly at him. Cuthbert could see nothing in the dim light but the huge, powerful silhouette and the small red eyes. They looked, somehow, intelligent.

“Don’t hurt me,” Cuthbert pleaded.

The creature remained still.

“I’ve got a gun,” Cuthbert whispered. He aimed carefully. “I won’t shoot if you go away,” he said quietly.

It moved slowly sideways, keeping its head turned toward Cuthbert. Then there was a sudden movement and it was gone.

Cuthbert backed away in a panic, his flashlight skittering wildly across the floor. He spun around frantically. All was silent. The creature’s stench filled the room. Suddenly he found himself stumbling into the Dinosaur Hall, and then he was slamming the door behind him.

“The key!” he cried. “Lavinia, for God’s sake!”

He looked wildly around the darkened hall. Before him, a great tyrannosaurus skeleton reared up from the center. In front of it squatted the dark form of a triceratops, its head lowered, the great black horns gleaming in the dull light.

He heard a sobbing, then he felt a key being pressed into his palm. He swiftly locked the door.

“Let’s go,” he said, guiding her away from the door, past the clawed foot of the tyrannosaurus. They moved deeper into darkness. Suddenly, Cuthbert pulled the Public Relations Director to one side, then guided her into a crouch. He peered into the gloom, senses straining. The Hall of Cretaceous Dinosaurs was deathly silent. Not even the sound of the rain penetrated this dark sanctum. The only light came from rows of high clerestory windows.

Surrounding them was a herd of small struthiomimus skeletons, arranged in a defensive U-shaped formation before the monstrous skeleton of a carnivorous dryptosaurus, its head down, jaws open, and huge claws extended. Cuthbert had always relished the scale and drama of this room, but now it frightened him. Now he knew what it was like to be hunted.

Behind them, the entrance to the Hall was blocked by a heavy steel emergency door. “Where’s Winston?” Cuthbert whispered, peering through the bones of the dryptosaurus.

“I don’t know,” Rickman moaned, gripping his arm. “Did you kill it?”

“I missed,” he whispered. “Please let me go. I need to have a clear shot.”

Rickman released him, then crawled backward between two of the struthiomimus skeletons, curling herself into a fetal position with a stifled sob.

“Be silent!” Cuthbert hissed.

The Hall lapsed again into a profound stillness. He looked around, probing the shadows with his eyes. He hoped Wright had found refuge in one of the many dark corners.

“Ian?” came a subdued voice. “Lavinia?”

Cuthbert turned and saw to his horror that Wright was leaning against the tail of a stegosaurus. As he watched, Wright swayed, then recovered.

“Winston!” Cuthbert hissed. “Get under cover!”

But Wright began walking unsteadily toward them. “Is that you, Ian?” Wright said, his voice puzzled. He stopped and leaned for a moment against the corner of a display case. “I feel sick,” he said matter-of-factly.

Suddenly an explosive noise rocketed across the hall, echoing crazily in the enormous space. Another crash followed. Dimly, Cuthbert saw that Wright's office door was now a jagged hole. A dark form emerged.

Behind him, Rickman screamed and covered her head.

Through the skeleton of the dryptosaurus, Cuthbert could see the dark shape moving swiftly across the open floor. Straight for him, he thought—but it suddenly veered toward the shadowy figure of Wright. The two shadows merged.

Then Cuthbert heard a wet crunching noise, a scream—and silence.

Cuthbert raised the gun and tried to sight through the ribs of the mounted skeleton.

The silhouette rose up with something in its mouth, shook its head slightly and made a sucking noise. Cuthbert closed his eyes, squeezing the trigger.

The Ruger bucked in his hand, and he heard a blast and a loud clattering. Now Cuthbert saw that the dryptosaurus was missing part of a rib. Behind him, Rickman gasped and moaned.

The dark shape of the creature beyond was gone.

A few moments went by and Cuthbert felt the hinges of his sanity begin to loosen. Then, in a flicker of lightning through the clerestory, Cuthbert clearly saw the beast moving swiftly along the near wall, coming directly toward him, its red eyes fixed on his face.

He swung the barrel and began firing wildly, three quick shots, each white flash illuminating rack upon rack of dark skulls, teeth and claws—the real beast suddenly lost in this wilderness of savage extinct creatures—and then the gun was clicking as the hammer fell harmlessly on the expended chambers.

As if from a half-remembered dream, Cuthbert heard the distant sound of human voices, coming from the direction of Wright's old lab. And suddenly he was running, heedless of obstacles, through the ruined door, through Wright's lab, and into the dark corridor beyond. He heard himself screaming, and then a spotlight was shining in his face and somebody grabbed him and pinned him against a wall.

"Calm down, you're all right! Look, there's blood on him!"

"Get the gun away from him," someone else said.

"Is he the one we're after?"

"No, they said an animal. But don't take any chances."

"Stop struggling!"

Another scream rose in Cuthbert's throat. "It's back there!" he cried. "It'll kill you all! It knows, you can see in its eyes that it knows!"

"Knows what?"

"Don't bother talking to him, he's raving." Cuthbert suddenly went limp.

The Commander came forward. "Is there anyone else back there?" he asked, shaking Cuthbert's shoulder.

"Yes," Cuthbert finally said. "Wright. Rickman."

The Commander looked up.

"You mean Winston Wright? The Director of the Museum? You must be Dr. Cuthbert, then. Where is Wright?"

"It was eating him," said Cuthbert, "eating the brains. Just eating and eating. It's in the Dinosaur Hall, through the lab there."

“Take him back to the Hall and have the medics evacuate him,” said the Commander to two members of his team. “You three, let’s go. On the double.” He raised his radio. “Red One to Dugout. We’ve located Cuthbert, and we’re sending him out.”

“They’re in this laboratory, here,” said the spotter, pointing at the blueprints. Now that the penetration was complete and the team was deep inside the Museum, the two had moved inside the mobile command unit, away from the hammering rain.

“The lab’s clear,” the Commander’s monotone came over the radio. “Proceeding into the Dinosaur Hall. This other door’s been broken down, too.”

“Go in and take that thing out!” cried Coffey. “But watch out for Dr. Wright. And keep a clear frequency. I want to be in touch at all times!”

Coffey waited, tensed over the set, hearing the faint hiss and crackle of the static over the open frequency. He heard the clink of a weapon and a few whispers.

“Smell that?” Coffey leaned closer. They were almost there. He gripped the edge of the table.

“Yup,” a voice answered.

There was a rattling.

“Kill the light and stay in the shadows. Red Seven, cover the left side of that skeleton. Red Three, go right. Red Four, get your back to the wall, cover the far sector.

There was a long silence. Coffey could hear heavy breathing and faint footfalls.

He heard a sudden explosive whisper. “Red Four, look, there’s a body here.”

Coffey felt his stomach tighten.

“No head,” he heard. “Nice.”

“Here’s another one,” whispered a voice. “See it? Lying in that group of dinosaurs.”

More clicking and rattling of weapons, more breathing.

“Red Seven, cover our path of retreat. There’s no other way out.”

“It may still be here,” someone whispered.

“That’s far enough, Red Four.”

Coffey’s knuckles whitened. Why the fuck didn’t they get it over with? These guys were a bunch of old women.

More rattling of metal.

“*Something’s moving! Over there!*” The voice was so loud Coffey jumped, and then a burst of automatic weapons fire dissolved immediately into static as the frequency overloaded.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Coffey began saying, over and over. Then for an instant he could hear screaming, and then more static; the even cadence of machine-gun fire; then, silence. The tinkling sound of something—what? Shattered dinosaur bones dropping and rolling on the marble floor?

Coffey felt a flood of relief. Whatever it was, it was dead. Nothing could have survived the shitload of firepower just unloaded. The nightmare was finally over. He eased himself down in a chair.

*"Red Four! Hoskins! Oh shit!"* the voice of the Commander screamed over the frequency. The voice was suddenly buried by the staccato of gunfire, then more static. Or was it a scream?

Coffey surged to his feet and turned to an agent standing behind him. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. He read his own terror in the agent's eyes.

"Red One!" he yelled into the mike. "Red One! Do you read?"

All he could hear was static.

"Talk to me, Commander! Do you read? Anyone!"

He switched frequencies wildly to the team in the Hall of the Heavens.

"Sir, we're removing the last of the bodies now," came the voice of a medic. "The rear detail of the SWAT team just evacuated Doctor Cuthbert to the roof. We just heard firing from upstairs. Are we going to need more evacuation—?"

"Get the hell out!" Coffey screamed. "Get your asses out! Get the fuck out and pull up the ladder!"

"Sir, what about the rest of the SWAT team? We can't leave those men—"

"They're dead! Understand? That's an order!"

He dropped the radio and leaned back, gazing vaguely out the window. A morgue truck slowly moved up toward the massive bulk of the Museum.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. "Sir, Agent Pendergast is requesting to speak with you."

Coffey slowly shook his head. "No. I don't want to talk to that fuck, you got that?"

"Sir, he—"

"Don't mention his name to me again."

Another agent opened the rear door and came inside, his suit sodden. "Sir, the dead are coming out now."

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

"The people from the Hall of the Heavens. There were seventeen dead, no survivors."

"Cuthbert? The guy you took out of the lab? Is he out?"

"They've just lowered him to the street."

"I want to talk to him."

Coffey stepped outside and ran down past the ambulance circle, his mind numb. How could a SWAT team buy it, just like that?

Outside, two medics with a stretcher approached. "Are you Cuthbert?" Coffey asked the still form.

The man looked around with unfocused eyes.

The doctor pushed past Coffey, sliced open Cuthbert's shirt, then inspected his face and eyes.

"There's blood here," he said. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't know," said Cuthbert.

"Respiration thirty, pulse one-twenty," said a paramedic.

"You're okay?" the doctor asked. "Is this your blood?"

"I don't know."

The doctor looked swiftly down Cuthbert's legs, felt them, felt his groin, examined his neck.

The doctor turned toward the paramedic. “Take him in for observation.” The medics wheeled the stretcher away.

“Cuthbert!” said Coffey, jogging beside him. “Did you see it?”

“See it?” Cuthbert repeated.

“See the fucking creature!”

“It knows,” Cuthbert said.

“Knows what?”

“It knows what’s going on, it knows exactly what’s happening.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It hates us,” said Cuthbert.

As the medics threw open the door of an ambulance, Coffey yelled, “What did it look like?”

“There was sadness in its eyes,” said Cuthbert. “Infinite sadness.”

“He’s a lunatic,” said Coffey to no one in particular.

“You won’t kill it,” Cuthbert added, with calm certainty.

The doors slammed shut.

“The hell I won’t!” shouted Coffey at the retreating ambulance. “Fuck you, Cuthbert! *The hell I won’t!*”

## Chapter 57

Pendergast lowered the radio and looked at Margo. “The creature just killed the better part of a SWAT team. Dr. Wright, too, from the sound of it. Coffey withdrew everyone else, and he won’t answer my summons. He seems to think everything is my fault.”

“He’s *got* to listen!” roared Frock. “We know what to do now. All they need to do is come in here with klieg lights!”

“I understand what’s happening,” said Pendergast. “He’s overloaded, looking for scapegoats. We can’t rely on his help.”

“My God,” Margo said. “Dr. Wright...” She put a hand to her mouth. “If my plan had worked—if I’d thought everything through—maybe all those people would still be alive.”

“And perhaps Lieutenant D’Agosta, and the Mayor, and all those others below us, would be dead,” Pendergast said. He looked down the hallway. “I suppose my duty now is to see you two out safely,” he said. “Perhaps we should take the route I suggested to D’Agosta. Assuming those blueprints didn’t lead him astray, of course.”

Then he glanced at Frock. “No, I don’t suppose that would work.”

“Go ahead!” Frock cried. “Don’t stay here on my account!”

Pendergast smiled thinly. “It isn’t that, Doctor. It’s the inclement weather. You know how the subbasement floods during rainy spells. I heard someone on the police radio saying the rain outside has been approaching monsoon strength for the last hour. When I was sprinkling those fibers into the subbasement, I noticed the water was at least two feet deep and flowing quickly eastward. That would

imply drainage from the river. We couldn't get down there now even if we wanted to." Pendergast raised his eyebrows. "If D'Agosta isn't out by now—well, his chances are marginal, at best."

He turned toward Margo. "Perhaps the best thing would be for you two to stay here, inside the Secure Area. We know the creature can't get past this reinforced door. Within a couple of hours, they are sure to restore power. I believe there are several men still trapped in Security Command and the Computer Room. They may be vulnerable. You've taught me a lot about this creature. We know its weaknesses, and we know its strengths. Those areas are near a long, unobstructed hallway. With you two safe in here, I can hunt it for a change."

"No," said Margo. "You can't do it by yourself."

"Perhaps not, Ms. Green, but I plan on making a fairly good imitation of it."

"I'm coming with you," she said resolutely.

"Sorry." Pendergast stood by the open door to the Secure Area expectantly.

"That thing is highly intelligent," she said. "I don't think you can go up against it alone. If you think that because I'm a woman—"

Pendergast looked astonished. "Ms. Green, I'm shocked you would have such a low opinion of me. The fact is, you've never been in this kind of situation before. Without a gun, you can't do anything."

Margo looked at him combatively. "I saved your ass back there when I told you to switch on your lamp," she challenged.

He raised an eyebrow.

From the darkness, Frock said, "Pendergast, don't be a Southern gentleman fool. Take her."

Pendergast turned to Frock. "Are you sure you'll be all right on your own, Doctor?" he asked. "We'll need to take both the flashlight and the miner's lamp if we're to have any chance of success."

"Of course!" Frock said with a dismissive wave. "I could use a bit of rest after all this excitement."

Pendergast hesitated a moment longer, then looked bemused. "Very well," he said. "Margo, lock the doctor inside the Secure Area, get his keys and what's left of my suit jacket, and let's go."

Smithback gave the flashlight a savage shake. The light flickered, grew brighter for a moment, then dimmed again.

"If that light goes out," D'Agosta said, "we're fucked. Turn it off; we'll switch it on now and then to check our progress."

They moved through the darkness, the sound of rushing water filling the close air. Smithback led; behind him came D'Agosta, grasping the journalist's hand—which, like the rest of him, had grown almost entirely numb.

Suddenly, Smithback pricked up his ears. In the dark, he gradually became aware of a new sound.

"You hear that?" Smithback asked.

D'Agosta listened. "I hear something," he answered.

"It sounds to me like—" Smithback fell silent.

"A waterfall," D'Agosta said with finality. "But whatever it is must be a ways off. Sounds carry in this tunnel. Keep it to yourself."

The group slogged on in silence.

“Light,” said D’Agosta.

Smithback turned it on, played it down the empty hall in front of them, then switched it off again. The sound was louder now; quite a bit louder, in fact. He felt a surge in the water.

“Shit!” said D’Agosta.

There was a sudden commotion behind them.

“Help!” came a feminine voice. “I’ve slipped! Don’t let go!”

“Grab her, somebody!” the Mayor shouted.

Smithback snapped on the light and angled it quickly backward. A middle-aged woman was thrashing about in the water, her long evening dress billowing out across the inky surface.

“Stand up!” the Mayor was shouting. “Anchor your feet!”

“Help me!” she screamed.

Smithback shoved the flashlight into his pocket and braced himself against the current. The woman was floating directly toward him. He saw her arm lash out and felt it wrap around his thigh in a viselike grip. He felt himself slipping.

“Wait!” he cried. “Stop struggling! I’ve got you!”

Her legs kicked out and wrapped around his knees. Smithback lost his grip on D’Agosta and staggered forward, marveling at her strength even as he was pulled off balance.

“You’re dragging me under!” he said, toppling to his chest in the water and feeling the current sucking him downward. Out of the corner of his eye he saw D’Agosta wading in his direction. The woman clambered onto him in a blind panic, forcing his head under water. He rose up under her damp gown, and then it was clinging to his nose and chin, disorienting him, suffocating him. A great lassitude began to sweep over him. He went under a second time, a strange, hollow roaring in his ears.

Suddenly he was above the water again, choking and coughing. A dreadful shrieking was coming from the tunnel ahead of them. He was held in a powerful grip. D’Agosta’s grip.

“We lost the woman,” D’Agosta said. “Come on.”

Her shrieks echoed toward them, growing fainter as she was swept farther downstream. Some of the guests were shouting and crying directions to her, others sobbing uncontrollably.

“Quick, everybody!” D’Agosta yelled. “Stay against the wall! Let’s move forward, and, whatever you do, don’t break the chain.” Under his breath, he muttered to Smithback, “Tell me you’ve still got the flashlight.”

“Here it is,” Smithback said, testing it.

“We have to keep going, or we’ll lose everybody,” D’Agosta muttered. Then he laughed a short, mirthless laugh. “Looks like I saved *your* life this time. That makes us even, Smithback.”

Smithback said nothing. He was trying to shut out the horrifying, anguished screams, fainter now and distorted by the tunnel. The sound of roaring water grew clearer and more menacing.

The event had demoralized the group. “We’ll be all right if we just hold hands!” Smithback heard the Mayor shout. “Keep the chain intact!”

Smithback gripped D'Agosta's hand as hard as he could. They waded downstream in the darkness.

"Light," said D'Agosta.

Smithback switched on the beam. And the bottom dropped out of his world.

A hundred yards ahead, the high ceiling of the tunnel sloped downwards to a narrow semicircular funnel. Beneath it, the roiling water writhed and surged thunderously, then plummeted abruptly into a dark chasm. Heavy mist rose, bearding the mossy throat of the pit with dark spray. Smithback watched, slackjawed, as all his hopes for a best-seller, all his dreams—even his wish to stay alive—disappeared into the whirlpool.

Dimly, he realized that the screaming behind him wasn't screaming, but cheering. He looked back, and saw the bedraggled group staring upward, above his head. At the point where the curved brickwork of the ceiling met the wall of the tunnel, a dark hole yawned, perhaps three feet square. Poking out of it was the end of a rusty iron ladder, bolted to the ancient masonry.

The cheering rapidly died away as the awful truth dawned.

"It's too fucking far to reach," D'Agosta said.

## Chapter 58

They moved away from the Secure Area and stealthily climbed a stairwell. Pendergast turned to Margo, put a finger to his lips, then pointed to the crimson splashes of blood on the floor. She nodded: the beast had gone this way when it ran from their lights. She remembered that she'd been up this staircase just the day before with Smithback, evading the guard. She followed Pendergast as he flicked off the miner's lamp, cautiously opened the first floor door, and moved out into the darkness beyond, the bundle of fibers clasped over his shoulder.

The agent stopped a moment, inhaling. "I don't smell anything," he whispered. "Which way to Security Command and the Computer Room?"

"I think we go left from here," Margo said. "And then through the Hall of Ancient Mammals. It's not too far. Just around the corner from Security Command is the long hallway Dr. Frock told you about."

Pendergast switched on the flashlight briefly and shone it down the corridor. "No blood spoor," he murmured. "The creature headed straight upstairs from the Secure Area—past this landing and right toward Dr. Wright, I'm afraid." He turned toward Margo. "And how do you propose we lure it here?"

"Use the fibers again," she replied.

"It didn't fall for that trick last time."

"But this time we're not trying to trap it. All we want to do is lure it around the corner. You'll be at the other end of the hallway, ready to shoot. We'll just leave some fibers at one end of the hall. We'll make a—a what do you call it?—at the far end."

"A blind."

“Right, a blind. And we’ll be hiding there, in the dark. When it comes, I’ll train the miner’s light onto it and you can start shooting.”

“Indeed. And how will we know when the creature has arrived? If the hallway is as long as Dr. Frock says it is, we may not be able to smell it in time.”

Margo was quiet. “That’s tough,” she finally admitted.

They stood for a moment in silence.

“There’s a glass case at the end of the hall,” Margo said. “It’s meant to display new books written by the Museum staff, but Mrs. Rickman never bothered to have it filled. So it won’t be locked. We can put the bundle in there. The creature may be out for blood, but I doubt it’ll be able to resist *that*. It’ll make some noise prying open the case. When you hear the noise, you shoot.”

“Sorry,” Pendergast said after a moment, “but I think it’s too obvious. We have to ask the question again: If *I* came across a setup like this, would I know it was a trap? In this case, the answer is yes. We need to think of something a little more subtle. Any new trap that uses the fibers as bait is bound to arouse its suspicions.”

Margo leaned against the cold marble wall of the corridor. “It has an acute sense of hearing as well as smell,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Perhaps the simplest approach is best. We use ourselves as bait. We make some noise. Talk loudly. Sound like easy prey.”

Pendergast nodded. “Like the ptarmigan, feigning a broken wing, drawing off the fox. And how will we know it’s there?”

“We’ll use the flashlight intermittently. Wave it about, shine it down the hall. We’ll use the low setting; it may irritate the creature, but it won’t rebuff it. But it will allow us to see it. The creature will think we’re looking around, trying to find our way. Then, when it comes for us, I switch to the miner’s light and you start shooting.”

Pendergast thought for a moment. “What about the possibility of the creature coming from the other direction? From behind us?”

“The hall dead-ends in the staff entrance to the Hall of Pacific Peoples,” Margo pointed out.

“So we’ll be trapped at the end of a cul-de-sac,” Pendergast protested. “I don’t like it.”

“Even if we weren’t trapped,” Margo said, “we wouldn’t be able to escape if you miss your shots. According to the Extrapolator, the thing can move almost as fast as a greyhound.”

Pendergast thought for a moment. “You know, Margo, this plan might work. It’s deceptively simple and uncluttered, like a Zurbarán still life or a Bruckner symphony. If this creature devastated a SWAT team, it probably feels there isn’t much more that human beings can do to it. It wouldn’t be as cautious.”

“And it’s wounded, which may slow it down.”

“Yes, it’s wounded. I think D’Agosta shot it, and the SWAT team may have gotten one or two additional rounds into it. Maybe I hit it, as well; there’s no way to be sure. But, Margo, being wounded makes it infinitely *more* dangerous. I would rather stalk ten healthy lions than one wounded one.” He straightened his shoulders and felt for his gun. “Lead on, please. Standing here in the dark with

this bundle on my back makes me very uneasy. From now on, we use only the flashlight. Be very careful.”

“Why don’t you give me the miner’s light, so you’ll be free to use the gun?” Margo suggested. “If we meet up with the beast unexpectedly, we’ll have to drive it away with the light.”

“If it’s badly wounded, I doubt anything will drive it away,” replied Pendergast. “But here it is.”

They moved quietly down the corridor, around a corner, and through a service door leading into the Hall of Ancient Mammals. It seemed to Margo that her stealthy footsteps echoed like gunshots across the polished stone floor. Row upon row of glass cases gleamed dully in the glow of the flashlight: giant elk, saber-toothed cats, dire wolves. Mastodon and woolly mammoth skeletons reared in the center of the gallery. Margo and Pendergast moved cautiously toward the Hall’s exit, Pendergast’s gun at the ready.

“See that door at the far end, the one marked STAFF ONLY?” Margo whispered. “Beyond that is the corridor housing Security Command, Staff Services, and the Computer Room. Around the corner is the hallway where you can set up your blind.” She hesitated. “If the creature is already there...”

“...I’ll wish I’d stayed in New Orleans, Ms. Green.” Stepping through the staff entrance into Section 18, they found themselves in a narrow hallway lined with doors. Pendergast swept the area with his flashlight: nothing.

“That’s it,” said Margo, indicating a door to their left. “Security Command.” Margo could briefly hear the murmur of voices as they passed. They passed another door marked CENTRAL COMPUTER.

“They’re sitting ducks in there,” Margo said. “Should we—?”

“No,” came the response. “No time.”

They turned the corner and stopped. Pendergast played his light down the hallway.

“What’s that doing there?” he asked.

Halfway down the hall, a massive steel security door flashed mockingly at them in the glow of the flashlight.

“The good Doctor was mistaken,” Pendergast said. “Cell Two must cut this corridor in half. That’s the edge of the perimeter, there.”

“What’s the distance?” Margo said in a monotone.

Pendergast pursed his lips. “I’d guess a hundred, a hundred and twenty-five feet, at the most.”

She turned to the agent. “Is that enough room?”

Pendergast remained motionless. “No. But it’ll have to do. Come on, Ms. Green, let’s get into position.”

The Mobile Command Unit was getting stuffier. Coffey unbuttoned his shirt and loosened his tie with a savage tug. The humidity had to be 110 percent. He hadn’t seen rain like this in twenty years. The drains were bubbling like geysers, the tires of the emergency vehicles up to their hubcaps in water.

The rear door swung open, revealing a man wearing SWAT fatigues.

“Sir?”

“What do you want?”

“The men would like to know when we’re going back

“Going back *in?*” Coffey yelled. “Are you out of your mind? Four of your men were just killed in there, torn apart like frigging hamburger!”

“But sir, there are people still trapped in there. Maybe we could—”

Coffey rounded on the man, eyes blazing, mouth spewing saliva. “Don’t you get it? We can’t just go busting back in there. We sent men in not knowing what we were up against. We’ve got to get the power restored, get the systems back on line before we—”

A policeman stuck his head inside the door of the van. “Sir, we’ve just had a report of a dead body floating in the Hudson River. It was spotted down at the Boat Basin. Seems like it was flushed out of one of the big storm drains.”

“Who the fuck cares about—”

“Sir, it’s a woman wearing an evening gown, and it’s been tentatively identified as one of the people missing from the party.”

“What?” Coffey was confused. It wasn’t possible. “Someone from the Mayor’s group?”

“One of the people trapped inside. The only women still unaccounted for inside apparently went down into the basement two hours ago.”

“You mean, with the *Mayor?*”

“I guess that would be right, sir.”

Coffey felt his bladder weakening. It couldn’t be true.

That fucking Pendergast. Fucking D’Agosta. It was all their fault. They disobeyed him, compromised his plan, sent all those people to their deaths. The Mayor, dead. They were going to have his ass for that.

“Sir?”

“Get out,” Coffey whispered. “Both of you, get out.” The door closed.

“This is Garcia, over. Does anyone copy?” the radio squawked. Coffey spun around and jabbed the radio with his finger.

“Garcia! What’s going on?”

“Nothing, sir, except the power’s still out. But I have Tom Allen here. He’s been asking to speak with you.”

“Put him on, then.”

“This is Allen. We’re getting a little concerned in here, Mr. Coffey. There’s nothing we can do until power’s restored. The batteries are failing on Garcia’s transmitter, and we’ve been keeping it off to conserve juice. We’d like you to get us out.”

Coffey laughed, suddenly, shrilly. The agents manning the consoles looked uneasily at one another. “You’d like me to get you out? Listen, Allen, you geniuses created this mess. You swore up and down the system would work, that everything had a backup. So you get your own asses out. The Mayor’s dead, and I’ve already lost more men than I—hello?”

“This is Garcia again. Sir, it’s pitch-black in here and we only have two flashlights. What happened to the SWAT team that was being sent in?”

Coffey’s laughter stopped abruptly. “Garcia? They got themselves killed. You hear me? *Killed*. Got their guts hung up like birthday ribbons in there. And it’s Pendergast’s fault, and D’Agosta’s fault, and fucking Allen’s fault, and *your* fault, too, probably. Now, we’ve got men on this side working to restore the power. They

say it can be done, it just may take a few hours. Okay? I'm gonna take that goddamn thing in there, but in *my* way, in my own sweet time. So you just sit tight. I'm not going to have more men killed to save your sorry asses."

There was a rap on the rear door. "Come in," he barked, switching off the radio.

An agent stepped inside and crouched beside Coffey, the glow of the monitors throwing his face into sharp relief. "Sir, I just got word that the Deputy Mayor is on his way over now. And the Governor's office is on the phone. They want an update."

Coffey closed his eyes.

Smithback looked up at the ladder, its rusty lower rung hanging a good four feet above his head. Maybe if there was no water he could have jumped it, but with the current nearing his chest it was impossible.

"See anything up there?" D'Agosta asked.

"Nope," replied Smithback. "This light's weak. I can't tell how far the thing extends."

"Turn off the light, then," D'Agosta gasped. "Give me a minute to think."

There was a long silence. Smithback felt another surge against his waist. The water was still rising fast. Another foot, and they would all be floating downstream toward—Smithback shook his head, angrily dispelling the thought.

"Where the hell is all this water coming from?" he moaned to no one in particular.

"This subbasement is built below the Hudson River water table," D'Agosta replied. "It leaks whenever there's a heavy rain."

"Leaks, sure—maybe it even floods a foot or two," Smithback panted. "But we're being inundated. They must be building arks out there."

D'Agosta didn't answer.

"The hell with this," a voice said. "Someone get on my shoulders. We'll go up one by one."

"Stow it!" D'Agosta snapped. "It's too damn high for that."

Smithback coughed, cleared his throat. "I've got an idea!" he said.

There was a silence.

"Look, that steel ladder appears to be pretty strong," he urged. "If we can fasten our belts together and loop them over that ladder, we can wait for the water to rise enough so we can grab the lower rung."

"I can't wait that long!" someone cried.

D'Agosta glared. "Smithback, that's the fucking worst idea I ever heard," he growled. "Besides, half the men here are wearing cummerbunds."

"I noticed *you* have a belt on," Smithback retorted.

"So I do," D'Agosta replied defensively. "But what makes you think the water will rise enough for us to reach the rung?"

"Look up there," Smithback said, shining his flashlight along the wall near the bottom of the metal ladder. "See that band of discoloration? It looks like a highwater mark to me. At least once in the past, the water has risen that high. If this is half the storm you think it is, we ought to get fairly close."

D'Agosta shook his head. "Well, I still think it's crazy," he said, "but I suppose it's better than waiting here to die. You men back there!" he shouted. "Belts! Pass your belts up to me!"

As the belts reached D'Agosta, he knotted them together, buckle to end, starting with the widest buckle. Then he passed them to Smithback, who looped them over his shoulders. Swinging the heavier end, he braced himself against the current, leaned back, and tossed it up toward the lowest rung. The twelve feet of leather fell back into the water, missing by several feet. He tried again, missed again.

"Here, give me that," D'Agosta said. "Let a man do a man's job."

"The hell with that," Smithback said, rearing back dangerously and giving another toss. This time Smithback ducked as the heavy buckle came swinging down; then he slid the far end through and pulled the improvised rope tight around the lower ring.

"Okay, everyone," D'Agosta said. "This is it. I want you all to link arms. Don't let go. As the water rises, it'll carry us toward the ladder. We'll play this back to you in sections as we rise. I hope the son of a bitch holds," he muttered, eyeing the linked belts dubiously.

"And the water rises far enough," said Smithback.

"If it doesn't, you'll hear about it from me, mister." Smithback turned to respond, but decided to save his breath. The current crept up around his chest, tugging at his armpits, and he felt a slow, inexorable pressure from below as his feet started to lose their hold on the smooth stone floor of the tunnel.

## Chapter 59

Garcia watched as the pool of light from Allen's flashlight moved slowly across a bank of dead controls, then back again. Nesbitt, the guard on monitoring duty, slouched at the coffee-stained "panic desk" in the middle of Security Command. Next to him sat Waters and the skinny, gawky-looking programmer from the Computer Room. They had knocked on the door of Security Command ten minutes earlier, scaring the three men inside half to death. Now the programmer was sitting quietly in the dark, chewing his cuticles and sniffing. Waters had placed his service revolver on the table and was nervously spinning it.

"What was that?" Waters said suddenly, stopping his pistol in mid-spin.

"What was what?" Garcia asked morosely.

"I thought I heard a noise in the hall just now," Waters said, swallowing hard. "Like feet going by."

"You're always hearing noises, Waters," Garcia said. "That's what got us here in the first place."

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence.

"Are you sure you read Coffey right?" Waters spoke up again. "If that thing destroyed a SWAT team, it could easily get to us."

"Stop thinking about it," said Garcia. "Stop talking about it. It happened three floors above us."

"I can't believe Coffey, just leaving us here to rot—"

"Waters? If you don't shut up I'm going to send you back to the Computer Room."

Waters fell silent.

"Radio Coffey again," Allen told Garcia. "We need to get the hell out of here, now."

Garcia slowly shook his head. "It ain't gonna work. Sounded to me like he was about five beers short of a six-pack. Maybe he's bent a bit under the pressure. We're stuck here for the duration."

"Who's his boss?" Allen insisted. "Give me the radio."

"No way. The emergency batteries are almost dead." Allen started to protest, then stopped abruptly. "I smell something," he said.

Garcia sat up. "So do I." Then he picked up his shotgun, slowly, like a sleeper caught in a bad dream.

"It's the killer beast!" Waters cried loudly. All the men were on their feet in an instant. Chairs were thrown back, smashing against the floor. There was a thump and a curse as somebody struck the side of a desk, then a splintering crash as a monitor fell to the floor. Garcia grabbed the radio.

"Coffey! It's here!"

There was a scratching, then a low rattling at the doorknob. Garcia felt a gush of warmth on his legs and realized his bladder had given way. Suddenly, the door bent inward, wood cracking under a savage blow. In the close, listening darkness, he heard somebody behind him start to pray.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Pendergast.

Margo played the flashlight down the hall. "I heard something."

From down the hall and around the corner came the sound of splintering wood.

"It's breaking through one of the doors!" said Pendergast. "We need to attract its attention. *Hey!*" he shouted.

Margo grabbed Pendergast's arm. "Don't say anything you wouldn't want it to understand," she hissed.

"Ms. Green, this is no time for jokes," Pendergast snapped. "Surely it doesn't understand English."

"I don't know. We're taking a chance, anyway, just trusting the Extrapolator's data. But the thing has a highly developed brain, and it may well have been in the Museum for years, listening from dark places. It might understand certain words. We can't take the chance."

"As you wish," Pendergast whispered. Then, he said loudly: "Where are you? Can you hear me?"

"Yes!" Margo shouted. "But I'm lost! Help! Can anyone hear us?"

Pendergast lowered his voice. "It must have heard that. Now we can only wait." He dropped to one knee, right hand aiming the .45, left hand bracing right wrist. "Keep playing the light toward the bend in the hallway, move it around as if you're lost. When I see the creature, I'll give you the word. Turn on the miner's light, and keep it aimed on the creature, no matter what. If it's angry—if it's just hunting for revenge now—we have to use any means possible to slow it down. We only have a hundred feet of corridor in which to kill it. If it can run as quickly as you think it

can, the beast can cover that distance in a couple of seconds. You can't hesitate, and you can't panic."

"A couple of seconds," Margo said. "I understand."

Garcia knelt in front of the monitor bank, the butt of his shotgun snug against his cheek, the barrel pointing into the gloom. Before him, the outline of the door was faintly visible. Behind him stood Waters in a combat stance. "When it comes through, just start firing, and don't stop." Garcia said. "I've only got eight rounds. I'll try to space my shots so you can reload at least once before it reaches us. And turn off that flashlight. You trying to give us away?"

The others in Security Command—Allen, the programmer, and Nesbitt the guard—had retreated to the far wall and were crouched beneath the darkened schematic of the Museum's security grid.

Waters was shaking. "It blew away a SWAT team," he said, his voice breaking.

There was another crash, and the door groaned, its hinges popping. Waters screamed, jumped up and scrambled backward into the dark, his gun lying forgotten on the floor.

"Waters, you prick, get back here!"

Garcia heard the sickening thud of bone against metal as Waters stumbled under the desks toward the far wall, banging his skull. "Don't let it get me!" he screamed.

Garcia forced himself to turn back toward the door. He tried to steady the shotgun. The foul reek of the creature filled his nostrils as the door shuddered under another heavy blow. More than anything, he did not want to see what was about to force its way into the room. He cursed and wiped his forehead with the back of a hand. Except for Waters's sobbing, there was silence.

Margo shined the flashlight down the hall, trying to imitate the random motions of somebody searching for a way out. The light licked across the walls and floor, giving dim illumination to the display cabinets. Her heart was hammering, her breath coming in short gasps.

"Help!" she cried again. "We're lost!" Her voice sounded unnaturally hoarse in her ears.

There were no more sounds from around the corner. The creature was listening.

"Hello?" she called, willing herself to speak again. "Is anybody there?"

The voice echoed and died in the corridor. She waited, staring into the gloom, straining to see any movement.

A dark shape began to resolve itself against the far darkness, at a distance where the flashlight beam failed. The movement stopped. It seemed to have its head up. A strange, liquid snuffling sound came toward them.

"Not yet," Pendergast whispered.

It moved a little farther around the corner. The snuffling noise grew louder, and then the stench, wafting down the hall, violated her nostrils.

The beast took another step.

"Not yet," Pendergast whispered.

Garcia's hand was shaking so violently he could hardly press the transmit button.

"Coffey!" he hissed. "Coffey, for God's sake! Do you copy?"

"This is Agent Slade from the Forward Command Post. Who's speaking, please?"

"This is Security Command," Garcia said, breathing thick and fast. "Where's Coffey? *Where's Coffey?*"

"Special Agent Coffey is temporarily indisposed. As of now, I'm taking command of the operation, pending the arrival of the regional director. What's your status?"

"What's our status?" Garcia laughed raggedly. "Our status is, we're fucked. It's outside the door. It's breaking in. I'm begging you, send a team in."

"Hell!" came the voice of Slade. "Why wasn't I informed?" Garcia heard some muffled talk. "Garcia? Do you have your weapon?"

"What good's a shotgun?" Garcia whispered, almost in tears. "You need to get in here with a fucking bazooka. Help us, *please.*"

"Garcia, we're trying to pick up the pieces here. Command-and-control is all screwed up. Just hold tight a moment. It can't get through the Security Command door, right? It's metal, isn't it?"

"It's wood, Slade, it's just a goddamn institutional door!" Garcia said, the tears running freely down his face.

"Wood? What kind of place is this? Garcia, listen to me now. Even if we sent someone in, it'd take them twenty minutes to get to you."

*Please...*

"You've got to handle it yourself. I don't know what you're up against, Garcia, but get a grip on yourself. We'll be in as soon as we can. Just keep cool and aim—"

Garcia sank to the floor, his finger slipping from the button in despair. It was hopeless, they were all dead men.

## Chapter 60

Smithback gripped the belt, playing a few more inches back toward the group. If anything, he thought, the water was rising even faster than before; there were surges every few minutes now, and although the current didn't seem to be getting stronger, the roar at the end of the tunnel had grown deafening. The oldest, the weakest, and the poorest swimmers were directly behind Smithback, clutching to the rope of belts; behind them the others were clinging together, treading water desperately. Everyone was silent now; there was no energy left to weep, moan, or even speak. Smithback looked up: two more feet, and he'd be able to grab the ladder.

"Must be a mother of a storm out there," said D'Agosta. He was next to Smithback, supporting an older woman. "Sure rained on the Museum's party," he added with a weak laugh.

Smithback merely looked up, snapping on the light. Eighteen more inches.

"Smithback, quit switching the light on and off, all right?" D'Agosta said irritably. "I'll tell you when to check."

Smithback felt another surge, which buffeted him against the brick walls of the tunnel. There were some gasps among the group but no one cut loose. If the belt rope gave way, they'd all be drowned in thirty seconds. Smithback tried not to think about it.

In a shaky but determined voice, the Mayor started telling a story to the group. It involved several well-known people in City Hall. Smithback, despite scenting a scoop, felt sleepier and sleepier—a sign, he remembered, of hypothermia.

“Okay, Smithback. Check the ladder.” The gruff voice of D’Agosta jerked him awake.

He shined the light upward, rattling it into life. In the past fifteen minutes the water had risen another foot, bringing the end of the ladder almost within reach. With a croak of delight, Smithback played more of the belts back to the group.

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” said D’Agosta. “You’re gonna go up first. I’ll help from down here, then I’ll follow last. Okay?”

“Okay,” Smithback said, shaking himself into consciousness.

D’Agosta pulled the belt taut, then grabbed Smithback by the waistband and heaved him upward. Smithback reached over his head, grabbing the lowest rung with his free hand.

“Give me the light,” said D’Agosta.

Smithback handed it down, then grabbed the rung with the other hand. He pulled himself up a little, then fell back, the muscles in his arms and back jerking spasmodically. With a deep breath, he pulled himself up again, this time reaching the second rung.

“Now you grab the rung,” D’Agosta said to someone. Smithback leaned against the rungs, gasping for breath. Then, looking upward again, he grasped the third rung, then the fourth. He felt around lightly with his feet to secure them on the first rung.

“Don’t step on anyone’s hands!” D’Agosta warned from below.

He felt a hand guide his foot, and he was able to put his weight on the lowest rung. The firmness felt like heaven. He reached down with one hand and helped the elderly woman. Then he turned back, feeling his strength returning, and moved upward.

The ladder ended at the mouth of a large pipe jutting out horizontally where the curved vault of the roof met the tunnel wall. Gingerly, he moved to the pipe and began crawling into the darkness.

Immediately, a putrid odor assaulted his nostrils. *Sewer*, he thought. He stopped involuntarily for a moment, then moved forward again.

The pipe ended, opening into blackness. Gingerly, he brought his feet outward and downward. A hard, firm dirt floor met his shoes a foot or so beneath the mouth of the pipe. He could hardly believe their luck: a chamber of unknown size, hung suspended here between the basement and subbasement. Probably some architectural palimpsest, a long-forgotten by-product of one of the Museum’s many reconstructions. He clambered out and moved a few inches forward, then another few inches, sweeping his feet over the blackness of the floor. The stench around him was abominable, but it was not the smell of the beast, and for that he was profoundly grateful. Dry things—twigs?—crunched beneath his feet. Behind him, he could hear grunting, and the sound of others moving down the pipe

toward him. The feeble light from D'Agosta's flashlight in the subbasement beyond could not penetrate the blackness.

He turned around, knelt down by the mouth of the pipe, and began helping the bedraggled group out, directing them off to the side, warning them not to stray too far into the dark.

One at a time, people emerged and spread out against the wall, feeling their way gingerly, collapsing in exhaustion. The room was quiet except for the sound of ragged breathing.

Finally, Smithback heard the voice of D'Agosta coming through the pipe. "Christ, what is that reek?" he muttered to Smithback. "That damned flashlight finally gave out. So I dropped it into the water. Okay, people," he said in a louder voice, standing up, "I want you to count off." The sound of dripping water started Smithback's heart racing until he realized it was simply D'Agosta, wringing out his sodden jacket.

One by one, in tired voices, the group gave their names. "Good," D'Agosta said. "Now to figure out where we are. We may need to look for higher ground, in case the water continues to rise."

"I'd like to look for higher ground anyway," came a voice from the darkness. "It stinks in here something awful."

"It'll be tough without light," Smithback said. "We'll need to go single file."

"I've got a lighter," one voice said. "Shall I see if it still works?"

"Careful," said someone else. "Smells like methane, if you ask me."

Smithback winced as a wavering yellow flame illuminated the chamber.

"*Oh, Jesus!*" somebody screamed.

The chamber was suddenly plunged into darkness again as the hand holding the lighter involuntarily jerked away—but not before Smithback got a single, devastating image of what lay around him.

Margo strained ahead in the dimness, slowly moving the flashlight around the hall, trying to keep from deliberately spotlighting the beast as it crouched at the corner, observing them.

"Not yet," Pendergast murmured. "Wait until it shows itself fully."

The creature seemed to pause for an eternity, unmoving, as silent and motionless as a stone gargoyle. Margo could see small red eyes watching her in the gloom. Every now and then the eyes disappeared, then reappeared, as the creature blinked.

The creature took another step, then froze again as if making up its mind, its low, powerful frame tensed and ready.

Then it started forward, coming down the hall toward them with a strange, terrifying lope.

"Now!" cried Pendergast.

Margo reached up and fumbled for the miner's helmet, and the hall was suddenly bathed in light. Almost immediately she heard a deafening *WHANG!* as Pendergast's powerful handgun barked next to her. The creature stopped briefly, and Margo could see it squinting, shaking its head against the light. It bent back as if to bite its haunch where the bullet had passed. Margo felt her mind receding from the reality: the low, pale head, horribly elongated, the crease of Pendergast's

bullet a white stripe above the eyes; the powerful forequarters, covered with dense fur and ending in long, rending talons; the lower rear haunches, wrinkled skin descending to five-clawed toes. Its fur was matted with crusted blood, and fresh blood shone on the scales of the hindquarters.

*WHANG!* The creature's right foreleg was yanked behind it, and Margo heard a terrible roar of rage. It spun back to face them and sprang forward, ropes of saliva swinging madly from its jaws.

*WHANG!* went the gun—a *miss*—and the creature kept coming, accelerating with horrible deliberation.

*WHANG!*

She saw, as if in slow motion, the left hind leg jerk back, and the creature falter slightly. But it recovered, and, with a renewed howl, coarse hair bristling high on its haunches, it came for them again.

*WHANG!* went the gun, but the creature did not slow, and at that point Margo realized with great clarity that their plan had failed, that there was time for only one more shot and that the creature's charge could not be stopped. "Pendergast!" she cried, stumbling backward, her miner's light tilting crazily upward, scrambling away from the red eyes that stared straight into her own with a terrifyingly comprehensible blend of rage, lust, and triumph.

Garcia sat on the floor, ears straining, wondering if the voice he'd heard was real—if there was somebody else out there, trapped in this nightmare—or whether it had just been a trick of his overheated brain.

Suddenly, a very different sound boomed outside the door; then there was another, and another.

He scrambled to his feet. *It couldn't be true.* He fumbled with the radio.

"Do you hear that?" a voice behind him said.

Then the sound came again, twice; then, a short silence; then again.

"I swear to God, somebody's shooting in the hall!" Garcia cried.

There was a long, dreadful silence. "It's stopped," said Garcia in a whisper.

"Did they get it? Did they get it?" Waters whimpered.

The silence stretched on. Garcia clutched the shotgun, its pump and trigger guard slick from sweat. Five or six shots, that's all he'd heard. And the creature had killed a heavily armed SWAT team.

"*Did they get it?*" Waters asked again.

Garcia listened intently, but could hear nothing from the hall. This was the worst of all: the brief raising, then sudden dashing, of his hopes. He waited.

There was a rattling at the door. "No," whispered Garcia. "It's back."

## Chapter 61

"Hand me that lighter!" D'Agosta barked. Smithback, falling blindly backward, saw the sudden spark of the flint and instinctively covered his eyes.

“Oh, Christ—” he heard D’Agosta groan. Then Smithback jerked as he felt something clutch his shoulder and drag him to his feet.

“Listen, Smithback,” the voice of D’Agosta hissed in his ear, “you can’t crap out on me now. I need you to help me keep these people together.”

Smithback gagged as he forced his eyes open. The dirt floor ahead of him was awash in bones: small, large, some broken and brittle, others with gristle still clinging to their knobby ends.

“Not twigs,” Smithback said, over and over again under his breath. “No, no, not twigs.” The light flicked out again, D’Agosta conserving its flame.

Another yellow flash, and Smithback looked wildly around. What he had kicked aside was the remains of a dog—a terrier, by the looks of it—glassy, staring eyes, light fur, small brown teats descending in ordered rows to the torn-out belly. Scattered around the floor were other carcasses: cats, rats, other creatures too thoroughly mauled or too long dead to be recognizable. Behind him, someone was screaming relentlessly.

The light went out, then reappeared, farther ahead now as D’Agosta moved forward. “Smithback, come with me,” came his voice. “Everybody, stare straight ahead. Let’s go.” As Smithback slowly placed one foot in front of the other, looking down just enough to avoid stepping on the loathesomeness beneath, something registered in his peripheral vision. He turned his head toward the wall to his right.

A pipe or duct had once run along the wall at shoulder height, but it had long since collapsed, its remains lying broken on the floor, half buried in offal. The heavy metal supports for the ductwork remained bolted to the wall, projecting outward like tines. Hung on the supports were a variety of human corpses, their forms seeming to waver in the dull glow of the flame. Smithback saw, but did not immediately comprehend, that all of the corpses had been decapitated. Scattered on the floor along the wall beneath were small ruined objects that he knew must be heads.

The bodies farthest from him had hung there the longest; they seemed more skeleton than flesh. He turned away, but not before his brain processed the final horror: on the meaty wrist of the nearest corpse was an unusual watch in the shape of a sundial. Moriarty’s watch.

“Oh, my God ... oh, my God,” Smithback repeated over and over. “Poor George.”

“You knew that guy?” D’Agosta said grimly. “Shit, this thing gets hot!”

The lighter flicked out again and Smithback immediately stopped moving.

“*What kind of a place is this?*” somebody behind them cried.

“I haven’t the faintest,” D’Agosta muttered.

“I do,” Smithback said woodenly. “It’s a *larder*.”

The light came back on and he started forward again, more quickly now. Behind him, Smithback could hear the Mayor urging the people to keep moving in a dead, mechanical voice.

Suddenly, the light flicked out again, and the journalist froze in position. “We’re at the far wall,” he heard D’Agosta say in the darkness. “One of the passages here slopes down, the other slopes up. We’re taking the high road.”

D’Agosta flicked on the lighter again and continued forward, Smithback following. After several moments, the smell began to dissipate. The ground grew

damp and soft beneath his feet. Smithback felt, or imagined he felt, the faintest hint of a cool breeze on his cheek.

D'Agosta laughed. "Christ, that feels fine."

The tunnel grew damp underfoot, then ended abruptly in another ladder. D'Agosta stepped towards it, reaching up with the lighter. Smithback moved forward eagerly, sniffing the freshening breeze. There was a sudden rushing sound and then a thud-thud! above, and a bright light passed quickly above them, followed by a splash of viscous water.

"A manhole!" D'Agosta cried. "We made it, I can't believe it, we fucking made it!"

He scrambled up the ladder and heaved against the round plate.

"It's fastened down," he grunted. "Twenty men couldn't lift this. *Help!*" he started calling, clambering up the ladder and placing his mouth close to one of the pry-holes, "*Somebody help us, for Chrissake!*" And then he started to laugh, sinking against the metal ladder and dropping the lighter, and Smithback also collapsed to the floor of the passage, laughing, crying, unable to control himself.

"We made it," D'Agosta said through his laughter. "Smithback! We made it! Kiss me, Smithback—you fucking journalist, I love you and I hope you make a million on this."

Smithback heard a voice above them from the street.

"You hear somebody yelling?"

"Hey, you up there!" D'Agosta cried out. "Want to earn a reward?"

"Hear that? There is somebody down there. Yo!"

"Did you hear me? Get us out of here!"

"How much?" another voice asked.

"Twenty bucks! Call the fire department, get us out!"

"Fifty bucks, man, or we walk."

D'Agosta couldn't stop laughing. "Fifty dollars then! Now get us the hell out of here!"

He turned around and spread his arms. "Smithback, move everybody forward. Folks, Mayor Harper, welcome back to New York City!"

The door rattled once more. Garcia pressed the buttstock tight against his cheek, crying quietly. It was trying to get in again. He took a deep breath and tried to steady the shotgun.

Then he realized that the rattling had resolved itself into a knock.

It sounded again, louder, and Garcia heard a muffled voice.

"Is anyone in there?"

"Who is it?" Garcia answered thickly.

"Special Agent Pendergast, FBI."

Garcia could hardly believe it. As he opened the door he saw a tall, thin man looking placidly back at him, his pale hair and eyes ghostly in the dim hallway. He held a flashlight in one hand and a large pistol in the other. Blood trailed down one side of his face, and his shirt was soaked in crazy Rorschach patterns. A shortish young woman with mousy brown hair stood beside him, a yellow miner's lamp dwarfing her head, her face, hair, and sweater covered with more dark, wet stains.

Pendergast finally broke into a grin. "We did it," he said simply.

Only Pendergast's grin made Garcia realize that the blood covering the two was not their own. "How—?" he faltered.

They pushed their way past him as the others, lined up under the dark Museum schematic, stared, frozen by fear and disbelief.

Pendergast indicated a chair with the flashlight. "Have a seat, Ms. Green," he said.

"Thank you," said Margo, the miner's light on her forehead bobbing upward. "Such a gentleman."

Pendergast seated himself. "Does anyone have a handkerchief?" he asked.

Allen came forward, pulling one from his pocket.

Pendergast handed it to Margo, who wiped the blood from her face and handed it back. Pendergast carefully wiped his face and hands. "Much obliged, Mr.—?"

"Allen. Tom Allen."

"Mr. Allen." Pendergast handed the blood-soaked handkerchief to Allen, who started to return it to his pocket, froze, then dropped it quickly. He stared at Pendergast. "Is it dead?"

"Yes, Mr. Allen. It's quite dead."

"You killed it?"

"We killed it. Rather, Ms. Green here killed it."

"Call me Margo. And it was Mr. Pendergast who fired the shot."

"Ah, but Margo, you told me where to place the shot. I never would have thought of it. All big game—lion, water buffalo, elephant—have eyes on the *sides* of their head. If they're charging, you'd never consider the eye. It's just not a viable shot."

"But the creature," Margo explained to Allen, "had a primate's face. Eyes rotated to the front for stereoscopic vision. A direct path to the brain. And with that incredibly thick skull, once you put a bullet inside the brain, it would simply bounce around until it was spent."

"You killed the creature with a shot through the eye?" Garcia asked, incredulously.

"I'd hit it several times," Pendergast said, "but it was simply too strong and too angry. I haven't had a good look at the creature—I think I'll leave that until much later—but it's safe to say that no other shot could have stopped it in time."

Pendergast adjusted his tie knot with two slender fingers—unusually fastidious, Margo thought, considering the blood and bits of gray matter covering his white shirt. She would never forget the sight of the creature's brain exploding out of the ruined eye socket, at once a horrifying and beautiful sight. In fact, it was the eyes—the horrible, angry eyes—that had given her a sudden, desperate flash of an idea, even as she'd scrambled backward, away from the rotting stench and slaughterhouse breath.

Suddenly, she was clutching her sides, shivering.

In a moment, Pendergast had motioned to Garcia to give up his uniform jacket. He draped it over her shoulders. "Calm down, Margo," he said, kneeling at her side. "It's all over."

"We have to get Dr. Frock," she stammered through blue lips.

"In a minute, in a minute," Pendergast said soothingly.

“Shall we make a report?” Garcia asked. “This radio has just about enough juice left for one more broadcast.”

“Yes, and we have to send a relief party for Lieutenant D’Agosta,” Pendergast said. Then he frowned. “I suppose this means talking to Coffey.”

“I don’t think so,” Garcia said. “Apparently, there’s been a change of command.” Pendergast’s eyebrows raised. “Indeed?”

“Indeed.” Garcia handed the radio to Pendergast. “An agent named Slade is claiming to be in charge. Why don’t you do the honors?”

“If you wish,” Pendergast said. “I’m glad it’s not Special Agent Coffey. Had it been, I’m afraid I would have taken him to task. I respond sharply to insults.” He shook his head. “It’s a very bad habit, but one I find hard to break.”

## Chapter 62

### Four Weeks Later

When Margo arrived, Pendergast and D’Agosta were already in Frock’s office. Pendergast was examining something on a low table while Frock talked animatedly next to him. D’Agosta was walking restlessly around the office, looking bored, picking things up and putting them down again. The latex cast of the claw sat in the middle of Frock’s desk like a nightmare paperweight. A large cake, purchased by Frock in celebration of Pendergast’s imminent departure, sat in the middle of the warm sunlit room, the white icing already beginning to droop.

“Last time I was there, I had a crayfish gumbo that was truly magnificent,” Frock was saying, gripping Pendergast’s elbow. “Ah, Margo,” he said, wheeling around. “Come in and take a look.”

Margo crossed the room. Spring had finally taken hold of the city, and through the great bow windows she could see the blue expanse of the Hudson River flowing southward, sparkling in the sunlight. On the promenade below, joggers filed past in steady ranks.

A large re-creation of the creature’s feet lay on the low table, next to the Cretaceous plaque of fossil footprints. Frock traced the tracks lovingly. “If not the same family, certainly the same order,” he said. “And the creature did indeed have five toes on the hind feet. Yet another link to the Mbwun figurine.”

Margo, looking closely, thought the two didn’t seem all that similar.

“Fractal evolution?” she suggested.

Frock looked at her. “It’s possible. But it would take extensive cladistic analysis to know for sure.” He grimaced. “Of course, that won’t be possible, now that the government has whisked the remains away for God only knows what purpose.”

In the month since the opening night disaster, public sentiment had gone from shock and incredulity, to fascination, to ultimate acceptance. For the first two weeks, the press had been abuzz with stories of the beast, but the conflicting accounts of the survivors created confusion and uncertainty. The only item that could settle the controversy—the corpse—was immediately removed from the

scene in a large white van with government plates, never to be seen again. Even Pendergast claimed to be ignorant of its whereabouts. Publicity soon turned to the human cost of the disaster, and to the lawsuits that threatened the manufacturers of the security system and, to a lesser degree, the police department and the Museum itself. Time magazine had run a lead story entitled “How Safe Are Our National Institutions?” Now, weeks later, people had begun to view the creature as a one-of-a-kind phenomenon: a freak throwback, like the dinosaur fishes that occasionally showed up in the nets of deep-sea fishermen. Interest had started to wane: the opening-night survivors were no longer interviewed on talk shows, the projected Saturday morning cartoon series had been cancelled, and “Museum Beast” action figures were going unsold in toy stores.

Frock glanced around. “Forgive my lack of hospitality. Sherry, anyone?”

There were murmurs of “No, thanks.”

“Not unless you’ve got a 7-Up chaser,” D’Agosta said. Pendergast blanched and looked in his direction.

D’Agosta took the latex cast of the claw from Frock’s desk and held it up. “Nasty,” he said.

“Exceptionally nasty,” Frock agreed. “It truly was part reptile, part primate. I won’t go into the technical details—I’ll leave that to Gregory Kawakita, who I’ve put to work analyzing what data we do have—but it appears that the reptilian genes are what gave the creature its strength, speed, and muscle mass. The primate genes contributed the intelligence and possibly made it endothermic. Warm-blooded. A formidable combination.

“Yeah, sure,” D’Agosta said, laying the cast down. “But what the hell *was* it?”

Frock chuckled. “My dear fellow, we simply don’t have enough data yet to say *exactly* what it was. And since it appears to have been the last of its kind, we may never know. We’ve just received an official survey of the *tepui* this creature came from. The devastation there has been complete. The plant this creature lived on, which by the way we have posthumously named *Liliceae mbuwunensis*, appears to be totally extinct. Mining has poisoned the entire swamp surrounding the *tepui*. Not to mention the fact that the entire area was initially torched with napalm, to help clear the area for mining. There were no traces of any other similar creatures wandering about the forest anywhere. While I am normally horrified by such environmental destruction, in this case it appears to have rid the earth of a terrible menace.” He sighed. “As a safety precaution—and against my advice, I might add—the FBI has destroyed all the packing fibers and plant specimens here in the Museum. So the plant, too, is truly extinct.”

“How do we know it was the last of its kind?” Margo asked. “Couldn’t there be another somewhere?”

“Not likely,” said Frock. “That *tepui* was an ecological island—by all accounts, a unique place in which animals and plants had developed a singular interdependence over literally millions of years.”

“And there certainly aren’t any more creatures in the Museum,” Pendergast said, coming forward. “With those ancient blueprints I found at the Historical Society, we were able to section off the subbasement and comb every square inch. We found many things of interest to urban archaeologists, but no further sign of the creature.”

"It looked so sad in death," Margo said. "So lonely. I almost feel sorry for it."

"It *was* lonely," said Frock, "lonely and lost. Traveling four thousand miles from its jungle home, following the trail of the last remaining specimens of the precious plants that kept it alive and free from pain. But it was very evil, and very fierce. I saw at least twelve bullet holes in the carcass before they took it away."

The door opened and Smithback walked in, theatrically waving a manila envelope in one hand and a magnum of champagne in the other. He whipped a sheaf of papers out of the envelope, holding them skyward with one long arm.

"A book contract, folks!" he said, grinning. D'Agosta scowled and turned away, picking up the claw again.

"I got everything I wanted, and made my agent rich," Smithback crowed.

"And yourself rich, too," said D'Agosta, looking as if he'd like to use the claw on the writer.

Smithback cleared his throat dramatically. "I've decided to donate half the royalties to a fund set up in memory of Officer John Bailey. To benefit his family."

D'Agosta turned toward Smithback. "Get lost," he said.

"No, really," said Smithback. "Half the royalties. After the advance has earned out, of course," he added hastily.

D'Agosta started to step toward Smithback, then stopped abruptly. "You got my cooperation," he said in a low voice, his jaw working stiffly.

"Thanks, Lieutenant. I think I'll need it."

"That's Captain, as of yesterday," said Pendergast.

"Captain D'Agosta?" Margo asked. "You've been promoted?"

D'Agosta nodded. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy, the Chief tells me." He pointed a finger at Smithback. "I get to read what you say about me *before* it goes to press, Smithback."

"Now wait a minute," Smithback said, "there are certain ethics that journalists have to follow—"

"Balls!" D'Agosta exploded.

Margo turned to Pendergast. "I can see this will be an exciting collaboration," she whispered. Pendergast nodded.

There was a light rapping, and the head of Greg Kawakita appeared from around the door to the outer office. "Oh, I'm sorry, Doctor Frock," he said, "your secretary didn't tell me you were busy. We can go over the results later."

"Nonsense!" cried Frock. "Come in, Gregory. Mr. Pendergast, Captain D'Agosta, this is Gregory Kawakita. He's the author of the G.S.E., the extrapolation program that allowed us to come up with such an accurate profile of the creature."

"You have my gratitude," Pendergast said. "Without that program, none of us would have been here today."

"Thanks very much, but the program was really Dr. Frock's brainchild," Kawakita said, eyeing the cake. "I just put the pieces together. Besides, there were a lot of things the Extrapolator didn't tell you. The forward placement of the eyes, for instance."

"Why, Greg, success has made you humble," Smithback said. "In any case," he continued, turning to Pendergast, "I've got a few questions for *you*. This vintage champagne doesn't come free, you know." He fixed the FBI agent with an expectant gaze. "Whose bodies did we discover in the lair, anyway?"

Pendergast raised his shoulders in a slight shrug. “I guess there’s no harm in telling you—although this is not for publication until you receive official word. As it happens, five of the eight remains have been identified. Two were those of homeless street persons, who crept into the Old Basement, presumably looking for warmth on a winter’s night. Another was that of a foreign tourist we found on Interpol’s missing persons list. Another, as you know, was George Moriarty, the Assistant Curator under Ian Cuthbert.”

“Poor George,” Margo whispered. For weeks, she had avoided thinking about Moriarty’s last moments, his final struggle with the beast. To die that way, then to be hung up like a side of beef ...

Pendergast waited a moment before continuing. “The fifth body has been tentatively identified from dental records as a man named Montague, an employee of the Museum who vanished several years ago.”

“Montague!” Frock said. “So the story was true.”

“Yes,” said Pendergast. “It seems that certain members of the Museum administration—Wright, Rickman, Cuthbert, and perhaps Ippolito—suspected there was something prowling the Museum. When a vast quantity of blood was found in the Old Basement, they had it washed away without notifying the police. When Montague’s disappearance coincided with that discovery, the group did nothing to shed any light on the event. They also had reason to believe that the creature was somehow connected to the Whittlesey expedition. Those suspicions may have been behind the moving of the crates. In retrospect, it was a terribly unwise move: It was what precipitated the killings.”

“You’re right, of course,” Frock said, wheeling himself back toward his desk. “We know the creature was highly intelligent. It realized it would be in danger if its existence in the Museum was discovered. I think it must have curbed its normally fierce nature as a means of self-preservation. When it first reached the Museum, it was desperate, perhaps feral, and it killed Montague when it saw him with the artifacts and the plants. But after that, it grew quickly cautious. It knew where the crates were, and it had a supply of the plant—or, at least, it would until the packing material gave out. It was parsimonious in its consumption. Of course, the hormones in the plant were highly concentrated. And the beast supplemented its diet occasionally, in stealthy ways. Rats living in the subbasement, cats escaped from the Animal Behavior department ... once or twice, even luckless human beings that wandered too deep into the Museum’s secret places. But it was always careful to conceal its kills, and several years passed in which it remained—for the most part—undetected.” He shifted slightly, the wheelchair creaking.

“Then it happened. The crates were removed, put under lock and key in the Secure Area. The beast grew first hungry, then desperate. Perhaps it grew murderous with rage at the beings who had deprived it of the plants—beings who themselves could be a substitute, though poor, for that which they’d taken away. The frenzy grew, and the beast killed, then killed again.”

Frock withdrew his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. “But it didn’t lose *all* rationality,” he continued. “Remember how it hid the body of the policeman in the exhibition? Even though its blood lust had been aroused, even though it was mad with desire for the plants, it had the presence of mind to realize that the killings were attracting unwanted attention to itself. Perhaps it had planned on bringing

the body of Beauregard back down to its lair. Chances are, it was unable to do so—the exhibition was far beyond its usual haunts—so it hid the body instead. After all, the hypothalamus was its primary objective; the rest was just meat.”

Margo shuddered.

“I’ve wondered more than once just why the beast went into that exhibition,” Pendergast said.

Frock raised his index finger. “So have I. And I think I know the reason. Remember, Mr. Pendergast, what else was in the exhibition.”

Pendergast nodded slowly. “Of course. The figurine of Mbwun.”

“Exactly,” said Frock. “The figurine depicting the beast itself. The creature’s one link with its home, the home that it had lost utterly.”

“You seem to have it all figured out,” Smithback said. “But if Wright and Cuthbert were aware of this thing, how did they know it was connected with the Whittlesey expedition?”

“I believe I can answer that,” Pendergast said. “They knew, of course, why the ship carrying the crates from Belém to New Orleans was delayed so long—much the way you learned, I expect, Mr. Smithback.”

Smithback suddenly looked nervous. “Well,” he began, “I—”

“They also read Whittlesey’s journal. And they knew the legends as well as anybody. Then, when Montague—the person assigned to curating the crates—disappeared, and a pool of blood was discovered near the location of the crates, it didn’t take a savant to put everything together. And besides,” he said, his expression clouding, “Cuthbert more or less confirmed it for me. As well as he was able, of course.”

Frock nodded. “They paid a terrible price. Winston and Lavinia dead, Ian Cuthbert institutionalized ... it’s distressing beyond words.”

“True,” Kawakita said, “but it’s no secret that it’s made you top contender for the next Director of the Museum.”

*He would think of that,* Margo thought.

Frock shook his head. “I doubt if it will be offered me, Gregory. Once the dust settles, rational heads will prevail. I’m too controversial. Besides, the Directorship doesn’t interest me. I have too much new material here for me to delay my next book any longer.”

“One thing that Dr. Wright and the rest didn’t know,” Pendergast went on—“in fact, something that nobody here knows—is that the killings didn’t start in New Orleans. There was a very similar murder in Belém, in the warehouse where the crates had been housed while awaiting shipping. I learned about it when I was investigating the shipboard killings.”

“That must have been the creature’s first stop on the way to New York,” Smithback said. “I guess it brings the story full circle.” He guided Pendergast to the sofa. “Now, Mr. Pendergast, I suppose this also solves the mystery of what happened to Whittlesey.”

“The creature killed him, that seems fairly certain,” said Pendergast. “Say, you don’t mind if I get a piece of that cake—”

Smithback placed a restraining hand on his arm. “How do you know?”

“That it killed Whittlesey? We found a souvenir in its lair.”

“You did?” Smithback whipped out his microcassette recorder.

“Put that back in your pocket, if you please, Mr. Smithback. Yes, it was something Whittlesey wore around his neck, apparently. A medallion in the shape of a double arrow.”

“That was embossed on his journal!” Smithback said. “And on the letterhead of the note he sent Montague!” Margo chimed in.

“Apparently it was Whittlesey’s family crest. We found it in the lair; a piece of it, anyway. Why the beast carried it from the Amazon we’ll never know, but there it is.”

“We found other artifacts in there, too,” said D’Agosta, through a mouthful of cake. “Along with a pile of Maxwell’s seed pods. The thing was a regular collector.

“Like what?” Margo asked, walking toward one of the bow windows and gazing out at the landscape beyond.

“Things you wouldn’t expect. A set of car keys, a lot of coins and subway tokens, even a beautiful gold pocket watch. We looked up the guy whose name was inscribed inside the watch, and he told us he’d lost it three years ago. He’d visited the Museum, and been pickpocketed.” D’Agosta shrugged. “Maybe that pickpocket is one of the unidentified bodies. Or maybe we’ll never find him.”

“The creature kept it hung by its chain from a nail in the wall of its lair,” Pendergast said. “It liked beautiful things. Another sign of intelligence, I suppose.”

“Was everything picked up from inside the Museum?” asked Smithback.

“As far as we can tell,” Pendergast said. “There’s no evidence the creature could—or wanted to—obtain egress from the Museum.”

“No?” Smithback said. “Then what about the exit you were leading D’Agosta toward?”

“He found it,” Pendergast said simply. “You were all very lucky.”

Smithback turned to ask D’Agosta another question, and Pendergast took the opportunity to get up and head for the cake. “It was awfully nice of you to throw me this party, Dr. Frock,” he said as he returned.

“You saved our lives,” Frock said. “I thought a little cake might be in order as our way of wishing you bon voyage.”

“I’m afraid, then,” Pendergast continued, “that I may be at this party under false pretenses.”

“Why is that?” Frock asked.

“I may not be leaving New York permanently. The directorship of the New York office is up for reassignment, you see.”

“You mean it’s not going to Coffey?” Smithback smirked.

Pendergast shook his head. “Poor Mr. Coffey,” he said. “I hope he enjoys his position in the Waco field office. In any case, the Mayor, who has become a great fan of Captain D’Agosta here, seems to think I have a good shot at it.”

“Congratulations!” cried Frock.

“It isn’t certain yet,” Pendergast said. “Nor am I certain I care to remain up here. Although the place does have its charms.”

He got up and walked to the bow window, where Margo was standing, staring out at the Hudson River and the green hills of the Palisades beyond.

“What are your plans, Margo?” he asked.

She turned to face him. “I’ve decided to stay at the Museum until I’ve finished my dissertation.”

Frock laughed. "The truth is, I refused to let her go," he said.

Margo smiled. "Actually, I've received an offer from Columbia. Tenure-track Assistant Professorship, starting next year. Columbia was my father's alma mater. So I've *got* to finish it, you see."

"Great news!" said Smithback. "We'll have to celebrate over dinner tonight."

"Dinner? Tonight?"

"Café des Artistes, seven o'clock," he said. "Listen, you've got to come. I'm a world-famous author, or about to become one. This champagne's getting warm," he continued, reaching for the bottle.

Everyone crowded round as Frock brought out glasses. Smithback angled the bottle toward the ceiling and fired off the cork with a satisfying *pop*.

"What'll we drink to?" asked D'Agosta, as the glasses were filled.

"To my book," said Smithback.

"To Special Agent Pendergast, and a safe journey home," Frock said.

"To the memory of George Moriarty," Margo said quietly.

"To George Moriarty." There was a silence.

"God bless us, everyone," Smithback intoned. Margo punched him playfully.

## Epilogue

### Chapter 63

#### Long Island City, Six Months Later

The rabbit jerked as the needle sank into its haunch. Kawakita watched as the dark blood filled up the syringe.

He placed the rabbit carefully back in its hutch, then transferred the blood to three centrifugal test tubes. He opened the nearby centrifuge, slotted the tubes into the drum, and shut the lid. Flicking the switch, he listened to the hum slowly build to a whine as the force of the rotation separated the blood into its components.

He sat back in the wooden chair and let his eyes roam around the surroundings. The office was dusty and the lighting dim, but Kawakita preferred it that way. No sense in drawing attention to oneself.

It had been very difficult in the beginning: finding the right place, assembling the equipment, even paying the rent. It was unbelievable how much they wanted for rundown warehouses in Queens. The computer had been the hardest item to come by. Instead of buying one, he had finally managed to hack his way over the telephone long lines into a large mainframe at the Solokov College of Medicine. It was a relatively secure site from which to run his Genetic Extrapolation Program.

He peered through the dingy window to the shop floor below. The large space was dark and relatively vacant, the only light coming from aquariums sitting on metal racks along the far wall. He could hear the faint bubbling of the filtration

systems. The lights from the tanks cast a dim greenish glow across the floor. Two dozen, give or take a few. Soon, he'd need more. But money was becoming less and less of a problem.

It was amazing, thought Kawakita, how the most elegant solutions were the simplest ones. Once you saw it, the answer was obvious. But it was *seeing* that answer for the first time that separated the timeless scientist from the merely great.

The Mbwun riddle was like that. He, Kawakita, had been the only one to suspect it, to see it, and—now—to prove it.

The whine of the centrifuge began to decrease in pitch, and soon the COMPLETED light began blinking a slow, monotonous red. Kawakita got up, opened the lid, and removed the tubes. The rabbit blood had been divided into its three constituents: clear serum on top, a thin layer of white blood cells in the middle, and a heavy layer of red blood cells at the bottom. He carefully suctioned off the serum, then placed drops of the cells into a series of watchglasses. Finally, he added various reagents and enzymes.

One of the watchglasses turned purple.

Kawakita smiled. It had been so simple.

After Frock and Margo had blundered up to him at the party, his initial skepticism had quickly changed to fascination. He had been on the periphery before, not really paying attention. But practically from the minute he'd hit Riverside Drive that evening—carried along in the stream of countless other hysterical guests who'd rushed from the opening—he began thinking. Then, in the aftermath, he began asking questions. When later he'd heard Frock pronounce the mystery solved, Kawakita's curiosity had only increased. Perhaps, to be fair, he'd had a little more objective distance than those who'd been inside the Museum that night, fighting the beast in the dark. But whatever the reason, there seemed to be small defects with the solution: little problems, minor contradictions that everyone had missed.

Everyone except Kawakita.

He'd always been a very cautious researcher; cautious, yet full of insatiable curiosity. It had helped him in the past: at Oxford, and in his early days at the Museum. And now, it helped him again. His caution had made him build a keystroke capture routine into the Extrapolator. For security reasons, of course—but also to learn what others might use his program for.

So it was only natural that he'd go back and examine what Frock and Margo had done.

All he'd had to do was press a few keys, and the program reeled off every question Frock and Margo had asked, every bit of data they had entered, and every result they had obtained.

That data had pointed him toward the real solution to the Mbwun mystery. It had been there under their noses the whole time, had they known what questions to ask. Kawakita learned to ask the right questions. And along with the answer came a stunning discovery.

A soft knock sounded at the warehouse door. Kawakita walked down the stairs to the main floor of the warehouse, moving without sound or hesitation through the gloom.

“Who is it?” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

“Tony,” said the voice.

Kawakita effortlessly slid back the iron bar from the door and pulled it open. A figure stepped through.

“It’s dark in here,” the man said. He was small and wiry, and walked with a distinct roll to his shoulders. He looked around nervously.

“Keep the lights off,” said Kawakita sharply. “Follow me.”

They walked to the far end of the warehouse. There, a long table had been set up under dull infrared lamps. The table was covered with drying fibers. At the end of the table was a scale. Kawakita scooped up a small handful of fibers and weighed them, removing several, then dropping a few back on. Then he slid the fibers into a Ziploc bag.

He looked at his visitor expectantly. The man dug his hand into his pants pocket and extended a wad of crumpled bills. Kawakita counted them: five twenties. He nodded and handed over the small bag. The man grabbed it eagerly, and began to tear open the seam.

“Not here!” said Kawakita.

“Sorry,” the man said. He moved toward the door as quickly as the dim light would allow.

“Try larger amounts,” Kawakita suggested. “Steep it in boiling water, that increases the concentration. I think you’ll find the results very gratifying.”

The man nodded. “Gratifying,” he said slowly, as if tasting the word.

“I will have more for you on Tuesday,” Kawakita said.

“Thank you,” the man whispered, and left. Kawakita closed the door and slid the bolt back in place. It had been a long day, and he felt bone tired, but he was looking forward to nightfall, when the sounds of the city would subside and darkness would cover the land. Night was rapidly becoming his favorite time of the day.

Once he reconstructed what Frock and Margo had done with his program, everything else fell into place. All he’d needed was to find one of the fibers. But that proved a difficult task. The Secure Area had been painstakingly cleaned, and the crates had been emptied of their artifacts and burned, along with the packing material. The lab where Margo had done the initial work was now spotless, the plant press destroyed. But nobody had remembered to clean out Margo’s handbag, which was notorious throughout the Anthropology Department for its untidiness. Margo herself had thrown it in the Museum incinerator several days after the disaster, as a precaution. But not before Kawakita had found the fiber he needed.

Despite his other trials, the supreme challenge had been growing the plant from a single fiber. It had taxed all his abilities, his knowledge of botany and genetics. But he was channeling all his ferocious energies into one thing now—thoughts of tenure vanished, a leave of absence taken from the Museum. And he had finally achieved it, not five weeks earlier. He remembered the surge of triumph he felt when the little green node appeared on an agar-covered petri dish. And now he had a large and steady supply growing in the tanks, fully inoculated with the reovirus. The strange reovirus that dated back sixty-five million years.

It had proven to be a perversely attractive type of lily pad, blooming almost continuously, big deep-purple blossoms with venous appendages and bright yellow

stamens. The virus was concentrated in the tough, fibrous stem. He was harvesting two pounds a week, and poised to increase his yield exponentially.

*The Kothoga knew all about this plant*, thought Kawakita. What appeared to be a blessing turned out for them to be a curse. They had tried to control its power, but failed. The legend told it best: the devil failed to keep his bargain, and the child of the devil, the Mbwun, had run wild. It had turned on its masters. It could not be controlled.

But Kawakita would not fail. The rabbit serum tests proved that he would succeed.

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place when he remembered what that cop, D'Agosta, had mentioned at the going-away party for the FBI agent: that they had found a double-arrow pendant belonging to John Whittlesey in the creature's lair. Proof, they said, that the monster had killed Whittlesey.

*Proof. What a joke. Proof, rather, that the monster **was** Whittlesey.*

Kawakita remembered clearly the day everything came together for him. It was an apotheosis, a revelation. It explained everything. The creature, the Museum Beast, He Who Walks On All Fours, was Whittlesey. And the proof lay within his grasp: his extrapolation program. Kawakita had placed human DNA on one side and the reovirus DNA on the other. And then he had asked for the intermediate form.

The computer gave the creature: He Who Walks On All Fours.

The reovirus in the plant was astonishing. Chances are, it had existed relatively unchanged since the Mesozoic era. In sufficient quantities, it had the power to induce morphological change of an astonishing nature. Everyone knew that the darkest, most isolated areas of rain forest held undiscovered plants of almost inconceivable importance to science. But Kawakita had already discovered his miracle. By eating the fibers and becoming infected with the reovirus, Whittlesey had turned into Mbwun.

Mbwun—the word the Kothoga used for the wonderful, terrible plant, *and for the creatures those who ate it became*. Kawakita could now visualize parts of the Kothoga's secret religion. The plants were a curse that was simultaneously hated and needed. The creatures kept the enemies of the Kothoga at bay—yet they themselves were a constant threat to their masters. Chances are, the Kothoga only kept one of the creatures around at a time—more than that would be too dangerous. The cult would have centered around the plant itself, its cultivation and harvesting. The climax of their ceremonials was undoubtedly the induction of a new creature—the force-feeding of the plant to the unwilling human victim. Initially, large quantities of the plant would be needed to ensure sufficient reovirus to effect the bodily change. Once the transformation was complete, the plant need be consumed only in small quantities, supplemented of course by other proteins. But it was critical that the dose be maintained. Otherwise, intense pain, even madness, would result as the body tried to revert. Of course, death would intervene before that happened. And the desperate creature would, if at all possible, find a substitute for the plant—the human hypothalamus being by far the most satisfactory.

In the close, comforting darkness, listening to the tranquil humming of the aquaria, Kawakita could guess at the drama that had played itself out in the

jungle. The Kothoga, laying eyes on a white man for the first time. Whittlesey's accomplice, Crocker, had no doubt been found first. Perhaps the creature had been old, or enfeebled. Perhaps Crocker had killed the creature with the expedition's gun as the creature disembowelled him. Or perhaps not. But when the Kothoga found Whittlesey, Kawakita knew there was only one possible outcome.

He wondered what Whittlesey must have felt: bound, perhaps ceremonially, being force-fed the reovirus from the strange plant he himself had collected just days earlier. Perhaps they brewed him a liquor from the plant's leaves, or perhaps they simply forced him to eat the dried fibers. They must have attempted to do with this white man what they had failed to do with their own kind: create a monster they could *control*. A monster that would keep out the road builders and the prospectors and the miners that were poised to invade the *tepui* from the south and destroy them. A monster that would terrorize the surrounding tribes *without* terrorizing its masters; that would ensure the security and isolation of the Kothoga forever.

But then civilization came anyway, with all its terrors. Kawakita imagined the day it happened: the Whittlesey-thing, crouched in the jungle, seeing the fire come falling from the sky, burning the *tepui*, the Kothoga, the precious plants. He alone escaped. And he alone knew where the life-giving fibers could still be found after the jungle was destroyed: He knew, because he had sent them there.

Or perhaps Whittlesey was already gone when the *tepui* was burned. Perhaps the Kothoga had been unable to control, once again, the creature they had created. Maybe Whittlesey, in his pitiful, terrible condition, had set his own agenda, which hadn't included sticking around as the Kothoga's avenging angel. Perhaps he'd simply wanted to go home. So he had abandoned the Kothoga, and the Kothoga had been destroyed by progress.

But, for the most part, Kawakita was indifferent to the anthropological details. He was interested in the power inherent in the plant, and the harnessing of such power.

You needed to control the source before you could control the creature.

*And that, thought Kawakita, is exactly why I'm going to succeed where the Kothoga failed.* He was controlling the source. Only he knew how to grow this difficult and delicate swamp lily from the depths of the Amazon jungle. Only he knew the proper pH of the water, the right temperature, the proper light, the correct mix of nutrients. Only he knew how to inoculate the plant with the reovirus.

They would be dependent on him. And, with the genetic splicing he had done through the rabbit serum, he'd been able to purify the essential strength of the virus, engineering it to be cleaner while diminishing some of the more unpleasant side effects.

At least, he was fairly sure he had.

These were revolutionary discoveries. Everyone knew that viruses inserted their own DNA into the cells of their victim. Normally, that DNA would simply instruct the victim's cells to make more viruses. That's what happened in every virus known to man: from the flu to AIDS.

This virus was different. It inserted a whole array of genes into its victim: *reptile* genes. Ancient reptile genes; sixty-five-million-year-old genes. Found today in the lowly gecko and a few other species. And it had apparently borrowed primate genes—no doubt human genes—over time, as well. A virus that stole genes from its host, and incorporated those genes into its victims.

Those genes, instead of making more viruses, remade the *victim*. Reshaped the victim, bit by bit, into a monster. The viruses instructed the body's own machinery to change the bone structure, the endocrine system, the limbs and skin and hair and internal organs. It changed the behavior, the weight, speed, and cunning of the victim. Gave the victim uncanny senses of smell and hearing, but diminished its eyesight and voice. Gave it immense power, and bulk, and speed, while leaving its wonderful hominid brain relatively intact. In short, the drug—the *virus*—turned a human victim into a terrible killing machine. No, the word *victim* did not fairly describe one infected with the virus. A better word might be *symbiont*. Because it was a privilege to receive the virus. A gift. A gift from Greg Kawakita.

It was beautiful. In fact, it was sublime.

The possibilities for genetic engineering were endless. And already, Kawakita had ideas for improvements. New genes the reovirus could insert into its host. Human genes as well as animal genes. He controlled what genes the reovirus would insert into its host. He controlled what the host would become. Unlike the primitive, superstitious Kothoga, he was in control—through science.

An interesting side effect of the plant was its narcotic effect: a wonderful, “clean” rush, without the unpleasant down of so many other drugs. Perhaps that was how the plant had originally ensured its own ingestion and, thus, its propagation. But for Kawakita, this side effect had provided cash from which to finance his research. He hadn't wanted to sell the drug originally, but the financial pressures he'd experienced had made it inevitable. He smiled as he thought of how easy it had been. The drug had already been given a name by the select coterie of eager users: *glaze*. The market was avid, and Kawakita could sell as much as he could make. Too bad it seemed to go so quickly.

Night had fallen. Kawakita removed his dark glasses and inhaled the rich fragrance of the warehouse, the subtle odor of the fibers, the smell of water and dust and internal combustion from the ambient air, mingled with mold and sulphur dioxide and a multitude of other smells. His chronic allergies had all but vanished. *Must be the clean Long Island air*, he thought wryly. He removed his tight shoes and curled his toes with pleasure.

He had made the most stunning advancement in genetics since the discovery of the double helix. It would have won him a Nobel Prize, he thought with an ironic smile.

Had he chosen that route.

But who needed a Nobel Prize, when the whole world was suddenly there for the plucking?

There came another knock at the door.

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\*\*\* End of Part III \*\*\*

