



PROLOGUE

Marty felt the wheels of the hover vehicle thud into place beneath him as he skillfully piloted it down to the street from the sky-track. He took pride in the fact that he nearly always made a soft landing, especially tonight with Michelle sitting next to him.

She beamed at him, "Nice job."

"Thanks." He touched an illuminated panel, shutting down the vehicle's turbine and switching to the regular engine and began to drive Michelle the last few blocks home. He smiled. It felt like the smile had never left his face all night.

The headlights picked out the features of the road ahead, the small camera embedded in the roof relaying the scene to the two people inside via an image projected onto a virtual windshield.


Marty looked over at Michelle again and she caught his glance. "What?"

"Just you," he said.

They had been friends since junior high and sweethearts since high school. She had been the only girl he had ever dated, the only girl he had ever wanted to date. Tonight he had cemented that relationship by proposing to her and she had accepted. They would be together forever.

"You're funny," she said. "Cute, but funny." She reached across and laid a hand lovingly on his thigh. He looked down, saw the diamond solitaire he had given her just hours earlier glinting in the darkness and smiled to himself again.

"Hey, big boy," she teased, "What do you say we take a little detour, y'know, fool around a little bit?" Her hand moved further up his leg. Marty squirmed a little in his seat. "C'mon. Don't you think tonight deserves a little celebration?" The insinuation was



clear.

“Hey, come on, Michelle, ease off, will ya?”

“What are you afraid of? I’m only playing. I’m not going to bite you.” Her hand moved further north.

“Chelle. Come on!” he snapped. “Not while I’m driving.”

She huffed and pulled her arm back, folding it across her chest. “You’re no fun at all.”

“Aw come on,” he looked across at her, “Don’t be like that. There’ll be plenty of time for that. It’s just I’m driving. If anything happens it could get us both...”

Michelle threw her hands onto the dashboard, her elbows locked, her eyes widening in horror. Marty had just enough time to look up and see a humanoid figure standing in the road in front of them.

Instinctively he stamped on the brakes, locking all four wheels and sending the vehicle into a long skid. He braced himself, but just at the moment of impact, the figure went up over the roof and disappeared out of sight.

For what seemed like eternity, the vehicle continued on its graceful slide and then abruptly came to a halt, skewed across the street.

For a moment they sat there in stunned silence. Marty blew out a breath and let his head fall back on the seat. His hands still gripped the steering controls tightly. He rolled his head to the side. He knew just by looking at her that Michelle was about to cry.

“Hey, baby, it’s okay. I mean, you’re okay, right?”

She nodded, blinking away the first of the tears.

“Well that’s good. That’s good. And I’m okay. So we’re okay.”

She nodded silently again.

He blew out another breath and ran a hand through his hair.

“What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know.” Michelle’s voice shook with emotion.

“I’m going to go check it out. Stay here, okay?”

She grabbed his arm with both hands. “No, Marty! No! Let’s

just go home. I just want to go home.”

“It’ll be all right, honey, just stay here. I’ll be right back. You’ll see. Driver’s door,” Marty commanded. The door popped out from the chassis and pivoted upward on its forward hinge. Cool night air rushed in. He stepped out and his breath plumed in the darkness.

There was nothing in the street behind them. No sign of what it was that they had almost hit. No indication that anything had happened apart from two snaking lines of black on the asphalt and the fading smell of burnt rubber in the air. Marty started walking back to where the skid marks began, his eyes scanning right and left along the street. Nothing. No sign of anything.

He stopped at the end of the tracks, scuffing them with the tip of his sneaker as if trying to erase the whole event. He looked further back down the street, put his hands on his hips and shook his head, not finding an explanation for what had just happened.

He took a deep breath. “Weird.”

The hover vehicle’s door popped behind him and he turned to see Michelle getting out. “Come on, Marty. It’s getting cold in here. Whatever it was, it’s gone. Let’s just go.”

It was then that the creature landed between them.

It rose slowly from its forced crouch until it stood at its full eight feet in height. Yellow, rabid eyes burnt into Marty. “Oh, my God,” he said under his breath. Michelle screamed.

“Mi...” He tried to speak but his throat would give no voice to his words. “Mi...Get in the car Michelle.” She continued to scream hysterically. “Michelle! Just get in the car!”

It took a step towards him. A large, hairy, padded foot fell soundlessly on the road. It was covered in hair, more like a coat than fur. Short brown hair which covered it from its feet to the tufts on its short, pointed ears. It snarled at Marty, the lips on the black muzzle pulling back to reveal a wicked set of canines.

Marty backed away from it, but it took another step towards him. It spread its arms out wide, arms with paws that seemed dis-

proportionately large. For the first time Marty could see that a small membrane of skin connected the arms to the body from the elbow up, and on the back of each elbow was a small, gripping claw. To his horror, he watched as three razor-sharp claws extended and retracted on each paw as if being made ready for use.

“Marty!” Michelle sobbed. “Don’t leave me here!”

“It’s all right, honey,” he shouted back. “I’m not leaving. Just stay calm. Everything will be okay.”

With lightning speed the creature dropped to all fours and with three giant bounds was on Marty before he could even react. Once again it reared up on its back legs, extended its claws and with a single vicious swipe took Marty’s head clean off. The decapitated body crumpled to the road in a heap.

Michelle cupped her hands to her mouth and gasped. “Oh, my God!” she whispered to herself and then again, “Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!”

She didn’t hesitate to get back in the hover vehicle now, climbing in quickly and frantically pulling the door down behind her. Once inside, she clambered across to the driver’s side, the seat that Marty had occupied only minutes before, and desperately reached out to pull the door down, fearing that at any moment whatever it was that had just killed him would appear right there and end her life too. She grabbed the handle and pulled the door closed.

“Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!” Her hands shook uncontrollably. She had to get away from here. The engine was still running. That was good. “Think, Michelle, think,” she told herself. The restraint! She reached around and grabbed the slender belt, pulling it over her shoulder. She tried to buckle it but her shaking hands would not allow her to. She let it zip back into place. Restraint? What the hell was she thinking? Just go!

She put the car into gear and lurched away and then for some reason, whether it was out of guilt for leaving Marty or just morbid curiosity, she turned the car back around.

Caught in the headlights, the creature was already crouched

over Marty's body. As she watched, appalled, it looked up at her. Its nose was already painted red with blood.

"No!" she screamed. "Get the hell away from him!" Without thinking she grabbed the accelerator lever and pushed it forward. The car lurched into life once again, shooting forward and throwing her back in the seat. She drove straight at the thing hunched over Marty, arms locked in grim determination, tears streaking down her face. As she bore down on it she saw the yellow eyes, bright in the headlights. Haunting. Crazy. And then just as before, right at the last second, the creature sprang up and out of the way.

The vehicle hit Marty's body, bucked wildly and threw Michelle out of her seat. Her head hit the roof and she fought to maintain control, but it was too late. With a crunch of metal, Michelle crashed into another vehicle parked on the street. A small cloud of steam started rising from the crumpled hood.

She brought a hand up to her face and sobbed uncontrollably, thinking about what she had just done. This whole situation was like some horrible nightmare.

A thud brought her back to her senses. She looked behind her. It was obvious from the dent that something heavy had landed on the roof. Before she could even react, three blades ripped through the ceiling next to her head. She screamed again as the claws pulled backwards with a tortured screeching, slicing open the vehicle's roof with ease.

"Driver's door!" Michelle screamed, but the door remained in place, damaged electronics from the impact rendering the voice activated system inoperative.

She fumbled blindly for the manual door latch, watching in horror as the thing tried to reach her, systematically ripping the roof apart. Finally, she found it.

Michelle ran. She didn't get very far.



CHAPTER

1


It was just after 4:00 AM when Chris Gault pulled his hover vehicle up to the staff entrance at Chicago's Interplanetary Zoological Park. He was surprised that the security guard was not at his post, but shrugged it off. The man was probably doing a quick check of the nearby perimeter fence. It wasn't unheard of. Besides, they had other security measures.

He turned to his left and opened his eyes wide, submitting to the retinal scan. The barrier rose obediently in front of him.

He pulled the vehicle up in his designated bay, shut off the engine and yawned. He was lagged and he knew it. Chris had just got back from an expedition four days ago and he still hadn't got back in synch with local time.

He hated lag. He also hated the fact that he seemed to suffer from it more than most people. Getting over cryosleep was one thing, lag was a whole other world of hurt. Some people barely suffered from it at all. Others had their own methods or superstitions or crazy ways of dealing with it. Chris just suffered with it for a week or more.

He'd been awake since 1:20 AM. Then he'd just tossed and turned and watched the digits on the clock tick by as they teased him with their progress. He couldn't stand it anymore so he had decided to go to work. He needed to keep his mind active. Better to be doing anything than nothing—and there was always something that needed doing at the IZP.



Chris got out of his car and walked through the double doors into the main building of the IZP. Things were different at the zoo these days. It was a shadow of its former self. The buildings looked dilapidated and old, as if the very concrete had grown tired and weary. There hadn't been any money spent here in years.

Part of that could be attributed to the Managing Director, Stephen Gruber. Prior to having the top job, Gruber had been the zoo's chief financial officer, and as such, he had kept a tight hold on the purse strings. He was a bean counter, a miser, and he didn't pay out for anything unless it was absolutely necessary. Now that he had the final say, it was difficult to get anything past Gruber. He hadn't greenlighted any new projects in a long time.

It wasn't all Gruber's fault, though. Admissions were down. For some reason they weren't discovering new star systems as frequently as they used to. Consequently there were fewer expeditions. Fewer expeditions meant fewer new captured life forms, and fewer new life forms meant fewer new exhibits. The zoo just wasn't popular any more, and in this day and age of 3D holo-videos where you could literally bring an animal to life in the middle of your living room, it was understandable.

As a result the U.L.F. division, the department specializing in the acquirement of the unidentified life forms, had gone from a staff of two hundred and fifty people to just under a hundred in the space of a few years, and about a fifth of the remainder had already submitted resignations. Right now a bunch of new intakes were being trained, but how long their careers would last was anyone's guess. To be honest, Chris was worried about his job. Gone were the good old days when his friend Wyatt ran the department.

He missed Wyatt. They were still friends and saw each other occasionally, Chris was, after all, godfather to Wyatt's son Alex, but Chris wished he had longer to get to know the man in a professional capacity. As it was, their relationship had been forged briefly in the most extreme conditions, when both men had been pushed to their very limits.



Chris had been just a kid back then, and even now was still relatively young, but he'd grown up fast. He sighed. That was all in the past.

Still, at least the zoo had the baby puglion. Born two months ago, the six-foot long infant was drawing some crowds and bringing in some much-needed revenue. A visit to the new arrival should be his first call.

He pressed his thumb against a sensor pad and another set of doors slid open. He stepped through and into a large room where walls were lined with racks of impressive-looking equipment. This was the U.L.F. department's storeroom.

It wasn't one of the elaborate-looking traps that Chris was after, nor a weapon, body armor or restraining equipment. Just a simple flashlight. He spied one in a crate on the floor and picked it up, flicking it on and peering in to its face to make sure its lux emitter still worked. You couldn't take anything for granted in this place anymore. Satisfied, he started on a very early morning round.

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The puglion compound was located in the bottom of Reptile Mountain, at least a half-mile walk from the ULF administration buildings. The impressive structure was the centerpiece of the IZP, erupting from the earth like a huge volcano. It was totally fabricated and hollow inside but even Chris had to admit, it looked quite authentic.

The Chicago night air was chilly and he shrugged off a shiver as his body acclimatized to the cold. His exhaled breaths expired in brief, wispy clouds.

The puglion swamp accounted for the entire ground level of Reptile Mountain. Above that, and accessible only by elevator, were the offices of the zoo's senior staff and the boardroom.

Puglions were large aliens, known to grow to thirty feet in



length in the wild. Here at the zoo, the two adults were twenty and eighteen feet long, stunted by the size of their artificial environment. They would never grow to their full potential, but as they had proved, they were mature enough to breed.

They were nasty, vicious, reptilian creatures captured from the bogs of Dachon-three. They had been difficult to trap, even more difficult to transport. They wouldn't be going out for any more puglions, that was for sure, which was why it was good that they now had a youngster.

Beyond the zoo's distant perimeter wall the occasional hum of a hover vehicle could be heard, but otherwise it was quiet. Chris's footfalls sounded incredibly loud against the concrete. It *was* quiet. Eerily quiet.

Chris's stomach tightened in a knot. A veteran of numerous expeditions now, Chris was finely attuned to his surroundings, even when back home on Earth. Like most trappers, he had an innate sixth sense that kicked in when all was not as it should be. It was an instinct that had served him well in the past, and he was not going to ignore it now. He slowed his pace.

Cautiously, he turned onto another of the zoo's walkways. On the track ahead a dark form huddled on the ground. Even though his eyes had adjusted to the dim light, Chris could not make out what it was. He flicked on the flashlight and aimed it at the black silhouette. The light revealed one thing; whatever it was, it was actually black. There were no distinguishing marks on the form to identify it.

Chris approached warily, passing the light beam over the object's full length. As he got closer he spotted a flash of white. He squinted to bring it into sharper focus and recognized it almost immediately. The heel of an old sneaker. This first piece of information now revealed what he had been unable to see before. A human form, laid on the ground in a fetal position with its back to him, dressed from head to toe in black, except for the white footwear. He sighed with relief. At least now he knew what he was

dealing with.

“Hey!” Chris called. “What are you doing here? This is state property. You know you shouldn’t be here.” There was no response.

It wasn’t the first time something like this had happened. Security was supposed to go around the entire zoo after closing time to ensure that everyone had left. That didn’t just mean the grounds but also the indoor exhibits. The reptile houses and tropical exhibits were heated buildings and zookeepers had reported finding some of Chicago’s vagrants bedded down in them from time to time when they opened up in the morning. It hadn’t happened in a long time but that didn’t mean that security couldn’t get lax.

What about this guy, though? He was out on a walkway in the middle of the night. Was he drunk?

“Hey!” Chris called again. “Did you hear me? You can’t be here.” Again there was no response.

Keeping the beam of the flashlight trained on the figure, Chris approached slowly. When he was closer, he crouched and placed the flashlight on the ground. There was still no sign that the individual even knew that he was there.

Now he could see that the stranger was crouched into a tight ball. Not only that, but he or she was wearing a balaclava-style hood. He reached out and touched the shoulder. The body flinched at the contact.

“Hey. Who are you? What are you doing here?” He gave the shoulder a gentle shake. The figure groaned in response. Chris was getting angry now. “Buddy, look, I’m not fooling around with you. You’re in a lot of trouble right now. You can either talk to me or tell your story to a cop. I don’t care which it is. So which is it going to be?”

Again, nothing.

“All right. You want to play it that way, that’s fine.” Chris grabbed the shoulder and pulled it towards him, trying to pull the figure onto its back. He wasn’t ready for the blood-curdling

scream.

He jumped backwards and fell hard on his rump, not able to find balance on his feet. The figure rolled slowly towards him and for the first time he saw the hands clenched tightly over the stomach, soaked in blood.

“Jesus. What happened to you?”

Two terrified eyes regarded him through holes in the hood. “Help me.”

Coming quickly to his senses, Chris picked himself up and rushed to the masked figure’s side. He grabbed one of the hands and tried to pull it away but the intruder resisted. “I’m a trained medic,” he said, “I can help you, but you have to let me see the wound.”

He felt the arm relax under his grip, moved it away and then did the same with the other. Already he didn’t like what he saw. The figure’s black jacket was unzipped and underneath, a black top, shredded by three diagonal slashes, glistened with moisture. The color was masked by the shirt and the darkness but he didn’t need to see color to know what it was.

He reached down and pulled the shirt out of the pants to get a better look at the wounds underneath. The masked man groaned in protest.

“Sorry, but I’ve got to do this.”

Under the shirt, the man’s flesh bore three matching slashes. All had punctured deeply. From experience, Chris knew that much more damage had been done than the three wounds suggested. The guy had lost a lot of blood. His damaged innards were being held in by ribbons of skin. This was bad. This was really bad.

Chris touched the com-link hanging over his ear. “Security. I have an intruder down in yellow section, walkway three. I need immediate medical assistance and an evac HV down here right now!” He paused, waiting for the reply. There was nothing, just the indifferent hiss of static. “Dammit!”



“You won’t get a reply,” the intruder managed. “It’s our fault. It’s all our fault.”

Chris ran through scenarios in his head. Even if help arrived the chances of this guy making it were already nose-diving. The best thing he could do was make him comfortable. Quickly he took off his jacket and then his sweater. Carefully Chris stuffed the sweater under the masked man’s bloody shirt and replaced his arms over his stomach. “Here, hold this tight against you.”

The man did as he was told, grunting with the effort and the pain.

Chris moved to the man’s head and pulled off the balaclava. He took a sharp intake of breath. Chris himself was young, but he was looking at a kid. The youngster regarded him with guilty, knowing eyes.

Carefully Chris propped him up, cradling his head and shoulders in his arms. “It’s okay. Help will be here in a minute. You’ll be okay.” he lied.

“My friend?” The kid asked. “What about my friend?”

“I don’t know, but let’s not worry about that right now. Let’s get you sorted out.”

“But it went after him after it attacked me.”

“What did?”

“The thing. The thing that came out of the enclosure.”

Chris’s stomach knotted again. “What did you do?”

“I’m sorry. We had no idea. It’s our fault. It’s all our fault.”

“Tell me what you did.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“No one’s going to die.” The comment galvanized Chris into action again. Again he touched the com-link. “Security. I need immediate medical assistance in yellow section, walkway three. Respond, please.”

“I’m so cold.”

“Oh no you don’t. Stay with me now, you hear?”

“Just make sure my friend’s okay.”



“Okay, I’ll do that, just as soon as you’re taken care of.”

Suddenly, as if remembering something, the kid grabbed at Chris’s arm. “You have to stop it!”

“Stop what?”

“We had no idea! You have to understand that!” The kid was getting hysterical.

“Okay! Okay! Calm down. Relax. We can figure it, out whatever it is.”

“Oh God! It’s our fault. It’s all our fault! You have to stop it. The...the...” The kid slumped back into Chris’s arms. “So cold... so cold.” He took three quick breaths and lolled his head over to look at Chris one last time. He managed two whispered words as a final long breath escaped past his lips. “I’m sorry.”

“Goddammit!” Chris cursed under his breath. Damn security. Where the hell was everybody?

Chris placed the kid’s head back on the ground carefully and with as much dignity as he could manage. He picked himself up and for the first time since removing his sweater felt the cold again. Giving himself a cursory look over he could see that he was covered in blood. The kid’s blood. He felt nauseous.

There was only one alien Chris knew that would make a wound like that. The mantor. Mantors were formidable creatures and they liked nothing more than chasing down prey. If the kid had an accomplice and he had run, then Chris doubted that had ended happily either. If you stood and faced the mantor it would open you up with its razor sharp claws. If you ran then it would bring you down. Either way, you didn’t stand a chance.

Chris started out for the mantor enclosure. To most people this would seem like madness, but he had good reason to go. If the mantor was loose, as he suspected, they were in trouble. Real trouble. Recapturing it was not a job to be taken lightly and certainly not one he would attempt on his own, but beyond that, he had to protect himself.

Each of the aliens had a keeper and each keeper had his own

equipment to protect him from his charge, should he need to enter the cage. Chris headed off for the keeper's station.

He hadn't gone far when he came across the second body. Decapitated. A crumpled heap by the side of the path. He took a furtive look around, listening for any signs of danger, and hurried on.

He knew he was coming at the enclosure from the wrong side. He would have to walk around the perimeter of it to reach the keeper's quarters. He went left around the viewing rail, thinking that would be the quicker option, and immediately spied the breach in the cage.

Between the viewing rail and the cage was a deep grassy moat that separated the public from the electrified enclosure. The two intruders had obviously climbed the rail, navigated the moat and set to work cutting a hole in the wire mesh. A large pair of industrial bolt cutters with rubber-insulated handles was discarded on the grass near where a large oval-shaped portion of the cage was bent outward.

Chris could only take a guess what had happened, but he figured that the two had started cutting a hole in the cage. Once they were through a few wires they'd probably done enough damage to short out the whole cage. Whether it was the noise they were making, or electrical arcing, something had attracted the mantor. They had run then, struggling to get back out of the moat and over the viewing rail. It was, after all, meant to make escape difficult. But escape they had, if not for long.

The mantor would have been going berserk in the cage and maybe it had tried to reach them, distant as they were, and discovered that the wire fence was no longer electrified. After that, it began testing the fence for weak spots and eventually found the area that they had started to cut and finished the job for them. Once the mantor was loose they had no chance.

Chris reached the keeper's quarters and placed his thumb on the sensor pad he found there. The door slid open for him. He stepped inside and watched the door close again before allowing

himself a sigh of relief. He was safe, for now at least.

He looked up at the items hanging up on the wall. It was rudimentary stuff, nothing akin to the equipment the ULF trappers used, but it was specialized for one animal and one animal only, and for that it served its purpose.

He began putting it on. A pair of armor-plated chaps that strapped around his thighs, a large breastplate that hung over his shoulders and buckled neatly behind his back, and a thick titanium helmet with a long neck guard and a visor which, when slid down into place, gave him two narrow eye slits to peer through.

He reached up to the wall again and brought down a large round object, the "smiter," as it was known to staff. It was primarily for warding off attacks but with enough weight behind it and in the right circumstances it could be used effectively to stun an aggressive animal into submission. He reached through the straps on its back with his left arm and tightened it into place with his right hand.

Finally, he took the last item down from the wall. An eight-foot long tazer fork. To the casual observer it looked like nothing more than a very large cocktail fork, but it was much more dangerous than that. On contact, a huge electrical current would surge between the two prongs and through the tissues of any intended target, immobilizing it temporarily in a fit of painful muscle spasms. Chris jabbed it against the floor and was rewarded with an arcing blue spark and a puff of smoke. The mantor wasn't the smartest creature he'd known but it had a healthy respect for pain.

Prepared now for whatever awaited him outside, Chris opened the door and stepped back out into the park, a 25th century knight ready for battle.

He had no intention of facing the mantor. He had seen what it could do firsthand. The equipment was solely for his own protection if the alien was still around.

Chris thought back to his conversation with the kid. You have to stop it, he had said. Stop what? The mantor? He should really



call the cops and report the break-in and the resulting danger to the public, but the only way he could do that was via a call to security through his com-link, and they weren't answering. He was off to security to see what those clowns were up to.

* * * * *

Upon entering the main security building, Chris immediately discarded the helmet and tazer fork, tossing them aside with no regard for where they fell. Anger coursed through him. He'd been playing scenarios in his head all the way here and he knew one thing for sure; someone was going to get a dressing-down.

He didn't know what he expected to find when he stepped through the double doors and into the main command area, but he was ready for almost anything. People slouching in chairs, feet up on consoles, comms not being monitored. Whatever was going on, he was going to give them a piece of his mind.

He never expected to find it deserted.

Chris slowed as he entered the room. This was crazy. Something was very wrong.

In front of him was a long arcing console that spanned the length of the curved room. Six empty chairs stood next to it. In front of that, slightly lower down, was a second similar console and again, six empty seats. A shift of twelve men was supposed to be working here.

On the opposite wall, a huge screen displayed a schematic of the whole zoo. Each color-coded section was lit in its corresponding color. Each lit section indicated that all shields, barriers, locks and electric fields were operating effectively. He quickly recognized the dark area in the yellow section as corresponding to the mantor's enclosure.

Down both sides and along the bottom of the large map were dozens of video feeds from cameras all over the zoo. Chris scanned them quickly. In two places the feeds were out. He didn't



need the knot in his stomach to tell him that wasn't normal.

Chris paced the length of the long arcing desk. Lights blinked everywhere. At the far end of the desk were a mug and a half-eaten sandwich. He placed a hand against the mug. The contents were still warm. Whatever had happened here, he hadn't long missed it.

He turned around. Above the door through which he had entered was a whole second floor accessible by a curved, iron-railed metal stairway at either end of the room. He couldn't see beyond the gallery that jutted out above his head. He wasn't about to go up there, either. There could still be danger.

"Hello!" he called. "Is there anybody there? Can anybody hear me?"

There was a thump and a muffled cry, but it came from close by. A door, just off to his left.

Chris moved swiftly to the door, placing his head close to it. "Hello. Can you hear me? Is everyone all right?"

There was an answer but he couldn't make it out.

"Hold on. I'll get you out of there." Chris went to put his thumb on the biometric sensor but it was gone, smashed away, leaving only a bundle of exposed wires. "Oh, great." He was glad he knew a thing or two about wiring. "Hold on," he said again. "This is going to take a little while."

Grabbing two of the wires, he touched the exposed ends together experimentally. Sparks flashed and Chris recoiled quickly, shaking his stinging hands. "Okay. Not those two," he muttered to himself.

He tried again. This time no sparks, but no movement from the door either. By trial-and-error he managed to eliminate wires until he found the two he needed. On contact, the door slid open and immediately, three hooded, bound men fell out and onto the floor. Behind them, others, also bound and hooded, staggered out. Chris looked in at the remainder. Eleven men had been locked in a room barely the size of a broom cupboard.

Quickly, Chris pulled the hood off the nearest man. Underneath the hood the man's mouth had been taped. Chris grabbed one end of the tape and yanked it off.

"Thank God you found us!" the guard blurted.

"What happened here?" Chris asked.

"There were six of them. Armed. We don't know where they came from or how they got in. We had no warning."

"But how is that possible?"

The guard offered up his bound wrists.

"Sorry. Let me get that for you." Chris pulled out a pocket knife and began to cut the rope away.

"I don't know. The only unusual thing that happened was that a section of the perimeter wall went down. Briefly, though, and then it came back up." The guard's hands came apart and he began to rub the stiffness out of his wrists. "Thank you."

Chris gave him the knife. "Here. Help your friends." Chris then set about taking the hoods from the others and removing the tape from their mouths while the first guard cut their bonds. "Go on," he said.

"We sent a man to go check it out. Shortly after that, two sets of feeds went down."

"Almost simultaneously," a second guard chipped in.

"I was about to go investigate myself," the first guard continued, and that's when they came in. Six of 'em. All wearing masks. No warning, just straight through the door."

"What did they want?"

"Didn't say. Didn't say much of anything. Just ordered us over here up against the wall. Four of them kept us under the gun while the other two tied us, taped us and then shoved us in here." He indicated the small room with a backward tick of his head.

"What then?"

"That was it. We couldn't get out. They left us alone."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No."

“Anyone?”

The ten other men all shook their heads.

“I heard them leave,” said one. “They hardly spoke while they were here but I definitely heard them leave.”

“How long ago?”

“Fifteen. Maybe twenty minutes.”

Others nodded their agreement.

“What happened to the man you sent out?” Chris asked the first guard.

“Dunno. He hasn’t come back, that’s for sure.”

“We need to find him. He could be in real danger.”

“Why, what’s happened?” Another asked.

“The mantor’s loose.”

All eleven men looked shocked, some muttering curses under their breaths.

Chris looked up at the wall, where the second set of cameras was out. “What’s that?” He asked, gesturing with his head.

One of the guards walked over to the side of the desk, leaning towards the wall and squinting a little to make out the feeds around the blank area. “That’s Reptile Mountain,” he said. “That’s the puglion enclosure.”

“Great,” Chris said under his breath. “Today just keeps getting better.”

He stood and looked at the others assembled around him. “Okay, I need you to go back to your stations. Check that everything is as it should be. I’m going to go back out there and try to find your co-worker.”

“Do you want some of us to come with you?” the first guard asked.

“No. No need to put more people at risk. I’ll be okay.” He bunched his hand into a fist and rapped on his body armor with his knuckles. “At least I should be,” he said, with the best grin he could manage.

The other man smiled sympathetically and nodded. “Okay

then. Be careful.”

Chris nodded and turned for the door. “Oh, and someone call the cops too.” Some of the security guards were already settling in behind their desks. He had barely gone five more paces when another voice spoke.

“Er, sir. You might want to come take a look at this.”

Chris didn’t like the tone of the voice. He turned on a dime and was next to the man in a second. The other man was staring down at his monitor, paneled flush into the desk. The display was flashing a horizontal red bar that almost spanned the screen. Below the bar it read: *Downloading 99%*. And then the blinking stopped and a new message appeared.

Download Complete.

There was a second when nothing happened. It was as if time stood still. Literally nothing happened. Nobody even breathed. And then a new message appeared.

Executing.

Chris’s attention was suddenly caught by the huge screen above him. Almost instantly, large parts of the map started disappearing, color being replaced by black. Enclosures, buildings, then entire sections blinked out. Security and safeguards in every part of the zoo were being overridden. A nightmare was unfolding in front of him and he was powerless to stop it.

Chris watched as every area in the zoo vanished and then, finally, the aquarium failed. He looked at the now totally blank screen in horror. “Oh shit.”