

The dull report of a pistol echoed unnoticed across the dusty desert. This was the first time the old man had killed another person.

Kessel Reaves looked somberly upon the fallen body crumpled at his feet, the hands still tightly bound. He had known the murder victim for close to fifteen years, and this relationship added a slight quiver to his hand as he lowered the gun.

He avoided eye contact with the cooling body as he stooped to retrieve the single shell casing. Kessel's hands shuffled through the coarse desert sand, and before he could stop the reflex he had fallen to his knees and vomited.

"What have I done?" he cursed, starting intently at the empty bullet as if the dark brass recesses would provide answers. Kessel straightened and squinted across the bright expanse of noonday sand before gritting his teeth and calming his frantic mind.

"In a sense, I haven't killed a person. No, no of course not. Joseph was one of them...yes, an Anubian and deserving swift justice," he thought, mumbling half of his reasons while shambling back to his car to unpack a shovel.

Slamming the trunk didn't slow Kessel's wavering thoughts from continuing. "He was a mere scout for an army only I know is invading!" He dragged the shovel behind him, fighting with his free hand to holster the pistol.

The sun had begun its descent to the lonely horizon by the time the grave had been dug, a shallow three feet of dirt shifted for his purposes. Physical labor was a cruel reminder of his 57 years, and the stress of the task hadn't helped slow his heart.

As part of his mental debrief Kessel did have to admit that he had executed the task flawlessly, with no known witnesses or pieces of evidence linking him to the body. The body of a friend, now being crudely rolled into an unmarked pocket of desert.

Late last night Kessel had met Joseph at The Smokestack, an industrial bar in an industrial town stuck in the middle of the state of Nevada. After a suitable amount of dark beer and enough hints from Kessel, the drunken Joseph had decided to bravely stumble his way home. Of course Kessel had left, sober, a few hours earlier. He was keen to cement an alibi by appearing on the closed circuit security cameras of the nearby gas station.

Then he calmly waited outside The Smokestack for Joseph to begin the mile long trip home.

Waiting with him was a steel baseball bat purchased, with cash, from the next town over.

The doctor didn't see the hit coming, and didn't feel it until groggily awakening in the desert the next morning.

Wearing a mask, Kessel was quick to question his victim on future Anubian plans. Joseph had revealed nothing and did little but sob and beg for mercy. The older man couldn't bring himself to torture his friend, so nothing of value was gleaned from the session.

Sighing heavily, Kessel sat in the shade cast from his car, pausing for a long drink of sun-warmed water. He needed to get back to the mine soon to clock out from work and complete the final piece of his alibi.

His job as a senior inspector at the Round Mountain gold mine provided plenty of space to rove around the deeper, less populated tunnels. A full day of work without being seen or remembered by any miners was not uncommon.

The mine, town, and airport were paralleled by red mountains and highway 376. South of the lonely highway 50 and far to the northwest of Las Vegas, there was little to interest tourists besides a place to refill their SUVs. The town was built by miners and for the miners, which lent a rough edge to the streets.

Hadley airport was slightly east of the houses, with the gold mine east of that, across the highway. "Round Mountain was a fine place to spend a normal, quiet life," Kessel thought, reminiscing as if he was reading a tour booklet.

He could see why the Anubians would choose it as an entry point into the United States.

A screech from the vultures overhead awoke him from the reverie. Coarsely he shouted to frighten the daring birds away from the site of the grave. Shaded by a small sage brush, the hole was now little more than a patch of disheveled sand. In time the breathing of the wind would level the surface and erase any evidence of human intervention.

"For the better," he supposed, sighing again as he fumbled the car key into the ignition. Gazing at the resting place of his friend, Kessel already wished that he could go back to his job as if nothing had happened. As if he had never discovered the Anubians, only three months prior. "Joseph, we both should have left this desert long ago, but now I'm afraid it'll be your permanent home," was his melodramatic eulogy as the car sparked to life.

The drive from grave site to mine site involved numerous back roads in an attempt to avoid anyone spotting his vehicle. By highway it was a short fifty mile trip, but Kessel had expanded that to an indirect route closer to eighty miles.

For all his bluster of disliking the desert, Kessel found himself at peace whenever he drove across it, especially alone. The repetitive outlines of hunched bushes and swirling sand heaps had a meditative effect on his worried mind. Little ambient sound penetrated the wall of warm air surrounding his vehicle, and signs of sparse life stirred while the sun was still up.

Close to twenty years in Round Mountain meant every dirt road and sign-less gravel turn were reflex to the old man. He kept the car at a reasonable speed, in no rush to aggravate a cloud of dust that would clearly mark his passing.

He was able to log two visible hours at work to supplement the six he supposedly spent in the lower tunnels. Most of the time was dragged out by looking over his shoulder and straining to hear any distant police sirens. Every loud noise or sudden movement caught and held his attention, and soon Kessel felt like a man hunted. Under the swinging light of tunnel B-32 he consoled himself that the murder had not been discovered yet, and if it was he would still escape suspicion.

After saying his good nights and leaving the mine Kessel stopped in at the store near the junction of Hadley Circle and Cove Street. The clean sided two story building had once been a hotel, but the lack of customers meant the owner sold the place years ago. A friend of Kessel's had purchased the land and reopened a big truck stop there, named The Captain's Place. The fading red metal roof and seashell colored stucco created a comfortable, familiar shelter for many big rigs. Tonight was no exception.

Gruff looking drivers of all descriptions were passing in and out of the place, but an air of friendliness remained. Kessel nodded or smiled at a few, but kept his pace brisk to forgo any lengthy conversations.

"Hey Cap, just these today," said Kessel, handing three newspapers to the owner.

Looking up from his crossword the bright eyed Captain smiled, "Ah my favorite customer. How're ya doing Kessel? Catch the game last night?"

"Unfortunately no," he replied, keeping track of the parking lot through sidelong glances. "I had some deep tunnel work today so I figured I'd get some extra shut eye." Mining terms were second nature to even the youngest resident of Round Mountain, and already Captain was

nodding his head in understanding.

"Ah well someone's gotta keep that ol' mine producing, eh? We'd end up a ghost town if it wasn't for the gold." Kessel smirked but didn't bother replying, knowing that mentioning the town's reliance on the mine was as common and shallow as talking about the weather. "Anyways, a buck seventy-five."

Home was a short distance from the truck stop, close enough that the radio barely had time to start playing before Kessel had shut off the car again. He lived on a section of Cove Street that paralleled Dixie Court and Kelsey Way, and had for his entire spell at Round Mountain.

Kessel gathered his newspapers before stepping out of the car and briefly appraising his house. The slouching bungalow was as weather beaten as Kessel's rough skin. Like most of the town the light blue siding had long ago faded to a forgettable dull white. Pieces of beaten tile flaked off the roof, unable to withstand the sun's constant bombardment. Kessel had repainted the door a striking navy blue color, one of the few simple renovations he had time for before his life had changed. His heavy boots stomped through a familiar groove in the dead lawn and he sighed again.

The interior was clearly lacking a woman's touch, and was mostly bare in a quiet, simple way. Poorly framed pictures hung crookedly in a few rooms, a reminder of his brief but passionate photography career. The soft blue carpet had forgotten the soothing feel of a vacuum as Kessel focused on more important matters. Dust clung and hid on every bookshelf and window sill, a constant invasion from the sandy air outside.

The single level of the house above ground had a bedroom, cramped bathroom, underused kitchen, and a dining room. Kessel had different priorities when he had purchased the house, but luckily the basement could be salvaged to meet his current needs.

As with most days he was keen to shutter the blinds and double check the lock on the back door. He then set a pot of water to boil and retired to his underground lair.

Walking down the thick oak stairs was like walking into the home of another man, perhaps a military man or gun enthusiast. Thick iron lockers replaced the quaint desert photos, and the calm blue tones turned to a functional matte black. His basement was a cement pit opened as a single room dotted with metal support beams and loose wiring.

A gun locker was pushed against the back wall, securely locked and immaculately maintained. Beside that was a long, orderly tool bench. The metal table squatting below a wooden rack of hanging hammers and saws, all lovingly hung and straightened.

The only disjointed aspect of the room was a comfortable red chair surrounded by an old television, still cradled on its antique wooden shelf. A round rug kept this shred of humanity clearly segmented from the rest of the basement. This den was pushed to the nook opposite the weapon rack.

Kessel flicked on the overhanging lights before dropping the thick stack of newsprint on the small table beside the chair. Gingerly he sat down, feeling as if resting was forbidden when there was still so much to do.

Across the room he could see the weaving pathways of pen that filled a whiteboard as big as the wall. It detailed suspected Anubian contacts, hideouts, modes of transportation and income, and other details so numerous that a crack team of FBI agents would have trouble remembering them all.

"Yes, still so much to do."

As he sat and read in his chair Kessel reflect that he might appear like any other resident of Round Mountain. A steaming bowl of hearty stew now rested beside him, healthy pieces of local Nevada longhorn mixed in with the broth. He had acquired the habit of keeping up with any news he could find, trying to sift through the stories and reports for any hint of Anubian activity. His realization and awakening three months ago meant any lead was his responsibility. Kessel remembered that day vividly.

He had been leaving the graveyard when he glimpsed a tall man standing under a gigantic tree that shaded the metal gates. The day was overcast and the wind was high, but not a single speck of dust was on the man's black business suit. He was dark skinned from the sun, but in a harsher, deeper way than most of the desert residents were. His black hair had been shaved close to the scalp except for a long ponytail clasped and controlled by gold bands. At the time Kessel had thought the hairstyle looked flamboyant, almost feminine, but now he knew better.

He was alone except for a black canine of a breed Kessel had never seen. The beast obediently resting to his left without a leash or collar, gazing about with a similar distant and disinterested look. As if it was...empty somehow.

A simple pin adorned the man's left pocket, gold and blue and resembling a single stylized eye. Kessel knew enough of Egyptian history to recognize the symbol as some kind of hieroglyph or marking of the ancient culture.

After nervously speeding up to get away from the master and pet, Kessel had pored over his outdated set of encyclopedias. He had crudely sketched the icon from memory, and found several references to it in the first letter he checked. The volume had all the disturbing facts on Anubis, the Egyptian god of the afterlife.

Kessel awoke with a start, realizing that recalling the memory had caused him to drift off. A thin tendril of steam still rose from the stew. He hurriedly ate the meal and finished the rest of his news. If anything related to Joseph was to be found it would be in tomorrow's paper at the earliest, but still Kessel kept expecting the fateful paragraph outlining the disappearance. Again he had to stop and mentally calm himself, knowing that murder would be the last outcome anyone would reach concerning his friend.

"Ah, Joseph..." he mused, remembering many festive nights joking around a table of empty glasses at The Smokestack. Joseph had long ago progressed from miner to veterinarian, but still preferred that dingy bar. When Kessel had christened him the first victim, he had done so for a few reasons. The most important was the dim hope that his friend could talk Kessel out of his private war. Perhaps sympathize with the problem and assure the old man that everything was fine.

Kessel had worried that he would hesitate before pulling the trigger. Hesitate at that critical moment when he went from a passive researcher of the Anubians to an active combatant against them. He had never been much for fighting or violence, both common past times of small mining towns. This didn't mean Kessel was soft or weak, as the many calluses on his steady hands attested. Swinging a heavy pick at a rock was as much work as swinging a fist at a drunk, so he had built up a solid reserve of muscle and stamina.

Training had molded that raw potential over the past months. The old man had a natural talent for learning and had absorbed numerous techniques through busy weekends of study. Hand to hand was still a last resort for him, as Kessel felt more comfortable with an enemy kept at rifles length.

A slight grin crept onto his face. "Huh, enemy. Listen to me list off my skills like I'm already a veteran soldier." Kessel knew he was largely untested, but also felt confident in his ability to plan

and prepare for any future field operations.

During the midweek the town was quick to close down as even the heaviest of drinkers normally had a mining job to wake up for the next morning. Blinking neon signs were darkened and the migration to the outlying homes was a rapid, practiced ritual. As the traffic lights switched to a blinking yellow or red, Kessel was preparing for his nightly review.

Standing before the planning board spanning his basement wall assured him such a routine was necessary. It cleared his mind before sleep while simultaneously helping him maintain an intimate knowledge of the information he had gathered. Ideally he could remove all traces of the deeds he planned to do but such a lofty goal simply wasn't feasible yet. Conceivably he would have fewer targets to track in the future, or the town would be so overrun that stealth and secrecy wouldn't matter.

At the top of the board was a large symbol of Anubis, the very same stylized eye he had seen on the man in the graveyard. From there numerous spokes of pen cascaded down into a web of lists, photos, and addresses.

If he had been aware of the Anubian menace a month before the unexpected graveyard sighting, this entire advance could have been stopped with a single bullet. Kessel was certain that the man he saw was none other than Yrret, the high priest in command of the invasion. Most of the power structure of the invaders was shrouded and misunderstood by Kessel, but he did at least know there was little beyond Yrret.

After the chance contact and subsequent investigation the complex mystery had started to unravel for Kessel. Over the course of many sleepless nights he began to unearth the menace hidden beneath the surface of his own town, own state, own country.

The god Anubis did not fade away or perish just because the ancient Egyptian society that worshiped him did. Cultural progress may have stemmed the river of servants and weakened the god, but every death in the desert was still in his domain. And like a hungry jackal who is never satisfied with the dry bodies of a single family or village, Anubis wanted more. More power and more deaths and more territory.

Kessel was still uncertain if the darkness spreading from Egypt was only enveloping America, but he knew that eventually it would affect the entire world. The arid deserts and plains encompassing the southern half of the continent was a fitting forward base for launching the attack. Comfortable with the sweltering temperatures and burning sun, the Anubians were adapted to thrive in Nevada.

He continued to look over the charts, already accustomed to the general plan of Anubis. Kessel's focus drifted to the numerous named portraits on the wall, over a dozen in total. Sprinkled amidst the photos were brief outlines of different establishments Kessel had identified as possible Anubian strongholds. The carefully analyzed list included unsuspecting places like the drive through restaurant along Smoky Boulevard and the old golf club down Electrum Drive.

He had solemnly removed Joseph Bank's picture, but the remaining infiltrators were still deeply embedded in the day to day life of Round Mountain. Invaders of all ages, professions, and economic standings had been marked by the old man. Kessel often visualized the cunning Anubians hosting a private meeting between conspirators. The school teachers, bus drivers, store clerks, office workers, and miners of the town gathered to murmur and scheme.

There was still a tentative question mark surrounding the entire conversion process. "How can you turn my friends to your cause? Second or third generation Americans into first wave Anubians as if it was nothing?"

Kessel softly tapped the left side of the board in wonder, looking over some of the answers he had concocted. Perhaps Anubis threatens their loved ones, or tricks them into believing their malicious acts of sabotage are necessary. "Yes, Joseph could have been duped like that," Kessel knew, already well aware of his deceased friend's penchant for as-seen-on-TV ads.

Frustrated by the doubt that line of questioning entailed, Kessel continued with the rest of the review. The overall motives of Anubis may be transparent, but the methods and goals to achieve them required some scrutiny. Kessel was sure that Round Mountain was carefully selected from a short list of desolate towns. The reason was likely financial, for the gold mine still boasted enough unrefined ore to fetch a billion dollars or more if sold on the black market.

Continuing on that assumption meant issues were soon muddied with uncertainty. Rationally Yrret intended to keep the mining population in working condition, which meant the majority of them would be unharmed. "A police state then? A lock down with forced labor?" Kessel nervously wondered, jotting a few quick notes onto the right side of the planning board. "With luck my next victim," he struggled with the words, "...target I mean, will know a bit more. I just need to start digging into their organization and finding what's what and who's who."

The final step was target selection, a task he had added only two days ago, and decisively implemented mere hours before. "I figure the plan of starting from the bottom and working to the top still holds true," Kessel thought, absently straightening a few of the photos. There were still so many blanks and unknowns that he didn't feel confident moving directly against Yrret yet.

Sighing at the burden the unplanned meeting had imposed, Kessel teetered a trembling finger over Matthew Walkers, a young man who innocently drove the southern garbage routes in the town. Upon further inspection Kessel learned that Matthew also clandestinely ferried goods between suspected Anubians. Clearly an important target for slowing the expansive enemy network, and also a potentially rich leak for confirming further targets.

"Yes Matthew, I'm afraid you'll be next," the lone warrior gravely promised. He was concerned at moving again so quickly after the Joseph incident, but part of Kessel's plan had been to keep Yrret under pressure at all times. Perhaps even force a withdrawal when the Anubian high priest realized Round Mountain just wasn't worth the trouble.

The sun dripped over the horizon as the town rose in preparation for another Thursday. At the mine a horn signifying shift change blared its report. Tired miners of the sunrise shift wiped bleary eyes as they shuffled into the light. Heavy clay was smeared on their padded knees and dirt had settled into every fiber of their hair.

Kessel had slept uneasily in his modest bed, his mind polluted with fitful images of gunfire. The last sobs of Joseph weighed heavily on him this morning as the gusto and adrenaline of the previous night wore off. Deflated, Kessel slumped on the edge of his bed, staring at the wall as the rising sun painfully bit into his eyes.

A coughing fit racked his body as he stood and ponderously leaned against the far wall. He could hear the neighbor's sprinklers spitting to life, and the dull drone of school buses and mail couriers.

To prevent stale intelligence he would spend the day watching Matthew, and prepare to strike by tomorrow. The agitated workforce would be eager for the weekend to arrive, so any action during the busy night would be noticed. Recovered from his coughs Kessel grimly confirmed "Tomorrow morning then."

Kessel would create another work related alibi, considering the only inconvenience was ensuring his time card got punched. Depending on the outcome of his scouting he hoped to catch

Matthew alone on his route, preferably in a narrow alley. Unluckily for the target, Round Mountain didn't bother to have teams hauling the garbage so the combined protection of a driver and loader would be negated.

Washed, cleanly shaven, and dressed in simple street clothes Kessel loaded his notebook and binoculars into the side compartment of his car. Slowly he pulled away from the curb outside his home, checking his watch once before steering towards Hadley Circle. This fresh two lane road encircled the entire housing section of Round Mountain and removed all congestion from the streets and crescents that crisscrossed the suburbs. Kessel knew Matthew would be driving south from the garbage dump soon, likely entering the Circle via a dirt road near Obsidian Drive. Moments later Kessel rolled a few blocks past the Baptist Church to turn left into Mahogany Boulevard. Luck was with him as the roads were fairly empty. Preliminary monitoring of Matthew was simpler because a schedule fluke meant Kessel's late shift at the mine wouldn't begin for another three hours. Calmly he turned the car around so it was facing Hadley Circle, then shut off the engine and waited. Kessel's vehicle rested in front of an unoccupied zone of dirt, casually shaded by a large palm frond. The sparse lot was marked with cracked wooden posts, their orange construction tape fluttering lazily in the morning breeze. Kessel passed his time by occasionally drawing cool water from a green canteen nestled underneath the passenger seat.

His car was an uninspiring 1993 Mercury Sable, bought second hand four years ago. Cracks chaotically wove across the front windshield like spider webs, a result of debris thrown from the gigantic hauler trucks at the mine. The dull silver grill was equally pockmarked from trailing off-road vehicles down poorly maintained gravel roads.

Kessel found the car perfect at being forgettably ugly, a requirement for the erratic patterns observation imposed. The light teal color had several pools of rust and grime, especially around the wheels. Heavy bolts were visible in the place of hub caps which were lost dodging antelope at night. Lovingly he patted the steering wheel and checked the time again.

Slouched in the driver's seat, Kessel immediately perked up upon hearing the distinct rambling noise of a large diesel engine. As expected a garbage truck shuddered into his field of view, coming from the left and going south on Hadley Circle. The cab was white and covered with logos and stickers designating it as an official City of Round Mountain crew vehicle. The metal shell on the back had been repainted green last summer, a short lived initiative of the city to impose environmental friendliness on its citizens. Now it just reinforced the bloated turtle look. Quickly Kessel started the engine, knowing Matthew wouldn't be watching for followers at all. "With luck they don't even know about Joseph yet," he mused, merging right onto Hadley Circle.

Originally Kessel's limited experience with trailing people was based on movies and pulp books he found at the library. With some trial and error he had perfected the art, now hovering like an unnoticed ghost in Matthew's rear view mirror. The reduced morning traffic and long view distance ahead meant Kessel eased the reins more than usual. An 800 foot cushion separated the vehicles, enough to react to route changes by the garbage truck while avoiding the awkward feeling that he should be passing the slower moving vehicle.

The old man could see Matthew's thick arm hanging out the window, thumping a beat against the side of the truck. Kessel hastily looked at his notes to see what route the vehicle had previously taken. His last observation was three weeks ago, more than enough time for the company to change the shifts. Normally Matthew would turn off the Circle and proceed into Horseshoe Way, a few blocks north of Kessel's home street. From there the truck tended to

weave through the alleys connecting the main streets.

Nervously Kessel checked his speed and surroundings, noting the turn would be seconds away. Still no signal from the truck that it intended to follow the previous route though, which gave Kessel pause. "Maybe they have a special delivery."

Horseshoe Way rolled past on his right without incident while the garbage truck continued south. Kelsey Way was the next street, although that was ignored as well. Finally the truck slowed and pulled to the left, preparing to turn onto Electrum Drive, an older road that headed southeast out of the town.

Preparing to exit as well Kessel quickly felt cramped as the car got closer and closer to the slowing target. Before he could plan his next move he saw the garbage truck complete the turn and immediately signal again, this time to the right. Reflex drove Kessel to twist the wheel and straightening his vehicle out to re-entering the main traffic of the Circle again. Driving past he could see Matthew continue his second turn and head towards the warehouses immediately south of Hadley Circle.

The Sable diligently spurred to life as Kessel accelerated towards the Round Mountain Library, relying on a chance to use his binoculars to catch a glimpse of Matthew. Quickly turning left and spinning to the far end of the parking lot, Kessel quieted the car and awkwardly squished into the back seat.

Adjusting the binoculars he caught a flash of the green turtle shell crawling between warehouses. The vehicle would momentarily pause as Matthew loaded heaping bags of garbage into the back then skirt forward to the next dump of trash. Kessel reassured himself, "So it was just a route change," followed by a long sigh to help unknot his stomach. Slowly he settled back into a comfortable slouch low in the seat.

However the truck wasn't done surprising and confusing the old man. He started forward and peered intently through the binoculars as Matthew maneuvered the truck near a loading ramp. Black smoke belched from the diesel cab as the driver gingerly eased the vehicle up the incline towards the back warehouse doors.

"What the..." Kessel wondered, panning his view around the perimeter of the building. A thick bold sign hung on the front of the steel warehouse, which Kessel quickly marked in his notebook. "Cartonnage Chemicals hey? Never even heard of ya," he said, tapping the pen against his chin in thought.

Kessel's vision was blocked by the back of the garbage truck as half of the vehicle was swallowed by the bay doors. He did note several pairs of feet on the opposite side and anxiously realized Matthew was no longer in the driver's seat.

Sitting on the edge of the back bench, Kessel vigilantly scrutinized the commotion around the truck. For what felt like hours he could see nothing besides the shuffling boots of at least five people. Without warning the truck started again and Kessel quickly darted his field glasses to the cab window. Matthew was there with a blond man, both silently looking down the ramp as the truck rolled forward.

Kessel snaked back into the front seat and cranked the starter, backing out of the parking lot as fast as prudence would allow. He squinted towards the Cartonnage Chemicals warehouse, hoping to judge where the truck was. Sunlight glinting off the gleaming logo on the cab caught his attention, and he saw that the two men were driving back towards the Circle. Kessel didn't want to risk regaining their position in the empty suburbs, knowing that even his car would stand out on a totally empty street.

Checking for an opening he rolled back onto Hadley Circle, content to shield himself behind a raised pickup truck. He was still eagerly gauging their progress along Electrum Drive, feeling



more and more certain that he would be five or six cars ahead when they merged.

Cursing under his breath the old man turned slightly as he drove by their truck, trying to avoid catching their eye. Immediately he was locked to the rear view mirror, counting vehicles that passed and trying to anticipate when they would enter traffic.

The hunched truck slowly pulled forward, a few cars back from the Sable. His steering wheel cover was damp with sweat and he indecisively tried to determine the smartest approach.

Fleeing now seemed a waste, especially if something important had been loaded at Cartonage Chemicals.

His mind churned and eventually Kessel brightened as he remembered the short concrete loop opposite Kelsey Way. If he could mix a bit of steel in with his nerves there was a chance he could casually leave the Circle, parallel the truck for a few hundred feet, and then sneak back in behind it.

Knowing the turn off was coming up soon, Kessel didn't have time to think of another option. He slowed and edged onto the older road, compulsively checking his rear view mirror as he went.

The two men still speechlessly watched the road and continued up the Circle. Driving opposite them on the loop, Kessel carefully judged their speed to guarantee he rejoined the flow of traffic a safe distance behind.

Kessel felt the smooth new pavement of Hadley Circle under the Sable's tires, slowly unclenching teeth he didn't realize he was grinding. Ending up at least eight cars behind the truck he hopefully escaped detection by the suspected Anubians.

Coolly he restored his 800 foot interval and waited to see if his quarry would reestablish the original route. Matthew's turn signal matched the old man's glowing face as the cat and mouse turned left, back onto Horseshoe Way.

"Good, back where we should be," Kessel loosened his jaw, not realizing he had tensely clamped it shut again. He eased off the pedal and slowed to a stop on the right side of the street, not wanting to obviously follow the garbage truck down the vacant street.

"Okay, so they're back. They're back, and carrying something. Or not, but either way it's important that I find out before they move it again." His mind was racing and he cursed his inexperience and hesitancy. "I know what I could do, I could hit 'em right now." Kessel tasted the idea, but needed definite proof of something critical being transported before he risked a daring daylight attack.

Impatiently he waited until the garbage truck exited down an alley. Sweeping the street once more he threw the door open, quickly crossing Horseshoe Way towards the nearest empty house. A big two story showhome barred his access to the alley, its compact wooden fence preventing an easy run to intercept the garbage truck.

Kessel glanced around and double checked the street for cars before sprinting towards the fence, efficiently launching over it with a grunt and swift push of his upper body. He could hear the whining of truck brakes and knew the two men were maintaining the exact route he had previously observed.

The lawn before him defiantly refused to yellow, and the soft green grass concealed his approach. He caught flickering images of Matthew through the gaps in the freshly painted fence boards. A lone tree occupied the yard, newly planted and still crowned by fresh soil. Kessel twirled his head to check the showhome interior to ensure it was empty, and was rewarded with darkened rooms and silent hallways.

There was a grinding sound as the garbage truck inhaled another bag into its dark green belly, followed by the piercing air brake release as the vehicle slowly rolled towards the next backyard. Kessel used the noisy opportunity to edge himself flush with the fence, cautiously waiting for

Matthew to exit the cab before risking a peep through a gap in the boards. The truck slowed to another stop at the back of a red bungalow, easing up so the front was even with the unpainted carport.

Slowly Kessel lowered himself to a crouch and moved his face close to the fence, his eyes hungrily taking in the alley. The truck was opposite his position across the potholed divide. He could clearly see the green back of the vehicle, and noted Matthew standing to the right of it. The screen door at the back of the bungalow screeched open and a big bellied man swathed in a plaid robe stepped out.

Matthew greeted the approaching man, a slight laugh edging his voice. "Hey there Tom! Still haven't found a job?" Kessel noted the name and relative position of the house, mentally assigning a future surveillance mission.

"Hah is it that obvious? Sure beats slinging this shit around," Tom replied, bearing a wide grin. He carried a loose bag of trash, the glass bottles inside clinking together as it swung in his meaty hand. "By the way, I got a bit more junk in the garage. You mind taking it too?"

Matthew reached forward to grab the bag, easily tossing the contents into the back of the truck. Kessel detected movement and turned in time to catch a brief look at the blond man reflected in the driver side mirror.

Matthew's reply brought his attention back to the conversation at hand. "Yep not a problem bud". Kessel heard the cranking of the garage door and shifted slightly to obtain a better angle of the interior. Tom had gone inside the unfinished building to manually open the wide door. Straining he caught the sound of thick plastic being dragged across the smooth asphalt as Tom came back into view, trailing a long black bag.

"Just two of them today. Been busy looking for a job and all," the big man said, retreating inside the garage again to heft another bag towards the truck.

"You seem to be doing well with the one we gave you," Matthew whispered, winking and hitting the side of the green truck with his gloved hand. Louder he called to the driver, "Hit it Morris!"

Kessel saw the blond man, Morris, flick a switch in the cab. Suddenly the back of green shell shifted upwards, thick hydraulics protesting as the cavernous maw opened. "Help me with this?" Matthew motioned, reaching down to grab the bag. Tom scurried opposite him and wheezed as he settled the other edge. Together they lifted the black bag into the garbage truck, pushing it to the right side once the cargo was loaded.

Kessel intently watched as the same procedure stashed the other bag. Matthew hit the side of the truck again, prompting Morris to close the back. Before the metal clamped shut Matthew grabbed a bottle from the left side and handed it to Tom.

"Say hi to the wife for me Tom," he said as the bigger man put the bottle into the deep pockets of his bathroom robe.

"Will do, thanks," Tom replied, his hand outstretched in farewell. He waited until the truck departed before waddling back into his garage to close the door.

Kessel fell back from the fence, trying to breathe calmly to avoid any fatal last minute detection. It looked like the three men had fulfilled some kind of Anubian transaction, but uncertainty just reiterated how little he knew of the whole process. From the size and apparent weight of the bags Kessel could hazard a guess that they were bodies, or at the very least weapons. He was less sure on the bottle given to Tom. It was small like a tin can of soup, but white and smooth as if containing some sort of facial moisturizer. Money? Drugs? His mind whirled at the numerous possibilities.

Either way he was sure Matthew or Morris, or both, needed to be captured and interrogated.

Tensely Kessel rose and crept back over the fence towards his car, trying to decide whether catching the exchanged cargo was worth the risk of attacking two men in an unplanned showdown. He had hoped that every task against the Anubians would be prepared and organized to ensure success, and Kessel certainly didn't want his second kidnapping to set a precedent of disorganization for future missions.

If he waited until tomorrow the garbage truck would certainly offload the bags somewhere, perhaps returning to Cartonnage Chemicals? The old man loathed thinking of assaulting or infiltrating such a place, especially when he had just discovered it that day.

Hesitating behind the edge of the showhome, Kessel eventually walked at a natural pace across to his car. In a flash he decisively chose to try to move on them now, for better or worse.

The incident with Joseph had been different, he was a friend and at the time Kessel had lingering doubts that what he was about to do was wrong. But not with these two Anubian transporters who clearly were active members of the invading force.

Kessel knew he was being overly reckless, but the primal instincts of the hunt had defeated his normally calm demeanor. All the waiting and watching and planning of the last three months was to be implemented once again.

He sparked the Sable to life, revving lightly until the sputtering engine ran clean. Adrenaline fired through his body as the car raced towards Dixie Court. Swerving he closed the Sable to fifty miles an hour, barely making the turn to Cove Street.

Squealing to a stop near the curb edging his house, Kessel vaulted out of the car and rushed inside. Stomping heavily down the stairs he headed directly to the gun locker, jangling the key free from his pocket.

The oiled hinges sprang open to reveal a commendable arsenal. Two 9mm Glock-19 pistols hung on the left, their compact black forms a natural concealed option for Kessel. The long barrel of an old M-14 rifle dominated the center of the rack, situated next to a Remington 870 shotgun. Neatly stacked along the bottom were cases of ammo, nearly a thousand rounds in total. Empty sections of dense pipe lay in the corner, an unfinished project to construct home made bombs. An assortment of knives were within reach below the pistols, their variety of sharp or serrated edges glinting against the basement light.

In his haste to return to the alley Kessel sloppily fumbled the first Glock he reached for, the polymer body clattering on the cement floor. "This'll be a catastrophe if I rush in like this," he berated. The old man calmed himself with a slow series of breaths and reconsidered his rash approach. "If I'm going to do this I'm going to do it right. Or not at all."

He turned from the locker and faced the planning board, reviewing the intricately marked town map. Tapping Dixie Court, one block from his house, Kessel began to strategize aloud. "Hmm I should have at least another forty minutes before they reach here, and close to an hour before they finish on Cove. That leaves maybe thirty minutes for Kelsey Way before getting back to the dump."

When he returned to the gun locker his hands were steady as he systematically checked and loaded the shotgun and a single pistol. Kessel bolted the locker shut and slipped upstairs to change clothes. Capturing multiple hostages was likely to be a messy affair even with a meticulous plan, so he'd need every scrap of advantage in his daring attack.

He wore baggy black cargo pants and a short sleeved gray shirt. Traceable work boots were swapped with cheap, light running shoes. Kessel casually tied a bandanna around his neck in case he needed to quickly hide his face. With luck the only people that would witness him were the victims.

All of the clothes were purchased five or six weeks ago at a swap meet hosted by the Round Mountain high school. Kessel paid with change from the truck stop and left quickly to avoid becoming a memory identifiable in court. Never wearing the clothes except during an operation meant they were less likely to be associated with him. Indulging in the safety of inconsistency he rotated the colors and style every week or so.

A combat knife was slipped into a sheath worn tightly around his ankle. Kessel then pushed the Glock into his belt and zipped a modified tennis racket case around the shotgun. He dumped a handful of shells, a few spare 9mm magazines, and a package of industrial tie-wraps into a cloth shoulder bag. The militarized version of these improvised handcuffs were common in police forces, but Kessel had to make do with zip strips taken from the mine.

Scrutinizing his appearance in the entryway mirror a final time, Kessel checked the door peephole. The street looked as quiet as he had left it, his impetuous entry failing to stir extra attention. He glanced at his watch to establish the window of opportunity before he was expected at the mine. Less than two hours remained before the shift bell would howl. Kessel scowled, "Stupid punch cards."

The entire situation and tremendous odds of something going wrong left his stomach knotted. Kessel knew he had to start progressing against Yrret and the Anubians, so he forced aside his doubts and confidently opened the door.

Striding to his car Kessel kept a keen eye on the surrounding homes, especially checking for any faces in the windows. The tan ammo bag was slung across his back while the tennis bag was over his right shoulder. Upon reaching the Sable he transferred these to the passenger side, pushing the bag up under the dash and casually resting the covered shotgun upright against the seat.

Years of living on Clove Street provided exhaustive knowledge of the three block radius the garbage truck would tack across. Based on his previous time calculations Kessel figured he had a good chance of catching the men near the end of Horseshoe Way.

Eagerly starting the car Kessel wandered through mental archives of people and dwellings along Horseshoe Way. "Elizabeth might be the best option," he calculated, visualizing her clean double wide lot. "That old widow bought out the neighbors years ago, and keeps to herself. These days she'd probably sleep through a gun battle." Kessel hoped the kidnapping wouldn't devolve to a street brawl but he had to be prepared for the worst circumstances.

Elizabeth Rose was older than Kessel, closer to 70 than 60. A decade before Kessel had moved into town her husband had died in a tunnel collapse. Now she busied herself with selling amusing arts and crafts and little trinkets out of her house, content to scrape by.

As part of the inward review of the woman Kessel also strained to remember specific details of yard layouts and what cover the alley offered. The plan was simply to approach the Anubian crew and use the shotgun to force his way into the cab. He'd bind both men with the plastic wrist straps and then secure them back to back. The shotgun would be kept opposite them, by his left leg. As he was cruising the truck out of the suburbs Kessel would keep a Glock pointed at their guts to thwart any daring heroism.

He would drive the truck up Hadley Circle then towards the dump, but continue past the airport towards the mine. City observers would think he was returning the trash. Seemingly bound for the airport he anticipated company bosses wouldn't give the vehicle a second glance. From there it was a simple matter paralleling the gold mine north until eventually choosing a side road to reach the mountains.

"Heh, all there is to it," Kessel nervously reassured himself, his grip tightening on the steering

wheel. "Only about a hundred ways something will screw up, and that's just off the top of my head." He worried they would try to drive away, or overpower him en route to the mountains, or yell and holler and draw their own weapons.

Knowing he had to fully commit to the job Kessel silenced the nervous chatter and focused on reaching Horseshoe Way.

Two blocks later the Sable snuck to the entry of the alley, Kessel immediately glanced ahead to confirm the truck was there. Across the rutted back road he was relieved to see the vehicle, a bag of fallen leaves being devoured by its hungry metal mouth. Matthew had just flipped the passenger door open and hopped back in. Swinging his view to the right Kessel could see they were five or six houses from the distinct yellow fence edging Elizabeth's home.

He adjusted the Glock held tightly by his belt and waited a few moments until they were closer to the desired zone of engagement. He pulled five tie-wraps and a pair of magazines from the crumpled bag, concealing them in his pockets.

When the truck was two houses away he turned off the Sable, having already checked that it wouldn't look out of place parked along the street. He grabbed the tennis bag and swiftly opened his door, already tempted to pull the concealing bandanna up. He walked towards the stationary truck, quickening his pace as necessary to reach the vehicle once it was behind the double wide lot.

Kessel anxiously felt the garbage truck crawl in slow motion. Finally the tail lights glowed and the air brakes distressingly whined the vehicle to a halt. He was less than ten feet from the back, a distance which evaporated in a hurried sprint. Crouching slightly he prepared to sneak up to the driver side door, wanting to get there before Matthew exited on the opposite side.

A fire lit in Kessel's eyes as tension and fear was converted into calculated precision. Uncertainty of the mission dripped out of his steadying hands. If his mind could drift at that moment he might stop and reflect, positively, how naturally the private war was growing on him. But instead the old man pulled his bandanna up and stormed the trucks flank, smoothly discarding the tennis bag to reveal the shotgun.

Morris never saw or heard the attacker until the door was thrown open. "What the f--" he started but was quickly silenced by the wide barrel of the Remington staring him in the face.

"Don't move Morris!" Kessel saw the other Anubian reach for the door handle, which he cut short by yelling. "Stop your shit Matthew, move the hell over now! Face the door, both of you!"

Kessel's heart was pounding as he freed the cuffs and looped them around Morris' clammy hands. He mercilessly tightened them until a deep red groove appeared, then he pushed the restrained man onto the floor of the cab. Savagely he smashed the butt of the shotgun into the prisoner's face, wanting him incoherent before proceeding to Matthew.

However the small interior was a boon to Matthew who instantly took advantage of the slight pause, deftly forcing the Remington to the roof and throwing open the door. Kessel cursed and launched himself over Morris, trying to get a clear shot as Matthew sprinted across the yard. Suddenly his eyes met with the clear blue orbs of Elizabeth. Intently focused on gardening she didn't notice the kidnapping until Matthew frantically dove by.

Her surprised yelp of "My word!" was overwhelmed by the deafening blast of a gun.

The kickback rattled Kessel's teeth and he immediately pumped a second shell into the smoking weapon. The cloud of pellets barely missed the kneeling woman but succeeded in clipping Matthew's ribs. The impact hammered his body to the ground before adrenaline converted the momentum to somersault him back into a run.

The wounded man was at the front gate when the second shot pierced the yellow fence beside him, inches from fatally hitting his neck.

"Dammit!" Kessel swore, knowing he wouldn't get a third attempt at shooting the fleeing Anubian.

Below him Morris groggily spit blood as Kessel locked gazes with the terrified Elizabeth. "These are bad men doing bad things to our town. I'm sorry to involve you, Miss Rose." Curtly nodding he slammed the door and floored it, wanting to be clear of the town before she called the police. Black exhaust belched in protest at the unfamiliar speed as the garbage truck withdrew from the alley.

Heaving the large vehicle around a corner Kessel had to hastily formulate a plan. He tore off his bandanna, slid the shotgun to his left and trained the pistol on Morris. "Don't even try it or I'll empty this entire clip into your worthless stomach!" Dizzy and unable to heed the threat the disoriented blond man responded by dribbling blood all over the floor.

The rush of combat was starting to burn off as Kessel's mind reeled. His heart pounded in his ears and the engine groaned at his feet. Flying he spun onto Hadley Circle at double the speed limit.

Mindful of how disastrous police interference would be Kessel slowed with the flow of traffic. Though attempting to appear in control of the situation his mind hysterically thought of how dreadfully the mission was progressing.

He was worried that his car would be suspiciously close to the scene of the kidnapping. And even with the bandanna it was likely Elizabeth could identify him. Plus Matthew had escaped and was probably summoning Anubian reinforcements to hunt the old man like a fevered peasant. Distracted by his wild thoughts Kessel nearly missed the dirt road exit. Cranking the garbage truck off the Circle he eagerly looked ahead to the dump.

Finally elusive luck shone on his desperate escape as not a single workman stopped the vehicle for inspection. He anxiously cruised across the property and northeast on the unpaved road. A few hundred feet later his nostrils were stung by the sweltering airport tarmac and he could hear the pattering of small rotors. Glancing in his side mirror Kessel determined he was far enough away from the dump to adjust his route towards unpopulated wilderness. The towering mountains spread before him as he gripped the steering wheel at the dark acts that remote location promised.

His hostage stirred as bleak scrubland enclosed on the side windows. "Do you realize w-what you're doing asshole? You're messing with--" Kessel flashed the gun down and struck the talking man in the nose, then retracted and delivered another powerful blow. The sickening crunch of pulverized cartilage elected a new howl of agony from Morris.

"You'll have plenty time to talk later, Anubian filth," he promised, absently wiping blood from the handle of the Glock.

Kessel guided the truck west, already a dozen miles outside of Round Mountain. He knew arriving at work on time was becoming an unlikely prospect, but the priority was questioning Morris as soon as possible. Agitation mingled with shock helped undermine hostage confidence and Kessel wanted to capitalize on that before Morris completely regained his willpower. The stolen truck rolled across Fremont Route and headed into the mountains. Kessel intended on following a local back road three or four miles into the secluded wooded hills. Designated on maps as Development Road 90 the cramped single lane route was essentially a widened hiking trail.

As Kessel navigated deeper into the woods the unwelcoming desert cactus relinquished its turf to swaying junipers. The dry air and suffocating winds cooled and slowed. Distant sounds of blasting at the mine sporadically mingled with Morris' whimpers, but otherwise the trip was silent. For a brief moment the isolated woodland almost made Kessel forget or forgive the Anubian slumped in the corner.

Spotting a clear patch of dry grass Kessel crunched the truck off the road, slowly winding between gnarled shrubs. Keeping the green shell perpendicular to Development Road 90 helped conceal the vehicle, and soon Kessel felt secure and sheltered enough for the interrogation. Shutting the truck off he checked the surrounding terrain for a viable spot to begin his unpleasant task. Either side of the road was dominated by steep sandy cliffs tinted red by the desolate sand. Ailing knots of flowering brittlebush highlighted the expanse with their yellow pedals.

Stunted junipers clawed a few meters above the ground, their braided fronds reaching for the clear sky. In the shade of the cliff ant mounds swarmed with militant insects while jackrabbits quietly nestled under the trees. Furry ears and noses perked upright and investigated the air as the skittish animals tried to decipher the foreign vehicles intent.

Knowing this was not the time for idle relaxation he mentally obliterated the soothing scenery and rebuilt the fire of anger deep in his chest.

"End of the road Morris. Get out of your door and stand by the truck, now," Kessel sternly ordered the hostage. "If you try anything I don't like you get buried in this valley."

Nodding the Anubian hopelessly scrambled from the floor and reached for the handle. Kessel slid out of the cab, carrying the shotgun in his left hand and warily aiming the Glock with his right. Carefully watching Morris the old man was not entirely convinced the floundering blond was not just acting broken spirited. Unlike with Matthew, Kessel was positive he could kill Morris before the man escaped. He would rather extract every trace of information first. In a chase situation the trees would provide cover to Morris, but Kessel could shoot with impunity and chase the Anubian as long as necessary.

Three strides carried Kessel around the front of the vehicle and behind Morris as the man dropped out of the cab, wheezing as his bound hands were incapable of slowing the tumble. Kessel waited for the fallen man to stand, not wanting to get within reach in case Morris was concocting a persistent ruse. Slowly the Anubian struggled to his feet and leaned heavily against the open cab.

Taking a brief inventory of his limited supplies Kessel realized he had forgotten a length of thick rope to bind the hostage to a tree and a metal shovel to dig a home for Morris. If he could tie the hostage to the truck or a tree he could search the green shell to determine what the mysterious bags and bottles contained.

Thinking quickly he yelled, "Take off your shoes, now!" Morris momentarily straightened and flashed confusion at the order, revealing a healthier strength beneath the painful coughs and defeated shoulders. Clumsily Morris tried to remove his boots and Kessel considered delivering another motivational smash in the nose or stomach.

The barefooted man regained his pose against the door, his boots strewn beside him. Kessel hoped any thoughts of a sudden escape would evaporate with the new consideration of the agonizing run shoeless across miles of desert.

"March directly in front of me until I tell you to stop. If your line isn't straight enough I'm going to shoot you in the knee!" Moving his pistol like a pointer finger Kessel snapped his wrist towards the cliff.

Morris passively shook his head and painfully started stepping over jagged grass and thorny branches. The cliff was less distance away than the length of a grocery aisle, but it took Morris many slow minutes to reach it. Every footing the Anubian tried seemed to administer piercing hazards and within seconds new blood was dripping from his legs.

Patient on the outside, Kessel was a rolling storm inside, trying to think up the most effective approach to his line of questioning. "That's enough. Stop." Kessel tried to deliver his commands with a short and displeased voice to force Morris on the defensive. "Drop to your knees and face the cliff. Hands up against your head."

The interrogator and prisoner were in the shade of the hillside. The nearest tree was several feet away, but the nearest ant colony was directly in front of Morris. Improvising Kessel glanced at the mound, "I'm going to ask you several questions. If I don't feel you are being truthful or you try to avoid answering I'm going to kick you into this ant hill." A smile crept onto his face as Morris gasped in surprise, likely reconsidering any trick or escape. Exploiting the exposed fear Kessel abruptly continued the announcement, "You and I both know these are Spanish fire ants. Look at the size of some of them too." Easing his posture in preparation for a flurry of questions, Kessel cleared his mind and began.

He opened with the simplest question, "Are you an Anubian?"

"A w-what? Old man you're--" the insult was stifled by Kessel firmly planting a foot on Morris' back. Pushing slightly he edged the twitching face closer to the ants. Hundreds of them streamed around the hive, the frantic pace providing the illusion they were hungry for human. In truth Kessel knew the fire ants, though painful, could not kill a fully grown man.

With the same tone he asked again, "Are you an Anubian?"

"Y-yes." Morris hung his head in defeat, and Kessel removed his foot and stood upright again. He noticed the Anubian sigh in relief and the white of his knuckles slacken. Vindication from the confession warmed the old man; finally a definitive testament that his private war was required.

To Morris he acted as if the admission had not surprised him, "And how did you become one?"

"It's confusing...in my case it started with the lure of m-money. A few friends of mine were yakking about an illegal job that paid well, so I came with them to some m-meeting place."

"Where?"

"A little shack above the m-mine."

Kessel pondered the possibilities, thinking Morris might be referring to the old town used before the gold mine was updated to the modern open pit style. "Continue."

"W-well we met with a business m-man of sorts. He had this weird hair and was generally a dick to us, but if the--"

"A pin, did he have a pin on him?"

"What? Um yeah I think he might have? It was a while ago m-man, give me a break."

Kessel shuddered and hoped Morris had provided a possible lead to Yrret's location.

"Anyways the money was good so I thought w-whatever right. The job was simple. Just going to a house and threatening the owner," Morris shrugged, "so w-we agree and the man kind of waves his hand and next thing I know I black out."

"Kind of waves his hand? Be more specific!"

"It's tough to show you with these stupid ties on."

"I bet it is." Kessel hated to give Morris any physical advantage or leverage in the conversation.

After a brief silence he conceded slightly, "Okay well just describe it then."

"So um you know those m-music conductor guys? This dude sort of moves his hand around like that, all stiff side to side finger pointing and so on."



Perhaps a signal to waiting troops who knocked Morris out. Kessel wasn't convinced of his reasoning and knew the motions could signify a great deal. "What happened when you woke up?"

"W-well the really spooky part was I didn't wake up in the ghost town or sleeping back at home or anything." Visibly shuddering Morris continued, "I wake up in a freaking coffin. The thing sort of feels...natural though, ya know?"

Kessel couldn't possibly imagine relating, but he tried to extract more description from the hostage, "What was the coffin like? Where was it?"

"Well it fits me nice and snug and has a big plaster door that slides off. The cover is all fancy looking with gold and blue and neat little designs." Kessel could tell the man was beginning to relax and recall aloud to himself, "It's underground a bit. Not like buried, just in a big basement with a bunch of other sarcophagus things. I really wasn't even paying much attention." Pausing and shaking his head Morris mumbled, "All I wanted to do then...all I've wanted to do since was follow the urges that pop into my head."

The conversation dropped as Kessel tried to interpret the meaning of the perplexing scenario. "...Urges? What urges Morris?"

"Maybe urges isn't right. Hell urges sounds like something I'd get back in high school around Tiffany," he laughed slightly, seeming to forget he was kneeling in front of a gun. "Just things like driving certain places or picking stuff up or killing someone or--"

Kessel interrupted the casual listing of murder, "Don't you think it's strange you follow urges to kill people?"

"W-what do you m-mean? I...I don't see why it'd be weird? After all the orders--"

"I thought you said they were urges?"

"No, like I said that was the wrong word for it. I sort of feel...compelled by a voice to do these things."

"This..." Kessel strained at the idea, "...voice. Where does it come from? Who is it?"

"I guess I never really bothered to find out." Morris appeared complacent with the idea, "Besides sometimes the voice tells m-me nice things...comforting things."

Storing the bizarre information for later analysis Kessel prepared to redirect his line of questioning to focus on the secret exchange viewed earlier.

"Enough. What did you pick up at the Cartonnage Chemicals warehouse? And why?"

Morris paused before beginning, clearly debating on what to reveal next. "Look m-man haven't I told you enough? Just let me go, I'll leave town I swear!"

Shouting he drew a tremble from Morris, "Tell me about this morning or those ants'll be crawling all over you!" Kessel was beginning to feel obligated to perform sinister duties for the greater interest of Round Mountain's safety. His shoulders tensed as another parcel of weight was added to the heavy burden.

"But you don't understand, if I--"

Flush with anger the older man carelessly pushed Morris forward, just close enough for a handful of ants to eagerly scurry onto his cheek. The hostage, having let his guard down during his earlier confession, began screaming in shock at the mistreatment. Kessel eased his foot off the hunched figure and Morris rapidly shot upright, desperate to escape the insects.

The confused fire ants, separated from their colony and sensing the tender skin of a larger creature, began furiously biting. Their thick mandibles injected burning venom across his features, the wounds instantly swelling and evoking signals of pain. Frantically Morris tried to swipe the red demons away, knocking at them with his shoulders.

The pace of the colony increased as warning pheromones escaped the crumpled bodies of the

fallen ants. "You've made them really hungry now," Kessel casually commented, trying to maintain a detached calm about the torture.

Morris, gritting away the agony of the bites, was quick to respond. "Damn you! You're sick, you animal!"

Kessel said and did nothing, but inwardly the words stung him as surely as a fire ant. He paused to let Morris regain his composure, withdrawing by listening to the soft bristle of wind in the trees as it rolled through the valley.

Finally he stated simply, "Spill it on Cartonage, or you'll be praying for only a few bites."

"Okay fine I'll tell you, okay? Okay just don't push m-me in again!"

Kessel had little intention of inflicting further pain upon the helpless man, but he couldn't let Morris detect this weakness. "Then tell me everything I want to know!"

"Alright okay!" Panicked Morris shouted his experience with the warehouse, "Cartonage Chemicals is a processing plant! We're transporting bodies!"

Simultaneously disgusted and impatient to learn more Kessel kept pressuring. "Why? For what purpose?"

"The bodies are mummified and...and...animated!" Seeing Kessel's incredulous glare and fearing reprisal with the fire ants, Morris hastily elaborated, "I don't know how it works, I swear! But the bodies are wrapped up in linen and dumped into big pits and vats. I think they get air dried or salted or something in there? Please man I'm telling you the truth!"

"Explain 'animated' then."

"The man I first met for the job comes in every few days and gathers up the driest bodies. So then he reads from this old book and next thing I see the bodies are shambling up like some horror movie! Honest!"

"What are the animated bodies used for?"

"I have no idea, I just saw them one day when I was delivering some fresh ones."

"Where do you get the new bodies from? Your friend Tom?"

Morris was surprised by the mention of the accomplice, but recovered and answered,

"Sometimes. He gets them from med students or morgues or digs them up from the graveyard, I think."

Revolted by the process Kessel fired another question. "And the jars? What are the white jars for?"

"I have no idea I'm just told to deliver them in exchange for bodies, okay? Please you gotta believe me man I mostly just drive the trucks!"

Ignoring the distressed plea Kessel continued grilling the trembling Morris. "What is the overall plan of the Anubians? What do they intend to do in Round Mountain?"

"I said I just drive the trucks I don't know any big plans, please--"

"Enough." Although he grew weary from maintaining the hardened facade, Kessel's stomach churned even more at what would follow. "Anything else to say for yourself, Morris?"

Realizing what was next the kneeling man stuttered a few words and crawled around on his knees to face Kessel. Staring up at the imposing gunman he pitifully begged, "Please don't do this. Please I didn't know this job would be like this. I'm just following the orders...I can't refuse them!"

Solemnly Kessel raised the pistol and aimed it at the bridge between Morris' eyes. Without another word he harshly squeezed the trigger.

Hot crimson exited the back of the hostages head and covered the cliff and ant mound. Cringing Kessel forced himself to watch, forced himself to endure the outcome of his choices and actions. In an instant light faded from the victim's eyes as the body slumped backward, the hands still

tightly bound.

He could feel bile rising in his throat but Kessel quickly swallowed his disgust. Again he aggressively reasoned how Morris had been an Anubian pawn, how he had murdered and stolen and been a blight upon the town.

But all the excuses were inadequate echoes next to the desperate last words of Morris.

For many long minutes Kessel simply stood over the body and tried to clear his mind. His hands were surprisingly steady, even if his breath came in ragged gasps. Starting the post execution cleanup broke his trance. He collected the expended shell casing then holstered the Glock and slowly walked back to the garbage truck.

After pressing a few buttons and pulling a few levers Kessel was able to open the hatch at the back of the truck. In a daze he walked to the rear and labored to free the two body bags. Groping in the darkened left side his hands brushed the smooth jars he saw Tom receive. Kessel hesitated and examined the three removed items. He began by unscrewing the white lid, wishing to defer opening the body bags.

Immediately he regretted the decision. Stringy intestines waited for him in the first jar, the decaying odor befouling his senses. Kessel instantly spun from the organ and vomited on the ground, his eyes watering as he coughed and heaved into the grass.

Nauseous and confused, Kessel chose to ignore the rest of the viscera containers and steeled himself to inspect the body bags. Both bags were crafted from thick black plastic, almost like a high quality suit bag. Unfortunately he knew no dress clothes awaited him. Kessel firmly fastened the bandanna to cover his mouth and nose, learning from his mistaken complacency. He kneeled and began to unzip the first bag inch by inch.

A rotting cloud escaped the opened bag, but he leaned away to avoid the foul smell. The contents were a pallid gray human body, as he feared. The second bag revealed a similar carcass, but fresh and less decayed.

Kessel couldn't bring himself to examine the bodies any closer. Closing the bags he awkwardly slung them back into the garbage truck. Securing his bandanna he reluctantly salvaged the opened jar and deposited it in the green shell.

"Grave robbing and trading organs...these Anubians deserve worse than what I'm doing."

Strengthened by the revealed items Kessel relentlessly marched back to Morris' body. He lifted the bloody mass and spread it under a nearby tree, the thick boughs shading most of the form. Kessel began to carefully pile stones over the body to prevent exposure to wandering animals or humans. The cairn was erected by strenuously ferrying heavy rocks from the bottom of the cliff. Laying the last stone he stood and stretched, pain arcing through his back and arms from the exertion. His watch reported Kessel's shift at the mine would begin in a few minutes. He avoiding thinking about the exhausting task of integrating all the information Morris had revealed. Organizing and updating the planning board could be done that night, when his mind was clear and the muddled details of the mission had been taken care of.

The first such detail was the garbage truck, the second was getting back to Round Mountain, and the third was his work tardiness.

In the midst of the rushed attack and kidnapping Kessel hadn't stopped to consider the hulking vehicle resting before him. Returning it to the dump depot was like handing the police a giant conclusive piece of evidence. He expected that Elizabeth had called the town sheriffs so any officers would be alert for the stolen truck. That left abandoning the vehicle somewhere as the only viable alternative.

Kessel had limited options for destroying such a sturdy metal beast. If his scratch built bombs were completed he could drop a few of those problem solvers in the back.

Luckily familiarity with the hills rendered a solution for the old man. He remembered a nearby waterfall that carved the sandstone into a severe drop. Even long dried and evaporated the location could serve as the truck's resting place.

Double checking the area once more for any mistakes or revealing pieces of proof, Kessel was satisfied to see nothing but the ceremonially buried body.

Closing the cab door he thought ahead to the dangerously long walk back to town, after the truck was destroyed. Perhaps he could scavenge some water near the sandstone cliffs, or find some refreshments in the truck compartments.

Kessel knew there was much to do in a very limited time frame, so he decided not to bother going into work. He didn't worry yet about an excuse for his boss, hoping one would provide itself later on, "I have bigger fish to fry than that." The main benefit of his job was to provide an alibi and arriving suspiciously late was as amiss as not showing up at all.

Removing the limitation of time cards provided flexibility for Kessel's plans. He could now wait until the sun was setting before hiking back to town. He would be starving by that point, but his stomach could handle a lack of food better than a lack of water. And wasted sweat would be pouring from his face if he mistakenly tried to cross the desert with the sun up.

The truck bumped back onto Development Road 90, the thin trail indifferent and unchanged by the nearby murder. Kessel dearly wished he could remain as apathetic. Ignoring the gloomy comparison he reviewed, "Okay, ditch the truck, wait out the sun then get back home. I'll call into work, eat, then start cataloging the new info." Already his stomach was complaining about the frantic start to the day. "Well, maybe eat first."

The dry falls silently watched him approach. The original reasoning for Development Road 90 was to provide tourist access to the region. A localized two year drought had ended those plans and left the falls as uninspiring trickles of water. Soon nothing but dust emptied across the sandstone, the forgotten road a reminder of man's feeble attempt to capitalize on the desert. Kessel slowed the truck a few feet from the edge of the central canal, the cab angled downwards into the deep rut.

Soured by his lacking mechanical knowledge necessary to improvise an exploding gas tank, Kessel settled for looting the cab and then driving the vehicle over the edge. He hoped the thirty foot drop to the bottom of the falls would do enough damage to the truck to hide any evidence. The two body bags were stacked beside him in a bid to damage them as much as possible.

Unable to force himself to move the disgusting white jars meant they would rattle around in the back. He feared the green shell would act as protective casing, but knew at the very least the contents of the cab would be mutilated.

He hungrily opened every cabinet and cubby to look for useful items. Kessel recovered a baseball cap, a half finished bottle of stale water, and a lighter. He hoped the trek back would be completed in a single night, but if anything went wrong the lighter would be his method of starting fire. "Nothing as embarrassing as freezing to death in the desert."

The prize of his search was a carefully packed box of chocolate bars. Three remained, softened from the hot compartment. Sugary calories were better than empty night air for quieting a grumbling stomach.

Easing himself out of the truck he snapped a branch from the nearest tree. The truck idled as Kessel cautiously prepared to jam the gas pedal down. He checked the orientation of the vehicle

and his escape route from it. Standing outside the door he reached within and edged the sturdy tree branch against the foot pedal. The truck rolled forward slightly in response. Kessel angled the opposite end of the branch closer to the seat. He took one deep breath then pushed the branch down and dove backwards from the truck.

Charging forward the vehicle roared loudly against the sandstone walls. Soon tires twirled futilely as they cleared the edge and the truck dropped through the air.

Kessel scrambled to the lip of the falls and intently peered over. Seconds later the heavy truck impacted on the ground with a loud crunch. Kessel heard shattering glass and the dying engine as the cab buckled against the unforgiving stone. The ear piercing siren of fatigued metal reached him, but the green shell was scarcely dented. Sparks blasted from various contact points, but Kessel unhappily noted no fires had started in the vehicle. A roaring blaze was a dependable practice to hide fingerprints.

Content enough with the outcome the old man leaned back and searched for a homely tree to pass the day under.

Kessel awoke at five o'clock, his beeping wrist watch ending a brief nap. Half the day was spent in relaxing contemplation beneath the tree until he had nodded off. Now the sky had darkened and the desert awoke with a flurry of buzzing insects and rustling rodents. Night time was a flurry of hunting and hiding for the nocturnal population.

Feeling rejuvenated from the calming hours spent dozing, Kessel was ready for his long walk home. Based on the time driving to reach the cliff face he estimated Round Mountain was at least fifteen miles away.

The Remington was strapped across his back and the pistol moved to a comfortable back pocket. The jug of water clattered against the metal shotgun barrel, the life saving contents sloshing with each step. Kessel covered his head and neck by tucking the bandanna under the cap he found. Dressed and rested Kessel was eager to set out, feeling ill prepared for a four or five hour adventure in the desert. He had eaten half a chocolate bar during the day, and started on the second piece as he walked. His stomach was delighted to learn that the snacks included a generous layer of peanuts.

When Kessel first moved to Round Mountain he had been an avid hiker. The endless desert and soaring temperatures were an exciting frontier unexplored and unimagined during his youth in Billings. Going from the largest city in Montana to a small mining town in Nevada was a drastic lifestyle change, but Kessel never regretted the reasons that drove him to undergo it.

He had been married once. Frieda Reaves was a beautiful woman too delicate to suffer the cold Montana winters. Close to two years younger, with vibrant brown hair and shimmering blue eyes, she easily hooked Kessel's attention.

They had met during a power outage at the local supermarket, bumping into each other as they aimlessly felt their way along the dark aisles. Dinners and courting followed as Kessel slowly won over the frigid country girl. Two years after the power outage they were wed at the diminutive church they frequented.

Kessel tried to refocus on the sloping trail below him, struggling to block out the pain accompanying the nostalgia. "Smooth going so far," he commented to the night. The hard packed road sped his pace, the pot holes easier to dodge on foot than behind a steering wheel.

A few steps ahead the memories slipped back into his mind, escaping through cracks in the mental wall he had erected. "My love..." he found himself whispering.

Despite its size the job market in Billings had been limited. Joking one night Kessel had

suggested they drop it all and move to the Silver State. Frieda had countered his wild proposal with straight faced analysis of the pros and cons. Eventually the joke became a plan and within a month they hosted a going away party for their exodus south.

Round Mountain wasn't their initial choice for a permanent dwelling. They had considered the larger towns of Tonopah or Beatty, but fate overheated their engine along highway 376. While the car was being fixed they unexpectedly felt at home with the valley's close knit community. Sitting in a local diner the two had been doubting the entire trip when a crew of boisterous miners joined their dinner table. The unexpected imposition instantly lightening the atmosphere and raised the Reaves' spirit. By the time the restaurant closed the group had become friends. Kessel was offered a job at the mines soon after and their repaired car never touched the highway to Tonopah again.

Smiling, Kessel drew the plastic container and wetted his lips. He was nearly out of the mountains and into the flat of the desert. The moon lit the landscape and left the impression that he was journeying across that rocky planetoid. Kessel felt at peace looking at the blue sand filling the space between empty blue roads. He loved travelling at night, his expert avoidance of scurrying scorpions and ankle twisting rabbit holes accrued over many similar hikes.

Kessel and Frieda lived peacefully in their soft blue bungalow. His career slowly developed while Frieda enlarged her circle of friends and involvement with the neighborhood organizations. Frieda was supportive and calming to Kessel, and he provided a stable foundation to contrast her troubled upbringing. After eleven years in Round Mountain they tried to start a family, but never could. Instead they aged together and their love and commitment grew.

She was killed in a traffic accident a year before Kessel discovered the Anubians. A sprinting coyote madly crossing Smoky Boulevard caused a car in the opposing lane to swerve into Frieda. The head-on collision killed the driver and crippled Frieda. She died before Kessel or the paramedics could arrive.

Kessel tried to see his next footstep through a steady flow of tears. Blinking away the sorrow he paused and slumped to the ground. "Frieda..." he whimpered, distracting himself by unwrapping a chocolate bar. Unsteady hands grabbed the food and his breathing calmed as new energy infused his limbs.

Another nine miles lay before Kessel, the lights of Round Mountain clearly visible in the distance. He could hear the soothing repetition of rock grinders at the mine. Wiping his face Kessel rose and took a tentative step, knowing the unlocked memories would continue unbidden.

Kessel had never felt pain like the passing of his wife. He mourned in the worst ways possible; alcohol and long, forgotten nights wasted staring at Frieda's picture. Physically he went to work and ate food and went driving, but mentally he withdrew into a cherished image of the past. With time the empty hole in his chest started to heal. He quit binge drinking and started taking care of himself. Torn jeans and stained shirts were replaced with cleanly pressed clothes as Kessel tentatively emerged from the dark cave of anguish.

Visitations to the graveyard started to last longer than breaking down into tears at the gate. That was when he had seen Yrret; when he had found purpose and meaning again.

Checking for traffic from the safety of a yucca tree Kessel recognized that he was, thankfully, close to home. Worn running shoes eased across the hard pavement of Fremont Route as he visualized the grand dinner awaiting him.

Kessel arrived back at the Mercury Sable close to five hours after leaving the falls. He felt like a week had passed since that incident, but he knew recalling Frieda had that effect.

No police vehicles remained on the scene, but warning tape cordoned off a large square

surrounding Elizabeth's yellow fence. He had snuck through backyards parallel to the alley Morris was kidnapped from.

The shotgun and pistol were barely covered by his wrapped bandanna, a feeble attempt to appear legitimate should someone have stopped him. Grit stuck in his teeth and caked his face into a dusty mask. All the water and chocolate had been consumed and his legs ached from the strenuous fifteen miles.

Lightly closing the Sable's door Kessel absorbed himself in the repose provided by the soft chair. He retrieved the keys and started the car, bright headlights piercing the street. Starving and wishing to recover calories after the long hike, Kessel tried to think of a store that would be open this late. First he removed the dusty baseball cap and bandanna then checked his appearance in the mirror. "Won't be winning any beauty contests, but good enough to not frighten any clerks." The vehicle rolled forward and Kessel turned towards a late night liquor store along the busier Hadley Circle. He had several thick steaks frozen at home, gifts from a friend who hunted antelope. Hungrily licking his lips he reached All Night Liquor, a misnomer considering the place closed at midnight. The neon sign cast a flickering blue over unadorned windows barred with rusted iron.

Inside the cashier absently flipped through a dirt biking magazine, his childish features appearing too young to be manning the register. Kessel drifted to the back, scanning the tall racks of alcohol for his preferred local whiskey.

Briefly he focused on a tantalizing round bottle of rum, the overhead lights causing the dark liquid to shimmer and dance. Pushing away the temptation Kessel inwardly reminded himself he was here for a rich steak marinade, not to regress into nights drinking Frieda away.

Eventually he settled on a bottle of Battle Mountain Whiskey, a pungent liquid crafted in a northern Nevada town. During his youth he had used a cheap light beer, Billings Best, to soak flank steaks in. Now Kessel had refined his recipe to utilize the smoky timber flavor of whiskey. Bringing the find to the front Kessel was amused when the clerk asked him to produce a driver's license. "Was it the wrinkled bills that gave me away?"

Grinning, the cashier slipped a paper bag over the glass bottle. "That or the gray hairs," he handed the bottle over and continued, "just company policy and all."

"Not a problem, it's nice to feel young sometimes." Kessel nodded farewell and headed back to his car, reflecting that his features must look less haunted than he assumed.

Kessel drove in a slight daze below the speed limit, intent on returning home to start cooking. Rounding the corner onto the familiar Cove Street he barely slammed the brakes on in time to avoid the blockade ahead.

Kessel's eyes widened with surprise and fear. A confident voice rang out, each word dripping with hateful venom. "Glad to see you made it back from murdering my friend!"

Matthew stood sullenly in the middle of the street. Bandages stained by the shotgun wound were visible through a tear in his shirt. His eyes were seething with absolute loathing and he sprayed spit with each vowel thrown at Kessel. "Thought I'd just give up and die like our mutual friend Joseph?" Kessel still sat frozen behind the wheel, the surreal scene not yet registering with his exhausted body. "Yes, yes we're well aware of your pitiful efforts so far. Luckily for you we've held back and waited, but as you can see, your luck just ran out!" Matthew had clearly practiced his taunting speech as each word was carefully weighted and timed to have a maximum effect on Kessel. Triumphant Matthew swept his arms to each side, drawing Kessel's attention to the dozens of shambling forms surrounding the Anubian.

Kessel had hoped to have the rest of the week to recover from the recent kidnapping. At least a

few nights to assimilate the new information, update his plans, and continue to ascertain the depths of peril. But the prospect of time to peacefully organize faded as soon as Kessel scrutinized the forms around Matthew.

Only that morning had he learned of the Cartonnage mummies being skillfully animated for a cryptic purpose. Believing Morris had exaggerated the claims meant Kessel was doubly shocked when he experienced the truth first hand. And the truth was standing in a menacing ring around Matthew; fifty or sixty of the undead bodies, gnawing and gashing their jagged teeth and twisting claws at the Sable.

Panic at the unbelievable horror of resurrected bodies repulsed Kessel to his core. Adrenaline burst through his limbs, the self preservation instinct consuming him like he had never felt before. He lowered his window slightly to shout back at Matthew, hoping to keep the leader occupied while he prepared for the onslaught.

Opening weakly he said, "I guess Morris was telling the truth about your little processing center." Kessel gained momentum through his blustering, "Of course he begged for his life soon after." "You son of a bitch! I'll be sure my slaves keep you alive when they start feasting!"

Kessel's hand closed around the bottle resting on the passenger seat. He sneaked the whiskey across and unscrewed the lid. Hoping to distract Matthew and sustain his rambling, time wasting threats he shouted a reply, "You Anubian cowards must really be quaking to throw this many bodies at me."

Matthew stamped his feet and hollered a barely discernible deluge of curses and insults, apparently invigorated by the chance to shout down his opponent face to face. Enduring the barbs Kessel stuffed the discarded bandanna into the top of the whiskey bottle. Next he searched both pockets for the lighter taken from the garbage truck, firmly grasping the cool metal found in his leg pocket.

Resolving to get a scrap of useful information from the meeting Kessel disregarded Matthew's continuing string of attacks. "If you guys are so tough why wait until now to attack me?"

"You fool we are here when we choose to be, no earlier and no later! Your weak officers and uniformed thugs can't protect you forever." Kessel hid his confusion, but perhaps there was an unexpected ally in the local police. After all some of his friends were in the force, and had been for many years. Matthew continued his incessant mocking, "Now get out of your car and die like the hero you pretend to be!"

Kessel ignored the sarcastic offer and focused on the idealized opportunity to collaborate with the police and cease fighting the private war alone. Then he looked up at the mummified ranks and realized enduring the attack was the foremost priority. His thumb flicked a glowing flame from the lighter.

Jammed into the mouth of the bottle the cloth bandanna starting glowing wherever the wavering flame touched. Rapidly returning the Glock to his belt and cocking a shell into the Remington he threw open the Sable's door.

Wildness surged across Kessel's face as he stood shielded by the door, cradling the shotgun and raising the simmering molotov cocktail like a torch. "I heard your shriveled toys were a tad dry. How about a drink?"

Matthew recognized the attack a second too late. Desperately he squawked in Egyptian, trying to command the sluggish minions to charge forward. Kessel was faster and hurled the flaming brand into the crowd.

Glass shattered and the burning wick touched volatile whiskey, instantly engulfing the street in a



fireball. Matthew protectively covered his face and spun away from the blast, keeping a wall of bodies between him and Kessel. The mindless creatures were unable to comprehend the blinding smoke and heat or feel their limbs burning off and almost the entire horde crumbled into ashen piles.

Kessel steadied his shotgun over the door and pumped round after round into the closest mummies that escaped the inferno. Apparently one of Matthew's orders had been received as the survivors were feebly advancing on the Mercury Sable. Their gait was stunted and uneven like a puppet and Kessel doubted they could even run. Glowing flames reflected off the shotgun barrel as he turned the street into a firing range, dropping any aggressor within a twenty foot radius. The pump shotgun grew hot with every expelled shell and Kessel knew he would need to reload the weapon soon.

The limited whiskey was quickly consumed by the conflagration. Unable to find combustible material the hungry blaze faded to embers. The street darkened and Kessel peered through the billowing smoke to find where Matthew had fled. Distantly he heard sirens and knew the road would soon be filled with a throng of responsive fire trucks.

Reaching into his car he grabbed the ammo bag and began sliding a handful of shells into the Remington. "I bet you won't like returning to Yrret with this news, eh Matthew?" He warily stalked forward, stooping to a crouch every few feet to check underneath cars for exposed legs. "Things might be embarrassing around the warehouse when everyone learns you lost fifty pieces of walking firewood to a bottle of Battle Mountain." Kessel enjoyed delivering the taunts to the undoubtedly fuming Matthew, pleased at how suddenly he had reversed the odds.

Finally he caught the leader ducking behind a jeep parked in the driveway two houses ahead. Three decomposing pairs of feet confirmed mummy bodyguards idly formed a protective shield around the man. Like a childhood game he pretended to still be searching, maintaining his course down the middle of the street.

Surprisingly Matthew revealed himself first, stepping from behind the jeep when Kessel was a house away. The mummies mimicked the action, still intervening between the two enemies. "Always the impetuous hero. Your dimwit brain must think we can only mummify people?" A chill crawled up Kessel's spine as he considered the possibilities, hoping Matthew was bluffing. "Aw and now you're so far from your safe car, aren't ya?"

Kessel figured he could reach the Sable in thirty seconds with a dedicated sprint, but he didn't trust the strength of his legs after hiking all night. Fighting to maintain his resolve Kessel took aim with his shotgun. He never got the chance to pull the trigger.

A loud crash echoed in the yards flanking him as Matthew leered and began chanting sonorous Egyptian. Kessel retreated towards his vehicle, sweeping the shotgun from left to right in the hopes of catching whatever festering undead emerged. He could hear something scratching along the concrete sidewalks. Something big.

Wooden fences blocked his view and would stop any shots as he backpedaled from the Anubian. Finally the latest threat emerged. A pair of monstrosities effortlessly sprang over the gates on either side of the road. The old man stifled a scream and turned to dash towards his car, the engine sputtering condolences as each stride brought him closer.

Gigantic four legged animals slavered and yipped, loosely wrapped in strips of linen that covered their patchy fur. Their imposing figures dwarfed his car in length and matched the Sable's height. Hunched necks and broad shoulders swayed as they lopped closer and closer to Kessel, their long muzzles barking like thunder. As he desperately fled Kessel realized they were enormous mummified jackals. And they were hungry.

They easily overtook Kessel, their wide strides propelling the beasts forward at an incredible rate. The closest jackal lowered its vast maw and hurled Kessel into the air like a fragile toy. The forty foot flight ended painfully as the old man crashed onto the hood of his car. He landed on his left side, the tough metal denting and forcing a spatter of blood from his mouth. Kessel concluded the voyage by deflecting and scrapping along the pavement.

Delirious with pain Kessel slowly rose to his feet, steadying himself with a weak push from the Sable's bumper. His dizzy mind processed the sound of the Remington clattering on the sidewalk ten feet away. With the ferocious jackals close on his tail the gun may as well have been in California.

Snarling a reminder of their proximity the two jackals seemed to be thrilled with the hunt. Kessel didn't expect to survive the night, but he still reflexively noted they may not be as mindless as the human mummies. Trying to profile their behavior he labored to notice defining features about the creatures. One was missing its left eye and the other had a thick spiny mane of fur running down its neck. "Eyeless and Spine it is," he weakly commented, wondering what difference it made to his last hours alive.

Desperately he pulled himself towards the open door and slouched into the driver's seat. He fired a trio of blind shots in the general direction of the beasts, the feeble 9mm bullets unnoticed by the towering undead. He slammed the gas pedal with all his strength, dragging his right hand onto the steering wheel as the tires spun forward. Kessel tasted coppery blood and realized he couldn't feel his left arm. Both eyes were beginning to swell shut and he probed the edge of a cheekbone splintered into his mouth.

The winding Sable scrapped the length of a long recreational vehicle parked on the side of the road. The crunching impact spurred Kessel from the edge of unconsciousness, but he knew death was closing quickly.

The baying undead jackals pierced the night and overruled the droning of Matthew's Egyptian commands. Kessel vaguely registered that the chant may have to be maintained to control the fickle beasts, and that empowered him with optimism. "If I can just get outside the city and away from his influence," he slurred, saliva and blood dribbling from his split lips.

The Sable sped along as best it could, the weak engine outmatched by the jackal's relentless pace. Their natural speed provided by fused leg bones and expansive feet was further augmented by the dark energy used in the animating process.

His swerving entrance onto Hadley Circle elicited numerous beeping car horns, the noise increasing as he angled left onto Smoky Boulevard a moment later. Silence followed as the jackals galloped past, many drivers rubbing their eyes in an attempt to disbelieve the undead aberrations.

Departing south out of Round Mountain he hoped to lose the jackals on the open highway. The engine labored past eighty miles an hour as Kessel forced the pedal down. Gravel clattered against the frame and he eased the wheel back and forth to stop a fatal spin out. Knowing going any faster on unpaved roads would likely kill him with a flat tire, he slowed as the junction to Wall Canyon Road approached.

Squinting into the rear mirror Kessel couldn't see the jackals anywhere. Knowing their shadowed bodies would be impossible to track against the starry sky the encouraging view provided no comfort. Kessel cursed himself for wasting the molotov on the feeble lure the Anubians craftily baited him with, wishing he could at least see his pursuers.

Swinging around a slow moving farm truck Kessel's hand shook as the tires fiercely clung to the

road. Peripheral vision obscured by his swollen eyelids forced Kessel to turning his head to nervously judge the distance to the truck. Dodging back in front of the sleepy vehicle awarded him a precious glimpse of the jackal to his left.

The beast casually matched his speed, appearing bored as Kessel slowed to survive the turn onto Wall Canyon Road. He violently twisted the wheel again and again with his right hand, unable to properly control the vehicle with his numb arm. Expelling a precarious sigh of relief at barely making the corner Kessel accelerated down the hard packed road. The Sable's rattling frame harmonized with his clattering teeth as he headed towards the pavement of Fremont Route. Suddenly he saw an indistinct form leap over the car, followed closely by another emerging from the opposite side. The jackals were playfully vaulting over his roof, their insidious malevolence confirming Kessel's suspicion that they were directly controlled by Matthew or innately intelligent. His escape plan was founded on the belief that it was the former; that the beasts might just wander away if he achieved enough distance from Round Mountain.

Buzzing headlights ahead reflected the smooth surface of Fremont Route. The road paralleled the main highway and was therefore busy by association. Generously wide and generally straight the route eventually looped north through the hills. Kessel dearly wished to lose the jackals by then to avoid a curving chase through jagged rocks. "That or be dead..." he mused negatively. Focusing on the upcoming turn Kessel gathered strength from his ebbing reserves. He slipped his hand to the top of steering wheel and prepared to swing the vehicle left, if the jackals didn't get there first.

Compressing the horn with his forearm he tried to warn the speeding traffic of his uncontrolled merge. Tightening his grip Kessel started to rotate the wheel, realizing the safest approach was to cut the corner and merge onto the paved road at a shallower angle.

The safest approach was not the option imposed by the jackals. Kessel's head cracked into the side window as Spine's serrated fangs sunk through the hatch of the Sable's trunk. The resistance slowed the vehicle and caused the tires to protest loudly at the competition. Alarmed as Eyeless charged from the opposite side Kessel adjusted to brace away from the impact.

The door nearest the old man collapsed as the jackal boldly threw himself at the car, propelling it sideways onto Fremont Route. Eyeless dropped to his haunches and growled at the car, momentarily stunned by the powerful impact.

The howling ring of exhausted metal reminded Kessel of the garbage truck striking the bottom of the sandstone falls. The Sable lifted from its spinning tires and would have rolled if Spine wasn't still tightly gripping the back. Drivers swerved and slowed in awe of the scene, baffled by what they were witnessing.

Eventually the weight of the vehicle balanced and leveled back onto the ground. Rubber instantly gripped the pavement and the car jolted forward like a cornered antelope. In the mirror Kessel could see Spine's soulless stare and felt the car fight against the jackal's fearsome strength. Revving the engine and jerking the wheel back and forth made Kessel wish he had all wheel drive. There was a clattering of tearing bone as Spine's clawed feet dug into the pavement, trying to find enough purchase the stall the Sable.

Rusted metal finally gave way to rotted flesh as the trunk snapped free, throwing Spine back and leaving him to angrily detach his jaw. Enraged at losing his prey the jackal lashed out at nearby bystanders, utterly demolishing three cars. Eyeless had recovered and was snarling and yipping his infuriated companion into chasing their original target.

Kessel watched the scene recede over his shoulder, hoping the infighting was an early symptom of Matthew's control deteriorating.

Wind roared around the car as Kessel powered down Fremont Route. Most of the traffic was centered on the highway, but travellers still infrequently drove past him towards Round Mountain. The riot of headlights behind him had faded miles ago as southern traffic was, presumably, jammed by the destroyed innocent cars.

Tenaciously hunted and barely conscious made the enchanting blue sands of the midnight desert lose their appeal. Kessel hadn't seen the in the jackals in the last eight miles, giving him hope they were distracted by the confusion at the junction. His speed was unrelenting as the vehicle approached its peak.

The Sable screamed to 100 miles per hour and still Kessel kept it floored, feeling safer as the speedometer crept towards 110. Kessel knew the car would need repairs after overworking the engine for such a sustained distance.

Eventually the paved road would intersect a gravel line to Peavine Canyon, but that was more than fifty miles ahead. For the moment Kessel grasped the steering wheel and made minor adjustments, lacking experience for more complex maneuvers at high speed.

Cursing he saw Spine gaining behind him, the sprinting jackal appearing stretched to his limit of his body. Kessel knew the undead forms wouldn't tire like normal muscles, but their rapidly pumping limbs could only physically move so fast. Eyeless trailed a few dozen feet behind but Kessel was unable to determine the beast's condition in the low light.

Testing his left arm again Kessel discovered he could move it through a lessened set of motions. The limb pulsed with agony but his racing heart fought to quiet the signals. Focusing he lifted his shattered hand and rested it on the bottom of the wheel, the extra support easing his discomfort. Kessel endured the pain as two hands felt less risky stabilizing the car.

Headlights appeared on the horizon, the beams wavering slightly as the approaching vehicle rolled down a small slope. While trying to think of a way to exploit the other car Kessel checked Spine's position. The two jackals were approaching side by side now, their sharp claws hitting the concrete with a steady rhythm as linen wrappings thrashed behind them like streamers. Each unfeeling visage showed no sign of fatigue or a desire to stop.

Fresh blood pooled in open mouth as Kessel tried to steady himself, "Maybe I'll just have to give them a reason to stop." The Sable was rapidly approaching the lone car, almost doubling the tourist's speed.

The restored control of his arm was realized just in time for an audacious struggle to outwit the jackals. He let off the gas slightly, noticing his leg was tired from driving so hard, but didn't touch the brakes. Still unsure of their sentience he didn't want to risk the beasts recognizing an increased glow from his tail lights.

Easing the car back to a reasonable ninety miles per hour he gradually shifted closer to the center line. Forcing his swollen eyes open he saw the jackals copied the variation. Wishing to keep them distracted he limply raised the Glock with his left arm. Lowering the window he fired two shots backwards before the resulting pain from the kickback forced him to quit.

The predators responded by closing to breathing distance of his rear bumper, their mandibles fervently snapping in preparation. "A...little...closer..." Kessel alternated his view between the approaching car and the approaching beasts, trying to time his trick as perfectly as possible. "I hope you have your seatbelt on," he pleaded to the oncoming car.

When the vehicles were closest, the blinding headlights brightest, the confusion greatest, Kessel acted. He deftly swung the Sable into the opposing lane.

Knowing his wife was crippled by an unsuspecting driver making the same mistake, Kessel

momentarily froze. Fractions of a second mattered so his brain instantaneously switched to the next step. Continuing cut to the left the Sable groaned as it edged off the road into uneven desert. He could feel the rear of the car start to sway as the heavy frame resisted fishtailing or flipping from the bumpy terrain. Kessel hoped the unaware driver didn't have time to react or change course as any unexpected movement could be fatal.

The other car sped past and Kessel jerked the wheel to the right to roughly bounce onto Fremont Route. Smooth pavement accommodated his increasing speed and he cranked his neck around to watch the aftermath.

As planned the mummies followed his line exactly. For a fleeting breath the jackals were illuminated by the headlights of the other car. Their feral expression showed no shock or fear as the car plowed into the pair at sixty miles per hour.

Eyeless reacted first with incredible agility the stunned Kessel wouldn't have thought possible. The jackal sprang directly upwards, muscled legs quivering with every ounce of available energy. For a moment the beast hung suspended in the air, seeming to escape the clutches of gravity. Underneath the leaping animal Spine failed to follow and subsequently was struck in the side by the car. His dried and withered rib cage exploded inwardly as the car started to fold at the front. A cloud of dust erupted from the gaping wound, substituting wet innards. Momentum lifted the back of the car off the road and the angled vehicle pushed forward like a blunt knife, splitting Spine in half. His involuntary yelp was cut short as the remains of the jackal flew down the road. Airbags erupted in the car as any passengers were thrown forward. Windows shattered and sparks flourished from the wheel wells and doors. Spine's soft tissue had slowed the oncoming car slightly, but the vehicle still skidded off the road. Smoke poured from the front and the red tail lights judged Kessel like demonic eyes.

Still accelerating the Sable recovered the original 100 mile per hour speed. Kessel wanted to stop and return to the crash to ensure the innocent people were alive. Appalled he was torn between a fierce desire to confront the repercussions or just continue fleeing the jackals. Eyeless solved the dilemma for him.

Appearing to draw strength from the destruction of Spine the provoked beast howled loudly and rushed forward. Even with a lead of speed and distance the vehicle was briefly overtaken. Kessel could see the baleful eye bobbing less than a foot away, a moment before Eyeless shouldered the driver side door.

Already crooked and nearly unhinged from the charge at the junction the metal splintered free from the force. Kessel stared in disbelief as the door skidded along the road on a bed of sparks. Barking victoriously Eyeless snapped and bit at the exposed man. Jagged teeth ripped lengthwise down his left arm, the deep laceration also reopening previous wounds. Grime from the jackal's mouth mingled with blood as Kessel heaved the car away, frantic to distance himself from the attacker.

The maneuver was needless as the jackal was already slowing. Eyeless settled on the rear of the Sable as the renewed burst of energy had dimmed. His stark vulnerability compelled Kessel to accelerate nervously, the black pavement zipping past the missing door.

The drone of the open air lulled Kessel into complacency. He was physically exhausted and acutely noticed it as waning adrenaline drained from his body. Mentally he was unable to face the horrifying crash he had inflicted on defenseless humans, miles ago.

Too weak to summon tears Kessel distracted himself by monitoring Eyeless through the back window. As before the jackal seemed unaffected by the miles of ground covered, and Kessel began to lose the light of hope delivered when Spine was killed.

Peavine Canyon Road was another twelve or thirteen miles away, but Kessel knew his high speed would devour that in a few minutes. Paving of the road had started last summer since a high volume of tourist traffic used it to traverse the desert between highway 376 and Fremont Route.

Unable to prevent slipping in and out of delirium, Kessel had a difficult time planning a way to destroy the last jackal. He felt the original idea of escaping Matthew's influence had failed. Coughing blood he spoke to maintain alertness, "Perhaps I can cut across to the highway and get Eyeless tangled under a semi." Doubting he was up to the task Kessel wheezed in a resigned tone, "Or I could drive until I run out of gas and let the bastard devour me."

Slumping forward Kessel appeared to give up and accept that fate. In response the car started to deviate from the straight road and towards the ditch. Unperturbed by the change Kessel raised his broken face as a dull shimmer caught his attention.

Soothing light poured into the Sable from the street lights at the junction ahead. The glinting sting was reflecting from a bent golden ring embracing his finger. His wedding band.

The familiar metal had been worn for so long he often forgot it was there. Ragged voiced Kessel hoarsely intoned the recognition, "Frieda..." Dormant pools of energy flowed through his body upon speaking her name. The hole ripped in his chest from her passing seemed to warm and glow. In truth his heart was pumping four times a second, his body rebelling and refusing to surrender and die, even if his mind ordered it.

Briefly ashamed of his cowardice in the face of overwhelming odds, Kessel forced himself upright. "One last gasp then, for my wife."

He wavered the car forward with his wounded arm and gingerly pulled the Glock from his belt. Stretching his right arm across his shoulder he stuck the weapon out through the space provided by the destroyed door. Aiming as best he could to the right of the car he fired rapidly, sweeping the gun horizontally so that it ended pointing on the left.

Watching in the rear view mirror he saw a pair of the systematic shots strike Eyeless. Kessel didn't intend to slay the jackal with 9mm bullets, aware that bringing down the gigantic beast would be as likely as killing an elephant with a pellet gun. He merely intended to distract Eyeless long enough to slow and complete the turn onto Peavine Canyon Road.

The jackal howled at the wounds, hesitation causing its legs to stutter and slow. Kessel gladly matched the reduced pace and yanked the pistol back inside the car. Planting his good hand back on the wheel he started to skid the car east on the link road.

Straightening the rusted vehicle on the partially paved road Kessel was surprised to see Eyeless had fallen even further behind. Perhaps the Glock hits had affected Matthew somehow, or further weakened his control over the distant minion.

Motivated by his success Kessel sped down Peavine Canyon Road towards the namesake canyon. He remembered the buttressed concrete bridge spanning the ravine and knew the location would provide his only chance at stopping the hungry jackal.

In the distance the highway snaked, bustling lanes hosting a steady flow of traffic. Kessel slowed from ninety miles per hour as the span approached. The two lane road narrowed over the bridge; sections of stone reinforcing each side tightened the way even more. A similar row of stone divided the road.

Though desperate, the last stand was to be planned as thoroughly as his first mission. He could angle his car to give cover and provide a firing platform for his undamaged hand. Most importantly the barricaded span would stop the jackal from flanking or getting behind him.

Kessel could then empty the extra Glock magazine at the mummy before it got close enough to eviscerate him.

Slamming on the brakes and swerving the Sable to the desired angle he grabbed the ammo bag and painfully slid the half empty magazine from the pistol. Catching a full magazine by the handle he locked the ammo in by pushing the gun down on the seat. Kessel held no illusions that he would be able to reload with a single hand in the heat of combat.

He had parked so the remaining door would protect him from the advancing mummy. The rear of the car was slanted towards the central divider while the headlights reflecting off the outer concrete edge. Rolling down the window he crouched on the bridge and leveled the gun through the opening. Buzzing insects and flecks of sand chaotically filtering through his lights. Kessel waited.

Eyeless arrived out of the night, growling and barking as if to announce his presence. The confident strides seemed slack and unsteady, which caused Kessel to scrutinize the beast for signs of weakness. Triumphant he noticed that a string of linen wrappings trailed behind the mummy, some covered in large patches of mangy fur. "So my original hypothesis was right!" His excitement and happiness soured as the words caused the broken cheekbone to shift painfully. The jackal stumbled and fell, the dark eyes still unchanged by the severed link to Matthew. Emitting a guttural cough Eyeless shambled to his feet, trying to charge Kessel through the blinding headlights.

Kessel exhaled and fired at the approaching jackal. He opened with a concentrated burst containing six of his fifteen bullets. The shots sped through the night like angry wasps, blasting apart the thin undead skin. Eyeless meandered to the left, unintentionally dodging the last shot. No blood dripped from the exit wounds and the dried husk continued advancing.

The beast was thirty feet away but progressing no faster than the human mummies Kessel had destroyed earlier. Eagerly aiming again he emptied the clip with a trio of three shot salvos. The additional nine bullets seemed to cripple and nearly kill Eyeless as even the smallest wounds accumulate. Dirty cloth strips surrounded the jackal and clouds of sand discharged after each impact.

Kessel lowered the empty gun and pulled himself to a standing position, trying to determine what to do next. Eyeless closed to less than twenty feet away as Kessel lowered himself into the passenger seat, scrambling to find more ammo. He figured a crippled attempt at reloading was better than waiting to die. Pulling a black metal magazine from the bag he tried to align it with the Glock.

At the same time Kessel mentally searched for alternative options. Cataloging his equipment reminded Kessel of the knife still sheathed around his ankle. He could try to hurl it or stab the creature in the face. Perhaps he could get into the car and try to repeatedly ram the undead against the median.

Unfortunately for Kessel his hesitation meant none of the uncertain attacks were completed.

Eyeless thundered a final roar and ran forward, burning the remaining dark energy animating him. The jackal's flesh started to rip and tear as the undead fuel overpowered his body.

Deteriorating rapidly Eyeless shoved the car with reckless fervor. The Sable lifted from the bridge and slammed on top of the outer barrier, tentatively balancing on the cracked concrete. Slumping to the ground the jackal closed its remaining eye. An unnatural wind swirled around the corpse. The dry fur, skin, and wrappings wavered and dust began to split free from the body. The whirlwind subsided as the jackal transformed into heaping piles of sand, from outstretched claws to open mouth.

The Glock slipped from his hand and Kessel, caught unaware, was thrown against the front window. The remaining door slammed closed and bruised his right leg as Kessel blindly tried to reorient himself inside the Sable. The jostling and rocking caused the unstable car to falter and grind free of the concrete barrier.

Silently opening his mouth to scream the old man in his steel prison fell over the edge of the bridge, plummeting to the ground below.

A thin ray of light slanted into his eyes.

Probing outwards with his senses Kessel was unaware of his body or surroundings. Dull feeling throbbed in his arm, confirming he had one limb at least. The pain spoke next across his neck and forehead, then his stomach and legs.

Muted echoes of cars overhead were washed away by the wind. Kessel tried speaking but no words came, tried opening his eyes but no further light shone.

Slowly the sluggish pulsing increased until intense, fiery pain wracked his entire body.

Unrelenting waves of agony smashed against him until Kessel blacked out.

A thin ray of light slanted into his eyes.

He heard the subdued drone of whispered conversation. Coarse blankets warmed the metal beneath him. Stone pressed roughly against his arm and he tried to speak again, but this time the words tentatively came. "H-hello?"

"Sarge that son of a bitch is awake! Let me ki--"

Kessel's attention drifted as he struggled to stay conscious.

A second voice spoke authoritatively, calming the first. "You know that's not how we run things. He'll first--"

Still unfocused, Kessel coughed, seizing pain erupting from his stomach from the action. Gently he opened his eyes further, slowly letting them adjust to the light. Mustard yellow walls surrounded him, immediately making him wish he had stayed asleep.

Kessel knew he was in jail.

"Alright come on now," a soft spoken female commanded, "you need water." Refreshing liquid trickled down his throat and for a moment he fondly hallucinated Frieda was feeding him. His eyes peeked open and he interrupted the drink with a resigned sigh. The stone walls of jail still entombed him.

Craning his neck he tried to catch a glimpse of the woman. He saw the imposing white frock of a nurse and tight curls of black hair. "Who...what h-happened," drained by the effort of speaking his eyes slipped closed.

Kessel knew time passed from the levels of light or dark that awaited him while testing his vision. The span could have been days or it could have been weeks, but eventually he recovered enough strength to hold his eyes open and complete full sentences.

He was still unsure what had happened, and the regularly visiting caregiver refused to elaborate. Kessel had lain on the metal bunk for twelve days before he had a chance to orient himself. In the late afternoon, nearly two weeks after he toppled from the bridge, the door to his cell clanked open.

"Hello, Kessel." The voice was calm and the old man recognized it from his first memory of the place.

Turning his head slightly Kessel peered across the room. "Oscar...Oscar is that you? I...I..." He



heard the squeak of polished shoes and two men advanced into the prison room.

Calmly shushing Kessel the voice spoke again, "Yes it's me. I've brought a Mr. Glagorn to see you. He's...he's the court appointed lawyer for your case, you understand."

"My case? What...I still don't--"

A new voice rang out coldly, curt and to the point. "As Sergeant Redmond said I am Mr. Glagorn. The Sergeant has requested that he brief you on the situation, but I will be sitting in to represent the interests of the court in this matter."

"Good, yes...please brief me, please tell me what's going on!" Kessel tried to leverage himself to a sitting position, failing painfully.

Oscar moved forward to try to restrict the old man, "Take it easy fella. First of all, tell me what you think is going on."

"Well...I..." Kessel realized he hadn't had time to craft a false story, and was too weak and wounded to think of a solid alibi on the spot. Remembering Matthew's words concerning police protection, he attempted to probe Oscar's knowledge on the subject. "I was being chased across town, and I tried to escape down Fremont. My..." he rolled the possibilities over in his mind, "...pursuers caught me at the canyon bridge, and rammed me off it." There was silence for a moment and Kessel nervously thought Oscar was awaiting elaboration. "I don't remember getting here though."

"No, no you wouldn't have. We got a call from a motorist about twenty miles from Peavine Canyon Road, saying there had been an accident. A family was...struck and drove off the road. They were coming up from Tonopah, and last I heard the husband and wife are okay."

"A...family?" Kessel cringed and tried to hide under the blankets as the memory of his selfish maneuver to kill Spine resurfaced. "Was anyone else hurt?"

"Unfortunately yes," Mr. Glagorn carried on before Oscar could speak. The lawyer had drawn a stack of papers from his briefcase and was reading from a stapled sheet. "A girl, age 11, is in a coma. And her brother, age 8, may be blind in his left eye." No emotion entered the man's voice as he recited the information.

Solemn silence hung in the air and clung to their clothes. Finally Oscar broke the rising tension, "Well, the husband was coherent enough to tell us that a Mercury Sable cut in front of him before continuing south at high speeds." Oscar cleared his throat and stared at Kessel, an unreadable emotion edging his face. "So the next morning we had a pair of squad cars search the area, and one noticed damage to the bridge at Peavine Canyon. He checked over the edge and saw your--"

Cutting in the lawyer corrected the policeman, "He saw 'a' vehicle, Sergeant. Ownership of said vehicle cannot be attached to my cl--"

Oscar exploded with his own interruption. "For God's sake Glagorn we know Kessel owns the Mercury and he just damn well said he got rammed off the bridge!"

Bristling at the raised voice the lawyer responded, "You told me this was going to be an informal meeting!" Mr. Glagorn seemed to enjoy lecturing, "Anything my client says here, or doesn't say, is impermissible in court."

"If this is informal then don't fight me on semantics!"

Kessel alternatively analyzed both faces during the argument. He realized Oscar's bushy red beard resembled a fiery maw whenever he raised his chin.

Nodding slightly Mr. Glagorn conceded and returned to his documents.

"Right well, we saw," Oscar smirked slightly and emphasized the next word, "your car at the bottom, wrapped around one of the support beams. We couldn't get a rig out until noon, but we

had a medic clamber down to check for survivors. Obviously you were inside and obviously you survived, even if your car didn't."

Kessel opened and closed his mouth, preparing to speak before rethinking the notion and returning to silence.

"So anyways, we had some other...strange reports that night. The Woodlocks," confusion painted across Kessel's face caused Oscar to elaborate, "the family of four in the car that was pushed off the road, well they say they hit...something. The report says an antelope, but I was on the scene when the husband was rambling about it and it ain't sound like no antelope." Kessel knew that when Oscar got agitated or frustrated his vernacular tended to slip.

Recovering the Sergeant continued, "And that wasn't the only report involving, um, things of that nature. The intersection of Fremont Route and, let's see," Oscar greedily grabbed a sheet of paper from the lawyer, "right, Wall Canyon Road. There were seven reports of similar sounding...antelope." Oscar's doubt manifested as a scoff.

Kessel spoke, regaining some confidence that, considering the circumstances, the details of the chase had been as accurately recorded as possible, "So it sounds like an...antelope problem. Am I being charged for swerving around the Woodlocks?"

Oscar looked disappointed at Kessel's obvious dodge of the issue. "Kessel, you're better than this." Sighing, the heavy set man dropped to a crouch, his knees creaking in protest of the unbalanced load. His intense gaze met Kessel's exhausted eyes and for a moment the two men exchanged emotions rather than words. "Now, let's talk as friends. What exactly is going on here?"

Oscar's analysis had stung Kessel, and he felt ashamed. In his heart he knew trying to avoid the consequences was as cowardly as when he surrendered to himself on the road. In a sense he had lost sight of his original goal and personal mission. After only two murders and mere days of active war he had forgotten the real reason to fight the Anubians. Instead of acting as a protector of the town of Round Mountain he had hurt a family and tried to weasel and worm his way free from a police Sergeant.

Kessel had hoped he could withstand the storms of war, hoped he could be as tough and heartless as his enemies. But he realized then, confined by those mustard yellow walls, that he couldn't. He couldn't bind and drag friends and coworkers into the desert to be executed, no matter their affiliation or past evils. Destroying mindless abominations, unnatural creatures, and enemy soldiers was different, but even then he managed to endanger the lives of innocent people.

Looking into Oscar's unwavering eyes his hardened exterior began to crumble until only the old, broken widower remained.

"Your accident causing antelope are really gigantic, undead jackals mummified by an insidious invading army lead by a high priest of Anubis."

"Good, now we're getting somewhere," whispered Oscar, approval softening his features.

Over the next three days Kessel outlined the Anubians and their goals to Oscar, who eagerly listened. Equally eager was the writing hand of Mr. Glagorn as he furiously jotted notes and diagrams of his client's unbelievable tale.

Kessel felt as if the self imposed burden was being lifted, that the weight and responsibility of stopping the Anubians was now shared. The exchange of information went both ways and Kessel learned much from the police work that had occurred.

As apprehensive as the Anubians were about moving against the police, it seemed the police

were just as hesitant to attack first. Pierre, the Chief of the Round Mountain police force, was worried that a barbaric street war would ensue if he dug below the surface of some of the strange activities going on in town.

"Now that we have some eye witness accounts and all your intelligence, that Frenchmen will definitely have to put a stop to this," Oscar excitedly mused after a particularly lengthy session with Kessel.

Wiser to the hierarchies and political forces, even in a town as small as Round Mountain, Mr. Glagorn was not as quick to agree. "It's likely Chief Pierre will spend at least another month confirming my client's information. He can't just start, as you would say, 'kicking down doors' based on the words of one wounded man."

Oscar casually waved the lawyer's points aside. "It isn't just Kessel's info; it's the people at the junction and the Woodlocks and a some other people in town."

Mr. Glagorn adjusted his round glasses and simply stated, "Well, I guess we'll see."

Kessel stopped short of confiding everything to Oscar, reminding himself that the man was still a police Sergeant and still had duties to perform. He left out any specific details concerning both Joseph and Morris, although he tentatively probed to see how much the police knew about both cases.

The only information he gleaned from Oscar was that the Sergeant was equally shy about revealing anything related to the two murders.

There was also the matter of Kessel's upcoming court date, which darkened the mood of the cell like a cloud on the horizon. The hearing had been delayed until the Woodlocks recovered enough to testify, and also until the doctors could finalize their prognosis of the children. And so what began as unencumbered warmth of sharing soon degenerated into a cold, distant relationship. Kessel and Oscar spoke less frequently and some days not at all, leaving Kessel to idly roam his small room. Kessel couldn't hear any other prisoners and wasn't sure how many cells the building had to begin with.

The unadorned cell was a ten foot square with solid bricks for three of the walls, the iron bar entryway supporting the fourth. Aside from the metal bunk swathed in blankets there was a toilet and wash basin shielded in the far corner, a comfort rarely afforded to prisoners in larger cities.

The female caregiver visited less and less as Kessel's wounds scarred over and strength returned to his limbs. The deep red gash from the last bite of Eyeless still scrawled down his left arm. The hand was slower to close and performed less dexterously in any trials or tests Kessel devised. He doubted his ability to handle a larger bore rifle, if he ever got the chance, and didn't think he'd be winning many boxing matches soon.

His right leg was in equally poor shape. When the Sable's door had tried to close it crushed the blood vessels in his calf muscles. Smashing to the desert floor fifteen feet below the bridge had nearly severed the limb, but his body settled for internal bleeding instead. Left untended for the hours before police arrived meant he couldn't feel much below his knee.

Walking with a pronounced limp Kessel eyed himself in the mirror. His cheeks were covered in a patchy beard, the brown stubble graying slightly from stress and age. Clear green eyes still reflected at him, his inner fire unquenched by the increasingly tedious prison sentence.

Wide streaks of hair had been shaved off as part of the emergency medical rescue performed at the crash site. Brutal, ugly scars meshed his cranium, a gift from the concrete beam his falling car had rolled into.

The paramedics and doctors were amazed he survived and were even more amazed at how quickly he was recovering. He stood regardless of the infectious bite, shattered bones, and internal hemorrhaging all across his body. Hundreds of tiny cuts and scrapes covered every piece of exposed skin. Still he was happy for the rest and comforts of the prison, realizing he had been exhausted past all mortal limits on the day of the second kidnapping. An unexpected benefit was time to think that had been denied by the hostile visit from Matthew.

Kessel knew his body was defying death not because of flesh or muscle, but because his heart and mind glowed with a quest for redemption. The Woodlocks were the first collateral innocents torn apart by his private war. During captivity Kessel began to realize if he hadn't spent time crushed in a car, on the edge of death, perhaps more victims would have followed.

"At what cost the war?" Kessel asked himself, pacing like the caged tiger he was becoming.

"After all we've talked about I'd be inclined to let you out, but it isn't my call." Kessel uneasily ran his hands over his scalp as Oscar continued. "It's not just your Anubians I'm worried about. A lot of people are confused and upset at what they hear about the Woodlocks. Rumors spread, you know that as well as anyone."

Flashing with anger the old man raised his face and glared at Oscar. "Hey now..." he started, but Oscar put a calming hand on the man's shoulder.

"Look I didn't mean anything by that, but you know how tough it was after Frieda..."

"Yeah, well, that's in the past Oscar." Cutting off the Sergeant's attempt to reply Kessel quickly returned the conversation to its original path, "So you were saying Anubians aren't my only problem?"

"I don't know if you remember but when you first woke up there was another man out here."

Kessel recalled the angry voice but said nothing. "Well he's a detective, Detective Kurt, and he's sent down from Carson City. Look this guy fits all the bad stereotypes from movies, and he wasn't too happy about the Woodlocks. He's not local, he doesn't know the suspicious things going on around town, and he certainly doesn't believe any of these Egyptian fairy tales."

"Fairy tales...huh." Kessel remarked, absently staring at the ground.

"Come on, why do you think we patched you up in a jail cell and not at the hospital where you belonged? Like I said most people are confused," more to himself Oscar said, "and the mixed signals from various departments aren't helping."

"So I'm supposed to stay in here while they get stronger and stronger, just because a detective and a few townfolk have their pitchforks out for me? Pierre hasn't even moved yet and it's not like the Anubians are waiting around."

"I know, I know all of that Kessel. But it doesn't change the fact that I'm a police officer first and your friend second." Seeing no response was forthcoming from Kessel, Oscar slowly turned to leave.

"Tell me one thing, did your search of the golf club turn up anything?"

Worn from Kessel's persistence, Oscar shook his head, "The Chief is letting me send two badges down tomorrow night."

"Good, he'll get his proof then."

Mr. Glagorn's assessment had been correct; Chief Pierre resisted acting until he could confirm the various tall tales he was hearing. The bureaucracy normally associated with larger stations still affected Round Mountain, so the Chief didn't have a chance to announce his intent until a week later.

Pierre still was unsatisfied at the accuracy of information he was receiving. He had scheduled

lunch meetings, TV and radio appearances, and more in an effort to calm the population. Some groups called for Kessel's blood, as Oscar had warned, while others dismissed the entire affair as misleading excitement.

A veteran of Round Mountain familiar with its families, Pierre had gone directly to the original source. He ordered Oscar to order Kessel to prepare his most reliable location or person tied to the Anubians.

In turn Kessel had tried to visualize his confiscated planning board. He had several leads to feed the Chief, but knew that any break in the case would need to be big enough to sway the citizens of Round Mountain. With luck even Detective Kurt would start listening.

So he had selected the golf club. Initially founded parallel to the mine, the ancient cabin had hosted some of the finest parties and events in the town's history. Any corruption or infiltration of the honored establishment would, with luck, shock Chief Pierre into action.

At least that was Kessel's plan; another half a week passed before Oscar had mentioned the two officers that would be sent to the golf club.

Kessel continued to pace his cell, gnashing his teeth at the inefficient efforts outside his control. "He'll get his proof then," he repeated, slipping back onto the metal bunk and trying to quiet his mind enough to sleep.

A tense suspicious saturated the air when the fateful night arrived. Kessel anxiously waited for Oscar or another officer to report the outcome of the golf club search. Watching the clock like he was at a disliked job, Kessel's excitement became trepidation as ten at night approached.

Finally he heard the heavy portal to the prison open and the quick steps of someone hurrying across the floor. "Likely Oscar coming to let me out!" Kessel vehemently predicted under his breath.

Kessel's spirit sank as the leering face of Detective Kurt slid out of the shadows. Narrow jawed and snub nosed the beady eyed Detective sidled up to Kessel's cell.

"Hey pal, looks like things didn't go so smoothly at the golf course..."

"Hah, I knew it! What happened?"

"There was a...a..." Kessel stood from his metal seat, approaching as if to physically draw the words from Kurt. "A power outage."

Pausing, Kessel's eyes narrowed in anger as the Detective began to laugh, the repeating high pitched giggle grating on Kessel's frayed nerves. Not rising to the obvious bait Kessel instead slumped back on the bench.

Annoyed by the uninspiring reaction of the prisoner, Kurt said, "There was nothing Kessel. Your wild goose chase turned up nothing, get it? The managers were nice guys and none of the golfers were," again the piercing giggle bore into Kessel's ears, "mummified."

Kessel refused to react more than a slight cringe at Kurt's horrendous laughter. "Hell me and boys were even invited in for some food." Kessel raised an eyebrow which prompted Kurt to confirm, "That's right, I went on the little expedition into the haven of Egyptian terrorists."

"I've said before these aren't simple terrorists." Kessel decided to play into Kurt's game slightly by dropping his own bait. "No wonder Carson City is a mess of drugs if this is the quality of your personal detective work."

"Hah, you old miner," Kurt lightly refuted. Abruptly spinning on his heel the Detective started to walk away from the cell. He stalled a few steps later before shambling back towards the bars. "I forgot to say I heard the doctor's decided on the Woodlocks. Best of luck at your rescheduled court date, pal. We're all rooting for you." Thinking for a moment Kurt leaned closer to the cell door, his chin jutting through the iron gate. Staring directly at Kessel he rasped, "Especially

Yrret."

A victorious look crossed Kurt's face as Kessel threw himself from the bench and charged the Detective, shouting "Damn you!". Two steps from the door the old man stumbled and fell, his wounded leg unaccustomed to the rigors of running.

Wailing laughter drained into the darkness as Detective Kurt turned his back on the cell and left the building.

Oscar came in the next morning, head hung in preparation for Kessel's outraged protests. Opening the cell the Sergeant edged inside and opened his mouth to calm Kessel.

The old man cut him off and started first, "Detective Kurt came and told me the...good news yesterday."

"You're sounding a lot calmer than I expected." Oscar examined Kessel's appearance but wasn't sure if time in prison was helping stabilize the man, or providing hours of solitude to spiral deeper into his ideas.

"That's because I want us both to be level headed when I tell you this." Standing up and approaching Oscar, the limping man peered down both ends of the corridor before continuing, "Kurt is one of them, he's in on the whole thing."

Inwardly Oscar sighed and answered his musings on incarceration by choosing the latter option. "Kessel..."

"No wait hear me out. I don't know if the Anubians have spread to Carson City, or if they converted Kurt yesterday, but either way he knows and he'll probably infect your whole department."

"I know that you and the Detective don't see eye to eye, but you can't keep dragging everyone you don't like into your conspiracies. Especially when they turn out to be unfounded."

Kessel said nothing as his breath came in short gasps, anger simmering behind his eyes.

"The Chief asked for your best lead, your BEST lead, and still the golf club had nothing there. I just finished debriefing with the other two officers and they had similar stories. All quiet, from all sources."

"Oscar! You just need to--"

"Kessel, I'm sorry, but I just can't listen to this right now." The stern order deflated the older man, who plopped back down on the bench. "If I don't see you before the hearing, then good luck in there. I heard the Woodlock's little girl woke up...although the boy is still having trouble seeing."

Much like Kurt, Oscar turned to leave, cutting off any forthcoming outcry from Kessel.

The status of his job at the mine depended on the outcome of the trial. His boss, a gruff bear of a man named Hilgor, had his fair share of police trouble in the past. Quick to anger but slow to judge, the boss knew there was too much confusion and misinformation surrounding the case to outright fire Kessel.

Still the old man had missed a significant portion of work, and a newer miner under the same circumstances would have been let go long ago. But Kessel had invested close to twenty years in the tunnels of Round Mountain, and Hilgor was astute enough to know such a valuable resource wasn't easily discarded.

So, slumped against the mustard yellow wall, Kessel was able to think how to proceed without worrying that his house would be repossessed and he'd be unable to afford food when he got out.

"If Kurt was turned that meant the other two officers were as well, probably. Perhaps they even

got to Oscar now."

Shivering at the implications of the other possibility, Kessel continued whispering, "Or the Detective was an Anubian already, back in Carson City. Which is, hmm, a six hour drive from here." Visualizing a map of Nevada Kessel shuddered again, "That'd be quite an area of control. Maybe even bigger than Yrret could manage alone." Worrying that hypothetical victory in his private war would sever only a single head of the hydra, Kessel slumped deeper into the wall. But he didn't surrender or give up. His month alone in prison, a month alone to pace and think, had toughened his mind and resolve.

Regardless of the reason for Kurt's allegiance, Kessel knew he'd need to escape the cell before he could continue to fight Yrret. Earlier doubts and fears about civilian casualties was still a fresh concern, as was the renewed desire to face the consequences and not try to dodge responsibility. Kessel convinced himself that now was not the time to spend months, or years, locked up in prison for injuring the Woodlocks. He could dutifully serve his time once Yrret was stopped, but until then he didn't want to strengthen the Anubian position by voluntarily weakening his own. Rising to his feet Kessel gripped the iron bars, thin flecks of rust dropping into his hand. The prison was old and an experienced criminal could likely break free with a day of effort. Kessel squeezed the cell bars tighter like he was trying to will them to bend, knowing more than a day of toil awaited him.

The date of his court case had been changed to five days away, but any developments with the blinded boy could modify the schedule again. Kessel didn't rely on that thin hope, instead trying to focus on the best way to escape during the intermittent time.

The remainder of the day passed without incident, and Kessel still had no definite outline for freeing himself. He had considered trying to overpower Oscar the next time the Sergeant visited, if he did at all. Kessel had quickly discarded the idea as prone to errors and unexpected factors, instead wishing to find a safer strategy to ensure his escape.

A coughing wheeze at 3am provided an unforeseen chance. Awoken by heavy footsteps and a steady dripping sound, Kessel blearily tried to decipher the darkness beyond his cell.

"K...Kesssss--" the whimpered cry trailed off and a large form slammed into the bars, a loud ringing echoing off the walls. Kessel leaned away from the shadow while fumbling into a defensive position.

After a tense moment of listening to the labored breaths of the slumped figure, Kessel aggressively shouted a challenge. "If you've come to kill me, you won't have an easy time of it!" "It's...me..." a cough and splattering sound disrupted the plea, "...it's...Oscar."

Surprise and curiosity propelled Kessel forward against his better judgment. "Oscar? What happened? What's going on?"

"I...don't--" again the voice faded as if Oscar was wrestling to stay awake. Finally the form shuddered and straightened slightly, the dripping sound increasing at the adjustment.

Outside the building a cloud lazily shifted past the moon, freeing the glowing light to reveal Oscar's condition. Blood from wounds on the Sergeant's forehead blended with a gaping slash halfway across his throat. Two dark patches stained his shirt around his heart and stomach.

Kessel's first reaction was to save Oscar. Their amiable relations may have corroded as the court date approached, but Oscar was still a friend to the old man. "We need to call someone, we need to get you help!"

"No...Kessel..." Oscar raised a hand and pressured the wound on his neck, the dribbling sound slowing as precious blood left him. "Listen, it was K...Kurt!"

Kessel involuntarily punched the bars, regretting it as hot pain seared his knuckles. "Damn him!"

After a moment his simmering rage calmed enough to probe the particulars. "How? When?" "I...I had been working late and nodded off at my d-desk." Oscar's eyes rolled back in his head and he hastily blinked to maintain his focus, eager to relay the events to at least one soul. "What wakes me up is that son of a bitch scrapping a knife across my throat." Kessel cringed at the imagery as Oscar continued his race against time, "Training takes over and I slam my phone into his head. Kurt gets a few stabs into my gut but I catch him with the bottom of the phone again." The Sergeant slid down the bars slightly, his eyes flickering again. Kessel tried to reach through the bars to support his friend, succeeding in easing the officer to a sitting position.

"Where is Kurt now?" Oscar's hand had slipped from his throat, renewing the gushing flow of blood. Kessel strained to keep his own hand over the wound while also trying to beckon Oscar back from unconsciousness. "Oscar, where is Kurt now?"

"Ugh, passed out I think, but he'll be up soon. I should have...should have killed him but I didn't...think of it at the time. He knew...I was going to testify on your...behalf." Kessel could feel Oscar's torn neck shaking at the exertion of speech. "So I came here...I...I believe you now Kessel...I..." Even under the awful circumstances the sentiment inspired the old man.

Clawing towards his belt the Sergeant's blood soaked hand jingled metal. Coughing and breathing futilely he slid the cell keys towards Kessel. "Get...get him for..." Oscar's head slumped forward, his chin sitting over the chest wounds.

Frantically Kessel tried to summon the man from the brink of death, but Oscar's heart had stopped. Blood pooled around his collapsed form, the expanding red circle spilling over the keys and border of the cell. Kessel cursed and burned with anger as red as Oscar's beard. He fervently tried to silence the doubting voice reminding him that another innocent had been added to the list of dead.

Knowing he didn't have much time, Kessel pushed aside the raw torrent of sorrow to concentrate on preparing for Kurt. He dragged the wet keys from the blood and slipped them into the jail door, his shoulders relaxing slightly as the heavy gate swung open.

"Free now...just not how I intended," he reflected, stooping to unbuckle Oscar's revolver, a Smith & Wesson Model 10. Kessel could hear distant running growing louder with each pounding step. The old man felt like a tightly coiled spring about to explode, his routine days in the cell motivating him to rapid, unthinking motion.

He scanned the hallway and predicted Kurt's path, marking the likely places for an ambush. Dark entrances to other cells dotted the hallway, eight or nine in total. There was a wooden door at the far end, dim yellow light distorted by the glass pane in the center. The opposite dead end had a narrow window barred near the roof. Clear blue moonlight outlined Oscar's body, black planks of shadow exaggerated from the bars.

Acting on adrenaline and instinct Kessel dragged the heavy body into his cell and closed the door. Then he skirted towards the window and melted into the shadowy blind spot below it. Clicking open the stolen revolver Kessel breathed a sigh of relief to see six bronze cartridges awaiting him. He locked the cylinder back into the Model 10 and waited.

Clouds drifted across the face of the moon, alternatively lightening or darkening the hallway. If Kessel strained he could catch a ticking clock, although every second seemed to drag as the footsteps approached. Kessel could hear the Detective's rambling voice, loud enough that he must not care about other officers listening. Gulping, Kessel realized it could also mean the entire night shift at the police station had become Anubians.

Seconds later a thin form was outlined in the glass frame of the doorway. Kessel calmed his breathing and shifted his weight, preparing to empty the revolver into whoever came through



the portal.

Kurt must have felt Oscar was no threat for he quickly and carelessly threw open the door. Still chattering, the Detective scurried down the hall. Backed by the yellow light a curved knife was clearly visible in Kurt's left hand.

Raising the Model 10, Kessel sighted down the barrel at the Detective's torso. He would have liked to question the Anubian to understand why Oscar testifying on Kessel's behalf deserved the penalty of death. Discovering the prominence of Anubians in Carson City would also have been valuable. But he knew time was against him, and Kurt was not one to be underestimated.

Kurt slowed and hesitated at seeing the pool of blood outside Kessel's cell. Taking advantage of the frozen target, Kessel cocked the revolver and quickly squeezed the trigger again and again. Intent on the puddle the man didn't have time to react to the fusillade of bullets that hit him. All six shots landed within inches of each other, their tight pattern blowing apart the Detective's chest.

Eyes wide in shock and surprise he didn't even have a chance to yell out. Unceremoniously he dropped face first onto the cold tile, the knife clattering from his hand. Warmed by successfully avenging Oscar, Kessel rose to his feet then spit at the Anubian corpse.

Firing a weapon inside a police jail was as foolish as kicking a hornet's nest, and Kessel knew he had seconds to elude any pursuit. He hastily grabbed a pair of speed loading magazines for the Model 10 from Oscar's belt, as well as a sturdy baton.

He ran towards the open door at the end of the hallway, wishing for a few more minutes to search Kurt, or somehow leave a note of warning. Unaccustomed to more exertion than pacing his cell, Kessel's damaged right leg seared with pain. He grunted and strode through the pain while limping out the door.

The hallway ended in an intersection heading left or right, and Kessel briskly surveyed both ways for advancing officers. Luckily none had arrived yet, but he didn't want to waste any more invaluable seconds. Both exits looked similar, with various closed office doors and filing rooms dividing the monotony of the mustard yellow walls.

Reloading the revolver he took a chance and started down the left hallway. Shouts of confusion echoed off the shining tiles as he shambled onwards, trying to divine where the bulk of the officers were yelling from.

Turning the corner another expanse of mundane tile and repeating doors awaited him. Kessel started to check each door, aspiring to determine if hiding in a room was a smarter move than wandering the halls until he bumped into a police patrol. His spirits rose as the calming green light of an EXIT sign shone from around the corner.

The events after the jackal chase had changed all of Kessel's plans, but for now his only concern was his next steps. Rebuilding the network of information, finding suitable shelter away from the scrutiny of the police, and continuing his private war could wait.

Peeking his head around the corner Kessel saw that the run to the navy blue exit door was clear. Keeping the revolver at the ready he jogged towards the steel portal as silently as possible. He tested the door and was relieved when it slid open unhindered. Pausing and drawing his strength Kessel pushed the door half open and waited a few seconds for any response. Cool air refreshingly drifted in through the crack and he could hear a dog barking in the distance. No shots or shouts rang out and he couldn't hear any vehicles, so Kessel widened the opening before escaping into the night.

Exuberance at freedom was dampened by Oscar's death. Kessel tried to clear the depressing fog

edging his thoughts, tried to convince himself that Kurt would have carried out the murder regardless of Kessel's presence.

His main doubt concerned the fact that Oscar had been killed to prevent him, unexpectedly, testifying for Kessel. "If not tonight, they would have killed him another time," Kessel reassured himself, knowing that becoming an Anubian had only heightened Kurt's itchy trigger finger. Still, sneaking shadow to shadow and building to building, Kessel wished Oscar was at his side and the two could be fighting the menace together. Lonely and forlorn, Kessel's body went on automatic as his thoughts deepened.

"So I'll fight alone, again," he said, resigning himself to the burden he previously hoped had lifted.

For the moment he needed to reach a safe house or a place to think. Blindly running through the Round Mountain suburbs was as reckless as it was pointless, and Kessel expected wailing police sirens to break the silent night any moment.

Like most important locations in the town, the prison was located along Hadley Circle. The complex was south of the garbage dump and east of his home. Most of the occupants were overnight drunks or petty shoplifters, so the populace had no reason to request the facility be moved further outside the town. Kessel's tired right leg was thankful for the shortened distance as he knew he could be across town in a matter of minutes, if needed.

Kessel briefly considered hiding out at the library, but remembered the cameras installed over the parking lot a few months ago. He entertained the idea of trying to sneak back into The Captain's Place. After helping unload a truck of food Kessel learned where the owner hid his spare key. The gamble would still be risky and relied on the key not being moved from under the red rock by the back door.

His body was naturally gravitating towards his home on Clove Street, and Kessel had to consciously veer away from the place. Every floor would be stripped and searched and all his important materials confiscated. "No, there's nothing there for me now," Kessel said, sadness edging his voice at having to surrender the home he had shared with Frieda.

Plus he decided the police might keep a squad car posted out front, even after the unusually lengthy stay in prison. If anything the officers would act as a deterrent to nosy neighbors or would-be vandals. There might even be additional police en-route to the bungalow now, and Kessel didn't feel like jumping from the frying pan into the furnace, if he could help it.

Smirking slightly Kessel realized the answer was right in front of him, and all around him. "The desert!" He figured the sun wouldn't rise for another four or five hours, and wouldn't unleash its true killing power for at least eight. That would be more than enough time to calm himself down, rest a while, and think of what to do next.

Long term shelter and a steady supply of food would be issues, as would entering or exiting the town while the police were on the lookout for him. But as he jogged southwest of the town, the logistics of surviving as an outcast from society didn't concern Kessel.

For the moment his desire was vengeance for the innocents he harmed, a feeling discovered and nurtured while cramped by the mustard yellow walls. Now that focus sated his stomach and provided strength as he limped into the flat, desolate wasteland.

The stoic desert remained uninterested in his return.

Kessel was just glad to not be dragging a prisoner or returning from an execution. His leg seemed to bother him less in the subdued night, and for the first mile of hiking he focused on forgetting the Anubians. Breathing slowly he calmed the storm of uncertainty at how to proceed, instead basking in the beautiful night.

Briefly he wished Frieda could be with him, or failing that at least Oscar or his old friend Joseph. The desire passed without the painful memories associated with each person. Kessel distracted himself with star gazing, the black dome sparkling overhead with billions of lights.

A police siren stirred him from the meditative walk, the distant noise cutting clear across the flat plains. Reluctantly lowering his head, Kessel forged a trail through the low shrubs, any relaxing thoughts evaporated as surely as water from the cracked mud he limped across.

Kessel walked in silence for half a mile, still weaving a path in a generally southwestern direction. Finally he stopped and peered into the night, mumbling to himself, "Enough wandering. Let's think now where to go."

An array of locations, both crafted by nature or shaped by man, spun through his mind like a spool of index cards. He knew of at least a dozen farms that he could check; perhaps even squat for a while in a barn whose owner had gone on vacation.

Kessel reminded himself that the priority tonight was a safe place to rest and wait out the day. A permanent locale would come later, once he revamped his strategy of engagement. Similar to the original idea to head into the desert, a flash of inspiration nearly bowled Kessel over.

"Of course, the canyon!" He exclaimed, eagerly attempting to find his bearing in the darkness.

The canyon was actually a dried river bed that ran over fifty miles south of the town. It was the very same crevice the fateful Peavine Canyon bridge spanned, as well as Wall and Pablo Canyon Road. At its deepest the walls were probably ten to twenty feet high, more than enough to prevent detection.

His mind drugged up memories of the place, trying to recall any scrap of beneficial information. At one point off-road vehicles had raced down the dried river, but a fatal crash some years earlier had prompted new laws, and fences, to be implemented.

Kessel also recalled an even earlier incident at The Captain's Place. Excitement followed rumors that some of the stunt drivers had found garnets in the caves honeycombing the cliff sides. When a newspaper article was printed confirming the details, the canyon had seen a resurgence of tourism for a brief time.

Not one to fall for schemes and ventures at quick and easy wealth, Kessel had avoided most of the flurried tour booths that grew overnight above the river. After the majority of garnets were exhausted the canyon had been abandoned to its original state of forgotten neglect. But if he walked far enough along the river bed he might chance upon a cave, perhaps even a whole network of them. That would more than suit his tastes for a temporary base.

Excitement and unpredictable waves of emotion were beginning to feel commonplace to Kessel, even welcome. His hunting instincts stirred again as he sped up to a light jog, wishing to reach the canyon before the sun rose.

From coordinating the distant and irregular headlights Kessel thought he was east of Fremont Route, slightly south of Wall Canyon Road, and far north of his crash site at Peavine Canyon Road. Basically the large tract of untamed desert between Fremont Route and highway 376 would become his domain.

He wanted to put some distance from the town so that he'd have an advanced chance at noticing any police. At the same time Kessel was concerned with hiking too far, as returning regularly to Round Mountain was going to be critical for continuing his war. He knew enthusiasm at the unknown adventure of exploring the canyon was fueling his muscles more than usual, so he remembered to consider that factor for how far he could hike in a few hours.

Kessel saw a wash of white sand ahead and knew the dead river bed was close. So far his trek had been an hour and a half long, but the miles fell and time crept forward unnoticed in the

dark.

Cheering inwardly Kessel felt the ground slope below him as the edge of the canyon approached. The moon seemed to take note of his desperate search and brightened its light, clearly revealing the snaking ivory expanse of the dried river. When the water was flowing it had carved spans as wide as two hundred feet, or as narrow as ten. The soft sand easily succumbed to the rapid river, and still molded new paths whenever flash floods occurred.

Kessel sped up and soon was at the rim of the gorge. The sides were a mere five or six feet here and Kessel knew clambering down the yielding surface wouldn't be difficult, even in the dark. Tightening his running shoes made the old man miss his sturdy boots. The police had been kind enough to retrieve new clothes from his home; clothes that weren't torn rags from plummeting off a bridge. He wore dusty blue jeans and a snug collared shirt patterned with plaid. He was stuck with his shoes he wore on missions since they had survived the fall, plus the police were already under pressure to cease giving him further personal belongings. "Heck I should be happy I'm not in an orange jumpsuit," he remarked, lowering himself to a crouch and edging his left leg over the lip of the canyon.

His feet sunk into the river bed as if it was forest moss. A thin layer of silt collected on the top and would twist and funnel through the canyon whenever the wind picked up. Below the sediment was thirsty old mud punctuated with rocks or frail bushes.

Kessel continued down the river, away from the town. He didn't want to risk moving further than two hours from Round Mountain. In a pinch he could sleep under an overhang, but ideally a cave would present itself in the next thirty or forty minutes of exploring.

As he walked Kessel realized how much the highway sounds were dampened by the crevice walls. He could clearly hear every cricket and scuffling field mouse, but only the loudest of cars reached his ears.

Unlike the uneven desert, Kessel was free to look around as he walked on the river bed. The flat base was empty of hazards in most cases. The only downside was he tired quicker as each plunging footfall strained his muscles and threatened to throw his balance. Briefly he was reminded of slogging through ankle high snow on his way to middle school in Billings.

Ten minutes since his descent into the canyon, Kessel heard a distant baying yip. Reflexively his hand gripped the hilt of the Model 10 revolver, the howling reminding him of the jackals. The noise instead originated from a pair of gray foxes scratching up the withered skin of a tree.

Another ten minutes passed and Kessel began to look for a good place to stop, knowing he couldn't futilely search for a cave much longer before he got too far from town. Another bark, closer and agitated, drew Kessel's attention upwards to the canyon walls. The rutted banks had grown to at least seventeen feet, and Kessel could barely see the top against the starry sky.

The noise repeated and allowed him to pinpoint the source. A dark burrow was barely visible a few feet from the top of the sheer wall, a tangle of branches obscuring the entrance.

Kessel left the center of the river bed and moved towards the base of the cliff. He looked behind and was satisfied to see his meandering shoe imprints were already filling with sand, hiding any trace of his progress. Returning his attention to the lair he craned his neck back, the looming bluff appearing even taller up close.

Sullenly he slid the revolver into his jeans and tried to dig a foot into the sand, his fingers gingerly searching for hand holds. Kessel knew groping on exposed outcroppings and underneath rocks was dangerous, as he could plant his hand on an angry cactus, or angrier scorpion. The lure of the den was too much to resist, for it could be a portal into the fabled caves long dismissed by the short attention span of tourists.

Kessel reversed his earlier analysis of his footwear, as the toes of the running shoes were sharp enough, after enough prodding and kicking, to cut into the walls. Tentatively testing his weight before settling into each jib resulted in slow progress. Eventually Kessel eased a hand into the nestle of branches outside the burrow, his body gingerly suspended fourteen feet above the ground.

Trying to listen for sharp toothed foxes waiting in the burrow, Kessel was rewarded with silence. He heaved himself up and peered into the dark hole, unable to see any definite shapes through the blackness. The moon shed no illumination on the problem and for a brief second Kessel cursed at not having a flashlight.

"I've killed two jackals as big as my car, and I'm afraid of a little gray fox?" Kessel questioned, the rhetorical taunt motivating him to climb into the burrow. The entrance was snug, but he squirmed and pushed with his shoulders to widen the gap into a three foot circle.

Throwing himself forward Kessel dragged his trailing limbs into the hole, sighing with relief at the successful climb. Unable to see, Kessel resorted to feeling along the walls and ceiling to try to visualize the burrow.

The roof was less than four feet above him, pushing Kessel to his knees as he advanced deeper into the hole. He whispered to the darkness and was pleased to hear his voice echo onwards and onwards into a deeper cave. Grinning he said, "Finally a spot of luck!" Forgetting himself he stood in excitement, slamming his head against the sand above him, roots painfully scraping his scars.

Shouting once more in an attempt to scare any animals that frequented the den, Kessel felt his way to the ground and struggled to arrange himself comfortably on the cool floor. As soon as his head was down Kessel keenly recognized how exhausting the day had turned out to be. Yawning he mumbled, "I can bother with planning tomorrow."

Sunlight awoke him a few hours later as dawn crept over the horizon. The bushes outside the burrow swayed in the wind and sand blew into the slits of his eyes. Coughing once Kessel moaned at the restrictive space inadequate for stretching knots from his back.

"Now let's get a proper look at this place..." he said, slowly returning to a crouch. He edged against the wall to let the most amount of sunshine in, even though shadows overtook the ground a few feet ahead. His pupils expanded and adjusted to the limited sun, but he knew he would need personal hand-held light to reveal more.

The burrow was little more than a cramped tunnel, perhaps five feet wide at its largest point and two feet at the smallest. Already his mind whirled with ambushes and traps he could rig in the narrow space to keep out intruders, if it came to that.

He was pleased to realize the echo heard hours before hadn't been a hallucination. Although the sun barely penetrated to the back wall Kessel could see a wide, jagged hole leading deeper underground.

The Model 10 scraped along the dirt wall as Kessel turned to look outside, the grinding screech giving him an idea. Quickly he pulled a dry root from the ceiling, rubbing the grime off with his hand. Next he wiggled a murky rock free; years in the mine allowing him to recognize flint.

Resting the branch on the ground he slowed his breathing and drew his revolver.

The gun was solid steel except for polished cedar wrapping the grip. Holding the weapon by the barrel he angled the flint rock towards the branch, then bluntly struck down with the bottom of the gun. His eyes glimmered as the force produced a shower of sparks. A few of the fiery meteors landed on the wood tinder, but none of them immediately caught flame.

Sweating as the rising sun matched the rising temperature, Kessel refined his fire making process

over the course of an hour. Patient and methodical Kessel now struck the improvised fire starter towards a tiny piece of sun dried lichen. His hand ringing from the repeating vibrations of the gun begged for respite, but a spark finally took.

Immediately he stooped over the lichen and gently blew on the uncertain flame. Oxygen fed the infant spark and soon the combustible moss flickered to life. Grunting with surprise and joy Kessel split a twig and edged it into the fire, continuing to do so until he had fed the blaze a branch as long as his forearm.

"Maybe I have more of a shot at living out here than I thought," he said, pleased his ideas and efforts had been rewarded with a flaming torch.

The flickering light spilled into the exit from the burrow, revealing a long tunnel descending at a sharp angle. He left his police baton resting against the wall, and, intent on discovering the mysterious depths, eagerly limped down the ramp. As he delved deeper and deeper into the earth the frequency of rocks increased until the sand walls had become solid brown stone.

Again his training as a miner was useful to ignore the imposing feeling of thousands of pounds of turf bearing down on his head. Limping for several minutes Kessel began to wonder if the tunnel would ever widen. He continued to feed the torch from a bundle of sticks, thankful to have the fuel as the tree roots had ceased to penetrate the stone ceiling.

The stone passage was tall enough to stand in, but spanning his arms still allowed him to easily touch both sides of the walls. The angle of descent had lessened slightly, but Kessel could tell he was already dozens of feet underground.

Smoke thinly wafted from the torch and drifted into his face, causing Kessel to squint his watering eyes. Coughing slightly he cleared the air with a lazy wave of his free hand. Suddenly he inhaled sharply, the accident filling his lungs with more smoke. Kessel hadn't been able to stop the reflex prompted by the sight ahead.

Dull monotonous walls split and broadened in both directions, as did the roof and floor. His small winding passage had become a gigantic cavernous room, so large the light of the torch didn't penetrate the encompassing darkness.

Recovering from hacking at the second breath of smoke, Kessel immersed himself in the beautiful cave environment. Long stalactites rose from the floor like fire ant hills, mirrored by stalagmites looming overhead. Moisture dripped and dribbled across the smooth rock surfaces, the trails of grainy residue slowly building into beautiful clusters.

Kessel numbly stumbled into the chamber, raising his voice in cheer at the find. Welcoming echoes spawned from every direction, and Kessel could glimpse the cause as numerous shafts split from the main chamber. His voice reverberated, "Well, I guess I'm home."

A grin spread across his face as Kessel considered the infinite possibilities for expanding the cave into his personal command center. Imaginary desks, planning boards, barrels of food, and equipment racks drifted from his mind to settle around the room.

His torch flickered and Kessel looked at the inadequate roll of firewood he had brought. The loyal revolver also caught his attention, and finally the reality of his situation started to sink in. The lone warrior had nothing but the clothes on his back, twelve stubby bullets, and vengeance overflowing from his heart.

Still he remained unbroken and pleased with his situation. In the fading light of his new home, Kessel bowed his head and evenly mouthed an oath. "I shall rebuild. Then I will kill Yrret." His gripped tightened on the rough torch and Kessel nodded slowly, almost in approval of himself, "I will kill Yrret."

Clambering back to the hot burrow, Kessel rested in the sloped area just outside the sun's blazing influence. He collected a stack of roots and absently fed them to the dwindling torch to avoid having to create fire again. Meanwhile he sat at the top of his sidewalk into his home; in this case a rocky tunnel dropping into a giant cave.

Kessel had delayed planning long enough, and now furtively set his mind to the task of looking to the future. His original goals and original idea of forcing the Anubians out of Round Mountain through a multitude of small, repeated attacks was sound. "Except this time I won't give them a month to recover," he remarked, lamenting the prison sentence.

"First I'll need guns and ammo, transportation, food, and clothing." Kessel ticked the items off on the bent fingers of his left hand. "I'll assume Cartonnage Chemicals is the Anubian headquarters. I can interfere in their operations without a suicidal frontal attack. Hmm," he scratched his unshaven chin in thought, "if I can whittle down their numbers enough I might be able to hit Cartonnage directly. Either that or cause Yrret to come out of hiding to deal with me himself." Kessel visualized the upcoming days, weeks, and months. He would sneak into an Anubian weapons cache and loot as much as possible, then fortify his cave. With luck he could find a spring or stream underground for long term hydration. As an adequate hunter he could poach antelope or trap small game to bolster any stolen canned food.

Once settled and secure he would perform operations each day or each week against the enemy presence in Round Mountain. After enough casualties the main warehouse would be lightly defended enough to attack head on. Alternatively Yrret would foolishly expose himself and be killed, thereby cutting the head off the snake.

A distant car horn barely reached his ears. "And I have to be clean about these attacks, and not overreach myself. And no innocents can get hurt again," Kessel unconsciously bit his lip, painfully, as if to remind himself of the anguish he had inflicted on the Woodlocks.

"Now for a weapon cache." The torch crackled beside him, and Kessel already had the perfect location in mind. "The golf club. The Anubians must have hidden their illegal arms well, or the police were inept. Either way I can at least get a vehicle and a gun or two." As a habit he spun the cylinder of his Model 10, "Yes...at least."

The first attack would be the most dangerous, Kessel concluded. He was outgunned and ignorant to what awaited him at the golf club. Any intelligence on the layout and organization of the club was at least two months old and very likely incorrect. Plus he had only a single chance at the place, for if he revealed his ploy without achieving the raid any security would be doubled by the time he got back.

His growling stomach and dry lips, already cracked at the edges and close to blistering from the sun, reminded the old man of the necessity of speed. If Kessel returned to his cave that night without supplies he would be dead by morning, or at least weak and delirious enough to ensure his home became his tomb.

Kessel rested on the cool, dark ground around the lip of the descent. He drifted in and out of sleep until three in the afternoon. The sun would still be painful, but not deadly, and once he reached town he could refresh himself from a backyard water hose or public fountain. With the police actively searching for him Kessel gambled blending with a bustling crowd was safer than being suspiciously alone on an empty street. If he needed to cross the town before or after the golf club raid, his preference was while the streets were relatively busy.

Planning to either go directly to the golf club or stop in the main city for refreshments first, Kessel figured he could gauge his strength closer to town. Walking up the river bed was a slightly indirect route that should take him a bit over two hours, resulting in him reaching the

Round Mountain area just as the sun set. His infiltration would be as perfect as possible since the gorge cut directly across Pablo Canyon Road, which intersected Electrum Drive at the golf course.

He hung the baton from his belt, his gait shortening as it adjusted to the unaccustomed weight. The Model 10 returned to the back of his jeans, the cool metal familiar against the small of his back. Kessel scratched his mangled hair, wishing for the protection of his bandanna. He settled for undoing his shirt and wrapping it around his head and shoulders, leaving his stomach exposed to the sun. "Better my pale belly than my face," he conceded, crawling towards the raised entrance.

Shielded by the bushes he scrutinized the surrounding area. Like a nervous gray fox he tentatively exposed a limb, then another, and finally started to slide his body into the sun. The rim of the canyon wall was almost within reach, but Kessel preferred to leave the path to his burrow concealed from that direction. Plus extra effort when exiting would mean no provided footholds for enemies clambering down from the top.

Slowly he retraced and reversed the path of the fourteen foot climb, reluctantly edging downwards until his feet touched the river bed. His trail from the night before was completely filled by silt, invisible to anyone but an expert tracker.

Kessel checked the area once more, determining it was clear with sight and sound. Lowering his head he began the long, hot march to raid a weapon cache.

Scanning the cabin with unaided eyes reminded Kessel to steal a pair of binoculars. He had gone directly to the golf club, the thought of fortifying his cave with plunder overcoming the strain of the hike. Now he sat across the road from the golf club, perched behind a rock as he intently watched each car leave the parking lot.

Automatic sprinklers rose from the ground like mindless mummies, their black mouths opening to spew water across the unnaturally green lawn. The majority of golfers had retired an hour ago, as the sun set. Most of them were rich old men eager to drink themselves into a stupor in the lounge. Kessel mused that a similar scene, spanning the class divide, was playing out all across town in the blue collar pubs.

The parking lot was mostly empty, perhaps at a third of its capacity. Water lightly pattered off the black sides of the staff limousine parked near the front. There was a smaller crescent road leading from Electrum Drive to the cabin, with giant imported trees bordering the concrete like sleeping titans.

Years of upgrades and expansions had turned the original wood cabin into a hotel sized resort. At least twenty rooms were contained across three floors, with a fully staffed kitchen in the basement. The original cabin had become a shrine to the golfers; a place to reminisce about better days while drinking overpriced vodka tonics.

He systematically checked every window he could see, trying to determine where the majority of the cache would be kept. His first instinct was in the basement, perhaps a dank storeroom forgotten by the cooks. Another option would be hiding in plain sight in a converted bedroom. "My best bet is to do this by the books. I should be able to waltz in and walk around for a while before anyone raises an eyebrow." Most of the exclusive clientele wouldn't recognize his face. He cast an uncertain gaze at his clothes before swatting at them to remove the dust from his hike. Worrying that any attempt to hide the police baton would be detected, Kessel left the heavy black club in the grass. "Right, I'll start at the bottom and go to the top, floor by floor."

Soft light illuminated a custom crafted wooden placard for the club, expensive but necessary as the members disapproved of tacky neon signs. Kessel limped across the Pablo Canyon Road and



approached the golf club from an angle, eager to get a better glimpse at the cars parked around the back of the resort. His top choice was a gaudy bronze humvee, the paint job blemishing what was otherwise a perfect off-road vehicle for his commute from the desert. The red jackets of two valet parking attendants stood out against the night, the workers idly chatting by the locker of keys. Kessel smiled and swept towards the front door, patting his shirt once again in a last ditch attempt to improve his appearance. Ducking behind a tree to cup sprinkler water into his parched mouth probably didn't help, but he figured it was less conspicuous than passing out in a hallway.

Engraved with a stylized mountain motif, the solid oak doors swung open as Kessel approached. The gaunt doorman looked him up and down once, then disdainfully extended a cotton napkin. Kessel took the offered rag and scrubbed it across his face. "Thanks, sir, it got mighty dusty out there."

"Yes...well..." the servant dragged each word through a pool of loathing, "Do you have business in the club?"

Kessel found himself unexpectedly improvising. "Not for long, I'm just meeting my brother to help him close a sales deal." He tried to add a relaxed detachment to his statements, as if he belonged in the club, all the while pretending to look further down the corridor. With luck the doorman would speculate a sales deal meant high rollers, and let him pass.

"Very good, the main lounge is--"

"Hey now, just cause I'm wearing plaid don't mean I haven't been here afore." Kessel wished he had a cash tip to follow up the preposterous claim, but settled for starting away from the doorman. The servant let him go without further comment, either offended or fooled by the bold act and brash accent. Kessel knew it was the doorman's job to look down on common folk and filter out the poor, a thought which gave him hope for simpler interactions with other patrons. The main corridor was short and adorned with various pictures and memorabilia of golfing legends. Kessel passed the coat room, nodding curtly to the teenager slouching on a stool. Perhaps sensing a kindred spirit out of his element, the teenager nodded his chin and replied, "Sup dude."

"Hopefully drinking," Kessel said, shrugging and laughing slightly.

The teenager raised an eyebrow and replied, "You know it, man."

Amused by a typical response to a typical comment, Kessel continued into the main hall. The wide oval chamber was overflowing with tacky souvenirs and brazen decorations. Old rusted driving irons hung crossed like swords on a far wall. A row of golf balls, shaded from plain white to all varieties of the rainbow, were arranged as a picture frame. Kessel scoffed at the ridiculous interior and equally ridiculous people who enjoyed it.

A grand staircase dominated the center of the room, curling backwards at the first landing. Elevators dinged and passengers came and went to his left, while busy staff streamed from behind a curtain on the right. Kessel guessed the entrance to the kitchen was behind the thick velvet wall, so he turned to investigate that first.

The majority of golfers avoiding making eye contact, although many eagerly and openly gossiped about the strange visitor. Kessel understood why the police hadn't found anything; they probably didn't bother penetrating further than the door.

Waiting to move until an arriving elevator distracted most of the people, Kessel slipped behind the curtain. Breathing a sigh of relief he entered a square concrete tunnel littered with discarded steel carts, crooked luggage racks, and bustling staff too focused to notice him. Gone was the soft yellow glow of faux lanterns; the sterile white ambiance of overhead lights replacing it. The

lower half of the walls were painted white with a soft teal line bordering where the paint met concrete.

Keeping to the quieter sides of the hallway Kessel advanced through the throng of rolling wheels and chattering employees. Doubt from the rough initial meeting faded as Kessel continued on unnoticed, peering into every room as he went.

Uniform large font clocks hung high near the unfinished rafters, watching him from every corner. Kessel was glad for the constant reminder of the passage of time, as overlooked minutes flowed into an hour. His scouting had revealed more ordered, bleak rooms than he cared to count.

Opting for worn stairs instead of the service elevator, Kessel had soon passed the kitchen. Unwilling to test his luck in the confined, frantic domain of professional chefs and support staff, he had continued to wander.

A sharply painted sign replete with arrows pointing every direction finally provided clues. Leaning against the wall he craned his neck and carefully examined the crisp writing. "Hmm, cold storage," he whispered, noticing the arrow lead in the opposite direction of the five other locations listed.

Containing a yelp of surprise Kessel realized the cold storage lettering was marked by Anubians. What initially appeared to be a generic skateboarding sticker covering half the 'C', actually had the Eye of Anubis symbol integrated into the logo. Kessel gasped and rubbed his eyes, thinking the glaring lights had confused him.

He dropped his hand and still the symbol remained. Kessel eagerly walked towards cold storage, trying to maintain his excitement to avoid drawing any unwanted attention.

Staff became less and less frequent, and the few he saw tended to cast lingering, questioning glares at Kessel. The cooler basement air gained a frigid edge as he rounded the last corner before cold storage.

The layout and style of the hallways hadn't changed since he first crossed the velvet curtain, except this one ended in a dented steel door with tiny shatterproof windows. He could hear the slow rumble of a service elevator, probably exiting directly into cold storage. With luck it was used for expediently depositing goods from semi-trucks, and would return him to the surface. Kessel sneaked up to the window and stood on his toes to see inside. The tendrils of fog lacing the ground couldn't hold his attention compared to the rows and rows of hooks hanging skinned animals. Most were cow, but he could distinguish a few sheep and pigs from the mix. It looked like the golf club preferred fresh, local animals, and had converted cold storage into a meat plant.

Sighing clouded the narrow window as Kessel realized there were no weapons in sight. The room was close to thirty feet in each direction, and yet nothing but racks and racks of meat were visible.

Tentatively he reached for the swinging steel door, adjusting his revolver so it was within easy reach. Kessel considered pretending to be a lost patron, but figured anyone this far in would have Anubian ties. Instead he attempted to keep the advantage of surprise by slowly opening the door.

His face was blasted with freezing wind, a sensation unremembered since his childhood winters in Billings. Kessel latched the top button of his shirt and continued to enter the room. Looking around the meat locker confirmed his initial impressions from the view port.

"Dammit...no weapons and no equipment," he cursed, a patch of air freezing as it escaped his

throat. Kessel futilely wandered down a few aisles formed by the hanging animals, unsure of what he expected to find. "A big, orderly pile of guns would have been a start."

Stumbling on a slick patch his knee cracked against the hard concrete, eliciting a second curse from the old man. Rising, he started to storm out of the room in frustration, already reconsidering where the next possible cache was.

Unbalanced by his anger the limping man fell again, this time scraping his elbow against the steel frame of a meat rack.

"What kind of awful skating rink is--" Sudden suspicion caused him to rolled over, cradling the bruised limb and intently searching the floor. Waving the fog away Kessel saw that a mound of ice had formed on the floor, almost like a baby stalactite from an arctic cave. A second pile was some distance away, but soon he realized the ice was repeating in a pattern.

Eyes widening he slowly looked upwards. The rafters were unfinished and hanging amidst the gray pipes, like deadly icicles, were guns. Lots of guns. Enough guns that Kessel jokingly thought he wouldn't even need ammo, he could just switch weapons as each one ran dry.

The spires of ice had formed from moisture dripping off the weapons when they were first brought into cold storage, and had acted like beacons for the man. Over each mound was another weapon, or in some cases a foot locker or box of ammo. Most hung from surplus meat hooks, others were craftily wedged in the beams and ducts chaotically weaving across the roof. Feeling like a lottery winner, Kessel scaled the racks supporting the rows and rows of animals and started pulling down the arsenal. At first he collected with wild abandon, but soon he started to look for specific items.

He loaded a cart from the hallway with his trophies and wheeled it towards the cold storage elevator. Experienced enough to keep his wits about him during such excitement, Kessel rode up along at first. The service elevator felt creaky and unstable, but it was built for industrial loads and reliably crawled towards the surface.

Emerging at the back of the building he could see the asphalt parking lot sprawled outside the door. Gleaming, Kessel checked both ways, trying to find the vehicle he had seen earlier. Unable to see the humvee he muttered a conclusion, "The valets musta moved it."

Kessel decided the easiest, safest, and most efficient method of transferring the weapons topside was with the elevator. First he would load it to the brim with looted equipment, then ride it up and jam the controls to keep it stuck at the parking lot. Next the valets would be knocked out, and he'd grab a pair of keys to back a stolen vehicle flush against the elevator. After moving the equipment to the trunk he could nonchalantly exit the golf club and return to his lair.

The elevator was half loaded when he heard the door swing open. Panicking he fled the unfinished pile of weapons to hide amongst the rows of meat. His teeth chattered from the cold and trepidation at a possible fire fight in the center of an Anubian base. Uncertain that the partially frozen weapons would fire, he instead drew his reliable Model 10 and listened.

He heard three distinct voices speaking Japanese; two males and one female. Kessel shook his fist in frustration at being unable to decipher the foreign language. He had no way to tell if the speakers were Anubians or not by their conversation. Still extremely reluctant to involve innocents he began to sneak between the hanging animals to catch a glimpse of the intruders. Their gossiping continued, the voices echoing and rebounding off the thick concrete walls. Having difficulty calculating their location he continued to creep forward, revolver first in case he turned a corner into the workers.

His inability to find the three worsened when he heard the voices split. It sounded like the female and one of the males detached from the other and were walking down the aisles of meat.

Their voices alternated between muted and clear as they passed between columns of animals nearby. A steady chopping rhythm began at the entrance to the chamber, and Kessel figured the remaining man was cutting up some meat for customers.

The noise gave Kessel hope that the three were standard staff and knew nothing of the Anubians. Then his only concern would be protecting the weapons loaded into the elevator, using only non-lethal force. Regrettably he tried to will the abandoned police baton into his hands from the grassy slope far outside the golf club.

The hope of stealthily escaping was shattered as he caught a glimpse of the other two. A single wall of meat separated them, causing Kessel to quickly duck behind the nearest cow. He tenderly steadied the spinning animal to try to blend in, and then peeked around it to observe the pair. Wearing plastic gloves, low quality filter masks, and white smocks spattered on the front with blood was a normal appearance for a butcher, but still unnerved Kessel. The man was lowered in a sturdy crouch and had boosted the woman into the rafters where she unsteadily rocked an M-16 rifle back and forth to edge it off a hook.

The burden of his war lessened at the two blatant Anubians. He imagined the third was standing watch by the door for any legitimate employees that stumbled in, and would hopefully be unarmed. Kessel knew he'd have to subdue the sentry before firing any shots, to prevent the man from running and summoning help.

Counting on the two Japanese employees to be delayed gathering more weapons, Kessel stalked a row back and then towards the origin of the chopping sound. A few feet later he reached the end of the aisle, scouting with a single eye held flush against a hanging lamb.

A burly butcher was splitting meat and bone with each powerful stroke of his black cleaver. He stood in front of a steel table covered with various animal parts and meat hooks, his back to Kessel. Steadying his breath Kessel crept forward, carefully dropping his heel first before rolling his toe down, trying to prevent any revealing noises.

He gripped the Model 10 by the barrel, intending to use the heavier handle like a crude club. When he was within two steps of the man Kessel skirted forward, stealth forgotten in a rush to strike the butcher.

He mimicked the butcher's arc and swung the revolver down with all the force he could muster. The blow connected with a resounding crack, but failed to knock the target out. Kessel was temporarily stunned by the endurance of the butcher as the Anubian turned and swung the cleaver in a crooked arc, clearly dizzy even though he remained standing.

Mouth agape at the charging man, Kessel barely raised his revolver in time to block the blow. The force threw his right arm back, the gun skittering across the floor towards the closest rack of meat.

Finally the shock wore off as anger stoked his well of adrenaline. Kessel brought his arm back and delivered a rapid punch to the butcher's hanging gut. The hit felt ineffectual, and probably would have been if the butcher wasn't bleeding from the head, so Kessel delivered a second thrust like lightning.

Taking advantage of the off balance butcher Kessel dodged past and grabbed a meat hook from the table, desperate to have anything besides his skin to block the cleaver. The curved blade was chipped in several places and had dark red stains of dried viscera. A wooden handle gave Kessel a good range of movement, plus the lighter weapon was faster than the bulky cleaver.

The butcher spun to face the crafty old man, apparently so intent on killing him that he forgot to shout out for help. Regardless Kessel hoped to end the fight quickly before the cessation of chops drew their attention.

He ducked a swing of the cleaver, the accurate attack evidence of the butcher's recovering

balance. Kessel raised his improvised weapon to deflect a second swing, this time a barbaric forward thrust that he easily caught and twisted away with the curved hook.

Applying additional force to the parry, Kessel was able to throw the cleaver far to his right, exposing the impressive torso of his foe. Capitalizing on the advantage Kessel delivered a weak left hook, his crippled arm significantly reducing the speed. He then swung the meat hook across from the right, swinging the weapon rapidly inwards from the deflected cleaver. A fresh streak of red stained the butcher's shirt as the blade harshly split skin. The cut was as long as the man's torso, but shallow and thin since Kessel was unfamiliar with hooked weapons.

Kessel realized he had overextended himself by following the hook with his shoulder and right side, opening his leaning torso to counter attacks by the butcher. Again showing a steel will and unflinching toughness the butcher ignored the laceration in time to catch the old man off guard. His battering ram fist flew into Kessel's rib cage three times, the force of the blows lifting Kessel from the ground and staggering him backwards.

Cooling air exploded from Kessel's lungs and he dropped to one knee. Breathing raggedly he tried to recover himself as the butcher advanced, cleaver raised. Kessel dug inwardly for the same strength and willpower that allowed him to execute friends, march across the desert, and survive a devastating fall.

Kessel sprung from his knees, meat hook leading, and carried forward as the blade caught the butcher in the stomach. Eager to kill, the butcher's recklessly raised arm had left his entire front unprotected. The man howled with agony as the hook pierced his stomach. Lifting with all his strength Kessel savagely drove the blade deeper.

Gurgling and spitting blood the heavy butcher slumped to the ground. Kessel didn't have time to recover, as the death wail had drawn the attention of his two allies. He could hear their shouts of surprise and the mechanical workings of magazines being loaded and guns readied.

Leaping over the corpse he sprinted for the fallen Model 10, grabbing the revolver mid-step before continuing down the aisle. If the Anubians ran directly towards the front counter they would be two rows over. Kessel planned to edge across the open gap and hit them from behind, using the frozen solid animals as cover.

The impact of hasty feet reached his ears, but again the echoes made pinpointing the sound impossible. He waited until the noise stopped, hoping that meant the pair had reached the butcher, then crouched and sneaked across two aisles.

He crawled backward to utilize the widest animal as cover, checking his revolver once out of habit. Six shots were in the cylinder, and he had a further six in the last speed loader taken from Oscar. A prolonged fire fight with the heavily armed Anubians would be suicide, but he hoped to catch them by surprise and wound or kill both.

He saw the two of them just as they reached the butcher's corpse. The man, armed with dual Desert Eagle pistols, angrily tore the meat hook free and threw it to the ground. Meanwhile the woman dropped to a practiced stance, sweeping her M-16 outwards towards the rows of animals.

From her sharp, expert movements Kessel determined the woman was the biggest threat. Carefully he edged the revolver around the animal, relying on the fog and endless avenues of attack to keep the Anubians distracted.

Intently lining up the sixty foot shot he rapidly fired three bullets at the stooped female. Two shots clanged off the durable steel counter while the third struck her in the thigh. She collapsed on the wounded leg with a yelp, but was prudent enough to crawl behind cover before Kessel could fire again.

The Japanese man wildly returned fire, shooting blind into the hanging animals. Giant slugs from the Desert Eagle blasted through the smaller sheep and pigs, but the frozen cows absorbed the bullets. The frantic man kept firing after the magazines had run dry, feebly clicking the triggers until his female colleague pulled him behind the counter. Expending the full seven rounds from each gun, Kessel could hear the man reloading the dual pistols.

Uncertain whether the pair knew where he was, Kessel decided to stay put behind his favorite cow. They might be counting on him making a break for the elevator, so he didn't want to risk going for more guns yet, especially when they hadn't thawed enough to reliably fire. Although wounded the woman wouldn't bleed to death, but she also couldn't run for help. Kessel decided the safest bet was to wait for his opponents to react; perhaps the anxious man would slip up and allow Kessel a clear shot.

The woman fired sporadic bursts across the room, trying to keep the invisible attacker pinned down. Kessel could barely make out the sound of them whispering over the gunfire, and soon he saw the man peeking out from behind the counter.

Knowing he would be focus scrutinizing the rows of meat, Kessel took the opportunity to fire, this time from the opposite side of his cover. Instead of aiming at the slim exposed cranium, he aimed higher and struck the metal rack over the counter. Two shots poured heavy chains, clamps, hooks, and grinders clattering down onto the stooped Anubians.

Smiling at the curses of pain that followed, Kessel used the distraction to sprint to the left, away from the elevator and in a rough flanking pattern from the counter. Catching his breath Kessel unclamped the bullets from his speed loader and reloaded them individually, ending with one spare.

Unfortunately the woman had anticipated his run, and after hastily swatting away the falling debris she leaned over the counter to watch for movement. Noticing the shadowy figure weaving between racks of meat, she held her fire to appear oblivious to her foe.

Directing the Japanese man to go directly up the nearest aisle and come at the shooter from the left, she proceeded to rest the M-16 on the counter and provide covering fire. At first she shot wide bursts into the room, still pretending to not know where Kessel was. Meanwhile the Japanese man sprinted to the racks and began slinking along to cut the shooter off.

Kessel was mid-stride while the pair reorganized. After being unable to locate the man he figured the Anubian had ducked into cover. The woman presented a larger target, her shoulders and head visible clutching the M-16. Aiming carefully Kessel steadied his breath and prepared to fire.

At the last minute the Japanese woman plunged behind the counter, his shot wasted striking the concrete wall. Unsure what had alerted her to the attack, Kessel sat confused for a moment. This provided a window of opportunity for the dual pistol wielding man to complete his flank.

Roaring a battle cry in Japanese he stormed from the rows of meat, firing at the crouched Kessel. A large caliber bullet grazed his right shoulder painfully before Kessel could react. On instinct the old man rolled under the nearest animal and started running up the aisle, hoping the intervening meat would provide cover.

The pistols continued their cacophony of fire, dropping some animals to the ground and piercing fist wide holes in others. However the Anubian had little combat training and his shots were sloppy. Kessel waited for the clatter of magazines hitting the cold ground before he returned fire. Dropping and rolling back to the original aisle, he fired two shots at the Japanese man, striking his torso and neck. Instantly the body dropped to the ground like a marionette with severed strings.

Kessel's eyes widened as the woman sighted him from behind the counter with the M-16, eagerly

rattling a stream of bullets on full automatic. Blindly firing three shots Kessel continued his roll over to the next aisle of meat, relieved when the clatter of incoming bullets softened upon hitting meat. He had again escaped unscathed, aside from minor cuts and bruises as flying pieces of concrete struck his face.

Having little time to think Kessel spun open the cylinder and loaded his last bullet. He could make a run for the dropped Desert Eagles and attempt to reload them, assuming the dead man had any left over magazines. However Kessel visualized his opponent and knew that she had some sort of military experience and may anticipate the attempt. "Let's give her something she won't expect..."

Kessel waited for the blaze of M-16 fire to die before he started his reckless maneuver. Silently he spun around the animal cover and sprinted towards the counter. The Japanese woman had ducked behind it to reload, and her eyes widened at the approaching wild man. Hastily dropping her M-16 she tried to draw a pistol from an ankle holster.

The weapon was raised halfway by the time Kessel got within range. The man continued running, and fired his single bullet point blank into her chest. Following the motion he dove forward behind the counter in case she had enough brain signals left to squeeze the trigger. After a few seconds of silence Kessel peered over the edge of the counter, grimly satisfied at the sprawled corpse before him.

Pulsing adrenaline was replaced by pulsing pain as the realization of his shoulder wound hit him. Gingerly rolling the shirt back Kessel looked over the cut, relieved to see the bullet had only split the skin and not remained in the limb. Coughing and rising to his feet Kessel sat on the counter, exhausted and drained from the frantic encounter.

As much as he had come to hate killing, Kessel admitted, and feared, that he was getting better at it. Confronting, let alone defeating, three opponents was an impressive feat. The woman definitely had prior experience with weapon handling and tactics, and still he had prevailed. Victory sweetened the raid and he eagerly finished looting the cold storage, confident the solid walls and steel doors had muffled any sounds from the rest of the cabin.

Hauling a combination of rifles, boxes, and containers, Kessel carefully loaded the last cardboard box of food into the elevator. Hiding in the alcove beside the door, he pressed the button for street level, tentatively drawing a recently thawed stub nosed MP5-K submachine gun.

A handful of ice and bandages were stuffed over his wounded shoulder, as Kessel decided a hasty exit was more important than a proper field dressing. A second encounter with even a single half trained Anubian grunt would probably kill him, Kessel concluded sourly.

The elevator blissfully dinged its arrival at the parking lot. The doors cordially slid open and Kessel was quick to jam them with a stolen crowbar to prevent the elevator from returning to cold storage halfway through his transfer.

Rushing towards the valet booth Kessel was pleased to see only a single employee remained. Instead of idly chatting the lone man was idly listening to music, vaguely aware of his surroundings. Kessel approached from behind and efficiently struck twice with the butt of the MP5-K. Dragging the unconscious body into the shadows of a nearby tree, Kessel turned to the parking lot to find a suitable vehicle.

A beautiful car two stalls over instantly caught his attention. For a moment Kessel remembered a different era, a peaceful era, when he had saved and scraped three summers of pay together to buy an old Detroit muscle car. Before he had met Frieda his only love was that machine.

Spending days and days to restore the car made Kessel feel like a king. Time passed and as he got older the inclination to administer lengthy repairs faded, resulting in the car being sold a

year before meeting his future wife.

Now the same make and model was parked before him, the keys likely within reach in the valet locker. Kessel scrambled to throw open the wooden cabinet, scanning a finger up and down each row until he found the correct key.

Then he whirled towards his new car, a 1970 Dodge Challenger, and sighed wistfully. The long, sleek nose and shorter trunk area defined the popular mopar design of muscle cars, a design instantly rekindling familiarity within Kessel. Unlike his crashed Sable the vehicle was certain to draw attention, but at that moment Kessel couldn't care less. It was painted a fiery orange with bright bronze trim and filled with a polished black interior, and somehow had avoided attracting a single grain of dust.

As if approaching an unpredictable animal in the wild, Kessel tentatively opened the door and slid into the front bench. Fumbling with the key he excitedly cranked the beast to life. The engine responded by roaring contently before settling into a steady purr. The dashboard lit up and Kessel was pleased to see the gas dial float to the top, indicating nearly a full tank of petrol. Easing the vehicle from the stall Kessel swung around and reversed towards the elevator. He opened the door and ran to pop the trunk in preparation for loading the loot. Constantly checking the surrounding area Kessel quickly ferried the stash back and forth from the nearby elevator to the car.

In under four minutes he had loaded enough supplies to last him close to a month, perhaps two if he rationed immediately. Looking at the golf club once more, Kessel unjammed the elevator, returned to the driver's seat, and casually rolled onto Pablo Canyon Road.

Kessel leaned against the cave wall with relief, the numb stone refreshing against his strained back. After escaping the gold club he had worked solidly for three days to unload and store his new equipment, stopping only to eat and sleep. Although it had reopened several times on the first day of work, his shoulder wound was stitched, patched and on the mend.

Tediously hauling each gun and box of ammo up to the mouth of the burrow was a tiring task, and only the beginning of the process. After the trunk had been emptied into the sunny den he had to slog down the long tunnel to his actual cave, a simple effort exacerbated by being repeated dozens of times.

Upon completion, Kessel felt comfortable and safe in his cave, perhaps even safer than his residential bungalow. Like a primitive driveway his new car rested on the dry river bed under a slight overhang, a crude pile of sage bushes shielding it from casual glances or helicopter surveillance. From the entrance inwards everything had been improved.

The cave mouth had been trapped with a combination of trip wires and flares, more to warn of intruders than to harm them. Kessel had little confidence in the reliability of the system as he had never attempted to jury rig a series of booby traps before.

Although missing furniture and a civilized place to eat or sleep, the cave was looking more and more like a permanent shelter. Rows of rifles and pistols adorned one wall, opposite crates of ammo and grenades. Kessel had even managed to loot a pile of land mines the size of pizzas. Jerry cans of gasoline sat in orderly rows near boxes of canned food. He hadn't acquired a proper travel stove and currently started a campfire for each meal. During days filled with exertion he ate two cans of beans or stew, otherwise, to extend his supplies, he reduced the intake to a single can.

After further exploring with his new flash lights, Kessel was very pleased to find the bountiful cave provided clean running water. A narrow tunnel delved deeper underground, and eventually connected with a lazily flowing river. For convenience he rigged up a makeshift well so water



was only a lowered bucket away.

His bed consisted of shrubs and clothes packed into a blanket found in the backseat of the car. Sighing contently he moved to the impromptu mattress and sat down to plot his next offensive.

The one month supply accumulated to half a years worth. His beard and hair grew in, new scars were earned, and Kessel's name became a hushed legend whispered by the people of Round Mountain. For two months he performed operations against the Anubians between six and eleven times a week. Two solid months of no respite, no quarter, and no mercy.

The exhausting guerrilla war manifested its toll through Kessel's increasingly haggard appearance. Between planning targets and missions, stealing supplies, avoiding the police, surveying different avenues of the town, and surviving numerous gunfights, the old man had grown into a fearsome warrior.

His tasks ran the gamut from assassinations to robbery, and every action was intricately planned to weaken the Anubians somehow. A few intrepid foes had attempted to follow him back to his cave, but a trail was fairly easy to spot once he cut into the desert, and none ever found his lair. Drive by shootings of Anubian meetings were second nature. He had bombed enemy households with high explosives concocted in his cave. Kidnapping and extracting information was a common tactic. Precision assassinations were a favored method of ensuring the Anubians feared to step outside. Constant raids and looting replenished his supplies above and beyond anything he could have imagined, and soon the cave became a veritable fortress.

And through it all Kessel had never again hurt an innocent. Initially his attacks seemed chaotic and unpredictable, perhaps even reckless, but soon a definite pattern emerged and became a facet of life in Round Mountain. People learned what areas to stay away from, and who to avoid. As in any conflict there were exceptions; angry rabble rousers intent on forming vigilante groups against Kessel. But the crafty old man escaped any trap, slinking in and out of the desert like a gray fox.

His closest calls, and several battle scars, had come from entrapment by the police. After his fourth time being shot, Kessel had decided first aid supplies were a must. Now a side tunnel splintering off the main cavern led to his often used medical bay. Their aggressive tactics against Kessel had slowed recently though, for a variety of political reasons.

The Dodge Challenger performed admirably, and the easily recognizable paint job became a boon. Sympathetic segments of the population would nod or blatantly wave when he rolled by, and some Anubians sprinted away as soon as they heard the powerful engine. Kessel had never intended for his war to become so public, but constant violence had meant the issue couldn't be hidden or ignored anymore.

Hanging a foot out the side window of his orange car, Kessel enjoyed a much needed break from the strenuous, albeit self imposed, pace. A dusty baseball cap was low over his eyes and the radio droned in the background, the forgettable music momentarily interrupted by a special announcement by the police concerning his latest attack.

A convoy of Anubian specialists were being driven in from Carson City, intent on quelling the local problems. However their high tech laser sighted weapons, carapace body armor, and grand plans meant little when twelve land mines detonated underneath their bus as it rolled onto Hadley Circle.

The reinforcements had finally confirmed information revealed by several sources; Carson City was chosen for the second expansion of the Anubians. Round Mountain was still the focus due to its gold mine and remote location, and Carson City was a logical development due to the larger

population of viable converts.

Kessel also stayed focused on the mining town, knowing that if he destroyed the central power structure in Round Mountain the limbs in Carson City would wither and die. Plus he was pushing himself to the edge of collapse and couldn't afford the energy to open a new front against an even bigger target.

Cartonnage Chemicals remained immune to his attacks, even after several lackluster attempts. The warehouse was subtly converted into a bunker, barely visible except to a trained eye. Lazy looking employees playing cards on stacks of palettes were actually well armed sentries. Common bay doors had been reinforced with so much metal they had to be lifted manually by a crew of four. A barbwire fence was erected surrounding the perimeter, but also electrified to an illegally high voltage.

Kessel was amused when he reflected on the place, comprehending that his largest window of opportunity was unrealized months ago when he had first seen Matthew and Morris entering the place. The Anubians were confident and secure in their cloak of secrecy then, and never would have expected a frontal attack. Now it was clearly a primary concern, and that limited Kessel's options.

Smirking, he adjusted himself on the warming seat. Kessel wasn't sure if fate or bad luck had revealed his targets earlier than he was prepared to act against them. First having seen Yrret exposed, unguarded, in the graveyard over half a year ago. And now glimpsing Cartonnage Chemicals during an infant stage of production before it became an impregnable fortress. Steam fountained from the top of the warehouse day and night now, the mummification centers running on overdrive to try to raise an army able to withstand Kessel. Through experience he had become an expert at killing the numerous varieties of mummies the plant produced. Grinning and stretching his scarred left arm, Kessel reflected on his highest kill count of 152 human mummies in a single night. Disgust mingled with the thought of so many bodies transported and processed just to stop him, dampening his previous celebration of victory. The sun sizzled off his unbuckled boot, and a slight breeze ruffled the red strip of cloth tied around his faithful FN-FAL rifle. The weapon had been stolen during his first raid on the golf club, a night resulting in many firsts. It was the first time he had been shot, the first skirmish he had won, and the first time he had killed more than a single person at once.

Absently he slipped his hand around the worn grip, his muscles loose and relaxed at the familiar weight. The gun had a long, thin barrel, which contrasted the wide magazine and over sized stock. For heavier missions he fitted the weapon with a drum style magazine containing 100 rounds, compared to the standard thirty. A scope was another common addition, but since most Anubians were cowering inside Cartonnage Chemicals Kessel hadn't had the chance to utilize it in a few weeks.

Persuaded by the comfortable September temperature Kessel drifting in and out of sleep. He had scheduled the whole day to rest and recover his strength, but also as a tactical decision.

Normally after losing a critical minion or location Yrret would angrily lash out at the civilians of Round Mountain. Typically the lead time on such responses was a day, so Kessel would have plenty to do by the next morning.

Attacking wasn't his only objective or method of weakening the Anubians strangling grip on the town. Defending and averting that very same grip from crushing the population was another primary goal. This won favor with the local police force, at least those who weren't Anubian converts. In addition the more he stopped the retaliation attacks, the more townsfolk would look the other way when his car drove by.

Originally the majority had slandered him a crazy old man that needed to be stopped, or killed.

But that roaring anger had subsided as truth of the Anubians slipped out. Bodies began disappearing, violent attacks perpetuated the night, mysterious sightings began near the warehouse, and a general sense of foreboding throughout the town culminated in a reversal of opinions.

And so exactly a month after his opening attack in the blitzkrieg of action, Kessel received his first gift from the supportive townsfolk. Soon cans of food, batteries, stitched clothes, and gasoline would clandestinely be left on door steps or near the curb.

Paralleling this emerging trend was a slackening in response time by the police, and in some cases even a total cessation of hostilities. From observation and interrogation Kessel had learned the police were fracturing internally across lines of opinion. Some days they took seven or eight minutes to react to an incident a block away, while other times they were opening fire within seconds.

Yrret and the Anubians had been outraged at the varying levels of support, and began to increase the brutality and intimidation they performed. However the tighter they gripped and strained to maintain a secretive hold on the populace, the more food and nods and waves Kessel received from his old neighbors and colleagues.

Smiling as the red cloth brushed his hand, Kessel reseated his hat and looked at the gun. The memento was looped around the barrel of the rifle, and had been part of the wrapping of the original gift of food he received. Unexpectedly the care package was left behind the yellow fence of Elizabeth Rose's house. Apparently the senior woman had rethought their chance meeting during Morris' kidnapping, and decided Kessel's work was a necessary evil.

A whining guitar solo dragged his attention back to the desert and the realization that the police announcement had concluded, being replaced by a screeching medley. Cringing Kessel leaned forward and turned the radio off, then raised his hand and rotated a second knob. Numerous curt voices of police officers crackled from his stolen scanner, the impressive technology capturing signals even though he was several miles from the town.

Kessel used the police scanner to stay abreast of any internal developments within the department. Plus it was extremely useful for escaping from a crime scene before the cavalry arrived. As lunch was rapidly approaching the pace of chatter slackened and became infected with a relaxed tone.

Listening for a few moments Kessel's attention span waned and soon he lowered the cap over his eyes and returned to his slouched posture. "It's my day off anyways," he muttered, casually tossing his leg out the window.

"Ah car 772 here, we just rendezvoused with our man," an air brake split the report for a brief second. A muffled exclamation was escaped under the officer's breath, "Wow that cab is bright like a lime." Louder he continued, "Waiting on our second escort vehicle then we'll head to Carson City."

There was static for a moment then a pleasant female voice replied, "Dispatch to car 772, that's negative on support, proceed solo with Cartonnage Chemicals truck."

Kessel bolted upright in his seat, the cap flipping off his head from the movement. He cranked the dial and shook his head in case the conversation had been a dream.

Frustration edged the speaker's voice, "Affirmative dispatch, car 772 out." The channel returned to routine calls and confirmations.

"What was that about?" he wondered aloud. "What would cops be doing escorting Anubian scum?" Kessel leaned to his right and opened the glove compartment, withdrawing a thick, worn journal. Unwrapping the elastic Kessel hastily paged through the book to find his entry from a

week ago.

"Hmm, here we are," squinted against the sun Kessel read from his Saturday night notes, "Semi-truck hijacked off highway 376, neon green cab, twenty eight and a half foot trailer..." his voice faded and he looked up from the book. "Somehow the Anubians have conned the police into escorting their stolen supply vehicle to their new base number two."

Checking the dashboard clock, Kessel sparked the engine and revved the pedal, each responsive discharge blasting sand behind the vehicle. The noise subsided as Kessel exited and made his way to the trunk.

Pushing aside tarps, rope, flashlights, and other survival supplies, he heaved open a secret compartment crudely cut into the floor of the trunk. A sawed off shotgun, two pineapple style grenades, and a box of spare magazines and loose buckshot shells greeted him. The 100 round drum for the FN-FAL, plus an assortment of pistols and knives, were left untouched. He transferred the weapons to the front bench, stashing the Lupara shotgun and shells to his left and letting the grenades roll on the seat beside him. Checking the FN-FAL he snugly fit the extra magazines into the long wide slot in the door.

His previous uncertainty before such an unplanned, rash attack would have frightened Kessel, but now experience and confidence cooled his nervousness. Nodding a goodbye to the burrow entrance above him, Kessel turned the car out from the overhang and started down the river bed, the suspension absorbing each unexpected root or rock.

The semi-truck would be limited to heading north on highway 376, and then east on highway 50. There was some possibility of variation as Carson City approached, but Kessel hoped to destroy or incapacitate the vehicle long before then.

Currently he focused on getting over to Fremont Route, thereby avoiding the city and still having a chance at locating the truck when the road connected with the highway a few miles north of Round Mountain.

Numerous high speed chases and getaways had substantially improved Kessel's ability to handle the car past 100 miles an hour. "Plus it's a little easier with a Challenger than a Sable," he amusingly observed as one of his many exits from the dry river approached. Even though the sand was quick to mask any tread tracks, Kessel still liked to vary his entrance points to the canyon. The upcoming location was viable because a huge bank of dirt had collapsed from the cliff side, and was packed enough to act like a ramp to the flat desert.

His orange Dodge Challenger had immediately lost its pristine luster within the first mile of scrubland. Dust permeated the interior to such a degree that Kessel wondered how the previous owner had managed to keep it clean at all. The rear tire was missing a hubcap from a particularly vicious corner, while the other one had been replaced after a .38 caliber slug flattened it. The passenger window had several cracks reminiscent of his Sable, except they were caused by an Anubian smashing across the hood.

The engine remained as hungry as ever, eagerly devouring the miles of wasteland towards Fremont Route. Familiar jostles and jogs bumped Kessel in his seat, but he lightly adjusted a skilled hand to compensate. Within minutes he reached the smooth pavement, waving and nodding as a local driver slowed to let him in from the unexpected merge lane of open desert. If Kessel drove calmly and within the speed limit he could almost make it to Carson City on a single tank of gas. But at chase speeds he doubted the range of the Challenger would attain 120 miles before running dry. "Hopefully I can stop the semi before that," he said, thankful at his habit of topping the petrol whenever he returned to the cave.

Keeping the police scanner loud enough to be heard over the sound of rushing air, Kessel passed at every available opportunity, hoping to reach the junction before the truck to give him time to

prepare. He recalled an old junkyard not far from highway 376 where he could stop and watch for his target, then roar out onto their tail.

Not wanting to harm the uncertain and unspoken agreement with the police, Kessel would try to disable the escort car first. Even if it was piloted by Anubians, killing police was a surefire method to lose the fragile public opinion and prompt a serious manhunt against him.

After that he could focus on the truck; an imposing task based on its sheer weight and endless wheels. Kessel lovingly patted the Lupara, knowing the wide spray from the stunted barrel would be invaluable for popping tires.

Based on the earlier radio conversation it was unlikely the police would be devoting additional backup to the semi-truck, so with luck he could stop the load before it even reached highway 50. Perhaps the strife inside the police ranks had benefited him again as the anti-Anubian elements refused to protect the Cartonage Chemicals vehicle.

A few minutes later Kessel slowed to a stop in the junkyard, his dust trail catching up and passing over the vehicle. He had a clear line of sight to the highway, breathing a sigh of relief upon seeing the road nearly empty of innocent drivers. The majority of travellers may be taking a break for lunch, giving him a clear window of opportunity where risk to the civilians could be reduced.

Like the rusted bones of a great mechanical beast, thousands of parts were strewn around him. There was a certain organization to the junkyard; as organized as towering piles of waste could be. Numerous roads weaved between the mounds, and his car pointed nose forward down the widest gravel path.

"Car 772 here, we're five minutes out from the Fremont Route junction. Any word on Carson City forces meeting us halfway?"

The same female dispatcher responded, clearly irritating by the constant pestering, "Again that's a negative car 772," a pause and sharp intake of breath, "just deliver the goods, and fast."

Kessel smiled and lowered the volume, vaguely questioning when, or if, the police would catch on to his use of a scanner. Round Mountain probably didn't have the budget or staff to revamp their communication network to something secure, he hoped.

Sliding the scope onto his FN-FAL, Kessel rubbed the lens clean and slung the weapon out the passenger window. The metal frame provided a sturdy platform to carry out his intention of firing at the police escort on sight. Peering through the scope he angled his view south down the highway, trying to spot the lime green cab.

Like an untested amateur his heart fluttered upon seeing the vehicle. He easily overcame the old feeling by steadying his grip on the rifle and clicking the selector to fully automatic in preparation.

A screaming police siren cut the air as the escort charged in front of the semi-truck. Kessel hadn't expected the blatant display and began to wonder what exactly the truck was hauling. Quickly marking several landmarks and the speed of nearby traffic Kessel calculated the convoy at eighty miles per hour or more. The semi-truck was likely grinding close to its maximum, but the flat terrain and fresh pavement provided little resistance.

Relaxing his posture and leaning into the scope, Kessel tracked the police car. Letting his body become accustomed to the speed of the target, he waited until they had passed directly in front of him. Kessel prepared to fire once the widest side of the car was visible.

Gently he squeezed and released the trigger several times, sending a cloud of three or four bullet clusters towards the escort. A muzzle brake retrofitted onto the barrel helped reduce the FN-FAL's bucking recoil. He could see several of the bursts strike the car, shattering glass and

exploding the front left tire. Screeching and swerving the police car dove off the road and smashed into a sand bank, the sirens garbled cry dying from the impact.

Checking through the scope Kessel saw both the passengers moving and partially coherent. Swinging his view to the semi-truck he saw red brake lights as the cab readjusted slightly to avoid the crashed escort. Instantly the police scanner was alight with shouting confusion.

"Cartonnage 001 here, dammit, your boys just got shot up and are off the road, repeat they are off--"

"Car 772 here--" coughing and cursing cut into the identification, "unknown shooter firing from a sheltered position. We are unhurt but the vehicle is wasted, we're sitting ducks here! Send someone, send anyone!"

Kessel dropped the FN-FAL into the passenger seat and slid back to start the car, roaring forward through the rusted piles and back onto Fremont Route. He raised the scanner's volume and tried to angle towards the semi-truck as the highway approached.

"Negative car 772, no available units in your vicinity. Can you spot the assailant?"

"Well get some units in my vicinity, now!"

"I repeat that's a negative car 772."

A rough section of pavement jutted upwards from the road, acting like a miniature ramp to the speeding Challenger.

"Wait, I see him, I see him!"

Kessel felt the vehicle lift off the ground as he flew towards highway 376, shaking his bones and throwing the contents of the car around when he landed. Tires whining, he threw the wheel to the left, smoothly straightening behind the semi-truck trailer.

Panic flooded the police scanner at the sight, "Oh shit, it's Kessel! He's after the truck! Help! Help!"

The cries of the Anubian truck driver echoed the police, "Send someone, please! Help!"

The dispatcher remained coldly silent as Kessel's assumption about partial allies in the force proved true. Cracking pistol shots stirred him from the reverie as the police exited their vehicle and fired from a crouch. Weaving the car slightly Kessel avoided all of the desperate rounds, and seconds later the broken cruiser was a distant speck in his rear view mirror.

Lifting the menacing Lupara, Kessel easily matched pace with the fleeing truck. "Now, let's see what you're carrying."

Kessel hopped up onto the back of the trailer, shoving a corpse deeper into the container to make room. Flicking on a flashlight he peered into the twenty eight and a half foot interior. The body of a second guard was curled in the corner where the man had bled to death from Kessel's first shots.

Defeating the semi-truck had been a surprisingly simple matter, but capturing it intact proved to be a bit more complicated. Eventually he was able to shoot out enough tires that the vehicle drifted left. After he shot the driver it was a simple matter of letting gravity pull the truck off the road.

Stopped on the side of the road and out of his car left the old man feeling exposed. He wanted to search the truck contents quickly, and planned to use his grenades to destroy whatever he found. Any intelligence he could gain on the Anubians first was critical, thus the flashlight he swept across the long cargo hold.

Three gigantic vats dominated the trailer, while associated wires and computer systems spiraled outwards like pieces of flaxen hair. Kessel remembered hearing of the drying vats from Morris, but didn't quite grasp the scale or quality of them until this first hand exposure.

Each tub was seven feet tall and close to eight feet long, while their width barely fit inside the truck. Thick aquarium style glass walled in each side, with tarnished bronze supports binding the entire structure together. Unhooked tubes, their size and color reminiscent of a clothes dryer, hung limply from every bulwark. Five openings per corner pointed into each vat, lending credence to Morris' speculation that corpses were dried by the processing tubs.

Kessel shivered with morbid fascination at the find, wedging his body past the first vat in an effort to thoroughly search the entire truck before he chose his next course of action. As his face came within inches of the glass he could smell the pungent odor of salt, and some chemical he didn't recognize.

Flashlight leading, he glimpsed strange canisters near the back of the trailer. Intrigued, he squeezed past the second and third tank, checking over his shoulder to ensure the trailer door remained open. "Should have wedged that," he regretted.

After straining his body through the narrow gap he saw what the canisters were. Brilliant yellow labels were pasted onto each of the tall bronze tanks, warning of their explosive contents.

"Propane. Perfect!" There were at least forty tanks in total, most nearly as tall as him, and from the tinge of rust likely just as old.

Kessel began reversing his path back towards the light, grinning at the realization that he had just stolen a gigantic improvised bomb from the Anubians.

His focus quickly changed to the best method of moving the propane. He checked the odometer in the Challenger and calculated that they had chased for a solid thirty seven miles. The semi-truck was in rough shape, but could likely still drive back to Round Mountain, even if it would be far below highway speeds.

So far the police scanner had been unusually quiet. He wondered what they would assume happened if the truck driver didn't report in soon. Even with almost half the tires shot out the semi-truck was tough enough to ram through any impromptu police barricades.

Or he could attempt to hide the truck, or car, or even the propane somewhere. "No, even if some of the police are holding back from helping the Anubians, they can't ignore a crime scene. This stretch road will be bustling with the boys in blue by dinner."

Scratching his chin and avoiding the wide eyes of passing travellers, Kessel tried to guess how many propane tanks would fit in the Challenger before it was overloaded and undrivable. He opened the trunk to help gauge his estimates, when the rope curled inside gave him an idea. Smashing the glass out of the nearest vat, he tightly knotted the hefty length of rope around the bronze support bars. He trailed the cord back to the rear of his car and tied it securely to the frame. "I'll just make a little spot for my car to fit," he casually muttered to himself, as if he was performing a mundane task like shopping for groceries. Manually lowering the two ramps from the back of the semi-truck, he returned to his car.

Kessel started the vehicle and looked out the window over his shoulder. Gently he eased the gas down, feeling the weight of the vat resist the Challenger's pull. The rope snapped taut and he feared it would break. Luckily the tub, although large and unwieldy, was lightweight since a majority of it was glass.

He heard a horrendous grinding noise as the vat started to gain momentum, and soon it scrapped forward. Rocks spewed from his tires and spattered the ramps, but soon the vat was teetering on the edge of the semi-truck. With one final thrust of acceleration the glass tub dropped onto the ramps and slid out of the truck, bright sparks flying from the metal on metal contact.

Letting out a breath he didn't realize he was holding, Kessel drove the vat forward slightly, away

from the truck in an effort to clear a path for his car. Springing from his seat, Kessel jogged to the back of the trailer and looked inside. Sullenly he realized a second vat would need to be moved, as the car nearly doubled the length of each tub.

"Hey there partner, can I help you with something?"

Kessel froze at the unexpected voice, his hand instantly going to the pistol holstered under his shoulder. He gazed at the glass vat ahead of him, catching a vague outline of the speaker reflected in the dull glass. Relaxing slightly he saw the man wasn't dressed in the blue uniform of a police officer.

Keeping his hand high near the pistol, Kessel turned his head and firmly replied, "With what?" "Well I was driving by and it looked like quite a proces...processio...well quite a big job going on here." Hearty, warm laughter followed the declaration. Apparently the speaker was either overconfident he could draw a gun before Kessel, or already had a weapon trained on the old man.

Resigned, Kessel turned around. A tall, lean man grinned at him, a broad cowboy hat matching his dusty jeans and loose jacket. Resignation turned to relief as Kessel thought of a third option, long forgotten by his endless days of war; perhaps the man was just a friendly samaritan.

The man, Cody, was close to fifteen years younger than Kessel. Apparently he was a rancher on a nearby cattle farm, and commuted into Round Mountain several times a week for trade. Kessel instantly took a liking to the blunt man, finding his matter-of-fact demeanor refreshingly simple. Almost like some of the older miners Kessel had worked with previously, what felt like years ago. Like most ranchers Cody took pride in owning the largest truck he could legally fit on the road. In this case the quad rear tires, oversized diesel engine, and sturdy trailer hitch were a blessing to Kessel. Within minutes they had made short work of the second vat. The process was so efficient that Kessel asked Cody to remove the final tub as well, just in case. The old man was adamant on hooking up the ropes alone, not wishing to expose the two corpses to Cody. Vaguely pointing in the direction of the glass vats Cody asked, "Shoot I figure I could take these off your hands and use 'em for water tanks, if ya don't mind?"

Kessel smiled at the offer, happy to clear evidence any way he could. "Sure Cody, do you need help loading them up?"

"Nah don't worry 'bout that, I figure you have places to go, after all." For a moment there was a glimmer, almost mischievous, in the rancher's eyes. The sentence hung in the air, and soon settled over the pair as an awkward silence.

"Say, that's a heck of a nice car. '70 Challenger right? Phew, don't see many of these anymore!" Kessel nervously considered the possibility that Cody was a covert assassin sent to catch the old man off guard, and his hand naturally slipped to the pistol grip as a result.

Seeing the movement, Cody put his hands up slightly, palms open towards Kessel. "Hey now, it ain't like that. I..." nervously he looked around, "...I really support what you're doing."

Slowly Kessel eased his hand from the weapon, waiting for Cody to elaborate. In a lower tone the rancher continued, "See, your Egyptian fellows decided my brother was getting uppity. He worked in the mines, good, smart kid, but didn't get much schooling on account of our pa dying young. Well he didn't like how things were being run there, and started talking to some of the other fellas. And one day," Cody clapped his hands together and held them shut as he continued to speak, "poof! He's gone."

The start of Kessel's condolences were interrupted as Cody continued, "I looked for him, sure as hell I did, but it's been four days and I haven't seen a trace of him." Shaking his head with regret, the rancher walked past Kessel and up the ramps into the trailer. Immersed in the tale Kessel



momentarily forgot the bodies inside.

Cody's sharp cowboy boot cut into the side of the nearest corpse, "And I figure assholes like these are the cause." Kessel should have known the clever, observant rancher would have seen the crudely hidden Anubians earlier.

Jumping from the back of the trailer Cody landed close to Kessel, his eyes regaining their sly understanding. "I talked to some of my friends, and, well, you know the rep you're getting and all. Then when I see your car like this I think 'A chance to meet the man', ya know?"

Kessel nodded and finally replied, carefully measuring each word, "Well, Cody, do I fit the image?"

Cody smirked and pushed the brim of his wide hat up, as if he was critically analyzing Kessel. "I figure you're pretty handy with that pistol and the fancy rifle in your car, so I'd say you match up mighty well." He finished the appraisal by firmly planting a hand on the older man's shoulder.

"Plus, you're the only one with the balls to stand up to these bastards, so you got that going for ya."

Acknowledging the comment with a tip of his head, Kessel waved his hand towards the car, "Well I'll be sure to shoot a few for your brother," pausing and looking to Cody's dusty visage he promised, "hell, for the both of you."

His spirits lightened by the words, Cody also motioned towards the car. "Let's get this thing loaded up then. I want to wake up to great news tomorrow." Laughing and shaking a finger at Kessel, he finished, "Involving propane!"

A bellowing laugh escaped the old man's chest; an uplifting activity he had gone too long without. The laughter faded naturally as the two set to the final task of backing the Challenger up the ramps of the trailer.

From inside the cab Kessel started the damaged semi-truck and blasted the horn in farewell. Black smoke poured from the exhaust stacks as the beast rumbled to life. Intrusive sand shifted and fell from the tires as he swung the vehicle back towards Round Mountain. The road remained empty enough to complete the turn without impeding traffic.

As the semi-truck slowly climbed gears, Kessel saluted out his window towards Cody. The rancher was measuring the vats, likely to determine which flatbed trailer to bring back to transport them. Upon seeing Kessel driving away he grabbed his cowboy hat and waved it around, cheering the warrior towards his next mission.

The exit was significantly bumpier than Kessel would have liked. Steering the truck was a constant struggle against the flat tires, which still wished to drive him left. Arms straining, Kessel shifted through the multitude of gears in the cab, once again thankful for his time spent working in the mine. Driving a gigantic hauler truck packed with ore was similar to driving a lime green semi-truck hauling a car.

"Well, a car and tons of propane," Kessel commented, the infectious glimmer from Cody's eyes now shining in the old man's. "Maybe it's time to pay another visit to Cartonnage Chemicals, since I doubt their little bunker will be much use against a twenty eight foot long bomb."

The crippled truck limped along at forty five miles per hour, although Kessel had found the switch for the warning flashers to indicate any other traffic should just go around. Once he settled into a comfortable equilibrium with the flat tires, Kessel had plenty of time to plan his attack.

He wished there was an opportunity to return to his cave and stock up on weapons and ammo, perhaps even body armor or a helmet. But Kessel was still nervous about police presence, and didn't want to leave his propane missile unguarded and visible on the edge of the road. Even

with eleven remaining tires, Kessel didn't know the limitations of the semi-truck well enough to risk a jaunt across the desert.

Instead he focused on what he did have. An FN-FAL with almost a dozen of the thirty round magazines, plus a 100 round drum. The double barreled Lupara shotgun still had plenty of ammo, as did his numerous pistols.

Kessel visualized his route, remembering and discarding various side roads as he narrowed down the least exposed method of reaching the warehouse. He would stay on highway 376 for as long as possible, knowing the smooth pavement was kinder to the damaged tires.

The junction where he disabled the police escort was likely to be swarming with reinforcements, but he could avoid it by taking a parallel road through the ranchlands. A semi-truck wouldn't look out of place amongst the farms, grain towers, and processing plants of the artificially watered basin.

Once he had passed the junction numerous gravel roads would provide a path west to Fremont Route, which he could use to circle south of the city. A similar byway north of Pablo Canyon Road would connect him east onto Smoky Boulevard. Then the short, dangerous run to the warehouse itself.

Kessel considered the possibility of waiting until nightfall to perform his stealthily entrance. He ignored the foolish idea, aware that successfully hiding a semi-truck in the open desert was as likely as him ever again attending a company dinner.

Having set a relative itinerary in his mind, Kessel looked for a safe place to pull off the road and convert the truck into a moving bomb. He could stash the Challenger in one of the old, unfinished parking lots near the library. The cameras installed in the official lot would likely be out of range to see the vehicle, plus the location would be out of sight from the direction of Cartonnage Chemicals.

If Kessel escaped alive he could run back to the vehicle and return to his cave. "If I escape..." he said, the somber thought dampening his excitement at finally having a slim chance at assaulting Cartonnage Chemicals. "I could be dead by morning, in fact."

For the first two weeks after his freedom from jail, Kessel had acquired a reckless, almost suicidal drive. The old man had been on the very doorstep of death, but hadn't stepped through quite yet. Coming that close to the end had changed him, and for a while he was infused with a jaded, careless attitude.

After Kessel had seen the positive effect his chain of successful missions had wrought, the feeling began to fade. But death, or the possibility of death, had never troubled him since then. In a way taking full responsibility for his own life, own safety, and own future everytime he stepped out of the cave was empowering.

And so his plan of attack didn't stray or dim with cowardice. The chance of death never factored into his desire to finally destroy Cartonnage Chemicals. He would set the truck to explode, jam the pedal down and let the bomb drive straight into the building. In the chaos that followed his FN-FAL would go to work on the confused Anubian employees.

Overall, Kessel was optimistic about his chances. The Anubians were running low on recruits and resources as the effects of guerrilla warfare sunk in. Driving alone, mechanically waving as impatient drivers honked and sped past, Kessel amusingly commented to himself, "Maybe there was only one cop escort because they only had one left!"

His rising assurance stumbled on a single obstacle. "Yrret," he cursed. For all his experience with death and pain, both giving and receiving, the thought of confronting the high priest made him shiver. Kessel slowly rotating his left arm, still unsatisfied with the mobility he retained in the wounded limb. Combined with a crippled leg and numerous other scars, Kessel didn't relish the

idea of hand to hand with his undoubtedly skilled foe.

For the next several miles he pushed the dark thoughts from his head, losing himself in the peaceful rhythm of the road. Alternating and shaking each tired arm, Kessel refocused as the possible turns into the ranchlands began.

The idling diesel engine vibrated through the entire cab. Kessel was parked on a narrow, single lane strip of gravel joining Fremont Route and Smoky Boulevard, his gaze distant as he looked towards the town.

Red and blue lights flashed around the crashed escort car and the police carefully checked every incoming or outgoing vehicle. He had easily avoided the junction and all unwelcoming traffic with the help of the side roads. Kessel again wondered if the incredible lapse in securing the numerous gravel roads was intentional or not.

Shrugging, he opened both cab doors, eager to remove the stinking corpse of the driver. There wasn't a chance earlier when he was clearly visible with Cody on the side of the road. Kessel eagerly dragged the rotting passenger to the back and stored him with the other two Anubians. Then he hoisted himself into the trailer, having utilized the slow drive to figure out an approach to manipulate the propane tanks into a timed explosion. Kessel was knowledgeable about chemical proportions for mixing volatile solutions, but complex fuses and timers escaped him. Reassuringly he said, "We'll keep it simple then." Carefully he unwove a length of rope into two thinner threads. Then he took the pair of grenades from his front seat and crudely wedged them between opposite ends of the propane tanks. Holding the pins he delicately tied the split rope through each ring, then unfurled the cord towards the rear of the trailer.

Once the Challenger was removed he could leave the bay doors slightly ajar, and dangle the two threads out the back. Then he would line the truck up with Cartonage Chemicals, jam the gas down and run to the back to catch the threads. As the truck rolled forward the tension on the strings would increase and increase until finally the pins were pulled, giving him about five seconds before they detonated the cache of propane.

Resting the ropes on the ground, Kessel couldn't help but scoff, "Ten bucks I either blow myself up, or nothing at all." The old man wished he had a better understanding of creating a proper timer, instead of resorting to crude rope tricks.

Returning to the cab he started the truck towards Smoky Boulevard, still mumbling to himself about fuses.

Kessel stopped once more by the library, hastily unloading the car and storing it in the dusty lot near the back. He prepared his equipment before moving the truck again.

The FN-FAL was beside him, and would be slung over his shoulder or back when running. The Lupara shotgun was holstered in a leather case on his limping right leg as the old man preferred to draw and fire with his uninjured primary hand. A trusty Glock-19 pistol hung over his left hip like a cowboy. Finally a knife was sheathed near each ankle; one balanced for throwing and the other with a sturdy handle for close combat.

The 100 round drum magazine was clipped into the FN-FAL, with two spare boxes of thirty on the back of his belt. A bandolier of bright red shotgun shells wrapped his waist and encompassed the front of his jeans.

Jingling with the overload of equipment, the well prepared Kessel lowered his head over the steering wheel. "Frieda...I know you're going to help me with this one."

Pausing his voice stuttered and cracked, but the old man knew the words must be spoken aloud. "Joseph...I'm...I'm sorry for what I did. That feels a lifetime ago, but I was foolish to execute you

in cold blood. That tactic...that--" he stopped himself, feeling any excuses would discredit the apology.

Wiping the early signs of tears from his eyes, Kessel straightened in the seat. Having said his version of a prayer, the old man focused on the upcoming attack, likely the decisive battle of the war.

He thought back to all the harm the Anubians had done, all the evil they had polluted the streets of Round Mountain with. As was his habit, Kessel slowly worked himself into a raging frenzy of absolute hatred, destroying all semblance of the weakness and vulnerability of doubt.

Gritting his teeth, the lone warrior started the truck, letting the loud engine vicariously roar for him. Releasing the brakes he sped towards Cartonnage Chemicals, the warehouse less than a minute away from his hidden car.

Two loose ropes trailed behind the semi-truck, a sharp corner revealing the sliding back door was slightly open. The smoking piers of Cartonnage Chemicals were visible a block ahead; the automated exterior lights beginning to shine as the sun set.

Kessel squealed the truck towards the warehouse, all pretense of surprise gone. Slamming on the brakes three hundred feet from the front entrance, Kessel hastily wedged a crowbar against the gas pedal, then dismounted the cab. The truck idled excitedly in first gear as Kessel jammed the opposite end of the crowbar against the driver's seat.

Kessel had already sprinted halfway to the end of the trailer when the vehicle lurched forward. He quickly grabbed the two ropes and waited.

Squeezing the trigger strings at every unexpected lurch or waver in the truck's path, Kessel bit his lip and hoped he had aimed the missile correctly. Unhindered by a driver, the flat tires slanted the truck to the left, but Kessel had accounted for that while lining the vehicle up.

The slack ropes started to tighten as the truck rolled forward. He heard shouts from oblivious guards outside the warehouse, but knew they were too late to stop the inevitable. The tension on the ropes increased and finally reached a crescendo before slackening as the pins snapped free of the two grenades.

Moving simultaneously with the rolling bomb, Kessel sprinted to the right, ducking into cover behind a postal truck, covering his ears and frantically counting down.

"5...4..."

The guards had drawn their hidden weapons and opened fire on the approaching vehicle, clearly unsure what to do.

"3...2..."

Sparks exploded from the overhead beams as the lime green cab erupted through the front of the building. Kessel could hear the engine feebly growling as the tires were stalled on rubble.

"1..."

The grenades detonated the chain of propane, erupting into a three story mushroom cloud. The blast created a shockwave that smashed his cover, threw him to the ground, and shattered windows for five blocks.

His ears rang and his head spun. The awful mix of burning rubber and human flesh assaulted his senses, stinging his eyes and nostrils. Screams echoed from inside the warehouse, and crumbling scaffolding dropped to the ground, trailing flames.

Crawling to his feet Kessel unslung the FN-FAL and stumbled towards the warehouse, knowing anyone alive inside would be even more disoriented.

Yelling an unintelligible battle cry, he threw himself through the burning breach.

Kessel instantly recognized rows and rows of vats in varying stages of processing. Some were filled with noxious black liquid, others were empty or had dead bodies in them. Most of them sparked and short circuited, but a few of the distant tubs still blasted natron salt to mummify piles of decomposing corpses.

He didn't have time to scrutinize the rest of the warehouse as an Anubian came at him with a wrench, the stumbling man barely aware of his surroundings. Stimulated by adrenaline, Kessel reacted instantly, firing two shots and dropping the enemy.

Stalking between the vats Kessel mercilessly gunned down anyone involved with the disgusting process. A trail of shed 7.62mm shells followed in his wake, as did several Anubian bodies.

Most of the enemies were stunned and dazed by the explosion, and provided easy prey for the veteran. A few had drawn revolvers, but most charged in his general direction with hand weapons.

"Yrret!" He shouted, trying to draw the high priest out from hiding.

A gangway ran overhead, half collapsed near the front of the warehouse. The main floor was dominated by the vats, but an elevator and stairwell near the back wall foreshadowed the sarcophagus room Morris and others had talked about.

Three Anubians attempted to ambush Kessel as he walked towards the stairs. One fired from the overhead walkway, and two flanked him from behind nearby vats. Still at the peak of his combat awareness, Kessel heard the sloppy attackers before the first shot had been fired.

Diving forward he rolled down the first step of the stairs, rapidly swinging around to bring the FN-FAL to bear. The motion caused the red cloth to flicker and sway, further movement caused by four quick shots from the rifle.

The shots struck the Anubians by the vats, two bullets each. His deft escape to the stairs had blocked the line of fire between the man above him on the metal grating. Quietly he snuck forward and edged along the wall. With luck the last Anubian would be focused on chasing Kessel and not expect a counter-attack.

He heard heavy footsteps above him, and swung out from his position to eagerly spray five rounds along the bottom of the gangway. There was a rattle as the attack struck metal, followed by a sickening thud when the last bullet pierced the man's foot. Screaming and off balance, the Anubian plummeted into the vat below, shattering the glass roof. Kessel grimaced and turned away as the active salt tubes dehydrated the man into a dry husk.

The thin tin ceiling started to fold and melt from the heat of the blaze, causing light sheets of roof to drift to the ground like metallic feathers.

Kessel ducked back to the stairs, clambering down them as quickly and quietly as possible.

Foul smelling fog greeted him halfway down the descent. He smothered a gagging cough as the sickly colored mist engulfed his body. Wheezing through his nose Kessel recovered and continued down the stairs, eager to find Yrret.

The fog lessened as he reached the basement level. As his visibility improved, Kessel gasped at the sight before him.

Hundreds of coffins were neatly ordered in rows, creating a grid of sarcophagi five wide by at least thirty long. Most were simple stone boxes, but others had detailed paintings in gold or blue. Kessel recognized assorted artifacts that were placed on each sarcophagus, most crafted in an Egyptian style.

The noise from upstairs dimmed, his breath stopped, and for a moment Kessel's heart beat faster than it ever had before. Through the fog he could see a podium carved from solid obsidian, and a man standing atop it.

Kessel gasped and mouthed a single word, "Yrret."

In place of his black business suit the high priest had donned thick linen robes bound with gold and interlaced with brilliant blue ingots. His head was bowed and he silently read from a voluminous tome filled with dry papyrus pages.

Kessel realized he was yelling and roaring at the Anubian, and that he had beckoned his feet into a galloping charge.

Calmly raising his head Yrret chanted in Egyptian, much as Matthew had done in the street. But unlike the minion, Yrret's rolling hymn commanded attention. Raising his arms the volume increased, just as Kessel realized he should have fired the FN-FAL instead of rushing ahead like a fool.

Yrret twisted his arm and pointed at Kessel, completing his chant as he did so. The old man froze like a statue, completely unable to get a response from his tense limbs. Hysterically roving his eyes around the room, Kessel tried to find a way to escape.

Instead he met the soulless gaze of the black dog from the graveyard, again heeled at Yrret's feet. The beast did not bark or even rise from its hunched position. Kessel looked at the animal, then recalled the mummified jackals that had smashed his Sable.

His mouth was paralyzed, but his mind was racing, "Of course," he thought, "I couldn't recognize the breed of dog because it isn't a dog, it's a damn black jackal!"

Yrret began chanting again, lightly pointing at each sarcophagus to match every accent in his intonation. Stronger than any mystical spell, panic gripped Kessel to the core of his heart.

Kessel tried to gasp or curse when he heard stone grating on stone from the coffin doors sliding open. Heavy tablets slammed onto the ground, and desiccated claws emerged from the tombs.

Shambling undead forms pulled themselves up and started towards the helpless old man.

Already vulnerable, he felt even more unnerved by the lack of taunts or gloating to Yrret's actions, and even the new minions were eerily silent.

Yrret and his pet passively watched the display with blank stares as outstretched claws from the filthy corpses edged closer to Kessel's face.

Steeling his nerves Kessel squeezed his eyes shut and waited to feel the tearing of skin. He mentally drifted from the room and back through the months of war, then deeper into the past. The peaceful years before Frieda's death warmed his heart, and still he slid backwards.

Upon remembering playfully chasing Frieda up to a lighthouse along their trip to the California coast, Kessel felt his leg stir in the physical world. Surprised by the movement, he stay immersed in the memories, hoping to direct himself to other events that may inspire motion.

He remembered lazy games of frisbee in the park on a Sunday, or their brief jogging phase

during the first winter in Round Mountain. Intensely focusing on each memory unlocked more sensation across his body, and Kessel almost felt he could successfully draw a weapon on Yrret.

Claws tore across his skin and he felt warm blood dribbling from dozens of shallow wounds, but still he delved deeper..

Finally he shut out the pain and transported himself to the wedding altar, lovingly staring into Frieda's eyes. Her white dress shimmered in the sun, nostalgia illuminating the glow to fantastic brightness. The priest had just presented the couple as Mr. and Mrs. Reaves, and he knew they would soon run down the aisle in celebration.

In the misty catacombs of Cartonnage Chemicals, Kessel's muscles tensed like a spring.

Commanded by Yrret to draw out the agony, the undead slowly tore and scratched at the seemingly helpless man.

"I love you Kessel!" Frieda said, her eyes brilliant with excitement. The two shared a smile and turned to joyfully skip towards their waiting car. Cheers and hooting roared from the crowd as

Kessel easily swept his new wife into his arms and started to rush her down the aisle. Frieda laughed her contagious laugh, and Kessel bellowed and hollered in response. White light consumed his thoughts as both the memory and paralyzing spell faded.

Snapping his eyes open, he whipped the Lupara from its holster and fired both barrels at Yrret. The thunderous report echoed through the room as a swarm of pellets flew at the high priest. Devoid of emotion the expressionless Yrret failed to react as the shots crashed through the altar and slammed into his torso. The black jackal rose, yelping and barking in confusion, as the man was thrown against the back wall.

Eyes wide with hopeful excitement at the possibility of victory, Kessel dropped the empty Lupara and started to work on the dozens of undead surrounding him.

Unlike the dry mummies he had been fighting so far, these new shambling corpses were fresh and seemingly impervious to pain. Unslinging the FN-FAL from his shoulder Kessel battered it in wide semi-circles to push the horde back. He sprinted towards the nearest wall, carving a path with a blast of automatic fire.

Pressed against the cold stone, Kessel had escaped being surrounded and overpowered by sheer numbers. He looked at the evil mob as the corpses turned and shambled towards him. Eyes narrowing he held the trigger down, arms straining to control the powerful recoil.

Expended shell casings clattered against the walls and floor as the drum poured ammo into the FN-FAL. Mummies collapsed and fell as shots riddled their decaying bodies. Kessel swept the gun back and forth, yelling in a blind rage at the unnatural enemies.

Only four of the undead remained when the magazine finally ran dry, close to ninety shots later. Two were within reach while the other pair advanced through the field of sarcophagi, one dragging a pierced leg.

The FN-FAL clattered to the ground, and Kessel didn't have a chance to draw his pistol. Instead he lowered his shoulder and charged into the nearest mummy, throwing the corpse back. While hunched over Kessel was quick to draw both knives from the ankle sheaths.

Snapping his wrist sent the one throwing knife flying at the closer target he hadn't pushed. The blade connected and quivered in the mummy's throat. Without a sound the corpse collapsed to the ground.

Recovered from the bull rush, the first mummy growled and swung a heavy claw at Kessel.

Ducking, he slashed across the creature's torso, splitting its stomach open. Ignoring the grievous wound the mummy's other arm scratched Kessel's extended wrist.

Retracting the wounded limb, Kessel cursed and kicked forward, knowing the opponent's rotting brain wouldn't understand how to block. The mummy stumbled back, granting Kessel a brief respite. He used the momentum of the attack to press the knife forward, stabbing directly towards the creature's neck.

Sharp metal split the windpipe and critical veins. Feebly swinging its arms as dark energy ebbed from the corpse, the mummy slumped against a stone coffin. The knife, lodged in a tangle of torn muscles, was ripped from Kessel's grip.

Bare handed, he glared at the remaining two mummies. Faster than lightning he drew the Glock-19 and fired five lethal shots into the closest Anubian minion.

Overtaken by anger, he holstered the pistol and ran forward. Leaping onto a stone sarcophagus separating the combatants, Kessel roared. He used the grave like a ramp, legs extending and arms outstretched as he launched himself at the last mummy.

Like a human torpedo Kessel hurtled at the creature, fist leading as he smashed into the undead body. Boosted by momentum he curled his hand around the mummy's face and drove it towards the floor.

There was a sickening crack as Kessel's entire weight pushed on the rotting head, shattering the skull.

Lifting himself from the ground, Kessel regained his wits enough to draw his last gun, aiming it at the pedestal area. "No!" he shouted, seeing that Yrret was gone, "Coward!"

Retrieving his knife, he hurried towards the front of the room. Relieved to see a narrow tunnel leading from the chamber, Kessel stooped to the ground to look for traces of Yrret. After a few moments of searching he could clearly see a trail of blood.

Knowing seconds could make the difference between catching the Anubian or not, Kessel left his other weapons and sprinted down the hall. He couldn't help but notice that the stone was freshly laid, and must have been built as an escape route when the warehouse was first taken over.

Fresh air struck his face as the dark tunnel sloped upwards. Fumbling forward Kessel could make out the dull yellow glow of streetlights. Invigorated by the end of the passage, he quickened his pace.

A rusted metal ladder greeted him, leading up to the pure night sky. Scrambling up the steps he emerged in an open field south of Hadley Circle. Cars whirred past in the distance and he could hear numerous sirens near the front of the warehouse.

Spinning and staring at the ground he desperately looked for hints of blood. Cursing at the empty desert, Kessel calmed himself and tried to think where Yrret would run.

Seconds later barking broke his concentration. "The black jackal!" he roared, running in the direction of the sound.

Approaching Electrum Drive, he saw the bright robes of the high priest. Yrret was lying face down in the dirt a few feet from the road while his animal desperately barked, apparently trying to wake the man up. Upon sensing Kessel's presence the tempo and volume of the yelps increased.

Finally Yrret grudgingly rose, dry stalks of grass and brush dirtying the once dignified garb.

Kessel raised the Glock and sighted down the barrel, but held his fire. He could hear voices in the distance, and didn't want to risk police pinpointing his location. "Still a chance I can escape after all this is over..." he muttered, starting to chase after the high priest.

Illuminated by headlights, Yrret stumbled across Electrum Drive, the black jackal urging him forward with barks and growls. The wounded Anubian had a commanding head start, but Kessel was moving much faster.

That changed as bullets whizzed around him, chopping up the asphalt as he dove to the other side of the road. Three shooters crouched by the back of the burning warehouse, flashlights blinding him from seeing their identity.

Moments later their intent was confirmed by a shouted order, "Police, freeze!"

Kessel cursed and wildly fired in their general direction, never intending to hit the officers.

Instead the three men were forced to seek cover, giving Kessel a chance to continue after Yrret.

The cat and mouse game extended to several panicked minutes. Whenever the police would get close Kessel would fire one or two shots to stall them. His progress was slowed by the constant gun battle, whereas Yrret was free to run unhindered at his best speed towards the mine.

Weaving between houses and stunted trees the Anubian blocked any chance at a clear shot from Kessel.

Checking the magazine Kessel realized he only had three bullets left. Sighing at having to wound innocents, he stopped behind a red boulder. Crouching and steadying himself over the rock, he turned and aimed at the advancing police.



With a resigned breath he fired a single round into the knee of the closest officer, painfully dropping the man. Radios blaring for backup, his comrades stopped to check the man's condition.

Running as soon as the shot left the gun, Kessel slipped away into the night after Yrret.

Breathing heavily Kessel scrambled up the loose rock edging the pit of the mine. The white robes of the priest were like a beacon in the night, a beacon he unerringly followed, hungry for the kill.

Years of blasting and digging in search of gold resulted in the steep hillside the mortal enemies ran up. Kessel knew the old mining town was at the top, surrounded by sullen, unremarkable desert. He had been to the location upon first moving to Round Mountain as part of a ghost town tour. The seemingly useless facts and information about the location provided invaluable to him now.

Built in 1906, a year after gold was discovered, the small town housed early pioneers to the area. Never exceeding a population of 200 souls until the late 1930s, there were few surviving buildings.

Yrret was nearly at the top of the mound, and Kessel worried he would lose the man after he crested. Trying to steady his breath and shaking hands, the old man raised the pistol. Wavering from the strain of the unexpected hike, Kessel squeezed off a single shot.

The bullet zipped through the air, ineffectually clattering off a boulder a few feet from Yrret. Kessel growled with anger and yelled at the fleeing Anubian, "Fight like a man you cowardly dog!" Deciding against wasting his remaining ammunition in another unlikely shot, he instead focused on planting one foot in front of the other as quickly as possible.

Throwing himself over the top, Kessel's ragged breathing momentarily stopped as a toxic green glow illuminated the night. His attention was momentarily drawn to the ghost town, although Yrret was nowhere to be seen.

Long tendrils of pale light pierced across the desert, random and unplanned like a spotlight shining on a broken mirror. Wind buffeted dust from the neglected buildings and stirred the low desert shrubs.

Regaining his strength, Kessel holstered the nearly empty Glock and moved towards the town. Powerful strides propelled him over the uneven ground, his run fueled purely by instinct. Kessel didn't know what awaited him, or what could be causing the glow. He knew, one way or another, the war would end tonight. The old man smirked and wished Yrret had already succumbed to his wounds, thereby making the point moot.

Edging around the cracked siding of the old mining office, Kessel had to squint and shield his eyes against the glaring brilliance before him. Raising his pistol, his last bullet in the chamber, Kessel advanced towards the light.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the brilliant display, allowing him to vaguely make out the shape of Yrret sprawled on the ground. The black jackal calmly rested beside the body, much as the beast had done at the graveyard and in the catacombs.

The glow dimmed as Kessel continued his approach, now within forty feet of the Anubian. He marked the source as an amulet around the high priest's neck. Eyes wide, Kessel realized the downed man was not breathing.

"It's over...it's finally over."

For a moment the lone warrior was too stunned to react. "He's...he's dead." The trembling light dimmed enough to allow Kessel to lower his blocking arm, as well as the Glock. Shining like a

fresh ember, the strange necklace flickered and died.

As the shining core faded, a single wisp of discolored smoke wafted towards the black jackal.

Raising its ears the beast calmly widened its jaw and swallowed the green cloud.

Confused and frightened, Kessel decided the best approach was to shoot the animal and sort the amulet out later. Raising the pistol he advanced to twenty feet, not wanting to miss his only shot.

A cold, calculated word stopped his advance, "Fool." Dropping the pistol and grabbing his ears, Kessel tried to shield the booming voice from his head. A second later he realized the words hadn't be vocalized, but had resounded in his very thoughts. "The one known as Kessel will not be doing anymore shooting, at least tonight."

"What...who?!" he shouted aloud, frantically looking towards the rising black jackal.

The response again pierced his thoughts, "You ask me to fight like a man. Why? Your species is weak. I had to sustain that puppet for two years, and it was like controlling a simple child."

His mind reeled at the statement, both from the meaning and the roaring chariot of noise it was delivered upon. Still kneeling on the ground grasping his pounding head, Kessel had never felt such agony before. Every syllable was like a migraine, every word like a club hitting the bare nerves of his brain.

Deliriously he screamed at the voice, "Stop! I..."

The jackal casually strode towards Kessel, lazily gripping the gun with its mouth. With a flick of its head the beast threw the weapon several feet behind Kessel. "You have caused me an unexpected amount of...trouble. Tell me Kessel, was it worth it? Was it worth dying alone and forgotten in the desert?"

Gritting his teeth as blood began to dribble from his ears, Kessel strained a reply, "Y-yes. I would hunt you to the ends of the earth, filthy Anubian!"

A mocking cough escaped the jackal's throat, "How little your people know. You call me Anubian, and yet you have only tasted the true power of Anubis. Once I crush your will, nothing shall stop me from grinding your pitiful town into the dirt."

Kessel knew months of progress in his war had to affect or weaken Yrret somehow. Fighting through the rolling, searing, unending pain, Kessel spit his answer, "I doubt it, asshole. How's your little base doing? What about your minion factory? What about y--"

"SILENCE!" The voice roared, throwing Kessel forward and provoking a cough of blood. "I grow weary of you, human. Now I, Yrret the High Priest of Anubis, shall bless you with a glimpse of my god. You shall look upon his face and writhe like a feeble street beggar. You shall plead for mercy a thousand times before I finally extinguish your life."

Barking and scratching the ground, the jackal began racing in tight circles around the kneeling man. The radius broadened and expanded, and soon a thin wisp of green smoke escaped through every hair on the jackal. Barking louder and louder and running faster and faster, the black jackal began to transform.

Increasing in size and mass, the long jaw elongated to triple its original length. Sleek fur stretched into a thin covering over pure ebony skin. The jackal slowed and stumbled for a moment, then rose on its hind legs like a terrible, mocking caricature of a human. Growling and barking, its forearms thickened and long claws extended from each hand. Stopping in place, the black jackal continued to rise from the ground, rapidly towering over Kessel.

Fine linen and intricate gold plating materialized across the creature's torso and loins. Thick gold bands and bracers locked across its arms, legs, and neck. Finally a divine blue and gold head dress settled on its narrow scalp.

Kessel fell back from the monstrosity, pushing himself with hands and feet towards the ruined

building. The transformed beast was almost nine feet tall, and resembled a diabolical mix of human and jackal. Kessel clearly recognized the face from his research of Anubis; it precisely resembled the jackal death masks ancient Egyptian priests would wear. But snapping jaws and slashing claws reinforced that no mask was covering the face.

"Tremble, Kessel! Tremble...and DIE!"

Frantically the old man rolled to the side as Yrret lunged forward, smashing through the corroded wood building as easily as a person might scatter toothpicks. As much as he tried to resist, Kessel's limbs began to tremble with fear at the raw power.

He drew his combat knife, the tiny blade making him feel like a mosquito trying to sting a lion. Kessel immediately began scrutinizing every movement Yrret made in the desperate hope of spotting a weakness. Unfortunately the creature appeared both strong as a bear and as fast as a snake. Luckily Yrret had ceased invading Kessel's thoughts, so the man didn't have to worry about suddenly collapsing to the ground in pain.

Turning from the shattered ruins, Yrret strode across the rubble towards Kessel. The old man continued to retreat, defensively slashing the dagger in front of him. Roaring laughter erupted from Yrret's throat as he stopped and raised an arm.

Light momentarily flashed from the beast's neck, where the amulet now rested. He had seen the human puppet wearing it moments ago, but somehow it was transferred to the jackal form of Yrret. Apparently utilizing the same dark energy that fueled the transformation, the amulet channeled Yrret's unbridled power. In his raised arm a green outline of a fine staff began to materialize.

Kessel gulped and kept swinging the knife as he looked behind him, trying to see where to run. The summoned staff was a coppery gold color, but likely as strong as steel. Large blades resembling axes topped either end of the bar. Howling with pleasure Yrret skillfully twirled the weapon as if to further demonstrate to Kessel how outmatched he was.

Finished toying with the old man, the jackal lunged forward, weapon still raised. Fueled by adrenaline and reacting on instinct, Kessel charged to meet the rush. Yrret's features were unreadable, but Kessel was certain he could detect the slightest edge of surprise in the beast's practiced strides.

At the last moment the old man dove forward as the double sided axe simultaneously swung over his head. Somersaulting through the towering legs, Kessel darted his knife out from the tucked stance. The tough onyx skin resisted the blow, but finally the sharpened metal pierced through Yrret's hide, drawing a thin line across his inner calf. Thick black liquid dribbled from the vein like frozen motor oil.

Confident from the blow, Kessel completed his tucked roll by rising into a sprint, eager to escape any backhanded swing by Yrret. The move saved his life as the jackal twisted and reversed the motion of the axe in a long arc behind him.

Stopping in a ready stance a few feet away outside the reach of the weapon, Kessel taunted the towering foe. "First blood goes to the 'pitiful' human, it seems."

"Last blood is what matters!" Yrret growled, his words vocalized externally instead of in Kessel's head. The old man was glad for the reprieve, and briefly considered that the different form may not allow telepathic communication.

Yrret charged again, and Kessel prepared to repeat his counter attack. Frantically his mind screamed at him that Yrret was smarter than that. So instead of ducking into a roll, Kessel dodged to the right. The jackal's repeated charge was also a feint; his true attack revealed when he stopped short and swung the axe low, trying to catch Kessel in another forward roll.

The golden axe rang off the rocky ground, and Yrret straightened quickly to reduce exposure from his overextended attack. Unfortunately Kessel was in no position to capitalize on the weakness, his swift shift right putting him on Yrret's flank.

For a moment both foes eyed each other tensely, clearly having underestimated each other.

Kessel switched the knife from hand to hand, a nervous habit he had gained during the recent raids. Yrret gripped his weapon tightly with both hands, waiting for Kessel to move first.

The old man was glad to oblige. He rushed towards Yrret, angling slightly to attack from the right side. Razor sharp teeth glimmered in Yrret's maw at the foolish, reckless man, and he tensed his shoulders in preparation for cleaving Kessel in half.

With his peripheral vision Kessel intently watched the jackal's arms, waiting for the noticeable clenching of muscles that would preempt the weapon swing. His eyes inadvertently widening, Kessel dodged sharply to the side he had been favoring. Yrret was midswing when the man moved, and hastily tried to correct the angle of his attack to compensate.

Suddenly pain shot through the beast's leg as the initial calf wound widened in reaction to the violent and sudden movement. Yrret stumbled forward slightly, the axe swishing wide of Kessel and chipping into the desert ground again.

Relieved that his tactic had worked, Kessel shot in from the right flank, easily scoring two savage hits on Yrret's unguarded ribs and shoulder. The rough skin seemed less resistant to piercing thrusts than the slash Kessel had originally tried, and soon more black blood poured from the fresh wounds.

Roaring the jackal reacted faster than Kessel expected, his powerful form ignoring wounds that would have felled an average sized man. Yrret snapped his left arm outwards, the golden bracer smashing full into Kessel's stomach.

Howling, the man flew backwards, his knuckles whitening in a desperate bid to retain the knife. Briefly remembering a similar flight instantiated by the mummified jackals, Kessel tried to land his unexpected airborne trip as safely as possible.

Twisting in midair during the fifteen foot arc, Kessel landed with his feet curled under him and quickly used the momentum of the flight to tumble backwards along the jagged ground. Rocks shredded lengths of cloth and skin from him, but Kessel remain conscious and aware.

Innately continuing the roll he dodged a glancing blow from the axe, as Yrret had rapidly charged after him. Kessel recovered from the ground, trying to ignore the pain from numerous superficial scratches and cuts.

Yrret howled and swept the axe across again, following the slow swing with another rapid left hook. Kessel ducked the fatal first attack in exchange for suffering the second blow. He stumbled back another five feet, barely keeping on his feet.

The two opponents warily circled each other in the old town square. Without looking to confirm, Kessel remembered from the tour that the nearby bank was solid brick. Hoping to trap Yrret's weapon in the mortar, the old man began to edge towards the building.

Unaware of the plan, the jackal eagerly followed, darting the staff forward like a spear to pressure Kessel. The light blows were easily swatted aside by the old man as he continued towards the squat red brick bank.

In a bid to enrage the towering beast, Kessel turned and sprinted towards the bank, throwing his back up against the wall. Luckily Yrret snared the bait and eagerly followed, axe raised to swing. Kessel continued his empty knife thrusts, the aggressive motions reeling in Yrret like a fish.

The jackal howled and swung the axe like a pendulum, the sharp blade flying with incredible force. Bricks and mortar absorbed the solid blow, returning reverberations through the weapon to Yrret's arms.

Kessel lunged forward, knife leading, simultaneously avoiding the shattered falling bricks. He continued the attack and delivered five rapid, lighter thrusts to the front and back of Yrret's thighs. Again passing between the monstrous legs, Kessel turned to see the result. Struggling with the axe, Yrret paid the older man no heed. Worried that the nonchalant attitude may be a lure, Kessel remained a safe distance away. With one final tug, Yrret freed his axe, angrily twisting the weapon away from the brick building. Still vibrating from the blow, the front facade of the unstable building collapsed inwardly.

Kessel felt weary from the struggle and punches, and also mentally tired from desperately trying to create methods of safely attacking the beast. He looked at Yrret's powerful pumping muscles and knew the jackal was just warming up.

Drawing strength from the wounds he had inflicted so far, Kessel tried to think of his next move. Mechanically he ducked and dodged axe thrusts and chops, the larger foe thankfully easy to predict. A previous meeting at the mine provided the inspiration needed for his next course of action.

He remembered Hilgor worrying about the possibility of a collapse in some of the deeper tunnels near the ghost town. Apparently the cellars and storage basements of the old town were just above the next set of shafts they wanted to cut. He recalled the work still being performed as piles and piles of wooden support beams were erected to stop the town from collapsing into the new mine.

But there had been an incident during a sloppy detonation to destroy some granite blocking the way. A section of the passages had collapsed, and nearly taken the building above with them. Perhaps Kessel could lure the easily enraged jackal towards that sinkhole, and somehow cause him to crash through to the tunnels below.

The plan was desperate, but Kessel decided he would tire and catch an axe blow long before he stabbed Yrret enough to slow the creature. As if to remind him of the point, a glancing swing clipped his left arm, slashing a thick layer of muscle from the outside of his limb.

Howling with agony he spun away from the blow, reflexively squeezing a hand over the gushing cut. Kessel wasn't sure if he could stem the flow of blood in time to prevent dizziness. Knowing that his internal clock was ticking, the old man spun and retreated towards the building that had nearly collapsed into the tunnels.

The sagging structure reminded him of his bungalow. Splintered boards and a crushed roof left little to identify the purpose of the building. Perhaps the slouched, faded building was the previous centuries version of a single floor home.

Kessel slammed into the door frame, his unsteady path driving him towards the entrance. Yrret slowly stalked behind him, licking his lips and stooping every few steps to savor the dripping trail of blood.

Quickly scanning the room Kessel saw a thin board that angled up to the sloping roof like a ramp. He scrambled up the dusty surface, his mind trying to determine if the floor was weak enough for Yrret to fall through.

"Let's see how you do with being stabbed in the face, Yrret!" Kessel taunted, his weak voice trying to tempt the jackal into a reckless charge. His words were true though, as being situated on the roof raised the old man to the same height as the jackal.

Silently the jackal advanced, his pace and stride even. The beast clearly relished the hunt and was in no rush to finish the kill.

Smashing his way through the weak outer wall, Yrret stepped into the room. The termite eaten floor creaked and groaned as his weight. Trying to hide the noise, Kessel dropped his hand from the axe wound and raised his dagger menacingly. He taunted, "Come on then, let's see how you

do in a fair fight!"

Yrret roared and hefted the axe, throwing his weight forward in a savage blow. Kessel backed up to the edge of the half collapsed roof, uncertain if the weapon would reach him or not. But the axe never came close, as the burdened floor finally succumbed to the shifting stance of the giant Anubian.

Yelping with surprise and anger, the axe slipped from Yrret's grasp as he desperately tried to find purchase amidst the ruined structure. His grappling arms slipped from view as Yrret plummeted to the collapsed tunnel below, the unexpected fall giving him no chance to brace for the landing. Kessel rushed to the edge of the roof, but couldn't see into the darkness. Quickly sliding down the ramp board, he peered over the edge of the pit.

Yrret's crushed body was illuminated by the soft green glow of his amulet. Kessel estimated the fall to be only twenty or thirty feet, but somehow it seemed to nearly kill Yrret. The same thin mist seeped from the gem, brightening the tunnel around the beast and revealing the reason. A series of splintered support beams had pierced the ebony hide. The rotten wood had been braced upwards, creating the equivalent of a giant spiked pit. Kessel cheered at the sight, the sudden exertion reminding him of the grievous arm wound.

"Do not be too content with your pathetic trick, human. Your species seems incapable of fighting with honor, and must resort to sulking in shadows and--" A growling cough interrupted Yrret's complaints. "You did nothing Kessel...nothing."

"Doesn't look that way from up here! It looks to me like you got your ass kicked by a so called weaker species!"

"You merely destroyed this form." The words were not spoken by the jackal, instead they reverberated in Kessel's mind, as before. The intensity had somewhat diminished, as if Yrret was speaking from a distant place. "My essence remains...as does...my hatred...for you..." The ominous threat hung in the old man's thoughts as the green light from the amulet faded. The mist drifted from the tunnel and dissipated into the quiet night air.

Kessel slumped to the ground, exhausted and bleeding. He was about to relax and reassure himself when the amulet suddenly flared to life, blazing beams of light exploding from the tunnel as they had done from the high priest's body earlier.

Covering his face the victorious warrior began to rise, more worried about his torn arm than researching the fallen jackal's corpse. A brief tremor shook the ground, and Kessel was quick to flee from the house, worried that the entire foundation was going to implode into the tunnels. But the tremors continued, and amplified, until the shaking knocked him to the ground. Barely visible cracks began to splinter from the pit and through the ground.

The roaring tumult continued and the crevices widened as sand and rocks fell into the chasms. Kessel tried to rise and flee, but he couldn't take more than a single step before the unexplained earthquake shook him to the ground.

Pale green light flashed from each crack, and Kessel feared the amulet had unleashed some sort of self destruct mechanism. Helpless against the roiling ground, Kessel curled into a fetal position and attempted to ride out the storm.

Soon he was shouting, although the cries were overruled by the splitting roar of the ground. Seconds later, the green light engulfed him.

"Hell," a voice started, "I...hot damn...he's waking up! He's coming out of the coma! Doc, come quick. Doc!"

Kessel felt awful. His limbs were dull from medication, but he knew they masked constant,

burning pain. Fresh sunlight shone in his eyes, painfully so, as if he had been recovering for a while.

"This is great news! I can not believe this, but he is awake!" a new, deeper voice said. There was a whining of medical instruments, "All vitals look okay...pulse normal. Check." Subdued female voices spoke a long string of technical terms before the second voice continued. "Okay, we will let him wake up naturally, it will be safer that way."

The process of fully awakening and being aware of his surroundings took an hour. The first voice commented every so often, at first to Kessel but eventually, impatiently, to a quiet TV rambling a sports game.

"Shoot Doc, do you think his arm'll be okay?"

The doctor, clearly highly educated and speaking with a slight accent Kessel couldn't place the origin of, replied, "Yes the skin graft last week was successful, and we should be able to remove the bandages soon. Now that he is awake we can see the results for ourselves."

"Great! Phew, just think, to survive something--"

Kessel coughed, drawing attention to himself. Uneasily he strained to fully open his eyes and take in his surroundings. "I..." his throat was parched and sore, "I'm alive." The words were as much as statement as a question.

"Hell yeah you are buddy! Jeez we were awful worried--"

Interrupting with a calming wave of his hand, the doctor leaned forward and spoke, "Kessel Reaves, you are in the Round Mountain municipal hospital, do you understand?"

"Yes...I recognize this place now," he said, finally looking at his surroundings. He was lying in a bed, casts and splints surrounding and supporting every inch of his body.

A wide window dominated the right wall, and a small antique TV hunched in the corner. Plastic plants were squished in the corner by the soft wooden door to the hallway. Tasteful wallpaper of round, plush rabbits dominated the bare walls.

His attention drifted to the doctor and the first speaker. "Wait...Cody? Is that you?"

"Of course it is man!"

"Cody here has been quite a reliable friend, visiting nearly every day." The doctor said, patting Cody on the back.

"How long have I...doctor I'm not sure..." Kessel started and stopped, unsure how to proceed. He honestly didn't expect to survive whatever the green lights were, let alone the earthquake.

Suddenly the thoughts and realizations of all that happened crashed down around him, and Kessel panicked. "I must get out of here, there's so much to do, I--"

"Ssh easy Kessel, easy," the doctor said, easing the frantic man back to a resting position, "It is natural to be nervous and anxious after being in a coma for so long." Withdrawing a chart from the end of the bed as Kessel mumbled doubts, the doctor started reading from the thick stack of papers.

Sitting in a friendly position near the edge of the bed, the doctor leaned towards Kessel. "Now Kessel, I want you to tell me the last thing you remember, please."

The old man felt as he did when he awoke in jail and Oscar asked him the same question. The thought of Oscar sent new emotions tearing through his heart, and tears unexpectedly spilled from his eyes.

"Hey now, it's okay, buddy," Cody consoled, putting a firm, comforting hand on the older man's shoulder.

Kessel let the tears flow, knowing half of them were tears of joy at defeating Yrret. Regardless of the taunting last words, regardless of what happened next, Kessel knew he had achieved

everything he hoped to.

Clearing his eyes by blinking and searching around the room, he suddenly wondered why no police officers were present, or even a lawyer like Mr. Glagorn. "I remember the ghost town, and, um, wait, Cody what are you doing here? How did you know I was here?"

The words seemed to hurt Cody. Before the man could reply the doctor stopped him with a nod, then continued to prompt Kessel along his original line of questioning, "Kessel, you two can talk all you want later. Right now I need to get you up to speed on what happened. But to do that I need to know where to start." Adjusting his weight and sighing, the doctor continued, "And it starts where everything ended for you. So...what do you remember?"

For a moment Kessel considered lying and weaving a grand story of why he was near the old mining town. Instead he swelled with pride at his victory, and triumphantly he stated, "I was at the ghost town because I had killed Yrret, the high priest of the Anubians, while he was in some kind of jackal-man form."

The confused, somber stares Cody and the doctor returned at the revelation gave Kessel the impression he had chosen the wrong answer.

"Dammit Cody, if that was the case why would I have all these scars?" Kessel roared later that night. Relentlessly continuing he pressed the man, "And you! You're telling me you didn't drive here in your big double-wide truck? That you don't own a ranch?" Fuming and swirling with confusion, Kessel kept shouting, "I mean, that's how the hell we met in the first place!"

Looking overwhelmed, the equally confused friend looked from the doctor to Kessel, trying to sort out answers. "I don't k-know what to tell you Kessel." He nervously looked to the doctor for some sort of guide or lead on how to proceed.

The doctor finished writing something on the charts, clicking his pen shut and raising his gaze to Cody. "Okay, how about you try to answer Kessel's questions again, as honestly as you can."

Wide eyed and nodding, Cody futilely looked back to Kessel. "Well, okay, first, the scars. You got those from cuts and broken bones from when the mine collapsed. The doctors couldn't stitch them in time, so they scarred over when you were in your coma."

Before Kessel could angrily interrupt the doctor silenced him with an outstretched hand, reassuringly nodding for Cody to continue. "Right, and I don't own a truck. I haven't since I was, hell, eighteen or nineteen? And of course I don't have a ranch, I've worked at the mine with you for twelve years!"

Kessel couldn't believe what he was hearing. According to the doctor and Cody, he had been in the hospital for close to a year after going into a coma. A collapse in the tunnels under the ghost town had put Kessel into the coma, and killed Joseph Banks.

Apparently his damaged brain had been spiraling lucid dreams containing ancient, conspiring Egyptian gods, and a fabricated adventure where he waged war against them.

"I must not be explaining myself very well, but there is evidence of everything," he emphasized the word and looked at the two men, "everything I've said. Just ask the police, they'll know all about this. Take a drive by the warehouse lane on Hadley Circle sometime! If you're really lazy just go to the library and you'll find my car!"

Cody and the doctor exchanged uncertain glances before Cody spoke, "Kessel, the thing is...I already drive the exact car you described. An orange 1970 Dodge Challenger. I got it with my first paycheck from the mine."

Frustration welled in Kessel again, "I don't get the purpose of your sick game," Cody was taken aback by the harsh words. "Are you an Anubian stooge or something? Were you a plant at the semi-truck to gain my confidence?" Turning his wrath towards the doctor, Kessel started to raise



his voice, "And you, what'd they tempt you with? A bit of money? Huh? Someone tell me!"

The pair left after dinner after the heated argument reached its climax. Kessel had tried to physically wring answers from Cody, which caused the man to storm out from the room. After sedating Kessel and readjusting his casts, the doctor had also left.

Kessel awoke near midnight, drowsy and disoriented from the injection. Stars winked at him through the open window as if they understood the confusing events of the day. His mobility limited from the splints, Kessel shuffled to an upright position and tried to shake off the lingering effects of the sedative.

"Okay...so what are they even saying?" Kessel muttered to himself, a comforting habit. "They're saying I'm, well, nuts. Crazy. Off whatever was left of my rocker," he wheezed, still slightly parched. "Cody drives a Challenger, I never killed Yrret...because there never was a Yrret." Kessel scoffed and shifted his left arm, "Right, and somehow my crippled left arm just happens to be from a mine collapse."

Sighing with the effort of sitting up, the old man slumped back into the pillows. "Clearly the only insanity here is their idea. I figured Yrret would try some kind of attack from beyond the grave, but I didn't expect this degree of mind games." He looked at the soothing bunny wallpaper, still uncomfortable in the hospital bed.

"Well, once I get out of here I can prove it all." Suddenly longing for the simple comforts of his cave, Kessel looked out the window in a daze. "I can stop by my home and grab some rifles, that'll prove it alright."

Still uncertain, Kessel mulled over the possibilities in his head. "So let's say the doctor is an Anubian...and Cody was a spy, or is one now. Why the elaborate setup, I wonder? Couldn't Yrret just get a minion to drop me off at the police station and call it a day?" Kessel knew that even with the fractured alliances in the police force, he'd still serve plenty of hard time. "Yrret must know that as well."

"Unless the green light and mist was some sort of hallucination agent, and I'm really baking in the desert sun imagining all this. That'd be a twisted way to kill me." Curling his lip in revulsion, he continued, "Twisted, but successful."

"I should be able to snap myself out of it then..." Exhausted from the mental strain, foreign environment, and numerous arguments, Kessel lost the energy to try. Slowly he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning Kessel refused to see anyone, aside from the stone faced duty nurse who insisted on checking his vital signs and splints.

"You should be ready for physical therapy in no time, sir," she stated in a distant tone.

He grumbled a reply, too low for her to hear, "That's because my legs were never hurt."

By morning of his second day awake, the doctor persisted on making progress with Kessel.

"Maybe some good news will cheer you up. It looks like we can remove your casts by the end of the week."

Kessel coldly remained silent, consciously ignoring the doctor by looking out the window.

A moment later Cody snuck into the room, "Looking out the window at my car?" Apparently a couple of days apart had helped eased Cody's attitude.

"Really not in the mood, rancher."

Sighing Cody slunk in front of Kessel, blocking his view of the clear Nevada skyline. "Looks like you'll have to talk to me!" Motioning to the doctor, "Hey Doc, what's the word? Gonna be much

longer?"

Absently the doctor flicked the IV leading to Kessel's wrist, "No, should be but a moment."

Cody fidgeted his fingers, eventually seating himself between Kessel and the window. Finally the doctor left the room, and Cody waited until his footsteps had faded before talking. "Whatcha say we wheel this thing over to see my Challenger?"

Helpless in his prison of casts, Kessel said nothing as the man eagerly edged the bed towards the light. Trepidation sputtered in Kessel's heart, but he calmed it by reasoning out Cody's tricks, "I know you just drove it over from the library and are going to pass it off as yours."

"Sure buddy...uh huh you totally got me...except how did I start the darn thing?"

"Um, hot wired?" Kessel uncertainly suggested.

"Did I learn that on my ranch?"

"Don't be an asshole just because I can't move."

Grandly sweeping his hands towards the parking lot below, Cody changed the subject and announced, "Well, feast your eyes on Rosie, the love of my life since I was 20!"

Kessel craned his neck and coughed in surprise at seeing the familiar orange Dodge Challenger parked in a visitor stall. "So if it wasn't hot wired, where are the keys?"

"Duh, right in my pocket," Cody said, dropping the familiar key onto the bedside table.

"Huh, well..."

"See! I told you it was mine!" Cody exclaimed, feeling victorious.

"...I was going to say you cleaned the dust off my car really well."

"Doc, I'm worried that even if he walks again, he won't have a lick of sense to go with it!"

The voices were distant as Kessel slowly woke, guessing it was five or six in the morning. The morning of his casts being removed.

"We are considering private therapy sessions to go with the physio. It is such a complex case though."

"I'm a what now?" Kessel interrupted, not liking the gossip the two were indulging in.

"Ah glad to see you up. All ready to get a glimpse of your legs aga--"

Suddenly Kessel bolted upright, the doctor's intonation reminding him of Yrret, "Wait! Say 'glimpse' again."

"I...uh, what? Kessel I really do not understand why--"

"Just say 'glimpse' again!"

"Fine. Glimpse."

Kessel sat back in his bed, hiding his shock. The undecipherable accent the doctor had was reminiscent of Yrret, and the way he said 'glimpse' was the same way the jackal had taunted Kessel at the ghost town.

The old man realized he needed to escape, and fast. Whatever the Anubians were planning, the misleading trickery was going to slip sometime. Kessel wanted to be comfortably in his cave long before that happened.

"Anyways, this is Ken Wells, he is with our internal security at the hospital. He will just be helping with any heavy lifting while we remove the casts." The doctor patted the hefty set man on the back, gently pulling him into the room.

Nodding, the security guard tipped his hat at Kessel. The old man was too intent on the familiar black grip of a Glock-19 holstered at the guard's hip to return the greeting.

"I shall call in the rest of the staff, and we can begin."

The last cast cracked free of his pale right leg, eliciting a sigh of relief from Kessel at his restored

movement. He saw the familiar smash line from the Sable's door, or mine collapse if Cody's tale was to be believed.

Cody sat by the window, trying to keep out of the way of the medical staff. The doctor commanded nurses as the painless cast and splint removal was completed. After successfully completing the operation, the supporting staff left. Only Cody, the doctor, and the Mr. Wells remained.

"What about this IV, are you gonna take this out too?" Kessel questioned, motioning towards the hanging bag of clear liquid.

"No that will stay attached until physio starts. After all we--"

The doctors voice faded into unimportant background noise as Kessel read the label on the hanging bag. Squinting and straining he couldn't believe his eyes. The familiar block letters of Cartonnage Chemicals were clearly printed along the top of the bag.

Kessel exploded into frenzied motion, catching everyone by surprise. Rapidly he ripped the taped needle from his arm, then lunged at the security guard.

In one smooth motion he had unholstered the pistol and aimed it at the guard's head, immediately ordering the doctor and Cody to his liking. "Doctor, lie on the floor, hands behind your head. Cody, take out your car keys and put them on the table, then get down beside the doctor." Seeing their stunned non-compliance, Kessel shouted, "Move it!"

"But...your legs, you can use them already?!" exclaimed the doctor, as he slowly dropped to the ground.

Indulging in a boastful taunt, Kessel whispered into the security guard's ear. "Mr. Wells, we won't be needing your services anymore, I'm afraid." He settled for clubbing the man across the back of the head three times with the Glock-19, which dropped the heavy guard.

The car keys jingled onto the table, and soon Cody was nervously lying beside the doctor. "Kessel what are you doing, man? This is nuts!"

"Shut up! Keep your eyes down!"

Kessel jumped across the bed, staying arms length away from both hostages. Quickly he wrapped the keys around a finger, then shifted the pistol to his left hand.

Disgusted and angry he kicked the metal stand for the IV bag over, "Trying to poison me eh doctor?" Whirling his arms around the room, he shouted, "Still can't fight like a man, can you Yrret?!" Blinded by confused rage at the unexpected hospital awakening, Kessel savagely kicked the doctor in the ribs.

"What the hell Kessel, calm dow--" Cody started, but another flurry of blows from Kessel left the man groaning instead of complaining.

"You think you could trick me? I've been fighting your kind alone for months!" He shouted, spittle drifting towards the prone doctor he thought Yrret was possessing. Still enraged, Kessel continued kicking until the helpless hostage stopped moving.

Spinning and lifting the bedside table with his right arm, he heaved the hard plastic furniture against the window. Safety glass shattered outwards as the desk flew into the parking lot below.

Kessel scrambled onto the window sill, then lowered himself to the patio roof a floor down.

His thin hospital gown flying behind him, Kessel ran to the Challenger and unlocked the door.

Flustered and disturbed, Cody had risen to their feet and looked on helplessly from the second floor window. Firing up the engine Kessel squealed out of the parking lot, heading directly for the ghost town to see Yrret's body first hand.

The reliable car idled behind him as Kessel tip toed barefoot across the desert. He had naturally avoided any police on the short drive to the old mining town above the pit. Now the slouched

building calmly waited in front of him.

He glanced around the rest of the town, seeing crumbling facades and sunken roofs. "That was...that was Yrret," he said, doubt edging his voice. "That tour was so long ago, I can't remember what the buildings looked like. But...no...yes, it must be from Yrret's axe."

Coughing as he shambled towards the century old building, Kessel nervously kept the pistol trained on the ruins. He gingerly stepped to the edge of the pit, avoiding jutting nails and splintered wood.

Utter darkness lay below him. "No Yrret," he said, resigned. Slumping beside the lip of the collapse, Kessel paused and thought. "Of course, they cleaned up the body as part of the ruse!" Turning to peer into the hole once more, Kessel caught a reflection of light. Blocking the sun from the side of his eyes, he intently stared down.

"Hmm what is that? Looks like tape?" Deciphering bold print across the square of yellow tape, Kessel read, "'Danger: Collapse'. Yeah, obviously."

Confused and despairing, he exited the building. Situated above Round Mountain provided a splendid view of the bustling town below. His eyes slowly drifted to various locations that he had performed missions at, hoping to find some clue or shred of proof about the Anubians. The area where Cartonnage Chemicals had been was filled with a half constructed warehouse. Various work crews poured cement, lifted steel beams, and busily swarmed around the skeleton like a colony of fire ants.

"They are probably just repairing my bomb, hah!" The conviction left his voice, and Kessel lowered himself to sit among the familiar desert denizens. A light breeze blew across the town, like an old friend, comforting the man. He idly lifted handfuls of sand and let them slip through his outstretched fingers.

Kessel felt as deflated, exhausted, and uncertain as the morning after killing Joseph. "Or did I kill him? Did I kill anyone?" Suddenly the pain in his foot reminded him of the brutal blows he had delivered to the limp doctor.

"No, not a doctor...he was just another form of Yrret!" Kessel's face twisted in anguish as he replayed the hospital escape in his mind. "What if...oh God...what have I done? He couldn't have been Yrret...because Yrret must have been...imagined."

Unable to contain his overwhelming confusion, Kessel bent to the side and spit vomit onto the floor of the wasteland. Recovering, he wiped his mouth and calmly he looked at the pistol in his hand, enjoying the deceptively small weight of the Glock-19. Tentatively he put the gun to his temple.

Kessel wasn't aware the weapon was light because it contained only a single round in the chamber.

At the hospital a nurse screamed, "Call the police! Doctor Terry is dead!"

The old widower exhaled. The dull report of a pistol echoed unnoticed across the dusty desert.