

A metal hatch opened as pressure reached equilibrium. Vapor cleared, revealing bright yellow eyes, peering out from the dark interior of the alien craft. The male stared at trees and plants never seen before. The oxygen-rich atmosphere saturated with moisture and the scent of life fascinated him. Another set of yellow eyes joined in the assessment of this strange new world.

A strobe blinked. The floor tilted, ejecting them both from the craft. They looked back as the hatch sealed, then turned and moved toward the cave entrance.

The craft climbed silently, disappearing through wispy clouds to re-board the orbiting mother ship one hundred miles above. After many more identical missions across the galaxy, the ship would return to its home planet, where a suicidal war between global factions was about to destroy much of their civilization. The need to return to Earth to inspect their investment and retrieve the male and female would no longer be a priority, fading in the memory and, over time, forgotten.

It would take decades to rid Earth of all life forms, even with no predator in existence capable of stopping the recent arrivals.

The marooned pair took three weeks to slaughter every animal within a half-mile radius of the cave. Soon they would breed; offspring moving further afield to widen their master's extermination program.

Deep under the Earth's crust, plates released millennia of growing pressure. One land mass plate yielded, allowing the other to advance upward. The ground burst open and an immense shock wave radiated outward in all directions.

He sensed it first as destruction approached at the speed of sound, hitting the cave system with colossal power, collapsing many caverns, filling them with a deluge of rock, earth, and water. She disappeared under a million tons of limestone. He fared better from the rockfall, his upper half spared.

Internal chemical reactions sealed and severed the good half of his body from the flattened lower portion. He recovered a day later, weak, ravenous, requiring immediate nourishment with the framework of the missing lower half of his body regenerated. Crawling through an undamaged tunnel, he reached the stash of recent kills and feasted. Several attempts to find a way out of the cave system proved futile. With no escape, he defaulted to survival. The mound of animal skins, in a small side cave, offered some comfort. He rested and began to shut down.

Translucent gel oozed from every pore of skin. Tiny white fibers erupted from the viscous gel, growing outward, strands binding, weaving into a thick spongy mesh, a fibrous

protective cocoon, lifting his body upward, continuing to expand around him, filling the cave. His mind drifted, wondering how long it would take. Would he ever emerge from this underground tomb? When would his masters return to rescue him?

Turning off unnecessary brain activity, he receded into the black void of hibernation that would pass unnoticed through two million years of human development.