The Patriarch

The cold blankness of its mind thawed as slowly as a polar glacier. Self-awareness returned as pleasant dreams of torture and feasting on living, screaming things. The flow of blood, the rending of flesh, and the infliction of agonizing pain just prior to consumption, these were sensations it cherished, and were near to its corrupt soul. The liquid warmth these visions brought raised other memories, of purpose and power, and a reason for wakefulness . . . the endless journey must be over. The ancient pod, as one of its final acts, had awakened its spore to prepare him for a new world.

Organically programmed by the Great Mother so long ago, the pod, itself a living thing, had survived the long voyage between galaxies, and found fertile soil upon which to plant its seed. The planet it neared fit the requirements implanted into its memory a 1000 millennia past. As it carried the vile package into the planet's gravitational field, a final, long withheld blast of gaseous thrusters propelled the fibrous pod into a searing reentry, scorching and burning away sacrificial layers of dead skin and flesh from the 10 meter long cylinder.

It appeared in the night sky as any other falling space debris. No more than a streak of self-destructive light doomed to a fiery extinction or explosive impact on the planet's surface. At 200,000 meters above the surface the pod released masses of tentacles that whipped about violently, increasing the atmospheric drag. They were replaced as they burned away in the thickening atmosphere, all the while gradually slowing the descent. At 50,000 meters, clusters of mushroom shaped growths were expelled on longer tentacles, further slowing the descent. The pods exploded periodically, as their outer layers burned away, and spewed millions of alien bacteria into a virgin atmosphere, introducing diseases that would propagate slowly over millennia, thereby aiding in the eventual downfall of the sentient population. At 5,000 meters a final, massive, gelatinous cloud of mucus was excreted from the pod. Rapidly stiffening, it flared into the shape of a living cloud. It inflated into a balloon shaped being, firmly attached to the pod with wire-like threads. Its single purpose was to slowly settle the pod unto dry land and self-destruct as the massive atmosphere above crushed its brief life into an acidic puddle of pod dissolving sputum.

After impact, as the pod slowly disintegrated around him, he began ripping into it, impatient, reveling in the realization that he would, at long last, be free to roam and hunt and create his own brood. Tearing through the final layers, his eyes bore the full brunt of the searing brightness of a midday sun. Agonized, stopping the pain by rolling onto his stomach, the young Insectid wallowed in the soothing acid bath that had dissolved the pod and sank its claws into the fertile soil beneath it. Breathing great gulps of alien air into his lungs for the first time in a million years, he reveled in the pain he felt, for pain sharpened his instincts. As his body rapidly adapted to the chemistry of the foreign environment, he again opened his eyes, just a slit this time, and shaking free of the last shreds of the pod, he surveyed the flat plain, with its waving stalks of grain that surrounded the landing area in all directions.

Crawling erect on four legs, unsteady and weak after the long sleep, the creature opened and closed its huge upper claws, lusting to devour something, anything. Stretching to his full height of two meters and casting his two arms wide, his fang filled skull laid back, he roared at his new home with a hunger bordering on insanity. He set off blindly through the waist high vegetation, his clawed feet crushing the fragile stalks. To him the direction was irrelevant; he was simply in search of another living creature. Whatever he met, no matter how large or small he would kill and devour with relish to honor the Great Mother and satisfy his own hunger.

The Great Mother had anticipated all in designing her seed children. They were amazingly resilient, strong, brutal, clever and unquestioningly loyal. The Insectid’s instincts would drive it on unceasingly. No matter where it landed, it would seek out the dominant species, infect the population, seek to control whatever defenses the society possessed and wait. When other of the Great Mother's children came, this world and all the genetic material it possessed would be theirs for the feeding.

He ran in short choppy steps, his muscles cramped and atrophied from his near immortal sleep, but such was his genetic design that as his hearts pumped his acidic blood throughout his body with ever greater force, his cells adjusted to the increased stress and expanded, strengthened, rapidly filling the loose hanging exoskeleton. Feeling his power grow within him, he quickened his pace and lengthened his stride, his great head swaying from side to side as he sought the scent that would tell him that prey was near. In such a manner he crossed endless kilometers of grainland, veering off each time he sensed another living animal suitable for his hunger. But each time the scent would weaken and its owner would evade its fate, and on he would run, steadily, untiringly, at a distance devouring thirty kilometers per hour. Into the sunset he ran, the smell of prey more frequent, but still elusive, frustrating.

The smell of poison reeked in his nostrils when he crossed the last of a series of low rippling hills. Two crescent moons, one red, one yellow, cast their pale glow across the land. Slowing to a walk, he scanned both disappearing ends of a narrow stream, only three meters wide, the poison he had smelled. He thirsted for liquid, but not this clear, sterile fluid. His thirst would only be quenched at the throat of a living being as he ripped the life from its body, but now he needed any type of liquid after covering over three hundred kilometers. Crouching instinctively, ever wary, he slowly crept down to the water's edge, ever suspicious of unknown situations. Kneeling on the soft bank, he boldly plunged his face in the chilled stream, snapping at imagined foes lurking in the water. Drinking quickly, he filled his first stomach before raising his head to glance around. The chemically neutral liquid mixed with the highly acidic bile of his first gut and was gradually passed into his system as it was purified to his physiological standards.

A small animal hopped the stream ten meters away and froze as the wind shifted and the acidic smell of the Insectid crept into its nostrils. The alien smiled, in its own way, and thrusting his head forward, hissed at the small furry creature. Panicking, the animal bolted up the slope kicking up small patches of dust as it fled its doom. Leaping after his prey, certain of his kill, the hunter lunged and missed as the small hopper cut left and ran parallel to the stream, desperately looking for hole to hide in. Pacing directly behind the fleeing animal, smelling its desperation, he leapt and the claws of the Insectid spread wide as it pinned the squirming creature to the ground. Lifting the stunned animal, still alive between his claws, he lowered his face and breathed deeply the scent of the creature's fear and slowly, while opening his great fanged maw, sank his razor sharp teeth into the animal's body, tasting blood and horror and succulent flesh. As he pulled the living prey apart, he savored the essence of new life as its blood dripped from his chin and its flesh slid down his hungry gullet. Two bites and it was gone, its life barely making an impression his hunger was so great. But he would remember this feeding, it was his first.

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All her young life Maraba had loved the solitude of the plains. Away from the settlement there was no work, and with three younger brothers there was always work. It was hard to find time to be alone and her parents had little tolerance for her love of music and poetry, and her desire to be a singer.

"Perhaps it’s the quiet, no animals, no parents and no whinny little brothers, no one to tell me what to do," she said to herself.

The sun would soon be rising over Haven Ridge and this was her favorite time of the day. If she got up early enough she could get to her favorite tree, a solitary silk tree perched on the hillside overlooking the settlement. Here she could play her music and enjoy the sunrise. Leaning back against the smooth bark, her bare feet covered with the pollen of an early spring day, she breathed deeply, loving the sound of the wind in the newborn leaves above her and the crisp coolness of the early morning.

Placing the wooden flute that her father had made for her tenth birthday against her lips, she started to play a favorite tune, and then halted, moistening her dry lips with her tongue. Then she began again, the quiet, subtle melody drifting outward from the hilltop. Her father had said that the flute was magical and would only play the sweetest music if she allowed it. Beauty flowed from the simple instrument as it had from the first day.

The last thing she ever saw was the reflection of the sun's golden light off the bottom of the sparse clouds populating the new day's sky.

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He had smelled the aroma of the prey from two kilometers away and this scent had held true all the way to the kill. He used no stealth in his approach, simply rushing up the back side of the hill and hearing the harsh unnatural sounds of her music, he reached around the large organic object and crushed the throat of the young creature.

Dragging her back down the way he had come, overwhelmed by his ravenous hunger, he thanked the Great Mother, ripped the false skins from his meal, tore open her chest, feasted on the single heart, and then proceeded to devour her other organs one by one until her thorax was an empty cavity. Somewhat sated, he stood up to his full height and sniffed the air, goblets of coagulating blood streaming from his mouth as he gulped down the last lengths of intestine. Wary of being ambushed while feeding, he looked around carefully. Sensing nothing, he bent down, pinned the body with one clawed foot, ripped off one arm and ran the appendage through his teeth, stripping most of the meat. He then discarded the bone and sinew, sending it spinning back up the hill to land at the base of the tree that the young girl had loved. Her mangled hand came to rest against its silken bark, still clutching her wooden flute.

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"She's at the tree, I know she is," five year old Jorna said gleefully as he laughed, then sprinted across the road and continued up the hill.

It had been a beautiful morning for the young boy. His two older brothers had both been switched by their mother for talking back to her and his older sister had disappeared, no doubt to play her stupid flute up by the big silk tree on the hill. She was due a switching when he brought her back to face their mother.

"Nope, Mom's not in a mood to be messed with today. The baby’s kicking and Mom says she wants to come out and play," he said to himself, out of breath from running all the way up the hill.

"Now where has she got off to?" he said, as he approached the tree from the front side of the hill.

The bright morning sun at his back lit the huge old tree as if with a spotlight. He loved the tree for different reasons than his sister. It was the only full grown tree within three kilometers of home and it was perfect for climbing. Even though the bark was smooth it had a tacky surface and he could scamper up the back side, which sloped more than the front, with ease when he was barefoot.

"What are those marks? It looks like . . ." Jorna said, as he came within five meters of the tree. He was old enough to have seen the slaughter of farm animals and knew what blood spilled on the ground looked like. Walking up to the base of the tree, the five year old boy stopped, and seeing blood also splattered on the tree he froze, and his hands began to shake.

"Maraba . . . where . . . where are you?" he asked quietly, his throat dry and the words barely squeaking out. Stepping away from the puddled blood, he walked around the right side of the tree, looked down and fell to his knees as he saw the ragged skeletal arm and the bloody hand grasping what he knew was his sister's magical flute.

"I . . . I . . ." the words died on his lips, unable to take his eyes off the arm. Hearing a sound, he desperately tore his eyes from the gruesome sight, looked up, and saw a nightmare padding up the hill towards him.

"Oh momma . . ." he cried, as he tried to move from his knees.

Urine ran down his legs and tears flowed down his cheeks as his fear overcame him. His mouth opened to scream as the thing approached and towered over him, but no sound would come out. His bowels loosened as the three-pronged claw reached down and clutched him around the throat, lifted him off the ground and brought him up to a face not even a warrior could confront without trembling.

Somewhat appeased from his recent meal, the Insectid reflected on his purpose on this planet, and based on the small size of this creature, decided to make him the first beneficiary of his Kiss. The boy's mind had frozen along with any ability to control his body. Unable to even shut his eyes, he simply stared openmouthed and wide eyed at the monstrosity before him. As the long greenish blue tongue snaked from between the rows of dagger sharp teeth, he could only moan. As the burning organ entered his mouth, he felt a sharp pain in the back of his throat just as his mind finally collapsed into oblivion.

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The boy was found by his mother an hour later. He lay beside his sister's arm. Her frantic screams and wails of horror and despair quickly brought half the village running to the top of the hill. The settlers found her cradling the unconscious boy, his throat swollen and bruised, as if he had been held in a vise. The hysterical woman could only cry and point back up toward the tree and gesture all around her. The Insectid had finished his meal after infecting the boy and the girl's remains were found scattered over thirty yards of hillside.

The first colony on Arcus had been settled only ten years before and this splinter colony had been in place for six months. This small colony was destined to become the great tower city of Altus Mon, but that was centuries away, and for now Altus Mon consisted of fifty frightened farmers who had never seen such a devastating sight.

The village consisted of a dozen prefab domes set up in circular fashion beside a stream that provided them with all their fresh water. It was located on a plain half way between Haven Ridge and another ridge that they called Tree Hill. The wild grain that grew naturally over great stretches of the plain at that latitude was called wheat on some planets, breadseed on others. These were simple people, loyal to the Empire, who depended on the local government for protection against marauding aliens. But for now they were alone, another convoy from the main colony was not due for two weeks and their only communicator had been inoperable for a month. This had not seemed significant, until now . . .

. . . .

"Jollun, listen to me! Those tracks were not caused by any wild animal known to this planet, or even this system," the man insisted.

"Savis, I don't give a frack what kind of track they are! We're going to find it and kill it, nothing else matters," Jollun shouted, barely able to control his volatile mood.

"Listen to me, all of you," Jollun said to the assembled crowd in the square. Almost all the farmers were there, excepting his wife, Annan, and their youngest son, who had not yet regained consciousness. The men were closest, some of them already armed with the settlements makeshift collection of antique weapons; five old autoguns, no longer functioning on automatic, with less than twenty rounds for each one, and an old pistol with eight rounds. The women stood outside the inner circle, huddled with their children, or standing beside their men.

"There is some kind of an animal out there that killed my daughter. Those of you who didn't see what was left of her have at least heard. None of our children will be safe until this thing's hide hangs from our comm tower," Jollun said, while pointing at the heavy framework of the forty meter tall structure that stood at the center of the square.

The rage in his voice was palpable even to the children, the youngest of which clung to their mother's legs, more afraid of the raging man than some unseen boogey.

"I say we form hunting parties, track this thing down and kill it," he continued, his anger feeding on the rising emotions of the men around him.

"We've got a good eight hours of daylight left. Now who's with me and who wants to stay here and hide?" Jollun finished, and thrust his old automatic rifle defiantly into the air. The roar of approval that greeted his ears was his answer.

"Alright, that's more like it," he yelled. "If we didn't have guts we wouldn't have left the main colony and come out here on our own."

The cheering men surrounded him, clapping him on the back, eager to go and hunt the thing that had destroyed their tranquility.

"Alright, quiet down now. Here's the plan," he said, as he settled down on one knee and began drawing in the dirt.

The men huddled around him, eager to see his proposal; the women and older children craned their necks or peeked between shoulders and legs.

"Alright, here's us," he said, while drawing a circle, "and here's Tree Hill. The tracks lead off this way, parallel to Branch Creek," he continued, while drawing the stream and the tracks running beside it.

"We've got 17 men, counting young Jack here," Jollun said, while looking up and pointing at the 15 year old son of Savis.

"We'll split up into five groups of three. Javis, you can stay here with your son and guard the settlement. I don't think any wild animal will approach the settlement, but no point in being foolish.

"Here, Jack, you take this," Jollun said, as he pulled their only handgun from his waist belt.

"All the grown men know how to use it, so your father can show you," he said, as he looked at Savis, who simply nodded in agreement.

Savis had known Jollun for many years and knew there was no way he would change the man's mind about this hunt, but Savis had grown up a hunter and knew that this large a creature was probably miles away by now and pursuing it was probably useless. In this heat the men would be back before nightfall, worn out and footsore, and that would be that, so he let Jollun continue on without arguing.

Jollun split the men into five groups, each group carrying one of the firearms along with other makeshift knives and polearms. His group would head directly up to the tree and follow the tracks from there. Two more groups would head up the hill two hundred meters on either side of his group and the other two groups would head around either side of the hill a further two hundred meters away from the center group. Anyone finding tracks, or other sign of the beast, would signal the others by banging on metal buckets each group would carry. One hit on the bucket would be used to get the attention of the other groups, two hits on the bucket would mean tracks had been sighted, three fast hits would mean that the creature had been sighted. Finishing his instructions Jollun added, "Now remember, only use the guns if you see the beast and think you can hit him. We can't afford to waste the ammo, but don't pass up a good shot. Any questions? One other thing, try to stay within eyesight of each other. From the size of these tracks it may be man-sized, and if we can see each other we can support each other more easily. If we get separated, head back to the settlement before it gets dark."

The men looked around at each other, nervous, but eager to begin.

"Let's go then," Jollun added, and headed south towards the center of the hill.

Savis nodded, as the other men headed out of the village.

"*It wasn't a bad plan*," he thought to himself.

He had been on big hunts before, and although they were better armed than this, Jollun's plan itself seemed logical. Still . . . the creature was probably long gone.

"Young Maraba had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. What kind of an animal could have torn her apart like that," he wondered.

His son had moved close to his side, fingering the old pistol anxiously.

"*Well*," he thought to himself, "*it won't hurt for the boy to know how to use the weapon . . . just in case,*" and set his rifle on the ground and said to his son, "Here Jack, let me show you how this works".

. . . .

The plan began well. The groups separated as ordered and started up and around the hill as the sun reached its zenith. Jollun had buried his daughter near the old silk tree earlier in the morning. Only a few of the men had the stomach to help him retrieve his daughter's remains, scattered as they were along the backside of the hill. He had left her flute as he had found it, clutched in her hand. How, he asked himself, could this have happened to his baby? They had come to this world seeking peace and a safe place to raise their family. The Imperial agricultural representative had assured them that there were no predators of any significance on the plains. The only reason that they had any weapons at all was their own desire to have some form of protection against the unknown. All the settlers knew stories of isolated settlements and colonies being assaulted and wiped out by marauding Grall and gangs. At least by purchasing a few weapons on the black market they would have a better chance of defending themselves.

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Jollun found the tracks seen previously without any trouble. The fertile black soil was soft and the three clawed impressions of the four legged beast were hard to miss. Looking left and right as his group paced down the hill, Jollun was gratified to see the nearest groups on either side and waved. Getting no reaction, he had one of his men bang once on the signal bucket. The day was hot and would get hotter still, but the men were still excited by the hunt and all waved back with their various weapons thrust into the air. The two outermost groups weren't visible yet, being hidden by the curvature of the hill, but that was to be expected.

As the land flattened out the tracks began to curve parallel to Branch Creek, but stayed two hundred meters or so from the creek's edge. Signaling once, he motioned the group on his left to cross the creek and walk parallel to it on the other side. He heard them signal once and pass the instructions on to the men on their left. They proceeded on in this fashion for more than two hours, the tracks never wavering.

By mid-afternoon, the hunting party had covered over five kilometers across the gently undulating terrain, when the tracks abruptly turned left and headed for the creek. Banging twice on the drum Jollun waved his arms toward the creek and began jogging toward the narrow stream. Unslinging the autogun from his back, he handed the signal drum back to the man who was running beside him.

"What do you think, Jollun?" the man asked excitedly between each gasping breath. "Was it thirsty? I know I sure am."

Jollun looked over at the smiling man, sweat dripping off his chin onto his sodden shirt, and shrugging, quickened his pace.

The tracks plunged down the steep bank and into the ten meter wide stream. Running to the side of the tracks, Jollun sprinted across the calf deep water and began searching the other side for the exit point of the trail. Cautioning the other men to stay back, he glanced back at where the tracks had entered the water and traced the exit point in his mind.

"Frack, he didn't come straight out," he cursed, and began trotting down one side of the stream bed, his eyes scanning for the deep telltale claw marks of the beast's pug.

After checking both sides of the sandy bed for fifty meters in both directions, he walked back to the other two men in his party and settled onto one knee to think.

Turning, he said, "Fasal, get out of the creek bed and signal the others twice, wave them to all come down here. There's been a change of plans."

When all fifteen men had come down to the creek, Jollun, restraining half of them from wallowing in the water for fear of disturbing the trail, began explaining the new plan.

"Alright, listen up, the thing's taken to the water. I suspect it's headed west, further away from the settlement, but we can't take that chance. Malaki, you and Georg take your groups and double back up the creek, one group on each side. If you find tracks exiting the creek fire one shot. We may get too far away for the buckets to be heard. If we find tracks, which I suspect we will, we'll do the same. It'll be a full moon tonight so just follow the creek around the hill back to the settlement. This thing’s a little smarter than I thought, so be careful. Don't step on it in the dark."

"Jollun, I don't like messing with this thing in the dark," said Malaki, as several of the men mumbled and nodded in agreement.

"Just stay closer together as it gets dark. You'll be able to support each other easier that way. For the Emperor's sake, you're not hunting a Grall, this is an animal. It doesn't have any weapons," he responded, shaming the nervous men into silence.

"Alright, we'll cool off in the water for ten minutes and then take off. Any more questions?" he asked.

Two hours before twilight the two groups continued their search for the unknown creature, each man looking back over his shoulder, waving goodbye and shouting good fortune to friends in the other group.

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The day had been uneventful, yet still stressful, back in the small settlement. Savis had shown his son, Jack, how to fire the ancient pistol. It was said to be a replica of a pistol from before the Great Betrayal. It was considered crude by modern standards, a revolver, but would still be effective against an unarmored man, or any man-sized animal. It fired a 2 cm solid lead projectile capable of penetrating a half centimeter of steel at close range. At less than twenty meters it was accurate and far more powerful than the rifles.

After the men had left, Savis had ordered the women and children to remain within fifty meters of the settlement for the rest of the day. After what had happened to Maraba none of them wanted to leave the perimeter of the village, let alone wander off into the prairie or surrounding hills as they once would have done without a moment’s thought. The youngest children, as nature had foolishly designed them, were mostly oblivious to the sudden danger. Many had been irritated when they had not been allowed to follow along with their fathers as they always had during work in the fields. A few scowls and cuffs to the more unruly had settled that problem.

Savis and Jack had spent the day outside the narrow perimeter he had set for the others. Savis taught Jack the subtleties of terrain, camouflage, how an animal's ability to smell you is affected by the direction of the wind. He also instructed him in what areas of an animal were more vulnerable than others.

"If it charges you, wait until it gets within ten meters," Savis cautioned, "and always take a head shot if it's available. If not the head, then the throat or the center of the chest. This handgun's old, but deadly. Unless this thing's armored, you'll punch a hole in him with this thing," he finished, and patted the huge pistol and handed it back to his son.

Jack proudly stuck it back into his trousers and cinched up his belt to prevent the heavy weapon from falling down his pant leg as it had earlier.

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Jollun found the track just as the small red moon had risen over the western plain. He stood at the top of the bank facing off to the northeast, staring at the deep tracks and the wide spacing that indicated that the creature had left the stream sprinting. Bending down, he examined the sharpness of the impressions; they were at least six hours old. About the time he had found the entry point into the stream, the beast had been exiting three kilometers downstream and heading back in the general direction of the settlement.

"What does it mean, Jollun? I don't like the way this looks. Isn't the village back that way?" said one of the men, the concern and exhaustion showing in his strained voice.

Jollun said nothing as he stood thinking, and stared off into the red darkness. The fatigue of the long day weighed heavily on his body, but his mind was alive and very afraid.

"By the Empress's soul, what have I done?" he said to himself, "Oh, Annan, what have I done?"

Slinging his rifle, he sprinted off into the darkness without a word, leaving a mass of confused men shouting after him.

Stopping abruptly, he turned back to the men, most of whom were still arguing among themselves, and shouted, "Well, don't just stand there, this thing has fooled us. Our families are in danger!" and turning, unslung his rifle, fired a shot into the air and began running northeast across the plain, the dim outline of Haven Ridge guiding his direction.

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Malaki's group had slogged in and out of the creek throughout the late day and into the evening. The only animals they had scared up were a couple of prairie leapers, who were more frightened than they when the animals had bolted in front of them in the dim moonlight. They were still two kilometers from the settlement when Georg heard the faint echo of a rifle shot.

"Malaki, did you hear that? It sounded like one rifle shot."

Standing in the streambed, Malaki looked up at his friend and said, "Are you sure? I didn't hear anything."

"I heard it too, Malaki," one of the other men confirmed as he ran up to the edge of the stream.

"What does it mean, Malaki? Did they find the track?" another asked. All the men had come running as the discussion became more animated.

"Look . . . listen to me!" Malaki shouted to quiet the arguing men. "We were about five kilometers from the settlement when we separated from Jollun. We're still a good two Ks from home and all we can see by is that fracking red moon," he said, as he pointed up to the hurtling red orb.

"In another three hours that will be gone and it'll be darker than the Betrayer’s soul. At least we know that the beast isn't around here or anywhere near the village. So let's cut across the plain and head straight west. Every hour we'll bang the bucket once until we hear from Jollun and the others. If we still don't hear from them, we'll walk until we're exhausted and set up a perimeter for the night. How's that sound?" he asked.

As the others nodded their assent, he climbed out of the stream, studied the direction of the stars, and headed due west with the others strung out loosely behind him. None of the men had grumbled, but most of them were already exhausted and hungry. Since they had planned to be back at the settlement before nightfall, most had not bothered to bring anything with them except water.

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The Insectid knew that the men would follow his spore. All species that nurtured their young for long periods of time behaved identically. His kind had preyed on such weak species for millennia uncounted, from galaxy to galaxy, and it was always the same. Attack the young and the mature beasts would fling themselves into the maw of the Great Mother herself in an attempt to protect their offspring. He had only to implement his plan. It had been completed in his mind as he had finished tearing the last shreds of meat from the young female beast he had found by the tall growing thing. They would hate him for his desecration of their young one and would pursue him blindly, thereby exposing the remainder of the herd to his assault. As he ran on through the fading day he smiled in the way of his kind, clacking the rows of shearing teeth as long as a large man's finger. One convert he had seeded so far and it would not be the last.

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Young Jorna awoke with only one thought in his mind. He stared aimlessly at the roof of their prefab dome, his mind passing through the brightly decorated cloths that his mother had strung from the curved ceiling. Life in the outlying settlements was always harsh, but the love and creativity of such as she, always brightened an otherwise drab and austere existence. Jorna had loved his mother with all his heart and soul, even more than most children, but he was no longer most children. The cells of the genetic implant that had been thrust into the lining of his throat had divided many times during the day and had entered his bloodstream, infiltrating the sensitive recesses of his young mind. Everything that he had been, the love that he had felt for his mother and father, brothers and sister was supplanted with a love for a monstrosity so foul and foreign that his subconscious still fought against its dominance. It was, however, a losing battle, because he was no longer really human. His allegiance, his loyalty, was now to a power foreign to all humanity. At the age of five he was now a pawn in the great game of the destruction of Mankind.

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Annan had fretted throughout the day. The gruesome death of her precious Maraba at the hands of some foul and evil creature had left her shaken to the core of her beliefs. How could the Empress, in her infinite power and wisdom, have allowed the death of her little innocent? Firstborn to last, all her children possessed part of her heart and soul. Now her oldest was dead, forever ripped from her arms, never to be hugged or scolded again, never to wed and have children of her own. At this last thought Annan sobbed, near to breaking down as she had earlier. Wiping her nose with a sodden cloth, she resumed cleaning vegetables for the evening meal, her torment held in check once again.

She had always thought of herself as being as tough as any man. A farmer's daughter, she had had both of her parents die in her arms, but they had been old and their passing expected. This was not fair, and hurt so very much more. Unknown to her, her pain had just begun.

Quietly, Jorna sat up, his feet dangling from the padded bench that his father had made for the house, and stared at the slumped shoulders of his mother as she silently sobbed over the meal she prepared for her shattered family. His young mind was torn with conflicting emotions. Images of dark terror were mixed with a desire to be enfolded by the serenity of a power that would shield him from harm for all eternity. The source of these emotions was the same fell power, as memories of his family fell further and further into the recesses of his mind. Preeminent became the desire to please his new family and his new father, who he sensed even now was approaching the settlement.

"I should go . . . and greet him," Jorna said, his mind almost numb from the day's experiences.

Annan turned at the sound of her youngest, and wiping her eyes, walked calmly to him, and dropping to her knees, brushed the hair from his face with her left hand while softly caressing his cheek with her right. Tilting his face upward, she was shocked to see the coldness in his eyes. She had expected shock, or fear, or sadness, but these were the eyes of a stranger.

"Jorna, how are you feeling?" she asked gently, suddenly very afraid as a cold chill ran up her spine. The boy's face was sullen, almost hostile.

"Are you hungry? Can I get you something?" she asked, her pulse racing as her heart began to weep at the sight of her once joyful little boy now seemingly empty of love.

"*He'll be all right*," she thought to herself, as she wrapped her arms around his small form and drew him to her. Resting his head against her neck, she sank to the floor and began to rock him back and forth while humming an old tune she used to sink to him.

Jorna’s psyche was battered by conflicting emotions and desires. Part of him screamed desperately to hug his mother tightly and dissolve in her loving, protective arms. Another darker presence in him felt the pulse of blood rushing through the carotid artery in her neck, and wanted to sink his teeth into that neck, and drain the life from her as she writhed in agony beneath him. Frozen by this wrenching conflict, he simply hung in her arms, limply, as if already dead. The part of him that was still human clung to lucidity, but knew that the other entity in him was winning. His innocent young mind was incapable of comprehending what was happening to him. He only knew that something bad inside him was changing him forever, and that the thing that had hurt him was responsible. But he was rapidly becoming part of that creature as the little boy disappeared forever and was replaced by a cold blooded killer.

. . . .

The red moon had just set behind Haven Ridge as Jack paced nervously on the road south of the settlement that ran parallel to Tree Hill. His father had gone down the road to the west two hours ago to the high spot in the road at the end of the hill. From there he should have been able to see at least a kilometer down the gently sloping terrain. Since they were so late he had suspected that the returning men would come back from that direction. It was only a thirty minute walk and he should have been back by now. His father had placed him in the ditch beside the road and had told him to stay there and wait quietly, making no sound, but Jack had been too nervous to wait for long. Besides, he had the pistol and felt confident that he could use it if necessary.

Stopping in the middle of the road, he kicked at a small rock that was dimly visible at his feet in the moonless night. Looking up, he tried to relax as he breathed in the cool night air and stared at the twinkling points of light in the ebony sky.

"How many of those have people around them," he wondered aloud to himself," and how many boys are looking up at our star and wondering if anyone lives here?"

Glancing over his right shoulder he could see the settlement surrounded by a halo of illumination cast by the perimeter lighting system. Usually on a night like this there would still be people visible walking around from house to house, visiting and sharing the days experiences, but tonight the area was still, as if no one was there. But Jack knew that everyone was there, except the men of course and only the youngest were asleep. He could almost feel the tension from here. The men were supposed to have come back hours ago and nothing had been heard from them.

Sighing, he turned back to the road that his father had gone down and glancing back at the village once more, turned back to the road and began walking to the west, to find his father.

. . . .

Savis had gone to the crest in the road and stood silently staring south until the plane disappeared in a high ripple in the ground. He knew that the red moon would be setting behind him within the hour and that it was time to start heading back to the settlement. Jack would start worrying soon and he wasn't sure what the boy would do.

His mind began to wander, recreating the momentous events of the day, when he turned to the north for some reason and glanced down at the narrow stream two hundred meters away. A dark shape was slowly working its way along the bottom of the small waterway. It was only visible for a moment between folds in the land that showed the sunken stream bed. At first, he thought his eyes had been playing tricks on him, but felt his blood begin to race as he replayed the image in his mind and realized that whatever it was had been bulky and walking upright and not human. Glancing up at the moon, Savis knew that he had only seconds to determine a course of action.

Checking the wind direction, Savis breathed a sigh of relief. The wind was coming out of the west, so the creature would not have been able to pick up his scent. Unslinging his rifle, he crouched, crossed the road, and began silently working his way down towards the creek, angling his approach so he would arrive there at an intersecting point long before the creature.

His mind instantly reverted to his youth and a hunt his father had taken him on when he was sixteen. A great bearlike animal called a Boarsat had been terrorizing flocks of sheep in surrounding homesteads. His father, Domas, was known as the greatest tracker and hunter in the region and had volunteered to track down the animal and kill it. Savis had been hunting with him for years, but never an animal like this. His father had assured him that this was just another hunt. All had gone well as they tracked the beast until they found themselves the hunted rather than the hunted. The Boarsat had used a streambed to double back on them in the dark and ambushed them as they followed his lure. Domas had shot the huge animal twice as it reared on them in the darkness. Savis had frozen and stood helplessly as the animal savaged his father in its death throes. His father's screams had jarred him into action and Savis had shot the beast in the back of the head to finally kill it. Domas had died two weeks later and Savis had not hunted since.

"*No more guilt Savis*," he thought to himself, as he approached the creek bed, "*that was a long time ago. Papa forgave you before he died. Now it’s time you forgave yourself and applied everything he ever taught you*."

Savis estimated that the animal was at least fifty meters downstream as he settled into an ambush spot at a notch in the southern slope above the stream. Rolling on to his stomach he peered into the dark, listening for the trickle of the slow moving water and the tread of alien feet.

"*If this thing is as smart as I think it is he'll be on this side since it’s steeper and provides better cover*," Savis thought to himself, as he took the safety off the weapon and pulled it tightly into his shoulder.

Savis was sure the monster would be able to hear his pounding heart, but knew that this was the hunter's illusion and calmed himself with a few deep, slow breaths, then settled down to wait.

. . . .

"*These animals are fools*." the alien beast thought as he quietly strode through the shallow waterway. "*I've seen them twice today without being seen; once, as they crested the hill where I killed the young food, and a second time as they found my marks heading for the fluid path. Spread out they were, but they aren't as fast as me, as clever as me. I'll infect their young and eat my choice, I will.*"

The Insectid froze a meter from the water and five from the edge of the embankment. Dropping to his haunches like a cat, his claw tips sinking into the sandy creek bottom and flexing reflexively, he peered into the blackness before him and snuffed the life from the air. The breeze was generally at his back, but the situation of the hunt had forced him to approach the prey's home from the wrong direction. It had been a conscious decision that ran against his genetic programming, but he had been given the ability to adapt to unusual situations and improvise. To approach some animals with the wind at your back was to tell them of your presence, but his consumption of the female's brain had told him much about this species. They were physically weak, with poor eyes and almost no sense of smell. How they had survived was beyond him. Their addition to the Great Mother's genetic brew might even weaken the brood, but perhaps they might be of some use.

The shifting breezes brought another scent into his mind . . . a single adult male, very near, and very afraid.

"Fear is good, little creature," he said quietly in the hisses and clicks of his species, "It tells me that you know that I'm here, and are either hiding from me or waiting for me. But why, I ask myself, why are you alone? Your kind hunt in packs because you are weak, but you are here alone," he said, as he rose back to his full height, still sniffing the fickle night air. The wind had shifted again, and was steadily blowing at his back, removing all trace of the prey.

Replaying the memory of the scent, the Insectid analyzed it again. Such ability had been given to his kind by the Great Mother. It had proven extremely useful in hunting down species that had little or no scent. Against an animal with a heavy musk, like this one, he could detect them from many kilometers away and from close range could almost read their mind; such was the hidden information available on the wind.

. . . .

Savis could see the dark sinister shape of the creature as it approached. The darkness played tricks on his vision, making him see two arms and four legs on the thing, which he knew was impossible. It stopped and dropped to a crouch near the water’s edge. He could see its huge glistening head twisting and turning in the air. He felt a great rush of fear in himself as he felt the breezes swirl around him for just a few seconds.

"*Oh Papa, he smells me*," Savis thought, as the sweat rolled down his face and into his eyes.

He wanted so desperately to wipe the salt sting from his eyes, but he dared not move, and was afraid to even blink. The thing was thirty meters away and level in his sights, but Savis wanted him closer, no more than ten meters away before he fired. He longed to see this thing dance as round after round tore his body apart just as it had torn his friend's daughter apart.

It was the thought of Maraba's bloody hand still clutching her flute that caused Jorna to snap just as the Insectid stood up. If the weapon had been an autogun rather than an antique lead slug weapon he might have had a chance at such close range. The first shot caromed off the thick chitinous carapace of the alien's head, as did the second and the third. The fourth chipped the tip of one incisor, causing a minor flesh wound to the interior of his mouth.

The startled Insectid was momentarily rocked backward in shock at the ambush, but the wound to its mouth had triggered one of Great Mother's primal instincts. Insectid never run when attacked . . . except in one direction . . . at the attacker.

As the creature roared its anger, Savis rose from his belly to a proper kneeling position, just as Papa had taught him. As it charged, Savis was not even bothered by the fact that the thing did in fact have two arms and four legs. The arms possessed three long claws the length of his forearm.

Time slowed down to Savis as he poured round after round into the ravening beast, its arms held wide as it charged his position. His mind's eye could see each round impact against the impenetrable skull, and when he shifted his aim to the throat, then chest, he followed the path of each bullet, despite the near darkness, as it travelled from his rifle, impacting exactly where he had aimed.

It was after the tenth round that he knew that he was going to die. This thing was as armored as a GalMar. He might as well have been throwing rocks, but it no longer mattered. As the creature's rush brought it to within five meters, he stood and continued to fire, no longer afraid, but aware that he now knew how his father had felt when the great Boarsat had loomed before him so many years ago. Savis was only glad that Jack was not with him, because he did not think this beast could be killed by the settlers, and Jack, if he lived, would not have to live with the lifelong guilt that had tormented him for so long.

"*If this is all they have for weapons I have been wasting my time today running from these beasts and being clever. They cannot harm me*," the Insectid thought, during the few seconds it took him to reach the small creature that had ambushed him.

The last thought he had before he reached the gangly creature, with the fire spitting object in its hands, was that the creature's smell had changed. It was no longer afraid.

"*Interesting*," he thought, as he ripped the man's head from his body with one blow, and with the second, shattered the torso, ripping through the yielding flesh from neck to crotch.

Standing in the remains of its prey, blood dripping from its terrible claws, the Insectid halted and pondered the scent it had detected.

"There was no fear, most unusual," he said, while absently bending and ripping an arm from the shredded corpse.

"It knew that it was going to die, but it wasn't afraid anymore. Why? I have never killed a creature that wasn't afraid when it died. Fast or slow, they were all afraid. Perhaps there is more to these soft creatures than I thought," he wondered aloud as he stripped the flesh from the creature's arm.

He had not eaten since the morning and was hungry. The confrontation had reminded him of that and had also allayed any doubts he had about how to attack the creature's hive. He would do it at his leisure, implant those he felt worthy and destroy the rest. Those that lived would become his first generation. He would be their Patriarch.

. . . .

Jack was still walking westward along the road when the rifle fire had begun in the streambed below him. He heard the roar of some ferocious animal followed by more rifle fire, his father's scream, horrid ripping sounds and then silence. Frozen in his tracks, he felt his body begin to shake as fear and the adrenal rush hit his system simultaneously. He knew that his father was dead. His father's scream and the horrid tearing noises told him that the thing that had killed his friend Maraba that morning had just killed his father. As tears streamed down his cheeks, leaving trails of agony that would never depart; Jack sank to the ground in the middle of the road and began rocking back and forth overwhelmed with fear and grief.

. . . .

The sound of the gunfire was also heard simultaneously by three other groups. The settlers that were still awake all jumped at the distant echoing sounds. Women clutched their children in hope that the nightmare was over. Malaki's group, to the southwest of Tree Hill, staggered to a halt and grouped together talking; Jollun, far separated from his following men, stopped, sank to one knee to rest and think.

"I counted 15, maybe 16 rounds," he said to himself, his hands gripped tightly on his rifle. "That came from the northeast, toward the settlement. Who was it? Savis and Jack or did Malaki find it coming around from the east?"

He had not had water in hours and his mouth was parched dry. Sucking the salt from his lips, Jollun groaned as he stood and staggered uphill towards the crest he hoped held the road back to the settlement.

Malaki sat at the center of a circle of exhausted men. All had sunk to the ground; a few were already asleep where they sat.

"Fasal, wake them up," Malaki ordered, and waited while the sleeping were none to gently prodded awake by their friend.

"Where do we go from here? We heard over a dozen shots, so it was no signal. Somebody found the thing, they must have and they were all close together, rapid like. So it must have been at close range. That wasn't careful aiming from a distance," he said to the assembled men and waited for a response.

From the shadows one man said, "Malaki, it's at least three, maybe four Ks back to our home from here. Surely the thing's dead after all that shooting. The shape we're in right now, we couldn't do anything anyway, let alone walk another four Ks tonight. Let's rest here for a few hours and then head straight back to the settlement."

"Well, what's everybody think?" asked Malaki. Two men had already rolled over on their sides and were snoring.

No one else disagreed, so Malaki said, "I'll set my chrono for four hours, no more," and as he adjusted his timepiece, glanced over in the near darkness at Fasal, who was the only one still sitting, and shook his head. Fasal only shrugged and joined the others on the ground.

. . . .

At the sound of the gunfire, Annan dropped a glass jar she had been drying, her hands shaking as the exploding shards scattered across the composite floor. Closing her eyes, she sighed, brushing her dirty hair from the side of her face. Glancing over at Jorna, she winced to see him sitting on the edge of the bench, smiling with a look of insane glee on his face.

"By the Emperor's soul, what is happening to him?" she asked herself, and smiling at him in return, she began to clean up the broken glass.

"At least the other two boys are asleep now," she thought to herself. Jorna's state had scared them as badly as the death of their sister. He would not respond to their appeals to talk or play, only glare at them as if they were strangers. She had finally told them to just leave him alone and that he would be better in the morning.

Finishing the cleanup, she glanced at Jorna again, found him unchanged, and walked out the door to get some air. Hoping to talk to another adult she walked further into the settlement center. Other women, peering from their windows or doorways, saw her and began to wander outside themselves. None of them could remember a longer day, or a night so filled with fear.

"Well what do you girl's think?" asked Molee, the wife of Savis.

"I think they'll be back soon with that thing strung over a pole. Like Jorna said, we'll skin it and hang its hide from the comm tower," another young wife answered, her hands shaking so badly that it was visible despite the fact that she had stuffed both hands in her coat pockets.

All the women nodded in agreement. What else could they say? Nothing had been heard from the men since they had left, and they were hours overdue. Never had a night seemed so black and hostile. Every light in the settlement was turned on. No one cared that the battery-driven perimeter lights would rapidly drain the batteries that provided their only power. Tonight, no one argued about replacement costs or backup power supplies. These women only wanted two things; daylight and their men, and right now they would take either one.

"Molee, have you seen Savis lately?" Annan asked her friend.

"No, I haven't seen him or Jack for hours and I'm getting worried. They should have stayed inside the perimeter," she answered.

"Why should they stay safe when the other men are all out hunting that thing in the dark?" another woman asked angrily. As the bickering went back and forth, they were silenced when the perimeter lights suddenly went out, leaving them illuminated only by the lights from the homes.

As some of the women began screaming, Annan yelled, "Be quiet you cows, it's probably only a circuit breaker. The perimeter system hasn't been used in months. All you're going to do is wake the children. Our men are being brave and so will we!"

Shamed into silence, the women shuffled their feet, glancing around at the deepening shadows.

"So what do we do?" asked Dawnree, a young mother of two babies.

"The first thing is to calm down," said Annan, her voice softer, but very tired. "The men will be back when then get here, no sooner. Until then we have to protect our homes and our children as best we can."

"Annan, I think I know where the circuit breaker is," said Molee, eager to do anything to keep her mind off the surrounding darkness.

"Good, very good, we'll go try to fix it," Annan replied. "Now the rest of you, back to your homes, arm yourselves with whatever weapons you can and be ready to use them to protect your children, and stay calm!"

"Come on Molee, show me the circuit breaker," Annan said, as the others left for their own homes.

"It's over on the backside of our house. When the wiring was run underground Savis had it mounted here," she said, as they walked into the near darkness on the west side of the settlement.

What happened next stayed in Annan's mind for the rest of her life. Molee was walking in front of her by about three meters when she suddenly screamed and rose into the darkness without another sound, her feet dangling a meter off the ground, twitching and kicking. After a snapping sound and a choking gurgle she hung loosely in midair, seemingly levitating in the darkness as if held by a trickster's hand.

The image that appeared from the darkest shadows behind the electrical circuit box was horrendous beyond belief. Well over two meters tall, it held Molee's limp form aloft as if she were a weightless little doll. It had impaled her on three dagger-like claws on its right hand. She noted that the two arms protruded from massive shoulders. Its head hung between the shoulders, shaped like a boulder with multifaceted eyes. Jaws filled with massive teeth hung slack, drool pooling at its feet as it stared at her, the head slowly swaying from side to side.

As the thing stood erect, its red eyes seeming to glow with a haunting internal fire, she slowly backed up, fighting for self-control as she began to shake with fear.

"*This*," she thought, "*is the thing that killed my little girl*."

Anger coursed through her every fiber, driving away the crippling fear and filling her with a resolve to see this beast dead.

After backing away three more steps, Annan turned and ran for the center of the settlement where the collective light of the homes was the brightest. She heard the creature hiss and heard the body of her friend thud against the ground, thrown by the killer as if it were discarding the core of a used fruit.

Her mind spinning in desperation, she fought off the urge to sprint for her house and shut the door. She knew instinctively that no door would hold this thing out and locking herself inside would only lead the beast to her other children. Ducking under the low framework of the steel comm tower, she spun about rapidly, searching the shadows for a sign of the six limbed creature.

"Annan, what is it? What's wrong," asked a young woman named Dreana, as she walked from the front door of her home cradling her youngest in her right arm. Her house was to the left of Molee's, and Annan had run between the two homes in her flight into the light.

"No, Dreana!" Annan screamed, as she saw the silhouette of the dreadful apparition emerge from the shadows beside her doorway.

"Get back in the house. Shut the door," she screamed in desperation.

As the woman turned to the right, instinctively protecting her infant from unseen harm, a massive form lunged for her back and a great clawed hand grasped her left shoulder and neck.

Annan screamed again at the crunching, snapping sound as the woman's upper torso was crushed like a fragile flower. She watched helplessly as the bestial thing stooped and plucked the helpless innocent from her dead mother's arms.

"Oh, by the Empress, nooo!" Annan screamed, as the beast stepped into the pure light cascading from the open doorway.

Another child, perhaps four years old had wandered to the doorway looking for his mother. Frozen by fear, his dead mother's vacant eyes staring upward from the ground at his feet, the young boy stood staring at the Insectid, unable to move.

The thing turned its head, glanced down at the boy as if at the next fish in the stream, then returned to focus again on the sleeping infant that it held in its lower hands. As Annan watched helplessly, the alien raised the child to chest level, extended its impregnating tongue and thrust it into the infant's mouth for just a second.

Annan felt her stomach boil and turned away, unable to stand the sight, and vomited at the base of the tower she had been hiding behind. As the child awoke and began to cry, she turned and ran for her home on the opposite side of the settlement.

The night became a blur as she saw other women and children appear in their doorways. She watched the screaming and panic spread throughout the doomed families, and ran on, powerless to help her friends. All she could think of to do was to grab her own children and flee, and to never stop running.

Ducking under the far leg of the tower's massive frame, she looked at her open doorway and saw young Jorna standing in front, backlit by her home's welcoming light. He was holding a knife in his hands as he stepped backward into the light, revealing a mouth covered with blood. In the background lay his two older brothers, their chests ripped open, and their hearts gone.

Annan froze as if struck by lightning. She stared at her smiling son only five meters away, her mind whirling as she realized what had happened earlier in the day. This bestial thing possessed the mind of whoever it infected and turned them into something alien, evil.

"Oh, my baby, what has happened to you?" she cried, as tears rolled down her cheeks, and the shock of this last brutal assault on her mind threatened to snap her will as easily as the beast could snap a woman's body.

She jumped as Jorna ran out of the house and into another home to her left. Walking mechanically, as death or worse spread behind her, Annan stared into the open doorway and casually observed three bodies laid out neatly on the floor. Three children lay dead their throats neatly cut. She jumped again as Jorna ran from the house carrying an infant in his arms. He ran past her and under the comm tower, the screaming infant dangling helplessly.

Turning slowly, Annan saw the bodies of several women and older children scattered about the compound. Blood was everywhere, body parts were scattered about like branches after a great storm. Dazed infants and young children sat screaming, clutching at dead and dismembered forms that had been mothers and brothers and sisters. Following Jorna with her eyes, Annan saw him approach another house, the shattered door hanging loosely from one hinge, as the alien ducked through the doorway.

"No Jorna, no . . ." she mumbled, and staggered toward her son. As she saw him stop in front of the beast, and present the baby to it as if in supplication, her head collided with a diagonal support beam on the tower, knocking her to her knees. Blood streaming into her eyes, exhausted, her mind numb and shocked beyond belief, the dying screams of her friends ringing in her ears, Annan welcomed the black void that reached out and drew the ground to her.

. . . .

Jollun gasped for breath and fell to his knees as he stumbled up to the road. The blackness of the night was only relieved by the scattered stars casting their feeble light between the slowly moving clouds. Fighting the impulse to wretch, not that he had anything on his stomach; he fought his way to his feet, overcoming the exhaustion that pulsed through his body in waves. Wiping the salt sting from his eyes, he blinked and looked to his right searching for the light that he knew the settlement would reflect off the low hanging clouds. Seeing nothing but silhouettes of faintly lit hillsides, he spun around, trying to verify his position on the road.

"Alright, there's the end of Haven Ridge," he said aloud to no one in particular and turned awkwardly to his right.

"And here's the end of Tree Hill. Now where's the fracking settlement?" he screamed, and fell back to his knees.

Jollun had run the last three kilometers up to the road as fast as his exhaustion would allow. He felt in his heart that his existence, as it had once been, was over. The coming of this monster, whoever or whatever it was, wherever it had come from, had changed his life forever. Groaning, he fought his way back to his feet and turning to his right, began trotting down the road, the old autogun slung across his back, oblivious to the raw sores the heavy weapon had worn into his back.

All he saw was a flash followed by the crack of a weapon as the bullet whizzed by his head. Throwing himself into the ditch to the right of the road, he froze as his startled senses awoke for the first time in hours.

"In the name of the Empress, who's out there? Who fired at me?" he yelled.

A weak voice responded, "Jollun, is that you? I'm sorry. I thought you were the monster."

Raising his head from the ditch, Jollun called out, "Jack, is that you boy? Hold your fire I'm coming to you".

Walking forward, Jollun could faintly see the boy sitting in the middle of the road, the heavy old revolver lying in the dirt at the boy's feet.

"Where's your father, son? Where's Savis?" Jollun asked, afraid of the answer he would get.

"Down there . . . in the stream . . . I . . . I can't go down there," the boy finished, his voice cracking with emotion.

Kneeling down in front of him, Jollun picked up the pistol and tucked it into his belt. Placing his right hand on the boy's slumping shoulder, he said, "What happened, Jack? Did you see the animal?"

"I heard it, and it wasn't no animal," he answered, "it was a monster and it killed my papa."

"Jack, now listen to me," Jollun said softly, his hand still on the boy's shoulder, "I'm going to go down to the stream and find Savis. You wait here, I'll be right back."

The boy nodded as Jollun turned, unslung his rifle, and began quietly working his way down to the stream.

"Don't know why I'm being quiet, that shot could have been heard five Ks away. I'm lucky that boy didn't kill me," Jollun said to himself, as he released the safety on the autogun.

Stopping ten meters from the edge of the berm at the stream's edge, he ducked down and waited. The only sound he could hear was the faint tinkle of the water cascading over small pebbles. Crouching, he walked forward just short of the crest. The rifle held at his shoulder, he swung the weapon quickly to the left and right, scanning for any likely target. Nothing moved. His heart pounding, he crested the berm and clambered down the bank. His tired legs betrayed him with their unsteadiness. Walking to the edge of the water, he scanned up and down the stream. The only sound was his heavy breathing, the pounding of his heart and the pleasant sound of the stream passing below him. Seeing and hearing nothing, he decided to walk east towards the settlement, keeping his weapon at the ready.

Fifty meters downstream he saw the faint glisten of ejected shell casings. Crouching lower, he worked his way quietly forward, scanning left and right, sensitive for the slightest movement. Seeing a round shape to his left, partially immersed a half meter in from the edge of the stream, he walked over and rolled the dimly lit object over with the tip of his left boot. Gasping, he turned his head aside and staggered back out of the water towards the edge of the bank. Leaning over, his hands trembling as he rested the weapon on his knees, he shook his head in disbelief. When he had rolled the thing over, Savis, or what was left of him, had stared up at him with his one remaining eye. The entire left side of his face was gone as if a great clawed hand had ripped his head from his shoulders and taken half his face with it. Staggering up the bank he headed back to the road . . . and Jack.

. . . .

As he turned and faced the center of the settlement, the Insectid knew that his business here was finished. His brood was started, over twenty young animals and five adults had been impregnated with his seed. All would be within his control within in one revolution of this planet. Within ten revolutions they would act and appear as normal to their own kind. The ferocious potency of the transference would have abated and left a more subtle change, almost undetectable except to a very astute individual who was looking for sign of the infestation. All the rest were dead. Some had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. His blood had been up, and the urge to kill was primal in his kind. Others had simply offended him by resisting, or not resisting enough. The youngest were always to be preferred he knew; fewer subliminal memories to interfere with necessary actions later in life.

Centuries would pass, if not millennia, before his kind would come and take this planet as his offering to the Great Mother. But he also knew that he would be waiting, no matter how long it took, and that he would be worshiped by his constantly growing brood, eventually numbering in the millions, as a living symbol of the Great Mother.

Flinging the half-finished leg aside, his great lust for meat finally sated, the Insectid turned to the north and trod from the devastated village. Crossing the stream, he leapt up the embankment, and stopping, turned back to face the village.

"*Here you shall build a great city, my children, you and your kind, for a hundred generations if need be,*" he thought to himself, *"and in the end, when your numbers are as great as the stars in the sky, my people shall come and harvest you for the belly of the Great Mother."*

Slowly turning away, the Insectid ambled across the plain and headed for the security of Haven Ridge. Here he would find the darkness that he preferred, caves and tunnels, the moist stench of decay, and wait out the short years until his children bred. Then he would carefully direct their growth, learning all about this new species of animal that he now knew called itself Human.

. . . .

Jollun stayed in the road with Jack for the remaining hour of darkness. As the first lightening of the new day fell upon the waving grain that covered most of the planet, he persuaded the boy to join him, and they began walking the short distance back to the settlement.

. . . .

Two years later, a small monument built of creamy white native stone was placed at the center of the location where the Tree Hill Settlement, had once existed. It recorded the names of the dead, and the name "Tree Hill". Nothing remained to show the love that had once blossomed for a six month period, nor the abject horror that came to destroy them one beautiful day in late Spring.

Strangely, none of the surviving women or children could remember what had happened that night. All were oddly calm, completely cooperative with the Imperial Interrogator that was sent to investigate the massacre. All except one, that is . . . and a rumor persisted about her for years, despite repeated attempts by Imperial authorities to squash its spread. She told a bizarre tale of murder and cannibalism, of a great six-limbed monster that kissed all the children and was worshiped by them. Eventually, she was deemed a threat to the public well-being and committed.

The other surviving women and their children had been very adamant about returning and rebuilding the settlement. The regional Imperial Representative, after interviewing the men who had survived, refused the request, and scattered the families throughout the planet's settlements. He felt that such madness would be quickly forgotten if he separated the victims and let them get on with their lives . . .

Sixty years later a man named Jorna returned to the deserted plain and founded the city of Altus Mon. There were tales of the valley being haunted, but he laughed, and pointed at an old silk tree that sat in a saddle on one hill and said, "Any place with a tree like that can't be all bad," and smiled . . .