



US Highway I-94, Jackson, Michigan  
Meteor Impact Site  
December 21 – Approximately 5:15 AM

Sergeant Paine had done a compete tour of the perimeter. His boys were on the ball this morning, making sure no vehicle got close to the roadblocks and keeping the media off the median, where several had parked to start filming the still-burning meteor crater. He had taken fire in Afghanistan, and these young men under his command thought he was hot shit.

It never ceased to amaze him how fascinated people were with tragedy, as long as it wasn't their own. Paine had ordered his soldiers to arrest any media types if they gave them trouble. He wasn't in the mood to put up with their nonsense right now. There were a lot of people dead and many more hurt by this natural disaster. He wondered for a moment just why things like this happen.

Life and death were such random events some times. A vehicle drives past this very spot one minute before the meteor impact and the people inside live. They come by a minute later and are burned to a crisp. But there wasn't any profit in dwelling on this. He was a practical man. When it was his time, he hoped he'd be able to accept it. He also hoped his demise wouldn't come from a chance event like this.

At least the fire had been contained. Fire trucks were still hosing down the crater, but to little effect. This looked like one of those things that would just have to burn itself out. Humans are no match for Mother Nature, and this burning rock was not going to fizzle out and die without a fight.

He had taken a moment to speak with each of the men here. He had no women under his command on this assignment. He didn't mind women soldiers. In fact, he preferred to have some to balance things out. He'd found sometimes it made for better group cohesion, other times it was a problem. But that was the way with everything in life.

The men were focused, but relaxed. They were well-trained and though they hadn't enjoyed being deployed in the middle of the night to guard a meteorite, their attitude had sobered when they saw the destruction and learned of the civilian casualties. Most of these boys hadn't served overseas the way Paine had. They'd watched the removal of bodies in quiet and somber respect. He hoped they'd never become so jaded that it wouldn't affect them at all.

The wind was picking up, swirling the fine snowflakes into little funnels of confetti. The flashing red and blue lights from the emergency vehicles painted this garish scene properly. He saw a small pocket of fire puff out from the meteor, rise into the sky and vanish. Still too hot for anyone to risk looking inside the crater.

There could be bodies down there, somebody's family buried under the meteor. What must that have been like? To see a burning ball of rock descending on you with no chance to get out of its flight path? He hoped there were no more dead kids. He had a child of his own. That had upset him, though he kept his emotions to himself, retained the stone-faced look necessary to present to his charges. All business, all the time.

There was a sweet smell in the air now. He looked around, but couldn't identify the source. It had to be something that was burning inside the crater. The soldiers were still on the ball. There were several positioned on guard and a squad doing a constant roving patrol. He had a platoon under his command and was rotating the men on the patrol to keep them fresh.

He stopped at the large tent that had been set up as a temporary command post a couple of hundred yards from the edge of the crater for a mug of coffee. It was cold and there was a light snowfall coating everything not in range of the heat from the crater. He wrapped his hands around the mug. It felt good to get some heat into his ice-cold hands. He stared into the night sky, wondering when the stars would turn back to their normal color.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of his neck tingled. He felt an icy cold stab of wind that seemed to cut right through his winter gear. His entire body shivered as if it was encased in ice. The emergency lights of the vehicles went dark. He listened, but there was no sound. Nothing from the dozen or more emergency and National Guard vehicles. Nothing from men on patrol. Nothing from the highway beyond the roadblocks. It was as if something had sucked all the air and power right out of the world.

WHOOSH!

The sound was unusually loud, especially considering the silence that had preceded it. He turned abruptly. In the distance he could see a huge silhouette climbing out of the crater. He stared, not sure he believed his own eyes. It had a large, misshapen head and a wide body. It stepped onto level ground and stopped.

It turned and looked both ways, then turned to face him. When it turned, Paine saw the outline of what looked like wings. He couldn't see its face, but he knew it was staring at him. He could feel the probing of alien eyes.

He set the coffee mug down, fumbled for his rifle, then tapped the communications link velcroed to his chest. He watched the silhouette drop to the ground and disappear from sight.

"Get frosty," he said, telling his soldiers to be on alert. "Possible Tango at edge of crater. Bravo Team meet me at Impact Edge East."

Paine aimed his rifle and made a beeline for the spot he'd seen the silhouette. He arrived as two soldiers joined him on either side. He quickly explained the situation, describing the thing he'd seen only as an unidentified Tango or enemy, and warned them to be extra careful.

A strange keening sound higher-pitched than a dentist's drill set Paine's teeth chattering. He crouched low, head on a swivel, and swept the area for the intruder.

One of the fire trucks flipped onto its side.

Paine jumped back. He activated his commlink.

"Hostiles. Repeat, hostiles. Cleared hot! Cleared hot!"

His soldiers were now authorized to shoot to kill. A police car flipped over and rolled past him. It crashed into the tent he'd just left, spilling equipment and supplies across the cold ground. His coffee mug lay in shards in the snow.

Another police car turned on its side. Another fire engine flipped into the air and landed upside-down. An Army truck popped into the air and rolled across the highway into the median.

Automatic weapons fire on the north side of the crater, near the highway median. Paine ran to the sound of guns. He saw the intruder – and stopped cold. The silhouette was now fully visible in the early morning darkness.

It was about eight feet tall. White and gray with hints of blue, it seemed to absorb light. Its skin rippled under the attack from the soldiers, who were peppering it with bullets. Its head was enormous and seemed to have faces on all four sides. The front, or what seemed to be the front, was that of a man. The back was mutilated, but looked like the remains of a bird's beak of some kind under two open wounds that might have once been eyes. The face on the right was a lion, on the left an ox.

The lion face sneered at him. Paine felt his skin crawling. This was a nightmare like nothing he'd ever seen or imagined. The creature jerked back a step, but did not fall. The creature unfurled its wings and the air around his soldiers swirled like a miniature tornado.

*Wings!*

The wings spread out from its back. It stood on two long legs with claws. Its arms also ended in claws that had fingers like a man, but with longer nails. There was a term for this.

*Cloven hooves!*

Paine was frozen still. He couldn't breathe. His soldiers were swept up in the funnel, smashed together. He saw bones breaking and blood squirting everywhere. This jolted him out of his shock. He screamed his rage and let loose with everything he had.

The nightmare creature turned its lion face to him. Its right arm extended toward him. A claw opened and closed. Paine charged the creature, still shooting. The creature's feet left the ground and flew into him.

It seized Paine by the head, then hurled him into the side of an overturned Army truck. Not finished with him, the intruder grabbed him by the collar, lifted him into the air and pushed its lion face against his.

It was worse than a nightmare. Its teeth brushed against his face. Some thick liquid ran down the side of its head. It had a crazed look in its eyes. Paine felt images flashing through his mind. Too fast for him to process.

*Was it trying to communicate?*

He slipped his sidearm out of the holster, pressed it against the creature's side and fired. The creature jerked back a step but didn't make a sound.

It flung the sergeant twenty yards through the air until he landed on a misshapen slab of concrete that had been thrown up by the meteor. He bounced off and rolled to the edge of the crater. Todd Paine lay still on his broken back, blood dripping from his nose.

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