

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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ONE



DISILLUSIONED

NEVILLE EDWARD DANSBURY BENT OVER, holding his mid-section. The gut-punch feeling of a wrecking ball smashing into him engulfed his entire torso. His head throbbed, and a queasiness rose up to meet it.

He grabbed his forehead with his right hand and steadied himself just as a red beam of light streaked across the sky. An explosion, two hundred yards from his position, blinded him for a moment. Debris flew in all directions, and dust and smoke billowed toward the darkening sky.

Ned staggered away from the blast and immediately backed into a stone wall. He turned and looked straight up at a massive structure. Its wall rose at least thirty yards into the air, maybe more. As far as he could see in the dusk-like conditions, its length went in both directions.

Across a road of some sort stood another structure. Smaller in height and width, and appearing to be made of the same stone, it was older and in a state of disrepair, compared to the wall behind him. Strangely shaped trees with purplish leaves protruded from cracks, running their boney limbs across the

face of it. It reminded him of pictures he'd seen in a magazine of stone wall trees in Hong Kong.

These look creepier, though.

The sky grew darker by the second as something big cast an enormous shadow. He couldn't tell if it was a natural phenomenon or a result of smoke from the nearby skirmish. A blueish hue, easing in intensity, radiated down from an oddly shaped astronomical body. The body's spray of light mixed with the smoke and dust, gave the entire scene an eerie, shadowy feel.

However, there were no stars. None at all. Ned stepped away from the taller wall and walked into the middle of the road, scanning the heavens.

Maybe they're just not visible yet ...

Suddenly, an acrid odor drifted in his direction. He covered and uncovered his nose to try and locate its origin. He turned the opposite direction, but the smell, burning tires mixed with the odor of a mildew-covered skunk, pierced his nostrils.

The dusty road veered to his right, and it led in the direction of the recent explosion before disappearing around a bend. To his left, it traveled over a rise and out of sight.

Ned took ten steps and stopped. In the distance, coming up from behind him, a rumbling noise grew in intensity. Something flying. Something mechanical. But unlike anything on Earth. He spun around, looking up. The racket grew louder, and the ground shook.

He faced the towering wall, when a red beam of light ripped through the sky above his head. It struck the decrepit wall now behind him with force, and the explosion sent searing heat in his direction. A section covered by the creepy trees with purple leaves disintegrated before his eyes. The red beam dissolved it into non-existence. The force of the blast sent

surrounding stone tumbling down into the road as smoke rose from the now gaping hole.

Ned pressed up against the taller wall just as movement caught his eye. Rounding the bend, a group of beings ran toward him. They darted side to side, avoiding weapons-fire. Yet, to Ned, they didn't look scared. They looked tired.

Are they a family, perhaps? There was a smaller being in the arms of a larger one, and two of the taller specimens carried something resembling short swords.

Another red beam of light zapped the ground with wicked force. A large hole instantly formed near the fleeing group, who jumped around and over it with relative ease.

A third beam of light slammed into the towering wall near Ned, knocking him off his feet. He rose to one knee, shook the cobwebs from his mind, and opened his eyes. The energy of the blast sizzled through his extremities, yet he marveled at how the stone structure remained unscathed, unlike its counterpart across the road.

Another beam struck the ground and exploded between him and the small group still running in his direction.

"Hey!" he said, waving his arms. "We need to get inside! The gun blasts don't have any effect on this build—" Ned's lips and tongue froze mid-sentence, swollen and unable to move. His throat constricted, and he couldn't make any sound. He could barely breathe.

A shearing pain stabbed him in the back, and he staggered to his right and tried to regain his balance just before everything went dark.