

Prologue

A quiet wind blew through twisted, smoking ruins. Shops and apartment complexes that had stood for fifty years were now gutted, all their merchandise and furnishings turned to ash from the heat of the blazes. Outside, the street was littered with glass fragments, bullet casings, torched cars, scattered rocks and broken bottles. Here and there splashes of blood turned a wall or the door of a car black.

Astonishingly, a single street lamp had evaded destruction. Though tilted as if it had been hit by a car, it continued to glow, creating a pool of light that stretched into the street. It was frightening, the scale of destruction in a formerly quiet section of town.

A police cruiser traveled slowly down the street, its searchlight running over the buildings and cars. Inside the vehicle were the forms of three cops, two in the front and one in the back. The shadowed form in the passenger seat came into brief relief under the flickering light. It revealed a youth of about twenty years with black wavy hair jammed under the police riot helmet, his body bulked by a bullet-proof vest. In his arms he cradled a M-14A1, the gleaming machine gun pointed out the window, the stubby grenade launcher slung underneath filled with tear gas canisters. His eyes moved constantly, never resting in one place long. The car moved out of the light and he was once more a bulky shadow in the front seat.

Once the car was out of the light, a shadow detached itself from the burned remains of a shop and stepped into the dim light of the streetlamp. He stared after the cruiser for a moment before looking around at the devastation.

"These humans are remarkable fun." The man said with a soft chuckle. "They are ready to battle at the drop of a hat. I wonder," he continued in a thoughtful manner, "what would happen if they knew what was about to happen in their world."

Here the man paused, as if listening to another voice. "No," he said to the wind, "They are not ready for more magic in the world. The First Ones have been created. Now they must prepare the world." Spastic laughter gripped the figure, echoing off the charred husks. "Oh, yes. They must prepare the world."

Cackling madly, the man stepped back into the shadow and vanished.