Earth-side Summary

Sanders (formerly Byrd) and Anya, have been working with Hollow/Foxtail (HF, to his friends), an AI that has it's processors located in a semi truck that wanders the American wastelands in an attempt to avoid being captured by it's creators, who want it back. HF sees the two as helpful assistants on it's quest do deal blows to it's former masters. The team had investigated an automated factory complex out in the middle of nowhere, and HF discovered by hacking into it's computer systems that there had been a large number of shipments made from the factory to a place called Alton, MO (a more specific address than that could not be determined).

At HF's behest, Sanders and Anya travelled to Alton (in the heart of an area known as the Chicken Empire for being owned by Tyson Corp) in an old van, stopping at a diner called Grandma's Kitchen to meet with Deviln, who arrived via a hired auto-car that she'd hijacked using her Machine Empathy. Devlin revealed that her investigations into her parents fates has run into some dead ends. Sanders related that their "Friend" thought that there might be Aliens about in the town. Devlin reached out, and picked up faintly on an empathic signal coming from nearby, the mind of somebody named Billy Ray Spivey behind bars having his memories suppressed somehow by another, non-human, mind. They ask their server, Herb, about the name, and learn that Spivey killed his father recently.

A short walk later lead them to the Sheriff's office on the town square, across from the town hall in the center. Sanders and Devlin entered the office (while Anya stayed outside to keep watch), and posed as a Lawyer named John Williams, esq. and his assistant, Diana. They managed to get past the receptionist and Sheriff Dan Oakley, as well as a Federal Marshall and a doctor examining Billy Ray, to get to their "client." The Sheriff and Doctor implied that Billy Ray is physically incredibly dangerous, and mentally unstable. Indeed Billy Ray seemed very out of it.

Devlin mentally probed Billy Ray, and got caught up in a memory of a dream of being abducted, and taken to a barn filled with bizarre biological apparatus. Not really herself, and going on about her mother and father having been abducted, she attacked Sanders when she woke from the probe, and he had to restrain her in an empty cell.

The deputies and the Marshall (a man named Deering) came over to see what the ruckus was about, and Devlin realized that the Marshall was attempting to empathically probe her. They had a contest of mental powers, but the Marshall came out on top (though she did get from the Marshall that he's been pursued at some point by the Men in Black, very similar to the ones that had attacked them once on the Moon). He opened up to her a bit mentally, and she found that he's not a bad guy. She opened up to him in return, and he helped her get her head straightened out regarding the bad effects of the dream.

Discussing with Deering, they found that he was aware that Billy Ray's mind had been wiped, and he related that he's sure it's not the first time, and that he was puzzled about how they were managing to do this. And generally that things had been happening in Billy Ray's head since the Marshall was assigned to bring him back to Alton for trial Billy Ray had fled following a spree of killings (including his father). They depart the Sheriff's office building to find a place to discuss more in private.

At a picnic table behind a gas station, while eating ice cream, they discussed the facts of the case. Deering also showed them a disturbing video of Billy Ray killing a man at a gas station. They discussed theories as to what was going on with him, but came to no conclusions. They discussed Devlin's relatively high level of empathic power, with Deering admitting that he'd only ever seen one person more powerful, a "witch-woman" from Northern Louisiana.

Deering asked if they needed his help, wanting to leave Alton, in part due to him having a bad feeling about the place and its population being mentally “fuzzy” to him, as though they’d mostly been affected to a lesser extent by the same thing that had damaged Spivey’s mind. Along with a feeling that somehow time was running out (a feeling Devlin had as well). Sanders got contact info from him, but told him that they could proceed without him.

They decided to follow up by going to see Billy Ray’s mother Angel Spivey at their home, where they also met Joe Crista, her brother-in-law, husband to Ange’s sister Amy. The couple had moved in after the murder to help Angel with things after Billy Ray had killed her husband, Rich. Angel asked after Billy Ray, and they asked her about some of the details of the case.

As they did this, to Devlin alone, the scene in the home turned into them all being dressed in odd finery in some sort of ancient monolithic great hall. Devlin begins to look around, wondering if this effect is caused by some empath nearby. She felt that the place emanated a certain malevolence.

Sanders and Anya go investigate Billy Ray’s room, and discover two things of interest. The first was a flyer for a band called “Flavor of Corruption,” one of whom named Jake Sorrow was wearing a shirt with a symbol on it that Devlin is seeing on one of the banners hanging in the great hall. The band is due to play a gig soon. The other was a pair of boots with mud on them that they learn was probably from him spending time up at a the town reservoir.

Outside the house, they discussed what had happened to Devlin, and how she had a sense that whatever caused the effect might be anywhere and everywhere around Alton, though perhaps stronger in the house. They got in the van, and decided to go to the see Billy Ray Spivey’s girlfriend, Gina Johnson. At her house they meet with an old guy who says she’s not about. Devlin reads his mind, finding it “fuzzy,” and feeling like the man has possibly been manipulated (though he thinks he’s telling the truth).

Having found Gina to be a dead end, the three take the van up to the reservoir as night is falling. As they approach, Devlin has a very strange foreboding feeling. Sanders went to check out a building by the side of the reservoir, as Devlin and Anya tried to get a look at things using a drone (and have a little moment together alone).

Inside the building, Sanders discovered a group of teens playing music and video games, etc. and drinking, having apparently made somewhat of a club house out of the pumping building. At a nearby shed, Sanders finds a kid passed out from too much alcohol. In another room of the building (entered through another door), Sanders finds an office with a logbook kept by one Phyllis Bradley. The logbook talks about Phyllis’ attempts to come up at night to get rid of the kids, but more importantly about a dream she had after falling asleep on on of her late night vigils about strange lights flashing over the reservoir.

Devlin steered the (amphibious) drone into the water. There appeared from above to be a diffuse mass in the water, confirmed more as the drone got deeper underwater and near the center of the reservoir. Suddenly the drone cuts out as it nears the center. Devlin notes that her feeling of unease emanate from about that same spot. They pondered getting scuba equipment too go diving to check it out.

Everybody met back at the van and discussed what they’d seen. They decide to wait for the teens to leave, which they do about 2 AM. Sanders investigated the pump room, and found another flyer for the band (identical to the one in Spivey’s room at home), and a bowl full of an odd black slimey

substance. On his way back to the van, the stuff in the bowl leapt out and into the reservoir, at which point Sanders noted something massive moving in the water. Sanders runs for the van, and they take off.

As they drove back to town, Sanders contacted HF on their gear, filling the AI in on the events of the day. HF agrees with them that there must be some connection with the Spivey case, and whatever is in the reservoir, speculating that perhaps Spivey was exposed to whatever is in the water there (perhaps the black stuff being the same stuff that has replaced Spivey's muscle tissue). They decide that they need to test Spivey somehow, and head for the Sheriff's office.

As he drove, Sanders saw a strange sight out of the windows of the van, trees that appeared to be made out of fractal skeleton keys. He stops and points it out, but nobody else can see this. Eventually even Sanders can only see regular trees where once he saw the key trees.

They arrived at the Sheriff's office in the early morning, and Devlin went in by herself, using her dissolution ability to get in through a grate. She used her machine empathy to have the cameras forget that she was there, and managed to eventually extract the samples they needed. They then took the van to a motel that they'd located, apparently the only motel in town (creatively named "The Alton Motel").

At the motel, they awaken the manager (one Tim Sinclair), and get the last of the rooms available, Room 104. As they went to the room, Devlin got the feeling that they were being watched. Sanders searched the room for bugs when they arrived, but found nothing. He installed some security measures, and discovered that the motel (and a lot of businesses in town) are run by a guy named Sinclair.

They ate breakfast the next day at "The Curve" diner, and discussed where to go from there. From a sign there, it's clear that the owner of this business and the motel is one Art Sinclair. One of the deputies recognized them as Billy Ray's attorneys, and questioned them, but leaves. They decided to split up, Devlin going to the courthouse to screw with the computers to become officially Billy Ray's attorney to get a continuance, Sanders going to the reservoir to go scuba diving, and Anya going to the farm to find Gina.

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