The Garrison

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Billy stuffed his turnpike receipt in his back pocket and stepped on the power, heading out of the toll gate and straight up I-576. He wasn’t trying to beat out anyone or give the state cops a challenge, but his foot was pretty heavy on the pedal, just out of enthusiasm—and nerves. Just another hour’s drive and he’d be there.

This load was gonna do it. This was the one that was gonna make him rich. He just knew it. It had to. He’d been looking at who did best selling stuff to the aliens and who went broke, and while he wasn’t one of those egghead professors or anything, he thought he had it doped out.

He knew he’d doped it out, because if he hadn’t, he was ruined, broke—he’d put every penny he had into this.

The aliens were gonna love what he had filling his van. They had to!

He charged past Spring Run and Dry Run and Doylesburg at sixty, slowed a bit for the traffic at the Waterloo-Blairs Mills exit and the long curve to the left, then floored it to get his load up the slope and across the ridge without losing speed.

At the top, as he crested the ridge, he took his foot off the power and stared. He’d been here half a dozen times before, as a tourist, as someone else’s roadie, and on his own, but it still got to him every time.

The alien fortress. The Castle. The Black Log Mountain garrison.

The whole structure was gleaming white, shining brightly in the midday sun. The outer walls curved up gracefully—he couldn’t see the base, the surrounding buildings clustered too closely, but Billy had seen them close up, and he knew that they started out flat to the ground and swooped upward in smooth soaring organic curves that were made up of thousands of narrow ribs, ranging from the thickness of threads to the size of century-old tree-trunks, weaving and interweaving to form a solid wall. Billy had had a coral paperweight once, and the way those walls were put together reminded him of coral somehow.

And at the top those curves ended in upthrust spikes and pinnacles that looked like some sort of gigantic bleached-out spun-sugar thistle.

And then inside the ring of the outer walls stood the main structure, with its spiral towers and twining buttresses, like a wild hybrid of Cinderella’s Castle at Disney World and some science- fictional city of the future run amok, all glowing softly—it didn’t really show by daylight, but at night the whole thing was lit up like one of those Christmas lawn displays, white speckled with dots and lines of red and green.

And at the center of the whole thing, that central tower, what some people called the Keep, rose up and up and up, half a mile into the sky, bristling with spines like some impossible pale cactus.

That was the actual ship—at least, that’s what everyone said. Billy hadn’t seen the place before the castle was built. Hell, he’d still been in diapers when the aliens first landed and settled in on Black Log Mountain—plastic diapers, not the modern live ones. No one had figured out back then how to use the alien’s sludge-eaters to make diapers. No one had ever seen the alien’s sludge- eaters.

Billy supposed it must’ve been one hell of a surprise when that half-mile-long starship dropped down out of nowhere like that, and started growing a castle here in the middle of Pennsylvania. The one in New South Wales had caught everyone off-guard, too, but Billy’d never seen that one up close. He’d never been to Australia. From the pictures, the castle there looked exactly like the one here; the only difference was in the surroundings.

Billy remembered when he’d first seen the Castle. He’d been about six, and his parents had driven up here with him and his sisters, all of them jammed into an old gas-burner. I-576 hadn’t been built yet, they’d come up the old roads through Orbisonia.

When they first saw the Castle his father had stopped the car and they’d all gotten out to look at it.

His father had stood there saying, “Oh, my God,” over and over. His mother had stared silently, but Billy had thought she looked scared.

And his kid sister Susanna had been openly terrified; she’d started shrieking, “Too big! Too big!” Then she’d climbed back in the car and hidden her face, refusing to look at the Castle again.

His older sister Lita hadn’t been scared, and neither had Billy. It wasn’t fear he’d felt.

It was greed. He’d wanted a piece of it.

And now he was going to get one, as much as any human could.

He was over the top of the ridge now, and headed down the western slope, down toward the foot of Black Log Mountain.

The city of Black Log reached from the castle walls at the top of the slope all the way down to the valley floor, and the sides of the interstate were lined with signs advertising power stations, motels, and short-term storage. It seemed as if there were even more than there had been on his last run.

Well, that was no surprise. Black Log had been growing constantly ever since the government first put up a couple of tents outside the castle gates. Back then the towns like Waterloo and Doylesburg had been tiny, half-forgotten villages reachable only by winding back roads, and Black Log Mountain itself had been nothing but woods—but then the aliens arrived. As long as the aliens were here and willing to do business, Billy figured people would be coming here to do business with them.

’Course, he’d heard a rumor when he was loading up that they weren’t buying much lately. His cousin Al had said he’d heard that the aliens had got real busy with something inside the Castle, no one was sure what—or if anyone was sure, whoever it was wasn’t talking about it. The aliens were pretty careful about who they let in and where Earthpeople went while they were in there.

Billy smiled. What really drove the eggheads batshit was that the aliens preferred generals and admirals to professors when it came to picking house-guests.

They liked artists, too, but they had their own ideas of what was art—Billy was counting on that. Maybe they’d got busy, but they’d still be interested in what he was carrying, he was sure of it.

He was into the city now and cutting diagonally up the side of Black Log Mountain, passing the run-down apartments where many of the less-successful traders lived.

Billy had heard plenty of folks saying that the way to get rich off the aliens wasn’t to trade with ’em directly at all, it was to come in here and open a restaurant or a motel or something to make money off the actual traders—like in the gold rush days, when most of the prospectors wound up broke, and the merchants who sold the prospectors their supplies wound up rich. That might have been true when the Castle first went up, but after almost twenty years the competition in the service industries was pretty fierce; it looked to him like the only way to make a real killing was off the aliens. Twenty years they’d been here—well, nineteen and a half—and they still didn’t have a good handle on what Earth money was worth.

Or maybe they just didn’t care. They hadn’t come here for money, after all—the trading that went on was just a sideline, something to keep the natives happy and to keep from getting bored.

Billy didn’t remember when the truth had come out; he’d been about four when the aliens had finally admitted why they were on Earth, and why they’d built two castles on opposite sides of the planet. It had been big news for a long time, but hadn’t meant much to a four-year-old.

Billy figured the Earthpeople back then must’ve been pretty damn stupid to have not figured it out for themselves—or maybe they had figured it out, and it had just taken awhile to get the aliens to admit it. He wasn’t clear on that, and it didn’t much matter. He didn’t remember not knowing, and couldn’t really imagine it.

He passed the Warehouse Row exit and slowed up a little. The castle towered over him now; he was close enough that he couldn’t see it all any more. The view had been far better from the ridgetop across the valley.

A castle like that, what had they thought it was for? What was a castle ever for?

A castle was a war machine, a defensive system—everyone knew that. And with one on each side of the globe, they could defend the whole planet.

That’s what they were doing; they were guarding Earth, keeping everyone safe. To Billy, that soaring central spire was a promise of protection—and now, a promise of wealth.

What had really worried the eggheads and the generals, though, was who were the aliens guarding against?

The aliens had never explained that very well—but then, how could they, beyond the obvious? Their bunch of aliens was at war with another bunch of aliens, and neither side had a name that would translate into English. Big surprise.

Billy took the Market Square exit and made the three-quarters-of-a-circle turn onto Market Street.

As long as the war wasn’t here, Billy didn’t really give a damn who was fighting, or why. It wasn’t any of his business. Earth wasn’t involved. The aliens in the two castles had assured everybody that Earth wasn’t involved, that they were just here to keep an eye on this part of the galaxy to make sure the other side wasn’t trying to sneak anything past them.

And they’d been here almost twenty years without any enemy fleets showing up, so Billy figured they’d told the truth. This wasn’t some front-line unit here; this was a backwater garrison in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to do but pass the time trading with the natives.

And Billy, as one of those natives, was eager to trade—desperate to trade. He’d always felt drawn to the Castle, ever since he first saw it, as if he knew that his entire life was tied to it, for better or for worse. He’d dropped out of high school to hire on as a roadie for Jack Chu, helping old Jack load and unload pinball machines, when Jack had decided that the aliens would love pinball machines—it had been a way to get close to the Castle, and Billy hadn’t hesitated an instant.

The aliens hadn’t been all that impressed. They’d bought just one machine, then lost interest. Billy figured it was because pinball machines were too big and heavy. Jack had lost a bundle, and Billy had been out of work, as well as out of school—but he was hooked more than ever. He’d been inside the Castle, hauling that old pinball machine, and he wanted to get in there again.

There was money to be made, trading with the aliens—and Billy liked the aliens. Jack never really had liked them; he’d just seen the chance for a quick buck.

Most people just saw a chance for a quick buck.

The market square was crowded—jammed, in fact. Billy saw that he wasn’t going to find any on-street parking. In fact, he wouldn’t be surprised if he had to double all the way back down to Warehouse Row and take a shuttle back up. He decided to try the Northeast Garage first, though.

A chance for a quick buck, all right. Fortunes had been made trading with the aliens. The guy who’d traded a Swiss Army Knife for a jar of sludge-eaters, the company that had swapped an antique steam engine for instruction in building portable fusion plants, the belly dancer who’d gotten the secret of fixed-field levitation for her performance, they were all unspeakably rich now.

And the aliens were rich, too—they collected royalties on the fusion plants and levitation fields. A few lawyers had gotten unspeakably rich off that.

They used their royalties to buy things that interested them, often paying outrageous prices—but not as outrageous as what those lucky few had received. Nobody had gotten any really valuable secrets out of the aliens in years now.

Billy’s on-board computer reported four parking spaces still vacant in the Northeast Garage; he stepped on the power to get one of them while he still could.

The alien’s computers made Earth’s best look like alphabet blocks, and that wasn’t even mentioning the nanomachines, like the ones that had built most of the castle, but the aliens insisted they couldn’t teach anyone how to make those. Most people didn’t believe them; most people assumed the aliens just didn’t trust Earthpeople with secrets that powerful.

Not Billy; he believed the aliens. After all, these weren’t some hotshot scientists sent to Earth to teach Earthpeople alien technology; these were soldiers. If you put an ordinary American soldier on some South Seas island, he’d be able to show the natives how to do some stuff—build a water wheel, say—but what if one of them asked how to make a radio? That soldier could show them how to work a radio, maybe how to fix one, but not how to build one.

So Billy was perfectly willing to believe the alien soldiers when they said they couldn’t explain their computers or other molecular machinery. He sympathized with them. They were doing their job, guarding Earth against the enemy; teaching the natives wasn’t what they were here for.

The four parking slots were on the top level, and two of them were gone when Billy got there, but he snagged the third one. He maneuvered the van in and cut the power.

As the field collapsed and the vehicle settled slowly to the pavement he pulled the big portfolio out of the back. This held his sample. He thought he’d only need the one, though you could never be sure with the aliens. They didn’t always think like Earthpeople.

They sure didn’t always agree with Earthpeople about what was valuable. Billy was counting on that. If the aliens didn’t buy his cargo he was ruined, he was out the twelve grand he’d put together from his own savings and all the money he could borrow, because no one else was going to pay for what he was hauling.

For lots of people twelve grand would be nothing much; for Billy it was everything.

It was a good thing, he thought, that the aliens didn’t have the same standards humans did.

That was something a lot of the traders didn’t understand. They figured the aliens would appreciate quality, like human millionaires. They’d show up on the aliens’ doorstep with truckloads of top-of-the-line electronics or first-quality gemstones or fine art from the galleries in New York, and go into shock at how little the aliens offered. Billy had seen it.

And then there were other traders who thought the aliens were the ultimate rubes. They’d show up with velvet paintings of matadors or big-eyed kittens, or with cheap kids’ toys, and sometimes the aliens bought and sometimes they didn’t.

Billy jogged down the sidewalk with the portfolio swinging. He thought he’d come up with something the aliens would buy. He’d listened to the older traders talking, he’d listened to the government officials who were constantly holding meaningless meetings with the aliens, he’d even listened to the professors who came to study the aliens and never seemed to realize that the aliens didn’t want to be studied, and he thought he’d figured it out.

He thought probably plenty of other folks had figured it out before him, but they’d kept their mouths shut and made their money and gone home to live in luxury. That was what he intended to do. He wasn’t going to find out how the nanomachines were made, or how to build a faster-than-light drive, but Billy was willing to settle for a few million dollars from the aliens’ royalty money.

He didn’t bother with the market square, where the crowds milled about, buying from each other and selling to each other while two of the aliens stalked curiously about, looking down at the humans. Those aliens weren’t going to be shelling out real money; they were just low-ranking grunts with pocket change. Instead he marched straight up to the castle gate.

A dozen pairs of eyes turned to watch him as he did.

“Hey, kid,” someone called, “forget it. They’re not letting anyone in any more.”

Billy didn’t hesitate; he wasn’t falling for that. He walked up to the human guards at the security point and pulled out his wallet.

“William Rodriquez,” he said. “I’ve got a pass.” He opened the wallet and showed the nearer guard the glittering little token that an alien had given him the year before, the token that meant the aliens liked him and that mere humans shouldn’t keep him out.

Of course, it didn’t mean the aliens would let him in this time; people with tokens got turned away all the time. The tokens all looked the same to Earthpeople, but the aliens could read them somehow; if the alien who had given a particular token was busy, or out of favor, or simply gone, the token would not be honored and no admittance would be given.

“Won’t do you any good, son,” the guard said. His manner was friendly enough, so Billy listened politely. “That fellow out there wasn’t just giving you a hard time; they haven’t let anyone in for the past three weeks. No traders, no brass, nobody. Hell, those two out in the market are just about the only ones who’ve been outside the walls since last month.”

Billy blinked. Now, that hadn’t been in his plans. He’d heard they weren’t buying much, but he hadn’t realized it was that bad.

“Anyone know why?” he asked.

The guard shook his head. “Lots of guesses, of course, but they’re not talking. They just say they’re busy.”

Billy didn’t like that. When soldiers were busy, that was a real bad sign.

“Mind if I try anyway?” he asked.

The guard shrugged. “Fine by me. You’ve got the pass, you go on in. You know the rules, right?”

“Sure.”

And of course he did. No knives, no guns, no explosives, and for some reason the aliens had never explained, no phones, no eyeglasses, and no fingernail polish. Never touch an alien. Never kick anything, though pushing with your hands was okay, and keep your shoes on at all times, even if you had to wade through one of the streams of water that sometimes ran through parts of the castle. Don’t cover your nose or mouth if you have to cough or sneeze.

He didn’t understand all the rules, but he knew them. And he didn’t have to understand them; he was a human, and the rules were alien. He only had to obey them.

He walked through the metal detector and the bioscanner without setting off any alarms, and then his feet were on the edge of the castle walls. Ahead of him the tracery of white fibers curved gradually upward; if he were to walk straight ahead, in twenty meters he’d have to get down on hands and knees to climb the slope, and in thirty he’d be stopped when the walls reached vertical.

He didn’t expect to go that far.

And sure enough, before he’d gone a dozen steps the wall opened before him.

And it wasn’t the high narrow opening with the blue light in it that meant “go away “; instead it was the regular gate, the big door and smooth gray path that would lead him into the castle.

Billy grinned with relief. Behind him, he heard the guard mutter, “Well, I’ll be damned.”

He strolled on down the path and through the doorway, into the familiar gray-and-white waiting room. Two aliens were waiting there for him.

These were the usual sort, not any of the exotic varieties—they were humanoid, eight or nine feet tall, very thin, with bluish-gray skin. They wore white overalls decorated with odd patterns of short lines in bright colors. Some Earthpeople theorized that those lines were insignia of rank, or clan designations, or controls for devices built into the overalls; Billy had no idea what they were, and didn’t much care. He lowered his portfolio and did the formal arms-spread, knees-spread gesture of greeting.

The aliens responded in kind, but quickly and sloppily.

Billy didn’t think he’d met either of these two before. The ordinary aliens weren’t always easy to tell apart, but these two didn’t look quite right to be anyone he’d dealt with before.

Of course, some aliens were completely different—there were aliens that looked like walking sea anemones or exploding turtles or plumbers’ nightmares. But ordinarily, humans didn’t see those aliens. Dealing with the natives was generally left to the eight-foot blue-gray humanoids, and those all looked more or less alike. And they wouldn’t give names, which made identification more difficult.

Nobody knew whether the other kinds were different species, or other parts of some complex life-cycle, or artificial creations; for that matter, a good many scientists thought the blue-gray humanoids were robots built specifically to deal with humans. That was just one of many subjects where the aliens weren’t talking.

“Hello,” Billy said. “I’m a trader. I’m called Billy.”

“Hello, Billy,” the nearer alien replied. “We will consider your wares. And we have news for your people.”

“What news?” He’d never heard that before.

“Let us trade first. What have you brought?”

Billy smiled. He lifted the portfolio, and a platform rose from the floor to accommodate it. He zipped it open to display the painting inside.

The aliens bent over it for a few seconds; then one of them asked, “Have we not seen images of this image before? Have we not been told that this is a cultural treasure? Our laws forbid the acquisition of any item you people consider to be a cultural treasure.”

Billy shook his head. “Nope,” he said. “This isn’t the original. Let me explain.”

The two aliens turned to listen to him, and Billy launched into his prepared speech.

“The original painting, Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night,’ is indeed one of our great cultural treasures. My people value it above all other hand-made images. So greatly do we value it that many of our young artists strive to recreate it, so that their hands may learn the skills that can make such a thing. I had heard how one of your people admired this image, and how greatly you regretted that you could not acquire it without harming us, so I thought of those young artists. Ordinarily, their recreations are stored away or even destroyed, for they are not the original and may not be displayed, but if they were instead to be given to you, in appreciation of your long service in guarding our planet from all enemies, would that not be a good thing for everyone?”

“This is a copy?”

Billy started to nod, then remembered that the aliens interpreted nodding as indicating boredom, rather than agreement. “Yes, this is a copy, made by a skilled young artist.”

“This is not itself a cultural treasure?”

“No.”

“And you have other copies?”

“Yes. In my vehicle I have one hundred forty-three more copies of this image, each hand-made by one of our finest artists.”

The aliens looked at one another and murmured quietly in their own language. Billy stood, watching, trying not to show how nervous he was.

He thought he had it figured right.

He’d known about the cultural treasure rule; plenty of would-be traders didn’t, and ruined themselves as a result. The aliens were fascinated by human arts and crafts, but had strict rules about what they could acquire.

Photographs didn’t interest them, not even photographs of famous artworks, or photos that were art in themselves; Billy wasn’t sure why this was so, but he’d seen it for himself, and he supposed it was because the aliens’ own recording devices were so superior to anything humans could do that buying human-made photos would be like a man with a good camera buying a child’s stick-figure sketch instead of snapping his own picture.

And Billy had observed, in his visits, that the aliens weren’t much interested in humans as subjects. They didn’t like portraits of any kind, or figure studies. He supposed that was natural enough; he wouldn’t have wanted to buy himself a painting of an alien. Let alone several paintings.

After all, they all looked alike.

The aliens weren’t much interested in anything else on Earth, either—paintings of dogs or horses or landscapes didn’t excite them.

And they didn’t think much of pure abstraction—or photorealism. They liked paintings that looked like paintings.

And the aliens were interested in things relating to themselves, to some extent. Humans had never been able to produce portraits of the aliens that the aliens appreciated—something indefinable was missing—but human paintings of the castle on Black Log Mountain had been popular for awhile.

And the aliens came from the stars.

Billy had put that all together, and had taken his savings and hired a bunch of art students to copy the Van Gogh, and here he was, trying not to sweat or tremble.

He even thought he knew why the aliens were interested in human art. It wasn’t as art for its own sake; it was as souvenirs. Quality didn’t matter. It was like tourists buying local arts and crafts. They didn’t care how good a piece was; they just wanted something that would show they’d been someplace unusual, something that would look interesting on a shelf or a wall back home.

And tourists wanted their souvenirs to look a little primitive, a little strange, but recognizable.

That fit the Van Gogh perfectly.

One of the aliens turned to him. “What price are you asking for each image?”

This was it. This was the crucial moment.

“These were made by the finest artists. I must ask five hundred thousand dollars for each painting.”

The alien hesitated.

The other alien murmured something—probably the equivalent of, “They expect you to haggle. They don’t respect you if you don’t.”

“That seems a high price,” the first alien said.

Billy nodded.

The two aliens conferred.

“Surely one hundred thousand each would be enough?” one of them suggested.

Billy suppressed a grin. If they took them all, that would be more than fourteen million dollars, and even if they only bought the single sample, he’d have a healthy profit—and that was their starting bid! He’d done it!

“The artists will be shamed,” he said, “that you could offer so little.”

The dickering took about twenty minutes, and settled on buying the entire batch at a quarter million each—thirty-six million dollars for a vanload of cheap copies! Billy was ecstatic.

“I will bring my vehicle to the gate for delivery,” he said.

“Yes,” the alien said, “but first, the news for your people.”

“Oh, yeah,” Billy said. He waited politely, expecting something trivial or incomprehensible.

“We are leaving,” the alien said. “The garrison is being withdrawn.”

Billy’s jaw dropped. In an instant, his world shifted beneath him.

The aliens had always been here, as long as he could remember, guarding Earth; how could they leave?

“Your paintings are a fine parting gift for our soldiers here. We thank you for that, but we will not be trading anything more with your people. We are prepared for our departure and will launch in seven hours. We strongly advise everyone to leave the area.”

“But... what about the one in Australia?”

“That garrison is also withdrawn. We are leaving your planet entirely.”

“Why? Is the war over?”

The alien made an ugly little noise that Billy couldn’t interpret—a laugh, perhaps? “No,” it said.

“But then why?” He tried not to sound as panicky as he felt.

“We are needed elsewhere.”

And that was all the answer Billy could coax from them; a moment later he was deposited back outside the gate.

A line had formed at the security checkpoint—people had seen Billy go in, and they assumed that meant a return to business as usual.

A few had already been turned away, though, from the dejected look of a group clustered to one side.

Billy’s appearance created something of a stir.

“Are they buying?” someone called. “What’d you sell ’em?”

Billy ignored the question. He hesitated, unsure what to do.

He had to bring his van around, of course, and get his money—the aliens would pay him with a check drawn on their accounts here on Earth.

Would that check still be good when they were gone? He’d have to get it certified or something.

But he also had to tell everyone the news. And he didn’t know how.

At last he stepped up to the nearer of the two guards at the checkpoint. “I have to talk to you,” he whispered.

Startled, the guard glanced around, then stepped back past the bioscanner to Billy’s side.

“What is it?” he asked.

“They told me to tell everyone,” Billy said. “They’re leaving. In seven hours. And they said something about people should be clear of the area when they launch—I guess it won’t be safe.”

“What?” The guard blinked at him. “Are you serious?”

“Damn right I am,” Billy said.

“This...you aren’t trying some sort of scam, are you, buddy? Because I swear, if you are, I’ll see your ass rot in jail.”

Billy shook his head. “Nope,” he said. “I swear right back at you, I’m telling you what they told me. If anyone’s lying, it’s them.”

“Oh, shit.” The guard looked up at the wall that towered over them. Then he turned and headed for his phone.

“Hey,” Billy called, “I got a delivery to make—they’re buying my cargo for souvenirs. When they open up for it, you can ask them yourself.”

The guard looked up from the phone with a slightly dazed expression; it took a few seconds for Billy’s words to penetrate. “Right,” he said at last.

Billy threw him a mock salute and headed for his van.

By the time he maneuvered the vehicle into the market square, soldiers and police were forcing the crowds back, ordering everyone away. A soldier came up to the van window and said, “You’ll have to back this right out of here, mister—square’s closed to traffic.”

“Not me,” Billy said. “Ask the gate guard—I’ve got a delivery.” He flashed the alien token in his wallet.

The soldier hesitated. “Wait here,” he said.

“Sure thing.”

By the time the soldier returned and waved Billy through a cluster of brass was forming at the security checkpoint. By the time he maneuvered the van backward through the heavy vehicle gate he was driving through a solid wall of officers and bureaucrats.

The castle wall opened, and three men in fancy uniforms marched through before Billy could even get the van’s rear doors open.

Billy watched them go, then shrugged and lifted a stack of paintings up onto one shoulder.

Once inside, an alien directed him down one passage, but he could see that the generals had taken another. He could hear their voices—they were already starting to shout.

That wouldn’t get them anywhere. Billy smiled at the alien, put down the paintings, and went back for more.

When he had transferred his entire cargo into the castle he smiled and said, “You pay me now, right?”

The alien handed him a slip of paper. Billy looked at it; sure enough, a check for thirty-six million dollars, made out to William Rodriquez.

His hand trembled.

Thirty-six million dollars.

And it was already certified, he saw.

No one had ever said the aliens were stupid. If there were things about Earth they didn’t seem to understand, it wasn’t because they were stupid, it was because they hadn’t bothered to learn them.

“Thank you,” Billy said.

He felt as if he should shake the alien’s hand, or even give it a big hug, but he knew the rules. He turned to go, holding the precious check out before him. Then he paused.

“Hey—goodbye, to all of you,” he said. “And good luck. I hope you guys win your war.” He waved, and walked out.

The alien didn’t respond to his farewell; it simply stood and watched him go.

Billy climbed into his van and tucked the check securely into a dashboard compartment; then he slammed the door and turned on the power.

It was time to get the hell out of here, and to never look back.

He wondered whether the brass would figure it out, and what they would do if they did. Would they pick through the wreckage, trying to rebuild the outer defenses? Would they try to build their own castles, their own starships? Would there be enough of the alien technology left to be any help?

Billy doubted it. He imagined South Sea islanders trying to build jeeps and radios from left-over spare parts.

The aliens said they were leaving because they were needed elsewhere.

That meant they were losing the war. Billy was sure of it. Why else would their commanders be desperate enough to withdraw a little backwater garrison like this?

And their enemy, whatever it was, might well hunt down and destroy every outpost it could find, even abandoned ones, just to make sure that victory was secure.

And when that enemy found Earth, Pennsylvania was going to become a very unhealthy place. Maybe not tomorrow, or next week, or next year—maybe never, really. Maybe the enemy would never bother with a place like this.

But Billy knew, as he joined the honking angry crowd of vehicles trying to crowd onto I-576 and get out of Black Log, that he was never coming back here. He was going to take his beads and trinkets, his thirty-six million dollars, and go as far away as he could get—California, maybe, or Europe. And he was going to enjoy life while he could.

Because any day, any time, the enemy could show up, and find the garrison gone, the castle walls undefended, the area unguarded against rapine and pillage.

And whoever was out there that would justify a castle like that was probably pretty damn good at rapine and pillage. They might well take out the entire planet. There might be nowhere to hide—but Billy was going to try.

The traffic was unbelievable. He was only a hundred miles away and headed west when the ship’s launch lit up the night sky behind him, and the castle keep rose toward the stars.