

Missing Content 3

An unknown error has disrupted the integration of this text. This content has been displaced from its original source.

Information: failure to integrate with
“Woodsend”

Detected: unknown

Error code: C-7006443

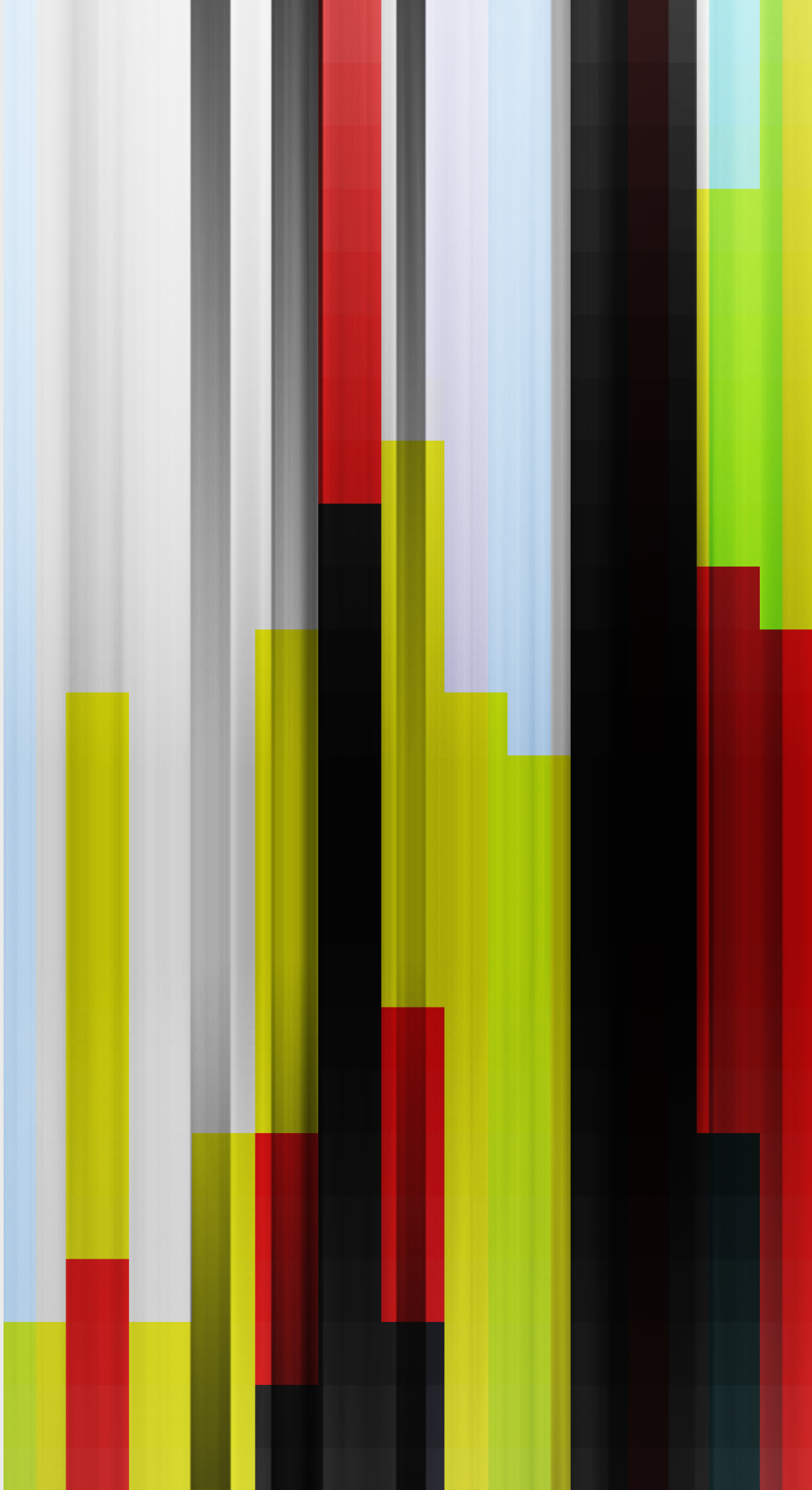
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The following text was recovered after a technical error displaced it from the source document **Woodsend** during conversion.

The missing content **MC3** has been auto-archived and contains approximately **28,000** words (**75** pages) of the original document.

MC3 is number **3** of **4** sections removed from **Woodsend**.

The displacement of this text does not appear to effect the natural reading of **Woodsend**.





Chalice Mountain 65 miles.

Road signs shot by the windows in the endless streak of black evergreen forest. The headlights rushed the darkness down the I-15. Becky squeezed the wheel, pensively driving next to the rattling cardboard of the duct-taped filler window. Simon fought the same urge to doze off from the passenger seat. The two drowsy souls were debilitated from trying to navigate the relentless hellscape of darkness and fog. They sat in silence, exhaustion, betrayed by their terribly miscalculated sojourn through Downtown Woodsend. Becky had her black knit Coast Guard cap back on to press down her choppy bleached hair, an ironic reminder as they sped to the communications tower that the whole nightmare had begun as a simple, routine search and rescue.

The remote North Pacific. An uncharted landmass. No locals in sight along miles of ordinary U.S. highway, sinkholes swallowing the road. Woodsend was a strange and familiar reflection, an all-American haunt.

A billboard went by, another missing child, with the number for the Whitetail County Sheriff's Department. Elliot Olsen.

Simon vigorously rubbed his scruffy face to stay awake, dragging the trucker cap off and running his hair back as he said, "I'm just going to forget about it."

Becky passed him a glance.

"I don't know what we saw back there, but... we can't trust our eyes. It's playing with our heads again."

Watching the headlights carve through the shadows ahead, blankets of mist streaming against the windshield, Simon's eyes began to wander the interior of the appropriated Woodsend Police SUV. There was only one place in the vehicle they had yet to check. As it occurred to him, he reached out to the radio along the head unit and hit the eject button on the tape player.

"What are you doing?" Becky asked.

They watched the slot eject a little red cassette tape, exchanging a curious look. Simon pulled it out for a quick examination. It was a small, retro tape, ketchup red.

“I haven’t seen one of these things forever,” he remarked, huffing out a perplexed laugh.
“No label. No brand.”

“Put it in,” Becky suggested. “Play it.”

“Are you sure?” He turned her a solemn stare to remind her of the last time they fiddled with the sound system. “We might not like what comes out.”

She slowly breathed out a long, helpless sigh. “Just... give it two seconds. It’s not radio.”

“I don’t know... Could be country music.”

“Hey, watch it. I like country.”

He shrugged, filling his lungs with an anticipating breath and popping the cassette tape back into the player. “At least there won’t be interference.”

The tape immediately ejected itself. Simon recoiled in confusion, pushing it back into the slot only to watch it automatically pop back out.

“What going on?” Becky asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, trying it again, and again. “It doesn’t want to go back in. It just keeps ejecting.”

“Of course it does.” She shook her head at the ongoing madness, muttering, “I hate this place. I hate it so much.”

The cassette player stuck out its bright red tongue at them.

“I don’t get it,” Simon said. “How’d they get it to stay in the first place?”

“Questions don’t have answers here,” Becky scoffed. “Welcome to Woodsend.”

“Hold on...” His lightbulb went on with an idea. He reached back behind her seat, feeling his hand down into the rear pocket. “I think I saw something earlier... when I was in the backseat.”

She looked over to see him pulling back up an old shoebox tape recorder in a gray plastic casing. It was slightly anachronistic, just like the cassette tape.

“Wow,” she remarked. “Good find.”

“I guess the cops here use these things,” he said as he inspected it. “They really need to update their equipment.”

He looked at the six buttons rowed along the base of the tape recorder, hitting eject to open the cassette door. It was empty. Becky kept peeking over to watch him as he took the red cassette tape out of the vehicle’s player and tried it in the retro shoebox recorder. Simon clicked it shut. He hesitated a moment before rewinding the tape to the beginning and pushing down the play button.

“Some of those simple folks living their lives in the peaceful hills of their ancestors just lost touch,” a man’s voice played on the recording in a rustic Midland accent. “They lost touch, is all. They forgot just what kind of god their fathers made a deal with, you know? A god of the grove. Guardian of the hearth. It’s like ain’t nobody seen what happens when they stop feeding the dragon, but *I’ve* seen it.”

Simon caught Becky’s uneasy glance.

The tape went on, “People know me as ‘Farmer Gray.’ It’s what the kids always called me... Do you know what it’s like to watch a bunch of them cute little taters playing in your yard, smile over at them from the porch, knowing one of them ain’t going to be around that spring, and another one the year after? Some of them get to grow pretty big, the ones picked last, but... they all end up on that slab eventually, don’t they? But, what happens... what happens when the supply runs dry?”

Simon listened like a statue, hoping to hear some clues as to where they were and what had been going on in that forsaken world.

Becky watched the road in a disturbed trance, mumbling, “*Farmer Gray?*”

The voice continued from the recorder’s speaker, filling the SUV with the words, “They have all kinds of names for him. They call him this and that, but I know what he is. Red Oak better batten down the hatches, because the Trickster’s coming to collect. 1891, a hundred and twenty-two years, and in just one night, the whole village will be a dug-up churchyard. You understand what I’m saying? He comes every year to my beloved home of Red Oak at the

quarter days, right on the solstices and equinoxes, the Lunar Visitor. Four times a year he makes his appearance, right on schedule. He comes at night, comes right for the altar. Sometimes, I see him in disguise; I see him dressed like one of the village folk, pretending he's one of us, just roaming the valley, sometimes all week; and then, he takes what's his and leaves us alone. See, we ain't bargaining for crops and harvest; we're saving our lives by paying off the Devil with Halloween candy, except that *candy* ain't always candy. At the vernal equinox, the Great Sabbat, the Trickster requires something more substantial. If we refuse, and he comes finding an empty altar, he gives us a second chance at summer solstice, with a few nasty warnings; and if he comes again at summer to find us trying to appease him with young goats and baskets of fruit, the warnings get more severe, and he gives poor Red Oak one last chance. The next quarter day comes, the autumnal equinox, and let me tell you... if he don't find no kid on that third try, it'll be the end of Red Oak."

"What in the hell is this?" Becky said.

"This..." Simon replied, pausing the cassette, "might have something to do with what's going on in this place." He began pulling out the Whitetail County map on their tourist pamphlet and unfolding it flat on his lap next to the recorder, thinking aloud, "*Red Oak*... This 'Farmer Gray' said his village was 'a hundred and twenty-two' years old, right? '1891,' he said."

"So? What is that?"

"That's... that's 2013. He recorded it this year."

He began running his finger along the key beside the map until the familiar words popped off the page and snagged his attention, number twenty-six: "Red Oak."

"There it is," he mumbled in surprise, telling Becky, "Number twenty-six. It's on the map. It's a place just out of Woodsend."

"What is?" she asked.

"The village, Red Oak. It says it's tucked in 'Maicoh Valley' close to the base of the mountains." He landed his finger on the map, right where number twenty-six was tagged further

north, saying, “It’s on the way to Chalice Mountain. Looks like it’s only about forty, forty-five miles up.”

Becky turned an anxious stare back and forth between him and the road. “You think there’s still people there?”

Simon shook his head at the map. “Not if it’s anything like the rest of this place, but you never know. It would sure be nice to see *someone* here, wouldn’t it? A local, someone that can tell us what the hell’s going on, just anybody.” He turned to her hesitant profile and asked, “What do you think?”

She lifted with a long inhale, traumatized by the last six hours of her life, answering as she breathed out, “I think... I want answers. I want to know why we’re stuck here, why this is happening to us. If Farmer Gray—or *anyone*—is in this ‘Red Oak,’ I think we need to find them. We *need* them. I think we should at least stop in and see if anyone’s there.”

“The *Trickster*...” Simon locked his puzzled glare on the road ahead. “A good question for Farmer Gray would be if he’s familiar with the Witz Fairy. That might explain everything. I wonder how different his ‘Trickster’ is from the one *we’re* dealing with.”

To fill the silence, he pushed the play button on the tape recorder, and the farmer’s voice resumed, “Don’t get me wrong, now, it’s always a tragedy for Red Oak to lose another one of its precious little ones, but let me tell you something... there are thirty-two peaceful homesteads in Red Oak, and it would be a real nightmare if the whole darn village ended up in ruin all in one night. I’ve seen what the Trickster does to people.”

After another half hour, Becky saw the highway turn-off. A plain metal sign stood at the opening in the forest wall: “RED OAK.” She let up on the gas and turned the wheel, taking the police SUV off to the left down a gravelly road through the woods. Simon was unsettled about the whole idea. An innocent detour was the whole reason they were in that enigma.

He had been braving a global circumnavigation in his one-man monohull, holding a three-hour lead in the 2013 Ocean Cup after surviving the violent winds of a tropical storm, and then a brief stop left him suspended in madness.

But he knew he had to do it again.

They couldn't just pass the village by.

The headlights shone down the tire tracks along the narrow dirt road ahead. They bumped along through the dark forest veined with branches, like channeling through a portal to another world.

"You don't think it's for real," Becky said, "do you?"

"What," Simon replied, "the tape?"

"Children... sacrificed to a...?"

"I can't imagine..." His scoffing chuckle was short-lived. He was fast losing the spirit to continue mocking the extent of Woodsend's insanity. "What kind of community would...? It's got to be a prank. Someone's having some fun."

"Who's having fun around *here*?"

The road soon brought them out from the trees into a dark, misty abyss, winding along between acres of rural land, broken wood fences, twisted barbwire. A sporadic handful of lampposts glowed across the distant landscape. Simon and Becky could barely see a thing, driving slowly through the shadows of a hilled village, faint silhouettes of a small rustic community lying in a fog illuminated by the full moon. The dirt road roller-coasted up, over, and around softly undulating pastures. Their headlights kept passing over distant, tumbledown barns and water tanks. Farmsteads sat dark and quiet beside squalid stables. Dirt roads branched off across the grassy landscape, snaking along the hills to all the cheap, boxy houses with bad paint jobs and run-down sheds. Rusted tractor parts lay as corpses in the unkempt agricultural fields. Herds of eyes reflected back from the darkness, a sparsity of livestock populating the large cattle-fenced squares of farmland between patches of trees. Black evergreens stacked up along the barely visible edges of the valley.

“Check it out,” Simon said, looking out his window at the house coming up on their right.

Its windows were glowing in the night, the only home they could see with the lights on.

Becky gradually brought the big law-enforcement SUV to a stop along the road and turned off the ignition, asking as she opened the door to drop out, “Should I bring the shotgun?”

“*I’d* bring it,” Simon said, shutting his door, waiting for her in front of the vehicle. “Just don’t scare anyone with it.”

She locked the SUV up and came over to join him with the long break-action shotgun in one hand, a box full of shells rattling in her tactical vest pocket, ready for anything in her army-green flight suit. “You really think we’ll find someone?”

“Lights are on. I don’t know.”

“There wasn’t a soul downtown—or anywhere else.”

“Maybe it’s different here.”

They walked together past a plot of young sunflowers, heading toward the ugly gabled cottage with shingle siding leading out a few strings of bulb patio lights to the nearest trees. A pair of yellow Adirondack chairs sat on the lawn in front of the porch. Thickets and dying gardens strangled the edges of the cottage. Close to the house was a grimy, neglected greenhouse. Simon nervously creaked up the porch steps, Becky shortly behind with the loaded gun. Interior drapes covered the illuminated windows. He forced down an anxious swallow, tapping the doorbell. The chime resounded beyond the door.

He took a quick glance back at Becky’s shotgun to reassure himself, whispering, “Hey, if something bad happens to me...”

The door suddenly began to unlock. He turned to see the middle-aged resident open it up from under the bright foyer lamp, a burly fifty-plus man in worn denim under a quilted vest, balding on top with silver cactus stubble. He was wearing rubber boots like he had just come in from a day’s work—at half past one in the morning. Simon and Becky stood dumb at the sight of him.

“Awfully late,” the man affably greeted with a pensive undertone. “Can I help you folks with something?”

“Uh... yeah.” Simon shook himself back to the present and explained, “Sorry, we’re just, uh... You’re the first person we’ve seen since we got here.”

“Yeah? I wouldn’t doubt it. Everyone here’s cozy and curled up for the night.”

Becky came up beside Simon to ask the man, “This is Red Oak, isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” he replied. “What can I do you for?”

“I’m Petty Officer Becky Segovia. I’m an aviation survival tech with the United States Coast Guard, Sector Honolulu, and this is Simon Hewitt. He was lost at sea during a solo yacht race, ended up losing his boat, ended up here. My aircrew and I went looking for him. We were grounded here due to an overheated chopper, and...”

The man gave the shotgun hanging at her side an untrusting stare.

“... and we need your help, sir. We’re in serious danger.”

“What *kind* of danger?” he asked.

Neither Simon nor Becky could form a proper answer. They cluelessly looked at each other.

“Well,” she finally answered, “we believe we’re under attack from a hostile presence.”

Dirty boot tracks patterned the hardwood floors through a small, ordinary living room looking into the hall where a balustraded stairway ascended to the second floor. Antiques and trophies decorated crude DIY furniture throughout the humble countryside house. Most of the walls were painted stark white between hewn log support beams.

The wooden spoon stirred around a steaming pot of homemade minestrone soup with rigatoni noodles. Rhonda stood at the stove in her plaid shirt and jeans, a small-framed woman, her head covered in a blowdried nest of feathery blonde hair with long bangs, heating up the leftover soup for their guests. There were no kids in the house, only a scattered rainbow of magnetic letters on the fridge.

Rhonda finally came out with a couple bowls of hot soup and brought them to the small dining table. She set them on the kitschy Swedish tablecloth in front of Simon and Becky as they thanked her for her hospitality. The dining room cluttered with fishing equipment was overlooked by the shuttered window of a closed storage loft high up on the wall.

“... there are thirty-two peaceful homesteads in Red Oak,” the tape recorder played from the center of the table, “and it would be a real nightmare if the whole darn village ended up in ruin all in one night. I’ve seen what the Trickster does to people.”

Simon stopped the tape.

As Rhonda took the last available seat at the square table, her husband, James Bender, let out a loud sigh, asking their late-night guests, “Is that it?”

“There’s nothing else on it,” Simon replied. “It’s just a couple minutes of recording.”

“And... this is why you made your way over here?”

From the opposite seat, Becky explained, “We don’t even know where we are, Mr. Bender—and I’m a navigational expert. We’re just trying to find a way off the island.”

“*Island!?*” James barked out a laugh. “Criminy, you two *are* a little off your bearings tonight, aren’t you?”

The wooden-blade ceiling fan spun over their perplexed little heads.

“This ain’t no *island*. I don’t know where you think you are right now, but this here’s the mainland.”

Becky was unable to move her blank, open stare.

Simon leaned in, tactfully telling him, “But sir... that’s impossible. I was stranded about two thousand miles northwest of Hawaii.”

Rhonda humorously chipped in, “I don’t know what you two been drinking, but when you can’t recognize home soil, it’s time to call a cab.”

James marveled over at Becky, “*U.S. Coast Guard*, you say, and you’re acting like you’ve never seen Amaruca before.”

Becky and Simon discreetly exchanged a telepathic look, wordlessly telling each other to hold their tongues. The Benders were gracious and down-to-earth, but the couple was looking back at them like the insanity was occupying the other two chairs at the table. They were oblivious to the horrors and mysteries all around them. The only thing Simon and Becky could do was shut up about their crisis and keep digging for answers. They knew now for certain that the weirdness of Woodsend had followed them to Red Oak.

Playing stupid, stiff with alienation, Becky decided to get back to a safer topic before one of their heads split open, saying as she blew on a hot spoonful of soup, “It’s been a long night for us. Maybe we *are* a little tired. We were actually hoping to find Farmer Gray.”

“*Farmer Gray?*” James replied.

Simon clarified, “The man on the tape. He said he lived here. He said Red Oak was his home.”

James shook his head with a shrugging expression, glancing at his equally clueless wife, and told them, “I’ve lived here since I was seventeen years old. I have *never* heard of a ‘Farmer Gray.’”

“The tape was from this year.”

“Look, Simon, there’s only so many people living in this valley.”

“Exactly thirty-two homes.”

“Well... yeah, that’s right, thirty-two. We all know each other here.”

“But, you see? That’s exactly what Farmer Gray said on the tape. He knows this place.”

“Not exactly,” Rhonda sweetly scoffed. “Oh, come on, hon. You really think our village is feeding its children to some heathen ‘Trickster’ god? It’s crazy!”

James added, “I think there’s a *trickster* having a little fun with *you*.”

Simon sighed, nodding his head as he looked back down to the minestrone and started spooning it up to his lips, admitting in a mumble, “Yeah, that’s what we thought too.”

“Someone made a spooky little recording, went around town leaving tapes for people to find... Where’d you find it, anyhow?”

“The cassette tape?” Becky asked, mindful not to stir up any more controversy than they already had. “Uh... just found it... lying around.”

“Well, they sure got you two good, didn’t they?”

Simon had a thousand questions, and he couldn’t ask any of them. He turned his eyes back down to the soup and kept slurping it from the edge of his spoon with Becky.

They had finally found locals, and it was like a psychological barrier was keeping them on two sides of a glass.

“How’s the minestrone?” Rhonda asked, pulling out a cigarette with her toothy smile and lighting up.

“It’s excellent,” Simon responded. “Thank-you. Homemade?”

“Mm-hmm.” She puffed out a cloud of smoke, pulling the ashtray a little closer. “My mother’s famous dish.”

Becky kept nodding with Simon, playing along in casual pretense through the absurdity and saying, “It’s really good.”

A bang on the wall suddenly grabbed their attention. The whole table fell silent and turned their eyes up to the walled-off loft with closed shutters over a small central window.

Simon and Becky were too afraid to ask, waiting for some kind of explanation.

They thought they had been alone in the house.

James finally attempted to put them at ease, chuckling, “Those goshdang boxes up there keep falling over.”

Simon tried to pay it no attention while the dark slits of the shuttered loft window stared down on them.

There was someone up there.

Becky set her spoon down, thinking to ask, “Is there a phone I could use?”

Rhonda turned in her seat to point to the nearby console table in the adjacent living room where there was an old corded handset resting on a base unit. “Just over there, honey. It’s a landline.”

“Thank-you,” Becky replied as she got up from her seat.

“But nobody’s going to hear you.”

Becky paused a step away from the table, waiting for her to explain.

Rhonda laughed to herself. “The telephone lines were damaged sometime yesterday afternoon. The entire valley’s out of contact until the line workers arrive, I’m afraid.”

“Oh...” Becky gradually pulled her chair in and sat back down. “Does anyone here have a *wireless* phone?”

This time, she received a scoff from her left as Simon replied, “You really think we’re going to get clear reception?”

“Maybe the interference has cleared up. I don’t know.”

“It’s atmospheric. If your radio’s not working, you’re not going to find *anything* that works. That transmitting tower up on Chalice Mountain is our best bet.” He turned to James and asked him, “Is there anyone else in Red Oak we can talk to?”

“At *this* hour?” James replied. “This village is trying to get a good night’s rest. You won’t find anything of use here anyway. I think it’d probably be best if you just... come back in the morning.”

Simon didn’t know what else to say. He saw Becky with the same helplessly pursed smile, both of them continuing at their minestrone.

“Finish the rest of your meals, wash up, if you like; then, how about you get back in your vehicle and take off for the night? It’s late. Get back on the highway and find yourself a motel. In fact, there’s a Motel Cordobes just four miles down.”

Simon and Becky were gone in five minutes.

They left the cottage, stepping out onto the porch and heading out over the front yard while James locked the door behind them with a final wave. Their disturbed cringes finally broke out when they heard the door shut behind them. Becky glanced back over her shoulder to see Rhonda at the window holding the curtains open a crack.

“*Goshdang*,” Simon mocked, paralyzed with the creeps as he grumbled, “Those people don’t think anything strange is going on here? They think we’re on the mainland. Did you hear that? They’re just as much a part of this bloody freak show as the rest of it. Nice people, but...”

He looked over to see Becky holding up the mysterious red cassette tape. She waited for it to evoke a reaction from him.

“How’d you get that?” He held up the tape recorder to see that Farmer Gray’s red cassette was still in the compartment, asking in bewilderment, “Is that another tape? Where’d you find it?”

She smoothly answered, “I stole it—sorry, *found* it.”

“Where?”

“Inside. I saw it sitting on the bookshelf in the living room.”

Simon plucked the second red cassette tape from her hand, checking both sides to see that it was identical to the first one. “*Mainland* my ass.”

They rushed back to their SUV along the dirt road as Simon changed out the first cassette for the new one. He set the recorder on the hood of the vehicle and played the tape. They stood pensively listening between the moonlit agricultural pastures hazed with fog.

The familiar male voice soon came out of the speaker, Farmer Gray, prompting their eye contact as he went on in a near perfect continuation of the previous tape, “You know, the folks of Red Oak are truly a decent bunch—truly. I don’t mean them no disrespect, but they ain’t what I would call a company of scholars, you know? The porch light’s on, but ain’t nobody home.” He released a long, disappointed sigh, going on, “Yeah... they did a real bad thing. On the other three quarter days of the year, they can put whatever they like on that altar, whatever seasonal harvest gatherings they feel content to give, but come spring... The vernal offering is *not* optional.”

Simon took a second to tell Becky, “They knew—the Benders. They knew about all this.”

The tape went on, “Looks like this year, the sweet old village of Red Oak is holding out on the Trickster. They withheld the vernal offering. Equinox night, the Lunar Visitor showed up

on schedule... found a goat tied up on the altar. Not the *first* time it's happened. They've tried it before. It's like baseball; he always gives them three chances. Strike one. Usually, by strike two they learn their lesson. Bad things just begin to happen across the valley, one after another. Red Oak's never gotten to strike three. Believe you me, the proof they've never gotten to strike three before is the fact they're still around today—and that's the truth... Now, things are starting to get a little tense around here. Summer solstice is past, no offering—strike two. If there ain't a child on that slab come fall equinox... this village ain't going to see the sun rise. Strike three. You see, the harassment is just a warning of impending doom; it ain't the real punishment. Crops die. Sheep end up tangled in the barbwire fence. Things catch fire. The Trickster's warning us. He wants to uphold the pact our fathers made with him. He wants *us* to uphold the pact, the Oath."

Simon checked over his shoulder with a chill, seeing the dark shadow of an old shed in the next pasture.

"I fear the day is a-comin'... when that fateful autumn equinox befalls—strike three. We all know what the Trickster did to poor Jeffrey and his horses. May we never put him to the test. But, if it does come to that... well, there's only one way to ward off the Trickster, and I may have figured it out."

The recording came to an end.

Silence rolled on until Simon stopped the tape and looked Becky in the eye to say, "Maybe it's *not* a prank. Why would the Benders lie about the tape? It's the same thing, Farmer Gray, the Trickster, another crazy rant just like the first tape."

Becky anxiously gulped before replying, "I don't know if it's such a *crazy rant* either."

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." She checked her digital watch, lighting it up with the glow function, and explaining, "Today is the twenty-second."

"... Yeah?"

She pierced him with her gaze. "September twenty-second. It's after midnight."

His expression gradually melted in alarm. "Equinox."

“The tape was made this year, right?”

“Right.”

“And this ‘Farmer Gray’ said that Red Oak didn’t present a child sacrifice on the vernal equinox, or the summer solstice.”

“Shit.” He nervously laughed as it dawned on him, still shaking his head in skepticism like it was all nonsense. “Strike three. Tonight’s the third and final chance.”

“He’s saying the Trickster’s coming *tonight*... which means there’s going to be a human sacrifice, or whoever these people are sacrificing to is about to massacre the place.”

He burst out with another laugh, pacing around, “No. This is ludicrous!”

She tossed up her hands. “I don’t know, Simon, I’ve seen a few *ludicrous* things already.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Really? After all you’ve seen already?” She stepped up to him with a grave demeanor, snagging his sober attention. “I was in the fish tank with Angus. Okay? I was *swimming* with that thing. You and I have both seen some things tonight. Don’t forget what happened back at camp.”

The tremble of fear returned to his breaths as his attempted laughs quickly perished. All he could reply with was a nod in sad, miserable agreement.

“Simon, I think you were onto something. This ‘Trickster’... it sounds a lot like the Witz Fairy. That could be the key to this whole thing.”

“You sure you want to stick around and find out?” Simon darkly teased. “Whatever this thing is, it’s coming for blood.”

“Then maybe we need to start warning people.”

“I don’t think the people *want* to be warned, Becky. The Benders already know about it. The whole village knows. The smart ones probably already fled the valley.”

“Unless they don’t think the Trickster can be outrun. Why else are James and Rhonda walking around in there with their boots on like it’s the middle of day?”

Simon looked back at the Benders’ cottage, all the lights on behind curtained windows, like the couple was just waiting for something.

“That’s why they wanted us out so quickly.” Becky sat the shotgun along her shoulder. “They wanted us out of this place before... They know it’s coming—tonight.”

“Then we should go,” Simon asserted, taking the tape recorder and making his way around to the passenger door. “We should get the hell out of here. I don’t want any part of this. These people can’t help us. Their phones are down, they’re oblivious to reality...”

Becky followed him over as he opened the door a crack, stopping him with the words, “Hold on. Will you just stop? Something *strange* happened to us. I know how you feel, believe me. I feel the same way, but do you really think this island, this place, is going to let us just leave?”

He slammed the door shut again in frustration, retorting, “I think we have more of a chance at the broadcasting facility, yeah.”

“Look,” she calmly insisted with a persuading closeness, “I need to know what exactly happened to my crew. I can’t just leave without an explanation. Something brought us here, for a reason, and that same *something* is terrorizing us, and I don’t think it’s going to let us just walk away; and these ‘folks’ living here know what it’s all about.”

His head dropped with a defeated sigh.

“Let’s just try to find Farmer Gray. He said he found a way to stop the Trickster... Simon, that could put an end to *all* of this. What if that’s who we heard on the radio? What if this whole place is a... a ‘trick.’ I mean, we’re dealing with witchcraft, curses... This is exactly what Pozo Sagrado was involved in. We’re under attack, Simon. Do you want to see who’s behind this? Maybe going home won’t stop it. This could be our only chance—Farmer Gray.”

“Fine,” he reluctantly agreed. “We’ll find Farmer Gray.”

“We’ll go to another house. We know these people are lying, so if they’re like the Benders and they don’t want to talk truth, we’ll *force* them to tell us something.”

After their deliberation, Simon and Becky went by foot with their flashlights down the road toward the next visible house, crossing through the beams of a rickety wooden cattle fence

and walking up the empty hillside pasture. The home sat atop the grassy slope, an old and simply crafted farmhouse, a steeply-gabled white box with a porch, chops of firewood stacked against the side. All its windows were dark, all the curtains shut, no light. Beyond a flower garden, a cylindrical outdoor grill stood alone in the backyard leading up to a patio. They passed through a sparse collection of fruitless peach trees, walking around the side of the farmhouse adorned with a plague of bushy vines scaling the trellis. Coming around the corner, Simon and Becky were paralyzed by light as the motion sensors suddenly lit up the side yard. Simon noticed the garden gnome, the little ceramic ornament staring back at him from the side of the porch shaded by a sloping tin roof.

A sudden gunshot roared through the silence.

Simon dropped to the ground with Becky, seeing pieces of the nearby peach tree spray out toward them. Becky kept one knee planted in the ground while she aimed the break-action shotgun back into the surrounding darkness.

“Whoa!” Simon cried out behind her, shouting at the distance with his hands up, “Stop! Don’t shoot!”

Becky slowly lifted up with her tightly braced shotgun staring directly at the figure emerging from the shadows. A man came over with a slightly lowered hunting rifle, stepping into the motion-sensor light with them, a lean late-twenties farmhand in plaid with patchy facial hair and a brown leather hat.

“Put it down!” Becky cried over to him, slowly turning the nose of her gun to the sky and flashing him a peaceful palm. “We’re not here for a gunfight!”

He kept his aim at the ground just ahead, saying with a low, vicious rasp as he carefully stepped closer, “Just human, huh. And how do I know that?”

Becky finally tossed her shotgun off to the side, glancing back to see Simon with his hands up and copying him in surrender.

“Think I haven’t learned my lesson?”

Becky started to figure it out, saying, “You think we’re someone else. You’re expecting him tonight, aren’t you?”

He lifted his aim on her, fiercely bracing to fire. “All I know is, there’s no strangers in this village.”

The opening front door behind Simon and Becky turned their attention. They saw a tall, sturdy fifty-or-so man stepping out onto the porch around the corner in jeans and a white t-shirt.

The resident of the house stopped at the unrailed side of the porch, standing right at the lip, his boot next to the garden gnome, and he scolded his armed neighbor, “Dammit, Claron, if one of them were Venador, we’d already be face down in the mud. Put that thing away.”

Claron hesitantly lowered his weapon, but only a few inches, rebellious and untrusting.

“I’m Bill,” the resident introduced himself to Simon and Becky. “Never seen your faces before.”

“Bill, thank-you,” Simon replied as he caught his breath, the anxiety winding down. “We just drove in. We’re looking for a man. We believe he lives in this village.”

Becky cut in with desperation, “Maybe *you* can help us.”

“And how’s that?” Bill sternly replied. “Where are you from, anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she sighed, knowing an explanation would’ve been pointless with those people. “What matters is that we work together.”

Bill looked past their heads to abruptly continue scolding Claron, “And what about *you*? What the hell are *you* doing on my property?”

“What am *I* doing?” Claron seethed back, swinging the rifle at his side as he marched closer to flail spittle with the accusation, “You’re the reason we’re all waiting to die here, you and Tammy!”

“Are you out of your mind!?”

Claron pointed the rifle at him in one hand like a blaming finger. “I know it’s you, Bill! You can’t keep fooling us!”

“Put that thing down, you idiot!”

“I know you’re hiding Julia somewhere!

Bill shook his head and looked at the ground, scoffing to himself, “*This* again. Demented little shit.”

“I know she’s alive, Bill! You’re trying to hide her so you don’t have to put on the altar! She’s our last hope, and you’d rather watch us all get slaughtered!”

“My daughter’s *dead*! Shame on you!”

“No, no, don’t pull that horseshit with me, Bill. Just bring her out. Bring her out and stop this thing before it’s too late, before we *all* end up dead—including Julia!”

Bill shot back an accusing finger with an emotional flush, “She’s *gone*, Claron! I buried her with all the rest of them! I buried her *myself*! I put her in the *ground*!”

“Clocks don’t spare no minutes, you old piss-drunk son of a bitch! We don’t have *time* for this!”

Becky cut in, looking between the two of them, “You know about the Trickster. That’s who you’re waiting for. It’s the autumnal equinox, and... there hasn’t been an infant offering in three quarter days. Tonight’s the night... You guys are for real.”

Bill retorted, “And how in the hell would you know that?”

“We heard it on a cassette tape, a man named ‘Farmer Gray’—that’s the man we’re looking for.”

Simon interrupted in astonishment to remark, “Unbelievable... You people really do sacrifice your children—your own children.”

“Because if we *don’t*,” Claron snapped at him, “this here valley of ours becomes a cauldron of death.”

Bill admitted in heavy sorrow, “Yes... Venador is coming tonight.”

“*Venador*?” Simon echoed, turning to Becky to confirm with her nod, “The Trickster.”

“It doesn’t matter what you call him. There are so many names... We know him as ‘Father Venador,’ the Goat Lord. He can disguise himself as anything, a snake, an owl, a spider,

man or beast... He only visits four times a year, rarely shows his true form. Only a few people here have ever seen him uncloaked.”

“But we’re *going* to,” Claron rubbed it in, “aren’t we, Bill?”

Bill swallowed the fear with his nod, his eyes glistening. “Yes, we are.”

Simon thought aloud as he tried to follow along, “The vernal offering wasn’t presented, so... tonight is...”

“The Scarlet Sabbat,” he answered. “It’s the great night of the autumnal equinox, but as you can see, there ain’t much festivity about it this year. The whole village knows what’s coming.”

“Some people are *cowards*,” Claron sharply chimed in again, “hiding in their little bunkers—like that’s going to save them—while *some* of us have the balls to pick up a weapon and stand up to the bastard.” He came swinging his arms up to Becky and Simon, sardonically telling them, “The last six months, he’s been killing our cows. He’s been mutilating and deforming the livestock. Harvest was a dud! We’ve had pests destroying crops, infesting our houses... ants crawling on my face in the middle of the night!”

Simon pulled out the tape recorder, ejecting the red cassette to show them as he said, “The guy on this tape said he was a citizen of Red Oak. Farmer Gray. He said he figured out a way to stop the Trickster—Venador.”

Bill responded from the side of the porch with crossed arms, “And you believe this ‘Farmer Gray’?”

Simon’s next words were lost. He was quieted in confusion.

“You trust him?”

Becky bent over to pick her shotgun back up from the ground, asking back, “Why *wouldn’t* we?”

Bill facetiously shrugged, already at peace with death. “How do you know it’s not just a trick?”

“It’s not. Everything he says on that tape is exactly what you just told us. We thought it was a prank too, but—”

“No, not a *prank*. I mean, are you really so sure Farmer Gray is Farmer Gray?”

Simon shook his head, still confused. “Who else would it be?”

Bill shook with a laugh at their naivety, at the dumb blank expressions on their faces, and went on to inform them, “That’s not the first cassette tape like that that I’ve seen. Bright red cassettes, kind of old-school, just like that one, been turning up all over the place.”

Bill’s wife, Tammy, suddenly stepped out onto the porch behind him, a willowy woman with long, straight graying hair draped along her cheeks.

She walked up to his shoulder along the side of the porch to add, “As a matter of fact, I saw a red cassette tape up in the graveyard.”

Simon asked her, “Do you know where we can find a man named ‘Farmer Gray’?”

“Never heard of him.”

“Well... where’s the graveyard? Because this guy said there was only one way to stop Venador, and he knew what it was. Whatever’s going on here, we’re stuck in this too, this nightmare, and we think Farmer Gray has the key.”

“It’s too late,” Bill said, releasing a fatalistic sigh and wrapping his arm around his wife to pull her close before cautioning Simon and Becky, “Forget about this man. Don’t go looking for him. It’s a fool’s errand. Venador will be coming any moment. Everyone should stay inside.” He stretched a sad, doubtful smile as he told them, “Tammy and I are going to be taking shelter in the basement.”

Claron scoffed loud with a bitter chuckle. “The *basement*!? That’s your plan!? Man, that devil is going to find you two so fast, and Julia, and rip you all to pieces.”

Bill raged back, “You have a *better* plan, boy!?”

“I don’t know! How about you get that big old rifle off your wall and join me in the fight!?”

“Well, good luck with that one, Claron. Really. Fortune be yours, because you have no idea what you’re up against. You don’t stand a chance out here.”

The two both held their tongues, huffing in anger to themselves.

Simon passed Becky a nod before telling Bill and Tammy, “We better not waste any more time. We’re going to head off to the graveyard, try to find that tape.”

Bill nodded with a heartbroken gaze like it was the last time he’d ever see them intact, pointing a little off to the side toward the distant hill. “Just down that way, top of the hill, right at the edge of the valley. That’s the Holy Chilam Graveyard.”

Simon and Becky could just barely make out the ridge about a half a mile away catching moonlight through the layers of mist.

As they started walking over, Simon looked back to say, “Thanks. If we figure this thing out, we’ll be sure to let you know.”

Claron sneered at them as they passed by, catching them with one last word of warning, “Be careful.”

They stopped to lend him their ears a moment.

“That’s where the altar is, the graveyard. It’s the first place Venador will visit, where he’ll find nothing. If you want to go there, my advice, don’t spend too long.”

“We don’t plan on it,” Simon replied, turning with Becky and heading off down the sloping field.

“There’s something else!” Claron called out, waiting until he had their attention again before continuing, “There’s just one more thing you need to watch out for. There’s a woman

*HOLY CHILAM
GRAVEYARD*

*In these grounds lie the remains
of the good people of Red Oak.
Please respect this place of silence.*

there, a madwoman. Folks here call her the 'Grave Hag.' Nobody knows her name, or who she is, where she came from. She just wanders between the headstones all night long."

Simon and Becky threw each other an unsettled glance.

"Don't worry about her. Just don't look her in the eye. *No* eye contact, and no loud noises, you understand? Ignore her, and she won't bother you any."

"Great, thanks," Simon replied in sarcasm. He kept going with Becky, walking over to the fence to get back onto the dirt road, unnerved as he asked her, "Is it really worth it?"

"What choice do we have?" she replied. "We need what Farmer Gray knows. Besides, we're here. Let's just find that cassette."

Claron saw them off with a distant glare as they faded into shadows in the fog, gripping his rifle tight in two hands.

Becky wandered with Simon down the winding dirt road behind the shaft of his flashlight, approaching a fork in the path marked with a tall stone sculpture. The old, weathered statue came into clarity through the fog, a ten-foot-high square column ornately carved with sacred Mesoamerican embellishment, an ancient Mayan stela. They stopped before the haunting figure embossed along its surface.

Mystified, Simon remarked, "*That* looks old."

He scanned the unnaturally placed artifact with his flashlight. The stone figure arrayed in ceremonial garb was crumbled away, hardly visible in its mossy, weathered condition; a skirted priest-like character carved along the middle with arms crookedly folded like a mantis, his long face hanging a split tongue with slit eyes. Like an enchanted totem pole, the anachronistic stela emitted a sharp feeling that felt like internal bleeding.

"Look over here!" Becky called from the side of the road, taking out her own flashlight and examining the dark pasture across the cattle fence.

"What is it?" Simon said on his way over.

The beam of his light joined hers, passing over the nearby grazing field where large bodies lay across the grass. There was a hellish odor. All the cows were dead, corpses rotting across the pasture as far as they could see, between which sat crumbled stone remains from what appeared to be Postclassic Mayan architecture; the tooth-lined mouth of a blocky dragon, square segments of a colossal serpent scattered about like they had lain there in the grass for eons.

“What do you make of it?” Becky asked.

“The livestock?” Simon asked back. “Or the ruins?”

“This is what they were talking about—Venador. He’s been harassing them, as a warning. Trick or treat.”

“Come on,” Simon said as he began to continue on down the road, “let’s get this over with.”

She followed him along the fence, taking a right turn in the forked road toward the tallest visible hill at the edge of the valley.

The narrowing road took them up through the remote, uncivilized parts of Red Oak along a ridge, pine trees sporadically poking up along the slope on either side. They could see the faintly moonlit headstones emerging ahead. The hilltop plateau spread out with an uneven graveyard, encompassed by thickets and trees. Variegated old tombstones, crosses, and obelisks stood before them on the other side of a short, rusted wrought-iron fence standing in broken sections. A small white sign was lifted on a post along the road in:

Simon and Becky nervously approached with their flashlights beaming across the corroded headstones. Dead leaves and branches gathered at the edges of fenced burial grounds. Their boots crunched along gravel between patches of dry grass overrunning the ill-maintained graveyard. A small skeletal tree strangled a stone angel. A shovel was left stabbed in the earth. Going down the open central aisle between the crooked headstones, Simon noticed the dark, hunched figure to his left down the row of graves. His hand reached out to squeeze Becky’s arm,

alerting her to the shadowy form roaming around the headstones in a cloak of a dozen ugly fabrics sewn together.

He quickly turned his light away from the figure and stepped in front of Becky's line of sight to shield her, saying, "Don't look at her."

Becky stared at him agape, whispering, "Is that the Grave Hag?"

He held a finger to his lips, whispering even quieter, "I think so."

He slowly and cautiously continued down the grassy graveyard aisle with her. They kept their lights aimed forward to the ground, discreetly searching the nearby graves for a red cassette tape. The sound of the Grave Hag rapidly shuffling across the graveyard behind them petrified them into monuments. She was unnaturally quick. Scared to the bone, Simon peeked back over his shoulder at the fog-shrouded darkness. He could see the hag like a black silhouette moving between each grave. She wandered through, stopping at a headstone to begin lamenting with a long, low creaking sob.

Becky kept stiffly moving forward with Simon, whispering close, "Don't look."

"It's time!" the Grave Hag howled and wailed behind them. "He's coming! Oh...!"

Simon and Becky heard her begin moving again, fast. She was crawling on all fours. Simon grabbed Becky to drag her off to the side of the aisle and duck down next to a headstone. They turned their eyes to the ground, listening to the haunting whimpers of the Grave Hag pass across the aisle ahead and stop near a different headstone just one row up to the left.

"Why!?" the hag cried with a grating old voice, weeping as she clung to the headstone and manically rambled, "Don't touch the pumpkin. Don't touch the pumpkin. Don't touch it."

Simon peeked around the headstone behind him to see the overlapping slabs of the graveyard ahead. No sign of the hag. He could hear her moving on down the rows to another grave. When they heard her wretched cries from the far end, he got back up with Becky and quickly moved on down the aisle.

"Do you see anything?" Becky whispered, scanning the rows of headstones on each side with him. "Shouldn't be too hard to find. It's bright red."

The end of the graveyard became visible in the haze, a small grassy clearing beyond the headstones with a central monument stretching like a three-foot-high stone table. The back of the graveyard was enclosed by a brick wall against the black forest, the end of Maicoh Valley. Simon and Becky approached the clearing with their flashlights both shining on the rectangular granite altar. Brass candlesticks stood covered in melted wax at the two front corners of the five-foot-wide slab of granite, beneath which were inscribed the words:

“BLESSED REPTILE”

Jeweled sacramental poles stood on either side of the altar, like Eastern croziers, each one capped with a pair of sculptured iguana tails curled into spirals. Behind the altar sat two backless benches for the ceremonial officiators made of the same granite along the grassy clearing.

“This is where they put them,” Simon softly spoke, glancing back for the hag as he stepped up close to the altar, “spring equinox, every year.”

“It’s empty,” Becky noted the most blatant observation in the same quiet voice. “What a sick tradition... But why did they stop? Six months, and no sacrifice. Why now?”

She shone her flashlight down along the base of the altar where clipped roses and small funerary bouquets lay dead and shriveled. At the right corner, lying with the flowers, her light stopped over a red cassette tape.

“There it is,” she urgently whispered. “Look.”

Simon spun his head around one more time for the Grave Hag. The graveyard lay drowned in darkness, touches of moonlight glowing along the headstones. He then went over to pick up the cassette. It was just as Bill’s wife had told them, a red cassette tape, unlabeled, same as the first two.

Simon held it up and waved it in front of Becky. “Farmer Gray’s been leaving them all over this place.”

“Or *someone*,” she replied. “What about the police?”

“What police?”

“The SUV. Why did the police have it in their tape player?”

Simon was suddenly paralyzed with instinct, listening with wide eyes to the gentle wind blowing through.

“What is it?” Becky whispered. “Simon?”

He gently shushed her, saying, “I don’t hear anything.”

“Me neither.”

Simon looked back into the shadows of the graveyard’s central aisle. He slowly turned his light toward the grassy passage where the spine-curved Grave Hag was standing motionless a mere twenty feet behind them in a loose, filthy nightgown beneath her strange multi-fabric cloak strung with rabbit pelts. Her pale, possessed face flashed at them with a bloody vessel-burst stare and a crazed grin smeared with vomit. Simon and Becky immediately turned their faces back to the altar, nauseas with unease.

Simon squeezed out the whisper, “Don’t move.”

“It used to be so beautiful,” the Grave Hag lamented behind them.

Becky clamped her teeth, anxiously staring without a blink at the altar.

“Oh, the long porch and the horses...” the hag went on, cackling like a hyena. “There used to be such a pleasant aroma.”

Simon and Becky stayed solid as stone listening to the Grave Hag shuffle up behind them. They didn’t speak. They didn’t look. They listened to the hideous old woman emit a beastly hiss. They could hear her crunch over the dry leaves right at their heels.

An arm’s length behind them, her voice raved, “What happened to the Dorsey Ranch? The paint is peeling. The food is spoiled. All the children used to play with the horses.”

Her breaths clicked with an inhuman croak.

“What an awful fate.” Her demented face pushed close to Simon for a smell. “What happened to the Dorsey Ranch is just the beginning.”

Simon couldn’t stand another second.

He calmly started walking off to the right, grabbing Becky to quietly drag along with him like nothing was wrong.

Simply ignoring the hag's existence, they strolled away together across the graveyard, cutting in through the headstones while the rasping voice rambled on behind them, "He descends from the Moon Temple. Each night, his celestial vessel sails the sky. Blood!"

"Keep going," Becky quietly urged Simon as they made their way to the side of the graveyard between the crumbling, unadorned slabs of stone. "Faster."

They picked up the pace and began running from her mad rambling.

"Oh, the pumpkin's so big!" the hag exclaimed with a shrieking gasp. "What a big boy he is! This one's a winner!"

Simon and Becky ran until they were out of the graveyard, until the Grave Hag had faded away with her cries within the obscuring fog. They walked along the grass around neatly planted birch trees, navigating a small park with their flashlights stretching just to the right of the graveyard. Massive gaps in faded red brick walls led them onto a gravel footpath encompassing the charred black remains of a small building.

"Okay," Becky said, catching her breath, "play the tape."

A cross-mounted steeple lay in the ruins. It was a local church, maybe a hundred years old, burned to the ground. Walking along the path around the rectangular plot of blackened wood beams piled over heaps of dust, bricks, and rubble, Simon changed out the second cassette tape for the new one, rewinding it to the beginning and hitting play. He held the tape recorder between them, listening as they strolled through the simple garden beside pedestaled limestone urns crawling with vines.

"No one really knows what he is," Farmer Gray's voice began the recording. "A long time ago, some of them Christian folk used to throw around the word 'demon,' or 'fallen angel.' The *Oath* ain't like the *Faith*. Heretics in *this* valley don't get the luxury of simply walking away. He doesn't *let* them walk away. He commands an unseen host of spirits, see. You try to run, you'll have evil parasites chewing at your thoughts the rest of your life, driving you mad. Happens all the time—someone breaks oath, leaves Red Oak, ends up in tragedy somewhere down the road, them and their whole family."

Becky walked out to the edge of the steep forested hill in front of the burned-down church, overlooking the foggy, moonlit valley of peaceful farmsteads and pastures.

“If there’s one thing we *do* know about him, it’s not to be on his bad side.”

Simon stood behind her with the recorder, looking down to find himself standing on a large, circular cement plaque in the grass marked in black smears with a cultic sigil. The symbol under his boots was like a shepherd’s crook with a V, encircled by the characters, “Z-O-L-E-L.”

“He’ll make an example of someone every once in a while,” the tape continued. “There’s only about a hundred and eighty people left in Red Oak, but he’ll do it. I’ve seen the Trickster stun a woman solid in front of everyone. It was in winter, at the Corvine Sabbat. I watched him shriek at her that terrible shriek. She was paralyzed upright on her two feet. I figure it’s some kind of focused sonic beam. His vocal cords can produce it naturally. He can stun an individual with the noise, and no one else around them gets affected. It’s a concentrated sound. Only thing you can do is make sure there’s no open space between him and you. He’ll paralyze you where you stand, and then he’ll move, and he’ll move *fast*.”

Becky cringed back at Simon, disturbed by Farmer Gray’s elaborations.

“After that, he’ll kill you. He’ll leave a mark too. It’s in his saliva, and it’s in the tip of his tail. Ever been stung by a bee? Well, believe me, there’s a reaction, and it ain’t pretty. He doesn’t eat the old, see; he *changes* them. His tail is long and barbed. He gets people with the stinger, and they become something else, something I don’t know that I can accurately describe. Folks in Red Oak call them the ‘Formless’; some of them say ‘meatdoll.’ I don’t know what’s in that tail, but the only reason the wound never kills people is because something venomous rapidly begins to change their genetic structure. You following me? What was a normal human being is remolded into a colorless, malformed humanoid, like a raw clay person, their features all... swollen and... mutated away into oblivion, like reverse development. Dr. Valentine, down by Judy Boyle’s orchard, caged up one of them Formless to examine, had it all locked up in his basement. Matter of fact... I think it was that same woman the Trickster stung at winter solstice.

Yup, the exact same one—Maggie Ann Buckley. It was Cecil Buckley’s foolish young wife. She was always speaking out of line... but what she turned into wasn’t no speaking thing.”

Becky walked back over to Simon with her disgusted expression. “What’s he talking about?”

Farmer Gray continued, “The Formless don’t talk. They only move if you get too close. They’re just man-eating zucchinis, nothing for a face but a heterogeneous mix of flesh and tissue reshaping a big old mouth where there shouldn’t be one. Completely dehumanized. No character, no definition, no soul. Valentine’s official name for it was ‘teratoma,’ like those ugly-looking tumors. It means a ‘monster sent by the gods as a sign.’ Imagine that. I’ve seen some of the animals turned into teratomas too. Hell, even *plants* can be infected—now, that’s something else, watching herbs and vegetables take on a new kind of life; not the *good* kind of life, mind you. What do I mean? Let’s put it this way: things that shouldn’t have teeth start growing teeth, and eyes, and not in the right places either. Demonic organisms—I don’t know how else to define them, but they ain’t from heaven, be sure of that. Vegetables become like people, and people become like vegetables... and this... this is the sad end of Red Oak if we don’t get a youngling on that altar come fall. Ain’t nobody going to return to dust. A hundred and eighty helpless golems will decorate our quiet little village forever. We’ll all be... changed.”

“I don’t even believe what I’m hearing,” Simon commented in a repulsed daze.

Becky shook her head, grumbling, “Is this guy going to give us his address, or what?”

They listened to the rest of the tape go on to say, “The Trickster’s not from this world, he really isn’t. He’s beyond intelligent. He knows how to get into your head, take control of your mind, speak without speaking. He can manipulate anything, the psyche, the ether... Unless you got some special talisman I don’t know about, there ain’t no stopping him. If he wants you, he’ll get you. Best thing is not to join the Oath in the first place. Some people are just born in the wrong place at the wrong time... I guess that’s *all* of us, because I got a bad feeling old Red Oak is about to get its last visitation from you-know-who... Maybe that was the plan all along—*his* plan. The only reason there ain’t no infants to offer is because all the women are barren. A curse.

A plague of infertility robbed them of their ability to reproduce. It only started several years ago, but now the kids have run out. Just this February, the last handful of children in Red Oak, the older ones, were all killed together when their school bus went off the cliff into the ocean. Fifteen of them, dead. That's why there was no vernal offering this year. They ain't *challenging* the Trickster, they just got no more kids. I'm starting to think this is what the Trickster wants. I'm thinking he's the one who caused the infertility to begin with. Maybe he even put something in the bus driver's head, too... but that ain't even the whole story."

Simon looked over to the charred ruins, noticing the blackened plaque along the remaining stone archway reading, "Holy Hill Community Church."

"See, there's still one kid in the village. Not everyone is so willing to separate from their child. There's been arguing and fighting, threats all across the valley, everyone trying to figure out if any households been hiding a child. They're all detectives now, you see. The official records say the bodies of all fifteen of those kids on the school bus were recovered and buried up in Holy Chilam, but Mr. Bender was just pretending when he shoveled dirt on that little casket. His little girl, Jessica, was never on that bus. She was home with the flu that day—lucky girl. The Benders knew Red Oak was doomed anyway because of all the infertility, so... they hid Jessica, made it look like she was dead and buried so they didn't have to give her to the Trickster. Hard to blame them, really. Jessica would've been Red Oak's final sacrifice anyway, and the Trickster would've just come to kill them all the next year. That's why they're keeping her a secret, not telling anyone. Face hell now or face it later—I guess they think it doesn't really matter, and maybe it doesn't. But, if they think they got some kind of winning chance come strike three, they're some kind of stupid. Wherever the Benders are keeping that little girl, the Trickster's going to sniff out that hiding spot and paint the house with her."

"The Benders," Becky remarked with realization. "It wasn't *Bill* hiding his girl, it was James and Rhonda."

"Yeah, that Trickster's something else," Farmer Gray chuckled through the dark holes of the speaker. "Doesn't much like getting his picture taken, neither. And another thing, he won't let

people talk about him to the outside world—outside the *Oath*, that is. He keeps himself a total secret. He'll do anything to keep the word from getting out. Some of the folks here tried to mail out a letter some summers ago describing what they had seen at the Ivory Sabbat, and the letter caught fire on their way into town. Electronics start acting funny when you try to put him on camera. The Interweb will shut down, lights will go out... all kinds of things; a *ghost in the machine*, as they say. He even has a secret name we're forbidden to repeat outside of ceremonial use, and anyone who does invites doom on themselves. People don't think he exists; that's how he reigns the way he does. But... if you want a fighting chance—now, I'm talking about that inevitable night of his final visitation—I think there may just be a way. Lately, I've been talking to Jeffrey Dorsey, and he had a neat idea; I mean, this guy really figured it out. He knows how to stop him. I really hate to put it like this, but... Jeffrey is probably Red Oak's last hope."

As the recording seemed to come to an end, Simon and Becky let out deep breaths.

"Is that it?" Becky said.

"I think so," Simon replied, stopping the tape recorder and putting it back in his jacket pocket as he voiced his concentrating mind, "*Jeffrey Dorsey*... He said this guy has the key to stopping this thing, right? *Dorsey*... I know that name."

Becky lit up as it came to her. "Dorsey Ranch."

"What?"

"Back in the graveyard, remember? The hag. She said something about a 'Dorsey Ranch.'"

"Did she?"

"You don't remember?"

"I wasn't really paying much attention to what she was *saying*. A ranch, huh."

"I bet it's right here in the valley." She began striding back toward the road, prompting Simon to pick up a jog with her as he followed behind. "Let's get a move on!"

The time was already 2:28 a.m.

On their way back down the road, cutting through pastures, they gravitated toward the closest light. There was a small, warm glow in the fog. Simon and Becky slowed their jog along the field by the barn where they found a man working on the bottom of his pickup truck with an electric lantern sitting nearby.

“Hello!?” Simon called out.

He stopped with Becky a short ways off, watching the pot-bellied, middle-aged man wiggle himself out from under the pickup in filthy blue-jean overalls.

“Wow,” he remarked, “you’re out fixing your truck.”

The farmer had a shaved head with an unshaven face, a bushy mustache.

He was smeared in oil, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe his hands off as he got up to return them a suspicious look. “Can I help you?”

Becky introduced, “I’m Becky, and this is Simon.”

“Name’s Ike. What can I do you for?”

“Well... we’re just... Are you not worried about taking shelter tonight?”

“Why?” he chuckled. “Is there a tornado riding through?”

Simon stepped closer, taking over the inquiry, “Tonight’s the autumnal equinox. It’s the Scarlet Sabbath. Have you not heard? ... The Trickster’s coming.”

He broke out a mocking grin. “What *Trickster*?”

“Venador—or, whatever you people call it. You’re not staying out here, are you?”

“Oh, that’s a bunch of poppycock.”

“Listen, man, we just got back from the altar. There’s nothing there. This thing is coming any second.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard the rumors. It’s a myth! Superstition. There’s no *Venador*, bud. Put yourself at ease.”

Simon and Becky flashed their eyes at each other in amazement.

“There ain’t nothing coming tonight.” Ike downed a nervous gulp and looked over at the pitchfork lying close at hand, keeping his smile up for his two guests. “Sounds like someone’s been jerking your chain a little bit.”

Becky shook her head with a confused laugh, “No, that’s not right. The people here—everyone, together—are involved in a pact. Okay? We know. You people sacrifice your... your own children.”

“And why would we do that?” he retorted.

“To appease Venador! I don’t know. Why would you?”

His expression fell somber and deathly. “Well, now... I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“But *everyone* here is aware of it, sir. It’s a communal arrangement.”

“Maybe you should just mind your own business,” he morosely replied, “get moving along now... unless there’s something I can actually do for you.”

“We were hoping to find a man here: Farmer Gray.”

“*Farmer Gray*? Never heard the name.”

“He referred to it as the ‘Oath.’ This whole place is forced to feed its kids to some bogey every spring equinox, and now the women can’t have children, and there’s no more kids to offer, so...”

“I don’t believe it,” he chuckled to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Yes, sir, I believe you *do*. I think you know *exactly* what tonight means, and I think unless you want to be—”

“So what!? Huh!?” he barked in rage, swelling red in anguish. “So what if some of us had to do something bad to preserve the good of this community!? What would *you* know about that!? You’re not even *from* here!”

Becky was speechless.

Ike's tears began welling up in his eyes, putting her straight with a tremble in his voice, "I am making a *choice*! You understand!? ... I'm choosing not to remember my son... my Lawson... and I'm choosing to see Red Oak a better way."

Simon decided to step in for Becky, softly and tactfully telling the man, "We're very sorry, sir. We didn't mean to... Just a heads-up, that's all."

"The Scarlet Sabbath," Ike said, his willfully ignorant smile returning beneath glistening, haunted eyes. "I always look forward to the fall festival. People are smiling. Fireworks light up the sky. It's going to be a happy night, this night."

Simon pulled off his cap to scratch the back of his head for something to say, shrugging at Becky's puzzled blank and finally asking Ike, "Ever heard of a 'Dorsey Ranch'?"

"Of course!" he answered. "*Everyone* knows the Dorsey Ranch."

"We're looking for the owner, Jeffrey Dorsey."

Ike gazed off into the dark distance next to them where moonlit clouds of fog swept through the fenced pastures, pointing to a shadow not too far away, about a six or seven-minute walk, and told them, "That's where you're headed, right there. The Dorsey Ranch."

Simon nodded at him with Becky, both of them plastering on pretend smiles, and started walking over to the ranch. "Thank-you. We really appreciate it. Sorry to bother you."

"No bother at all!" he cheerfully replied, flashing his palm. "Bye-bye, now."

They tossed him back a quick wave and began marching off toward the distantly silhouetted building.

Ike turned their heads one more time with the tip, "Watch your step over there!"

When they were far enough away, stamping over mud, Becky quietly commented to Simon, "What is with these people?"

"I can't even imagine," he said back. "What I *do* know is, that guy better hope we find what we're looking for."

"Think this craziness extends to the rest of the island?"

"Have you seen anyone else on the island?"

The wooden sign hung from the beam above the gate in the fence, rocking in the wind:

“DORSEY RANCH”

A small two-hundred-square-foot pumpkin patch along the way in contained a collection of jack o’lanterns around a massive prize pumpkin. Sheds and riding pens sat empty along the perimeters of the ranch. Simon walked with Becky across the open field with their flashlights toward the dark timber-framed brick house staring back at them with a pair of second-floor dormer windows projecting from a shingled slope.

Simon called out from afar to put his nerves at rest, “Mr. Dorsey!? Hello!?”

The uninviting blackness behind the windows put resistance on their approach.

“Sure doesn’t look like anyone’s in,” Becky remarked.

They saw a long stable off to the right of the house, almost adjoined to it. Their boots fearfully crept up the front steps to a wide, unlit porch. All the floorboards creaked under their steps. The lanterns hanging from the overhead beams were all dark. Leather tub chairs and old American Indian water jugs on wire stands decorated the length of the porch. The green door windowed with a fogged glass oval stood before a doormat reading, “Wipe your hooves!”

“Mr. Dorsey!?” Simon called again at the front door, giving it a knock.

“Try the doorbell,” Becky suggested.

They kept glancing over their shoulder at every little noise. The ranch was so quiet; any minor disturbance felt like a threat.

Simon looked around with open hands. “There *is* no doorbell.”

He tried the handle. It immediately opened. His wide eyes turned back to Becky, and he gave the unlocked door a light push to watch it open before them into sheer darkness.

“Gals first,” he nervously quipped, stepping aside for her.

“We don’t have time for that,” she sternly countered.

“Good one,” he conceded with a laugh, loathing himself as he cautiously stepped into the dark house with his flashlight.

He scanned the walls hanging with framed paintings of horses, riding trophies adorning the top of the cabinet. A bunch of dirty shoes and boots lay crammed together beneath the foyer bench. He finally found a light switch—that didn't work.

"Dead," he sighed. "Great. No power."

Becky cringed at the stench as it got stronger toward the living room. "Someone needs to check their fridge, or take out the garbage, or something."

The rotten odor stung Simon's nose. He recoiled in disgust on his way through the living room across a geometric rug of Navajo weaving. Their flashlights kept exploring the open space nicely furnished with a classic country style. Wrought-iron standing lamps with decoratively curled feet lifted unlit animal-hide shades. Suspended from between the ceiling beams above them was a hollow wagon-wheel chandelier. Mirrors and antique cabinets dressed the sides against roughly-hewn dungeon masonry. A poorly crafted taxidermic elk head watched them from above the mantelpiece with uneven eyes and a decayed, open mouth full of crooked teeth like some crying inbred mutant.

The long kitchen looped around a central counter unit. It had a pair of sinks beneath an overhead rack lined with hooks for a busy collection of pots and pans. Simon and Becky stepped along the glossy hardwood, checking out the crude old stone and wood kitchen designed like a cozy mineshaft. They were definitely at the source of the deathly smell. Molding fruit and vegetables appeared as they passed the beams of their flashlights along the counters and tables, worms crawling in and out.

"Ugh, what happened to this place?" Becky said. "Such a nice place, too."

Dirty pots crusted with the remains of a final dinner sat along the two professional, gas-fueled stove-and-oven units sitting side by side.

"Hello!?" Simon called out again. "Is anybody home!?"

He looked down with his light and jumped at the cockroach scuttling by his toe.

Becky turned her flashlight on his startled expression and teased, "I don't think anyone's home, Simon."

He turned his flashlight on her in retaliation until she got her light out of his face, quipping back, “What, you never let your house go for a couple of weeks?”

Back into the living room, Simon ended up following Becky up the open timber staircase horizontally zigzagging with a pair of flights up to the overlooking balcony. Becky tried the light switch up in the second-floor hallway, but it was another dud.

“The breaker panel’s probably in the basement,” Simon told her.

“Yeah, probably,” she replied. “Not sure I care to look.”

They slowly creaked down the short corridor, checking the open bathroom on the left with their lights, a cramped, ordinary white tub with drawn curtains and scummy tiles; a standing sink beneath a cracked cabinet mirror; toilet paper rolled out along the floor. They quickly moved on to shine their lights straight down the hallway ahead, where a small double-doored cabinet stood against the ending wall. On top were two tall, unlit white candles in tapered brass holders, and vertically spanning the wall above the cabinet was a tall painting in a regally gilded Victorian frame. Simon and Becky shone their lights on the bizarre portrait.

The subject of the painting was an unsettling figure with inhuman qualities, a devil, dark and muted. It was a slender, masculine, almost insectoid angel somewhere between realism and impressionism, oil on canvas. It held together crooked arms and long-fingered hands in praying-mantis posture, pale six-inch claws gleaming amidst the dark gray skin swamped in shadows. A thick hooded cobra neck tapered up to an extended head like a pharaonic nemes-style headdress, a pious and majestic abomination masked with a long, segmented bone face having the appearance of a saintly male statue; swollen eyelids bulging out, thin slits like a desert lizard. Two dots marked its forehead beneath a pair of asymmetrical antelope horns, one twisted upward, the other curved back and down to the side.

“Okay,” Becky said. “I’m ready to go now.”

Two thin tongues hung like myriapodal antennae from the hidden extensions of its mouth splitting a serpentine Glasgow smile across its cheeks. The chimeric portrait belonged in an old grimoire. It was straight out of an occult encyclopedia. The figure was almost venerated by the

hellishly serene composition with its long, barbed tail circling over it like a triumphal arch. Large, tattered moth wings hung folded over its legs, draped into a long skirt, the ends torn with red markings like the creature had been wading in blood.

“What on earth...?” Becky commented again. “Jeffrey has a sick taste in art.”

“No...” Simon replied, walking up to the familiar image, “it’s not just art. It’s the same figure we saw at the forked road, carved in stone. I recognize it.”

He observed how four loose, folded butterfly-like wings wrapped around the figure’s front as a garment to cover its legs, wings like a Satanic fairy.

“I know this painting... this exact one... I’ve seen it before.” He stared in mesmerized terror, stopping his flashlight on the portrait’s calmly disturbing white mask and mumbling, “Sixteenth Etheric Bishop of the Concilium Saturnia, a cardinal magus of fifteen score legions...”

Becky turned her disturbed gaze to the back of his head. “What?”

He cluelessly spun back to catch her sharpening glare, replying, “I’m sorry?”

Her eyebrows went up. “What do you mean, ‘sorry’? What the hell did you just say?”

“I was just...” He pointed at the portrait in front of them, saying, “I just recognize this from somewhere. Can’t quite place it.”

“No, *after* that,” she chided, raising her voice, “Simon, you just said something really weird. What was that?”

He began to seep out a laugh through his oblivious shrug. “I don’t know, what was it?”

She took her troubled demeanor back a slow, untrusting step, taking a deep breath and telling him, “I don’t know either, but that was really creepy. You said something about a ‘bishop,’ or something. I don’t know. Like... how did you know that?”

He began to reflect her agitation. “Now you’re starting to scare me.”

“You don’t remember saying what you just said?”

“No. I didn’t say *anything*,” he insisted, turning his eyes back to the eerie, demonic painting and telling her, “Come on, let’s just... let’s just keep going. We don’t have time.”

Her mouth hung open. She helplessly shrugged, rolling her eyes at the madness and proceeding on past him into the open room at the end of the hall. “Okay. We’ll just forget that happened, I guess.”

He followed her into the small, old-fashioned study, searching the walls of crowded bookshelves with his flashlight as he told her, “This thing messes with our heads, remember. We can’t trust everything we experience.”

“Right,” she bitterly laughed at their misery. “Either *you’re* crazy or *I’m* crazy.”

“We’re *both* crazy. How about that?” he said in an attempt to comfort her.

They were surrounded by dusty books on varnished mahogany shelves, a study decorated with potted cactuses and sculptures of angels, a wooden artist’s manikin pirouetting beside an analog mantel clock—2:52 a.m. Simon walked around the tidy desk at the end where he found a pair of reading glasses and an empty wine glass on either side of a handwritten note, a ballpoint pen lying on a single sheet of plain white paper with the letterhead, “Dorsey Ranch, Equestrian Training Center.”

“What’s that?” Becky asked, coming over to join him. “Is that from Jeffrey?”

“Looks like it,” Simon answered as he held the flashlight over the letter.

They looked down on the ink handwriting together, hoping to come across Jeffrey Dorsey’s supposed key to warding off Venador.

The letter read, “My brothers, I am writing this so that you will know the truth. It looks like I am finally going to have to call it quits. I have faithfully served Sky Mother for the whole of my 55 years and have given the sum of my offspring for her satiation, Harriet, John, Chester, and Paula. I have devoted my labors to that fiend all of my life. I have spent countless hours in meditation and temple service, and now, she has left me in torment. She has afflicted me for the last five months with a mad jibber-jabbering wife that I can hardly recognize, whose mind is beyond all help. Mariana disappears all night to run amok somewhere like a wild boar. Last month, my bathwater began to boil me alive. And now, brothers, today, I have been cursed with

the task of having to take my Winchester down to the stable and put down my eleven beauties. I can't bear to hear them screaming out there."

Reading the end of the letter, Becky returned Simon's troubled look and made the observation, "It doesn't make sense. It sounds like he's talking about Venador."

"That's what I thought too," Simon replied.

"Everyone else called it a 'he.' Who's this 'Sky Mother'?"

He took a breath to think on it a moment before noting, "Before, you said the Witz Fairy was *feminine*, right? A 'patroness.'"

"Yeah. The Pozo cult sees her like a folk saint. She's maternal."

"Maybe they *are* the same—Venador, Sky Mother, the Witz Fairy... I mean, it seems like everyone we talk to has a different name for it. It's androgynous. Maybe it appears in different ways to different people. It masquerades... to reflect the ideals of each individual."

"Embodying archetypes..." She followed his train of thought. "... in order to appeal to both the anima and the animus, male, female, changing at will."

Simon proceeded to lift the letter off the desk, flipping it over to see another chunk of handwriting continued along the reverse side. "There's more."

"Good," she said, strolling around to the other side of the desk. "We still don't know how to stop Venador. What's it say?"

He set the letter back down on the desk and proceeded to read the rest of it aloud for Becky, "'Sky Mother has blessed me with a plague. After I am done putting a bullet in my precious Carousel and putting that poor girl out of her suffering, my dearest thoroughbred, I suppose I will start distributing my firearms and prepping for the Scarlet Sabbat. This is my rebellion. I am going to rally every able body I can find. The only way to stop our tormentor is good old courage and gunpowder.'"

Becky straightened up in alarm on the other side of the desk.

Simon hesitated a moment in shock before reading on, "'I know that there is a couple in Red Oak that has been hiding their youngling, and I know who it is too, but I have resolved not

to say anything. I am not angry at them anymore. They are not the reason for my afflictions. Dragging out their child will only delay our execution another year. This barren community has nothing more to give Sky Mother. This is the end. Red Oak is fast on its way to confrontation one way or another. I say, let's lock and load... Your pal, JD.'"

When he rolled his eyes up to Becky, she was stunned, confused, creased with frustration. "What?" she scoffed. "That's it? *Lock and load*?"

He wiped his mouth in thought with one hand, puzzling over it as she went pacing and ranting around the dark study with her flashlight.

"That's his big secret!? *Gunpowder*!? Are you kidding me!? What's so hard to figure out about that? I thought Farmer Gray said this 'Jeffrey' guy was the only one who could stop him."

"Or the only one who knew *how*," Simon suggested with a shrug. "That other guy over by Bill's house was out waiting for Venador with his rifle. Maybe that's all it takes. Maybe it's flesh and blood."

Becky huffed out a scoffing breath at him, marching back up to the desk to berate, "Really? A shapeshifting spirit that has repeatedly manipulated electronics, our perception of reality, and you think the key to stopping him is *bullets*? Simon, this is *paranormal*."

He pulled out one of the red cassette tapes to wave around, saying, "All we know is what *this* guy tells us, Becky, and *he* said Jeffrey Dorsey would have the answer. So, here's the answer, in Jeffrey's own hand—'gunpowder.'"

"No," she dismissed the whole idea, shaking her head. "No, I don't like this one bit. That's not right."

"Well, that's what it says."

"Something's not right!" She held her forehead, overloaded with anxiety. "That Farmer Gray's just leading us nowhere."

"Come on, Becky, it's not a dead end."

She looked back up at him with a resolute gaze, nodding. "Let's go. Let's just get out of here."

He leaned forward with one hand on the desk, contending with her, “Becky, what if that doesn’t stop everything that’s happening? Remember what you said? It’s not confined to this little village.”

“I want to get out of this place. Now.”

“Leave the pack, and you become the predator’s first target. There are other people here, people who can help us.”

“No. I’m sorry, Simon. I can’t stay here. This place is screwed. This whole thing is... an illusion. It’s the Witz Fairy. I don’t believe it. I don’t believe *any* of it!”

“Becky, I know. I know what you’re thinking. Believe me, I’ve been pinching myself since I lost my boat. I don’t fully believe it either, but here we are, and no amount of blinking or slapping our faces is going to change it. Alright?”

Her wilted head began a faint, miserable nod.

He sympathetically watched her despairing soul with heartbroken eyes and told her in a tender voice once the tension had cooled, “If you want to keep going up to Chalice Mountain, we can do that.”

She turned him her sad, pouting eyes, watching him come around the desk with a sigh to join her on the Zapotec wool rug stretched along the open floor.

“Okay, that’s fine,” he conceded with a weary smile. “We’ll stick to the original plan. We’ll just keep trucking up the I-15, find that radio tower, send out a distress message... and hopefully, it’ll get through the interference. Who knows? It might work. It’s a way more powerful transmitter, higher up...”

“Thanks,” she sighed. “Really, thank-you.”

It was a relieving decision for him also. He glowed back at her, holding out his fist and waiting for her to bump knuckles with a laugh.

“Don’t worry,” he encouraged her, turning to head back out, “we’ll get through this.”

“Hey,” she quipped, “who’s saving who?”

Simon heard his boot kick a ball of paper along the rug as he was walking back. He turned the light down to the floor to see a crumpled note, picking it up and unfolding the crinkly letter. It had the same Dorsey Ranch heading, the same company note paper as Jeffrey's letter, same penmanship.

"What's that?" Becky said. "Rough draft?"

"Actually, yeah, it is," Simon replied as his brow furrowed. "He must've written this one first."

"The version he didn't like?"

He held his flashlight on the letter and began reading it aloud, "'To whoever finds this, if anyone is even alive, don't make the mistakes I did. I thought my lifetime of devotion to that witch god would spare me the agony that I have endured for the last five months. Don't wait for Sky Mother to come and butcher Red Oak into bacon bits. This place has nothing left to bargain with. There is no reasoning with that beast. Do what I am doing, leave with grace. Press the barrel of your gun to the roof of your mouth and give yourself a dignified end. I have lost it all. Sky Mother has taken everything from me. She has taken my gorgeous wife... Sandra... and my little Amber... the light of my life...'"

Becky's jaw fell loose as she watched him choke on the words, stepping up beside him to see the letter for herself, saying, "That can't be right."

He anxiously twitched in dread, trying to laugh at it. "That's what it says... 'Sandra' and 'Amber.'"

"Impossible." She shook her haunted grimace, striding back up to the desk to set the shotgun down and take a second look at the other letter, telling him, "It says right here, 'Harriet, John, Chester, and Paula.' *Those* are the names of his four kids."

Apprehensive tears built up in Simon's eyes. He gulped hard, entranced by the crumpled first draft of the letter while helplessly replying, "He wrote 'Amber.' It's his own writing."

Becky dropped the letter. She gave him back the same vulnerable, confused look, unable to conjure up an answer for even the faintest comfort.

“No big deal,” he trembled. “So what? ... His wife and daughter have the same names as mine.”

“It can’t be though. The other letter doesn’t say ‘Amber.’”

He flapped the crumpled paper at her and cried, “Then why did he write it *here*!?”

She dragged the shotgun back off the desk, resting it along her shoulder and scraping up the response, “They’re not uncommon names.”

“Oh, it’s a coincidence.” His sanity wavered with an anxious laugh, realizing his mind was just a toy for some higher darkness, his perception bending through a paranormal prism, and he furiously continued to read the rest of the letter, “‘If you want to be a fool and stand up to Sky Mother, here’s the secret to stopping her: there is no stopping her... This hell will never end... Our last chance to save Red Oak was burned down decades ago, burned right to the ground. Do your loved ones a favor and blow their heads off, just like I have to in eleven of the stalls down in my stable. I can hear poor Carousel now, my true white stallion. I’ll do her in last, and then I’ll do myself, and that’ll be that. Woe to Red Oak. The blood of our children is on our hands. Maybe we deserve...’”

The letter ended abruptly, no signature.

Simon crumpled it in a quick fist, throwing it aside in rage. “Useless. This guy doesn’t know *what* he thinks.”

“It didn’t sound anything like his other letter,” Becky remarked, “the pessimism...”

Aggravated, Simon grumbled on, “How could his family have different names in each letter? What’s *my* family doing in his letter!?”

“It’s messing with you again. That’s my conclusion.” Becky commiseratively sighed, passing him by on her way to the door and going on, “The wife had a different name too. It’s this *place*. It’s not the Bermuda Triangle, but it’s not any better. That’s why we need to just get out of here, and fast.” Simon followed behind as she led the way back out into the hallway and asserted, “This is no time to get clever, or brave.”

They had only one objective: leave.

No more time for delays.

Creaking back down the dark second-floor corridor, Simon gave the bathroom on the right another quick glance with his flashlight, passing by before putting his boots in reverse to stand back at the open doorway. He kept his light on top of the mirrored cabinet mounted above the sink. Becky stopped to notice him from the end of the hall and curiously turned back as he went in. She stepped halfway into the bathroom, standing next to him and giving the light switch some futile flips.

She turned her flashlight on the object in Simon's hands, a red cassette tape, asking, "Another one? Where was it?"

"On top of the mirror," he said, pulling out the tape recorder and switching in the new tape. "Number four. Shall we listen to it?"

"Do we have a choice?"

He held the recorder and played the tape, standing together next to spilled magazines and listening to Farmer Gray's voice fill the cramped little tiled bathroom with a wise, sinister tone, "Well, here we are, boys and girls... Are you ready for the big festival?"

A slow, deranged, artificial laugh crackled through the speaker like a smoker's cough.

"I told you this moment would come. I warned you, did I not? You should have left."

A hiss of static flared up like radio noise with another dark laugh, stimulating a fearful glance between Simon and Becky.

"You two should never have come. It's *far* too late to leave now."

The parting words penetrated their hearts. They knew, as the finished recording went on silent, that they had played the fool.

"It's *him*," Becky dreadfully realized.

In the midst of swirling minds, they listened as a handful of clocks began filling the house with a gentle and dissonant symphony of chimes, upstairs and down. They stepped back out into the hallway, hearing all the resonant chimes going off at the same time. Pendulum

clocks. Mantel clocks. Grandfather clocks. Cuckoo clocks. Every battery-operated clock in the house was in pandemonium.

Simon checked his wristwatch, telling Becky, “Three o’clock sharp.”

She started dragging him along by the sleeve as she marched off her panic. “I thought we said we were getting the hell out of this place.”

They rushed down the steps, stampeding down to the living room and booking it straight for the front door. An antique pendulum swung in the long glass case of a dark oaken grandfather clock singing its knell. The moment they sprung out onto the porch, they could hear the cries of a horse in the near distance. It was coming from the left, the stable next to the house, neighs of torment.

“The horses are riled by the noise,” Becky commented.

“I don’t think so,” Simon reluctantly replied with a nervous gaze. “How many horses do you hear?”

It was apparent that there was only one left.

Simon went down the porch steps and paced across the field along the house, saying as he led the way over to the stable, “Jeffrey said in the letter... he had to put them all down. Remember that?”

Becky tried to piece it together on their way over to the dark, open doors to the stable. The big old timber barn with shuttered windows pitched a tall roof sloping with corrugated tin.

Simon pushed open the metal gate in the fence, crossing onto the dirt equestrian grounds, saying back to Becky, “He’s got to be around here somewhere.”

“Who?” she replied. “Jeffrey?”

“He sounded pretty attached to his horses. Whatever happened to them... maybe he couldn’t go through with killing them all. He said there was one, ‘Carousel’...”

They slowed at the dark, gaping mouth of the cavernous wooden stable, searching the edges inside with their flashlights and proceeding through silence down the floorboards. The neighing horse had ceased.

“Mr. Dorsey!?” Simon called down the shadowy length ahead with an echo. “Mr. Dorsey, are you in here!?”

Within metal frames, boards of wood formed the lower walls of each individual stall on either side of the aisle beneath viewing grilles. Saddles and feeding buckets hung from hooks along the outer walls, dead lamps branching off from the dividing support columns.

Becky called out, “Jeffrey!?”

She wandered over to the nearest stall on their left, stepping up to the metal bars with her flashlight. Simon flinched at her abrupt scream. He watched her push away from the grille in horror.

“What is it!?” he said, getting nothing from the repulsed expression twisting her face and going up to the stall to get his own look.

He shone his light into the hay-scattered enclosure where a brown crooked-bodied horse lay dead and deformed with a warped face, its lidless eyes sunken low in a misshapen skull, extra legs bending out at varying stages of growths. His breaths started picking up in shock. He speechlessly backed away from the grille with a gulp.

“Have you ever seen anything like that?” Becky grieved.

Simon went up to the next stall and checked it with his light to find the scarring image of another twisted mutation while Becky went along the opposite side to find the same horror.

She could only bear to look in a couple more stalls before tearing herself away from the freak show. “What happened in here?”

Malformed spines, contorted and elongated torsos, double heads. Some of them had manlike faces crushed in flat, some with overgrown teeth too big for their mouths protruding like tusks. The skin was loose and falling off the muscles and sinews. Simon finally joined Becky back in the center of the aisle with a crushed heart, the two of them standing with faces melted in misery in the middle of the fourteen-stall stable full of dead monstrosities.

“They’ve all been shot,” he said with a shaking head, checking the ceiling beams above them with his light. “This is what Venador did to him, to his horses.”

A crash against the wall caught their sharp attention.

They immediately spun their lights to the aisle ahead. Before the open grooming space at the far end, the door to the last stall on the left was wide open. Becky looked to Simon for confidence, but he was stiff with apprehension.

They both remembered that there had been one horse still neighing in there before they arrived.

Becky knew what had to be done, putting away her flashlight and cocking the gun in her arms before calling out on the faintest hope, “Mr. Dorsey, is that you!?”

Simon noticed an electric lantern hanging by one of the support columns. He took it off the hook and slowly turned the dial, lighting up a large radial glow around them, surrounded by an oppressive mass of shadows. He passed Becky a nod, sticking close as she quietly crossed her steps toward the last stall with the loaded shotgun tightly braced against her shoulder. They stayed against the opposite side of the aisle and gradually began to see into the stall where a pair of legs were lying in gumboots, toes up.

Becky anxiously called again, “Jeffrey!? ... Are you okay!?”

Simon gave her a grave shake of the head. They slowly started moving in. The wooden name plaque nailed under the metal grille read, “CAROUSEL.” Becky waited for Simon to light the stall ahead before getting too close.

When they saw it, they shriveled in horror.

Becky leaned her arm back against the inner wall, gagging away from the body, while Simon paced around with revolted grunts.

“God, no,” he said, unable to keep from sneaking glances down at the decapitated, denim-clad body devoured like a vultures’ feast from the waist up.

He saw the rifle lying along the side of the stall, an old Winchester. Becky slowly turned to look back over her shoulder, her hand pressed to her mouth, eyes wet with tears. The corpse was lying flat on its spine with a bloody ribcage picked nearly clean of flesh. Flies buzzed on and off a pile of entrails spilling out of the open belly.

“What happened to him?” she said with a choke, swiftly taking her cringe out of the stall with her. “I can’t do this. I can’t be here.”

Simon was shortly behind her, catching up to her outside the open stall to ask, “Are you going to be okay?”

Her lips stayed tightly sealed in anguish. She was too overwhelmed to give him an answer, responding with a false nod while holding down the urge to vomit.

“I don’t know what did that,” Simon said. “Suicide? I don’t think so. His rifle was in there. I think he came down to...”

Simon reacted to Becky’s sudden shock as she darted her eyes to the grooming space next to them. He waved the lantern over to the shadows against her shattering scream to see the myriad of pale horse legs crawling toward them on clacking hooves, the heart-stopping mutation of a true white thoroughbred. A dozen dysfunctional equine limbs arranged like a fair-coated arachnid awkwardly slid Carousel’s deformed body along the ground. From its backside, it hoisted up a long-maned neck for a tail where the stallion’s disfigured head flopped at the end like a scorpion’s sting with small, whited-out eyes. A mouth laden with crooked, oversized teeth howled out a tortured neigh. Simon pulled Becky out of her transfixion and rushed back into the open stall with her, quickly taking the door back with him just as the deformed horse slammed its limp head into the bars. He fell back to the hay beside the boots of Jeffrey’s corpse while the lantern bounced on behind him.

They were caged in.

As Carousel kept slamming against the other side of the door, gnawing at the grille with a bloody mouth, Becky leaped for the interior handles to hold the door shut. She crouched down, screaming over the mutant’s wails and shrieks. Simon found a bridle hanging on the wall and slid over with the leather lead to begin wrapping it around the handles. She helped him tie it into a firm knot to lock the banging door, both of them falling back off their feet as Carousel’s long, hoofed legs began feeling in through the bars of the grille. She rolled away, grabbing her shotgun off the ground to let off a round at the nine or ten legs reaching in. The creature screamed as the

blast ripped off one of its hooves. She backed away to a safe distance at the back of the stall, quickly breaking open the breech of her shotgun and pulling out another pair of shells to load her next shot. Lifting up the barrel, she collected her emotions to calmly focus her aim, firing on the spidery horse legs coming through the bars. Simon finally thought to pick up Jeffrey's Winchester hunting rifle, and he joined her from the other corner of the stall, taking a shot on Carousel through the grille. Every hit erupted a hellish noise from the mutant.

"Try for the head!" Becky cried over to him as she snapped the shotgun back open to load her next two rounds. "The *head*, Simon!"

He figured out the reload lever along the base of the rifle, keeping the maple stock pressed into this shoulder while letting off round after round. Carousel's head kept slamming the grille from the end of its flailing scorpion tail. It finally clamped its teeth around the bars, unable to free itself.

Simon and Becky unloaded their rounds on its head until both of their guns clicked empty.

They stopped, lowering their weapons with heavy arms, gasping for breath. Carousel's head was gone. Blood painted the grille. It was silent. The dead white stallion legs all began sliding back out through the bars until a hard thud on the other side stirred up some relief. Simon dropped the empty rifle and cautiously approached the door with Becky, bringing the electric lantern to see the horrific monster lying lifeless outside. Becky couldn't bring herself to make a single comment. She was shellshocked.

"Come on... let's just focus on getting out," Simon said, crouching down and untying the leather strap from around the handles. "Don't try to make sense of it."

When the door was free, he shoved it open against Carousel's body, pushing it wide enough to slip out past the nightmarish mutation and dashing down the stable floor without looking back.

The glow of the shaking lantern suddenly unveiled a figure blocking the door.

They skidded to a stop, Becky pointing her flashlight straight at the little brunette child looking back at them in a skirt and hoodie.

A girl no more than ten.

Simon stared with peeled eyes at the edge of a mental collapse. He gaped at her, his daughter.

“Amber!” he shouted with a crack.

His cry immediately scared her off. The girl fled outside.

Becky kicked off behind Simon in his sudden pursuit, trying to slow him down with some sense as she yelled, “Simon! It’s not her!”

She chased after him outside the stable, out into the foggy night where everything was just a bit dimmer than before. They looked up to see the abnormally large full moon eclipsed in red, looming over them like an angry eye.

A blood moon for the Scarlet Sabbat.

“Simon!” she urged him, catching up to him as he stopped and swung his lantern around looking for his daughter. “It *can’t* be her, Simon.”

“Why not!?” he panicked, rushing around the equestrian field in a desperate search.

“Because,” she argued, “it’s *not possible*. Your daughter’s thousands of miles away.”

His legs began to slow with his diminishing will. He kept swiveling his sad gaze. There was no sight of Amber anywhere.

“She’s at *home*, Simon, with her mother, in Georgia.”

He gradually picked up a nod until his head dropped in agreement. He knew she was right. His hard breaths wanted to begin crying. He held his forehead in one palm, his mad little mind, while Becky came up next to him with a comforting hand on his back.

“It’s not real,” she said. “It’s an illusion.”

“You saw her too,” he sniveled, “right?”

He dropped his hand, looking over with a hard sniff to see her reluctant nod.

“You’re right.” He shook his head and woke his senses back up with a couple of deep breaths, gazing back up at the massive red moon in the misty sky above. “I get the feeling... I get the feeling that Farmer Gray is...”

The rolling acres, trees, and farmsteads of Red Oak lay bloodstained under the eclipse, haunted by the faintest sound of clock chimes from every household in the valley.

“Do you hear that?”

“Yeah, I do,” Becky said as she marched past him. “That sound means ‘no more wasting time.’ Come on.”

He blew out his stress with a hard exhale, giving himself a quick slap on the cheek and following her back off the ranch grounds, marveling in horror, “I’ve never seen anything so deformed in my life. It’s beyond any natural explanation.”

Becky led the way across the fenced field toward the front gate, grimly responding, “I don’t want to think about it right now, Simon. I really just want to focus on getting out of here now, okay?”

“I’m just saying... What kind of witchcraft are we dealing with here?”

“I don’t think a *witch* did that to the horses.” Approaching the gate, as they passed by the small vegetable patch of jack o’lanterns on the right where a giant prize pumpkin sat on a bed of twisted vines, she went on to anxiously rant, “We’re talking about something that’s *vastly* more powerful, more sophisticated, and stronger than we are in virtually every way, and we have absolutely *no* protection from it.”

“You don’t think it’s... from another world...?”

“Like *space*?” she scoffed. “Honestly, I don’t think we’re that lucky.”

He passed her by as she made a sudden stop along the trail, looking back to see her struggling to move her right foot. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. It’s caught on something.” She kept trying to wiggle her boot free from a dry vine. “It’s got my ankle.”

He brought the lantern closer to see five or six thick, fleshy gray pumpkin vines wrapped her around her boot with wilted leaves. She anxiously crouched down to start pulling at them. The harder she pulled, the tighter they began to squeeze.

“I can’t get it off!” she started to freak out.

“Do you have a knife?” Simon asked as he knelt down to help.

A deep, gurgling groan drew their attention to the colossal 2,506-pound gourd sagging under its own weight in the middle of the small leafy patch between crudely carved jack o’lanterns, Jeffrey’s hideous prize pumpkin. It was covered in lumps and mold, an unnatural gray color, movement undulating beneath its flesh. All the shriveled leaves began slowly shifting across the patch.

The vines suddenly pulled Becky’s boot from under her.

She fell to her back with a scream, the two of them watching the giant, sinewy pumpkin begin to turn, vines reaching out for them like arms.

“Becky!” Simon dropped the lantern and desperately grabbed onto her as she reached out for him.

Screaming in panic, she found herself being pulled into the pumpkin patch, more and more vines wrapping her legs. They could see a tear spreading along the pumpkin as it turned to face them, a monstrous mouth opening with a scatter of human and animal teeth. Becky cried out to Simon. She held onto him, but it was hardly slowing the pull. Simon kept telling her to hang on while the both of them were being dragged in toward what appeared to be a sentient, carnivorous gourd the size of a small car. It moaned every time they shook its vines. Stringy tendons stretched and tore apart the wider it cracked open its crooked grin. It drew them onto the dirt patch while moving itself closer like a massive slug, a genetic aberration. Simon saw the vines trying to wrap around his legs.

“This isn’t working,” he uttered in terror.

He let Becky go and left her shouting for him, yanking his ankle out of the vine’s grip and scrambling away.

“Simon!” she screamed, sliding faster toward the yawning lump of flesh. “Don’t leave me! Simon!”

He picked up the shotgun, cocked it, aiming at the behemoth pumpkin and pulling the trigger, but the shot was soundless. Becky hadn’t reloaded.

“Simon!”

“It’s empty!” he cried back, rushing back up to her. “Where’s the ammo!?”

“There’s no more! Please, Simon...!”

“What do you mean!?”

“I’m out of shells! Just get me out!”

His head swiveled around for an idea. The shotgun fell to the ground. He slipped and skidded over to the loose chops of wood nearby where an axe sat wedged in a severed tree stump and began fighting with the long wood handle to pull it out. Listening to Becky’s screams against the guttural croak of the man-eating squash, he desperately yanked at the axe with one foot on the stump until it threw him back to the ground. He landed with a hard grunt, quickly rolling over to see the axe lying free in the grass.

Becky tried turning onto her knees and crawling back out of the dirt patch with all her strength. The constricting vines got a hold of her wrist. Silently laughing jack o’lanterns mocked her from each side. She clawed her way back through the soil, groaning and crying in her struggle against the pull. Her efforts to crawl out were working, but the predatory pumpkin slid after her, keeping her from gaining any distance.

Simon suddenly returned between them, hacking at the vines with his axe.

The pumpkin wailed like it had internal organs. He chopped at the ground, cutting the vines, one after another, dark brown blood spewing out. Becky was finally able to crawl out with her limbs free. Simon maniacally swung the axe until he was out of the patch with her.

“Are you okay!?” he gasped at her, falling to one knee.

Her chest pumped, fighting to breathe. She immediately pushed herself back up off the ground and took the axe from his hand, running back up to the patch to furiously hurl it at the

prize pumpkin. The axehead stuck in its fleshy shell with a spray of black mud-like fluid. The pumpkin kept crying out with its horrible, unnatural noises like it could feel pain.

Simon stood back up, picked up the empty shotgun, and chased to catch up as she immediately began running to get back to their vehicle. “Becky! Hey! Wait!”

“I’ve had enough of this place!” she wept along her fatigued jog out of the ranch. “That’s *exactly* what he was talking about!”

“Who!?”

She slowed down when they were a ways beyond the fence, stopping to tell him through her breathless panic, “Farmer Gray! The mutations! He said this would happen!”

They looked back toward the pumpkin patch beyond the ranch fence. The giant animated gourd was still moaning in pain. Simon had accidentally left the lantern behind to glow on the living pumpkin patch.

“That’s how Venador warned them,” he said. “Disaster... ‘tricks’... He was warning them about tonight.” He took out his flashlight and flicked it on, then handed Becky her shotgun back, saying, “You might want to reload.”

She took it with a traumatized laugh. “Let me know when you see some ammo.”

They continued on running back across the pastures, climbing through the fences, making their way back with their flashlights in a Hadean orange fog beneath the menacing blood moon. Crickets chirped with the faint death knell of clock chimes simultaneously ringing inside all the rustic houses across the Maicoh Valley hills.

Simon and Becky ran back over to the nearby farm, following the lantern glow in the reddened fog where Ike was silhouetted with his pickup truck. They cried out to him, telling him to get inside, to take cover. Their boots stamped to an eventual stop as Ike’s awkwardly postured form came into clarity. The farmer stood twisted and erect, motionless. His skin was gray, rigid like bark, all his clothes absorbed by his flesh; everything transformed and redefined into a humanoid mass of colorless organic matter. He had mutated into a raw form of misshapen being,

a malformed clay person. Simon and Becky held their lights on him in shock. He wasn't moving, still as a mannequin, only a slight rocking.

The words rolled out from Simon's devastated stare, "No... Please, God..."

No more semblance of humanity remained in Ike's face than the shriveled features of a carved-apple expression in anguish, asymmetrical formations of eyeballs and teeth grown at random like a Picasso mutation across a stump head flowering with fungal folds of flesh.

Becky fell to her knees beside Simon and vomited at the ground.

She saw him stepping closer to the thing, spitting at the ground one more time before warning him, "Don't touch it!"

He glanced back at her, taking the advice. His attention was immediately turned back to Ike's barely recognizable form at the sound of a hungering hiss. The noise was emitting from the jagged crack in Ike's head where interdigitated carnivore teeth clamped a wide mouth shut.

"Don't get too close," Becky went on behind him. "It's a 'Formless.'"

Simon couldn't drag his eyes away from the terror, coming to the conclusion, "Then he's already here." He backed away from the mutation. "Venador—it's already time."

Taking his hand, Becky got up on her feet and looked back at the fungal golem one more time with her flashlight, tears wetting her eyes. "This is what he makes people... This is what Farmer Gray said, just a complete erasure of humanity... Look at him. Is there even a person left in there?"

"Farmer Gray wasn't kidding," he remarked. "Venador stings them... they change."

"We're going to end up the same way if we stay here any longer."

She began leading Simon along again as she walked off, away from Ike, picking it up to a sprint.

It was nearly impossible to navigate back to the vehicle through the rusty fog. They managed to find their way onto one of the winding dirt roads along the hill and followed it down, running with the knowledge that he was already there in the village, the Trickster, somewhere in the abyssal darkness and haze.

Simon slowed along the road at a noise, whispering to Becky, “Stop, stop... Did you hear that?”

She nodded past him, prompting him to look to his side where a raccoon was running along the side of the road. He emptied his lungs in relief—until Becky seized his arm with a tight grasp. He looked back at the raccoon as it ran past a tall pine tree standing alone along the side of the road where the log fence was broken. Beside the tree stood a motionless, featureless gray figure in the tall grass, one of the Formless, another ex-human; the demonic organism called a ‘teratoma,’ a product of Venador’s mutative stinger.

Who was it this time? they wondered. Another local? Another wandering fool?

Red Oak was in the midst of its transformation.

The hour of judgment.

“No loud noises,” Becky whispered to him. “No more talking.”

They ignored the teratoma standing along the roadside and continued on with a quiet, terrified march, acutely aware that the evil presence in Red Oak was just a snapping branch away from hunting them down. They turned their flashlights off; they couldn’t risk attracting attention. The only illumination left was a ruddy fog under a blood moon.

The peach trees began to appear along the hill to their right. They had made their way back to Bill and Tammy’s property, hopping over the ditch and climbing up the hill in the dark. They followed each other up through the sickly peach trees to the farmhouse silhouetted on the hilltop, brushing through the leafy branches, feeling through the dark.

The motion-sensor lights suddenly lit up the side of the house as they drew near, where a grotesque gray teratoma was sitting against the trellised wall next to the recycling bins.

Simon and Becky held each other back from it in fear, the two of them looping around to the front yard where the next set of sensor lights flashed on. They looked up at the porch thickly shadowed under the lit-up facade. The front door was open, the delicate sound of mixed clock chimes pouring out.

“No, don’t,” Becky said as she held Simon back from approaching the house.

“I just want to see if Bill’s still in there,” he told her with a calming tone. “Maybe he’s still alive.”

She urgently hissed back, “That was him around the corner.”

Simon hesitated with a long gaze into the open front door, staring down the dark foyer hall with a squint, and finally pulling his arm out of her grasp to begin approaching the porch steps. “I just want to get a look.”

“Everyone here is *dead*.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

He gradually crossed his steps toward the porch, listening for any sign of Bill, or his wife Tammy, taking the creaky steps nice and slow. The front door had been left wide open, broken in, hanging askew by the lower hinge. He could see things knocked over throughout the foyer. The place had been ravaged. Cracks split the windows. It was a violent home invasion. Simon took out his flashlight to give the foyer a quick look from the outside. He wasn’t planning on going in.

“Bill!” he called with a whisper. “Is someone there!?”

He stepped up to the porch floorboards, turning on his flashlight and seeing the devastation stretched out along the foyer hallway before him, shattered picture frames and wooden shards of smashed furniture. A cuckoo clock was going wild somewhere inside. He heard the hiss to his left and turned his light to see a teratoma with wisps of long silver hair suddenly lunging toward him. Its entire head split open to eat him with a plethora of mixed teeth. He immediately dodged out of the way, crashing into the doorframe as the faceless gray form clumsily stumbled past and racing back off the porch to meet Becky on the lawn with a pounding heart.

“What’s wrong with you!?” she scolded.

Simon moistened his throat with a gulp, locking his flashlight back on the teratoma as it continued to stand motionless on the porch in a neutral position of dormancy like a brainless plant.

“You can’t get too close to them,” Becky kept berating him. “Watch out. Use your head, Simon.”

He wordlessly agreed with a mortified nod.

The stationary gray mutant remained in its dormant, upright position, its facial features horribly regrown in a genetic scatter across the organic gray mass of its head.

Simon and Becky stuck close on their way back around the side of the house, keeping their distance from the other Formless still sitting immobile against the trellised wall. They started running to get out of the motion-sensor lights before the roaming nightmare returned to that part of the village. Passing by the unwallled patio behind the house, the backyard sensors caught them jogging and flashed on the next set of lights. A large spread of illumination revealed the open field sloping down to the fence ahead of them with islets of flowerbeds. Ornamental stone fairies sat on benches and frolicked with mocking smiles amongst the plots of chrysanthemums, purple daisies, and autumnal rudbeckias. Simon and Becky were making their way through the garden when a sharp hiss came at them from the side to get their attention. They jolted in fright and fired their eyes over to see the young hatted farmhand from earlier, Claron.

He lifted up from behind a flowerbed with his hunting rifle in hand, rushing over to them and whispering in amazement, “You’re still alive!? We three must be the last ones.”

Simon stepped up close to him to keep the volume down as he quietly raved, “It’s happening. This is real. We just got back from Jeffrey’s ranch—Jeffrey Dorsey. You wouldn’t believe what we saw there.”

“I think I would. I couldn’t find a single home that wasn’t already turned into a slaughterhouse of meatdolls.”

“*Meatdolls*? Is that what you call them?”

“That’s what *everybody* called them—before they became one.” He gave the lit-up backyard patio behind them an unsettled glance, checking the area out like time was his greatest enemy and saying, “It’s Venador, man. This place is ancient history. It’s done. We need to make our way the hell out of here.”

“Come with us,” Becky jumped in to say. “We have an SUV parked close to the Benders’. It’s just down the road a ways.”

“No way. No noise. We’ll never make it out.”

“What do you mean?” Simon retorted. “What are we going to do, then?”

“I don’t know, but that thing will hear us driving out. It can tear right through metal.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

“We got to go by foot. I say we make a run for the woods.”

Claron’s eyes suddenly flared open. He forced Simon aside and braced his loaded rifle, aiming straight behind him where a patchy-cloaked figure was roaming with them in the flower garden.

“Get back!” he cried to Simon and Becky.

It was the Grave Hag. From across the flowerbed, she moved like a phantom.

“Run!” he kept shouting at them. “Get out of here! Now!”

“Keep it down!” Becky urgently whispered. “It’s just that crazy hag!”

“That ain’t no *hag*!”

As the Grave Hag wandered along with her mournful weeping, her unusually large and arched form began crawling up onto the flowerbed toward them. Claron backed away with Simon and Becky and began blasting off loud echoing shots. Bullets weren’t slowing the hag a bit. With a hissing dragon shriek, the Grave Hag spun around. A long tail swiped Claron’s throat and sent him flailing with blood into the next flowerbed.

Adrenaline was bursting.

Simon immediately bolted from the garden with a suicidal run for the vehicle down the sloping field of peach trees.

He looked back to see Becky dropping the shotgun to retrieve Claron’s rifle and cried out to her, “Becky! What are you doing!? Run!”

She sprinted a ways across the garden to gain some distance before turning the gun on the hag, but when she lifted her aim, there was no hag; there was a dark, sinewy figure standing ten

feet high with mantis arms and long clawed fingers held together in prayerful posture; tattered, moth-like wings folded into a long skirt over its legs. Simon saw the same thing she did, the same demon from the painting in Jeffrey's house, his limbs loosening in fear. A tall, hooded, pharaonic neck lifted a long bone face like an angelic mask, thin lizard slits in bulging eyelids; one horn twisted up, the other curving down.

The polynymous god of Red Oak.

Two slender tongues hung like antennae from the oral splits in its cheeks. A hidden mouth carved the monster's trick face into two halves as it opened with streams of saliva and long, protruding needle teeth. It leaned forward to blast Becky with a concentrated Medusa shriek, a trilling scream that crescendoed with a hiss until Becky's whole body was frozen in paralysis.

"Becky!" Simon shouted back to her. "Get out of there!"

She stood petrified like stone with horror in her eyes. Lines of blood streamed down from her ears, the rifle shaking in her arms. The priestly, elegant organism, Venador, stood tall and upright with a humanoid guise. Simon was silenced when he saw it shed its skirt of torn fairy wings and begin slowly crawling close to the ground toward Becky like a long-limbed reptile, arms and legs crookedly jointed, charcoal-gray musculature armored like an insect. Becky was powerless to do anything but watch the barbed bayonet at the tip of its long tail wave like a serpent in the air as it came.

The stinger swung down and gored her straight through the chest.

Simon shook in his own traumatized paralysis.

Becky jolted in shock, coughing up a throat full of blood with the sharp prong projecting from her back. Her eyes soundlessly screamed as she stood impaled like a lifeless puppet. Venador's tail then flung her body off into the darkness like garbage to metamorphose with the rest of Red Oak. Simon recoiled at the sight of the homicidal demon turning to see him with its pale angel mask, shocked back into reality by its swollen, slit-eyed stare. He whirled around and ran between the peach trees in gasping hysteria.

Becky was dead. Everyone was dead. The whole valley was a garden of meatdolls.

Simon could hear Death coming on two legs. The hard thumping came rapidly stamping after him. It was sprinting. Nearing the fence at the end of the field, Simon found a bunch of old steel drums to toss himself behind. He squirmed over the mud to lift his back against one of the drums while his heart punched from the inside. He looked over to see the old unroofed agricultural tractor sitting just a short leap away. Venador's loudening dash spurred him to make the leap. He made a desperate scurry for the tractor, crawling between the large rear tires to hide beneath it while Venador violently smashed through the steel drums behind him. He hid in the shadow with his shaking hands pressed over his mouth, listening to the hellfiend's frenetic wandering along the field. The light fixed to the nearby telephone post along the road cast enough of a glow to reveal monstrosously clawed feet stamping across the grass as it searched for him.

The tractor suddenly crashed above him as Venador leaped on top.

It crawled overhead, hissing, smelling.

Simon waited, patiently listening as it gradually began to leave on all fours.

"Simon, where are you!?" Becky's voice called. "I think I found a way out!"

In the blackness beneath the tractor, his eyes remained peeled in horror.

"We can't stay here! Come on!"

He shook his head. He refused to believe it.

Her voice roamed off through the peach trees with Venador, saying, "We're never going to get out of here, Simon. We're going to be here forever."

It was imitating her voice, like a tape recording. Simon waited until it was far enough away before slipping out from under the side of the tractor. He carefully stood up to peek back over the top. The hillside of peach trees was swamped in darkness. All the sensor lights on Bill's house had shut back off. Venador was nowhere in sight. Simon started making a brave sneak toward the road, carefully squeezing through the cattle fence. He then froze to grab his pockets in realization.

Becky had the car keys.

He darted his head around looking for options. The SUV was a shadow just down the road in achingly close proximity, but there was no going back for the keys. He had to find another way out. He quickly crossed the road to get out of the light from the telephone pole, hurrying up the large neighboring lawn strewn with a mess of tied garbage bags and work supplies, back toward the first house that he and Becky had visited. Festive lines of bulb patio lights branched out from the house over the yard. On his way over to the luminous windows of the Benders' cottage through the cluttered lawn, he accidentally kicked over a stack of plastic industrial buckets full of broken branches, stumbling back into a recycling tub of empty bottles to make another loud disturbance in the quiet village.

The noise couldn't be undone.

He had just called out to his killer.

He began scrambling over rakes, shovels, hoes, making another quick dash for the nearest hiding spot. He got out of the glow of the overhead strings of lightbulbs by sliding himself into a partially collapsed DIY woodshed, hiding with chops of wood and a portable generator behind fallen sheets of plywood roofing, staring back out at the calm yard through the gaps in the beamed wall.

Red Oak was silent, wheezing with a cool breeze.

The Benders' nearby cottage emitted a muted clock chime.

Simon flinched at the crash of a wheelbarrow, watching it soar across the yard to go tumbling off into the withered vegetable garden. Venador was right there with him, lurking outside after every little noise, after the taste in the air. Simon shrunk down into the shadows. He listened to things getting tossed, work ladders knocked over, the sound of heavy werewolf feet thudding over unraveled tarpaulin.

"Face it," said the voice outside in Farmer Gray's rustic accent, "you and I both know this ain't going to last long. Why don't you just own up to the facts?"

Simon watched the long, segmented black tail whipping around the yard like a monstrous python, flailing trash with the bladed tip still wet with Becky's blood. He leaned over to see a

little further through the gaps in the boards. There was a vehicle beside the cottage, the Benders' white pickup truck.

Simon was a lot closer to *their* car keys than *Becky's*.

He had to get inside their house; the waiting game was one he was bound to lose.

Venador continued to mimic Farmer Gray's voice, "I know you, Simon Hewitt. Do *you* know *me*?"

Simon could visualize exactly where it was in the yard. He held that image in his head as he reached down for the control panel along the portable generator next to him.

"You see me the only way your mind knows how. I have no form."

He sucked in breaths of courage, then flipped the power switch and began an adrenalized charge out of the woodshed while the portable generator roared to life. He ran for the dried old vegetable garden and wove through the trellised tomato vines to hide, glancing back only once to see the ten-foot nightmare pounce into the woodshed after the rumbling noise and tear it to pieces from the inside in a mindless rage. He ran from its horrible shrieks of excitement, finding his way out of the garden and around the back of the pickup truck to see if the keys were in the ignition. He skidded to a stop in the space between the truck and the cottage wall.

James was lying headless along the grass before him.

The rifle was in his hand.

Simon pressed his shoulder against the side of the pickup, faint with horror.

It appeared as though James had beaten the Trickster to it.

Simon flexed a war face. He tried not to look down at the body while nauseously sidling up to the driver window and looking inside. It was too dark. He quietly opened the door, checking around the wheel and feeling in for the ignition—no keys. Without fully closing the door, he gave James' decapitated body another quick glance before lifting his wet, miserable eyes back up, then carefully began to crouch down and feel the pockets along the suicided corpse.

Venador was busy ripping apart workbenches and plastic containment drums.

Simon kept feeling up into the pockets along James' vest. He patted the man's bloodstained clothes all over, but no jingle.

James hadn't planned on going anywhere.

The car keys must've been inside the cottage, Simon thought, just as he had feared.

He cautiously lifted back up with his gaze set over the hood of the pickup and started creeping back, listening to the demonic frenzy of bloodlust massacring the yard as he made his way around to the back of the cottage. He quietly climbed up the short, creaky wooden staircase to the backyard door. The door was busted in with the clawed-up screen. All the lights inside were on. Simon could hear the delicate clock chime within. He crept into the cramped, generic white kitchen full of outdated appliances. The sink was full of dishes. An empty bottle of cheap wine stood on the counter beside a corkscrew. Nothing was cleaned up.

The Benders had known it would be their last dinner—homemade minestrone soup with rigatoni noodles.

Following the clock chime, Simon snuck over the cheap linoleum tiles and made his way out the open doorway to the hardwood of the darkened main hallway. A symmetrical collage of frameless square mirrors gridded the wall next to him with his passing reflection as he proceeded down the narrow hall. The hanging fan dangled broken and askew with shattered light fixtures. His attention was dragged over to the roughly-crafted, double-drawer console table standing against the wall beneath the stairway balustrade. He stepped over to see the cracked picture frames between shards from the broken flower vase, family photos knocked over each other, photos of himself, photos of his wife, the two of them smiling together, vacationing in Mexico. It was like he was in his own house. He picked up their tender, intimate wedding photo, shaking his head in a fit of confusion.

There she was, Sandra, beautiful Sandra, in her beautiful white gown with her beautiful white smile.

It was all he wanted, to go back home, see her again, hold her; but she was thousands of miles away, and he was at the mouth of hell in a manifest nightmare. Seeing her face smiling back at him from behind that cracked glass evoked such a swarm of emotions.

The photo was duller than he remembered it, the expressions bland and artificial, eyes lifeless like dummies.

He hyperventilated over the frame trembling in his hand against the hypnotizing chime of the clock.

The tone behind Sandra's expression seemed to darken. Her smile stayed pinned up beneath grim, whispering eyes, sending an inexplicable shiver through his body.

Simon threw the frame back down to the table as he jolted back in panic to awaken from the sinister trance. He noticed the swinging pendulum next to him with a startled flinch. It was a carved wooden owl clock mounted on the wall. The folksy novelty rocked its pendulum tail back and forth with rolling eyeballs, keeping the quiet of the house interrupted with a constant chime. He didn't know what the hell was happening, but when he looked back at the picture frames in front of him, James and Rhonda were back in all of their family photos.

Simon paused his breaths a moment to listen.

It was silent outside.

His time was running out. He opened each of the two drawers in the table like a pantomime and rifled around the cluttered stationary supplies before skipping over to the jackets hanging by the front door to give the pockets a fast feel. His anxiously searching gaze fired around the foyer for car keys, finding nothing. He rushed into the adjacent living room and started eyeing the cheaply nailed-together bookshelves displaying dusty volumes of books on spirituality, psychology, ancient religion, psychosomatic phenomena, paranormal communication. Thick medieval grimoires broadened the collection with Spanish titles in gold and silver along leather spines.

Sabiduría de la Demonología.

El Grimorio de Beldad.

Libro del Visitante Lunar.

Little bronze ballerinas danced in tutus around an antique bone-china tea set. Simon looked over his shoulder to check the other side of the room, where he found a hellish meatdoll sitting motionless in the upright recliner. Eyes and teeth randomly sprouted across gray demonic flesh on a head torn in half by an open grin, suited with the vomit-colored upholstery of a musty early-seventies furniture collection.

Rhonda hadn't been as quick as James.

She sat there like a vegetable in her own home, a Formless, the mass of demonic matter pulling every recognizable part of her out of proportion, recreating her body into a hideous eternal prison. Her giant toothy smile gaped open at the ceiling like a bad child's drawing. Simon moved on, taking his pounding heart away as he stepped back with a haunted transfixion. Into the adjacent dining room with the lofty ceiling, he marched around the square table dressed in a kitschy tablecloth where he had enjoyed hot minestrone soup with the Benders just a couple hours earlier, looking for the keys through the clutter of fishing equipment. He had nearly completed a full circle through the small, rural cottage. He jumped over to the tables and drawers along the edges to rummage around.

A large shadow rushed by the window.

Simon petrified at the fading noise, staring back at the black night outside the small curtained window. He waited to hear another sound with a suspended breath.

The sound quickly came, Venador crashing in through the front door with a predatory shriek.

Simon fell to the floor and squirmed under the dining table to the sound of the demon smashing his way down the narrow hallway just a couple walls over. The tablecloth barely hung low enough for him to stay hidden. He pulled his knees up to his chest and sat still as a boulder. Pots and ladles clanked along the floor of the kitchen. Venador was making its violent way through the cottage.

"Did you like my soup?" Rhonda's voice approached from the kitchen. "Be honest, now."

Simon squeezed his legs in tight, balling up in sweat under the table with an apprehensive, agonized grimace. The sleek, shiny black canine feet sinewed in chitinous armor stomped past his clamped eyelids as the slender devil raced across the floor looking for him. He opened his eyes to see from under the hem of the tablecloth. China plates and vases shattered on the living-room floor ahead as a long tail whipped around. Rolling his eyes to the left, he noticed something glimmering at him from along the floor at the base of a stack of packing boxes.

A set of keys.

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He turned his trembling gaze back to the ruined living room to see that Venador had moved on. He could hear it hissing its way back into the foyer, and he seized the opportunity to quietly crawl out from under the table and grab the keys without a noise. He slowly arose to his feet with steady, controlled breaths, looking back and forth between the kitchen and living room. There was no telling which way he could get out of the house without running into his own gruesome slaughter.

Back door or front.

A shuffling sound lifted his attention high up the wall in front of him. The dining-room ceiling was higher than the other rooms. Near the top of the twenty-foot-high wall, he saw a girl, a young girl, under ten, peeking through the black-shuttered window of the storage loft that overlooked the dining room. She quickly closed the shutter to hide.

It was the Benders' kid, the one they had been hiding.

Jessica, the last child in Red Oak.

Now, she was the last living resident in the village.

Simon listened to furniture smash in the main hallway on the other side of the house. The clock chime died. He spun around the dining room in agitation until he spotted a straight wooden ladder standing against the opposite wall.

He couldn't leave Red Oak without her.

He took the ladder with his breath held, careful not to hit the blades of the hanging fan as he brought it across the room and quietly leaned it against the wall beneath the shuttered loft access window. He began climbing the wood steps with creaks that paralyzed him in cringing fear. His dreading eyes kept checking left and right. With brief pauses at every creak, he gradually made his way up to the shutters and opened them up, peering into the pitch-black loft. As he crawled in through the window, his feet accidentally knocked over the ladder. He crashed down onto the loft floorboards while the ladder hit the dining-room floor and scrambled back up to close the shutters. In total darkness, he crouched down on one knee, listening to Venador's pounding footsteps make another brief pass through the dining room. He listened to the tail bat paintings off the wall. He heard the table smash to pieces, the bits tossed around.

"Simon? ... Simon, I'm scared," Becky's voice trembled outside the shutters.

He kept himself silent and invisible. He could hear the hanging fan outside crash with an electric shock.

"You're getting too close... Do you really *want* the truth, Simon?"

The voices and ruination shortly came to an end, and Venador stamped on through the cottage. Simon opened up his mouth with a stifled gasp to fill his lungs, quickly feeling for his flashlight and taking it out to fire a beam into the darkness. Along the side of the storage loft, his flashlight spotted an antique toy chest painted with zoo animals, passing the shaft of light across a small dresser. He looked around to find an iron-framed twin bed with pink blankets. It was Jessica's bedroom. A blood-red glow from the eclipse was coming in through the angled roof

window. His light stopped dead on the girl standing in the middle of the small loft. He grabbed his heart. His expression melted open.

It wasn't Jessica. It was Amber.

It was his daughter, his own daughter.

"Amber?" he whispered in disbelief.

The flashlight quivered with his hand. He lifted upright and slowly stepped over, hastening up to her and grabbing her shoulder. He leaned forward to stare back into her glassy doll-like eyes.

"Amber, what's going on!?" he panicked into her face with a desperate whisper. "How did you get here!?"

She gazed back without animation, without words, like all the dolls and stuffed animals watching from the encompassing shelves. Her countenance was so pale.

"Amber! Talk to me!"

Rapidly shifting around in anxiety, Simon slid his hand off her shoulder and paced over to the window sloped along the pitched roof. He stared up through the glass at the monstrous blood moon. The roof may have been their best option. He knew they couldn't hide in there forever. They had to keep moving. Constant motion was the only chance they had.

Venador had found everyone else; it would find *them* too.

There was a small lamp on the bedside table. He pulled the chain switch to faintly fill the loft bedroom with a small, dim glow, dropping his flashlight back into his jacket pocket and walking back over to the roof window. Glancing back at Amber as she blankly watched with a teddy bear in her arms, he gently turned the handle at the base of the window and opened it up until it stopped at a forty-five-degree angle.

Venador's bone mask suddenly smashed through the wooden shutters behind Amber.

She whirled around with a scream as the bulging slit eyes and asymmetrical horns of the angelic trick face moved in through the loft access window toward her.

Simon stumbled down to the floor and cried out, "Amber! Get back!"

She fell to the floor, scrambling away in terror as Venador's thick neck extended into the loft, its splitting smile opening up a long, hidden mouth of protrusible fish teeth that reached out for her with a hiss between two long feeler tongues. She turned onto her knees to crawl away, but the tongues quickly stretched out to grab her, gruesomely snatching her back into the draconic mouth as Venador instantly retracted from the window and vanished with her before Simon's crushed, wordless stare.

His breath shook, palms pressed down.

He stared into the floor with a shaking head.

He told himself again and again that it wasn't real.

It was impossible. His daughter was miles away.

It wasn't real. It wasn't real. She was miles away.

He sniffed in hard, slapping his face for courage. With returning senses, he picked himself up out of his mire of trauma, rushing back over to the roof window to get out of the house before Venador returned. He squeezed through the gap and slid out along the slope of the shingled roof with one hand clinging to the windowsill, releasing himself to the eaves to hop down. He crashed down hard to the front yard.

Venador was anywhere.

Scrambling to his feet, Simon raced in front of the warm living-room windows, pulling out the car keys as he turned the corner of the cottage to meet the despairing sight of the overturned white pickup truck. The vehicle was a beached whale, rolled onto its back, tires in the air. Simon's mind was stunted by doom from planning his next course of action.

There was no other way out that didn't involve a footrace he couldn't win.

It was too late to go back for the keys to the SUV; Becky would already have become a Formless.

The useless car keys fell to the grass. Simon started running. He didn't know where. He just went, sliding around the truck, down the backyard, pumping his limbs down the open pasture, a cemetery for rusted old farming equipment. Venador drowned the peaceful nighttime

silence behind him with a resonant minotaur bellow. Simon took out his flashlight to wave around as he frantically charged through the blood-tinted fog, heading for the nearest structure to hide.

The silhouette of a cylindrical building began to emerge.

It was a decrepit round barn wrapped in wood beams with holes and hollow windows, a tall conical roof of torn-up green shingles and exposed framework like a slumping, ragged gnome's cap with a louvered cupola missing slats. Simon ran through a doorway along the side of the dark, circular barn, pushing the large wood door shut behind him and dropping the iron latch. He looked around the passage curving to his left and right, the outer ring of the abandoned century-old barn emptied out and cluttered with supplies in the earliest stages of renovation.

The Kennard Round Barn, 1905.

Heading to the left, beneath radial ceiling beams, he started following the outer ring along the rough cement with his flashlight. A wall of iron bars caged the inner ring behind a round colonnade of wooden support posts. Simon stepped over the mess of rolled chickenwire and unplugged power tools to see through the bars. He looked deeper into the barn with his light, gazing past the next concentric passage encircling the central floor where a collapsing framework of support beams surrounded an old brick tower rising from the middle. The bricks were blackened around a cast-iron incinerator door. On the wall beside it was a valved gas-pipe regulator connected to a nearby operation console. The central tower appeared to be a defunct storage silo being used as an industrial furnace.

"Daddy?"

Solid with fear, Simon creaked his stiff head around to look back with his flashlight at the outer wall of dilapidated boards where a garden hose hung in loops from a hook, listening to his daughter's sweet little voice just on the other side.

"I thought you wanted to play."

The long, pointed blade of Venador's tail tore through the boards. Simon's reflexes threw him to the ground beneath the swiping stinger. He desperately crawled until he could get on his

feet and start running around the outer ring. Venador's tail stabbed through the wall again, a narrow miss thrusting in behind him. Simon spun around to see it retracting back outside and tripped over a bag of manure, landing flat on his back. He squirmed to get back up, keeping low as the stinger ripped through the wall above him and pressing himself to the concrete covered in dirt and hay while it swung wild overhead. The sharp edge of the barbed stinger flailed into a cable running up one of the support posts and let off a deafening electrical discharge. Simon seized up at the noise, rolling onto his back as the tail slipped back out of the wall in a shower of sparks. He kicked away, getting back up to continue around the outer ring looking for a way into the central circle.

The silo furnace was his only ticket out of Red Oak. He could lead Venador in, start leaking the gas, take the ladder up to the cupola and escape from the roof.

He could light up the whole damn place in a second.

A makeshift electrical panel soon appeared along one of the support posts. Simon stopped to open it up and start flipping the switches. A sparse scatter of safety-grilled lightbulbs lit up from wires hanging all along the concentric rings of the barn. The lines of portable construction lighting was barely adequate, but it allowed him to navigate a little easier and see what he was doing. An opening in the barred inner wall was just a little further down. He put away the flashlight and kept running down the ring.

The next violent strike from Venador's tail forced him back to the ground.

He ducked under the sharp stinger, quickly grabbing the roll of chickenwire next to him to shield himself from the next thrust. He lifted it up just in time to catch the long point of Venador's tail. It pierced straight through the roll of wire, viciously shoving him back over clutter and trash into the iron cage of the inner wall. His back smashed against the heavy bars. He held the stinger back with clamped teeth, the sharp tip poking straight through the layers of chickenwire, pushing toward his face. His strength was outmatched. He tossed the roll to the side and crouched before Venador's tail began slamming it around like a hammer between the support

posts. When Venador finally dragged its tail back out with the roll of chickenwire, it ripped out a massive hole in the wall, pieces of wooden boards sailing out into the night.

A newly made doorway yawned open before Simon's despairing eyes.

He struggled to regain balance as he pulled himself along the support posts and continued hurtling around the ring with Amber's taunting giggle close on his tail. He quickly found the opening along the inner wall, tossed himself through, and clumsily fell out onto the floorboards of the inner ring encompassing the central floor. Glancing back over his shoulder, he noticed that the open doorway in the cage wall had an upward sliding door. It was a vertical cattle gate. He jumped back to his feet to grab the handles along the upper frame of the doorway and slide the gate down with all his strength. He brought the shaky metal gate straight down to the floor with a hard crash to block Venador from getting in, and then slid the rusty iron latch all the way to the right. Locked.

It was a temporary obstacle, but it bought him time.

Crawling through the next wooden colonnade of support posts, leaping through the wooden framework, Simon reached the open space that circled the brick silo towering to the roof from the middle. He gazed up at the rickety skeleton of support beams holding up the lofty, coned ceiling. The historic Kennard Round Barn had been cleared out for electric generators and small skid-mounted industrial units. They were all hooked up through cables snaking the dirty cement floor. The barn was being converted into a carcass disposal plant. The four evenly spaced units branching out from the central silo furnace were auxiliary incinerators for the livestock, each one running large-bore exhaust pipes up into the wall of the silo. Simon's eyes followed the fixed maintenance ladder scaling the tall brick tower.

His one and only escape route.

Squeezing through a set of gas pipes, Simon hurried around to the operation console standing close to the primary furnace door, overwhelmed by the crude and confusing control board covered in switches.

A metal crash from the distance turned his head.

With a heart racing toward cardiac arrest, he looked back at the controls with a shaking head, determined to ignore his fear and figure something out. The key had been left in the power switch. He opened up the safety cover and turned the key to activate the systems. An electrical hum started up. He skipped away from the console to the gas regulator attached to the silo wall with a series of valve pipes, tapping a finger along the small digital control panel to activate the gas feed. He took it right up, setting the gas release to one hundred percent along the primary furnace.

The next noise brought his eyes straight up.

He stared up through the unstable network of old wooden ceiling beams, watching a single broken board come bouncing down along the framework from the darkness of the ceiling high above. He started backing away from the silo, eyes glued to the unseen heights. The board hit the ground close by. He soon saw the lurking shadow, a pale mask coming down with long black limbs crawling the layered ceiling beams.

The hellfiend had climbed in through the tattered roof.

Simon dove to the ground, crawling through a narrow space beneath the combustion pipes of the nearest incinerator unit. Venador landed heavy on the cement behind his squirming legs. He pulled himself out to the other side and immediately hid behind the incinerator's large solid-waste chamber. The crowbar next to him instantly caught his notice. He snatched it from the ground and held on tight, looking over to see another fixed ladder along the side of the silo.

Venador's face suddenly blocked his view with an opening grin as the monster crawled up onto the incinerator.

Simon whirled around the end of the boxy waste chamber, evading the reach of Venador's twin tongues, and circled back around through a small grove of gas pipes to the primary furnace console while the reptilian predator followed behind on all fours. He slid back up to the regulator along the silo to quickly make sure all the valves were open by turning each of the hand levers clockwise to their full rightward position. He then stood over the horizontal main pipe feeding

gas to each of the branching pipes and began desperately hacking at it with the crowbar. He was barely making a dent.

He turned to see Venador's tail swinging like an axe to decapitate him.

He dropped to the ground beneath the stinger as it slashed the main pipe open with a hiss of leaking gas, peeking through his shielding arms to see Venador towering upright before him. Rolling over to make a run for the ladder around the side of the silo, he found his whole body suddenly incapacitated by a deafening shriek.

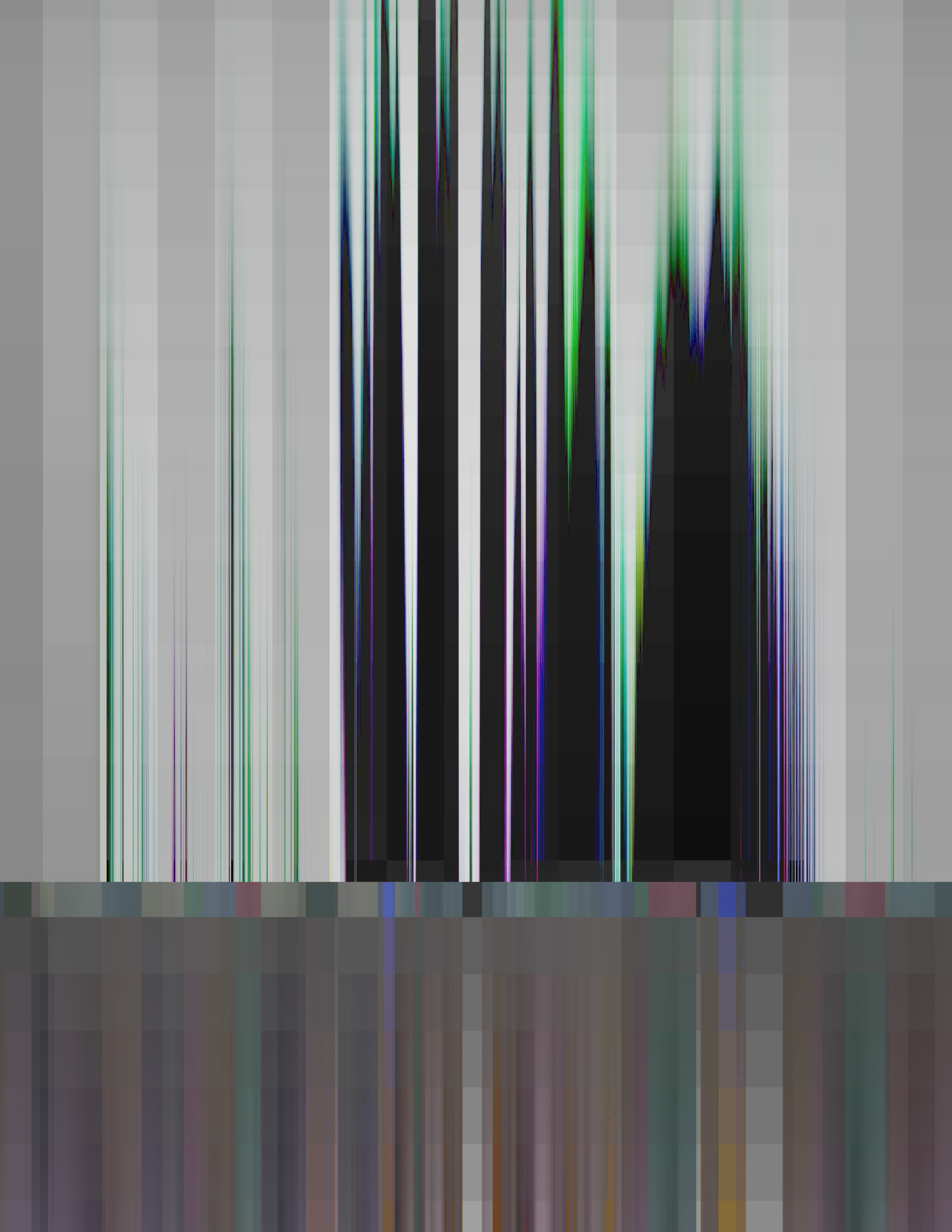
The world went silent. Ears bleeding. Skull-crushing pain.

He stood paralyzed on his feet from the focused sonic beam of Venador's cry.

Involuntary shakes overtook his stone limbs.

He wore his inflamed, agonized expression like an irremovable mask. His right eye turned far enough to see the lithe, beautiful form approaching in his periphery, Becky gently walking up from behind. She pressed up to his back with a hand wrapping around to his chest, her other hand lifting a kitchen knife for him to see. He couldn't move, speak, react. With her emotionless face intimately close to his bleeding ear, she set the blade in the shadow beneath his trembling jaw. He shook desperately to free himself from the Medusa's power.

She drew a fast line across his throat.



He screamed in a moment of pain. Frightened birds took flight from the branches above. Clutching his throat, he dropped to his knees, crushing dead leaves in the middle of a dark forest. He knelt alone, confused, gasping as his heart gradually calmed. He held out his palm to see it dry and clean of blood. His nauseas gut jolted with a preliminary retch. He fell forward to his hands to let out a spill of vomit, followed by another, coughing and spitting at the ground between scared breaths. Moonlit fog erased the distance in every direction. He found himself alone in a small clearing in the woods. All around was an infinite maze of tall, neatly spaced pine trees. His fingers shot back through his hair as he puzzled over where he was and what he was doing. He attempted to stand, immediately losing balance in a dizzying head rush and collapsing back down to the leaves.

His name was being called from the near distance.

He turned to see the beam of a flashlight wandering through the trees down the hillside. It was Becky's voice. He could see her stumbling and sliding down the steep hill, rustling along the slippery blanket of fallen leaves.

"Simon!" she called out. "Is that you!? Say something!"

"I'm here!" he shouted back, immediately turning to face the ground again with a dry heave.

She came rushing over, kicking up the leaves. Her dark shape emerged from the fog. Simon held his hand up to shield his eyes from the blinding flashlight.

"Simon!" she exclaimed at the sight of him, hurrying over to crouch beside him. "Simon! Are you okay!?"

"I don't know," he helplessly replied.

His mind was in a haze. He couldn't explain himself.

Becky helped him up to his feet as they grabbed each other's arms, asking, "What are you doing here?"

He peered deep into his most recent thoughts to try and recall a memory as it all slipped away, answering, "I don't remember... I... How did I get here?"

“That’s *my* question.”

He couldn’t believe it. It felt like he had just been spewed out of hell, but he couldn’t remember any of it.

“Seriously,” Becky said, holding him out to examine his head for injuries, “you don’t remember how you got here? Did you fall?”

“I don’t think so,” he answered. “I remember... a place.”

“A *place*?”

He clamped his eyes shut in concentration, conjuring up the name, “Red Oak.”

“Simon, what are you talking about? Did you have another hallucination?”

His eyes opened back up as he gave a weak, almost breathless laugh and said, “I don’t think *hallucination* is the right word.”

“Then *what*?”

“It was so elaborate... *You* were there. I remember... I was so scared... It wasn’t real, was it?”

“You’re going to have to explain it better than that. I pulled over to the side of the road because you said you were sick. Do you remember that?”

He lifted his perplexed stare to meet her eyes. “When?”

She checked her watch. “Just about twenty minutes ago.”

“What? No...”

“Yeah. I figured ten minutes was a bit long to be vomiting in the bushes. I thought something had happened to you. I got out and spent the last ten minutes wandering around looking for you in this creepy forest.”

“But... I was...”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

He started up a clueless shrug. “Sitting in the car with you, I guess... on our way to Chalice Mountain.”

“Good. At least you remember *something*. So... can you tell me what happened over the last twenty minutes?”

His head kept shaking. He followed alongside her as she led him through the woods with an arm around his back and told her again, “I really don’t remember it... It was a lot longer than twenty minutes—for me. I was somewhere completely different.”

“*Red Oak*,” she repeated. “Is that a real place?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Nothing?”

Simon anxiously reached into his jacket pocket to pull out his tourist pamphlet and unfold the little map of Woodsend. Becky shone her flashlight over to help him see. He laughed as his eyes crawled up and down the map looking for Red Oak.

“It’s supposed to be right along I-15,” he marveled, “right where we were headed.”

It wasn’t there. The name didn’t show up anywhere along the key beside the map.

There was no Red Oak. It was simply gone. Even his mind couldn’t dredge it back up.

It was if it had never happened.

“You’re right,” Becky sighed as they took it slow through the woods on their way back to the vehicle, “they’re *not* hallucinations. Whatever’s happening to us... something is behind it all.”

“I know,” Simon hauntingly replied. “I think I saw it.”

“Saw *what*?” She crept a nervous eye to his profile. “What did you see?”

“The Witz Fairy.”

All he had left were vague impressions, residual feelings of dread rocking like debris along the surface of his mind; no memory, no explanation.

With their arms around each other, side by side, Simon and Becky walked along the edge of the lonely highway together between dark forest walls.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“Getting there,” he chuckled in self-pity.

“Just keep breathing the fresh air. If you have to hurl again... look away.”

He laughed with her, as if they weren’t still stranded together on a geographical mass absent from all traditional maps of the North Pacific, as if a cognitive prism wasn’t bending their perception of reality at every curve in the road, as if they weren’t still in the labyrinth of distortions being violently stalked by the most indescribable horrors.

Reaching the SUV, Becky threw open the driver door and got back into her seat, Simon sliding into the passenger seat next to her with a tired groan. They slammed their doors shut at the same time.

“It’s just in your head,” she reminded him, jamming the key into the ignition and firing it up. “It’s this place... or whatever lives here. That’s what *I* think. It’s toying with us.”

His drowsy head rocked along the headrest as she put on some gas and turned the wheel to get back to their drive down the long Interstate 15, off to Chalice Mountain to try and break through the fog of atmospheric interference and make contact with the outside world. He stretched his finger down to the vehicle’s cassette player and pushed the eject button, watching nothing happen, nothing at all, laughing.

“What?” Becky asked. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he answered, sleepily watching the headlights plow through the darkness ahead. “Just a feeling.”

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This is GRAY
This is BLACK
This is RED
This is YELLOW
This is GREEN
This is MAYA
This is BLUE
This is MAGENTA
Sys_M : disconnected // ("Just a feeling")
/^^D\« «neotropical with a wingspan of 8-10 cm, adults often feeding on rotting» »
ADMIN () z – CO *■ G , PRSM• ^704WR« «Even jade is shattered» »
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