

# CTHULHU WARS

— A SANDY PETERSEN GAME —

## IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

and other tales of Cthulhu Wars



Ben Monroe

In the Belly of the Beast and other Tales of Cthulhu Wars is a work of fiction. Names and characters are fictitious, and the incidents described won't happen until the stars are right and Cthulhu rises from his eternal slumber. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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*IN THE BELLY  
OF THE BEAST  
AND OTHER TALES OF  
CTHULHU WARS*

*by Ben Monroe*

*For Beth*

*Part One*  
*Tales of Cthulhu Wars*

*“It is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth’s dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone; lest sleeping abnormalities wake to resurgent life, and blasphemously surviving nightmares squirm and splash out of their black lairs to newer and wider conquests...”*

-H.P. Lovecraft



## *The Darkness Within*

The desert at night is cold and unforgiving.

Through the barren copper sands, the blacktop of the highway winds like a scar. At the horizon, black meets black as the road becomes the sky, and the sky becomes the road; an uncertain embrace where both lose themselves in each other. Silent night birds crease the sky, blotting out the winking stars for moments. One plummets to the dusty ground, snapping up a skittering cold-blooded morsel and flaps off into the dark.

In the distance, a groaning rumble as a pinprick of white light rolls over the horizon, searing the night, blinding the nocturnal creatures which flee in terror back to their subterranean hovels.

He rides through the night on his wild hunt. Dust coats his desert-parched throat, dry from miles of the ride. His brown leather jacket bundles him in against the worst of the night's chill, but he is stiff from the cold. His long black hair is blown back over his shoulders, filthy with the dirt of seven states. Moonlight reflects off of the twin mirrors of his sunglasses like pale gibbous eyes rimmed with night-blue velvet shadow. He rides, his past behind him; ahead, only the future. His twin-wheeled beast charges forward, eating up the miles, chasing dawn, and he smiles.

Up ahead of him are lights—the glossy, neon glow which rails against the dark of the desert. He thinks of the last time



he'd stopped to eat. It had been somewhere in Louisiana. He remembers the girl behind the counter at that roadside eatery. Black hair, black as the secret under-feathers of a raven's wing, a silver ankh dangling on a glittering chain around her thin neck. How ironic. And her eyes. He always remembers the eyes. Hers were like twin sapphires, glittering out from a moon-white face. She had rimmed them with kohl, to frame them. Such pretty eyes.

He shifts his grip, roaring off the beaten path and into the lot of the tiny all-night diner, and glides past the derelict vehicles before the place. His journey stops in front of a pay telephone stall. He kills the engine and stops for a moment, letting his body get used to the sudden lack of thrust and vibration that have been with him for hours. His ears soak up the night sounds, the insects, a faint howling, and the buzz of electricity sucked from the generator by the livid neon sign. "Eat" it tells him, "All Night."

He climbs off the bike, his boots crunching the gravel of the lot as he stands, stretches, and stalks to the payphone, lifts the receiver and places it to his ear. The buzz of the phone comforts him like an adventure about to begin. He dials the number and shovels in change until the tinny voice on the other side has told him he's paid enough. The phone rings. Again. After the third ring a woman's voice answers.

"Hello?"

He listens, exhaling steam into the cold night air. That voice.

"Hello? Who is this?" He would cry if he could. The voice, that sweet lost voice.

He places the receiver into its cradle and turns back to the diner. Its lights beckoning, promises of comfort, of warmth, of life.

Gravel crunches under the soles of his cracked leather boots as he approaches the diner. From his mouth issues a

thick cloud of steam, his life's heat drifting into the night air. He pauses for a moment, thinking of clouds in the sky. The buzzing of honeybees on a warm summer day, laughter as he splashed in a lake with friends. So far away, so long ago.

A bell rings, snapping him from his reverie. The diner's door swings open, and a tired, gray old man steps out into the night. The old man tightens his thick collar around his pencil-thin neck, papery skin pale from the sudden cold. He nods to the Stranger. "Evening" he grunts.

The Stranger nods his acceptance of a fellow nighthawk.

"Colder than a nun's tits tonight, eh?" continues the old one. The Stranger nods again, places his hand on the door.

The old man tightens his cap and lumbers off toward a mud-caked pickup truck. The Stranger watches as the truck pulls out onto the blacktop. The crimson glow of the tail-lights speeds to the horizon, then vanishes, snuffed out like a pair of candles.

He shakes off the cold, stamping his feet, then opens the door to the diner, stepping through into the bright, gleaming, white-tiled sanctuary. He removes his gloves and rubs the heat back into his hands. The girl behind the counter looks up from her dog-eared paperback.

"Evening, sugar" she coos. "Just put a fresh pot on." She's lovely, he thinks. Her chestnut hair swings loose above her jaw, cut in a tight bob. She smiles at him, and he admires her eyes, green like verdigris bronze, shining bright in the fluorescent light of the diner.

He approaches the counter, taking a place on a swiveling stool. The girl turns to the pot of coffee and pours.

"How do you take it?"

A moment's hesitation; "Black," he replies.



The girl turns back to him and smiles. Oh, he thinks, she is beautiful, eyes like a summer glade.

"You got far to go?" she says.

"Why do you ask?"

She approaches the counter with the steaming pot of black liquid, then pours the coffee into a blue mug. A drop splashes over the rim, stark against the polished white countertop.

"Well," she replies, "Most folks don't go charging past here this late at night," she pauses and looks at her watch "or this early in the morning, unless they're trying to make time."

"No," he sighs. "I don't have far to go at all."

He lifts the mug under his face, inhaling the rising steam.

"You going to take off those shades?" she asks.

"No...eyes are used to the dark."

"I see," she chuckles. "Want me to turn down the lights?"

He sips the coffee. She's beautiful; he thinks it could be different with her.

"No. Not just yet." He takes a mouthful of the coffee, letting the dark, bitter fluid burn his tongue before swallowing.

The girl brings up a rag and wipes down the counter.

"Excuse me," he stammers.

"Yes?"

"Ah, nothing." He sips the coffee.

"What is it?" She takes a seat behind the counter, close to him.

God, could it be different with her? the voice in his head debates with itself. She has such...

"No... Well, I...you have beautiful eyes."

She blushes. "Thank you, that's kind."

"Well, I'm sure you hear that a lot."

"No," she says, "hardly ever at all."

"That's a shame."

"Would you take off those glasses?" She reaches towards his face.

His head jerks back, out of reach.

"No, it's too bright," he stands. It'll be the same...never different, she's the same as all the rest, he thinks.

"I'll turn down the lights."

Before he can tell her not to, the diner goes dark. He feels for something to steady himself with, and his hand comes to rest on the back of a peeling vinyl chair.

He feels a touch, whisper-light on his cheek.

"It's dark now," she says. "Take them off."

The same as all the rest...

Her hand pulls the sunglasses away. His head sags forward, long hair spilling before his face, cloaking it in shadow.

Her hand tugs on his shoulder, turning him toward her.

The same...

His voice, small and tired, finds itself. "Please don't," he says, as her hand reaches under his chin, lifting his face up so that she can see into his eyes. His strange eyes, solid verdigris green, lined with swirling, moving flecks of gold. The irises long, ragged slits, horizontal across the strange orbs. Something in the back of his brain, coiled around the top of his spine, twitches, stirs, wakes.

She shrieks and backs away from the strange man with the toad-like eyes. She reaches for something, anything to defend herself with, and her hand comes to rest on a sharp steel knife. The woman snatches it up, brandishing it in front of herself, and tells the stranger to "Stay the hell away from me! What are you?"

And the stranger rises from his stool. His clothing bulges and ripples; his throat swells to twice its size, and his mouth

opens. Wide, so wide, and she has an image in her mind's eye of a snake, or toad, or some awful scaled thing, trying to swallow something twice its size.

And with a coughing, gurgling, retching sound, black slime erupts from the stranger's mouth. Vomits forth, rolling down his chest and across the diner counter. And she screams as the slime coalesces, taking ropy, fibrous form. And her screams cut off as the black, viscous thing leaps at her face, forces its bulk into her mouth, her nostrils, her eyes...



The desert during the day is a blasted, heat-soaked wasteland.

Hours later, the sun has risen, heat waves are rising from the scorched dust of the desert. The diner is buzzing with corpulent black flies. Cherry-red siren lights beat a crazy kaleidoscope pattern against the wall of the eatery. Inside, a forensic crew tries to assemble the fragmentary clues hinting at the night's events.

A blue-clad officer stands amidst a sea of reporters; they thrust microphones at him as if for a blessing. Sweat rolls down his forehead, oozing between his jowls. He wipes his glistening face with a soaked handkerchief as he addresses the crowd. "There's nothing more I can tell you right now... please, just let us do our job."

"Excuse me, officer," a smartly dressed young woman interjects, the highway reflected in her silver glasses. "Is it true that the victim..." she glances at her notepad. "Is it true that when you found her, her eyes were torn out?"

"No comment."



## *Deep Dreams*

It's astonishing to realize how much pain a person can withstand and endure and incorporate into the everyday motions of life. Aches and sprains of minor annoyance become routine afterthoughts. Acquaintances' snipes and barbs irritate at first, but over time are seen as character flaws and accepted. Like the proverbial frog in a pot, discomfort evolves into complacency in the normal course of life, as we go about our daily tasks and chores.

Adam Marsh was aware on some fundamental level he was losing his grip on reality. But the descent had been so slow and gradual it never registered on his conscious mind. Over the past few months, he'd become more closed off, irritable, and disagreeable. However, his creative work had taken a turn for the better, and he felt a sense of productivity and accomplishment.

Adam had been an amateur painter and sculptor most of his life. He found the act of creating art pleasing and meditative. Even the little moments brought him pleasure: mixing dabs of paint, or the scrape of the palette knife on rough canvas, feeling the pressure of his fingers molding clay, and getting into the small details with his tools. All these things brought him pleasure and served as an outlet for his daydreams and fancies.

They had, however, never paid the bills. For the last few years he had woken early every day to pursue his art before

heading off to his day job. For a living he fixed cars, working for an independent mechanic and body shop for most of his adult life. He enjoyed the work, using his hands to build, alter, and repair. But it wasn't his soul's work.

A few months ago, the dreams began, and his sleeping mind picked up on something vast. At first, the dreams were of drowning. The same dreams again and again, where he was alone in a dark sea, floating in warm waves. Then thick and viscous water forced itself into his nose, down his throat. He was choking on the fluid while it pulled him under. Lapping waves and rivulets took on solid form, wrapping around him like the arms of drowned sailors seeking revenge. The stink of the ocean was in his lungs, cloying, salty, his brain on fire as the breath was expelled from his lungs and he sank beneath the surface.

He'd wake in a cold sweat, his sheets soaked around him. For moments he could not take a breath, his chest still aching and constricted. And then reality would rush around him like waves crashing onto the beach. Long, merciful gusts of air would flood in as he gasped at the air and collapsed back into the cold, wet sheets.

As the dreams intensified, Adam's art became his obsession. He sculpted, painted, created, moving from one piece to the next, flitting amongst his projects like a raven on a field of bloated corpses. And corpse-like they were. Images of men and women drowning. Some singularly, some in groups, masses. Faces wracked in terror of something only they could see. One vile image showed a group of men and women fleeing the crashing waves on a dark beach. The vague outline of misshapen beings lurked in the deep, watching and waiting. Long, ropy tendrils slid from the ocean's edge, reaching after the fleeing people. Another was a six-foot-tall extreme close view on a bloated corpse's face, lying dead on a raft at sea. Crabs unlike any seen before on Earth scam-

bled up the side of the face, picking at the blistering flesh, gorging on the bloated eyes.

All other exploits forgotten, Adam dreamed, and he created. He stopped going to his job, and a few days later, an angry voicemail from his employer told him his services were no longer necessary. He ceased even the most rudimentary of hygienic habits, and took sustenance with no pleasure in the act, only consuming the simplest of food found in his cupboards, chewing and swallowing while never taking his eyes off his art. When he slept, the dreams continued; he fell into them so that his waking hours became measured in handfuls. He became drawn toward them, called to the dreams despite his terrors. And the dreams got darker.

He dreamt not just of being pulled under, of drowning, but of sinking to the deepest recesses of the ocean. The alien, stygian abyss where nothing of the surface world could survive. He drifted and floated along the eddies and currents, watching the strange horrors of the deep parade before him. The translucent luminous creatures of the deep parted before him as he roamed. Often, strange, quasi-humanoid shapes darted in the periphery of his vision. Shimmering, scaled hide glinting in the darkness, distant, yet familiar. On the longest nights of his dreaming, he would come to a great city beneath the sea. A corpse-city of spires, and tombs, and great vaulted chambers within which sinister, dark shapes lurked amongst the weeds and detritus of the ocean floor.

The dreams called to him, gave him purpose. He found himself drawn to them, and to the deep. He wandered at night, leaving his meager home, and exploring out into the dark city surrounding him where he found kindred souls. Raving wanderers cast from the daylight world. Once, at an all-night diner, he found himself in a deep discussion regarding the fundamental nature of the universe. He and the night-people picked apart the notion of God, the Big Bang

and many other strange theories of the universe's creation. In the end they came to grudging agreement that none of them made any sense, and therefore they were all mad. On another of his wanderings, he stumbled over the corpse of a drifter. Rather than being startled or dismayed by it, he found it fascinating. He dragged it back to his home and spent a week watching it rot.

And all this while, the dreams continued. His nocturnal adventures did not slake his restlessness, nor did his art help any longer. His paintings had become more ragged, abstract. Almost more tones and emotions than images. To an observer, they were dark swathes of color and texture, representative of his growing mania more than any specific object or place. However, to Adam, they were his method of getting the images in his head out into the world. When he looked on the world around him, he saw in different ways than his fellow humans. Where we saw color, shape, logical angles and curves, he saw chaos, fluidity. The faces of monsters hid beneath the facade of humanity, and this was plain to Adam.

Throughout all this, he felt the tugging call of the ocean. The dreams spoke to him, beckoning him, and drew him to the sea. In time, he could no longer resist the call. He abandoned his home, withdrew the rest of his meager reserves of cash from the bank, and bought a train ticket to the coast. Air travel would have been faster, but when he thought of being that high above the world, panic and dread filled him. The high places of the world were anathema to him.

As the train progressed, hour by hour, day by day, he felt his anxiety lessen. He sketched and worked with pastel crayons in his cabin. Unsettling images which left the train's cleaning crew fearful and anxious when they stumbled across them. Images of the plains and valleys through which they were traveling, but not fertile and alive as they were—rather, the



images showed the landscape blasted, burned, and writhing with monstrosities.

Adam himself spent as much time alone in his cabin as he could. His physical aspect was mirroring his mental state: eyes bulged and stared out into space as his mind wandered; skin, sallow and puffy, hung in loose folds over his skeletal frame. By the time the train had reached the coast, his cabin was ripe with the pungent odor of his decay. The staff complained that it had a “fishy” element to it and were uncomfortable in his presence.

As the train reached the coast, Adam’s mood lightened. He peered out the window with awe and anticipation. And when he got his first whiff of sea air, his body electrified. As the train pulled into the station, Adam rushed off, across the platform, to the beach nearby. All his belongings lay forgotten in his cabin behind him. He had no use for them now.

He ran across the highway, dodging cars as they barreled by, honking their displeasure at him as he rushed onto the sandy banks, charging through the rushes of tall beach grass. The glinting ocean ahead called to him now, like a distant lover seen after a long absence. As he ran, he shed his clothing like a snake, writhing out of his filthy shirt and pants, kicking off his shoes. Beachgoers looked on in horror at the sight of this naked, filthy deformed madman, as he changed before their eyes, his face flattening and widening. His skin was a greasy gray-green color, his feet and hands gnarled, webbed, and clawed.

As he approached the lapping waters of the ocean, his change was complete. What he had resisted and thought to be madness was instead the blood of his ancestors calling him home. He dropped to all fours, his head raised high, and emitted a horrible barking croak that chilled the blood of those unfortunate to watch this spectacle. He dove into the ocean, the warm embrace of the sea surrounded him, pulled

him into it. He swam, reaching out with his webbed claws, and kicking forward against the surf. And as he pushed forward, league by league, he joined more of his kind. At first a few, then dozens, hundreds, an entire legion of his brethren swam silently through the dark water. From across the Earth's land and seas, the bloodline of Cthulhu, that titanic dead god beneath the sea, responded to the call. Into the dark, deep water they went. Toward the corpse city in the deep where their dead god lay dreaming.



## *The Crucible*

I'm going to tell you how I got here. It's not a long story, but I hope you'll get something out of it. Try to get comfortable; it won't be long.

Change is never easy, change of self least of all. Simple things are fixed with little effort. A fresh coat of paint to brighten up a room, or swapping ingredients in a recipe for something more unusual. But real changes are the most difficult. Those changes that cause you to truly alter your life. The ones where you take a long look at yourself and say "this isn't working" are when you realize you must reshape yourself and create a new reality. Or fade away.

So it was, when I was at the lowest point of my existence, that I found the Crucible. My career was over, due to some foolish improprieties with the company's financial records. My children despised me, and my wife's dalliances had become impossible to ignore. The foundation rock of my existence had crumbled away, until I felt as if I were standing on nothing more than a thimble-sized pinnacle, staring into the abyss surrounding me. I took to drink, and drugs, but the numbing effect never lasted, and I always woke up trapped in my body. Still my despised self.

The Crucible promised a change. The brochures and website espoused the notion of emotional reconstruction. A system where they break you down bit by bit and build you back up into a stronger whole. The price of the program

was steep, but it seemed my only chance. At that point in my existence, my only hope was something drastic. Either a rebuilding of myself, or a dance with the hangman's rope.

And so I made my decision and sent away the last of my savings to enroll. It would mean a flight, hotels, and a weekend on the outskirts of Las Vegas, away from my family, but an actual chance of hope. I would be able to say "I made it through. I am a better person now."

Before the actual class was to begin, there were endless forms and interviews. I talked about myself, my goals and dreams, my deepest fears and my gnawing worries. I spoke about things I hadn't told my closest friends, or family; even things I'd never admitted to myself. Of secret perversions, mistreatments, and crimes I'd never voiced to another soul. The interviewers had a way of putting me at ease, even just over the phone or the occasional video call. I'd speak for hours, barely even noticing that the time had passed. At the end, I'd rise as if from a daze, but refreshed, as if great burdens vanished from the deepest chasms of my soul, brought to light and expunged. As the days passed I felt almost lighter, dizzy with a sense of hope for a rebirth into something different, reborn. Maybe I could someday look at in the mirror without a sense of disgust and self-loathing.

When it was finally time to leave my family and travel to the Crucible, I did so gladly, and without fuss. I said my good-byes, which fell on deaf ears, and left the house. I had never been so alone, so drenched in failure, yet so full of hope.

My air travel to the Crucible was uneventful, aside from my usual hatred of plane flights. And the strange man an aisle over. I often looked up from the book I'd brought to pass the time, and finding him staring at once off into the distance, and yet right at me, as if he were gazing into my mind. When he would notice me meeting his gaze, he would return his attention to the yellowed notepad in his lap, scrawling a few

notes. I did not bother to guess their purpose. The paranoiac in me assumed he was making observations about myself, but the ridiculousness of the thought would pass with a sardonic chuckle, and I'd return to my book.

And yet, this nonverbal tête-à-tête continued throughout the flight. The plane landed, and the disheveled stranger with the vacant stare became lost in the crowd as we debarked the aircraft.

The rest of the day passed quietly if uncomfortably hot. My hotel squatted above a casino on the "Strip." It was bustling, busy, and chaotic, but the rates fit my meager budget. I had intended to spend my free time exploring the city and its surrounding areas, but the heat was miserable. So instead I ended up holed up in my room, sheltered from the blistering sun. The day wore on.

A few hours of boredom later it was time to venture out to the Crucible. Finding the place proved more difficult than I'd expected. I'd brought a pocket GPS device from home, and attached it to my rental car, but about half an hour out from Vegas, it failed me. The screen images tumbled, rolled, and spun as would a compass being bombarded by magnetization from all directions. As the sun sunk low over the mountains, I pulled into a gas station to get a proper paper map and ask directions.

I joked with the clerk behind the counter about my GPS and general lack of good fortune for any sorts of modern technology. He at first seemed amused by my story, but as I mentioned I was trying to find the Crucible, his attitude became cold. I got the distinct impression I was not the first waylaid wanderer attempting to find the place. In fact, he warned me off. He told me I should just leave well enough alone and return to my home. When pressed, he wouldn't tell me why. Perplexed, I left, and assumed that perhaps he was a disgruntled graduate of the program.

My anxiety increased as I drove. I was still trying to find the location, and the start time of the first session was fast approaching, and I feared I'd be late for the opening ceremonies, or check-in, or whatever they would call it. In my calls with the group earlier, they'd made it clear everything would start on time, and not to be late.

And then, as panic rose in me, I located the Crucible. I drove around it twice to make sure, but there it was, looming out of the failing daylight, sandwiched between a Subway franchise and a Grills & Hot Tubs store. I don't know what I was expecting, but a small office in the corner of a decrepit strip mall wasn't it. I parked my car in the dusty lot and hastened to the front door to check in.

There was a palpable miasma of broken souls in the hall as we waited for the program to begin. Fifty people waiting, clinging to the false promise of a changed life, of a new beginning. We signed forms without reading them, we shook hands, and nervous small talk rushed through the room. And then, with mediocre fanfare, they led us into the conference hall.

I expected grandiosity, or at least a sense of wonder, but what we found was a simple, plain room, conference tables along one wall, and a bank of dozens of folding chairs before a small stage. As we took our seats, a hush fell over the room; one by one we lost interest in the meaningless chit-chat, and the lights went low and dim.

A pair of figures entered, strode through the dim light, and took the stage. The woman was tall and beautiful. There was something ethereal about her—an almost supernatural presence that drew eyes and minds to her. The man was likewise tall, standing head and shoulders above the tallest among us. His gait was lithe and languorous as he glided to the stage. He took the stage, turning to face us. All eyes fell on him. When he spoke, his voice was like the beating of angelic

wings. Or perhaps the predatory thrumming of a swarm of murderous wasps.

He spoke to us of the world and our place in it, weaving a tapestry of pain and remorse, of our individual journeys that had led us to this place. The longer he spoke, the more his presence enraptured us. His power and promises bound us. His words burrowed into our minds and blinded us to the memories of the outside world.

And as he held the throng in rapture, he spoke of change and of the genesis of a new world. He drew us into his vision, to see the failing world as a phoenix waiting for a rebirth. The Tall Man spoke of us as the heralds of a new age and reality. He showed us we had a purpose. We had a place in this new world. Our lives had led to this moment. To this place. This nexus of everything. And so in that moment we swore ourselves to him, the Tall Man with the sweet words. For he would show us the way and send us to show others. We would burn the world and usher in its rebirth. He is ancient, all-knowing. He is the muse of genius, and the whispering of madness. The incarnation of change, and the morphic shifting of realities to come.

And now it's happening. The world is changing. You see it on the news and breathe it in the air. Chaos surrounds us, infests us. Changes us. So now I will give you the greatest gift of all. When the Tall Man whispered his secrets to us, he sent us into the world. He sent us to go forth and find brothers and sisters to bring to his side. They will revel in the glory of the reborn world. Listen carefully now. I'll even loosen your restraints as long as you don't try to run. Now, I'm only allowed to tell you this once....





## *Frost Bite*

Jimmy crushed a glowing cigarette butt out under the heel of his scuffed work boots, smearing the ash against the cold, dirty linoleum floor of the main hallway in the East Ward of the Chambers Hospital. Moonlight filtered in through the mesh-reinforced glass panes lining the hallway. He walked across to one window and peered into the courtyard below. Rain spattered in thick, fat drops against the glass, and formed rippling pools on the cobblestone driveway below him. Way down in the hazy glow of yellowing streetlights he could see his car, a beat-up old Chevy Impala that was once cherry red, two or three owners before him. Now it was just a faded lump of rust held together with duct tape and prayer.

“Great,” he said to nobody in particular. “My life has become a fucking cliché. Walking the halls of a creepy-ass abandoned hospital on Halloween night. In the fucking rain.”

It’s getting cold early this year, but he’s too young to notice the change. It’s the old-timers who mutter about how it “didn’t used to get this cold until near Thanksgiving.” The setting sun catches in his eyes. An impish sparkle shines for a moment before vanishing.

He’s wearing the mantle of trouble and worry, but can’t place why. Most of his friends left at the end of summer. Either to college, or for those with less ambition, just “the hell out of town.” Graduation was a bittersweet affair, as he knew there wasn’t much chance he’d ever see most of them again.

The people he'd grown up around were off in different directions and he was staying put.

But he knew he'd be okay, even if he had to wait a year to go to college. He'd busted his ass in four years of high school and gotten a partial scholarship to Miskatonic in Arkham. It wasn't his first choice (anything in sunny California, Florida, really anywhere warm would have been better), but it was a damn good school, and would look better on his resume than community college. The scholarship was a boon, and he figured if he took a year off to work and save up, he'd be able to hit the ground running in his freshman year, with a little money in the bank. Seeing as he was the first child in his family to go to college, and being raised by his single mom and all, he'd do just about anything to help with the tuition.

He took the job as a caretaker at the old Chambers Asylum out of necessity. He doesn't like it much, but the pay's decent, and all he has to do is walk the perimeter twice a night to keep an eye out for troublemakers. The place has been empty for most of the last twenty years, and now it's little more than a local curiosity on the edge of town. However, it occupies prime local real estate and a development company has taken a keen interest in keeping the property "safe." By which they mean they don't want a bunch of punk teenagers messing around in there, getting hurt and suing them before they can convert thing into high-priced luxury condominiums.

Jimmy doesn't care about that stuff though; he's just collecting a paycheck. With luck, he might find something different. Something that will distract him, keep his mind elsewhere. But now, he's got a job. Tonight is Halloween, and that means everyone is pulling a shift at Chambers. Punks, Goths, and many troublemakers have a habit of descending

on the old abandoned hospital on Halloween night, booze and rumors of ghosts getting their blood flowing.

His boss, the toad-like Franklin Gandoffi, had let him know in no uncertain terms that "every damn one of the caretakers" were working tonight, because Gandoffi was too cheap a bastard to hire a real security team.

Jimmy stood back from the window and shone his flashlight up the hallway, scanning back and forth. From the distance came the echo of approaching footsteps.

"That you, Rick?" he called into the darkness.

"Course it's me. Fuck else you think it is?" came the gruff reply. A moment later and Rick Franklin came around a corner, swinging his trademark thermos of spiked coffee in one hand, and his five-cell Maglite in the other. He'd named the flashlight "Exclobberer" one night after a crackhead jumped him getting out of his car. He beat the living crap out of his attacker with it, and since he'd been watching that King Arthur cartoon with his kids all week, the name just came to him.

"Man, how the hell did I end up spending Halloween night with an ugly SOB like you?" Rick said, and a grin split his face as he unscrewed the cap to his thermos.

"Guess we both got lucky," Jimmy replied, and blew warm air into his hands, rubbing them together for warmth.

Rick took a swig out of the thermos before he offered it to Jimmy. "Keep the chill out your bones, son?"

Jimmy accepted and drank a mouthful of the warm brew. He handed the thermos back to Rick and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You seen anything tonight?" Rick asked, aiming the white arc of Exclobberer's glow up and down the corridor. Loose ceiling tiles had fallen to the floor. At the end of his field of vision, an old steel wheel chair lay on its side. Graffiti was

smear across the peeling walls of the grim hallway. He could almost make out the baroque design work, but from the colors of the spray paint, he figured at least half a dozen local gangs had claimed this as their territory at one time or another.

“Not a damn thing,” Jimmy said. “Total waste of my night. Least we’re getting paid overtime for the extra shift.”

“Least there’s that.” Rick took one more swig out of the thermos and sauntered off down the hallway. “I’ll catch you on my next circuit. Say hi to the rest of the gang for me.”

“Yeah, will do,” Jimmy said, turning his flashlight back down the hallway and walking through the darkness. He heard Rick’s footsteps getting farther and farther away. Aside from Rick, he had seen none of the other caretakers in over an hour. “Betcha he’s holed up in the boiler room with a fifth of Jack and a pack of cards. Damn, it’s cold,” he mumbled to himself, noticing his breath steaming before him.

Jimmy kept walking, casting the light back and forth, back and forth against the walls of the hospital. The chill was unexpected, and he’d not brought his gloves. Sometimes he brought his hands to his face to blow warmth onto them. Often, when he was here by himself, he’d wonder what type of people had lurked here. What variety of ailments, physical or psychological, had brought people to the Chambers Hospital fifty or a hundred years ago?

Out of nowhere he saw a shape dart across the hallway, out of the field of his flashlight. Hard to make out in the dark. Maybe a kid dressed in a dark costume; might be a trick of the light. He stepped up his pace and reached for his walkie-talkie. As he brought it to his lips and pressed the “send” button Jimmy whispered, “Rick, we got a bogie.” He raised the radio to his ear, the volume low, but all he got was static.

He depressed the button again. "I'm at the top of the fourth-floor service stairway; I'm gonna take a look."

He stood in front of the old metal door. He hesitated for a moment, then put his face up to the small glass window in the center. Beyond was a dark stairwell, illuminated only by the faint moonlight filtering down through a shattered skylight a few stories up. He pushed the latch bar and opened the door.

A blast of cold air greeted him as he stepped onto the landing. He cast the beam of the flashlight up and down, but saw nobody. Jimmy could hear the patter of hail on the skylight above him, soft, susurrant. Hadn't it been rain a few minutes ago? Thick chips of ice fell from the sky, stinging his skin where they hit him.

And below him, the stumping of footsteps. He stepped forward to the railing and looked down, aiming his flashlight into the abyss, and saw the dark shape again, hand on the railing, walking downward. Down toward the basement.

Halfway down the shape stopped and turned up to Jimmy. Inky black eye sockets swam within a white face which glowed softly. It pulled back from the railing and Jimmy felt a chill creep up his spine. Something at the back of his scalp contracted and told him to run, to get the hell out of here. He shook his head. "Just a kid in a mask" he told himself. "One of those shitty dime-store skeleton masks. That's all."

"Hey!" he called down into the stairwell. "This is private property, jackass!" No reply. "I don't want to come down after you any more than you want me to, so why don't you get your ass back up here, and I'll escort you off the premises, and we call it a night?"

He waited a moment, and descended the stairs, one by one. He raised the walkie to his mouth and pressed the button. As he did so, a sudden chill came over him. As of invisible

icy tendrils slinking around him, enveloping him. His feet crunched ice as he crept forward. The ground was slick with hailstones; he took one more step and his feet froze solid to the ground. Hearing a crackling, crunching, grating sound, and feeling an oozing chill on his neck, and he knew something was behind him.

Clammy fingers closed around his throat; he felt the cold of the grave as a hand gripped his arm, another his leg. Cold flooded over his body, numbing him, freezing him in place. Out of the corner of his right eye, he saw a pale, moon-white hand slide across his field of view and felt a moment of absolute horror as the fingers dug into his eye sockets, plucking out his eyeballs. He tried to scream but cold fingers slithered into his mouth, gripping his tongue and pulling. His mouth filled with his own blood and the heat poured out of his body. Something grabbed his leg, and he forced his head down, drooling blood over the pale, moon-faced horror gnawing on his thigh with a black mouth full of rows of dagger-like teeth, like a shark's. A howling noise rose from the thing on his back, joined by the one at his leg. And then a chorus of wailing grew all around him, as more of the things, lean, hungry, and cold as the grave, slunk towards him.



A few hours later, Rick found Jimmy's flashlight in a pool of frozen blood on the stairwell at the fourth-floor landing of the Chambers Hospital. Police came, and searched the building. Posters went up with Jimmy's picture on them around town. Nobody ever saw Jimmy Fenlon alive again, and soon nobody even remembered him.



## *Yellow Dreams, Ochre Skies*

The curse of humanity has always been our curiosity. Ever since we crawled from the slime, we've been obsessed with discovering what lies around the corner, up over the next hill, beyond the stars. The constant search for knowledge is a thinly veiled attempt at self-discovery. That perpetual tugging feeling that humanity is more than a collection of random atoms held together by tension and physics, but rather that we are somehow important. That we are mirror images of some benign creative force, sent forth into the wilds to explore, to discover, and to report our findings to our tribe. But in fact, we are barely more than the feral apes which share our form and genetics.

This was the realization that led Antony Marchand to understand that the most vile expression of base humanity was art of any sort. The arrogance of the creative impulse was a thing which only humanity could infer from our place in the cosmos. Art forces us to feel that our thoughts, our feelings, our needs and wants, are actually important in the face of a malignant or often indifferent universe. "Because," Antony once thought, "I imagined this thing." And once he began to think of himself as imaginative, he thought of himself as creative. And when Antony felt creative, he felt that God Himself had smiled upon him, and only him. And that he must share his vision with the world. That this inconsequential thought which had come upon him gave Antony some sort



of divine mandate to go forth into the world, and inflict his vision upon others. "Once they see my vision," he once told himself, "They will not only understand me, but themselves, as well."

But the truth of the matter is far removed from the impulse which drove him. Indeed it was truly some fatal flaw in the tapestry of reality which caused him to force his vision on the world. It was the recursive creative energies of entropy, of chaos, of malformed reality which spurred Antony on to seek deeper meaning of what he saw in his mind's eye.

For when Antony was still with his mind, it was then that he wandered far. Learning the art of entering a trance state from Eastern mystics, he felt that his soul, or consciousness, or ka, or whatever spark within, was able to separate itself from his body, and travel far from this placid island we call Earth. Far into the sea of night, of stars. And oh, how he now wished he'd never taken that journey. For his mind wandered the recesses of the universe, and touched other thoughts, saw other sights for which feeble mortal minds could never prepare. Until he finally came to the black city on the black lake, on the black world. The lake which roiled and bubbled on the shores of that dead beach, and the towering spires which loomed there. And the voices, those grinding, sinful whispers issuing from unseen beings, repeating the two sinister words over and over: "Hali" and "Hastur."

Those words gnawed into Antony's mind—bored into his brain like worms and reached to the center of his being. For those words were the names of that which he'd sought for so long. The source and the impulse of creativity. Not the ordered scientific creation of worlds which exist by following the rules of science, the feeble laws of nature. No, these were the tremulous tones at the core of the chaos, the random, the nonsensical whims of entropy and madness. These were the names of the creative sparks lying latent in all consciousness.

They were the percussive throb underlying the heartbeat of the cosmos, pounding across time and dimensions.

With this realization festering in his soul, Antony found himself torn from the dark lake, ripped across time and space and back to his weakened human form. Days had passed in his journey of understanding. Days in which his body had lain in squalor, unnourished, unmoving. Had anyone chanced upon Antony, they would not have been foolish in mistaking his trancelike state for that of death itself. As his dry eyes opened, and his aching joints and muscles began to flex for the first time in many days, he found himself filled with renewed purpose.

Over the following days, he gathered the castoffs of the world. The mad, the diseased. The artists, poets, and musicians. Antony spoke to them of the black lake on the black world. He touched their minds in ways that only the truly enlightened may reach the truly mad. For one is by necessity a component of the other. And his followers grew. Days became weeks and months, and soon his followers were legion, and took on an aspect of a carnival of the damned. They reveled in an orgy of creation, of art, of madness made manifest.

But the black lake on the black world, that foul bog Hali, was not done yet with Antony Marchand. As he fasted and feasted and spouted the words of creation to his followers, he began to change. Subtle differences at first: an affectation of an odd pattern of speech, strangely baroque and out-of-place clothing. But in time his body began to become as random and twisted as his mind. His limbs stretched, his face became a horror show grimace of teeth and sores. He took to wrapping himself in bandages to contain the pus and other secretions which his body constantly oozed from suppurating abscesses and lesions.

In truth, he was barely Antony Marchand any longer. For when his mind had made that fateful trek across the limitless gulfs of reality, he had indeed touched another mind. A mind trapped on the black world, trapped on the shores of the black lake. The thing called Hastur itself had put tenebrous hooks into Antony's exposed soul, and followed it back to Earth. The longer Antony espoused the truths of the universe, the longer he surrounded himself with the mad sycophants he called his followers, the less he was indeed Antony, and the more he became the Prophet of the end times. The essential Antony-ness faded over time, and eventually all that was left was the Yellow King, the Prophet and Predecessor of Hastur itself. The gnawing thought-thing that will force cracks in reality, and let the full awfulness of Hastur through to our world.

And messengers of the King in Yellow spread. They slunk unseen through the night places, they glided on silent wings, whispering songs of madness and adaptation before them. They were insidious and unstoppable. From one town to the next they traveled, ravenously emptying every city they came to, collecting new followers and leaving blasted wastes behind them, sowing desecration in their wake. When they met resistance, they devoured it. Death itself did not stop them, as the holy secretions of the King in Yellow simply caused the dead to walk again, reveling in their newfound freedom, to bring a holocaust of frenzy and madness to bear on the unsuspecting world.

As the once-Antony, now King in Yellow, led his mad throng across the world, the world changed in his passing. Nature became twisted and capricious. Logic and science fell to chaos as the mad whims of the Yellow King manifested in ever-more-horrific ways. Survivors in California were horrified when one morning the sun ground to a halt midway to rising. It never moved again for them, casting its baleful,

ruddy glow across the Pacific Ocean like a drowsy cyclops. In the American heartland crops suddenly withered overnight, as children went feral, killing adults and marching off to follow the Yellow King. Across the Asias, cenobitic monks stabbed out their own eyes and ears, cutting themselves off from the rest of reality forever.

In time, the march of madness begun by that mad dreamer Antony Marchand reached its peak. The mad artists, psychotics, and broken people who followed him ground the world beneath their bloody feet. It was then, on a whisper, on a tinge of chill in the fall air that the preparations were complete, and the King in Yellow opened the Void. His bandaged fingers, crusted with black pus, and throbbing with pain and power, reached toward the core of everything. Broken black nails plucked apart the very fabric of reality, thread by thread, stitch by stitch, until he could glimpse the black lake Hali beyond the rip. And all was right with his plans and plots, and the minds of his minions shattered, and their bodies were rent by the foul wind off the lake, as if with the lashes and barbs of the scourges of hell itself.

In the last moments, through the rift poured Hastur itself, at once thought and form. Madness made flesh, and flesh made madness. The King in Yellow laid the world low, spread out the banquet before Hastur.

And Hastur fed.



## *Homecoming*

“Ah, the joy of country life,” she thought as her bus bumped and jostled along the decrepit backwoods road. Karen Binchley was a big-city girl with big-city dreams and a small-town past. She wasn’t outgoing enough to compete in the theater major she’d started college in, and needing to fill out her general education requirements, she’d stumbled on a psych class. A few years of hard work later she’d managed a degree in psychology, and many thousands of dollars of student loan debt.

But ideals only carry one so far, and hopes and dreams can’t fill an empty belly. One day she woke up, looked around at her crappy apartment in a crappy part of a crappy city, gazed disgustedly over at her crappy loser boyfriend, packed her bags, and found herself on a bus home. And that’s how she ended up here, where even Greyhound won’t go. Indeed, she had to take two connections once she reached Boston to get where she was grudgingly going.

That’s how she came home, and how she ended up staring through the grimy bus window at a rickety, bullet hole-ridden sign outside a grim, ramshackle town. Below it, the population number had been crossed out and rewritten with marker so many times as to finally become an illegible amorphous mass. On the main sign, a single word glared back at her with malicious intent: “Dunwich.”

Karen hated Dunwich. There was no point sugarcoating her feelings for the place, but it was still home. When the rest of the world had ground her down, there was one place she could always return to. Slovenly and downtrodden as it was. It was an old town, dating back to the early 1700s at least. Records had been spotty at that time, of course. Most of the settlers just found a place, put up a shack and called it their own. Rumors of witches and goblins kept the government at bay for many years, and nobody bothered with things like deeds of land or ownership papers.

Mostly quiet, and awfully spread out, the residents of Dunwich kept to themselves. There'd been some trouble on Sentinel Hill in the early 1900s, but it was hushed up pretty quickly and forgotten. Whispers of devil worship and old gods, and magical nonsense were spoken of even in her time. But nobody paid much heed to the tales of Old Wizard Whately, and he and his awful sons soon became the stuff of boogeyman legend. In the 1970s, there'd actually been a bit of a boom in the area. The auto industry came in briefly, attempting to set up manufacturing in and around Dunwich. This led to an influx of housing, as well as the dreaded "outsiders" and "city folks" slowly encroaching on what used to be a safe haven for the odd residents of the Miskatonic Valley. Karen's dad was one of these. He came in to manage a new Ford Motor Company plant, met her mother, and stayed a while.

Predictably, the industry didn't last. The town shriveled and died until it was back to a small town with lots of empty buildings and a few original inhabitants. By the time Karen left for college, Dunwich had passed by decline to life support. Now it was firmly in decay. Her mother had died when Karen was a child, and her father hanged himself shortly before Karen left for college. The old family home was hers now, despite her many attempts to try and sell it. Few peo-

ple come to Dunwich of their own choosing, and fewer still want to settle there. As the grimy bus spat fumes along what passed for the main street of town, Karen couldn't help but notice the soaped-over windows, the dusty, drooping "Going out of business!" signs, and other indicators of a city in its death throes.

Like it or not, the long trip home was almost over. The bus ground to a halt in front of the only hotel in town still in operation. As she exited the bus, Karen noticed the eyes of the townsfolk watching her—the few strange old men and women lingering downtown, hoping to catch a glimpse of something new, something noteworthy. Wanting to know exactly what was coming into their domain, even if they feared and resented the outside influence. The sidewalks were uneven and filthy; one more thing that hadn't changed since she left. She knew she'd end up having to walk to her house from the bus stop. Definitely no Uber out here, she thought to herself.

Fortunately the town was small enough that it wouldn't be difficult. And so she threw her pack across her shoulder, lifted her suitcase, and began walking. As she trudged through town she could still feel eyes upon her. Furtive glances were thrown at her from behind hastily drawn curtains. A lone shopkeeper stopped sweeping the front steps of Bishop's All You Can Need General Store, leaned on his broom, and watched her with suspicion as she crossed the street to avoid him. As a child, she'd always gotten a strange feeling from that store and its weird owners. He didn't look like one of the Bishops that she remembered, but better safe than sorry.

A few more blocks, and then she turned up the hill on Sentinel Road, making the final ascent to her home. By the time she got to the steps of her house, she was beaded with sweat and ready to be done with carrying her meager belongings. The house itself was a two-story affair, built and probably abandoned in the early twentieth century, then renovated in



the 1970s when her father came to town chasing a career. Much like Karen, it was a product of neglect, loss, and disillusion. Gabled roofs wrapped around a brick chimney that hadn't felt heat in years. The house seemed cold. Not so much frozen in time and place, but dead. Hollow, she thought. She had few warm memories of the place, none easily called to mind. She climbed the short staircase to the porch, and remembered the time she'd fallen running around the corner, slipping in the gravel surrounding the house, and lodging black grit under the skin of her bloody knee.

Karen still had her key, and was almost disappointed to find that it still fit the lock. Opening the door, she was met with darkness, quiet, and the musty, dusty smell of a family home abandoned to time. She noted a familiar, round-faced clock on the wall, its blocky, service-like hands pointing at 9:23. Karen found herself wondering when the clock had finally given up the ghost. How long since those hands stopped trying to measure the movement of time, and just resigned themselves to only engaging in reality twice a day. She supposed everyone got to that point eventually. Maybe she already had.

Continuing through the house, she moved around furniture covered with dusty cloths, finding her way through the once-familiar passages and rooms, walking through her memories like a stranger. Eventually she decided on the family room to rest for the night. Throwing back the dusty drop cloth on the couch presented her with a serviceable and relatively clean space to rest. Her pack and case were left next to the fireplace after she rummaged through her pack to scrape together something for an evening meal. A few granola bars and the remains of a pack of turkey jerky would have to hold her over until morning. Fortunately the house had a well on the premises, so a quick trip to the pump meant she at least had water to drink. Tomorrow she would go down to Bishop's and begin stocking the pantry.

As she sat and ate, her eyes grew tired; it had been a long, tiring day. The light through the windows from outside changed from white to gold to deep orange and, finally, scarlet. She wanted to sleep, but was also restless enough that she didn't feel she could. Checking her watch, the time was only 9:23 in the evening. She thought maybe if she read for a bit, her eyes might get tired and help her to sleep. She'd been trying to make her way through a Sutter Cane potboiler she'd picked up at the bus station in New York for a few days, but reading it just made her angry. She thought maybe if she tried it again, it'd bore her enough to sleep.

A few pages in, however, she was startled by roaming headlights approaching her house. Floodlights through the big picture window caused her to sit upright and peer out toward the road leading up the hill. But when her eyes adjusted, she saw no car, no vehicle of any sort. Thinking maybe she'd dozed off and dreamed it, she took her seat on the couch, unnerved. Moments later, the front of the house was once again flooded with light. White, purple, orange, swirling and thronging. Running to the window, Karen once again looked out, but could find no source of the glow. It seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

The light pulsed through the front window like a living thing, as if it were searching the room for her, or for any signs of life. And then, again, in an instant it was gone.

Her eyes were tearing up from the intensity of the light. Silhouettes of the furniture and objects in the room were seared into her retinas, but fading slowly. She rubbed her eyes, shook her head, and tried to clear her vision. Checking her watch once again, she found herself cursing the cheap timepiece. According to the watch, it was still 9:23.

And then outside the house she heard voices, distant and low at first, and then closer and more distinct. She crossed the living room and went to open the front door, but as her

hand closed around the doorknob, she recoiled in horror. Expecting the cold, brassy feel of the knob, she was disgusted to feel something warm, spongy, almost pulsing with life. The door itself was slick with pinpricks of moisture. Wiping her hand on her jeans, she felt the slime coating her palm, felt it ooze onto her pant leg, moist and warm.

The light returned, blazing through the windows, dappling her skin with all the colors she could imagine, and many she could not. Coalescing into sickly white, and then shattering, splintering into a madman's spectrum once again. The door trembled in its frame, shuddered, and then let out a sound almost like a sigh, a choke, and then disintegrated into a fine powder. And the disintegration spread, the walls of the house crumbling into their component atoms, and tumbling haphazardly into the eddies and currents of the strange wind which caressed her skin, which seemed to follow the shadows and glimmers of the sickening light. She felt translucent, transparent, as her body took on a sheen like glass, and looking down she could see through her skin, through her muscles, even to the bones within.

The light failed once again. The walls of the house surrounded her, and her skin was solid, opaque. She screamed and rushed forward, slamming herself against the door, and bouncing back as a jolt of pain shot through her shoulder. She barreled at the door again, taking it off its hinges and out of its frame, and stumbled into the night air. Karen rolled across the porch, tumbled over the stairs and came to rest on her hands and knees at the base, her hands torn to shreds by the gravel surrounding the house. When she looked up, she saw dozens of people standing on the other side of the gravel pathway, staring intently, unblinkingly, at her. The man from the general store, the faces in the windows—all the loathly inhabitants of devil-haunted Dunwich stood just

outside the ring of gravel. They looked at her with malicious intent in their feral eyes.

The light returned, casting its baleful gaze across the throng, revealing them for their true selves. Karen looked upon the real forms of the inhabitants of Dunwich for the first time, and saw inhuman monsters before her. Saw the shifting bodies, the limbs replaced by hungry, sucking tendrils. Saw the eyes black as the dead places between the stars. The horrible disfigurements of insane gods' whims. And then the bodies began to flow, to merge, to conjoin in a despicable orgy of complete chaos. The light grew stronger, the hideous flesh of the multitude bubbled and roiled, and great balls of light vomited forth from the rippling forms.

The old god rose from the new flesh. The light was flesh and flesh was the light. And the world trembled as the night was rent with the screams of the mad old gods, and what was begun on Sentinel Hill so many years ago was finally finished. What old Wizard Whately had started was complete. Karen Binchley was just the first unfortunate soul to be caught in the beginning of the new world.



## *Feeding the Cuckoo*

The end of the world spread like a virus. From every corner of the globe came stories about doomsday cults spreading their insane ramblings. Then the unbelievable stories about the monsters. Stomping, gnawing, rending things of indescribable form and shape. Nightmare creatures prophesied by the fevered ravings of madmen and hack writers.

Of course, in addition to death and taxes, the other true inevitability of life on earth is that no matter how awful things get for the common man, the very rich and very powerful go on. When the streets and alleys run with blood, the ballrooms and boardrooms flow with brandy. But even those endless parties become stale over time.

William James Thorne was one of those people whose wealth was not so great that the common man had ever heard of him. Still, his family's riches went back generations, and he was comfortably loaded. He was not a celebrity because of his wealth, but he was still able to sit high above the fires as the world burned around him. So it was that he found himself at the end of days, contemplating his past, and wondering if there was much of a future before him.

Among his many fortunes, Thorne was lucky enough to have a fully-staffed kitchen and waitstaff living on-site in this house. He wasn't sure if they were a family, or simply shared a common ethnic heritage. Frankly, Thorne was too wrapped up in his own wonderings to care much either way. The

staff of the house had been here since he was a boy. Immigrants fleeing some warlord or uprising in their homeland. Thorne's father had sponsored them years ago, in one of his few moments of misguided altruism. They were unusual people, keeping mostly to themselves, but hardworking and obedient to the elder Thorne.

William never could remember where they came from specifically. Only that they seemed to call themselves 'Chau-chaus,' or something like that. Might have been a French term for a group of Vietnamese hill people for all he knew. He never bothered getting close to them, or showing any interest in them in the slightest. They cooked well enough, kept the house clean, and stayed out of his affairs, and that was enough for him. The Tcho-Tcho servants took great care to keep Thorne happy and healthy, though. He was brought the choicest cuts of meat, the freshest vegetables, the premium fare from the larder. They fawned on him to an annoying degree. And still he barely acknowledged them.

His house had become a safe haven for the vastly wealthy; his compatriots and peers, whether he liked them or not. Many of his guests had been stranded nearby when the airports closed, as flight became unsafe. The roads became a wasteland, and so people (even those of unlimited means) eventually had no way to travel. Soon, Thorne had found himself host to a party that seemed to have been going on in one form or another for months on end. The faces occasionally changed, but the wine and food continued. The conversation ebbed and flowed, but that was to be expected. Reports of revolution, civil uprisings, and chaos in the streets were commonplace at first. And over time the news changed to the surreal stories of misshapen extra-dimensional intruders. By the time the world was indeed ending, Thorne's guests had begun to embrace a sort of mania infused with

the sudden realization of their own cosmic insignificance. All hope had been abandoned by those who entered his home.

Decadent days and nights stretched out into weeks. The people to whom Thorne had offered sanctuary began to slowly irritate him, and then to become nearly intolerable. He took to spending more time alone in his study. The dark walls and luxurious furnishings comforted him. He closed the thick drapes across the immense picture windows so as to block out the view of the city burning in the distance. He would spend hours in solitude while the party went on in the rest of the house and the servants saw to the needs of his guests. Outside, the world died. Inside the house music and revelry reigned, stained with a caul of mania and desperation. And within his sanctum, Thorne drank and ruminated. Alcohol numbed his fears and worries, and he began to care less and less about anyone but himself. He started fantasizing about doing away with his houseguests completely.

The first murder was a shock, though it only quelled the enthusiasm of the throng momentarily. The body had been found in an upstairs bathroom by a state senator from someplace in the Midwest. A captain of industry found gutted and strangled with his own intestines, but with a look of glee across his face. Bloody loops wrapped around the corpse's neck, pulled tight. The tongue thick and black, and protruding from the mouth. Red and bloody eyes bulged from the face. The senator recoiled into the hallway upon first seeing this sight, retching up the steady diet of appetizers and strong liquor he'd been on for the past few days. He was able to find one of the Tcho-Tcho servants, and barely managed to explain what he'd found. Within an hour, the housekeepers had cleared away the mutilated corpse and returned to their quarters.

Thorne was informed of this tragic event, but cared little for the details. One less mouth to feed; one less source of

inane chatter and small talk. Later that night, the senator and corpse were the center of attention of Thorne's guests as they were treated to a Tcho-Tcho specialty for dinner: "Pork with White Sauce." They dined heartily. The senator gained some small status of celebrity within the circle of Thorne's guests. He was asked to repeat the story of finding the corpse over and over for the next few days. The tale grew in the telling, and became more gruesome and ghastly each time he regaled the throng with it. Indeed, he was in the middle of telling the story yet again when he began to gasp and choke, and sprang to his feet as a fountain of blood poured from between his lips. His throat bulged with the force of the gout, popping the top button off his shirt as a great mass of meaty tissue forced its way from his mouth.

He clawed at his own throat, unkempt nails raking at skin stretched thin. And then he fell to the ground, dead, as the bloody mass slithered out from his gaping maw, jaw unhinged and lips torn from the force of its exit. The group around his body stood in shock, as the thing spasmed a few times. Its malformed limbs twitched and shivered, and then it was still. A scream broke the silence and pandemonium followed. In short order, the Tcho-Tcho servants rushed into the room, took the senator's body and the strange, vaguely humanoid thing, rolled them up in the blanket on which they lay, and dragged the remains quickly out of the room. A trail of blood drops followed in their wake, and was the only indication of their passing.

The meal that night was again, sumptuous. Few of the guests—still reeling from the shock of the senator's death—had the appetite to eat it. But Thorne, alone in his study, was insatiable. He gorged on the braised veal placed before him. He was inexplicably ravenous, and that night he slept sated.

After the death of the senator, a few of Thorne's guests decided that they would rather take their chances outside.



The house wasn't safe, they agreed. Something was terribly wrong in this charnel pit, and they must get out. The Tcho-Tchos tried to keep them calm, tried to appease them with sweet promises of safety, of decadent pleasures of the flesh and mind. A few fell sway to these seductions, but two guests had been through enough, and made a rush for the gates: Mary and Jacob, film producers with a string of minor hits behind them.

As they pushed the doors open, trying desperately to get outside, Mary was the first to die. As she shouldered open the massive doors to Thorne's mansion, the ruddy sunlight trickled through the opening. Where it touched her skin, her flesh began to bubble, pop, liquefy, and ooze off her bones. She shrieked more in surprise than pain, as the flesh was numb and the process of dissolution utterly painless.

Jacob rushed to her side, only to feel a lancing pain in his shoulder. Turning around, he saw one of the Tcho-Tchos grinning at him. That maniac grin was doubly disturbing coming from the squat, wide face of the Tcho-Tcho—the Tcho-Tcho with a silver tube gripped in one hand, from which he'd just fired a dart into Jacob's back. A dart laced with poison that raged through Jacob's blood, fried his brain, and caused him to fall moments later to the floor. Jacob's head cracked on the marble tiles as he fell. The scalp split open, and blood, thick and curdling, oozed from the wound. Moments later, the same red congealed mass began to pour from his nose, eyes and mouth. In less than a minute, his body liquefied from the inside out, much as Mary's shortly did from the outside in. The Tcho-Tcho giggled as he watched the skeletal remains of the two would-be escapees, now just bones in puddles of putrescence. That night, the Tcho-Tchos bathed Thorne. They anointed him in pungent, exotic oils and perfumes. They fed him a thick, hearty soup as they danced around him and chanted over and over again: "Ubbo! Sathla!" His eyes stared

mindlessly, vacantly into space as they dribbled spoonfuls of soup between his lips. Over the next few hours, the rest of the guests were rounded up one by one. The Tcho-Tchos rampaged through the mansion. With cleavers, metal hooks, choking ropes, and poisoned darts, they hunted the guests down.

The mansion became an abattoir as Thorne's guests, once safe from the outside world, were stabbed, chopped, hacked, and dismembered. The stench of offal and burning flesh whirled through the air as the meat was prepared for Thorne's pleasure. Because Thorne himself was now something to fear, the last vestiges of humanity slipping away from him. Form became formless. Rational thought gave way to hunger and mania. The thing that was once Thorne became plastic, liquid, formless. It roiled and heaved and slid off the makeshift throne. The Tcho-Tchos herded the fluid mass into a great bronze cauldron. They threw chunks of flesh in after it. The Thorne-thing formed fanged maws, rubbery tendrils of flesh, limbs that were only temporary to catch and eat all the meat offered to it. And the Tcho-Tchos danced and chanted and screamed in ecstasy: "Ubbo! Sathla!"



## *Shadows of a Darker Night*

The trail leading out of town was dry, gray, like ash. I couldn't help but notice that the oaks bending over the dusty ground were gnarled and desiccated like the twisted hands of an arthritic old woman playing "this is the church, this is the steeple." Everywhere was overrun with this sort of growth. Dry and brittle, and yet overgrown and fecund, as if the local flora had suddenly overnight become inflamed, swollen, more than actually grown. This wilderness was once beautiful, peaceful. A spot for solitude, contemplation, and relaxation. Now we were here for survival.

When the cities began to fall, many people stubbornly stayed put in some vain attempt to defend their homes against the inevitable destruction, the chaos brewing all around. But others quite literally headed for the hills, for the safety of nature, thinking that hiding amongst the trees would be safer than staying holed up in the charnel edifices of mankind. And as with so many things, we were proven wrong. Fleeing the madmen and monsters in the cities simply put us in the path of the things in the woods. The things that live on blood and suffering, and leave desecration and mutilation behind.

Taking what meager supplies we could, two dozen of us made it past the barricades as the city burned behind us. By the end of the first night, fewer than half a dozen remained. We raced east, where the hills rose wild against the dark sky. Flames behind us, ash before us. We were well aware

that the world burned, and we were but unspent fuel. The first hours were hard going, through brush and bramble, following no clear path, the only direction in our minds being “away from civilization.” After hours of running, we stopped to rest and collect our thoughts.

The sun was a distant memory, and darkness surrounded us. We began to finally feel safe among the trees, and so were completely off guard when the attack came. Wild, indescribable shapes crashed toward us from all sides, shapes with massive tendrils and stomping hooves. Nightmare things from the deepest recesses of a madman’s fevered dreams.

My companions were torn, crushed, and dismembered as I watched on in horror. Blood and gore rained down everywhere as the monstrous things went about their butcher’s work. And the unforgettable noise, as if from hundreds of suckling mouths, thirsty for blood. The tendrils scooping up the bodies of the dead, and dragging them toward the loathsome maws, radiating hooked fangs grasping on to the slabs of meat, and then grotesquely sucking the blood and juices from the corpses. And as the crashing monstrosities stomped their hooves, and gnashed their fangs, and roared their awful throaty, braying call, other shapes emerged from the stygian dark. Hunched, vaguely humanoid creatures crusted with filth and gore slunk from the shadows, dodging and weaving around the feet of the massive beasts, snatching at the corpses of the fallen, dragging limbs, organs and offal to their hideous canine maws. Their bleating, barking voices called to each other in the darkness as they reached a fevered frenzy of blood thirst.

I ran, stumbling through the wilderness, branches and bark tearing at my skin as I careened off trees and rocks. I became disoriented, utterly lost in the darkness, a profound darkness such as I’d never experienced. Night in the wilderness is al-

ways dark, but now with the sky choked with ash, even the meager starlight offered nothing but the memory of hope.

Through the smoke above, I made out the hazy, diffuse glow of the moon glaring down at me, and casting a soft light through the woods. With the moonlight as my only source of illumination, I continued trudging amongst the detritus of the forest. I had nearly given up any hope of finding shelter before the dawn when I saw in the distance a small building: a hermit's cottage of some sort. Probably a retirement home for someone who decided to pack it up and live off the land. A low fence surrounded the single-story house, a few planks knocked out of place along one edge, showing where the owner's dog or some other pet had escaped into the wild. Inside the fence, I could make out planter boxes and a small garden overrun by strange, spiny weeds. The building was covered in crawling vines, but looked relatively safe. I skirted the perimeter, making sure to stay in the cover of the tree lines. Waiting for some time, I finally decided that it seemed safe enough. Certainly couldn't be any worse than whatever might be with me in the woods.

Avoiding the gate, I went around to the side where the planks were loose. It was a matter of a quick breath, and an uncomfortable squeeze to push through, but I emerged inside the fence unscathed. Approaching the house, I momentarily thought I saw movement through one window, like a brief afterimage of a dark shape crossing a dim pool of moonlight.

Slowly I padded up the low stairs to the porch, and reached out to try the doorknob. Finding it loose, I turned the knob and cautiously pushed the door open to reveal the inner rooms of the house. A musty smell drifted from the deep places of the home, indicating either the house had long since been abandoned, or whomever lived there was not keeping the place up. In either case, I could handle the smell,

and preferred the stale atmosphere of a house which could be closed up to the unknowable perils of the woods outside.

Outside, the wind picked up, pushing and pulling at the walls of the cottage. I could hear the strange, high-pitched howling as it whipped through trees overhead. Knowing I'd be settling in the cabin for the night, I decided to make the best of it. Checking the long-unused fireplace, I could feel a slight breeze, indicating the chimney was not blocked. I gathered some old papers, and began to stoke a fire with cut wood I found stacked next to the hearth. It was threaded with webs, and fat, oily-black spiders crawled from the small logs as I disturbed them. Soon I had a meager fire going, enough to warm the room, but hopefully not enough to cause notice from outside. There was no power to the cabin, evidenced by my cursory flicking of switches as I'd walked through it earlier. So the firelight gave me the only illumination.

A dusty, creaking rocking chair was all I could find that looked remotely comfortable, and so I sat in it to rest for the night. As my eyes grew heavy, the sound outside intensified. As the groaning wind rushed around the house, I began to hear another noise through the din. A scratching—brief, intermittent, but clearly audible, coming from beneath the floorboards of the cabin. At first I ignored it, assuming it to be rats, or a raccoon, or any number of nocturnal creatures. But the sound intensified; it moved about the building, but still the same scratching noise, as of nails being dragged across wood.

Unable to rest further, and beginning to feel the early hint of panic in my gut, I rose from the rocking chair, and moved about the cabin. I followed the scratching down the hall, until I found myself in a bedroom I'd searched when I first found the house. The walls were plainly decorated, and a large mattress rested in the center of the floor, flush to the ground. As I entered the room, I noticed the familiar musty

smell of the rest of the house. It was then I noticed that in one corner of the room was a large wooden box, filled with dried cobs of multicolored corn. Strangely enough, upon the cobs was growing a strange, slightly phosphorescent fungus of some sort. Not quite toadstools, but capped like mushrooms. The fungus branched from itself, almost like small trees, none larger than my thumb. As I approached to get a closer look, I had the distinct impression that they were slowly turning toward me, like so many eyestalks.

Behind me, I heard a ripping, tearing noise, so subtle as to be almost unnoticeable but for my heightened, panic-enhanced senses. As I turned to confront the source of the sound, I saw the filthy gray mattress bulge in the middle, and then rise before being thrown to the side. A hole in the ground was revealed, a gaping maw where the floorboards had been scratched through. And from the hole began to emerge a large, pincerlike limb. It scratched at the wood, finding purchase, and then it was followed by a twin pincer.

Gasping, I stumbled back and fell upon the box of corn and fungus. More spiny limbs emerged from the hole, and were followed by a great, glowing mass of tissue. I began to choke on fumes in the air, my throat burned, and as I coughed and wheezed, I realized that my lungs were filling with the spores of that awful fungus I had fallen into; the glowing fungus which had laid long on the dried corn. And then the thing fully emerged from the hole, and through my spore-clogged eyes I could barely make out the shape of the thing. Was it a great crab, or a bat, or some unholy synergy of the two? It clicked its awful pincer feet on the floorboards as it came towards me, and I made a mad dash for the door of the cabin.

I ran. I ran blindly under the influence of a single instinct: survival. The brambles and bracken tore at my legs, and I stumbled and fell many times, leaving my hands and arms

cut and bleeding, and caked with dry, gray dust. I heard the rush of great wings burst from the cabin behind me, and rush high into the night sky. I ran until the breath burned hot in my choked lungs. I'm putting these words down now in some vain hope that maybe they will be read someday. If mankind survives, if the horrors making sport of us are not our extinction event, then maybe, someday, someone will want to know how I died. My mouth is dry. My head is fuzzy, and I'm having trouble keeping my eyes focused. The fungus is eating me away from the inside out; I can feel it. Feel it crawling under my skin, into my brain. Just now, I felt the skin on my chest split open like wet paper. It wasn't painful. Disturbing to watch, but not uncomfortable. I watched as first one, and then dozens of tiny crab-like creatures crawled out from the wound, each one flexing tiny wings, and then leaping off into the wind. I can feel more of them inside me, hundreds of the things, just trying to work their way out.



*Part Two*  
*In the Belly of the Beast*

*“It might, too, have been the singular cold that alienated me; for such chilliness was abnormal on so hot a day, and the abnormal always excites aversion, distrust, and fear.”*

-H. P. Lovecraft, “Cool Air”



## *Chapter One*

As with many great changes in human history, few people noticed while it was happening. There were infinite pieces in play in the great chaotic game which signaled the apocalypse. It wasn't until the end of the world was irreversible that humankind realized its doom. Seas roiled, nations fell. Blame passed and sabers rattled. The world spiraled into entropy, but most people held more concern for their daily lives than the fate of the species.

When reports of monsters became commonplace, most assumed they were hoaxes, pranks, or games, similar to the "evil clown" sightings of a few years earlier.

There came reports of strange, gaunt, shadowy creatures roaming the cold northern areas, slinking into houses and stealing away in the dead of night; favored household pets went missing, or the occasional small child or sick elder.

At beaches around the world, witnesses claimed to see "frog men" lurking among the shoals. Such sightings became more commonplace, but were derided and ignored by the authorities.

In the southwestern deserts of the United States, venomous serpents seemed to take on an aspect of intelligence, ranging and hunting far outside their usual grounds. And in the small, sad places of the planet, those villages and farmlands forgotten by the first world's reporters, further horrors grew.

Cults devoted to strange alien beings rose out of the obscurity of the third world, or the secret hidden places of the first world. Hoaxes and rumors became more unsettling, harder to ignore. In time, authorities sent agents to investigate these strange occurrences, but it was too late. The creatures claimed the earth and began the work to transform it into something more to their liking—something more appealing to their biologies and desires.

And thus what would become known as the Night of Horrors, and nobody could ignore the monsters any longer. In a single night, a wave of madness swept across the globe. It hit the Pacific Islands first, radiating outward across the so-called Ring of Fire, and spilling across the surface of the earth. An almost palpable evil force trailed in its wake. Overnight, millions became murderous, feral, taking to the night-dark streets with the taste of blood in their mouths and a great hunger for violence, chaos, and murder in their hearts. Those unaffected by the horrible call to madness huddled in terror wherever they could find safety. They watched as nightmare images spilled across the news, filling the media channels with visions out of the depths of hell. Social media filled with panicked posts as survivors woke in the night, unaware of the destruction's extent. Monstrous forms stalked streets and alleys across the world. Wherever there were cameras to record them, they captured the abominations.

Few would have noticed, but as dawn rose along the west coast of the United States, the collective horrors of the night ceased for the merest moment. As if madness itself took a breath and paused, waiting for the true terror to begin.

And it was at that moment when a camera on a ship in the South Pacific Ocean captured one of the last images broadcast by human means. The image of a great black island, slimy with weeds from the bottom of the ocean, fluttering with strange, pale fish, gasping for their lives. A new island

rose from the deeps, yet showed strange geometric structures, haphazardly placed at bizarre angles, and of titanic proportion. One of these monolithic structures split open with a banshee scream, and a pale light burst forth bathing the island in a palpable violet glow. Four massive, flexible obelisk-shaped objects fell out of the crack, and suddenly squirmed forward. Four more followed along the other side. And the realization that these things were merely the fingers of a vast presence as these titanic digits clenched the black basalt rock and dragged the rest of their bulk towards the opening. A monstrous bulk drew forward. Massive writhing cilia whipped out of the opening, followed by a massive, pulpy head, surmounted by a multitude of great glassy orbs. Within the orbs was the vastness of space and time, and infinite stars swum in those black pools of insanity. The vast alien thing dragged, stumbled, and rose as it exited the tomb. It was as if a mountain stumbled, crawled, and finally walked. The image went black, the signal lost.

The monsters had risen. Their human cults exalted the black horrors above all things and paid them homage. The monsters had taught their slaves how to fight and kill in new ways, how to bring the civilizations of the world toppling down. The Old Ones, cyclopean alien beings who ruled earth before the rise of the mammals, before the great reptiles, had come to reclaim the world. Across the world madness was king, and humanity died in a holocaust of chaos.



## *Chapter Two*

Damian hunched behind a thicket of sage beside the highway. The heady scent of the bushes filled his lungs and drove away the rancid stink trapped in his sinuses. The thick, acrid air had filled with vaporous ash. When the world fell, it had fallen hard, and burned hot. He often wondered how many lives' worth of ash he inhaled with each breath. How many particles of how many people he drew into his lungs as he struggled to live in this harsh, dead world. He wore a scarf around his face and a pair of dark goggles over his eyes to keep out the worst of the dust of the old world.

He peered over the fringe of the sagebrush, scanning the horizon. It was early morning, but the sky was already dark overhead, the days shorter now because of the crud filling the atmosphere. Well, not shorter. Dimmer. The world had taken on the color of a perpetual blood-red sunset; brighter during the ruddy day, darker at night, and the burning stink ever present in the air.

The highway was empty, and he didn't expect that to change soon. He'd not seen any sign of other humans in weeks, but that only kept him on edge. Being on the constant verge of panic kept him alive, kept him going, but also exhausted him. Damian couldn't remember the last time he'd had an uninterrupted night's sleep or a full belly. His supply of water was getting low, and that forced him to weigh options.

Traveling inland east from the coast had been slow going until he'd gotten past the major cities. Now he was in the long, flat stretches of inland California and making better time. His family had owned a vacation cabin up in the mountains to the east. Damian had been moving in that direction for a while now. He knew the area, knew it was fairly secluded, well-stocked and safe. Damian had decided that it would be a good place to wait things out for a while. The simple truth was he was in a part of the country that was less populated before the world died. People going crazy and killing each other only made his journey quieter. But he still had to be careful.

Still, he didn't want to push his luck. He could see hills rising in the distance and knew it would be slow going once he reached them. Golden summer grass stretched out on either side of the road, tinged red from the haze-filled sky. His mode of transportation right now was a good old muscle-powered mountain bike. When he'd first fled the coast, he'd done so in a car, but that soon ran empty. He could scrounge gas at first, siphoning from other vehicles or the occasional portable container. But as he traveled, it became harder to find means to keep the vehicle going. When he found the mountain bike, he decided that was the best way to go. Not as fast as a car or motorcycle, but more versatile. And as long as he had strength, he could keep it going.

Damian shuffled back from the sagebrush. His dust-crusting boots scraped against the rocks and dirt as he slunk back away from the edge of the highway. East it is, he thought. Keeping low, he made his way back to where he'd stashed his bike. With practiced ease, he stowed his meager supplies in the nylon saddlebags over the rear wheel, and snapped everything closed. He grabbed the hydration pack from where he'd slung it over the bike's handlebars and took a quick sip of water from the protruding rubber tube. Damian scowled

at the slight alkaline taste of the water, but swallowed it anyway, knowing he'd better find clean water soon or things could get bad for him. He put the hydration pack on, sliding his arms through the straps and buckling it against his chest. And then in one fluid motion he mounted the bike, stomped the pedal, and glided off in silence.

He rode aside the highway, still in sight of the road. The terrain and foliage just off-road would obscure him from anyone further down the road. The rough, uneven dirt made the ride bumpy and played havoc on his lower back, but he knew it was better to be unseen than to be comfortable.

The sky continued to brighten, and overhead the diffuse glow of the sun peeked through the haze. The scarf wrapped around his face and the goggles over his eyes kept out the worst of the particulate matter, but he could still taste and smell the burning in the air. As he pumped his legs and barreled forward, in the distance he heard a thunderous, bleating roar.

He skidded to a stop and fell to the ground. Pain lanced up his side as he hit the earth. As fast as he could, he scrabbled free of the bike and dropped prone, gripping the hardpan dirt as if trying to will himself underground.

Damian's breath caught in his chest. He held still, not daring to move, breathe, or make himself known. His pulse pounded in his ears, and he felt like he would explode. Filled with fear and panic, he released his breath and took a few brief breaths of the foul air while still pressing tight to the dirt.

Again in the distance, he heard the bleating roar, followed by slow, measured beats, as if on massive drums. He raised his head, looking toward the road, but saw nothing. Just a few small trees, and the brush and road trash which lined the sides of the highway. Fighting his better judgment, he body-crawled forward, keeping low to the ground and using

his elbows and knees to drag him toward the edge of the highway.

As he got closer to the road, he once more heard the trumpeting roar and the banging, stomping sound roll across the landscape. He felt like the noise was receding.

Damian held his breath for a moment, then rose to a squat, stabilizing himself with his hands on his knees, peering into the distance through the haze of smoke at the bushes, trees, hazy hills and buttes far away—the same things he'd seen from his side of the road.

What he'd at first thought was a tree shifted, moving forward while what he had taken for branches undulated against the sky. It was hard to see through the haze, his mind's eye slipping around the edges of the thing. It was massive, towering twenty feet tall at least. The thing's hide was dark, almost black as a nightmare, and it lumbered on three massive hooved legs each as big around as a small tree trunk. Each time one of the hooved feet stomped the ground, it raised the drum-like beat he'd heard earlier. Massive feelers erupted from the top crest of the creature, waving at the sky as if in supplication.

As he watched, one tendril, as thick as his arm and three times as long, whipped down to the ground. Dust burst upward, and the tendril rose high; a desert hare was caught wrapped in the end of the alien appendage, squealing in terror. A slit bisected the black, lumpy body of the thing, and a wet gash peeled open, exposing a maw dripping pale, viscous ooze, with bright white, hooklike fangs shining within. With a swift motion, the tendril shoved the captured hare into the slime-slick, oozing mouth. A spray of blood and fur, and it disappeared behind the puffy, cancerous lips which smacked and slurped at the gore dripping from them.



The awful thing leaned back on one of its tripod hooves. The gash of a mouth opened wide, and a horrible ululating howl broke forth from deep within it, followed by another, and yet another. Damian's nerves were on fire, the panicked instinct to flee rising in him. He was sure there were more of the monsters coming until he looked closer at the thing and saw that second and third horrible, bloody mouths had opened on its bulbous torso. The three mouths screamed blind rage at the sky in unison, but with differently pitched voices. The creature's crown of tendrils whipped back and forth in a frenzy of motion. And then it fell silent, and the stalks slowed to an undulating twitch. It raised one hoofed leg, took a step, repeated with each of its three legs. It continued the pattern, its awkward, heavy-footed gait pounding the earth, stirring up clouds of dust in its passage.

Damian watched, never taking his eyes off the thing. After a few moments, he realized it was striding directly away from him and back into the wilderness. Damian's eyes followed it for ten minutes or longer, until it vanished in a haze of smoke and distant trees and scrub. When the creature was out of sight, he still waited, eyes never moving from the last place he'd seen it. In all, twenty minutes passed before he got to his feet, grabbed his bike by the handlebars, and walked it back along the side of the highway.

His hands and legs shook. Adrenaline still flooded his body, but he was on the downside of full on panic. As he regained control of his limbs, he mounted his bike, pushed hard down on the pedals, and shot off down the dirt paths next to the highway. He knew he'd avoided an untimely and grisly death. And that something similar or worse might wait for him around the next bend.



Damian's legs pumped the pedals as his bike chewed up the miles across the hardpan dirt and dry summer grass. He was within sight of the highway, following alongside it as best he could while dodging rocks, bushes, and the occasional low tree. The scare he'd had earlier that morning had passed, though it still came to mind. As the end times had started, the sight of such creatures had sent him quaking in fear, mind reeling from the alienness of the things. But in just the short time since, he'd seen so many awful things, and heard of worse. The monstrous black tripedal creature was just one of a whole pantheon full of ghastly creatures that now stalked across the world.

But worse than the monsters were their human servants. Damian had had plenty of run-ins with those pitiful madmen and women who'd thrown aside all semblance of humanity and reveled at the feet of their horrendous new masters. They turned against their own planet, their own species, enthralled and enslaved by the alien horrors of this blighted world. He shivered as he thought about his last encounter with a group of them—one of many encounters in the new world which he was trying to forget.

So while Damian was on constant alert for danger, he was also becoming inured to the mind-shattering horrors that ground the earth beneath their feet. He kept his eyes on the path ahead of him, sometimes glancing side to side, but never looking back.

Overhead, the sky was brighter. Smoke and haze still clouded the sky, and the dim, indistinct glow of the sun was overhead. He'd been pedaling for a few hours and figured it was somewhere around noon. He'd lost his watch when the world ended, so couldn't know for sure, but the sun's position in the sky gave him his best guess.

The highway veered to the right—or south, he had to remind himself, trying to keep his bearings as best he could.

Around a bend he saw a trio of cars stopped dead in the center of the road, all smashed into each other. Black patches of leaked oil and gas puddled below them, and he wondered how long they'd sat on the blacktop, relics of the past.

Damian's feet stopped pushing on the pedals, and he glided forward. Slowing to a stop, he resumed his cautious stance, getting off the bike and dropping to a low squat along the roadside. Holding the bike by one handlebar grip, he crept forward, eyes always on the cars. He inched closer and saw no movement.

Closer still, and then he stopped a few dozen yards from the pileup. He saw no occupants in any of them through the glittering splinters of glass that remained of the windows. He scanned the road, the horizon, all around him, but he saw no movement.

He mounted the bike again and rode toward the cars. Damian felt a momentary panic as his tires hit the asphalt and he realized he had no cover. He felt exposed. Pedaling faster, he approached the wrecks and closed the distance to them in mere moments. A dozen feet from the rearmost car, he skidded to a stop. A quick glance confirmed that he was still in the clear.

Damian swung his leg over the frame of the bike and walked it toward the cars. Propping the bike up on its kickstand, he left it and approached the rear car. Now he was closer and could assess the situation better. The rear car had smashed headlong into the passenger side of the middle one, and that car had rear-ended the one in front. The frontmost car's hood had caved in from a forward collision, but there was no sign of what it had hit. Smearred into the crumpled metal of the hood was a dry, thick, almost tar-like substance. Damian had seen nothing like the pale, custardy yellow slime before, and it gave him a chill up his spine to stare at it too long.

One by one he tried the car doors and found each unlocked. No passengers in any of the vehicles. He pulled the door of the center car, and it swung open, once more looking around at his surroundings. Expecting danger at any moment, he took the driver's seat, sliding behind the wheel of the car. Then he scavenged. The console and glove box held nothing but useless paperwork. Likewise, nothing in the back seat aside from a few empty water bottles and a vacant bag of Cheetos. He ran his fingers within the bag, picking up a few stray crumbs at the bottom. Licking his finger rewarded him with the stale, salty taste of pre-apocalypse junk food. He hadn't realized how much he missed that crap until now. He tried the trunk release lever, but nothing happened; the trunk lid had smashed into the car behind it and would not open without tools which he did not have.

The next car to check was the front-most. It was also empty, and there were no clues as to the whereabouts of its owner. When he checked the back seat, he saw a child's blanket covering something. The blanket was bright blue, with stars and friendly-looking dragons printed on it. Damian stifled nervous laughter at that; there were no such things as nice monsters.

He reached out and gripped the blanket with one hand. Then took a deep breath and pulled it back. Under the blanket was nothing but a child's safety seat and harness. He released the breath. Staring at the seat, he wondered what he'd expected. Only as he examined it closer did he notice the sprinkle of dried blood around the harness. And then his eyes traveled down, following the trail of dark-brown droplets to where a child's shoe lay on the floorboard between the front and back seats. A single small shoe, once bright and pink, now spattered with puddles and flecks of dried gore.

Damian stared at the shoe for a moment, climbed from the car, and threw up, stomach clenching and heaving as he

heaved up what little food he'd eaten that day out into the dry asphalt beneath his own feet.

His head swam, dizziness washing over him like a tide sucking at his consciousness, a low, subtle ringing started in his ears. Hands on his knees, bent into a half-squatting position. He felt himself swoon and sat down on the warm asphalt, then lay on his back, staring up at the sky. Damian knew he'd just avoided blacking out, which could have been a death sentence out here with no shelter and nobody to watch over him. Lying on his back, his skin felt clammy and a cold sweat broke out across his brow. The ringing in his ears faded, but was still noticeable. In the red, hazy sky, he watched two distant birds fly across his field of view. He concentrated on them until they disappeared in the perpetual overcast of smoke.

A few more moments and the ringing in his ears diminished until he could almost not hear it at all. He leaned up onto his elbows and then sat up. A brief, dizzying nausea pulsed through his head, and then he felt better. He sat up with his back against the car. Scanning as far as he could see, Damian decided he had a few more minutes before he should get moving again. He loosened the rubber tubing of his hydration pack and took a few slow sips of the musty water. He could tell he was getting down to the last few ounces of water in his pack and only had slightly more in the plastic bottle in his saddlebags.

Damian needed to find water soon. And he needed food. There was nothing left in his saddlebags. What he'd just thrown up was the last of his food: a half-eaten protein bar he'd had for breakfast. He figured he could go a while longer before he needed food, but he'd rather not.

One last car to check. Damian got to his feet, pausing on his way up in case he lost his balance or felt like he would black out again. He approached the last car in the line of

wreckage, more cautious than he had been a few minutes earlier, and opened the driver's door. Nestled in the console cupholders he saw two full, sealed water bottles. Without stopping to think, he grabbed one, snapped the seal on the cap and unscrewed it. He took a long, thirsty drag of warm water from the bottle. It had a faint stale taste to it, but he assumed that came of it having sat exposed to the sunlight for who knew how long.

He guzzled half the bottle in two more deep gulps. Fighting his instinct to gorge himself, he replaced the cap on the bottle, then walked back over to his bike and dropped both bottles into his saddlebags. Returning to the car, he opened the rear doors and checked the back seat. He found nothing there, even when he got down on his knees, running his hands under the front seats. A few pennies, and a blue ball-point pen that had leaked thick drops of blue ink. Nothing he had any use for. He returned to the driver's seat, fumbled under the console for a few seconds, then found the trunk release and pulled it. He felt a click and, looking out the rear window, he saw that the trunk had sprung open.

Sliding out of the driver's chair, he walked back around to see what he'd found. The car's trunk did not disappoint. Whoever had driven this vehicle had had time to think before rushing out of their home. There was an overnight bag, a gallon jug of water, and a cardboard carton filled with canned goods. Checking it, he found a few cans of beans, corn, and canned chicken. Enough for a few days of crappy camping meals.

He grabbed the cardboard box with both hands and rushed it back to his bike. Opening one saddlebag, he dumped the box's contents into it, the cans clattering and clunking into the bottom of the bag. He then grabbed the jug of water from the trunk and likewise placed it in his saddlebag. He drained the last of the water from his hydration pack and

refilled it with the half-drunk water bottle from the second car, tossing the empty bottle back in the car.

He'd stayed in the open too long. Jumping back onto his bike, he shoved the pedals and raced forward along the highway. He was still continuing east and making good time. Feeling a little more confident about his luck, Damian decided he'd keep going on the highway for a while. He'd make better time riding on the asphalt and avoiding the dirt.



That feeling of safety didn't last. Soon the panicky intuitive worry that had kept him alive for the last few weeks took over again. He pulled off the highway, onto the dirt pathway along the side of the road, and then even further into the long grasses which ran alongside the road.

He rode this way for another hour before he decided he needed to stop and eat something. The anxious feeling was subsiding, and he felt safe enough to stop for a while. He turned his bike deeper into the grasses, toward a line of trees a dozen yards away. The rough terrain rattled his teeth and back as he pumped the pedals harder. When he found a clearing, he stopped, dismounted, and leaned his bike up against a tree.

Damian dug in the saddlebags, pulling out a can of chicken. Protein would be the best choice for now, he thought. He decided he'd eat this one now and save the rest for later. Fumbling through his saddlebags, he found a chrome multi-tool at the bottom of one bag. Flipping that open, and pulling out the can opener blade, he got the chicken open in less than a minute. The can opened raggedly, though, and as he peeled back the lid, a shock of pain lanced through his thumb. Damian sucked air between his teeth at the pain and hissed "Shit!" through his clenched teeth as he gashed his

thumb on the jagged metal. Blood welled up in the cut and splashed to the ground in thick, scarlet drops.

“Son of a bitch,” he exclaimed in a hushed voice. His voice sounded odd in his own ears. It had been a long time since he’d heard a human voice outside his head. Too long. And he wondered if he’d ever hear one again. He enclosed his thumb inside his fingers and clenched his fist to stop the bleeding. His thumb ached and stung. Warm blood oozed from between his fingers, making them slick.

The cut continued to bleed, and he rummaged with his good hand through the bags again until he pulled out a rudimentary first aid kit. He put that on the ground, then grabbed one of the water bottles. He cracked it open with his teeth, sat down on the warm summer-dry dirt, and placed the bottle next to the first aid kit.

Fumbling the kit open with one hand, he had to clench the zipper pull between his teeth. Damian knew there wasn’t much in the kit, just the basics: a few bandages, some tape, antibiotic ointment, and antiseptic cleaning pads.

Damian opened his hand, grimacing at the pain as his fingers peeled away from his thumb. Fresh drops of blood welled up in the gash. Grabbing the water bottle with his good hand, he poured the clean water out over his wounded thumb, splashing it over his entire hand to wash away the congealing blood. Pink runnels of bloody water ran down his arm and sloshed to the ground. The dry earth drank it up, almost greedily, leaving a wet, pink stain behind.

Blood continued to well up in the gash, thick and crimson. He used his fingers and teeth again to open one of the antiseptic wipes. Taking a deep breath, and steeling himself against the pain to come, he smeared the wipe across the wound. It stung. The pain of the alcohol on his exposed nerves lanced through his hand, causing him to cry out. He



clamped his jaw shut, not wanting to draw the attention of anything in earshot, knowing he had to do this fast and get moving again. Again, he rubbed the cloth against his thumb, jaws clenched, and held back a cry as pain shot up his arm and through his hand again. Dropping the wet, bloody wipe to the ground, he inspected the wound. The cut was deep, and more than an inch long along the inside of his thumb. Another half inch and it would have cut right into the meat of his palm.

The flow of blood was slowing. Damian first tried closing it up with a simple adhesive Band-Aid, but it didn't cover the wound. As soon as he flexed his thumb, the blood flowed again, soaking the Band-Aid and causing it to peel off. Taking a small roll of gauze bandage from the kit, he wrapped his thumb with it. Damian ended up using the whole thing on his thumb. He fixed it down with tape, using his teeth to tear it free of the spool once he had it in place.

His whole hand throbbed. He looked around at the mess he'd made. Bloody antiseptic wipe, bloody strips of Band-Aid, splatters of blood where he'd dripped. He slugged down a few swallows from the water bottle. Then he remembered the can of chicken that had started this whole mess. He shooed away a cluster of strange orange flies that had landed on the lip of the can and were lapping up the juice along the edge. They flew off into the warm air as he waved his hand at them.

Damian was unsurprised to see a smear of his own blood on the can, right where he'd cut his thumb, but he was far too hungry for that to bother him. This time with more caution, he dipped three fingers into the precooked chicken meat, warmed by the midday heat. He ate in great hungry mouthfuls and gulps, shoveling the meat into his mouth and swallowing it without chewing. Damian continued eating until the can was empty except for a few leftover bits of meat.

He poured a splash of water into the can, swirled it around until the fluid mixed and picked up all the stray chunks, and drank it down like broth. When he'd emptied the can, he tossed it away. His hand stung, throbbed, but felt better. Nursing it as he continued his traveling would be difficult, but he figured it was better than a sprained ankle, or something that'd cripple his mobility.

Damian repacked the first aid kit, picked up the water bottle, and put both back into the saddlebags on his bike. After everything was back in place, he mounted the bike once more, bid goodbye to his makeshift rest stop, and rode away. His legs pumped the pedals slowly at first while he got his balance right. Traveling slow enough, he figured he could continue on for a while with only one hand on the handlebars. He looped the fingers of his injured hand through the shoulder strap of his hydration pack, and let it hang limp for a while. He wasn't sure about it, but figured that compressing his elbow, and hanging his hand above the level of his heart would slow the blood flow to his hand. "Heh," he chuckled. "Look ma, no hands..." Once he'd been going like that for a mile, he felt safe with speeding up, and pedaled harder, faster. With a little food in him, and a belly full of fresh water, he put power into his stride, and made headway along the road.



## *Chapter Three*

The wendigo waited out the days in an old mine, deep below the dirt crust of the earth, safe from the agonizing heat of the sun. Deep down, it ate snakes, worms, and rodents, and dreamed of warm blood and hot, quivering meat. Its long purple tongue darted out from between jaws lined with razor-sharp teeth. Not the teeth of a man, but of an apex predator: sharp, serrated, made for eating meat, splintering bones, and scraping marrow. Its tongue licked the snake's blood—its last meal—from between sharklike teeth, lapping the gore off the thing's claws, and from around its lipless mouth.

It was a long way from its home, or its last memories of a home. The wendigo only had dim, flickering memories of life as a human, but when it had been a man it had lived in the mountains. It remembered ice and snow and a battle between titans that destroyed the world.

It hungered, and it needed to hunt, to devour. It needed the chase and the overpowering of prey as much as it needed a full belly. But the heat overpowered the creature. It raised its head, staring down the long, dark tunnel toward the entrance to its lair, and saw the dim glow of twilight that made the thing's black, soulless eyes ache.

It could not travel under direct sunlight; the heat burned it, caused blisters and infections to erupt across its hide. Even though the sky was dim, and the sun hid in the haze, the

heat would burn the creature's skin, blistering and festering where it was bare, making it itch where sparse patches of matted thick white fur covered its thin, corpse-pale hide. For now it slunk between the shadows, waiting for night to fall.

But it had scented something. Something distant, enticing, tantalizing. It was the iron smell of blood, faint on the wind. Man's blood. It reared back, throwing its head in the air, shaking out its mane, and howled. Soon, the wendigo would feed.



## *Chapter Four*

Despite the late-summer warmth of the day, the evening came in cool and pleasant. Damian could still see the dim glow of the sun in the sky, not quite at the horizon line yet. Daylight had taken on a steely gray color, and shadows were long, but with diffuse, indistinct edges. With the haze of smoke in the sky, night approached quickly.

As he crested a low rise in the highway, he looked out across the land before him. The road sloped downward, rising and falling in the distance, and gentle hills rose up on either side of him. In the distance were hazy shapes of buildings. Dim light reflected off of what he assumed was glass, most likely windows. The road didn't seem to go straight to it, so he wasn't sure how much farther it was. But this must be the town he'd seen signs for, and none too soon. His hand throbbed and hurt, and he wanted to find shelter before night fell.

He kept riding, picking up a little speed as his second wind kicked in. Seeing the town before him gave him hope and renewed his vigor. The highway wound through the low points of the sloping hills, adding time to his journey. At one point, as he came around a bend in the road, he noticed a large construction of wood and rusted metal on the side of the road—abandoned mining equipment, forgotten a hundred years or more. The weather-worn wooden frame towered over the surrounding trees, with rusty metal gears and rivets adding

an orange tinge to the representation of decay. He traveled through California's Gold Country, so it was not that out of place. An effigy or historical reminder of days gone by.

The road rose and fell, wound back and forth like a snake. He pushed on for another half an hour or more before the road widened from two lanes to four. As he slowed to take in his surroundings, he saw just ahead of him where the road split off. An access ramp sloped downward, emptying into the parking lot of a strip mall. Jackpot, he thought to himself, veering off to follow down to the lot.

The lot was empty of vehicles, except for the blackened, burned-out hulk of a Toyota Camry. A Burger King, Ace Hardware ("Pete's Ace," to be specific), and a Walgreens greeted him along the edge of the lot. Better than he'd counted on. He'd hoped for shelter for the coming nightfall, but these promised supplies too. He glided down the pathway, pressing the brakes and slowing as he approached the front of the strip mall. Pedaling with slow, deliberate strokes, he rode along the sidewalk before the storefronts, peering into each one as he passed. He didn't dare stop yet. Taking a few minutes to check them out was safer, smarter. If he encountered anything dangerous, he'd just pound the pedals and take off like a flash.

As he passed he noticed the telltale signs that the stores had emptied fast, and more than likely been looted. Toward the end of the walkway, down by the entrance to the hardware store, an enclosed shelving unit of propane tanks had toppled over. It looked like someone (or something he thought, with a slight shudder) had tried to pry the case open, but had failed to do so. The hardware store's doors were ajar, but intact. He peeked in through the glass doors, and saw that the store had been picked clean. The Walgreens drugstore's front window was shattered, and he noticed a toppled trash can inside the store, the obvious implement of destruction.

Damian passed in one direction, turned back and rode the same path to be sure. He glanced through the windows, searching for anything that screamed “danger.” The stores just looked abandoned.

Slowing his bike down in front of the Walgreens, he realized how exhausted he was. How much his hand hurt, throbbed and stung. And how he’d like to spend at least one night in a location he could barricade himself within and sleep in safety.

Dismounting his bike, but with one hand still on the handlebar, he reached out with the elbow of his injured hand. He propped his elbow behind the open door and levered it open. It swung open easily although the hinges were gritty. Peering inside, he saw the store was dark, the last rays of daylight barely coming through the shattered front window.

He moved farther in, letting the door swing almost closed behind him, and while at first he considered pulling the door shut, he then thought better of it. Anything wanting to follow him could vault through the gaping window. And leaving the door open just a touch would give him an easier escape route.

The store was a mess. Paper cartons, plastic bottles, all the detritus of the previous world littered the aisles. He walked his bike up and down the aisles, looking for anything useful, but also keeping an eye out for danger. Lots of makeup, some exercise equipment, hairbrushes. A rack of key rings grabbed his attention, and he approached it. There were half a dozen small aluminum carabiner clip key rings, and one with a built-in flashlight. All good stuff. The carabiners went into his pocket, and he flicked the flashlight on, placing it between his teeth to give his hand a rest. Even the small toys and gifts turnstiles had been ransacked. In the snack food area, against all odds he managed to scrounge a few bags of

peanuts, and two bottles of Gatorade that had rolled under a display of sunglasses.

And then he had a brief flash of inspiration: Walgreens was a pharmacy. He rolled his bike toward the back of the store, to the pharmacy counter. Behind the counter he saw the shelves of medications, ransacked, but holding a glimmer of hope. Damian parked his bike in front of the counter, then walked around through the small swinging door, pushing it open with his hip. Behind the counter, the pharmacy was still somewhat orderly, if rummaged through. He moved his head from side to side, casting light from the flashlight onto the shelves of medications.

Damian looked through the remaining medicine bottles. Lots of them he did not know for the uses of, and other looters hadn't either, as there were entire shelves filled with bottles labeled with strange names like "gabapentin" or "liothyronine." One shelving unit was bare, and he assumed that was where the heavy narcotics had been. He scattered pill bottles around until he found what looked like the antibiotics. All the "-acin," "-mycin," and "-cillin" drugs.

He scanned over the names of the few bottles remaining, arcane names stared back at him. Ciprofloxacin, ofloxacin, and amoxicillin. He didn't recognize the first few, but remembered having amoxicillin for an ear infection a few years before. So with his good hand, he grabbed that bottle, and stashed it in the pocket of his jeans.

Feeling a little less anxious now that he had found the antibiotics, he went to explore the rest of the pharmacy area. A few small prepackaged first aid kits were handy, and some other packages of bandages, ointments, bandage scissors, and so on. He got the feeling that the looters had been satisfying immediate needs, not thinking of the long-term requirements of survival. He figured that was just human nature, really.



Damian picked up the first aid supplies and went back to the pharmacy counter, then arranged them in front of himself, along with a bottle of water, and hydrogen peroxide. With his teeth, he peeled off the adhesive tape, letting the bandage he'd wrapped around his wounded hand loosen. Blood had seeped into the wrapping but hadn't yet begun to soak through. Getting down to the skin, he took a breath, held it, and then ripped the cloth away from the wound. Clotting blood had a good grip on the fabric, and a shot of pain lanced through his hand when he ripped the cloth off. He gasped, clenching his teeth as stars swam across his vision. With his good hand, he braced himself against the counter. Moments passed as he regained his balance and waited until certain he would not black out or vomit again.

Damian looked at his gashed thumb. It felt hot and was caked with dried blood. Fresh rivulets of blood and clear fluid were welling up in the wound itself. With the supplies he'd found in the pharmacy, he did a better job of cleaning it out than he had on the road earlier. He rinsed it clean, scrubbing off the matted blood with a clean cloth. The wound wasn't looking good, swollen and red. He didn't know much about medicine or first aid, and he feared an infection was setting in, or would be soon. All the same, he was glad he'd found the antibiotics. Damian knew enough to know that if it started leaking pus, he would want the amoxicillin handy.

A splash of hydrogen peroxide cleaned the wound, once again bringing the stinging pain of chemicals on exposed flesh and nerves. The peroxide foamed into a pink froth, and he let it settle down before rinsing it off with water, then drying it with a cloth before applying an antibiotic ointment and wrapping and sealing up the wound with a large Band-Aid.

After all that, Damian felt like resting. He sat down in one of the plastic and metal chairs near the pharmacy counter,

leaned back, and let his head rest against the wall behind him. Within a minute, he was dozing.



Damian jerked awake, jumping to his feet, instantly alert. He'd not meant to fall asleep, and was suddenly frantic when he realized the sun had set, and not even a ruddy glimmer of light remained in the sky. He rose and walked toward the smashed open windows and saw only the night's darkness beyond. Outside was just still and black. He could almost see the highway from where he stood, but it was indistinct, nebulous, just the merest hint of a road in the haze and darkness. He heard none of the night sounds that used to comfort him when he went camping as a child, either.

Damian took his eyes off the road, turning back to the interior of the Walgreens. He walked across the store. Back past a wall of empty shelves that held sodas and beers at one point, and then into a corner full of unlabeled cleaning supplies. Beyond that, on one wall in the corner of the store was a pair of double doors with wired glass windows set in the center of the top half of each door. He approached the doors, squatting under the windows. He took a broom from the collection of cleaning supplies and threaded it through the handles of the door. Once the broom handle was stable, he stood up and peered through the glass.

Beyond the doors, he spied a small, dark room. He waited a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the further darkness, and even then it was difficult to see within. Damian removed the broom handle, assuming that if something inside meant to leap out at him, it would have by now.

Gripping the handle with his good hand, he opened the door and leaned in. The room was dark, and a ripe, meaty smell permeated it. He stepped in and shone his tiny key

chain flashlight into the room. Dim, pale LED light offered scant illumination, but helped him get a better look at the room. It looked like it had been used for storage, an employee lounge, or maybe both. The room held a pair of plastic dining tables, surrounded by chairs. Against one wall was a dingy sofa. Another sweep of the light and he noticed a refrigerator next to a small table containing a microwave oven against the far wall, with another pair of doors straight across from him. He crossed the room and opened the fridge door. A rank smell of mold and rot overwhelmed him, and he closed the door.

Damian approached the double doors on the far side of the room. As he got closer, the foul smell in the room became stronger. He leaned close, putting his face close to the glass, and peered into the room beyond. One window was crusted over with a thick, dark substance. He peered through the other and saw darkness beyond the wire-meshed safety glass. He pushed the door open a few inches, and as soon as the door opened, he reeled back as a revolting smell overwhelmed him. Choking back his rising gorge, he pushed again against the door. It moved forward, then seemed to catch on something.

He shone the flashlight into the opening but couldn't see anything but a faint dark stain on the sliver of floor. This is nuts, he thought and then shoved hard. The door hit something, a brief momentary resistance, and then flung forward as a wet squelching noise rose from the other side. He entered the room, and the door swung shut behind him. Damian turned, and shone his light downward toward the floor.

Behind the door was a bloated corpse, split open at the abdomen, its distended guts pushing out of the rotting flesh. A double-barreled shotgun lay across its lap, one hand still gripping it. What remained of the corpse's head was a ruin of crusted gore and shattered bone. As Damian fought back

the urge to vomit, he saw that the top half of the corpse's head splattered up the door, pellets of shot embedded in the wooden panels, and dried blood and brain matter splattered outward and upward across both doors and up to the ceiling.

Damian staggered backward, and his heel hit something soft on the ground. A moment of resistance, and then it burst open beneath his foot. He tripped and fell backward, landing on his ass. Looking down, he saw a hand smashed flat and smeared under his heel. His eyes traveled along the length of the accompanying arm to a torso lying just a few feet away from him. The legs were missing; just bloody stumps lying in a black pool of dried gore. Something was wrong with the head.

Damian's vision swam, his head reeled. What he'd assumed was a stockroom was an abattoir. He pushed back with his feet, shuffling away from the mangled corpses until his back was flush to the wall. His breathing was short and shallow, and he felt panic rising in his gut.

Everything here felt unnatural to him. There was a strange, fundamental wrongness to the scene, aside from the mangled corpses. It wasn't just the brutality of the scene, or the acrid smell of rotting flesh. It wasn't even the grisly suicide. He'd seen his share of those since the world ended.

He looked again at the mutilated torso. A black trail of crusted gore smeared off into the distance, marking the path it had been dragged along to here, its final resting place. The trail led away from the corpse, into the distant darkness. He shone his light along it to follow, and as he raised it, found the trail leading right across the floor of the storeroom, and out under a gap of only a few inches below the aluminum roll-up door which made up most of the far wall. The gap wouldn't be wide enough to crawl under or drag someone through.

He shone his light at the corpse's head and then realized what was wrong about it. From his vantage point, it looked flattened on top. He moved to get a better view, and saw the head had had its top removed, shorn off as if with a razor-sharp blade. And worse yet, the brain was missing from inside. The inside of the skull was just a dry white cavity, a shimmer of dried yellow crust from the hole where the spinal cord and brain should be. A thin trickle of dried blood had dripped from the torn skin of the scalp, but mostly the wound seemed to have been cauterized.

Damian looked around the room again, taking in the stacked boxes, pallets of supplies. He wondered where the corpse's head was and then forced himself to stifle laughter born of mania. Where are the flies? He wondered. Two mangled, mutilated corpses, blood everywhere, and a door open to the outside. But the flies, the crows, the coyotes—the harbingers of disease, the feasters of carrion—were nowhere.

He felt cold, heavy in his gut as fear simmered within him. His hands were shaking, and he flexed his fingers, making tight fists and releasing them to shake off the anxiety brewing in him.

Getting to his feet, he rose and walked around the bodies, pushing open the double doors and stepping through into the employee lounge. He hurried through and back out into the main retail area of the store. Damian grabbed his bike from where he'd propped it up and headed straight for the doors to the store.

But as he approached them, through the open windows he heard voices. Snippets of conversation, faint and indistinct. But true human voices, not strange night noises or fevered imaginings. He stopped, squatted down behind a register, and crept toward the windows. Peering out into the night, he saw two shapes outside the window, walking across the lot toward him, but still occluded by the darkness outside. They

were coming closer. After a few moments he was able to tell from their whispers that one was a woman, the other a man.

They stepped up onto the walkway just outside the store. The woman spoke: "Watch the windows, I'll get the door."

"Got it" said the man.

The pair split apart, the woman walking toward the front doors, while the man took a step toward the window. Damian saw that the man held something long and thin in one hand, brandishing it before him like a knife or sword, ready for danger.

The woman stood outside the doors, then cupped her hands around her face and looked through the glass before opening the doors and stepping through. Damian didn't know what to do. Behind him was the terror of death and the unnatural suffering. Before him were the first two humans he'd seen in...weeks? Months? He'd lost track, in all honesty.

And so he did what most people do when confronted by two terrifying options: he froze.



She stood inside the store. Dim moonlight shone behind her, glimmered around her. It was at her back, and she was wearing a deep hood over her head, her face lost in a pool of darkness. Damian pressed himself tight, his back against the fiberboard wall of the kiosk he was hiding in. His eyes never left her. Her thick-soled black boots crunched glass as she ambled across the linoleum tile floor. Step by step she stalked into the store.

Damian's heart pounded in his chest; adrenaline flooded his blood, and he was bordering on panic. The woman stepped forward, scanning back and forth as she walked closer toward him.

"Anything?" the man outside whispered through the broken front window.

"Zip it" she hissed back. "Seriously." She stepped a few feet closer to where Damian was lurking under the checkout counter.

Damian realized he only had seconds left before they would discover him. "Please" he said, as he stood up, hands out to his side. "Please, can we talk?" As he turned, she leapt back, dropping into a low defensive stance. He saw now that she held a long, dark blade in her right hand. Her left hand was at her waist.

"Don't fucking move" she spat. She thrust her long knife out in front of her. "I will gut you before thinking twice." He could almost make out the movement of her lips in the darkness that swallowed her face under her hood.

"I don't doubt it" Damian said. He raised his hands higher, almost up to shoulder height. "I don't want to fight you. I didn't want to startle you is all."

She stood up, but held the long knife pointed straight at him. She took a step forward and Damian rocked back on the balls of his feet. The heavy feeling in his gut had returned, along with a sense of resignation. And the strange, comfortable sense of belonging that came with the first human conversation he'd had in memory.

She thrust the knife out, arm straight in front of her, and stepped forward. "What's with your hand?" she asked. "What happened to it?"

Damian forced a smile. "I cut it. Pretty bad. It's why I came in here, actually. Looking for something to clean it with."

"Shit," the woman said. "I know I'll regret this. Miguel!" she called out over her shoulder, though not loud enough to attract unwanted attention. "Get in here. We've got company."

With dim light coming through the window, Damian got a better view of her now. She was wearing a long coat which hid her shape, and a dark hooded sweat jacket under that. A forest green T-shirt topped jeans and her heavy boots. She looked like she'd rummaged through a flea market while beating a hasty retreat from civilization.

"Hey," he said. "You've got me dead to rights here. But I feel like shit. Do you mind if I just sit?"

"Don't move" she said. "Don't even blink."

As she spoke, the front door slipped open, and the man from outside stepped in. Damian's eyes darted sideways to watch as the guy walked forward. Damian assumed this was Miguel. And if that was the case, Miguel was clutching a crowbar in one meaty fist—a foot-long length of pig iron sharpened to a spike at one end and a knife blade at the other.

As if my day couldn't get any worse, Damian thought.

Miguel came forward and the woman said, "Let's see your hand." Damian looked back and forth between them. Miguel had the crowbar raised to strike at any moment. The woman had her knife pointed right at his throat. Damn, that's a long knife, he thought. Like almost a machete.

"Yeah, sure" Damian said, lowering his injured hand. Bound tight in its wrappings, he held it out in front of her. With her free hand, she reached out and grabbed his injured one. He cried out as agonizing pain lanced up his arm. His knees went weak and loose, and he felt himself falling forward. She let go of his bandaged hand as he dropped.

"Sonofa...Miguel, help me out," she said.

Damian fell to his knees and cradled his wounded hand against his chest. She knelt in front of him and slid her wicked-looking knife into a sheath hanging on her belt. "Hell, man, let's look at that hand."



Damian felt faint, his head spinning and stars flitted before his eyes. He raised his head to speak, and a wave of gray overcame him. All of a sudden his head was swimming in a pool of darkness, and he pitched forward as his body went limp. The woman's hands darted out and caught his head before he cracked it on the lobby floor. Then everything was dark.



"What can we do with him?" a faint female voice asked as Damian swam back up to consciousness.

"I don't know," a man's voice replied. "He's hurt. We can't just leave him."

Damian opened his eyes. The acoustic tile ceiling overhead and the flat, cold feeling under him told him he was flat on his back. The man and the woman stood nearby.

"Don't..." he started, then lifted up onto his elbows. "Don't go in the staff room."

The woman turned to him, then laughed. "How long have you been awake?" she asked.

Damian sat up, slowly moving so his back was leaning against the wall of the checkout kiosk. "Just a moment," he replied. "You did a hell of a number on my hand." Then he looked down at his hand and noticed the fresh bandage; one of them had changed the dressing while he was out. He looked up at the pair, surprised.

"We're not barbarians," Miguel said. He squatted down next to Damian, putting his hand on Damian's forehead. "Take it easy, okay? That's a hell of a cut you've got there." Damian nodded, while getting a better look at Miguel. The guy was wearing thrift-store castoffs similar to the woman's: boots, jeans, a heavy jacket, with his head wrapped in a scarf which

fell down around his neck. A few days' worth of stubble dusted Miguel's cheeks and jaw. It wasn't a beard yet, just a week's worth of patchy neglect.

The woman, Damian noticed, had dropped her hood. Her ash-blond hair was cropped short, resting just above her ears and clipped around the nape of her neck. Nervous blue eyes darted around the store, alert for any sign of movement. She wore a sort of scarf similar to Miguel's, but tugged down around her neck. As she turned toward him, he saw that besides the long knife sheathed at her side, she had a short compound bow slung in a holster on her back.

Miguel was no longer carrying the crowbar, but Damian saw it wasn't far away, propped up against the side of the kiosk. He nodded in its direction, then pointed at it with his bandaged hand. "Don't forget your crowbar."

Miguel's eyes widened, then he reached out and picked up the long shaft of cold metal. "Yeah, wasn't planning to."

"Better safe than sorry, right?" Damian asked. He raised his wounded hand as if pointing out the danger of the new world.

The woman cracked a brief grin, "Very true." She then looked down at Damian, her eyes scanning over him top to bottom. "You said to stay out of the staff room. Why?" She looked toward the back of the store, peering into the darkness.

Damian felt his throat go dry, licked his lips, and tried to swallow before replying. "There's..." he coughed, trying to force words to come. He shivered as he remembered the slaughterhouse scene in the staff room. "Two corpses. Mutilated. The whole room's splattered with them. But..."

He noticed the woman and Miguel lock eyes for a second, worried looks crossing their faces. "But what?" she said.

"Something else was just...wrong, or off...just weird."

With one smooth motion, the woman unslung the bow on her back and nocked an arrow to the string. She took one step back into a slight crouch, turning her body toward the faint doors at the end of the store. "What do you mean 'weird'?" she asked, voice dropping to a whisper. "Be as specific as you can."

Damian rose to his feet, unsteady at first, keeping his balance with one hand on the register. "Okay, the staff room itself wasn't really the issue. But right beyond that, there's like, a stockroom, or loading area or whatever you'd call it. It's got one of those big aluminum rolling doors making up one wall, you know?"

"Sure," she said. "So a truck can drive in and drop off stock."

"Right. Exactly," Damian replied. "The corpses are in that room. The storeroom or stockroom. One of them...well, looked like he'd blown his own head off. Shotgun in his lap, and brains splattered up to the ceiling." He shuddered, remembering the surreal glimpse of the headless corpse. "The other was just the body, the legs ripped off." Damian shivered with the memory, "And the corpse's head...it was cracked open and emptied. Cleaned out."

Kris and Miguel shared a look. A look that said, This guy's either nuts, or we're in trouble.

"But the worst thing," Damian continued. "The thing that really felt weird about the whole scene, was that even though the loading door was open, the corpses were...I don't know the word for it, really. There were no signs of animals. Don't you think that's weird? I'd have assumed from the look of the bodies, they've probably been there a few days, if not more. And you'd think they would've been eaten, right? Coyotes or crows. Or even rats or raccoons or something. Any kind of critter that eats carrion. But there weren't even any flies in

there. The door was open to the outside, and yet nothing had come in to...well, to eat."

"Right," the woman said. "That is strange." She relaxed her grip on the bow, took a few steps forward toward the back of the store.

Miguel turned to Damian, "How long you been here? Have you looked around the place more than that?"

"Maybe an hour or so. Not much more than that though I'm not sure how long I was out just now." Damian pointed back toward the pharmacy. "I saw this strip mall off the highway and came in here first. Hoped to find something for my hand. All in all, it seems pretty secure. Safe for a night anyway." He looked out through the broken front window. "I don't like traveling at night if I can help it."

Miguel nodded. "I hear you. There's some weird stuff out there now."

The woman turned to Miguel and Damian. "Enough. We can tell ghost stories later. This place is as good as any for tonight. I agree the roads aren't safe to travel on after dark. Miguel, grab the gear, I'll look around."

"Okay, yeah, sure," Miguel replied and jogged outside the store to get their things.

"Okay stranger, what's your name?" she asked Damian.

"Damian," he replied.

"Heh. Of course," she said with a wry smile. "Like that creepy devil kid. That movie freaked me out when I was little. I mean, that kid seemed so normal, and then it turned out he was the devil all along."

Damian did not understand what she was talking about, but had learned a long time ago not to argue with anyone holding a weapon. Especially anyone who looked like they knew how to use said weapon. "Sure," he replied.

"Well, Damian, I'm Kris. May as well get comfy; it's going to be a long night." She walked back toward the pharmacy and noticed his bike. "This yours?"

Damian nodded. "Yeah, been riding it for weeks now, since my car ran out of gas."

She seemed to approve. "Smart. Good choice. We've got a truck parked nearby, though. If you want to bug out with us in the morning, you're welcome to stow this in the bed."

Damian walked along with her, taking his bike by the handlebars and moving with it to the back of the store. "Well," he replied, "let's see how things look in the morning."

As they moved to the back of the store, Miguel came back through the front with a pair of large backpacks slung over his shoulders. He double-stepped it toward them, then handed one to Kris. She took it and hoisted it over one shoulder.

"Okay, Damian. Where's safe? What have you already figured out?"

Damian pointed toward the pharmacy counter. "Back there" he said. "We could make camp in the staff room, but that's a little close to those corpses and all that weirdness. But the pharmacy area's clear. There's a counter there, too, which will block us from the sight of anyone looking through the front window."

"Nice," Miguel said. "Or anything, I suppose?"

"Well," Damian said, thinking about that. "Hard to say. I've seen things that hunted with no eyes at all. So who knows?"

"Pharmacy it is, then," Kris said, and strode past the countertop before dropping her backpack in one corner of the small room. "We'll take watch and try and get some rest. Place looks ransacked though. Too bad there's nothing to eat."

"Well, hell," Damian said, opening the saddlebags of his bike. "You should have said something." He reached into the

bags, pulling out a few cans of chicken, and a jug of water. "Eat up," he said, holding the food out toward them.

Miguel stared at him for a moment, unbelieving. "You're just giving this up?"

"Hell, call it payment for medical services rendered, if that makes you happy," Damian replied. "But just eat, okay? We're all in this together now."

The rest of the night passed in peaceful silence, only the chirruping of crickets faint in the distance. Watches came and went, and they all slept well, though all were disturbed by strange dreams. Dreams of alien vistas of arctic plains, and the biting cold of deep space. Visions of creaking dim shapes in the darkness, cold eyes like glittering chips of ice. Titan-sized shadows stomping behind dark mountains. And the feeling of deep, gnawing hunger.



## *Chapter Five*

Dawn broke the horizon early. Red streaks of sunlight crawled through the splintered windows of the Walgreens, inching toward the back of the store where Miguel, Kris, and Damian slept. Miguel had been on second watch, but fell asleep after Kris woke him. Thus he'd never woken Damian for the final watch. But the night had passed in peace, and the trio reaped the benefits of a decent night's sleep.

As the summer sun rose early, so did Damian. He came to consciousness aware of a warm light beyond his closed eyes. Ruddy and itchy, he opened his eyes, blinking the sleep out and then propping himself up on one elbow. Miguel and Kris still slept, and he didn't fault them for that. His hand throbbed, inflamed and hot. He sat up, stretched and cracked the tension out of his back.

He got to his feet and rummaged through the saddlebags on his bike. There was enough food in them to make a half-hearted attempt at breakfast for the group. His group. It had been a long time since he'd had any human companionship, any voices other than his own to comfort him. Humans are social animals, and he'd been on his own for too long. Could he trust this new pair? Time would tell, he supposed. Better to be traveling in a group than on his own, since he couldn't watch his own back. He decided to just follow along and see where this went.

Damian was rummaging when Miguel snapped awake with a snorting snore. “Fuckadoodledoo...sonofafucknut...” He sat up straight, head snapping from one side to the other. Kris was still out. “Damian, right?” he asked.

Damian nodded. “Mornin’ sunshine. You slept through the night, didn’t you?”

“Fucknuts,” Miguel grunted, and got to his feet. He walked around behind the pharmacy desk, making half-hearted motions as if on some military patrol. The kind he most likely had seen in a Fast and Furious movie or something. Hand gripping tight to his crowbar, trying to save face in front of Damian.

“Miguel, don’t sweat it. It’s our secret. Nothing happened last night. Everything’s fine.” Damian spread his stash of food across the counter. A few cans of chicken, two bags of toffee peanuts, and a jug of water. “The bounty runneth over,” he chided.

“Sure, yeah” Miguel said, calming. He tore open a package of peanuts, shook a few into his hand, popped them into his mouth and chewed. “You’re being liberal with your supplies,” he said, and offered the plastic packet of peanuts to Damian.

Damian took the bag, shook a few of the sticky nuts into his hand. “Told you last night. We’re all in this together.”

“How do you know me and her, we’re not like, some kind of bad guys or something?” Miguel asked.

Damian tossed a few of the sugar-coated nuts into his mouth and munched. He regarded Miguel for a moment, then swallowed. “You seen any monsters?” he asked. “Because that’s how I know. Because I’ve seen things out of nightmares, things that tore folks limb from limb and never blinked.”

“We’ve all seen things,” Kris’ voice, rising from sleep. “It’s amazing how monumentally fucked the world has become,” she said. Her arm was over her eyes, blocking out the light.



"Miguel," she said, "I think what our new friend is getting at, is that he trusts us because we're human, and we need to stick together."

Miguel looked into Damian's eyes. Damian was watching Kris, but his eyes rose to meet Miguel's. "Yeah. Ain't that the truth," he said. "Look, I don't know your stories, or how you've lasted this long. I can tell you that most of what's kept me alive has been a willingness to hide and run. But what I know is that you're the first actual people I've seen in..." Damian drifted; his eyes dropped and his head sagged.

"You don't even remember, do you?" Miguel asked.

"No, I have no idea," Damian replied. "I really don't. I stopped keeping track of the days long ago. What's the point? I know it's still summer, and when it gets cold, when winter comes in...well, I sure as hell hope I'm somewhere warm when it does."

"What if you're not?" Kris asked.

Damian swallowed the last of the glazed peanuts. "Well, I suppose I'm fucked then," he laughed.

Kris threw her head back and laughed. Damian and Miguel both soon joined in. Damian couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed with someone, or had even the briefest glimmer of hope.

"Getting light out," Kris said. "We should pack up and get moving soon."

Damian nodded and repacked the saddlebags of his bike. "I never stay anywhere too long. Learned that a while ago."

Miguel walked over to the pharmacy shelving. "I assume you've looked through all this?" he asked, perusing the few bottles still on the shelves.

"Yeah," Damian replied. "I found antibiotics for my hand just in case. The rest of it? Beats me. Never heard of most. I figure other folks took the most popular meds a while ago."

Kris took a final swig from the water jug, then handed it back to Damian, who placed it in the saddlebag. "You should take those, then. That's a nasty cut you got; I checked it when you were out. It's getting infected already."

Damian raised his injured hand and looked at the wrappings. "What if I need it more later?"

"If you need it later, you need it later. What you don't need is for that wound to become gangrenous. Or for your blood to become infected. If the infection spreads, or gets worse, you could lose the hand. If it goes gangrene, there's nothing we can do for you. So I'd suggest you take the meds now, and worry about later, later."

Damian nodded. He pulled the transparent orange bottle of amoxicillin from his pocket. Then he popped the cap and shook a tablet out into his hand. "God, I always hate the way these things smell. Like halitosis." He tossed the pill into his mouth and swallowed it dry.

Miguel turned from the shelving. "Smart man, D.," he said.

Kris slung her bow and quiver of arrows over her shoulder, "You need a hand with the bike, Damian?"

"No, thanks. I'll manage."

"Nothing here that I can figure out," Miguel said, walking away from the pharmacy shelves. "I say we leave the rest for the next folks through here. Maybe they'll be able to use them."

"Sure, that makes sense," Kris replied. "Damian?"

"Yeah, sure. No point in taking stuff we don't know how to use."

"Well, the tribe has spoken," Miguel said. "Let's get out of here."

They walked to the front of the store. Slowing as they approached the broken glass window. Kris nocked an arrow to her bowstring, then peered out of the window. She looked

into the distance. “Clear,” she said, quiet so only Miguel and Damian could hear.

Miguel opened the front door, holding it while Damian pushed his bike through. Kris followed him, and Miguel let the door glide shut as he stepped through.

Her voice still low, Kris said, “The truck’s up the ramp. Just a ways up the road. You up for a hike?”

Damian looked from Miguel to Kris, suspicious. “Why’d you leave it up there? Aren’t you worried someone’d steal it?”

Kris nodded in understanding. “Sure is a possibility,” she said. “But like you said earlier, you’re the first person Miguel and I have seen in weeks. We left the truck so we could come in quiet. Figured we could run back to the truck if we needed to.”

Damian gripped the handlebars tighter, but wasn’t ready to flee just yet. “Yeah, okay. Let’s see this truck of yours.”

“Miguel, please lead the way,” Kris said.



Kris hadn’t lied; the truck was close—just up the ramp, and a short hike along the highway. Kris and Miguel led the way along the road, scanning for any signs of danger. Damian walked his bike behind them, alert for anything out of the ordinary, but also becoming concerned by the warm and aching feeling in his hand. Soon Kris slowed the group down, looked back at Damian and then pointed just off the road toward a large lumpish shape against the tree line. The truck, he assumed. Covered in a canvas tarp, and with dead branches propped up along it for rudimentary camouflage. Damian assumed that anyone actively looking for a truck in this location would have had little trouble spotting it. But the

haphazard disguise served to distract the casual observer, and that seemed to have been fine.

Miguel approached the lump, knocked a few branches away, and then pulled at the tarp. It slid over the top of the truck, billowing and falling to the side with a faint swish as he tugged.

The truck itself looked beat to hell, but still functional, though caked with mud and what looked like crusted algae on the bumper. Damian started to ask about that, then decided he didn't want to know the details. It looked like it'd get them away from here, and that's all Damian cared about. The bed of the truck was empty aside from four large blue plastic jerrycans. One of them had large black "X" marks on the sides, edges—all over it. For whatever reason, there was no mistaking it differed from the others. Damian leaned in for a better look. He recoiled at the sight of what he first thought was a snake, but it was just a long green rubber garden hose, coiled near the cans.

Miguel noticed Damian checking out the cans. "That one is drinkable water."

Damian nodded in understanding. "The others?" he asked.

Miguel waved his hands at the cans. "Gasoline. We siphon or steal whenever we can. Two empties now though. Gotta find more soon."

"Okay," Damian said. "I'll keep my eyes out and let you know if I see a Shell station."

Kris was still scanning the area, bow nocked with an arrow held before her, but aimed at the ground. Miguel folded the tarp into sections. "Hey, D.," he said, "grab me that," and pointed toward a strap of nylon webbing slung around the door handle. Damian picked up the strap, clicked the plastic tabs open, and brought it over to Miguel. "Thanks, just wrap it around here," Miguel said, holding the tarp out. Damian

wrapped the strap around the tarp, and fixed the plastic locking tabs in place. Miguel then tossed the rolled tarp into the back of the truck.

“Okay,” Miguel said. “Now for your gear.”

Kris was turning in slow circles. She seemed anxious, but Damian couldn’t see what worried her.

“Get in the truck,” she said. “Fast. I don’t think we’re alone out here.”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s do it.” Miguel hoisted Damian’s bike up and tossed it into the back of the truck. It bumped up against the jerrycans. It was a snug fit in the truck bed. “Damian, let’s get moving. There’s room for all of us inside the cab.”

“Kris, what’s — ” Damian asked.

“Move! Get in the truck now!” Kris shouted.

There was a sudden rushing of wind. A high-pitched whine that sounded like an insectile buzzing rose all around them as the forest came to life. The monsters had come.



Damian felt a rush of air over his head and ducked. As he did, he felt something brush past his head, scraping across his scalp. He hit the ground hard, looked up, and saw something out of a nightmare above his head. It was huge and looked as large as him, though it was twisting in the air, so he couldn’t be sure. It had a crustacean symmetry to it—many appendages of varying size ridged the edges of the thing’s body, topped with a strange, bulbous, ridged mass where a head might be. This blobby nodule was aswarm with a multitude of cilia-like growths, and it glowed with a ruddy, fungus-like phosphorescence. The creature was borne aloft on a set of great insect-like wings, which beat the sky so fast they were almost invisible; just a humming blur with

an almost indistinct crystalline shimmer. It came to an abrupt halt, hovering in midair, and turned lighting fast back toward Damian.

Then the howling, buzzing sound was all around them, and three more of the alien creatures burst from the tree line and swarmed around them. The things flew around, over, and across the hapless humans, reaching out and snapping with their massive claws. One creature seemed almost to hang back from the others. In its fore claws, it gripped a long silver rod, with a strange blue light shimmering along its length. Miguel grabbed up his crowbar and dodged around behind the truck. Damian dropped flat to the ground and rolled under it.

As he did so, he saw Kris raise her bow, pull the string back tight, and loose an arrow all in one smooth motion. The arrow flew straight and true, piercing the chitinous hide of the monster which had buzzed over Damian's head and impaling the creature, punching in all the way to the fletching. As she drew another arrow, the creature's blobby central mass rippled with color and motion, the ruddy glow replaced by a sickening greenish hue that then rippled with a light show of patterns and colors. The head-lumps of the other creatures repeated the asynchronous polychromatic pulsing as they hovered above the truck. Their large nodules flashing colors and patterns, paused, then sped into staccato frenzy.

Kris seated another arrow and drew the bowstring back. "It's like they're communicating with each other!" she yelled. She loosed the arrow, and again it flew straight and true, piercing the glowing central mass of the same creature she'd already hit. It sliced through the ridged, tumor-like mass and erupted out the other side. The creature then turned in mid-air, spread its claws wide to its sides, and flew straight at her. She ducked and rolled as the thing zoomed overhead. Its claws waved in the air, grasping at her, snatching and tear-

ing a strip of cloth from her jacket. With a buzzing whine, it arced up and into the sky again.

One of the other creatures dropped to the ground, wings folding into its carapace, and bashed at the truck, trying to get at Damian underneath. It scrabbled with its large pincer, snapping the claw shut inches from his face. Damian rolled back further, shoving off the ground with his hands, bringing screaming fire into his wounded palm.

Miguel ran to the truck, crowbar raised high in his hand. While the strange creature was low to the ground, and its claw was under the truck reaching for Damian, Miguel struck. He slammed his foot onto the joint where the claw met the body of the creature. He stomped hard, and then followed it down with a devastating strike with the crowbar, piercing deep into the cartilaginous joint. Miguel wrenched it with all his strength and the joint ripped and split. A viscous gray fluid sprayed out across his face, torso, and hands.

The creature bucked under him, throwing him back against the truck. It stood up, off-balance, with the wounded pincer hanging limp at its side. As it rose, Damian rolled back out from under the truck, grabbed the creature's limp pincer, kicked the monster in the chest, and pulled hard. With a sickening ripping sound and another spray of gray slime the claw came free, and the thing staggered backward. Its central mass flashed a frantic array of color, then diaphanous wings burst from its carapace, and it launched into the sky.

Kris shot another arrow, but this one did little damage. It cracked against the creature's shell, chipping it, but not debilitating it. With a rush of wings, this creature joined the others and soon the four of them were fleeing into the air, back into the trees.

Damian, Kris, and Miguel were still. Silent. The buzzing receded and Damian realized he was holding his breath. He

let it out quiet and slow, his heart beating hard and fast, and adrenaline flooding his blood. He realized he was still holding the creature's arm and dropped it to the ground with a dull thud.

"What the actual hell were those?" Miguel asked.

Damian kicked at the pincer lying on the ground. "Beats me. Like flying lobsters or something."

Kris came over and knelt to examine the claw. She poked at it with her knife, used the blade as a lever to move it around. "It's light," she said. "Doesn't weigh anything at all. But damn," she said, thrusting the tip of the blade against the shell. "The shell is strong." She stood, still staring at the claw as a foul yellow steam sloughed off it, dropping to the ground and roiling along the asphalt road. Then the awful thing smoked and hissed. Dozens of small black pits opened along its length, grew larger, merged, and the claw took on a loathsome, spongy appearance. The acrid steam became a thick yellow mist, or smoke, and the air stank with the smell of vinegar and rotting mushrooms.

Damian looked toward the trees, back to the dissolving claw and then to his companions. "Let's get out of here."



Miguel jumped into the driver's seat of the truck, shoved his keys into the ignition and turned. The engine roared to life with a heavy, grinding growl. Damian slid into the cab next to Miguel. After taking one final look around, Kris tossed her bow and quiver of arrows into the bed of the truck and leapt into the seat next to Damian. She slammed the door shut and slapped the dashboard. "Move it. I want this shit hole to be a distant memory if those things regroup and return."



Miguel popped the clutch, pulled the gearshift into place, and stomped the accelerator. Tires sprayed a shower of grit and gravel as the pickup shot forward onto the highway and roared away. Damian watched out the rearview mirror as the strip mall diminished and then vanished in the distance. Soon the horizon behind them was nothing but the blacktop slicing through the golden hills. Ahead, the road arced up for a few miles, and then tumbled down into a steep descent toward a small town. He could see buildings, parks, roadside attractions. But no people, aside from occasional corpses littering the side of the road. He wondered about that often. It mystified him even after months of survival in this awful, mean world. The monsters had gotten lots of people, he knew that. But it was almost like millions had just vanished overnight.

All three watched the road, eyes darting back and forth, alert for any sign of inhabitants. Both human and otherwise. The road ahead was empty but for a few abandoned cars strewn across the asphalt. As they approached downtown, Damian pointed. "Hey, look," he said. "Gas up ahead."

Miguel and Kris looked where he was pointing. Up ahead and off the road was the familiar red, white, and blue iconography of the Chevron gas logo, up on a tall pole. He assumed that maybe in the past it had rotated, lit up as a beacon for the weary traveler. Now it was caught in mid-rotation, stopped whenever the power went out, and was just off-center. They were seeing it almost edge on, and almost missed it.

Kris squinted her eyes, peering ahead and trying to get a better view of the station. "What do you think?"

Miguel sucked at his teeth, thinking. "I don't like it. I say we keep going."

Damian was still watching ahead, looking for any sign of movement, of danger of any sort. "Why's that? We could get in and out fast, I'm sure."

"Yeah, maybe," Miguel said. "But I still think we should pass it up. We've got a third of a tank and a full jerry of gas in the back. We'll get pretty far with that."

"Well, sure," Damian said. "But what happens when that runs out?"

Kris sank back into the seat. "We're on a main highway. There'll be cars down the road, so there will be gas. I don't want to stop yet. If it was on the edge of town, maybe, but we're smack in the middle here, and I'm still worried about those things."

"You think they might regroup?" Damian asked, looking over his shoulder and peering up through the rear window, trying to get a glimpse of any danger sneaking up behind them.

"Absolutely. And who knows how fast those things can move when they've a mind to?" Kris replied. "I'd rather we get some serious distance between us and them before we stop."

Damian nodded. "Okay, fair enough."

Miguel slowed the truck down. There were three cars blocking the road ahead. Past them, it arced up again to a blind hill. He moved the pickup forward, gliding between two of the cars, then skirting the third. The truck shuddered and rumbled as he went off the asphalt and onto the gravel shoulder for a minute.

Passing by the third car, Kris peered out the side window, getting a good look at it, a recent model mid-sized sedan. Daggers of glass sparkling in the early-morning sun surrounded the holes where the driver's and passenger's windows had been. Blood splattered all over the car's interior,

over the upholstery, smeared over the dashboard, trailed out the window and halfway down the hood where it stopped.

Kris's gaze wandered from the car's hood and rose into the sky. She saw the pine and oak treetops in the distance, the thick wood starting less than a hundred yards off the side of the road. The swaying trees grew up into the hills until they blocked her vision with a wall of darkest green. A picture-perfect landscape in another time that now filled her with dread.

She tore her eyes from the trees, and forced them ahead, back to the road. "Straight ahead, that's the best. We'll find gas later."

Miguel cleared the last car and slid back onto the road. The truck's tires grabbed the asphalt as if they were meeting an old friend after a great absence. He dropped his foot onto the accelerator and sped up, leaving the town behind them.



They continued on in silence, all three still feeling the aftereffects of their encounter with the buzzing alien creatures. They were barreling along the highway still, and all often checked the mirrors to make sure nothing was sneaking up on them. Miles stretched behind them as the truck chewed up the road in front. Soon, the little town and the loathsome flying monstrosities were forgotten. Or at least they were no longer at the front of their minds.

Miguel released the pressure on the accelerator, the truck slowed to a comfortable speed. "Keep your eyes out for gas," he said. "I think we're clear. We can stop a few moments to tank up."

Kris pulled her eyes back into focus. Her thoughts had been a million miles away when he spoke. She'd been watch-

ing the world pass them by, keeping her eyes out for danger, while her mind wandered, she was thinking about how there was good fortune in knowing they had a little more summer ahead of them. A few more warm months before winter came in, chill and hungry.

Since the monsters came and the modern world had crumbled to dust, survival was a goal measured in moments. But it was easier because of the warm summer weather. She wondered what would happen if they made it to winter. The snows and sleet in the mountains would kill them if they didn't have shelter by then.

Foul weather wasn't the only danger worrying her. More creatures like the ones they'd met this morning could lurk anywhere. They weren't the first such things she'd seen, or heard about, either. Outside San Francisco, she'd almost been killed by a mob of things she first thought were human, but turned out to be doglike creatures which spilled out of warrens beneath the legendary cemeteries of Cupertino—monsters with burrowing snouts, sharp teeth, and a hunger for rotting flesh. They stank of the graves they feasted in.

Though it had been weeks since she'd escaped them, Kris still sometimes thought she could catch a whiff of their smell on her clothes. Because of those creatures, she'd traveled alone for weeks. She'd struck out from San Francisco with a few companions, but none of them made it out of Cupertino. Grace, Johnny, and Adam. Sweet Adam, whom she'd loved, but who was too kind to survive in a world of nightmares made real. The three of them butchered in front of her, but she'd escaped unscathed. At least with no physical scars.

Miguel's words pulled her from her reverie. She spoke up, "Good idea. And I've been thinking."

Damian's eyes were fixed on the road dead ahead. "What about?" he asked.

"We're making decent time and the road is empty. With luck it will stay that way for a while," Kris started. "I'm thinking maybe we shoot over the mountains and then make our way south."

"Why's that?" Miguel asked.

"Summer won't last forever," she said. "I think we want to move south to find somewhere warm before winter comes in, anyway."

"You don't think this will end soon, do you?" Damian asked.

"No," she replied. "I'm pretty much sure we're on our own. I mean, we may meet other people along the way. But everything else? America, apple pie, the whole damn world. Yeah, I think that pipe dream's over."

Damian nodded. "I wonder what winter'll be like this year," he said, almost under his breath.

"What do you mean?" Miguel replied. "Same as usual, right? Cold, rainy...."

"Who knows?" Kris said. "I mean, does anyone?"

"No. Not anymore," Damian said. "Nothing about the world surprises me now."

Miguel replied, "Ain't that the truth?"

Damian watched the mountains pass by through he window. "Thing is," he said. "I might have a place to crash for the winter. Family cabin near Tahoe. That's where I was heading when you found me."

"Really?" Kris said. "Is it safe?"

"I sure hope so," Damian said. "We used to go up there during winter and summer. I was up there skiing last winter, and we locked it up tight before we left. My plan was to wait out the winter there. Figure it's got to be pretty safe, secluded like it is."

"That's awfully generous," Kris said, a tinge of suspicion in her tone. "You're just telling us about this place?"

"Well, I'm assuming that it's going to need to be stocked," Damian replied. "We'll need to do some scavenging, maybe even some hunting. You're good with that bow, you know?"

"So you're saying we'd have to earn our keep?" Kris asked. "That's fair."

"I can't promise anything," Damian said. "I'm assuming it's still standing, but who knows. But it's worth a shot." A moment later, he sat up straight in his seat, and gestured ahead with his hand, "Hey, check it out."

Ahead, maybe half a mile up the road peeking out from behind a few pines dotting the side of the road, they saw a sign. "Kennedy Diner & Gas" it said, red text painted over a large white panel. A yellow sunrise illustration behind the text. "Breakfast served all day!" a smaller sign read just below it. Four cars were in front of the building, parked side by side like pretty maids all in a row.

Damian peered ahead. "What do you think," he asked. "Should we risk it?"

Kris nodded and reached for her seat belt release. "Definitely. But we do this fast, and quiet. Damian, Miguel and I have...well, sort of a routine, I guess."

Miguel cracked the slightest hint of a smile. "Yeah, you could call it a routine. When we stop, just stay nearby, or in the truck. Chances are everything's clear, but we want to make sure we're safe. First sign of trouble..."

"We get the hell out of here," Kris finished the sentence for him.

"Damn straight," Miguel added.

"Okay, sure. No problem," Damian said. "Just tell me what to do. Or would you rather I stay out of your way?"

Miguel slowed the truck and veered off the side of the highway. Tires rattled on the gravel bed of the parking lot as they rolled into the diner and gas station. There was no sign of the cars' drivers. Inch by inch they pulled up to the pumps. "Now," Kris said. "We wait."

They sat, motor idling, Kris and Miguel watching either side of the road. Peering into the trees across the highway, and over the wooden facade of the diner's small, one-story building. Damian was getting itchy feet. "Can we—" he started.

"Shhhh!" Kris hissed, low, almost whispering. "Wait."

He did. They sat almost motionless as two, three, five minutes passed.

"Let's do this," Miguel said, breaking the silence. He opened the car door, holding the latch in one hand, pushing with the other. When it was open, he released the latch with deliberate slowness, making sure it didn't make a sound as it clicked back to its starting place. Kris did the same, then slid her feet onto the ground outside.

"Think the pumps still work?" Damian asked in a low voice.

"No," Miguel replied. "Probably not."

"But we won't worry about the pumps," Kris said. She turned to the truck bed, reached over the sidewall, and pulled up Miguel's crowbar. Then she was striding across the gravel. "It's just the cars we can work with."

"Why not siphon gas from the station's tanks? Plenty more there, right?" Damian asked.

Miguel walked to the back of the truck and grabbed the rubber garden hose from the bed. "Way too deep, brother. We'd need some kind of pump or something. And we ain't got one."

Damian nodded in understanding. "Never thought about that before, I guess."

She approached a dusty green late-model Toyota Camry. It had a few dings and dents, but otherwise was in decent shape. "We found that out the hard way, didn't we Miguel?"

"Sure did. I tried sucking gas out of an underground tank a while back. Fumes knocked me on my ass before I got so much as a drop. I don't recommend it."

Kris laughed, "Never seen a person puke that hard before in my life."

Miguel brought the hose over to the Camry and dropped it next to the car. "Yeah, that was awful," he said. "Hey, Damian, grab me those jerrys."

Damian walked to the back of the truck, grabbed the latch of the tailgate and clicked it open. The gate fell open, he steadied himself with his good hand, and hopped up into the back of the truck. Once inside, he moved around the bike and grabbed one of the empty jerrycans. "Head's up," he called out, as he tossed it to Miguel.

Miguel caught it and placed it next to the hose. "Okay, next one," he said.

Damian picked up the other can and tossed it toward Miguel. "All right!" Miguel said, catching the can and walking it over to the hose. "Now it's a party."

By the time he got to the Camry, Kris had forced the locked fuel door open with the crowbar. She unscrewed the gas cap, dropped it to the ground, and, picking up the hose, she shoved one end of it into the opening to the filler pipe and lowered it a few inches until she could feel it sloshing around in the gas within.

"Jackpot," she said. "This one's got a few gallons in it, easy," she said, and then picked up the other end of the hose. She opened the black plastic stopper on the jerrycan, pulled out a long plastic tube, and placed it to the side. Kris put the open end of the hose to her mouth and took a few long



sucks on it before coughing, spitting out a mouthful of gasoline, and putting the leaking hose end into the mouth of the can. The sloshing, splashing noise from within told her the siphon worked. "Just a few minutes, and it'll be full. These folks must have filled up recently. Maybe right here."

Miguel brought the other can over, popped the lid and got it ready to fill. In a minute or two the plastic jerrycan was full and he moved the hose over to the second can, sloshing gas on the asphalt and gravel between the two.

As he did so, Kris picked up the full can. She replaced the cap, then lugged the can around back to the truck. Kris jumped up into the bed, and secured the can where it had been.

"All out," Miguel announced, as the hose from the Camry ran dry. "But here's another one full." He lifted the can up over the side of the truck, handing it to Kris. She placed it next to the first one.

"How you doing?" he said to Kris.

"First one's done." She jumped over the side of the truck walls and dragged the hose to the next of the cars. The process was the same: Miguel placed one end of the hose into the next car's fuel tank, but now she dragged the other end around to the side of the truck. She took a few drags on the end of the hose until gasoline flowed again. This time, she forced the spitting hose end into the opening to the truck's filler pipe and let the stolen gas flow into the tank. Within a few minutes the hose shuddered, coughed, and was dry.

"We're done," Miguel said. "Bone dry."

Damian walked over to help Miguel. "We should start on the next car, right?"

Miguel nodded. "Yeah, that's our system. We fill the cans first, and then the truck."

“So you have extra if you have to make a fast escape,” Damian said.

Kris spat gasoline into the gravel at her feet. “Damn, I need a mint,” she said.

They moved to the next car and drained it dry. They started on the third, but the truck was full before they siphoned everything from it.

The dull orange glow of the sun was more or less overhead as they piled into the truck and left the roadside diner. Miguel and Damian up front in the cab, Kris sat in the bed of the truck next to the bike and the jerrycans, her bow and arrows within arm’s reach, and her eyes scouring the sides of the road—but more often than not staring far down the road behind them, alert for any sign of danger.



## *Chapter Six*

The wendigo blazed across the landscape, a white blur charging through the shadows of the forest. It kept to the woods, leaping from tree branches, shaded by them from the dim sunlight overhead. Full sunlight would burn the thing, but with the occluding haze of smoke in the air, it could travel in shadow. Beady black eyes glittered with malice as the once-human beast searched for its prey. The rank burning smell in the air was like the venomous stink of acid in its nostrils, but far off it scented the blood of man under the thick, acrid miasma.

Aching hunger raged in its guts as it ran. It gnawed at its own lips, scraping them raw. They oozed with thick black ichor, which ran in clots down its chin, matting into the white bristles sprouting in patches over its rough, pale hide. It ate whatever it could get in its claws. Rough hornlike nails dug in bark for grubs, grasped at squirrels, rabbits, birds. It stopped to gorge on carrion, even bark and moss when it became desperate. But the man's blood called to it. A trace scent-path along which the wendigo charged, drawn forward by the burning hunger for warm flesh and hot blood. And there was something strangely compelling about this scent. Almost like following the pheromone trail left by ants to mark a path for their hive, the wendigo trailed after the faint iron tang of man-blood.

An unending, insatiable hunger consumed the wendigo. It would eat anything and everything to satisfy the gnawing want. But only the meat of mankind could fill the void within its empty gut.

And so the wendigo tore up the miles, claws ripping and rending at the ground, the bark of trees. It ran, leapt, almost flew as it barreled forward hunting the quarry it sought with such reckless desperation. The beast was angry now, could feel the scent dwindling. It needed the wind, the blizzard, the arctic air to blast through this hot land, the breath of its god, Ithaqua, to whisk it into the sky, to blow away the stink of burning civilization, and allow it to fly after the fleeing prey.

Soon, it knew. Soon it would meet humans that held the magic of the north winds, the corruptible men and women who would join it. It could feel them, those waiting souls, in the mountains where the chill air was more hospitable to the wendigo. Where food was scarce, and a hard winter would force some to live on different kinds of meat. Those who would give up their humanity to serve Ithaqua just as it had, long ago.

And when the Breath of Ithaqua froze their blood and brought the Hunger to them—oh, then the wendigo would flourish. Then the wendigo would lead its new kin in the hunt for meat and blood, and the sweet marrow within the bones of men. But first it must eat.



## *Chapter Seven*

The afternoon passed in silence as the truck traveled along the mountain highway. The road wound through the great rocky outcrops and peaks, rising and falling. Slow rises followed flattened stretches as they powered around the edges of the Sierras and climbed ever higher. In time the rises leveled out, and after cresting the summit, the road plummeted down at a dizzying angle.

Green highway signs ahead alerted them they were fifty miles from Tahoe City. Damian wondered how anyone could drive down this sloping highway during the winter, when people would come to Tahoe for the skiing and other snow sports.

Miguel focused his eyes on the road ahead, but Damian could see that his knuckles were white, gripping the steering wheel tight. As the road snaked on, Miguel slowed his speed. He worried they might come around a blind curve and smack into a stopped car or pileup. They were okay on gas for a while now, but if they damaged the truck, they'd be walking.

Damian decided to get him talking. Maybe taking his mind off the road would help Miguel out. "How'd you meet up with Kris?" he said.

"Huh?" Miguel said. Then took his eyes off the road for a moment to look at Damian. "Oh, well. I'd been on foot for a few weeks before I met Kris. I'd fled Folsom in the night,

left all my stuff in my shitty little studio apartment and took off into the hills on my motorcycle. She'd fled east from San Francisco, right? So when we met up, I was pretty impressed she'd made it that far by herself. That was like...I don't know, a couple hundred miles maybe? She told me a little about her story, and when we compared notes, our tales had been pretty similar. Monsters in the streets, the deranged worshippers of dark gods. Great black things with writhing tentacles, stomping hoofs on legs as long as a man is tall. We've been traveling together for weeks, maybe even months now, and we're a good team."

"Gotcha," Damian said. "I guess all our stories are basically pretty much the same."

"Sure enough," Miguel said. Miguel wanted to give Damian the benefit of the doubt, but still saw him as a liability. Damian seemed all right, but Miguel had learned not to trust a bright smile and a strong handshake. And Damian didn't even score points on the handshake, with his messed-up hand. He wasn't impressed with how Damian had hidden under the truck when those monsters came earlier in the day. But at least he hadn't turned tail and run. And when it came down to it, Damian had fought.

For now, Miguel just kept his focus on the road ahead, and decided he'd take it easy on the new guy for the time being. Maybe he'd end up being valuable.

Damian spoke up, "Hey, can we pull over for a few? I'm not feeling so hot."

Miguel turned to look at Damian. He saw dark circles under Damian's eyes, and his skin was pale. "Damn, you're looking a little green. Hang on..." He slowed the truck and steered toward the side of the road. The tires shuddered as they hit the gravel shoulder, and then the truck slowed to a brief, skidding halt.

At once, Damian sprang the latch and hopped out of the cab. He took four steps away from the truck and then fell to his knees. He used his good hand to steady himself while clutching his wounded fist tight to his belly.

Kris leapt over the wall of the truck bed and approached him. "What's wrong?"

Damian waved her back with his wounded hand, and then pitched forward, retching as vomit exploded from his mouth into the dirt below him. He spat, clearing his mouth and taking a deep breath. Then he buckled over and puked again, feeling like his ribs would crack from the pressure put on his torso by his muscles trying to force everything out.

"Shit," he heard Kris say through a fog. "Miguel, keep the truck running!"

With another heaving thrust, Damian was bent forward again. His body squeezed and pressed, but nothing more came up. He slumped to the ground, rolled onto his back and stared up at the sky. "Son of a bitch..." he muttered.

Kris approached him, "What's wrong? What happened?"

"I think it's the meds," Damian said. "My guts cramped up this morning after I took another pill. I don't think those things agree with me." Then he laughed: a thin, wheezing chuckle.

Kris put her hand on his forehead. His skin was damp with sweat, but cool to the touch. "How's your hand?" she said, reaching out to take his hurt hand in hers.

Damian winced as she picked it up. "Hurts like hell."

She held his hand and unwrapped the bandages. When she had exposed the wound, she saw the gash was puffy, inflamed and red around the edges. There was no pus or other discharge. But his fingers were red and swollen, and almost invisible beneath the skin there were red streaks running from the wound up his arm.

“Hold your hand tight. Don’t flex it, or let the wound open.” She stood up and went back to the truck, returning moments later with a first aid kit and a bottle of water. Once again she cleaned and dressed the wound.

Damian gritted his teeth, feeling his gorge rising again through the process. He sipped at the water as she worked. When she had finished, he lay back on the ground, stars swimming in his eyes.

Kris looked down at him. “I’ll give you a moment, then we have to get moving.”

“Sure,” he said. “You take the cab this time, though. Your eyes are better than mine, and if I puke again, it won’t stink the truck up too bad.” He forced a thin smile. “Just my luck, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” Kris replied.

“I survive the end of the world, monsters, the fall of civilization...and I’m going to die from cutting my hand on a damn can of Costco chicken.”

“You won’t die from this,” Kris said, then put her hand behind his head, helping him get to his feet. “It’s a bad infection, and the meds are making you sick. But I doubt you’ll die from it. We’ll figure something out.”

“We’ll see,” Damian said. She helped him up into the bed of the truck, and he propped himself up against the jerrycans and rolled up tarps. “Keep your eyes out for somewhere to settle until morning.”

She nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. “You rest and watch our backs. Keep drinking that water, but slow, or you’ll keep vomiting. Don’t need you getting dehydrated out here.”

“You got it. Let’s get moving,” he said.

Kris got into the cab where Miguel gave her a worried look. “How’s it look?” he asked.



"It's a bad infection. He might lose the hand. Might even kill him," she said. "It's not good at all. And he's reacting to the amoxicillin. That stuff can be rough on your guts."

"What are we going to do?" Miguel asked as he threw the truck into gear and drove back toward the road.

"We'll do everything we can, I suppose," Kris replied. Her eyes were distant, distracted. Staring off down the long road ahead of them.

"If he becomes a liability?" Miguel asked. "If he gets bad enough he can't travel, what then?"

Kris thought about that before answering. It was an inevitability. People die, people become problems. But they're still people. The fundamental humanity remains. "If that happens," she said, "we'll make him as comfortable as we can until he goes. We'll take care of him and then move on."

Miguel chewed on that, let the idea roll around in his head, then nodded. "Yeah, you're right."

"For now, we keep going. With luck we'll find somewhere to stop for the night. But just keep pushing along for now."

"Good enough for me," he said. Miguel pressed down on the accelerator and the truck trundled down the road.

Damian held his arm in his lap, flexing his fingers, trying to keep the blood moving. He was sick, he knew that. He knew Kris was telling him otherwise, but he felt like hell. His hand was on fire, and he was still dizzy, lightheaded. As the truck picked up speed, he felt he was a liability to this crew. And he decided that if things got worse, or if he didn't heal up fast, he'd figure out a way to ditch them both. He could always just sneak off and die like a wounded animal in the woods. He thought it would be better to just make himself scarce than to endanger others.



Cool mountain air whipped around Damian as he dozed in the back of the truck. He'd noticed that the air was much cleaner now that they'd crested the mountain. The stinging, acrid haze of thin smoke in the air hadn't made it over. If he'd had his wits about him earlier, he would have realized that the air had cleared hours ago, as they were approaching the summit. Damian sipped water and then took a few deep breaths. But while the air was fresh, the burning stink of lowland smoke had sunk into his clothes, hair, even his skin. It'd be a long time before he could get the stink off.

He watched the highway snake away behind him. His eyes darted to the road's shoulder, up the sloping rise to his left, and down the plummeting drop to the right. He was glad Miguel was careful and going slow when taking the turns. Staring into the ravine off the side of the road made his head swim and turned his guts to water.

Uphill, the mountain was silent, still. Stands of pines dotted the landscape, making dark patches in the distance where they clung together, brightened by the explosive gold of Sierra aspens. The closer groves were reedy and thin, giving a clear view through them for a hundred yards away from the road. Everything low to the ground was dry and brown this late in the summer. Dry, golden grass clung to the mountain-side while red and orange brush and scrub disrupted the landscape.

Damian had no sense of the natural beauty surrounding him. His immediate thought was that anything could slink through the deep shadows of the woods. Who could guess what sort of things were clinging to the tall trunks of the aspen and pine trees? What strange creatures could burrow

under the golden carpet of flora? And all that summer-dry foliage was a powder keg, an acres-wide tinderbox just waiting for a spark to become a conflagration.

He'd never liked Nevada. Deserts made him hot and uncomfortable, and the few times he'd been to Vegas had been miserable. But he looked forward to getting down the mountain and into the valley basin where he wasn't surrounded by so much flammable debris.

As his mind wandered, he felt the truck slow almost to a stop, but still going at a crawl. He turned and used the jerry-cans to brace himself to get a look ahead.

The shamrock-green road signs read "Truckee,, with big white arrows pointing straight ahead. They were approaching a city, the biggest one he'd seen in weeks of travel. Not a Chicago, or L.A.-sized city, but not a small town like the one they'd left that morning, either. There could be anything here. "Caution paid off in dividends," as his dad used to say.

"Damian?" Kris asked, her voice low, almost lost in the grinding crunch of the tires on the blacktop. He shuffled around the side of the truck, leaning against the wall. Kris's head was leaning almost outside the window.

"What's up?" he replied. "We stopping?"

"I think we should," Kris said. "I don't see anyone, but who knows? Let's pull over, stretch, and see what we see."

Damian felt a rush of worry. He sat up straight, looking around. They hadn't quite made it into Truckee yet, but there it was just up ahead. The highway cut right through town and was empty. A few cars on the road were pointed in the opposite direction, but nothing blocked the road into town. Miguel held the truck going slow and steady, inching toward the deserted city and ready to bolt at any moment. Damian peered in through the cab's rear window, and could see a look of concern on Miguel's face. The choice was to either

take them into Truckee, or continue on the highway and put the city behind them. In another world, a simple choice. In this world, nothing was ever simple.

They continued until they approached the exit ramp which would take them right into downtown Truckee. Damian rapped on the window, getting Miguel's attention. When Miguel glanced over his shoulder, Damian pointed toward town, shrugged and gave a thumbs-up. Miguel responded in kind, and turned the steering wheel to the right, taking the exit. The road was empty now. Not even stopped cars fleeing the city on the opposing parallel ramp. Damian gripped the truck's edge, holding on tight as he peered along the side of the ramp, eyes focusing near and far, shifting to take in as much information as possible. Miguel and Kris were doing the same. Scanning as far as they could while also keeping a lookout for anything lurking nearby.

They pulled off the highway onto Donner Pass Road, a long stretch of road that ran straight ahead of them for a mile or more. Great pine forests stretched away from the sides of the road, and after the truck was on the road proper, the horizon disappeared into the green woods. As they entered the city, Damian noticed that the air was cooler than he'd expected. He hadn't noticed it before, rather thinking the chill was from the wind or the mountainous elevation. Maybe it was the trees, filtering a soft breeze through their boughs, or perhaps it was just coming on an early fall. He sat back down, trying to at least eliminate the chill formed by the truck's motion.

Then the truck curved at a bend in the road, and up ahead they saw signs of civilization. Not the sparse, low buildings they'd been able to make out from the highway, but the structures of a proper city. Small houses on the roadside. A park to their right, the play structures still and quiet. Damian couldn't help feeling strange as they passed, seeing the

teeter-totters, swings, slides. Things that on a bright summer day should be alive with the joyful screaming of giggling children. Now lifeless, empty.

He tore his eyes from the playground as they passed. Up ahead on a tall pole was the familiar “S” logo of a Safeway supermarket. Damian became excited at the possibility of all the different things such a store held—foods, medicine, toiletries, anything he could want. But as they approached the sign, he saw that the store had seen better days. Sunlight glinted off the shattered remains of great picture windows, and black streaks of char and smoke spilled upward across the facade, streaking to the roof. Deep through the window openings he could see sunlight streaming through where the roof had burned away. A dozen burned-out cars in the parking lot punctuated the destruction.

Out of the corner of his eye he spied a flash of motion in the store, like someone rushing from one pool of light to another, then disappearing into the shadows. He sat up straight, thumped on the window of the cab to signal Miguel. “Stop the truck!” he shouted through the glass.

The truck slammed to a halt, and Damian looked toward the ruined grocery store. He raised one hand to shield his eyes from the sun, but it didn’t help him see any better. “What is it?” Miguel asked from inside the cab. “Did you see something?”

Nothing. No motion, no unusual sounds, just a scorched edifice left to die against the edge of the woods.

“No...” Damian said. “Just a trick of the light. Never mind.”

The truck sped up. Damian held tight, keeping his balance. Then Kris’s arm shot out of the window and thumped the door twice, getting his attention. She pointed down the road, and when he followed her finger with his eyes, he saw the sign. One that gave him some actual hope: a sky-blue plac-

ard with a white arrow pointing to the right and “HOSPITAL” written in large block letters.

That’s the golden ticket, Damian thought. Medicine, showers, clean beds, maybe even food. Anything could be there. He slumped back against the rolled-up tarps, leaned his head against the jerrycans full of gasoline and water, and relaxed for the first time all day. He knew it wasn’t perfect, and may not even be anything more than another burned-out ruin of hope. But it was something. Hell, even if it was just some place they could hole up for a few days, it was worth investigating.

Miguel powered the truck forward up to an almost normal city-limit speed. He turned right down Pine Avenue, continuing on for another block or two before pulling up into the hospital’s parking lot. “Sierra Health” signs greeted them as they pulled up in front of a large pair of glass doors. The building was low and wide, two stories high, with a brick facade over the first floor, tan paint over the stucco of the upper floor, and forest green accents for the window frames, awnings, and rimming the roof. It looked somewhat modern, Damian thought, or more likely refurbished. The building seemed in good condition anyway. He took that as a good sign.

Miguel cut the ignition, pressed on the foot brake, and stepped out of the car. Kris followed, staying close to the truck, while pressing her hands into her lower back, stretching it out. Damian lowered himself out of the truck bed and walked a few paces toward the large double doors.

Miguel put his hand out on Damian’s shoulder as he passed. “Not just yet...” Miguel said.

“I’m going to look,” Damian said. “You two stay by the truck. If there’s a problem, I won’t be far, and we can just get the hell out of here.”

Kris nodded, "I'll be behind you. Let me know what you see."

Damian approached the large glass doors, unsurprised when they didn't open at his approach. They were automatic doors, but the power to run them was long since out. He pressed his face close to the glass, peering into the hallway beyond. The corridor ran straight backward to what must have been a reception desk, where two corridors branched off to either side. Two wide, low sofas against the walls on either side. Just before the desk, glass doors opened on what looked like a gift shop. Light stretched into the dark hallway, allowing him a good view.

He was still nervous about going in. He turned back to Kris, who he saw was watching.

"It seems clear," he said. "I can't see too far in, but it seems okay."

With no warning, a howl shattered the silence. An animal noise, great and awful, a predatory shriek, far in the distance and yet burrowing right into their minds, as if some animal presence had yowled directly into their brains. They turned in unison, pulses racing, dread rising. The primitive instinct of fight or flight rose in their minds, but flight was the more attractive option. Miguel charged the truck, and Kris followed. Damian ran to the glass hospital doors and tried to pull them apart, to lever them open somehow.

The surrounding temperature dropped as the strange summer coolness became a chill. Damian's fingers fumbled in the sudden cold. Kris saw her breath fogging in the air before her. Miguel's hands lost their grip on the truck keys, and he dropped them to the ground at his feet.

The howl again, louder, closer, more triumphant. It echoed off the trees, the mountains, the buildings. It came from all around them, and from within them.

And then the clattering ratchet noise of a metal door scraping open, and a stranger's voice, a low-toned shouting not-whisper, raspy, "This way, hurry!" They saw a woman's face peeking from behind an open metal access door. Confusion fogged their minds, the howling of the wild thing piercing their thoughts. "Now!" the woman shouted. "Move it, or you're dead!"

Damian ran, sprinted toward the door. Miguel and Kris followed as fast as they could. The temperature continued its slump, their muscles stiffened, but they ran toward the open door, toward what they hoped would be some kind of haven. The woman threw the door open wide as they approached, and once the trio had barreled inside, she slammed the door shut behind them. Everything was dark and still. Outside the building, muffled by the door and distance, the howl again echoed out across the land.



Damian had the briefest glimpse of a narrow corridor, carpeted floor and beige walls before the door slammed shut. He knew Miguel and Kris had made it in with him, but now he was in total darkness.

"Quiet," the woman said. Her voice was low, a harsh whisper. "Just don't talk." There was a moment of complete silence. The only sounds were the slight scuffing of their boots on the carpeted floor and the throbbing pulse of blood in their ears. Damian realized he'd been holding his breath and let it out without a sound.

The great howling shriek sounded again, distant and cold, as if a storm cloud's thunder screamed in fury. Silence followed. Moments dragged out into minutes as the four squatted in the darkness. Damian's heart rate slowed down, and as he regained his composure, he noticed a stale, antiseptic smell in the air.



The howl came again, but distant, far less distinct. Moving on, with any luck. Damian smirked at that thought. He could not remember the last time luck had gone his way.

There was a slight click and then a flash of white light. Kris hissed, "What the...?" and then Damian saw the source: a pale white light shone from a large flashlight. The woman's voice said, "Just me. Just...just follow me, okay? Quiet..." She moved past Damian, who was in total bewilderment from this latest turn of events. The flashlight cast a cold glow down the hallway.

Kris and Miguel shared a look, shrugged and followed along. Damian was close behind. The woman led them down the hallway, past a few doors set into recessed alcoves. "Imaging" the placard on one said. "Draw Lab" said another. As they walked, Damian noticed a corridor leading to the left, and glancing down it saw the reception desk he'd spotted through the glass entry doors earlier, realizing they'd come in through a side entrance of some sort. Good to know, and good to have a basic layout in case they needed to beat a hasty retreat.

The corridor widened out into a large central area, with corridors branching out from each side, and chest-high desks arranged in a square. The woman stepped in a few feet and placed her flashlight on a counter, switching it off. Dim light shone through a murky skylight overhead. "Come on in," she said. "There's nobody here but us."

Kris and Miguel stepped into the room, taking the whole area in. "This area used to be a nurses' station," the woman said, rummaging through a drawer. Open doors surrounded the station, lining the walls, with dark rooms behind. Some daylight filtered through distant windows in those rooms, casting an eerie pallor through the area. She found what she was looking for, proclaimed, "Aha!" and held up a ring of jangling keys.

Damian entered behind the others. He looked around as they had, noticing the doors, dim light, and the total emptiness of the place. It felt strange in here. It seemed like a place which should be bursting with people, activity, life. His few experiences with hospitals had conditioned him to think they're often quiet, yet always busy. His eyes stopped on a bank of chairs nearby.

"You know," he said, and walked toward them. "If it's all the same to you, I think I'll just sit for a bit." He pulled a sturdy plastic and metal chair from against a wall, turned and did just that. Once he settled into the chair, he leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

The woman approached him. "What happened to him?" she asked. "He's not looking so hot."

Kris was stalking the perimeter of the room, peeking into the empty rooms as she passed each door. "Infection," she said. "Cut his hand. Can you help him?"

"Let's look," the woman said. "Let me see that hand."

Without opening his eyes, Damian raised his bandaged hand. The woman took it in hers, unwrapped the dressing and winced as the foul smell hit her nostrils. Sour, meaty, and ripe. She saw that the infection's discharge had seeped through the last layers of wrapping. "Okay, hold tight. This may hurt." As she unwrapped the last of the bandage, the fabric was stuck tight in the clotting gore. The wound stretched and reopened as she peeled off the remaining wrappings. A thin trickle of blood oozed from the gash. She looked up to see that Damian was gritting his teeth tight, muscles standing out along the sides of his jaw. His eyes were watering, and his skin was getting pale.

"Help me out here," she said, waving at Miguel who was standing nearby.

Miguel hustled over, "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"If he faints, catch him," she said.

"I'm not going to faint," Damian said, almost under his breath. "I'd puke if I had anything in me right now."

Miguel leaned in anyway, hands at his side, but ready to dive forward just in case.

"Is there anything you can do?" Miguel asked the woman. Kris finished her search of the room and came over to stand with the rest. Her fear of danger eased.

"You're in luck," she said. "There is. This needs proper cleaning, and he will need stitches. He's fighting a nasty infection, but we've got antibiotics left."

Damian groaned. "I took some...shit, what was it?" He asked, opening his eyes and looking at Miguel. "Do you remember?"

Miguel nodded. "Amoxycillin. We've still got it, out in the truck."

The woman turned back to Damian. "And it didn't work?"

"Beats me," Damian said. "It ripped up my guts, though. Took it last night, and again early this morning, and I was puking a few hours later."

"Okay, good to know. We'll try something else." She stood up, stretched out her legs and waved the three to follow her. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up."

Kris put her hand out to stop Damian before asking, "What are you, a nurse, doctor? What's your story?"

"Doctor Gina Bates, at your service. General medicine. And I'm sure my story's about the same as yours; we can swap war stories some other time. For now, we can walk and talk. Follow me." She led them to one of the open doors, escorting them into the small room.

"Okay, Mr. Hand, let's get you up on the examination table. You," she said, pointing to Miguel. "Down the hall, the door

marked 'supplies.' Inside there's a rack of shelves. Find me a suture kit." She tossed him the key ring. He noticed each key was a different color. "Blue key," she said.

"Got it." Miguel nodded. "Suture kit. Be right back."

Kris watched him leave. "What can I do?" she said, stepping up to stand next to the exam table.

Gina pointed at the cabinet nearby. "Rubber gloves, alcohol, sterile pads. Grab all that stuff." She went over to the small sink, pumped liquid soap into her palm, and lathered up, using a jug of water nearby to rinse clean.

Kris brought her the requested supplies, arranging them on a metal tray on rolling legs. Gina put her hands into a pair of blue rubber gloves, snapping them on tight.

"All right," she said. "Let's take care of this hand."

Gina poured rubbing alcohol onto a cotton ball and wiped the area around the gash. Damian clenched his teeth as the alcohol stung his raw flesh. He gripped the table edge tight with his good hand and sucked a quick hissing breath between his teeth as the sting hit. His hand felt like it was on fire, and he felt faint.

"You going to be okay?" Gina asked, noting his sudden pallor.

"I think I should lie down," Damian said. Kris stepped forward, ready to catch him if he blacked out, but that turned out to be unnecessary.

"Good idea," Gina said. "This won't take long, but better safe than sorry." She gave his hand one last wipe with a clean sterile gauze pad. "Okay, time to stitch this up. Don't touch anything." She released his hand, and Damian lay back on the padded table. The vinyl covering felt cool against his skin, and his head stopped spinning.

"You sure you're okay?" Gina asked.

"Yeah, peachy," he replied. And closed his eyes. "Just queasy. It'll pass."

"Rest for now. I've got to numb the area." Gina took a syringe from the stainless steel tray and jabbed it into a small glass vial labeled "Lydocaine HCI 1%." She measured out a dose, drawing it up into the syringe with the plunger. Satisfied with the dosage, she squirted out a few drops, clearing any stray air bubbles from the glittering metal needle. "Okay, you'll feel a little pinch."

With a swift motion, Gina jabbed the needle into Damian's hand, right in the pad between the thumb and forefinger. She pushed down on the plunger, and a chill flooded his hand. Damian opened his eyes to peek at his wound. The skin was puffy, full of medicinal fluid, but already he could feel the ache subsiding.

"Let's give this a minute or two," Gina said. "Needs to marinate a bit." She directed at Damian that smile of calm concern perfected by doctors everywhere.

Damian nodded. "Sure. You're the boss; what do you need me to do?" Kris paced around the room. She stopped at the open window and peered outside, looking into the parking lot. They were on a different side from where they'd entered. That much she could tell. She wanted to know where the truck was before she lowered her guard.

"Anything outside?" Gina asked.

"No, not that I see," Kris replied. "You have any idea what that noise was earlier?"

Gina shook her head. "No, but I've heard it before. Never so close though."

Kris stepped back from the window. "And you're all alone in here?"

Gina looked toward her. "Yes. I'm sure I can tell what you're thinking, though. There's a cafeteria full of canned

food. Enough to feed hundreds for a week. Or one for years, unless the dried and canned things begin to expire. We've an emergency diesel generator, too. I don't use the electricity at all, but there's enough juice in it to run for a few hours if I ever needed it to. Still have running water, too."

"No shit?" Kris said, surprised. "Don't suppose it's hot, is it?"

Gina laughed. "Tell you what, let's get Mr. Hand here settled, and then it's hot showers and dinner for everyone." Kris grinned at that. "Now you're talking my language."



## *Chapter Eight*

Back before the world ended, Ezekiel “Zeke” Beane and his brothers wouldn’t have been able to shop at the Safeway in Truckee without a lot of stares. The few times they came to town for supplies, security guards followed them around, mothers clung tight to their children, and otherwise pleasant dogs growled and snarled. Townies didn’t much care for the Beanes. Even if they’d never met them, or even heard of them, most living creatures had an instinctual dislike of the Beanes.

So one benefit of the world ending was that Zeke and his awful brothers had the run of the place. When the town evacuated, the Beanes stayed behind in their forest shack. A group of FEMA volunteers had ventured off the beaten path, found the Beanes’ ramshackle cabin deep in the woods, and were never seen again. The Beanes would never have left, anyway. They’d held their miserable plot of land for hundred years or more, and would not give it up for any reason as pedestrian as the end of the world.

With the town emptied, the Beanes were free to roam. Zeke was the runt of the clan, and they didn’t trust him with many of the important jobs. Cain and the others had gone hunting today, but excluded Zeke, so he went to town instead. And that was fine with him, anyway. Zeke liked going to town because it was big and mysterious and smelled cleaner than the shack the Beanes lived in. He liked the playground where

kids used to play, but where he wasn't ever allowed to go. He liked the supermarket a lot. Never knew what he might find there. Back before, they'd come to town only once in a long while, and he'd become good at stealing stuff from the store while his brothers bought the few things they needed that they couldn't make themselves.

Mars bars were his favorite, but they were long gone. He'd stolen a whole box of them when everyone left town, ate them all in one night and made himself sick. Most of the store was burned up anyway, but he still liked to go poke around. He'd cleaned out most of the stuff he liked or thought his family could use. But he kept rummaging around just in case he found something else good. It was something to do.

Zeke was walking through the store with a stick that he'd found in the forest while he was walking to the store that day. He thought it was a good stick, and he could use it for hitting stuff fishing, or skewering meat or something. But for now he was just trailing it alongside himself as he walked, letting it beat a rattling chatter as he dragged it against the shelves to his side.

As he explored, he heard a distant grumbling, growling, mechanical noise. He thought it sounded like the truck Cain sometimes drove, but a lot less loud and wheezy. He double-stepped it to the front of the store and watched out the window as a pickup truck crept through town toward the store. Zeke froze. Other people, folks that weren't Beaness, gave him pause. They often meant danger, or at the least ejection from the premises.

As the truck rolled along the frontage road, Zeke loped down the aisle to get a better look. He kept low, hoping not to be seen. But then he heard an indistinct shouting from the truck, and it stopped. Zeke crouched low, peering out of the hole in the wall where a window once had been, breath caught in his chest.



The truck was still, idling low. Someone in the truck bed was looking his direction. Zeke was feeling panicky, close to running. His gut told him to skedaddle out of the store and into the woods. But soon the guy sat down again, and the truck rolled down the frontage road once more.

These were the first people aside from his family that Zeke had seen in months, and his limited curiosity was piqued. He decided that this was something worth knowing about, and knew his brothers would be interested. Pulling his dirty red cap down low over his forehead, he hopped through the store's smashed front windows, landing without a sound on the walkway out front.

The truck had disappeared beyond the low wall and thick landscaping which blocked off the parking lot, so he took off at a full run. Just as he reached the street, he saw the truck way far down the road. He might've missed it if the driver hadn't pressed the brakes as he turned, lighting up the back of the vehicle with the glowing red embers of brake lights.

As the truck rolled down the side road, Zeke darted from the lot, rushing along the cars abandoned on the sides of the street, making sure not to be seen. He reached the corner in no time, and could see the truck as it pulled into the parking lot of the hospital. Zeke hated the hospital because they'd killed his grandma, Old Mother Beane, but also because of the looks he and his brothers had gotten when they'd gone in there a few times.

He was deciding whether to follow the truck farther when a rancorous shriek tore through the silence, causing Zeke's head to pound. Blood vessels in his skull throbbed. He'd heard that noise before. And he never liked what followed. It meant there would be songs and dances tonight, and he hated them. Knowing outlanders had stopped at the hospital was enough. He decided he would slink back to the cabin

and tell his brothers. If their hunt had gone sour, he knew they'd want to know there was fresh meat in town.



## *Chapter Nine*

By late afternoon they were settling in for the foreseeable future. Gina had done an excellent job stitching and bandaging Damian's hand. They had all taken long-overdue showers; even the industrial shampoo and soap felt like gifts from God to them. They'd raided the laundry for clean hospital scrubs, and tossed their old clothes into the wash.

Miguel had found his way into the kitchen and discovered it was far larger than he'd expected. Filled with a wide variety of canned foods and dry goods, there was enough to last for months, if not longer.

Damian rested on a red vinyl couch in the cafeteria adjacent to the kitchen as Kris emerged from the hallway leading to the showers. She wore pale blue hospital scrubs like the others, toweling off her hair as she entered the cafe.

"Holy crap, I can't remember the last time I was clean!" she said, smiling as she entered the room. "How's the hand?" she asked.

Damian raised his gauze-wrapped hand to face height, and turned it over and back, examining it.

"Feels okay, I guess. Better than before." He placed it back in his lap, resting palm up. "The lidocaine hasn't worn off." He shrugged. "But I'm assuming it's on the mend."

Gina called in from the kitchen, "Probably another couple of hours before you'll be feeling anything with it. I've got

some Tylenol if it hurts after that. The pharmacy's running pretty low these days, but I have a few things squirreled away."

"So, there you have it," Damian said. "Good as new."

"Good. Glad to hear it." Kris replied, then walked toward the kitchen. Over the cafe's counter, and through the opening to the kitchen, she could see Miguel grabbing a few pots and pans. "What's for dinner, Miguel?"

"Oh, man," he said grinning as he turned to her. "What isn't?"

Gina turned to him. "Hey, I know you're all hungry, but this food has to last, right?"

Kris put her hand on Miguel's arm as he was reaching for a large can of bean medley, "Miguel, let's not go overboard. Only cook what we can eat."

Gina seemed relieved at that. "I mean, help yourself, of course. But the refrigeration's out, so we can't save leftovers. I'd rather not waste anything."

Miguel dropped a pot into the sink and filled it with water from the tap. "Sure, no problem. We'll make this last." The tap rattled and thudded as he turned it on, and after a few moments cold, clear water spat out of the nozzle, rushing into the metal pot. "Kind of amazed the water still works."

"Right?" Gina said. "I figured it wouldn't last, but there must be plenty still in the underground pipes. But again, who knows how long it'll run, so only use what we need. Water's more important for drinking and washing than cooking right now."

Damian got up from the couch he'd claimed and walked toward the kitchen. "Anything I can do to help?"

"No," Miguel replied. "This won't take long. Just hang tight." Miguel carried the pot full of water over to the stove top, turned the gas knob, and with a puff of ozone and a slight

rotten-egg smell of natural gas, a starburst of blue flame erupted as the propane came to life under it. "Hey, all right!" he said.

"Where's the tank?" Kris asked.

Gina waved her left hand toward the general vicinity of the back of the hospital. "Out back. There's a utility courtyard, and three thousand-gallon tanks locked up behind a gated fence."

"Know how full they are?" Kris asked.

"That I couldn't tell you. Haven't checked in a while," Gina replied. "Wish I'd paid more attention to the operations and maintenance plans of the place before."

"We'll check it later," Kris said.

Damian spoke up at that, "Shouldn't be hard to figure out, there's gotta be a gauge or something on them."

"Oh, I'm sure there is," Kris said. "And I bet they filled those things often, so they're doubtless good for a while."

"Speaking of checking things out, I'd like to check the truck," Damian added. "After we ran inside, I heard a huge crash outside."

"I heard it too," Kris said. "I've been wondering about that. Miguel, you good in here?"

Miguel responded with a big thumbs-up. There was a hissing splash as he dumped the contents of a package of spaghetti into the roiling pot of water.

"Okay," Kris said. "Let's go look at our stuff."

"Down this hall. Second left," Gina said. She pointed to the hall leading away from the kitchen, across the cafeteria from the hall leading to the showers.

Kris peered down the corridor. It was as dark as the rest of the facility. Dim, but with faint pools of light along the left side of the floor where rooms with windows facing outside

dripped faint light in. “Okay, we’ll be fast, and then right back.”

Gina turned back to the kitchen. “We’ll have dinner ready for you when you’re back.”

“Better hurry though,” Miguel teased. “I’m hella hungry, and may eat all this spaghetti before you get back.”

“Come on,” she said to Damian. “Let’s do this.”



Damian and Kris walked down the hall. Their eyes had adjusted to the dim light, and they soon found themselves back in the lobby where the reception desk was. Across the lobby from them was the corridor they’d slunk down earlier that afternoon. And to their right, the wide hallway leading outside.

“It’s just too damn quiet, that’s what’s giving me the creeps, you know?” Damian said.

“I know. Back before, I used to dream about a little peace and quiet from time to time,” Kris said. “Now I can’t stand it. Too much quiet and always waiting for something awful to happen.”

“I still can’t figure out where everyone went, you know?” Damian asked.

Kris stepped up to the double glass doors and looked through them, cupping her hands around her face to cut down the glare from outside. “When it first happened, everything was just chaos. Emergency services told us to stay indoors during the riots. ‘Looters’ right?”

“I heard the same thing,” Damian said. “‘Looters’ became ‘murderers.’”

“I figure it was the same everywhere. Anywhere I’ve been through,” she responded. “Everyone either holed up in their

homes, and got themselves killed, or they descended on emergency shelters which became overwhelmed.”

“But what about the rest? The ones who didn’t flee to the cities, who weren’t found hiding?” Damian said. He looked through the side windows into the parking lot. “There has to be other people. The...the monsters can’t have gotten them all...”

“Hope not,” she replied. “Sure as hell hope we find others. If we can find more people we’ll be safer.”

“You think so?” Damian said, doubt in his voice.

“Hell yes,” she replied. “I’m sure we’ll meet some royal assholes as we go along, Damian. But still, they’re people. When it comes down to ‘us versus them’ we have to side with people over the monsters.”

Damian stood back from the glass doors and nodded in agreement. “I hope the people we meet next agree with that sentiment.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

Damian pushed on the emergency open bar on the glass doors. He felt the lock engage, but when he shoved against the doors, they didn’t budge.

“Hang on,” Kris said. She dropped to one knee and found a manual latch embedded into the doorframe. She slid her fingernail under a metal flap, which popped out perpendicular to the frame. When she turned it like a key, Damian felt the door give. He pressed again on the emergency exit bar, and the doors slid apart a few inches. He placed his hands between the doors and pried them apart with little effort, widening the gap enough for him to cross through into the walkway to the parking lot.

Kris followed behind him, grabbing a small stone from the greenery along the walkway and placed it between the doors. She brushed off her hands and looked up at Damian,

who had a puzzled look on his face. “Just in case,” she said. “Don’t want to get locked out.”

From the end of the walkway they had a good view of the parking lot. Dusk was coming, and Damian could feel the absorbed heat of the blacktop lot radiating up at him. And behind that, a strange chill. Like eddies of ice water flowing through a hot spring. Tendrils of cold wove through the radiant heat, sending a shiver up his spine.

The truck was right where they’d parked it earlier, but something was off about it. It took Damian a moment to realize that the tires were flat. The truck’s rims lay right on the warm asphalt.

“Check it out,” he said, and walked toward it.

“Dammit,” Kris said, hustling after him. “How the hell can we fix that? If we even can...”

Approaching the truck, Damian saw four long furrows raked down the sidewall of one, while another had a large, ragged hole wrapping around the side and into the tread. A thick, greasy slime coated the area around the hole, drying to a pale, bluish fibrous crust. “Damn...this looks like it was—”

“Bitten,” Kris finished. “Something bit right through that tire.” She squatted down in front of the tire. “Look at this. The rubber’s torn open, ripped apart like tissue. What could gnaw through a tire?”

Damian was scanning the area, dread welling up in him. “I don’t know, Kris, but I don’t like it.” He stepped away from the truck. Damian looked up the road back toward Truckee, then around the lot. “Grab what we need and get back inside.”

“Leave it for now,” she said, but then thought better and reached into the back of the truck. Her hand came back up a moment later gripping her bow and quiver of arrows. With



her other hand, she grabbed Miguel's crowbar. "Okay. Now let's get back inside."

They returned to the lobby, closing and latching the door behind them. "Help me with this," Kris said, and grabbed the arm of one sofa against the side wall and dragged it toward the doors. Damian gripped the other side with his good hand and helped her pull. "Put it in front of the doors. Won't stop anything trying to break through, but at least we'll have a better chance of hearing whatever it is."

They put the sofa in front of the doors and pushed it up tight against them. "One more," Kris said, and they pulled another sofa over. With some wrangling and finessing, and not a small amount of grunting and swearing, they lifted it up and piled it on top of the first.

Walking back toward the cafeteria, Damian asked "You think we're safe here?"

Kris thought about that for a moment, then replied, "I don't think we're safe anywhere."

"This place is good," Damian said. "We've got food for a while, hot water as long as it lasts. I don't want to just abandon it. Besides, I have no idea how we'd fix the tires, do you?"

"We're not going anywhere tonight, that's for sure," Kris said. "We'll set watches tonight. I wonder if we can get up on the roof. We'd get a better idea of what's around here from a higher vantage. And tomorrow, we'll see if we can figure out what to do about getting those tires replaced. Or maybe we can steal another truck from somewhere. I saw tons of vehicles on the way into town. I'm sure we can find more if we look."

"Fair enough," Damian said, but he didn't sound convinced. "We'll just take it one day at a time, I suppose."



As they entered the cafeteria, the smell of cooking hit them like lead weights. Damian's pace sped up. "Oh, man," he said. "I can't remember the last time I smelled anything I actually wanted to eat."

Kris's mouth began to water. The rich, spicy smell of tomato sauce hung in the air, with something milky sweet lingering behind. As they stepped into the cafeteria, Gina was placing plates near the stove, while Miguel was ladling up large portions of spaghetti with thick red sauce. Steam rose from the plates as he dished them up.

Kris approached the kitchen, Damian was right at her side as she entered. "We seem to have a problem, friends," she said.

"What's that?" Gina asked.

"Something ate the tires of our truck," Damian added.

Miguel stopped mid-ladle, tonight's dinner forgotten. "What? What do you mean ate the tires?" he said.

"Pretty much just that," Kris said. "One tire slashed to hell. The other? Something just chewed right through it."

"Did you see what did it?" Gina asked. "Was it anything you've seen before?"

"No," Damian said. "There was nothing there. Nothing I saw, anyway."

"Me neither," Kris added. "We looked around but didn't see anything. My concern, though, is that that truck was our way out. If anything goes south while we're here, we need to be able to get moving fast."

Miguel dropped the rest of the ladle full of spaghetti on a waiting plate. "There's got to be another vehicle somewhere

we can get moving. Easier than trying to replace the tires on the truck.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Damian added. “I’m sure I saw a Pep Boys as we came into town. They’d have tires, but who knows if they’re the right ones for the truck, or if we could even get the machinery working to replace them. Better to just find a new vehicle.”

“That assumes that you’re leaving, though, right?” Gina asked.

Damian picked up two plates of spaghetti and carried them out to the cafeteria. “What do you say we figure this out over dinner?”

Miguel seemed in agreement, taking the next two plates out and setting them on the table where Damian was already digging in. “Yeah, come on. Let’s eat.” Gina and Kris followed, taking seats and gulping down mouthfuls of pasta.

By the time Kris had finished half her food, Damian had already polished off his whole plate. “Damn, that was good. Any more?” he said and peered toward the kitchen.

Miguel smiled and picked up Damian’s plate. “Plenty. Despite our plan for rationing, I figured I’d make a little extra for the first meal.” He went to the kitchen, returning moments later with a plate heaped again with pasta and thick, fragrant red sauce.

“Reminds me,” Gina said. “Here, take this.” She opened a small yellow pill bottle and shook a white tablet into her palm, handing it to Damian.

Damian took the pill, looking at it while reaching for a cup of water. “What is it?” he asked, deciding he’d want to know before swallowing it.

“Keflex,” Gina said. “Had a few bottles in the pharmacy. It’s an antibiotic; should help with your hand. And it’s easier on

the guts than the amoxicillin you were taking before. We've got tons of other antibiotics if this doesn't work."

Damian popped the pill into his mouth, following it with a mouthful of water and swallowing it all down. "Thanks for finding this. I owe you."

"It's okay to take it with or without food. But I'd suggest you take it with, if you can. Twice a day, so take one with dinner and one with breakfast. There's seven days worth of meds in that bottle, which should do it for you."

Kris rose from the table to get a second helping herself. "We need to figure out a plan for tonight and tomorrow."

"Only tonight and tomorrow?" Gina asked.

"Kris don't like to think more'n a day ahead," Miguel said around a mouthful of spaghetti.

"He's right," Kris replied, with a hint of amused exasperation in her voice. "Every plan we've had since it all came down...well, none of them lasted. It's worth having an idea about the future, but plans are only worth making for the next twenty-four hours. Things change too fast to keep up."

"That makes sense, I suppose," Gina said. "But I have to warn you: nothing's changed around here in months. Not until you three showed up, anyway." She still wasn't sure she could trust them. They seemed as stable as she could imagine anyone who'd spent any time out on the road could be. But still, she was wary. She'd seen firsthand how dangerous this brave new world was.

"That's as may be," Kris said. "But things could change for us at any moment. We already know there's something dangerous outside. And I've got to admit it freaks me out that whatever it is went after the truck."

"Our way out," Miguel added.

"Right," Kris said. "Figure either it went after the truck because...well, who knows. Maybe it smelled of prey, or looked

like it...or because it wanted to cut us off. To keep us in one place.”

“So whatever it is, it’s either smart or lucky,” Miguel said. “Either way doesn’t sound good.”

“No,” Damian said. “It doesn’t.”

“Okay,” Gina said, pushing her empty plate away. “What do you think we should do? We don’t even have a clue what this thing might be. Right?”

“Right,” Kris said. “Let’s assume it’s big and mean and wants to kill us.”

“Fair assumption,” Miguel muttered. “Everything else does.”

“Tonight,” Kris said, giving Miguel a heaping helping of stink-eye, “I think it’s best if we all sleep near the side door, the one Gina let us in through earlier. Or any door that’s not obvious from the outside. We’ll crash out near there and keep a watch.”

“You think that’s necessary?” Gina asked. “It’s been quiet as a tomb here. I hadn’t even heard that howl in weeks...until today.”

“It’s better we’re safe than sorry,” Kris said.

“Agreed,” Damian added. “Just for peace of mind, we’ll stay together, and set up a watch tonight.”

“I’m in,” Miguel said. “And then what? Assuming we survive the night, what about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we sort out a vehicle. Maybe more than one,” Kris said, “and look at the propane tanks outside. We should make an effort to roam around and get the lay of the land. We need to find out what sort of resources we have to work with.”

“You thought there might be vehicles on the road we can scavenge, right?” Damian asked.

"Yes." Kris replied. "I'm sure we can find something. Just toss all our stuff from the truck in the back and have a new vehicle ready for whenever we need it."

"If not," Miguel said, "we scrounge something on the outskirts. Have to figure not everyone took their cars with them. Plenty of families might have had two or more cars. Can't drive them all at once."

Damian thought about that. He let the idea tumble around in his head before speaking. "I guess that makes sense. I'm not thrilled about rummaging around the outskirts of town solo though. We'll stick together doing that. Everyone watches out for each other."

"Of course," Kris said. "Wouldn't happen any other way."

Miguel stood and cleared the table. "Sounds like we've got a full day tomorrow. We should get rest, then."

"Agreed," Kris added. "We'll find a place to camp out for the night."

Miguel returned for the last of the dirty dishes. "Tell you what," he said. "I'll finish up the dishes, you two sort out the sleeping arrangements. Get it done sooner than later, right?" He hoisted the last of the plates and tableware, and turned to walk toward the kitchen.

"Sure, Miguel, that sounds fine," Kris said. "You don't mind? You cooked, too. No reason you have to clean up."

"Nah, it's fine," Miguel said, smiling. "I kind of miss having folks to cook for." Miguel's smile faltered for a moment.

"You okay?" Damian asked.

"Yeah, no...just thinking about my family. Wondering where they are, what happened to them, you know?" Miguel said. "Hadh't seen them for a few months even before this mess started."

“Shit, man, I had no idea,” Kris said, approaching Miguel, and holding out her hands to take the dishes. “You never mentioned that.”

“Well,” Miguel said. “I mean, we all got our problems, right? This world did no one any favors.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Damian added. “Hey, I’ll help with the dishes. I’m sure I can dry with my gimpy hand.”

Gina nodded, but added, “Keep that hand dry. Out of the dirty water.”

“You got it,” Damian said. “Come on, everyone, we’ve got stuff to do here,” Kris added. “It’s going to be a long night. Let’s get to work.”



## *Chapter Ten*

The miserable cabin squatted in the forest like a toad dying of a slow, lingering infection. Twin windows shone light from within, like dull animal eyes. Thin wisps of dark smoke rose from a lichen-crusted chimney, spilling a foul-smelling miasma into the air. The greasy smoke mixed with the perpetual haze of the ashen sky, and carried a stink of corruption. The odor was foul and strange enough to keep animals away from the cabin. It would also have scared off any sane human, had any been nearby.

This horrid cabin was the home of the Beane family, who rarely went into town and were not welcome anywhere when they did. Cain was the oldest, the leader and the muscle. Tabor and Jabez were twins, born joined at the hip, but Mother Beane's cleaver had separated them before they learned to walk. Zeke was the runt of the litter, and they didn't consider him much good for anything. Rumor had it that Cain was more than likely father to one or more of his brothers. Mother Beane had not been seen by anyone outside her family in years. Before the world ended, and the monsters roamed, the Beanes were the local boogeymen. And for good reason.

Now they continued their existence much as they had before. They hunted, they drank, they cursed the bright sun and kept to the shadows of their squalid cabin and the unseen warrens beneath it. And when the night was clear, when winter's chill wrapped the woods in crystals of hoarfrost, the



Beanes sang songs to their strange god Ithaqua and danced naked beneath the stars.

Shortly before the world ended, when the corpse-god Cthulhu rose from its tomb city deep in the Pacific ocean, their magic became easier. The stars had aligned in better configurations, and the alien beings which had lurked, slept, and hidden upon the earth and among the stars, broke free and strode wide and far.

Cain and his brothers felt this change in their blood if not their minds. They relied on instinct, on the gut hunches passed down along their thinning bloodline from past generations. And when the stars became right again, they thrived. Their boldness increased, and they once again hunted their favorite prey: man. For the Beanes, human flesh had once been their staple, but had over time become a “special treat.” In the 1910s and '20s, when they first fled west from northern Maine and moved into their cabin in the Sierras, human meat had been easier to come by. But as the 20th century ground on, they had to be subtler, and had to rely on less noticeable game. But they never lost their taste for their own kind.

Soon, they knew. Soon the Great Wendigo itself, Ithaqua, would come, and would bless them with the Rime. It would transform them for all time, and they would join the wendigo in their hunts, and drink chilled blood, crack the frozen bones of the dead and gnaw the sweet marrow from within.

For now they sang songs to the spirits of the northern winds, the cold things that stalked the arctic frozen places of the world. The Beanes carved their flesh, scarring themselves to look more like the creatures they called. They shrieked nocturnal curses into the glimmering sky, and called for the wendigos to join them, and offered sacrifices of blood and fat and flesh. They promised the young flesh of infants, and the dry bones of the elderly.

Their footsteps repeated the ancient patterns, dragging and grinding intersecting lines and curves into the dead soil. They placed the skulls of their ancestors at the right points, and reserved the place of honor for their matriarch. Withered, leathery skin still clung to the grinning skull of Old Mother Beane, and her one shriveled, raisin-like dead eye stared into the circle. Patches of bristling phosphorescent fungus stippled the brow, ringed the orbits of her eye sockets, and peppered her chin like strange whiskers. As the Beanes' rite became a cacophony, the glowing patches, almost indistinct at first, glowed brighter, the blue-white light becoming more pronounced, leprous and loathsome.

And when the skull of Old Mother Beane was a glowing beacon in the darkness, Cain himself dragged tonight's offering from the cabin. Their hunt had gone well today, and they'd nabbed fresh meat. Earlier, Zeke had told his brothers about more in the hospital, but for tonight they needed only this one. Tomorrow they'd hunt again.

The young man twitched and kicked as Cain dragged him bound and gagged into the center of the dance. They'd found him a few days ago, traveling with his kin; those strange fellows with the bulging eyes, the wide, fishlike mouths, and the stink of low tide always on them. Tales told that they'd been forced from their homes back east nearly a hundred years ago by the US government and locked up in internment prisons in the deserts of Nevada. In time, those strange fishy folks made it out of the prison camps, and blended in with the local populace. Supposedly they'd gone underground in the 1940s, infesting the vast underground cisterns and water table beneath Nevada, where they sacrificed and worshipped Great Cthulhu, their dead-but-dreaming titan god, and took direction from its alien psychic dream-sendings.

That never sat right with the Beanes. The Beanes knew these others—the Marshes, the Waites, and the rest—were

enemies. Even more so than the city folk who were blissfully unaware of their befouled pedigree. And that's what made this fellow a perfect sacrifice. Ithaqua wanted blood, but the blood of its hated rivals was the sweetest of all.

As Cain dragged him forward by the shirt collar, the man's froggy eyes went wild with fear. He knew his suffering would be agonizing, yet brief. The man tried to stand, looking like he was thinking of running.

Cain reached reached out and Tabor placed a crusty five-pound sledge hammer into his hand. With one smooth stroke, Cain swung the hammer sideways, smashing the top of the man's tibia, crushing his knee. The man screamed, falling forward as his leg went out. "You ain't gon' get away with this!" the man shouted. "My kin'll already be looking for me! They won't let you and your filth get away with it!"

Cain reached out and grabbed the man by the throat, squeezing his neck in one massive hand. "Let 'em come," Caine growled. "More meat." His victim sputtered and coughed, his sallow skin turning blue, and his awful watery eyes bulging even farther from their sockets. Cain's meaty fist gripped the handle of the hammer, fingers twitching to get a better grip while he choked the spasming man with his other hand. The man's face turned purple; his tongue was black and thrust out from between his wide lips, veins bulging out along his throat and across his brow. Cain watched his prey's misery through cold, black eyes, and with little regard to his distress. This was just meat, just blood, an offering to the wendigo.

The briefest of grins twitched at the corners of Cain's lips, and he raised the hammer shoulder high. With a brief stroke, he brought the hammer pounding into the side of the man's head. Blood arced, shining crimson in the cold moonlight before splattering into the dirt. The man's eyes lost focus and rolled dazed back in his head. Cain loosened his grip and dropped the sacrifice. The body hit the ground with a

dull thud, smacking its head on a wide stone slab. Its legs twitched and spasmed as Cain dropped to his knees, straddling the body.

As Zeke and his brothers danced in the moonlight, calling out with animalistic voices, howling strange words to the sky, Cain brought the hammer down again in the center of the man's forehead, smashing through the skull and deep into the brain, again, and again. He pounded the corpse's head against the slab until it was nothing but a flat bloody pulp, and then threw his hands in the air, tossed his head back, and howled wolflike into the wind.

He scooped the pulped brains, bone, and flesh up with his hands, and carried the mess over to the glowing totemic skull of Mother Beane. Almost like one might feed an infant, he placed bits of the bloody pulp into the skull's gaping open mouth. He stood for a moment, watching the mummified skull, watching the red mess dripping down the jaw, oozing off the chin and splattering to the earth. And then he saw what he'd expected for so long: the jaw moved. It opened, and a black, wormlike remnant of a tongue slithered out from between teeth as white as moon-madness. It lapped at the blood and gore, and the single shriveled white eye twitched in the skull, rotating to stare up at Cain. Cain could almost swear the thing smiled.

With a triumphant howl, Cain signaled to his brothers, and they fell on the corpse, tearing at it with long knives, clawed fingers, and sharpened teeth. They raked the flesh from the bones, swallowing it raw and bloody, savoring the iron taste of blood, and the salty taste of dead dreams from the ocean's deepest abyss.



In the woods, the wendigo watched the cavorting, the murder, with hungry glee. Firelight flickered off its black eyes as it felt the gnawing urge rising in its stomach. It had raced across the wild places in search of its prey, feeling the tug of the blood it had smelled before on the road. The blood already festering with rot, signaling the decay of the Man, and the carrion taste it so craved with such utter desperation. It had been so close. It had been within sprinting distance of the Man when it felt the call of the witch. The thin magic had pulled it near, dragged it away from its quarry, which had made it furious. But now as it watched and waited, as it felt the magic grow as the witch and her brood made the sacrifices, their voices calling out with the intonations of power, now it knew this was the right place. The wendigo would leave the Man for the time being. Leave it with its infection to fester and ripen. For now, the wendigo had different plans.

Before it the Beanes cavorted and devoured the fishy-smelling corpse on the rough ground. The wendigo basked in the power here. It felt the cold chill of the witch, whose magic had caused the wendigo to veer off course. Had pulled it from the path to feeding, and into the deeper parts of the wood. But the wendigo understood it all now. This family, this brood of killers, had the blood of the wendigo in them. The witch had pledged them to Ithaqua long ago. Back when she was more than just a skull and the psychic presence inhabiting it. Before she'd become crusted with the Rime of Ithaqua. She had bred that bloodline true, intermingling the humanness with the alien inheritance of the wendigo, the brood of Ithaqua.

The meat lust was strong now. The wendigo gnawed at its ragged rictus mouth with sawlike predator's teeth. Black, viscous blood trickled from the raw-scraped lips, and a long purple tongue snaked out from between and around the

teeth, catching the clotting gore and lapping it back into the wendigo's maw.

This was the moment. The time for which it had been called. The reason Ithaqua had pushed it onto this path to begin with. These cavorting murderers would be the first of a new tribe. They'd been groomed and bred for this, and it was now their time. Their time to grow, and change, and for them to receive the gift of the Hunger, for the seed of Ithaqua to grow within them.

With a great howl which shook the trees, caused the cabin to rumble and tremble, the wendigo strode forward out of the trees, into the circle of firelight.

Cain turned to the creature, taking it in. A head taller than a man, and thin as a willow-stick scarecrow. Skin covered in bruises and rent with gashes from which black blood oozed. Its fingers were a foot long and ended in hawklike talons, black as sin, and steaming with cold. Hoarfrost-like crystalline fur feathered the thing's hide in patches, an eerie sparkling in the dim moonlight that glowed with the same blue-white color limning Mother Beane's remains.

In unison, Cain, and his brothers approached the wendigo. There was no surprise in their dull eyes, just the barest hint of anticipation, as if they were on the precipice of purpose in their miserable lives. The wendigo howled again, threw its claws out to its side, tossed its head back, face to the moon, and howled and howled, until the Beanes thought their ears would split from the sound.

They surrounded the wendigo, and knelt before it, supplicants to its dark power. Its claws tore flesh from its own body, cold, gelid, dripping with black ichor. And one by one, the wendigo fed the Beane clan from its own body, with its own blood. They feasted on the monster's flesh as the mummified head of their forebear watched them from her place

of honor. And by the flickering firelight, by the dim, hazy moonlight, Mother Beane's leathery skin pulled back from its lips. It creaked with the exertion but could not fight back the grin, the smile of a mother watching her children come into their own.

As they ate from the flesh of the wendigo, the air shimmered in the firelight. Lines of cold white energy arced from the sacrificial altar, sparking into the sky, one after another. Then the arcing lines of energy converged into a central hub, sparking and spitting white-hot power. Lines of energy lanced into the chests of the Beanes, spearing through their hearts and electrifying their bodies. From outside the universe of man, alien energy flowed through space and time, traveled along the arcs of power, and pulsed into the Beanes. The energy suffused their bodies, filled voids and sparked off rudimentary human nervous systems. As one their eyes snapped open, revealing dead black spheres behind the lids. The change was beginning, and the wendigo thought this was good.



## *Chapter Eleven*

The morning air was clear and clean, with just the faintest smell of smoke. As the sun crept up in the east, darkness paled to vibrant orange, spilling long shadows through the trees along the mountainside. Orange paled further to yellow and then sky blue as the morning came in still and cool.

Kris had been up for the past two hours, watching the world shift from darkness to light. Near the doctor's lounge where they'd made camp for the night, a stairway gave access to the roof. They'd taken turns watching the area surrounding the hospital from up there, but the night had passed with merciful quiet. For the first half of her watch, Kris had made intermittent perimeter checks from the rooftop, gazing down into the lot, off into the woods, or toward the rest of Truckee. She carried her bow in hand, and arrows were slung in her quiver at her waist. She hadn't drawn an arrow, though. She didn't know if she'd be able to hit anything in the dark, anyway.

She'd set up her chair next to the stairwell access, leaned back against it, and for the past hour just watched the sun rise. She watched as the sky blazed to life. A moment of peace amidst the chaos of the past few months. The sun rose as if it were any normal morning before the world woke. Kris imagined the hustle and bustle of people getting up to do their normal people things. Before the streets filled with cars, and they went to jobs, ran errands, and all the normal



things normal people used to do. Back when there were people, anyway.

She rose to walk around again, see what she could. The lot was empty except for the same vehicles they'd seen when they found the hospital yesterday. Her gaze fell on their truck, and she stopped and thought about what to do about that mess. The other cars looked serviceable. They would work as getaway vehicles if that became necessary. The truck remained her preference because of the space in the back. Plenty of room to haul supplies and gear. But if all else failed, she supposed it would be better to split the gear across two or more cars. Still, the state of the truck's tires concerned her.

What beast or monster could split the tires like that? The marks were the claws and bite of something massive. At least as big as a mountain lion, more likely much bigger. But would a wild animal know to attack the tires and cripple the vehicle? And why would it wreck the vehicle they'd come in, but none of the others? It made no sense to her at all.

As the sun rose, she could feel the air warming. It had been a warm evening, and she could tell already it would be a hot day. But something was wrong with the air. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something about the air, the sky. A strange fluid aspect, as of cold tendrils worming through the growing heat. She shivered as a chill skittered along her exposed skin, raising gooseflesh on her bare forearms and crawling up her spine.

As she surveyed the landscape around her, something odd struck her. She watched the forest in the distance shimmer and ripple. Like heat waves, but it wasn't hot enough for that mirage-like distortion in the air just yet. She took a moment to realize what was causing her to feel uneasy watching the ripples. It wasn't the lack of heat at all, but rather that the rippling was flowing perpendicular to the ground, not parallel to it. The waves of shimmering dissonance ebbed and flowed

along the tree line, causing the pines and aspens to distort lengthwise. The distortion became unnoticeable as her eyes rose from the trees. Whatever the strange phenomenon was, it was invisible against the bright blue of the morning sky.



Kris charged down the stairs, taking them two, sometimes three at a time. Hitting the first-floor landing, she hopped through the open access door and into the corridor beyond. She ran down the corridor, heels pounding on the tiled flooring and shot through the open doors to the doctor's lounge. They'd taken the sofas as beds last night, but her companions were gone. Bedrolls were rolled up and stashed in a corner of the room, near a large bookshelf stuffed full of medical texts.

Kris felt panic set in, but then realized they must have moved into the cafeteria. She ran out of the room, sprinted down the corridor, and back toward the kitchen. As she approached, the smell of cooking greeted her, filling her nostrils with what she was sure was the salty aroma of eggs and bacon.

A moment later she burst into the cafeteria where Gina, Miguel, and Damian were dishing up plates of breakfast. They turned to her as she entered, their happy expressions turning to worry as they saw the panic in her eyes.

"What's going on?" Damian said, placing his plate on the table. "I was just coming to get you."

"I...I don't know..." Kris said. "I mean, it's, well, it's nothing. But a really weird nothing."

Gina and Miguel dropped their plates on the table next to Damian's. The silverware clattered as the plates hit the tabletop.

"Show us," Gina said.

"Yeah, okay, come here," Kris said, running across the room to where the large windows spilled light in. She peered out, looking toward the sky in the distance. She could still see the strange perpendicular ripples in the sky. "Okay, look at that," she said.

Gina held her face close to the glass, trying to see what the fuss was all about. "What are we looking at?"

Damian and Miguel were now also staring out of the big windows, eyes surveying back and forth. "All I'm seeing is trees and sky, Kris," Damian said, confused.

"Okay, look," Kris said. "In the distance, way out there. Look where the tree line meets the sky." She waited a moment, gave them a second to see it themselves.

"It's... well, I don't know what it is," Damian said. "It's like it's rippling but..."

"The wrong way," Miguel said. "Like heat waves, but vertical instead of horizontal."

Gina pressed her hands to the sides of her face, cupping them against the glass to cut down the glare. "That is weird. I'm no meteorologist, but I've never heard of anything like this. I mean, it almost reminds me of..." her voice trailed off. She was staring at the treetops now, watching them wave and wobble, rippling in a nonexistent breeze.

"Of what?" Kris asked. "Any idea what this is?"

"Oh, yeah," Gina replied. "I mean, no. I've no idea what it is. But it reminds me of...Have you ever seen the northern lights? Way up north toward the arctic circle, right? Some magnetic phenomenon, causing this amazing rippling light show during winter months."

"Sure," Damian said, "Yeah. I've never seen it in person, but I've seen photos and film of it. I mean, there's no color to this, but aside from that, I see what you're getting at."

Gina kept watching the same shifting ripples in the air. “But there’s a tinge of color to it,” she said. “Look again. It’s faint, but where it ripples, it’s almost like it’s amplifying and fading the color beyond it.”

“Well, it’s damn weird,” Miguel said. “Whatever it is.”

“Agreed,” Kris said. “Totally agree with you.”

“When do you think it started?” Damian asked. “I don’t remember noticing it yesterday, but we were frantic then.”

“No idea,” Kris said. “I noticed it a few minutes ago. Then I came down to show you. Gina? Ever seen this before?”

Gina stepped back from the window. “No. Not at all. But, I don’t sky gaze much these days.”

Damian was still watching the sky as the rest stepped back from the window. “Just what we need. One more thing to scratch our heads about,” he said. “Worrying on an empty stomach never did anyone any good.” He turned from the window and walked back over to the table where he’d left breakfast earlier. Sitting down before his plate, he pulled it toward him and dug into his food. “Powdered eggs and shelf-stable bacon, but it’s the best breakfast I can remember.”

Kris took a seat next to him, but her eyes were distant. Still looking out the window, her mind miles away toward the horizon.



A few hours after they’d finished breakfast and cleaned up, Damian and Kris were back up on the roof. Downstairs, Gina was giving Miguel a tour of the hospital. On the roof, they were looking around at their surroundings. The city sprawled out for a mile north, west and east before it dissipated into the pine and aspen. South was thick with green

and gold overgrowth. The woods were deep, dark, and foreboding.

The distant rippling in the air made them both feel uneasy. It was a fundamental wrongness in the way they understood light to act. Almost like a visual vertigo, making them dizzy as their eyes fought to make sense of distant objects. The horizon, the trees, any sense of lines and geometry became hard to track. Damian's head swam. He felt a crawling nausea creeping up the back of his skull and had to turn away from the view. Feeling dizzy, he sat on the roof, held his head between his hands and stared at his feet, at the gravel and tarpaper covering the roof. Focusing on something close to his vision helped steady him.

"Even within the walls of a hospital, I don't feel safe," Damian said as the nausea passed. He looked up at Kris, "I can't help but wonder what slinks around in the woods."

"Could be anything. More of those flying things? Or who knows what?" Kris replied. Her brows furrowed as she squinted, as if trying to magnify her vision to look farther.

"I guess we can at least assume that there's plenty of stuff in the woods for those things to eat. With luck they won't hunt us," Damian said. He was making a slow circuit around the perimeter of the roof, his gaze never resting long on any one spot.

"Not until the woods are empty. There's also the matter of where everyone went," Kris replied. She broke her view off from the woods and looked toward the city. "This place is as dead as every other town I've seen. But I still can't figure it out. Sure, lots of folks ran. To the FEMA centers, or just far away from the cities. But lots of others stayed put, holed up in their houses, boarded up the windows and waited for help. I don't get it..." she trailed off.

"Right," Damian replied. "There just ought to be more people."

"I'm sure there are," Kris said with a note of uncertainty in her voice. "Somewhere there's got to be others in the same shape as us. Inevitably some are better off, too."

"And many worse off," Damian added.

"Sure," Kris said. She kicked at the gravel, her boots scuffing the grit and dirt of the roof. "And then there are the servants. You ever come across any of them? Freakin' nut jobs."

Damian nodded. He'd had run-ins with the human cultists of the alien monsters over the past few months. It never ended well. "I met these guys a while back. They had carved and mutilated themselves to look more like the monsters. Splitting their tongues, their lips, scarring their skin. Like they wanted to become monstrous to either blend in, or to make the monsters happy."

"People crave power," Kris said. "Some of them, I guess they see the monsters winning and want to be on the winning team."

"I suppose that's true. But as the saying goes, 'some people just want to watch the world burn,'" Damian said.

Kris thought about the group she'd left San Francisco with, the people she'd lost along the way.

"Same thing," she said. "What happened to those guys you met? The ones who wanted to be monsters?"

Damian felt sick. He didn't want to talk about this, didn't want to admit what he'd done. "I locked them in a barn and burned it down around their heads," Damian said, regretting opening his mouth.

Kris looked at him, then gazed off again to the rippling horizon. "Good," she said.

Inside the hospital, Gina ~~continued~~ her tour, showing Miguel around, noting supply rooms, dispensaries, the operating rooms. Miguel had previously never given any thought to how much effort went into running a hospital. Seeing it all laid out like this was impressive.

They approached a door down at the end of a dim corridor. A blue sign with white lettering read "Stairs." Other signs showed that going up allowed roof access and going down led to the morgue. Miguel approached the door, pulled on the handle and found it opened.

"Let's not go downstairs," Gina said as he stepped toward the opening.

Miguel peered into the stairwell. Light filtered down from the skylight above while the stairs leading down vanished into darkness. A chill crept up his spine as a faint rancid smell drifted up from down below, caught on the eddies of the breeze caused by the open door.

"The morgue's down there?" he asked. Gina nodded.

"There's no lighting though," Gina said. "And nothing to see, anyway."

"Just a bunch of dead guys, huh?" Miguel asked. He wasn't in any rush to go look at a bunch of rotting corpses. He'd seen enough of those when he fled Folsom, and plenty more on the road.

"Pretty much," Gina said. "Besides, with the power off, and running on emergency stores of propane, I have no idea if the refrigeration units have held up."

Miguel thought about that. A look of disgust crossed his face. "I can see how that would be...well, I guess 'pretty gross' is the phrase I'm after."

"That's one way to put it," Gina agreed. "The human body is gross when it breaks down. Corpses in and of themselves

aren't infectious; they don't give off 'foul airs' or anything. That's a myth. But there's no reason to expose yourself to the putrescent bodies. Not only will they stink, but...well, it's just not hygienic. I don't know how many corpses there might be. Or what they died of. I'm sure there are records in the morgue, but we've no reason to go checking."

"Sure, doc," Miguel said with a slight grin. "I have no burning desire to go look at rotting bodies, anyway."

"Fair enough," she replied. "Let's look up top, see what our companions are doing on the roof." Gina pulled open the access door to the stairwell and stepped through. She noticed the same foulness in the air which Miguel had smelled earlier. As he followed her onto the stairway landing she also felt a chill. The stairwell was well-insulated from the summer warmth outside, cool and comfortable. But this was different. It was as if thin tendrils of icy coldness darted through the air, wafting around her, tickling at her exposed skin.

Miguel shivered and rubbed his arms as if smearing away icy cold spider silk. "What the hell?" he said, breaking the tomb-like silence. "Doc, any idea what this is?" He waved his hand through the air, almost like he was treading water. He felt his fingers pass through runnels of winter chill, back into normal comfortable coolness, and then freezing again.

Gina held her hands parallel to the floor. She felt the tendrils of coldness wafting side to side and rising from below her. "It's like it's coming up from down there," she said, then took a step forward, placed her hands on the handrail and looked down to the dim basement floor landing.

"Guess the refrigeration is still on?" Miguel asked, but she could hear skepticism in his tone.

"Maybe. I should check it out. You coming?" She started down the stairs, turned at the next landing, and stepped down the last few stairs to the floor.



Miguel looked up toward the pale blue light of the skylight, then back down toward the pool of darkness where he could barely see Gina. "Just wait, okay! Wait for me!" Miguel vaulted down the stairs after her and was by her side within moments.

At the basement landing the smell and the chill were more pronounced. A single door set into the wall before them gave access to the hallway beyond. Gina grabbed the handle and pulled. The door swung open, and then the stench crashed over them both like a wave. Miguel turned from the door, hand going to his mouth to hold back his gorge. Gina turned her face from the open door as the fetid smell washed past.

"Jesus," she said, coughing. "What a stink..." She opened the door wide and flipped down the kick down doorstopper with the tip of her shoe. The door held open in place and she stepped through into the hallway beyond. It was dark, almost lightless. Reaching out with her hand, Kris felt along the wall. After a few steps she came to the side of the corridor.

"What are you doing?" Miguel asked from just inside the doorway.

She kept feeling along the wall, until her hand felt something cold, flat, metallic. "Utility box," she said. "Flashlight, in case of emergencies." Feeling along the edge of the box mounted on the wall, her fingers found the latch and opened it. Inside she felt a long plastic tube and pulled it out. A flick of the switch, and then a beam of cold white light spat from the end, shining down the hall.

Miguel stepped into the hallway and peered into the beam cast by the flashlight, trying to make out anything in the dimness beyond. Just ahead of them on the wall were wide elevator doors, beyond that what looked like a security guard

desk. It was dark past that. "I'm not one hundred percent sure this is a good idea," he said.

Gina walked toward the desk. "No," she said, waving the glow of the flashlight in a slow arc before her. Miguel cast one longing glance back at the door to the stairwell, then hustled to catch up to her.

"Okay," he said. "As long as we're together on that." They passed the elevator doors, and as they approached the desk in the hallway, Miguel could make out a pair of wide double doors at the end of the corridor. From their vantage point, Miguel could almost make out the shape of something jammed between the two doors keeping one door propped halfway open.

Gina stopped at the security desk and picked up a clipboard resting on it. The clipboard was dirty with a thin layer of grimy dust. Something about the dust repulsed her, made her skin crawl. She put the clipboard back down and wiped her fingers off on the leg of her pants.

Miguel looked over the desk as she wiped her hands. Next to the desk he saw a squat metal trash can. Looking into it, he saw a dried-out, half-eaten sandwich, and a shriveled-up orange dusted with blue-green mold.

"Security made himself scarce fast, eh?" he said.

"Must've bugged out like everyone else, I guess," Gina replied.

"Do you think the doors are open? I can't see it well," Miguel asked. Taking a few steps toward the doors, he added, "It almost looks like there's light in there. What do you think?"

Gina lowered the flashlight and walked halfway down the corridor toward the doors. There seemed to be a trace of pale light coming through the windows. She motioned Miguel up. The two of them walked at a slow, cautious pace

toward the doors. As they approached, Gina saw a metal gurney jammed between the doors, keeping one of them open. "Hold the light," she said, and handed it to Miguel. Once he had it steady, she opened the door and looked in.

The cloying smell overwhelmed her, and now she could see why. Embedded in the wall were six drawers for cold storage of human remains. In regular times, they left bodies in the storage drawers until someone transferred them to the local mortician, or wherever the next of kin wanted the body taken. Five of the drawer doors were open, hanging off the hinges. The fourth was marred with scratches and dents, but still closed.

In the center of the room was a flyblown, bloody ruin. Three arms, a leg, and a sprawling heap of tangled, rotten meat, which Gina assumed to be intestines and organs, but couldn't make out anything specific from. A crusty, dark-red pool on the floor surrounded the mess, with runnels of dried blood smearing out toward a pair of large double doors against the far wall, like someone had dragged a leaking corpse from the room. Over all this, a strange phosphorescent crust. Threads and faint trceries created a faintly glowing latticework over the pile of offal and remains. An awful pale-blue glow emanated from the bloody ruin before her. Gina turned from the abattoir, leaned against the doorway, and felt waves of nausea roll over her. Again she fought back her gorge and kept it down.

Miguel, however, was not so fortunate. He looked into the room and recoiled. Miguel wheeled around, fell to his knees, bracing himself against the wall with one hand and retched in the corner. "Oh, God..." he said between heaving up his breakfast. "What the hell?"

Gina took a deep, slow breath and held it for a moment. Then she walked into the room to a supply cabinet hanging on a nearby wall and swung the door open. Rummag-

ing around inside, she pulled out a tin of Vicks Vapo-Rub. Scooping a small blob out with her finger, she smeared it across her upper lip. The stinging, pungent odor of the salve masked the worst of the stink of decaying meat in the center of the room. Miguel was now standing in the doorway, watching her. She tossed him the jar, and he caught it. "Rub it under your nose," she said. "It'll mask the smell."

"Or maybe we should just leave." Miguel said. He looked at the small tub of pungent jelly suspiciously. "Now."

"In a minute," Gina replied. "I want to look at this stuff." She crossed to the center of the room to the jumble of human remains piled in the center. "Bring the light over here."

Miguel brought the flashlight over to her. "Hang on," he said. He walked to the double doors on the far side of the room, careful not to step in the trail of dried gore as he did so. When he got to the doors and tried them, he found they opened onto a small loading dock beyond. A platform shot straight out from the back of the hospital room, ending after a dozen feet in a ledge a few feet above the blacktop vehicle access. He used the built-in doorstops to keep them wide open and a breeze grew, blowing the smell out. Pale daylight flooded into the room now, casting the scene of horror into stark relief.

"Good idea," Gina said. "The light helps."

Miguel went back inside, where he noticed the pale glow emanating from the body parts had faded. Gina squatted next to the pile with a scalpel in one hand, and a small glass dish in the other. As he watched, she excised a sliver of the luminescent flesh.

"What is it?" he asked. "Any idea?"

She held the scalpel up close to her face, trying to get a better look at the strange bristly growth on the shred of flesh. It was like small, thick fibers or hairs. Besides the soft

bluish glow, it glittered in the dim room. "Well, it looks like maybe some mold. I've heard of bioluminescent fungi, sure. But it's not my area of expertise. I'd like to look at this under a microscope."

Miguel was feeling antsy. The longer he stayed down here with the rotten-meat smell, the dismembered body parts, and other human remains, the less he wanted to. "We should get out of here. Just lock this room up and leave. Right now."

Gina looked up from slicing bits off of the corpse parts, realizing that scientific curiosity had overcome her basic need for safety. "Yes, you're right," she said, scraping the sliver of glowing flesh from her scalpel and into the glass dish in her other hand. As she did, her hand slipped, and the knife scraped against her knuckle. "Shit!" she hissed and almost dropped the dish.

Miguel's head snapped toward her, "What? What is it?" he asked, with borderline panic in his tone.

She placed a lid on the dish, sealing it. "Cut my finger. Close up the doors, I can take this upstairs and examine it in one of the lab rooms." She placed the dish on a nearby medical tray, and then went to a sink, turning on the tap, and running her hand under the water for a few moments. She washed with viscous pink liquid soap, scrubbing the area around the slight cut on her hand.

"Is it deep?" Miguel asked. "How bad is it?"

Gina shook water off her hand and regarded the slight cut. "It's nothing. Not even bleeding. Just scraped the skin. Nothing to worry about." She peeled open the paper wrapper on a plastic bandage and applied it to the cut. "Come on, let's go." "Don't have to ask me twice," Miguel said rushing over to the outer doors, kicking the doorstops up and letting them swing closed behind him. "Come on. This room is awful."



## *Chapter Twelve*

Gina sat on a swiveling stool in a dark room, hunched over a large microscope. With no electricity running in the hospital, she'd rigged up a contraption of test tube holders to hold a small penlight steady, and pointed at the mirror reflecting light up into the lens.

She'd set a slide in the device, one with the tiniest sliver of flesh from the samples she'd brought up from the basement. Peering into the microscope, she could see the flesh's cellular structure in decent detail. She would have preferred better lighting for more detail on the cells. The cell structure she saw was odd. It reminded her of frostbite, with crystallized, abnormal edges, some of which had burst open.

Gina sat up straight, stretching out her tight lower back. She removed the slide and prepared another one. With a scalpel, she removed some of the luminous fibers crusting the samples of rotting flesh in the petri dish nearby. She carefully placed the fibers onto the slide with care, then arranged them in the center, in as flat a layer as she could. The first slide cover she placed over them crushed them flat, almost powdered. She prepped another, this time leaving the cover off, and placed the slide gingerly onto the microscope tray.

What she saw when she gazed into the eyepiece came as a complete surprise. She'd expected a fungal cell structure. Rounded rods and chambers, something that looked organic, natural. What she saw was more crystalline. The fibers were

an intricate lacework pattern, fractal sequences that folded and wrapped over each other. Impossible for her eye to follow, and when she did, there was illusory motion, the feeling that what she was seeing through the lenses was undulating, shifting, somehow growing.

Gina increased the magnification. With an exponential increase in detail, she realized that it hadn't been a trick of the lens. The fibers were moving. At the magnification she had them at, they were twitching. At first she thought maybe the microscope was unstable, but she wasn't even touching the table it was on. Everything was still.

Once again increasing the magnification settings, the image came closer. Now she was seeing the microscopic structure of the fibers. She watched as the glowing crystal threads vibrated at the increased magnification. Adjusting the focus to clarify the image, she saw the source of the tremor. They weren't shuddering; they were growing. The microscopic crystals were expanding, growing to twice their original size, and then shattering into fragments, each fragment then growing again before cracking and repeating the process. Some larger crystal structures joined with others, forming lattices and longer chains.

Gina leaned back from the eyepiece. This was just weird. The...threads? Fibers? Crystals? Whatever they were, they acted organic, were growing at a steady rate, but they looked like minerals. Like sugar or salt crystals under magnification. She pulled the slide out of the microscope and set it aside. Turning to the sample she'd taken earlier, she removed the penlight from the contraption she'd set it in, and held it above the tissue samples. The phosphorescence grew fainter under the light, but the fibers were obvious. She wasn't sure, but they looked like they'd grown since she first looked at them.

Gina placed the lid back on the dish, and slid it next to the microscope. After peering into the microscope and looking at the strange crystalline cells, she was left with more questions than answers. With her thoughts focused on the slides and microscopic strangeness of the threads, she hadn't noticed that her finger had begun to itch. She'd been scratching it under the bandage for the last few minutes, unaware.



Miguel was scraping together something that almost resembled food—some scraps from breakfast, supplemented with random items from the dark recesses of the pantry—when Gina entered the cafeteria.

“Where are the others?” she said, looking around the small room.

“Kris said she wanted to check on the propane tanks. She and Damian went out back a while ago,” Miguel replied. “Did you check out the stuff from the morgue?”

Gina nodded, then pulled up a chair at one table and sat down hard. Then her hands were at her temples, trying to rub the stress away. “I did, but it makes no sense. I’ve seen nothing like it before.”

“Oh, yeah? What’d you see?” Miguel said, pulling up a chair across the table from her. “Aside from glowing rotten meat...”

“That’s the thing,” she replied. “These fibers, right? At first I thought they were a kind of fungus. Perhaps some sort of slime mold. But under magnification, they look mineral. Crystalline structures, growing and combining with each other.”

“So what does that mean? What is it?” Miguel asked.



“Honestly?” Gina replied. “I have no idea. But it raises a lot of questions. How did it get in the morgue? What happened to the bodies that should have been in there?”

“What bodies? What’s going on?” Kris said. She and Damian entered the room, and they were both looking toward Gina.

“Pull up a chair, we’ve got stuff to tell you,” Miguel said. “Let me put a pot of coffee on...”



Soon, everyone was up to speed. Kris and Damian explained they’d gone out to check on the propane tanks, which had turned out to be close to full. Gina and Miguel relayed their experience in the morgue, and Gina tried to explain what she’d seen under the microscope.

“How long had those bodies been there?” Damian asked. “I mean, I assume they didn’t just get up and walk out on their own, so it’d be great if we had a rough idea of when they’d disappeared.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. “Let’s not assume anything...” Kris said.

“I don’t want to stretch credulity too far,” Gina added. “But I’m concerned that someone or something took the bodies out of the morgue.” Her finger was itching more now. She was rubbing the bandage with her thumbnail, but her knuckle no longer expressed any feeling at all. It was numbing to external sensation under the plastic, but still itched deep within.

Miguel sat up straight at that, shocked. “The outer doors!” he said. “They were unlocked when we got there. I could just swing them right open.”

“Okay, so that’s something we didn’t know before,” Kris added. “So we can assume anyway that something pulled the

corpses out. Any predator, anything looking for food. Coyotes, mountain lions, what sort of critters do they have up here, anyway?" She looked around the table at her companions. "Anyone have any ideas?"

"Sure," Gina said. "All the above. Bears, wolves, anything, really. They keep to themselves, but none of that is unheard of. But, could be anything. There's strange stuff in the woods..."

"And then this fuzz, the glowing stuff," Miguel added. "That stuff was just weird."

Gina's finger was itching like mad. She peeled the bandage away and scratched at the cut with her thumbnail. "I have to agree with you," she said. "It seemed like a mineral, like a fibrous glass or crystal, but growing and interweaving with itself. I mean, minerals can grow like that, but in response to immense pressure, heat. Lots of outside influence. And not that fast. This growth looked organic. They were duplicating and expanding like biological cells." She paused, looking around the table at her companions. "I don't get it."

"So I have to wonder," Damian said. "How safe are we here? First something attacked the truck. And we find out something rampaged through the morgue. Maybe even the same something."

"Until this morning," Gina said, "I'd have told you we were safe here. Now, I don't know." She was scraping at her finger now. She mulled over the events of the day, the ongoing conversation with the group, and her eyes traveled down to rest on her hand. The cut was still small, a hair less than a centimeter long, but thin fibers twitched along the edges, glowing with a soft, pale blue-white light. Gina's breath caught in her throat, and she felt her heart pounding in her chest. The glow began in the area of the cut, but she could see it faintly below the surface of her finger, surrounding

the wound, and threading out under her fingernail. She closed her hand, making a loose fist and hiding her finger inside.

Kris leaned back in her chair, she was chewing at her lower lip, deep in thought. "I think we need to assume we're not safe here. Maybe we never were."

"So what are we going to do?" Miguel said. "What's our plan from here?"

"Well the truck's not an option," Damian said, exasperated. "The tires are wrecked, and who knows if we'll be able to change them soon?"

"We're not hurting for transportation, though," Kris said, sitting up straight in her chair. "There're a few cars in the parking lot. I didn't see anything as big as the truck. But we'll find something."

"Sure," Gina said. "Do any of you know how to hot-wire a car? Because I sure don't."

Kris smirked, "I can teach you. Don't sweat it."

Miguel stared at her, mouth agape. "Seriously? You're just a twenty-piece bucket of surprises, aren't you?"

Kris laughed, throwing her head back. "Yeah, well, you learn things in your misspent youth. Sometimes they even turn out to be useful."

Damian smiled at that. "So we get a few vehicles ready to bug out fast if we have to. We put them around the side. Maybe by one of the big side doors. Easy to get to if we need to escape fast."

Gina stood, pushing back her chair as she did so. "Okay, that's settled then. You three sort out transportation. I'll pack a few supplies, grab extra meds in case we need them. I don't want to leave here. But if we have to, better to go prepared."

Marching orders in place, Kris, Damian, and Miguel headed out to the parking lot to see what they could sort out.



Gina stayed behind, though. Her finger was still itching, but she ignored it; it was a dull annoyance that wasn't even registering any more. Like an extracted tooth, it was more an oddity that she had become used to ignoring.

But what she was feeling, which she could not seem to ignore, was the deep pang of insatiable hunger. It had only been a few hours since breakfast, but already she was ravenous. She thought it must have been all the excitement and stress of the morning, causing her metabolism to go on overdrive.

She picked at some things in the pantry, but nothing she found appealed to her. Then she saw the packages of shelf-stable bacon. Before she realized she'd done it, she had torn open the package and was chewing on the rich, meaty strips, swallowing thick wads of fatty meat, not even tasting them as they tumbled into her gullet.

This was better, this was what she wanted. Or at least closer to what she wanted. The stringy meat and marbled waves of greasy fat sated her hunger for the moment. At least the manic want, the psychological craving, abated. The physical need was still strong, however. Her gut rumbled and groaned, her body wanting more. Wanted the meat, but something more familiar. Something closer to its own kind.

Gina wiped her mouth with the back of her forearm, smearing grease and flecks of bacon across her coat sleeve. Hunger dug claws into her gut. The need to eat, specifically to eat meat, consumed all thought.

With a flash of instinct, she charged out of the pantry, out of the cafeteria and down the dark hallway toward the stairwell. Toward the morgue.



Outside the air was thick and warm. A soft breeze whispered through the woods, pushing eddies of dust and leaves before it. Kris and Miguel were near the hospital and had found nothing larger than a few sedans in the parking lot. They had placed one car by each of the side exit doors.

Damian went farther into town to find a truck or SUV, anything with more space. It was quiet outside, different from the hospital silence. He found that the most disconcerting now. The disconnected feeling of being surrounded by human structures, by the signs and remains of human civilization, but the utter lifelessness of the world around him. He walked up the street toward the main frontage road. Back the way they'd entered the parking lot and saw there were a few worthwhile vehicles nearby. An older-model SUV caught his eye, and it didn't take him long to get to it.

Sunlight glittered off the glass storefront windows as he approached the SUV. Reaching out to grab the door handle a strange foreboding struck him. A paranoid shiver traced his spine. Something here was out of place.

He looked around, expecting to see someone or something watching him. But nothing was there. The street was empty, devoid of anything alive except for him. He felt a subtle wrongness coursing through his body, but his physical senses gleaned nothing at all.

Kris had shown them earlier how to get a car started, and it surprised him how easy it was. Just a matter of cramming a screwdriver into the instrument panel, ripping off a few inches of the insulation on the ignition wiring, and he was off and running. A burst of sparks and a whiff of ozone, and the SUV's engine sputtered to life. He had to push hard on

the gas pedal, rev up the engine, and let it idle for a while to get the battery up and running again. But he was fortunate to have found an older vehicle. Modern cars with Bluetooth connections, alarm systems, and all that useless nonsense could have drained the battery over the course of a couple of weeks. The SUV he'd found would need some charging time, but it was solid, a workhorse.

Damian let the engine idle for a few minutes. The tank was almost full, and they had the reserve gas cans back in the truck at the hospital. But he suddenly wondered if this wasn't the perfect time to move on. To leave Kris, Miguel, and Gina, and strike back out on his own. He'd only known them for two days, and he'd been doing just fine by himself for months now. The world had changed. It had become predatory and even crueller than before. Maybe he was safer on his own.

He pressed the pedals into neutral, popped the transmission into reverse, and pulled back along the edge of the street, backing up from the car in front of him to make extra space to pull out. He realized as he was doing this that he was falling into old habits: checking his rearview mirror, peeking at the side mirrors. Who was he looking out for? There wasn't a soul on the road within a hundred miles.

So he threw the transmission into first gear and stalled out the engine. The SUV lurched forward a few inches and stopped. It had been forever and a day since he'd last driven a manual transmission vehicle, and he'd forgotten what a pain in the ass they were.

He took the ignition wires in his hands, pressed down on the gas pedal, and touched the bare ends of the wires together. The engine roared back to life, and he sat back, relieved, back sinking into the bucket seat.

Damian pushed the gearshift into first, brought his foot up on the clutch while depressing the gas pedal, and the SUV rolled forward. It pulled out into the street and rolled along the blacktop. Inch by inch he crawled along and then picked up speed. It was a straight shot to the hospital parking lot, and the farther he went, the more comfortable he was with the controls of the vehicle.

The hospital loomed large before him, and he rolled the SUV right into the parking lot. Swerving around the disabled truck and continuing along the side of the building. He figured he'd pull up around the back somewhere, wherever it was easy to find a space to turn around in, and not have to worry about pulling into a tight parking slot. He still wasn't feeling comfortable with the controls of the vehicle, but figured he'd sort it out in time.

He pulled the SUV to a slow stop as he came up next to the truck. Pulling up on the handbrake, he shifted the vehicle into park and let it lurch to a stop. Damian slid from the driver's seat and exited the vehicle, all the while keeping his eyes on his surroundings, and alert for any signs of danger. He took longer than he'd hoped, but within a few minutes he'd managed to single-handedly drag all four jerrycans of gasoline and water, plus his bike and all the other gear from the back of the truck, and stow it in the cargo area of the SUV. It was a mess of jumbled equipment, but he figured he'd sort it out later.

Damian rolled around the back, still watching the woods, keeping an eye on the distant trees which edged the lot. As he came around the back of the building, he saw a low loading dock, with a sterile sign posted next to a pair of double doors. "Morgue Deliveries" was all it said.

This was good, he thought. He turned the SUV around and backed it into the loading area. If they needed to make a quick escape from this place, it'd be just as easy to pull

through the double doors of the morgue as anywhere else. He thought it was ghoulish, but still.

With the SUV parked in the loading area, he killed the engine and hopped out of the cab. He was uncomfortable outside on his own, though he couldn't say why. He'd seen enough weirdness over the last few months. Damian stopped to consider the notion that just a few minutes ago, he'd been considering ditching his new companions, and now he realized just how much he'd grown used to having them around. He understood what people used to say about a person needing other people around. "No man is an island," and all that. He used to consider it so much philosophical nonsense, but now he thought maybe there was something to it after all.

Damian slipped from the SUV and turned. He was staring right at the double doors to the morgue. Grim flights of fancy flittered through his imagination as he steeled himself up to entering. He imagined the scene the doc and Miguel had described earlier. The thought of confronting that testament to mortality did not entice him further. But he steeled himself and approached the doors.

He stepped up onto the raised dock and walked toward the double doors which led to the morgue. Reaching out with one hand, he pressed one door open. It yielded as he leaned into it, swinging open at a touch. Miguel had said he'd locked up behind them earlier, but he must have forgotten.

The smell hit him first—the stink of corruption, of rot and decay—as the doors opened. His hand went to his mouth, and he fought back the urge to vomit or run. The primitive, instinctual urge to flee the scene of murder or massacre almost took over.

But he held firm. Damian held back the crawling nausea in his gut and stepped into the room. The soft glow suffusing the bare remains was the first thing he noticed as he entered.



The blue-white phosphorescence almost occluded the scene of horror smeared out across the floor of the small, dark room. He closed his eyes, feeling the inklings of a swoon. When he opened them, nothing had changed. The dark room stank, and still had the strange pale-blue glow.

Damian stepped within the morgue and made a hasty crossing to the other side of the room where the exit doors stood. As he crossed, and the outer doors swung shut behind him, he couldn't help but see that the phosphorescence continued along the floor of the room. It trickled along the linoleum flooring, and out into the corridor where he was going. He went through the doorway into the hall, and the glittering light concentrated in a patch in the corner next to the doors and the wall of the hallway. But it went no further.

To Damian, it seemed as if this patch was where Miguel had said he'd thrown up earlier. There was a faint acrid vomity smell here, lending credence to his notion. He couldn't be sure, but it looked to him as if the strange glowing patches were trailing along any residual sign of biological matter. Blood, meat, vomit—the material did not seem to discriminate as to its host.

Damian was more worried by the darkness of the hallway. The glow in the corner had spread, crawling ivy-like up the wall, but didn't cast enough light to see by. He tried his key light, but the dim LED glow only shone a few feet before him, not casting enough light to see down the hall. At the far end of the hallway he could see a brief glimmer from the stairwell beyond, but everything in between was darkness. The darkness on its own was disconcerting, but with Damian's nerves already jangled, it filled him with dread.

Damian took a few steps forward. He reached out his hand beside him to feel for the hallway wall. A few steps to his right and his hand stopped on cool, smooth wallpaper. He took a dozen slow steps forward, letting his eyes adjust to

the light. He continued to walk forward, almost blind, but then realized the main reason he wasn't seeing much in the way of shapes in the shadows was because there wasn't anything to see in the hall. Ahead, he could just see something wide and flat. As he got closer, he could tell it was a low table of some sort. Maybe a gurney or desk? It was hard to tell through the blanket of darkness.

Moving around it and continuing on he found himself almost at the other end of the hall when he heard something crash to the ground far behind him. He turned around to look down the dim hall behind him, and could just make out the doorway of the morgue, faint sunlight glimmered through the room, the glowing slime patch, dim and distant. And then a clattering metallic crash, something in or beyond the morgue smashing to the ground. He turned back around and ran toward the stairwell doors. He was running blind, disoriented, just aiming for the dim glass window ahead of him. It came closer and closer, and then he threw the door open, charged out into the landing and up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Rounding the landing he burst out into the hallway into the hospital, and continued on, searching and calling out for his companions.



## *Chapter Thirteen*

The filthy, sooty room was littered with the bones and other remains of past victims. The Beane clan was cunningly resourceful and wasted nothing. A table made from an old wooden door on stumps held moldering cardboard boxes stuffed full of wallets, keys, surgical implants, and other treasures lifted from previous meals.

In the dark recesses of the Beanes' cabin, deep in the wood, the wendigo rested, its gaunt legs pulled tight to its chest, hideous long arms wrapped tightly around them. It had wound itself up into an almost egg-like shape, tucked into a shadowy corner. The preternatural stuff which composed its flesh had knitted and stitched itself anew; where the Beanes had fed from it, once-seeping wounds were now only puckered memories of pain. While it seemed dormant, the wendigo did not sleep. Nothing so terrestrial as that. Its mind drifted through the cold and dark of space and time, tracing cosmic webs and patterns, drawing together images and thoughts from future, past, and times never meant to be.

The temperature in the cabin had plummeted, the chill localized on the dormant wendigo. Its non-terrestrial physiology was altering the surrounding environment, transforming the temperature of the region to be more suitable for its preternatural form. For the wendigo was the harbinger, the first volley in the eventual onslaught of Ithaqua, the ruler of its kind. And Ithaqua was near. The wendigo knew it had may-

be another turn of the planet, two at most, before it would have amassed the energy to open the gates and bring Ithaqua forth from the voids beyond space and time.

The Beanes sprawled out on the dirt floor of the cabin. Their skin was pale, tight against the gaunt muscles beneath. Gray slime, shot through with tendrils of dark red gore, pooled near their heads as their internal organs liquefied and were expelled, jetting from their mouths in spastic, volcanic spurts. Glowing threads encircled their mouths, eyelids, nostrils, had burrowed through their flesh and nervous system from the inside out. They had spent the morning in convulsions, paroxysms of rebirth as the wendigo's matter took its course.

The Communion of the flesh and blood of the wendigo would soon be complete. They were metamorphosing, evolving, drawing forth the alien energies from Ithaqua's realm, and reforming their bodies to play host. Anything human sloughed away and was replaced by the alien matter of the wendigo. The crystalline tendrils threaded through their bodies, slipped up the core of their spines and into their brains, replacing the human nerves with something akin to radio receptors, crystalline matter grown to heed the call of the wendigo. Once the transformation finished, the Beanes would be extensions of the wendigo, joined in thought and purpose.

Along one wall, a special box sat on a special stool in a special place of honor. Within the box, coated in chipped, lacquered red on the outside and cushioned with ratty velvet padding inside, was Mother Beane, the head of the family. Her physical senses had been depleted around the time her body had decayed, but she had other senses—magical senses attuned to the desire of her god, Ithaqua. And she sensed that her progeny were changing around her, were fulfilling the purpose for which she had bred them. The purpose she'd

set for them so many generations ago, and the reason they'd bred their bloodline straight and thin for so, so long.

The time of the wendigo was near. And she thought this was good. And, oh, how they would feast tonight!



## *Chapter Fourteen*

Gina sat in the morgue, a large chunk of meat she'd carved off of the last remaining corpse in her hands. Someone had locked it up, and it was undisturbed by whatever had pulled the others out. But she'd gotten to it. She'd felt the gnawing hunger deep inside her. The phosphorous crystals had tugged and urged her down to this charnel house where the meat she craved ripened.

When she got the corpse out of its cubbyhole, she fell on it with relish. Putting a scalpel and bone saw to work with a surgeon's hand, she removed a large swath of skin and muscle from the corpse's chest. Gina bit into it, teeth slicing through the rancid meat. She chewed, swallowed, and went back for seconds. She ate and ate, but was still hungry. This was the meat she craved, but even the human flesh did not fulfill her.

When she heard the SUV back into the loading dock, a shock of fear lanced through her. At first, she felt the animalistic instinct of a predator defending its kill. But then a wave of disgust and self-loathing washed over her, a sudden return to sanity as she came out of a frenzy of feeding and realized just what she'd been doing.

Gina heard Damian approaching the doors from the outside, and she leapt under a table in a dark corner of the room. The room was dark enough that when he charged through it, he didn't notice her at all.

She sat, still in the darkness, and watched him go by, watched the doors swing shut in his passing. A smear of clot-  
ted gore around her lips; crumbs of fat dripped off her chin. She wanted to call out to him, to confess her sin and beg forgiveness, for help. What the hell am I doing? she thought.

But she was so, so hungry. She stood up straight, approached the doors which Damian had just gone through. Her mind became still; a hunter's calm came over her. And she wondered what it would be like to try fresher meat.

As she got closer to the door, her foot snagged on the wheel of an instrument tray, and she stumbled. She reached out to steady herself on the tray, and it slipped out from under her grasp. She pitched to the floor, scattering medical instruments all over and breaking the silence with a sharp crash as the tray smashed into the linoleum.

Gina rolled into the fall, slamming into the door and knocking it open. She kicked out, knocking the door open again. Then she shoved herself from the door. She'd tipped her hand, she knew that. Damian would be on the run now. When she thought of him as Damian, as a person, a companion, she was again shocked back to reality.

She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket. In the dim light of the room, she saw the clots of gore, meat, and fat smeared along the length of her arm. Her stomach roiled and a moment later she was on her hands and knees vomiting up rotten flesh on the floor.

While her body expunged itself of the foulness, her mind roiled. I'm going mad, she thought. There was no reasonable answer for her actions, for the disgusting behavior she'd exhibited in the last few minutes. Fear struggled with remorse as she rolled onto her back, holding her body tight with both arms across her chest as a fit of coughing wracked her body. Her throat was raw, burning. Tears of anger and fear rolled

from her eyes, and she rocked back and forth, her mouth open wide in a silent scream.



“This is all fucked up,” Miguel said, as he and Kris walked along the hallway near the nurses’ station. “She could be anywhere.”

“Gina! Hey, Doc, you here?” Kris called out. She waved a flashlight into a room along the edge of the corridor, then another. “She went to get supplies, right?”

Miguel nodded in agreement. “So where is she? Not downstairs, not up here?”

Kris shone the flashlight into another couple of rooms while chewing over this question. “I don’t know. Maybe there’s a basement or something.”

“I’m not going back down to the damn morgue looking for her. And I doubt she’d have gone back there, either.”

“Sure,” Kris said. She lowered the flashlight, pulled a chair from against the wall and sat down in it, leaning back and sighing as she did. “Okay, so we’ll find her. Or we won’t.”

“And what then?” Miguel asked. He dragged a chair over from the nurses’ station and sat across from her. “Whoever, or whatever that was...what if it comes back?”

“We leave. Simple as that,” Kris said. “We’ve got cars staged nearby, we can get out of here any time we want.” She heard footsteps pounding toward them and stood up. Her hand went to the knife at her belt, but then she relaxed as she saw Damian come running down the hall.

“Oh, thank God,” he said, stopping when he saw Kris and Miguel. Breathing hard, he walked over to them. “Had a hell of a fright downstairs.”

“What?” Kris said, her voice urgent.



“What happened? Do you know where the Doc is?” Miguel added. “The hell’s going on around here?”

“No idea,” Damian said. He leaned against the nurses’ desk, and took a deep breath, feeling his heart slowing down. “I was out there, right? Found an SUV, too. Decent shape; should fit us all.”

“Where is it now?” Kris asked. “Were you able to — ”

“Yes, it’s parked out back by the loading dock. Didn’t realize it led to the morgue until I pulled up. I...” Damian looked from Kris to Miguel and back. Worry came over his face, an almost frantic, fearful look. “I freaked, okay? Something out there just spooked me. I parked the car and came in. And man, Miguel you weren’t kidding when you described the mess in the morgue.”

Miguel almost had the image of that room out of his head. It all came flooding back to him. “Yeah, don’t remind me...”

Kris held up her hand to shush him. “Go on, Damian, what happened?”

“I got spooked, is all. I went through the morgue to get back inside, and — ”

“Wait, what? How’d you get in?” Kris asked, panic rising in her tone. “Weren’t the doors—”

“Ah, no...” Damian interjected. “No, the doors were unlocked. They opened easy.”

Kris shot a poison look at Miguel. “What the actual fuck were you thinking?”

“Jeez, man, I wasn’t thinking, okay?” Miguel spat back.

“Okay, anyway,” Damian said. “So, I went through the morgue, and remembered you telling us about the hallway leading back to the stairwell.”

“So you went that way?” Kris asked. “What then?”

"I'm going into the hall, and it's pitch-black, right? All I can see is the window down the other end of the hall, so I'm pointing in that direction. And then there's a crash from the morgue, and I spin around and the doors behind me are swinging open and shut, and that's the end of that. I ran. Almost broke my neck in the dark, but I ran until I got to the stairwell, and the hell out of there." Damian took a breath. He walked across and sat in the chair Kris had been in.

"That's it? Nothing came after you?" she asked.

Damian barked a sharp laugh. "Yeah, that's it. Like I said, I freaked. And then I'm downstairs wandering around looking for everyone, and can't find any of you. Heard you talking up here and came after you."

Kris leaned against the wall, ran her hand through her short hair, and closed her eyes. Leaning her head back against the wall, she said, "We're not safe here. We need to consider the possibility we may have to leave here right now."

"What about the Doc?" Miguel asked. "We going to look for her before we bug out?"

"Sure," Kris said, nodding and pushing away from the wall. "Let's look around, she's gotta be somewhere."

Damian rose from the chair, and he and Miguel trailed after Kris. "If my opinion's worth anything," Damian said, "I'd like to suggest that from now on, we don't split up. We travel together and be ready to run if we need to."

"Done," Kris said.

Miguel nodded agreement. "Absolutely," he said.



"Gina! Doc!" Miguel yelled out, as they walked down the dark hallway.

Kris and Damian shone flashlights back and forth, down the hall, into rooms, but there was no sign of her. They had searched the top floor of the hospital, and were now down on the first floor. Damian felt this was all in vain.

"Last time I saw her," Miguel said, "was right before we went out to move cars."

"Sure," Damian agreed. "She went to pack up supplies while we dealt with the vehicles. So where is she now?"

Kris shook her head, frustration clear on her face. "Maybe she went out to check on the propane?" she said. "We'd talked about that yesterday, but never did go look."

"Maybe," Damian said, but doubt was clear in his tone. "I mean, sure, that's possible. But I don't think she'd have done that without mentioning it to at least one of us."

They entered the cafeteria, Miguel going first while Kris and Damian watched the sides and behind them. Miguel went into the galley as they looked around the dining area. When he entered the galley, Miguel noticed a bacon wrapper on the floor, torn open and tossed aside without care, empty but still filmy with grease. "Hey, guys!"

Kris and Damian rushed into the kitchen. "What? What is it?" Damian asked.

"Did either of you get into the bacon?" Miguel pointed at the wrapper on the floor.

Damian looked at it, then kicked at it with the toe of his shoe. "No, not me. We didn't have this earlier, either."

"No, we didn't," Kris responded. "Someone's been in the pantry while we were out."

Miguel felt himself going on the defensive, sticking up for the Doc, even though he'd only known her less than a day. "Hey, well, I mean if you think about it, what's the big deal? She's sharing her food with us. No reason she can't get into the stuff she's been saving all this time."

"That's not my worry," Kris replied. "It's not that she may have eaten the stuff. It's that we don't know who got into this. Could have been the Doc, or someone else. Or something else."

"Come on," Damian said. "Let's keep looking."

The hallway got darker, dimming around them as they continued along. After another minute, they were approaching the stairwell to the morgue.

"You know, I don't want to go back down there if we don't have to," Miguel said.

"I'm with you on this one," Damian added. "I came from there, and there was nobody down there but me. I'm sure."

"Then what made that noise you mentioned?" Kris said.

"I don't want to find out," Damian said, with more than a hint of fear in his voice.

"We'll be in and out in a moment," Kris said, and walked toward the stairs.

Damian and Miguel shared a nervous look. Neither wanted to reenter the morgue. Something primal, primordial was pressing at them, urging them to just turn and run. But it's one failing of intellect that often the mind overrules the gut, and so they followed Kris through the doorway.

They emerged onto the landing and began the descent to the basement. As they walked, Damian felt a chill in the air. "Anyone else notice how cold it is in here?" he asked.

"Now you mention it, yes," Miguel said. "I noticed that before, the cold rises from below."

Damian leaned over the railing and peered into the dim depths of the shaft. "I don't like this..."

Kris took the final steps and then was standing in front of the doors to the morgue hallway. The cold was palpable now. She could almost make out the steam rising on her

breath in the dim light. As Miguel and Damian joined her on the landing before the stairs and elevator shaft, she clicked on her flashlight.

A flash of movement beyond the door's porthole window startled her. "What the fuck was that?" she shouted and shone her light through the glass. The reflection on the glass made it impossible to see anything in the hallway. Taking the light away, she looked through the windows, and down the hall. In the distance, framing the far doors, was a soft blue-white glow. Phosphorescent patchwork crawled up from the far corner, spreading out over the walls, reaching up toward the ceiling.

"Damian, look at this," Kris said.

He stepped forward, peering through the glass and into the hallway. "Holy...I swear, when I was down there it was just the patch in the corner. Whatever it is, it's spreading."

Something slammed into the door. A face was suddenly at the window, and the door burst outward. Damian tumbled back into the stairwell landing, colliding off Miguel and sending them both sprawling.

Kris shrieked and leapt back as Gina came screaming from the hall. Her skin was pale, ice-white, her dark-brown hair disheveled and hanging in front of her face. Gina turned and snarled at Kris before leaping on her. As she leapt, her lank hair flew from her face, revealing wide eyes, black, matte like coal, dead to what faint light there was in the shaft.

Gina grabbed on to Kris with ice-cold hands. Nails like talons sunk into the cloth of Kris' shirt. Gina's legs wrapped around her torso as Kris fell under the weight of the assault. Kris got her arm up under Gina's chin, holding her head away as Gina's teeth chattered and clacked, biting and chomping at air.

"Get her off me!" Kris shouted, shoving at Gina, trying to push her off.

Damian rushed forward, grabbed a handful of Gina's hair and pulled her back. With a sickening, wet ripping noise, Gina's scalp tore free from her skull, sending Damian sprawling again as he lost his balance. A spray of thick, black blood exploded from the open wound. Gina threw her head back and howled, an animal shriek that pierced right into their skulls, set off primal fears, and shook them in ancient places long forgotten. It was the howl of a thwarted predator, the shriek of rage that sparked ancestral fears of the things that lurked in the wilds and hunted mankind.

No humanity remained in Gina. Nothing but aching need and bottomless hunger. All her energies and thought were bent on filling that hole. She was oblivious to everything except the prey she held in her icy grip, and her desire to sink her teeth into the hot meat before her, to slake her thirst on the blood.

Miguel leapt behind her, taking Gina by surprise. Hefting his flashlight low on the handle, he raised it high over his head, and brought it crashing down into her skull. A sickening crack resounded through the stairwell, and Gina ceased motion. Miguel raised the flashlight again and brought it down once more. With this second impact, her head crumpled in. The flashlight sank deep, and a shower of clotted black gore erupted from the ruins of her skull.

Kris shoved against Gina one last time, and the corpse of the doctor tumbled to the ground next to her.

"What the fuck!" Damian shouted. "What the fuck! That was the Doc!"

"What the hell is going on? What happened to her?" Miguel said, sinking to his knees. He shook all over. His hands went limp, and he dropped the flashlight to the floor next to him with a dull clack.

Kris had shoved herself back against the far wall, trying to put as much distance between her and the corpse before her as she could. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she felt close to losing her breakfast. She took a few deep breaths of air, calming her panic and taking in the grisly tableau before her: Gina, skull crushed, lying on the floor, Miguel and Damian splattered in black slime or gore. As she calmed, she noticed Gina's hand. "Don't touch her!" Kris shouted. "Stay away from the corpse!"

Miguel and Damian snapped concerned looks from Kris to Gina and to each other. "What?" Miguel asked. "What's wrong?"

"Look at her!" Kris shouted.

They did. They saw a fuzzy crust of luminous mold-like fibers. Gina's skin wasn't just pale, it was threaded through with the stuff, a faint luminescence rising from somewhere beneath her skin. The largest concentration of it was at her hand, and it had worked up her arm into her shoulder, then to patches along her neck and over her face. Miguel looked to his flashlight, discarded a few feet away, and realized that within the clotting gore there were lumps of glowing matter stuck to it.

"Fuck this," Damian said, got to his feet and sprinted up the stairwell. He ran, legs pumping and feet pounding until he was in the doctors' lounge, and he charged into the shower full force. He collided against the tiled wall while cranking at the shower handles. Cold water cascaded over him, heating as he stripped off his gore-splattered clothing. Within moments he had stripped bare and begun scrubbing the caked black filth from his body.

A few moments later, Miguel and Kris came barreling down the hall, calling after him. When they saw him in the shower, saw the threads of diluted gore sluicing off him and down

the drain, they realized the same thing he had: whatever had turned Gina into a monster, they had it all over them. Without second thoughts, they both charged into shower stalls and began scrubbing the foulness from their bodies.





## *Chapter Fifteen*

Kris and Miguel were securing the jerrycans of gasoline and water in the back of the SUV still parked at the loading dock outside the morgue. Damian had grabbed as many first aid kits as he could get his hands on, and a few cases of food, and filled any remaining empty spaces. He'd strapped his bike on the roof rack with a few nylon cords he'd found in the SUV's glove box. They were all keeping well clear of the doors leading to the grisly scene in the morgue.

Against his better wishes Damian had checked earlier to make sure the door was secure. What he'd seen was what he'd expected, and yet more so. The phosphorescent, velvet-like crust had spread, as if it had sought all the biological matter in the room. It flowed over the remains of the bodies in the center of the floor, out the interior doors, and into the hallway. He hadn't gone far enough in to check for sure. His last action before leaving the room for the final time was to throw the latch, making sure that when he went back out onto the dock and shut the doors behind him, they locked tight. Rattling the handles assured him they could not open from the outside.

By late in the afternoon, Damian was becoming anxious about getting on the road. Looking to the sky made him uncomfortable, with the strange vertical shimmer in the distance. Something about that anomaly in the summer sky set

him on edge. He couldn't help but feel there was some malevolence in the ripples of light.

"We've got an hour or so left before sunset," Miguel assured them, while lifting a case filled with antibiotics from Gina's stash into the back of the SUV. "Summer hours and all."

"We need to decide before dark," Kris replied. "Do we stay, or do we go?"

Damian walked around the SUV to the same side she was on. "I can go either way. If we decide to bug out, there's some wisdom in just getting out of here soon. We could be well into Nevada by daybreak. Get a ton of miles under us before it gets hot."

"True," Miguel replied. "But it's also safer to drive in the day time. We'll see obstacles before they're a problem. And without our lights on, we won't be as noticeable."

Kris wiped her hands on her jeans, rubbing off dirt and grime, and thinking as she did. "I don't know if this place is safe, but I'm leaning toward 'not.' We don't know what the hell that glowing stuff is, but it's spreading, and look what it did to the Doc."

Disgust washed over Miguel's face as he remembered the sickening feeling of Gina's skull crunching under the weight of his flashlight, the feeling of abject horror as he realized he'd just killed someone he'd had breakfast with that morning.

"She was like an animal," he said. "She'd just gone off the rails."

"Right," Kris replied. "Whatever that stuff is, I don't want to be around in case it gets into one of us."

Damian's eyes drifted back toward the doors to the morgue. "There could be other things in there."

"What do you mean?" Kris asked. "Was there something else you saw?"

"No, not that," Damian said. "But whatever pulled the corpses out of the drawers, right? They should have been locked up tight. But something had dragged them out, fed on them."

Kris put her hands behind her on the platform, leaned against the rise of the dock and nodded. "Sure. Whatever that was. What if it comes back, right?"

Miguel was getting nervous now. "And what if it's not a bear, or wolf, or whatever? What if it's one of those things? Something that brought that glowing shit with it?"

"That's the big question, isn't it?" Kris said and pushed off the edge of the dock. "What if it's some kind of monster? If it can infect us, then all bets are off. Okay, fellas. I say we get gone. Maybe we'll find a safe place in Nevada."

"Sure," Damian added, "there's gotta be people somewhere. Maybe the army base in Reno is still active. And there's still my family cabin near Tahoe. We could be there tomorrow, most likely. I'm with you."

Miguel nodded, a thin smile creeping across his face. "Hell yes," he said, relieved.

There was a strange, high-pitched creaking, grinding noise behind them. As one they turned to look as the doors to the morgue rattled and shook. Then Damian noticed the glass, the large windows set into the upper halves of the doors. "Holy shit—" he said.

"What is that?" Kris added, fear tinging her tone.

The windows crawled with a latticework of what looked like frost crystals. It was growing over the glass almost like living creatures crawling across it. As it expanded across the glass, the surrounding metal frame crusted with the same similar pseudo-hoarfrost. The creaking rose in pitch, and suddenly the glass shattered and crumbled into a glittering shower of pebble-sized fragments, which tumbled to the concrete slab of the loading dock.

Then the shimmering tendrils slipped through the opening, the crystalline patch reaching and slithering out, growing like ice crystals gone berserk. The crust spread, shooting out feelers, exploring the cracks and surface of the doors, the wall. As it reached the floor of the dock, it rolled and folded over itself, tendrils slipping out and inching forward. Damian was close to panic and saw that the crawling frost was making a path directly toward him and his companions.

Kris approached the SUV and slammed the hatchback door down. "Okay. Let's go."



An hour later they were back on the road. The hospital was a memory now, behind them and soon to be forgotten. Whatever lay ahead, they'd have to take it as it came. The sun set behind them and cast the sloping mountains into ruddy darkness. A last yellow sliver of daylight glimmered in the rear-view mirror, lying low against the rising mountaintops, dimming and then vanishing as they left the town in the distance.

Miguel drove, with Kris in the front passenger seat. All the windows were down, letting dry summer air in as the SUV ate up the miles. They were going slow again, inching along as the highway wound through the mountain pass.

"I don't want to roll up into a wreck or something," Miguel said. "We break down out here, it will be a hell of a hike..."

"Just drive carefully, we'll be fine. And let us know if you get tired, we'll switch off," Kris said.

In the rear, Damian was staring out the open window as the mountains passed. He watched the trees in the distance, noticing they were thinning out. Patches of dirt more frequent and gaps between the trees became common. Even though they moved slow, it was difficult to make out anything in the

distance. On the other side, the terrain plummeted down. In the distance he could almost determine the edge of the dark peaks of mountains across the valley, almost blended completely into the darkening sky.

"Feels like it's getting warmer outside," Kris commented. "You notice that?"

Miguel reached his arm out of the window, letting the warm air sluice over and around his hand. "Yeah, I guess," he said. "Weird how cold it was earlier. That shit in the morgue almost seemed to change the surrounding air, you know?"

"I noticed that, too," Damian said. "Whatever that stuff was, it was like it radiated cold around it."

Kris nodded agreement with that. "Wonder how far it'll spread," she said.

Damian had nothing to add. His fear was that it wouldn't stop spreading, that they'd always be trying to outrun it. But that's nonsense, he told himself. It can't go on forever.

Then he heard the howl. Distant, remote, but filled with sinister intent. It was low, a discordance of angry tones, but rising fast in pitch, like the strings of an instrument being stretched tight. "What's that?" Damian said, almost shouting in fear. "You hear that?"

"What?" Kris said. "What do you hear?"

"Just...shhhhh! Listen!" Damian said, turning back, almost pushing his head out of the window. Outside was quiet, the soft crunch of gravel under the SUV's tires, a low whisper of the night air they slowly passed through.

"I don't hear—" Miguel began and was cut short as the howl came again. It was long, full of yearning, a wail of rage and hunger, soon joined by another, and then a third, or more. The howls rose, blended into a harmony which crawled into the skulls of Damian and the others. Shimmered around in

their minds, making them queasy and dizzy. One by one, the noises quieted, the discomfort passed.

“What the hell is it?” Damian said, frantic.

“Whatever it is,” Kris said, “it sounds like it’s behind us.”

“You think it’s that stuff?” Miguel added, terror clear in his voice. “That shit that got the Doc?”

“I have no idea,” Kris said, fear mingling with frustration. “I think it’d be a good idea if we got the hell out of here. Drive faster.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Miguel said, pounding on the gas pedal. The SUV shot forward, taking the curves of the road fast. Miguel’s eyes were on the road ahead and occasionally shot to the rearview mirror. The road ahead glowed pale in the cold light of the SUV’s halogen headlights, the beams crossing back and forth as he took the turns and twists with practiced ease. Through the mirrors, the receding path was black, with occasional bursts of crimson glow as Miguel tapped the brakes, slowing their descent.

The strange howl echoed in Miguel’s head, an alien sound formed of tones that made his skin crawl. Even the memory of it raised his hackles. “Maybe we should have stayed in Truckee...” he said.

“The hospital wasn’t safe,” Kris replied. “You saw that... that...whatever the hell it was.”

Damian’s worry was obvious in his voice when he spoke up. “The thing that made that noise. What if it’s the same thing destroyed the corpses in the morgue? That left that crud everywhere?”

Kris turned in her seat to look back at him. “Who knows? We can’t try to predict or understand the world now.”

Miguel laughed, a harsh bark of defeat. “Yeah, I mean, the entire world’s just a big frickin’ horror show now, anyway. I

used to watch all those monster movies when I was a kid, you know? They were a laugh. Guys in rubber masks and suits, chasing after girls who'd be running in bikinis and high heels through a forest or whatever."

"But the monsters are real," Kris said. "There's nothing funny about this."

"So what the hell do we do?" Miguel said, exasperated. "We keep running until they get us? Till we run out of gas and we're lost in the freakin' desert with some slimy fungus monsters crawling after us? Or maybe those flying lobster things'll come back and knock us off the freakin' cliff here."

"We'll find other people," Kris said. "Damian, you said there was a military base in Reno?"

"Sure, absolutely," Damian added, trying to console the increasingly erratic Miguel. "They've gotta have resources there, right? There's gotta be other folks out there somewhere. We talked about this before, and I still believe it."

"We'll be in Reno soon," Kris said, while scanning the horizon. "Saw a sign a few miles back. Should we stop and look around, or pass it up?"

"Worth at least cruising through downtown," Damian said. "But let's play it by ear."

"Sounds good," Miguel added. "Go in fast, get out fast."



Kris sat straight in her chair, eyes on the side of the road, watching the mountain slope fly by past them. Her short hair whipped in the wind, lashing over her eyes and around her head. She held it back with one hand and kept watch on the side of the road.

Damian had climbed over the back seat and was sitting in the rear cargo compartment. He'd shoved the jerrycans out of

the way and now found himself with his back pressed against the rear window, staring behind them into the gloom.

"I see nothing. You?" he shouted to Kris.

"Not a damn thing!" she yelled back. "Just trees, and—" The howl came again, riding the currents of the night wind, barreling down the mountainside. Distant at first, then louder, closer. "What's that?!" she shouted, pointing out the window.

As Miguel turned to look he lost his grip on the steering wheel, and the SUV slipped sideways as he almost lost control. He grabbed the wheel, yanked it back into place and the vehicle charged straight again with a sickening lurch.

Damian bounced off the jerrycans beside him, cracking his head against the side of the vehicle's interior. Reaching out lightning fast he grabbed at an overhead handhold to balance himself, but only jammed his injured hand against the roof of the car. "Watch where the hell you're driving!" he yelled as he bounced around in the back of the SUV.

"Shut up and look out the window!" Kris yelled, still pointing and waving outside.

Damian did. Shifting back onto his rump, he peered out the back window. He saw the gloom of night, the vague schism of darkness where the mountains behind them transitioned almost imperceptibly to the dark night sky. Then motion in the trees. A glimpse of pale moonlight glittering of pale shapes moving fast along the ground. Another up higher, almost as if it were flying or leaping through the tree-line. They were hard to make out through the shield of trees, scrub, and rocks. The glimmering shapes darted, leapt, zig-zagged in the distance. But they moved with purpose, with conviction.

Miguel's eyes were on the road ahead, darting to the side mirrors. "I don't see anything! What is it?" he shouted.

"Just drive, dammit!" Kris yelled back. "I don't know what it is either. Can you see?" she said to Damian. "Can you make



anything out? All I see are jumbled blurs, like giant lightning bugs flitting around.”

“Whatever it is,” Damian said, “whatever they are, they’re coming our way.”

Once again the silent night split with the ear-rending howl of the things. The harmonic cacophony of multiple hellish voices shrieking in unison. First one, then another and another, and more, all howling in rage.

“Sonofabitch!” Damian shouted, hands covering his ears, trying to block out the nightmarish din. “That noise! God, it’s like it’s digging right into my skull!” Which is in fact what it felt like to them all. Like needles of ice—long, thin slivers of cold nothingness—thrust into their minds. Piercing violations of all they’d assumed sanity was for so long, as if lances formed of the chill darkness of the gulfs between the stars had shot right into their brains; something about the way the noise reverberated in their ears, like feedback from an amp turned up far too high.

Miguel shoved harder on the gas pedal. He had it floored, and the car was careening down the mountain road. His eyes were watering from the pain in his head, the shrill din throbbing in his ears. He felt as if at any moment his pulsing eardrums would split open.

After a few more moments, his vision contracted. Darkness ringed the edges of his sight, and he shook his head to clear it out. The howl came again, splitting the night and making him swoon. He could feel the SUV swerving, and forced himself back to consciousness. Fear lanced through his mind as the vehicle fishtailed back and forth across the highway. Outside, far into the dark vagueness of the night-shrouded wilderness, he saw the pale shapes still pacing them.

As Damian watched the woods, trying to track the strange, luminous motion within, one of the shapes leapt forward, just

beyond the tree line, and right across the road from them. It seemed humanoid, lashing out with limbs resembling arms and legs as it tore across the forest floor. It dodged between and around trees as it raced through the wood. It charged up the trunk of a tree, climbing ten or more feet off the ground, leapt across into another tree's crown, and then jumped to the ground, still running.

Then the thing turned toward him, its face directly across from Damian, and he stumbled back from the window in horror. The creature's face was a pale, drawn mask of horrific intent. Jaw long and slack, with a snakelike tongue whipping from the creature's maw. Its eyes were sunk back in its skull, black and hollow. As it looked at Damian, it stopped running for a moment, threw its head back to the sky, and split the night with another ear-shattering shriek. It ran again, screeching against the night.

Miguel hunched over the steering wheel, trying to keep his focus on the road ahead of them, squinting into the distance. His hands gripped tight on the wheel, and his eyes darted from the road to the mirrors and back.

A blur of white from the edge of the road, and then something large and heavy smashed into the side of the SUV. "What the hell is it?" Damian shouted as a scrabbling shriek of rending metal raked up the side of the vehicle. The creature clung to the side, claws dug tight into the metal frame, and it was climbing spider-like to the roof. It crossed the window before Damian's eyes. Quick as winter lightning it was on top, and raking at the roof with its black nails.

Miguel jerked the wheel back and forth, swerving to try and dislodge the creature.

Damian's eyes fell behind them, out the rear window as he saw two more of the pale, glimmering gaunt things erupt from the wood, charging toward the road and the SUV.

Sparks shot from the things' claws as they raked the black-top, swallowing up the distance and closing on the SUV. He felt panic rising from his gut, flooding his nerves. He scrambled around in back of the vehicle, searching for something to use as a weapon.

His hand closed around a tire iron and he gripped it, lined up a shot at one of the slaving things, then threw with all his strength. His shoulder strained as he whipped the heavy crossed bar out the back and into the darkness. For once, luck was with him, and the spinning metal smashed into the face of one of the charging beasts. It tumbled and rolled along the asphalt, slowed momentarily before getting its claws back beneath it, and shot back up onto its haunches. It stopped, raised its head, and howled into the night. As they sped forward, Damian could see a smear of black fluid oozing from the thing's smashed face, and rough patches of dark gore dripped from its body where it had scraped against the road.

But two of them kept coming, bearing down on the SUV, and Damian was tumbling to and fro in the back as Miguel swerved. The thing on the roof scraped its claws against the metal above Damian's head. He was on his back, looking up as he saw the long black talons pierce the roof, raking gashes through the metal which shrieked as it was torn asunder.

Kris grabbed her quiver of arrows, pulled one out, and gripped it like a spear. White-knuckled, she rolled down the window, and rose, like she would climb out of it and confront the thing on the roof.

Miguel's eyes darted to the rearview mirror. The creatures bearing down behind them were close now, almost on them. "Wait!" he shouted. "Hold on to something!"

Kris stopped, stared at him. "Shit!" she hissed, sat back and pressed her feet against the floorboards in front of her.

Damian didn't understand what was happening. He was too worried about the monsters charging toward him, mere feet from his face now.

When Miguel slammed on the brakes, Damian wasn't ready for it. He slammed against the jerrycans, knocking them over and on top of him. The SUV fishtailed along the road, skidding to a halt, but the creatures were moving fast and taken by surprise. Those behind the SUV smashed into the rear door and went sprawling. The thing on the roof lost its grip and flew forward, crashing into the road, rolling and skidding twenty feet or more before coming to a halt. Miguel released the brake, stomped on the gas pedal, and the wheels skidded momentarily. Then the vehicle shot forward.

The creature before them raised its head, lips parted in a snarl, and exposed its mouthful of jagged teeth like rows of chipping tombstones. Its dead black eyes stared at the SUV for a split second, blinded by the headlights of the oncoming vehicle. Miguel shifted the steering wheel to the left, getting the vehicle pointed right at it, and bore down on the creature. There was a sickening thud and crunch as the SUV rolled over it and shot off into the night. A moment later, Damian had gotten out from under the mess in back, and watched through the rear mirror as the creature's ruined corpse receded in the darkness, glistening red in the glow of the rear lights. He could see the thing sprawled out on the asphalt, broken and twisted, its head pulped and smeared against the road. A slimy black trail followed a few feet beyond, tire treads marking the direction they now moved.

Miguel kept his foot stamped down hard on the accelerator pedal, and his hands tight on the wheel. "Do you see them?" he shouted over his shoulder. "Anything?"

Damian gripped the edge of the window frame and watched out of the back. He saw the four shapes in the distance, moving slow, getting to their feet. They turned their heads toward

the speeding vehicle, and as they shrank in the distance, Damian felt like their dead black eyes were peering right into his soul. His blood ran cold at the thought, the notion that these things could see into his mind, pierce his thoughts.

As the SUV curved around a bend in the road, the creatures disappeared into the darkness, fading faster than their memory would. The SUV hit a straight patch of flat road, picked up speed and raced into the night. Damian sat back against the jumbled mess around him and felt his heart slow. He hadn't realized how fast it was racing, how flooded with adrenaline he'd become. Once they were out of danger, he knew he would crash hard.

"There's nothing out back," he said. "They're not following us, or if they are, we're moving faster than they are."

"Which is it?" Kris shot back. She pushed her head out of the window, looking back the way they'd come. Pulling back into the cab, "Are they gone, or slowed down?"

Damian kept watching out the back. All he saw was darkness, and roadside scenery glowing blood red, illuminated by the SUV's tail lights. "Beats the hell out of me," he said. "But I'm telling you, I don't see anything. I'll keep watching and let you know if I do."

"Fair enough," Miguel added. "We're maybe an hour from Reno. You see anything, you let us know. Kris and I will watch ahead."

"And I'm serious, you see anything weird," Kris said, "you let us know."

"Sure, no problem," Damian said. He could tell already it was going to be a long night.



The night wore on, and Kris's eyes were caught in the twilight period between dead tired and totally alert. There'd been no sign of the creatures for an hour or more, but she was still on edge. Adrenaline still pulsed through her blood, making her anxious and more than a little frantic. Miguel was driving the SUV with an expert hand, but they still went faster than she was comfortable with. She'd gotten used to the snail's pace they'd been at, and she was still concerned about hitting something in the road. But then, she also worried about the monsters they'd just avoided.

Their headlights sliced a path ahead of them, lighting up the road for a hundred feet give or take. And that was what alerted them to the massive roadblock before they smashed right into it.

"Son of a bitch..." Miguel said, pressing on the brake and bringing the vehicle screeching to a halt.

Damian lost his balance, sprawling onto his back and sending their supplies tumbling once again.

"What's going on? Are they back?" he shouted. "Why are we stopping?"

Kris turned back to him, "Road's blocked" she said. She looked around before she opened the side door and hopped out on to the blacktop.

"What the—" Miguel erupted in surprise.

She held up her hand as if to shush him. "Just give me a minute," she said. "And keep the engine going."

Damian clambered over the gear in the back of the SUV and slid into the rear passenger seats. "So what's going on?" he said, peering through the windshield. In an instant, he realized what a stupid question that was. "Shit," he whispered.

"Yeah, no kidding," Miguel added.

Just at the edge of the headlights' beam, the road split. A signpost told them to veer left to continue on to Reno, and

that bearing right would take them south to Lake Tahoe. The lefthand direction—the direction in which Kris was walking—was a tangle of wreckage. Cars smashed into and on top of each other, blocking the road. They'd have to clear these vehicles before they could travel this road at all.

And over it all lingered a sickening, charred rotten smell—the smell of barbecue left in the sun to spoil for a long time.

Kris approached the wreckage with caution. She didn't want to get so far ahead of their ride that she couldn't make a hasty retreat, but she wanted to see how bad this pileup was. As she approached, it was obvious what a complete mess this was. Cars, vans, and even a pair of motorcycles tossed and tumbled from one side of the highway to the other—at least a few deep, too. She craned her neck to get a better look past, but couldn't see much. So she jumped up on a forest-green Volvo station wagon, putting her hand on the hood first for balance, then leaping up onto it and landing with a dull metallic thunk.

Standing tall she saw her worst-case scenario before her. Hundreds of vehicles packed the road. Whatever the evacuation plan had been, it had turned to complete chaos. Vehicles of all sorts impacted both the eastbound and westbound lanes. It seemed as if all semblance of traffic safety had vanished as people had fled Reno. Cars pointed in all directions leaving the city, but they'd never made it past this point. Something had caused the flow of traffic to come to a sudden and disastrous halt.

Casting her flashlight from side to side, she saw withered corpses in a few of the vehicles. About fifty feet into the morass the cars were blackened, scorched, even melted in places—evidence of a great fire at some point, long since cooled. The wind trickled along the highway, wafting the smell of decayed flesh, burning skin and hair.

As she hopped down from the hood of the Volvo, Kris reflected for a moment that the burned wrecks, the dead in their cars, were a sad and mundane horror. She'd become so used to the sinister threat of predatory monsters, chimerical shapes in the night, living tendrils of icy crystals, that the prosaic and mundane awfulness of human death and decay barely registered with her any longer. For a moment, she wondered what it meant to be human in a world full of monsters. But then she remembered that she was in fact one of the remaining humans in that world of monsters. And the creatures were best left undiscovered.

"Road's blocked," she called out to Miguel and Damian. "Completely." She turned back toward the SUV and then stopped short. A dark smear on the vehicle's grill was almost washed out by the glow of the headlights. There was something odd about it though. It was glittering, almost shimmering. She crept forward, watching the patch. "Kill the lights," she shouted in subdued tones. "Now!"

The headlights flicked off. The patch glimmered, glowed. She walked forward and could see the black ichor splattered over the dented grill. The splatter seemed to curdle, drying out. White crystalline fibers grew from the smear, glowing pale blue against the darkness. Her blood went cold. She jogged to the SUV, dropped to the ground a few feet in front, and checked under the carriage. The glowing fibrous crust spread from the grille under the SUV. Closer to it, she could see it twitch and flow in the night's slight breeze. She leapt back up to her feet, ran around and grabbed on to Miguel's arm. "The stuff's on the car!" she shouted.

"What? What stuff?" Miguel asked, panic making his throat tighten. He shoved the door open and jumped out. Behind him, the rear door burst open and Damian followed right behind him.



"Holy crap," Damian gasped as he saw the luminous crust crawling up the front of the SUV. "That's the same as the stuff from the hospital!"

"That's where you hit the monster, right?" Damian said.

"Right!" Miguel said.

Damian walked around to the other side of the vehicle, and saw that the rear tire was glowing softly with a fibrous crust which sprouted from clots of thick black gore. "I swear this is the same stuff from the hospital, don't you think?"

Kris ran her hand through her hair, rubbing her forehead and closing her eyes. She was overwhelmed. Too many options, and not enough paths. "The road to Reno is blocked," she said. "We could hike from here, but we'll be on foot the whole way, and it will be slow going."

"Or, we go to Tahoe," Damian added. "It's closer, but out of our way. We can probably find shelter for the night and figure it out in the morning."

The glowing patch was spreading, creeping from under the carriage, up the sides, from the grille up over the hood. Kris sidled over to where he stood and squatted down to look closer at the grill. "It looks the same as we saw in the hospital, so I think we should assume that it is the same stuff."

"It's growing over that slime, or blood, or whatever that black stuff is," said Damian. "See how it's sort of just sprouting out of it?" He pointed with his index finger, but didn't get closer to the phosphorescence. "Those things must be... what's the word? Secreting? Extruding? Anyway this stuff, it must come from them, you think?"

Kris' eyes went wide, a shadow of fear crossed her face. "The Doc...."

Miguel stepped back, shocked. "She was turning into one of them."

"You mean," Damian said, stumbling away from the vehicle, now wary of the loathsome glowing patch. "You mean, those..." he waved his hands back toward the road they'd come in on. "Those, things were people?"

Kris's eyes traveled up the road. "Yeah," she said. "There's a good chance they may have been...once, anyway."

Miguel pulled gear out through the SUV's hatchback. He was working around the splash of glowing ichor near the rear tires, and wheel well. As he moved around the back of the vehicle, it was clear he was keeping an eye on that stuff, making sure not to get near any of it. He pulled out bags of medical supplies salvaged from the hospital, a jug of water, his crowbar, anything he could get his hands on.

"What are you doing?" Kris shouted running over to him. "We can still drive this," she said, gesturing to the vehicle.

"I'm not getting back in that thing," Miguel said. "You do what you want, but I'm done with that."

"It still drives fine, just got that crud on it," Kris replied. "Still has plenty of gas, and can get us along faster than we can go on foot."

Miguel shook his head back and forth. "No way. That crap's all over the grille, the doors. You saw how it spread in the hospital," he said. "How long until it's in the air system, or creeping through the seams? Till it's in the cab with us, and we're breathing that shit? Or it's climbing up our legs?"

Kris took a step away from the SUV, then shone her light at it, noticing where the glowing ichor was inching toward the seam where the door's edge met the frame. "Hell," she said. "Yeah, I hadn't thought of that."

Damian also shuffled back a few paces. "Okay, maybe he's right," he said.

Kris walked toward them picked up one jerrycan of water and said, "Take whatever you can carry, and let's get going."

"We're just going to leave it all here?" Damian said. "All the water, gas...all that stuff?"

Kris nodded. "Yes. Maybe we'll find another vehicle up the road, and we can come back for our stuff later. I don't know. Just take what you can carry."

"What about a car from that pileup?" Damian asked. "Anything we could drive in there?"

"It's a mess," Kris replied. "The cars nearest to us are tangled and wrecked, like they just stopped. Abandoned. Further in, there's a bunch of burned-out husks. Maybe past that we could find something. But getting it off the road, through the trees to the side...it'd be impossible."

"What about going farther in?" Miguel asked. "We could walk through the wreckage, maybe if we got far enough, we'd find something drivable, something in the clear."

"Possible," Kris said. "I don't want to be blocked in by all that mess. If those creatures come back..."

"Or something even worse," Damian added. He was getting anxious, eyes darting to the tree line around them, up into the night sky, and down the road both ways.

Kris turned to look at him. "Well, thanks for that happy thought."

Damian approached the SUV and unhooked his bike from the roof rack. "There's plenty of room in the saddlebags," he said. "We can stow some smaller stuff in there."

"Sure, makes sense. The water bottles, stuff like that," Miguel added.

"Let's get moving then," Kris said. "I don't want to stay in any one place longer than we have to."



It took them another fifteen minutes to get organized and ready to move out. Each had a first aid kit and a small bottle of water on them. They loaded as many other supplies into the bags on Damian's bike as possible including the case of antibiotics just in case, and strapped a jerrycan full of water onto the frame which supported the saddlebags. And then they were off.

With the water jug strapped to it, Damian's bike was off-balance, so he walked next to it instead of riding, pushing it along. Miguel and Kris to either side of him. She'd turned off the flashlight out of fear of being seen. The stars overhead glimmering in the clear night sky and the moon was full and bright. There was enough ambient light for them to see the road ahead of them, the surrounding trees, and a bit into the distance.

All of them were on alert. Damian had been on his own for months, ever since the beginning. He was more used to traveling under his own power, exposed to the elements. Kris and Miguel had grown somewhat complacent in the relative safety of their truck. They felt exposed now, hiking through a grim, dark forest in the dead of night. Every creaking tree branch, each whispered rustling in the boughs, any little night noise was cause for alarm. The road was smooth and paved well, so was of benefit to them, and with the double lanes going in each direction, they had plenty of wide space before the edge of the forest. While they traveled with caution, they took heart knowing they would see anything coming at them through the trees before it got to them. Or they hoped so, any way.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, the road continued along as the landscape sloped down below them. They came to an overpass crossing over the highway and stopped.

"I feel exposed," Damian said. The overpass went far, farther than they could see the end in the dark. A few yards before them was the perpendicular highway, and then a set of railway tracks running parallel to that. Past that, they could just make out the glittering ripples of the slow, churning Truckee river.

Kris peered into the darkness. "Can you see anything past the river?"

Miguel took a few steps forward, "Just flat and dark. More damn trees maybe past that."

"Okay," Kris said and walked toward the overpass. "Let's do this. Fast, and careful."

Stepping out onto the overpass was a leap of faith for them. They were now out of the woods and walking twenty feet or more above the earth below. They walked in silence, scanning the horizon on all sides, wary of any impending danger. After a few minutes of this they'd crossed the highway below, passed by the railroad tracks, and were over the gurgling river. Moonlight glittered off the rippling surface of the river as they crossed, white diamond lights flickering below almost like the night sky reflected along the winding black strip under them.

Damian spoke in an almost whisper, "That just gives me the creeps."

Kris peered down over the edge of the pass. "Why's that?" she asked.

"Just makes me wonder when I can't see things clear," Damian said. "It wouldn't be so bad in the daytime when water's clear enough you could see into it."

He stopped and pushed down the kickstand of his bike, propping it up and letting it stand for a moment. He walked to the edge and looked down toward the moonlight-dappled water. It rippled and flowed as he watched, traveling from some unknown source to a distant shore. As he watched, he thought he saw a shiver of motion from the edge of his sight. His eyes snapped in that direction and he watched, motionless. Out of the corner of his eye he spied a quick flash along the shore, and then another. Something was moving along the edge of the river, but he couldn't see what.

Then a glint of light turned toward him. It was distant, but looked like a pair of pale, luminous green eyes staring at him, unblinking, before swiveling away. Then the darkness moved, hard to distinguish against the surrounding night, but like a large person, then another, both crawling on all fours, scrabbling and hopping up the slope of the river's bank, before disappearing in silence into the scrub and brush of the plain beyond.

"See anything?" Miguel asked, walking across next to Damian to peer over the edge.

"I...I don't know, maybe," Damian said. "Thought I saw something crawling out of the water, but it's so dark I can't be sure. I swear I thought I saw eyes. It was like something down there looking at us."

"Come on," Kris said. "Grab your shit and let's get the hell off this bridge. I'm still not convinced we left those things far enough behind us." Damian nodded in agreement. He grabbed the handlebars of the bike and pushed it forward. "Sooner we get out of here, the better," he agreed. He looked back toward the distant river bank, but saw nothing else. The night was once again still.



## *Chapter Sixteen*

For an hour or more they traveled in silence. It was hard to tell time without watches, and no sun overhead. But the moon moved along its trajectory by degrees, and over time had crossed a noticeable arc of the sky. The overpass had led them across a gully and back to flat land. The trees along the side of the road became dense again as they walked, and they felt more comfortable again. They stuck to one side of the road as they hiked, and kept a lookout on both sides, and in front and behind them as often as they could.

As they continued on, Miguel saw a roadside sign up ahead in the distance. He couldn't tell what it said, but the shape silhouetted against the night sky was obvious. "Something up ahead," he said.

Damian stopped fast, hands going loose on the bike, like he was getting ready to drop it and run. "What? What do you see?" he said, his voice quavering.

"It looks like a road sign or something," Miguel replied. "Look," and he pointed toward the rectangular patch in the darkness. He kept walking, and a few moments later Kris and Damian followed behind him. After a dozen yards, they could make out the sign: Truckee Tahoe Airport it read.

"Well now, that's interesting," Kris said, approaching the sign. "Don't suppose either of you know how to fly a plane?"

Miguel shook his head. Damian laughed, low and bitter.

"No," he said. "Of course not. Maybe we can find a new ride. Or at least shelter for the night."

"I'm a little concerned of stopping anywhere we can't check out in daylight," Kris said. "But I agree we should look into it. Can't imagine it could be any more dangerous than on the open road."

"I don't know," said Damian. "No place seems safe...."

Miguel stepped up next to Damian. "Hey, I got an idea," he said. "Let's get that water jug off the back, then you can zip over on your bike, scope it out real quick, and come back and let us know what you see."

Damian just stared at him for a few moments before tightening his hands on the handlebars. "You want me to go alone?" he said. "Just pop on down to the creepy abandoned airport like I'm going to the neighborhood store for a gallon of milk? Hell with that."

Kris put up her hands as if to say hold on a moment. "Damian, it's not a bad idea. But let's wait to decide until we're a little closer. We can hike down the road, and once we're in sight of the airport, Damian can go in fast, take a quick tour around and see if he sees anything. But we can also keep our eyes on him in case he needs help."

"For cripe's sake," Damian said, exasperated. "Yeah, okay, sure. Fine. Let's get this over with."



As they approached the small airport, Damian noticed how still everything was around them. He knew one day he'd get used to it, but the remains of human civilization now felt hollow and grim to him. Human works and edifices were now little more than shed skin, forgotten as the new world sloughed them away. The road to the airport was overgrown



with weeds, strewn with leaves and other signs of neglect. No vehicle had used this road for months, which gave him at least a little sense of comfort.

They rounded a curve, and then the airport was right before them. A tall chain-link fence surrounded it in either direction as far as they could see. A gate hung on its hinges where the road crossed it. Small buildings lurked in the distance, dim against the darkness beyond. Moonlight reflected off the dusty windows, waxing and waning as clouds crossed the sky, making dull, diffuse patterns on the ground.

"See anything?" Miguel asked, sidling up next to Damian.

Damian snapped down the bike's kickstand and let it lean. He unlimbered the water jug strapped to the back. "Nothing. Couple buildings, that's about it."

Kris took the jug as it slipped. "You okay doing this?" she asked Damian.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "In and out. If I'm not back in a few minutes, call 9-1-1." He wasn't enjoying the idea of going off on his own. Especially into such a wide-open, dark place. Damian climbed onto the bike and strapped his hydration pack on his back. Then he pressed the pedals hard and sped down the road.

"Be careful!" Kris called quietly after him.

Damian caught her words just before he was out of earshot, raised his hurt hand and gave a thumbs-up over his head.

Miguel looked around the side of the road, found a small copse of trees to one side and dragged the water jug toward it.

"Over here," he said, waving Kris over. "This seems like a decent place to hunker down while we wait."

Kris followed him. "I want to make sure we can keep an eye on him as far as we can." She looked down the road, saw Damian fading into the distance as he circled the facil-

ity. "Guess we won't be able to see him much in the dark, though."

Miguel nodded. "But we'll be able to hear him if he needs us. We're not going far off-road. But we're out of sight if anything comes by."

Kris looked back toward the airport. Damian had vanished, lost in the shadows. For a moment she thought she saw his silhouette cross a reflected moonbeam, but that could have been a ripple in the clouds overhead.

"Sure, okay," she said, and walked to where Miguel was making a small, cold camp twenty feet away from the black-top. She opened her pack and took out a small plastic bottle of water, cracked the seal and took a long drink. As she sat, she looked back down the way they'd come. "You think we've seen the last of those things?"

Miguel shook his head. "No," he said. "Not at all. But at least maybe we made headway. If we can find somewhere to crash for the night, maybe they'll pass us by. Maybe not."

"Too many 'maybes' in the world these days," Kris said, taking another drag of water.

"What do you mean 'these days'?" Miguel said, almost laughing. "The world was always one big 'maybe.' There were never any guarantees. Nobody ever said life was fair. It's always been just one random thing after another. No rhyme or reason to any of it."

"You believe that? Really? That we have no control over our lives, our destiny?" Kris asked, skeptical.

"Lots of people thought they had control of their lives back in the day. Made lists and plans, and long-term goals." Miguel scoffed. "Look where that got us. We were so busy stressing about our 401(k) plans, dental insurance, and picking good daycares for little Billy and Betty. But nobody planned for fire falling from the sky, creatures crawling from the deeps,

or people turning into monsters. Nobody planned for that shit. No such thing as ‘destiny’ either. That’s just something people used to say to justify doing whatever stupid shit they wanted to. All a bunch of bullshit.”

She laughed. “‘All a bunch of bullshit.’ I guess, times being what they are, I suppose I can’t say I disagree with that philosophy,” Kris said. “But I still think it’s worth trying. I’m not giving up yet.”

“Oh, I’m not giving up,” Miguel said. “I hope that somewhere out there, other people have found safety, and we’ll find them. Someplace we can stay safe from the monsters, regain something of what we had before. I’m hoping for that. But I’m not expecting it.”



Damian pumped the pedals on his bike, powering along the roadway toward the nearest of the small, utilitarian airport buildings. He could tell already this was a municipal airport, the type of place that hobbyist pilots, news helicopters, and small charter flights took off from. He couldn’t shake feeling exposed, however. The area around the airport was clear and flat, with mountains in the distance.

As his eyes played along the edges of the mountains, he thought he could make out the slim silhouettes of aircraft warning light towers. He figured that back before the power grids failed, the whole valley would be lit up at night like Christmas, sparkling and glowing from one side to the other, welcoming pilots to safety no matter the season. Now, the valley was dark and dead. An open-aired tomb to a dead age.

He approached the small building. A few torn and peeling posters pasted up next to the entrance doors. One had information about some upcoming community events at nearby

Tahoe. A Beer and Bluegrass festival, an Art & Wine festival, both in early summer. The things people used to enjoy when free time wasn't spent running for your life. They'd been scheduled for right about the time the world ended. Would have been a few months ago by now, he thought. He then wondered if the organizers of those events had gotten their deposits back and giggled at the absurdity of the notion. Damian tried to get control of himself, wiped a tear of laughter from the corner of his eye, and rode closer.

He tried the glass door to the facility and found it locked tight. Running on instinct, he'd reached out with his hurt hand to open the door. A lance of pain up his arm reminded him he still had plenty of healing to do. It also reminded him he was overdue for his dose of antibiotics that evening. He pulled the bottle of pills out of his pocket with his good hand, popped one in his mouth, and swallowed it with a drink of water from the tube of his hydration pack. The water was stale, dusty tasting. He couldn't remember when he'd last filled it, but it was too late to get fresh water now.

Damian flexed his hand, stretched the fingers and tendons. He could feel the gash under the bandage pulling against the stitches and relaxed. It would be time to change the dressing soon, too. Too much to do, never enough time for it all.

He pushed on with the bike, zipping around the small building. Once he'd turned around the corner, he could make out the rest of the airport's functions. Rows of small hangars were close ahead. Another small building, and a small parking lot just past. The lot looked like it contained a few trucks and cars. However, it was behind another fence and gate. Locked and chained closed, razor wire curled along the top edge of the fence. If they could get to the vehicles behind that gate, they could put more distance between them and whatever those things were that had attacked them earlier.

That would take a few people to pull off. He'd have to go back and get the others before trying for the vehicles.

Damian continued around the airport to get the layout down. As he passed the hangars, he looked in and saw a pair of small planes. A fueling station was nearby, but Damian figured that was jet fuel, and that was not going to do them a damn bit of good unless one of them leaned to fly. The hangars opened onto wide blacktop, which then connected to the long runway.

His eyes tracked down the runway, and in the distance he saw a large dark mass, but it was hard to tell what it was against the darkness surrounding it. He focused on it, and after a few moments his eyes adjusted enough he thought he could make out the shape of a plane. But it was resting strangely, leaning to one side with one wing sticking up into the air. As best he could tell, it looked like it had collided with something, or run off the runway and rolled. But he couldn't tell for sure.

After his investigation, he concluded there was nobody here. So he pounded the pedals on the bike and shot back up the road to where he'd left his companions. He rolled through the gate, past the fence, and up the road. As he came to the spot where he'd left his companions he slowed down, scanning for them. Kris and Miguel came out from the tree line and waved him down.



"For a minute I thought you'd gotten smart and left without me," he said, as they approached.

"No, not yet," Kris said. "Glad we gave you a couple extra minutes."

"What'd you see? Anything we should worry about?" Miguel asked.

Damian shook his head, frowning. "No, nothing at all. The place sure looks empty. A few planes still in their hangars. Maybe one ditched on the runway. A bunch of cars and trucks in a locked-up lot, but I couldn't get to them."

Kris walked toward the gate. "Definitely worth checking out then," she said. She turned her head back over her shoulder and called out, "You coming with?"

Damian nodded and rolled the bike forward to catch up. Miguel was quick to hustle up behind him. As they passed through the fence, Kris stopped to check the gate. The chain-link gate doors swung freely as she pulled one forward. "Damian, grab the other one, would you?" she asked.

He did, pulling the facing gate door toward its brother, and then throwing the latch down as they met. It was a thick, industrial chunk of cast aluminum, sturdy but not indestructible. "Too bad we don't have some kind of lock or something," Damian said as he fixed the latch closed.

"This'll do," Kris said, tugging on the latch, making sure it was secure. "If nothing else, it makes the place look closed up." She stepped back, assessing the gates. "Better than nothing, I suppose."

Miguel eyed the gates, unconvinced. His gaze wandered back up the road, and a shiver crawled up his spine. He suddenly wanted to be off the road, where strange monsters lurking in the night could not watch them. "Where are we going?" he asked. "Where can we hunker down?"

"There's a small building right ahead of us," Damian said as they walked. "The doors are locked, but I'm sure we can force them open. If not, we'll find another way in."

“Let’s see what we’ve got here,” Kris said, as she approached the building. She saw the tattered posters and smiled. “Damn, beer and bluegrass sounds great right about now.”

Miguel pressed his face against the glass door, peering inside. He brought both hands up to frame his face, trying to cut out his own reflection in the glass, make his sight clearer. “Looks like some kind of lounge. Like a rest stop for pilots, maybe?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Kris said. “Fixed-base operators. Small airports like this, I’ve heard about them. Have refueling stations for the planes, and rest areas for the pilots. A place to stay between charters, or whatever.”

Miguel tried the doors and found them locked.

“Yeah, tried that already,” Damian said. “Maybe we break a window?”

Kris nodded and walked around the long edge of the building. “Works for me,” she said.

In a few minutes they were around the side of the building. They hopped a low fence to go around to the back, and once there they found glass doors similar to the ones in the front. They were likewise locked tight. Nearby was a raised flower bed along the edge of the building, and above that was a bank of windows. It was short work to smash one open. Miguel pierced the pane with his crowbar, shattering it into a glittering shower of glass fragments. A few more swipes of the crowbar along the edge took care of any remaining jagged pieces, and the frame knocked clear.

One by one, they stepped through the empty frame into the small, sparsely furnished room. Kris clicked on her flashlight and passed it back and forth across the silent room. A few chairs and cafe-style tables filled the center, while long couches were against the walls. A tall reception desk stood

near the part of the room where they'd entered, and off to the side. Veneered double doors stood in the wall near the desk.

A stale, musty smell to the room instantly put them off. As Kris walked through the space, she saw a freestanding popcorn machine tucked between a sofa and a structural pillar. It reminded her of one she'd seen at a company carnival a long time ago. It had an old-time carnival feel, with red and yellow stripes and decals. As she approached it, she could tell that the smell was coming from the machine. A crusty smell, stale butter and rancid oil, but with something underlying it—an acrid, almost animal smell.

She shone the light through the glass pane, illuminating the yellow kernels within. Black specks peppered the tumble of popcorn, mildewy and sour. The mound shifted. Just a slight amount, but noticeable. Kris took a step back and hissed at her companions, "Stop!"

Then the yellow mass erupted. A shrieking, chittering squeal split the silence, and a long, pale shape slammed against the glass of the machine, toppling it. The machine hit the ground with a crash of glass shattering, and the moldy popcorn shot out the top and scattered across the floor. Then a long, writhing, snakelike form slithered out of the ruined glass box. Kris leapt back clear of the thing.

It was almost the length of her arm, and a wan yellow so pale and translucent as to be almost indistinguishable. Black arteries and veins were visible beneath the thin sheath of skin, and internal bony ridges pushed and flexed as it moved. As it flopped and slithered along the ground toward her, one end raised from the floor and lolled toward her. When it was pointing in her general direction, the close end split vertically, exposing a slit full of needlelike fangs, dripping with slime. The creature had no eyes, looking almost wormlike in its blindness. But as she dodged to the left, the wriggling thing followed her with its blind face.



While Kris was still recovering, Miguel darted forward. He swung with his crowbar, but the creature slithered out of the way. Without hesitation, Miguel stomped down on the thing with his booted foot. Stepping on the thing was like biting down on a tough, gristly piece of meat. His foot came down hard, sank into the muscles of the creature, and then encountered solid resistance. The creature whipped its head from side to side, slaver splattering from its strange mouth slit, fangs clicking rhythmically against each other as the mouth snapped open and closed. Miguel didn't let up the pressure. He pressed harder with his foot and raised the crowbar up high, taking a moment to aim and then slamming it down hard. The flat edge of the crowbar smashed the thing's head, mashing it to the floor. He lifted the crowbar again, shifted it in his hand, and stabbed down with the bladelike end. The creature opened its mouth to hiss at him as he did, and the stabbing flat edge pierced into the thing's mouth, through and out the back of what he assumed was the monster's head.

The creature flailed and writhed in pain as the length of metal shot out the back of its head. It chomped at the iron bar in its mouth, needle teeth scraping against the cold metal shaft. As the crowbar slipped through it, Miguel's hand came close to the creature's teeth. Reflexively, he pulled his hand back, dropping the crowbar, which fell to the ground with a dull metallic clank and took the creature's head down with it. Miguel stomped on its head; his booted foot rose and fell, over and over, until the creature's head was nothing more than a smear of black ichor and pulped alien flesh.

Kris stood nearby, watching the creature's spasming death throes. Damian stared at the ruined mess of the thing's head.

"I think you killed it," he said.

It twitched once, and a jet of black slime spat from the ruined stump where its head had been. Miguel smirked. The

event was almost comical in its grotesqueness. Now that the thing was dead, the danger passed, he reached down to pick up the crowbar and then stopped. With his head lower to the ground, he saw motion in the distance. In the back corner of the room, past the double doors set into the wall, what he'd first taken for an alcove he now realized was a corridor going farther into the building. Inside, a shadowy, pulsing mass rolled toward them. "What the..." he said, standing to face the bulky, tumor-like blob.

Kris shone her light in the direction Miguel was looking and then stopped, aghast. The light gleamed and glimmered over a multitude of shivering, roiling creatures. Dozens of the snakelike things they'd just killed swarmed toward them, coiled and knotted into a large, squirming ball. "Run" she said, unbelieving. "Run!"

She charged across the tiled floor, running straight for the window they'd smashed open for entrance earlier. In seconds she was out the window and running from the building. Miguel followed close behind her, leaping through the window and over the low flower bed in front.

Damian closed on the window and turned as he passed through. Behind him, the slithering mass oozed and flexed across the floor, only a few yards behind him. His eyes traced over the shape of the mass, unable to tell where one creature ended and another began. The slithering, pale creatures snapped and hissed, screeching terrible high-pitched cries as they inched toward him. He climbed through the window and scrambled forward, but then his foot caught on the brick edge of the flower bed and he stumbled. Damian fell forward, hands outstretched to break his fall. When he hit the ground, pain exploded up from his wounded hand. He rolled onto his back, shoving his lacerated hand under the opposing armpit, and clamping down hard on it. "Sonofabitch!" he screamed.

Kris was twenty feet ahead when she heard him cry out and turned back to see him lying on his back. His face twisted in a grimace of pain, he rocked back and forth. Above him, the pale, ropy things were pouring out of the empty window pane. "Damian, move!" she yelled.

Damian snapped back to an awareness of the danger he'd fled mere moments ago. He kicked back with his feet, scrambling away from the roiling knot of glistening snake-like things. Pale pink mouths full of dripping fangs snapped and hissed as if they could sense food nearby. He scooted back on his butt, using his good hand for leverage and then rolling over, getting to his knees and to his feet and running to his bike. He clambered onto it, still favoring his bad hand, and pedaled furiously to escape the coming swarm.

Damian zoomed right past Kris and Miguel and across the service road, pointing himself in the direction of the airplane hangars and parking lot he'd seen earlier. "This way!" he cried out through tight, gritted teeth. "Follow me!"



They did, as fast as they could. Once they caught up to him at the gate, Kris and Miguel were both out of breath. Miguel had his hands on his knees and was sucking in deep gulps of warm night air. Kris turned to look behind, but saw no sign of the creatures they'd fled. "Those things," she said. "Why aren't they following us?"

Damian tried to get a sense of the direction the surrounding air was flowing, but couldn't tell for sure.

"We might be downwind of them?" he said, unsure. "They didn't have eyes! Maybe they have a great sense of smell? Hell, beats me."

She still watched behind them, breathing heavy as her pounding heart slowed. "Could be, I suppose."

Miguel stood, legs aching, close to cramping.

"Just keep an eye out for them," he said. "Make sure they don't catch our scent or whatever it is they do."

"We need to figure out what we do now," Kris said, looking down the access road crossing the hangars. Toward the main road and the fence she could almost make out in the distance. "Do we bag this place and continue on to Tahoe tonight? Or wait it out until morning?"

"Does it even matter?" Damian asked, jaw clenched. The pain in his hand was a dull screaming throb now, and he was fighting back tears of pain as he spoke. Kris and Miguel both looked at him.

"I mean that," he said. "Everywhere we go, it's one out-of-the-frying-pan-into-the-fire situation after another." He took his hand out from under his armpit; when he looked at it, he could see flowers of blood seeping out from inside the gauze bandage. "Shit!" he hissed.

"What happened?" Miguel asked, coming closer. "Did you get bit?"

"No, nothing that dramatic," Damian said. "I just fell coming out the window. Landed on my hand. My luck, I popped a stitch or two."

"Well, that settles it," Kris said.

"What do you mean?" Damian asked. "Settles what?"

"We stop here for a few hours at least," Kris replied. "Let's change that dressing, see how it looks, and we'll figure it out from there. If those slimy things don't show up soon, I think we can assume they're not going to."

"Okay. Let's do this fast," Damian said. He sat on the ground, with his back to the chain-link fence, and with his good hand peeled the tape from the gauze wrappings. As he did that,

Miguel got the spare first aid kit open and organized. It had gotten jostled in their run, but he could find the essentials: gauze, tape, a wide bandage, antibiotic ointment.

Layer by layer, Damian peeled back the gauze. When he got to the final layer, it was sticky and crusted to his skin. A wave of nausea flooded over him as Miguel peeled the last of the gauze from his hand. The way the thin fabric tugged at his wound caused his stomach to roll and his vision to swoon. He felt like he would black out. "I need to lie down," he said.

Without waiting for help or even finishing the sentence, he slid down until his back was flat against the ground. Twinkling stars swam in and out of focus and he felt fluid seeping from his throbbing hand. He curled his fingers in to feel the palm, and could tell it was wet and sticky with blood. "I'm going to be sick," he said, and closed his eyes again. "How bad is it?"

Miguel had already gotten out spare gauze to clean the wound. "It's ugly," he said. "I'm not going to lie to you. Looks like you ripped a stitch or two. Let me clean this up." He wiped the blood away, cleaning the wound as best he could.

Damian gritted his teeth. It was more like a grotesque feeling of unpleasantness than pain, but it caused his stomach to do backflips once again. Miguel wadded up a ball of clean gauze and placed it in Damian's palm. "Hold on to this for a minute. Let me get a bandage ready."

After another minute, Miguel had cleaned the wound, and had placed a wide adhesive bandage tight over the worst. Once in place, he rewrapped Damian's hand with gauze, and secured it with tape. "I think the best thing you can do is keep pressure on it somehow. If nothing else, keep the gauze tight until it stops seeping."

"Makes sense," Damian agreed. He felt queasy, like his head was swimming in circles, but the pain in his hand was less.

"I don't see any of those things," Kris said. She turned back toward him. "You okay to travel, or should we camp out here tonight?"

"Whatever you guys want to do, I'll make it work," Damian replied, and dragged himself back up to sit with his back to the fence again. "Nowhere's safe, anyway. I feel like maybe we travel in the daylight just so we can see anything coming."

"I'm good with that," Miguel said. "Why don't you two rest. I'll see if I can find us a way into this parking lot."

"You think we could jump the fence?" Damian asked. "Get over the razor wire somehow?"

"Not sure I want to risk it, to be honest," Miguel replied. "Besides, we still need to get a car out. And busting through a locked gate could damage the car or set off the airbags. I'm assuming it's not as easy as it looks in the movies, you know? I'll figure something out," Miguel said, and walked the perimeter of the fence, looking for a way in.

Damian looked back toward the building they'd fled. "Wonder what those things were living off of in there," he said.

"Best not to think about it too hard," Kris replied. "I imagine that we don't want to know."

"Probably right, actually," Damian agreed.

"Guys!" They heard Miguel call out to them from down by the end of the fence where it attached to the edge of a small-craft hangar. "Hey, over here!" he called softly.

Damian and Kris looked in his direction and saw him waving them over. Damian got to his feet, staggering as he stood up. Kris reached out a hand to steady him, but he waved her away. "Thanks," he said. "But I'm good. Wobbly." He leaned on his bike as he pushed it, which helped steady him.

They walked toward Miguel to see what was so important and found him standing in an open doorway.

"All that fuss," he said, "and someone forgot to lock this door."

"Well, look at that," Kris said, moving toward the door. She turned to look back at Damian. "Maybe our luck's turning."

Damian shook his head, but approached the door anyway. The three entered the dark hangar, shutting the door tight behind them as they did so.

Inside, the hangar was mostly empty. A single-prop small airplane parked in the center of the curved-roof structure that seemed small and somehow pitiful. There was room for a few more along the walls, as indicated by painted stripes along the cold concrete floor. A few crates and foldout plastic tables butted up against the far wall, that was someone's idea of a makeshift office. Just a place that in a normal world, someone could sit and have a sandwich, play a crossword puzzle, fill out paperwork or flight plans, or whatever small-craft hobbyist pilots did.

Damian leaned his bike against the wall and went over to the small plane. He tried the hatch and found that it swung open, unlocked. "Hey, the plane's open," he called over to his companions.

"No shit?" Miguel said and walked over to join him. "Too bad none of us know how to fly one of these."

A moment later Kris joined them, taking a slow walk around the small craft.

"Anything inside?" she asked.

Damian stepped up onto the steps above the landing gear, and into the plane.

"No, nothing," he called back. "Whoever owned this plane wasn't getting ready for a trip."

"Okay," Kris said. "I say we stay the night here and keep on to Tahoe in the morning." She looked from Damian to

Miguel, expecting one or both to counter her idea with one of their own.

“Sure,” Damian said. He slumped against the wall of the hangar, exhaustion clear in his eyes. “I’m not up for a walk right now anyway.”

“Works for me,” Miguel said. He latched the access door they’d come through, making sure it locked tight, and from the inside. “I’ll take first watch,” he said, looking from Kris to Damian and back. “I’m still amped up from before.”

Kris nodded at that. “Yeah,” she said. “I don’t know if I can sleep, anyway. But sure, take first watch. I doubt anything’ll sneak up on us, anyway. Metal walls, metal roof, metal doors.

Anything tries to get in here, we’ll hear it coming.”





## *Chapter Seventeen*

Broken and bleeding, the wendigo skulked through the woods, its brood slinking at its side. From one hand, tied tight in weathered leather straps, the witch's head dangled. The mummified Head of the Family lolled at the wendigo's side, but it was horribly aware of its surroundings. The one white, withered, raisin-like eye moved across the landscape, taking in its surroundings, trying to make sense of the wendigo's impenetrable thoughts.

They'd lost one of their own tonight, crushed by the damnable prey, the prey they had been pursuing for days now. The wendigo cared not for the fallen. They had made quick use of the dead one's meat, had fallen on it with the meat-lust hunger gnawing in their guts. And the fallen's flesh and blood had given them sustenance, if only fleetingly. The fallen one had once been called Ezekiel, or 'Zeke,' and was the runt of the litter. The trace memories the wendigo felt after feeding told it that, gave it a dreamy impression of a man who was both cruel and a coward. Not an unfamiliar feed-gestalt at all. So many of the wendigo's previous meals were men who thought themselves noble and fine, but were petty, cruel things.

The witch and the wendigo conversed and plotted soundlessly, even wordlessly. Their minds connected along ethereal psychic threads linking the shriveled human brain to the alien one of singular purpose. They felt the call of Ithaqua

stronger now. Felt the tugging, yearning of their god and master, trying to rend the caul separating it from Earth. Ith-aqua raged in the cold void of space, and hungered to stride across the world of man, devouring everything in its path, satisfy its hunger with the hot blood of mankind. The witch knew the stars were grinding through the sky and into the proper alignment. The wendigo could feel it. They knew it would soon be the right time to chant the tones, trace the patterns, and break down the walls to call forth Ith-aqua. This was the witch's goal, her ultimate purpose. For she didn't even care about temporal power, or heavenly reward from her god. No, she simply wanted Ith-aqua unleashed, to revel in the madness and chaos to come.

All the witch's plans would soon come to fruition, and it needed the wendigo strong to complete them. The witch felt the gnawing need within the creatures. Their need to fill their bellies with human flesh, muscles, sinews, fat, marrow, and the spongy pudding in the skulls of their prey. Their need to slake their thirst with blood, to drink in the power in the hot, red rivers of life.

They must catch up with the human prey. The witch knew this and knew it must happen soon. The stars would soon be right for the summoning, but time was running short. The witch was not without her own tricks, however, and given the right circumstances, she could slow the fleeing humans down. Call up a storm, a torrent of freezing rain to keep them desperate for shelter.

The wendigo howled, raged, spat, and hissed in fury. It held the witch's head up by its tether, swinging it around like a bull-roarer. Its brood picked up speed around it as it did, charging a wild rumpus into the night.



## *Chapter Eighteen*

Damian, Kris, and Miguel slept on the cold concrete-slab floor, with cushions salvaged from the small plane packs for pillows. The thin metal walls of the hangar rattled through the night with every passing breeze. Every ping and shudder of wind tracing the walls set them on edge, jerking them out of fitful sleep. There was little light; only a slight glimmer of pale moonlight filtered in through the high windows, opened in the past, and forgotten that way.

Damian's hand had cooled to a dull throb and was another source of distraction from sleep. Even the slightest movement caused fresh waves of aching pain to roll from the wound. The seeping had stopped, and he thought that was a good sign, but didn't know for sure. Two hours later he couldn't stand lying on his back looking at the ceiling any more, and got up to relieve himself.

Kris leaned up on one elbow as he walked toward the door leading outside. "You okay?" she asked.

"Can't sleep. And gotta pee," he said, unabashed. "Figured nobody'd want me doing that in here and stinking the place up."

A soft laugh escaped her lips. "Fair enough."

Damian unlocked the metal door, pulled it open, and stepped into the night. The airport was still and quiet. Just the distant rustling of trees and the wind whispering around the buildings nearby that made any sound at all. Small ed-

dies and whirls of dust skipped along the access roadway in front of him, and there was a dry summery smell in the air. He walked twenty feet down the road, unzipped, and emptied his bladder.

His hand ached, and he flexed his fingers, feeling muscles and tendons strain against the tight-wrapped gauze. He'd have to be more careful with it in the future, keep it clean and dry and change the dressing as often as he could. Damian knew he'd been lucky finding a hospital, medication, all that. Chances of my luck holding out are slim to none, he thought.

He zipped up and turned around to return to the relative safety of the hangar. The airport area was flat and wide, and he felt exposed in the wide swath of land. He felt uneasy being out under the wide night sky. The dark forest surrounded them on all sides at the edge of his vision. He paced in front of the hangar, back and forth. In the silence of the dark night, he heard the scuffing rattle of his boots on the gravel path next to the access road. His feet kicked and crunched small pebbles as he paced. He thought about his bike, his trusty steed for the past few months. It would be so easy to sneak off and glide away in total silence. He could be gone before either of his companions woke, and they'd be none the wiser.

Damian knew it was better to travel in a group, and that Kris and Miguel seemed at least somewhat competent. But he also couldn't shake the notion that everything had become more complicated since meeting them a few days ago. His eyes were dry and gritty with exhaustion, but he couldn't sleep. He walked farther from the hangar, down the access road and out to the runway. The hangar where Kris and Miguel slept was still in view, so he wasn't nervous about getting too far from them for now. But he knew he wouldn't be able to fall asleep again tonight.

As he walked along the blacktop runway lost in his thoughts, he heard a noise. A great creaking rolled across the grass, followed by another from a different direction. He thought it sounded like massive trees bending slowly in the wind. He stopped. Something about that sound raised his hackles, made his skin crawl. He heard it again and listened, focusing his attention in the direction he thought it was coming from. It came again, long and low, and he realized it wasn't the creaking of tall trees in the wind. No, it was more like a croaking. A deep, throaty, insistent rumble, rolling through the trees, echoing off the hills and buildings that surrounded him. He felt suddenly uncomfortable, exposed and anxious.

Damian backed up, keeping his eyes on the distant, brooding woods, the almost invisible mountains beyond them. Step by step, he returned to the hangar, watching the surrounding woods for any sign of movement or menace.

As he backed toward the hangar, he glimpsed flickering light in the distance—faint, pale-green pinpoints, like pairs of eyes, bobbing and winking on and off with no pattern he could discern. He tried to convince himself that he wasn't even sure if what he was seeing was a real thing, or that it was just moonlight glimmering off the leaves of distant trees.

His heel hit the edge of the road, and he turned around to face the hangar. He picked up his pace, no longer caring about the noise he made running over the grit and gravel. Damian found himself at almost a run by the time he made it back to the access road, and then he was back in the hangar, closing the door and locking it behind him. Damian stood with his back to the door, leaning against it. He was out of breath, taking big lungfuls of air as he leaned against it.

Kris and Miguel both sat up straight, startled awake by the noise of the door closing. "What's going on?" Kris asked. Miguel was up on his feet, reaching for his crowbar.

Damian stepped away from the door. "Maybe nothing. I heard some weird noises outside, and thought I saw something. Maybe my eyes playing tricks on me."

"What noises?" Kris asked.

"What did you see?" Miguel asked.

Damian opened the door a crack. He peeked up the road, into the darkness.

"Seriously," Kris said. "What do you think you saw?"

He shook his head and closed the door again. "Nothing out there now," he said. "It was like...I don't know how to describe it."

"Try," she said.

"Yeah, okay. At first, I thought it was maybe trees creaking in the wind. It was loud, and that sort of reeeeeek kind of noise, you know?"

"Sure," Kris said. "Tall trees in the wind, bending and rubbing against each other."

"Right," he replied. "Like that, but not that. When I heard it again, it was more like the croaking of frogs." He turned toward the door, listening for any sounds outside.

"Frogs?" Miguel asked. "You sure?"

"Well, I mean, not actual frogs, but like frogs, if you get what I mean."

"Okay, got it," Kris said. "Then what?"

"So I heard this noise, and then it stopped. But then a few seconds later, I heard it again from a different direction. Back and forth like that."

"As if they were talking to each other..." Kris trailed off.

Damian looked at her, worry in his eyes. "Yes, exactly. Like something—some things—were talking."

"You said you saw something, what was it?" Miguel asked.

"It looked like dull lights, way off in the distance," Damian replied. "Way back in the trees. Sort of wandering; coming and going. Like they were looking for something. Us maybe. Or anything else, I suppose."

"Maybe the same things you saw back at the bridge?" Kris asked.

Damian's eyes went wide. "Yeah, definitely could have been."

"Shit," Miguel said. "We never should have stopped here. Should have kept on the road."

"You wouldn't get back in the car," Kris said. "We could have been in Tahoe by now if we'd driven."

"Yeah, and if we'd stayed in the car, we'd all be infected with that blue shit, and going nuts like the doc. Uh-uh. No way you're pinning that on me."

"Can we focus?" Damian said. "Taking the SUV could have gone either way, and you both know it. We decided, and there's no point second-guessing it now. We need to keep our heads now, not squabble between ourselves."

"Fair enough," Miguel said. "So what now? Do we stay or move out?"

"I don't think we should leave," Damian said. "We can't see jack in the dark. If there are monsters out there, who knows how good their night vision might be."

"I agree," Kris added. "At least in the daytime if anything's coming at us we have a better chance of seeing it."

"Then let's be ready to move at first light," Miguel said.

"Shouldn't have to wait long," Damian replied. "Only a couple more hours to daybreak."

"Okay, try to get some rest till then, I suppose," Kris said. "How's your hand doing, anyway?"

Daman raised his hand, flexed it a little. "Still hurts. Aches and itches something awful. But I'll live, I suppose."

"Knock on wood, man," Miguel said. "Hell, I'm not going to be able get any sleep now. Not thinking there might be more of those things outside."

"I doubt any of us will," Kris said, concern in her voice.



They did not rest much at all, passing the time mostly in silence. They occasionally chatted in low, whispered voices, and less-frequent peeks out the door to make sure nothing was approaching. As the sun rose, the hangar warmed up fast. They'd not realized how chilly it had become until the air grew warmer.

In time the skylights overhead changed from indigo to ruddy yellow, then to pale blue as the day broke. They ate a meager breakfast of canned fruit and meat and washed it down with the last of the water in their bottles.

After they ate, they packed up the rest of their gear and left the hangar. Outside, the morning was heavy and warm. Silent, but for the somnolent buzzing of insects in the nearby thick, shaggy, summer-golden fields surrounding the small airport.

"Going to be a hot one today," Damian said, as he wheeled his bike from out of the hangar.

Kris and Miguel exited after him and shut the door. "Show us where you saw those things," Kris said, looking around for anything out of the ordinary.

"Up here," Damian said. "Follow me." He walked up the access road, toward the runway. When they got there, he stopped and pointed across the field between it and the woods beyond. "There," he said. "Past the tree line, but in that general direction I suppose."



"Let's look," Kris said, and walked into the tall grass.

Damian hopped on his bike and rode after her.

"You think that's a good idea?" Miguel called after. He watched as they walked toward the trees, standing still, not sure if he wanted to go that way too. He looked back over his shoulder at the hangar, the office building, and the other small buildings nearby. A sense of desolation came over him, and he turned to hustle after the others. "Hey!" he called out. "Hang on!"

"I feel exposed," Damian said, as they walked across the wide grassy field. The dry golden grass and overgrown scrub were up to his waist in places. He looked up toward the sky, the mountains in the distance, and the peaks that surrounded them. "We're way out in the open, anyone could see us here."

"Hopefully we'll see them, too," Kris said.

"Any idea what we're looking for?" Miguel asked. "Got any clues for us?"

Damian looked toward the trees, past the edge of the field. "I don't know. I think they were just up there." He pointed at the bunching of trees thirty feet in front. "Well, somewhere around here."

Damian stepped a few feet forward, and they followed next to him. "Holy crap," Miguel said, "You smell that?"

Damian took a sniff and wrinkled his nose in disgust. A rank, fishy smell permeated the area, stronger up ahead. "Yes," he gagged. "What the hell is it?"

Kris' hand was over her nose and mouth, shielding her from the worst of the green, fishy stink. She walked ahead of the others and looked around. Down on the ground, she saw a cluster of strange footprints mashed into the muddy earth. The lower branches of the trees at her eyeline and below were bent and broken, as if something, or a group

of things, had tromped through here showing no regard for stealth or subtlety. A viscous scum had dried to a glistening crust on the branches and leaves where whatever it was had passed through the night before. "You hear that?" she asked.

Damian and Miguel stood still, listening. In the distance, they heard the rushing sound of flowing water. "Sounds like the river we passed earlier," Damian said. "Must cut through near here somewhere. Let's see." And after that he jogged ahead.

They came out of the trees and found themselves on the upper slope of a river bank. Down the sandy bank leading into the water, they could see four sets of the strange footprints. Damian squatted down before a pair to get a better look. The print was long—half again the size of his own foot—and wide, splayed out more at the toes and tapering to a wider-than-normal heel. The toes were stubby and short, with long claw marks piercing the sand an inch in front.

As he looked at them, Kris joined him and leaned in to look.

"Check out these prints," he said. "The foot is wide, but the toes are so short. And far apart, look. Weird."

"I don't think the toes are short," Kris said. "They look like they're webbed. Like the webbing makes the pad of the foot look longer than it is. Like enormous frog's feet."

Damian recalled the disturbing croaking noise he'd heard the previous night.

"Sure," he said. "That make as much sense as anything."

While they were looking at the prints, Miguel had wandered downstream. He came around a bend and suddenly was swarmed by a cloud of buzzing huge black flies. Each was the size of his thumbnail, and they flew clumsily. He swatted at them, dispersing the cloud and keeping them

from flying into his face, hands slapping at air, and more than once pounding away the loathsome black insects.

Miguel turned his head and saw one flying straight for his eyes. He swatted it hard with an open palm, and it popped open like overripe fruit. When the grotesque insect burst, it spurted yellow ichor, which clung to his hand and dripped down his arm. He shook his hand, madly trying to get the pus-like discharge to fling from his skin. And as he shook his hand, the flies spread out. He flailed with his hands, continuing to swat at the dispersing creatures. He became frantic, and then stumbled, tangled up in his own legs and landing face-first on the riverbank. The flies buzzed upward in a dark cloud as he pushed himself up and then looked into a horror.

His face was inches from the flyblown corpse of a woman. Her face toward him, one eye missing, the socket picked clean and a thin dribble of jellylike fluid trickling from the vacant socket. He scrambled backward, screaming in surprise. Then he saw that her body ended just below her sternum in a bloody ruin. Organs and blood had spilled out of the chest cavity, and the flies had been crawling around on the open torso. Her skin was pale, bloodless, mouth open wide to the sky in an expression of abject horror. A large scoop had come out of the sand below her torso, as if something like a great shovel or claw had bisected her, splitting her body and raking away the ground as it retreated to the river. Blood and a sluice of torn flesh oozed into the runnel, pooling at the lower points.

Miguel stood. He turned and walked back to where he'd left the others. As he came around the bend, he saw Kris and Damian approaching with quizzical looks on their faces as they saw him, pale and wide-eyed, walking toward them.

"What's wrong?" Kris asked as she approached him.

He stepped a few more feet toward them and then pitched to his knees. Miguel convulsed, landing on his outstretched hands and retching. The meager breakfast he'd shared with them that morning erupted from his open mouth. Stinking clots splattered into the sand below him. He heaved once more, dry, and then rolled over onto his side.

"What the hell, man?" Damian asked. "What's wrong?"

"Body," Miguel said, so low they almost couldn't hear him. "Oh, my God..."

Damian looked down at him. "He's in shock," Kris said. "I'll go see what he found, you stay with him."

"No, I'll go," Damian said. "You keep an eye on him, and for anything coming." He walked down the river bank in the direction Miguel had come.

"What, you feeling all chivalrous suddenly, Damian?" Kris scoffed as he was leaving.

"What? No, nothing like that," he said.

"Then what? Think I can't handle seeing another corpse?" Kris asked.

"Seriously," Damian said. Then he raised his hand. She saw the bandage, the black crust in the center and the red tinge seeping around it. "If there's something out there in the woods," he said. "Something out for blood...well, better I draw it away from you two, than right toward us."

"Yeah, okay," she said, and turned back to Miguel. "Just be careful."

Damian walked around the bend in the river until he saw the corpse. He'd been ready for something bad, but hadn't expected this. Something about seeing only part of a corpse, just sliced in half like this, crawled around in his mind in awful ways, like an insect let loose in his brain. Tens of thousands of years of evolution and conditioning created a need in humans to see their kindred in certain recognizable con-

figurations. Seeing a single dead eye staring into the sky, knowing they're not registering consciousness any longer, is bad enough. But seeing something like this, half the body just carved off and missing, could be enough to drive anyone over the edge. He tried to look at the corpse, to give it some respect, but the sight was just too awful. Large black flies had alighted once again on the body, crawling along the severed bloody bisection, up the neck and over her face. One was crawling into her nostril, and another into her empty eye socket.

He approached it while looking around the river, staying aware of his surroundings, and any interruptions or predatory creatures. But his gut told him that whatever had done this was long gone. The remnant of the corpse was pale and flyblown. The blood was black and clotted. He figured whatever had done this had done it a day or more ago, long before he'd seen the things last night.

Damian nudged the body with his boot until it tumbled into the shallow crater with a solid thud. He got down on his knees, and with his good hand he spent a few minutes scraping sand over it. Under the dappled light trickling down through the trees, with only one good hand to work with, he buried the remains. Then he stood and stared down at the sandy heap.

In the distance, he heard Kris's call, "Damian? You okay?"

He looked up, and down the river bank in her direction. "Yeah!" he called back. "Just give me a minute." He looked back at the makeshift burial mound, and ran his sandy, gritty fingers through his hair, scratching his head as he tried to think of something to say.

"I feel stupid," he said. "It's like I'm talking to myself." He walked to the river bank, dipped his sandy hand into the water and splashed the grit from it, returned to the grave

side and sat next to it. "I'm sorry I never got to know you. I know that sounds stupid, especially considering you're dead and can't hear me or anything. But it's true. Maybe you were a moron, or maybe you were a poet laureate. You could have been an asshole, or the next Mother Teresa. Doesn't matter now, I suppose. But you were human, and that's what matters."

He stood up, brushing sand from his jeans as he did. "None of us know how much time we have. Probably not long. But maybe things will get better some day."

Damian looked down one last time at the mound of sand. Large black flies were already landing on the heap. He thought it wouldn't be long before the elements and creatures in the woods unburied her. But for now, whoever she was, she rested.

Damian returned to where he'd left Kris and Miguel. He dropped to the ground next to them, sitting in the sand, and propping his back up against a large rock. He closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the stone, and sighed, full of weariness and resignation.

"What took so long?" Kris asked, looking at him with narrow, suspicious eyes. "I was starting to worry. Did you find the body?"

Damian nodded without opening his eyes. "Yeah," he replied. "I didn't want to just leave it there like that. I buried it in the sand."

"For real?" Kris asked. "You don't think maybe we have other priorities right now?" She stood, walked a few feet away from him, then knelt down to dip her hands into the cool river water. Kris rubbed her hands together, sluicing off the grains of sand which had become stuck to her skin. "Maybe we could focus on getting ourselves to safety, rather than worrying about folks who're already beyond help?"

Damian opened his eyes to look at her. Her back was to him as he did and she couldn't see the look of abject disappointment which shadowed his face for the briefest of moments. "Okay, sure," he said. "You're probably right."

"I'm with Kris on this one, Damian," Miguel added. He was still lying down, feeling dizzy. The shock of coming across the mutilated body had taken its toll on him. It wasn't the first corpse he'd seen since everything went to hell. But the state of it, the wrongness of the missing lower half, had shaken him to his core. "We need to stay together, stop screwing around, and figure out what our next move is."



Their discussion went on for another half an hour at least. They agreed that going back to the airport and trying to liberate the vehicles locked up in the parking area was foolish. They didn't have the tools necessary to cut through the gate, and trying to get over the razor wire was an exercise in foolishness. Going back to the road to Reno was likewise a worthless idea. They still did not know how far the road blockage was, but from her earlier look, Kris figured it was at least a solid mile of Detroit steel and Tokyo plastic. So instead they agreed to continue south to Lake Tahoe and Damian's family cabin. From there they could find a vehicle to get them back on the road north on side roads to Reno to find the military base. Or continue over the mountains and down into Nevada.

After retrieving their gear, they got moving again on the road to Tahoe. Based on the road signs they'd seen as they traveled down the highway, they assumed they had about three more hours to get to the north edge of the lake.

For the next hour they hiked in silence along the winding road. The surrounding forest thickened again as they trav-

eled away from the airport. They kept looking around for any signs of danger, any indication there were predators to be wary of, but they saw nothing alarming. They spoke little as they walked, and picked at their provisions. None of them were very hungry, though Kris and Damian kept trying to convince Miguel to eat something. He was looking pale, having had trouble keeping anything down over the last few days.

Damian thought it was a mean streak of luck that someone with as nervous a disposition as Miguel had come across so many unpleasanties. It seemed to Damian that Miguel's response to the unnatural was to vomit. He grinned slightly thinking about that. When he had to fight back nervous laughter, Damian realized he himself was not dealing with the stress well. But he kept that observation to himself for now.

The sun crawled across the sky, rising overhead, but still indistinct beyond the tall trees. By late morning they'd traveled a few miles, and the heat had become uncomfortable. Runnels of sweat oozed down Damian's back as he pushed his bike along the road.

"You know," he said. "One way or another, I can't wait to get to the lake." He remembered coming to Tahoe as a kid with his family, and that the fishing was decent. He never caught "the bug" as his dad used to say. But he thought he'd remember enough of what he'd learned that he'd be able to catch something for dinner.

"Yeah," Miguel said. "Going to go skinny dipping or something?"

"Hell, I might," Damian said. "Bet the fishing's good, too. Find some gear, and we'll be having trout or salmon for dinner tonight."

"Assuming there's anything left in the lake," Kris said.



Damian thought for a while in silence. There were no guarantees. All they could do was hope for the best, and roll with the punches as they came.

"Nobody's been fishing up here for months," he said. "I bet it's full of fish. Or maybe the whole lake could be toxic, for all we know. But we'll deal with that when we get to it."

"We gotta catch a break at some point," Miguel said. "Even the law of averages would make you think at some point shit's gotta go our way."

A sarcastic, barking laugh escaped from Damian. "Are you kidding me? What have we caught if not a break? Look around you, man!" Damian let go of the bike, letting it crash to the earth with a clatter, and a hollow thunk as the jerry-can full of water banged on the ground. He waved his arms side to side. "The world's gone! We could be the only people left on earth! Every moment we get is a gift. Every step or breath we've taken since the monsters came? That's your 'break' right there. Law of averages ate the world and spat the three of us out." He bent down and picked the bike back up, righting it and pushing it forward again. "You got your break, Miguel. Make the best of it."

Miguel opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it. It was too hot for an argument, and with no idea what was lurking in the woods he wasn't feeling the need to start a shouting match, anyway.



The tree line receded from the road as they walked. The sides of the road sloped upward, lined with large rocks. Erosion control during the winter months, Damian assumed. But now the sun was overhead, the heat miserable.

"Can we stop for a minute?" Damian asked.

Without a word, Kris and Miguel stopped alongside him. Damian took off his jacket, and a momentary chill hit him. His shirt had soaked through with sweat, and the slight breeze was a comfort. He slung the sweat-soaked jacket over the frame of his bike. Miguel and Kris were doing the same, stripping off their outer layers, and down to just T-shirts.

"Toss your jackets on the bike," Damian said. "Doesn't add enough weight to the bike to make it any harder to push along. Easier than you guys having to strap them to your packs or something."

Damian took a few long swallows of warm water from a bottle in the saddlebags, then passed it to the others before replacing it. Around them, Damian couldn't help but notice the silence. Nothing much more than a soft sighing breeze, and the occasional bird's chirp in the distance.

"So desolate," he said, surprised to hear his own voice against the silence. "Still feels weird that we can walk so far, for so long, and not even have to worry about cars on the road or anything."

"Gotta wonder if maybe we are the last folks on Earth," Miguel said.

"I doubt it," Kris replied. "We've made it this far, there's got to be others who did."

"Hope so," Miguel said, and then started walking again. "Sure as hell do.... Come on, let's get moving. Don't want to spend all day in the sun."

Kris and Damian agreed and got to walking. Damian knew they were close to something, somewhere. The road was well maintained, and he remembered from coming to Tahoe as a kid that there were towns up near here.

"Damn, I wish we had a map," he said. "Be a hell of a lot easier to figure out where we are, what might be up ahead."

Then Kris pointed down the road, "Hey. Check it out." Up ahead, a sign read King's Beach 2 mi. "Looks like we're getting somewhere," she said as they approached the sign.

"King's Beach is a decent-sized town," Damian said. "At least I seem to remember it was." He propped his bike against the sign and worked the kinks out of his lower back with his good hand.

"But they're all connected," he continued. "All the little towns around the lake are close together and connected by the road that goes all the way around. Our cabin's east of here, and if there's nothing there for us, it'll be easy enough to keep going to the next one afterward. But with any luck we can find a car or something and either make haste to the cabin, or get back on our way to Reno."

"Okay," Kris said. "Let's see what we see." Miguel looked both ways from the split. Neither path seemed more appealing than the other to him.

"Fair enough," he said. "Let's do it."



## *Chapter Nineteen*

As they walked they could now feel the road sloping down again, the forest rising above them to one side, and dipping low to the other. Damian was certain they were near the lake, and remembered the way it inclined downward, almost crater-like, toward the water's edge. The road rolled through the landscape, winding with the flow of the hills—never in a straight line, but they'd become used to that by now.

Damian thought sometimes that it might even be easier to just go off-road and cut a straight path through the wood. But then he feared getting lost without a map, or any real sense of direction. He'd been up here plenty in the past, but didn't really know these woods that well, and neither did his companions. Best to just stick to the road even if it slowed them somewhat.

It didn't take them long before they saw the lake. The road wound parallel to the lake's shore, the eastern side of the road sloping down toward it, while they continued on straight ahead south toward the town. The distant lake was just visible through the woods, and they could see the occasional glitter of sunlight on the blue-green water.

"We must be close," Kris said. "There's the lake. The town must be up ahead."

"Gotta be," Damian agreed.

Sure enough, as they came around a slight bend, they saw a cabin up a side road jutting from the main one they

were on. It was one of those strange alpine cabins with the tall, sloping roofs best for keeping snow from piling up and collapsing the place. As they approached, they saw that the back half of this cabin was a ruin of charred beams and a great blackened hole burned through the roof. The front door was missing, a gaping, ragged hole where it once stood.

"We're almost there," Damian said. "My guess is we'll see more cabins like these as we get to the town proper."

And they did—a dozen or more, though in better repair than the first burned-out hulk they'd seen. Just off the side of the road were little enclaves of cabins, the sort that only the summer and winter people used—tourist rentals, or vacation properties for people who just visited the area. Not long after that they found the road into town, and they caught their second wind. The sight of their immediate destination before them gave them a little burst of hope, and the resulting energy to pick up the pace.

Within a few more minutes they were in downtown King's Beach proper, surrounded by small shops and restaurants. Damian remembered this street being vibrant, busy, full of life. But now it was all lifeless, empty. Dark wood beams seemed to be the primary aesthetic style here, built to enhance the surrounding woodlands, rather than push back against them.

They trudged down the main street, not saying a word, and searching their surroundings as they went, still wary of threat from any direction. As they walked, they saw a side road that shot across town, straight down to the lake. In the distance was a short jetty that crawled out over the surface of the lake.

"What do you think?" Damian asked. "Check out the lake, see if we can find fishing gear? Or a place to crash for the night, or a car or something?"

"Lots of options," Kris said. "Let's check the shore. We should be able to get a decent view from there."

They walked along the side road, and the shore came into better view. As they approached the lake, Damian realized that he had forgotten just how vast it was. He could see the far shore, and the sunlight reflected on the lapping water was almost blinding in its intensity. He made a mental note to find a new pair of sunglasses at some point soon. Maybe he'd find some later in the day, when they went scrounging through the little gift and sporting goods stores endemic to the area.

As they got closer, they heard the low, rhythmic lapping sound the waves made on the surface of the lake. The waves were small, mere inches in height, but in the preternatural silence which permeated the area the sound was noticeable, almost thunderous compared to the surrounding calm and quiet. In the distance, Damian heard a heavy splash. He turned to look down the shore, and a hundred yards away saw a boulder at the shore's edge with ripples spreading out around it. A light froth of bubbles popped and dissipated along the surface.

"You guys see that?" he said, pointing toward the rock. Miguel and Kris looked in the direction he indicated.

"See what?" Kris asked. "The rock?"

"Yeah," Damian said, and walked toward it. His boots crunched in the gravelly sand along the shore, another disturbance in the silence. "I heard a splash from there just now. Sounded like something fell or dove from the rock into the water."

"I see nothing," Miguel said, peering into the distance.

"I swear I heard a splash over there," Damian said, and walked down the beach toward the rock. "The water was all ripply right there," he said, pointing toward the waves lapping at the large rock. He walked along the shore until he stood across from it. It was ten feet from shore, and he could only see part of it. He paced back and forth trying to view as much as he could from the beach.

"What do you see?" Kris said, as she and Miguel caught up to him.

She looked toward the rock, then into the water splashing around it. She hadn't noticed before, but now saw how clear the lake water was. It lapped at the shore, and she could see the sand and pebbles making up the lake bed below it. Her eyes wandered out past the rock, and the water became deeper, darkening, occluded from the sunlight.

"It gets deep fast out that way, huh?" she said, and gestured with a quick flick of her chin.

"Oh, yeah," Damian said. "It's a big crater. I heard it's something like two thousand feet deep. Anything at all might be lurking down there."

"Doesn't fill me with confidence, you know?" Miguel said. Then he walked up the beach, toward a small copse of trees. "Hey," he said, "check this out."

He reached up into one tree and took something in his hand: a small, greenish-gray leather pouch, lashed to the tree branch with thick twine, the kind a kid might use to collect glass marbles, or other trinkets and oddities. Miguel pulled once, but the twine was tight. With a quick jerk of his arm, he yanked one more time, and the twine snapped free, the remaining bits of the strand dangling from the tree. He felt the pouch between his fingers.

"Feels like there're rocks or something in it," he said, and brought the pouch over to the others.

Kris and Damian stepped up to meet him, curious about this strange find. "What's in it?" Damian asked.

Miguel shrugged and tried working the lashing ties open with his fingers. The knot was tight, and he used his teeth to gnaw the loops open. The strings pulled apart and the pouch's end came open. He upended it and spilled the contents into his open palm. A half dozen small stones fell out, each about the size of the final joint of his thumb, fiery orange, with clear white striations running across their surface. They were smooth, polished to gleaming. Miguel almost thought they glowed when the sunlight sparkled off their glossy surfaces. But as he rolled them around in his palm, he noticed what he first thought was an imperfection in each. Looking at them closer he saw a design carved into the surface of each stone.

"What the hell?" he whispered. "Look at this," he held out his palm, offering the stones to Kris and Damian for inspection.

Kris took one from his hand and looked at it up close. "Is that—" she began.

"Looks like a swastika," Damian interrupted. "I mean, not exactly, but it sure is close. Like the lines are at a steeper angle, see?" he said, pointing with a finger at the strange design. It looked like a swastika symbol, but the extremity lines were closer to acute than right angles.

"They all have that design on them," Miguel said. "Why the hell would anyone hang a bag of Nazi stones in a tree?"

"We don't know they're Nazi stones, Miguel," Kris said, and dropped the stone she was holding back into the bag. "It's weird. They're weird. But that symbol isn't exactly a swastika."

"What do you think it is, then?" Miguel asked. "Because they sure as hell look like swastikas to me."



"No idea," she said. "Just put 'em back where you found them."

"Yeah, sure. Gladly," Miguel said, and threw the bag back over at the tree. It hit the trunk with a rattle, then slid down the bark to drop into the grass at the base of the tree.

Damian still had one stone in his hand. He tossed it into the air once, then caught it in his hand. Then he brought his arm back and tossed the stone low at the surface of the lake where it skipped once, twice, a third time, and then sliced under the dark water on its fourth impact. Circles rippled out from where the stone had skipped on the surface of the water, glittering in the golden afternoon sun. For a moment, Damian felt almost content.



The sun was sinking in the sky. A warm summer's late afternoon had fallen, silent and still. Damian walked along North Lake Boulevard, passing by abandoned store fronts, motels, even a 7-Eleven stood vacant. Kris and Miguel walked behind him, scanning from side to side. They'd decided not to bother with a vehicle for now. There were many to choose from, but it was getting late. They'd decided after some discussion to find a place to crash out for the night and get back on the road in the morning.

They'd talked about going back to get their supplies from the abandoned SUV, but finally decided if they could replace the supplies, there was no point in taking the risk to go back. Miguel had pointed out that at the rate the phosphorous crust was growing over the SUV by the time they'd abandoned it, chances are it was overgrown by now. That idea didn't sit well with any of them, so they decided to just leave it alone unless necessary.

They kept walking along the street until they found a single-level motel pulled back from the road. The redwood beams and rough stonework facade helped to blend it into the surrounding woods and gave it a sort of homey feel. But the large sign on the side of the street reading “Red Wolf Lodge” made it impossible to miss. Damian imagined what it might have looked like when electricity still flowed. At night, with the sign and landscaping all lit, up the place would seem rather pleasant. But when he caught himself thinking about the time before the world changed, he got a sinking feeling in the pit of his gut, so he shoved it aside and moved on.

“Try the door,” Damian said, as Miguel approached glass double doors set into the redwood frame. Miguel shot him a contemptuous look and then grabbed the door handle. It swung open, and a breeze of stale air wafted out from deep inside the building, the faint stink of linens needing a change, and a building needing airing out. A musty smell.

They entered and looked around, taking in the sparse, dark lobby. A dusty stuffed eagle perched over the reception desk, wings outspread in a perpetual liftoff. Damian went around behind the reception desk and opened the door to the small manager’s office behind it. He opened it to a slight buzzing sound and saw it was lit with a bright streak of afternoon sunlight coming through the window facing toward the lake. As he peeked in, a hazy cloud of lazy flies took flight and stirred around the room. Shooing the flies away with his hand, he entered the room.

“Find anything good?” Miguel asked, peeking through the door.

Damian looked at the desk, at the chairs before and behind it. There were the remains of a sandwich and banana on the desk, both thick with mold and squirming with maggots. The sight of the bluish fuzz on the rotten food reminded him of

the luminous crust exuded by the monsters from the hospital, and he felt a chill squirm up his spine.

“Nah, nothing,” he called back, then unlatched and opened the window. The warm, fresh air poured through and dissipated the smell of decay a little. Damian watched as a few flies whizzed clumsily about and found their way out through the open window. As he turned to leave, he noticed a key ring hanging on a bent nail next to the desk. Twelve keys hung on it, marked from “1” to “11,” and then a final one with “MGR” marked on it in black Sharpie.

“Got the keys!” Damian shouted to the lobby. “Let’s check the rest of the place.”

Checking the hotel’s other rooms did not take long. It was a small motel, only eleven vacant rooms, some tidier than others. Within an hour of finding the place, they felt comfortable camping there for the night.

“We can each have our own room, if we want to,” Miguel noted as they converged back in the lobby.

“We should stay in one room tonight,” Kris replied. “I don’t feel comfortable spreading us out until we have a better idea of what’s around here.”

“I’m with you,” Damian added. “We find a room we can block up and take turns on watch.”

They opened Room 1, next to the manager’s office and lobby. It was one of the larger of the rooms, with a pair of double beds. Floral-printed wallpaper lined the walls, a riot of hundreds of tiny pink- and raspberry-colored flowers. Two large windows were on opposite sides of the room. One had a grim view of the gravel-strewn parking lot. The other faced the lake, a hundred yards or more distant. A sea of green trees and bushes was between the lake and the motel, but Damian could just make out the water glittering in the distance. The room itself was clean and tidy. Damian thought

it must have been vacant for a while, even before the town died.

Soon they'd brought in all their gear and settled in. Kris sat in a large cushioned chair and kicked off her boots. She stretched her legs out before her and wiggled her unconfined toes.

"Feels great to get out of those things," she said, and slumped down in the chair, resting her head against the backrest.

"Don't get too comfortable," Damian said, while looking out the large window facing out toward the woods and lake beyond. "It's still a couple of hours till sundown, I figure. Maybe we do a little quick scavenging and see if we can drum up supplies?"

"That's a good idea," Miguel added. "I saw a 7-Eleven down the road that didn't look too looted. Lots of options there, probably."

Damian nodded, "I saw the same one. Good idea. Thank God for overly processed packaged food, eh?"

"Yeah," Miguel replied. "Who'd have thought I'd ever be ready to sell my soul for a Twinkie and a packet of beef jerky?"

Kris scowled at him, "Don't even joke about that." She leaned forward and grabbed at her boots, starting to put them back on. "Who knows where some of these things came from? Or what they want from us?"

"Okay, fair enough," Miguel said.

"Tell you what, Kris," Damian said while emptying his pack. "Why don't you stay here, keep an eye on the place, our gear, all that? Take an hour off."

Miguel agreed with that notion, "Yeah, just take five. The 7-Eleven's just a few blocks down the road. We'll go down, fill up our bags with whatever we can find, and be back in less than half an hour."

She dropped her boot and leaned back into the chair. "You sure? Many hands make light work and all, you know?"

"Don't sweat it," Miguel said. "We'll just get what we can for tonight. If we need to, we return for more tomorrow."

"Sounds good," she replied. "But be careful, and if you're not back in half an hour, I'm coming looking for you."

Damian gave her a thumbs-up, slung his pack over his shoulder and walked out the front door. Miguel followed, turning back to her as he closed the door. "Lock up behind us. And I'll do like a 'shave-and-a-haircut' knock so you know it's us when we get back."

"Miguel, there's a window right there. I'll be able to see you fine," she said.

He smirked, embarrassed.

"Yeah, true," he said. "Just be careful." He closed the door behind him as he left the room.



Kris threw the bolt after the door shut, and did the chain latch for good measure. Grabbing the edge of the curtains, she drew them almost closed, only leaving a few inches of space between them. After pulling a chair over near the gap, she took a lookout position, glancing through the front window.

A minute or two passed and she leaned back into the chair. "This is just stupid," she said to nobody but herself, then got up and paced to the other side of the room. The room was getting stuffy in the afternoon heat. The window opened with a little hand-cranked knob, and it was still in good working order. Giving it a few quick turns opened the window a few inches, and brought a slight breeze into the room. It was a green, fresh smell, the warm summer smell of summer-warm

pine sap and cool lake water. A mountain smell, she decided. A few minutes had passed since Damian and Miguel left, and she began to relax a little enjoying the peace and quiet. As she relaxed, she wondered what it would be like to strike out on her own. There was safety in numbers, but extra people to watch her back also meant extra people to look out for, worry about, and have to take care of.

She stared out the large window, looking out at the woods and the shimmering lake beyond. It'd be easy enough to find a small boat or raft, or even just ride a bike along the shore. She could take a canoe to the other side of Lake Tahoe under cover of darkness and vanish before either of the others even noticed. Lost in thought, her mind wandering the alleys and corridors of possibility, she didn't hear the chugging and coughing truck engine until it was barreling down the road she was staring across, belching a cloud of dust behind it as it came around the bend. She grabbed the curtain edges and pulled them closed fast, leaving just a thin gap through which to watch.

A large, muddy pickup screeched to a halt on the black-top behind the motel. She dropped to the floor, pulling her knees up to her chest, and pushing her back up flat against the wall under the window. Her breath came slow but hard, panic rising in her gut as she looked around the room for her bow, Miguel's crowbar. Anything she could use as a weapon.

She turned and rose up slowly to peer over the window-sill just as the truck's engine coughed, backfired, and spat a cloud of black smoke from the tailpipe. She heard it idling rough, saw it shake and shudder. Then its passenger-side door opened and a wide, hefty man slid out, landing solidly on both feet next to the truck. He was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a shapeless, heavy long coat over his strangely proportioned body. He walked hunched over, his neck and back bowed at an angle she felt must be painful. From his halting,

waddling gait, she assumed he must have a deformity in his legs or back—arthritis, at the least, or maybe even scoliosis or the like. She couldn't understand how the man could even walk without a cane or crutches. He bowed so far forward, hands thrust deep into his pockets, and she expected him to tumble over face-first into the dirt at any moment.

But he did not. He loped toward the front of the cab, head lolling back and forth, stopping occasionally and stretching out on his neck, smelling the air as if trying to catch a scent. Kris couldn't make out the man's face at all, lost in the deep shadows cast from the wide brim of his strange hat. Then another shape, stranger than the first, scrambled around the front of the truck from the far side. This one was down on all fours, face low to the ground, and crawling along the blacktop like an enormous toad. It wore a stained, greasy brown overcoat, similar to the one draped over the other strange creature, and it wore the same sort of wide-brimmed hat with a crumpled, domed crown. Something about it was even stranger though. Kris watched the figure closely, trying to get a better look.

It crawled slowly on all fours along the ground, stepping forward first with one hand, then following up with the opposite foot. The hand... she thought. It was hard to see from where she squatted, but she could see that the thing's hand was grayish-green, slick and rubbery. Her eyes darted from this fellow to his original companion, but he still had his hands shoved down deep into his coat pockets. She thought that maybe he wore strange rubber gloves, but then she saw his bare feet—saw they were the same pale gray-green as the hands, had the same weird rubbery sheen to them.

And then it turned from her as it lifted first one foot, then its paw-like hand to skulk forward. She saw the fingers and toes, long and delicate, tipped with shining green talons and webbed. A thin, almost translucent rubbery webbing

stretched from between the toes and fingers of the creature. And as she watched, the other one removed its hand from its pocket and gestured with one long, drab finger. She could clearly make out the same trace webbing between its fingers.

The creature (she no longer thought of either of these things as “men”) crawled low along the ground, raised its head again and barked out a strange, coughing, barking “yawp!” As it did, it raised its face into a beam of light. Kris got a momentary look at the thing’s wide-lipped mouth opening on a deep black gullet. She saw a flash of needle-thin teeth, and a quick glimpse of the thing’s bulbous, watery eyes. Fear rose in her throat, and she clapped her hand over her mouth to hold back a shout of surprise. She dropped fast to the floor, her nose filled with the musty, mildewy smell of filthy carpet as she breathed hard through her nostrils, fighting back panic.

Then came a soft knock at the door, and her heart leapt in her chest. Full of fright, at the edge of panic, she took a moment to register the “shave-and-a-haircut” rapping pattern. Rolling onto her belly, she crawled toward the door, got up on her knees, and undid the locks, opening it a crack. Damian and Miguel stood on the stoop outside, jugs of water in each hand. They saw the terror in her eyes.

“What? What is it?” Damian hissed. He pushed the door open and moved into the room, looking around.

“Outside!” Kris spat. “In back,” and she gestured wildly with her open hand, pointing toward the back window. Damian strode across the room and came to the curtains from the side, sneaking up on the gap and peeking outside.

Miguel closed and locked the door behind him as he entered. “What do you see?” he said to Damian.

“A truck,” Damian replied. “Big dirty truck, and two guys getting into it.”



"They're not human," Kris whispered

He watched from between the curtains as the two shapes got into the truck's cab. The taller of the two slammed the door hard. Then it reached one of its webbed paws out through the window to slap twice on the roof, the universal sign for "go". Damian thought it was odd to see such a human gesture made strange by the frog-like hand making it.

"Shit," he said. "What are they?" As if the thing could hear him, it turned for one last look around. As it did, the brim of the thing's hat raised, and sunlight lit up its face. Damian saw the wide, flabby lips; the bulging, staring eyes; and the loathsome, mottled, warty skin hanging from the thing's face. The toad-like creature scrunched up its flat nose, widened its mouth, and then spat a thick wad of vibrant green snot at the ground. It coughed once, then the engine started with a bang and a burp, and the creature faced forward.

"What? What is it?" Miguel asked, running forward and moving the edge of the curtain to peer out from the side. But by the time he'd approached the window, the truck was rolling down the road again. It kicked up clouds of dust and vomited black exhaust fumes into the air behind it as it disappeared down the road.

"I don't know," Damian replied. "They sure as hell don't look human."

"Shit, you think those things from the hospital caught up with us?" Miguel said.

Kris came to the window and peeked out from between the curtains. "I don't think so," she said. "They didn't seem the same, anyway."

"No, they're something different," Damian said.

"Gonna need a field guide to keep up with all the different monsters there are," Miguel said. "Like one of those old bird books my dad had." He walked away from the curtain and

sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at the floral-print wallpaper. In the general direction of the wall, anyway. His eyes were unfocused, and his mind wandering. "But they looked human to you at first, right?" he asked.

Kris replied quickly. "Yes," she said. "They did at first. But then, they weren't."

"Right," Damian added. "They were wearing clothes like people. But baggy stuff. Overcoats and big hats. One of them carried itself like a person, but the other was crawling on the ground like an animal."

Miguel stared at Damian and said "I sort of feel like monsters dressed in trench coats and big hats should strike me as sort of funny, but it's really not."

"No," Kris agreed. "Not at all. It was like they were trying to pass as human."

"Shall we still stay the night here? Or move on somewhere else?" Damian asked.

"I think it's best if we stay put," Kris replied. "Sun's going down soon, and we don't want to be hiking in the dark again. We can close the windows tight, keep any light low, and just keep quiet. We should be fine."



Miguel picked up his pack from where he'd tossed it aside next to the door. "We didn't find much, but it'll keep us going awhile." Unlatching the closure straps, he reached inside the pack, and brought out cans of Dennison's Chili, a few tubs of Maruchan dehydrated noodle soups, a box of cherry Pop-Tarts, and two small plastic bottles of Coca-Cola.

"But now," he said, a grin crossing his face, "the piece of resistance!" He dug once more into his pack, and pulled

out a six pack of Coors. "It's not cold, but what the hell, right?"

Kris reached out and pulled one beer from the plastic ring holding it to the rest. "Miguel," she said, popping the tab on the can. "You are my hero."

White foam oozed from the hole, and a slight drizzle ran over the lip, down to her thumb. She took a long drink of the beer, swallowed, and smiled. "Damn, never thought I'd see one of these again."

Damian opened a can and took a gulp. "Yeah, well, drink it slow. And eat something, will you?"

They made a quiet dinner that night. Cold chili out of the cans, and cold instant soup made with cold water from the jugs they'd found. It took longer to reconstitute the soup with cold water, so dinner was slow as well as quiet. By the time they'd finished, the sun was a vibrant orange sliver, low between the horizon and the darkening sky.

"Getting cold," Damian said, breaking the silence. "Does anyone care if I close the windows?"

Miguel shook his head. "No, no problem," Kris replied. "I'm feeling a chill, too. Is that normal?"

Damian shrugged. "Late summer, early fall, it's not unusual to get a chilly night occasionally, I suppose. Wind off the lake, maybe,"

He was moving to close up the window when he heard a great rolling rumble coming from outside. Far away, low, and blessedly natural. "Sounds like a summer storm's brewing," he said, looking out the window. The clouds overhead were darkening, dense with angry potential. "Yeah, looks like rain," he murmured, peering out of the window.

"Well, shut 'em up, then," Kris said. Her eyes were drooping now, the beer had kicked in, and she had a nice warm buzz going. "Maybe keep 'em open a crack for now, though,"

she said. "If that truck comes back, we should be able to hear it over the storm, anyway."

"Yeah," Miguel added. "That thing was loud." He settled into the chair by the window, kicking his boots off and letting his toes squirm free.

"Oh, hey, almost forgot," Damian said. He reached for his jacket, thrown over the back of a chair. He rummaged in the pockets, and then pulled out a package of white wax emergency candles, and a couple small boxes of matches. "Found these at the 7-Eleven, too." He unwrapped the candles and took a pair out. "Figured if we needed light, we could save the batteries on the flashlights."

"Good idea," Kris said. "Where can we set them up, though?"

"Oh, I know," Damian said after he'd thought about it for a moment. He walked into the small bathroom opening into the room. A moment later he returned with two small glasses. Peeling the paper wrappings off them, he placed one on the nightstand between the two beds, and the other on the small table near the front door. He struck a match, and the flame sparked up, bright in the darkening room. Damian held the candle over the flame for a moment until the base began to run and drip. Then he quickly placed the melting stub of the candle against the bottom of the drinking glass. It held firm, and the wax hardened fast. He juggled the cup, and the candle stayed put. He placed glass on the nightstand, then went over to light the other candle. "There it is. Should be fine, and we don't have to worry about it falling over and burning us all up in our sleep."

"You're a regular Boy Scout, aren't you?" Kris said, laughing.

"Nah," Damian said. "Just thought of it." He repeated the process on the second candle and placed the glass back on the table top before turning around to look at his handiwork.

The dark room was lit with a ruddy, dim light from the two candles. It was enough to see by, and that's all he cared about.

When he looked back at Kris and Miguel, he couldn't help but notice how small and fragile they looked in the dim light. The dark shadows of their eyes emphasized how tired and frail they all felt. Ghostly, he thought. He wondered what would become of them all. Of the whole species, really. Had the great experiment of humankind run its course at long last? Could they outlast the monsters? He had no idea. He didn't even know if he cared anymore. Maybe it would be easier to just stop running, stop fighting, lay his sword and shield down by the riverside and call it a day.

For now though, it was a slog from one day to the next. He wasn't completely without hope for the future, but what goals he used to have were dimming. He looked around the small, close room. Miguel and Kris were already fast asleep, crashed hard after the frantic chaos of the last few days. But Damian couldn't sleep. He was still riding on nervous, anxious energy, and didn't think he'd be out for a few hours at least. He figured he'd let them rest, and then wake one of them to keep watch later when he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

He pulled a chair up in front of the window looking out over the lake and opened the curtains wider. A cold breeze seeped through the narrow opening between the panes of glass. The room had already begun to get stuffy, and Damian appreciated the sliver of fresh air. Outside, darkness blanketed the landscape. The dark sky was a churning roil of storm clouds, which disconcerted him. Summer storms were one thing, but these clouds set him on edge. He wished they'd just dump the rain and be done with their threats. Maybe what the world needed was a good old-fashioned biblical flood. Wash everything away and start over from scratch.

Lightning pierced the sky in the distance. A brief afterimage burned into his retinas started to fade just as thunder rolled across the lake, soon followed by a shower of rain. Thick, heavy drops splattered against the windows, splashed against the ground. Across the road, he could see the boughs of trees shuddering and shaking as the rain lashed them. The storm mesmerized him, his mind wandering as water poured out of the sky. He watched as the storm washed back and forth, flurries of wind blowing the rainfall around in sheets. The curtains ballooned out, blown by the wind now gusting through the window. It was getting cold. Damian shivered as he moved to close the window, to seal off the room from the rain coming in. This was not the comfortable fresh chill he'd felt earlier. No, this was a frigid, unseasonable cold. He cranked the knob to wind the window closed and felt a crunch as a crust of ice cracked around the pane. He had to pull it tight as it swung into place.

Damian took a step back from the window, incredulous. He reached out and shook Miguel and Kris awake.

"Hey, you have to see this," he said, pointing toward the window.

Miguel rose from sleep, rubbed his eyes and looked toward the window. Kris shot out of bed and approached the window.

"It's a freaking ice storm," she said. She looked back at Damian. "When did this start? How long have I been out?"

Damian shook his head slightly. "Not long, really. The storm just started a few minutes ago. And look at this." Outside they saw the rain had changed to snow. Flurries of white pellets tumbled from the sky, dancing on the eddies of the wind. Miguel went to the front of the room and opened the door. From outside, they heard a soft, rhythmic pattering.

“It’s snow?” Miguel said, turning back toward them. “I’m sorry, but what the actual hell is going on?”



## *Chapter Twenty*

Hunger was almost overwhelming now, and the wendigo felt the pull of power to the south. They'd followed the scent of their prey for a day, subsisting on roots, moss, anything they could get their hands on, avoiding the scalding sunlight as best they could. Finding their prey's spoor near the airport had drawn them down to the river where the smell of blood was thick and meaty to their heightened inhuman senses.

In a frenzy, they descended on the sandy beach, uncovering the half-corpse Damian had buried there. The smell of the thing was off, unsettling to them, but they were beyond caring. They fell on the corpse with gusto, tearing flesh, rending muscle, biting into the rancid meat with their saw-blade teeth. They filled their bellies with the cold flesh until they could hold no more, and then they licked the bones clean, cracked them open to lick out the marrow with their wormlike tongues.

Their satiety did not last. Though the cold meat filled whatever passed for their stomachs, it did not slake their need. They could tell the time was coming when Ithaqua would descend from the starry void. The veil was wearing thin and the dawn of the Wendigo would soon arrive. They ached to hasten the arrival, prepare the world for the coming of Ithaqua. The flesh of the cold corpse had given them enough energy to perform a rite of quickening, and they knew if they didn't cast the runes now, they'd not have a second chance.



The witch cast images into the minds of her brood and the wendigo and the brood saw clear sigils and signs, burned into their minds like freezing brands.

They scraped at the sandy beach; they dragged claws through the grit, punctuated alien designs with stomping feet and pounding fists. They transcribed angles and curves, carved a tattoo of scars into the skin of the land. And they danced, and howled, and clattered rocks and bones together. A cacophony of conflicting yet complementary tones. Rhythmic chanting, clashing as they pranced and leapt and fulfilled the motions and piercing vibrations of the spell the witch intended. “Oooh-aaa! Ooooh-aaah!” they howled into the dark sky. “Tisf-irreit! Ooooh-aaah! Mehfet offiiir! Mehb’ornen! Mehb’ornen fee-t’offiiir! Mehb’ornen fee-t’offiiir!”

Their wild dance collected power—drew energy from the dancers, and the latent power of the land surrounding them. Invisible tracteries of power were caught up in their motion and screeching howls, connected with the lines carved into the sand, and amplified as the ritual came to a climax. Like a charge of static electricity, the collected power exploded into the night. It flooded forth, a glowing white fire erupting skyward with a thunderclap.

The pallid column lanced the sky and the dome of heaven drew dark. Thin wisps of summer cloud grew thick and dark. They rolled through the sky, colliding and growing, until the sky was thick with black storm clouds, and the stars winked out behind them. Wind blew, rain poured forth and became freezing sleet. Snow fell thick and heavy. The witch was pleased. The wendigo felt a crackling, electric sense of anticipation, or of purpose becoming manifest. The way prepared, Ithaqua would soon arrive to a frozen wasteland, someplace more hospitable to its entropic metabolism. Snow was falling all around them. Summer died, and winter’s freezing grip crushed the land.



## *Chapter Twenty-One*

When the storm came in and the temperature dropped, they got cold fast. Miguel and Kris raided the other rooms in the motel, stripping beds of blankets and dragging them back to their room. Damian searched the manager's office again. He hoped his luck would last and he'd find something else to keep the cold at bay, but there was nothing.

They'd worked fast to shut the door and windows. Towels packed around the cracks kept the worst of the wind out and sealed them off as best they could from the frigid tempest outside. After fifteen minutes, they huddled together in the room, wrapped in layers of woolen blankets and thin quilts, trying to stay warm. They weren't comfortable, but they kept the worst of the iciness of the room away. When they spoke, they could see their breath steaming in the dim candlelight.

"Never seen anything like this," Damian said. He stared out the window at the road and woods beyond lost under piles of fresh snowfall. Trees and buildings nothing more than indistinct shapes lost in the howling blur of the storm. "I mean, maybe in the middle of winter, sure."

"But it's nowhere near winter," Miguel said. "I mean, I don't think it is, anyway."

"No, not even close," Damian said. "Somewhere around middle of September is my guess. Just a few hours ago it was blazing hot."

"It's not natural," Kris said. "Weather was normal the last few days. Too damn hot, even. Then this just comes out of nowhere."

Damian peered into the night, hoping for some clue, some idea to pop into his head. "So what do we do?" he said. "We can't travel in this." He closed the curtains and looked at Miguel and Kris with an expectant look on his face, like he hoped one of them had an idea.

"We'll just have to wait it out," Kris said. "We've got supplies to last a few more days, and we can find stuff in town. Bet there's some sporting goods stores in town. Maybe we can find snow gear. We'll need it if we have to hike out."

"Most places would have been stocked up for summer when everything fell apart, though," Damian said.

"Have you got any better ideas?" Kris asked. "We've got to at least try, don't we?" She pulled her blankets around her and crawled back into bed. "Just go to sleep. Things'll look different in the morning."

Damian nodded in agreement. "Sure," he said. "Sure, we'll figure it out in the morning."

He blew out the two emergency candles, casting the room into semi-darkness. "Everything will be different tomorrow," Damian whispered to himself. He pulled blankets around himself, sat back down in his chair, and watched the snow fall outside.



There are small, dark hours in the dead of night. Black moments when the night has gone on so long, and the darkness seems so total that the human mind almost reverts to a primal state. That's when the fear rises—the animal worry of a night that will go on forever, and a sun which will not rise.

The terror in worrying about things outside the circle of the campfire that want us dead. That primal fear of things in the darkness that aren't there in the light. That totality of subconscious worry that worms into your brain and convinces you that maybe this time the sun just won't rise. Rational thought knows better, but rationality is a daytime thing. Nighttime is the time for dread and worry.

Damian dozed before the window in their small, dark room. He dreamt of being alone, wandering a wasteland of perpetual twilight. A strange, vibrant, yet dying purple sun hung on the horizon, and alien constellations glittered overhead. Between him and the sunset were countless miles of peculiar twisted trees, dark quasi-humanoid shapes, and pale glowing eyes distant in the darkness.

As he wandered the landscapes of his mind the ground beneath him shook, juddering and rolling, causing him to bob and sway like flotsam on tempest-tossed waves. He tumbled backward as a great cracking rent the air, a thunderous cacophony as far in the distance a mountain first seemed to fall, and then rise, impossibly tall. A multitude of caves appeared at the apex of the mountain and glowed with baleful dead light. And it was not a mountain at all, he realized, but a malevolent dead god returned for unfinished business. The titan's mind touched his, and he became overwhelmed with knowledge of the vast gulfs between the stars, of planets stripped bare of life, and of a strange tomb city in the abyss far below the ocean's surface.

He woke screaming, shirt soaked with panic sweat, and breathing heavily. He leapt to his feet, discarding the blankets he'd wrapped himself in. They fell in a shapeless heap at his feet as Kris and Miguel jumped up, shocked awake by his piercing cry.

Miguel tumbled out of bed, landing hard on the floor. In an instant he was feeling around in the dark for the crowbar

he'd left next to the bed. His eyes were wild with panic and fright, a sheen of sweat across his forehead.

Kris vaulted out of bed, dropping her heap of blankets to the floor as her hand went to the knife at her belt and pulled it free. "What?!" she shouted, eyes darting around the room, out the window and settling on Damian. "What is it?" She took a fighter's stance, holding the long knife in front of her, the steel blade glinting dully in the gloom.

Damian stared, wild-eyed, from her to Miguel and back. He staggered back a step, then another, and stumbled over the chair, tumbling to the ground. His heart still pounded in his chest, and he could still taste the sour squirt of adrenaline in the back of his throat. Nervous laughter escaped his mouth as he forced an unconvincing smile. "Just a fucking bad dream. Can you believe that?"

Kris took a knee next to him and offered him a bottle of water from their cache of supplies. "Drink this," she said, unscrewing the cap and handing it to him. "Slow and steady."

He took a long, slow sip of water, but still felt a gag building up in his throat. He was able to fight it back and swallow the water.

"Holy crap," he said. "It was just a stupid nightmare. All the crap we've gone through, and I'm about to piss myself like a toddler having a bad dream."

"Yeah, well, it's a mess of a world right now," Kris said. "No doubt about that. It'd almost be more worrisome if we didn't have bad dreams now and again."

Miguel took a stance next to the window, peering out into the darkness.

"True," he said. "Everything the way it is it's probably just our brains' way of dealing with the stress. The whole damn world's fallen apart. You're not the only one having bad dreams now and again."

Kris smiled at that, "You're sure the loudest about them though."

"It felt surreal and real all at the same time," Damian said. "I was just lost, on a black landscape under a dying purple sun, right? Totally unreal, and yet it felt like I was there."

Miguel's eyes widened in surprise as he turned toward Damian. "Then what?" he said, leaning in.

"At first nothing," Damian said. "And then I saw eyes in the distance, pale—"

"And green?" Kris finished. "Dozens of them, hidden among the twisted black forest..."

Damian looked at her, paused a moment as understanding dawned. "Yeah," he said. "And then a mountain fell—"

"Then rose," Miguel added.

"And then caves opened and were eyes," Kris said.

Damian looked from one to the other, then swallowed the rest of the bottle of water before he spoke. "Yeah," he said. "That's pretty much it."

"Huh," Miguel said. "Just when I was thinking things couldn't get weirder."

He fumbled on the nightstand until his hand found the small paper box he'd been searching for. Feeling around the edges as he opened it, he managed not to dump the matches out on the floor, and struck one alight. The room flashed with yellow light as he relit the candle on the nightstand. In the dull yellow glow from the candle, Miguel took stock of his companions.

"What does it all mean?" he asked. "The dream, the flash storm, the weirdos in the truck earlier?"

"Once is happenstance, and all that," Damian said.

"We need to find a ride, and get the hell out of here, is what I think it means," Kris said. "Tonight, if possible."

"We can't drive in this," Damian said. "There were cars on the road, sure. I'm sure we could hot-wire one and get moving. But the snow is thick, and the cars around here weren't ready for winter. The chances of finding one with chains in the trunk are astronomical."

"I don't know what else to suggest," Kris spat. "Unless you can conjure up a magic carpet or something."

"My suggestion," Damian said. "Is simply that we don't freak out just because we all had the same crazy dream. My suggestion is that we wait until morning, which can't be far off at this point. We wait until morning, and then if we decide to run, we do so when we can see the road."

Miguel wagged his finger and pointed at Damian. "Right," he said. "I'm with you on this one. I don't want to go messing around in the dark, in the snow, trying to find a car that works. And without the sun to guide us, we'll be driving blind in this whiteout."

Kris relented, frustrated. "Okay, I concede," she said. "You're right. Running now is no good, tomorrow we'll — "

"Ah, hey, do you hear that?" Damian said.

She stopped talking. The three of them stopped and listened. From around them came a high-pitched creaking, grinding sort of sound. It was faint, almost like a low ringing in the ears. But as they listened, as they focused on it, the whine became a squeal, a tooth-grindingly awful noise that drove right into their ears. Damian looked toward the windows, where pale, diffuse moonlight filtered through the thin curtains. He reached forward to pull back the cloth, and saw threads of ice winding from the edge of the window, crawling across the glass like huge, invisible slugs leaving fractal-patterned slime in their wakes. The crystal patterns grew across the windows at an alarming rate, pressing against the glass, freezing

it, causing the molecular structure of the pane to grind itself to pieces.

Damian had mere moments to realize all this before there was a loud crystalline pop as a spiderweb crack appeared in the center of the window, then another a few inches below it. A rattle of cracking glass followed this, at the places where the ice had become thickest, then in stereo as the window opposite cracked and shattered.

“What the hell?” Miguel said. “It’s like—”

“Like at the hospital...” Kris trailed off.

The cracks met one after another, and the glass popped and creaked. And then, with a sudden dull thud, the windows crumbled. The glass tumbled in a glittering shower, falling both within and without the room. A sudden arctic chill blew through, blowing out the candle and whipping the curtains into a frenzy as flurries of snow burst into the room and whipped around them.

“Grab your stuff,” Kris shouted. “We’re getting the hell out of here!”

They picked up their bags and charged for the door just as it blew inward. Three large forms stood in silhouette in the open doorway. Draped in dark, shapeless clothing and cloaked in flurries of snow, the forms were almost indistinguishable against the night beyond them. Wide, clammy hands shot out and grabbed Kris by the throat, stifling her cry of surprise. They dragged her from the room, her fists pounding against the arm holding her. She tried to get a breath of air and failed. Then she felt herself lifted into the air and tossed through it, landing with a dull, metallic thud. She took a quick, gasping breath and looked around, realized she’d been tossed into the back of a pickup truck. With one arm she pushed herself up, moving to leap over the side of the truck, but one creature swung its moss-green clawed



hand at her. The meaty paw slammed into the side of her head, and she swooned. Spots swam before her eyes as she blacked out.

As the creatures entered the room, Damian leapt back over one bed, coming down hard on his ankle and rolling to the floor. He lay in a heap, looking around him for any kind of weapon.

Miguel lashed out with his crowbar and felt a squelching crunch as it collided against the humped back of one of the things. The creature raised its head and let out a croaking howl of pain. It turned its face to stare at Miguel. Its eyes glowed in the gloom, like the eyes of deep-sea fish Miguel remembered seeing at the aquarium as a child. The thing's mouth was wide and thick-lipped. When it opened to take huge gulping breaths of cold air, it confronted Miguel with long, needle-like teeth, perfect for rending and tearing smaller prey. And as the creature grabbed Miguel and dragged him forward, he caught a loathsome smell—the noxious, fishy stink of strange, pale things washed to shore from dark, deep places, and left to rot under a cold winter's sun.

The creature swung out with one wide paw, clapping Miguel across the side of his head, and a blast of fresh pain exploded across his cheek as he fell to his knees. He put his hand to his face, and it came away wet and red. Before he could shake off the shock of the blow, the creature grabbed him and shoved him to the ground, pushed together his hands, and lashed them tight with coarse rope. He fought and bucked against the weight of the creature pressing him down, but could gain no leverage against the weight of the thing. They grabbed him by the shoulders and feet and dragged him from the room. From his prone position on the floor, Damian could see where Miguel had dropped his crowbar on the other side of the bed. He belly-crawled around to grab it. Just as he reached the cold metal bar, he

heard the throaty growl of a diesel engine roaring to life. He staggered to his feet and felt a dull ache in his ankle where he'd jammed it leaping over the bed. Ignoring the pain he rushed to the door, only to see one of the strange, shapeless creatures dragging Miguel up into the back of a rusty, beat-to-hell pickup truck, the same one they'd seen earlier in the day behind the motel.

After the thing pulled Miguel's feet into the truck, it leapt over the side, loped to the back and slammed the tailgate closed. It lurched around and crawled in through the passenger side door, slamming it shut. Its arm dropped out of the open window frame, and it pounded twice on the side. Only then did Damian see a third creature sitting in the bed of the truck as it banged twice in response on the roof of the cab. The truck rolled forward, dim yellow headlights illuminating the snow-covered road before it. The single unbroken tail light cast a bloody glow behind as it turned out of the parking lot in slow, careful fits and starts. The tires slipped and skidded on the icy road and the vehicle rocked and shuddered.

Almost without thinking, Damian shouldered his pack full of gear and headed out into the night behind the juddering truck.



## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

Damian kept pace with the truck at a distance. The snowfall had lightened some, but the ground was still thick with powder, the road suddenly slick with ice, and the driver took the road carefully. Although he was on foot, and trudging through thick snow, Damian could still keep the truck in sight. It never got too far ahead of him, and he kept focusing on the single red taillight. He knew his actions made no sense at all. What if he caught up to the truck? Would he get there in time to free his friends? Could he take on the abductors himself?

But he knew he had to try to rescue them. He was cold and miserable as he jogged through the icy night, so he focused on his knowledge (or hope) that if things were different and monsters had trapped him, Kris and Miguel would come for him. What he didn't want to tell himself, but was closer to the truth, was that after only having been in their company for a few days, he'd realized how much he missed human companionship. That the months on the road before meeting them had been miserable. Not only the endless fear of discovery, of being found by things with gnashing teeth and rending claws, but the singular, fundamental loneliness of a world without people.

Damian trudged after the truck for an hour or more. He'd been able to keep a good idea of where the road was; though he inevitably lost sight of the truck, he had no trouble fol-

lowing the churned-up trail. He continued on, walking between the slushy tracks left in the vehicle's wake, stumbling over roots and rocks buried in the shin-deep snow. Slush seeped through his shoes, and his toes grew numb. His chest ached from taking in deep breaths of the frigid air as he tried to keep up with the truck. In time, the sky lightened. Dark clouds still occluded the stars overhead, but a gray brightness suffused the surrounding terrain. The sun was rising, he supposed, but it was still an hour or more until morning.

He stopped walking for a moment and took stock of his surroundings. Everything around him still, silent, and foreboding. As the sun rose, far behind the thick gray clouds, he saw the tire marks veered off-road up ahead. Quickening his pace to get a better look, he saw the trail had taken a sudden left turn, churning up a white mass of snow as it did, like the truck had fishtailed through the snow as it changed course. He stood in the middle of the piled mass of snow, looking off the edge of what he thought was the main road. He'd never have seen it if he weren't following the trail of the truck, but they'd trundled onto a side road, and the trail continued. It couldn't have been more than a single-lane dirt track through the trees. Thick woods lined it thick on either side, and he thought it had snuck up on the drivers, too. Even if they'd known it was here, in the dark and covered by the unnatural snowfall, it would have been practically impossible to see from a distance.

Morning had come in gray and still. A dim, distant brightness gave him the general direction of the sun, but the fog and trees diffused the light. And he was miserable and cold now; he could barely feel his feet at all and was desperate to get warm. Horrific images of losing toes to frostbite flitted through his head as he continued on. Damian took another deep breath and rushed down the road, hoping he'd come upon the truck bearing his companions soon.

Up ahead, indistinct in threads of mist weaving between trees and brush, Damian spotted a ramshackle two-level cabin, the truck parked half-assedly right in front. From the angle he was at, trees blocked his view of the house, but he could see the truck. The tailgate was lowered and he saw nobody in the cab. He approached the cabin, and as he got closer he heard the quiet slap of waves on a sandy beach. Faint yellow lights glimmered through a few of the windows on the lower story of the cabin. The windows above were dark. Damian took a wide-circling path around the cabin's perimeter. As he walked around the cabin, he saw the ground slope down ahead, where it gave way to a small cove. In the distance the pool narrowed, almost to the width of a wide creek, or narrow river. Beyond that, he could see Lake Tahoe itself glimmering dully in the steel-gray morning light.

The cabin itself butted up right against the edge of the slope yards away from where he stood. The dark pool just below the back porch of the dismal building. He stepped back from where he stood at the edge of the slope and turned to walk toward the cabin. As he did, he saw ripples in the water below the porch. Then a splash as a hideous creature rose from the dark water. The thing stood hunched on two stubby legs, and elongated arms hung from its shoulders, ending in webbed, clawed hands.

The creature's head was wide, almost toad-like, with a mass of slimy feelers ringed the flabby lips. Spiny growths began at the crown of the thing's skull and traveled in a row down its back, splitting off into further rows at the shoulders and the base of its spine, and down the back of each arm and leg. Thin membranous webbing connected the thorn-like spikes, making them seem almost a fish's fins. It opened its wide mouth, gulping at the air, and Damian saw bloody red gill slits palpitate along the stumpy neck. It was at an angle, turned slightly away from him, and the night's darkness was

receding, but he could just make out one of the creature's green glowing eyes. The creature crawled toadishly up the bank of the pond, and then on to the cabin's porch.

A wooden-framed screen door marked the entryway to the cabin from the porch, and the hideous thing squatted before it. It turned, raised its head and sniffed at the air, stretching its head out on its thick neck. Then, lowering its head, the thing let out a croaking, throaty bark, a staccato series of grunts and cries in a parody of human speech. As it did this, the screen door swung open. Damian watched in silence as one abductor from the hotel sauntered through the ratty door and onto the porch. It still wore the shapeless, long overcoat and the floppy, wide-brimmed hat. It was like a child playing dress up and pretending to be an adult. But in this case it was a half-formed abomination trying to pass as human, or maybe something that had grown so accustomed to its disguise that it no longer felt like shedding it. It approached the squatting thing on the doorstep, opened its fish-lipped mouth wide and made the same incomprehensible barking yawps. Having done so, it took a seat at the edge of the porch, its misshapen feet dangling over the edge.

A minute passed as the things squatted on the porch, staring into the black waters of the pool beneath them. And then, from the direction of the waterway, Damian heard soft gurgles and splashes. He rushed behind the thick trunk of an aspen and dropped to a squat. The sound became clearer, stronger. It sounded like it was mere yards away, passing by his hidey hole and moving up the lake's shore toward the house. He edged around the circumference of the tree, holding steady to it with his good hand as he peered around the edge. As he watched, first one, then another and another of the hideous frog-like creatures loped up the bank of the pool. Soon a dozen or more of the hunched, gray-green

things crawled up the slope. They clambered over each other in their haste to get onto the porch and into the cabin.

Damian's heart caught in his throat. He knew his friends were inside and now knew they were in terrible danger. The loping aquatic nightmares he'd just witnessed carried themselves with unknowable but clearly malign intent. He had to figure out a way to rescue his companions, but did not know how. There were no emergency services to call on, no cavalry to come to the rescue. It was all up to him now. Kris and Miguel were at the mercy of these things, and only he knew they were within this repulsive cabin deep in the woods.

With fear gnawing at his guts he crept toward the decrepit building. He stayed low, trying to keep clear of both the nearby outlet to Lake Tahoe, and stay under the edge of the first-floor windows. Damian slunk around the edges of the porch, skirting the muddy edge of the pool. As he crept past the porch, he heard low, guttural voices from inside the building. The screen door opened right into a large room, which was dark from his vantage point. A glimmer of sunlight cast through a window across the room, but it didn't illuminate much. He hastened his step and soon was at the far edge of the building. Once there, he turned to see a scene of horror he was glad to have missed when he approached in darkness.

In a small clearing near the building, now in plain view, were five crucified bodies. Great wooden poles stabbed into ground at angles, making five large X shapes lashed together with straps of leather, barbed wire; any variety of materials. On each of these frames hung a withered human form, stripped naked and rent with deep Y-shaped wounds across the abdomens, which had been emptied of their contents. Each had its feet tied at the upward slants of the frames, and rough, thick spikes had been nailed through the ankles into the wooden beams. The hands were likewise lashed and nailed down at the downward slopes. The heads hung loose,

and Damian could see clearly that these victims had had their eyes gouged out, teeth smashed in, and throats slit. The bodies were pale and bloodless and lightly flecked with snow. Guts, organs, and intestines draped into piles below the heads of the sacrifices in black puddles of clotted gore.

Damian's mind reeled. The smell of the dead was still thick in the air, foul and dark.

At the center of this ring of sacrifices was a simple pile of stones. It looked precariously placed to him, but Damian knew it was as solid as his sanity was becoming shaky. The rock atop the cairn was oddly shaped, and after a moment Damian realized that it was in fact a sculpture, primitive in form, and perhaps of great age. It was an effigy of some sort, a humanoid creature squatting on its haunches, with clawed forearms on its knees. Thin but long wings fanned from the creature's back. Atop all this, a hideous, malformed head rested, pulpy and bloated, with what looked like a mass of feelers cascading down from below blobs and contours. He assumed those represented eyes though they did not match the usual symmetry or quantity of the creatures he was most familiar with. The sculpture was altogether awful, and a sick feeling of dread filled him when he looked at it.

Damian was taking in the horrific scene before him when he realized something he hadn't noticed initially: the snowfall had ignored this circle of death. The snow dusted the roof of the cabin, was still thick in the surrounding woods. But within the area inside the wooden beams with their blasphemous decor, the snow was absent, as if the horrors within had repelled it, or the snow had been kept out by some darker and blacker magic than whatever had called the storm.

As he was processing these worries, he heard a slam from the porch, a rattle of the screen door on its hinges, and then the meaty, slapping footsteps of something coming out onto the porch. He dropped prone to the muddy ground near a



pile of crudely chopped wood. Then he crawled backward in the slimy muck until he pressed tight against the rough wooden slat walls of the cabin. He gagged as the sour stink of the filth filled his sinuses. He heard croaking voices from the direction of the porch and tried to remain still. Every nerve in his body and mind screamed out for him to run, to abandon his companions and flee this place. But he fought against the impulse; he stayed still, with his eyes closed for fear of glimpsing the toad-like horrors again.

And as he wallowed in the slime, he realized that the things were speaking. Not in animal grunts, but in a crude croaking approximation of human speech.

"Need more humans," said the first voice. "These not enough."

"I know!" said the next. "You stupid. I not."

"Screw you!" maybe the first voice again, but he could not be sure. "Need to do the song now! Wendigos coming soon. They already killed your brother Jeb! We gotta make the songs, and bring Cthulhu!"

Cthulhu. Damian had never heard the word before, but it filled him with dread. He did not understand what it meant, to what it referred. But something about the sounds of that guttural incantation sent a shiver up his spine and deep into the most primal areas of his mind. It had a sound to it like someone's last gurgled breath escaping their lungs as slimy horrors dragged them screaming into the deepest watery abyss.

"White ones coming, and we'll be ready!" said one voice. "We were first, and we'll be last!"

"Tell the priests. Tell them all to be ready," said the other.

Then a creaking of wood, porch boards bowing under their weight, a moment of silence, followed by a tremendous splash, and another after. Damian raised his head out of the

muck, got up onto his knees and peered around the woodpile. The porch was empty. The creatures must have leapt into the nearby pond. They would alert someone or something. Their priests and others of their kind, he supposed.

None of this sounded hopeful to Damian. But if nothing else, he now knew there were at least fewer of the strange aquatic monstrosities within the building.



Damian climbed back onto the back porch. He shot one fearful glance toward the pond behind the cabin, took a deep breath, and opened the screen door quietly as he could. Within the house, all was silent. An acrid, fishy smell permeated the dwelling, causing him to gag and fight back retching. The screen door opened into a rustic kitchen. Large pots, the outsides blackened from the bottom up from overuse, were on the four-burner gas stove. He looked into the pots and a rancid stink emanating from within wafted out. They were filthy, slimed with the remains of a recent meal. Damian decided it was best not to think about what they had been cooking. Nearby, a large refrigerator was likewise dirty and unsanitary looking. Black or dark-red prints were on the handle and surface of the fridge. Again he decided he didn't want to know what might be within.

The kitchen opened onto a short hallway, peeling paper lined the walls, and stained, pitted and scratched wooden slats made up the floor. Up ahead, the front door to the cabin stood at the end of the hall. Stairs ascended to the next level further along, and the hall opened on one side, a wide opening into a large room.

Damian moved down the hallway and entered the larger room. He assumed it had been a living room at some point, from the look of the tatty sofa and ruined chairs. A torch-

iere-style lamp lay toppled over against the far wall, the glass lampshade shattered against the floor. Set into one wall was a pellet-stove fireplace. Damian hustled over to where a complete set of fireplace tools hung on hooks set into the brick hearth. He grabbed a poker with a solid heft to it. It was a solid piece, made of cast iron or bronze, he assumed. The poking tip was sharp and crusted with soot and ash.

As he hefted it, he heard footsteps behind him. Turning, he saw the creature in the shapeless coat and floppy hat staring right at him, poisonous green eyes cutting through the dusty gloom of the dim room. Damian had a moment to wonder why the creature wasn't attacking him before he remembered that muck and slime drenched him, and he might pass for one of the toad-things himself.

And then the creature was on him, leaping across the room, tattered coat flapping in the air as it landed in front of Damian. It opened its hideous, fang-filled, fishlike mouth and hissed at him, long tongue lolling out from between rows of cruel, hooked teeth. Without thought, Damian thrust out with the poker. He shoved the length of iron right into the creature's maw, encountering brief resistance as it separated tissue and muscle, and then grated against bone. The creature grabbed the metal shaft with its webbed paws, hissing and gurgling as dark blood poured from its mouth. It slapped at the rod, kicked back with its feet, and tried to pull itself off the spiked end.

Damian dug his heels in, gripped the poker tight with both hands, and charged toward the far wall. The thing was surprisingly light, and as it tried to screech and flailed about, Damian impaled it against the wall. The poker's barbed spike crunched through the creature's skull, pierced through the spine, and went right into the moldering wall of the cabin. It flailed its stubby arms, reached out to grab Damian, and then fell back to trying to pull the iron rod from its mouth.

Now he was close to the disgusting creature, he could see it was distinctly different from the things he'd seen crawling from the slime of the lake earlier. This one was some awful hybrid of monster and man. Its skin hung loose on its frame, jowly and pockmarked. Gray-green blemishes splotched the skin of the creature, but it was nearly human skin, not fishy scales, nor slick and amphibian.

Damian gave the poker a quick turn to the left, put his foot on the hybrid creature's chest, and pulled the shaft free. It crunched again sickeningly as it pulled free from the wall and back through the thing's head. A gout of dark ichor fountained from the monster's mouth as it collapsed. Damian looked down at the poker, slick with gore and clots of greenish brain matter lodged in the terminal barb.

He flicked his wrist, splattering the worst of the gore off the poker and against the nearby wall, then crossed the room back into the hall. A low twinge of panic picked at the back of his brain. He needed to find his companions and get out of here soon. Damian took the stairs to the second level. When he reached the landing, he found there was a closed door across the hall from him. The handle turned easily. The hinges were gritty but did not squeak as he pushed the door in. The room inside was a bedroom, and unoccupied. A large bed, armoire, and lady's vanity stood near a window looking out into the woods. Quietly closing the door, he stepped back out into the hall.

The next door was likewise unlocked. He opened it and entered a sparsely furnished room. Only a cot and three wooden chairs stood in the otherwise vacant area. The cot was stained black with a dried crust of thickening ichor or other pestilent discharge. And the room reeked. A fishy miasma hung in the air, thick and damp. The smell of the room coupled with the unnatural chill created a distinctly unpleasant atmosphere.

Damian returned to the second-floor landing. There were no other rooms on this floor, but as he scanned around, his eyes came to rest on a small trapdoor set into the wall at the far end of the hall. A simple laundry chute. He'd not seen one of these in a long time, not since visiting his grandparents in their hundred-year-old farmhouse as a boy.

He crossed the landing, opened the chute slowly, and was overwhelmed by the fishy stink emanating from it. His eyes watered as he peered into the chute, but darkness swallowed the shaft before he could see the bottom. As he listened, though, he heard a wet slapping noise in the distance, echoing off the walls of the chute. And then a splash, a grunt and a pitiful whimper. All in darkness, all distant and unreachable.

He hurried across the landing and took the stairs two at a time. When he arrived at the first-floor entryway again, he turned and ran back around behind the stairway. There, set into the wall, he saw a plain wooden door, easily missed in the darkness. The doorknob was small and coated in chipping, yellowed enamel paint. He would never have seen the door if he'd not been looking for it. Taking the knob in hand, he turned it by degrees and opened the door. A staircase stretched down before him to a rough dirt floor. Uneven yellow light illuminated what he could see of the small dank, foul-smelling chamber. He descended the stairs, taking them one at a time, preparing to bolt.



Uncomfortable. muggy warmth filled the small basement room. By the time he descended to the dirt floor, he was uncomfortably hot. It was a storage room filled with shelves piled high with cardboard boxes which had split open in the humidity, spilling years of bric-a-brac from within. Nearby he

saw the end of the laundry chute coming down over a large basin. A decrepit washer and dryer next to that, their doors ripped off and discarded. Hanging from a nail in the wall above the dryer was an ancient oil-filled lantern, the source of the sickly yellow light in the room. He reached out and took it off the nail to carry it with him as he searched. From somewhere nearby, he could hear sloshing water. He waved the lantern right and left, and saw that around the edge of the stairway, a low brick wall rose from the dirt floor. Damian approached the wall and shone the lantern into the chamber beyond it.

There was no floor to that chamber. Beyond the rough brick barrier was a pool of brackish water. Kris and Miguel were hanging unconscious against the far wall, arms up over their heads, bound with rope and slung over large iron hooks set into the basement walls. Four similar hooks on the wall of the room stood empty. Their bodies disappeared into the water at the waist. His eyes darted to the stairs then back to the two.

“Kris!” he hissed. “Miguel!”

Nothing.

“Shit,” Damian said. He held the lamp over the dark water of the flooded room, trying to look into the brackish deeps. The water was silty, opaque with algae or some other obscuring material. The lamp shone a few inches beneath the rippling surface before diffusing into a scatter of green rays. He had no way to tell how deep it was.

“Oh shit, shit, shit, I don’t want to do this...” he muttered. He put the lamp on the ledge of the low brick wall. With his good hand, he leveraged himself until he was sitting on the ledge, and then swung his feet over to let them sink into the water.

He expected a shock of cold, but the water was lukewarm. Holding on to the brick wall, he lowered himself into the water, until his feet found the bottom of the pool. It relieved him to find that where he stood in the pool was only up to his thighs. He'd dreaded the depth of the pool, fearing it might be over his head. Holding one hand against the wall to steady himself, he traced a path around the edge of the room. He stepped forward with caution, testing each place he meant to put his foot before putting any weight on it. Below the water, the floor was soft mud or clay. He could keep his footing as he inched around the perimeter of the pool toward where Kris hung like a slab of meat.

When he reached her, he dipped his cupped hands into the water, and splashed some in Kris's face, then patted her cheek.

"Kris!" he whispered. "Wake up, kiddo, c'mon!"

Runnels of watery blood drizzled down the side of her face. She'd taken a solid hit to her head, and he thought she might have a scalp wound. Hard to see in the shadows though. He grabbed her head in both hands and raised it up to face him.

"Wake up! Come on, wake up!" he said, urgency in his voice. And then her eyes opened slow, unfocused, and looked at him.

"What the hell?" She trailed off. Then she looked around the chamber, saw the murky pool and her legs dangling into the water. "Get me down!" she shouted, and thrashed against her bonds.

"Just hang on a moment," Damian said. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her up. He got her up a few inches, and her arms fell forward, released from the hook.

"Sonofabitch," she said, leaning against the wall. "Arms are asleep." She shook them to get the blood flowing again, then she saw Miguel hanging a few feet away. "Can you get him down?"

"Of course," Damian said. "Just give me a moment." He moved to where Miguel hung and lifted.

Kris tore at the ropes around her wrists with her teeth. She gripped the rope between her eyeteeth, dug in between the strands, and pulled. It took some tugging and grunting, but the rope slid free. She kept working on the knots as Damian levered Miguel down from the wall.

As his arms came free, Miguel slumped forward, still unconscious. He flopped over Damian's back, and Damian staggered under the weight. "Dammit..." Damian said, and took a step back to balance himself. His foot came down over space, an unexpected drop-off, and he fell backward into the dark, tepid water. His arms shot out, finding nothing to grab on to. In a moment he sank under the surface, Miguel's prone body falling on top of him.

Damian splashed and twisted, instantly disoriented by the darkness. Miguel snapped awake as soon as he hit the water and thrashed in complete confusion. Damian kicked out trying, to get above the water, and felt air on his face as he broke the surface. He took a great gasp of air and then saw Miguel flailing. Damian grabbed at Miguel's shirt, taking a handful of cloth and pulling him up.

"Miguel!" he hissed. "Just be quiet! We're here!"

Miguel's eye were wide, frantic. "Where are we?" he said. Kris leaned forward and grabbed ahold of him, then pulled him toward the edge.

"We need to get out first. I'll fill you in later," Damian said. "Go to the light, fast."

He waved his hands toward the lamp and then swam across the pool. Kris and Miguel skirted the perimeter of the room and were almost at the brick retaining wall when the water started churning.



Damian felt something skirt his legs as he swam forward—something long and thin, just touching his shins as it whipped past. He swam faster. Every ounce of energy in his body went into propelling him forward as the water churned and roiled around him.

Kris and Miguel reached the brick wall and vaulted over it as Damian swam up behind them. He grabbed the brick wall and pulled himself over it as something grabbed his leg. It circled tight around his ankle. He felt bones grinding, and the joint popped as he pulled against the pressure.

“Help!” he cried out. “Help me!”

Miguel grabbed his arm with both hands and pulled him over the low wall. Kris snatched at the collar of his jacket and pulled hard. He rose over the wall, and they continued pulling. As he came above the surface of the water, they saw what had gripped his ankle: a long, black, ropy tendril squirmed around his lower leg. It was luminous in the dim light, giving off its own suffused violet glow.

As they pulled him free of the chamber, the rest of the thing’s bulk broke the surface of the water: a protoplasmic mass of muscle and alien flesh. The thing stared at them with a disturbing array of glossy black eyes. It squirmed toward them through the churning water, squirting out more tendrils to grip the walls, pulling against Damian’s leg as it dragged its immeasurable bulk forward.

“RUN!” Miguel shouted. He reached out and shoved Kris toward the stairs. “Get out!” and then he grabbed the oil lamp by the handle and swung it overhead, releasing it to fly in a haphazard arc. Damian kicked at the squirming tendril with his other foot, scraping the sole of his boot at it trying to get free. And then the lamp smashed against the thing’s bulk, shattering and splattering oil across its glistening surface.

The oil caught fire in an instant, and it engulfed the awful creature in flame. Instantly the pressure let up on Damian's leg, and he scrambled free.

The creature thrashed and flailed, and the air filled with a terrible ammonia-like burning smell as the creature's skin blistered and burned. The room was lit with a bright light from the burning monstrosity, and Kris and Miguel rushed to the stairs while Damian staggered after them.

Pain lanced through his ankle as he hobbled up the stairs, and Damian caught one last image of the thing as it slunk back underwater, still burning. When the flaming oil hit the water, a tremendous roar erupted as a great ball of fire shot upward from the center of the pool, hitting the ceiling overhead and spreading out through the room. Damian felt a sudden wash of heat across his back as he dragged himself up, gripping the handrails as tight as he could.

Kris and Miguel rushed out onto the first floor landing, and Damian followed close behind. As he lurched through the basement door, he slammed it shut behind him. The flame had singed the hair on the back of his head and his clothing steamed. He leaned against the shuttered door for a moment to catch his breath.

"That thing wrecked my ankle," he gasped.

"Where are we?" Kris asked, looking around. "Last I remember was being in that hotel room, and then...nothing."

"Come on," Damian replied. "We need to get the hell out of here, and I'll explain as we go." He looked up and down the hall, then lurched toward the cabin's front doors. "This way, come on."

They bolted down the hallway and opened the front door. Stepping out onto the porch and into the fresh air, Damian stopped dead. "Back inside, now!" he shouted.

“What? Why?” Miguel said, looking at Damian, then out toward the snowy field. Then he saw the creatures lurking in the woods—pale and inhuman, their black eyes stark against their icy white skin, long teeth framed within their lipless mouths, which dripped black ichor.

Some of them wore tatters of human clothing. But one was almost naked, bare except for the beaded necklaces and bracelets it wore. Raven-black feathers and long, sharp bones were lashed among the beads. In one taloned hand it held a wide strap of leather, and wrapped up in and dangling from this strap was a leathery, withered human head. The thing looked straight at Miguel, and he felt an immense sense of dread fall over him. Beyond the creatures, Damian caught the strange shimmering disturbance in the air. A chill descended on him and he realized his bladder had become loose, and he was wetting himself.



They ran back into the cabin, slamming the door behind them. “Help me!” Damian said, grabbing on to the edge of a sofa and dragging it toward the door. Miguel grabbed the other end and pushed. They levered the sofa in front of the door just as the things outside collided with it. The horrid pale creatures rolled over themselves onto the front porch in a frenzy, slamming and clawing at the wood, hissing and spitting in anger.

“What now?” Kris said. “Any ideas?”

“Back way,” Damian said, and limped toward the rear of the cabin.

They rushed down the hall and into the kitchen. When they reached the screen door Miguel burst onto the porch and skidded to a halt.

"You have got to be kidding me," he said, as he saw first a pair of webbed, clawed hands come over the edge of the porch, and then a wide-lipped, fishlike head heaving up behind them. Large, pale-green eyes stared him down.

"Back inside!" he shouted and turned back into the kitchen. He heard scrabbling and clawing behind him as the humanoid crawled up onto the porch, nails digging into the wooden slats as it dragged its bulk from the water.

Miguel slammed the door shut behind him as he sprang into the kitchen. Down the hall, they heard the creatures outside smashing at the door, desperate to gain entry. Behind them, the kitchen door banged in its frame as the creature pulled it trying to rip it off its hinges.

Damian's eyes were wide in panic, heart racing in his chest. "They're all around us!" he said.

Kris looked down the hall, then at the back door as it shuddered again. "Do you smell that?"

They did. "Smoke," Damian said, and walked toward the hall. From under the door to the cellar, he saw thin threads of smoke trickling out. "The basement's on fire..." He backed into the kitchen, stopping when he bumped into Kris.

Panic coursed through the air like an electrical charge. A crash rang out from the front of the house as the windows broke in, and glass shattered to the wooden floor. Damian looked down the hall and could see the long, pale arms and black talons reaching in through broken sheets of glass. He looked at Miguel.

"Get ready to run," he said. "Out the back door."

As if in answer there came a sudden pounding at the back door. They saw weirdly shaped shadows through the blinds covering the window next to the doors. Men with fins like fish scratched against the glass.

He ran to the stove and cranked all five burners on. The electricity was out, so there was no spark to ignite the gas. But the gas flowed. Within moments, the room filled with the sour rotten-egg smell of natural gas filling the space.

Kris coughed. "Get ready," Damian said, as a heavy crash resounded from down the hall, and the back door rattled in its hinges again, loud and ominous. Damian grabbed up a large, dirty carving knife from next to the sink. He looked back down the hall, down toward the slim gap between the floorboards and the lower edge of the door to the basement where smoke poured through. He saw a flicker of flame, and he rushed the back door.

"Now!" he shouted.

Miguel pulled the door open and one of the terrible frog-like things leapt through, gnashing its teeth, brandishing its claws, and snarling its awful croaking roar. Damian fell on it without mercy, without hesitation. He thrust out with the carving knife and the blade sank deep into the thing's eye. Black vitreous jelly squirted and gushed from the ruined orb, and the monster howled in pain and rage. It clawed at Damian's arm, raking great gashes along his forearm with its talons. Damian gritted his teeth at the pain and shoved harder with the knife. There was a crunching, gritting, popping sensation, and the blade shot forward another few inches, right into the creature's skull. He twisted the blade and with one last spasming twitch the creature fell to the floor, still and dead.

"RUN!" Damian shouted.

Miguel and Kris pounded feet against the floorboards, shooting out onto the porch and past three more of the frog-things. Kris recognized one from the previous night, still wearing its shapeless coat and its hat with the ruined crown.

Another carried a long tube in both hands, crusted in black corals and slimed with algae.

Damian lurched forward, still favoring his ankle, yet moving as fast as he could.

As the creatures turned to give chase, there was a crashing noise from within the house. The three frog-things turned their baleful gaze down the hall, where they saw pale white shapes with slavering jaws and ruinous talons. The frog-men shouted rage-filled croaking shrieks and charged toward their hated enemies, while the dead white things crawled toward them, scaling the walls like huge, awful insects, howling their terrible chant: "Oooh-aaa! Ooooh-aaah! Tisf-irreit! Ooooh-aaah! Mehfet offiir! Mehb'ornen! Mehb'ornen fee-t'offiir! Mehb'ornen fee-t'offiir!"

The first of the pale creatures leapt from the wall, arcing through the air and landing atop the miserable frog-man in the coat and hat. They fell to the floor in a writhing tangle of claws and scales and cold dead flesh. Another of the frog creatures raised the long, metallic black tube it carried, and aimed it at one of the pale crawlers. It squeezed a polypous mass at one end, and a finger-long, lamprey-like projectile spat from the open end. The thing latched on to the chest of the pale monster hanging from the wall and burrowed into its chest with amazing speed, minuscule teeth rasping and gnawing like tiny saw blades as it chewed in random patterns through the withered guts of the creature that was once Cain Beane.

Miguel, Kris, and Damian ran from the kitchen across the porch and leapt off, splashing heavily into the creek below. Without stopping to think, they dove into the water and swam toward the lake with all their strength. When they were across the creek, they crawled up onto the far shore, got to their feet and ran through the low scrub.

Damian turned to look behind and saw one of the frog things erupt from the back door, landing gracelessly on its back. Its limbs stretched out and raised up as one of the pale, vampire-like horrors sailed through the air, falling atop the frog monster and burying its fanged maw into the slimy toad-thing's throat.

And there was a deafening roar, a WHOOMP! as the cabin erupted into flame. Glass burst outwards and caught the sunlight in an explosion of glittering shards. The heat blew outwards, and Damian felt the shock waves smash into him, and then all he could hear was a high-pitched whine in his ears. Everything else sounded dull and far away, indistinct, like he had cotton shoved deep into his ear canals.

He saw Miguel and Kris pitch forward, losing their balance as they fell to the earth. Past them across the creek was a cloud of thick black smoke, and a fireball erupting skyward where the cabin had once been. He watched as the fire licked the sky and the cabin burned, consumed by the hungry tongues of red flame licking at the beams, the walls, the roof. Damian took a moment to lean against a pine tree, the bark sticky with summer sap. He ached all over, his arm bled, his ankle screamed in pain. But he looked at his companions, picking themselves up from the dirt, struggling to go on. For a moment, he thought maybe humanity had a chance. Maybe they could fight against the monsters, root them out, and take the battle to them. That it might be possible to rebuild.

Flaming shards and splinters fell from the sky, crashing to earth all around like a shower of minuscule meteors. The thick green boughs of the pine he hid under protected him from the flaming debris plummeting from the heavens. As he leaned back against the tree, he saw Kris and Miguel crawling toward him on their hands and knees at first, but then rising to run toward him. With their backs to the burning

cabin, they did not see the cabin wall explode in a shower of sparks and burning timber.

Something long, huge, ropy and aflame shot out from the gap. Long, snakelike tendrils stretched out of the burning ruin, dragging a vast black bulk glimpsed in the raging flames, a hint of dozens of glassy eyes staring out at and through and into Damian and his companions. The thing from the well pulled itself from the flaming ruin, and heaved its smoking bulk into the water nearby. They watched in disbelief as it rolled and swam strangely toward the lake before it submerged and disappeared in a frothing rush of bubbles. Damian felt his bowels turn to water and loosen, felt his limbs go weak, and his primate brain flood with a single instinct: flee. He did. He turned and ran without thought or direction. Kris and Miguel didn't even turn to look behind them before they chased after him. The sheer terror in Damian's eyes was enough for them to know it was time to run. They stumbled through the wood until they hit the shore of Lake Tahoe and didn't stop to look behind until they lay gasping for air on the sandy beach.





## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Damian woke to the smell of burning. A fine powder of ash had floated down and powdered his body like fine, albeit dirty snow. The sun was well above the horizon, but lost behind the gray clouds obscuring the sky. The wan sunlight scattered dull, lead-colored glints on the rippling lake surface nearby. Something confused him at first. The smell of smoke in the air reminded him of the long days before he'd met Miguel and Kris, before the hospital, before the horrors in the woods. Briefly, he felt alone, but not lonely. He felt almost a relief without the burden of companions to watch out for, or to watch out for him.

He heard a cough nearby, and he turned his head, feeling his neck creak and grind as he did so. His muscles were sore and bruised all over, his joints aching like they were aflame. Sitting up was agony, but he managed it, leaning on his good hand and cradling his injured one and his newly bloodied arm in his lap as he did. Miguel stood on the dry, ash-flecked grass nearby. Kris was a few feet farther away, hunched down by the lake bed, doing something in the water. As she turned, Damian realized she'd been soaking a cloth in the water.

"You're awake?" she said.

Damian nodded yes and instantly regretted doing so.

"You've lost a lot of blood," she said. Kris walked toward him, took his wounded arm in her hand and washed the

wound with the damp cloth. "This looks bad. You left a trail as you ran." He looked in what he thought was the direction he'd run and saw a few crimson blossoms of his life's blood soaked into the ash.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

"Not long at all, actually," Kris replied. "We followed you from the cabin to here, we could keep up. And then you collapsed a few minutes ago."

Miguel turned to them, urgency clear in his eyes. "We can't stay long. If anything survived that blast, it'll be coming after us soon."

"I'm more concerned about anything else that might be in the lake," Kris said.

"Something survived," Damian said. He tried to stand, but his weak knees betrayed him, and he fell back on his ass in the dirt. "Shit," he said. "There was something else in the cabin. I think maybe the same creature that grabbed me in the basement. It was clawing its way out as the place was falling apart."

"Is that what you saw?" Kris said. "What made you run?"

"I think so," Damian said. "It's fuzzy in my head. I saw the building burning. Something came out. Like an immense octopus maybe. It was awful, whatever it was. I could see eyes through the fire. Or maybe I just imagined them." He stood again. This time he did not fall, though Kris put her arm around him to steady him. "I think it was one of the things they worship. I saw an idol to it in the field near the cabin."

"Everything about this is wrong," Miguel said. "We need to move. To get the hell out of here."

A distant animal howl broke the silence, a raging, furious howl that split the thick summer air and pierced their minds like slivers of ice, needle-sharp and miles long. Fractal webs of pain threaded through their minds, chaining them one

to the other and linking them to the psyche of something alien and altogether awful. The howl became long, thin, stretched out until it became the high whistling of a frozen wind, baying through an endless arctic night, carrying the cold, musty smell of dead things packed in permafrost. Ed-dies and whorls of ash and dirt spat up into the air as the wind raged toward the lake. Lofty pines bowed and creaked in its onslaught, showering Damian, Kris, and Miguel with all manner of things caught in the boughs. Thin flurries of ash whirled around and fell down on them. Twigs and needles fell and branches cracked, plummeting to earth.

"Where can we go?" Damian said. He leaned on Kris, who did her best to help him stand, but they were both off-balance.

Miguel cast his eyes along the shore, hoping to find a small boat, a raft, anything. "I don't know. Just follow the shoreline until we find something," he said.

They hiked along the shore, feet squelching in the wet sand along the lake's edge. The lake water became choppy, splashing and crashing in heavy waves against the shore.

"This isn't right," Damian said. "There's no tide here. Waves shouldn't get more than a few inches high. Look at these."

The waves were rolling back into the lake, cresting four or five feet high, and smashing again against the shore. The wind whipped at them now, throwing their hair in their faces, grasping at their clothing.

Then the howl again—closer now, and urgent, and this time from above. Damian looked up into the sky, and saw a white shape, humanoid, but wrapped in writhing gray mist the color of angry storm clouds. Its eyes burned with cold fire as it plummeted downward from the sky.

"Look out!" he cried, as he leapt for cover, knocking Kris over in his haste.

Startled, Miguel looked up just as the thing grabbed him. It hooked into his flesh with long, black talons, grabbed him with hands like coils of night-cold steel. It sunk its shark-like teeth into Miguel's shoulder, latching on like a lamprey. Blood flowed hot and free down Miguel's back and chest, red runnels of life splattering and splashing into the ground below. And then the creature kicked off of the ground, launching itself and its prey into the sky. It ascended so fast that Miguel shot out of his boots, leaving them to splash down into the puddle of his own blood as the thing tore into the sky.

"Aiiieeeeeee! Oh, God it burnnnnnsssss!" Miguel's terrified voice receded into the darkening sky as he and his tormentor catapulted upward into the thick, roiling storm clouds. Kris and Damian got up as lightning exploded, forking across the sky.

"What...what just happened?" Kris stammered.

"Miguel!" Damian shouted at the heavens. "Miguel!"

As if in answer, a sudden shower of warm rain poured down out of the sky, drenching them both. Not rain, though. Blood—Miguel's blood cascading out of the clouds. And lightning again, and again. Fork after fork of blazing light exploded across the sky before they even had the chance to realize their companion's gore rained from the sky, soaking them.

The lightning came again, but this time it was six spokes, radiating out from a glowing central hub—a huge circle of crackling light high in the sky, with streamers of energy shooting out from it, arcing from the central ring all the way to earth. Lightning spat and sparked, and where it touched the earth, cold blue flame shot upward. The central hub expanded outward, a circle widening until they could see that within it was utter blackness. Not the natural darkness of night, but purest black, a complete and utter absence of light

and heat of any kind. The ring widened further as Kris and Damian stared agog.

Thin, high on the wind they heard an awful cry once more, "Oooh-aaa! Ooooh-aaah! Tisf-irreit! Ooooh-aaah! Mehfet offiiir! Mehb'ornen! Mehb'ornen fee-t'offiiir! Mehb'ornen fee-t'offiiir!"

Within the dark circle appeared a pair of massive eyes, cloudy and dead like a corpse's, but burning with a terrible, ancient inner light. The eyes came closer, moving through the inky blackness almost filling the ring, before coming through the crackling axis of primordial energies. A colossal monstrosity gripped the edges of the hub and slithered out like a boneless mass, plummeting out and then colliding with the earth with a tremendous, deafening smash. For an instant it vanished behind the tree line, and then it rose, lumbering high above the trees, dwarfing the mountains in the distance; the air shimmered and rippled around it.

The monster's vast head was somewhat humanoid in aspect, with massive, cold, dead eyes, and a gaping slack-jawed maw at its center. An idiot's face, but the size of a dirigible. Instead of drool, fog vapor spread from its gullet, floating off into the darkening sky. Where the fog alighted on the topmost boughs and peaks of the forest, the trees froze and died in an instant. Its leprous hide was pale gray, with dark patches and streaks of a corpse's purple lividity. The monstrous creature reached out, grabbing the earth with its taloned claws and digging in to pull its bulk forward along the ground. It crushed the woods underneath as it dragged its gargantuan, sluglike torso forward.

As the death-pale giant came closer, Damian saw that the thing's colossal body was aswarm with tiny creatures. A moment later, his mind adjusted to the sheer size of the thing, and he realized they were humanoid in shape and form, white-skinned creatures that clawed their way across the

thing's body as it lumbered forward, like the creatures which had hunted them through the woods, but a full legion, not just a handful. As they watched, the things crawling across the monstrosity leapt from it, plummeted into open air and were borne aloft by the winds. At first the unnatural tempest buffeted the creatures back and forth, clumsy and flailing. But then the winds snatched them up and scattered them. They raced, shrieking, through the sky, white comet-like streaks issuing forth to all the directions of the globe.

Kris grabbed Damian, hoisted him up as adrenaline flooded her blood. "Run," she said. Her voice was dead, toneless. "Just run."



The two hobbled as fast as they could. Far in the distance the sunset was just a blood-red sliver along the peaks of the mountains. The smell of the burning cabin hung in the air, but behind that was a distant cold, dead smell, like vast quantities of raw meat ruined by freezer burn. Damian and Kris lurched along the shore of Lake Tahoe, wet sand clinging to their boots as they trudged through it. They were desperate now, thinking only of escape, survival.

"It's getting colder," Kris said. She took a few more steps forward, Damian leaning on her shoulder. When she breathed out, a thin wisp of mist escaped her lips. "So cold," she whispered through teeth clenched tight.

"It's that thing," Damian said. "Like everything warm or alive is being driven before it, pushed away. Did you see the way its breath froze the trees?"

"Yes," Kris said. "We need to move, or we'll end up the same way. Don't know about you, but I've no interest in becoming part of the winter wonderland."

The wind changed direction, flowing across them, pulling back toward the cabin, toward the horrible necrotic giant. It had been a strong breeze before, but now it was a howling gale. Damian paused and watched the trees bend in the tempest. They arced backward, away from the direction he and Kris were walking. He turned to look back along the path they'd forged at the lake's edge. In the sky he saw clouds pulling in the same direction, creating a vast funnel-like cone, twisting toward a central point. The wind pulled greedily, and he heard a creaking, a cracking, a cacophony of grinding and breaking, as trees close to the center splintered and flew into the vortex.

"That thing's sucking it all in!" Damian said. "It'll swallow the whole forest."

He doubled his pace, twisted ankle and bruised muscles forgotten. He almost knocked Kris over in his haste to flee the site. She held on to him, but he was still balancing on her, and she did her best to hold him up without falling over herself.

The lake raged beside them, waves smashing and crashing on the shore. The beaches of this normally calm lake were unused to the punishment, and sand sloughed off into the water. Damian and Kris kept going forward, and as suddenly as the wind had begun, it stopped. The lake fell quiet, trees bowed back upright.

Then silence. Utter and complete silence for a moment which stretched into seconds. And just when Damian hoped the worst was over, an overwhelming roar growled across the woods, rumbling and echoing off the mountains. The banshee wail gained volume as it dropped in pitch until Damian and Kris fell to the ground. They had to cover their ears with their hands to block out the roar of the titan which strode the Earth behind them.

As the thunderous cry rolled across the world, a typhoon followed in its wake. For the great beast, Ithaqua the Wind-walker, had drawn breath and was now letting it forth. Corrupt and foul, the Great Wendigo's breath rolled fetid and poisonous across the woods, the stench of a mass grave a thousand acres wide. The stink of dead worlds and millennia of decay trapped in the belly of the creature. Sand and rocks whipped through the air. Trees and vacation cabins broke again, tossed through the air over and past the two fugitives.

They lay on their stomachs, faces pressed into the sand, hands over their ears and holding their breath. Kris clenched her teeth, muscles standing out along her jaw like steel cables. Every atom of her being urged her to scream, to give in to the chaos that surrounded her. And yet she remained steadfast.

Damian did not. Damian opened his mouth wide, wide to the point of pain, where his jaws creaked and the corners of his mouth cracked and bled, and he shrieked a scream of madness. A wail of terror, supplication, and resignation. But this man-made cacophony became but a whisper in the discord suffusing the surrounding air. Ithaqua wailed, the wendigos streaked tittering through the sky, and Damian went limp.

What felt like eons passing to Kris was over within moments. Calm returned to the world.

Her ears rang, feeling full and heavy deep inside. A few minutes passed, and she raised her head, then rose to her hands and knees to survey the surrounding damage. The woods were a ruin, blasted down flat, radiating out from where the creature still held court in the distance. Storm clouds and darkness still obscured the thing, and a few lone trees which had escaped the damage. In the cloudy gray morning, the titan was a gargantuan silhouette in the distant fog and clouds, towering over the trees surrounding it.



Damian shivered and clawed at the sandy beach, still face-down in the muck. She could hear his muffled screams now, and reached out to touch his shoulders, to shake him and get him moving again. Kris took his shoulders in her hands and rolled him onto his back. His face was wide-eyed, white with shock where his skin peeked through the crusted sand and drying gore.

“Damian!” she said through clenched teeth, her voice urgent. “Damian! We have to move! We can’t stay here.”

She shoved her hands under his arms and dragged him to his feet. Kris pushed him along, and he plodded forward under her urgent tugging. The chaos receded behind them as they worked their way along the shore, feet sucking into the wet sand as they trudged along.



Damian and Kris kept going as fast as their legs would move, focused on no specific direction other than away from whatever horrors lay behind them. They rounded the edge of Lake Tahoe, the water now calmed, languid ripples on its surface. The sun overhead was dim behind the dark clouds and sent diffused sparkles across the rippling water. As they continued, something disturbed the rippling. The sunlight's reflection dappled and distorted, and the water frothed. A congeries of bubbles rose from the depths to the surface of the lake and churned it. They watched as a whirlpool opened in the vast, deep water of the ancient lake.

Then there were glowing spots in the water approaching the shore. The water itself began to glow, a sickening deep green, but with pairs of brighter pinpoints within. The points of light came closer, swimming against the pull of the churning waters, and then hunched, slime-draped humanoid shapes emerged from the water. Not one or a handful, but

a legion of the horrible frog-like creatures squirmed forth from the deeps, their pale underbellies bright against the gray daylight, and their eyes glowing chartreuse, like the strange alien fish found in deep trenches beneath the sea.

Damian felt his legs go out from under him. Kris toppled as he fell to the ground. She pulled him from the shore, dragged him back from the lapping waves into the cover of the fallen trees. Kris had him around the waist, dragging him through the sand and fallen branches and splintered logs, when the things pulling themselves out of the surf stopped moving. As one they stood tall, threw their heads back, and barked nonsense words at the sky—a din of subhuman voices, trying to be clear, triumphant in their conviction. The noise was an alien dirge that made no sense to her ears. As it continued, the voices found each other. The multitude caught the rhythm and cadence, and became one voice, one awful chant that shook her soul. Sounds never meant for human ears to hear, for human minds to comprehend, rattled and shook through the labyrinthine passages of her brain. Soon it rang forth, one gargantuan cry: “Iä! Iä! Cthulhu fhtagn! Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah-nagl fhtagn.”

Again and again the nightmarish cry rang across the land. It rippled across the waves as the fish-men bared their teeth at the sky, shook their hands at the heavens, and screamed out to whatever horror would receive their calling.

Thunder rolled down from the mountains to the west, a sound that began low and soft and soon became dire and monstrous. Kris sat with her back to a fallen tree, Damian’s head cradled in her lap. She listened to the approaching din, waiting for another blast of fetid air, or a storm of hail and ice, anything. But as she listened to the noise, it became sharp clattering, a rumbling, crumbling tumult that was not thunder at all. It sounded more like an avalanche, of rocks in free fall. She rose and peeked over the top of the tree

supporting her. The lake was aswarm with glistening frog-things, but they'd fallen silent. Their backs were to her and they looked to the west. She followed the line of their sight, looking across the lake to the far shore, and from the shore to the slopes of the mountain, then up to the peaks.

Clouds did not obscure the sky in that direction, though soon she wished they had. Beyond the mountain something moved, reached a clawed arm over the mountain's peak, grabbed the earth facing her, and tugged. The arm pulled and soon dragged a body over. It was the size of a mountain itself, massive and misshapen. Through a veil of darkness she could barely make out the bulbous head where many black eyes glistened along the surface. A squirming beard of enormous tendrils or tentacles ringed the head below these eyes.

The thing was reminiscent of an octopus or cuttlefish, sharing common characteristics, but clearly on a divergent path of some fevered evolutionary nightmare. Black vestigial wings reached out from its shoulders as its terrible clawed arms dragged it over the mountain's crest. The thing dragged its hindquarters over the peak and crawled on all four of its massive limbs down the face of the mountain. Within only a dozen strides the thing squatted on the far shore of the lake.

Kris turned and dropped beside Damian. Fear flooded her mind, turning her limbs to jelly. She held a scream tight in her throat, letting out only a muffled whine through her nostrils as she clamped her hands over her mouth.

Damian opened his eyes and looked up at her. He sat up, paying no heed to his bleeding arm, his wounded hand or his aching jaws as he opened his mouth and issued forth one single, awful word: "Cthulhu."

Damian stood up, leaning on a fallen tree and surveying the chaos beyond. The great black beast lumbered forward,

shaking the earth beneath its thunderous footfalls. It stepped into the lake, sending water and waves gushing high as it did. In the distance rang the banshee wail of the corpse-god Ithaqua, and Great Cthulhu swung its massive head toward the sound. The storm clouds rolled and thundered overhead, and Cthulhu waded knee-deep across the shallow edge of the lake, waves crashing before it. The frog-things charged madly before their god, roiling and flailing in the waves which preceded its lumbering gait. They were tossed through the froth to come up on the shore, howling and shrieking with bloodlust.

Ithaqua rose from the plain and shoved itself up high on its massive clawed arms, leaning back on its legless body and shrieking thunderously into the night. Winds raged forth from the putrescent titan, howled from its gigantic, cavernous mouth, spreading foulness and the stink of dead civilizations around it. Trees withered and died where the breath settled. Lightning arced and exploded in the clouds, and greasy black hailstones fell from the sky—a patter at first, and then a torrent. Ithaqua hated all life. It saw the universe as nothing but food, chattel for itself and its brood. Ithaqua meant to devour the universe, and when nothing remained but itself and its spawn, it would devour them last. Around Ithaqua, the wendigos raged and flew through the air. They screamed in a frenzy of hunger and delight. They'd been trapped in the void for eons and now were free to feed.

The pale things with dead eyes and black talons fell from the sky like fallen angels. It became a scene out of medieval apocalyptic art, as the ivory-skinned wendigos pounced on the slimy gray-green frog-things crawling from the surf. The mountains echoed with screaming, piercing cries as devils fought demons, claws rent skin and hide, cold green blood intermingled with thick black ichor. Wendigos snatched up the reef-devils, dragging them high into the sky and tear-

ing them apart. Dozens of wendigos became snared in nets thrown by the fishy things, dragged under water and summarily dismembered.

As the battle raged below, the titans closed. Ithaqua's bulk slithered forward, crushing frenzied combatants under it. With its arms outstretched, insatiable hunger deep in its belly, gales of poisonous fumes flowed from its maw as it raged toward Cthulhu, one of its many hated enemies from time immemorial.

Great Cthulhu's thunderous stride picked up pace until it was almost sprinting across the mountainside toward Ithaqua. Its vestigial wings stretched out, catching air and causing its gait to become gliding leaps. The landscape rumbled and cracked when the monstrous claws crashed to earth. Cthulhu knew its time had come—Ithaqua would be the first to fall at its crushing talons, and its mind-blasting power. As it charged forward, Cthulhu's bulbous head glowed with a sickening internal light. It was faint at first, but then rhythmic rippling streams became apparent as arcs of purple and red light washed over its head like waves of eldritch energy.

The titans clashed, colliding with each other like vengeful planets. Shock waves blasted out from their collision, the sound thunderous and deafening. For miles around, nothing stayed standing. Trees fell and avalanches rolled boulders the size of houses down the mountainside. Damian and Kris felt their minds swoon—reality shifted, the landscape changing around them, rippling in staccato flashes like they were being tossed through multiple simultaneous points in time before settling back to their proper place. As if all time and space imploded on itself and was reborn an infinite number of times in a single instant.

Locked in hate-filled grappling, Cthulhu and Ithaqua rent and tore at each other. Ice fell from the sky, the ground became slick and mired, and the monstrous god-things were

rimed with frost and slime. Cthulhu's tendrils burrowed into the doughy matter that made up Ithaqua's physical form, and black ichorous venom ran down the Great Wendigo's body, splashing in torrents to the earth. Ithaqua grabbed the polypous head of Cthulhu and squeezed it until the arcing lights dimmed. The head collapsed, and Cthulhu stood still for a moment, teetering on legs like skyscrapers. A flash of lightning arced the sky, and Cthulhu's flaccid head resorbed into its body, then was spat out again fully formed, and full of rage.

Damian moved away from the log, tugging at Kris's shirt for her to follow him. "We need to go," he said. And then a flash of white as a shape tore out of the trees and launched itself right at Damian. It glared with dead black eyes, and bones and claws and the remains of many meals dangled from a leather thong around the thing's neck. In one hand, it held the mummified head of Mother Beane tangled in straps, a single eye glowing with hate.

The wendigo leapt at Damian, claws outstretched. It had found its prey, the man flesh it had sniffed out and obsessed over for days now. The smell of rich, familiar blood filled its nostrils as it landed on top of Damian, knocking him flat on his back.

Damian punched and slapped at the creature, but in his weakened state he could not dislodge the monster. The horrible thing forced Damian's arms to the ground with its taloned claws. It sat atop his chest and leaned in to feed, long tongue licking at its rows and rows of sharp teeth, its ragged, torn, ichor-dripping lips. It lowered its face to Damian's, breathing in the heady, rich smell of his fear, of the drying blood crusting his skin. Damian screamed out, "Kris! Help me! Get it off me! Oh God help me!" He grabbed at the leather thong hanging from the creature's neck, tearing it free of the monstrous horror.

The wendigo's head suddenly darted forward and was at Damian's neck with lightning speed, biting deep into his shoulder. Red gouts of blood ran down his torso, mixed with the sticky black ichor from the wendigos' suppurating wounds. Damian cried out as unimaginable pain flooded him, pain that burned like cold fire filled with hate.

The wendigo worried at his shoulder and then stopped. The pale thing, the creature that stank of frozen death, raised its head and looked down at Damian. Dead eyes deep in black sockets of rot and corruption regarded Damian as a strange boy might look down on a particularly interesting bug—instincts overwhelmed, hunger forgotten for just the merest moment as the creature looked on Damian with a look tinged with revelation. Damian saw none of this, just bled out and felt pain and fear flowing through his body. But the wendigo looked at him and broke its frenzied attack. This one, it thought in its own primitive patois, this one is not for food. This one has other uses.

And then something that passed for humor creased the monster's mind. A sick grin split the thing's mouth, and it threw its head back and threw out a howl of frustration and black humor. The wendigo vaulted off of Damian, leapt onto a nearby fallen tree, threw its arms skyward, and sprang into the night.



Damian lay on the earth, choking, blood seeping from his ruined shoulder. In one hand, he still clutched the leather thong from around the Wendigo's neck, festooned with strange and awful talismans.

Kris watched all this feeling numb, in a daze. Her mind had become stimulated to a point of almost complete overload, and all she could do was watch the monstrous tableau play-

ing out before them. As the earth shook and the skies shattered, she felt a tugging at her sleeve. Like a mindless automaton, her head swiveled to the left to see Damian staring at her, eyes wide with fear. He was mud-caked, gore-streaked, and had his hand on her arm.

“Kris,” he said. “There’s nothing left for us.” He tugged at her arm again, and she moved toward him, turning away from the battle raging in the distance. “The world is theirs now.” He shoved the necklace he’d torn from around the wendigo’s throat deep into a pocket.

She stared at him and moved forward. She took a step and then another and leaned on him now. Damian, weakened by loss of blood and the loss of his world, shouldered the burden as best he could. They walked now, ignored and forgotten by the world around them. They trudged away through the freezing night, echoes of madness and violence filling the distance behind them. His shoulder throbbed. He didn’t have to look to know what he’d see, but he turned his head anyway to glimpse the ruined flesh. It was all black and awful in the misty gray light, and where the monster’s teeth had pierced his skin, he saw the faintest trace of phosphorescent fibers sprouting from deep within the wound.

A screeching sound blasted across the landscape. Cries from monstrous throats ripped high and fast up into the sky. Kris and Damian looked up, turned behind them, and saw the sky blotted out. Cthulhu took to the air. Its body shrank almost imperceptibly as its once-vestigial wings swelled into massive draconic pinions that spread wide and blotted out the sky. The necrotized, snakelike Ithaqua coiled around it, squeezing like an anaconda bent on destroying a planet. The two alien gods rose overhead, hurtled through the sky as they fought and battled each other. Damian had lost any sense of scale, but he felt that the two titans were miles high into the sky now, yet still vast. Then they grew, became larg-



er, blocking yet more of the sky, and Damian realized they were descending. The two monstrosities were falling to earth at an alarming speed.

He grabbed hold of Kris and dragged her forward, pulling on her arm, and they ran and stumbled through the wasteland of broken trees and ruined roads. And when the monsters crashed to earth, Damian and Kris were knocked sailing through the air by the shock wave.



The ground did not simply shudder. It rolled and shook; it buckled and heaved. Damian and Kris, flat on their backs, were still tempest-tossed, and felt their ribs rattling against the ground. A thunderous explosion shattered the night, sending tons of dirt and rubble skyward, blotting out the stars. Then they heard rushing water, like being at the side of a gushing white-water river, but there wasn't any water nearby, was there? They'd left the lake's edge a mile or more back, working their way inland. Far away, they still heard the struggle of titanic alien gods. The nightmarish battle was moving away, but still loud enough that it was clear in their ears.

The air thick with dust and debris, Damian decided he'd had enough.

"I can't go on," he said. He slumped to the ground, keeling over and lying on his back, face up to the darkening sky, gulping for air.

Kris pulled at him, tried to get him to walk again, but he was a dead weight.

"Can't we rest for a bit?" he said.

Then everything went wild. A pale light blasted out in rippling concentric circles from a distant central point wherever

the battle between the two alien monsters had concluded. Energy blasted out, and wave by wave, Damian and Kris felt the outcome—disoriented, jumbled, blasted forward, backward, and outside of time, space, and other dimensional notions not understood by the primitive minds of earthly primates. They saw, lived, created, and destroyed universes. They rippled along the flow of space-time in every possible permutation. Damian's mind stretched to infinite visions and alien pathways; his body had become infused with the essence of the alien otherness of the wendigo, and his essence stretched thin across the streams of time. He was fighting against the complete loss of his self, but the struggle was too much for his weakened form. As Cthulhu and Ithaqua tore the fabric of the universe apart, Damian became fractured and rebuilt and lost in the ebbs and flows of cosmic power.



## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

The wendigo howled at the universe as it catapulted through the sky. Gods struggled and died below it, and it no longer cared for them. It hungered again, and understood not only its past, but what lay before it in the future. Let Ith-aqua fight its petty wars. There was other meat on this dying world. And more worlds beyond this one.



## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

Kris woke up coughing, her sinuses thick and throat dry. A dusty, mineral taste in her mouth as she opened her eyes and looked up at the clear blue sky. Grit flaked into her eyes as she did, and they watered and blinked as she fought to expel the foreign debris. She raised her hand to wipe at her eye, but a fine silt of dirt or ash covered it.

Alarmed, she sat upright and looked around, surprised to see the same gray dust over everything. Trees had fallen flat to earth, branches blasted bare of leaves and needles. The mountain peaks to the west all wore a gray shroud. She rose to her feet and realized that she was all alone. Nothing else living moved within her sight. In the distance, back in the direction from which she'd fled with Damian last night, she heard rushing water and investigated.

The going was slow as her sore muscles and general fatigue wore her out. More than once fatigue forced her to stop and rest against a log or rock. As the sound of water came closer, the terrain became less familiar. She kept on until she came to a wide gorge. As she reached the edge and looked down into it, she saw it was a crater, vast and deep. Water rushed from a source in the west along the bottom and out to the east. She continued walking along the edge until she found the terminus of the river, a vast blanket of shimmering blue far below her.

Nevada, she realized. No longer a desert, but completely and utterly flooded as far as she could see. With shock and awe Kris realized the gorge, the crater, this was what remained of the mountain edge of Lake Tahoe, cracked open completely when the twin titans had fallen through the sky and crashed to earth. The lake's basin had flooded out, sluicing through the rent, widening it with the pressure of trillions of gallons of water suddenly free to move. The water had crashed through, flooding into the Carson Valley, and who knows how far out after that.

She wondered about the people in the valley. When torrents of water carried monsters into the valley had the survivors met them? Had they fallen? Had they fought? Had there been anyone there at all? From her vantage point high up, the low desert of the valley was now shimmering blue. Kris supposed that was the way of things. The world changes, grows, dies. Maybe it's reborn, maybe it just festers and rots. But her corner was washed clear for now.

If Kris had been able to go north, she could have gone back up to King's Beach, grabbed her gear with little trouble and been on her way from there. Unless she could fly across the chasm, or felt like climbing down deep into the unstable valley, there was little hope going in that direction.

She walked back westward along the edge of the deep ravine. It didn't take her long to find the remains of Tahoe's eastern shore. The shore now sloped off into a slimy black chasm, hundreds of feet of rock and sand now exposed to the sun's light for the first time in millions of years. And it smelled, the stink of algae drying in the summer sun, rich and green. Deep in the bottom of the ravine she saw the dwindling remnant of Lake Tahoe's vast basin of water draining fast. Maybe it would hit some equilibrium in time if the crack wasn't too deep.

So she walked. She trudged through the dust and ash, tripping on buried roots and rocks. Once, she stumbled over a severed human head, withered and leathery. It skittered and rolled away as she kicked it, coming to rest half a dozen feet away. It stared at Kris with one pale, rheumy eye. And then the jaw creaked open and a long, thin, purple tongue snaked forth from between snagged, stained teeth. Something in Kris's mind snapped. She charged the skull, bringing the heel of her boot down on it. The bone cracked and leathery skin split as she stomped it over and over. Soon it was nothing but a brown stain in the gray ash.

She traced a path along the highway that circled the lake, the same one they'd been diverted onto yesterday. For hours she walked south along the highway until she saw a sign marking a neighborhood of summer tourist cabins, labeled "Slaughterhouse Canyon." When she saw that she burst out laughing. She doubled over and lay on the ground, gasping for air as she was caught in a paroxysm of spastic laughter. And as happens when shock turns to grief, the laughter soon turned to tears, great sobbing heaves and cries as Kris rocked on the ground, in the dirt and dust. Utterly and completely alone.



## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

Damian slipped and skipped through time and space. His mind flittered through the eddies of cosmic consciousness like a stone jumping on a lake. When the titans clashed, he'd already contracted the Rime of Ithaqua and been tainted with the spoor of the Old Ones. He became as they are, as they were, as they will be. The Old Ones exist not eternally, but outside the human concept of time and space as it is at all.

As the Rime interlaced with his mind and body, it pulled him closer to a terminal moment, to a place in time and space close to where he'd been lost, but not perfectly so. He dragged himself back to earth in the desert, where the sky was ruddy and filled with ash. The blazing heat of the sun glared down at him from behind the hazy caul. He found shelter in a mine, vacated years before. He hid from the sun during the daytime hours, deep in the earth. His clothes rotted away, and the only thing he kept from his previous life was the leather thong strung with feathers and fetish bones he'd ripped from the wendigo's neck. He wore it as a talisman around his own neck. He had a dim memory of companions. Remembered ice and snow and a battle between gods that destroyed the world. Soon the Rime had rewoven his mind, stripped him of anything resembling the human he'd been before.

The thing that had been Damian now fed on rats and worms and snakes, with its long purple tongue darting from

between rows of razor-sharp teeth. But it hungered for better fare. It needed to hunt, to devour. It needed the chase and the overpowering of prey as much as it needed a full belly. But the heat overpowered the creature. It raised its head, staring down the long, dark tunnel toward the entrance to its lair, and saw the dim glow of daylight. Even the dim twilight made the thing's eyes ache.

It could not travel under direct sunlight; the heat burned it. Even though the sky was dim, and the sun hid in the haze, the heat would still burn the creature's skin, blistering and festering where it was bare, making it itch where sparse patches of matted thick white fur covered its thin, corpse-pale hide. For now it slunk between the shadows and waited for night to come.

But now it scented something. Something distant, enticing, tantalizing. It was the iron smell of blood, faint on the wind. Man's blood. It reared back, throwing its head in the air, shaking out its mane, and howled. Soon, the wendigo would feed.





## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

Kris found a cabin in decent repair and spent the rest of the day sleeping there. There were fresh clothes in the closets, and a garage filled with racks of dried food, bottles of water—everything she'd need for a while. And a fully-fueled Jeep Wrangler hardtop. It was dusty and had seen some wear, but she tried it and the engine turned.

When she was too tired to work any more that day, she chose a room to sleep in. On the nightstand was a photo of a happy, smiling family. She looked at the husband in the picture. It didn't take her long before she recognized Damian in that smile. The man in the photo was a few pounds heavier, less worn down, somehow more real than the Damian she'd come to know. She laughed as she sat on the edge of the bed, and started to undress. After all the traveling, all the horrors and chaos, she'd found Damian's cabin after all. Laughter turned quickly to tears, and she sobbed softly until sleep took her.

She cleaned herself up over the next few days. A hand-pumped water spigot out back still drew well water, and even if it was cold, she got herself clean. She traded in her worn denim and leather traveling clothes for khaki pants and a plaid flannel shirt—autumn or winter wear, which was lucky for her. The new clothes smelled of cedar and detergent, clean smells of the old world, of the time before monsters walked the earth.

A few weeks later, with a chill in the air and a dent made in the provisions she'd found, Kris decided it was time to travel south. That had been their original plan, the idea she, Miguel, and Damian had cooked up before they'd found the hospital. Travel south, stay warm.

At first she'd used the Jeep to look for Damian. For a week she'd driven the highway and side roads between the cabin and where she'd left him. She called his name, searched high and low for him, but there'd been no sign of him at all. As far as she could determine, it was like he'd just vanished off the face of the planet. It was more than likely that when the mountain had cracked open, he'd been washed away. Or carried off by one of the monsters. Her journey took her back up to King's Beach eventually, going the other way around the lake, and she retrieved what they'd left in the hotel.

She gave it another couple of days after deciding. She knew it made sense to get moving, to get back on the road before the snows came in. She wanted to get somewhere warm, hopefully find other people. Kris knew there must still be people out there, other survivors like herself. Maybe a FEMA camp, or a military base.



Just over a month after Kris found the cabin, the first snows began to fall. She woke up one morning and the previous night's gray skies had dropped a thin layer of fine white powder across the area. It was beautiful, peaceful.

And she knew it was time to leave.



For another two weeks, she drove along the highways and byways of Nevada, and then into New Mexico. The water out of Tahoe had flooded the Carson Valley completely under. She had to take side and back roads to skirt the water and avoid it as best she could. Once she got around that, Nevada itself was dry, dusty, and empty. She drove during the day, camped out off-road or in abandoned buildings at night.

She didn't encounter the pale things with dead eyes again. Nor did she have any dealings with the strange, fishlike creatures on her path. Occasionally she saw strange shapes in the sky at night, or off in the distance of the desert during the day, hulking black forms made indistinct by the hazy gray of winter storms in the hills and highways, and she avoided them. She even saw humans from time to time, but they were diseased, mutated, changed by alien power and warped into forms which filled her with dread. She kept clear.



Kris woke early one morning. The gas station she'd camped out in was cold and drafty. She'd found a siphon pump weeks back and used it to suck gasoline out of underground tanks. It was tedious work, but she'd been able to keep the Wrangler filled, and two spare cans of gas besides.

She made breakfast that morning of packaged jerky strips from the convenience store attached to the gas station. A few stale crackers and a juice box rounded out her repast. She still had food from the cabin's stores in the back of the jeep, but she didn't want to dig into that if she didn't have to.

She'd scavenged a few extra items from the store (one can never have too many batteries these days) and was loading them into the back of the Jeep when she heard rumbling

coming from down the road, a low, rattling noise that set her on edge, before she realized what it was: tires. Vehicles approaching from the south, the same direction she'd been heading when she stopped here for the night.

Kris got down low on one knee, looking out the window of the store to see what was coming. Outside, in the distance, she saw a large truck—army green, a trailer pulling a flat bed. On the bed were dozens of boxes held under a tarp which flapped in the wind from the truck's motion. The truck slowed a hundred yards away and turned off from the road. It was taking a side road, one she'd missed when she'd driven the highway last night in the pitch-black desert darkness. As the truck turned off the main road, she saw letters stenciled on the side of the cabin, and again on the tarp: FEMA.

So the old world wasn't done yet. They still fought, still survived.

Kris didn't hesitate. She pushed the door open and ran out as the truck completed its turn. It was picking up speed again when she reached through the window of the Jeep and pounded on the horn. It bleated loud and long as she held pressure on the horn for what seemed like an eternity.

The truck stopped. Brake lights flashed red, then cut out entirely. She released the horn just in time to hear the high-pitched gasping whine of hydraulic brakes engaging. Half a minute passed and then two people in military uniforms came around the side of the truck. They were both looking around warily, holding pistols. One man, one woman. When they saw her they raised their pistols.

Without hesitation, Kris raised her hands, "Hi," she said, voice cracking slightly. "I don't know where you came from, or where you're going. But if there's any chance you could spare some room, or need an extra pair of hands..."

The two soldiers approached her. "That your Jeep?" the woman asked.

Kris shook her head. "I found it in Tahoe, nobody seemed to be using it, so I—"

"You were in Tahoe?" the man asked. "When?"

"A month or so ago, I guess," Kris said.

"We've got room for you. As long as you can tell us your story," the man said. "Give us some idea of what happened up there."

"Sure," Kris replied. "Of course."

"Fair warning," said the man. "We've got a lot of sick people in camp. Medic says it's pneumonia. We've got a quarantine center set up for them, but it's been tricky keeping it under control."

"Hang on," Kris said, and walked to the jeep. She pulled the rear hatch open, and removed the cardboard carton full of antibiotics. "Keflex, Augmentin, amoxicillin—...all kinds of stuff in here. Figured it might be handy eventually."

The woman's eyes went wide. "You're kidding, right?" she asked, rushing over to take the box from Kris, rifling through the bottles and boxes of antibiotics inside. She turned to her companion. "This is a gold mine!" she said. "Well, you've definitely earned your keep." She smiled at Kris. "Let's get a move on. Hot food and showers await."

The two got back into their truck, and Kris followed along in her borrowed Jeep. They wound along the side roads as the sun rose over the hills, and by the time it was overhead, Kris was approaching a tent city of hundreds. A bustling, thriving outpost of humanity amid a new world of gods and monsters.

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The horror movie theme song playlist I made with Amazon Prime Music, and listened to while writing this can be found at <http://bit.ly/Spooky-Tunes>.

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### *About the Author:*

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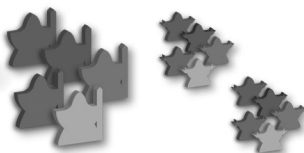
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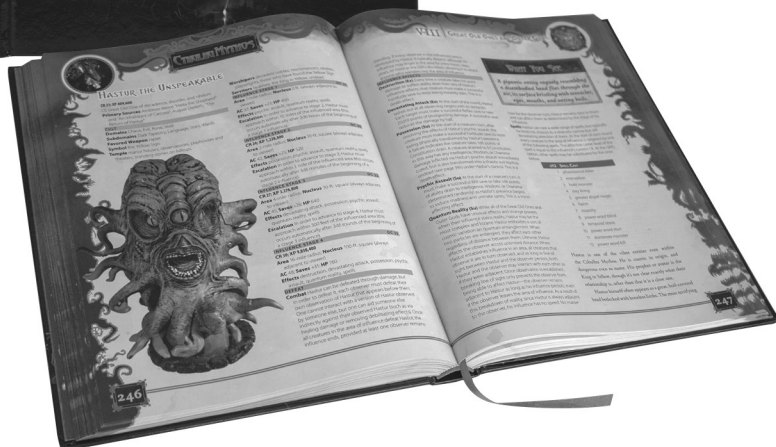
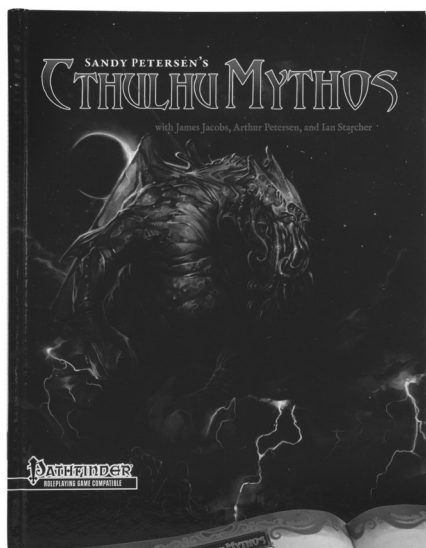
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