

One

I wasn't alone the first time I woke up in this place. The sky was the dark of early dawn, the last few brightest stars still twinkling against navy blue. I groaned, dead grass crunching under my back, and looked up to find a dark figure standing beside a jagged stone, watching me.

I sat up slowly, my mouth gummy, my body aching. Eyeing the figure, I turned to face it, still too weak to stand, and tried to remember how to talk.

“Whaaa....whaaa....”

I began to cough, hacking and wheezing uncontrollably. Arms around my abdomen, I fell over, brightly colored specks exploding against the back of my eyelids as I struggled to breathe. Forcing myself up onto my hands and knees, I finally expelled a gobbet of phlegm the size of a meatball. It was black.

I fell back on my side, resting for a moment. The sky was growing lighter, although the figure remained veiled – unnaturally so. Gripping a handful of soggy earth, I pushed myself up again, panting.

“Whaaa....what's happening?” I finally managed. “What is this?” My tongue felt alien, strange.

I was in a field of short stone monoliths, patched with the occasional skeleton of a tree. A graveyard, I realized. Old, and unattended. The dead grass beneath me grew wild, fat clumps of weeds rising around the graves as tall as bushes. The figure shifted slightly, but said nothing. It was perfectly silent. I couldn't even hear it breathe.

“I don’t...I can’t...” I tried to stand, my whole body trembling, my knees shaking like a toddler trying to take his first steps. Moving my left foot forward, I collapsed, crumpling pathetically at the figure’s feet.

“*Help me,*” I moaned, my eyes stinging with frustrated tears. “*Please,* I don’t know what’s happening...”

The shadow swam in my vision, the figure running like ink in the dim light. I blinked, and found that it was gone.

“Hello?” I looked around desperately, trying to see where the figure had gone. “*Hello?*” I said again, with a hint of desperation.

Silence.

The sun began to rise, a sliver of grey across the reddish brown tree-tops on the horizon. The final stars began to disappear from the overcast sky, and as I clumsily turned this way and that, I found that I was truly alone.

Giving up, I collapsed to the ground, gathering my strength. Back once again on the cold brown grass, I re-familiarized myself with my body. The light brown skin of my hands pale with cold, slightly blue in the dim grey light. Arms clad in the sleeves of a black, woolen coat. Feet – numb, in once-white sneakers, now streaked with dirt. Jeans on my legs. Cold mud on the back of my head, seeping through my hair to the scalp.

Birds chirped in the distance, and I wondered if I was dead. Do birds chirp in Hell? Like a prayer, before a feast. Would they soon sweep in, like a cloud of black? Were my guts and flesh to be their breakfast, their bacon and eggs?

A Blue Jay swept across my field of vision, and I somehow doubted it.

“Okay,” I grunted, pushing myself up on my elbow.

I stood – more successfully this time.

The graveyard was weathered, to say the least. Now that there was light, I could see how neglected it truly was. Weeds and brambles aside, nearly half of the headstones were broken. The rest were worn down, etched and softened by the elements. How long it had taken them to become this derelict, I had no idea. Twenty years? Fifty? A hundred?

I began to walk, idly reading the names and dates on the graves as I went.

HENRY JOSEPH THOMPSON – 1929-1995

ELEANOR EISNER HEMINGWAY – 1975-2003

JOO LEE SEONG – 1964-2035

JENNIFER LONG DAVENPORT – 2003-2018

DANIEL RAMEREZ-GARCIA – 1991-2031

I looked around for a while, finding graves of people who had died as long ago as 1890 – although those graves were almost completely illegible – and graves as recent as the late 2030s. The newest I could find was a baby who had been still-born in 2039. *Little Lucia – Resting in the Arms of Angels.*

I came to a break in the mossy stone walls that lined the field; an archway with a rusted gate hanging off of its hinges. There was sign, words etched in dirty copper, over the archway. I couldn't read them through the filth. My earlier weakness having faded, I climbed up the side of the arch and reached over to wipe the sign with my sleeve. After a bit of effort, I could finally make them out.

Juggler's Meadow Cemetery

Reading the sign, a faint twinge of memory tickled at my brain. But that's all it was – a twinge. I couldn't even remember my own name. With a slow, creeping feeling of cold slipping over me, I began to revisit the idea that maybe I was dead.

Two

Just outside of the cemetery was a park. I walked through it slowly, trying not to slip on thick grass wet with morning dew. The trees had taken over, maples all red and gold with autumn. Here and there the scattered remnants of civilization reminded me of where I was -- the rusted shards of what had once been a trash can, reaching up like skeletal claws; top heavy posts that had once been grills, jutting out besides the small mossy fragments of planks from picnic tables long rotted away.

The lush green foliage and the bright crimson of the trees tittering with birds felt inappropriately picturesque. Like a place as dead as this didn't have any right to be so pretty.

A butterfly rested on the skull of a dead child, orange and black wings fluttering in the warm, morning light. I felt my gut clench as I realized what I was looking at. The child's skin was completely gone, the bone long since bleached by the sun. A few shredded remains of clothing clung to its ribs and pelvis. One shoe remained, melted and deformed by the years of exposure.

The child was leaned up against a jungle gym, which now looked like the filthy skeleton of some oversized beast. All that remained of the swing set was a peeling pipe structure with a few dangling chains. The rest of the structures were even more abstract.

Following a path choked with weeds and grass, I shoved through a thicket of overgrown bushes, pushing out onto a street. The cracked and broken sidewalks were lined with very old, long abandoned houses, looking like diseased faces with their hanging doorways, sagging

rooftops and paint gone a uniform yellow, brown and grey, no matter what color the houses might once have been.

I hesitated for a moment, considering whether or not it would be a good idea to call attention to myself. I should have been scared, but somehow I wasn't, staring up into those blacked out windows like rotten teeth. It was so odd and dreamlike, being in this place with no memory of anything before this morning, nothing but snatches of images too quick and fragmented to be of any use. That, and an odd familiarity to the place. It sort of numbed me to the entire situation. I was too confused, too new to all of this to be afraid.

That wouldn't last long.

"Hello?" I called. "*Helllooooo!*"

My voice echoed, a small flock of birds bursting from a nearby tree top in startlement, making me jump. Besides that, though, there was no reply.

To my right, old, rotten residential continued on, the street curving out of sight. To my left, however, the way continued onto a broader street running perpendicular to this one. A filthy storefront gleamed dully up ahead, cracked glass held together by wire mesh.

I walked towards the shop, occasionally calling out, although I didn't expect to find anyone. I stopped where the two streets met, to orient myself. The sun was rising at my back, to the east. I now stood on Main Street, as I could make out from the barely legible sign post lying on its side, half buried in the leaves. It stretched North and South, and looking over to the North I noticed something curious. A few blocks away was a mass of fog, surging and boiling away, fat curls rising up from the top like some hideous deep sea *thing* before fading in the sunlight.

Idly kicking a stone across the rotting carpets of leaves that matted the street, I made my way over to its hazy edge. As I drew near it struck me that the mist ended abruptly, as if flattened

up against an invisible barrier. It was murky to the point of being completely opaque, and rose up ten feet at its roiling top. Unease gripping me, I slowly backed away, wanting to leave but unwilling to turn my back to it.

Finally, I turned and ran -- skipping occasionally as I imagined dark figures reaching out from the mist with hands attached to arms like tentacles, stretching to grab at my heels. Several blocks north from where I had started I finally stopped, bending over with my hands on my knees to catch my breath. The cool air burned in my lungs, and looking back I saw that nothing had followed me.

I straightened up, readjusting my coat, feeling foolish. The mud in my hair had mostly dried at this point and I shook it out with my hands, flakes of dirt raining down on my shoulders.

Taking a step, my foot crunched down on something. I shifted my sneaker, revealing the crushed hand of another skeleton -- an adult's, this time. There was something odd about this one, though.

Its ribs stuck out from the leaves as if from mud, its skull half submerged, jaws agape, as if killed mid-scream. Bent over, I prodded the forehead of the skull. It fell cleanly in half. The whole skeleton had been sliced in half, so finely that the bones had remained in place, leaning up against one another. I ran my finger along where it had been severed, and found it to be completely smooth. I had no idea what could have possibly done such a thing.

Uneasy, I moved on, eyeing the broken storefronts and empty car husks with newfound paranoia. As I walked down the street I was once again struck by that sense of overwhelming familiarity. It was as if I had come this way a thousand times before. Certain landmarks coalesced with snatches of memory, filling me a feeling not unlike vertigo as they came into view. An old theater -- three remaining letters hanging crooked on the yellowing billboard. An

even older civil war monument at the center of a roundabout -- a black monolith etched with the names of dozens of fallen veterans who had once called this town their home.

I knew this place. I was sure of it.

I turned a corner at a broken, candy-striped pole leaned against the collapsed heap of an old barbershop, my footsteps sure. I had no idea where I was going, but of the route I was certain.

Following my feet, I continued to walk.

Three

I stopped twice before finding what I was looking for.

The first time was at what was left of a soda machine. I realized how thirsty I was, and spent nearly twenty minutes trying to pry it open before finally toppling it over in frustration. It burst apart, sludge and wet rust pouring out like the guts of dead animal. Digging through the slurry, I managed to find one can of Coke that wasn't totally degraded. Cracking it open with a satisfying hiss, I drank deep. Coughing and sputtering, I spit it out, wiping my mouth on my sleeve, eyes tearing up. It was putrid and metallic – totally undrinkable.

The second time was at a set of hand prints in the cement. They were delicate, the prints of a teenage girl, or a maybe a boy with slender fingers. An odd, suffocating feeling clenched at my chest, and I kneeled down beside them in spite of myself, laying my hand over one of the prints. The stone was warm from the sun, and for a moment felt alive.

When I came to the big, yellow house with the rooster weathervane still miraculously towering on the remaining tiled spire, I knew that this was the place that my feet had been taking me. The house was enormous, short stone walls up to my waist bordering an expansive front yard, which had been completely overtaken by rose bushes. There wasn't a petal to be seen, however -- just thorns, jutting out from sleek brown stems, angry and red.

The pathway remained passable, however, the rosebushes clinging to the outer fringes and spilling their way in, leaving something of a clearing around the middle.

I delicately put my foot onto the first step, weary of rotten wood. It held, creaking loudly. The second was soft, and would have collapsed had I not skipped it, up onto the third, then the

porch. The door, once impressive, well lacquered and artfully crafted, hung crookedly in the doorway.

Struggling for a bit, I forced it in. Although loose on its hinges, it had kept closed well enough. Now I had to jump back as it came careening down, crashing onto the porch steps and tumbling down to the pathway.

Dusty shafts of light fell across my path as I cautiously entered the house, unsure of what I might find, or what I was even looking for.

I could tell that this home had once been beautiful. I stood in the foyer - a huge, open room that branched out into a sunroom on my right and a moderately sized ballroom to my left. Twin staircases leading up to the second floor curved up along either side of the foyer, framing a full wall of once ornately decorated glass with a view to an overgrown courtyard.

High up above, plaster hung down from the ceiling in wet, fleshy strips, exposing insulation stuffed between naked support beams, giving me the oddest sensation that I'd been swallowed up by some great, rotting beast.

The stairs were partially collapsed, what still held looking totally unstable. Scaling them was out of the question.

“Hello?” I called, tentatively. “Anybody here?”

No reply.

I called out again, louder this time, but still no answer.

I wandered into the sunroom to my right, stepping over clumps of moss and weeds that had sprung up from the carpeting. The room was a circle of windows, lined by benches with old cushions black with mildew, torn open with old stuffing hanging out where birds and other animals had scavenged for nesting material. The windows were mostly gone, sunlight streaming

through open panes and what glass remained. A tall sapling thrived at the center of the floor, bursting from the carpet and pushing up against the ceiling, where it curved to keep growing. It was eery, and beautiful.

I turned back, slowly walking over to the ballroom, carefully examining every wall, every ruined piece of art, every rotting piece of furniture. I had no idea what I was looking for. There was this nagging feeling chewing at the pit of my stomach like indigestion, like I had forgotten something desperately important, but couldn't quite place my finger on what it was.

The ballroom was empty, save for an old piano. Ivory keys thudded mutely as I pressed them, hammers striking rust and empty air within the slouching wooden husk. I continued through the house with growing anxiety, surer by the moment that I was wasting my time – that there was nothing here for me.

The cracked, paper-thin optic mesh of an old wallscreen curled in on itself over a surprisingly clean fireplace in the living room – an only slightly singed log sitting atop a cast iron holder within it. A half circle of once plush sofas and arm chairs faced it, cushions and woodwork better preserved than those in the sunroom, despite having been made into the homes of several species of rodent.

I tapped the dusty pad set into the wall beside the screen, willing it to come to life, to light up with faces and noise and news of the world around me. No such luck. There wasn't any power, that I could see.

There was only one window in the room, white and red stained glass, depicting a woman bent over in prayer. It was completely intact, leaving this room more protected from the elements than the others I had seen thus far.

A bookcase across the room caught my eye, standing beside a leather recliner in the corner, and a lamp hanging overhead. A cozy little reading nook. A framed photograph sitting on one of the shelves next to a dusty snow globe. Wiping away the dust and grime with my sleeve, I saw that it was of a little girl with a crown of wild yellow hair, blowing bubbles with a puckered smile on her tiny face. A pale man with salt and pepper hair sat on a bench nearby, grinning as he watched the little girl play. I recognized the jungle gym behind the man as the one from the playground next to the graveyard, and wondered if this little girl was the dead child I had seen propped up against it. The thought twisted up my gut, and for a moment I thought I was going to be sick.

So far I had seen plenty of paintings hanging from the walls, but no photos. All pretty well ruined, not having had the protection of glass like the photograph of the man and the yellow haired girl. It was as if the owners of the house had found them tacky, allowing only this single photograph on this one shelf in the reading nook, besides the snow globe, a few dancer figurines, and a tiny, emerald studded jewelry box.

I popped the jewelry box open and jumped back in surprise as a little girl's voice began to sing.

“Heeey Jude, don’t make it bad! Take a saaaaad song, and make it b-eh-eh-ter. Remember! To let her into your heart – then you will sta-art, to make it better...”

The song was pretty, despite the little girl's lackluster singing ability. A piano played clumsily in the background, and I figured that it too must have been the little girl, playing as she sung.

Against the back of the lid was a well-lacquered photomontage, pasted down around a circle of silver inscribed with the words “To Ellie. Happy 17th! You’ll always be our beautiful little lady. Love, Mom and Dad. Nov. 12th, 2039.”

My heart began to pound as I looked the photos over, one by one. Some were of her as a child, one of her playing the piano, another of her wearing a tutu, in line with a group of other girls learning ballet. But the other photos chronicled the girl as she grew up, one with a much older Ellie wearing an elegant, black leotard, standing in a graceful pirouette, eyes closed, yellow hair pulled tightly against her scalp. There were two more of her playing piano, one as an adolescent, another as a teenager, focused and beautiful. Ellie on horseback. Ellie driving a car, hands held awkwardly on the wheel, the man with salt and pepper hair (presumably her father) gripping his seat with his face pulled back in a terrified grimace.

Within the jewelry box was a feather, a few pieces of sea glass, an amethyst stone, and a dried out wasps’ nest. A little girl’s treasure trove, the younger Ellie’s most prized possessions – still preserved, even now.

I stood there, fingers delicately tracing the edges and contours of the jewelry box as I let the song go on, repeating itself. I felt dizzy, high, and was suddenly overwhelmed by a desperate and suffocating sadness. I forced myself to close the box, shaking my head.

The other shelves were filled with books, almost all in French and what appeared to be Latin – neither of which I could understand. The only book that was written in English was an ornate, leather-bound King James Bible, perfectly intact despite some traces of mold creeping across the edges. I flipped through it quickly, shaking it to make sure nothing was tucked away inside. Clouds of dust rose from the pages and I began to cough, closing the bible quickly and putting it away.

I moved on to the other rooms with growing frustration as I found little else of any interest. The kitchen was horrible, the sink full of black, a carpet of ants rippling across the floor, enveloping the corpse of a dead raccoon with its innards spilled out onto the tile. I didn't even bother opening the fridge, not curious enough to find out what gruesome ecology might have taken hold within it over the decades.

There was nothing here, nothing but a bunch of dead things. I threw my hands up in the air, going back to the living room, and angrily began to pace back and forth across the warped wooden floorboards. There was nothing here. Not a thing. No clues as to what brought me here, nothing to explain what had happened to this place, or where I should go, or whether or not there was anyone left within a thousand miles of this place – or at all.

I thought of the figure who had been there when I first woke up, that shadow watching over me. Whoever, whatever it was, it was responsible for me being here. I *knew* it. And it must have known that I would come here, this house.

But why?

“Where are you?” I demanded. “Come out!”

I stood there, hands clenched into fists as the silence beat down on me.

“*Where are you?*” I shouted, louder this time. “Where the hell are you? Show yourself you son of a bitch, I know you're there! *I know you're there!*”

With a growl, I grabbed the snow globe off the shelf, flinging it across the room. It exploded wetly against the mantle. Unsatisfied, I upturned one of the sofas with a roar, still shouting and screaming for the figure to show itself, to come out and get whatever it was planning with me over with. I didn't care anymore. I had run out of calm, run out of patience. I'd tear this place apart, if I had to. I'd burn it to the goddamn ground.

I glanced over at the stained glass woman with malice, something about her meek piety further feeding my destructive rage. Stalking over to the fireplace, I bent over to grab the log, to hurl it right at her, and smash her out of existence.

Click.

The log was artificial, lifting slightly but staying attached to the cast iron holder, as if on a hinge. Puzzled, I released it, and turned around, finding that the bookcase across the room had swung open to reveal a hidden entrance. Looking into the darkness, my breath caught in my throat as I realized what I was looking at.

A staircase, leading down.

Four

Kicking in the old coffee table, I tore off one of the legs. With a pang of guilt, I ripped out the pages of one books written in French, wrapping them around the thick end of the leg and binding them against it with long swatches of stuffing and fabric from one of the sofa cushions.

Delicately, I popped open the bottom of the emerald jewelry box. Careful not to damage the circuitry, I pried out the tiny, fingernail sized battery that powered the speaker.

Stepping around the ants and entrails spread across the kitchen floor, I set down the rudimentary torch and battery on the countertop and dug around the under kitchen sink until I found a dry square of steel wool.

Holding my breath, unsure if the battery would be powerful enough, I placed the steel wool in the sink and touched the battery against it. A dull red quickly spread across the mesh and I pulled the battery away. Hefting the torch, I touched the stuffing to the wool. It caught -- a thick, oily flame quickly enveloping the paper and cloth.

The flame wouldn't last long, so I quickly made my way over to the secret entrance, torch held out before me. Steeling myself, I began to descend.

Cement stairs led into the darkness below, the way impeded by an unpleasant amount of spider webs. I brushed them aside, careful not to set them aflame. I stifled shudders as the occasional spider dropped on my sleeves or shirt, little brown ones with fat, furry bodies and long yellow legs. Slapping them away, I did my best to control my revulsion.

At the foot of the stairs was a cement room, painted flickering orange by my light. On the far side of the room, set into the cement, was a large, steel door. It was seamless and smooth, no handles or knobs, no break in the surface but for a small porthole of thick, dusty glass.

A bulb hung from a wire in the ceiling at the center of the room, a small chain dangling within reach. I ignored it as I went straight for the door, wiping away dust with my sleeve. It was no good – the other side of the glass was also covered with a fine layer of dust, shielding what lay beyond from view.

Set into the wall beside the door was a keypad with a small LCD display over it – currently dark. I tapped a few random numbers on the keypad, not really expecting anything to happen.

To my surprise, there came a whine of electricity. The words **ERROR** appeared for a moment, and then the screen went dark again. I tried typing a few more numbers, but it appeared that the last message had used up whatever residual batter power remained.

I searched the walls until I came upon a fuse box. I opened it up, flipping switches to no effect, until finally there came a hum of power from beyond the steel door.

Dull red light began to pulse through the circle of glass, and the LCD display lit up over the keypad. **AWAITING INPUT**, in green against the black.

My torch dwindled, the pulsing red light slowly overpowering the flickering orange of the fire. I tried the light bulb hanging at the center of the room, and for a moment the basement was lit with bright fluorescent light. With a flash and a pop, the bulb died.

My torch died and began to smoke. I gently placed it on the ground, nervous not to make a sound. Irrationally, perhaps – if anyone (or anything) was on the other side of the door, they were probably aware of my presence by now. But still – I tread lightly.

Taking in the room, slapping my neck as a tiny spider touched down and began to scuttle across my skin, I noticed a large utility chest in the corner, near the stairs. Taking my now dead torch, I brushed aside the veritable curtains of webs, pulling the yellow plastic box from the nest, out into the open. It wasn't locked. Popping it open, I found that it was a fully stocked tool and emergency kit with supplies, water, and rations.

I took out one of those reflective emergency blankets and spread it out across the cold stone. I carefully pulled everything from the chest, one by one, and neatly laid it across the blanket.

There were a few spare bulbs amid the supplies. After two duds, the third bulb worked. Swaying gently on the wire, harsh white light filled the basement. I began to pick through the supplies more carefully.

Moving to close the chest so I could use it as a seat, I almost missed a small scrap of paper tucked neatly into a seam at the bottom. Unfolding it, I found a note scribbled in neat, cramped hand.

*I AM HE THAT LIVETH, AND WAS DEAD: AND BEHOLD, I AM ALIVE FOR
EVERMORE, AMEN; AND HAVE THE KEYS OF HELL AND DEATH.*

“Well,” I muttered. “That’s cheerful.”

Six

Slowly nibbling on some dry, bready ration, I carefully examined the steel door, trying to find some sort of weakness or imperfection. The steel was seamless, perfectly fitted into the wall. I could spend days beating and prying at it with a crowbar and I knew I still wouldn't be able to get into this thing. Anything short of a jackhammer, and even then...

It appeared that unless I could figure out the code, I wasn't going to find out what was on the other side of this door. I tried a couple of simple combinations.

1111, first.

Next, I tried the most recent year I had seen in the graveyard, *2039*.

Then the house's address, *2971*.

After the third attempt there came a horrible computerized screech, piercing and so loud it hurt. The green **AWAITING INPUT** replaced by a flashing red **THREE FAILED ATTEMPTS**, then a twenty minute timer, **20:00:00**, counting down.

I cried out in surprise at the noise, stumbling back into a thick swath of web completely full of spiders. As they covered my neck, clothes, hair and face, crawling and biting, I began to scream, flailing as I tore off my jacket, a desperate slapping dance as I tried desperately to get them off of me. I made a dash for the stairs, overwhelmed by disgust and a sudden, smothering sense of claustrophobia.

I slowly caught my breath out on the crumbling front porch, the thudding of my heartbeat steadily receding back to its normal rhythm. I quickly stripped down to my socks and boxers, shaking out my clothing until I was sure that no more of the spiders remained. Damp cold

clinging to my skin, I quickly re-dressed. As I slowly pulled on my shirt, pulling it tight against the sudden chill, I noticed the mist.

I froze, terror clutching at me as I imagined dozens of monstrous eyes within, watching me, just out of sight. The boiling white wall that I had seen across town – it was here now. Just half a block up from where I now stood. As if it had followed me.

I slowly backed into the house, never taking my eyes off the mist. Moving quickly, I went out again, dragging the big, broken door back up onto the porch, propping it back into its frame. For whatever protection *that* would be worth.

In the basement, the counter was now at a little over ten minutes. I took a seat on utility chest, watching the numbers slowly shrink. Nine minutes. Six. Five minutes.

Three.

Two.

One minute remaining.

The red numbers seemed to burn as the seconds ticked away. I sat, frozen, muscles tensed. Telling myself that nothing would happen when the counter reached zero -- that the terrible, choking unease tight across my chest was for nothing. Nothing was going to happen. Nothing was going to...

Ten seconds remaining. I couldn't breath. Couldn't move. I forced myself to stand, to slowly back away to the staircase.

Two.

One.

Zero.

That horrible computer screech rang out again, cutting through me. I wrung my hands, forcing myself to stand my ground, to watch the screen, now flashing **00:00:00**.

The screen went dark, the keypad going silent. The bulb overhead flickered as the power seemed to wane for a brief moment, and then the screen once again read **AWAITING INPUT** in green letters against the black.

Relief flooded through me like a drug. I went over to the utility chest, heaving a sigh as I collapsed onto my seat atop the yellow plastic. I picked up one of the little cartons of water, tearing it open and drinking deeply. I wasn't sure what I had been so afraid of. Three incorrect codes resulting in a security lockout. It was pretty standard.

I tried two more codes. Thinking back to the jewelry box, I tried Ellie's birth date: 11/12/2022 – 11112022 on the keypad.

No go.

I tried it again, just with the month and date this time – 1112.

Wrong again.

I sat down on the chest, not eager for another twenty minute countdown. I thought back to the mist outside, closer by the moment. I thought of it flooding through the windows, the doors, pouring down the stairs, crooked little hands reaching out from the churning white...

I shook my head, focusing on the task at hand. One by one, I looked over the contents of the chest spread out before me, searching for inspiration. Finishing the carton of water, I neatly folded the cardboard, placing it on the floor beside me. I was still thirsty, but resisted the urge to open another. There was no way to know how long I'd have to stretch these supplies out. Even tightly rationed, there was only really enough to get me through the week. I'd have to scavenge, search other houses in search of food and water. It wasn't an appealing thought.

Pulling the scrap of paper from my pocket, I read it aloud, “I am he that liveth and was dead. And, behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen, and have the keys of Hell and of death.”

I sighed, rubbing my eyes. There was an odd familiarity to the words. I had heard them before, I was sure of it. But where?

Turning the yellowing scrap over in my hands, it finally hit me.

Scrambling to my feet, I rushed up the stairs, into the living room. Searching through the shelves, I found it quickly – the only volume neither in French or Latin. The King James Bible.

Flipping through the pages, I brought it back downstairs, scanning the paragraphs as I searched for the line. Where was it, where...

There.

“1.17: And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:”

And then,

“1.18: I am he that liveth, and was dead...”

I closed the book, my finger holding the spot at the page. Hesitantly, I entered the numbers on the keypad. 1. 1. 8.

I hit enter, and winced as that horrible screech rang out once again. Bitter disappointment filled me as the screen went dark.

The moment stretched as I awaited for the flashing red letters. But none came.

With a loud *hiss*, the door slid open, the crack lit red by the pulsing light beyond.

Seven

The inside of the shelter was dimly illuminated by the little red light and the fluorescent bulb hanging in the basement. It was smallish, practical. There was a kitchenette, and a sitting area with bunk beds set into the walls: two on one side, two on the other.

The dried, leathery bodies of two women were kneeling beside one of the beds, looking to have died in prayer. My stomach tightened, and for one awful moment I thought they were alive – just kneeling there in silence, in the darkness, waiting. When I realized that they were long dead I was struck with a sense of morbid relief.

There were two other doors on either side of the shelter. Before I went to see what lay behind them, however, I searched for a light brighter than the red LED, which was set into the steel wall beside the door. Next to the LED was a small brass plate and a large, unmarked lever. Wiping the plate, I revealed the words RESET REQUIRED, lightly etched into the brass.

Tentatively, I took the lever and pulled it down. Everything went instantly dark – the LED and the light bulb in the adjacent room shutting off, leaving me in absolute blackness. I counted to ten under my breath and then, with a grunt, I forced the lever up again.

The whole shelter lit up instantly as the generator whirred back on. I had to squint, blinking back tears at the intense brightness of the long fluorescent bulbs flickering on along the curved metal ceiling. Everything came to life. The alarm on the little oven began to blink in its reset state, beeping quietly. Water gurgled behind one of two unexplored doors.

Music played from hidden speakers, a man with a deep, melancholy voice, gently crooning, “When I was seventeen, it was a verrry good year. It was a very good year, for small

town girls, and sofffft, summer nights. We'd hiiiide from the lights, on the village green...when I was seventeen..."

As the song continued, I went to take a closer look at the dead women. There were two dusty syringes laid out in front of them. One woman was clutching a small white cross. The other was holding onto an old photograph of Ellie as a little girl, smiling up at the camera in a dance class.

My eyes lingered on the photo for a moment, and then the woman holding it. Her hair was grey, with traces of yellow. Like Ellie. The other woman's hair was dark and curly. Thick, draping down past her shoulders.

I tore my eyes away from them and went to see what was behind the two doors. One led to a cramped bathroom with a small toilet, sink and shower. The other led to a large pantry, big enough to walk into. The shelves were full, to the brim, stocked with enough to feed a family for a year.

I began to sift through the supplies. Endless cans of peas, corn, peaches, spinach and a variety of other fruits and vegetables. Military rations, cookies, crackers, preserves and candy. Medical supplies, rows of gauze and iodine and pill bottles. Flashlights. Batteries.

In the corner, tucked between two of the shelves, was a tall, metal locker. It hung ajar, it's lock and key dropped carelessly at on the floor long ago. Inside the locker, I found two black, plastic cases – one small, the other quite long.

Opening the littler case, I found a short Smith & Wesson revolver along with a box of bullets. I carefully removed it from the case, the cool weight of it calming in my hand. Automatically, I pushed the release, popped out the cylinder. I began to load it, the soft click of the bullets sliding in to place sharp and satisfying.

With a grating whirr and a crackling of electricity the lights cut out, the beeping of the oven and the crooning of the man's voice silenced. The red light began to pulse once more. Reset Required. Muttering a curse, I pushed the cylinder back into place and carefully put down the gun.

None of the flashlights worked. It was fine, I didn't really need them anyway – the LED was dim, but bright enough for me to find my way back to the lever. With a heave, I pushed it to the *Off* position, once again leaving me in utter blackness. Silently counting to ten, I slid the lever back to *On*. The red LED pulsed back to life, the hanging bulb in the basement flickering to life. That was all, though. Everything else – the lights in the shelter, the music, the plumbing – was dead.

I tried again, waiting even longer before switching the lever back to *On*. Same result.

“Great,” I sighed.

A feminine scream ripped through the air. I jumped, biting back a shout as I almost fell over in surprise. The scream had come from up the stairs, outside the house. It had been faint, but piercing. Terrified. Full of pain.

I held my breath, wondering if I had imagined it, when the scream came again.

“Please!” a girl wailed. “Help me! Please, somebody help me!”

Scrambling, I ran over to the pantry, feeling around till I found the revolver. Quick but quiet, I moved up the stairs, into the living room.

Though it was still in the middle of the day, the light had become oddly grey. As I slid noiselessly through the house, the choked, exhausted sobs became increasingly audible. They were pathetic, weak and hiccupping.

With trembling fingers, I pulled back the hammer. Gun held out before me, I pushed aside the door and stepped out into the mist.

Eight

The house had been completely swallowed by it. Though the sun shone above, all I could see was a hazy grey, bright enough to hurt my eyes without being enough to cut through the murky whiteness. I couldn't see more than a few paces before me, and beyond that? Nothing more than shapes and shadows. It was if I was walking through a cloud.

The condensation beading up on my face and hair felt sticky and unclean. I picked my way through the rosebushes, carefully following the sound of the girl's pitiful weeping.

"Shit," I hissed, gritting my teeth to keep them from chattering as I began to tremble. "Shit!" All around me was an eerie, deathly silence. The mist seemed to muffle everything – everything but the girl.

She stood at the center of the street, unmoving. Slender, with long, filthy hair. Still sobbing. She couldn't have been more than seventeen. Her arms hung at her sides, her head lolling. She appeared to be wearing the shredded, damp remains of military fatigues.

"H—hello?" I whispered loudly. "Are...are you okay?"

"P-p-please...help me..." the girl moaned. Exhausted. Raspy, as if she'd been shouting for days. "It hurts, oh god it hurts..."

I lowered my gun, taking a slow step forward. This was wrong. This was so wrong.

"What happened here?" I said. "Are you hurt? Are you lost?"

She looked up without moving her head, pretty blue eyes focusing on me for the first time. They darted around, as if looking for others. Seeing that I was alone, they widened with fear.

“I’m lost too,” I continued, “But I found food, and water. If you--”

“Run,” she gasped. “You have to--”

She cried out in pain, and began to float. As her feet left the asphalt she dangled, loose limbed. A massive silhouette rose up behind her, as tall as three men, and I realized with horror that she wasn’t floating.

The creature was grey and vaguely humanoid. It had no face, no hair – just tough, fatty flesh like thick-wrinkled elephant hide. It held out one massive arm above the girl. Long yellow tubes hung from its fat grey fingers, controlling the girl like a marionette. They were stuck into bleeding sores all along her arms, legs and back.

Frozen, eyes wide, I could only scream wordlessly as it reached out with its other hand and pinned me to the ground. A wet cavity opened in its chest with a smacking sound, where it roughly stowed the wailing girl.

Pulling the yellow tubes from her skin with a series of soft pops, it reached the wriggling tendrils towards me. As they came closer, I could see that there were little toothy mouths at the end of each tube.

Still screaming, I came to my senses and awkwardly unloaded three bullets into the thing’s chest and neck, above the cavity. The creature recoiled in surprise at the sound of the bullets, and I quickly writhed away from fingers as big and hard as sapling tree trunks.

Staggering to my feet, I ran. Behind me, there came another wet *smack* as it closed the cavity in its chest, muffling the girl’s cries. It began to chase me, massive feet audibly crackling the asphalt with every step.

Sprinting through the front door of Ellie's house, I barely dodged the creature's grasp as it took a moment to smash through the door frame. The house was full of mist at this point, dirty white flooding in through the front door and broken windows.

I barreled down the stairs, the thing just behind me, yellow tubes snapping and biting at my neck, missing me by inches. Diving into the shelter, I desperately yanked the heavy, steel door closed— severing two of the yellow tubes.

They wriggled and snapped grotesquely on the floor. I stepped on them furiously, screaming “Fuck you! FUCK YOU!” over and over again as I reduced them to a smear.

The creature smashed its body against the door, making the whole shelter shudder. I stumbled with a cry, falling to the ground and crawling backwards as I watched the sagging grey flesh ram up against the porthole, over and over again.

It held.

The light bulb in the basement had been smashed in the chase, and as the creature frantically tried to tear its way into the shelter, the pulsing red light of the LED was the only remaining illumination.

I stood up, wanting to be away from the door but refusing to take my eyes off of it. Not watching where I was going as I backed away, I tripped over the dead women, the three of us tumbling to the floor in a tangle.

“JESUS CHRIS! Oh God, oh God!”

I desperately pulled myself from their mummified limbs, their dead stares watching me as I slid away.

The creature gave up trying to force open the door and pulled out the girl once more, her cries of agony and fear were no longer muffled. It pressed her against the door, her face lit with red light in the circle of glass.

In ordinary circumstances she would have been beautiful. Her pretty blue eyes were wild with fear and endless pain, and it was then that I knew for sure that she was actually alive, actually suffering as this creature kept her for bait.

“Please!” she cried. “Help me! Oh god PLEASE! I can’t—oh god I CAN’T...!”

I practically fell into the bathroom, emptying my stomach in the toilet. When I was done, I pushed the bathroom door closed to block out her pleading, if only slightly.

I curled up into a ball on the floor and pressed my hands against my ears. Squeezing my eyes shut, I began to cry hysterically.

Nine

It wouldn't leave. It was patient. It would spend hours at a time, just hammering at the steel, clawing at the cement. With every earth quaking strike, I was sure *this* would be the instance in which the door would begin to give.

But it didn't.

When the creature grew either weary or bored of ramming into the door, it would take out the girl, pressing her against the glass. It would shake her violently whenever she began to pass out – some thick fluid coursing through the tubes into her body, making her scream.

I began to hate the girl. Hate her face, her crying. Her pleas for me to kill her, to end her suffering.

"I'm sorry!" I'd shout at her, shaking my head. "I'm so sorry!"

What was I supposed to do?

The gun became my center. The cold metal, my anchor. The warm wood of the handle sweet against my palm. I made a nest in the pantry, dusty blankets from the bed untouched by the dead women folded up on the floor. I would close the pantry door; a flashlight lit and pointed up to drown out the awful red light. Then I'd just sit there, propped up against pillows, clutching the revolver.

I had found a rifle in the other case. Long and polished. No good to me now.

I forced myself to eat, even though I wasn't hungry. I grew numb to the pounding, the weeping, the shaking. I didn't even taste the food, I just ate. Cause what else was there to do?

Even with the door closed, even with the flashlight's soft white light, I could still see the red. That goddamn LED, on and off, on and off, on and off on and off ON AND OFF—

I considered smashing it, but knew that'd be stupid. Better that horrible flashing than utter blackness. Better red then to be left at the mercy of the scant few batteries that still had some juice in them. Most of them hadn't worked, and I had a feeling that the few that did wouldn't last long.

I forced myself to move the women. I used gloves that I found among the tools, a rag tied around my face so that I wouldn't inhale their dust. Their mummified bodies were sickeningly light – barely anything at all. It somehow made them seem less real. Or more dead. I wasn't sure which.

I lay them on the bed they had knelt beside, carefully placing the photograph on the yellow haired woman's chest and the cross on the other. Then I covered them with blankets, hoping it was enough.

I'm not sure how much time passed. Days, to be sure. I'm not sure how many. Sometimes I'd sleep for hours, sometimes for minutes. I was never quite sure. The air began to grow stale. I was sure of it. Hot. Old. I began to panic in my little room, flinging open the door and going out into the communal space. It was hot there too. So hot. I didn't remember it being this hot, I'd always been cold here. Cold since I woke up in this place, damp and chill in the graveyard.

But now my heart was pounding and I couldn't breathe and I realized how close the walls and ceiling were and I had to lie down, outstretched, closing my eyes as I pressed the cold metal of the gun against my cheek.

Stretched out with my eyes closed, I could pretend this place was bigger than it was. Pressing the revolver deeper into the flesh of my cheek, flattening my other palm against the

textured steel floor. I imagined myself on a vast expanse, with a ceiling so high I couldn't see it, with walls so far away they might as well not have existed.

I could feel the girl's eyes on me, but I didn't care. It didn't matter anymore. I was in the vast steel room, frigid and open, cold air surging around me from the cavernous expanse. I was a million miles away, far from the mist, far above the earth.

But I wasn't. The floor felt warm. My foot knocked against the wall, reminding me of my confines. And the air tasted bad. Tasted like rot, and dust, and I suddenly wondered where the air was coming from. I sat up, eyes snapping open. Searching the ceiling for the grill of a vent.

There, in the corner, near the beds. I ran over to it. The creature, either hearing or seeing or god knows how sensing my movements pumped more of the fluid into the girl. I didn't need to see it to know – I could hear it in the way she screamed. Why couldn't she shut up why couldn't she just *SHUT UP*—

I held my hand beside the grill, fingers trembling as I held my breath, hoping for air. After what seemed like an eternity, I felt a tickle. Or maybe I didn't. Maybe I imagined it. I wasn't sure. The downy hair on the back of my hand had seemed to move, just for a second. Who could tell in this light, but I swore I had felt it.

I yanked my hand away, suddenly not sure which would be worse – no air 'cause the shelter had died, 'cause nothing but that *stupid goddamn light* seemed to have any power – or that awful oily mist pouring through. In such little amounts that I couldn't see it? Not in this light. But filling the air all around me. And not just mist – other creatures. Tiny creatures, as big as bugs. Or smaller -- like germs. I began to itch, began to imagine little legs crawling across my skin.

Backing away from the vent, I pulled out the rag and tied it around my face. Just in case. Not that it would do anything. But at least I could---

It was hot, SO HOT, I had to pull the rag off. It made the air worse – who cares if bugs crawled into my lungs, at least I could breathe. At least I wouldn't suffocate. Or would I?

I'm not sure when it happened, but the creature was slamming against the door when there came a crackle. Stone crumbling. The shelter shifted, moved in its foundation. The thing had found some fault, its perseverance finally paying off. The door held, but the whole room moved, ever so slightly. Inches, barely. I was sure of it. We moved and didn't move back.

It was then that the scraping began. Hundreds of little scabbling noises, tiny creatures I hadn't seen crawling in around the edges, out around the walls of the shelter. Scraping and scratching, like hungry fingers trying to dig into a can.

With a moan, I ducked back into the pantry, closing the door, holding my breath. I turned on all the flashlights, pointing them at all the walls, all the corners. My eyes darted from shelf to shelf, the muzzle of the revolver swinging back and forth as each shadow seemed to come to life in my peripheral, normal when I looked directly at them and shifting when I wasn't.

The scabbling continued, everywhere, *everywhere*. I couldn't stop whimpering, couldn't stop shaking. But then an icy calm fell over me. The screaming. The clawing. It was so loud that all of a sudden it seemed to jumble up into white noise. Into something that didn't make sense, something that couldn't reach me. Slowly, lovingly, I turned the barrel of my gun towards my face.

The end was sharp and hard against the roof of my mouth. Cold against my tongue. Bitter. It was strange, how easy it would be. How little effort it would take to turn off all the lights – to shut off all the noise. It wouldn't be so bad. It wouldn't be bad at all. The cold against

my tongue was my anchor. The pain in the roof of my mouth was the entire universe, focused into a tiny point. Like the beginning of time, the moment before the big bang.

But no. I couldn't just do it. I *wouldn't* just do it. Not unless I had to. Not unless the walls of my steel casket had been breached. Not unless I had no other choice, no more air, no more food. No more...

Finger lovingly caressing the trigger, I waited for a reason.