

Bugs In The Stew

A tale from the “Dark Wonderland” Chronicles.

By Joel S. Williams, aka Mr. Ogunberry.

Copyright © 2017 by Joel S. Williams aka Mr. Ogunberry.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Published by planetogun.com.

Behold the Dark Wonderland, a place where humanity is thrust into contact with people, places and things of the supernatural variety. This tale is one of many accounts of men and women coming face to face with agents of the paranormal world. We hope you enjoy this story. And remember, it can happen to you, if you believe it.

Event Date: 2015

CHAPTER ONE

Armin leapt over the craggy log and landed perfectly in her red boots. She smiled at her accomplishment, and continued along the narrow path through the woods. It was just after 4: pm, and Armin quickened her pace to ensure she reached before the sunset.

She was fifteen years old, very well aware of her surroundings, but as a girl her parents advised her to be extremely cautious on the street. She had bright blue eyes, puckered lips and long auburn hair tied into a ponytail. That, coupled with a slender frame, she was what was considered by societal standers “pretty”. But Armin would have preferred if she had her father's muscles. Not that she wanted to be macho looking, but it would certainly help in her Home Economics class with lifting those heavy bags of flour.

As Armin walked amongst the trees she scratched the dried dough from beneath her fingers nail. “I’m gonna need to cut these for tomorrow,” she said. And suddenly, her foot bumped something. Armin sprawled forward but splayed her hands to stop the ground from being acquainted with her face. She winced and stood up, brushing the dust from her palms in her jeans.

Armin turned around to what had caused her the almost fall with an annoyed expression. Sticking out of the leaf-littered ground was a long, white object caked in dirt. Armin knelt and got a closer look. She found a small twig next to her and began brushing off some of the dirt.

And after a few seconds of doing so, Armin found that it was a bone. More specifically that of a human arm.

A creepy chill ran up Armin's back and she sprung up. “*Whoa...*” She said, “What the heck?”

Armin pulled her eyes from the partial skeleton and looked around her. She had gone off the sidewalk of the main road and up a slope into the gloomy woods just seven minutes ago, but already she could barely hear the vehicles anymore or see any remnants of the street. Surrounding her was the endless old trees; their leaves so many above it dulled the lights of the setting sun to mere strings of luminance.

Within the shade Armin barely saw any animals other than a few crows, squirrels, mice and insects crawling on the ground. The wind scarcely blew, and against the leaves it sounded

like whispers. On a tree that Armin walked by she saw a dreamcatcher nailed to its trunk. The portions hanging off fluttered even though the wind was weak; as if something else was moving it. Now the creepy chills the young woman felt earlier turned into claws that pinched her nerves.

Armin turned and continued walking, briskly. This time she reached into her pink backpack and took out a large knife she had used in cooking class earlier. She held it close to her small breasts as she traversed the narrow path. There were constant moving shadows from the small critters around her, but Armin couldn't identify them clearly enough.

And then she spotted it; something to her right. Armin slowed down and observed what the structure was. She stopped, realizing it was a shack. Most of the building was withered and covered in strange vines, and on the trees around it Armin saw more of the red dreamcatchers. The door was slightly open, and as Armin peered into the slight exposure of the darkness inside, she contemplated going in to find out what lurked in there.

Is someone in there? Armin thought, feeling a knowing presence close by.

Something overhead cawed, snapping Armin out of her trance. She lifted the knife in a stabbing gesture, but paused when she realized it was only the birds above. She exhaled and lowered her weapon.

“I think I'm trying to be an adult too fast,” Armin said to herself.

She had taken this route because it was a direct path that lead to her neighborhood as opposed to going the long way around on the main street. She had heard that this patch of woodland, even though relatively small, was said to be plagued by supernatural happenstances for generations.

Armin didn't believe in such folly, which was why she felt comfortable enough to dare the trek through *The Chief's Woods*. But Armin was now reconsidering if it was a good idea.

But as Armin walked away, intent on reaching home as soon as possible, she saw it. It was just there; untouched or unscathed by the environment. A big red doll.

Surprised by the out of place object, Armin stopped and stared at it, creeping closer as if entranced by its dark eyes against its porcelain face.

The doll was propped up against a tree as if it was just chilling out. The posture was kind of comical to Armin, but she wasn't laughing. Her hand with the knife began to shake for some reason, and Armin held her arm steady.

The doll wore a frilly red skirt and blouse, with black shoes adorned with silver flowers. Her raven hair was tied into two pigtails. But what stood out the most was how large the doll was. It stood at nearly four feet, almost the size of her little brother.

“I wonder who left you here...?” said Armin.

And as the young woman pondered upon that, she also noticed a silver necklace the doll wore, with a pendant hanging from the center. Immediately Armin locked eyes with the green jewel in it. She couldn't hear, feel or smell anything anymore; only the pendant occupied her senses. Armin lifted a finger and touched the jewel. Its coldness shot up her arm and zapped her mind. Armin stiffened. Her vision suddenly went blank, then in the blink of an eye it was with the warm scene of a vast field of flowers. The setting sun baked the sky orange and yellow, and the winds bent the flowers into a graceful dance.

But Armin's startled eyes were focused on the slender shape before her, and it was that of a young woman with flowing, black hair and brown skin. She turned from the ball of fire in the sky and focused her glowing eyes on Armin.

Armin stiffened, swallowed and clenched her fists. She tried moving her feet, but they wouldn't budge. Armin quickly glanced at her boots; now sunken in a pool of insects.

“No!” Armin yelp, trying in vain to twist her feet free as the insects crawled up her legs like a million sharp fingers. Armin spotted the woman getting closer. As her pace increased so did that of the sunset. And by time the woman started running towards Armin the sun had fallen, and darkness shrouded them except the shape of the naked female getting closer.

The insects now reached up to Armin's neck, clustering so much it seemed a hand held her throat. The bugs had now infested every nook and cranny of her body, even her privates. Armin screamed and ripped at her body to rid herself of her violators. “No! Don't!” she said. Tears appeared in her flesh as she battled off the creatures. She tried to scream once more but the bugs dove down her throat, silencing any outcry. Armin choked, coughing up spit and blood as the insects chewed and clawed their way into her from both ends. Tears brimmed Armin's eyes as she sensation of glass and acid sliding down her throat and into her pelvis intensified. Soon she felt her body sinking into the mass of insects, along with the sticky warmth of her own blood oozing down her legs.

Armin reached up to her neck just as the woman dove at her, fangs and claws prepped and ready.

And Armin screamed and open her eyes. She slid back on her bottom, kicking up dirt as she crawled away. She finally stopped screaming and stilled herself a few meters away from the doll. She took deep breathes, her chest pumping up and down like something wanted out from her body. She saw the light from the pendant vanish, and Armin saw her chance. She scrambled to her feet and took off, leaving behind the dark woods, and the strange doll in her dust.

Several minutes later of non-stop running, Armin found herself out of the woods and sprinting down the slope onto the sidewalk. She suddenly halted, almost leaping into the air upon seeing an old woman with fluffy grey hair in a black and pink frock.

“Yikes! Miss Sylva!” said Armin.

Miss Sylva narrowed her eyes, increasing the wrinkles around her grey peepers.

“What the heck were you doing young lady” she said, her voice sounding like a squawking bird. Armin looked side to side, fumbling for her words. But Miss Sylva didn't let up. “And what are you doing with the knife in your hands? Don't you know that's dangerous?”

Miss Sylva pointed a bony finger at the weapon held close to Armin's chest.

The girl looked at it. “Umm...” Armin quickly hid it behind her and forced a crooked smile at the woman. “I...was...just...”

Miss Sylva placed her hands on her hips and stuck her head out on her scrawny neck. “You were in the Chief's Woods...weren't you?”

Armin could no longer hold her breathe or the two drops of urine inside her any longer. She exhaled and said with slumped shoulders, “Look, Miss Sylva I was just trying to take a shortcut home—” Armin quickly looked around her to make sure no one she knew was close by. She only saw a few people on the streets, and a few cars pulling into their respective driveways as the adults came home from work. She turned to Miss Sylva “—Please don't tell my mom and dad! Please!”

Miss Sylva slowly smiled. The high angles at which the corners of her mouth turned foretold Armin the old woman's next course of action.

Aww man, Armin thought.

“Well...” Miss Sylva said, “if you don't want your parents to find out,” and Miss Sylva stuck her palm out, “then pay up little missy.”

Armin cringed. “Really?”

Miss Sylva widened her eyes to white orbs. “Yes! Really?”

A woman walked by from behind Miss Sylva. The woman spotted Armin, and then Miss Sylva, and as she passed in her noisy high heel she smirked at Armin tauntingly.

Miss Sylva, Aka “Miss *Silver*”, was notorious around these parts as the town’s “Big Nose”: so big it had to brush pass everyone. She spent most of her time walking through the neighborhood trying to find the biggest to the smallest little secret to purchase and add to her treasure-trove of information. She'd been here since the day she was born, and in those eighty-odd years no one had ever seen her supposed husband or children, or even the inside of her house for that matter.

“You kids nowadays,” Miss Sylva said. “You all think you can just gallivant about without any consequences. When you realize you'll have to pay for it, then you'll understand.”

Armin scowled and reached into her pocket. She took out two bill folds and some coins and said, “How much is it?”

“Ten dollars,” said the old woman.

Armin closed her hand with the money and pulled it back, gawking at the smirking woman. “Are you serious? Ten Bucks? I’m not working yet, you know.”

“Hey,” said Miss Sylva, “If it were a man who was doing this, you'd probably have to give him your 'little girl's pouch'.” When she saw Armin grimace in terror, she continued, “Count yourself lucky and learn from this, you little hussy!”

Armin frowned, handing Miss Sylva the ten-dollar bill. Miss Sylva took it and inspected it for a moment with a steady, watery eye. She then pocketed the money in her purse and turned to Armin. “Now, get going before I charge you interest...”

Armin stormed off; fists clenched and mumbling profanities. Miss Sylva watched the young woman cross the street towards her yellow house. Once she saw Armin viciously open the door and closed it behind her as she entered, Miss Sylva snorted. “Little brats. Don't know what they're dealing with out here.”

A loud rustling sound snatched the attention of Miss Sylva. She turned her head as fast as she could in the direction of the slope, but her old muscles didn't function as they once used to. Miss Sylva held her eyes at the woods for a few seconds as she deliberated, and finally came to a decision. Slowly, and carefully, she crouched and went up the slope. She eventually had to crawl on her hands, and silently cursed her mortality.

She reached the top, dusted off her hands and sighed. She stood and scoured the surrounding vegetation expectantly. The place had a peculiar odor, like old clothes and dried rat carcasses. She could barely make out the finer details, and so reached for her glasses out of her purse.

By the time her feeble hands managed to place the spectacles over her eyes, Miss Sylva's vision had just adjusted to a girl in red clothing disappearing into the distant bushes.

Miss Sylva frowned. Then her expression turned into a haggard expression. "Damn kids..."

CHAPTER TWO

Armin felt a tickling sensation on her legs while in her bed, and reflexively kicked. A squeaky voice replied with a, “Ouch!”

Armin's eyes flew open and she sat. Her hair was let loose, and the constant tossing and turning from last night's nightmares had churned her hair into a bushy mess around her head.

At the foot of her bed she saw her little brother holding his nose with a feather in his left hand. He gave her a deathly frown, removing his hand to reveal a drop of blood beneath his nose. “What the hell Armin?” Gordon said. His steely blue eyes were intense beneath his black eyebrows.

“What...oh...sorry,” said Armin. As Gordon walked away from the bed wincing and blinking out tears, she rubbed her eyes and said, “You shouldn’t try to scare me like that, Gordon.”

Wearing one of his many blue merino and black shorts, Gordon turned to his sister and said, “Who the hell gets scared when they get tickled?”

Armin pulled the pink sheets off her and stepped out of the bed. “Get lost, loser,” she said. “Stop dorking up my room.”

“I’m telling mom!” Gordon said, and ran through the room door.

Armin yawned and stretched, wearing a simple tunic and baggy trousers. She turned around and began making her bed. As he did she ran over her duties for the day. First there was school; dealing with the boring classes until it was time for Home Economics. Chemistry and Biology at least had some relevance to cooking and nutrition. Math and English of course was essential. Everything else was “snore's-ville” to her.

And suddenly, all of that took a dip from her mind, and was replaced with the image of the red doll. Armin suddenly paused, feeling the chills. She tried to flush out the images but they wouldn't budge. She felt the touch of the bugs once more, and instantly grimaced and scratched herself.

“Gosh dammit...” she said silently.

Armin looked around her room, trying to find something to really distract her.

Her room was painted in white, making it easier for her to see the various posters on the walls, most of which consisted of recipes for preparing various foods. Her dresser had feminine cosmetics along with statuettes of ice-creams, crackers and a large, colorful bowl of gumballs.

Armin stared at the figurines on the furniture, letting them spark a plethora of creative combinations for snacks and treats. She even briefly imagined a young girl dressed in armor battling off vegetable-like monsters with a giant, golden spoon. The plant-based villains almost overpowered the young heroine, but with the sudden help of the “Candy Coated Calvary”, the young woman was sweetened, and able to create a flood of sugar from her spoon that drowned the leafy, root-ridden evil doers and flushed them into the abyss. Then the heroine and her army of anthropomorphic candy allies climbed the top of a mountain of ice-cream, where the heroine planted the “Flag of Desertia” at the top, and smiled and cheered with the others, revealing their decaying teeth.

Armin smiled, and took a deep breath. She felt calm now. Whether what she saw was real or not, at the very least, she had a wonderful story to tell her grandchildren. Armin didn't tell her parents about what happened yesterday evening; fearing both of them not believe her strange tale and the fact that she disobeyed their rules and went into the woods. So, she decided it was best to not let them know, and never do it again.

Armin walked over to the dresser and took up her toothbrush. She made her way across the brown carpet to a rack near the door and took up her wash-rag and towel. After going across the hall and washing up and brushing her teeth she came back to her room with her towel draped around her.

She quickly got dressed, this time wearing a white blouse with pink seams and bell-foot pants. She tied her hair into a pony tail and went for her backpack on the rack, ensuring all the equipment she needed was still there from yesterday evening.

With her utilities secured, she left her room and walked through the burgundy hallway pass her parents' and Gordon's room. She entered the modest looking living room, and was immediately met with her father walking into the middle of the room.

Mr. Bronson was six feet tall, slim built but looked firm in the muscles. He wore blue overalls as the others at his construction job did. Around his waist was a well ornamented tool belt, and draped across his back was a stuffed knapsack. Armin had inherited his formula for Auburn hair, but unlike them and their mother, he had dark brown eyes.

He was wiping some pancake syrup off his hands when he spotted Armin. He smiled at her, and said, “Hey sweetie. What's the day looking like?”

Armin replied brightly, “The usual; sleeping through History, busting my brain in Math, listening to the foreign students trying to read English...and *loving* whipping up that pastry!”

Both Armin and her father grinned and bumped fists.

“How's Gordon's nose by the way, dad?” Armin said. “It was really flowing. I didn't mean to.”

Mr. Bronson said, “He's fine. Just a little shuffle with his bridge. That'll teach him to tone down on his pranks.” He flexed his shoulders and mumbled, “And get rid of all that blue in his room...”

Armin chuckled. “So, you're off now?”

“Yep,” her father said. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “See you later girl.”

“Bye dad,” said Armin as he walked out the door.

Armin walked into the kitchen. There around the kitchen table she spotted Gordon in a blue shirt and shorts. The little boy had so many clothes of the same color that at times Armin couldn't tell if he was wearing the same clothes every day or a fresh batch. However, Armin noticed today his t-shirt was a V-neck.

At the other end of the table was their mother; a slender but tall woman with cropped back hair. She wore a simple pink sweater and jeans, and sipped coffee while she read from her computer.

She saw Armin finding herself around the table before the untouched food meant for her, and said, “Hey sweetie!”

“Hey mom,” said Armin as she dropped the bag at the foot of the chair and took up her fork.

“*Hey mom'...*” said Gordon mockingly, his eyes still fixed on the smartphone in his hands.

Armin glared across at Gordon and said, “Keep that up and I'll give you one more of those karate kicks.”

Gordon looked up, crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at Armin. “Eat boogers, Arm-pits!”

“Hey, cut it out!” said Mrs. Bronson sharply. “If you two keep that up in front of me I’ll knock both your heads together...”

Gordon and Armin maintained their stare at each other. Then Gordon looked away and mumbled, “Yeah, because old blockhead here might give me a concussion.”

“Boy!” said Mrs. Bronson.

Gordon looked at his mother, and saw her burning a hole through him with her eyes. Gordon felt the heat off them and shuddered. “Okay, I’m sorry mom!” he said.

Mrs. Bronson eventually relaxed her face and went back to her work. She had her eyes on the emails she got from the customers about her goods online. She saw a comment about her and scowled, and that was when her phone went off.

She got up and reached for the phone in her pocket. As she walked towards the exits she said, “You kids finish up your breakfast and don’t be late for school.”

“Yeah mom,” said Armin.

“Roger,” said Gordon.

Mrs. Bronson left the room, then suddenly leaned back with an excited face. “Oh, and Armin. Tell me how those waffles taste. I added less butter this time like you said...” Armin took her fork up and nipped off piece of the waffles and put in her mouth. She chewed it slowly, then gave her mom a thumb’s up.

Ms. Bronson punched the air and skipped away.

As Armin ate her breakfast she spotted Gordon staring at her out of the corner of her eye. Gordon realized she noticed, and smirked.

Armin put down her fork and said, “What?”

Her twelve-year old brother grinned. “You know what I want,” said Gordon.

Armin suddenly blushed and smiled. But quickly scowled and said in a hushed voice, “Not here, you dufus. Mom’s in the next room.”

Gordon put down his cellphone and got up. He walked over to Armin, and immediately she felt a tingling sensation on her lips and nipples.

Gordon touched her leg and whispered, “C’mon. It’ll be quick...”

“No,” said Armin, this time more assertively. She looked away and rested her chin on her fist. *Why did I even start this?* Armin thought.

Gordon clasped his hands and hopped up and down with a bulge in his pants. "Pleeeeeeeeeeease Armin?" he said. "I swear I won't play anymore pranks if you let me."

After a few seconds of looking into Gordon's pleading eyes; the only time she saw any genuine innocence in him, Armin sighed and sat up. She turned to him and said, "Make this quick..."

"Yes," said Gordon.

Armin took one more glance at the doorway. Satisfied, she turned to Gordon with a playful smirk, and lifted her blouse and bra in one swoop up to her chin, exposing her breasts.

Gordon leaned forward, wrapped his mouth around her breast and applied suction. As he did his tongue eagerly wriggled around her nipple. As the boy went to work, licking and sucking, the sweetness of the tingling sensation raced across Armin's chest and down to her groin where the moisture already began to saturate in her underwear.

Armin closed her eyes as she drifted off into the soothing, unnaturalness of the act. She winced, and flinched at times, exhaling soft moans in between.

"Kids?"

Armin's and Gordon's eyes flew wide open.

They quickly pulled away; Gordon ran back to his seat and Armin pulled down her blouse. Mrs. Bronson walked into the kitchen to see Gordon taking up his backpack and Armin scarfing down the last of the pancakes.

"Done!" Armin said. She flew out of her seat and reached for her own backpack. "That was much better than the last time, mom."

Gordon made snorting sounds like a pig, and Armin went over to him and yanked his hair.

Mrs. Bronson ignored their play and smiled. "Thanks Armin. Now, you two better hurry off to school."

"Sure mom," said Gordon. He turned to Armin and said, "Last one out's a rotten egg!" And Gordon turned and ran to the front door.

"First one out is a dork," Armin said.

Armin stopped and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. "Later," she said.

"Bye!" said Mrs. Bronson as the door closed behind her children.

Now in the silence of her home, Mrs. Bronson sighed and said, “Those two; they’re the best kids ever.”

Outside on the lawn Armin and Gordon stood watching the other people go about their daily lives. The sun was at a modest temperature and lighting. The town filled with the sounds of vehicles, chirping birds and human conversation.

Out of the two siblings, it was Armin who broke the silence. “Gordon...” she said.

“...Yeah?” he replied.

“What we’re doing...do you think we need to stop?” Armin said. She noticed a small woman walking a rather large Pitbull that seemed able to swallow her whole.

Gordon said, “You’re the older one, sis. What do you think?”

Armin sighed and said, “I just don’t want mom and dad to find out. I don’t want anyone to.”

Gordon went closer to his sister and took her hand. He looked up to her face and said, “But you like doing...”

“I like being a good sister to you,” said Armin. She flicked Gordon’s nose. “Even if you’re a stupid little punk.”

Gordon smiled and rubbed his nose. After a while of deliberation he said, “Maybe...maybe we can stop until you’re in college. That way we won’t be in the house for mom and dad to see.”

Armin now had her gaze up the street, where she could see the top of the woods. The image of the doll appeared in her head, but was quickly swept away by the Candy Heroine. “That’s assuming you can handle it. I caught you masturbating to my underwear after all,” she said.

Gordon frowned and said, “Shut up, Armin.”

Gordon remembered how all this started. He was exploring the urges within his body and the reactions they made whenever he would see a girl at school. He’d gone home one evening, wonder how to exercise the stifling demon out of him. So he tried using the most easily accessible female-esk object he could; his sister’s underwear. In the confines of his room, Gordon had executed the act of masturbation as according to the say and the gestures the older boys at school did during their jokes. It’d worked. And the smell of his sister had provided

energy for his exercise. A wondrous scent that he fell in love with the instant he inhaled from the fabric.

Since he had discovered the incredibly fun activity six months ago, Gordon tried to make spare to time for his “Gordon Gonzala”, rummaging through his sister's dirty laundry for fresh, sexually stimulating sustenance. He had enjoyed his secret reign, until his sister took note of her missing panties.

Armin had stormed into his room, shedding light upon the boy in bed pleasuring himself. After wresting her panties from his sticky grasp, Armin had sat him down and scolded him. Their parents weren't home that afternoon, and Armin let her rage fly.

But as Gordon cried in embarrassment, repeating his sorries, and explaining his inability to fit in with others, something had happened to Armin.

It was then his sister took pity on him, holding him close to her bosom. And Armin, at that moment, had done the unthinkable. She had pull her little brother's pants down, and took his small manhood in her hands. She had lifted her shirt and showed Gordon for the first time a woman's upper jewels. She stroked his hardened boner slowly at first, then as she held his face against her breasts and ordered him to use his mouth, she increased the pace, rubbing her thumb on the tip of him each time she brought her hand up. Gordon groaned as she did. In the moment, they had looked at the expressions on each other's face and giggled.

And finally, Gordon felt it, the upsurge of pleasure the grown boys rambled on about as if it were a gospel. He held Armin tight and squealed. Whiteness splashed onto his sister's thighs.

The two siblings had knelt there, smiling at each other.

“I love you sis,” Gordon had said, hugging his sister.

“I love you too...” Armin had replied, wrapping her arms around his neck, resting her chin on his head.

Now, as Gordon stood with his sister under the bus-stop, he looked at her admiringly. No longer was she just someone there to help with his homework and play pranks on. She was now, if Gordon dared to think it, a genuine friend.

There was a sudden loud harp, and Armin turned to look down the street. There she saw the blinding yellow of the school bus coming up the road.

“Hey,” said Gordon, tugging on Armin's blouse.

She turned to him and said, “What?”

Smiling profusely, Gordon pointed across the street. "Checkout that chick across the road," he said.

Armin turned her attention to the other side of the street, and immediately froze.

A young, Native American girl in red clothes stood on the other side of the road. She wore a small white knapsack on her back, and had her hair tied in two pigtails. Her eyes were dark, with a glint of white in them.

"She's like me," said Gordon, "only she likes red!" Gordon didn't get a reply from his sister. He turned to her and saw the startled expression on her face. "Armin?"

Armin tightened her grip on her little brother's hand. She stared back at the stoic expression of the narrow-faced girl across the street. *This isn't possible!* Armin thought. *You're not real!*

Gordon pried his hand from Armin's grasp. He rubbed his hand and said, "Armin, you blockhead! That hurt!"

Armin momentarily snapped out of her trance and turned to Gordon. "Sorry Gordon. I was just...daydreaming..."

The bus pulled over in front of the two kids, blocking Armin's view of the girl. The doors to the vehicle opened up and Armin hurried Gordon up the steps. Armin entered after him. She held his hand and guided them through the chatter and play of the children on the bus to two empty seats at the back.

Armin brushed a crushed-up paper and candy wrapper off the seat and sat Gordon down. But the boy also took notice of the worried look on his sister's face as she looked out the window.

Armin peered through the glass over the heads of two boys checking her out. On the other side she could still see the young girl in red. This time her position was turned, as if she could see Armin through the glass inside. And as if to make sure Armin knew, she girl smiled, revealing a mouthful of dreadfully sharp teeth.

Armin visibly flinched and took two steps back, out of sight of the girl outside.

"Are you okay Armin?" Gordon said. "You're acting really weird."

Armin turned to Gordon with a terrified look. Then one of the boys before her said, "Nah, little man. She's just wondering which one of us to ask out."

Armin smiled nervously at the two boys and went back to her seat. Gordon discretely took Armin's hand in his, between them. "You okay?"

Armin nodded. "...Yeah," she said. "I'm fine. I just didn't get enough sleep."

Armin put her backpack in her lap, and stared contemplatively at one of her fruit keyrings. *My little brother can see you, so you must be real*, thought Armin. *Who are you? What are you? Those bones I found...That doll...That cabin...*

After a few seconds of deliberation, Armin realized whether she wanted to or not, she was going to find out about what was going on in the woods. So might as well, she went hunting before that girl did.

CHAPTER THREE

It was that time of the day; that time when Armin could be *Armin*! It was third-period, and Armin raced through the busy, blue hallways, navigating through teachers and students alike.

The room to her Home Economics class was just around the left corner, but as Armin tried to prep her mind for making that very special cake she'd been dreaming of for weeks now, images of the girl-in-red still popped up.

Not now bitch! Armin thought. She quickly replaced the dreaded image of the girl with that of the Candy Heroine and continued.

Armin came upon the door to the Home Economics room. She peered through the glass in the door inside, but the translucence only obscured the images of what was on the other side. However, it was impossible to mistake the glaring yellow of the walls. Armin opened the door and was greeted with a barrage of smells. Flour, sugar, eggs, vanilla, nutmeg...all sorts of wonderful food fragrances assailed her nostrils, spiraling her mind as she pictured a hundred different cakes with a hundred different tastes.

Armin smiled, one of genuine delight.

The room had three counters stretching through the center. Each was fitted with four sockets. Around the area were eight ovens as well, four on opposite sides of the room. There were also two huge cupboards over tables occupied by small, electrical appliances. Students in aprons were at the refrigerators remove and storing goods. Some were at the dish washers risking their utensils in preparation.

Walking around the classroom was Mr. Bryce. He was a rarity in men who had interested in Home Eco', and amongst the students his ever-bright demeanor coined him the nickname "Mr. Brittany". Still, as nice as he was, referring to him out of his name would instantly land a bold student in detention.

Wearing an apron over his jeans and dress-shirt, he observed the equipment of each student keenly behind his spectacles.

He had heard the door open, and turned to see Armin walking in.

He smiled and said, "Ah, the cooking queen is here!"

Armin blushed. The other students took note of Armin, and half of them met her with a scowl.

As Armin went to her usual spot she scowled back at everyone. She wasn't trying to be antagonistic, she just wanted to let them know she wasn't here for applause from the teacher or anyone unless they would transfer to her grades.

I'm here to do my best, Armin thought. Haters, scary dolls or not.

As Armin took her ingredients out of her bag and place them on the counter, a boy next to her said, "I hope there're no ants in that bag of sugar..."

Armin turned to the boy, a rather tall fifteen-year-old of African descent. He smiled at Armin. But, having been on speaking terms for a few months, Armin allowed herself to chuckle.

"Not this time, Paul," said Armin. "I made sure to lock them up in an air-tight bag."

Paul, who had his fruits in a small bowl before him, said, "Armin, you do know that ants have big teeth to eat through the bag, right?"

"Their mandibles, not teeth," said Armin. "And they won't touch it if you coat the plastic in bleach."

Paul frowned and said, "So you moved up from ants to bleach now? You're really trying to kill us, huh?"

Armin and a few students who overheard chuckled.

Once everyone was present, Mr. Bryce said, "All right everyone, settle down. Settle down!" Once all the students were quiet, Mr. Bryce continued, "Now before you all start, I'll just remind you again of the rules. Number one, no talking; especially you Paul." The students chuckled briefly. Paul bit his lip and gave Mr. Bryce a thumb's up. "Number two, no sharing. Everyone should be prepared for their class."

"Chucky ain't got that covered, though," said a girl.

Chucky, a boy in the back in overalls with shaggy auburn hair, glowered at the class sniggering at him. He clenched the knife tighter in his hand.

"And third and lastly," said Mr. Bryce, "make good food. Now," he clapped his hands, "let's get cooking. It's twelve fifteen. You have one hour and forty-five minutes starting...now!"

Plates, bowls, cups, jugs and utensils clanged, and the sounds of plastic wrappers unfolding filled the air.

Armin ran through the procedure for mixing the ingredients with the dough. She added the flour and wheat into the bowl, then went over the one of the blenders with another bowl containing sliced fruits and water.

At the table next to another student Armin added the water into her blender. As she did, however, she noticed a beetle on the table. She frowned at the insect and flicked it off with a finger. Armin went back to what she was doing and added the fruits into the machine's container. She closed it and pressed "liquefy" on the machine. As the blender churned the fruits into a pulp, Armin went over to her counter and fetched a small jug. She glanced at Paul's work, intrigued by the smell of the food coloring he was using. Paul spotted Armin examining his items, and Armin gave him a thumb's up before walking off.

Armin went back to the blender she left on—and screamed and dropped the jug.

Her blender was swarming with beetles. There were so many that they made a faint scraping sound as they sought to infest every inch of the appliance to find a way inside.

Armin's hands trembled at her side, immediately remembering the vision of the bugs burrowing inside her flesh. She began to scratch all over.

"Is she crazy?" a student said.

"Are you okay Armin?" another child said.

A student at the table with the appliances looked at the blender, then back at Armin incredulously as if she saw nothing.

Mr. Bryce hurried over to Armin and held her by the shoulders. He lowered his head to hers and said, "Armin, sweetie, are you alright?" Armin didn't respond, still staring at the blender where the beetles increased their pace, as if taunting the girl.

They're right there! Armin thought. *Can't you all see? They're right there!*

"Armin?" said Mr. Bryce a little louder. This time he shook Armin.

The young woman flinched and clamped her eyes shut. When she opened them, all the creepy-crawlies on the appliance were completely gone. Armin got her breathing under control. Now she felt Mr. Bryce's presence next to her. "Huh?"

"It's okay Armin," said Mr. Bryce. He gently escorted Armin out of the room, and into the hallway where the other kids wouldn't hear them.

The teacher stood before Armin, studying the emotions on her face. "What happened in there, Armin?"

Armin rubbed her eyes, thinking probably she hallucinated the creatures. *How comes no one else saw them?*

"Armin...?" Mr. Bryce said a little more sternly.

“It's nothing...Mr. Bryce...” Armin said.

“*Nothing?*” Mr. Bryce said. He gestured to the door behind him. “Armin, you just screamed like you saw ten dead bodies!”

Armin's mind still felt a little woozy. She remembered touching the single beetle before, and felt its physical mass as she flicked it away. *Then how comes no one else saw them?*

The sound of breaking glass snapped at Mr. Bryce's attention. He spun to the door, where through the glass he could make out figures running about. But above all he could hear the horrified screams of the children.

“The hell?” Mr. Bryce dove for the door knob and twisted it, he pushed the door open and bolted inside.

Now the screams were more audible; almost deafening and making someone wince at the prospect of the vocal cords tearing apart. Armin caught her herself, and quickly ran in after Mr. Bryce. All the children were against the walls screaming at the horror in the middle of the room.

“Jesus Christ!” Mr. Bryce screamed. “Paul!”

“Holy Shit!” Armin said, gasping in disbelief.

A massive cloud of beetles swarmed around the thrashing young man. His form was barely visible within the mass of insects. Their buzzing drowned out all cries in the room, except that of the victim caught in the center of their frenzy.

A student screamed, “Someone help him! Please help him!”

As if snapped out of his trance, Mr. Bryce quickly leveled his eyes with the fire-extinguisher on the wall. As he ran towards it, Paul kept on crying and bouncing over the equipment and chairs. Drops of blood dotted the floor wherever he staggered along with bits and pieces of his clothes.

Mr. Bryce ran over with the fire-extinguisher and turned it on. A thick, white mist spewed from the nozzle onto the beetles, but Paul's constant movements was throwing off Mr. Bryce's aim. Finally, Paul fell upon the floor. Mr. Bryce stood over him, continuing to douse the beetles. The insects fell on the floor like rain. Their wings and legs twitched less and less as the seconds passed.

The children came off the walls and gathered around their fallen classmate. Mr. Bryce waved them back and swatted at the last of the bugs hovering over the boy. The six-legged intruders eventually flew out the shattered window they had entered through.

Then the screams suddenly started again. The students retreated; even Mr. Bryce stood up with a terrified expression. Tears were brimming his eyes and his mouth fumbled for his words.

“...Oh...Oh my god...” Mr. Bryce finally said. He held his head and staggered away.

Armin parted two students out of her way to look at the scene. On sight of what was left of Paul, Armin gasped, and quickly covered her mouth.

Paul laid bloodied on his back. His clothes were torn to shreds, and most of the exposed flesh had been chewed down to the muscles. But the boy’s face was where the carnage was worst. His nose was eaten off to a bloody orifice. One of his eyes had been ripped and ran viscous fluid down his face. His mouth gaped open, uttering stifled gargles, as his tongue had been eaten down to a stub. He suddenly coughed, spewing beetles and blood from his nose and throat. More screams were added to the mix.

Mr. Bryce weakly reached into his pocket for his cellphone. As the tears rolled down his face, he said, “Get into the hall kids! Now...Go!”

The children poured into the hallway through the door, almost tripping each other. As Mr. Bryce dialed the number for the police, Armin took one curious glance behind her. Sure enough, as she had suspected, Armin spotted the girl-in-red at the window.

The girl smiled back at Armin, and vanished out of sight.

That night, Armin sat in her bed, hunched over and deep in her thoughts. The lights were off, and the only illumination came from her cellphone on the bed and the street light shining through her room’s window.

When the incident had happened a few hours ago, Mr. Bryce had contacted the police before running for the emergency-alarm. All the students had filed into the hallway and waited for their parents to arrive and pick them up. The teachers had tried to quiet them down; let them know that everything was going to be okay, but the Home Economics class was already spewing the story around in the hall.

When their parents came, so did the police and the ambulance. Armin's mother picked her up and drove to her little brother's school. As if she could envision the same thing happen at her son's place of learning, Mrs. Bronson went inside and requested for her to take her son home early. So, Mrs. Bronson had brought both her children home with her, and called her husband.

Mr. Bronson came home an hour early, and he and his wife questioned Armin about the “accident”. Armin made sure to make no mention of the woods, fearing a spike in her parents' emotions. As a result, Armin only mentioned the beetles that busted in the school and attacked her classmate.

Later that evening, her mother had made everyone dinner, while her father phoned the school about the issue. Armin had told her mother she didn't want to attend school tomorrow, and for the first time, there was no protest from her parents.

It was eleven o' clock. The empty bowl lay on the table along with Armin's knickknacks. She just woke up after a two-hour nap. The thoughts of a dead classmate weren't easily forgotten on the same day. She had repeatedly run numerous scenarios of the Candy Heroine battling various edibles until she stopped crying, and the thought of Paul being eaten alive didn't make her want to throw up.

She managed to get over the image of death rather easily this time, but wondered how it would fare the next time if it were one of her family members.

So, this is it now, huh? Armin thought. This is what war and death really looks like? This is adult stuff now, then? You got what you wanted Armin, you got to grow up fast.

There was a tender knock on the door, but Armin could hear it. “Come in,” she said.

The knob twisted and the door pushed inward. Gordon peeped inside, blue eyes matching his blue pajamas.

“Armin?” Gordon said.

“I'm here,” Armin said.

Gordon closed the door, with the lock. He walked over to the bed, and Armin scooted over and gave him space. He sat next her. Both had their legs crossed. They maintained the usual silence for some seconds before it was broken by Gordon.

“Dad told me about what happened. Are you okay?”

Armin nodded, staring at the scrolling images of different cartoon characters on her cellphone. “I feel a little better since school...” she said.

Gordon turned and faced her. “That sounded scary and cool,” said Gordon with a tiny smile. “Bugs eating the guy? How did it look? His body I mean?”

Armin gave Gordon such a cold stare that the little boy gasped and pull back. Armin realized how much maliciousness was spilling from her face, and lightened her expression. She sighed and said, "The guy that got killed was my friend, Gordon."

"Gosh, Armin," said Gordon. "I'm sorry. I didn't know..."

Gordon's face had a genuine worried look, and Armin smiled. The boy before her could easily switch between the best jokes, annoying pranks and affection when necessary.

Armin touched his face, gently stroking his cheek. Gordon felt a ripple of warmth under her touch. But he realized something strange about Armin's silence.

"You're not telling me everything, are you?" Gordon said.

Armin's smiled was replaced by a thin-lipped expression. She couldn't get her little brother involved in any of this. It was bad enough the creature was following her. Now, it had killed, letting Armin know very well what its intent was.

She had to protect Gordon.

"I can't tell you what it is," said Armin.

"But I wanna help, Armin!" Gordon protested, now crouched in the bed.

Armin sat him back down. She held him by the cheeks and kissed him on his forehead. She looked him in the eyes and said softly, "You're the last person I want involved in this, Gordon. But I'll fix things. Don't worry, I'll end this. I'll keep you safe...I promise..."

Gordon didn't know much other than what information was immediately available to him. The only research he would do was if it related to homework, comics or video games. But one thing he was well aware of was his sister's emotions. Just as how she had comforted him during his time of need, he wanted to do the same for her.

Gordon got up so quickly Armin was caught off guard. He pushed Armin down by her shoulders onto her back. He got on top of her, looking her dead in the eyes.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Armin said, her voice trembling.

"Keep your voice down..." Gordon whispered.

Armin lowered her voice, but said with the same intensity, "What are you doing, Gordon?"

"I wanna take care of you," said the boy. He leaned in and tried to kiss Armin but she turned away.

"No," she said. "We agreed we wouldn't do this anymore..."

“I wanna take care of you like how you took care of me, Armin,” Gordon said.

Armin saw the pleading in Gordon's eyes. He held her down by her wrists, but she could easily wrestle him off.

But that wasn't what she sensed from him. Her brother didn't want sex, he just wanted to make her feel better. He just wanted to be close to her.

Just as how she wanted to be close to him.

Armin sensed her body craving the affection being dangled before her. She had already seen death at its most brutal. Her life was turned upside down, and she couldn't control it. But this feeling she knew, was something good.

And so Armin relaxed, allowing her mind to absorb the cool night's air, the scent of the powder wafting off her skin, and view of the cute young man waiting just before her face. Armin took a deep breath, exhaled a warm breath that brushed against Gordon's neck. “How far are you going to go?” Armin said.

“I wanna go...as far as you'll let me,” said Gordon.

Armin deliberated silently, and after a while, she reached for her pants and pushed them down, exposing her white underwear. “Make me feel good here...with your mouth...”

Gordon's eyes flew wide open. “Whoa! Really?”

Armin nodded with a mischievous smile. “I don't want you to put your penis inside me. I don't have a condom, and I might get pregnant. It'll make me feel good. You already like the smell; imaging how it tastes?”

Gordon's smile widened. He moved a few spaces back, and pulled down Armin's pants. He then took her panties by the sides, and slowly pulled them down to her ankles. Upon seeing the puffy, hairy hunk of flesh with the predominant split in the middle, Gordon grinned and punched the air.

“Score!” he said.

“*Quiet*,” said Armin, scowling.

“*Sorry...*” said Gordon, cringing.

The boy slowly leaned over his sister once more. He crawled his way down until his face was directly above her crotch. He pressed his nose against her pubic hair and took a deep sniff. The fleshy fragrance made him rigid in his trousers. He stuck two fingers inside her, fast. Armin squeaked and crossed her legs. She covered her mouth.

Gordon looked up with a grin and said, "Quiet."

"Sorry," aid Armin. "Do it slower, you dummy."

Gordon slowly thrust his fingers in and out of Armin. The girl felt tingles racing up her body. She jerked and twitched each time his fingers entered her, gripping the sheets tighter as Gordon increased his speed, biting her lip to suppress her outbursts. Now the boy's fingers were getting stickier and slipperier. After five minutes Gordon took out his fingers. He held them up to the moonlight shining through the window, watching the light glint of the strand of fluid between his fingers.

Gordon put his hand to his lips hesitantly. Upon picking up the fragrance once more his mouth watered. He stuck his fingers in his mouth, sucking on them and savoring the raw, spicy, musty flavor.

"How is it?" Armin said.

Gordon took his fingers out of his mouth and said, "It tastes kind of funny, but not bad..."

Armin and Gordon silently giggled.

Then Armin hatched a plan, and said, "I have an idea..."

She kicked her feet out of her panties and got up. She pushed Gordon onto his back and unzipped his pajamas at the crotch. His five-inch manhood popped up, rigid and waiting, throbbing with hot blood.

Armin saw it, and said, "You really are trooper, huh?"

"What are you gonna do?" said Gordon, looking at his sister with anticipation dripping off his face.

Without another word Armin spun around, she crawled backwards until her ass rested directly above his face and his penis pointed directly to her chin. She looked over her shoulder and said, "You didn't think your big sister would let you do this alone, did you?"

Gordon held her bottom by the cheeks, and stared directly into her vagina. A drop of fluid dripped onto his nose. "All right," he said. "Let's do this, Armin."

Armin sat in his face, more specifically on his awaiting tongue. Armin bowed her head onto his erect phallus, taking all of him into her mouth.

As Gordon's tongue friskily licked her lips, Armin slowly and forcefully sucked on him, and made sure she squeezed her lips on the tip of his penis where he was most sensitive.

As both siblings pleased each other, they moaned, but their sounds were luckily muffled by their crotches in each other's mouth. Then Gordon discovered a bud of flesh beneath the skin at the top of her vagina. Upon wrapping his lips around her clitoris, Armin uttered a tight scream and flinched, hard. Discovering her weak spot, Gordon attacked. He sucked and licked as hard as he could. In retaliation Armin increased her mouth and tongue's power. She grinded on his face and Gordon thrust, intent on reaching the back of her throat.

They continued to go hard, increasing the waves of pleasure until they came faster and faster.

Until finally...they came...together.

Gordon shot his load in Armin's throat, stinging her and causing her to choke and close her eyes. And she in turn released her creamy fluids like running a faucet into his mouth.

Armin sat up and rolled off him. Both siblings lay next to each other, head-to-head, staring into the ceiling as they savored each other.

“How do I taste?” Gordon said.

Armin swallowed what was in her mouth and said, “It tastes a little tangy and salty.”

Gordon said, “Bad, huh?”

“Not too bad,” said Armin.

They both giggled.

After a while Armin said, “You should go before mom and dad wake up.”

“...I guess,” said Gordon.

Armin rolled over onto Gordon. She looked him in the eyes and gave him a soft kiss. “I love you...” she said. “And I want you to promise me you'll stay safe on the road.”

Gordon kissed her back with equal passion, and said “I love you too. I promise.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Armin sat in the kitchen with a bowl of fruits and toast in front of her. She had eaten half of her breakfast before she shifted focus onto something more important.

Indeed, the images of death were difficult to forget. But Armin wouldn't wait to see any more of it.

Since last night, Armin had been thinking about a plan; a plan to end all of this. Preparation was key in everything; from preparing a meal to survival. She needed information on what the creature was that was stalking her. She had tried online earlier this morning, but no information on killer-dolls commanding a horde of carnivorous beetles came up.

The history of the Chief's Woods was that during the town's settlement by the Europeans in the 1800's, there were trials and tribulations. There were scuffles between the natives and the settlers, weather conditions and rivaling factions within the European colony in the location. But there were also tales of those; settlers and native folk alike, falling victim to the woods.

It could never be explained what was leading to the death of both whites and natives, and most people believed some other rival colonists either from Spain or France had poisoned the patch of vegetation. However, throughout the history of the small city, only the English, natives and African slaves had resided here. No other group was ever documented.

And so, with logic unable to explain the strange events, the Woods was officially labeled cursed.

But, Armin realized that the people who would know the most, would be the people who lived here the longest. And there was only one person who had lived long enough who could provide any sort of valuable information on the Chief's Wood's.

Armin sat up and sighed. "...I never thought I'd actually need her help, twice..." she Armin.

On the other side of the table, her mother looked up from the computer and said, "What was that, Armin?"

"Huh?" said Armin. She turned to her mother. "Umm...I was just thinking about my friend. Hey, mom, can I go see her?"

"Who?" Mrs. Bronson said.

Armin quickly said, "Pauline."

Mrs. Bronson looked perplexed. She knew her daughter had a few friends; not many, but a few. But Mrs. Bronson wasn't familiar with anyone named *Pauline*. "Who's Pauline?" she said.

"She's a friend I met a month ago," Armin lied. "She transferred from Biology to Home Economics. She was friends with me...and Paul..."

"...Oh..." said Mrs. Bronson. "So she was there too when it happened?"

Armin nodded with a tight mouth. "Yeah," she said. "We were talking last night and planned on meeting up in the park with some other kids."

Mrs. Bronson leaned back and deliberated on the idea for a moment, tapping her finger on the table. She sighed and said, "All right, you can go. But make sure you're back here before four. And don't go anywhere else, or else I'll be here about it."

Armin smiled and said, "Thanks mom. We won't stay long. It's gonna be like a little memorial ceremony."

Her mother smiled. "A memorial so early?"

"I guess," said Armin.

The young woman finished her breakfast and went upstairs for some stuff; her kitchen knife, cellphone and about seventy dollars. She hid the knife in her backpack along with a bottle of water and a protein bar. She went downstairs, wearing a white tunic and baggy pants with flower patterns and her red boots. She went into the kitchen and told her mother goodbye before heading out.

It was just after nine in the morning and the sun was just picking up. Gordon was at school, presumably safe considering the girl-in-red was after her. Armin took a cautious glance up the street where the woods were. She didn't see anything of the mysterious girl, and went in the opposite direction.

Everyone knew where Miss Sylva's house was, and coincidentally for Armin, it was in the same direction one would take to leave the community and reach the park. But even though Armin had doubts as to whether the old woman could help her or not, she kept looking behind her, knowing for certain the girl-in-red was a real threat.

Fourteen minutes later and Armin was there. The abode of Miss Sylva.

Contrary to Miss Sylva's reputation for being an old, slimy she-weasel, she actually took great care of her home. The yard was bordered by red picket fences, and the lawn was neatly cut

with the walkway from the gate to the front door spruced with colorful flowers at the sides. The house itself had a sloping red roof and mint green walls.

Armin stood a few feet from the gate and said, “Miss Sylva?” She waited a few seconds and said again, “Miss Sylva are you there?”

As Armin waited for the woman to respond, she looked around her. She didn't notice anything ordinary at first, but then she noticed something in a tree across the street. Armin turned around with a slight scowl. “What the hell?”

Armin went to the edge of the sidewalk and peered closer just to make sure she wasn't being misled. And sure enough, she wasn't. Within the greenery Armin could see bits of white and red. She also saw someone's head full of grey hair.

Armin waited until three vehicles drove pass and crossed the street. Upon walking up to tree and peering upwards, she confirmed her suspicions.

“Miss Sylva?” said Armin.

The old woman expertly balanced herself on the small branches with her feet and hands. Her head was cocked over a small tree limb, staring into the neighbor's yard, and possibly trying to get a view into the window. When she heard Armin's voice she looked down with wide eyes behind her glasses and gaped.

“Wh-What-huh?” Miss Sylva said. “*You?* What the heck are you doing here?”

Armin pointed to herself and said, “*Me?* What're you doing snooping around in the tree?”

Miss Sylva scowled. She slowly climbed out of the tree, mumbling as she carefully placed her feet on each branch below. It took a good four minutes for Miss Sylva to descent to the bottom of the tree, and Armin arched an eyebrow upon thinking of Miss Sylva's determination to gather gossip.

The old woman landed unceremoniously on her feet before falling forward. Armin motioned towards Miss Sylva, but the old woman quickly reached forward and broke her fall with her hands. Armin held her under her arms and helped her to stand straight.

Miss Sylva made a loud groan and rubbed her lower back. “These damn old bones of mine...” she said sharply.

“Are you fine?” said Armin.

Miss Sylva turned to Armin, fists clenched and shoulders raised. “What flew in your head to think you can just *run-up* on old women and scare them like that? You little Punk!”

Armin's frustration with the situation at school, her sex life and the old woman finally took its toll, but Armin quickly caught herself and released her anger in a concentrated form. “Look here, you old bat! I might have walked through the woods, but that's not illegal. Invading people's privacy by peeping through their windows can land you in jail. There's no age limit on that lady.”

Miss Sylva suddenly dropped her shoulders and chuckled. “Pwaaah!” she said, with flick of a wrinkled hand. “Do you really think the police will send me to jail; a wee little old lady like me?”

Armin clenched her fists. “Trust me,” she said, “with what's happening at my school, the police will be the least of your worries.”

Miss Sylva's toothy grin slowly vanished, replaced by a serious expression. She folded her arms and said, “What happened at your school?”

Armin noticed the sudden change in the old woman's demeanor and said, “Why are you asking?”

They studied each other's expressions and body motions for several seconds, trying to see which one would break first. But Armin decided it would be best to be as straight forward as possible.

“Bugs flew into my school; into my class. They ate one my friends alive,” she said. “A girl-in-red brought them with her...”

Armin noticed Miss Sylva's hands fold into fists. She looked at the woman's leathery face and saw how unusually steady and strong her gaze was.

Armin grinned triumphantly. “*You know...*” she said. “You know about that doll, don't you?”

Miss Sylva casted a suspicious glare to the side before bringing her eyes back to Armin. Her foot slowly shook.

It was confirmation for the young girl. Her smile widened.

Miss Sylva sighed and unfolded her arms. She said to Armin, “Shut up and come with me,” and walked off.

Armin suddenly found herself trying to keep up with the pace of the old woman as she briskly strode across the street.

Miss Sylva opened the gate and made way for Armin. Once the young woman cautiously entered the yard Miss Sylva closed the gate and walked Armin to the front door. Miss Sylva took the key out of her frock pocket and twisted it in the knob. Then she paused, turned to Armin, and said in a cold voice, “You tell anyone about what happens inside here, and what happened to your friend at school will be child's play compared to what I'll do to you...”

Armin stiffened and reach for the strap of her bag. She shifted her feet uncomfortably, and nodded vigorously.

Miss Sylva turned to the door and pushed it open.

Because the roof hung over the sides of the house, much sunlight wasn't able to reach inside at this time of day. But nonetheless, the living room had above average décor; with scenic paintings on the walls and red-cushioned furniture.

Miss Sylva pointed to one of the couches and said, “Sit.”

Armin walked over and took a seat. She picked up a strange, earthy smell inside, heavily mixed with a tinge of lemon.

As Miss Sylva hurried into another room, Armin considered what truths the woman was about to tell her—that's considering Miss Sylva wasn't working with the doll!

Dammit! Armin thought. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea!*

Armin put her backpack in her lap and fiddled inside. Finding the knife's handle, she gripped it tightly, but didn't take it out just as yet.

Miss Sylva came back from the other room with a laptop in one and a small bowl in the other. She seated herself beside Armin in the couch. She gave Armin the bowl, and upon taking it the young woman saw sweets inside.

Armin smirked, in that moment. *Just like an old lady.*

Miss Sylva Put the computer in her lap to rest, crossing her arms over it. She stared at Armin long and hard before saying, “What's your name again?”

“...Armin,” the girl replied.

“Now Armin,” said Miss Sylva, “you've just stumbled into some deep shit, little girl. Deep shit most adults wouldn't want to be in.”

Armin's appetite was gone, and she placed the bowl next her and said, "Miss Sylva...what is that thing in the woods? Is the doll...is it alive?"

"Obviously," the woman said. "And it's not a doll?"

"Well what is it?" said Armin.

"It's an alien," said Miss Sylva.

Armin gave her an incredulous look. "An...*alien*?"

Miss Sylva leaned back a little. She looked at the ornate woodwork in the ceiling and said, "Well, not exactly the kind that comes from outer space..." Miss Sylva closed her eyes and went quiet, as if thinking hard about something. She looked at Armin and said, "Little girl, what I'm going to show you—are you sure you want to be involved in this?"

Armin said, "I don't have a choice, do I. Ever since I touched that fricking doll I've been having nightmares. Now someone died."

Armin let loose a deep sigh. She sat forward and held her head. She ran her fingers through her hair and said, "I'm worried about my little brother, Miss Sylva." She sat up turned to the older woman. "He's an annoying little brat...But he's a good boy..."

Miss Sylva Put aside the laptop and got up. She stood before Armin, reach for the lock on her necklace and said, "Remember, no word to anyone about this..."

Miss Sylva pulled the neckless. The pearls in it glowed intensely as she tossed it aside. Her skin rippled and boiled into a fine mist. Armin flew out of her seat, knife in hand. "Holy shit!" she said as she ran towards the door. Her outstretched arm with the knife trembled before the disintegrating woman.

I knew this was a bad idea!

The shroud of tan, gaseous matter dissipated from around Miss Sylva, and what was left had Armin flabbergasted. "Huh?" she said.

The old, shriveled up weasel Armin had known of Miss Sylva was gone. What now stood before Armin was a woman in her mid-thirties; skin supple, eyes bright and green, her arms and shoulders toned, and her hair a striking bright brown.

The woman, now standing a few inches taller, smiled brightly and gestured to herself. "Well, what do you think?"

Armin lowered the knife and took slow steps towards Miss Sylva. "What the hell was that?"

“Oh,” the woman said, daintily folding her arms, “this is what we call magic, sweetheart.”

“...Magic?” said Armin.

Miss Sylva took Armin by the shoulders and sat her back down. She sat beside Armin, crossed her smooth legs and laid her manicured hands in her lap.

“You don't need to worry,” said Miss Sylva. “I won't hurt you.”

“...Yeah...” said Armin. “But...like...you got *younger!*”

The woman shook her head. “Actually, this really is my age,” she said. “Armin what you just saw was a spell used to temporarily alter my age. I'm really thirty-three years old. And my name isn't Miss Sylva, its Susan.”

“Susan?” said Armin. “So, like, all of this”—and Susan waved her hands around the room—“this isn't real?”

Susan put her arms around Armin and said in a low voice, “There're many mysteries in this world, Armin. My organization works to keep track of them so they don't spiral out of humanity's control and cause our demise.”

“What is your organization?” Armin said.

“We call ourselves Ark,” Susan said. “We're a secret organization funded by certain rich individuals who seek to preserve humanity against supernatural forces. Our main goals are to preserve humanity, while at the same time documenting and coexisting with other intelligent, non-human lifeforms.”

Armin said, “You mean...like aliens?”

Susan nodded. “And cryptids like the sasquatch, raiks, the Lochness Monster—even fairies, vampires, werewolves and demons. You name it, we hunt it...”

“Holy cow,” said Armin. “Things like that actually exist? Then, how comes no one can find evidence of it?”

“Oh, there is evidence,” said Susan. “My organization just makes sure it doesn't reach the public and cause mass hysteria. But there are a few places where humans actually interact with these supernatural creatures on a daily basis.”

Armin got up. She paced around the room holding her arms as she processed the information with a worried look. She stopped and said to Susan, “Then that thing that killed my friend, what was it?”

Susan uncrossed her legs and sat forward, looking into Armin's face. "That's an extradimensional being," she said. "You see, kid, you have our universe with our set of planets, solar systems and galaxies, and then you have parallel universes."

Armin remembered watching something similar to what Susan just said. She didn't quite remember which TV show it was, but she had a clue. "Like universes just like our, but different?"

"Yeah, sort of," said Susan. "There's a difference in some dimensions. Let me explain. You have our universe with the physical world we live in, or the material world. Then you have the astral plane where powerful beings without physical bodies live, and third is the spirit realm; a place where it's said all souls go to rest in endless dreams. And lastly, you have 'pocket dimensions'. These four planes of existence usually make up a universe. That being in the woods is called an *omeffigy*. It's from our universe, but from a pocket dimension."

Armin sat next to Susan and said, "What's an *omeffigy*?"

"Typically, it's a carnivorous, small humanoid," said Susan. She opened the laptop and typed on the keyboard, after a few seconds she found what she was looking for. "It looks like a doll, usually, until it's ready to feed."

Susan turned the computer around to Armin. The girl looked the screen and saw the photo of a small boy in simply clothing. But the face was what gave Armin shivers and made her rub her arms. She raised her shoulders as if to protect her neck.

The boy had shiny white skin; like a glass plate or porcelain. His eyes were jet black except for a speck of white light in the center. He had a gaping, drooling mouth with flesh shearing teeth, and a strange jeweled necklace was around his neck. The boy, or creature, had his hands bounded behind him and his feet shackled. Next to him stood two persons in brown uniform, although their heads were out of view. The background resembled that of a playground, but the sky above told it was dusk.

Armin suddenly thought upon Gordon.

"It's a monster," Armin remarked, her eyes fixed at the creature snarling miserably at its captors.

Susan said, "Actually," and pointed to the boy, "that's the monster right there."

Armin followed the tip of Susan's finger and found it upon the jewel around the boy's neck.

Armin frowned and said, "The necklace?"

"Yep," said Susan. "The omeffigy's body is in the jewel. The rest of the body is actually a system of nerves that embed itself into the host and take control of its body as it mutates it; a parasite basically."

As Susan closed the laptop, Armin said, "So that's why when I touched the pendant around the doll's neck, I saw a girl. And there were bugs..." Susan made a hard face, as if she was dealt an annoying blow. "What?" Armin was curious to the sudden change in Susan's expression.

"That omeffigy in particular is who we've been looking for," said Susan. "Things always start with just one. The first omeffigy came to this world over two centuries ago. Our organization, luckily, has been on earth for nearly three hundred years. This state in particular has been a prime breeding ground for the omeffigies. But this town in particular is where *Ningkako* appeared. That doll you saw...that's the mother for all of them."

"...No shit..." Armin said with a tired expression.

Susan sighed loudly, and said, "Armin. The disguise I was wearing, Miss Sylva, it's what we at the organization call a 'Protean Persona'. It's an identity whose role can be filled by more than one person. I'm the third in the past sixty years to take on the persona of Miss Sylva. The two before me, they died at the hands of *Ningkako*."

Armin saw the worried look on Susan's face, and was starting to realize what she was about now.

"You came to finish the job, didn't you?" Armin said.

"A boy died yesterday," said Susan. "The doll lives in the woods because it's the most secluded place in town, while at the same being close to her preferred food source. Humans. It feeds on flesh to nourish its body, but fear maintains its life force."

"...My friend died because of me," Armin said, hanging her head.

Susan quickly cradled Armin's face in her hands. "Don't say that!" Susan said, wiping the tear running down from Armin's cheek. "You didn't kill that boy. That thing did!"

"But it wouldn't have if I weren't such an idiot and went into the woods," said Armin in a shaky voice, her eyes glistening. "...My little brother...he needs my help...I have to save him!"

Susan held Armin's head in her bosom and rubbed her back. "Don't worry, girl. I'll end it. You just go home and get some rest. I'll go to the woods today and finish things once and for all. Just leave that bitch to me."

Back at Gordon's school, it was recess. The back of the compound beamed with the joy of youth, as six to twelve-year-old children bustled about across the yard.

The area itself was divided into two sections; one for the seniors and the other for the junior students. The younger children hung from monkey bars, went like pendulums on the swings and spewed debris from the sandbox, while the older children were jogging across the track constructed around the field or practicing their football formations.

Gordon, however, sat on the sidelines on a bench as the other students played. He was engrossed in playing an RPG on his smartphone, looking up everyone once in a while to see if a teacher was coming. But luckily most of the adults were inside going over papers.

But as Gordon tried to focus on strategizing a plan to defeat the boss his heroes were up against, Armin couldn't leave his mind.

Last night was awesome! Gordon thought.

He and Armin had become closer, in more ways than one. She had pleased him, and he had pleased her. Both had given equally to each other, strengthening their bond. His sister was his best friend, and his girlfriend now. Not to mention how she smelt and tasted! He had been with a girl he knew most boys wanted. He could now look at the other boys and laugh inwardly, realizing he was now on their level.

Of course, Gordon wasn't stupid. He could never reveal what he and his sister were doing to each other. His parents would goodly kill them and the world wouldn't accept them.

But being close to Armin was too good to give up. Hell, he might even form an actual relationship with her once they were out of the house. Once they became consenting adults, the world couldn't do much but about it.

But if that meant being with Armin, it was worth it.

Man was that good!

Gordon felt his pants swelling, and fought to control his urges. Then something struck the fence behind Gordon, startling him and ceasing the flow of blood to his groin.

The boy quickly looked around and saw a football falling to the ground. Gordon furrowed his forehead at the object, then he heard, “Hey! Gor-*dumb!*”

Gordon turned around and saw one of the boys on the field walking towards the edge of it. The student was dressed in football gear with the red coloring of his school's team. He was Matt, a blonde-haired student Gordon knew, but didn't take a fancy to that much.

Matt said, “Toss the ball back over here, snot-face!”

Gordon stood up and said, “Eat a bag dog crap, Matt!”

One of the other boys said, “Just ignore him and give us the ball, Gordon!”

Gordon locked eyes with Matt's snarky smile, but eventually decided against an argument. Gordon wanted time to play his video game and reminisce on his sister's vagina, and the sooner he got it, the better.

Gordon walked over the bench towards the fence. He stooped and reached for the ball—and halted upon seeing her.

Bent over, Gordon saw a pair of feet in shiny, girly black shoes. He followed them up to a red skirt, blouse, and a pretty necklace with a bright jewel between two small breasts, and finally a pretty face with hair in pigtails.

The girl had her arms crossed behind her, and rocked back on forth on the balls of her feet.

“Hi,” she said.

Gordon recognized the girl from yesterday at the bust stop. But his mind immediately leapt to ask what was she doing here.

“...Umm, hey?” Gordon said.

The girl giggled lightly. She stopped rocking and said, “So, you like playing football?”

Gordon took up the ball and held it under his arm. As he gazed upon the young female, his male mind, having been already charged with the thought of Armin's body, immediately began matching her attributes with that of the girl behind on the other side of the fence where the bushes grew wild.

“N-not really,” Gordon said. He giggled a little then stopped. “I like...video games...”

The girl's smile tightened and she narrowed her dark eyes. Gordon felt something run up his feet and spine.

“I didn't know they had such cute boys over here,” the girl said. But her voice was low and steady.

Gordon was about to reply, when Matt said, “Hey, Gor-bage! Throw the ball already!”

Gordon suddenly looked from the field to the girl with a confused expression. “Huh? Umm” Gordon from the girl. “All right!” Gordon tossed the ball. Matt caught it firmly, scoffed at Gordon and walked back to his teammates.

But the moment Gordon turned away, the young woman struck. She opened her knapsack behind her, and out flew a horde of beetles, carrying a writhing bracelet with a red jewel in its center. They took into the air, above the heads of the human boys where they wouldn't notice.

Gordon went back to the girl-in-red. He put his phone into his pocket, now wanting to give her his full attention. But suddenly, Armin came to his mind. Her words rung in his head, pleading with him to be careful. She had spoken these words while laying on top of him.

Suddenly Gordon stopped smiling. The girl caught onto the change in his emotions, and her smile dampened as well.

“I really shouldn't talk to strangers,” said Gordon.

The girl took her hands from behind her. She fingered the ends of her skirt. “Strangers?” she said. And that was when it happened.

Without so much as a hint or warning, the young woman lifted her skirt, exposing the bare skin of her privates to Gordon.

The boy's mind froze, as did the rest of this body. Suddenly a few nerves fought the shock and Gordon took a step back. “*Whooooaaaa!*” he said.

“We won't be strangers after you've had this,” the young woman said smoothly.

And then the beetles descended upon Gordon. But the way in which the executed the procedure, Gordon couldn't have done much.

First, they dropped the bracelet in his head. Gordon winced and ducked. He opened his mouth to scream, and that when the rest of the insects flew down his throat. Gordon choked as his tiny attackers bit and scratched at his windpipe, silencing any screams. Gordon clutched at his throat and mouth, kicking as he fought for air.

While he struggled on his back, the girl dropped her skirt. She walked towards the fence, and her body broke apart into thousands of beetles upon contact. They swarmed through the hole in the fence and reformed the girl's body on the other side; flesh, clothes and all.

She took up the bracelet, reached for Gordon's hand and clasped the bracelet around it. A squeaking sound came from the jewel as the band it was in sprouted many pointy threads that burrowed into Gordon's flesh. The bugs fled from Gordon's throat as dark veins erupted all over the boy's body before disappearing.

The girl stepped away with a stoic expression, watching Gordon's still body.

After a few seconds Gordon slowly rose to his feet. He turned to the girl-in-red, looking back at with blue eyes—eyes that instantly became pitch black. Gordon grinned at her, revealing his sharp teeth.

The girl smiled back with teeth equally as menacing.

She took Gordon's hand in hers as if he were a dear friend, and said, “Now, my child, let's go home.”

The ground beneath them broke apart, erupting in centipedes and maggots. They both looked in each other's eyes as they sank into the pool of insects, disappearing off the compound.

Armin laid in her bed, resting her head on her arm as she scrolled down on the webpage. Currently her mind was fixated on the visit she had with Miss Sylva, or in this case, Susan. And now, for the last six hours, all Armin could think about was the paranormal.

Right now she was looking up at all paranormal occurrences that took place in the city throughout the years. She had just done research on the Ark organization.

And boy was that a rude awakening.

She had typed in the words “Ark Secret Group” more than once. Each time she was met with a “this site does not exist” pop-up. And upon the fifth time, she suddenly got a call from Susan.

“If you want to live, cut that out,” Susan had said before disconnecting the call.

That had shaken up Armin. If they had the power to know where someone was just by their browsing history, what else could they do?

I don't know whether to be afraid of the doll or these people, Armin had thought.

But regardless if Ark was off limits, Armin still had the rest of the world at her finger tips. She went as deep as she could; anything about aliens, ghosts, vampires, the Mothman, bigfoot, witches, parallel universes, secret organizations (Ark not being one, of them, of course) disappearances, superpowers—the works!

Armin didn't know if all this particular information was accurate. But if not, she could always ask Susan. And besides, Armin had already seen enough shit in the last two days to make even a lion become a vegetarian.

Armin sighed and put her phone down. She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes. “Damn, Armin,” she said, “you've really gone off the deep end.”

She rubbed her burning eyes and opened them. *Maybe, when this over; if Susan kills that doll, I can join her organization*, Armin thought. *I could protect Gordon much better from there with all the stuff they have.*

The phone rang.

Armin looked over at it. She took it up and saw that it was her mother. Armin answered it. “Hey mom, what's up?”

“Is Gordon home?” Mrs. Bronson said.

Armin noted the pitch in her mother's voice. She sat up with a curious expression. “No. Gordon's not home? I thought you went for him?”

“He's not at school, Armin!” Mrs. Bronson said.

Armin flew out of the bed and onto her feet. All thoughts about the otherworldly were gone. Now, there was only Gordon at the forefront of her mind.

“What?” Armin said. “What're you talking about—”

“He's not here!” said Mrs. Bronson. “He's missing! I went to pick him up, but the teachers told me they were searching for him and couldn't find him. One of the boys in his class said they saw him talking to some girl at the back of the fence—then by the time came for them to find him, Gordon was gone!”

Armin's mind shut off from the outside world once she heard “girl”. There was a painful silence as Armin's mind envisioned the culprit. Even as her mother said, “Armin, stay home just in case Gordon he arrives. I'll call your dad...” Armin's mind could only envision the girl-in-red.

Armin lowered the phone with a blank stare. “...You fucking bitch,” she said, and hung up, just as her mother was asking if she was still on the line.

Armin put the phone in her pocket and reached for her backpack off the rack. She checked to ensure her knife was still inside, and put on her boots and hurried into the kitchen. She went to the sink and reached for a hammer her father usually hid underneath it. She put it in her backpack and made her way into the living room and into the hallway leading to the

backdoor. There was a small stand there with gardening tools and bottles, and Armin took up the bottle of kerosene and put it inside her backpack with everything else.

With her necessary tools secured, Armin ran through the house to the front door.

Don't worry, Gordy, Armin thought, your big sister's coming for you.

Susan purposefully walked up the street, garnering a few stares due to her peculiar attire. After she'd spoken to Armin hours ago, she had prepared herself to deal with the threat lurking in the neighborhood.

She couldn't fail; not like the others did. The omeffigy was now running rampant and had to be stopped once and for all. During her preparations she'd also called for backup from her organization, but at the same time she had to make sure that she at least could mitigate the danger.

I'm sorry, Susan thought, but I can't wait on you, Peacock. I have to at least try on my own.

Susan wore an ornate, leather jacket over her white tunic, along with black trousers and boots. Around her waist were various small jars and vials, along with a 9mm pistol and an extra magazine. Both her wrists were wrapped in beautiful silver chains, and slung across her shoulder was a rather long briefcase.

Susan reached the edge of the Chief's Woods. The woman noted how formidable the sun above was, but the gloom in the woods remained constant. Susan flexed her fingers, and walked up the slope. Upon entering the vegetation, she could already feel goosebumps, and the silence was too unnerving. But she wouldn't be dismayed.

Susan took one of the jars off her waist and opened it. She took out a handful of salt and closed it. She stopped, noting the fluid, unusual movement of the bushes around her. As Susan rubbed the salt in her hands, she thought back on her notes on the omeffigies: Though being extradimensional beings with high spiritual energy, they still needed to maintain their physical bodies. And their prepared source of nutrients was human flesh.

After rubbing her hands, Susan took a vial off her waist, uncorked it, and tossed its contents around her.

It was blood.

A bitter, metallic smell began to saturate in the air. Susan held her palms over each other and pulled out the tucked-in end of the chains. She let them hang at her side. She grasped them tightly, and when the chains came in contact with the salt, Susan whispered, “*Asui'tlesfera*,” and the chains glowed, giving off an icy mist.

It was over ten seconds of her laying out the bait, and already, Susan could sense the approach of vile gluttony. She took a firm stance as the scraping and chipping sounds increased. She felt a small trembling beneath her feet and looked down...

And there they were.

Centipedes and maggots erupted out of the soil. As if trained to do so they hurriedly crawled for the blood before quickly shifting their attention to Susan. They formed a writhing circle around her. Numbering in the thousands, each individual threw itself over the other to be the first to sample fresh blood.

But Susan wouldn't have it.

Spinning the chains between her fingers like bands of light, she lashed at the bugs. With each hit light busted from the chains, sending waves of scorched insects flying as the light incinerated them upon sensing their killing intent.

Susan increased her pace, then wriggled her wrists and dropped more coils, extending the chains into whips of light. Susan struck the ground, this time sending even more of her attackers to bite the dust.

But the bugs kept on coming. And her strength was depleting.

“Dammit!” Susan said. She retreated, running a circle around the carnivorous horde, and made her way through the bushes—unknowingly stepping over the dried leg of a corpse sticking out of the dirt.

She spun the chains back on her wrist, and took two vials off her waist. She glanced behind her and saw the bugs charging through the soil at her, levelling the shrubs in their path.

She suddenly stopped and spun around. She poured sulfur from one vial and powered wood from the other on the ground. She tossed the vials away, touched the material with a finger and said, “*Igti-scah!*”

The heap of colored powder erupted in flames. Susan gestured to the insects coming at her, and the flames grew and lurched forward. The column of insects was greeted with scorching fire that quickly spread over them like butter over bread.

As the creatures caught fire the others at the back of the swarm quickly scattered and burrowed into the ground. But the woman could still sense the killing intent.

Susan stood up, listening for whatever was coming next. She reached for her suitcase and began pulling off different sections of it, exposing a rectangular rifle. Susan held the weapon ready, spinning in completely angles expectantly, searching for the next wave of terror. A small fire fueled by dead bugs burnt brightly next to her.

There was silence, and then came gleeful, childish laughter.

Fear exploded in Susan. Her breathing became heavy as did the pounding of her heart. She swallowed down her dry throat, wanting to scream at her adversary, but trying not to feed the fear within her.

Then Susan spotted a red blur to her right. She spun in that direction, but saw nothing. She heard bushes rustling thirty degrees to her left, but when she turned and aimed the gun in that spot, nothing was there.

Shit! Susan thought.

And there came the laughter again.

“So, they sent a pretty woman after me,” a girl's voice said. It was low, but echoed ominously. “And just like the last time, only one...”

“I'll be enough to kill you, bitch!” said Susan, trying to reassure herself.

“...That's what they all said,” the girl said again. Only, this time her voice went cold. “But they were all boring. But I have to admit, you lasted longer than the others did. I only met a few humans who could wield magic...even though they all died eventually...”

Susan was still. She tried to sense the direction of the omeffigy, freeing her mind of worldly thoughts and focusing only on emotions as her teacher had thought her. At first Susan couldn't feel the location of it, but then she could.

All around her.

The girl's voice said, “It was fun, but I need to feed now.”

Arms, legs and heads lurched and popped out of the ground, and bodies crawled to the surface.

“*Oh my god...*” said Susan almost breathlessly. She had dealt with spirits before, and even tussled with a few raiks. But never had she seen anything visually repulsive as this.

Rotting corpses lumbered around her, snarling and groaning painfully as clumps of debris fell off their dried, rotting flesh. Some had their meat decayed down to the bone on their arms, legs and face. Others had their clothes intact while the rest had theirs torn or fused with the putrid mess of their bodies. But the sight of thousands of insects wriggling beneath what was left of their skin, as if manipulating their bodies, and the cold light in the sockets of their skulls, told Susan that these weren't just any undead. They were slaves to Ningkako.

Was she really this powerful? thought Susan.

The first undead charged at the woman with outstretched arms and a gaping mouth. Susan aimed her rifle at his chest and pressed the trigger. There was a muffled “*bang*” and the muzzle flashed. There was a loud thud, instantly followed by the zombie’s chest blowing apart. Its lower half flew back with the torso torn to shreds. Bug-juice and flesh flew everywhere.

And as if on que, the undead all attacked Susan.

The woman shot down one more corpse and ran over it. She tried to distance herself from the zombies awkwardly running behind her. Coincidentally she could, as the undead didn't have proper muscles and tendons to move their limbs quickly enough.

But though Susan could outrun the walking dead, she couldn't evade the beetles.

Susan pointed her gun and got another shot off into an undead and tore a leg off before being alerted to the beetles descending from the trees. She halted and screamed. She shot in vain at the black, buzzing mist of mandibles and claws that thickened around her, but it was a useless venture.

The beetles nipped at her flesh, forcing her to relinquish her weapon and swat at the creatures and claw them off her. With this trick the insects stunned her, giving the undead time to subdue her. Each one took an arm and leg and carried her off through the trees.

The car sped just inches pass Armin as she ran across the street. She ignored the onlookers and the shouting driver and reached the other side. She reached the mouth of the woods, and with Gordon on her mind, Armin ran into the cluster of trees.

She held the knife firmly in her hand, trying to find back the path that ran through the woods. After four minutes she found it. She leapt over a rusted shopping cart in the ground and forced her way through a cluster of bushes. And then she heard the screams.

“What the...” Armin paused as she tried to see if she would here it again. She did, and they were loud and hysterical. But, also familiar. “...Susan!”

Armin hurried down the path, and stomped to a halt.

There before her, some few meters away, was Susan; now a captive. The woman was being hauled off by what Armin could only describe as zombie-ish looking people with beetles buzzing around them.

Armin quickly went off the trail. She found a tree and stooped behind it. She peeped around the tree and saw the zombies carrying Susan into the shack. All six of them in total went into the building, and behind them was the girl-in-red.

She was a few paces behind the undead and their hostage, and as they disappeared inside, the girl stopped.

Armin held her breath.

The girl turned around and Armin pulled behind the tree. The girl had a stoic expression for a moment, but when Armin peered around again, the girl spotted her and smiled.

Armin held the knife tighter. But she didn't look away. This time, Armin stood up and took four steps into the open. She glowered at the girl in red. The girl made a wry smirk as if amused by Armin's display of courage.

“Ningkako,” said Armin. “I want my brother!”

Now called by her real name, Ningkako's expression fell flat, and her eyes became white and shiny. She said in a distorted voice, “*Come and get him,*” and walked into the shack.

Armin hesitated—and also wondered how the hell so many people could fit into a small space such as that? *For Gordon*, she thought, and walked towards the depraved building.

Armin reached the door, feeling a sudden sharp chill as she touched it. It only momentarily startled Armin, and she continued into the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

The shack had a few holes in the ceiling that allowed what minuscule light the sun could squeeze into the woods to penetrate inside. Most of it was filled with rotten leaves, twigs, animal droppings and a few skeletons of dead rats, birds and cats.

But though the putrid smell forced Armin to lift a hand to her nose, the images of a large latch in the floor held her gaze. Armin slowly walked inside, feeling her boots sink into the muck beneath. She knelt next to the latch and lifted it. She only saw darkness, but felt a deep chill coming from its bowels. Armin took out her phone and turned on its flashlight. She pointed down in the hollow and was shocked to see a small staircase.

Armin lowered the latch and went back outside. She found a good size stick, and fetched some twigs as well. She took a piece of plastic out of her backpack and put the twigs in it. She then took out a dishtowel and tied to the end of the stick along with the twigs. She dosed it in kerosene, and set it alight with a match.

She went back into the shack and opened the latch once more. Insects scurried in horror at the sudden scorching brightness.

“Okay,” Armin said, with a torch in one hand and a knife in the other, “let's see how far this rabbit hole goes.”

Armin took her first step, testing the sturdiness of the footing. Once satisfied she continued down. She casted the light on the walls and noted they were encased in dirt and a few outgrowing roots, but the further she went the more she noted they were being replaced with stone.

Armin saw something glinting in the torch's light. She knelt and picked it up. Holding the object to the light she saw that it was an ornate silver chain with a crescent-like pendant at the end. Armin wasn't sure who it belonged to at first, but remembered seeing Susan with something similar. Armin put it in her pocket and continued.

She traveled for six minutes without incident, until the stairs ended in a small room with large, wooden double-doors at the end. Here the smell of moldy wood and rotten eggs proudly rose from the mud before her, and Armin could even see worms wriggling through it.

The young woman carefully walked through the sludge and reached the door. She noticed there were iron ornaments resembling children and cat-like animals on it. Armin hovered her torch near the handles. Beetles quickly flew away from the fire. Armin touched it nonetheless, and pushed the door open. It made a squishing sound as it moved through the mud and creaked at the hinges.

When Armin entered the room behind it, she was met with a small series of steps leading up to a corridor of smooth walls.

Her grip on the knife tightened as she went up the stairs. Now in the hall, the torch's light suddenly seemed brighter, dripping off pieces of flaming ash. The floor here was constructed of smooth, discolored stones as was the ceiling. The wind howled discreetly as Armin realized the corridor split in two at the end.

But there were also paintings and carvings on the walls. And there were doors.

Armin held the torch near the walls, intrigued by the images. On her right next to a closed door she saw the carving of humanoid figures in loincloth and heavy clothing on the shoulders and arms. They all had conical headwear, and were in a line of five, gesturing to the painting of a shapely woman with massive, outstretching dark hair and rings around her neck.

Some kinda god? Armin thought.

Armin stood before the door and tested it. It was closed. She peered through a set of bars at the top, and saw into a darkened room with anything barely visible.

She ignored it and went to another image on the wall. This one showed the people holding smaller humans, possibly children, to the giant woman floating in the sky. Armin crossed the corridor to another image showing the floating woman hovering over the children and spilling something from her mouth upon them. Another set of paintings showed these children now flying along with the deity, and the people kneeling before them. The next image showed the deity lifting her hands to the heavens with the sun above. Beneath her what looked like trees were reaching towards her, and the stick-looking image of the people leapt in praise.

Armin tested the second door, but it was also closed. The images in this corridor ended, and Armin went into the next one. She saw the path on her right turn into a bend, with what look like unlit torches hung on the wall. But when she looked to her left, she flinched and shuddered.

Rat-infested skeletons hung by the dozens on the wall like ornaments. Armin slowly approached them and held the torch to get more detail. She made a squeamish face as rats scurried over the bones. She saw what looked like teeth marks on the remains, but wasn't sure if they were the work of the scavengers or what being actually killed them. Armin noticed a darkened patch beneath the skeletons and shone the light on it. It was like a huge reddish black stain, and smelt rotten.

Armin rubbed her nose and turned away. Then she heard squeaks and scratching claws behind her. She quickly spun around to see the rodents leaping off the skeletons and running towards her.

Armin shrieked. "Ah! Oh, shit!"

Armin swung the torch at the rodents, striking the floor and managing to squish one of them. Her efforts were successful, and the rats retreated in cracks in the walls. Armin relaxed after seeing no more of the vermin, and continued.

She took the other corridor, trying to piece together more information on the wall next to another door. She saw that this image showed the deity and her children above a group of humans, with one human in a large robe and more flamboyant headwear leading them.

But then, something caught Armin's ears. It was a strange sound at first, but she eventually figured it out.

Mumbling? Armin thought.

She looked beside the hieroglyphs and saw a door. Armin went to it and held the knob. She twisted it and pushed, and the door moved. Armin opened the door and stuck the torch inside first. The light revealed a rather small room. The shadows bounced off a bucket in one corner, a few wooden figures in another, and a human skull and femur bone in the next.

And a boy sitting in the back.

Armin's heart leapt for a moment. The black hair and build was similar to Gordon's. She hurried towards him, but stopped upon the torchlight revealing more about the boy.

His body was emaciated, and the skin pale. He only wore shorts, and his joints had heavy creases as if they weren't fully apart of each other and were tacked on. And around his neck, Armin saw a band with a single red jewel.

His breath was raspy, and now Armin could hear the words he spoke: *"I'm, sorry...mother...I was just hungry. I'm sorry mother. I was...just...hungry..."*

Armin stopped four paces from the boy, the torch stretched out to secure the space between them. Her other hand instinctively lifted the knife. Armin mustered enough resolve, and whispered, "...Gordon...?"

The boy's head flew up. Shiny eyes and a drooling maw of fangs greeted Armin. The boy's mouth opened into a massive gape; the lower jaw attached by fleshy membranes and light glistening off his teeth.

"Hungry!" the boy screamed.

Armin screamed and retreated, slipping on the stickiness on the floor and falling on her bottom.

The boy sprung from his seat like a cat. Armin yelp and kicked out, stopping him with a boot to the face. The boy staggered back with a pained growl and Armin scurried to her feet. The boy shook his head to relieve the sting and immediately went for Armin once more.

Armin backed up against the door, slamming it shut. She swung the torch, causing the flames to growl in the breeze. The snarling creature leapt at her, and suddenly fell on his face as if he was yanked back. He got up, snarling and grabbing at Armin, but something held his frenzy a few feet away from Armin.

Armin quickly saw his left foot lifted behind him, and spotted the chain around his ankle leading to an iron post in the wall. She then ran towards the boy and whacked him in the head. Sparks flew and he fell awkwardly. He held his head and rolled onto his side. He made a strange whimpering sound, which steadily grew in intensity and filled the room.

The creature stopped wailing, and silence followed. Armin waited with the torch lifted above her head to deal another blow, but nothing happened for a while. Until, she heard more screams and wails coming from outside.

Realizing what just happened, Armin said, "Ooooooooooh...*shit*."

Armin knew if they all came in this room it would be a deathtrap. She spun and opened the door and ran outside.

Armin continued on her original path, screwing reading the information on the walls. A door before her flew open, and an omeffigy in the form of a girl in a tattered dress ran out at her.

Armin swung the torch but the creature ducked beneath it and pounced on her. The omeffigy wrapped her clawed hands around Armin's neck and squeezed. The omeffigy opened her mouth and bore her teeth, but as she went for the young woman's throat Armin plunged her knife in the omeffigy's eye. Drops of blood spurted onto Armin's face and the omeffigy went limp. Armin rolled the body of her and got up.

Armin heard more footsteps and screams echoing through the halls and continued running. She bolted pass a door that flew open with two male omeffigies running out. As they gave chase behind her Armin ran pass a crossroad's in the hall that saw omeffigies from both ends running in her direction.

Shit! Shit! Shiiiiit! Armin thought as the number of jaws and claws increased behind her.

She went up a few steps, and ran into several of the creatures coming towards her. Some even wielded bones and stones in their hands.

Armin had no choice now. She had to fight!

She stopped, spun and swung the torch. It connected with two creatures. They shrieked and staggered back with the rest. Taking the opening Armin lunged and stabbed a female in the gut. The omeffigy girl squealed and crumpled to the floor, clutching her bleeding stomach.

Armin swept the torch behind her, keeping the others at bay. However, one of the omeffigies holding a bone whacked Armin in the back. She winced and staggered, but quickly rebounded and clubbed an omeffigy across the head. Armin screamed and ran into the creatures, bashing at them with the torch. One of the omeffigies slipped and fell, and Armin quickly dove upon him, plunging the knife in his throat. Blood sprayed instantly.

The torch was knocked from her grasp, startling Armin. She stood and waved the knife at the omeffigies, but with the fire gone, she was an open target. They swarmed her.

Armin screamed as the claws made contact with her skin. She stabbed one of them in the shoulder, but as it wailed and backed away another omeffigy bit into her shoulder. Armin cried, shedding tears at this point. She screamed with beastly fury and repeatedly stabbed the creature in the head until it went limp. Its dead weight brought Armin down. And the others proceeded to kick and club her.

Armin folded up into a ball, feeling a few drops of urine escape into her underwear. “Stop! Stop it, please!” she said, but the onslaught continued. And Armin kept on thinking, “*I don’t wanna die! I don’t wanna die! Mom! Dad! Susan! Gordon!*”

“Enough!”

The voice was loud and commanding.

The creatures immediately halted ravaging Armin. The young woman laid trembling and bloodied on the floor. She was losing consciousness until the blows stopped. Armin reluctantly moved her hands off her face, revealing a puffy eye and a busted lip. Most of her clothes were torn, and her limbs were bruised with ripped skin. The pain running through her was too much for her to stand, and she sufficed to only stare between the legs of her attackers in the distance where they also looked.

It was back where she came from. The torch was near the wall in her immediate vicinity, and down the corridor was shaded. But the image of someone waltzing forward was visible.

The figure stopped several meters before the gang of snarling, hooting, mutated children. By Armin's estimation, the person stood at least six feet. Most of his form was concealed by some kind of cloak.

“Picking on a defenseless girl, are we?” His voice was more soothing this time, almost as if he was a man who practiced vocals. “*Naughty, naughty little shits, you are.*”

He was close enough now to the light. He wore a brown cloak over his dress shirt and tight jeans, along with pointy boots. But his face was the most striking thing. His eyes had glitter around them that sparkled like lights. His lips were deep red, and his long hair hung around his head, and was dyed in pink, green, blue and yellow in a vertical manner. There was also a piece of cloth tied around his forehead with a red feather sticking out, and around his waist were various vials and jars.

He lifted one hand, where the end of his sleeve was wide and frilly and his fingers slender and painted black. He pointed at them and said, “You all need to be rid from this world, now.”

An omeffigy snarled and waved a bone at the man. “Meat!” it said. The others around it made approving shrieks as well.

The man frowned and lowered his hand. “Oh well,” he said. He reached for two vials on his waist. “I tried to play nice!”

He popped the top off and turned them upside down. Salt flowed from one and silver from the other. He put up the vials and blew the dust before him. The substances mixed with each other and flew towards the confused creatures.

The man dropped his hands and said, "Okay, you get the first move..."

The omeffigy with the bone charged, and the others followed. The man smirked, and said, "Asui'tlesfera!"

The sparkling dust in the air ignited on contact with the omeffigies. Whitish light erupted from their bodies. They wailed and thrashed, falling, rolling and screaming in agony. Armin sat up, shocked by what she saw. The omeffigies now glowed like angles, but smoked like burning wood.

The man walked towards Armin, ignoring the falling, charred bodies around him. Armin quickly mustered the strength and rose into a crouched position. But somehow, she sensed no threat coming from the stranger. She looked around for her weapons; her backpack, knife and torch were far from her grasp, and the man was already kneeling before her.

She picked up a sweet fragrance, like roses and honey, wafting from him. She looked into his face, and saw almost feminine features apart from a rigid jaw. She stared into his sparkling eyes, and felt almost entranced to the point where the fact that she was surrounded by death didn't startle her.

"What's your name, babe?" the man said.

"It's...Armin," she said. "Who are you?"

The man chuckled. "They call me Peacock," he said. He touched her face gently. "Wow, they really did a good job on your face, though!"

Armin frowned and swatted his hand away. She tried to stand up and winced at the pain. Peacock helped her up by the shoulders and said, "Be careful now..."

Armin looked at the man again, studying his strange features. Then the memory of Gordon clapped in her mind like thunder. "My brother! My little brother needs my help!"

Armin limped over for her backpack and the torch. As she slung the bag over her shoulder, the man said, "Darling, I hope you don't think you're going to fight them when you can't even squat to take a piss?"

Armin turned to him with her torch in hand and said, "I have to save him! I'm the only one who can. They got the other woman!"

A slight scowl appeared on Peacock's face. "So she really disobeyed my orders, huh?" he said. He folded his arms and closed his eyes, He opened them and said, "I'll need to write her up for insubordination..."

"Wait," said Armin, "you know her?"

"Of course!" said Peacock. "She's my student."

Armin approached him and said, "Then...you must be from Ark!"

The man made a quizzical look. "Oh, you're the girl she told me about!" Peacock unfolded his arms and spun around, looking into the ceiling while giggling. He stopped and faced Armin again. "You girls really are something else. You all think you can take on the world without training wheels, huh?"

Armin scowled, feeling a little insulted, and embarrassed, as well as guilty. "Look here, you shiny bastard," The man faked a gasp and put a hand to his mouth, but Armin continued, "My little brother's down here because I was a nosey bitch and touched that doll! So it's my responsibility—"

A backhanded slap from Peacock cut Armin's word short. She yelped. She held her stinging cheek and looked at the man in disbelief. She felt tears brimming her eyes. Then Peacock reached for her cheeks and held them gently. He laid his forehead against hers and closed his eyes.

Armin was silent, confused by this gesture. Then Peacock said, softly, "There are so many horrors in this world, little girl. Some things will scare you, others will leave you dead, and some will do even worse. My job...is to make sure that the innocent don't ever have to experience such terrors." Peacock lifted his head. Both of them now seemed on the verge of crying. Peacock smiled. "So, little birdy," he touched her nose, "don't go jumping out of the nest too quick. Enjoy being young, and have fun. When you get older you can try to fly, but let the big birds keep you safe, for now. Because out there, wolves and lions show no mercy. And when they do kill you, you will at least have good memories to look back on."

Peacock's last sentence struck a loud chord with Armin. She didn't really know how to respond to that. But Peacock was right. She didn't need to grow too fast. If this situation was what being an adult meant, she hoped she and Gordon could at least squeezed out whatever joy of their young days before then.

Armin wiped her eyes and nodded. "Okay. But, my brother still needs help."

Peacock blinked, and his eyes got dry as if the tears were never there. He straightened himself and said, “Darling! Darling! Not to worry! Peacock; one of the Eight Talons of the Nest, has arrived!” He toned down his voice and said cautiously, “Just stay behind and out of the way. The thing at the end of this trail is a top-class monster. A level-3, as we call it. Just wait for an opening, and snatch your brother and run.”

Armin shook her head and said, “But, can you really kill her?” Armin gestured to the rifle slung across the man's back. “You only have one gun.”

Peacock touched the weapon and said, “Oh, this? It's actually Susan's. I found it and brought it along. Damn kids. Always leaving their toys out! I don't need stuff like this. Well...maybe just a little BB-gun.” Peacock clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Now, let's get to work!”

As peacock walked off, Armin raced to his side. She fumbled in her pocket and took out the chain. “I think this belongs to Susan.”

They made their way out of the corridors and up a rocky slope bordered by columns of tree roots.

After a glance at the item, Peacock said, “Silver is a very special element. Throughout history it's been used to combat supernatural creatures; werewolves, fairies, ghosts...Mix it with salt and recite a spell that detects 'killing-intent', and you have something that literally burns the evil out of things. Unfortunately, it's too weak to work on big-fish like this miserable bitch up here.”

At the top of the slope they saw a great hollow, getting wider as they reached and the light from within strengthening.

Peacock put his hand before Armin, and she knowingly took a few steps back.

“Be careful,” Armin said.

Peacock waved at her and made his way to the top.

The opening spilt into a crude set of steps that led into a large clearing. The light source was revealed to be a massive fire, coming from beneath a giant pot big enough to fit an elephant.

And then, upon seeing activity around it, Peacock frowned and said, “Oh dear.”

There were dozens of omeffigies gathered amongst the pot. Around the chamber were wooden statues of strange humanoids with their cupped hands holding bowls of candles. Peacock looked around at his level and found two more similar paths leading down to the pot. From one

of them Peacock noted a pack of six omeffigies dragging two bounded humans down to a batch of captive humans.

Peacock spent more time looking at the heap of victims. There were thirteen people in total, and among he spotted Susan. His fists clenched, then he relaxed them. He saw that she spotted him. Susan's eyes briefly flew open before she looked away.

A suddenly laughter caught Peacock's attention, and at the other end of the pot he saw her.

There was Ningkako, in her red attire. She stood on a construct of wood plastered together with mud and crushed, dried animals. The top of the platform was flattened, allowing other omeffigies to stand and toss all manner of things into the pot of boiling water; from carrots, yams, leaves, corn, pepper and cinnamon. Some even poured bottles of whisky and syrup into the mix as well.

While they prepped the stew, Ningkako held Gordon close to her and took his arm, dancing with him as if they were in a ballet.

A man managed to free the rope from out of his mouth. He gasped for air and said, "Help! Please someone help! Help me!"

An omeffigy standing by with a club whacked the man across the head, triggering frantic sounds from the other semi-mute captives. The man whimpered, blood trickling from his head.

"This is gonna be so much fun!" Ningkako said. "First, we're gonna eat! Then have sex! Then eat...then more sex!" And Ningkako laughed again.

"Dear god..." said Peacock. He looked at the omeffigies. They were mutated, vicious, vile and villainous. But they were still children.

But, they couldn't be saved.

One of the omeffigies stirring the pot turned to Ningkako with a thumb's up and said, "Ready, mommy!"

Ningkako let go of Gordon and said, "Great!" She turned to the humans. "Bring me the first one!"

The humans cried, and the omeffigies cheered.

"Hold it right there, hag!" said Peacock.

The creatures gawked at the man atop the chamber. Ningkako spotted Peacock. She grimaced before replacing it with a smile and said, "Oh! Another one!"

Peacock strode down the stairs. As he did Armin lifted her head and peered down the hollow. She saw what the omeffigies were doing. A sharp chill ran up her spine. “They’re *fricking crazy*,” Armin whispered. “You don’t mix whisky with soup.” But she spotted an omeffigy next to Ningkako. He had black hair, and wore all blue clothes. She got up and said, “Gordon!” She leapt and waved her hands. “Gordon! It’s me, Armin! You’re big sister’s here!”

The omeffigies turned their attention to Armin at the back. Peacock tensed and closed his eyes. He said through clenched teeth, “*Good, god, almighty.*” He spun around and pointed at Armin. “Didn’t I tell you to stay back, you dimwit?”

Armin suddenly ceased her noise. She held her mouth, moved her hand and said, “Sorry!”

Ningkako chuckled. “They sent a sweet-looking man and a little girl after me?” Ningkako gestured outward questioningly. Do they really wish to continue to insult me like this?”

Peacock, continuing his way down to the base of the chamber, said, “I’m all that’s needed, Ningkako. You’ve terrorized this city for too long. I wish I could forgive your actions, but they’re too abominable.” He stopped at the foot of the steps. Omeffigies inched closer towards him, trying to surround him.

Ningkako’s expression darkened, but her eyes lit up. “Then do something about it, *mortal.*”

Peacock held his shirt in the center, and said, “You first, babe.”

Ningkako’s human skin melted off her, replaced by the shiny, porcelain flesh of the doll. It opened its mouth and a swarm of beetles took to the air. Their numbers grew until they threatened to blot out the ceiling of the chamber.

Looking at it, Peacock said, “Damn. That much?”

Ningkako pointed at the man and said, “Feed!”

The buzzing swarm descended upon Peacock.

“I never thought I would need to use this right off the bat,” Peacock said. He closed his eyes and smiled. “But, such is the life of a performer.” His eyes opened. He spread his legs and ripped open his shirt. But instead of chest hairs, he had colorful feathers.

Peacock flex his chest outward, surging forth feathers that seems to have been a hundred times more than what was on his body. The feathers collided with the beetles, intermixing with

the ravenous insects. Then Peacock crossed his arms, said the words, “*Sparkle for daddy,*” and snapped his fingers.

The feathers glowed in a variety of colors like Peacock’s hair. The ceiling seemed to resembling the blackness of space with the beetles and stars the feathers, before the colorful lights exploded.

One by one they went like fireworks, tearing the beetles to shreds, until they exploded at once. The shock wave hit those below and pressed them, all except Peacock and Ningkako, and shook the foundation of the hollow they were in.

Armin fell, shielding her eyes with her hand. “The hell?”

Burning, colorful insect remains rained inside the chamber.

Ningkako looked at the air; eyes wide open in disbelief. She slowly lowered her head to the man, but he was already in action.

Peacock ran towards the captives while the omeffigies were dazed. At the same time, Armin took her torch in one hand and a hammer in the other and ran down the path.

Peacock flexed his wrists, and two lockets hanging from chains appeared. With the salt and silver inside, he said, “Asui’tlesfera!” and the lockets caught alight with icy luminance.

He spun them like propellers, and the first omeffigy to come in contact with them instantly reeled in agony as she was caught on fire at the intensity of the lights. Peacock continued to lash the omeffigies into burning submission as he carved a path towards the hostages.

Armin snuck around the edge of the chamber, trying to get behind the platform to reach Gordon.

Peacock dropped an omeffigy with a roundhouse kick that snapped its neck, uppercut another one out of his way and crossed the lockets like scissors at the neck of a zombie before him, beheading the snarling undead. The headless corpse fell, and before Peacock was Susan.

Peacock stepped over the other captives and untied Susan first. Once he did her arms she pulled the gag from her mouth and said, “I’m so glad your—”

Peacock slapped her across the face. Susan held her cheek and scowled at him. He arched an eyebrow at her, and Susan relaxed and nodded. “Okay, I won’t make this mistake again.”

“Good,” said Peacock, unslinging the rifle and handing it to Susan, “now get to work.”

Susan took the rifle and got up. Peacock went back to keeping the omeffigies coming at them at bay, while Susan freed to other hostages.

Ningkako, finally fed up with the man's exploits, decided extreme measures were needed. Her body suddenly shook as if something wanted out, and sure enough, it did. The doll-like body exploded in light. Locusts and beetles flew from a large black form that quickly grew. The black mass unfolded into hair that floated in the sky, attached to a lanky, pale-skinned woman with her skin crawling with insects. Her narrow face possessed a slender nose and lights for eyes. Her supple breasts stood at attention, and her pubic was so vast it was tied into long braids with several jeweled braids.

Ningkako took to the air, her insect squires hovering diligently around her.

Gordon looked on in awe at the magnificence that was Ningkako, and then felt a grip on his foot. He looked down and saw a hand, and before he could react he was yanked off the platform.

Gordon and Armin rolled down onto the floor. Both scurried to their feet, facing each other.

“Gordon, it's me! Armin!” she said

Gordon crouched like an animal and snarled at her.

Armin saw the necklace around Gordon's neck. “Gordy don't you recognize me? It's your sister!”

Gordo leapt at her. Armin side-stepped him. Gordon sprung to his feet and repeatedly clawed at her. Armin tried keeping him back with the torch but Gordon was relentless. He managed to scratch her arm more than once, and Armin was forced to jab her elbow into his face.

“Shit!” Amin snarled. It was now becoming clear that she had to harm Gordon if she wanted to keep him off her. She couldn't kill him, but the way he was going, that seemed to be the only option.

Bullshit! Armin thought. *You're coming home with me, Gordon!*

Armin stuck out her forearm, and Gordon took the bait. He reached and bit onto her arm. Armin clenched her teeth and grimaced, and whacked Gordon in the middle of the head with the hammer.

It worked. Gordon's eyes flew open and he twisted and fell. Armin clutched her arm to her stomach for a while before reaching into her backpack for her phone's USB cable, and used it to bound Gordon's arms behind him. She hefted him over her shoulder, straining beneath the wait.

And while hurrying off with Gordon, Armin thought: *He's probably gonna get big like dad!*

After just downing an omeffigy, Peacock saw the terror above. For the first time since entering the cave, he shuddered at the deathly aura exuding from the female being.

“We're in the shitter now,” Peacock said. He looked behind him and saw the last of the captives being freed. “Susan, hurry to the entrance!”

Susan nodded. She turned to the startled individuals and shouted for their attention. “Everyone, just follow me!”

Susan looked across from her and saw Armin coming towards her with Gordon. And also the omeffigies and zombies.

“Armin behind you!” Susan said.

Armin took a quick glance over her shoulder and saw the feral creatures coming. She quickly directed herself out of the way, allowing Susan to take shots at them. The semi-special explosive rounds tore apart their bodies in sprays of blood.

Armin joined the other captives and made their way up the steps. Susan saw that even though Armin's body was so damaged, she was still keeping up with them.

She's incredible! Susan thought.

Leading the front, Susan spotted two omeffigies and a zombie coming at her. The undead woman threw a rock at her. Susan ducked beneath it, took aim and fired. The round hit the zombie square in the gut, blowing it apart and separating the zombie in two. Susan switched her aim to the omeffigy charging with a club and fired. The bullet tore off the creature's leg, flipping her onto her face.

As the wounded omeffigy wailed anguish, fear consumed the second omeffigy and it ran off.

Susan stopped and ushered everyone up the stairs.

As Susan ran off with the prisoners behind her, Ningkako took notice and opened her mouth into a massive, toothy gape. She screamed, splitting the ears of the mortals below, and swooped at them.

Peacock reached for the feather on his forehead and said, "Oh no you don't!"

Peacock stood in Ningkako's path. Ningkako clasped her hands before her and her insects surged towards Peacock. The man lifted his left hand and said, "*Plareeste!*" A large stone in the ring on his middle finger lit up. The insects, just inches before him, suddenly crashed into a massive glass.

When Armin, the last in the group, went up the slope, Susan turned to her teacher. She saw his arm trembling as the bugs pressed behind the barrier and forced it into a huge buldge.

"Peacock!" she said.

"I said to get the fuck outta here!" Peacock said. "Now!"

Peacock lifted the other hand with the feather, and upon spotting it Susan realized what he was about to do. Susan's eyes widened, but she didn't protest. She said, "You better meet us back up there!" And she reluctantly hurried up the exit.

The bugs suddenly dispersed, and in dove Ningkako with a solid punch, shattering the barrier to pieces that quickly vanished. Peacock was thrown onto his back. He winced and hurried back up. He looked at his ring and saw that the stone was shattered. But he still held the bright red feather in the other hand.

Ningkako hovered back into the center of the room, and said, "I will bury you here, mortal!" She raised her hands, and the lights in Ningkako's eyes brightened, spilling from her mouth as well. She screamed, and the chamber began to shake. Huge roots burst through the walls, ceiling and floor. Dust and rubble rained from above, and the insects buzzed around Ningkako in a huge ball, breaking up the light coming from her and forming a crude disco ball-like structure.

Peacock saw the roots blocking off the exits, and a few smaller ones wrapped around his feet. Peacock smirked, closed his eyes and relaxed his body.

He lifted the feather and held it daintily between his fingers. He looked to the giant ball of bugs and said, "Well, what's an end without a bang, heh?" He threw the feather in the air. "*Skaros Flaros!*"

Light seeped from the feather, then exploded. The luminous redness casted a massive glowing blob above Peacock. It bulged and contorted then imploded and caught on fire. Two massive wings cloaked in flames spread from the ball of fire, then talons, and then a bird's head on a long neck of golden feathers. The bird opened its beak and uttered a glorious, harmonic screech. The insects scattered in fright, exposing Ningkako.

“Now,” said Peacock as Ningkako gestured towards him and bugs and roots reached for the human, “burn for daddy!”

The massive phoenix flapped its wings, spewing embers all over the place. It flew into the approaching plants and insects, turning them all into ash. The roots consumed Peacock like the coils of a snake, and the last thing he saw was the light of the phoenix and Ningkako colliding glinting off his eyes.

Susan led everyone through the empty corridors, feeling the whole place shudder from the conflict between Ningkako and peacock.

Master, please be okay, Susan thought.

Susan reached the corridor leading to the double doors and pushed it open. She allowed everyone to go up. Armin was keeping up the rear as always due to Gordon's weight but she didn't falter. As Armin entered through the door, Susan felt a sudden increase of spiritual energy, and the air getting warmer. She looked back, and saw light growing from around the corridor. “Oh crap!”

She turned and ran, and said, “Everyone, hurry!” Susan turned and pushed the doors close. But before it shut completely she glimpsed fire spewing into the corridor Susan hopped through the vile muckiness and raced to the exit with the others. She hurriedly pushed Armin up as she heard the fire squeezing through the creases in the door, eventually tearing it off.

They all exited out into the shack and ran into the woods. Susan slipped on something but quickly found her balance. She let the latch drop over the steps, but the flames instantly punched it off. Susan leaped into a dive as the fire ripped a hole in the ceiling of the shack. The freed hostages distanced themselves from the building before turning to watch the roof catch fire.

Armin threw the unconscious Gordon on the ground. She knelt over him and cradled his head in his arms. “Gordon?”

Armin slapped him twice, but he didn't stir. *Did I hit him too hard?* Armin thought. She shouted into his ear, but nothing happened. She started panicking. She pried open one of his eyes, but saw only blackness. "Shit! Gordon, get up!"

Susan turned her eyes from the smoking hollow in the top of the building to the freed captives. They all chattered amongst each other; some were still in shock, while others seemed dazed as if they woke from a dream. But then she saw Armin.

Susan walked over to the girl, and found her crying, rocking back and forth with her brother in her arms. Susan touched Armin and she looked up and replied, "He...he won't wake up!"

Susan took Gordon in her arms and checked his pulse; it was almost non-existent.

"Is he gonna be okay?" said Armin.

Susan looked in Armin's face, but couldn't find the words to respond with.

Then Susan heard the people behind her creating a hysterical uproar. They all retreated and surrounded her. Susan turned around and peered into shack; where something lumbered out. It was encrusted in ash that fell apart with each step it took.

A woman turned to Susan and said, "Quick! Do something!"

"Aww man!" said an obese man.

"We're fricking dead, now!" another man said.

The person threw the cloak from over his body, casting the ash in the air. Peacock shook himself and exhaled deeply. He had a few burn marks on his clothes, but thanks to his fireproof cloak and Ningkako's own roots trying to entomb him, he was saved from the worst of the burns. He smiled at everyone, and said, "Well that went well!"

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Susan smiled. But Armin still remained fixed on Gordon.

Peacock raised his right hand, and in it was a pendant with a green jewel. Peacock said, "Good riddance to crazy bitches." He took a narrow dagger from off his waist. Upon the weapon being exposed the necklace wiggled and made a whimpering sound, but it couldn't escape Peacock's grasp. The man stabbed the green jewel. The necklace stiffened and squeaked. Blood spurted from the crystal and the color faded. The jewel cracked and turned to dust. The man tossed it away and wiped his hand on his pants before sheathing his dagger.

Armin heard a squeaking nose coming from Gordon. She spotted the bracelet he wore squirming. The red jewel darkened and turned to dust, and the bracelet popped off. Armin leaned closer expectantly.

She heard Gordon take a loud breath. Susan checked his pulse once more. She looked at Armin with a smile and said, "He's sleeping now..."

Armin's mouth quivered before she burst into tears. She hugged Susan, tightly, almost suffocating the woman. Susan patted Armin and she let go. Armin quickly released her and apologized.

Peacock frowned and reached for a jar off his waist. He poured some grey powder in his palm and blew it towards the crowd. Susan instantly covered her nose with her blouse. Curious, Armin said, "What's going on?"

And people began to fall around her. Having inhaled some of the dust herself, Armin began to feel sleepy, and before she could protest, she fell on top of Gordon and began snoring.

Susan stood next to Peacock, looking at the unconscious people around her.

"Armin? Gordon?"

The voice came from the east. It was low, but they both knew it belonged to someone who would happen upon the scene.

"It sounds like the kids' parents..." said Susan.

Peacock looked away from the children and said, "...Well...let's get going." He walked in the opposite direction of the voice.

He and Susan reached a few meters away before she said to him, "What will happen to them?"

"They'll most likely end up in the hospital," Peacock said. "We'll have some Softfeathers visit them and erase their memories."

"Even the girl?" Susan said.

Peacock looked across at her with a wry smirk. "...You're planning on having her recruited, huh?"

"She was amazing in there," said Susan.

Peacock suddenly dropped on his hand and knee.

"Master!" Susan cried, quickly holding him under the arms and hoisting him slowly to his feet.

“...I'm fine...” Peacock said, but his voice was straining. After a moment of catching his breath he continued. “That last spell took a lot out of me.”

Susan slung his arm across her shoulder and divided his body weight with her. They slowed walked through the woods; now illuminated with beams of sunlight. The sky above turned the clouds orange as the sun set in the distance.

Susan bit her lip before reluctantly saying, “...How much?”

Peacock said, “I think a solid seven years this time. Such is the sacrifice to wield magic that can kill divine beings, love.”

“You can't keep on doing this,” said Susan.

“That's why we need to continue to search for better magic,” said Peacock. He rubbed a hand on his face, and suddenly felt a small beard. “Hopefully before I turn sixty!”

“I guess old age is getting close, huh?” said Susan with a smirk, trying to lighten the mood.

Peacock scowled at her with a side-eyed stare. “Oh, please! I'm still thirty-three on the inside. But come to think of it, I might consider taking on that girl...”

“Really?” Susan said, beaming at Peacock.

“Sure!” He suddenly tapped her on the forehead, making her flinch. He frowned. “She could make a better assistant than you, dummy! You really saw all that fire and didn't come look for me? I even had to come and knock out the hostages! What if one of them had ran off and tattled?”

After a moment of quietness, Susan said, “I'm sorry, master. I'll do better next time?”

Peacock waved her away and said, “Take that off your mind, sweetie. Cause you know what we need to do after a long day's work...?”

Both of them stood apart, giggling childishly. They held each other's hands and said, “Time to hit the spa!”

THE END

Thank you for reading.

Follow me on twitter @mr_ogunberry, email me at planetogun@outlook.com to join my mailing list and receive updates.

