

Joel S. Williams aka Mr. Ogunberry

# Dead in the Grass

A tale from the Dark Wonderland Chronicles

By Joel S. Williams, aka Mr. Ogunberry

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Behold the Dark Wonderland, a place where humanity is thrust into contact with people, locations 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.

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## CHAPTER ONE

The school bell rung, and the students swarmed out of their classes, running through the beige-colored walls of the corridor in a chorus of screams and shouts. Amongst them was a young girl named Penny Pensworth, moving in a hurried pace.

As the students piled through the front doors into the dizzying light, Penny contemplated the manner in which she would complete her chores. Today a special program would be airing on the television, and she wanted to get things done quickly so she could watch it in time before heading out into the fields.

Penny lived in the rural town of Poppersville, a place with a small population founded over two hundred years ago. Apart from farming and mining, the town's income was partly made up of the tourists who came to sample the town's history and lore, and a few contracts offered to the town's folk by the nearby big cities.

As Penny entered the front of the school, she looked around for a few of her classmates through the bustling bodies, and after walking for a while she spotted them. They were two girls, their complexion a lighter shade compared to Penny's dark skin. They were Christine and Paula; the latter having black hair while the other was blonde.

Penny fixed the strap of her backpack on her shoulder as she approached them. As she got close, she noticed they were talking to two boys from the football team, both of whom wore their teams red jacket with the mascot of a coyote on the back.

Christine noticed Penny approaching her, and said, "Hey, Penny! What's up?"

"I was just about to head home," said Penny, now having everyone's attention. "...I thought you girls would be walking home with me today?"

"Oh..." said Christine, she looked at Paula, who looked at the boys. They all smiled with each other, making Penny feel a bit uneasy. Christine turned to Penny. "We were planning on walking home with Rob and Ben."

Penny noted the mischievous glint in the eyes of the boys. "...Oh...Okay." she said.

"You wanna come with us?" said Paula, eyeing Penny eagerly.

"No!" Penny quickly replied. "...Um...I can't today. I have some work to do."

"Damn," said Christine. "Penny you're boring!"

"A girl's gotta chill out sometimes, you know," said Rob.

Penny had an idea of what was going to go happen if she left with the boys, and also what would happen if her father heard about it. The latter was what she feared the most. Penny made a nervous smile and shifted her feet uncomfortably. “Sorry...I can’t.”

Paula scoffed and the others chuckled.

“Boy, Penny,” said Christine as she pinched Penny’s cheeks and shook her head. “You’re going to miss out on a lot in life if you keep this up.”

Penny only replied with a chuckle.

Ben wrapped his arm around Paula and said, “You girls coming?”

The five of them walked amongst the dissipating crowd to the school gates, where parked cars were already leaving. The buildings in the town were mostly made of wood and concrete. There were a few abandoned farms and mills where it was said strange phenomenon occurred, but were mostly kept as tourist sites.

Even as they came onto the sidewalk next to a fruit vendor, Penny could see a few Japanese visitors taking pictures with the locals.

“Well,” Christine hugged Penny, “see you later Pen’.”

Penny hugged her back as well as Paula. As the two girls walked away with the boys Penny said, “Make sure to stay safe you guys!”

“We will!” said Rob.

Penny watch the four of them take the opposite side of the street, where an amusement park was and a farm owned by a senile old man.

Penny sighed. She hefted her bag strap and hurried down the street. Thirty minutes later, as the sun was setting behind the distant hills that surrounded the town, Penny found herself in her community. It was a dwelling consisting of around twenty families, most of which were farmers such as Penny’s own.

Lustrous red and blue flowers were planted on the side of the street, and most homes were surrounded by picket fences or tall mesh if they had animals.

Penny took a rocky path up a slope and came upon her house. It was a two-story house that had served as the home of the Pensworth family for four generations. Penny reached over the short mesh fence infested with vines and unlatched the gate. She closed it behind her and walked across the dark soil towards the front porch. In the yard was a large tent-like structure

where her father's truck was parked. But its absence told he was still out delivering goods to the neighboring towns.

Penny took off her shoes and opened the door with them in hand. The inside of her house was painted burgundy with shocking yellow colored furniture. There were two paths in the living room; the one at the very back leading to the back door and the path upstairs, while the one on the right lead to the kitchen.

"Mom?" said Penny as she walked towards the kitchen.

"In here, honey," a soft voice replied.

Penny went into the kitchen, and found her mother stirring something in a bowl. The slim woman wore a tight red blouse with a draping apron concealing the rest of her body. Her hair was braided into a large bun. She took notice of Penny and said, "Hey, how was school?"

Penny sighed and said, "It was fine. Mr. Redfield was going on about his government conspiracies again."

Her mother chuckled and shook her head. She emptied the contents of the bowl into the simmering pot on the stove and said, "It's amazing with all the stuff he talks they haven't fired him yet."

"Probably they're paying him to act crazy," said Penny, sparking a chuckle between the two of them.

"Well, just go and get freshened up," her mother said. "Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes. Your father will be home by seven."

"Okay," said Penny as she headed up the stairs.

Penny reached the second floor and made towards her room. She opened the door and hurried inside. Unlike the rest of her house, Penny's room was painted in a soothing yellow. The bedspread was ocher with red polka dots, complementing the red carpet and the bedside. Penny tossed her shoes in a corner next to the other ones and put her backpack on a small desk where various action figures were. She took off her clothes and tossed them in the basket and hurried into the shower across the hall.

After her bath, Penny slipped into a simple tunic and pink tights. She tied her hair into two puffy buns and headed downstairs. After a hefty meal, Penny raced back upstairs, almost throwing up her food. She went into her bag for her textbooks and threw them on the bed,

spending the next half-hour going over the notes she made in class. With that task completed, Penny eagerly leaped off the bed and jogged down stairs.

Her mother took note of her as she hopped into the couch and said, “Hey, slow down!”

“Sorry!” said Penny as she reached for the remote of the table. “I don’t wanna miss it.”

Mrs. Pensworth walked around to Penny and said in a cold voice, “...I hope you did your homework...”

Penny sighed inwardly and looked at her mother. “I already did, mom. Right after I ate.”

Her mother nodded lightly and said, “All right,” and walked away.

Penny turned on the TV and switched to her desired channel. The program she was waiting for hadn’t started as yet, so she held out for the next twenty minutes watching a kid’s cartoon that was going on.

Finally, after minutes of a man in a poorly made yellow duck suit dancing around with small children, it started.

Penny sat forward as the opening sequence began for this week’s episode of *Ultragirl*. She sang along to the theme as the image showed Ultragirl in her pink and yellow frilly suit battling various monsters and evil doers. Once the actual story began, Penny sat in the couch cross-legged and enjoyed. This day’s episode revolved around Ultragirl trying to prepare for her school’s science project while trying to defeat a giant squid-rat monster who frequently attacks to the town. The episode ends with Ultragirl having to sacrifice her science project but instead spending the day of presentation stopping the Ratsquid before it harmed a woman and her child.

As the end credits rolled, Penny sat there contemplating about Ultragirl and her burden. Having to uphold the responsibly of great power at the cost of her own wellbeing.

*Both terrifying and magical*, Penny thought.

Penny watched the TV until sunset. By then it was time for her to head out into the fields before her father arrived.

She turned off the TV and went into the back of the house. As Penny walked through the hall, the sun was already setting the skies ablaze with warm colors through the windows as its shift ended.

Next to the back door was an in-door toolshed, and Penny opened it. She didn’t need to turn on the lights, as she already knew the location of the object she desired. She reached next to

a row of farming tools and took up a stick. She held it firmly by the base and swung it up so she could view the top. Half of the stick had a steel edge running along it.

She closed the shed behind her and said, “Mom! I’ll be out in the fields!”

“Don’t stay out too long!” her mother replied.

Penny opened the door and walked out into the backyard. The small path leading around the house branched into a field half the size of a football stadium. The property itself was surrounded by a small forest but bordered by a barbed-wire fence three meters high.

The path was spruced with fragrant flowers, and as Penny skipped by, she noticed bugs darting to and from the plants in search of nectar. To Penny’s left was the chicken coup, from which a pungent odor emanated, and to her right laid a larger shed which was where the birds were slaughtered. The rest of the land was left for the crops.

Penny held the stick before her and flicked a small latch at the top. The metal along the shaft abruptly snapped out into a twelve-inch, glistening scythe.

Penny playfully whirled the weapon around her, striking the grass and pretending to strike an airborne assailant. She mimicked one of Ultragirl’s moves; the *Whirlwind Wallop*, and repeatedly spun with the scythe.

From upstairs in her parents’ bedroom that overlooked the field, Penny’s mother watched her play and sighed and shook her head. “You’re still fifteen and playing like a girl...” she said, concerned about her daughter’s immaturity. But as she thought about it, her daughter was doing well in school and wasn’t getting into any trouble. And that thought made her relax. Whatever Penny was doing seemed to be going well for her, so her mother walked away from the window.

Penny, who had been secretly sneaking glances at her mother at the window, noticed the moment she walked away. Penny then slowly head towards the back, walking in between the vegetables rooted in the soil. She paused and plucked a few raspberries off the bush and ate them before continuing.

Penny slowly continued to the back of the farm, where just ahead was the forest, now imbued with the glow of the sun and the many shadows. The last of the birds’ chirping was dying out along with the day.

But Penny had to see it.

It was two days ago when she had snuck into the forest and found the thing. A strange looking shrub—flower—or whatever it was.

Penny carefully pulled apart the wires running along the posts and slipped through them with the nimbleness of a cat. She held her scythe firmly as she walked amongst the trees, cautious of the tales of roaming coyotes and bears.

After a few minutes, she came upon the spot. It lay surrounded by blueberries and weed. Penny made cautious steps the closer she got. It resembled fleshy intestines, but were gray colored. There were five of them of varying heights, but shorter than she was. At their ends were large buds like fruits of some sort, but Penny wasn't sure.

She took a deep breath, flexed her fingers on her weapon and said, "...Okay." Penny knelt next to the plants to get a closer look. The large buds were covered in red veins and a few whiskers that waved around in the air.

"...What?" said Penny, perplexed at the moving parts of the plants.

She found a small stick and poked one of the plants with it.

Nothing happened.

After a few more tries and no response, Penny decided to actually touch the plant to take a sample to show her parents. She slowly brought her finger closer to the strange flora. Closer and closer, until her skin made contact with one of the whiskers.

Suddenly the red veins throbbed, and the plant twitched.

Penny quickly leaped back and uttered a tight scream. She held the scythe ready to bring it down onto the potential threat. "Holy cow!" she said, breathing heavily.

The plant suddenly began to writhe, then it stopped. Penny held her posture for a few more seconds until she saw the plant's movements cease. Penny took a step back, now fully aware this thing was responsive to touch. She heard about plants that could move on their own, like the Venus flytrap. But she never saw something like this.

Penny suddenly realized it was getting dark, and after giving the plant one more suspicious glance, she turned and headed back to the house.

That evening, Christine, Paula, Rob and Ben were on the property of Mr. Richards, having taken the back fence. The stars were just popping up in the sky, and shadows were casted all round from the trees and tall grass that had taken over the property.

Ever since his wife died, Mr. Richards had become recluse, rarely going out into his fields to till his land. And most times people never saw him off the property either.

The four teenagers were all chuckles and smiles as they hurried to most verdant part of the field. Their they saw a scarecrow perched on a post, with many green, rubbery vines dangling off it.

As Paula and Rob approached the object, Paula said, "That's one ugly ass scarecrow."

Rob eyed the humanoid structure as well, noticing how it resembled an old man in farmer's gear, only his clothes were tattered and covered in thick vines. Red fuzzy stuff lurched over his face beneath his hat.

"...Yeah," said Rob.

Rob then turned to see Christine lying in the grass with Ben atop of her. Both were making out with loud, sloppy sounds.

"Boy, you two don't waste time," said Rob.

Christine glanced at them, giggled, and went back to enjoying herself.

Paula suddenly wrapped her arms around Rob, much to his surprise. She looked into his eyes and said softly, "Come on, isn't that what we're here for?"

Rob relaxed under Paula's caress. He held her waist and smile, kissing her. The young man fell back into the grass and Paula sat on top of him. Paula slowly lifted off her blouse, exposing her ample breasts behind her bra. Rob smiled, eagerly reaching for them.

Paula winced and said, "Hey, easy..."

"Sorry," said Rob. He slowed his hands, gently massaging her breasts. Paula smiled. She bit her lips and slowly began gyrating her waist on top of him. She could already feel him bulging beneath her, and she moved harder.

Rob, now moaning under the force of the blood rushing down his trousers, held Paula by the neck and brought his lips to hers. As they kissed Rob splayed his arms behind his head, brushing against the stalk of a plant. But he ignored it as he and Paula swapped saliva.

However, this particular plant would not be ignored after coming in contact with living flesh. For even though Penny had managed to get away from the previous stalk, these four humans were close enough and stationary.

The strange plants began to writhe, then the chemicals inside them surge forth, bending their bodies in accords to the stimuli that triggered their nervous system. The whiskers directed the plants by way of reaching for the electrical impulses coming from the humans.

And they found their target.

One of the plants suddenly coiled around Rob's neck. The boy suddenly reached for his throat. He flailed as the coils tightened and the bud of the plant neared his face, throwing a screaming Paula off him.

Paula rolled on her hands and feet and saw Rob's dying face. "Oh my god! Rob!"

Alerted to her screams, Christine and Ben turned to their friends and saw what was going on.

"What the shit?" said Ben as he got off Christine and hurried to the other boy. Christine got up and quickly followed.

Paula, crying as she was, tried pulling the plants from around Rob's neck, but the coils held firm with an otherworldly force. Then Ben came to her side. He pushed Paula away and tried his turn at tugging at the coils. They were loosening under his grip at last.

Christine attempted to get close and one of the plants tripped her. Christine fell flat on her back. Quickly accessing what was going on Christine sat up and began slapping at the vines wrapping around her feet.

"No! No! Get off!" she said.

Christine frantically kicked her feet out of it and crawled away on her bottom. Once her feet were free he got up and shuddered. She looked around for signs of the plants and her friends.

"Paula? Ben?" she said. Christine was surrounded by grass just beneath her chest. Her breath came in heavy rasps. She looked around her, noticed the scarecrow was gone off its post, and began to panic. However, Christine heard the voice of the others, and ran towards it.

"Guys!" she said.

As Christine came upon her group, she witnessed over a dozen of the plants were wriggling towards her three companions. As Ben freed Rob from the last coil around his neck, the strange plants launched their secret weapon. The pores along their surfaces dilated, and out excreted a fine, colored mist that quickly saturated the air. The school kids began coughing, grasping at their throats and mouth for their breaths. With quick thinking Ben pulled his shirt over his nose and ran towards Christine.

Christine put one foot forward and reach out for her, but two grotesquely mutated hands reached out of the bushes, grabbed Christine by the waist and yanked her back out of sight.

"Christine!" Ben said, looking at the spot where she once was, left with only her drowning screams.

The toxins in the air began to take effect; blurring Ben's vision and slowing the flow of his blood. With his muscles starved Ben fell on his hands and knees. He turned to where the rest of his friends were, or at least hoped. Though his vision was getting more useless and his mind blacking out, he could vaguely make out the figure of something close to a man as it approached his friends squirming on the ground under the vines that subdued them. Ben's strength faded, and the rest of the plants had at him. They constricted him and brought him to the ground.

"...Uhg...Get the hell...off me..." said Ben. He struggled, but his fate it seemed, was already set in stone.

One of the plants slithered to his head along his chest. Upon reaching his mouth, the red veins on the bud opened, releasing many wriggling tendrils. The stalk lurched into Ben's mouth. As the human gagged the tendrils of the bud snapped it off the stalk, and the bud crawled down the boy's throat. And as the bud spread its roots within Ben's body, destroying his organs and fusing with his flesh, the last image to cross Ben's dying eyes, was that of the scarecrow.

## CHAPTER TWO

The following day, Penny was seated in her classroom, but with the news she was hearing today, she doubted classes from now on would be the same.

Standing before the students was their form teacher, an elderly woman in a red blouse and dress and cropped her hair named Mrs. Danvers. The woman had a look on her face that made her seem even twice as old, but it was also a look on the faces of the younglings.

The unmistakable look of fear.

Mrs. Danvers went on with the news she was reporting: “The police are issuing an investigation into their disappearances.”

“How long will take to find them Mrs. Danvers!” said a student.

Mrs. Danvers shook her. “...We don’t know how long it will take before we can find them, Stanley.” she replied to the boy.

“Maybe it’s the tourists!” said a girl. “I heard they usually do stuff like this!”

“Then what would they want with the two jocks?” said another boy.

“I don’t think they would be even able to take them with the jocks there unless it was more than one guy!” said another girl.

Mrs. Danvers quickly said, “What’s important for now, class, is that each time you leave school, ensure that your parents pick you up. If not, always go home in groups and don’t speak to anyone you don’t know. For now, the four students are only missing. The police are doing all they can to find them. But for now, just focus on your studies until you reach home.”

But it was difficult for Penny to concentrate with the many strange happenings taking place. First there was the strange moving plant she found yesterday, now her friends were missing—possibly kidnapped!

*This is like that episode of Ultragirl where the magician took over the town and was turning people into mind-slaves!* Penny thought. ‘

But this was real.

The first break Penny got she called her father, informing him of the situation at the school and for him to come pick her up. After he agreed and hung up, Penny tried to finish the rest of her day.

When school was finished, the students hurried out of their classrooms with more excitement than ever. As Penny moved with the others outside, she saw that the crowd had thickened compared to yesterday. Parents who had taken the time off from work to pick up their children were here, not to mention twice as many police officers prowling the streets with keen eyes. However, the flow of tourists hadn't shifted.

Penny wove and pushed through the crowd. She stood at the front of the school, waiting for her father. As she did, the school's security officers walked up to her.

"Your parents coming to pick you up, kid?" said the stocky man.

Penny nodded. "Yeah," she said. "My dad's coming for me."

The guard nodded and said, "Alright. Just don't go anywhere?"

Penny took a deep breath and exhaled, waiting patiently for her father's truck to appear on the street. As the minutes passed and the people on the school compound lessened, Penny suddenly spotted an odd character.

Coming down her side of the street was a lanky figure, walking with an unusual pep in his step as if he hadn't heard what was happening in town. He wore black overalls with a red dress shirt with a striking green bowtie, a large coat that swung around him, and a fedora tilted over his eyes concealed most of his face.

The man even garnered stares from the residents and tourists.

As he passed Penny she sensed a strange aura emanating from the man, and a pungent smell that made her shudder. As she turned and looked at his back, Penny noticed a fairly large briefcase almost the size of a suitcase—and something oddly familiar.

She couldn't make it out at first, but when the man stopped by a vendor to purchase some goods, Penny realized what it was. The bud end of the strange plants she saw yesterday was sticking out of the half-open mouth of his briefcase.

*No way!* Penny thought. A thousand thoughts raced through her head. She had to know the nature of the plant she discovered, and this strange man looked as if he had the answers. But she couldn't move from her spot. She had to wait on her father.

*But I have to know!* Penny thought.

As the man turned and left the stall, Penny looked around to see if the security guard was looking. She didn't see him anywhere, and she made off for the stranger. Penny hurried, reaching inside her bag for her sharpened pencil just in case *he* turned out to be the kidnapper in town.

As she got close to him, Penny felt the eerie aura again, but she shrugged it off.

Inches away from him, Penny said, "...Um...Excuse me!"

The man stopped. He cocked his head, and spun around.

Penny's little heart skipped a beat and she froze upon seeing the face that met her.

The man's skin was pale as a ghost. He had the African features; a broad nose and full-lips on a narrow face. But besides his small beard, he had bizarre yellow eyes that stared back at Penny intensely.

Penny swallowed nervously, fumbling for her words. But it was the stranger who spoke first. "...Yes?" he said, his tone grating and low.

"...Um..." Penny found the courage to form words again. "Sorry to disturb you sir. I...I was just wondering about the plant I saw sticking out of the case on your back?"

The man's eyes narrowed, forcing Penny a step back. "Oh," he said. "You're interested in it?"

"Um, yes," said Penny. "I...Um...I saw it near the woods next to my neighbor's farm. It was moving. I thought it was a snake at first."

The man suddenly smiled. He leaned into Penny's face and said, "Did it get to touch you?"

"No," said Penny quietly.

"You escaped?" the man said.

"...Yes," said Penny.

The man smiled, exposing sharp teeth that made Penny flinch. He chuckled almost childishly. He straightened himself and said, "Ah. Good girl." He took one of the berries he bought and ate it. "These little shrubs aren't things you play with, girly. If you see them, avoid them. I'll take care of it."

As Penny contemplated the man's words, she heard a loud voice say; "Penny!"

Shocked by the loudness and familiarity, Penny spun around and saw her father coming up the street towards her. "Oh shit..." she whispered. "Dad!"

Penny turned to the stranger, but all she saw was the man walking away. She turned back to her father and went to meet him halfway.

He was a stout man with trimmed hair, wearing a grey shirt and dark pants. Penny's dark eyes she had gotten from him. He held Penny by her arm and said, "What are you doing? I told you to wait by the school gate for me!"

"Sorry dad," she said. "I was just asking that guy about his plants..."

Her father took a few breaths and his shoulders slumped. "Penny you know better than to talk to stranger."

Penny nodded. "Yeah dad, I'm sorry," she said.

Her father relaxed, and eventually smiled. "Come on," he said, "let's see what your mom's cooking."

As her father led her to the vehicle Penny took one more glance behind her. She didn't see the stranger anymore. She got into the passenger seat of the truck, feeling a little easier around her father. But the thought of the plant and the stranger was still lingering in her mind. Penny contemplated going back into the forest to check the plant once more, however, seeing as how her father would be home and the situation with the missing children, she decided against it.

Later that night, two squad cars pulled up to the home of Mr. Richards. They parked at the front gate, and two officers exited each vehicle and began to inspect the front of the property. An officer walked up the vine slathered front porch and knocked on the withered door.

"Mr. Richards!" said the officer.

The one behind him with a large mustache said, "Look through the window, Stan. The lights aren't on. Either he's dead asleep or he's gone."

The officer at the door stared at the windows and shook his head. "I don't think he's gone, Paul," he said. "No one's reported seeing him leave the property in a while."

"Maybe we should just kick down the door and see what's inside," said Paul as he ran his finger over the holster of his gun.

"Hey guys," said another officer. "Over here."

The other policemen gathered around the officer staring in the darkened field. "What did you find, Mitch?" said Paul.

Corporal Mitch Saggert pointed, and the others tried to follow the path of his finger.

"See that?" Mitch said. "Look between those trees..."

As the others did, the fourth officer, named Walker, said, "...Yea...I see it."

In the distance Walker identified the silhouette of someone walking through the bushes.

Soon the others on Walker's hints could see the figure as well.

"Saddle up, boys," said Paul, "that person's taller than Mr. Richards. He isn't supposed to be here."

All four officers took out their firearms and walked around the back of the house to the farm. They passed an empty chicken coop with a pungent odor that made Paul spit in the grass and cover his mouth. They neared the location of where they saw the stranger, inching their steps as to not alert their target.

They passed a stable with the doors closed and an eerie silence.

Then there was a loud grunt.

The officers halted, with Mitch swearing under his breath. They heard blunt, continuous sounds for a few seconds and then it stopped. The grass around them moved tauntingly, and the wind rustled the leaves in sinister whispers.

"...The hell..." sneered Stan.

"*Quiet,*" said Walker.

They heard the stranger grumbling, and they followed his voice. They walked into a small clearing and back into the vegetation. And after a few meters they came into a larger clearing. And there they saw the man under the shade of a tree.

The stranger wore a rippling cloak, and that was just about all they could make out of him. In his hand a blade glistened, and in the other he held a silver canister with blue markings. However, before him on the ground lay a body shrouded in thick vines.

"What the hell?" said Paul.

"Freeze! Put your hands up!" said Mitch.

The man turned to them and gave them his attention, exposing his grey face and beaming yellow eyes.

"What the fuck?" said Walker.

"Drop your weapons you son of a bitch!" said Paul, gesturing with his gun. "Do it!"

The stranger let out a loud groan and said, "I really wish you men weren't here..."

"Step away from the body, now!" said Mitch.

As the stranger moved away, Mitch went over to the body while his colleagues trained their guns on the culprit.

Mitch knelt next to the person and immediately shuddered upon sight of it. It was a corpse, with strange vines and smelly green fluid. Some of the tendrils seem to have been cut, presumably the stranger's doing. Mitch looked at the face and realized that it was a complete mess of bulges with red things coming out of the eyes, ears and mouth.

"...Jesus..." Mitch said, covering his mouth at the putrid smell.

The stranger said in a slightly annoyed voice, "You men are going to ruining everything. With so many of you here, they'll use it to confuse you all and pick you off one by one."

"Shut up!" said Stan.

"Who the hell are you talking about?" said Paul. "Whose 'they'?"

Then Mitch inspected the clothing on the body, realizing something familiar about the color. He moved away some of the vines and exposed the logo on the jacket.

The logo of the local high school's football teams.

The shock gripped Mitch's throat. Unsettling things crawled up his spine, and he stiffened. Mitch fought the clutch of fear and turned to the others. They looked at their fellow officer and noted the lifeless look in his eyes.

"What is it?" said Paul.

"...It's one of the kids..." said Mitch.

The officers all gave the stranger a diabolic look. The man quickly waved his hands and said almost playfully, "Oh, don't look at me! That's not my doing..."

The surrounding bushes shook and rattled. The officers stole quick glances around them to find the source of it. They couldn't, however, they caught glimpses of sections of the plants shaking in different directions.

"What's going on?" said Paul hysterically. He ran up to the stranger and grabbed him by his neck. "What the fuck's going on?"

The stranger, peering into the man's watery eyes, smiled and said silently, "Oh, they just want an after-dinner snack."

A steady bellow lurched from the grass. Panicking, Stan took wild shots into the bushes around him. But nothing stirred.

"Hold your fire Stan!" said Walker. He projected his voice and said, "We're from the Poppersville Police Department! Come out with your hands up now!"

"They don't use their hands that much," said the stranger.

But before Paul could reply, vines lashed out of the brush and wrapped themselves around Walker.

“Shit! W-What the hell?” Walker screamed as he tried to wrestle out of the muscular tentacles, but they successfully subdued him, pinning his feet and arms together. “Help!” The vines dropped Walker on his belly and dragged him.

Stan quickly ran to Walker’s aid, pulling at the vines. “This shit won’t budge!” he said.

More tendrils wrapped around Mitch’s leg and released mist from their pores. The man quickly opened fire at managed to rip apart the vines and free himself.

The stranger shot his elbow across Paul’s face, dove and rolled out of the way and reach for his knife and cannister on the ground. Paul swore and opened fire at the stranger, but with some otherworldly force the culprit managed to dodge the first bullet and disappear into the bushes.

“Get the hell back here!” said Paul, immediately giving chase.

“Paul, wait!” Mitch said.

Mitch made to run after the man, but something ran into Mitch instead.

The creature leaped into Mitch before he had time to fire, bringing them both to the ground. Mitch suddenly felt an uncomfortable weight and the tendrils wrapping themselves around him. He looked up and could only make out a face with decaying skin and vines writhing around it.

Mitch gaped and said, “Holy shit...”

Most of the thing’s long hair concealed its face, but by its proportions Mitch could tell it was a woman. Or at least used to be.

The creature opened its mouth and throbbing things like massive roots spewed out. They buried into Mitch’s flesh. The man screamed and opened fire, scoring bloody holes in the thing’s stomach. It only made a guttural scream and continued its onslaught. The mutated female continued to drain his bodily fluids, and Mitch slowly lost strength and consciousness thanks to the blood loss and toxic chemicals released by the vines.

Stan stood up and opened fire into the unseen foe in the grass. He heard a sudden yelp and the vines around Walker loosened. Walker scurried to his feet and was instantly met with a scarecrow leaping upon his back. It wrestled him back to the ground, threw more vines around him and released the mist from its pores.

Soon Stan, Walker and Mitch were incapacitated by the toxic gases, and one by one they fell to their attackers.

Paul followed the distancing figure of the stranger into the stable. Paul aimed awkwardly and got off a shot that whizzed pass the man's head. The stranger yelped and duck, and ran between the open doors of the stable and disappeared.

“Stop!” said Paul.

Paul ran into the stable—and was instantly met with a horrific scene. There in the hay-littered stall were the emaciated animals. Paul covered his mouth and took out his flashlight. As he turned on the light he saw more details on the bodies. They were mostly horses, and a pig. All of which were bones with rotting skin pulled tightly over them. A putrid smell was lavishing richly in the air.

“My...*god!*” said Paul, carefully stepping around the corpses.

He poked the flashlight into each stall, carefully scouring every nook and cranny for the perpetrator. Beads of sweat ran down his face, and he had to grip his hand with the gun to stop it from shaking. Paul heard scurrying sounds behind him and instantly spun to meet the source, but he only saw footsteps in the shifted hay. He exhaled and followed the footsteps to the image of the stranger standing in the middle of the doorway.

“Hold it the fuck right there!” said Paul, running into the middle of the path with the man firmly in his sights.

“You know,” the stranger said, “when you enter these buildings, you sometimes need to study the infrastructure. You never know what might be lurking around you...especially in the ceiling...”

“What?” Paul.

Then Paul witness the faint motion of the suspect pointing up. Paul didn't know what to think at first—until he felt a dreadful presence above him and a drop of something wet on his shoulder. Shivers immediately ran through Paul's body, and reluctantly, the man looked up.

His flashlight exposed a female poised in the ceiling like some gecko, caressed by many tendrils.

Paul gaped. “...Jesus.”

The creature stood up in the ceiling, hanging just by her feet. She threw back her head and red, throbbing tendrils shot out of her eyes and mouth. As the creature fell, Paul screamed and opened fire.

The monstrosity landed upon him with the weight of a bag of cement, instantly pinning him down. As Paul fired wildly and wrestled with the monster, the stranger contemplated upon the helpless man. But then something else crossed the stranger's mind.

"Hmmm," he said as the creature released its toxic vapors and bounded the officer's arms. "You know, I probably should have brought more knives."

And just like that, the stranger turned and left.

## CHAPTER THREE

It was Friday. Penny would've usually made plans with her friends to go to the amusement park, but the disappearance of the students wouldn't let her parents allow it. However, her parents had called into the school and requested for Penny to get the day off to do some household chores.

Penny's duty today was to stock up on goods. These were the foods that they didn't grow on the farm. The young girl wore a rippling yellow dress over her tights as she walked with a small backpack, and a two-inch switchblade in her waist that her father gave to her.

It was early morning. The sun wasn't at its peak yet, and cool fresh air caressed her as Penny walked along the flower-cluttered path out of her neighborhood and onto the main street. Penny passed a few shops, most of which sold household crockery and a few souvenirs. She even passed a mill that spewed smoke from a private property some yards away.

Penny reached the supermarket, painted in white with yellow at the base and edges. As she made her way to the whole foods section of the store, Penny heard the voice of a news reporter on the radio say mid-way in his speech, "We also strongly encourage all visiting tourists to remain in their hotels until the curfew is over. Rest assured that our loyal police department will be working diligently to scour every nook and cranny for the culprits of the recent crimes, and do everything to bring the missing persons home. Remember, the curfew begins at seven 'o'clock sharp. Please stay inside and enjoy your evening."

And with that there was a beep and the announcement ended. The chatter in the store suddenly increased.

A chilling feeling swept over Penny, and she paused just before the packaged goods on the shelf.

*This is something out of a Stephen King Novel*, Penny thought. But her guess seemed plausible enough. What were the chances of her small town being plagued by a terror such as this?

Tonight was supposed to be *Frat-House* Fridays with her parents. Her mother was supposed to be preparing grilled-cheese sandwiches and shrimps fried in pepper and honey to go along with the rice and dumplings. Her father would roast buttered corn over the grill in the front yard. And they would end the night watching DVDs of eighties action flicks.

But with the possible commotion broadcasted over the radio, would that even happen tonight?

Penny shrugged off the idea and continued with her shopping. After she cashed her goods and exited the store with them firmly stuffed in her backpack, she could already see signs of the approaching event tonight. As if triggered by the announcement, Penny already saw a few police officers more than usual, even for a Friday night when people usually got drunk and went with the flow of the alcohol.

Nonetheless, people still went on with their business. And if the adults thought everything would be okay, why couldn't she?

Penny walked back home, not seeing anything strange along the way. But she still held her pocket knife firmly in hand. Back at her house, her father had already left for work, but he usually arrived home earlier on Fridays out of obligation to the family ritual.

Penny and her mother cleaned in and around the house, after which both of them relaxed until evening came when they were to star the family festivities.

Penny had dressed down into a rippling pink dress over her underwear and lay in her bed. She tried going over the notes in her books, but her mind kept shifting from her studies to the impending curfew, the strange plant...and the stranger.

Penny groaned and clamped her hands over her head. "Get it together Penny..." she said.

Penny relaxed and took a deep breath. She opened her eyes and sighed. For the next thirty minutes she was able to focus entirely on her homework. But soon afterwards, the beckoning aura of the strange things around her finally garnered her attention. Penny sat at the edge of the bed deliberating whether she should take the risk, and ultimately decided to do it.

Penny got up and put on a pair of tights. She walked into the hallway and knocked on her parents' door.

"Mom!" she said. "I'm going out on the farm for a little while..."

"...Okay," her mother replied. "But make sure you get back inside before four o'clock."

"Sure thing!" said Penny as she ran down the stairs.

She made her way to the back of the house. She went inside the toolshed and took out her trusted scythe. As Penny stepped into the sudden brightness and warmth, she opened up her scythe. She looked around her, taking in the tranquility of the chirping birds and the cool winds that swayed and bobbed the trees.

Penny looked dead ahead of her through the crop field into the forest in the distance. After which, she walked off.

This time Penny had a strap across her body with many pockets. The belt itself was a gift to her father from one of his military buddies, but Penny's father allowed her to use it when he realized her tomboyish ways. Instead of military death-dealing devices, Penny fitted the pocket with knives, cans of pepper spray, a water bottle and bandages.

As Penny walked across the field she noticed something peculiar about the scarecrow. She stopped and shielded her eyes from the glare above with her hand, squinting as she tried to make out the changes in the scarecrow. Beneath the mess of vines it appeared to have a different coloring and was missing its hat.

*Did dad change it?* Penny thought. Eventually the young girl shrugged and moved on.

Once more, Penny carefully went between the wires in the fences, taking cautious steps as she approached the area where the strange plant was. She held the scythe close, ready to swing at the slightest movement. She steadied her breathe as she approached the tree, knowing thing was capable of moving.

Penny finally reached the spot. But she saw nothing there.

A dumbfounded look came upon her, then panic as she remembered the wriggling movement of the plants. Penny quickly straightened herself and looked around her. She didn't see anything out of the ordinary right away, but soon her eyes spotted something peculiar.

Penny looked to her right amongst a few trees and spotted what looked a like a torn piece of cloth.

"...Oh boy..." said Penny, she gripped her scythe tighter and went over to it. She tipped on her toes to inspect the red fabric on the small tree. But as she did Penny suddenly heard the bush rustling to her left. She snapped her head in that direction just to see something disappear in the depths of the brush.

Penny retreated a few steps, wide-eyed, and held her weapon ready. There wasn't a response for the next two minutes. Penny swallowed a nervous lump, and mustered what courage she could and said to herself, "You're not gonna scare me anymore..."

Penny uttered a high screech and leapt into the bushes with her scythe. She wildly swung her weapon, sending shredded leaves flying around her. Finally, after some seconds, Penny

stopped herself. Before her stood the massacred bushes that revealed only the mutilated plants that stained the air with a bitter smell.

*Maybe I kind of over did it*, Penny thought. Penny looked around the forest once more, carefully.

Her immediate view held many different trees and plants huddled together. In the distance she could see the green hills that surrounded most of the town. But apart from the abundance of birds she heard, Penny couldn't for the life of her remember seeing any big animals around. The last time she saw bear was when she was nine years old. She'd heard rumors of the animal population declining for some reason, but she never thought she would actually come upon the scenario one day.

Penny continued to search around her for any large fauna, and that was when she spotted something else.

There it was up a bushy slope. A lonely wooden structure.

Curiosity tugged at her nose, and Penny slowly went up to the building. She reached the top and was met by a rusted, vine infested mesh fence. The house looked more decrepit up close; the wood was discovered and strewn with vines and chips. She was at the back of the house, where she saw a single door and two foggy windows. There was even a dreamcatcher composed of a wooden ring, webs of green wires and large red feathers hanging off the base.

Penny was aware that Poppersville had a small population of Cherokee Native Americans, but she wasn't aware that one lived out here, as usually they live up in the hills.

But now Penny realized the house was more of a hut.

Penny took one quick glance in the direction of her farm, and turned back to the hut. She climbed over the short fence, and once on the other side Penny readied a knife in her hand. She walked around the dried, grassy property of the land and made her way to the front of the shack. The building itself was surrounded by the fence for a distance of about seven meters on three sides, but was shorter at the back. Nothing much grew in the yard besides a few roses. But then, Penny found it strange how beautiful plants like these grew near something as shabby as this.

Penny stood silently at the front of the building, noting nothing out of the ordinary other than another dreamcatcher and foggy windows once more. However, Penny saw that the front door was propped almost half open, allowing Penny to see the gloom inside.

Penny heard scratching noises behind her and snapped her body around. She heard nothing but trees, bushes, butterflies and squirrels.

Penny frowned. “What the hell?” she said, watching as more of the little critters crawl into the yard. Overhead blue-jays darted about with tuneful songs. And soon, the mix of furry little animals and roses made the yard seem more like a garden. Penny started to feel uncomfortable with the sudden change in the scene, and with firm grip on her weapon and check of her utility belt, she walked into the shack.

Penny carefully pulled the door open. Almost immediately she was met with the dank smell of cut grass, old clothes and cinnamon. Penny wiggled her nose and squinted, adjusting her eyes to the room’s lighting. Sunlight crept over the withered mahogany floors and laid upon the rest of the space.

Penny’s eyes relaxed and saw the interior. Dominating the space in the room were more of the dreamcatchers. This time some possessed sparkling jewels and varied in size. They hung from the ceiling by beaded strings and on the walls.

“...*Man*, this place feels weird,” Penny whispered, watching the ornaments swing and spin in the slight breeze from outside.

The rest of the inside was occupied by a makeshift bed of straw and sticks bent and woven into form. Empty jars and baskets were on the left side, and something huge was covered by a cloth in the center of the room.

Penny looked beyond the large object and saw that the back door was boarded up. With that in mind, she focused on what was before her. Penny lifted her knife, walking towards the concealed object. She reached for the dusty cloth and gripped it, feeling the slippery coldness on it. Penny pulled it off and quickly stepped away.

What she expected was something to jump out at her. However, she didn’t expect something like this.

A small fountain—constructed of human bones.

Penny gasped. Her young body shook, but curiosity prevented her from running. The bowl of the fountain consisted of ribs and hands, while the stand was a construct of three spines held together by some strange red matter. But the skull at the other edge of the bowl was what scared her the most. It stared back at her with pink crystals in its sockets.

Penny's hesitation subsided, and she crept towards the fountain. She peered into the middle of the fountain and discovered another pink crystal in its center. However, surrounding it inside where blotches of dark, red stains.

It had a foul, yet familiar smell. One Penny, who had been next to her parents as they killed chickens, knew all too well.

Blood.

Penny started to piece things together bit by bit in that instant. *Some blood ritual stuff was going down here, huh?* she thought.

She'd read about Poppersville's past during school. It was one of many small populations founded by runaway slaves, Native American allies and whites who had brokered a peace treaty in 1890.

The community was a mix of different cultures all crammed together to form one. They celebrated America's independence, the Cherokee summer harvest, the freed slave's music festival in March, Thanksgiving and most importantly *Redstone*, the celebration to commemorate the founding of Poppersville.

But besides those holidays, the town had another dark history the population often wanted to keep buried.

Though it was advertised as just town-folklore in the tourist flyers and on the website, Poppersville had a long history of practicing witchcraft, and was said to have been prominent during the war between the town's inhabitants and the government trying to claim the land. The history books told tales of men and women, from African witchdoctors, Native American Shamans and European-bred witches who conjured the most diabolical spells and hexes. Members of the government military were said to have gone terribly ill for no reason, and gone mad to the point of attacking their own comrades. Some tales even went so far as to add the images of dead fighters walking across the battlefield, under the command of the town's cult folk.

When the industrial revolution hit Poppersville in the forties, the influence of the cult dwindled, and eventually they were replaced by the legend of various alien sightings.

*Wait a minute*, Penny thought. *Could that be it? Could aliens be making the people go missing?*

Since the last thirty years, only around seventeen people had gone missing. Of that, only four bodies were found; people who had wandered too far into the forest and succumbed to predation by bears, wolves and pumas. The others were never found. Also, in that timeframe there were only five murders. Three were the result of domestic violence, one was the result of a robbery in an old woman's home, and the last was when a group of young locals got into a brawl with two gay tourists. One of the tourists had died from a hammer to the head.

All in all, to Penny, the murders were the least of her worries. She knew what happened to those people. But the disappearances were what puzzled her. And now they were happening again.

Not knowing to Penny was the equivalent of missing a limb.

And it was that compulsion that triggered Penny to cut her arm with the knife, just behind the vital vessels in her wrist. She'd learn to injure herself without much hesitation after watching an episode of *Ultragirl* where she had to sacrifice an arm to rescue her classmates from 'Kozgorath the Baneful Ant God'. Luckily, the magical faery queen had granted Ultragirl a one-time favor and restored her arm.

Penny bit her lip and uttered only a tight grunt as she opened her flesh. She placed her arm over the fountain and let her blood drip onto the gem in the center. But nothing happened. Penny looked at the gem intently, looked at the skull, the dreamcatchers and back at the gem.

Still, nothing happened.

And after three minutes of waiting, Penny finally gave up. "Oh well," she said. "Guess I better go and help mom..."

As adventurous as she was, Penny also enjoyed the finer things in life. She couldn't waste time on things that provided no results, and so Penny took a bandage from out of her utility belt, wrapped the inch-wide cut on her forearm and walked out of the room. Penny pushed the door back in the original posture she found it, with just a slender beam of sunlight slicing its way inside the hut.

And, just seconds after Penny left, her blood was absorbed into the gem like oil in a sponge. The crystal exuded a lustrous warm light, both from the one in the center and those embedded in the skull. An eerie aura manifested that caused the dreamcatchers to flutter and spin.

The light almost consumed the bowl now, emitting loud gasps and wisps. Part of it shot up like a missile and wiggled like a living thing. It flopped its way out of the fountain and onto the floor like a piece of meat. The light in the fountain faded, and everything went still and quite once more.

The worm-like creature was six inches long, rubbery with ruddy skin and blue rings between its segments. It straightened itself, and several stubby little legs popped from beneath its underside. It lifted his upper body, throwing back a terrifyingly humanoid head.

“Ooooooooohohohohooooo!” the creature said.

It possessed a sharp nose and jutting chin. His eyes were yellow and glinted with unjustified purpose. He licked his dark lips with a forked tongue and took a deep breath. He exhaled deep and long, as if he was savoring the fresh air.

“...Aaaaaawww...” he said. “The smell of a fragile human soul.”

Suddenly the worm made a startled expression. He looked around the room, turning on his tiny legs and undulating his body with incredible speed.

“Waaaaait a minute...” he said. “Where is she?”

The worm finally stopped at the creak in the door. He spotted the sunlight outside and smiled mischievously. “Hahah! So, you think you can escape fate, heh? Well...we’ll see about that!”

The worm wiggled his lower half, and hurriedly slithered out of the cabin.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Later that evening, Penny and her parents were in the living room wearing karate outfits. Before them on the table was a bounty of food that seemed fit for a banquet. The windows and doors were all locked, and the family of three almost had the volume on the TV maxed as they cheered.

On the DVD was a movie entitled “Iron Tiger”, whose protagonist, Lao Chung, was on a quest of revenge to defeat Wun Tsung, who had poisoned Lao Chung’s master and deceitfully defeated and killed him in combat. The movie was nearing its climax, with Lao Chung fighting Wun Tsung atop a temple. Both were covered in blood and bruises as they dealt each other stylishly wicked blows.

“Come on!” said Mr. Pensworth. “Lao Chung get him, boy!”

Mrs. Pensworth hooted and punched the air. “You can do it Lao!” she said.

Penny leaped up and down the couch, her shirt stained with juice and grease. She had a half-eaten shrimp in her hand, and she said, “Do it! Do it!”

Wielding the snake-style technique, Wun Tsung was overpowering Lao Chung’s tiger-style technique, until suddenly, after getting a blow that nearly killed him, Lao Chung remembered his master, and found the strength to get back up. He flexed his muscled and took his fighting stance once more. He uttered a deep growl and a red aura appeared around him. “*Keeeeeyaaaaah!*” he screamed,

The family cheered harder, this time kicking and punching as if they were the ones in combat. Mr. Pensworth stumbled each time her tried to kick. Only his wife and Penny could execute the leg-work properly.

Lao Chung engaged Wun Tsung once more, this time deflecting all his blows and countering with blinding claw swipes that left huge marks on Wun Tsung. Wun Tsung suddenly countered with a kick. He then retreated, twisted the two fingers together, creating a dark aura around it.

“Holy smokes!” said, Penny. “It’s the ‘Twin Dragon’ technique!”

Mr. Pensworth fell back in the couch and waved his hands. “Lao, get outta there!”

Wun Tsung leaped and flew forward, he jabbed at Lao Chung—but then the hero did the unthinkable.

Lao Chung clasped his hands, timed just as Wun Tsung's arms were close enough, and stuck his hands between them. Lao Chung snarled and forcefully opened his hands, parting Wun Tsung's arms and deflected the path of his Twin Dragon. The dark aura on Wun Chung's fingers shot off and punched huge holes in the wall.

Penny and her parents leaned over the table and gawked. "Huh?" they all said.

Lao Chung thrust his fists into Wun Tsung, then kick him in his gut and sent Wun Tsung staggering back.

Mrs. Pensworth stood and said, "Oh no! I think this is it!"

Lao Chung threw his hands behind him, set then like claws and held them apart from each other. The red aura appeared again, this time travelling to his hands.

Penny beamed. "Oh yeah!"

The faint image of a burning tiger appeared over Lao Chung. The family huddled together with admirable smiles. Lao Chung screamed like a siren, leaped in the air, and thrust his glowing claws into Wun Tsung. The family leapt and screamed, "Burning Iron Tigeeeeeeeeer!"

On impact there was an explosion created by sub-par special effects. The blast sent Wun Tsung flying through the wall. As the villain's screams died, the hero fell on his knees. The ends credits slowly rolled up the screen.

The three family members slumped in the couch and sighed.

"Okay..." said Mr. Pensworth, he turned to Penny "...Your turn Penny. What do you wanna watch?"

Penny quickly said, "Ultragirl vs The Ant King!"

Her father frowned and said, "Huh? Isn't that...like...a kid's show?"

Penny folded her arms and said, "No, it's not dad."

"I watched it before, honey," Mrs. Pensworth said. "It's actually really good. There's not much girly, kiddie's stuff in it. It's more like action and adventure...but with a girl in the lead and a little high school life."

Mr. Pensworth got up and said, "So long as it ain't got no sex or swearing, I'm good for it."

"Promise, dad," said Penny.

As her father got up and reached under the table for a batch of DVDs, Penny got up and said, "I'll be right back. I'm just gonna go wash my face."

“Okay sweetie,” said her mother.

Penny went up the stairs and into the bathroom. She washed the grease off her hands and face and went into her room where she threw herself onto the mattress and spread her arms and legs. As Penny stared at the ceiling, a sensation of relief came upon her.

When she was with her family, she felt a sudden release. She was free from the demands of her curiosity, from her social life with friends and from school work. With her family, she could just enjoy being happy.

Penny giggled and closed her eyes. With the flow of blood diverted to her stomach, she didn't think much, and just immersed herself in the joy she was experiencing. She began flexing her arms and legs as if making a snow angel.

*This is the life*, she thought.

Something fell on Penny's chest. She immediately opened her eyes and was staring right into the face of a worm with a man's features. They both locked eyes for a while, with the worm looking expectantly at the young girl. Penny's eyes were wide open, but the sudden fear she felt was quickly subsiding.

As if he could sense the change within the young girl, the worm smiled and said, “You're not afraid?”

After a long pause, Penny said, “Not really.”

As Penny sat up, the worm scurried off her and made his way to the edge of the bed. Penny folded her legs and placed her hands on her knees as she stared at the creature.

The worm bobbed his head. “Just as I thought. You really are a true believer!”

“What are you?” Penny said. “And what are you talking about?”

The worm crawled closer to her. Now that she could see him clearly, Penny tilted her head at his strange shape.

“Me?” the worm said. He narrowed his eyes and smirked. “Why, I'm Mozgul the spectacular serpent!”

Penny folded her lips and sniggered. She covered her mouth to hide her wide smile. Mozgul's yellow eyes intensified. “What are you laughing about, girl?”

Penny took a few breaths and said after her giggling fit subsided, “It's just that...you're a few inches short from being a snake.”

Something in Mozgul snapped, and his eyes lit up. A strange blue aura appeared around him, spreading in a fine film that coated the entire room in the blink of an eye. Penny was suddenly hoisted into the air along with other smaller objects in her room. Penny flailed and wailed as she was spun around the room with everything else. But her room door was closed, and the sounds of the movie from downstairs drowned her screams.

“You think you know me, you little hussy,” Mozgul said through clenched teeth. “I’m the Great Wizard Mozgul! I was the first sorcerer to ever conquer ten kingdoms on my world! I slew thousands of men and made a tower with their heads! I made kings and queens my servants! I—”

“Okay! Alright! I get!” Penny said.

Mozgul’s eyes stopped glowing and Penny and the objects fell to the floor. Penny rolled onto her hands and knees, groaning and rubbing her backside.

“Ah, I’m glad you understand, now,” said Mozgul.

Penny got up and folded her fists. She scowled at Mozgul and said, “Then, if you’re a wizard like you say you are,” she pointed at him, “why do you look like an overweight earthworm?”

Mozgul frowned and said, “Well, I was a great wizard for sure.” His voice took on a deep tone. “But there were much stronger foes where I’m from. Yeeeeeeesssssss...terrifying they were.” Mozgul crept closer to the bed, and for the first time, Penny felt chills in his presence. “I was very confident in my powers, and so I challenged them. They defeated me, but spared my life.”

Mozgul threw back his hand and said, “Ooohohohoho!” Penny flinched.

Mozgul stopped his hollering, then said, “They did this to me. They gave me this cursed body, then banished me from my world.”

Penny, her curiosity hungrily aroused, approached the bed and sat next to Mozgul. “Where exactly are you from, Mr. Mozgul?”

“From a wonderful place, my girl,” said Mozgul. His eyes glowed, and one of Penny’s action figures lifted off the floor and floated before her, covered in faint light. “Power such as this, is accessible to those with a strong spiritual force.”

Penny took the toy from the air in her hand, and watched the strange energy disappear. She had felt a tingling sensation upon coming in contact with it. However, Penny turned to Mozgul, and said, “What are you doing here?”

Mozgul made a mischievous grin and said, "Why, I'm on a trek for revenge."

Penny's eyes widened, and she said, "...Really?"

"Yes," said Mozgul. "You see, little girl, when you went to that fountain and offered your blood, you inadvertently summoned me. I've been reduced from a great man to a miserably, old, legless mess that has to now bargain for his strength." He crawled into Penny's lap and stared into her face. "What I do, little girl, is give mortals access to this wonderful power I just displayed, in exchange for something just as equally valuable."

"What's that...?" Penny said, now feeling a little nervous. She probably wondered if she should have killed the worm when she had the chance.

Mozgul bit his lip, then whispered, "Bodies."

"Bodies?" said Penny.

"Yep," said Mozgul. "Dead, human, bodies. Or preferably alive; that way the organs are still somewhat intact and don't stink."

"Why do you need bodies?" said Penny. "Is it for some kind of sacrificial ritual?"

"No," said Mozgul. "I need it for my brethren who've also been turned into worthless forms like myself. Anyone who grants me a body, I give them access to my power. The more bodies they give to me, the more power I return."

Penny took Mozgul and threw him against the wall. He screamed and fell on the floor. Penny got up and reached for a shoe. She stood over Mozgul with the makeshift weapon in hand and said, "Like I'd go around killing people to make you stronger!"

Mozgul rolled onto his feet, groaning. He shook his head and looked at Penny with a wide grin. "Oh, my little sweet," he said, "you might be forced to make that decision sooner than you think."

"What are you talking about?" Penny said, lifting the shoe higher.

Mozgul gestured with his prominent chin to the window. Penny reluctantly turned around and looked at it. She glanced at Mozgul one more time before turning to the window again.

Penny backed away from Mozgul, before reluctantly walking towards the window. She lifted it further up and stuck her head out into the cool night's air. She saw that the streets were clear due to the curfew, however she could see a few lights in the neighbor's homes and hear the faint sound of music coming from another house.

But her eyes suddenly caught the phenomenon Mozgul was talking about. A pink mist drifted from the forest, creeping towards the home like the body of some gargantuan specter.

"Whoa!" Penny said. She swept her eyes over the forest now being eaten alive by the pink matter. She stopped upon seeing the back of the farm from her position, where some of the pink mist was already covering the crops. And Penny noticed within the mist, the shape of two humanoids lumbering out. They were covered in plant-like matter and moved with inhuman coordination.

Penny leaned off the window ledge and gasped. "What the hell!"

The scarecrow that was hung up within the crops suddenly twisted his arms and legs and fell off. It joined the other intruders as they ran towards the house.

"Oh Crap!" Penny said. She spun around and raced for the door.

"Don't forget me, now!" said Mozgul as he leapt into the pocket of her pants.

"Mom! Dad!" Penny said as she ran down the stairs.

She ran into the living and saw her parents looking wide-eyed and expectantly at her. They noticed her expression, and her mother said, "What is it Penny?"

"I just saw strangers running around the back yard!" said Penny.

Her father immediately threw his plate of food on the table and stood up. "Penny don't joke around?" Mr. Pensworth said.

"I'm not, dad!" said Penny. She pointed up the stairs. "I was looking out the window in my room and I saw them!"

Mrs. Pensworth quickly got up and looked at her husband. The man made a stern face and said, "Both of you, in the attic, now!"

Mrs. Pensworth took Penny by the hand and led her up the stairs. Mr. Pensworth went into the kitchen and reached for the shotgun he had hidden under the kitchen table. He heard a loud bang from upstairs and heard his wife and daughter scream.

He hurried back into the living room, and saw his girls running down the stairs. "What?"

"They're inside!" Mrs. Pensworth said.

Penny and her mother hurried behind the man. Mr. Pensworth cocked his gun and aimed it up the stairs. All three of them could hear the footsteps above them. Penny and her mother tightened their grip on each other. Mr. Pensworth's hands were steady on his weapon as were his eyes on the steps.

The footsteps stopped.

*Oh shit!* Penny thought. *Come on, Penny! Do something! What would Ultra Girl do?*

The ceiling above shattered to smithereens. Rubble and bodies fell upon them. Something landed on Mr. Pensworth and struck him in the shoulder, causing him to misfire and blast a huge hole in the wall.

Mrs. Pensworth screamed as she wrestled a mutated woman of her. Her assailant attempted to wrap its vines around her. The infected woman opened her mouth and three red wriggling tendrils popped out. Mrs. Pensworth screamed louder.

Penny had scurried to one side and ran down the hall to the back door.

Mr. Pensworth shoved the scarecrow off him, cursed and got up. He stood face to face with the creature that screeched at him; red tendrils flexing from every orifice in its face. He lifted the gun and said, "Get the fuck outta my house."

Mr. Pensworth pulled the trigger. The blast tore off the creature's right shoulder and threw it like a sack of meat against the wall. Mr. Pensworth turned to his wife on the floor and swung the butt of his gun in the head of the intruder on top of her. It grunted and rolled off. Mr. Pensworth went to help his wife but the third monster ran into him, shoving him into the wall. Both of them wrestled for the gun until the creature released a strange mist from its vine.

Penny ran to the tool shed and reached for her belt of items and her scythe. As she did, Mozgul raced up her back and perched on her shoulder. "Come on, Penny, you know you need my help," he said.

"Piss off!" said Penny as she opened her scythe and ran back into the living room.

Penny saw a strange mist permeating the air. Her mother repeatedly stabbed one of the scarecrow people with a fork, and her father was slumped against the wall; with the creature's red tendrils buried in his neck.

"Dad!" Penny screamed.

Her father's eyes were pale to the point of death. The red things pulsed and throbbed, and she witnessed the horrifying image of her father's body quickly losing its mass, and the creature's gut swelling. Penny went to strike the monster, but after inhaling the mist, her movements were sluggish. Penny fell on her knees. She slowly turned to her mother and saw her slowly falling back with the creature's tendrils eagerly going for her neck.

Mozgul crawled over Penny's head and hung between her forehead. He peered into her droopy eyes and said, "Come on...Do it!" He saw Penny's eyes shift over to the dying frame of her father, and Mozgul said, "Your dad is just about done for."

Penny fell and rolled over onto her back. Her mother cried as the creature's tendrils pierced her neck.

Penny raised her hand before her, crying. Mozgul hurried onto her hand, reached for her thumb and bit off a piece of flesh. As the blood dripped from the wound, Mozgul licked the next dangling drop. He looked at Penny and said, "I've got your blood, Penny. Now think about which parent you want to get rid of, and say 'I sacrifice'."

The creature who got shot rose to its feet after having shrugged off its injury. It walked over to Penny. Its tendrils slithering out of its mouth and dripping thick strings of saliva. It stood over the young girl.

"Save yourself," Mozgul's word echoed in Penny's ear.

Penny reluctantly opened her mouth, and said, "...I..."

The window burst open. Glass showered inside the room. The creature over Penny quickly turned to the window to see someone in black garbs leaping inside. Mozgul wailed and ran down Penny's shirt out of sight.

The man in black spotted the mutant coming at him, and said, "You have glass on your face, chap." He reached into his coat, took out a small vial and threw it all in one fluid motion. The vial broke over the creature's face and split its liquid contents. It held its face and thrashed about as the chemicals burnt its flesh. The stranger leaped and executed a roundhouse kick to the creature's steaming head, crashing the monstrosity into the floor.

The stranger reached for something behind him and whipped out a 9-mm pistol. He opened fire into the creature over Mrs. Pensworth, scoring gunshots in the back of its head. The creature slumped, retracted its tendrils and rolled over. The other scarecrow with its bloated gut ran at the stranger. He stomped in its knee, thrust his palm in his chin and shot the mutant in the face. The creature fell back heavily.

The stranger checked his weapon's magazine and said, "Well that went smoothly." He turned to Penny and saw her slowly getting up. Her eyes beamed with expectancy. But Penny fell, and the man realized she was still under the effects of the drugs.

The stranger knelt over the girl.

"Please..." Penny said "...help my family...please..."

The stranger turned to her father; or what remained of him. The man had been sucked down to a form that resembled someone suffering from anorexia. His eyes were pale, and his clothes covered him like a huge sheet. He couldn't sense any movements coming from her father, and turned to Penny and said, "Your father's gone, love."

Tears rolled down Penny's face. "Mom...?" she said.

The stranger turned to her mother. He saw a little blood on her neck, but he could see her chest slowly moving up and down. "Hmph," he said. "I guess she still has some kick in her."

The strange reached into his cloak and produced a small syringe. He stuck it in Penny's neck without warning, making her scream.

"Ouch! W-What was that?" Penny said.

The stranger walked over to her mother while he said, "That was a serum to null the effects of the creature's sleeping spores." He knelt over Penny's mother and did the same procedure. He propped up Mrs. Pensworth in a seated position with her head hunched over.

Penny rose to her feet steadily, and successfully stood with her scythe in hand. Walking over to her father, Penny saw the rictus expression on his face as the life was drained from him. Penny closed her eyes and touched his bony cheek, then she wept and embraced his corpse.

The stranger rubbed Mrs. Pensworth's back and said, "They're dreadful friggers. They inject a toxic enzyme that dissolves the organs in the bodies. Then they just drink it up like fruit punch." The stranger felt the woman stirring before him. However, his eyes were fixed on the girl kneeling before the dead body.

Penny let go of her father and wiped her eyes. She rose to her feet with the scythe firm in her grasp and turned to the strange man. Her eyes were red from crying, and her expression seemed tired. But it was a different kind of exhaustion that the stranger was well versed about. He smiled.

"...I want to kill them," said Penny. She approached the stranger. "I want to know where they are."

The stranger slung Mrs. Pensworth's arm over his shoulder and rose with her. His eyes narrowed at Penny, and he said almost gleefully, "Your daddy's dead, and your immediate thought is revenge?"

Mozgul ruffled nervously in Penny's shirt pocket. The girl said, "I want to keep my mom safe" Then the thought of Ultragirl popped in her head. Ultragirl wouldn't have allowed anymore of her friends to die if one died before her eyes. That's what a hero does. Penny readied her scythe, "They're not getting my mom."

The stranger chuckled, a sound that was almost electrical and throaty. "Well, little girl," he said. "To be honest, I found your curiosity quite interesting the moment I saw you, which was why I followed you home."

In that moment the childlike wiring in Penny's mind spurred, and she recoiled slightly and said, "You...you *followed* me?"

The stranger frowned and growled, "Don't get the wrong idea, I don't rape little girls. I find women in general annoying and whiny. You, on the other hand, were just so...interesting." Then he cocked his head to the side and said, "Then again, something else seemed to have followed you home as well."

Penny caught the stranger's eyes dropping to her stomach, where the bulge of Mozgul shivered. Suddenly the worm scurried out of her shirt through the collar and perched atop Penny's head.

"Penny," said Mozgul, "I don't trust this man! He's devious and mean-looking. You cement-colored freak!"

The stranger clenched his jaw and glowered at the worm. Mozgul yelped and lowered his head, but before the stranger could react, Penny grabbed Mozgul and shook him before her.

"Yeah, like you're any different!" Penny said. "You almost made me kill one of my parents!"

"Me?" Mozgul said as he tried to squirm free. "You're the one who almost made that decision, you little hussy!"

"That was the drugs in the air!" Penny said.

There were sudden, spontaneous popping sounds outside. Penny and Mozgul suddenly went silent and turned their heads to the door.

"Are those gunshots?" Penny said.

The stranger said, "It sounds like the town's police force are already having dinner with the creatures."

Penny let go of Mozgul who hurriedly crawled up the sleeve of her shirt. She said, "What do we do?"

Mrs. Pensworth groaned and held her head. She opened her eyes and looked around. Her voice was weak, but suddenly gain strength. "P-Penny...David?"

She spotted Penny and found a sudden strength within her muscles. "Penny! What, wh—" " Out of the corner of her eyes, Mrs. Pensworth spotted her husband "—Oh my god! David!"

She ran from the stranger and knelt over her husband. As the woman wept and pleaded for help, Penny could do nothing but ignore her and turn to the strange man in their house. "What do we do next?" she said.

The stranger dug something from out of his ear and said, "Well, I'm about to kill whatever is causing the ruckus out there. There's a source to all of this madness."

Mrs. Pensworth suddenly embraced her daughter and said, frantically, "Penny! Baby, are you all right?" She turned to the stranger and screamed. "Who the fuck are you?" She began pounding the man. "Get out of my house! I'll fucking kill you!"

The stranger pushed her away and gave the woman a solid punch that dropped her on her bottom.

"No, don't!" Penny said as the man knelt over her.

The stranger held Mrs. Pensworth by the throat. His face was just inches from hers, and he said in a low, sinister voice, "Listen, you stupid bitch! I'm the man who prevented those things from killing you and your child. Now, if you want to live, you listen to me." Mrs. Pensworth's eyes were filled with tears as she tried to pry his hands off her neck. The man suddenly shook her head against the floor, and Mrs. Pensworth screamed. Penny tried to push him off but he shoved her away. "You selfish idiot! Stop crying and prioritize keeping your daughter safe!"

"All right! Okay!" the woman said.

The stranger smiled, and said, "Good."

He got off her, and Mrs. Pensworth went and embraced Penny. The man approached the door and turned to the two women. "Now," he said, "what we're dealing with here is an infestation of the paranormal variety." There were more gunshots outside, and they could now hear the screams. "My organization has been investigating these creatures for some time now; gathering intelligence on the various legends and folklore of the town to come to some sort of

conclusion on whether this thing exists or not." He gestured to Mr. Pensworth's body and chuckled. "I guess we have proof they're real now, huh?"

Penny and her mother scowled at the man. But it was Mrs. Pensworth who said, "Just who the hell are you? And what did this to my husband?"

The man said, "Me? Well, just call me by my office name, Glarion."

Penny said, "Glarion?"

The man, Glarion, said, "Yes. It's some strange language from some tribe in Uganda. But it means 'Outcast'. And why do I choose the name outcast? Because as you can see with my horrifying skin and my eyes, I'm a freak of nature."

Penny noted the man's forced a smile, but Glarion instantly frowned afterwards.

Mrs. Pensworth gestured to one of the dead creatures. "And what the hell are these things in my house?"

"Oh, those," said Glarion. "We call the source of these creatures a helflorian. It spreads by infecting animals with a parasite that takes over the host's body. The infected we just call mutants."

"How many are out there?" Mrs. Pensworth said as she reached for her husband's discarded shotgun and checked the chamber. She immediately looked around for the box of ammunition.

"Well it depends on how many got infected," said Glarion. Penny spotted the box of shotgun shells and took it up. She gave it to her mother who quickly began to reload the weapon, but Glarion continued: "It started out with animals at first, because they were close to its habitat. I guess when humans came and took over the environment, the helflorian just turned to us as food too."

Mrs. Pensworth cocked her weapon and looked at Glarion. "Well, I'm not leaving this town. My family's been here for over sixty years."

"Tell that to the helflorian," Glarion said.

There was a loud explosion that vibrated the house. Penny and her mother looked at each other, then at the man in the room. Glarion reached over his shoulder into the large suitcase he carried and gripped the golden handle of something. The man pulled out a short flail and pressed a bottom on the handle. Two blades appeared on opposite sides, dripping with cleaning solution. Glarion smiled and said, "If you want to keep them down, aim for their head. They hate cleaning

agent and they hate fire even more." He opened the door, and the sound of the town's siren flooded inside, making the two women tense. "Now, ladies. Let's get cracking!"

Mrs. Pensworth said, "Penny, whatever you do, stay close to me!"

"Got it mom!" Penny spun the scythe in her hands.

"Glarion, we'll take my truck," Mrs. Pensworth said.

Glarion cackled and opened the door. The women followed.

The three of them ran outside in the faint, pink mist that had now enveloped the community. They surveyed the area and noticed the windows in some houses were busted out. Two houses were on fire. One house had a husband and wife on the roof with machetes and pitch forks swinging and jabbing at the mutants hanging off the edge. A car was overturned in the street and the occupants dragged out and being feasted upon by the creatures. Another mutant ran down the street cloaked in flames and screaming in terror. When it fell, a group of men and women ran up the street.

And then a horde of mutants ran out of nowhere and into the survivors. Bloody axes and machetes swung back and forth, guns went off, spores erupted, and tendrils found flesh.

And three mutants ran across the lawn towards Glarion and the Pensworths.

Mrs. Pensworth eagerly took aim and fired. The blast hit one square below the neck, partially ripping its head off its torso. The creature fell, and Glarion ran over its corpse into the other two.

Glarion laughed as he swung his weapon viciously, lopping off the outstretched hand of a mutant. He kicked the snarling creature back and swung his weapon across the face of the next one. The blade hacked a deep crevice in the creature's face and tore out its tendrils. Glarion then switched back to his previous target and chopped it in its neck. Blood spurted from the wound as it fell.

While Glarion was busy slaying his victims, Mrs. Pensworth and Penny had entered the vehicle. Mrs. Pensworth started the truck, then stuck her head out and said, "Hey, are you coming?"

Glarion quickly ran into the back of the vehicle as it drove off. He stood in it and looked out the back as five civilians ran after their transport—with several mutants chasing them.

Mrs. Pensworth spotted them in the sideview mirror and said, "We have to help these people, Penny."

Penny nodded. "Sure mom," she said.

Glarion felt the truck slowing down, and could fairly ascertain the intention of the driver. He sighed and said, "Fine." He took out his pistol. "I guess we can save a few lives while we can..."

Glarion took aim at a mutant and fired. Its head snapped back and it stumbled. A mutant lurched his vines forward and snared a woman. She screamed and struggled but the mutant leaped upon her. Glarion fired at another one, but he missed.

Glarion mumbled, closed one eye and aimed again, and upon his next shot, he hit his mark. The bullet punctured the creature's throat. It grabbed its neck, fell on its knees and on its face.

The first two civilians held onto the truck and leaped on, followed by the other two.

A man turned to the stranger and said, "Thank—"

The civilians paused upon meeting their eyes with Glarion's skin. Glarion man frowned at them and said dryly, "You're welcome."

Glarion went further down the truck and spoke through the small view port into the front, "Madam, I want this truck to go to the coal mines, if you don't mind."

"Why there?" said Mrs. Pensworth as she turned onto a new street that lead directly into the town's square. Penny looked to her left and could see at the top of the hill were Bloodstone was located. Mrs. Pensworth saw mutants chasing a woman and child into a store.

"Because that's where the roots of the helflorian is," said Glarion.

Penny turned and said, "Really?"

"Wait a minute," said Mrs. Pensworth. "I need to get my daughter somewhere safe first!"

The neared the town, and saw the chaos unfold here as well as Mrs. Pensworth drove the truck around an overturned van. Two emaciated corpses laid in the street. Several members of the local police force were atop their vehicles, picking off the mutants coming at them with gunfire. Glarion looked to his right across the street and saw three mutants carrying the unconscious bodies of some civilians into the woods. He looked further up, and noticed that the coal mine was just over the hill. However, by vehicle would be the safest way—due to his civilian companions.

One of the men in the back of the truck fired his hunting rifle at a mutant attempting to leap into the back. The bullet scored a hit in its head and dropped the mutant back.

The screams and gunfire were deafening now, and Mrs. Pensworth could hardly navigate the debris in the streets. The path to the abandoned coalmines were on a barren road, but getting there through the mess in the town was the problem.

Suddenly, several people were chased into the street by a horde of mutants.

Mrs. Pensworth stepped on the brakes and swung the steering wheel. "Oh no!"

Penny screamed and held onto her mother as she felt the vehicle crash into the side of a pawn shop, shattering the wall. Those in the back of the truck were thrown off their feet. However, Glarion quickly sprung back up as if nothing had happened.

Glarion exited the vehicle, ignoring the squirming occupants inside. He shot a mutant coming at him in the chest and chopped it in the head. Glarion ripped out his flail and fired two shots into the next mutant attacker. But this time, as the creature fell on its knees, it was finished off by an axe to the head, wielded by a man wearing a gasmask.

The man plucked out his axe, looked at Glarion and nodded. Seeing as if the man wasn't perturbed by his appearance, Glarion nodded back and turned away. Glarion hurried to the front door of the building and broke the glass with his flail. He entered the store and spotted Mrs. Pensworth and Penny unsteadily exiting the truck.

Glarion heard a ruckus and turned to the direction it came from. The back door to the pawnshop suddenly flew open and the owner; a middle-aged man in simple attire, attempted to climb over the counter. A mutated deer ran from out of the back and mounted the helpless chap.

The deer bleated, opening its mouth to reveal three tendrils that punctured the man's back. The man hollered in agony.

Another deer ran out of the back, covered in writhing vines and its eyeballs replaced by wriggling red threads. It paused upon seeing Glarion and protruded its feeding tendrils.

Glarion frowned and lifted his flail. "Just try it..." he said.

The deer leapt—and so did Penny.

With a lung-stretching roar befitting of a lioness, Penny lifted the scythe over her head and brought it down upon the deer's neck midair. It was a clean cut. Glarion side-stepped the headless corpse and let it crash into the wall. The head fell next to Penny's feet and she kicked it away.

Glarion smiled at Penny and said, "At-it girl."

Penny smiled and flicked the blood off her weapon.

Penny's mother stared at her daughter with wide eyes. "I see where your dad's genes went," she said.

"Okay," said Glarion, and shot the other feeding, monstrous deer in the head, "let's get going."

As Glarion walked outside he was met with the four survivors from Penny's neighborhood; three men and a woman, and the man in the gasmask. Penny came and stood at Glarion's side as he stared at them before bringing his eyes back to the other civilians.

"So, I guess you're all looking for a leader?" Glarion said.

The blonde-haired man who had spoken to Glarion in the truck said, "You seem like someone who knows what the hell's going on around here. My name's Preston, by the way."

"I'm Toyogan," said a Native American man with his hair tied into a pony tail. He held a handgun, while two icepicks were both sides of his waist as well as a pouch on his belt.

"Name's Snyder," said a brown-skinned man. He gestured to the woman next to him. "This is my wife, Rachel." The couple both had crossbows.

The man with the gasmask said in a muffled voice, "Just call me Bran."

Mrs. Pensworth came next to the small crowd and said, "The engine got dented in. Unless we got time to fix it, this truck isn't going anywhere."

Gunfire alerted the small group to the one of the police shooting a bunch of infected coyotes running through the streets. Preston lifted his rifle and fired. A coyote yapped and twisted over. It began to kick as the blood flowed from it. "Fucking place turned into a zombie playground."

Rachel tapped Preston on the shoulder and said, "Watch your mouth around the kid!"

"This isn't the time to be formal, honey," said Snyder. "Leave the man alone."

"Huh?" said Preston. He quickly spotted the young girl in her karate outfit. "Oops! Sorry."

Bran said, "Where are you headed?"

Glarion noticed the knives around Bran's waist, the small liquor bottles and a small power saw. Glarion smiled inwardly at the man before him in the gasmask, dressed in his pajamas and boots. "I'm heading to the old coal mine. I think that's where the source of this mess is."

"You look like one of those government types," said Toyogan.

Glarion smiled and said, "I look like it, but I won't give away my secret."

"His skin looks more like a government experiment," said Preston, smiling.

Glarion glared at the man, and his smile instantly vanished.

"Hey, you jerk, knock it off!" said Penny.

Glarion smiled at the little girl, and she smiled back.

"Okay, Mr.," said Snyder. "Getting to the coal mines is gonna be a long and dangerous walk. That place hasn't been used in decades, and those things might be more up there. You sure you're up for it?"

Glarion tilted his head, hiding his eyes beneath his hat. "Do I look scared?" He lifted his head, revealing a maniacal grin.

Snyder visibly shuddered.

"What about my daughter?" said Mr. Pensworth, holding Penny close with an arm around her shoulder. "She can't just go into a battlefield?"

Bran approached the woman and said with his muffled voice sounding like he was speaking through an old radio, "Look around, miss," he gestured with the axe around him, "this place is fucked." Rachel was about to protest when Snyder held her back. Bran continued, "These things will come for you even if you hide in the deepest hole. We just have to kill whatever tries to kill *us*." Bran turned away and leapt onto the top of a trash can and lifted his axe into the air. "This is what I like, baby! Bring it on you bastards!"

"Okay," said Preston, his rifle hoisted against his shoulder. "Let's get moving. Lead the way stranger."

Glarion said, "Then follow," and walked off.

The mission was simple. The group only had to make it to the coal mines intact with some ammunition left. And by that, Glarion had to devise a unique tactic. He put away his flail and took out a specially prepared spray can and had his pistol. As expected, the mutants came running at their small party from all angles. Glarion shot the infect deer and dogs charging at them, and sprayed them with a solution that caused their skin to itch uncontrollably.

As the creatures were stunned by their wounds or flailed in misery at the power of the irritant, Bran and Penny finished them off with their close-quarters weapons. Penny hacked the head off a wounded deer and chopped and infected Pitbull in the back, while Bran split a coyote's head in two with his axe before swinging his weapon into the head of another dog.

As the party tried its best to avoid wasting time fighting the creatures, they allowed more mutants to chase them. However, Preston, Snyder and Rachel kept up the rear with the task of gunning down those that got too ambitious and dared to get close. In the middle was Toyogan and Mrs. Pensworth acting as quick switch-ins for the other three when they needed to reload.

They spent nearly seventeen minutes running through the town, and along the way saw folks getting eaten and carrier away by the human-mutations or dragged off by the animals in their jaws. However, some civilians were still fighting off the monstrous invaders—notable was a group of three atop a roof raining Molotov cocktails on the mutants below.

“Should we help them?” said Rachael.

“No!” Glarion said, leaping over a lunging dog that was subsequently bisected by Penny’s scythe. “Our energy would be better spent dealing with the source!”

Preston fired and knocked the brains of a mutant man out the back of his skull. As the creature fell, Preston leapt over a dead woman and spotted two mutants carrying off two children over the roof of a liquor store. "God damn..."

Glarion spotted the barren road up ahead, and said, "This is the path out of town boys and girls!" He tossed away his empty spray cans and took out his other pistol. He gunned down three infected before him. "Everyone proceed up ahead! I'll deal with the bastards behind us!"

Glarion slowed his pace, allowing Penny, Preston, Bran and the others to take the lead. The sound of the screeching creatures rang in Glarion's ears like a hive of dying bees.

"Bloody annoying," he said. Glarion reached into the upper sides of his coat and produced two canisters. He flipped off the tops with his thumbs, and green smoke began to spew out. He tossed them behind him and said, "go to sleep already."

The mutants, oblivious to the tossed objects, continued their pursuit. Glarion on the other hand executed the final phase of this small plan. With the others safely up ahead, Glarion produced a lighter, lit it and tossed it behind him. The flames igniting the chemicals in the air, spreading like a plague, until eventually reaching the canisters.

They exploded.

There was a flash of light and a rapid expanse of fire that threw the mutants off their feet. There was a muffled thud as those closest to the blast were torn to shreds.

The party had briefly stopped and turned around to see Glarion skipping towards them, leaving the carnage behind him.

"Hot damn!" said Snyder.

Glarion skipped between them, and said, "Fireworks, children! Fireworks!" He started jogging. "Hurry up! I need to find the helflorian. I need to test out more of my experiments."

The surviving townsfolk looked at each other nervously, but Penny ran off and said, "Come on, everyone! We have to save the town!"

Eventually, everyone else followed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

It was nearing midnight, and Glarion's party had went off the road and further into the woods for coverage from the creatures. As they traveled, they fed off energy bars Toyogan had packed in his pouch. Leading the group, Glarion bounced while he walked, and moved his arms almost as if he were dancing. Penny was at his side, trying to copy his movements as well.

Mrs. Pensworth watched as Penny took Glarion's hand, and both of them began skipping through the mess of shadows and darkened trees. Mrs. Pensworth hadn't quite come to grasp with the suddenly loss of her husband, but she had to stay focused in order to ensure her daughter's safety. But the woman wondered how her child could be adapting so easily to the loss of her father. Mrs. Pensworth wondered whether she should be happy her daughter wasn't wallowing in sorry, or concerned her child would not be able to understand the concept of love.

Mrs. Pensworth switched her mind to her weapon briefly, checking to make sure it was loaded and ready once more. It was a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun which held six rounds. Besides the six currently inside the weapon, Mrs. Pensworth had eight rounds left in her pocket.

"You seem distant," said a man's voice.

Mrs. Pensworth snapped her head to the left and saw Toyogan walking next to her. She sighed, and smiled.

"Nah," she said. "I'm just tired from all of this."

"...How's your girl?" Toyogan said.

Despite the situation, Mrs. Pensworth wasn't stupid. She could immediately pick up that the man next to her wasn't just trying to make small talk. She knew he saw a woman and her child out here in the wilderness, and decided this was the best place to assert his position to find a woman.

But Mrs. Pensworth wasn't about to dishonor her husband or neglect her child by hooking up just like; and her sex drive just died for the time being along with her husband. But she wasn't going to tell the man off.

"My daughter's fine," Mrs. Pensworth said. Then she added, "She's keeping up after her father got killed by those monsters."

Toyogan's smile swayed for a bit. "Oh, I see," he said with less vibrancy. "I'm sorry about that."

Behind them Snyder and Rachel were huddled together; Rachel resting her head on the man's shoulder. Bran looked around with the axe playfully swinging in his hand. Behind them Preston kept up the rear. He drank from a canteen he had prepared, and he walked with a leisurely pace as if these kinds of environments weren't foreign to him.

Toyogan looked ahead of them. They were nearing a small path that wove to the right around a sign that said "CAUTION. BEAR TERRITORY", however the group hadn't seen anything bigger than squirrels or birds within the minutes they'd been in the woods. Months to be exact. However, the disappearance of the big game in the area had finally been explained, when they all attacked the town, slaughtering and kidnapping everyone while under the influence of this helflorian being the strange man spoke about.

"...I lost my family as well," said Toyogan. Mrs. Pensworth gave him a shocked look. "My son, he died a few years back."

"I'm...sorry," Mrs. Pensworth said. "What happened to him?"

"Leukemia," said Toyogan. However, he smiled. "You know, I'm kind of happy that he went back then, as horrible as it sounds. I wouldn't have wanted him around to see all of this mess."

Mrs. Pensworth didn't know how to respond to Toyogan's statement. Was it better to die on a bed surrounded by your loved ones, or by the hands of vicious monsters? It was still death, but the former sounded more pleasant and comforting.

Toyogan slapped her on the shoulder, and said, "Don't worry. I don't use sob stories to get women. I let what's in my pants do the talking. I just wanted you to know you have to keep moving on." He chuckled, and Mrs. Pensworth, after a while, giggled as well.

*Wow, way to jump the gun, Betty,* Mrs. Pensworth thought. "Yeah," she said. "We need to kill whatever this thing is and take back our town."

Preston, who had his sharp blue eyes scouring between every tree, spotted something some yards ahead beyond the group, even before Glarion did. He froze, then he made a chirping sound.

The others stopped, as well as Glarion and Penny, and turned around to see Preston motioning for them to get down. They all quickly crouched.

"What is it?" Bran whispered.

Preston raised his rifle and looked along the glass scope. He pointed ahead of his rifle and the party looked in the direction he motioned.

Rachel gasped and said, "Oh my god," and held her husband's hand.

Several yards away over a row of nightshade bushes, the party saw a line of mutants; humans, deer, cougars, and the massive bulk that was a grizzly bear with its fur gone and its wet, leathery flesh covered in writhing vines.

"This is some fucking horror movie shit, man..." said Bran, his eyes wide behind the glass of his mask.

Glarion said as low as he could beneath the ears of the creatures, "Just wait until they pass. Then we follow."

And so, the survivors all waited until the twenty-odd mutant individuals were a good distance away and vanished down a slope. Glarion stood up and said, "Forward, gentlepeople."

Everyone stood and followed Glarion. They all took a slow pace to ensure they didn't get too close to the mutants. But Glarion made sure he had the mutant in the back of line of creatures within his sights at all times.

Eventually, they were led out of the trees and onto a barren road where small plants were shooting up out of the ground. Glarion held back his hand, and everyone behind him paused. Glarion waited until the last mutant walked out of his sights into a vast hollow into the hillside. Glarion walked into the middle of the road and gestured for the others to follow. One by one they surrounded him, with Preston being the last to arrive and join them in front of the cave.

There were signs hung above the entrance, but the words had faded due to rust. The wooden frame that bordered the mouth of the cave had rotted away, with pieces haven fallen off. Vines, those of the strange variety, crept from the inside out like inviting threads of death.

"You mean to tell me no one ever decided to come check this place out?" said Snyder.

"They did," said Preston. "They just never came back."

Bran said to Glarion, "So what, we just gonna walked on inside? They're might be hundreds of those things inside."

Rachel said, "With the way you were acting a while back, we'd think you were a commando."

Bran turned to the woman and said, "I'm not. And I ain't stupid either. I don't pick fights I can't win."

"Some people would say that's being a coward," said Preston. Rachel and Toyogan sniggered.

Glarion took off his briefcase and put it on the ground. He opened it, exposing its contents, and Penny quickly hurried to view what was inside.

Bran put the end of the axe on the ground and rested his hands atop the handle. "Talk all you want," he said, "cause last time a checked, when my coward ass was running away, I wasn't alone."

Soon everyone gathered around Glarion as he rummaged through the strange-looking items in his briefcase. He parted most of the objects until he found what he wanted. He lifted it out of the suitcase with both hands, and everyone cautiously retreated a few steps away.

It resembled a metallic box with ornate marking. There were three sections at the top that folded inwards with large creases in the center and a handle on both sides.

"What is that thing?" Rachel said.

Glarion turned to her with a dry expression and said, "Take a wild guess..."

Toyogan then said, "If it's something to kill those monsters, my guess it's a bomb; to deal with their large numbers at once."

Glarion turned to the man and said, "Bingo! Give this strapping chap here a prize—no, it's not a bomb. Though it packs a similar punch."

"So how are we gonna get in there and plant it?" Snyder said. As he spoke, Glarion had put the box on the ground and closed his briefcase. "With all those things inside, we'll never get close to the big boss you're talking about."

Glarion knelt over the metal box. He pressed a button in the center. There was a sharp hiss and the three sections flipped open, exposing a screen on the top half and a special sensor pad beneath it.

"Whoa!" said Bran.

"Awesome," Penny said.

Mrs. Pensworth pulled her daughter behind her and said, "Stay back, sweetie."

"State your name?" The voice came suddenly from the box.

"Damn!" Bran said. "It talks?"

"Ottoman," said the stranger, "this is your master, Glarion."

The box suddenly hummed, then said, "Master Glarion, welcome. What is your request?"

Glarion reached into his pocket and took out a piece of the strange vine. He squeezed it over the sensor pad until three drops of fluid fell on it. Ottoman activated the scanner and a yellow line of light ran up and down. After four seconds, it beeped and stopped.

"Scan complete," said Ottoman. "Registration of helflorian DNA now complete."

"Wait," said Preston with a bewildered look, "that thing is a bomb and a robot?"

"Neat!" said Penny, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "It's like that episode of Ultragirl when she met Barris the Cyborg!"

"Ottoman," said Glarion, "I need your assistance in killing this lifeform. I need you to track down a creature purely of helflorian DNA and exterminate it."

"Understood, master," Ottoman replied. "However, the requirements must be met."

Toyogan raised an eyebrow and said, "Requirements?"

Ottoman said, "In order to erase this lifeform, a sacrifice of equal value is needed. Is there anyone willing to provide this requirement?"

Snyder suddenly backed away and raised his crossbow in level with Glarion's head. "What the fuck?"

"Snyder, wait!" Rachel said, running between him and Glarion.

Preston already distanced himself near the other side of the road and had his rifle ready.

Everyone gave Glarion a confused or cold stare. Glarion, however, replied with an annoyed expression. His frown was almost to the point of making it seem his mouth would fall off. He took off his hat, exposing his black hair that was tied into two, large cornrows that poised on the top of his head like ears.

"Are you really gonna sacrifice us?" Snyder said. "Answer me you fucker!"

"Just relax, everyone," said Toyogan, standing before Mrs. Pensworth and her child. He turned to Glarion. "Sir, you need to explain yourself, right now."

"I still await your order, master," said Ottoman.

Bran gestured to the box with his axe and said, "You shut the hell up!" He pointed at Glarion, who was staring in Penny's waiting eyes. "You, you weird colored bastard, what the hell's going on?"

Glarion looked away from Penny, and said, "Hold on there, Ottoman. The rest of you lot better calm the bloody hell down. I don't intend on killing anyone." Glarion placed on back his hat, carefully sat himself down on the ground and said. "This machine here is something I found

next to some guy's shack in New York. It's a magical, robotic device specializing in killing specific organism based on DNA. However, it requires specifications to work. In this case, a sacrifice of something else."

"Like us?" said Preston.

"Like anything I choose to kill or destroy," said Glarion. "For instance," Glairon turned to the box, "Ottoman, I choose to sacrifice the living beings infested with helflorian DNA."

"Understood," said Ottoman. The machine made a low, steady hum, then it stopped. "Sacrifice excepted. In order to exterminate the helflorian source, 170 helflorians will need to be sacrificed."

Glarion stood up, took up the briefcase and placed it on his back. "Thank you, Ottoman. We accept your condition."

"Task accepted, " said Ottoman. "Demolition mode activated."

Four legs suddenly sprouted from the edges of the box. At the front side a sphere on a flexible tube extended and two lights above activated. The sphere revealed a camera that had a rim of blue light around it. Ottoman turned around and trotted towards the cave.

The civilians gathered back around Glarion, and they all watched the robot head towards the mine.

"So, now what?" said Snyder.

Glarion took out a canister and his flail. "Now, we go hunting," he said, and walked off.

The group had created torches from the nearby vegetation and their resources. However, Glarion preferred to occupy his hands with his weapons. As did Penny. Ottoman kept a steady, purposeful pace ahead of the group.

With the lighting from the group sufficient, they could see the ins of the mine. They were expecting cold, blackened walls of earth and sooth, however the helflorian creature, it seemed, had made well sure those who dared to enter the abandoned hollow knew it was its lair.

The strange vines that had been plaguing the town were more abundant here, all clustered together like alien veins and capillaries, slowly pulsating and throbbing. There were large leaves, some as thick as a small tree. The smaller vines wriggled towards the group, but were repelled by their torches. The plants, their sensitive hairs sensing the presence of the humans and the robot,

had released their sleep-inducing spores into the air, however Glarion had already supplied the group with the antidote to nullify the effects of the pink mist.

"Man," said Bran as he chopped two of the vines hanging from the ceiling, "this place looks like something out of some old guy's fairytale."

"More like The Sinister Sluge's lair," said Penny as she observed the remnants of one of the support beams infested with vines and strange bugs.

"Who?" said Bran.

"A character out of a cartoon called Ultragirl," said Preston. "My little cousin outta town loves to watch it."

Bran groaned behind his mask and said, "Damn kids."

The group leapt over a fallen wooden post with a piece of chain hanging off. Ottoman lead them around a new path, where they saw a wooden cart ripped off the track and thrown into a corner behind one of the beams. There were two paths down the end of the vine-infested tunnel they took, however, it was Toyogan who first spotted something strange on the wall near him.

"Hey," he said as he neared it. Toyogan saw what appeared to be a smooth, pink sack the size of a football hanging from one of the vines. Toyogan held his torch to it and saw that it was filled with fluid, and churning. "Check this out."

As Preston and Bran went to investigate, Mrs. Pensworth, Penny, Snyder and Rachel stood next to Glarion. Glarion himself was watching Ottoman as he flashed a light from the sphere that was his head on one of the sacks that had now revealed to be one of several dozen present.

Ottoman ended his scan, and turned to Glarion and said, "It contains animal tissue."

And that was when the sack before Toyogan suddenly pushed the skeletal remains of a small cat it had hidden in its depths against the transparent material.

Bran and Preston recoiled and yelped. "Oh shit!" Bran said. His voice echoed within the silence of the cavern.

The others in the group went to investigate the strange plant-form.

Rachel, furrowing her forehead, said, "It looks like—"

"They're digesting the animals," said Glarion flatly.

Rachel covered her mouth and pulled away, her stomach feeling upset. Mrs. Pensworth suddenly made a shocked expression, and said, "Wait. Then, when they were kidnapping the people."

"Was for damn supper," said Snyder.

Rachel leaned against the wall across from the others. "I change my mind, honey!" she said. "I wanna go back?"

Snyder walked over to Rachel and held her by her shoulders, feeling the woman shake in his arms. He embraced her and said, softly, "Hey, don't worry. I'll keep you safe."

Bran scowled at the woman and said, "If you haven't realized by now, missy, there isn't anything to go back to. Hey man, you need to keep that woman under wraps more."

Snyder spun around with a dreadful scowl and said, "Hey, you shut the hell up." He marched towards Bran, who raised his axe. "I've had enough of your damn mouth—"

Preston quickly stepped in between the two men, keeping them apart with his arms.

And the vines behind Rachel suddenly wrapped themselves around her, and the woman screamed. Rachel struggled to break free, angling the torch to burn what was behind her.

"Rachel!" Snyder reached for his wife. He grabbed her and tried pulling her from the vines. Bran chopped the vines sticking out of the wall behind her. Then a hand reached between the plants and grabbed Bran.

And then they appeared. Squeezing out of the vines in the wall as if they were sleeping there, were the horrid forms of the mutants. Most were once human. However, a few mutated animals were thrown in the mix as well.

Glarion turned his attention to the other end of the path, and more mutants came running and snarling to greet them. Glarion grinned maniacally, and spun the flail and said, "Ottoman, start counting!"

"On stand-bye, master," said the machine.

Mrs. Pensworth cocked the shotgun with one hand and said, "Penny! Do whatever it takes to stay alive!" She opened fire into the first mutant to lurch out of the wall, throwing it back with a vast hole beneath its neck.

Penny swung her weapon into the hide of a mutant woman, chopping her through the waist. "Got it!" As the woman staggered, Penny skewered her through the face with the tip of the scythe and yanked it out.

Bran and Snyder managed to free Rachel. Then Preston unsheathed a knife and said over the screeching creatures, "If you can, don't use guns!" Preston ducked beneath the swiping claws of a mutant, slapped the monster with the torch and stabbed it in the neck. "This place is narrow! You might shoot someone!"

Snyder and Rachel stood back to back, took out their machetes and began hacking into the creatures before them.

Next to the Pensworth women was Toyogan, expertly parrying the attacks of the creatures with his torch, then countering with lethal strikes from his icepicks that opened up the arteries of his foes. Already Toyogan downed four mutants.

Toyogan heard screams next to him and spun around to see Penny struggling with a puma on top of her. Penny forcefully kept the creature at bay by pushing the body of her scythe into its dripping jaws. Toyogan hooked his icepick in the animal's neck and hoisted it off Penny with outstanding dexterity. He tossed the animal aside, and Preston stood over it and slashed open its neck.

Bran chopped a mutant dog in the head and kicked it away. A mutant dog nipped Bran on his calf and he yelped and hopped away. Bran spun around and repeatedly chopped the infected canine. "Die fucker!" Bran said.

Penny quickly recovered and got to her feet. She swung at three deer that tried to get their slimy tendrils onto her, but her scythe kept them back. Then there were two explosions, and two deer were spun onto their sides. Toyogan came and clubbed the last deer in the head. Mrs. Pensworth reloaded her smoking shotgun.

But while everyone else struggled with the creatures, Glarion seemed to be having himself a grandiose of a time.

Glarion used the chemicals in the spray to irritate the skin of the creatures before him, then chopped and slashed into the mass of screaming, thrashing monsters. As Glarion did, gore flew upon his clothes, but he didn't seem to mind. He grinned all the while dropping his foes. Glarion was making a path forward, and already he had left over two dozen corpses behind him. The air stunk of a brand of stink only dead flesh could produce.

"Ottoman!" Glarion said, slashing open the chest of a mutant and kicking the creature back into a bunch of coyotes, who Glarion then sprayed at, "how much are we now?"

"The kill count is currently at thirty-three—" Glarion finished flailing to death a mutated woman "—thirty-four, master," said the robot as it crawled over a fallen mutant.

Glarion spun around with a horrified look. "Huh?" He peered past Ottoman and looked at the civilians; Bran of which just finished chopping up a coyote. All of them were breathing heavily; except Penny and Bran who were looking around for something else to kill. "Oi! You lazy bastards! We're only up to thirty-four! What the hell have you all bene doing?"

"What the hell?" said Snyder. "Is this a game to you?"

Glarion gestured behind him at the four-dozen or more mutants heading their way. "Does that look like a game to you, chubby?"

Snyder scowled and motioned towards Glarion, but Rachel and Bran stopped.

Glarion put up his flail and said, "Torch." Toyogan tossed Glarion his torch, and he caught it. "We have to get to the source before we get overrun by these things." Glarion tossed away his empty canister and reached into his coat for a new one. "At the same time, we need to reach the one hundred seventy for the sacrifice. Everyone, forward!"

Glarion lifted the canister to the torch and pressed the top, a strong-smelling fluid burst forth onto the fire, transforming it into a flamethrower that consumed the mutants. Squeals of agony filled the air as Glarion torched the creatures to death, walking briskly and kicking those staggering around out of his way. As he did, Ottoman and the others followed close by, picking off the stragglers.

Eventually the survivors overwhelmed the creatures, causing them to retreat the other way they came. Glarion said, "Ottoman, score!"

"Forty-seven, master," replied the robot.

"I'm almost out of rounds!" said Mrs. Pensworth, loading the last four bullets into her weapon.

Preston loaded a fresh magazine in his rifle. His weapon had twenty rounds, and he also had a spare clip in the pouch on his back. His previous military training thought him to always be prepared. "I think I got forty rounds overall!" he said.

"Lead the way, Ottoman," said Glarion.

Ottoman picked up his pace and began sprinting like a dog. He led the group into the next corridor, where the vines were a little less. There were several large hollows in the sides of the walls, and also a peculiar giant, bright green vine in the ceiling.

And then Preston spotted it as he ran. "Wait!" He retreated a few steps and stood before the hollow in the wall. "Look!"

Almost everyone went to look at what Preston was talking about. However, Glarion and Toyogan continued down the track to where they saw the carts still standing. As they inspected it with Ottoman standing watch up ahead, Preston took out a lighter, and the others with the torches got the idea and held them before Preston to light his way.

"Is that what I think it is?" said Bran.

Snyder smiled and said, "Oh yeah."

Before the group were three barrels of explosives; more specifically, gunpowder.

"I think they used this to blast holes into the cave that shovels and pickaxes couldn't break," said Mrs. Pensworth.

Preston slung his rifle and went over to the crates. As he inspected them, Rachel said, "Wait, should we touch those? Aren't they unstable?"

Preston hefted one of the barrels on his shoulder and said, "Not unless you bring fire near it. Come on guys, help me with these."

Rachel, Mrs. Pensworth and Penny took the torches, allowing the men to carry the barrels out of the space onto the path. As they did, Toyogan and Glarion tested the carts by levers on their sides. The man turned the levers, and the carts moved back and forth. Toyogan and Glarion looked at each other. Both men smiled.

Glarion looked at the others coming with the barrels, and said, "Oh, you folks found something as well?"

"Yeah!" said Penny as she skipped with the torch towards him. "We can use these on the monster just in case your robot doesn't work?"

Glarion patted Penny on the head and said, "Goodwork."

Then a sudden electrical harp came from Ottoman. Glarion quickly approached the robot and said, "What is it, Otto?"

The robot had its head stretched out before it, and its body shook as if something was filling. "I sense a vast increase in their numbers, master."

The others suddenly became aware of Ottoman's words and paid close attention.

"How many?" Glarion said

Ottoman said, "...Forty-seven...seventy-three...one hundred fourteen...one hundred fifty...two hundred..."

Rachel felt something vile in her stomach, and she flinched and said, "Good god..."

"It seems the entire hive is coming for us," said Toyogan, expectantly looking at the vines wriggling on the wet walls.

"Three hundred forty," said Ottoman. And that was when the group began to feel the walls around them trembling.

Bran finally said, "Okay! We're officially fucked!"

The creatures tore through the walls and the ceiling. This time their appearances was more monstrous than before. Whether human, deer, dog, cat, puma or bear, all had leathery grey skin covered in twitching leaves. Their feeding tendrils busted through their faces, necks and guts, and their appendages ended in huge claws.

Glarion snatched up Ottoman and ran towards the cart. He leaped in, as did Penny. "Quick," he said, "Ottoman get this thing moving!"

Ottoman leaped onto the edge of the cart and latched a leg onto the lever. Like a propeller Ottoman spun his foreleg, and the carts bucked and steadily moved forward. Snyder helped Rachel into the rear cart next to the crates they had piled inside. Mrs. Pensworth leaped into the cart with Glarion and her daughter; and opened fire at a mutant human running towards them, tearing its head off.

The carts moved at a surprising pace thanks to Ottoman's work, and the men on the outside had to quicken their legs just to keep up, while at the same time picking off the creatures targeting them. Preston picked off the creatures with well-placed shots. Toyogan, with icepicks in both hands, used his brute strength to carve canyons into the flesh of the mutants as he ran, causing sufficient blood loss to slow them down. Snyder and Bran however struggled with their attackers, spending most of their time pushing them off as opposed to actually killing them.

While Rachel picked off the creatures with her crossbow, Mrs. Pensworth joined her daughter by taking out her machete and chopping the hands and vines of the creatures that got too close to the carts.

But the numbers of the creatures grew. And up ahead, Glarion saw two tunnels with mutants running towards them from both.

"Which way, Ottoman?" Glarion said.

"The path to the right is where the signal is strongest, master," he said.

Glarion turned around and said, "Everyone keep to the right!" He then reached into his briefcase and took out his flail. Glarion held it before him and extended the blades. He pressed a button on the handle, and the top half with the blades suddenly spun with such intensity the wind threatened to blow off Glarion's hat. "Ottoman, pick up the pace! Come on you wretches!"

Ottoman's limb went faster, and the cart now seemed to be on par with any sports vehicle. The four men running after it frantically fanned it down and screamed for it to stop. The cart rammed into the mutants, lurching everyone forward and causing the women to momentarily lose their balance. The vehicle knocked the smaller creatures out of the way like pesky flies, staining the front with blood. The stubborn ones who clung onto the cart had their hands and reaching vines sawed off by Glarion's rotating flail. With this method the cart was making progress, until a mutant bear suddenly rose onto its hindlegs and slammed his forepaws onto the cart.

The vehicle abruptly slowed down, pushing back the bear. But the creature dug its claws into the ground at the side of the tracks and held on. It suddenly roared, spilling feeding tendrils from its mouth that covered Glarion, Penny and Mrs. Pensworth. The women screamed, swatting the tendrils off them. Glarion roared and shoved his weapon into the bear's gut, spewing its chewed entrails all over the place. Now the cart slowed, and the men could catch up to it.

A mutant dog bit Snyder on his thigh, and the man hollered and recoiled, countering with a brutal chop to the dog's head. He continued with the others, but now his weight and injury kept him at the rear of the group.

Taking note of his comrade's situation, Preston said to Bran next to him, "Hey, hop in there and get me a barrel!"

"What?" Bran said.

"Just do it!" Preston barked.

Bran held onto the edge of the moving vehicle and hopped inside. Rachel scooted over as Bran grabbed a barrel, clenched his teeth and hefted it upon the edge of the cart and tossed it over. Preston leaped over the barrel as it bounced once and rolled behind him. A mutant bear stepped on it and slipped. The bear in turn tripped other mutants.

Preston spun around and crouched. He took aim between the legs of the creatures, glimpsed the barrel within his scope, and fired.

The bullet hit its mark—there was a small flash of the bullet hole for a split second before the barrel exploded. Dust and flames quickly filled the path, kicking up a shroud of minced vines, stones and torn bodies. The shockwave raced over the group and threw them off their feet. The horde at the front quickly retreated upon seeing the flames.

Once the dust settled, everyone slowly got to their feet. Penny held onto the cart for leverage and pulled herself up. She heard a loud ringing in her ears then felt a grip on her hand. Penny looked up and saw her mother's face, and suddenly felt a sense of relief.

Preston, Bran, Snyder and Toyogan got to their feet. Bran groaned, rubbed his throbbing back and said, "What the hell, Preston! You couldn't give us a head's up?"

Snyder smacked Bran across the face, removing his mask and revealing his dark skin, small beard, mustache and trimmed afro. Bran held his cheek and glowered at Snyder. "What?"

"...Shut up!" Snyder said. He turned around, and spotted his wife slouched over the barrels. "Rachel?" He hurried over to her. "Rachel!"

Toyogan went to the cart at the front. There he saw Mrs. Pensworth helping her daughter out of the vehicle. Toyogan noticed the little girl holding onto the scythe even still, and admired her fighting spirit,

"Are you fine?" Toyogan said.

"...Just a few cuts and bruises," said Mrs. Pensworth.

Penny rubbed a small swelling on her forehead—then she suddenly remembered. Penny looked around until she spotted Glarion; who was slouched over the front of the cart. "Glarion!" she said.

When Penny went over and shoved him, Glarion suddenly reared up with the flail and screamed. Penny yelled and retreated, and Toyogan and the girl's mother ran to her side. Glarion's eyes suddenly lost their fury. "Huh? What?" he said.

"Are you crazy?" Mrs. Pensworth said, standing between him and Penny.

Glarion lowered his weapon and rubbed the back of his neck. "Only when I drink too much eggnog," he said, and hopped out of the cart.

Ottoman had detached himself from the cart and was already walking around. The robots walked before Glarion's feet and said, "Master, the kill count is at one hundred twelve."

"Hah," said Glarion, "only fifty-eight more to go!"

Then Snyder shrieked.

Everyone turned with weapons ready in his direction. The big man threw his still wife out of his hands. There, on Rachel's back, were two mutant babies. Their feeding tendrils firmly planted in her neck and their stomach's swelling.

As everyone rushed to Rachel's aid, Snyder reached for the mutants. They squeaked and thrashed in his grasp. Snyder yelled and pulled them off her, but their feeding tendrils seemed to have fused with Rachel's flesh. Toyogan cut the tendrils of both creatures. Snyder tossed them aside and cradled his wife in his arms. "Baby wake up! Please!"

Bran, his mask fitted back on his face, murmured a curse word as he buried the axe in the back of a mutant, killing it instantly. Preston stomped the other one to a bloody pulp.

Glarion ignored the echoes of vile screams behind him. He looked in the distance and saw the creatures returning once more to finish what they started.

"Shit," he said. He turned to the robot. "Ottoman, which way?"

Ottoman turned around and pointed with his light at the wall of vines. "One hundred and ninety meters through there," he said.

Glarion saw the vines, and frowned. He wondered upon a way to break through them and suddenly remembered. He turned to the others; and Snyder, who still tried to revive his wife.

Mrs. Pensworth checked Rachel's pulse. The woman's small frame had withered, especially at the neck. Mrs. Pensworth took her fingers off her neck, and gave Snyder a disappointed look. She shook her head.

Snyder suddenly uttered a loud gasp. He rocked back and forth with his wife in his arms. Penny saw the dead woman, but somehow didn't feel anything. However, the other men had solemn looks on their faces. Bran rest his hand on Snyder's shoulder.

"Hey," said Glarion, "they're coming back. We need to move."

Preston knelt next to Snyder and said, "...We need to go, brother."

Toyogan forcefully pulled his eyes away and said to Glarion. "Where next?"

Glarion pointed to the wall and said, "Right through there. Just a few feet beyond that wall is a path. We might need to use the rest of those barrels."

Toyogan nodded at Glarion and went to the cart. Preston got up, walked beyond the others and stood before the group. He lifted his rifle and began taking shots at the approaching mutants.

Mrs. Pensworth turned to Glarion and said, "But wait. With two barrels—won't the blast be a bit too much?"

Toyogan finished packing the barrels against the wall. He turned to Glarion and said, "We'll need to move far away, at the same time blow this thing up."

Preston turned around and said, "This tunnel has a bend in it. I can't shoot around that."

Then Snyder gently laid his wife down, got up and wiped his eyes. Snyder walked towards the barrels, garnering confused stares from everyone. He straightened himself before Toyogan, took a deep breath, and said, "I'll set it off."

"What?" Mrs. Pensworth said. "No! No, you can't!" She marched towards Snyder and said, "Your—your wife just died! You can't just up and kill yourself too?" She turned to Glarion. "You! Don't you have something else to use?"

Preston just finished gunning down a mutant deer and said, "You guys better hurry! They're just fifty meters away!"

Glarion said, "Ottoman doesn't work like that. His specifications have to be met in order to do anything."

"Wait!" Penny said.

Everyone turned her.

Penny had her eyes on the vines running along the ground. "What about the vines? We can use it like a string. Like they do with dynamite! Can't we?"

The adults around her, even Snyder, suddenly gave her a wide-eyed stare. They looked at each other excitedly, and they all focused on Glarion.

Penny watch Glarion give her a bright grin. "My," he said. "Your father would have been proud of you."

Preston lit a Molotov cocktail in his hands and threw it at the mutants. The sudden burst of flames saw them retreating with frustrated shrieks. "Guys...?"

Toyogan had found a vine in the ground. He ripped it up, and discovered that its body was buried in the direction leading back from where they came. "Found one."

Glarion reached into his coat and took out a canister of flammable solution. "Move your asses!" Glarion said.

Preston turned from the creatures and ran. Mrs. Pensworth took her daughter by the hand and dragged her along with them. Bran was already ahead of the group. Snyder kissed his wife on the lips before folding her hands on her chest and following the others.

Toyogan stuck the tip of the vine in the top of the barrel, then ripped out more of the vine out of the ground as he ran down the tunnel. Glarion sprayed the solution on the vine from the entrance hole and followed Toyogan. The creatures had kicked up dirt and diminished the flames Preston created. A mutant woman at the front was the first to take the charge.

Toyogan and Glarion got a good fifty meters before Toyogan ripped out all of the vine. He held it up and said, "This is all of it!"

Glarion took it from him, sprayed it, and tossed it on the ground. Glarion took out a lighter and lit the vine. Like a fuse, the fire raced along the plant. "Okay, everyone! Time to haul some more ass!" Glarion and everyone else put their legs to work once more.

The horde of murderous mutants ran towards them, unknowingly passing the fire consuming the length of the vine. Some had stopped to feed on what remained of Rachel. However, her corpse was positioned next to the barrels, and her husband had folded her right hand to show her middle finger. And then, the proverbial "fuck you" came, when the fire found the barrel.

The first barrel went off spectacularly, hitting the second one that brightened the tunnel even more. The glorious flames howled as they consumed the screaming mutants.

Glarion snatched Ottoman off the ground and held the robot under his arm as he and Toyogan raced back to the entrance of the cave. Glarion snuck a glance behind him and saw the debris coming towards him.

Glarion threw his head back and laughed. "I love it, baby!"

The debris lifted him and Toyogan off the ground. Both men screamed and hugged each other, riding the wave until its power depleted and they were tossed across the ground.

After a few minutes, both men opened their eyes to see everyone standing over them. Glarion lifted his head to look at the strange weight on his chest, and found Ottoman looking at him.

Glarion let out a long growl, and said, "Otto...?"

"Kill-count; two hundred seventy-six," the robot said. "Kill count reached, and exceeded, master."

Glarion dropped his head and sighed. "Okay, Ottoman. Go do your thing."

"Understood, sir," said the robot with a deeper voice now. "Commencing demolition." Ottoman leaped off Glarion's chest and ran into the darkness of the tunnel. Glarion got up and help Toyogan to his feet.

"So that's it?" said Bran, looking at everyone expectantly. "We just wait on that little robot-shit to kill the monster?"

Glarion looked around and found his hat. He dusted it and placed it back on his head. "Yep," he said. Glarion began walking. "Now, let's hurry up before we get caught in the crossfire."

Glarion led them all out of the mines and back onto the street. Glarion took off his briefcase and crouched in the middle of the road. He opened it up and took out a pack of marshmallow, milk, sugar and a bottle of water. He turned to the others staring at him, and said, "Well? Don't you damn stand there, get us a fire!"

Reluctantly, the group made a bonfire in the middle of the street within ten minutes. They all gathered around the fire with sticks of swollen marshmallows and plastic cups of warm milk. Snyder had already put on back a pot of water over the fire. The man wasn't in ruins as he was when his wife just died. However, he didn't speak much.

Penny sat between her mother and Glarion, eating the sweets with gusto. Toyogan picked his words carefully while conversing with Mrs. Pensworth. Most of their talk was about how they would go about rebuilding their homes. Bran was dancing to music from his cellphone, at the same time swinging his axe around, all the while he got stares from Penny. Preston sat on a log at the roadside, drinking from a small canteen while watching the dancing fireflies and listening to the crickets.

And then there was a sudden quake. Everyone paused. There was one more quake, and everyone looked at Glarion expectantly.

Glarion took a long sip of his milk and said, "Looks like the helflorian was bigger than I thought."

The thunderous sounds coming from the mine grew louder. Everyone got up and looked towards the mine's entrance. The vines around the mouth of it thrashed wildly. The sight of flying dust and rubble became clearer within the hollow, and with it, came a huge bellowing figure.

Everyone retreated further down the road. But Glarion remained seated, drinking and reading some notes from his cellphone.

A colossal, green behemoth covered in thousands of vines tore through the mine. It lifted its massive head like a whale breaking the water's surface and tore apart the ground above the cave's entrance. Its body resembled that of a squat lizard, however the head was large and round, with six pink eyes. Its mouth was wide enough to swallow an African elephant in one gulp, and spilling from between its massive maw were scores of feeding tendrils.

It roared once more, vibrating the forest and making the civilians holler and move further away.

"Hey, you jackass!" Mrs. Pensworth said to the still seated Glarion. "Get away from there!"

Glarion frowned at the woman. He turned to the helflorian towering over two stories above him. The monster took notice of Glarion, and it crouched on its muscular, clawed legs. It made a guttural hiss, its breath kicking up a fine sheet of dirt. The helflorian's massive feet lurch forward, shaking the earth with each step.

However, Glarion's expression remained placid.

"Glarion!" Penny said.

The helflorian's advance came to an abrupt halt. It tried to move forward, digging up the street with its claws, but it still remained rooted. Glarion noticed beneath the creature's stomach were many sacks of all sizes, filled with animals and humans alike, however some were busted open. Glarion also saw the helflorian had two bloody sockets where some of its eyes should have been. And there were burn marks on its body and a few missing vines on its back.

The helflorian made a last-ditched lunge, but it was a lunge cut short, as it was thrown into the trees along the roadside, snapping a few in half.

"Who?" Preston said.

"What the fuck?" said Bran.

With the creature out of everyone's sight, they could now see a massive, metallic humanoid shape with faintly glowing creases of blue light. Its anatomy had a somewhat squat design, but the ornately crafted silver armor plates on its body; especially the upper shoulders, gave it a fearsome, commanding presence. Its head was circular, with two blue lights above a jointed mouth.

"Cool!" said Penny as she gazed upon the brilliance that was the massive robot.

Glarion stood up and said, "Oi! Ottoman!"

The robot turned to Glarion. "Yes, master..." Ottoman's voice was more electrical now, but with the quality of a deep-voiced speaker.

Glarion vigorously shooed Ottoman with his hand and said, "Get that over with, already! That little prick is giving you so much trouble? You killed a dragon for crying out loud!"

Ottoman nodded. "As you wish, master."

The helflorian kicked its legs free from Ottoman's grasp. It crouched and pounced like a gigantic feline.

Ottoman caught the monster in a bearhug, but the helflorian clawed and bit Ottoman, scoring more hideous scars on his body. Ottoman squeezed the creature hard, and the loud snap of its spine made everyone wince and flinch. Ottoman tossed the helflorian over his head and the creature landed on its back, causing a small deforestation of the woods.

The helflorian onto its belly and crawled towards Ottoman with its front legs, dragging its dead half with it. It opened its mouth and roared, spewing forth a huge mass of tendrils.

And Ottoman crossed his arms over his chest and hunched over, then lifted his torso, opened his arms and stuck out his glowing chest. A massive, dazzling beam of blue light zapped the helflorian right in its face. The monster didn't even have time to scream before its body blew apart, showering the entire area in chunks of burning alien flesh.

The civilians shielded their eyes from the light, then noted a sudden shadow over them. They looked up and beheld the sight of the helflorian's head descending from the sky.

"Scatter!" Preston said.

Everyone ran and dove out of the way of the helflorian's scorched skull that crashed into the ground. Once the rain of alien body parts was over, they all approached the head of the alien.

Penny and Preston ran towards Glarion. The three of them stared at the massive crater of charred wood and bones where the creature once was.

Ottoman approached them with heavy thuds. He stood just a few feet away from the civilians who gathered together. Ottoman's body was suddenly shrouded in blue light, and his form shrunk back to the small size he originally was. Ottoman's body steamed with the after effects of the energy.

Glarion knelt before him and said, "Thank you for your service, Ottoman."

"It was my pleasure, master," said Ottoman.

Ottoman folded back into a box, and Glarion took him up and carefully placed him back into the briefcase. Glarion hefted the briefcase onto his back and sat next to the campfire. He took a sip from his cup of milk, a long one, closed his eyes, and sighed.

"Well then," said Glarion, turning to the civilians, "I guess you folks deserve some truth after all of this mess. Well, have a seat now." The civilians seated themselves back around the campfire. Glarion gestured to everyone, and they all took up back their cups and sticks of marshmallows.

"Mr. Toyogan was right," said Glarion, "I'm a government agent. I work for a specific department, however. We call ourselves the Red Scarab. We specialize in destroying any supernatural beings that threaten human existence, while collecting any material of such nature that can benefit the growth of our species."

"So, you've killed stuff like his before?" said Preston.

"Tons," said Glarion.

"And how comes the world doesn't know about monsters, or about your organization?" said Snyder.

"Well, technically the world does know about these monsters," said Glarion. "That's how mythology and legends are formed; your reports on sightings of strange creatures, ghosts and your alien abduction stories."

"That sounds cool," said Penny.

"Except when they try to kill and eat you," said Snyder.

"Not all of them," said Glarion, he sipped from his cup. "The sentient ones; the ones who're smart like us, know to avoid humans and keep to themselves."

Toyogan then said, "My grandfather told me stories about how the forest people, the ones we call sasquatch, once lived alongside mankind in centuries past. But humans turned on them, forcing them into hiding."

Snyder snorted. "Well if you're to make me feel sorry for them, it isn't working. Those fuckers took my wife. If I ever see anything that isn't human, I'm killing it."

No one really tried to argue with Snyder's point. However, one protest came in the form of Mozgul wiggling in Penny's shirt. She placed her hand over him, and said, "Umm..." The adults turned to the young girl "...I need to go urinate."

As she got up, her mother said, "Make sure you don't go far, sweetie."

"Okay, mom," said Penny as she hurried into the bushes. She looked behind her and saw the adults conversing once more. She stooped, reached into her clothes and took out the worm in her hand.

Mozgul gasped and said, "My, I thought that I was going to grow a beard in there!"

"Quiet," said Penny. "What are you still doing here?"

Mozgul glowered at Penny. He spat into grass and said, "I told you; I'm not going anywhere until you make your sacrifice and I grant your wish."

"I'm not sacrificing anyone," said Penny. "I won't kill my mother, even if I'm dying."

Mozgul smiled mischievously at Penny. "Oh, really?" he said. Mozgul gestured with his prominent chin over Penny's shoulder. "That strange man you seem to like so much, have you realized that his machine required a sacrifice to work as well?"

Penny was about protest when the realization hit her, freezing her mouth wide opened. She closed her mouth and stared at Mozgul contemplatively. She gave Glarion a quick glance. The man was animated as he spoke to the others. The man who had just saved them all—had he really sacrificed a loved one?

Penny gave Mozgul her attention again, and said, "Bullshit. You don't know that?"

Mozgul said, "Really? Do you know many people with a magical robot that grants wishes in exchange for the sacrifice of living beings? Oh! that's right." Mozgul leaned closer to Penny, and said in a dry voice, "That's a being exactly like *me*."

Penny covered her mouth, feeling something heavy and hot drop in her stomach.

Mozgul relaxed his voice and said, "Though, that machine's method of giving his master power could be different than mine."

"Master?" said Penny.

"Penny? Are you okay?" Mrs. Pensworth said.

Penny quickly lifted her head and said, "Ugh, just finishing up, mom!"

"Is it a number two?" Bran said, and was immediately met with a tap on the head from Preston. "What?"

Penny lowered her head and said to Mozgul, "What do you mean by...*master*?"

"Hmmm, that's right," Mozgul said, grinning. "You are my master. Once you give the bodies I want, I will give you as much power as you want. Tell you what, Penny, I'll make it

easier. Instead of you sacrificing your mother and bestowing upon you a majority of my power, I'll do something much simpler. If you can give me five hundred bodies, I'll grant you my power."

Penny's mind went from concern for her mother's safety to genuine curiosity. "How would we do that?" Penny said.

Mozgul did a backflip and grinned. "That's my girl," he said. Mozgul settled himself in her palm. "Just get me the strongest bodies you can find. I would prefer them whole, as I already mentioned. You see, Penny, the greater the sacrifice, the more power you can get. Since you haven't chosen your mother, we will have to work with those who aren't your kin."

Penny was silent, for a while, then she nodded with a straight face. "Okay then."

Mozgul leaned his head to the side. "Huh, just like that now?"

"I want to know more," said Penny.

And it was then Mozgul noticed something in Penny's unwavering voice and eyes. It was almost as if it were desperation, but more instinctive and animal like. For the first time, Mozgul was uncertain about the girl's interest in the supernatural.

Mozgul's smile vanished, and he eyed Penny suspiciously. "We'll discuss it later, when we have settled out of the madness that just took place." And Mozgul scurried into her sleeve and out of sight.

Penny got up, thinking about the possibilities of such power. *I can be like a superhero, Penny thought. Maybe I could even bring dad back!*

When Penny walked out of the bushes and back into the street, she was just in time to hear Glarion say, "And that is why I want to recruit you all!"

Penny beamed. "Really?"

Glarion turned to her and said, "Yes, really! I could use a few lackeys just in case old Otto decides he needs more unfortunate souls to sacrifice. You can all make the work easier. I can use Mr. Toyogan's brute strength and Mr. Preston's marksmanship. I'm sure we can nurture Mr. Snyder's hate for aliens into a lethal force when it comes to extermination mission. And Bran, we...well..." Glarion rubbed his chin. "I guess your tenacity is commendable?"

Bran said, "Screw you, freak!"

Glarion turned to Mrs. Pensworth and said, "And you are your daughter can contribute girl power!"

Mrs. Pensworth folded her arms and said, "One; I'm a grown ass woman with responsibilities to my daughter. Two; that's downright sexist. I used to be a mechanic!"

Glarion laughed. "It was a joke, dear. But now that you mentioned the background of your skillset, you'll definitely be of use to us."

Penny hurried over to Glarion, bouncing on her feet. "What can I do?"

Glarion took out a disinfectant canister and sprayed it on her hands. He hugged her and held her close. Penny felt the unusual hardness of his muscles, surprised there was a chiseled frame beneath his nerdy attire and his weirdness. "You can be my protégé, with your mother's permission of course."

"Pedophile," said Bran, earning him two back-handed slaps from Preston and Snyder. He yelled and held his reddening cheeks. "Guys come on! Show some restraint here!"

Toyogan suddenly heard a peculiar sound and stood up. He followed the direction of the noise, and turned to the sky in the east.

"What is it?" said Preston.

Soon the sound became clearer, and everyone stood and copied Toyogan's position. Then the image which were like dots became clearer.

"Helicopters?" Bran said.

Glarion clapped his hands. "Hahah! The clean-up crew's here!"

Minutes later the three helicopters hovered over the sections of the woods where the death of the helflorian had occurred. One lowered to street, just above ground level. As the civilians grouped together, several armed men in black suits exited the vehicle and created a perimeter around the area.

Glarion stood before the helicopter, his coat fluttering like the wings of some dark bird. He gestured to the survivors and smiled. "So, you sorry lot, are you ready to go on some fantastic fucking adventures?"

Joel S. Williams aka Mr. Ogunberry

THE END

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