Category: Adult, Age 35 about 3,200 words

Smart Meat

by Gwen F

Run! Have to keep moving. Don't stop. Don't look back. Run. RUN!

I wasn't supposed to figure out what this place is or what's been happening to the others or how there's only one way to leave here. I played docile, I watched, and I learned. Now is my chance and it's the only chance I'll have to live.

Two left turns. Down the stairs. Right turn. Lift card hidden in the vent. Hope it works.

The hallways are dark but I'm sure that they won't be for long. The attendee who opened my pen was dazed when I struck him but he'll make it to the security alarm soon. After that, this becomes a bigger risk. I'll have to outrun men in hallways I'm unfamiliar with while finishing a plan that might not have ever had a chance of success.

Lungs burning. Legs aching. Can't stop. No choice. RUN!

Alarms start blaring from all sides as red lights flash. A mechanical voice announces that "Fr-Sp400A" has broken containment and calls for all security to assist in intercepting the 'product'. I lose vital moments by running all the way to the lift door before realizing I hadn't stopped to grab the card from the vents on the way.

Going through the halls from the other direction makes it harder but I manage to find the correct vent just as I begin to hear the sounds of heavy footfalls from further down the hall. In my rush to grab the card I dislodge the entire vent cover and fling it off my hand and down the hall toward the noise.

Run. Get to the lift before they catch me.

In the past I've gone into the lift when being taken for some procedure or test, so I have a vague idea of how it functions but I've never been on it alone. Sliding to a stop in front of the doors now, I frantically press the access card against the small black reader on the wall and I'm shortly rewarded with a small green light accompanied by a beeping sound. I rush in before the doors finish parting and my heart stalls as I see the first of the security officers enter the hall opposite me.

My eyes won't focus on the array of buttons that decorate the panel in front of me. I try to think which ones took me up before, but there's no time. Frantically, I swipe at the panel and hope that one of the several new lights mean that I'm headed toward my freedom. The doors close before any of the armed figures are able to make it to me and I nearly collapse to the floor when the lift starts moving up.

Legs trembling. Breathe. Have to be ready to run again soon. Breathe. Survive.

The mirrored walls in the lift are usually the only time that I can see myself. I find the reflection unsettling on normal occasions and today is no different. My hair is kept short and hangs in tufts over my head, and my skin is so much paler than that of any of the attendees who I've shared this space with in the past. If I manage to leave this place maybe I can learn how to be so well put together as those others. If I'm not able to, I expect that my appearance would always mark me as different and make it easy for them to find me and bring me back.

"Unscheduled lift activation detected. Disabling primary power. Security to the eleventh floor." The mechanical voice has returned. The lift suddenly stops and this time I do fall to the floor as my vision goes dark.

No! Not like this! Not alone in the dark!

Desperately I fumble in the dark for the panel, but none of the switches respond and no light brings me relief. The sound of my heartbeat seems to fill the blackness that swallows me as I thrash more desperately at the panel and then the doors. Eventually my fingers find the small crease in the center of the door and I pry at the panels hoping for any sign of movement, of freedom.

With a creak the doors part to reveal a new hallway only slightly less dim than the lift I was previously trapped in. I've never been to this hallway and I don't know if that is a good or bad thing but I know that to stay still is to die. Ignoring the protestations of my body I break into as fast a sprint as I can manage and head into the faint light.

Closed doors in the hallway refuse to open and limit my options so I continue running along the zigzagging corridor. Before long I notice that the space before me is becoming lighter as I proceed and after a few more moments I crash into and through a pair of doors.

I'm immediately blinded and disoriented. Everything I can see is impossibly green and bright. The air is hot and smells of salt and something that I can't place. After a few moments of adjustment, my eyes confirm what I suspected: I've made it to the outside and am closer to my freedom than I'd ever imagined.

Breathe. Don't stop. Hide.

I dash toward the trees in front of me hoping to make pursuit more difficult. I've never seen trees before but I've heard enough talk about them to know what's in front of me. Other than very brief outdoor tests I can't recall ever being outside before and my mind is at war between curiosity and the danger that still follows me.

I collapse at the bottom of a small hill, once I've confirmed that I can no longer see the doors that I exited through, and try to force my exhausted mind to think on what to do next. I

have no knowledge of the area here or of how I could try to evade capture and escape. On some level I don't think I expected to ever make it this far but now I'm here and I have to continue.

Voices carry through the trees and I press myself lower to the ground, hoping that I'm not seen.

"Non-lethal force only. These are too expensive to waste even a few ounces, so we need to capture it, not kill it. Now spread out and search", says a deep voice from behind.

Heavy feet crunch leaves and brush from all around me and it's clear that I've lost my chance to run from this spot without being seen. The soil here has formed a sort of natural bowl and so I stay as low as I can in the hopes that my hunters will go around me without ever knowing where I am.

Gradually, the sounds recede and I find myself able to breathe fully again. The time for running seems to be over, at least temporarily. Keeping low, I begin to pick my way through the various plants, leaves, and branches. With the facility building still behind me I have little choice but to roughly follow in the direction of the men who passed through here and I'm constantly on alert for any sound or sign of movement around me.

Inside the building it was often quiet but never truly silent. There was always some sort of buzzing or whirring from machines or vents. The silence in these woods feels oppressive by comparison. Occasionally, the leaves around me are stirred by a light breeze but that quickly dissipates to return the blanket of silence which makes my every movement seem impossibly loud.

Soon a break in the trees materializes and what I see beyond them is hard for my mind to process. The ground becomes lighter and continues its downward slope until it reaches water. More water than I've ever seen in my life. I have no idea how to cross that much water or even

that that much water could exist in one place. Overwhelmed, I slump down at the base of a large tree and find that new water is spilling from my eyes as if attempting to join that which is in front of me.

My entire life, until this moment, has happened almost exclusively inside the walls of the facility that I just left. It was a life of isolation, fear, and endless tests and jabs. There were few of us and we were prohibited from any behavior which emulated the staff. Those who spoke or showed any sign of forming community with each other would be punished severely. Many had their tongues removed after repeat offenses.

I learned that it was safest to appear dumb, docile, and cooperative. After learning this, I was able to learn many other things. If I kept my eyes low, followed basic instructions easily, and pretended not to notice anything going on around me most of the other people in the building began acting as if I wasn't in the room at all.

This is how I learned more language than most of my peers, even if I could never use it. I learned about the key cards that activate the lift, about how there's a whole world outside of this facility, and about how our life here wasn't what we should consider normal. Gradually, I began to put together a plan to leave and try to find the rest of that world I'd heard about. It didn't sound all that good; but I had also learned what the end of my days in this facility would look like and so I knew I had to.

At first I wanted to try to bring others with me but everywhere I looked I saw people so defeated by their circumstance that they would either refuse to try to help themselves or even go as far as to help our captors instead. They'd become a part of the system that kept them chained and the best that I could hope for was to get myself out. I couldn't save everyone.

The day I finally stole the key card began the chain of events that brought me to where I

am now. I'm amazed that I wasn't caught. I made a show out of tripping and falling into the attendee who was leading me toward the lift for another round of tests and exercises. As I fell I grabbed onto them as if to catch myself and I swiped the card off its clip. While they were caught up in anger and exclamations about my stupidity, I slide the card quickly into the vent at the base of the wall.

They struck me and yelled at me but otherwise continued on. Upon reaching the lift, the attendee who's card I stole assumed it was lost and their associate activated the lift. I carefully counted the vents to remember which one held my prize just as I'd previously counted the turns and paths taken to reach the lift. It had all worked so well until now. Now, sitting here under this tree facing endless water, with an overwhelming weight on my chest this suddenly feels impossible.

I don't get the opportunity to spend long in the sea of my own pity because the silence behind me is interrupted. I can only assume that it is one of the security guards who happened to come this way, and I have no avenue for escape available to me. Behind me is danger and in front of me is an infinite expanse of water.

I crouch facing the tree and try to peer around it to get a glimpse of my tracker before he is able to see me. My timing couldn't have been worse. As soon as my head comes around the tree the uniformed man turns to look directly at me. He releases a cry as I rush forward trying to clear the ground between us. Before I have time to think, I'm swinging my balled hand toward his face. He tries to react but his surprise makes him slow and I'm able to connect with his nose before he raises a weapon.

The man staggers back as blood bursts from the center of his face. I don't know what reaction I expected from this but I find myself horrified as he starts to laugh. The blood soaking

through his facial hair and joining his crazed smile causes me to freeze momentarily.

"I never thought one of you would put up a fight. This is actually going to be fun," It's the deep voiced man I heard giving commands earlier. I don't know if it's his voice, his laugh, or the looming threat of violence but I find my ability to move suddenly returned to me and I take off running in a new direction; any direction other than him. From behind me I can hear him speaking but I don't catch all of it. He says something about quadrants and the beach and then I'm out of earshot again.

It takes practically no time at all for the woods around me to explode into action and noise. Before I know it there are shouts coming from all directions as more uniformed shapes begin calling out my position and the direction I'm heading. Several times I narrowly avoid running directly into one as they appear from within the brush. Hands grasp at me and try to take hold to prevent my flight.

My attention is divided as I try to avoid their grip and I don't see the man stepping out from the trees in front of me until it's too late. He's raised some sort of small tube toward me and twin prongs of metal dig into my skin before convulsing agony overtakes me. I black out briefly but it can only have been a moment because while I'm sprawled out on the ground the man has yet to grip me. My entire body screams in pain and my muscles tighten.

I manage to kick at him and he falls before he can grab me. Willing myself to my feet I run madly away. I cover almost no ground before another surprise attacker appears. This one sprays something at my face and I am once again too slow to save myself. Everywhere the spray touches burns. I scream and swipe at my eyes but to my horror I find that I can hardly see at all.

Whatever terror I've felt before pales in comparison to the raw emotion that overtakes me now. Every shape around me turns from tree or bush to men in uniform. I'm running but I can't

make out anything. I can't think or plan, only run. The rushing sound of water blends with the coarse shouts and other unknown sounds. I feel several hard pricks across my back but I can't react to the new pain.

Run! Feet moving. Lungs breathing. Escape. PAIN.

My leading foot leaves the ground and for a sickening period of time fails to find new ground. My stomach rises as all sense of weight leaves my body. The ominous colors and shapes around me swirl and blur more rapidly until I finally land with a resounding CRACK in my left leg. New pain rushes to overwhelm my overtaxed brain and then I lose consciousness.

I wake disoriented and unsure if the events of my memories are real. I can no longer feel the pain in my leg, hear the sound of the water, or feel the sun on my skin. Gone also are the shouts and movement and grasping hands. Instead, I feel pressure across my waist and wrists.

By the time I manage to wrench my eyes open I realize several things all at once. I am still moving. My hands are bound to the arms of a rolling chair along with my waist. I am back inside the facility.

The last realization should have evoked a new fear response in me but I can't seem to locate the emotion for it. Someone is at my back pushing the chair and I'm rolling through parts of the facility that I don't often see and have never entered. On a screen in a nearby room a grotesque looking man is speaking with a smug look while he announces that the meat crisis will soon be solved by a new deal that he's been working to put in place.

"Soon you'll have better meat. Cheaper meat. The best meat. You won't even want the old meat anymore."

I can't make sense of the strange man's words. I try to think. I try to feel anything. A blanket has been pulled over my mind, warm and comfortable, and I can't find the energy to

shake it off.

The room that I'm headed toward now is one that I've seen others enter but never come back out of. The floor is stained a deep brown and has a drain at the center of the sloped floor. Looking down at the floor I notice that my left leg which I injured during my escape attempt is truncated several inches below the knee. This manages to startle a small skip out of my heart but then that same heavy blanket settles back over my thoughts and the feeling fades.

The security person who I hit earlier is standing in the corner of the room. The blood is now gone from his face but his nose remains a painful looking purple lump. His previously unsettling grin is still present and in his hand is the pronged weapon that caused me such pain earlier.

From behind me comes a soft voice, "You let it get injured so badly that we had to sedate it and sacrifice a good bit of the flesh. This is unacceptable. I expect a full report covering the incident and any contingencies needed to prevent it from repeating, and any further incidents will result in docking of your pay for any preventable damages. Am I understood?"

An emotion I don't know crosses over the man's face, but he grunts his assent before exiting the room from the door we came through. I've been turned now to face the man who was earlier watching the grotesque man speak about the meat crisis. In his hand is a large wooden rod and he approaches me with a practiced stride.

"Darin, please include in your report on this harvest that recent spikes in adrenaline may have effected the quality of the meat," The same soft voice from before.

"Yes ma'am. Do we know how it managed to get out?"

"We'll find out. After a few generations it won't matter. We will be able to breed the intelligence out of them. I'm considering recommending tongue removal at birth as well. Thank

you for your help, Darin. We're doing important work here."

Darin lifts the rod high and brings it down sharply onto the crown of my head and then everything goes black.

Name: Alison C

Phone Number:

Age: 29

Number Eight

When a girl goes missing, especially a beautiful young lady full of life and potential, a community will come together to find her. The students and faculty of Stone Peak University had organized search parties and posted fliers as soon as Miranda Jenkins' boyfriend reported that she never made it to dinner after her big English presentation. Campus police enlisted the help of the city's K-9 unit to sniff through halls and dorms with handler pockets full of Miranda's favorite scrunchies.

Nothing came of it.

A few weeks later, there was another tragedy. Another girl, gone without a trace.

Miranda and Beth are nothing alike. Miranda with long blond hair and a sporty build. Beth with short twists and a petite frame. Of course, everyone goes through the same motions again. More late-night search parties, more fliers, more dogs.

They say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result.

The problem with a tragedy that repeats itself is that people become desensitized to it. By the fourth girl's disappearance, people were greeting the information with "what a shame".

"I'll keep an eye out."

"Our thoughts and prayers are with her family during this trying time."

Such a shame, but it would never happen to them. It is so easy to pretend there is a window between reality and tragedy; that it will never truly affect you until you lift the glass and decide to let it in.

I was one of those stupid, unaffected people until two nights ago.

It didn't even occur to me to worry about Maria when I left to walk Jordan back to the dorms. She was surrounded by her sorority sisters and all of the glitz and glitter that came

with their winter semi-formal. The image of her had burned into my mind and suddenly *I* was the one printing out twenty dollars' worth of posters.

MISSING

Maria Cabrello

Age: 21

Physical Description: 5'2", 110lbs, brown skin, long brown hair, brown eyes

Last seen at the Alpha Theta Pi Sorority House wearing a short pastel pink dress, black heels, and a fluffy white jacket.

Please contact Sunny Adhara and campus police with any information.

I still have one in my pocket, Maria's smiling face appearing any time I unfold it to ask a passerby if they have seen her. Most say they will keep an eye out, but I only believe the ones who take out their phones to snap a picture. A handful wouldn't even give me the time of day. Just rushed by on their way to class. It's hard to believe I was one of them.

It's hard to believe Maria is number seven. Seven girls gone and not one of them has been found.

It's been snowing off and on since Maria vanished. During the day, the sky is slate gray with unending clouds. At night, the world sits heavily in the black. Flakes fall past the yellow streetlights and gather on the icy ground in unassuming banks. My boots crunch quietly through the crisp white layer on what I hope is the sidewalk that leads to Montague Hall. I'm hardly on this side of campus, but three of the missing girls are business majors and it's my only lead. As I get closer, I fumble out my camcorder and turn it on.

A grainy copy of myself stares back, nose and cheeks red and scarf tucked up under my chin.

"This is, uh, Sunny Adhara. I know that this camcorder is for my midterm, but I think some storage can be spare for this. It is..." I pull out my phone and check the time. "1:07 AM on December tenth and I am approaching Montague Hall to see if I can find any clues as to where Maria and the others might have gone. If this winds up being nothing, Future Sunny, I'm sorry about all the editing."

I flip the camera around and make sure my gloved hand is secure in the strap before continuing.

The world is unbearably quiet. My breath comes out in large plumes as I try to slow my slamming heart. No reasonable person is out in the snow at this hour. Everyone is snuggled up safe at home or in some warm bar somewhere. The library has extended their hours so students with full schedules can cram with whatever time remains in the day. That's where Maria should have been; head bent over a book of marketing strategies with her glittery pink gel pen in hand.

I sigh and the wind exhales with me, a brisk gale that lasts just long enough to coat my screen in powdery flakes. It's easy enough to brush it clean with my glove, but something snags my attention.

A young woman has walked into frame. I zoom in to make out the details of her: dark sweatshirt, gray sweatpants, and sneakers. Her brown hair is tied up. She's not Maria and I strain to remember the name that's on the tip of my tongue. I have spent hours memorizing the missing girls at this point.

Miranda, Beth, Saoirse, Amelie, Candace...

"Abby!" I look up and the echo of my voice dies quickly in the snow. My blood runs cold as I stare at the empty path before me. I glance back at the screen and there's Abigail Hart, walking with her hands in the front pocket of her hoodie. When I look away, the snow is silent and undisturbed.

Abby is walking toward Montague Hall, same as me. I stare into the camera and follow as quietly as I can.

This is most certainly a mistake. I should take my footage to the police, or maybe a priest, but it's too late now. Abby is moving along the same path as where she was last seen, going to fetch a forgotten laptop charger that has long been confiscated as evidence. My blood is thrumming under my skin as she makes that last turn.

Montague Hall rises before us like a crypt. It's newly built when compared to the rest of campus, but the style was made to match the other buildings. Tall arched windows loom overhead, pitch black in the dead of night. The signs that normally reveal directions to the various lecture rooms are all covered in white as the wind picks up again. I watch Abby move around the bronze statue of Howard Montague, a hat dipped low over his face and a briefcase in hand, to head for the front doors of the building.

The temperature plummets as Abby's hand reaches the door and I struggle to keep my hand from shaking. I expect her to go through it and try to remember if I know anything about lock-picking so that I can follow.

But she just... Stands there. Pale hand on the doorknob. She doesn't even try to turn it. I zoom in again to try and see her face.

Abby turns and looks directly at the camera.

My pulse thunders. She can *see me*. It's so obvious she can see me and I'm frozen to the spot, unsure of what to do. Her blue eyes just stare at the lens, unblinking and without so much as a spark of anything behind them. The screen begins to static and I look up—

And she's *right. There.*

I'm not sure if I scream. *Something* rips itself from my throat and I am raw and shaking and terrified. I slip and fall back onto the iced over ground in an attempt to get away. Some instinct has me keep hold of the camcorder as I try to scramble backwards with one hand. When I look back up, wondering how close she is, Abby is gone.

I tremble on the ground and quickly flash the camcorder around. All the screen shows is Montague Hall, devoid of life, and falling snow. I pull my knees up to my chest and try to steady my breathing. Panic continues to spark across my nerves, so I switch the camera over to view what I've filmed over the past several minutes.

It's mostly static. Black and white and shifting like the snow falling around me.

"Shit," I mutter between my chattering teeth. I fast forward and rewind a few times and hope to catch a glimpse of something. Anything to prove I didn't hallucinate the whole thing.

A girl begins to take shape in the blur.

Her features are hard to place, bouncing between soft and sharp, hair either incredibly short or incredibly long depending on the millisecond at which I pause. My hands are shaking horribly, but I continue to fast forward. Rewind.

Fast forward.

Rewind.

It takes me too long to realize what I'm looking at. Blue eyes to brown to green. Natural lips to glossy to bubblegum pink. I feel sick as an amalgamation of the seven missing girls moves her mouth to form shapes. I move my own to try and find out what they are trying to say to me.

Help, maybe?

Save us?

I have to fast forward and rewind several more times and try to add sound to what I'm seeing.

"Rrrr... uh... nn... Rruhnn..."

Run.

I launch to my feet and begin to sprint. It doesn't matter where. *Away.*

I don't realize something has my ankle until I am falling forward.

The ice rushes up to meet me and I collide with it hard. My teeth go into my lip and I taste hot blood on my tongue. Pain races up my knees and arms from where I foolishly try to catch myself. Something cracks in my wrist and I watch the camcorder slide out of my grip, the recording light still on. I dig my gloves into the ice, but I'm pulled backwards. I kick and scream as I am pulled closer and closer to Montague Hall. My free ankle is grabbed and when I look back, I see absolutely nothing. Just the indent in my jeans where *something* has me. I continue to scream and pray to whatever god might be listening that someone hears me. That they find the camcorder.

That they find me before it's too late.

Category: Adult, Age 32 about 3,350 words

Unplanned Vacation

by Adriane R

Jasmine stood at the baggage carousel, clutching and twisting the straps on her leather bag. The 12 hour flight left her feeling anxious and tired, but they made it. She was finally in America. This was her first time traveling abroad and it was intimidating. Her gaze found Cleo who was half grunting at a vending machine, shaking it slightly, trying to get it to release whatever she's already purchased seconds off the plane. Cleo had travelled to America several times before, but this time, she dragged Jasmine along. Jasmine managed a half smile when her friend finally managed to wrestle a snack cake from the machine. Cleo swiped her brown curls out of her face with triumph. She looked like she had won the lottery, Jasmine just felt an impending sense of dread.

At the rental agency, the clerk handed the keys to Jasmine skeptically eyeing her passport and foreign license. Cleo ignored the interaction and sucked a lollipop at the TV. An early snow was falling on the area. Jasmine eyed the weather report, jiggling the keys in her hands.

"Are you sure you don't want to get a room nearby?" Jasmine asked hopefully.

Cleo popped her candy out of her mouth and pointed it at Jasmine, "Nah, I didn't plan extra funds for that. Besides, you've been driving for a year now." As she popped her lollipop back in her mouth she mouthed a wet "Cheerio" in an exaggerated accent at the clerk and hefted her bag on her shoulder towards the exit. Jasmine rolled her eyes at her, apologized to the clerk and left quickly following her into the cold, dusky evening to their car.

Jasmine fiddled with the nav system and gently led the car onto the exit road. "I don't understand why you haven't learned to drive yet, you're nearly twenty-five." Cleo sighed dramatically and tossed her candy stick out of the window.

"I don't need to learn how to drive. I can just take the train or the bus everywhere."

"Not here, you can't." She bit her lip and squinted into the dark ahead of her on the road, the smallest of snowflakes had begun to fall. Cleo pulled out an AUX cord and plugged her phone into the car, blasting her pop country music for all of Colorado to hear. Jasmine tapped the steering wheel and bent closer to the dash, trying to make out the bright white lines on the increasingly darkening roads.

The snow swirled thickly in front of the car as the music blared throughout. Jasmine squinted and turned the radio down to see better. Cleo huffed in the carseat beside her, flicking through her socials on her phone. She whined loudly and tossed her phone at her feet. "There's no signal in this stupid state."

"Did you make sure to switch your phone to international?"

"Well, Duh. It was working when we landed and it suddenly stopped."

Jasmine looked at the nav unit on the center console, it was flashing a bright 'out of network' sign. She grimaced and tried to restart the unit, clicking buttons until the screen wouldn't respond anymore. Her car mate grew increasingly irritated, needling Jasmine, trying to give advice. Jasmine ignored her and looked out the windshield. The storm outside raged; blocking her vision of the road. Was she even on the road anymore?

A flash of grey darted in front of the car, causing her to swerve the car to the right and sent them careening into a ditch. The last thing she heard was a loud crunch and pop as the airbags deployed and hit her in the face.

When she opened her eyes again she was facing Cleo; who looked deathly still. Cleo's head was lolled over to the side on the spiderwebbed passenger window, blood congealed on her forehead and slowly dripped down the side of her pale face. "Cleo…" Jasmine choked out. A

streak of pain shot through her neck as she tried to lift her head. She reached out to touch Cleo. Still warm, felt like a pulse. Good. "Cleo?" She asked loudly and exhaled when Cleo moaned.

"Wait—" Cleo's eyes popped open in surprise and her face twisted into pain as she reached her hand up to her head. Blood ran down her fingers and Cleo's mouth made an O. "Are we dead?"

"Better not fucking be," Jasmine replied unbuckling herself and reaching into her leather bag for her phone. Outside, the snow had started to pile on top of the car and the cold began to seep into the car. Jasmine fumbled the passkey onto her lockscreen and punched the emergency dial button. "No service" the phone responded. Jasmine shrieked in frustration.

"Could you cut it out?" Cleo, still clutching her head in one hand, checked her phone. Again, "No service" lit up across the screen. "Damnit." She slammed herself into the door trying to open it. Stuck. She sucked in a breath and looked at Jasmine with panicked eyes. "What do we do now?"

Jasmine pushed the airbag away from her and craned her neck towards the road. The car was nose-down in a ditch. She released her seat belt and pushed herself into the backseat. The rear door opened under her hands. She stumbled out; Cleo slithered out beside her into the snow. Cold air whipped at both of the women, sending shivers down their spines. Cleo stomped out of the ditch to the road and stuck her thumb out.

"What are you doing?" Jasmine hissed at her.

"I'm trying to get us a ride, since you crashed the car."

"Since *I* crashed the car?"

"Mmyep, you were the only one driving. What the hell happened anyways?" Cleo turned to look at Jasmine. Jasmine clutched her arms and trembled.

"I don't know. I was trying to see the road and then something ran in front of the car."

Cleo rolled her eyes. "Of course, I should have known better than to let you drive." Jasmine felt tears prickle at her eyes. Cleo sighed. "Okay, it doesn't look like anyone is coming, let's go back to the car with our stuff and attempt to bundle up. Okay?" She dropped her arm and walked back to Jasmine, caressing her arms softly and turned them back towards the car.

Jasmine fumbled the keys out of the ignition and unlocked the trunk for Cleo who stood impatiently by to grab their suit cases. Headbeams reflected in the mirror and blinded Jasmine. Two car doors slammed shut.

"Hello, out there?" A shrill voice called out. "Anyone down there?"

"YES!" Cleo shouted back and bounded up out of the ditch.

"Cleo, Wait—"

A spindly woman crested the ridge and stared down at wreckage, tutting at them. A small, portly man with wisps of hair blowing in the wind stood next to her, his glasses barely hanging onto the bridge of his bulbous nose. Cleo stumbled backwards at the sight of them catching herself in Jasmine's outstretched arms.

"Well now," the old woman said, crossing her arms. "Fell into a bit of a snare did you?" The man tottered over to the girls, grabbed their bags, and helped them out of the ditch onto the side of the road.

"Are you two okay?" He peered at both of them, eyeing them up for apparent injuries, his eyes darting past them at the wreck below. "How long have you been out here?" His eyes bulged with panic and concern.

Cleo swooned into her rescuer and acted faint. "Oh gosh, I don't even know. I think it's been hours." *Tut.*

The willowy woman snapped and squinted at the still steaming car. "Well dears, let us take you in, warm and feed you. Can't have you out here in this horrible storm." She turned her back on them quickly and trudged to a decrepit BMW parked on the edge of the road.. Jasmine followed behind the couple, twisting the strap on her leather bag. The man shook fresh snowfall out of his thinning black hair and cupped his hands around his mouth and breathed into them, waiting for Jasmine to catch up to them.

The doors of the car closed around them, encasing them in warmth. The man shifted uncomfortably in the driver's seat, "This here's my wife Katherine," She waved a hand nonsensically at him. "I'm Edgar. We live up the road just a ways, you can stay with us until the storm passes and we can get a wrecker out here." *Tut.*

Cleo chatted away at the older couple on the way to their home. Katherine tutted back in response. Edgar nodded along, half listening with two shaky hands on the wheel and sweat dripping from his brow. He steered the car down a dark, gravel road.

Jasmine nervously glanced at the road behind them. Katherine caught her eye in the rearview mirror. "A couple hundred acres. T'was my grandaddy's land." Her stern grey eyes flicked away, something like a smirk played at her thin old lips and made Jasmine uneasy. "Generations of us have lived and died on this land. Edgar and I are the last ones left." She rested a thin frail hand on Edgar's meaty thigh. He nodded and white knuckled the wheel. "It's not much in the dark and cold, but you should see it in the morn'. A full view of the mountains."

Jasmine squinted through the car window trying to place the mountains, all that she found were swirls of snow and darkness. The car pulled up to an older house, two story, shutters battened down, screen door creaking in the wind. Cleo exclaimed about the architecture, cooing

over the old style of the house and its attic windows. Jasmine overheard a mention of tuberculosis in the late 19th century.

The old couple led them onto the porch, ushering them out of the wind, while Edgar fumbled with his keys in the front door. The inside of the house was damp and drafty. Katherine led them into the kitchen for tea while Edgar started the fire in the living room. Firelight flickered against photos in frames: married couples, women with babes on their hips, elderly. The fashion of the house was that of a historical magazine. Woven carpets adorned the floors, knit blankets on a wooden ladder, a kettle steaming in the fireplace. The floors creaked under Jasmine's footsteps as she made her way to grab a mug from Katherine in the kitchen.Edgar followed quickly with the steaming kettle. The hot tea in her hands warmed her whole body when she took a sip.

Katherine lit a candle and placed it on an old kitchen island. "Shall we make something to eat? You must be starving." Edgar nodded nervously in her direction while stifling a trite laugh. Cleo placed a hand over her stomach and agreed, looking towards Jasmine.

Jasmine glanced away from Cleo and turned to face the sweaty man. "I'm actually very tired and could use a bath, would you mind?" Cleo moaned, setting her tea down harshly. *Tut.* Edgar glared at his wife and revealed to Jasmine a long hallway that led upstairs to a small platform with a singular bedroom and tiny restroom. He followed her shortly with her suitcase setting it down inside the small room. "American's really don't like baths do they?" She said, staring at the tiny tub. Edgar shrugged past her and handed her a fresh towel that smelled of cedar from a hideaway linen closet behind the door. Jasmine wrinkled up her nose at the smell but thanked him politely and locked the door on his exit.

She sat on the edge of the tub, thumbing through her phone looking for service. One bar. Not a lot, not enough to use data, but enough to get a few messages from her mum worried that Jasmine hadn't reached out in a while. She tried to send a text to her explaining the snow storm and that she was okay, but it wouldn't send. She audibly sighed in frustration.

The tub faucet looked foreign to her; a singular handle pointed downwards and a spout, caked in limescale. She undressed and looked her body over in the small oblong mirror above the sink. She looked tired and wary. Her pale cheeks were stripped pink from the cold winds and her hair was in a disheveled plait on her shoulder. She combed out her hair and sat in the small tub. The water was tepid at best, felt gritty on her skin, and chilled fast due to the drafty house which forced her to get out earlier than she wanted. Over the clamour of the tub draining she thought she heard a thud from downstairs. She stiffened as she became aware of a shuffling of feet and then eerie silence echoed as the last of the water in the tub drained out.

She dressed from her suitcase and slid her boots on. Subtle sounds of chopping came from the kitchen as she opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Her shoulders relaxed. She tried to make herself stand tall, slung her leather bag over her shoulder and she made her way downstairs to the kitchen. Katherine stood over a boiling pot on a gas stove; tossing aromatics in a broth. The food smelt wrong. Blood oozed off of the cutting board onto the island countertop and made Jasmine sick to her stomach. Whatever Katherine was cooking, Jasmine wanted no part of.

"Hello dear," Katherine said with her back turned to her. Jasmine jerked away from the kitchen island Katherine's voice startling her back to her senses. "Was the bath to your liking?" Jasmine rubbed her aching shoulders. The cramped tub would not allow her to soak her whole body at a time so she'd resorted to awkward positions trying to keep her body warm throughout.

"Fine, thanks." Edgar and Cleo were nowhere to be found.. "Um, where has Cleo and Edgar gone?" Katherine hesitated over the pot.

"Cleo went to lie down in the guest room down the hall." She flicked her wrist in a direction past the kitchen. "I haven't a clue about Edgar though. Would you be a dear and grab an onion out of the pantry?" Jasmine looked around her, *Tut.* "The large door just behind you, dear."

Jasmine turned and stood facing a small door; tall as the ceiling but narrow. She peered in cautiously. Pantry items were stacked from floor to ceiling. She found an onion and placed it on the kitchen counter. "You certainly have a lot of food for just the two of you. Not go to market much?"

"Oh no, we go rarely. Just about once a month or so to stock up on staples." Staples, Jasmine thought, more like end of the world prepping. Katherine threw the blood soaked cutting board and knife into the sink with a clang and dug out a second set to set on the island and began chopping the onion. Jasmine stepped back towards the small door watching Katerine and hugged herself, nervously looking around the kitchen. The kitchen was unsettlingly large. Herbs and spices filled dowels near the window to dry, pots hung from the ceiling.

Edgar shuffled back into the room, sweating profusely and beet red in the face. *Tut.* Katherine looked at her husband with a raised eyebrow and he nodded, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing his brow. "Guest room's all set up for you upstairs, opposite the bathroom." Jasmine cocked her head quizzically at him. *Tut.* He looked towards his wife who was scowling down at the onions she was cutting. "What? Is something the matter?" *Tut.* He glanced back at Jasmine.

"I'm sorry, it's just that Katherine said that the Guest room was down this hall here?" She pointed in the direction of the room Katherine mentioned.. Edgar's eyes bulged like a boggling

rat. "Right, yes, well. Uh, change of plans I guess then… The room down the hall isn't, uh, suitable." He tried to contain his nervousness to no avail. *Tut.*

"Okay, I'll uh, just grab my other bag and go to see Cleo." Jasmine turned to go up the stairs to grab her suitcase. Edgar grabbed her wrist.

"I'm really sorry about this, Miss." His eyes narrowed at her and he licked his chapped lips. Jasmine tried to wrench free of his grasp. The wife walked around the island slowly, holding the kitchen knife low to her waist. Jasmine panicked and pulled open the pantry door, slamming it into the man's face. He yelped and released her, holding his hand over nose gushing blood. Jasmine pushed past him and yelled out for Cleo down the hall where the raw-boned woman said she had gone.

She screamed Cleo's name, opening doors and looking inside each one for her. A second bathroom, a pristine office, and then a dark room covered in splotches and plastic. "Cleo?" Footsteps echoed down the hall behind her. She ducked into the room and locked the door behind her. They banged on the other side of the door. A heavy wooden table stood in the middle of the room. She pulled it over and blocked the door. Her hands came away sticky and warm. In the dim light she held them up, a thick, dark liquid ran down her fingers. Her skin prickled and every hair on her body stood up.

Her heart threatened to pound out of her chest. She slapped at the light switch. Red, blood, red, drying on her hands. The table was covered in a visceral mess of blood. She stepped away from the table in disbelief, bumping into something swaying behind her. She turned and screamed. A soft and tepid body was hung upside down by the feet, naked and gutted. She looked at the brown mop of hair on the head. "Cleo." She sobbed, staring at the curls covering

her face. "Oh god no."Cleo's throat slashed and drained. Jasmine backed away from the lifeless body and ran to the other side of the room.

Cleavers, hooks, and surgical instruments littered the surfaces and walls waiting to be used again. A utility sink in the corner stood solitary and blood splashed, a bucket nearby contained innards, seeping and wet. Chemicals for cleaning sat on an open shelving unit. Tears ran down Jasmine's cheeks, she rubbed at her eyes. A small window to her right that she could never fit through. The killer couple banged on the door, inserted a key and twisted the knob.

A saw blade came whirling at Edgar's head when he managed to open the door enough to stick his head in. A sickening crunch of bone slumped him forward into the open space, head split. Jasmine dropped the motorized saw and vomited. Katherine pulled on Edgar trying desperately to get him out of the door frame, sobbing and wailing. Jasmine rushed the door and trapped her captor's arm in the door frame. She slammed her body against it and heard the snap of bones. Katherine howled. Jasmine pulled the table further back and opened the door to Katherine cradling her dead husband, her right arm limp and crooked at her side. She looked up at Jasmine with wet, red eyes in disbelief."Tut." Jasmine spat as she stepped over her. She ran back to the kitchen, the pot on the stove bubbling over. Bits of grey meat clung to the edges of the pot. Jasmine set a metal canister of cleaning chemicals next to the open flame and flipped all the other gas valves open. She walked out the front door into the snow.

–

When emergency services arrived they found a pale young woman stained with blood standing in front of the old house on Phageín Rd. The house was engulfed in flames. The fire department responded to a call from a neighbor concerned about a house fire. Paramedics rushed

to the woman with a medkit and blankets. Jasmine stood unflinching despite the icy wind. Red and blue lights flashed in her eyes. The house ablaze, crumbled behind her. *Tut.*

Scary Story 2025
"When the War Begins"

Autumn W

Age 18, High School Graduate/Adult

*****NOTE*****

This is a part of the script for the pilot episode of Pinnacles, the series I'm working on with the help of my friend at HYPER SABER STUDIOS.

==========

(There was high-pitch ear ringing, accompanied by the sounds of debris being moved, muffled voices, and footsteps. A near sound of feet reached a stop close to the first-person view. After using a scanner, a heartbeat pops up, prompting the man to call for his comrades to help.)

??? #1: *faint, muffled* I found someone! Under here!!
??? #2: Over here! Let's get 'im out! One. Two. Three!!

(The debris is lifted up, and the group of soldiers are stunned to see a 12-year-old girl, bleeding from the head, battered and bruised badly. One of the soldiers picks her up.)

??? #3: Careful. She's bleeding bad.
??? #1: Get the commander. We'll try to stop the bleeding.

(One of the soldiers leaves to fetch the commander while the other soldiers tend to the girl...)

★★★

(Just moments ago, the same 12-year-old girl was asleep in her quarters, her bedroom adorned with posters of fantasial tales, pictures of her best memories with her family, along with cat plushies, nightlights, and more. The girl starts struggling to sleep as gunshots and screams are heard in the background, only waking up when she hears a frantic voice calling her name.)

???: TEMPEST!!
Tempest: Unh? Virginia?
Virginia: We need to go, sweetie!!
Tempest: What's going on?

Scary Story 2025
"When the War Begins"

Autumn W

Age 18, High School Graduate/Adult

(Tempest's question is answered as she looks out the window, seeing Fort Shastashen under attack...)

***

(Virginia and Tempest are running hastily through the corridors of the fortress, Tempest letting out a shriek as she watches someone get gunned down.)

Tempest: EEK!!
Virginia: It's okay, sweetie — We'll make it out. Come on!!

(They continue running until they reach a dead end, surrounded by an intruder ready to open fire on them. Virginia immediately stands protectively in front of Tempest until someone comes in, letting loose on the intruder.)

Tempest: Charleston?
Charleston: There you are!

(Charleston reloads his gun as Tempest hugs him. Virginia meets with them as she asks him something.)

Virginia: What's the current status of the barricades?
Charleston: *hugging Tempest* Not good. It's getting unstable.
Virginia: ... Meaning...
Charleston: It's going down. We need to evacuate and reach the Resistance.

(Tempest looked up at Charleston, overhearing his words.)

Tempest: What about our home?

(Charleston looked down at Tempest.)

Scary Story 2025
"When the War Begins"

Autumn W

(719

Age 18, High School Graduate/Adult

Charleston: We *will* have a home. Someplace safer than here. A friend of ours runs the Resistance. He'll help us, and he'll help take care of you.

(Tempest simply nods as the trio continue running.)

***

Charleston: There's an underground passageway that'll get us out of Fort Shastashen safely.
Tempest: And to the Resistance?

(Charleston turns to Tempest while he pushes back any intruders.)

Charleston: Hopefully.

(They continue to run before slowing down, nearing the exit.)

Virginia: We're almost there.
Charleston: ... Virginia — Take Tempest with you. I'll catch up as soon as the coast is clear.

(He turns to Tempest.)

Charleston: And Tempest? If things go wrong, you need to stay close to Virginia until you reach the Resistance. Otherwise, get away as soon as possible.

(He kneels down to her level.)

Charleston: I wish it didn't have to be like this... But the world isn't what we all wish it could be. Life isn't fair, and I can't bear the idea that you have to see that too soon. Stay close to Virginia, no matter what. When I'm done here, we'll get to the Resistance and we'll be safe. *You'll* be safe.

(Tempest nods with a slight shake as Virginia takes her with.)

Scary Story 2025
"When the War Begins"

Autumn W

Age 18, High School Graduate/Adult

Tempest: O-okay. I'll go. Be careful, Charleston.
Virginia: Come on, Tempest — Let's go.
Charleston: ... *sighs* **I love you both.**

★★★

(Virginia keeps Tempest close to her as they make it out of the underway.)

Virginia: This is it. We just need to reach the Resistance. I'll hope Charleston made it out.

(As the two girls walk ahead with caution, Tempest is in awe at what the outside world looks like. When they leave the tunnels, Charleston meets up with them, much to Tempest's relief... But not for long as one of the intruders had caught up to them, opening fire as the screen went black, occupied by the sound of a bullet — 3 bullets, two sounds of blood spilled, and Tempest's scream.)

Ariana M

Age: 29

A group of teenagers Amy 16, Jackie 15, Leah the youngest who was only 14. Were making Halloween Plans for that night. Leah wanted to go Trick Or Treating. Amy and Jackie wanted to go to the local abandoned house on 15th street. Rumor has it in the early 90's there was a out of control party that a night stalker crashed slaying 13 of the partying teens. Blood and chum coated the walls so badly that no matter how hard you cleaned. There was always blood stained shadows. Of course this was all hear say and the house had been condemned for years and years and no one ever dared entered. Until one boy named Danny 20 years ago and got viscously maned. Some say the boy never existed. He was never on the news. He never attended any local school districts. Never had a friend there was no family that ever had a service. There was no obituaries on him either he never existed or anyone who knew of him totally vanished. At least that's the story I have heard Amy said. Jackie rolled her eyes and said wow what a great story. Leah trying to be brave said in a semi confident voice they are tearing that old creepy house down tomorrow Nov 1st. So if we ever want to see if the legends are true we have only one night tonight. The girls stared at each other in semi panic none of them wanted to seem more scared then a 14 year old with known anxiety issues. Jackie and Amy looked at each other then at Leah and said okay little one we will take you Trick Or Treating then at 10:00 tonight we will sneak in. Leah already questioning her self said our parents would never let us go near that place. Amy said at least your parents would care. my dad would probably jump for joy if he never had to take care of me for the rest of his life. Jackie and Leah both looked at the ground not knowing what to say or feel. Amy quickly pulled it together and said say you are spending the night at my house. Jackie and Leah said are you sure your dad won't care your having a sleep over. Amy almost irritated at the question said he's a drunk and it's Halloween night his night will consist of at a sleep over at whatever bar allows him to stay that long. The girls just blanky stared at each other and said well thanks for having us over tonight. Amy, Jackie and Leah all got ready for Halloween dressed in there zombie costumes smothered in blood and fake guts. Amy, Jackie and Leah all got ready for Halloween dressed in there zombie costumes smothered in blood and fake guts. Leah was already complaining how she felt disgusting and Jackie seemed just a little to thrilled to be undead. Amy could care less about her costume in the slightest. The girls were already munching on there candy. Eating non stop until there jaws hurt. Leah jumped in the shower. The other 2 girls weren't going to shower just to go into a nasty creepy house. The clock struck 10 way quicker then the girls expected. Leah was hoping they forgot about it completely. Jackie and Amy looked at the clock and said we better get going let's grab our shoes.Leah sighed a little to loud where everyone could hear her. Leah said I am not ready to go I am getting a little spooked to be honest. Amy just looked at her and told her have you seen my

life it can't be as scary as the Leah. I have no mom since the accident and my dad is never really here even if he is. You two are my only friends in the whole world! Just you 2! We never do what I want ever you always are so judgmental on my life and my ideas and Amy started to just cry. Which they had never seen in all the years being friends with her. Jackie put her arm around her and said we are your family and we so support you if this house means that much to you. Then we can all handle it for you plus we are teens this is what we are supposed to do. Leah being the youngest in the group always felt childish around the so she quickly agreed. Let's go I am so ready plus everyone hypes these things up and nothing happens we will only be there a few minutes. Amy laughed no little girl not a few minutes everyone knows the really scary stuff doesn't happen till midnight we are spending the night there not here. Jackie smiled and said let's get going the sooner she gets there and the sooner she gets board the easier it will be to leave. The girls jumped through big piles of orange and red leaves until they arrived. The house looked much scarier in the dark with the windows boarded up and the metal gate banging from the wind. The vines wrapped all around the once white house that now was dingy gray and brown.Jackie said lets see if the door is even opened. Amy grabbed the door full forced and pushed up against it and nothing. The door would not budge. Leah was feeling relieved and played along barely touching the door it swung open. Now Leah could barely breathe. Amy went right in like she had no fear or care. Jackie said be careful who knows what could be in here. Amy grabbed flashlights then when she saw it the blood it even smelled like fresh blood. Amy looked at her 2 friends and said I think we might need to go. The girls looked at her in pure confusion what are you talking about? Amy said I have a weird feeling something isn't right. We need to go now then, all of a sudden they heard a mans voice. Thanks Amy for brining them here. Amy answered Hello? How do you know my name. Jackie and Leah were so mad this was your plan? To purposely scare us that's low even for you Amy and that's not okay to do to your so called friends. Amy swore she didn't know what was going and Jackie was starting to believe her. Then Leah started screaming as she saw someone in the corner with the biggest knife she had ever seen. The Man was short and a little stocky. The 3 girls ran up the stairs screaming. HELLLPPPP! No one could her them!!! Jackie had fallen down trying to make it to the door and she yelled you guys close the door and lock it! Get out! I will fight him off as long as I can. They both cried and said no not with out! Then they saw the man coming. They heard Jackie scream as loud as she could and they heard banging on the floor and saw blood slowly seep in from the door. They heard footsteps approaching Amy said this is all my fault and Leah said Amy none of this is your fault Jackie just got killed and we are next if we don't pull it together. Amy looked confused and proud all at the same time. She grabbed Leah's arm and looked for anyway to hide or get out. That's when they saw it a attic with a ladder. Amy said quick get up here we will pull the ladder in and he will never know where we are who will think we left. Leah said leave the door cracked a little bit so he thinks we went out of this room. Amy said that is the most dumb and brilliant thing I have ever heard of but we need to be quick if we are doing that. You go first Leah okay she said Shakely. The girls managed to pull up the ladder and go to the other side of the house in attic. Amy was loosing it why couldn't we have done this sooner she said? Leah confused said we are all stressed and doing the best we can. I wish I could have thought of it sooner. Then there she was. Amy white as a ghost said Jackie? You are okay? Thank god and

hugged her. That's when Jackie screamed they are up here. Leah laughed until she almost started crying. Amy said OH MY GOD! You guys are the ones scaring me that's a relief. She heard foot steps but wasn't scared. She saw the man was her DAD! Dad you are in on it? I was so scared this was crazy. I should have known when Jackie and Leah were acting braver them this couldn't be real. He grabbed the knife and held it high and said I could never hurt my own daughter which you are not! Amy said you are DRUNK its's me AMY BABY! He said no Jackie is my daughter which I found out when your mom died! You are nothing to me just a little brat who always cried and never cared about anyone only your self. Jackie Laughed and Leah was on the ground smiling with her feet on the ground crossed. Amy looking confused The dad stabbed her right in the head in between the eye balls! and her blood dripped down her face slowly to her neck. Amy said why?!?!? How could you do this to me? Jackie said my dad has been raising you on his own for years and you have ever done is bitch about him and judge him and blame him for your mom's accident for her death. Leah looked and said your mom's death was no accident. I had just gotten out of the child's asylum for another one of my famous known episodes your mom was walking right by me. Before then I had only killed animals but I needed to feed into the devilish hunger of committing a murder I wanted to watch the life drain from her face. I wanted to see real fear. Amy loosing what looked like all the blood from her body said how did they let you out Leah? Leah smiled and said that's not my name!!!! My name is Danny!!! It wasn't 20 years ago it was only a few years ago the same day and year your mom died!!!!! Amy dropped lifeless to the ground and clenched for someone's hand!!! They all kicked her dead body smothered her blood all over the walls of there house and said HAPPY HALLOWEEN AMY!!!!!

WIDEFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT 3

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>

Scary Story Contest Submission - Colon, A

2 messages

A[redacted] Thu, Oct 23, 2025 at 9:13 PM

Name: Alicia C[redacted]

[redacted] Co 80925

Age: 34

by Alicia C[redacted]

There has been a soft rustling in my ear for a few days now. I think I know why, and I am terrified. It's all because of a house on my street—house 1467 of Amberlight Lane.

My family and I just moved to Amberlight Lane. It's well known in town for its historic beauty; it was once featured in an article about the top ten Fall destinations in the state. The street is lined with cast-iron street lamps and trees that litter the sidewalks with red and gold leaves every year. And true to the name *Amberlight*, each resident fills their home with warm, soft lighting that seeps out into the street each evening.

However, house 1467 is different. It was abandoned about twenty years ago—eight years before I was born. My mom says it's a sore thumb, except in October, when it's considered "festive".

I haven't made any friends on the street yet, but I see the other kids playing outside. When they walk past 1467, they start to run. I guess to avoid being in front of it for too long.

It was Halloween night, just before dusk. I was sitting with my mom on the front porch, passing out candy to the younger trick-or-treaters who needed to make their rounds with their moms and dads before it got dark. I noticed two kids my age walking by—not trick-or-treating, just hanging out.

"Mom, can I go talk to those kids? Please?" I asked. I really wanted to make some friends. I was tired of being so bored on the weekends.

She sighed. "Yes, go ahead. But stay on our street, and don't go into anyone's house. I still don't know anyone here either."

I immediately jumped up. "Thank you!" I said, already running.

"Hey!" I called out as I ran up to the group. "Hey, my name's David." I was catching my breath. "David Morce. I just moved in over there." I pointed toward my house. My mom waved, probably thinking I was introducing her too. "What are you guys up to?"

"We're just walking around. There isn't much else to do around here, but you can come too," said a girl. "I'm Cassie, this is my brother Marcus."

I was relieved. It could have easily been a humiliating walk back to my house.

Cassie was the only one in a costume; splotchy green makeup, a black dress, and a pointy hat; obviously a witch. She gestured to Marcus, a lanky boy with brown hair and braces.

"We were just talking about the abandoned house at the end of the street," Cassie said, grinning. "We were debating who should go up and knock on the door, just to see if anyone answers."

"Why would anyone answer if it's abandoned?" I asked.

Marcus chimed in. "I swear I heard a loud noise coming from inside one night, like someone slammed a door or something.

"And I've heard scratching at the door, like a cat or dog trying to get out," Cassie added. 'Someone or *something* is in there.'" She looked at me quizzically with a raise brow. "So, David, what do you think? If you believe it's abandoned, you shouldn't be scared to go knock on the door, right?"

"I don't see the big deal." I shrugged but Cassie's growing excitement about the house was starting to make me nervous.

"Ok then," she said. "I mean it *is* Halloween after all. Shouldn't it be little scary? Maybe instead of just knocking you should go *inside*. Just a quick look around and then come back."

Her tone was taunting.

"No way! That's illegal to break into someone's house!" I said.

"Technically, it's not someone's house," Marcus added, sheepishly.

"Why don't you go then?" I asked Marcus.

Before he could answer, Cassie jumped in. "Great idea! Marcus, you go with him. The rest of us will stand watch on the sidewalk. If anyone gets suspicious, we'll shout 'Trick-or-treat!' How's that for a signal?"

"Alright, fine," I said. I didn't want to risk losing my shot at making new friends already. Cassie was bossy, but the rest seemed nice enough. "As long as Marcus goes with me, I'll go. I can see that house from my front window. I've never seen anyone around it. I'm not scared."

"Let's go then!" Cassie said eagerly. "Oh and you have to take a picture as proof that you actually walked through it."

She handed me a flashlight, and Marcus pulled one out of his pocket. This seemed preplanned. I wondered if they had planned to send Marcus in alone before I showed up or if my presence gave Cassie an out. Much to her relief, I'm sure.

We all headed toward 1467. By now, the sun had fully set. In the dark, the house looked more than abandoned—it looked *menacing*.

"Follow me" Cassie whispered, then added mockingly, "And don't start crying now."

My eyes and nose had begun to run in from the brisk wind, but I ignored her and followed her around the back of the house.

Instead of grass, the yard was filled with tall weeds laced with spider webs that pulled at the bottom of my jeans. Cassie hunched over the doorknob and started picking the lock with surprising speed.

I made a note to myself to check if our doors at home had deadbolts.

"There's no turning back now," she said. She opened the door and stepped aside.

"After you, Marcus." I said.

I didn't want to go in first, just in case they planned to close the door behind me as a prank.

Marcus grimaced and glanced at the open doorway. He stepped through flashlight sweeping shakily across the floor ahead, revealing a preview of the filth that lay ahead for us. I followed him down the narrow hallway crouching close behind while fumbling with my flashlight, trying to make it brighter. The batteries were already dying. Assuming the houses on the street are just as similar on the inside as they are on the outside, the hall should lead directly into the living room.

The air inside was filled with a dank, mildewy scent—and something else I couldn't quite identify. Like iron or rust mixed with pine. I had never smelled anything like it. Mold crept up the walls around us. The carpet was matted with dirt and stains from indeterminable sources.

"Shh—stop walking," I whispered. We both stopped and listened. My ears picked up a vague susurration coming from the end of the hall. I aimed my dim light and caught a glimpse of something scurrying across the room. I exhaled a sigh of relief. "Cassie was right. There *is* a cat."

We pressed forward, finally reaching the entrance of the room when Marcus dropped his flashlight and began to gasp and spit frantically. I shined my light at him. He was grabbing at his face. It was streaked with a reflective substance.

"What is it?!" I whispered loudly as I reached for him, then retracted my hand rapidly, trying to shake off what felt like a spider web. "Ack!"

I didn't take another step. I scanned the space around me for a safe path forward. My light caught shimmers of something strung through the air all around me.

"Sorry, it was just a web. I just wasn't expecting it. I'm good." Marcus had calmed down and picked up his flashlight. "Ugh, but my light's out."

"And mine's about to die. Just take the picture so we can get out of here." I hoped he couldn't sense the panic building in my voice. The murmur had grown louder, we were surrounded by it; a low busy hum. I had the gnawing idea that the room itself was alive.

Click. Marcus snapped a photo and the camera flashed. For just a moment the flash illuminated the room. The room had no furniture but it was far from empty. Before there was time to react we saw the source of the noise. Thousands of black legs moving quickly, crawling over each other in crowded heaps on the ceiling corners. Rust colored stains soaked into the walls directly below the clusters.

It lit up the webs that were strung from floor to ceiling. They were filled with spiders. Most were the size of normal house spiders, but some the size of rats, and some even bigger. Long, skinny legs dragged large, round abdomens big enough to be confused with a cat. A *very* large cat.

Chaos erupted. The camera flash set them off into a frenzy. Surrounding us, falling on our heads, shoulders, and at our feet. They scurried over the walls, down the hall, and across the ceiling blocking our exit. Marcus was screaming. I could hear him running around the room and stomping. I realized I was doing the same. The flashlight must've turned off when I dropped it. We couldn't see them. But we could hear them running, falling. And then I heard a *hiss*. It was long and low like steam under pressure being slowly released. It had to be one of the big ones. I ducked down and covered my head. I could hear Marcus's screams turn to sobs.

"We need to go! GO!" I yelled, fighting back my own tears as I tried to feel my way toward the exit. I ran my hand along the wall—spiders under my fingers with every touch. They crawled across my face, I could feel them in my hair. I was struggling to catch my breath in my panic, but I needed to keep my mouth closed tight. I was covered.

A roaming light filled the room from outside. Someone's headlights granted us a precious moment of light. I caught a glimpse of the way out. Then I saw one the size of a small boulder descending from directly above me. Fangs first, it slid its enormous body down from the ceiling, releasing another long, soft hiss. Its eyes reflected in the light, revealing its mindless motivation: to only seek heat…food. I was frozen—too scared to move, afraid that if I did, it might move faster. I was trapped in a web that hadn't even been spun for me yet. Or maybe it had. This house was its trap now. It had long ago moved on from flies and moths. It needed bigger prey.

Something grabbed me by the collar. "Run!" Marcus didn't let go; he pulled me along with him. We made it back outside. Cassie wasn't waiting by the sidewalk like we had planned, she was standing outside the door, stunned.

Spiders were still pouring out the door behind us, running into the yard and back into inconspicuousness.

That was Friday. Marcus and I are okay but he isn't ready to talk about it. The house is going to be destroyed once they can contain the infestation.

But there is something in my ear—something scratching, crawling, and probably growing.

L Fri, Oct 24, 2025 at 8:50 AM

T[illegible]

Hi Alicia!

Thank you for your submission, we're looking forward to reading it! The contest winners will be announced in mid to late November!

Thank you!
SPL Staff
[Quoted text hidden]

Desolation

Name: Rebecca Al

Age: 32 (adult category)

There is a menacing presence that looms within the woods. I'm not sure of what lives inside. From time to time I hear faint rustlings or see a vague, far-off shape shifting among the dark, brittle trees. Although my impressions are indistinct, there is a palpable malevolence that spreads through the woods like a fog. It seems somehow contained to the woods, but that does not diminish the sense of danger I feel. I have a sense that whatever it is that's lurking within wants me.

I dare not enter the wood, but I need to know what lies beyond it, so I walk along the border of the wood at a comfortable distance. I keep it to my right, and a dry plain stretches endlessly to my left. I need to find out whether there is some change to this interminable landscape.

I don't know how long I've been here. I can't track the passing of time. The sky is perpetually gray.

It is windless and quiet, as it usually is. All I hear is the crunching sound of my footsteps as I trudge along, lost in my thoughts.

My eyes slowly register something unfamiliar on the horizon. A human figure stands at a modest distance from the edge of the wood. I haven't seen anyone in what feels like ages.

"Hey!" My voice has been out of use and comes out in a weak croak. The person is so far away, I doubt that they heard me. Still, I wave and hasten my way towards them. To my horror, they enter the woods.

"No, it's not safe!" I whisper more to myself than to the person and pick up my pace to a jog towards the spot they just entered the woods.

As if in response to my warning, a clamor of screeches and snarls breaks out from the edge of the woods up ahead. I immediately abandon my path and dash to a nearby boulder. I crouch behind it, too petrified with fear to try to see what's happening.

Sinister, guttural sounds intermingle with the person's wails. I shut my eyes and cover my ears, just willing it to end. And, suddenly, it does. The attack must be over.

I slowly uncover my ears but remain in a crouched position. After a few long, quiet minutes of clinging to the side of the rock (as though it could really protect me) I slightly raise my head and take a cautious peek.

At first, I don't notice anything unusual. But then I see an indefinite shape among the trees slowly moving along the wood's perimeter. My heart drops in my chest as I realize it's heading in my direction.

I drop my head back down behind the boulder. I can't be seen. I close my eyes. My ears are straining to get any hint of the creature's movements. I pick up the sound of faint, trudging footsteps. As the creature nears, I'm horrified to register the sound of what can only be flesh rending and bones snapping. The mournful wails resume and seem incredibly close.

I'm driven to do the unthinkable. I make a dash from behind my covering out into the open plain.

I am exposed now. The beast can see me. I don't care. I don't think. I just need to get as far away from that creature as possible.

I run as fast as I can for probably ten minutes before I dare to glance behind me. I can't catch a clear sight of the wood, so I stop in my tracks to try to get a better look. I'm a bit perplexed to see that the woods are only a distant blur on the horizon. It seems impossible that I traveled so far in the time I was running, and yet, once I am sure of what I'm seeing, I feel a tinge of relief to be so far away.

I carefully scan the plain, and the relief spreads within my chest when I see no sign of anything following me. I can go slower now, but I am still resolved to continue my trek and leave the horrors I just witnessed far behind me.

As I turn around, I'm met by the sight of the woods not one hundred yards in front of me. I'm so startled that I jump back suddenly and collapse to the ground. I sit there dumb-founded for several moments. Even if I got disoriented during the run, how did I suddenly come so close to the woods?

I listen for any signs of the terrible beast. There is only silence.

Maybe I ran to a different part of the woods. Maybe it extends in directions that I couldn't predict.

I'm trembling from my seat on the ground even as I try to reassure myself with these thoughts. I know those explanations are insufficient. One moment I was running in an open plain and in the next this wood appeared before me.

Even with no sign of the blood-thirsty creature, I am stricken by the sense that there is an ominous force emanating from the line of tall, dark trees.

I'm in a daze for a while, but then I finally pick myself up off the ground. I back away from the edge of the woods a bit more, but I don't run away this time. I'm fairly certain it would be pointless. I decide to continue walking along the border as I was doing before. I have no other choice.

I come across something I have never seen up to this point. There is a stone well situated at an uncomfortably close distance to the woods' edge. At first, I don't even consider approaching it. But the very sight of the well seems to draw out a burning sensation in my throat. I'm incredibly thirsty.

I attempt to turn away from the well and to keep walking, but the sharp pain in my throat only intensifies the more I try to ignore it. The need is so immediate that I quickly conclude that it would be better to be killed by some beast than to suffer another minute of thirst.

I rush recklessly over to the well. The well is covered by a stone lid. I try to slide it off, but it doesn't budge. I see a short bit of rope hanging down the outer side of the well, barely touching the ground. I tug at it, but it is held securely under the weight of the lid.

I circle the well a bit desperately now, searching for a way to remove the lid. I finally spot some sort of latching mechanism. I am just about to try pushing the latch, when I hear a yell.

"Stop that!" a shrill voice commands.

I spin around, startled. A small woman emerges from the woods. I'm surprised to see another person at all, much less someone who looks so tiny and defenseless coming out from among the menacing trees. I stare at her dumbly as she cries out again.

"Didn't you notice that the lid holds the rope in place? If you take off the lid the bucket will be lost."

I look back at the well. The bit of rope I noticed before is pretty much opposite the latch on the lid. I did notice that the lid held the rope, but my thirst isn't allowing me to think clearly.

"Sorry, I'm just so thirsty," is all I respond.

"How do you think I feel? I've been waiting here forever," the woman snaps. She has dark, scornful eyes.

"Waiting?" I ask slowly.

She lets out an exasperated sigh. "Are you stupid? It obviously requires two people to access the water. One to remove the lid, the other to hold the rope. I've been waiting in the woods for ages for someone else to come along."

Now it was starting to make sense. The woman walks around the well opposite me and squats down.

"I'm holding the rope. You can remove the lid now," she says.

I nod and place my hands on the latch. I'm just about to open the lid when it all strikes me as too good to be true.

"Wait, so you'll use the bucket to get some water, and you'll share it with me?" I'm not able to conceal the suspicion in my voice.

"Yeah, yeah," she blurts impatiently. "Obviously I get to drink first. I've been waiting, and you just got here."

"But you will share with me?" I press.

I also want to ask why she was staying in the woods instead of out here by the well, but her eyes flash angrily at me.

"Do you know the torment I've been in, waiting for this water?" her low voice trembles with rage. "You'll get your water when it's your turn!"

The fiery pain in my throat rears up at her mention of the water. I don't want to anger her further, so I nod apologetically and press the latch. The lid releases and slides easily away. The well is deep, and I can't see to its bottom. The woman pulls the rope from side to side, and we hear distant splashing noises as the bucket disturbs the water.

With a look of triumph on her face, the woman starts heaving the bucket up by the rope. Soon, the bucket comes into view. The sight of the clear water sloshing about in the bucket sets me on edge. The burning sensation in my throat is all-consuming.

The woman pulls the bucket over the rim of the well, raises it to her lips and greedily gulps it down. I'm outraged as I see all the wasted water spilling out from the bucket. I take a step towards her, hoping to somehow catch some of the spilling water for myself.

The woman, sensing my movements, lowers the bucket from her lips and looks at me dangerously.

"It's just, you're spilling so much." I justify myself angrily. "Can't we scoop it out somehow and both get some?"

Her dark eyes stay fixed on me for a while, and then a vindictive smile breaks across her tiny face. She raises the bucket and dumps the entirety of the water back into the well. Then she tosses the bucket and length of rope into the depths of the well.

My perplexity is quickly overcome with blind rage. I don't know what I'm screaming at her as I charge her and knock her to the ground.

Once on the ground, her smile vanishes and she stares blankly at me. Her indifference is infuriating. "Why did you do that?" I wail. I pull her torso up a few inches from the ground and slam it back down again. Her head slaps the hard ground violently. I don't stop. I continue shrieking and smashing her into the ground. Exhaustion stops me and I look down to see what damage I've wrought.

Did I kill her? I wonder more out of curiosity than remorse.

The woman's blank eyes snap into focus. She looks directly into my eyes and she sits up abruptly and flashes a sinister grin. I don't have time to move. She grabs my wrists in her tiny but powerful hands and hauls me towards the woods.

I try to cry out but my voice chokes up with inhuman guttural sounds. Now the woman is laughing as she drags me into the ominous shade of the trees. Instead of weeping, all I can do is snarl.

The woman hurls me against a tree. I hear a dull crack and feel a searing pain across my shoulder blades where they hit the trunk. The cracking doesn't stop. It's as though this first break set off a chain reaction throughout my body. The gap between my shoulder blades begins widening. I'm breathless as my spine breaks repeatedly and pushes out as though trying to rip through my back. All I can do is wail as my body convulses and my bones shift and snap into unnatural angles.

I look hopelessly up at the woman who is watching me with a mixture of amusement and repulsion. Tears are welling up my vision, so I can't see clearly, but something about the woman is altered. Her face is unnaturally elongated. Her eyes are entirely black.

Am I becoming a beast like her? I wonder.

"You are nothing like me and you will be nothing like me." She says, clearly offended. Then she smiles again. "Soon you'll be nothing but an unthinking animal."

Why am I changing? What does this woman have to do with it?

"I was just sent to tempt you. You're not becoming like me. You're simply becoming who you truly are."

My thoughts are becoming dull, but something about what she says rings true. She walks away, disappearing deeper into the woods. I am left alone with the snapping of my bones and the deadening of my mind.

WIDEFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT 3

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>

Adult spooky story entry.

1 message

Tue, Oct 28, 2025 at 7:36 PM

To: "Library, Security Public" <spl@wsd3.org>

Title: " What happened?"
Ashley M
Age Adult
7
10

The ringing in her head was so intensely loud, such an unsettling buzz. Callie reaches up to feel her head and tries to pinpoint why her head is buzzing. That is when she runs her hand over her scalp and in between the fibers of her hair and feels something wet, she moves her hand down to her vision of sight and notices that her fingers are full of crimson red dripping down her fingers. She then confusingly looks around and realizes it is dawn and she is in a Forest full of trees, rocks and who knows what else that may lurk in the woods. She had no recollection of the night before; her princess costume from the night before was soaked in blood and had different scratch-like marks sprinkled throughout the dress as if someone had attacked her. She stands up shakily. She has no idea how she got here, and in the state she is in, there is no denying someone tried to hurt her, maybe even kill her, and they almost succeeded.

With a fuzzy memory and a sharp pain radiating throughout her head, she tries to piece together a timeline of what happened last night. The last thing she remembers is going to her first-ever college Halloween party with her best friend, Stacie, last night. Callie didn't like a lot of people, but there was always something different about her that drew Callie to Stacie. So on Halloween morning, Stacie beamed when she walked through her and Callie's dorm room door. She excitedly announced, holding up an orange and black flyer. "Sam is throwing a Halloween party tonight & we're going." As she excitedly shakes the flyer in front of Callie's face. Callie tries really hard not to roll her eyes at this goofy, stereotypical frat boy, and he's a real tool. Callie can't seem to understand what someone as magnificent as Stacie would see in someone as foolish as Sam, even despite Callie's constant claims that she gets an unsettling feeling from Sam. Stacie just calls Callie silly and ignores it, and goes back to obsessing over Sam.

That night (Halloween night), as the girls arrive on the doorsteps of the frat house, which is draped in miles of fake cobwebs and purple and orange crepe paper. They can hear the bass from the backyard booming. The girls look at each other. Stacie has a look of astonishment and excitement. Callie has a look of worry and dread. As much as Callie hates things like this, she loves Stacie, and she loves how Stacie looks when she is happy and smiling. So begrudgingly, they head into the party. As they head to the party, a not totally belligerent drunk guy hands them orange solo cups, which are filled with foamy beer. That is when Sam runs in and sneaks up on Stacie, twirling her around, admiring her seductive version of a feline. Sam and Stacie, with a quickness, run up stairs to do what? Callie can't even imagine, or maybe she can she just doesn't want to. So she then, against her better judgement, she drinks both foamy beers in her hand, one hers, the other the abandoned foamy cup of a friend who would rather spend all night with a guy like that.

As the memory fades, Callie snaps back to the present panic slowly starts creeping in. The last time I saw that untrustworthy frat bro, he was going with my best friend up the stairs. From there, everything turns really foggy. While all these thoughts race through her head, her knees become heavy and he crashes down in the forest knees first hearing the crunch of late autumn leaves underneath her, when the sun suddenly hits something causing it to shine, something appearing in the distant like a golden mini saucer, she works towards the glowing gold as she gets close she realizes it's just a golden ring. That is when she takes a closer look and realizes that the glowing is attached to something, and she finally arrives at the destination of the ominous golden glow. She lets out the biggest shriek a human has probably ever heard. With tears in her eyes, she realizes it's Stacie's ring and that her friend's ring is attached to Stacie's lifeless body. She then drops to her knees again and crawls next to her lifeless friend and examines her to try to piece together what happened. She notices the crimson wetness dripping down and covering her friend's face. Then she notices a pocket knife shoved in the abdomen of someone she loves so dearly. Her eyes welled up. Who could do this? This had to be Sam. Callie always knew he was a trouble. She wonders to herself how much pain her sweet Stacie had to suffer, and how much more sinister her death was.

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/?ik=29dd261c36&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f:1847278242903568858&simpl=msg-f:1847278242903568858 2/2

As Callie is lying on the ground next to Stacie, she hears a rustling of leaves and branches in the distance. As she begins to stand up, she notices Sam in the distance with multiple police at his side. She runs towards Sam, screaming, " How could you?" She dodges towards him, screaming, " Now u go and get the authorities as if your sick master piece needs to be a whole spectacle?"

That is when Sam looks at her, startled, and says, "I think you're mistaken. I am not sure what you remember about last, as you did seem pretty intoxicated, and your eyes appeared very dark when Stacie and I came from downstairs. You had approached us yelling and screaming, upset that the friend had abandoned you and that no one would ever really love you like u do. She then stormed off, running into the woods a few miles down from the party, looking for peace. I was so hesitant to go, it didn't seem like my business. That is when I decided to follow, and in ways I am glad I did, and in ways I am now changed forever. She told you that you need to stop being so obsessed with her. Then all of a sudden, you looked full of rage as you pushed her and she pushed you back, causing you to stumble on a pile of rocks." While he says this, she reaches up to the blood splattered wetness upon her scalp. Then her eyes began to well with tears. She then looks at him and responds, " That's when I pushed her back, causing her to hit her head on a big, massive rock hidden behind a tree. I had panicked because I didn't know if she was alive or not. I took the rock and bashed her head in more. After realizing what I had done, I was panicked she would die in pain, so I stabbed her with a pocket knife I had in my purse in hopes it would speed things along. But I love her, I have always loved her." She pleads with the authorities and Sam. That is when the authorities start to arrest Callie. As they are about to wheel her off in their patrol cars.

The frat bro Sam looks at Callie, "I was never the monster you made me about to be, it's you, you are the monster. "

NOTICE: This email message, including any attachments, is for the sole use and the intended recipient(s) regarding the business of Widefield School District 3, and may contain confidential and privileged information protected by federal and state law. Any unauthorized review, use, disclosure, or distribution is prohibited. If you are not the intended recipient, please contact the sender by reply email and destroy all copies of the original message.

WIDEFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT 3

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>

Scary Story Contest - Adult

1 message

Wed, Oct 22, 2025 at 12:55 PM

Sean F

Colo 16

The Hunter
By
Sean F

Forests that used to be death traps for the few merchants or gypsies who dared travel through them now have well-worn roads opening up new trade opportunities for dozens of towns and villages. In some of the smaller towns, it's like the dark times have been written out of the history books: doors are left unlocked; children wander off for hours without leaving their mothers in a nervous sweat.

Don't get me wrong, there's still crime. Most of the stories I look into turn out to be common pirates or bandits, but there are a few that seem to go deeper than petty thugs. It's stories like these that bring back memories of the old days; strange events that people attribute to ghosts or banshees or whatever else lurks in the dark regions of our country that people still fear, the sort of things that will give you nightmares. Although ancient superstitions aren't something I like to look into, I know firsthand that there are worse things out there than bandits.

I was on my way to Farview Hills to speak with a woman whose husband disappeared last month. I was part of a wagon train of merchants and travelers going through the marshes, the only road to Farview Hills that wasn't flooded most of the year. Pierse, the leader of the wagon train, pulled me aside one night after the wagons circled up to get my opinion on something that I could tell was making him nervous. He kept stealing glances into the dark marsh before we finally arrived at his wagon. Once inside, he pulled the tan canvas closed, leaned in close, and whispered, "Have you seen it too? Last night and the night before? Something has been moving through the marsh with us that isn't part of our wagon train."

I told him I hadn't seen anything that seemed out of the ordinary, and he invited me to stay up with him and his two sons, Thomas and Kain, and keep watch. I accepted; I thought it would do me some good to interact with other human beings in a way that didn't involve my work.

I had heard that spirits and other sorts of unmentionables were preying on travelers in the vast wilderness that makes up a majority of our landscape, but I had always thought it was the wild imaginations of the survivors trying to make sense of what happened.

To break the silence, I started telling them that I was traveling from the edges of the Knothole Mountains near Wood Haven because of my interaction with a man in our main shipping port, King's Harbor, in the harbor's most, well let's just say well-known pub, and not in a good way, I spoke with a man from a nomadic tribe that moves along the Knothorn Mountains. He had come down to King's Harbor to find work on a ship or in the fish market; whatever could make him enough money to move his family away from the mountains. When I inquired as to why he wanted to move his family, he told me, "The mountains have become too dangerous." That was all I needed to saddle my horse and head north towards the mountains.

The mountains, being well known for bringing even the most skilled climbers to their deaths, proved to be too much for me and the small group who started out from Wood Haven. By the end of the first week, we hadn't even made it halfway up, and our supplies had been nearly exhausted. We headed back down to Wood Haven, and I joined up with this wagon party shortly after that.

"Did you see anything on the mountain?" asked Thomas, throwing more wood on the fire.

"Of course he didn't, you twit," said Kain, "nothing can live up there."

"Damn it, boys!" Pierse growled, "Just keep your mouths shut and your eyes on the marsh. It shouldn't be too much longer."

And he was right. Soon, we could hear movement in the marsh; something was slowly creeping towards us. Thomas and I took up arms and put out the fire while Pierse and Kain went from wagon to wagon, warning them and getting them ready to move if we had to. A few of the other men in our company armed themselves and came outside the wagon circle with us.

We could see their eyes now, at least a dozen pairs of glowing yellow orbs, stalking through the swamp towards us. We could vaguely make out human-like shapes through the darkness.

"We're armed, don't come any closer," Pierse shouted. They did not respond. They didn't even react; they just kept coming towards us.

"What do they want?"

"What are they?"

"Are they human?" was what I could make out over the nervous chatter as our antagonists advanced on us.

Already, we had the women and children heading in the opposite direction, towards the mountains where we had made camp a few nights prior. There were caves there where they could have some shelter, and, if they stuck to the main road, there was a higher chance that someone might come along to help them.

Back at the wagon circle, we readied our bows; most of the men had the standard long bows, while Pierse, myself, and a few of the others in our group cocked our crossbows and took aim. Pierse gave one last warning before we released our bolts on our aggressors. I made sure mine found its target in the glowing yellow eye in this thing's head. I brought another bolt into my hand while searching for a second target, but I found my first target still staggering forward. I put another arrow clear through the remaining eye, and it still did not bring down whatever this thing was.

Seeing what had happened, Thomas and Kain each grabbed an oil-soaked arrow from their quiver and leapt down from their perch on top of the wagon. They dipped the tips of the arrows into the embers of our extinguished fire and shot the flaming projectiles straight into the eyes of my target. The other archers followed suit and started dipping their arrows in oil. Within minutes, every archer had an ignited arrow notched and ready. In unison, we filled the marsh with a fiery glow and could finally make out what our attackers looked like.

We were being besieged by living skeletons, some still in their skin. I've read about ghouls before, horrible undead nasties, but I didn't think they were real, or at least not real anymore.

--

Sean F. F[redacted]

"Every quiet moment carries the spark of imagination."

This is a true ghost story. It happened to me.

My husband and I and our newborn baby boy lived in an old house on Platte Avenue in the fair city of Colorado Springs. One dark autumn night, I bundled up my baby and prepared to go pick up my husband at the airport. As I entered the kitchen, put on my coat and grabbed my purse, I heard my back door close which rattled the kitchen door. I had no idea who may have entered, so I carefully opened the kitchen door to see if someone was on the landing. No one was there. Stairs to the basement also led from the landing. As I stepped onto the landing, the overhead light suddendly came on. I quickly realized that the only light switch for the landing was behind me in the kitchen! I spun around...no one was there. Then, I heard the basement door slowly creaking. I looked over the banister to see the door swing slowly open. I called out, "Who's there!" No answer. I was positive someone had entered through the back door and descended to the basement. I went back into the kitchen and grabbed the biggest knife I could find. I had to see if someone was playing a joke on me! I walked carefully down the stairs and into the basement, but no one was there. I checked the two closets, every corner and even the old coal cellar. I found nothing.

Over the many years that we lived in this house, many other unexplained occurrences took place. Loud noises late at night that sounded like a bowling ball being dropped to the floor. Jewelry worn daily, suddenly missing, that would turn up later in a coat that hadn't been worn for a couple of years. Coming home after work and finding the front door and the two windows next to our fireplace standing wide open. We often heard a woman's voice. Soon, we got used to our house ghost. We called her Mrs. Hamilton. She just liked to play pranks on us. She mean't no harm.

Submitted by:

Ms. L. Schardt,

My Horror Story

I'M A NORMAL KID WITH A TROUBLED PAST. I WAS NEGLECTED AS A KID AND R*PED TWICE, ONCE WHEN I WAS 14 AND WHEN I WAS 15. I GOT SICK WITH MENINGITIS B WHEN I WAS 12. I HAVE PTSD FROM WITNESSING A CRIME. I HAVE BLOOD SUGAR ISSUES AND SOMETIMES BREATHING ISSUES. I REMEMBER WHEN MY "MOM" WOULD LEAVE MY OLDEST BROTHER IN CHARGE SO SHE COULD" LIVE LIFE" AS SHE WOULD OFTEN SAY. I WAS GLAD WHEN MY BROTHER GOT TO BE MY LEGAL GUARDIAN AFTER MY DAD DIED. THERE WERE TIMES SHE WOULD TRY TO TAKE CUSTODY OF ME BUT GOT CAUGHT EVERY TIME. THE WORST WAS CHRISTMAS LAST YEAR. IT WAS CHRISTMAS NIGHT AND EVERYONE WAS ASLEEP EXCEPT ME BECAUSE THE BABY MONITOR WAS FLASHING SO I WAS UP AND THE HOUSE ALARM WAS GOING OFF SO I RAN TO GET MY BROTHER. THEN MYSTERIOUSLY THE BABY MONITOR WENT SILENT AND WE BOTH KNEW THAT WAS NOT A GOOD THING. SO, WE RAN TO THE BABY'S ROOM AND SAW THEY WERE NOT THERE. SO, WE CALLED THE POLICE AND THEY CAME OVER AND ASKED QUESTIONS AND CHECKED THE SECURITY FOOTAGE. AFTER THAT THEY SEARCHED FOR THE GIRLS AND PUT OUT AN AMBER ALERT SO MORE PEOPLE CAN HELP FIND THEM. IT TOOK A FEW HOURS BUT THEY FOUND THE GIRLS AND ARRESTED THE PERSON WHO KIDNAPPED THEM. AFTER ALL THE TRAGEDY, MY LIFE IS GOING GOOD AND NOW I HAVE 4 KIDS AND THEY ARE EASYGOING.

The End

ElizabethE

Adult

Food of the Gods

"Vengeance. Vengeance is all that remains."

My name is Snarler, or Tannsgrisnir in the High Tongue. I don't care which, if either, you use, as I don't plan to be here long. Along with my trace-mate, Tanngnjostr (Tooth-grinder), I lived a life none would envy. We were enslaved by the Asgaardian god Thor, forced to pull his chariot on daily treks. Sometimes he'd even have other godlings ride along: There'd be as many as four of them in the chariot! Four, being pulled by just two goats! It was a hard life that Tooth-grinder and I had, and we were more than justified to snarl and grind our teeth over even this small part of our lot. Hauling those godlings from fjord to fjord or trotting through giant- infested woods was our daily fare. And the cold! You would not believe how cold it got whenever Thor had the whim to visit the frost-giants' realm! You'd think that, of an evening, we'd be allowed to peacefully graze and replenish ourselves with restful sleep. You'd think that…but you'd be wrong.

They say that Thor's brother Loki is a malicious trickster. In reality his actions pale compared to the cruel jests of Thor. Or maybe Thor's depraved humor was just the vicious work of the Norns, those who are supposed to weave our fates and then snip off our lives so we can die into peaceful oblivion. Be warned, ye who would commerce with the gods: Thor does not let such peaceful things as Death interfere with his desires.

Each evening, after he made camp, Thor would draw forth his enchanted hammer. After our hard day of working, pulling his chariot and his friends around, he would take that hammer and bash in Tooth-grinder's head…and then mine. Sometimes it was

quick, but often it was not and we would languish in pain as our lifeblood leaked into the soil.

The hammer had an evil magic, instilled in it by dwarves who, with their tormented envy of all other living things, do their best to make lives miserable. With this hammer, Mjolnir by name, the dwarves exceeded their highest expectations. When it killed someone or something, it held the victim's soul, their life-essence, until the wielder chose to release it. Thus, when Thor slew us of an evening, we were still there, still aware, still feeling. We saw him draw his knife, pierce our skin with its keen point. We felt him flay our carcasses, carve the muscle from our bones. We anguished as the flames of the cooking fires slowly roasted our flesh, felt the teeth of Thor and his guests rip into us with each bite they took. Eventually they would have their fill. Did we dare hope that the peace of death would come now? Would our souls be released to seek the eternal pastures which we deserved?

No.

Come morning Thor would spread our flayed skins upon the frosty or dew-dampened ground, then scatter our well-chewed bones back upon them. Releasing our life essences from his hammer, he would focus them upon the bare bones and skins, using his magic to flesh out our bodies, forcing us back into life…a horrific life of continuous servitude. We snarled and grit our teeth even more fiercely when he came to us once more with the iron bits, wedging them painfully behind our molars. Do you wonder why we snapped at him as he forced us to accept those bitter bits within our mouths, strapped the traces once more upon us, and whipped us once more into motion? This was our daily, and nightly, lot: One we would have to endure forever…or so it seemed.

It was not uncommon, during our travels, for Thor to stop at a mortal's abode. It was amazing how often the mortals owning these homes had daughters of nubile age. Thor and the other godlings would flirt outrageously, competing with each other for the attentions of the girls. Thor loved to seem generous and also liked to amaze the peasant folk with his magic, particularly if a daughter was awed by his grandeur.

One night when Thor was our sole passenger, he stopped at the farmstead of a peasant named Gunbar. Gunbar had a son, Jalfi, and a daughter, Roseka. Roseka was just coming into the bloom of womanhood, and Thor's eyes lit lustfully when he saw her. True to form, Thor invited the family to join in a feast. I, of course, knew what was coming and tried bolting as soon as the reins were released and the traces unstrapped. But Thor grasped one of my horns, threw me to the ground, and struck once again with that cruel hammer. As I was squirming, it proved a glancing blow, leaving me dazed and all too easily a victim of his second blow .Tooth-grinder fared no better, and soon we were better fare than those peasants had eaten for many a moon. The son, Jolfi, so greedy to get every last ounce of sustenance from this god-sent meal, even cracked one of Toothgrinder's leg bones to get at the nutritious marrow. Thor was so smitten with Roseka, calling her his Rosebud and running his hands through her silken tresses; he did not notice what Jolfi was doing. As the bone cracked I felt my trace-mate's spirit wince in pain, but that pain would prove our release from servitude.

The next day dawned clear but cold. Gunbar and his children did not wish to leave their turf-fire even to bid their guest "safe travel" as was customary. I could tell that Thor had made no conquest the night before as he grumbled his way to the door. Yet Thor still had one more trick to show them. He summoned them outside to witness what he

called his most impressive magic. One does not lightly refuse a god, so soon the three mortals were all huddled outside their doorway. Thor spread out the goatskins, those shells of our tortured lives, then placed our bones upon them. Majestically he raised his hammer, calling Tooth-Grinder and I forth once more into our skins. But this time, as I stood, I saw Tooth-grinder stumble. My trace-mate was lame!

Thor was furious! His chariot could not be pulled by a lone goat. But then I saw a crafty gleam in his eye. Perhaps he could turn things to his advantage. He had not yet given up on wooing the young lass, and angrily charged the family with damaging his property. Gunbar blanched for, if such a charge were made at a woot-meet, his reputation would be ruined. He could afford not even a skald to help him with his case should this come before the judges. All this showed in Gunbar's facial expression within an instant, and Thor's quick eye told him that Gunbar would quickly agree with any demand the god made. Thor's skillful bartering soon had the peasant giving his two children as servants in exchange for two goats, one of which was lame. Perhaps the peasant thought his children would have a better life being with the gods, instead of on an overworked farm. Perhaps he simply was thinking of two fewer mouths to feed: I will not judge him. As his son and daughter walked off with Thor, I wondered if Thor would be tasting Roseka's lips that night, or her flesh, one never knows with the gods. My one wish for the two youngsters was that they would not end up experiencing the hammer's magic as Tooth-grinder and I had.

Put out to pasture that day, I thought the Norns had finally redeemed us. There was grass to eat, the weather was warm, and we were finally free. No more trudging along with that massive chariot behind us, no more daily slaughter, no more suffering as we

were eaten each night and restored each day. A butterfly wafted by on a gentle breeze and I gave it a merry chase. But the Norns are not kind. They weave our fates using entrails for warp threads and human heads as loom weights. I should have known our retirement was not to last.

Humans have but few uses for goats. A she-goat can give milk for cheese, but a he goat is only good for the use of his hair to weave a coarse cloth…or for meat. That afternoon Gunbar came to the field with a sharpened knife. I ran, but Tooth-Grinder, being lame, was not fast enough. He truly died, his life blood soaking into a field on his first day of freedom, and I saw the same fate lay in my near future. That night I bolted for the woods.

I wandered some for the next few months, cursing my life and the gods who wrought such misery. I had no companion now save my anger, and that anger finally led me here. The journey to find you was slow, for I had to be careful. I knew, O Fenrir Wolf, that the gods had hidden you well. But the wind brought word of your presence; I followed every rumor until I discovered your prison. I knew Heimdall, Thor's ally, kept watch so none could get to you. Yet cautiously I crept past Heimdall's gaze, and his interest was not aroused. Why would he suspect a goat, especially one of Thor's own? It is common knowledge that the Asgardians keep you half-starved so you lack the strength to break the magic cord that binds you. The gods know that you hate them as much as I do, that when you are freed you will attack them and destroy their Val-hall. All know how they fear you, how they tricked you in younger days. They called it a game, promising to unbind you. You broke the greatest of chains, but when they offered the magic cord, you suspected their duplicity. The godling Tyr put his hand in your mouth as

guarantee that they would release you…but they did not. His hand was not a great enough cost for their betrayal; their refusal to give you the promised freedom. Your long years of your captivity demand that you do no less than bring their doom. Ragnarok will begin, the end of all. Only starvation keeps you weak enough to be held by their chain.

Now I stand before you, having often served as the food of gods. Thor has eaten me; his magical strength courses through me still. My meat will provide you more than enough sustenance to break the chain that holds you. Promise me but two things before I walk within your chain's reach and Ragnarok begins. First, that your jaws be quick and merciful; second, that my vengeance on the gods be fulfilled.

The Church in the Woods

The soft cheeks of Audrey Hoffman weren't prepared for the pain of the blow. It was almost as if Erwin Tandor's knuckles were one with her mandible for a brief, horrific, moment. "Just who do you think you are?" he sneered. All Audrey could do was gasp through her tears and bloody nose. "I don't know," she sniffled, cautiously beginning to back away from her bully. "Exactly!" Erwin shouted back. "You're just some dumb first grader. You'll *never* know." Erwin turned away and walked off, of course, light on his feet. "Wait!" Audrey squeaked after him, and he spun back around. "You want more of this?" Erwin smiled wickedly and held up his fist. "Who do *you* think you are?" The whites of his eyes became frozen snow and ice, but only for a second. "I'm *strong,"* said Erwin. "Stronger than *you.*"

Audrey rubbed her black and blue face, and dashed off to the schoolyard, ignoring the coos and pleas of the teachers and administrators pursuing her. They had no power. The very same thing would happen to her again tomorrow. If those in authority didn't have real power to stop the sufferings of the "little kids" like herself, who did? Certainly not the parents. Her mother worked over time, and she never knew her father. Audrey had known how to fend for herself from the very start. Maybe that's what life was about. Surviving, and fending for yourself. But in order to accomplish that, one needed to be *strong.* Animalistically strong.



Micheal was higher than every eagle that soared the planet in his mother's hands as she held him above the chattering crowd at Metropolitan Local Zoo. "Closer, mommy, closer," the little one babbled. "I'll try," his mother answered hesitantly. It took some pushing and squeezing on Mrs. Jones's part to make it all the way up to the cage, but she made it. The gigantic glorious beast glowered, glaring at the sweaty tourists and families that gaped at him. There was a plaque on his cage that read, *Ajax, African Lion, King of the Beasts.* Micheal's eyes sparkled with wonder, and he smiled ear to ear at the thought of being called "king of the beasts." The only thing that stood between Micheal, and the king of the beasts were the cold bars of metal that caged the lion in. Micheal jerked forward, reaching his tiny arm closer..closer.. A frightened squeal escaped the boy's mouth as he reflexively pulled back. The lion had pounced on the bars of his cage, snapping his heavy mandible. His cold and kingly gaze was fixed directly on Micheal. A majority of the crowd around the lion cage had cowered elsewhere, whispering something about a savage beast. "Foolish child," Micheal's mother placed him back on the ground as she scolded him. "You should *never* place your hand near the cage of a wild animal."

Micheal pouted all the way home from the zoo, sorrowfully wishing that he had gained the favor of the jungle kingdom's ruler. He felt a weight on his stomach. It wasn't fear. Micheal knew he was safe now. The weight was much too cold and steely to be considered disappointment. It was shame. Not because Micheal had been scolded by his mother in public, that was something he had grown very accustomed to. When Ajax the lion bared his teeth in Micheal's direction, Micheal had been *scared.* He couldn't be *scared* of a lion, even if it *was* the king of the beasts. Getting scared was for babies. No, Micheal just knew in his heart that he had to be the one to *hunt* the lion. Show it who's boss. Because everyone died, but only the weak died a death of cowardice.



Kelly bit her dry and cracked lip as the battered truck she had owned since was fifteen rattled across the woodlands. She hadn't been back to her aunt's cabin since the Thanksgiving before last. (Kelly couldn't make it last year due to the unforgiving fleet of snow that walled her in.) She wished that she was visiting for the holidays. Instead, she was on her way to a funeral.

On the sweltering late August morning it happened, Aunt Estelle rang her six times, but Kelly had been operating a wood chipper at the lumber mill, so she didn't pick it up until the very end of the day. After Kelly came home, (where there was decent cell service), she returned her aunt's call. "Jill's gone." Kelly's heart practically stopped. "What? What do you mean she's *gone?* I thought she was at summer camp." No response. Kelly tried to swallow the boulder that managed to find its way into her throat. Did the line cut out? "She was supposed to be back from Camp Vestri two months ago. Apparently, some sort of batshit forest fire started the night before she was supposed to come home. The staff has been looking everywhere. *We've* been looking everywhere. Not a trace. The authorities decided that it was time to…" my aunt choked up. "Proclaim her dead." The color drained from Kelly's face, and her thoughts melted into pure static. "My baby's been reduced to ash.." Aunt Estelle was in hysterics.

Jill was only sixteen when it happened. Kelly didn't want to imagine what it was like to die at sixteen years old. Kelly could still remember how Jill would dash to the seat next to her every Christmas and Thanksgiving. Somehow, Kelly never lost track of all of the pictures, letters, and crafts that Jill had made her. If you asked her to, Kelly could recite Jill's favorite color (purple), favorite animals (penguins and moose), and best friend (it changed from year-to-year, but her most recent one was named Red.). Even though Kelly wouldn't have traded the treasure of a girl for all the money in the world, the tears never came. Kelly just *couldn't* believe that Jill was dead, despite the fact that all of the evidence was there. Forest fires were bitches that inhaled wood trees and cabins faster than five-year-olds inhaled macaroni and cheese. It was no secret that the fires inhaled people even faster.

Kelly shook the image from her head. There was still six hours left in her journey to Aunt Estelle's cottage, and she couldn't afford to crash her truck. She deeply inhaled, and caught a glimpse of her slightly wrinkled face in the rearview mirror, framed by a light brown bun streaked with gray. Aunt Estelle never failed to mention how stunning her verdant green eyes were. Kelly tried to reroute her train of thought, but instead, she accidentally rerouted her truck instead. Which wrong turn did she make? Her truck was just managing to squeeze between crowds of dying pines, branches brutally scratching against the window. Kelly tapped on her phone to open up her GPS, but the screen remained unchanged and black.

Kelly gasped in shock as her stomach took a leap at the sparky sound of a blown fuse. Or at least, Kelly thought it was a blown fuse. The smoke streaming through the cracked window of the truck made her cough. There was no doubt about it. The engine was broken. Kelly sighed, but remained calm. She knew she could fix this, but a two hour pit stop in the middle of God-knows-where was not exactly ideal for a long truck trip. Kelly popped open the bed of the truck, and it squeaked open like a tortured squirrel. Kelly's jaw hung open. Her suitcase and duffel bag took up all of the space in the truck bed. She was so used to having jump cables and repair tools stowed away, that she had forgotten she had taken them out. Kelly's heart began pounding, and she fought the urge to scream. But then again, she was so far away from society, that not a soul would hear it. All she had to survive on her own was some clothes, her reading glasses, her dead phone, and keys. Maybe there was an abandoned shack campground nearby. That wasn't uncommon in this part of the country. But that was a best case scenario. All Kelly could do was walk until she found some form of civilization. She'd be walking for miles, but if she waited for someone to rescue her, she'd be waiting even longer. Besides, Kelly was the type to take accountability and pull *herself* out of her own shitshow.

As she strolled through the woods, collecting her thoughts, the silky scent of pine faded away to a prickly odor similar to marujana. Or was it gasoline? Kelly couldn't tell, but it certainly didn't belong in the forest. She kept walking anyway. Perhaps this was only the beginning of her going mad.

Her journey continued, and the forest changed from a dark cage of trees closing her in, to a slightly more defined, yet still unkempt, path. The path continued for a few hours before reaching almost a solid wall of pines. Kelly's heart raced. Could this be the boundaries to someone's property? She squeezed her way through the pines, into a clearing. Kelly was shocked to find a battered chapel that probably hosted a congregation of twenty, at most. The white paint on its walls was chipping off, and the cross on the top of the building looked like it had been pulled from a windmill. Outside the church, was a sturdy metal sign with engraved letters that read: PASCAL LAMB CHAPEL. CHRIST IS OUR HOPE. It was unsurprising that the age-old sign had been graffitied, but the text that was crudely spray painted in black felt…off. **HAIL THE LION.** Kelly raised an eyebrow. A crazy person had definitely made a visit here. A druggie who "found God," and wanted to share it with the world. Kelly sighed, and hoped that there would be a stash of doomsday prepper supplies inside the church. She walked up to the church's double doors, and pushed them open with a creak that echoed through the sanctuary. At least 200 pairs of eyes laser focused on her. What kind of church was this?



The stares of the congregation only lasted a few seconds before Kelly squeezed in the pews among them. The preacher at the altar kept going like nothing had happened. The man was tall, and muscular. His baby blue shirt was faded with dirt, and his beard was messy and unkempt. He looked like most of Kelly's coworkers at the lumber mill. "The book of Peter read that the Enemy roams like a lion, watching for someone to devour. The only way we can escape the traps of the Devil is if *we* devour *him.* We must *become* the lion." A chorus of 'amens' resounded through the congregation. Kelly relaxed. Practically all of the pews were filled, which meant that *someone* could probably show her where she could get help. "We must cut *everything* out of our lives that lures into the jaws of the enemy. The longer we linger in worldly pleasures, the more sumptuous we are for the hungry beast. Anything that

even makes you *consider* the experience of submitting to temptations, *you must kill.*" Roars of agreement, amens, and monologues recited in tongues were chorused back. "I will conclude today's sermon with the reminder that the weak do *not* pass through the narrow gate. You are a predator. You are a lion."

The preacher came down from the altar, and nobody spoke a single word as they left the church. Kelly could hear the breeze passing through the branches of the pines. A few men lingered in the chapel, whispering among themselves. Kelly stood up in her pew, and started to approach them, but was met by a furious and scrunched expression, and a cock of the head towards the chapel doors. She obeyed and left. Most of the churchgoers had already wandered back off to the woods, but Kelly was able to quickly tap one member on the shoulder before she walked away. The woman turned around, her brown eyes creased with suspicion. She couldn't have been any older than 25. Her dirty blond hair was pulled tight in a low bun, and her body was draped in a knit brown sweater dress. "Excuse me ma'mm," Kelly began. "I'm so sorry to interrupt your Sunday, I know that you've probably got things to do and people to see, but my old truck broke down not far from here, and I really gotta hit the road for a personal matter. Could you maybe point me in the direction of a mechanic shop, or someone who can help me out?" The woman avoided eye contact with Kelly, and picked at her nails nervously. She didn't answer. "I'm sorry ma'mm, I didn't mean to offend you or nothing, I just.." The woman dashed back into the church building, her eyes practically glued open with shock. Kelly shook her head, confused. Maybe the woman had some sort of disability that prevented her from speaking. Kelly had a cousin like that, and had always felt embarrassed that she didn't know how to sign back and forth with him.

A few seconds later, the preacher came out of the chapel doors, and approached Kelly. He smiled warmly, his brown, slightly bloodshot eyes glazed with honey. "I'm so glad you came to the service today," he said, holding out his hand for me to shake. "I'm Pastor Micheal, I'm sort of the one who keeps things shaking around here." Kelly gladly shook his hand back, grateful to have found someone friendly. Of course, Kelly knew that it was only to try to convert her, but she knew an easy way out. She would just politely decline, get her car towed, and leave. "My name is Kelly, my phone's dead, and I need some help getting home." "Home!?" Pastor Micheal laughed. "Daughter, you *are* home." Kelly suppressed a sigh. She would get some help sooner or later. "So, you guys are Christian?" she asked. "We are the Church of Deliverance. We are Christian, and God has revealed to me that it is my calling to start a *new* church community, one that breaks boundaries and expands the horizons of modern Christian life." Kelly opened her mouth to ask for a phone to borrow, but Pastor Micheal spoke first. "My daughter in Christ Sarah was very distressed. She said that you were travelling?" "Yeah, just to see family. And it's really urgent. I really need your help," urged Kelly, careful not to abandon her polite tone. "Well, what's the matter?" Pastor Micheal cooly asked, as if he had heard about–and dealt with–every emergency in the world. "Well, if you must know, my cousin is dead. I'm travelling for her funeral," Kelly coldly stated before biting her lower lip. "Who was your cousin?" asked Pastor Micheal. "Her name was Jill. She was killed in a fire at Camp Vestri a few months ago." Pastor Micheal stroked his chin. "Jill Comptren?" Kelly just barely stopped herself from gasping, and stared agape at the pastor. "That's her, alright," said Kelly. "Did you know her?" she quickly added. Pastor Micheal laughed. "Walk with me," he said, gesturing into the woods. Kelly followed, hoping that since he had connections with Jill, that he could direct her to Aunt Estelle's place.

"Jill Comptren was dead, but now she is truly alive!" the pastor grinned as he led Kelly through the trees. "Being alive in Christ and being *alive* aren't the same things," Kelly reminded him. "We found her," Pastor Micheal reassured her. "Really!? What!? Can I talk to her!? Why haven't you called.." "Shhh..shh.." the pastor coaxed. "You'll see her in time. For now, let me explain how *you* can truly be alive too." "I didn't come here to convert to no religion. I came here to collect my niece, and bring her back to her family." "My child, she *is* with her family.." Pastor Micheal started to say something else, but Kelly paid no attention. "*No she's not!"* Kelly meant to sound menacing, but her voice broke, so it came out like a whine. The pastor stopped in his tracks, and swiveled his feet to face Kelly. Then he clutched her shoulders and whispered, "It will *not* be necessary for you to say a word, because they *will see* how *pure* and *reverent* your conduct is." Kelly's face flamed, and she tensed every one of her muscles. She wanted to say something like, "You *did not* just tell me to shut up," or "It's in your best interest to take your hands off of me *this second*," but nothing came out. It was like her brain misfired, and wouldn't let her lips articulate her words. The pastor continued to walk. "When we found your cousin, she was miserable. She was sobbing with great pain, she had lipgloss on her lips, and diamond studs in her ears. She was a lost sheep. But we brought her home. And with the help of my sister Audrey, we showed her who she *truly is. A lion."*

Pastor Micheal squeezed between a couple of trees, and Kelly followed behind him, revealing another clearing. A very large plot of dirt was surrounded by cut tree trunks, and there were hundreds of little wooden shacks lined up in rows. At the very end of the rustic neighborhood, lay a small stucco building. The two weaved among the rows, and stopped at one that was a few houses away from the stucco building. Pastor Micheal nodded to the house.

"Pay a visit to Audrey. She will help you clean up and find something decent to wear. I hope you will choose to follow the light. It truly *will* bring you peace and joy." Pastor Micheal walked off, leaving Audrey alone.

Her first instinct was to get the hell out of here. She had mistakenly wandered into some sort of fucked-up religious commune, and would be toast if she didn't become a permanent follower. But if Jill was here, Kelly would never forgive herself for not bringing her cousin back. If she got on the pastor's good side, maybe she would have a chance to quietly escape with Jill in a few weeks. Kelly inhaled deeply, and walked up to the wooden shack. The entire house had clearly been hand-built of hard wood and rusty nails. The walls grew a garden of splinters, and the low and flat roof was wet from rain. Kelly gently knocked on the knobless door three times. "Come in," a deadpan voice commanded.



The interior of the shack was almost bare. The two things inside were a wooden rocking chair and spinning wheel. The woman inside was doing some sort of embroidery in the chair. She had lightly tanned skin with ratty dark brown hair that flowed just past her chest. Her outfit was a dress that looked similar to a bedsheet, with a bright orange sash draped across her shoulders. "Are you.. Are you Audrey?" asked Kelly. The woman gritted her teeth and stood up. "Are you the newcomer?" the woman asked, her clenched teeth forcing itself into a smile. "I'm just here to collect my cousin and go home," Kelly honestly responded. "I'm certain that The Wise One explained that you are home." "Uhh.." before Kelly could think of a way to answer, the woman kept talking. "How much do you care about yourself?" Audrey's fake smile softened into an expression of concern. "How much do I care about myself?" Kelly echoed, her brow creasing with confusion. She had never been asked that before, and didn't know how to answer. "When was the last time you felt truly..*loved?*" The woman's eyes seemed to pinprick every bit of Kelly's being, and Kelly shuffled her feet on the floor, unsettled. She wasn't sure if she wanted to answer the woman's question. Not because the woman scared her, but because Kelly truly didn't know. "That one stumps a lot of people."

A more natural smile melted across the woman's face. "Do you know why God tracks our every move?" How many questions was she going to ask? "Because He *loves* you. He *wants* you to be loved, sister." Kelly shrugged. That's exactly what she'd been told in Bible School. Maybe this place was more normal than she thought it was, and they were just a bit..out there. "But the only way that you can accept that love, is by accepting others. And when we all accept each other, well..that's how The Kingdom of Heaven is built." Kelly just nodded and played along. She had been raised Christian, so she was used to hearing this kind of stuff. "Even if you are an outsider, I accept you," the woman's airy voice seemed to float into Kelly's heart. "My name is Audrey. I promise, we *will* get you to your cousin, and help you back to where you came from. We just ask that you do one thing." "What?" asked Kelly. "Come to our Spiritual tonight. Just have an open mind. Who knows, you may learn something new." "And.." "And after that, we'll bring you right back to where you came from." "Thank you," said Kelly, her shoulders relaxing as relief took her over. "Oh, and my name is Audrey. Don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything."



Kelly spent the rest of the day wandering among the odd village in search of Jill. Irritation continually built up in her. Only some came out of their houses, and Kelly would've known Jill's face. She had even asked a passerby, "Have you seen Jill Comptren around here?' The man just shook his head and grunted. Kelly sat on a bare patch of forest ground, and sighed. It did occur to her that the preacher may have been lying, so that he had more time to try and convert her. But if he was lying, he wouldn't have known Jill's first and last name on the fly. She *had* to be here, and Kelly would not rest until she found her cousin. It was her duty and purpose now. Kelly's heart gave a leap as she spotted something against the wall of the stucco building at the end of the neighborhood. Her hopes weren't very high, but they didn't need to be, because what she saw turned out to be exactly what she was hoping for.

Kelly hadn't seen a real wall-mounted payphone in years. Of course, the one mounted on the building was rusty, neglected, and likely hadn't been shown any love for some time. Kelly frantically searched her pockets for loose change. No luck. Her last hope was her bra. Kelly discreetly searched below her button down, and managed to find a singular quarter tucked behind the thick band of her brassiere. She thanked whatever higher power had

blessed her, and shoved the quarter in the slot. Then, Kelly thanked the same higher power that she was born into a generation that forced her to memorize phone numbers. Her Aunt Estelle's house phone was the first–and only number–Kelly had ever remembered. It had been drilled into her head from the minute she could be outside and alone with the door closed. Kelly very carefully punched the number, hoping with all her might that Aunt Estelle still answered her house phone. *2484345508* A piercing and static beep rustled through the speakers. Kelly cringed, but still clung to the hope that the phone was functional. The phone made the noise a few more times, and then a tinny and almost aggressive automated voice informed her: *The caller you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please leave a short message after the tone.* The obnoxious distorted beep sounded again, and Kelly stamped her foot and growled, "*Fuck!*" "Aunt Estelle, this is Kelly. I don't have much time to explain, but the truck's bit the dust–and I'm at this weird religious commune–if you can track the call, please come find me as soon as you can. I have reason to believe that they've got Jill, and she survived the fire. It sounds crazy, but–" *Time's up.* The automated voice spoke again, and the receiver rang obnoxiously. Kelly slammed the receiver back down, and stomped away.

The brash orange of the sunset was almost a compliment to the dusty brown of the dirt on the ground, and the strange pot-like smell returned to the air. People in entirely beige and brown yarns started leaving their huts, and making their way back into the woods. Out of the corner of her eye, Kelly caught sight of a short girl with lightly tanned skin, dimples, and sandy hair— "Jill!"

Kelly ran to her cousin like an Olympic runner determined to win gold. A shiny and perfect smile spread across the girl's face--her white gingham skirt flowing behind her. The two embraced, beyond overjoyed. "Are you alright?" Kelly hugged Jill tighter. They broke, and Jill replied, "I've been given food, shelter, clothing, and community. I could've been consumed in the fiery flames, before a savior came." She sounded like she was reading cue cards, but the urgent wideness in her dark eyes told Kelly that it was safer to play along.

"I wasn't aware that the newcomer was you!" Jill practically jumped into the air. "Usually, we don't allow newcomers in the village, but Pastor Micheal, our Wise One, says he likes you. He says there's something special about you. What did he say again.." Jill tapped her fingernails together, thinking. "That God has put Himself in your eyes. Yes, that's what he said. And *that's* why you should come to the Spiritual. Come on," Jill took Kelly's hand, and dragged her towards the woods. "Uhh..what *is* this Spiritual thing, exactly?" Kelly questioned. "It helps you open your heart and mind to God even more. I've never been before, but The Wise One says I'm ready. I can't believe I get to do it with *you!*" Kelly bit her lip, and began to sweat. What was she going to say? She had no proof that this Spitiual–that this *entire establishment* was anything abnormal. Yet–she felt in her gut–that something *evil* lurked behind it.



The chapel was dead silent–just like she had first found it. Yet, every pew was evenly filled with people. Everyone stood entirely motionless, barely moving a muscle. They were like mannequins, but glassy eyed and gently breathing. Kelly imagined that their heartbeats sounded mechanical. The smell of hot honey wafted through the chapel, the result of the many candles that were scattered around the sanctuary. Kelly and Jill were the last ones to file in, save for Pastor Micheal and Audrey. The footsteps of the two echoed across the aisle, like the faint chirp of a bird who hid their nest in the ceiling of a tunnel. Audrey stopped at the front of the altar, and took a seat in the front pew. Pastor Micheal continued his walk, and stood in the center, in front of the bare table. "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him," he plainly quoted to the crowd. "Who among you would like to be *godly?*" Every hand in the congregation mechanically reached for the sky. Kelly raised her hand, too, so that she didn't cause a scene. But as she held her arm up, something flashed through her mind. Kelly didn't remember much about her childhood, but right now, something pushed her..no...*forced* her to remember.

Kelly was back in Bible School, in the bright red children's room of a tiny Southern Baptist Church beyond the grasslands. The burly preacher read aloud from a children's picture Bible in a honeyed and intense Southern accent, his eyes scanning every little set of button eyes in the crowd.

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. *"For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

Kelly's stomach churned, and she quickly put her hand down. "We must mimic The Lord in *everything,*" Pastor Micheal continued his speech. "We must die with The Lord, we must rise with The Lord. Thus, we must

sacrifice ourselves *to* The Lord." Pastor Micheal knelt before the altar, and opened a drawer attached to the front of the table. From the drawer, he procured a single rusty nail. Not a nail used for woodworking or repairs, but one that resembled a pike. Along with the nail, the pastor also withdrew a hammer with a yellow rubber handle, and a flat metal brick for the body. He also pulled out a clay chalice, and a pile of leaves. Pastor Micheal placed the leaves inside of the chalice, and fixed his gaze on Audrey.

"Almighty God, have mercy on me," Audrey's light voice rang throughout the chapel as she stood up, and walked up to the altar. She kneeled next to Pastor Micheal, and Pastor Micheal turned to the crowd. "Lead by example, all of you," he gestured to Audrey with the rusty nail. All of a sudden, he slammed the rusty nail into Audrey's forearm with the hammer. She wheezed as the spike protruded through her dirty skin, the metal tinted orange with fluid. Kelly squeezed Jill's hand and stood up. This macabre act of blasphemy *couldn't* be anything religious or righteous. This was a cult.



In a flash, the pastor removed the nail from Audrey's throbbing arm. The gaping wound oozed with infection, and Audrey's eye twitched, a force of some kind suppressing her tears. Kelly didn't notice this, her eyes were on the door, grip set firmly on Jill. *They were getting out.* The faded ivory doors moved closer and closer, but a weight ever-so-slighty pulled them back. Audrey was holding onto Jill's other hand, and Jill stopped to look back. Pastor Micheal moved his head to the three girls by the door, and drank from the cup. The noxious smell that had previously filled the forest now filled the room. "We are lions," he said. "The lions must consume the enemy. *I know* that both of you truly want to be free." "See?" Audrey held up her limp arm, the sanguine opening pulsating. "God won't let me cry, because the pain is *good*." "All of you guys....are *fucked up."* Kelly yanked her cousin back, and pushed on the double doors. A barrier clanked against the divide, locking them in. Pastor Micheal now stood with them at the back, holding his hammer and nail. "Do something *good* for your cousin. Show her what it's like to be *like God, knowing good and evil."* Kelly remained silent, and guided Jill behind her back. Hatred pulsed through her soul, like black ink in water. She wanted this man to *die.* "I'm still waiting," Pastor Micheal impatiently tapped his foot. Kelly convulsively gave Pastor Micheal a shove to the shoulder. He stood still, like a sturdy oak. "I was *counting on you* to make the right choice Kelly. I thought you were going to be a fierce lioness, like Audrey." "Do not. Touch. Her," Kelly threatened through a clenched jaw. "I promise, I won't," the pastor smiled. "*You* have to find someone important to you, to assist in your transformation. Clearly, that person is our own precious Jill." "You can't make me do this," Kelly couldn't stop her tears from flowing. Pastor Micheal moved closer, and whispered directly into Kelly's ear, "There's someone I want you to meet, daughter."



Echoes of breathing could be heard in the chapel while Kelly was being dragged across the aisle like a dog on a leash. Of course, the attendees stared, but Kelly noticed that some of them had tears in their eyes. Her heart pounded like the nail that Audrey had taken in the forearm. Kelly's brain melted at the thought of what might happen to her, and the mush that her brain had become proceeded to boil at the thought of what might happen to Jill. Kelly was dragged onto the altar, behind the table. Pastor Micheal pushed on the bare wall behind the altar, forcing a built-in door to protrude. The sound that drifted out of the door was a squealing sort of whimper, a very faint and quiet cry. Kelly's heart dropped to her stomach. Would she be left behind the altar to starve?

Pastor Micheal was the first to enter the door, and led Kelly down a straight cement staircase. Kelly caught a glimpse of a grimacing Audrey closing the door behind them. The whimpers and whines got even louder as they descended toward an echoing chamber. "Do you keep people down here?" Kelly stammered. Pastor Micheal didn't answer until they arrived at the lower landing, an unfinished cement basement with stained walls. "No, daughter," the pastor replied. "The people keep *themselves*."

Kelly did not listen to the pastor's answer. She was regaining her feet, trying not to pass out at the only thing in the cold and damp room. A large metal cage, holding a quivering and starved lion. Upon seeing Kelly and Micheal, the lion pounced on the bars of its cage, desperately scratching. "Are you *becoming* the lion?" asked Pastor Micheal. "Or do you *belong* to the lion?" The animal shakily prowled around its prison, and Kelly was able to count every one of its ribs, and the ridges of its spine. Kelly took a deep breath, knowing that there had to be *some way* to get out of this. She looked Pastor Micheal in the eye, and asked, "Why?" The pastor's expression creased with curiosity. "*Why* do you hurt people–and animals–like this?" Above the basement, I heard a slight vibration. "You are

more *hurt* now than you've ever known. You need the healing of Jesus Christ." A repeated squealing noise startled the lion even more, and it snapped its teeth. "Ajax is *mine* now, because *I am* the lion. You have two choices, daughter. Audrey is keeping a close eye on your cousin up in the chapel. However, because *you* are her spiritual guide, *you* are the only one who can truly transform her into the lioness she truly is. In that process, you too, will become a beast. Audrey is already the queen of beasts. She can do nothing about your indifference." Repeated banging and shouts shook the floorboards that held up the ceiling. Kelly didn't know how to think. "So, your choices are, *become the lion,* or *be devoured by it."* Pastor Micheal reached into the pocket of his khakis, and pulled out a bronze key.

Kelly spun around, and bolted back towards the stairs, but the pastor was too quick for her. He restrained her by the torso, applying an overwhelming amount of pressure on her ribcage as he dragged her across the cement floor. Micheal slammed Kelly against the bars of the cage. The beast's unlatched mandible framed Kelly's head. The lion's putrid breath filled her senses, and she could closely observe the rubbery texture of its gums. One of his elbows dug into Kelly's neck, and he restrained her feet with the weight of his boots. The pastor's other hand still gripped the key to the cage, where he was less than an inch away from penetrating the lock. Kelly tried to listen for more noises from above the basement, but all that met her was silence. It was clear that nobody was coming to rescue her, or Jill. "Don't you *want* to be stronger than the enemy? Don't you want to *become* the lion? Become *like the one true God?*" The pastor's breath uncomfortably blew into Kelly's ear. She only had one course of action. Kelly barely gasped out three words. "*Jesus was a lamb."*



This was supposed to be mine. Jill admired the intricately marbled ceramic of the urn. Engraved on it were the words: *Strength in Life, Peace in Death.* Jill almost wished it was her, knowing that she couldn't have done what her cousin did. Kelly was the only reason that she was able to escape the commune on time. Well, Kelly, and.. Jill shook it off. What she did was not worth a second thought. Not until the trial.

Excruciating pain suddenly dug through her legs, and she stumbled backwards. The morticians had left her alone in the room to say goodbye. There was no one to catch her. Jill went limp and fell on her back, uncontrollably quaking and shivering as she pulled herself into an upright seated position. She found that her black maxiskirt was soaked in blood. She pulled the folds up. Engraved down her left leg were the words: YOU KILLED THE QUEEN. On her right, it read: IT'S YOUR TURN.

