

ETERNAL VICTIM

A NOVELLA

BY DEXTER MORGENSTERN

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This book is a work of fiction. While some events take place during actual historical events, with historical figures related to those events, this story is made up.

Seriously, don't take it seriously.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The first game I ever beat was *Resident Evil*. I started playing that before I hopped on the *Pokémon* and *Final Fantasy* wagons, but the genre stuck with me. Once I hit my teens, I discovered games like *Fatal Frame*, *Clock Tower*, and *Silent Hill*, and while those games are fun and scary, they also ended up desensitizing me a little; the gory scenes and sudden jump scares affected me less and less, and I started to notice the stories. It changed the experience from “Whoa, that’s scary,” to “Wow, that’s an amazing twist,” and I started to appreciate the genre even more. I wanted to write my own stories for games, but that’s kind of a niche market, so I’m sticking with books for now. The question is, how does a person so used to horror know if a book is actually scary? Since my fascination comes from the stories themselves, I started to research, applying bits and pieces of history I learned about on the way. I found elements of Buddhism to be exciting: the concepts of hungry ghosts, Naraka, and karma all amazed me, so I packaged them all into my own little fiction. Now sitting before you is a chaotic trifecta of Buddhism, history, and ghost-zombies in the form of a novella, written by an insomniac college senior fueled by black coffee, tequila, and Cradle of Filth. Enjoy!

THE WHISTLER

I

Beep. Beep. Beep. That sound. I wake with a gasp that burns my throat. My eyes sting from the abrupt refocus, although there's almost no light for them to adjust to. I strain to turn my head. Every part of my body resists the movement with a coarse mix of numbness and raw pain. As I swallow, the feeling of hot gravel rubs against my esophagus. I twitch my legs, but an intense throbbing tears at what's between them. Something terrible has happened to me.

Bearing through the pain and the shock, I steady my shaky breathing and, through sheer force of will, begin to rise. I try to cry out but my dried and bruised throat won't let much more than a croaked hiss escape.

Finally managing to sit straight, I lean forward, giving my body a rest. What happened to me I cannot recall, but whatever happened, whoever attacked me... they're not all I've forgotten. The only thing harder than trying to move is trying to invoke a single memory. My name... this place... I don't remember how to think, and the attempt alone cues a minor ache in the front of my temple.

The room is dark, but between the railed bed and this cotton gown I'm wearing, I must be in a hospital. Not even the moon pities me enough to send a usable ray of light.

No sound escapes from outside—neither footsteps from the hall nor traffic from the street. It's so quiet I can almost hear my heartbeat, but even that's so... so faint. Is it even there? I put a hand to my heart to check if I'm alive. I stop. There is a tube embedded in my arm, secured with tape. It leads to a—

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The sound of the heartrate monitor—the sound that woke me—returns, accelerating my already fragile heart. All at once, I feel it hammering against my ribs.

Swallowing hard, I tentatively step one foot onto the cold sheet tile floor. Gritting my teeth against the pain lancing through my core, I push myself up. My legs tremble and I let out a silent cry. I make it a single step before I fall. It takes several more attempts until I'm on my feet.

With my hands spread out for balance, I take two cautious steps toward the heartrate monitor. I reach out and slump my weight against it, but of course the monitor is on wheels—it glides away beneath me, and I jerk upright, before the tiles become my new bed.

An empty intravenous bag hangs next to the monitor. I ditch it, wincing as I pull the red needle from my arm. I let it drop, then tear away the straps that link me to the monitor. I expect it to flatline or shut down, but it doesn't skip a beat. I stare at the machine as it beeps away, wondering if it's broken—but it's not important. Finding someone who can help me: that is my goal.

With one hand on my throbbing arm and the other outstretched, I find the door. It opens quietly, allowing a slice of red light to seep through.

“H-hello?” I try to ask, but I have no voice. I need water.

The red light is coming from a large exit sign down the hallway to my right. To my left is blackness, a void that makes the eerie red exit sign seem almost welcoming. I half-heartedly head toward the exit, using the blank, porous walls for support. At the end, the hallway branches out onto four doors. One is marked by an “In case of fire, use stairwell” sign. There is no way I can safely climb downstairs. An elevator is right next to it, but when I fumble around the wall for the call button and press it, there's no response. There's a door to the right, maybe leading toward another hall. I push against it, but it's barred. Locked from the other side? I push again, but I don't have the strength.

A single whistled note carries from the void behind me, freezing me in place. A subtle, almost familiar laugh follows it. As the sound hums through my body, every inch of my being urges me away. The whistling resumes, invoking a frigid draft with its six lugubrious notes. The pitch climbs up and down.

The pain in my throat keeps me from hyperventilating. I know this voice too well but, at the same time, I don't. I spin on my heel, wide eyes raking the red-bathed corridor for a place to hide. If I try the stairs, I might fall and injure myself further. The door on the opposite side—a restroom? I can hide in a stall, or lock it, or... I hobble over as quickly as my legs will carry me.

I throw myself against the door, cringing at the loud bang it makes when it hits the doorstep. Slamming it behind me, I push the lock till it clicks, and a light flickers on.

Whoever is out there, if they're determined to get me, they will. I back up until a sink digs into my lower back. Water. Maybe it will help. My body burns inside. I've bled. I look up into the mirror, and through the flickering light, I see nothing. I put a hand up to my face. I touch my throat, feeling scars along the way. The mirror is blank. There's no one.

“Am I dead?” I mouth to myself, no voice escaping my lips. I look down at my hands. I can see them. They're caked in dirt and dried blood, but they exist. I look back into the mirror just in time to glimpse a dark silhouette reaching for me.

My head flares with such an agonizing migraine that I have to clutch the sink to stay upright. The room around me spins, and I dry heave several times over the faucet, my

vision swimming. Gradually, the throbbing pain subsides and the spinning stops. I gasp, sucking in moist air, and raise my hand up to the mirror. I recoil as a speck of rain drops down. *Rain?*

I look at the ceiling, but it's fading out. As drops of rain fall onto my face, I turn back to the window. *Window?*

The world is changing. I'm outside in the rain. I back away from the window. There are people inside, milling around what looks like a store or workshop. But people aren't just inside. They're all around me, bustling about in the rain.

"Make way, make way!" someone shouts. A sharp whistle follows, accompanied by a barrage of boots in the mud.

I pivot about as a squadron of soldiers in green khaki uniforms marches down toward me. Most of the men are brown-skinned and wear white turbans of some kind. Their leader wears a similar uniform, marked out only by his cap.

I want to ask where I am and who these men are, but I have no one to speak with. This isn't the hospital I woke up in, but I too am different. I am in no pain.

I glance down at my body. My legs are beaten and bare, my gown tattered. Most remarkable is my skin: the blood and dirt are gone, but the bluish tinge of what can only be bruising decorates my arms, just like my legs. Bruises but no pain? This makes no sense. What kind of dream is this?

A large man approaches me, hurrying away from the marching troops. He's holding the hand of a young child. I look into their faces. They stare through me. They keep coming, heading right at me. I flinch as they pass through and open the door to the building behind. I turn slowly back to the window, mouth dropped as I raise a hand to my face. I'm dead, aren't I? These people don't see me. They don't feel me. And yet I can feel the ground, the window, and the rain.

I steady myself against the wall and peer back out at the street. The way these people are dressed, the way this town is built... it all seems so dated. The hospital was recognizable, relatable, but this... this seems somehow behind, beyond. I still don't know who I am. I still don't know what happened, but now at least I'm pretty su—no, I *know* I'm dead.

I put my hands up to my temple. As the rain cascades down, flooding my eyes, my hair, I try to rifle through my brain, but I can't think of anything. I have no sense of my past or myself. Amnesia, that's the word—but I don't even know how I learned it.

I return my attention to the soldiers as they grow nearer. They march by me, through me, without so much as a passing glance, except... no, wait a second. That soldier, *there*. I move forward, drifting through the masses.

I know he saw me. I can tell by the look on his face, how he abruptly averted his gaze, how he stares at the ground.

“H-hey!” I try to call, not much more than a wheeze escaping. Like a nightmare, I won’t be heard. The soldiers keep moving, and I stumble after them.

As they march, their boots kick mud up from the ground. I flinch, but all I feel is cool rain on my skin and wet mud beneath my feet. I realize I haven’t been leaving footprints.

As we leave the district, I see ahead the soldiers’ destination: a pier not far down the way, where more soldiers are filing onto a massive ship.

I take in the sight before turning to glance behind, but... everything we passed is gone. The path is shrouded in fog that drifts about a wooden walkway I don’t recall traversing.

A piercing scream splits the sudden silence.

I jerk forward. The soldiers are gone. The ship is gone, but I still face the pier. The rain still pours, but the overcast sunlight has darkened, becoming a mournful moonlight sullied by heavy clouds.

The girl screams again. I run toward the sound, whipping around the shambling shacks that seem to rise from the fog until I hit the docks, taking cover behind the nearest hut as the thuds and oomphs of a fight sound off from around the corner. I spot a girl hiding behind a pair of shipping crates. I lean a little further—and then I spot *him*.

A tall, fat man towers over a second girl crawling frantically through the mud. He brandishes a sledgehammer, sauntering as he whistles that elegiac tune, those six, droning notes I heard in the hospital.

The girl drags herself up using a nearby post and limps away from the marauder toward me. He swoops in, fast for such a large man, and swipes her ankle from under her with his hammer. She cries out, hitting the ground once more.

I stumble back, falling into the mud.

“Ada, help...” the girl weakly calls.

I carefully peek back around. The wounded girl reaches for the pale-faced woman behind the crates.

“Ada? Now, now, you wouldn’t be trying to get her in trouble too, eh? I mean, look at you. Ya can barely crawl. Dead already, and you want to call for Ada, eh?” the man cackles. He speaks with a boisterous British accent—odd. Is that where I am? England? And those soldiers with turbans—they looked like Indians. Then, this must be...

“Ada, oh Ada!” he sings, maintaining the same notes he whistles. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the Whistler by now. Care to make the *News of the World* together?” He mockingly raises a hand to his ear, panning around, daring anyone to come help the girl. “You see. That Indian scum doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

I turn back over to the girl hiding behind the barrels. She has her hands clutched over her ears. She is mouthing something. Praying.

“Are you done, already?” the Whistler asks the crawling girl, who is still inching away from the predator behind her.

I catch details of his uniform as he draws closer: a hat with an eight-pointed star and a buttoned vest. He's some kind of guard. Not a soldier, but a policeman perhaps.

“Ada... please,” she sobs.

Ada removes her hands from her ears and runs out from behind the barrels. She stands defiant for only a moment before taking three steps back, knowing she has no plausible plan of attack.

The Whistler just looks at her, stepping over the crippled girl.

He chuckles, then resumes his joyless whistling. Ada almost falls, her back to the water. Her feet are at the edge of the docks.

She can't swim. Somehow, I know Ada. I need to speak with her.

The Whistler, although walking leisurely, is so huge that his stride leaves him mere paces from Ada. He stops in front of her.

Ada screams, “Run, Christiana!” and bolts directly toward me. The Whistler takes one long step, extends his leg, and trips the running woman, causing her to drop something. It's shiny, like a necklace.

As she reaches for it, the man steps on her hand, the sound brief and harsh.

“Aww, how sweet,” the man coos. “Some good *he* did ya, eh?” He kicks the trinket into the water below the boardwalk.

“Help!” Ada screams as the man mounts her, one knee on her back.

“Well? Aren't you gonna run?” he coyly asks, tugging Ada up by her hair.

The other girl, Christiana, is still on her knees, crawling through the mud, her ankle hanging limp and swollen.

He drags Ada over, ignoring her screams.

I turn around, looking for someone who can help, but no one else is in sight.

“I'll be back for you,” he says to Christiana as he passes her.

Ada struggles in his grasp, managing to wrench herself free. She turns and races for the dockside before throwing herself down and peering into the murky water.

The man advances quickly, raises his hammer, and brings it down in a terrible arc that catches Ada in the shin. Her leg breaks with a thunderous crack.

I can't let this happen. I must be here for a reason. I look back, hoping someone will show up at the last second. Nothing but fog.

Maybe I can do something. That one Indian soldier, he saw me. He was special. Maybe Ada is too.

I follow the killer, stopping to help Christiana. As I get closer, I notice the dirt on her torn, raggedy clothes. She must be homeless, or some kind of orphan. I mouth her name, trying to speak to her, but she doesn't react to my voiceless calls. Ada's screams echo in the distance as he carries her out to the docks.

A wet gargle boils from below me. I look back down, jumping away as I take in the deformed husk that was once Christiana. Her skin is blue and wet. She coughs, spitting up water, then stares me down with swollen eyes before lurching on top of me, clawing at my throat. Her small fingers dig deep into the curves of my neck. I try to pry her hands loose, but she's strong—I swing, my fist sinking into wet skin, her nose cracking, then hook my thumbs under her fingers, wrenching myself free. Christiana—the monster she has turned into—crawls at me, legs twisting in directions they aren't supposed to bend. I scramble up and back away, still trying to take in what's happening, but Ada's screaming makes me turn.

The fog has tightened, as if there's no way back. My heart throbs, brain screaming at me to not continue on this foolish endeavor. I run after Ada and the fat man.

I spot her lying on the ground, broken and blue. I'm too late. I kneel down and feel her forehead. Her body, like Christiana's, is soaked. I feel something fall away inside. As I embrace her, my mind flashes with another migraine.

When I come to, I find myself crawling away from the Whistler, but not of my own will. This body moves itself, as if someone else were in control, but as the pain in my head fades, I am met with jarring agony in my leg. It's been smashed to pieces.

"You should have stayed hidden, little Indian bitch. I like to show mercy to one of ya every now and then, but you've seen my face!" he growls at me, or her, or... us.

I—no—Ada turns and hobbles away, adrenaline helping to mask the pain of the broken leg, but a sharp kick to the back knocks us both down. Before she rises again, Ada screams as the hammer comes down on her second ankle. I want to scream too; Ada's screams aren't loud enough to cover the pain we both feel.

What did I get myself into? Why did I seek to help someone I didn't have the power to assist?

Ada reaches not for help, but for the necklace that floats in the ocean. She gets a final glimpse of it before he tugs her by her hair, whistling as he hefts her for a second before throwing her out into the water. Ada flails not just for the surface, but for the necklace floating overhead as the salt stings her eyes—but she can't swim, and even if she could paddle, her shattered legs are useless. We sink deeper into the frigid sea that only gets

colder the further we drop. Eventually, Ada's eyes close as she cries out, hoping one of the bubbles falls upon the right ears, but she can no longer fight the instinct to inhale. The stinging water floods her lungs. Her throat locks, and just as she feels the barnacle-covered rocks at the bottom, she dies. We die.

II

I gasp, pulling my head out of a metal tub, and slip down the side, landing in a heap on the dirty floor. I cough, spitting up the fetid water I've swallowed, then gasp again, finally heaving some stale oxygen into my lungs.

What nightmare is this? I rub the water from the eyes, shivering beneath the icy droplets and frosty air. I just drowned... in someone else's body. I stay like that for several minutes, staring at the rusted tub and trying to force myself to comprehend what just happened. How am I alive? Am I even alive? I finally turn over to see another sink across from me, a mirror looming above it.

I let out an exasperated breath that seems to fog up the entire room before managing to pull myself upright. I stand and hobble over to the sink. In the mirror, there is still no reflection. I look back at the bathroom doorway. The door itself seems to have fallen apart, and a dark passageway stretches into black.

I look back into the mirror. For a moment there is nothing; and then I fall, that silhouette appearing once more.

This time, it doesn't send the world spinning. I crawl back, all the way to the wall, clutching a hand to my mouth, though there is no voice, no scream to suppress.

A head emerges from the mirror, then shoulders. Two pallid hands reach out and grab the sink. I close my eyes, hoping the monster will go away, but when I open them, it—*she*—stands directly over me. I flinch again, but when I look back, nothing but a hand is offered.

"Come with me," she softly instructs.

Hesitantly, I take the hand. As she pulls me to my feet, the light in the room flickers back on, illuminating us both. Before me is a brown-skinned, black-haired young woman.

Like Ada, Christiana, and me, the bruises and scars along her skin tell the tale of what I can only assume was a brutal and bloody murder. The dimness in her once-brown eyes betrays no emotion.

"You don't have a lot left in you. You have to move," she says.

I take a few breaths, trying initially to respond, but she shakes her head. She knows I am without a voice. I look toward the doorway and then back to her. She nods.

"You don't have time to wait here and panic. The killer gets closer with every breath. The closer it is to finding you, the more the balance is in its favor."

She flickers, her widening eyes finally betraying the fear within her.

“You can’t let him hurt you again. Not here, not when the balance is this close to darkness,” she explains. “Witness and learn, and the balance will return to you. Then you can escape.”

The balance? Witness? *What?*

She grabs me by my wrist—apparently frustrated by my indecisiveness—and pulls me from the room into the dark corridor of... a ship. This is a ship. A few select working lights illuminate the rust and barnacles that tarnish its interior.

Sharp thuds echo around the corner.

As my heartrate climbs, I turn to the girl, who backs away. “The killer is close,” she breathes. “Go! Don’t stay in one place too long.”

She puts her hands to her head and releases a distorted scream, the bathroom light flickering. The mirror shatters, projectiles of glass cutting straight through her as she disappears.

Before I can question anything, the thudding sound resumes. The woman told me to run, and the fact that the first thing I remember is waking up inside a hospital, which I inexplicably teleported from... I don’t have any room for skepticism. I’m following a nightmare, and that girl is the only person so far who has given me any cards to play.

I move away from the thudding and duck into a nearby room. The crates lazily piled inside give it away as some kind of storage area. A pile of tools protruding from an open crate catches my attention. I run over, each thud in the background sending a jolt through my heart. I rummage through the crate, finally putting a hand on something solid—a weapon? I take it from the box; it’s a crowbar. The weight of the cold, metal tool surprises me, but that means I can use it.

I step from the room, hazarding a look toward the noise. At the end of the corridor, a door budes just slightly with each bang. Something is beating it from the other side. I hurry in the opposite direction, hugging the slick wall, the crowbar held defensively against my chest. Part of me wants to move faster, to get away from the danger behind me, but the other part of me is afraid of what dangers may lurk ahead. I pass by several rooms, not daring to look inside any open doorway. From one of them, the gray hand of a corpse protrudes. People have died here.

I stare at it, frozen, until a much louder thud followed by the sound of metal crashing against metal tells me that whatever accompanies me on this ship has been freed. Deciding something that beats down metal doors is more dangerous than a corpse, I step over the arm to face the corridor’s end. There’s a circular hatch in the floor. I peer over it to see a metal ladder leading down to a new level of darkness and flickering lights.

Before I can decide whether or not to hazard it, someone coughs and wheezes behind me. I look back to see that the owner of the arm sticking from the door is not quite dead.

A gray-fleshed man crawls out of the room, supporting his body using nothing but his arms. He leaks water from his very pores, and his mouth exhales more water than air with every groan. Looking at me with bulbous, white eyes, he snarls, spitting out a pint of water in the process. He moves one of his legs forward as if to rise, but his ankle twists and collapses beneath him, sending him sprawling onto his stomach to regurgitate more putrid fluid.

I step backward, bumping my Achilles on the circular rim behind me. I fall, hitting my back on the hatch, and catch the ledge before I dip too low. Pain flares from my spine, but I can ignore that in the name of survival.

I struggle to regain my footing but I slip and the man grabs my legs, crawling over me. He coughs, the sound like sandpaper, spitting his vile fluid all across my chest. I try to cry out—it's cold, so cold it burns my skin, eating away at the outer layers. As I struggle to stay upright, he crawls further on top of me, reaching for my jaw, compressing my teeth with his sinewy fingers.

I kick and push until my whole body slips through. The crowbar saves me from the full drop, almost dislocating my arm as it hooks one of the ladder's rungs.

The bloated corpse drops straight down on top of me. The cold iron of the crowbar tears the skin from my hand, but I don't let go, pulling the ladder loose instead, the entire flimsy contraption collapsing.

With a strong arm, he grabs my cheekbones. I hold the crowbar up, rolling about, trying to push him off, and finally, I strike. I swing the crowbar as hard as I can. I get the hook into his mouth and tug. The iron rips through his cheek, splitting his half-rotted face. He rolls off, ejecting more water as I scurry back. I can't fight this thing here. Abandoning the crowbar, I rise and sprint down the corridor.

I make it only a few steps before a man emerges from one of the rooms. I stop in my tracks as his eyes widen, but I recognize him. He's the soldier I saw earlier—the only person who could see me. I grab him by his filthy white undershirt. I can touch him! I don't know why I trust him, but he's a safer bet than that thing down the hallway. His eyes fix on mine as my skin touches his, and I recoil suddenly—his jaw rots before my eyes, falling to the floor. His face swells with several boils, and a bloody, gaping hole replaces his left eye. He fades right through my grip and is gone. Behind me, the gray man gurgles.

I dash into the room the soldier emerged from and wait. As the creature nears, I ready myself. His bulbous head emerges and I dash forward, grab the door, and slam it. The door closes on the monster's torso. I open it a little and slam again. Water gushes from his lungs.

I slam again, hearing bones crack. I bend down, wrench the crowbar from his mouth, and bring it down on his head. Tears streaming down my cheeks, I strike again and again, blood and water splashing my face as his skull shatters with thundering claps. I finally stop, out of breath. The creature is dead—or at least deader than he was before.

Breathing heavily, I survey the room. Darkness. I cautiously open the door, letting some of the outside light seep in. I spy a flip lighter on a table next to a bed and take it, sparking the mechanism again and again until it finally lights. Through the dim glow of the flame, I spy a jacket hanging on the edge of the bed with a nametag. “River.”

I look about the rest of the room. Other clothing items, some boots, and a couple books lie scattered about. I pick up one of the books. It has a worn, leather cover, and a pen is tucked inside. It looks like a journal. I start to open it, but a loud boom from outside shakes the entire ship.

I gasp, using my arm to silence my own breathing, and closing the lighter.

“Where are you, missy?” he calls. He. *Him*. The Whistler. That bang—he’s dropped from the ladder. *Think*. As big as he is, I can’t imagine him fitting through the opening.

I look at the crowbar on the ground next to the body. I have the lighter in one hand, the journal in the other. River’s jacket! I set the journal on the bed just long enough to don the jacket that is only a couple sizes too big for me (and River was not a large man). I stick the lighter in one of the jacket pockets and the journal in another.

As the footsteps get closer, I cautiously pick up the crowbar.

Obviously, whatever is happening defies any sensible explanation. There’s no way of knowing if this murderer can detect me or if he has to rely on his senses like I do. If it’s the latter, I might be able to elude him. He might think I ran down the hall. He might not check every room. If it’s the former, or if he does detect me, then I need to make a break for it.

I force myself to swallow and take a deep breath.

“Aw... now why’d ya have to go n’ kill ‘em, eh? He’s just like you. Just a victim, another one of the drowned.”

He’s right outside.

Heart racing as I muster the strength to run, I make a break for it. I slip through the barely open door and bolt down the hallway opposite the killer.

He doesn’t run after me. Just maintains his pace.

“But you know all about what I do to my victims, eh?” He’s speaking to me as if he knows me.

I make a right turn. Dead end. It looks like the ship got hit by something that caused the ceiling to collapse. I turn back. There are doors. I try each one, but they’re either locked or blocked. Wherever I am, be it the hospital, the city, the pier, or even this ship, my options

seem limited, as if my path is predetermined. I won't play that game. I keep moving. It's all I can do: another turn, another corridor. If I could find a stairwell or a ladder or something... the whistling and footsteps are get closer and closer. He may only walk, but he's fast.

Down the last turn is another dead end.

He taps his hammer along the ship's metal walls.

With no other choice, I climb into the debris. There's a space just wide enough for me to fit through at the top. As I reach over a ruined bulkhead, I tear my leg on a jagged piece of metal. I grit my teeth as I pull myself through anyway and curl into a ball when I fall down the other side.

I exhale. He can't fit through that.

He stops on the other side.

"Well, look at that. You may not have any fight in you, but you've got the flight alright," he hums, a whimsical tone in his voice.

I limp on, blood gushing from my thigh. A deathly cough sounds from somewhere nearby. Behind me, another monster has materialized, crawling through a hole in the ship's hull, from which not a single gust of wind intrudes. This monster is familiar. That face. *Christiana*.

I ready the crowbar in my hands as she gets closer. Splintered bones extend from her legs, but that doesn't stop her from trying to stand. She comes at me, one hand outstretched. In her left hand, she holds a bronze necklace, the one Ada swam for in her dying panic.

"This one," the Whistler started. "She took the easy way out. Got my day's work out of the Indian, but when I turned back, she was gone... already drowned herself. Gave me quite a fright. Thought she got away, but no, she made it easy for me."

That girl from the mirror told me I have to witness and learn to escape. All I've learned is that everything that chases me wants me dead, and everything else I'm supposed to chase. With my leg still gushing blood and my mind a mess of scrambled thoughts and impulses, I stand, my mouth dry.

Christiana grabs my arm with hers. I twist and jerk away, but unlike the monster that attacked me on the dock, she is now so fragile that her arm breaks. I use one hand to pry hers off mine, breaking her thumb with a sickening snap that causes me to flinch in the midst of the struggle. I grab the necklace from her broken hand and kick her away.

She squirms on the ground, her half-dead eyes revealing more despair than hatred. I look at the necklace, a locket, but while I'm distracted, she reaches for my wounded leg.

I fall, flailing wildly with my good leg until my foot finally connects with her face. I scramble up and blindly swing the crowbar in a tight curve. The blow isn't as strong as I

want it to be, but it knocks Christiana closer to the breach. Idea in mind, I hit her with a golf-style swing, sending her sliding through the breach.

The whistling from the other side of the debris resumes, followed by a loud bang. He enjoyed the show, but now it's his turn. Chunks of concrete and iron tumble from the heaped pile as the terrible hammer does its work.

I frantically glance back and forth. Debris on either side. The only other exit is the breach.

I move over and look outside. There is neither a sky nor a sea in view, just an endless fog. This is no escape.

The only way to escape is to learn, the girl told me. I look down at the locket. Inside is a faded picture. I can make out two faces: one is Ada, and the other... it's that soldier, River. River must be their last name. They are related. I pull out River's journal and look at the opening page, wincing as another loud bang knocks shards of rubble to the floor. *Atraiu River* it reads. At first, I don't recognize the script. It's written in Hindi, but the longer I stare, the more sense I can make of it. Somehow, I can recall the language.

I flip to a random page, hoping I'll find something in here that will summon him back. One page in particular speaks to me:

October 22nd, 1914

Mother, I am sorry. Your last words to me were spent asking me to protect my sister, to provide for her, but when Father passed I had no other means. I had to join the military. It was the only way I could keep Ada off the streets. We escaped the slums of India only to end up in the slums of Great Britain. It would be better if the people here didn't look at us with disgust, but I must provide for Ada. The world is falling apart. Everyone is killing each other, and now I have to go very far away from her. They promised I'd be paid fairly, and they will send my money to the orphanage, but I won't be there to watch her. She isn't quite old enough to fend for herself yet, but the Brits need forces to fight the German Empire in a place called Tanga. Please forgive me. I will be with her in spirit. I only pray that I make it back to her."

He doesn't. That much I've already witnessed, but as I finish the thought, my head bursts with pain. I drop the journal, falling first to my knees and then forward into the fog.

III

“Go, go, go!” a voice shouts.

I stir, pulling my head from the sand. I try to wipe my face clean, but not a single grain has clung to me or even my hair. The only thing that brushes my face is the chain of the locket that’s still in my hand. The journal is gone, as are the jacket and the lighter. I only have this locket.

Somehow, this object truly is important. Is this what that girl meant? *Further away from the killer?* I carefully wrap the locket around my wrist, flinching as a swarm of Indian soldiers runs through me. I must find Atraiu.

We are on a beach. Behind me is the ocean. Several British warships float in the near distance, and numerous smaller vessels release infantry onto the coast, where soldiers already posted open hatches and hustle their fellows out.

“No mines! It’s clear. Go, go, go!” one of the soldiers urges.

The sound of guns firing in the distance alerts me to the front. Bullets zip the beach as the Indian soldiers rush forward, holding their helmets. Some dive for cover while others drop to the ground. More just keep running, glancing up for muzzle flashes or wisps of smoke.

I jump back as a soldier collapses right beside me, clutching his shoulder and crying out in pain.

Another two soldiers kneel down to help him. One of them is Atraiu. With one arm, Atraiu carries a long, brown rifle and, with the other, he drags his wounded comrade by his good shoulder while the other soldier takes the man’s legs.

More bullets zip in, one going through me and pinging off the side of a soldier’s helmet, causing him to flinch. For a second, I’m relieved that I am ethereal, but then I remember the Whistler and his drowned victims, and that I am merely watching a horrific battle. If what that girl said is true... if every breath brings the balance closer to darkness, then it’s possible I could be sucked into battles far more dangerous.

Soon, the dozens of Indian soldiers storming the beach become hundreds, and the initial chaos moves with some sense of direction.

“Come on! The Gurkhas are way ahead of us. Our objective is the city,” one soldier shouts.

“I’ve got him. Go, go on,” another urges as he drops down next to the wounded man, brandishing a kit bearing a white cross.

Atraiu doesn’t argue. He gently sets the man down, checks his gear, and joins the shifting herd.

I follow him up the beach as he takes cover, scans the area, and advances. All around, random men shout “Go!” and “Move!”

Atraiu keeps his head down as he approaches the tree line. Bodies already litter the battlefield. Meanwhile, the song of explosives booming and bullets zipping spreads panic through the ranks of the frightened young men. Atraiu dives as a machine gun opens up, burying his body with several other Indians behind a wall of sandbags that once defended their enemies.

Not far ahead, a concrete blockade barricades the road that presumably leads to Atraiu’s objective. While the blockade itself swarms with Allied soldiers, the battle rages immediately behind it.

An explosion cuts off the drone of the machine gun and Atraiu dares a glance before an Indian soldier runs up. “Keep moving!” the man says.

Behind me, the last several groups of soldiers bustle into a formation. With the beach successfully seized, the soldiers hitting the water don’t have to run for cover. The influx forces the vanguard soldiers right through enemy lines, and Atraiu doesn’t get much of a breath before continuing.

He runs around the sandbags, but instead of filing in to get by the blockaded road and straight to the city, he runs with a few stragglers into a copse of palm trees.

I tail him as he runs deep through the trees before stumbling over a dead soldier. He hits the ground, rises, and after identifying it as one of his own, hides behind one of the scrawny palm trees just as a bullet lands in the dirt next to him. His allies throw themselves down, rifles braced, and return fire in staccato bursts. Atraiu peeks back around, rifle to his shoulder, and ducks back as more bullets come at him. He scrambles from his position, ducking behind the tall grass.

I’m no help in this battle. I’m both invisible and untouchable, but I know somehow that Atraiu and Ada are connected to me. Somehow, I have to get his attention, but I’m worried that if I sit here and watch for too long, I’ll be sucked back into the void, chased by those water-spitting things or by the Whistler himself. All I can do is watch and learn.

Atraiu swings his arm in an arc. I don’t understand the movement until an explosion tears through the enemy trench, sending earth and blood blooming. He runs forward, followed by several of his brethren, before the dust can settle. By now, several buildings—outposts—have begun to emerge within the loosely spaced trees, small wooden palisades

fencing off the gaps in between. When the barrel of a machine gun peeks through a slit, nobody has the chance to duck.

I flinch as the machinegun opens fire. Atraiu has the great fortune of being near a hill, and jumps into both cover and concealment as the machinegun howls, hacking down a palm tree. The tree splinters, hurting no one, but through the sounds of randomly tossed grenades, gunshots, and the frenzied cries of men, another sound fills the air. A sound no one notices in time. A buzzing.

I follow the sound. Looming above us is a swarm, no, a cloud of... bees? I don't know how many men came on those ships with Atraiu, but these bees have by far the largest force.

Already angered by the noise and the smoke, the bees scatter from the collapsed tree that once held their home, adding to the chaos by attacking men on both sides, agitating other nests, and bringing a third faction into the fight.

Oddly enough, the men seem more afraid of the bees than they are of the machine gun, and several dozen rush the enemy line, many of them falling. The machinegun can't take them all, and once it stops firing, the panicked men—Atraiu included—swarm the outpost.

The assault of bees doesn't relent, and Atraiu runs like a frightened rodent into one of the buildings, stampeding the place with his brethren behind him. He drops to the ground, covering his neck and face, knowing no other way to defend himself than to panic. He may be a soldier, but he is no warrior. And while he crouches there, shielding himself, the atmosphere nudges just slightly, as if time has slowed just enough for an acute observer to notice. The noises from the battle distort in the background and a fog abruptly obstructs the sunlight beaming down on the battle.

Is this the balance the woman spoke of? If so, there's been a shift. I don't know in which direction, but Atraiu peeks out from his hands and, just like when I first spotted him out in the town, he looks at me.

“Ada?” he asks me, forcing himself to stand.

Feeling a surge of tears welling behind my eyes, I present the locket and shake my head. I realize that Atraiu's fate is tragic in either direction: either he returns, finding Ada dead and gone, or he dies in the war. Either way, they never see each other again.

He steps past the locket and embraces me. “Oh, please. No, no, no...” he cries.

I want to say I'm sorry, but I've no power to speak.

“How could I let this happen?” he sobs.

He lets me go at arm's length, tears pouring down his face like droplets of rain. His eyes narrow just enough to reveal his confusion. He's expecting an answer, but I have none for him.

He looks to the ground, realization of his failure flooding his mind. His fingers tremble as he pulls away, fumbling with a bracelet around his wrist. He takes it off and kneels back down, praying into the beads.

“Please, bring me back. Bring me back. Let me make it back to her,” he cries.

I almost don’t notice the return of the bees’ droning until a dark-skinned Tanga native—a soldier enlisted to the German Empire—runs in from behind. He too is under attack by the bees, but upon recognizing a vulnerable foe, he points his rifle.

I turn around, looking for Atraiu’s allies, but their bodies are heaped nearby.

With an ear-splitting boom, Atraiu falls, the contents of his skull scattered across the wall. If my form were wholly physical, I might faint, but it’s all I can do to drop to my own knees before Atraiu River, a soldier who couldn’t defend himself or his sister. His hands still clutch the bracelet. I reach for them.

Much like Ada’s locket, I feel a magnetic, spiritual connection to the bracelet. I roll it about in my hand, looking it over: prayer beads.

I put them around my wrist, right next to Ada’s locket. My head begins to ache, a flashing light searing the back of my eyelids. I’ve learned, or I’ve witnessed, and now the balance moves forward, away from the killer. At least, I think so. When the throbbing subsides, I find myself on a fog-shrouded street. The Whistler is strolling down a sidewalk toward me, and I fear that I may be wrong.

IV

I stand in silence, listening to the rhythm of my heart gradually slow from heavy rain to a cautious trembling as the killer walks right by me, eyes set on another target. *He's not attacking me.* He can't even see me, a fact my mind realizes long before my heart does. He's fifty paces down the way when the looming fog comes in, chilling my skin as it shrouds me. Within its frigid embrace, a sound joins the rhythm of my heart. *Beep-beep... beep-beep.* My skin crawls with goosebumps as numbness enlaces my limbs. My tongue oozes metallic fluid and my vision fades. I can't stay here. I can't let this fog take me.

Before I lose any more feeling, I run forward through the thickening mist, the street sliding in and out of focus. I step out of the fog, my feet coming down without so much as a slapping sound against the cracked brick slabs that comprise the mossy street.

The killer reenters my sight. I have to stay close to him. My bounds, my limits on this... vision? Memory? If I don't move forward, I'll be sucked back into what I can only assume is my own death. I have to witness.

Before I get too close to the Whistler, I spot a second person in the distance: an older woman, brown-skinned. Indian. I walk on the opposite side of the street, close enough to evade the fog but far enough that I have a head start should the hulking psychopath suddenly decide he's aware of me.

As he stalks her, her pace quickens. His does too. Either bravely or stupidly, the woman whirls around. "Why do you follow me? I'll summon the police."

The Whistler chuckles, stopping a mere ten paces behind. "Relax there, lady." He points at the star on his hat. "I am the metro police. Constable Duane, at'cha."

She recoils, arms cradled defensively over her chest. "I have done no crime."

"Maybe so, but there's been a right rash of crimes. 'Specially 'round you Indian folk. 'Specially this time o' night. Thought maybe I'd keep an eye on ya."

"I just finished cleaning—"

"No need for explaining, ya? Tells you what. You just walk on home, and my being here oughta keep you safe from any night lurkers. You can't live far from here." He motions to the area around.

Judging by the cracked and muddied streets and the crumbling, three-story brick-and-mortar buildings, this place can't be more than a slum.

The woman ceases to argue or even to speak, crossing the street and passing right through me as I move to get a better angle.

The woman's breath comes thick and fast—she is already afraid of the Whistler, as she should be. I turn back forward just in time to make eye contact with him, and even in my ethereal form, goosebumps rise on my skin as he—and I swear—looks directly at me, poisoning me with his venom-green eyes. As he passes through, a thousand frigid needles dig into my flesh, stunning me in place until I realize that I am not actually hurt. As the fog rolls in behind him, I follow.

It isn't long before he starts his trademark whistling, albeit at a slower tempo than before, letting each minor note drone just a bit longer.

The Indian woman turns one final corner and nods her silent thanks before hastily escaping up an open stairway. Duane, the Whistler, casually removes his hat and sets it upon the handle of his sledgehammer... I realize with a start that he hadn't been carrying it before. It has been here, outside the woman's home, the whole time. He already knew that she lives here.

He steps away from the stairway and approaches a horse-drawn carriage with "Police Patrol" painted on the side. He pets the horse with feigned interest as he stares up at one of the windows. Soon enough, he steps away, returns to the stairway, and, right as he reaffixes his cap, a sharp scream erupts from upstairs. Taking up his sledgehammer, he heads toward the sound of the scream.

Already knowing what to expect, I follow, just as the fog encloses the staircase.

Constable Duane takes the stairs one step at a time, stretching his arms out and flexing his muscles. There's no haste, no hurry, no fear. For a psychopath attempting to get away with murder, there's no discretion, no finesse. When we step past a pool of blood, I grasp the idea that this is not his first victim of the night. Perhaps he isn't worried about witnesses.

Blood leaks from an open door. The Indian woman is inside, groveling on the floor with her back to us. In her arms: a dead child.

"No, Kian..." she cries in Hindi. The boy in her arms drips dark blood.

A muffled, gagged cry comes from the corner. "Prisha?!" The woman lets go of the dead boy, stumbling over a blanket on the floor as she crawls over to a canvas sack in the corner. Duane stands, watching the scene unfold in silence, a smile on his face.

At last, he resumes his whistling as the woman fumbles with the knotted rope sealing the bag shut.

Alarm displacing her grief, she whirls around, facing her child's murderer.

"This is my handiwork, yes," he admits. "Could 'a been a lot messier. Still can be. Guess it depends on whether or not you come quietly."

The woman gapes at him, still working to free her second child.

“Is that what you want?” she sobs. “Is that what you killed my child for?” She puts her hand over her chest.

“No, no, you’ve read me wrong. I’ll get what I want from you regardless. Little, ah, Prisha? Was it? Yes, her fate depends on how much trouble you give me. Don’t worry. Plenty of air holes in that sack, but come on. I got a spot in my buggy.”

And with that, he lunges forward, grabbing her by her throat as she half-fights, half-submits. I flinch as he pulls her toward and then through me.

The surge of cold freezes my breath in place as my vision whites out.

I wake in the same room, alone. The window overlooking the street reveals nothing but the endless fog. I approach it, place a hand on the cold glass, but the only thing that catches my attention is a movement behind me in the absence of my reflection.

“You can’t stay here,” the gloomy girl from the ship says. “But you can’t move forward until you know where to go.”

The window cracks, letting the fog sneak in, wisps tickling my arms hungrily.

“Atraiu died before he learned of Ada’s death. He is her protector, still lost in the void. Still hungry, like the Whistler’s victims who envy your life. In a sense, we are all hungry for something. We are all preta: lost souls.

“You *are* lost?” she asks suddenly, prodding me.

I nod.

“You’re searching for something. Answers to your questions. The victims—the other preta—they search for their lost lives, stolen from them by the very same darkness that haunts you. The same evil that haunts me.”

So I’m connected to the killer, just as I am to Ada and Atraiu.

“But Atraiu,” she continues, almost reading my thoughts, “knows exactly who he is searching for.” She points at the bracelet and locket around my wrist. “The evil stands in his way, keeping Ada hidden. Atraiu won’t find her unless he finds the evil.”

The window cracks again. I watch the fissures spread, reaching outward until finally it shatters all at once, the fog rolling through.

“The evil is looking for something, too,” she admits, ignoring the shards of glass. “It’s coming for me. If it finds me here, it finds you, but you know who it is.” Her voice begins to distort as her figure fades.

I slam my eyes shut and put both hands to my head as the pain returns.

“Think about everything you’ve learned.” Her voice rings in the back of my consciousness. “You don’t have to be lost forever.”

The fog's chilling grip drains the blood from my veins. She told me to think, but all I can do is recall what I've seen. He stalked this woman, followed her here, laid a trap, and kidnapped her. He said before that he likes to leave witnesses... I pause. *The woman's other child!* I open my eyes just in time to see the fog envelop the canvas sack.

I blindly run over, flailing at the fog until the bag comes back into view, tugging at the knotted rope that holds it shut. The rope is tight, a masterful knot, and the canvas is too thick to tear open. There's no whimpering or movement coming from inside. I put an ear to the canvas as the fog overtakes me, but all I hear is the heartrate monitor's beeping growing progressively louder. I'm dying. I will die if I don't move forward, but what is the lesson here?

No one found the child imprisoned inside here. No justice, no rightful burial. Would these children become hungry preta as the girl described, or would the mother?

A thought strikes me as the sensation drains from my body, the fog taking away my ability to so much as breathe. My mind fights through the frustrating beeps that hammer from the inside of my skull. He'd have a lair of some sort. As a constable, answers could be found at—the beeping stops. I let go of the breath I didn't realize I held as the fog slowly dissipates.

As it clears, I find myself lying against cold, concrete steps, and as the blood returns to my limbs I stand upright, taking it in. Before me are two, wooden double doors with a familiar, eight-pointed star on each one. This place... it's a jail.

V

I pull the tarnished brass handle on the door, which protests with a garish groan. With the door open just wide enough, I enter, letting it shut behind me. My nose is greeted with a noxious mix of dust and mold. Although the place looks decrepit, it is not wholly unkempt: no books or papers litter the ground, although the wood that forms the floor and walls is old and moist. Dust litters every object, as if everything here has been left as-is for a decade. A lit lantern on a nearby desk is the only thing that shows that anyone has been here. Using it, I scan the desk, but don't find anything except a few civil records, some ammunition for a pistol, some restraints, and an old journal.

I blow the dust from the hardbound journal, revealing *M. Jameson* etched into the front. I open it to a few police entries, thoughts, and detective's analyses, but what catches my eye are several tears. Pages of this journal have been torn out, and on the first blank page after the tears, blood stains the paper. Perhaps there was evidence here condemning the Whistler, but I won't find the answers on blank pages.

I tip-toe from the entry room through a corridor that leads me by an open lavatory. A quick peek inside reveals one of the sources of the putrid smell, and shattered shards of glass all over the ground are all that remains of the mirror. I continue into a T-shaped hall with a bulky, metal door on the right that I assume leads to the cells, and a smaller wooden door on the left with the words *Constable Duane Maxwell* on its face. A cautious tug on the handle tells me it's locked.

A quiet moan echoes from the door behind me, freezing me in place. Nausea settles in my stomach: I know I'll have to seek the source eventually. I creep back down the corridor, my own breathing deafening. Putting my ear to the thick metal door, I hear the moaning resume. "Please..." the voice calls. "Someone, let me out..."

It's not Duane.

I push against the door, ignoring the scraping of the metal as it drags against the dirty ground.

Inside the cells, the unwelcome aroma of decaying flesh fills my nostrils. I step past the first cell to my left and cringe away from the sight of a hobbled corpse drowned in the toilet. Yellow grime and rust garnishes the wall behind the scene. If flies could be preta, this would be their paradise.

The voice groans incoherently, coming from the last of six cells on my right. I avert my gaze from the other potential disasters I pass by and peer into the final cell, raising my lantern to illuminate it. Inside, a beaten and bloodied man sits on the floor, ankles smashed, wrists shackled to the bolted-down iron bedframe, and a gaping hole in his head. In his hand is a pistol, and a pool of dried blood coats the floor around him. What surprises me the most is the police badge fastened to his torn uniform. This isn't his cell—he is one of the wardens. Those calls for help—were they echoes from his restless soul?

Before turning away from the cell, a page on the ground next to his corpse catches my attention. More pages are scattered on the floor inside. They could be the missing pages from the journal. I need to get in there.

Keys rest in the lock on the door. Whoever locked him in wasn't worried about him getting out. I pull against the cell door, the cold iron resisting at first, but after applying a bit more elbow, it begins to budge open just enough for me to slip through. I pick up the first page nearby that isn't covered in blood:

No one cares about this place. The poor Indian sods out here are just the rejects who don't get shipped off to their deaths as cannon fodder in the war. Despite hundreds of people in this district, it's just me and Mr. Maxwell to keep the peace. Some job we're doing. All I've done all week is yell at people for shitting in the streets.

His large, messy handwriting makes most of the page illegible, but one of these pages has to have some clue. I pick up a second one:

Several complaints started coming in about people going missing. Even worse are the ones who have been found. A body washed up on shore, all beaten up and broken in the wrong places. Definitely a murder. Maxwell isn't eager to find the killer though. Just sent it off to the papers to "see if anyone cares."

I toss the paper down, picking up a third, a fourth, a fifth, looking through for anything useful. After several minutes, I find a clue:

Mr. Maxwell has gone mad. Several dozen murders and he's barely in the office anymore. When he is, he just bitches about the papers not covering all the murders. He's always out late and shows up well into the afternoon. Not been no assistance with this case. Been thinking about making a trip to London and getting someone more qualified to solve this mystery.

A new page:

Found an eyewitness to the murder. Some poor girl mentioned something about a man with a sledgehammer whistling before beating her mum half to death, then tossing her into the water. What's worse is she said it was an Englishman, a constable. There's only two constables in this part of town, and one of them's me.

The other pages on the ground are either illegibly bloodied or don't contain useful information.

A loud clang resounds from somewhere outside of the cell. I'm not alone. I turn back to the corpse, looking down at the pistol in his hand. Holding my stomach tight, I step through the pool of blood and carefully wrench the gun from his firm grip, but when I do, a crumpled page drops. His last words. I smoothly open the paper and hold it close to the lantern so I can make out the words:

When I confronted him about the witness... big mistake. He took her to interview himself, and didn't come back till I was about to leave for the city with my journal in hand. Bastard knew I was onto him. Overtook me. Left me a pen and paper so I could leave a message for my family. He knows I don't have one. Arrogant prick.

On the back of the page are a few more scribbles:

He keeps bringing them here and killing them. Where's the help? Hell, it's been days.

On the very bottom, his last words.

He laughs every time he sees I'm still breathing. Today, he dropped a pistol into my lap... his idea of mercy. Left the keys here too. He won't be back, but he knows I'm not going nowhere.

Those keys in the door. I look back to see them still hanging in the lock. Maybe one of those opens Duane's office. I move toward them, but another loud clang causes me to jump, then another, and another. The other cell doors are falling over one by one, and when the last one falls, a series of wet thuds echo through the jail.

It's so dark in here that I can't see what's coming. With the stampede echoing from all sides, I fling the lantern around, my sweaty palms threatening to drop it before anything comes within range of the light. The keys dangle from the lock in my peripheral. My only choice.

In one hand I have the lantern, and in the other the gun. I hastily use my spare fingers to get the keys, but they're stuck in the lock. I'd swear if I had the voice to. As sweat drips from every pore in my body, I set the lantern on the ground and tug at the keys full force until the cell key breaks, freeing the rest of the bundle. I grab the lantern's handle and take several steps back, turning around just in time to avoid the flailing arm of a preta.

Her sunken face is all too familiar, even as she spews foul water from her throat. It's the woman I just watched Duane stalk. I guess he succeeded in bringing her down to his lair. I back away toward Jameson's cell as she crawls at me, thankful she can only move so fast with her useless legs. I put the keyring around my thumb, trying to juggle it, the gun, and the lantern in my two small hands.

As I finally ready the weapon, a second preta appears to my left, her excessively strong arms dragging me to the ground in an instant. The lantern cracks from the fall, but the flame doesn't go out. The monster gets a hand around my jaw and spits icy water all over my chest and face. It burns intensely, eating away at my skin as her hand wrenches at my jaw.

The second one is upon me, her grey fingers clawing at my face. It bends down, pushing for mouth-to-mouth, regurgitating an unsteady, fountain-like stream of icy-hot water, and I know why. I can't breathe without inhaling it. Together, the two preta pin me down by my head and chest and force my mouth open. Both of them flood me, and as the nauseating water scalds my tongue and funnels down my throat, my body rejects it. But this revolting, two-way channel allows no room for air to flow. If the burning that gradually eats at my flesh doesn't kill me, the lack of air will.

I don't know how I manage it, but I fire off a shot into the chest of one of the preta. The bullet penetrates straight through her chest and lung, stifling her repulsive regurgitation as it leaks from the new opening.

The pressure eased, I turn to the side and vomit before pressing the pistol directly into the preta's head. I roll over as she falls next to me, rejecting most of the water I consumed, shivering to the core.

The taste of bile is soon displaced by the flavor of blood, but I have no time to wait and recover. I scramble to my knees and finish off the first preta with a bullet to the throat. Between the darkness and the water still stinging my eyes, I can't see much. I barely hear the gunshot as my ears too feel waterlogged, but I know my mission and I can't let fear be my weakness.

When I'm sure I have the keys, the lantern, and the gun, I shoot at the next preta that comes into sight, blowing a hole in his stomach and knocking him back. I sway past the rest, praying one of them doesn't get me by the ankles. My skin feels like it's on fire, and I hit the cell wall hard, pushing myself onward on dead legs. If I get dragged down again...

I make it to the door and throw myself at it before remembering it opens toward me. With a freshly bruised shoulder, I use my body weight to pry the door open, slip through, and force it shut behind me.

I fall to the ground, dimly hoping they don't know how to open doors as more of the putrescent, blood-mixed water escapes my throat.

I hear moans and scratches on the other side of the door and crawl away toward Duane's office, hoping that as soon as I open it, they will dematerialize as everything else seems to whenever I learn something.

When I make it over, I use the handle to pull myself up, fumbling with the keys until one of them clicks. I enter the room, slam the door behind me, and sit against it. Now there are two doors between those preta and me.

My pain abates slightly, but doesn't completely disappear. Thankfully, I lost the gash I earned on the ship when I transitioned to the battle Atraiu died in. Strangely, the locket and prayer bracelet are still tied around my wrists, and I still have the gun, they keys, and the lantern. I'm not finished here yet.

Unlike the desk in the entryway, this office is completely destroyed. Books and papers litter the ground. The desk in the center looks as if every object was tossed off of it to make way for the papers carefully displayed on its face.

I set the keys down and turn over the first paper. "British Indian Expeditionary Force Casts Off" reads the headline. I scan the pages and find "Woman Found Mysteriously Drowned" as a subheading.

I recall that Jameson's journal said something about chasing headlines as I look over the next paper. "Assault on Tanga Fails. Winner: The Bees." It isn't until the third page that I read "Strange Series of Murders Stir Indian Community."

On the last page on the desk, I finally see the Whistler's headline. "Homicidal Maniac Known as 'Whistler' Identified." I read further:

Constable Duane Maxwell has been found responsible for over twenty-eight murders, and the body count rises. After a mass-murder took place in the Metropolitan Police's Southeast Jail Center, evidence of his involvement in a string of homicides in which the victims were crippled and then either tossed into bodies of water or drowned in lavatories was discovered by—

"They never did find me..." a voice whispers down my neck.

I whirl around. Before my heart can do more damage to my chest than the preta already have, the Whistler has his arm around my throat.

"I wonder how many times I'll have this joy," he muses as my cheeks saturate. More water escapes my throat as his hand squeezes so hard my tongue sticks out.

I try to kick, but my feet aren't even on the ground, and my tiny legs flail pathetically against this massive murderer.

I drop the lantern on the desk, my hands clawing at Duane's clenched fists, but as the beeping of the heartrate monitor rings in my ears, my hand finds the gun set on the desk behind me. I blindly fire a shot above me, vaguely toward his head. He staggers and drops me.

I turn around to find him wiping blood from his greasy hair, now visible because I blew his helmet clean off. It's a shot to the head, but only a graze.

"We're not going through this again!" he growls, readying his famous sledgehammer.

I point the gun and shoot it again, but all I get is an empty click.

"You could never do anything without a gun. Weapons of the weak." I use my arms to drag myself around the other side of the desk. He leers across at me.

"When I finish you," he starts, "they'll know of your death for generations to come."

He jumps on top of the table, his massive boots shaking it so hard that even the lantern falls over. He grabs my hair, dragging me toward him, and my mouth splits into a silent scream.

"You think I'm doomed for Hell, but I'm taking hundreds like you with me," he growls through gritted teeth.

Flailing, I deaden my weight so I'm almost sitting. He has to lean over to hang onto me, but it's such an awkward angle that he can't swing his hammer.

I grasp the fallen lantern and swipe it onto the stone floor, sending glass and oil spraying across the desk, the papers, my arm, and Duane's trousers all at once. The flame catches quickly. He falls off the desk as I fall backward, trying to stamp out the fire on my arm. Atraiu's beads glow mysteriously from the flame, but there's no time to investigate—the Whistler swears and curses from the other side, and I know that this is my only opportunity to get past him.

I rise, dart past the flames and am about to escape the room when I spy the star I shot off of his helmet. Like Ada's locket and Atraiu's beads, it calls to me. I came here for something, something more than to learn about the Whistler.

I grab it and just barely get the door open as my attacker finally extinguishes his burning pants.

Aside from the firelight behind me, it's completely dark out in the hallway. I run forward, looking for the corridor to turn down, and make it through just as one of the preta reaches for me.

I leap and fall into the corridor, crawling away for dear life as moonlight from outside lances through the cracks.

Duane kicks the preta out of the way, his mouth curved into a horrible smile.

I am up and running when I hear a large boot stomp behind me. He swings, but the narrow corridor doesn't allow him much of an arc. The head nudges my shoulder, sending me careening forward.

I spread my hands out as I sprawl, grasping the wall. I stagger toward the door.

Another boot falls behind me—right behind me this time—and even as I open the door and run into the chilling embrace of the fog, I know he has me. But he doesn't.

I run several more paces before turning around, seeing nothing but fog. Relief swells up from my stomach, and I realize the pain in my arm, my neck, and my throat are all gone.

I made it out... though I know that the transition is just temporary, that I haven't escaped the Whistler—Duane—just yet.

Soon enough, a familiar scream echoes in the distance. It's not familiar solely in the sense that I know the person; rather, it's a scream I have heard before. I run toward it, and as I get closer to the scene, I spot the Whistler stalking Ada on the pier ahead of me. The barrel I hid behind the first time comes into view.

I don't bother ducking behind it this time. The entire scene is nothing but déjà vu to me. The only thing different is... I look down. I have the locket, the prayer beads, and the Whistler's eight-pointed star.

I can't fight the Whistler. Even with a gun, I barely escaped, but the girl from the mirror's words ring in my ears. Atraiu is a preta searching for Ada. Guided by her instructions, I put one foot in front of the other. The Whistler is upon Ada, but stops as I walk to her side.

“Ya just can't wait for me to kill ya again, eh hussy?”

He turns to me, although this time he looks different. The star is missing from his helmet; it's in my hand.

I don't know if he has a memory of what happened just three minutes ago, if he remembers being shot, or if I am truthfully just hopping through and surviving various memories, but I know that nothing I can say or do alone will stop this psychopath. I turn to Ada, dropping down on one knee. She's already been crippled. I place Atraiu's beads into her hands.

She looks at me, her eyes scanning my face, as if trying to place me. Finally, she smiles, and I know there's a connection between us. As we stare into each other, I all but forget the Whistler until I hear a loud grunt. I turn, seeing him raise his sledgehammer.

My heart leaps into my throat as the bloodstained head descends, but Duane is knocked off balance as something cannons into him from behind. A much tinier man has both arms locked around the Whistler's throat.

“Ada!” Atraiu cries.

“Urgh, what is this?!” Duane spurts, dropping the hammer and shaking, pulling away at Atraiu's arms.

“I'm sorry, Ada,” Atraiu cries. “I'm doing what I should have done in the first place.”

As I look down at Ada, I see her face is turning blue. Her hair is soaked. She's still dying.

I hug her tightly: amnesia or not, I know I'm supposed to love this girl. She doesn't deserve to die. I went through all of this—woke up from what is possibly my own death, fought the Whistler and all his preta to reunite Ada with her brother. She can't die on me now. If she does, what did I come here for? Does Atraiu actually have to defeat the Whistler, or do I have to help her escape?

I try to pick her up, but her waterlogged body is far too heavy for me to lift. I try to pull her, but her gaze tells me she doesn't want to be moved.

I turn back to the Whistler and Atraiu. The Whistler strikes at the soldier, but Atraiu is agile and ducks underneath the fat man's fist, throwing himself forward. While Atraiu isn't strong enough to take Duane down, the blow causes them both to stumble back, and when Duane turns to mitigate the impact, he finds there is no footing behind him. Both men plummet off the deck.

Ada puts a wet hand on my shoulder, coughing up seawater. Hers isn't the only hand that touches me.

With a jolt, I turn around to see Atraiu, but not the frightened soldier... the bee-stung corpse in army fatigues is embracing his sister. I step back, letting them have their moment. With every second, she turns bluer and her gasps become less frequent, while more of his skin swells with boils and a hole forms where his eye should be.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you," he finally says, but as he does this, he turns to face me.

Atraiu closes his remaining eye. Brother and sister collapse.

Their bodies begin to fade, as does the pier. I turn to the water and spot a clear reflection of the stall behind me.

I whip back around, cringing as pain floods my throat and my groin, but I know where I am. I'm in the restroom of the hospital.

I turn back to the mirror. Though my face is still invisible, I can see my hand clearly.

As I remember this moment and what led me to the restroom in the first place, I quieten, listening for the Whistler. After a long period of silence, I push the door back open and peer outside, so quietly that I can hear the beeping of the heartrate monitor down the hall.

Question after question forms in my head. *What happened with Ada and Atraiu? Why can I still not remember anything? Where is that girl, and who is she?* Perhaps there's a missed clue in my room. As much as it pains me to walk, I lean against the walls and make my way out of the bathroom.

The beeping grows louder as I enter the dark room. The light switch doesn't work and, as I walk inside, careful to not trip over anything, I search for any papers or identifiers, anything that will tell me who I am.

As I search, my body tightens, my muscles start to spasm, and I fall back to the floor. Parts of me are numb, while other parts throb with pain. My eyes seem to take longer to focus, lagging behind my head's movements. I see stars.

The faintest voices ring in my ear. "She's having a reaction! Doctor!"

"Quick, she's seizing!"

The light clicks on, while the beeping of the heartrate monitor accelerates. A chime sounds from outside. The light... the elevator. I open my eyes, but the entire room is hazy. I'm about to faint, about to die.

I crawl out of the room. The elevator door is open, but it's so far. I reach for the floor in front of me several times, tugging myself on, afraid it's going to close on me, afraid I'm not going to make it. I manage to get one leg up and barely stumble forward on two feet as I make the last several paces into the elevator, the doors closing behind me.

The elevator doesn't descend as I expect it to.

It drops.

THE CONSTRICTOR

VI

Shouting stirs me. I wake to blurred vision and try to move my limbs. Thankfully, I'm uninjured, but my head aches and there are pebbles digging into my skull. The shouting becomes more coherent as my ears hone in; they are muddled by numerous murmurs. People are arguing, others whisper—but there are hundreds of voices.

I rise to my feet, shaking my hair that falls well below my shoulder. I put a hand to my head. I don't remember my hair being this thick or this long, but there are many things I don't remember about myself. Someone runs through me, splashing through a puddle, but even as I raise my hands to deflect the water, I remember I'm ethereal.

I look down at the puddle and see no reflection. A hand touches my shoulder from behind.

"You made it," the mysterious girl says, still in her battered clothes, skin plagued with bruises, dirt, and bloodstains. She glows, radiant amongst the miffed passersby who seem to zone out as Maven speaks to me.

Wait, *Maven*?

"That's my name," she says. "You learn more than just what you see." She motions to the crowd.

A mix of people rush by, some well-dressed in suits or dresses, some in battered work clothes, some policemen, and some in a sort of military cadet uniform. This is nothing like the British-Indian slums. I shudder as an older couple marches right through Maven and me. I'm still not used to that.

"The evil is near, and it isn't happy with the damage you've done," Maven explains. "You won't recognize it as the Whistler this time, but it's looking for us. Especially now. I can't stay here when it's so close to me."

She points her finger to an object on the ground. "Remember what you're here for."

It's a piece of paper, a flyer. To my surprise, it's touchable. Picking it up, I read: *Pro-American Rally: Mass Demonstration for True Americanism, Feb 20th, 1939, at Madison Square Garden*. On the bottom, it reads *German American Bund*.

Madison Square Garden, 1939... I'm traveling through time and space. I turn back to Maven, but instead of her, a pair of teenagers rush through me, one of them snatching the flyer and looking at it with a grimace on his face. He grabs the hand of the slightly younger teenage girl with him and proceeds on down the street.

Drawn, I follow them.

Both of them are short, dark-haired, and brown-eyed. From their features, I can tell they are related. The girl has long hair and a striped dress. The boy keeps his curly hair tucked into a flat cap and his shirt tucked into suspenders.

“Morty, why are we here?” the girl asks, more alarmed by the crowd than annoyed. As she speaks, the voices of the crowd distort around me.

Morty raises the flyer. “Because of this,” he growls. “These people are why Mom and Dad brought us here with Bubbe.”

“But if they’re bad then why are you bringing us to them?” the girl quizzes.

“Because, Tori,” Morty answers, “we are called protestors. So are some of the people here. Mostly immigrants, like you and me, who know that Hitler and his supporters are dangerous people. If they think no one opposes them, they will try to take over. This is why we have to be here. We have to stand up against our enemies. And the speaker today, Fritz Kuhn... well, he’s one of ‘em.”

Tori winces, unconvinced, but she follows regardless. As she moves, she locks eyes with me, and I realize that I know this girl, just as I’d known Ada.

I keep following the two, at first trying to squeeze by the other protestors in the crowd, but nobody adjusts their direction to evade me, so I just walk through them. Every time I do, I expect to feel something, but only a chilling wave greets me.

A stage becomes visible up ahead, upon which stands a large statue of George Washington, another figure I remember without knowing why. American flags adorn the stage, hanging above several uniformed men in military slacks, red badges on their arms.

Closer to the stage, a well-organized squadron of people also wear the red badges, and it isn’t long before the shouting and murmuring of the crowd turn to insults and arguments. There are two sides to this meeting, and as I get a better look, I gather that Tori and Morty are members of the smaller faction.

Separating the protestors from the others are many uniformed guards posted in a line, but they don’t bear the look of peacekeepers meant to subdue violence. The glares of these men show hunger.

“Right here,” Morty finally says.

The two children have gotten as close to the front stage as possible, but they’re still quite far away. The uniformed guards separate them from a much larger body of onlookers and supporters.

A wave of cheering erupts from the supporters as a man—the Fritz fellow Morty mentioned—walks to the center podium in front of the Washington figure. The cheering is soon drowned out by the many boos of the people closest to me.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Fritz says, “fellow Americans, American patriots... I am sure I do not come before you tonight as a complete stranger. You all have heard the reports of me in the Jewish-controlled press, who paint me as a creature with horns, cloven hooves, and a long tail. We, with American ideals, demand that our government shall be returned to the American people who founded it!”

As he continues, advocating for a white, gentile-ruled America, it doesn't take me long to realize what this person is advocating for: Nazism. I take a closer look at the red patch upon one of the guards separating the protesters, and realize that upon it is a swastika. Like George Washington, I know this part of history, but I don't know how I know. Wherever I'm from, I was never on the side of the Nazis, and neither are these kids.

I turn back to the children in the crowd, watching as Morty reaches into a small satchel. From the satchel, he reveals a pair of eggs, one of which he discreetly hands off to Tori.

As the speaker continues, rallying the supporters in the crowd, a protestor rushes the stage, triggering a commotion. Seizing his chance, Morty expertly tosses his egg toward the stage. Despite the child's good arm, the egg doesn't reach the stage, landing instead on one of the cheering supporters. He immediately produces another one from the satchel and turns to Tori. “Go ahead. Throw yours,” he encourages.

Tori hesitates briefly before throwing the egg, which doesn't make it far—it cracks across the face of one of the guards, who wipes it from his head with a wide grimace.

But Morty and Tori aren't the only people throwing things, and as the speaker does his best to ignore the protestors, many of the guards start shoving members of the crowd.

The egg-struck guard digs through the crowd, his face red, and wrestles with protestors. Fists cutting with surgical precision, he finally smiles, the same malicious smirk and toxic green eyes as the Whistler. Maven said he was near. Only fitting he'd be a Nazi.

He passes through me, grabbing Tori by her hair.

“You threw that egg, you little bitch?” he growls. Members of the crowd try to fight him off, but this man, unlike the Whistler, is all muscle. His arms bulge through his rolled-up sleeves and with one push he knocks three other protestors down before striking Tori. I want to run in and help her, but I am useless.

Fritz resumes his speech, but the fighting is spreading. Morty sneaks up on the green-eyed Nazi from behind, leaps on his back, and stabs him in the eye with a small pocket knife. Police rush the fighting crowd as the man goes down, trying to break up the fight, while Morty pulls his injured sister away. The hulking Nazi, screaming more with rage than pain, shoves past the police, thrashing at anyone within reach. He looks up, his blazing eyes fixed on my face—and before I can react, I'm on the ground, staring up at the boot that's crashing down toward me.

VII

My head trembles as fluid leaks down my temple. I try to recall how I ended up in this hospital, but all I can hear is the heartrate monitor. My head hurts, badly. It's more than a headache, more than a migraine. As it throbs, more fluid trickles down my skull. This isn't a leak: it's blood. My head shudders as blood pools around my eye, escalating the pain.

I'm not in the hospital. The blood is flowing down my face to the floor, not toward a bed. What's more... as my arms shake, as my head twitches and my eyes flicker, as I sob, voice crying out for anyone who can hear... I realize I'm not in control of this body.

These eyes open, but see nothing. There is no light, but my shoes struggle against a solid ground. I've never worn shoes—I've had nothing but my hospital gown since I first woke. The only time that changed is when... when I lived Ada's death. This must be... Tori's body?

Her hands hang above her head in warm chains that dig into her wrists like sharp glass. She gasps and tries to cry out once more, but her throat is too dry to make much of a sound. She's parched, as if her body's water is draining through her blood. Through all her struggling, there's a noise that causes her to stop in place. She's not the only one sobbing. We aren't alone here. A third voice joins in, more chains rattling, and soon there's a choir of victims, cries resonating and chains rattling from all directions.

A thunderous bang resounds as a large bolt clicks. Tori closes her eyes to shield them from the blinding light as a shutter in the distance grinds open. She hazards enough of a peek to see the silhouette of a person in the opening. Her eyes are so accustomed to the darkness that looking at the light equates to staring at the sun.

“God... please...” the girl directly behind us cries.

The shutter closes with another bang and a sharp click activates dozens of overhead lights that illuminate the entire room.

How did I get here? At the rally, he went after Tori and Morty, but they escaped, and he came for me. Something clicked and he got ahold of me, even though the balance was in my favor. Either I waited too long, or something lured him there, but he found me.

This new killer... he's different from the Whistler. Tori eyes the dozen or so girls around us on this factory floor. She is the only one held upright. Some are fully suspended on their side, some raised higher so their feet can't touch the ground. Some are held by a single hand and foot, while another hangs from her stomach alone. Some whimper, holding their eyes closed, while others stare, catatonic from their torture. A girl to our left hangs upside-down, already dead.

"Aww, shame," comes the deep, grumbling voice of the Nazi as he walks up to the dead girl. "Took the easy way out and bled to death, huh? You other sweethearts should take a lesson, eh?"

He may not whistle, but his voice carries the same malice. It sends the same shivers through Tori's core as it does through mine.

He walks behind us, examining the other girls. Tori looks at them too. They're mostly in their late teens or early twenties, and I realize that judging by the height from which we hang, Tori has definitely grown. Whatever is happening, it's long after the rally.

The Nazi finishes circling the area, ogling his handiwork, finally settling on Tori. He's no longer in the Nazi uniform: no swastika rests on his sleeve, but his muscles bulge out, even bigger than before. He's grown a small beard, and although one of his eyes has been replaced with a wooden one, his remaining green eye stares twice as intensely. A star on his khaki shirt reads Texas Ranger. *Texas?! He brought Tori from Madison Square Garden to Texas?! I don't have all of the pieces to make sense of this transition, but I'm in no control. I want to call for Maven, to look for a mirror that may summon her—she always seems to appear when I search for a reflection, but I know she would never appear this close to the killer. He's looking for her too.*

"I thought you were familiar, sweetheart," he begins. "Couldn't miss that scar of yours. The one I left when I hit ya. Where's the boy, eh? Ain't got your back this time, does he?" He chuckles, putting a hand on Tori's jaw. He wipes a bit of blood from her face and licks it off his finger before spitting it back onto our face. Tori flinches.

"Too kosher for my taste," he jokes. He pulls her in, licking the dried blood from the bottom of her neck to the top of her temple. Her entire body trembles at the feeling of his thorny tongue. If a drop of fluid existed in her bladder, she'd likely have lost it, because even she can't cringe hard enough for the both of us.

"Ya thirsty, Tori?" he asks, walking off, his boots splashing in what I can only imagine is the collective blood of his other victims. "Ya know they're holding Kuhn not too far from here. You came all the way here for freedom, but then these Jewish hypocrites lock people away for saying anything against the status quo. They canceled his citizenship, holed him

up all the way down here in Texas. Tell me, sweetheart, do ya still think we're in the land of the free?"

I'm not entirely sure what his plan is or why he's sharing this with us, but Tori's eyes settle on the canteen in his hand.

"Drink up," he instructs, forcing what I am thankful is just water down our throat. Tori chokes on the first few sips, spluttering as her throat contracts.

"Tell me," he says, grabbing Tori's jaw again, "do you think you're truly free here?"

Tori can't bring herself to look directly into his eye, and he smiles at her weakness, patting her on the cheek before stepping away. "Of course you're not free. If you're gonna be a prisoner, I ought to at least show you how it's done around here, eh?" He puts a set of goggles over his eyes and returns to the far end of the room by the shutter. He shuts the lights off, leaving Tori with a lingering vision of whiteness as her eyes readjust to the dark.

The shutter stays closed. He's still in here, and the communal sobbing of the girls grows increasingly louder as the room fills with the rank smell of fear, drowning out the once-overbearing scent of blood. I hear footsteps as the killer ascends a metal staircase somewhere in the room.

Tori struggles against the chains that cut her so deeply. One of the links is broken, digging further into her wrist whenever she moves. A flip switches above, cuing an earsplitting trumpet—an alarm—that rings throughout the warehouse, or whatever it is we're trapped in.

The whimpers turn to screams, and Tori's own fear infects me as she struggles against the chains, ignoring the iron that rips into her wrists. Everyone is screaming, and Tori's screams tear at her own vocal cords as she tries to drown out the alarm.

If she weren't almost completely drained of blood, these ears would bleed too. How does no one outside hear this? Are we in the middle of nowhere? How does the entire state of Texas not come to our aid?

Tori tugs against the chains, hoping they'll relent at least a little, and they do. She gets her hands down just enough to cover her ears against the alarm. It doesn't help much, but after a bright flash, I realize Tori isn't screaming to cover the sound. This isn't why they're afraid.

The flash goes off again. It's a camera, and its light reveals a scene that causes Tori to lose what little bit of water she just drank. He's down here, next to us, tugging at one of the girls' chains. He pulls with all of his might as the chains constrict her limbs, tearing through the flesh, wrenching the bone. As he pulls, the veins in his arms bulge until they're thick as serpents. The camera sits on a tripod on the floor. With the next flash, the girl's leg comes clean off.

Tori turns her head away, slamming her eyes shut, tears leaking between the cracks. The torture continues, and I wonder how his victim isn't yet dead as another ten flashes go by. After an eternity, the alarm stops, the lights flicker on, and the shutter opens and closes. Tori refuses to move for several minutes, and when she does, she lets out a terrible sob. What remains in the chains next to her can hardly be recognized as a person. Limbs are separated from a split torso, with only one leg and a head still attached to the main body. Some innards lie on the ground, squeezed out by the brutal constriction. Tori only looks for a second, but that's enough to send her over the edge. She wretches, cries out once more, and slips into unconsciousness.

Fading in and out, Tori hardly stirs through the next alarm. Everything she hears and sees is muffled, her mind a thick haze blocking out the trauma she's witnessed, the damage she's suffered. So that's what the alarm is for: it induces fear. Every time it goes off, someone dies. In the meantime, the remaining survivors struggle, praying either starvation or blood loss will end them before the alarm does.

I don't know how long I've been here. Tori's a survivor. Her body is strong, and it feels like I've hung here for a longer time than I spent eluding the Whistler. When Tori's eyes open one last time to the sound of the shutter, she sees there's no one else alive but her. The killer is saying something to us... some final monologue as he paces about, stepping through the rancid pools of blood. Tori wants to be afraid, but all she feels is numb. She gave up on life days ago. No one is coming to rescue her. Her ears are deaf to the sound of the alarm. She doesn't feel the metal against her wrists anymore, nerves killed by the chains that bind. She doesn't feel anything until a cool iron chain wraps around her leg and tightens. She doesn't scream as it tears through—she doesn't, but I do, the silent cry echoing through my entire body. Tori is dying, but I still want to live. The killer's immense strength breaks through her brittle bones as the chains scissor through skin, muscle, tissue, and finally bone. Her arms are next, but before her body hits the ground, she's already dead.

VIII

“Victoria Gale?” a man's voice calls. I stir; it came from outside the door.

I lean my head up. I am in no pain. My wrists, my ankles... they aren't shackled. There's no blood. There are no bruises. Of course, that doesn't mean I haven't suffered any damage; I stay still, trying not to relive the nightmare of Tori's death. The length of it. That Nazi, that killer... how can a person do that? How can he sleep at night? How does a person murder so many people over such a long period of time and not get caught?

I'd gone from drowning at the hands of the Whistler to being hung, starved, and tortured by the Nazi. The door opens, shaking me from my mental despondence. A girl has opened it, but not just any girl. It's *her*—Tori. But she's older now. She's practically an adult, and the only thing tarnishing her beautiful face is a round scar on her forehead.

I want to get up and hold her. Touch her face and let her know I'm here—but I can't, because I'm not.

Standing in the doorway is not the killer but another stranger. I rise and walk up behind Tori, who hesitantly invites the man in. She balls her hands in front of her chest, seemingly intimidated, but his uniform is that of an American soldier.

“Please, have a seat. As I said, I'm here from the United States Army.”

“Morty sent me a letter?” she asks, barely able to breathe the words. She's already sweating, praying that this man is just a personal courier and not the person I already know he is.

“Not quite. I worked with Mr. Mordecai—er, Morty— quite briefly. I'm Corporal Dixon.” He holds out a hand, but Tori doesn't accept. She just sits.

“I understand you both lost your grandmother not many months ago. She left Mr. Morty her...” he motions around the dingy apartment. “Well, estate may not be the best choice of words.”

Tori nods, fumbling with her long black hair. “Morty told me not to worry.”

Corporal Dixon looks at the ground. “Morty spoke very highly of you. He was very reluctant to leave you, but as a true American, he worked to liberate all of Europe from the Nazi regime, all whilst trying to track down the parents who sent you overseas. I understand that you're both migrants from Europe?”

Tori nods.

“Well, your brother was a brave man,” he says quietly.

Tori looks up at him, her face pale. “Was? Where is he?”

Corporal Dixon reaches into his case, revealing a folded American flag, upon which rests a letter and a set of dog tags. My heart accelerates just as Tori's does as she takes in her brother's legacy.

“On June 6th, your brother helped us to capture one of five beachheads along the coast of Normandy. Not just as infantry, but also as a legendary paratrooper, a role not many men were willing to occupy. I have with me”—he looks away as Tori shrinks into a ball—“a flag, dedicated to his service, his dog tags, and his last earnings—with a bonus—for his service to the United States and the Allied Forces. He mentioned a photograph in his will, but we didn't find it on his person.”

He sets the flag and several items down on the table nearest her as she begins sobbing.

“I am... very sorry,” Corporal Dixon explains quietly, but she does not hear him. In her mind, Tori is all alone.

Her grandmother—her Bubbe—gone, her parents' whereabouts a mystery in Nazi-occupied territory, and now her brother killed, just like Atraiu... except Ada never had to hear about her brother's demise.

I don't witness the departure of Corporal Dixon. All at once, he is gone, but Tori still sits in a ball. I try to curl up next to her, but end up moving right through her. I can't help her here. I can't help her—and yet I know she needs me.

I move back as she reaches out and grasps the dog tag. *Mordecai Gale, United States Army.*

Behind it, a second tag drops to the ground. As she examines the first, I peer at the fallen one. It contains the Shema, a famous Jewish prayer. She holds the first tag tightly, crying into her arms.

I spy the letter Corporal Dixon left with Tori. She has yet to touch it. I take it:

Tori, if you are receiving this letter, then I will never be able to express how truly sorry I am for abandoning you. I never should have left you. I never wanted to, but I saw the headlines, just as you did. Nazi Germany is spreading, and Mom and Dad both stopped responding to our letters. I knew that if we wanted to hold on to any hope of seeing them again, I had to enlist. I promised you I'd bring back our only picture with them, and I have willed it to be sent back with my effects. I wanted to bring it so I could find them, but leaving was a mistake, and I didn't make it. Even with me gone, I will still be with you in spirit. Everything I did was to protect and provide for you. I couldn't stand another day of working in one of those factories and, even worse, I couldn't imagine subjecting you to that. I tried,

and I failed, and I'm sorry. Just remember, I love you more than anything, and even in my death, you will never be alone. I will look after you, even in spirit.

Love,

Your Loyal Brother.

Morty.

A tear falls through the letter into the void as I read it. It's eerily similar to Atraiu's journal. He lived and died in war, fighting for his sister. Wind rushes around me, daggers tearing at my skull as the world shifts.

“Yes, sir!”

I look around. I'm on a plane. Several soldiers are strapped into seats against either wall, facing one another. I stand until my head settles, eventually fixing my eyes upon Morty, whose familiar face stands out from the rest. I know him so well... those eyes, those flat cheekbones. He rests a rifle on his lap, but in his hands, he holds a picture.

“One minute!” the officer in the back yells. The soldiers twitch, some praying, some holding their eyes closed, almost all as scared as the girls in the killer's chains. I can see one reason why: they're all practically kids. The young men hold their breaths, leaning against their seats, praying they'll survive the coming encounter.

“Alright men, prepare yourselves!” their leader calls.

The soldiers all unfasten their belts, strapping a set of packs to their backs, double-checking their equipment and their weapons, and hesitantly lining up single file as the rear hatch of the plane opens. If I weren't but a ghostly witness to this event, I'd surely stumble.

“We're overhead! Go, go, go!”

One by one, the men tumble out of the plane, some of them pushed by the soldiers behind them. Morty takes his turn in the middle of the ranks. As he drops, an abrupt gust sucks me out of the plane into nothing but fog.

I come to in front of a large tree, somewhat stunned. I quickly remember what happened and look up to the sky, where only fog exists. Bodies litter the ground around me, a mix of two different uniforms. I cringe as I recognize a few faces of the American boys who parachuted out of the plane, and my heart drops as I realize Morty's corpse is likely among them. There are no bullets zipping by, no shouts or screams of war, and no planes dropping soldiers overhead.

Something tickles my neck and I spin around, ready to run—but it's just a picture. In it, a young boy holds a baby. There are three adults. Two are younger and bear an uncanny resemblance to Morty and Tori. The older woman in the photo must be their grandmother,

their Bubbe. This is the photo Morty mentioned, the only surviving picture of their whole family, and it was lost with Morty.

Did he drop it while parachuting?

I look back up at the fog-masked sky, but end up peering into the branches of the tree. Hanging from a parachute caught in the treetops, Morty's corpse drips blood from several gunshot wounds. He never even made it to the ground. I look back at the photo in my hand.

My head starts to hurt, but I know this is merely the mark of a new transition. I hold my eyes closed, bearing through it as I puzzle over my role here. When I open my eyes, I find myself peering at the bulging back of the Nazi.

IX

The killer isn't looking at me, but that doesn't stop me from reliving the trauma this sadistic psychopath takes so much pleasure inflicting. When I'm sure the balance doesn't have him fixed on pursuing me, I take in his appearance.

He doesn't look as grisly as he did back in the warehouse. His beard is neatly trimmed, bald head tucked into a rancher's hat, and an eyepatch sits neatly over his bad eye. His uniform is now a tan business suit with the ranger star pinned over it. His attention is acutely focused on a podium in front of a crowd of perhaps fifty people. He's security, I realize.

"And for the longest time," the female speaker continues, "I didn't know what to do. My brother was the soldier, he was the breadwinner. The Army didn't want girls carrying guns, and the factories he could barely stand definitely didn't want me. As much as it pained me to miss my brother every day, I knew I couldn't live my life dependent on someone else. He wouldn't want that. Our parents wouldn't want that. Our grandmother wouldn't. The only way to make the sacrifices of my family count for something was to make myself count for something, to change the world."

At the podium, Tori speaks beautifully: she's articulate and assertive. This isn't the same timid, clueless follower that Morty led. His death didn't destroy her—it invigorated her.

"I inherited my brother's earnings and moved far away from New York, all the way down to Georgia, where I started school and found the Atlanta Women's Club. They supported me and my endeavors, gave me a purpose, and that is why I'm here today—not only as a transfer, but also as an ambassador from Atlanta. With funds raised from all over Georgia, we are offering scholarships to provide education to women across the nation."

"This can't be," the killer murmurs, mouth curving into a grotesque grin. "Ambassador, eh? This sweetheart all the way out here? It must be fate." He chuckles to himself.

He's right. He finds her, captures her, tortures her, and finally kills her. Morty took this man's eye in New York before the war. Now, the war looks to be over, but this man and his hate endure. Fate may be an appropriate word.

I look down at the picture in my hand. Maybe I'm here to prevent this death from occurring, but how? All I know is that with Ada, I had to return her heirloom. Maybe I need to bring Tori this picture. Maybe it will change things.

I start toward the crowd, moving past the killer ranger who looks right through me to the podium. I put a hand out toward the first body in my way, but as before, I drift right through. I cut straight through the crowd, consisting mostly of women captivated by Tori's tale of resilience.

As I move, her words distort and the people stop moving. They're still here, but... they're practically frozen, pale mannequins waiting for life. The sound of boots behind me tells me the killer is on his way. The balance might have shifted, but I don't risk turning back to find out.

I continue marching forward, gliding through the still bodies as Tori's incoherent, distorted words reverberate through the area.

The crowd seems endless, a much larger body of people than I first observed. It's some kind of trap. My heart screams at me as I quicken my pace to a jog, a run, and then a sprint. Tori too is frozen, but her hazy voice still rings in my ears. At the foot of the stage, I see just how much she's changed. Her mousey body and long, unkempt hair are now complemented by large horn-rimmed glasses. I don't wait to find the stairs. I hit the edge and climb to the top as the footsteps fall closer and closer to me. With the photo in hand, I touch Tori's shoulder, mind flashing as her figure shocks me, causing my own body to tear and contort. I'm losing grip, and as my eyes white out, imploding within my head, I fall to my knees, waiting for the pain to recede. Finally, I look up to get my bearings.

Dormitory buildings surround me on both sides. It is nighttime. It's some kind of university, possibly the University of Texas, the one Tori mentioned in her speech.

As I look around, a car accelerates and drifts past, blinding me with its headlights.

I step off the gravel path and onto the concrete sidewalk in front of one of the doors, eventually creeping behind a nearby pillar as what is now clearly a boxy police car pulls around. It stops a few yards down from me and shuts off. I already know who's about to exit before the brown leather boot touches the ground. The killer emerges and shines a flashlight over a paper he's holding. He's back in his khaki pants and tan button-up shirt. There's no eyepatch on his face or hat on his hairless dome of a head. He shines the light on the doors as he passes, finally heading up a set of concrete steps to the second story.

As the fog rolls in behind me, I have no choice but to follow. I tip-toe up the steps behind the killer, hoping that he won't notice me and still not knowing what I can do to stop him. I'm just a witness here, powerless—but I want to help in any way I can.

The killer knocks on a door with the butt of his flashlight. "Ms. Gale? Are ya there? Officer Marx, Texas Rangers. Open up," he orders, haste in his tone.

After a few seconds, the door slowly opens. Marx shines the light in the doorway before stepping in.

I keep my back against the wall as I inch closer, trying to eavesdrop.

“No, no this can't wait at all. You've been identified as an involved party. I have to bring you in.”

“But this doesn't make any sense! I have rights. I have alibis. I can prove I wasn't involved in any robbery. Just let me talk to—”

“You'll have plenty of time for all of this at the station. Don't make me peg you with resisting as well. If you're innocent, this matter can be over within a couple of hours. Or it can take days.”

Tori doesn't seem as strong-willed as she did at the podium—I guess she hasn't had time to rehearse her responses. Her shyness is taking over, but that's attributable to the way Ranger Marx looms over her, backing her into a corner.

A sudden look of familiarity floods her face as he steps beneath the light. “Your eye?” she whispers.

“Ahh, sweetheart. I think you already know what happened to my eye.”

He punches her in the throat just as she's about to scream. She hits the wall hard. He grabs her by her neck and tosses her to the ground, ripping off her necklace in the process. Morty's dog tags.

“No! Please,” she croaks, barely audible.

He tosses the dog tags to the ground and cuffs the weakened woman. “Let's go,” he growls, lifting her to her feet.

I dive to the side as the two of them walk by, witnesses peering around the corner. “Just another drunken disturbance,” Marx mutters as he forces her through the crowd.

The fog starts to roll in, but the dog tags on the ground beckon me. I step back into the room and seize them, comparing them to the family photo I picked up from Morty. These two artifacts are similarly symbolic, sentimental even, and I start to wonder why I'm not only drawn to people like Ada, Tori, Atraiu, and Morty, but to the objects that mean so much to them.

I look around the room for anything else that might help, eyes settling at last on a mirror. At what point will I have witnessed enough to be able to see myself? If what Maven told me is true, I learn more than just what I witness.

“You learn fragments, but each fragment is useless until you can put them all together,” she says from behind. “You already know how to reach me, but when will you learn not to?”

“The evil is looking for me. Tracking me. A preta after a preta, and if I'm near you...” she closes her eyes. “I am merely a conscience, one of several. I am not the key to your escape. The keys... are in your hands.” She points at the dog tags and the picture.

I hold them up to her, not sure what else I can do.

“Atraiu was a preta searching for Ada’s spirit. What do you think Mordecai is? Why do you think you’ve been shown this?” Her tone is almost hostile. “What is in his way? What does he need in order to find his sister?”

The mirror splits behind me.

She shakes her head. “Go... go now!” But it’s too late. My vision whites out as a fissure splits down my skull. She’s right. Every time I talk to her, the killer gets closer. The Whistler was pursuing her, but this Marx guy too? They’re all fragments.

The pain’s intensity magnifies, forcing me down as I pray for it to peak, but the pain has only slightly relented when the familiar sound of the shutter scraping open replaces the ringing in my ears. I’m too afraid to open my eyes. He cannot do this to me again.

“Dear Jesus, have mercy...” a voice mutters. I don’t recognize it.

I open my eyes to spy a ranger removing his brown hat. It’s hot. There’s sunlight. I’m outside a large, lone building on a lake. It’s a hatchery.

“This is definitely it. Another one.”

“No way a lone person could do this twice. More like the work of one of them Chicago gangs,” another person says.

“I’m not going in.” The first ranger walks away, blue in the face as he struggles to retain the contents of his stomach.

“H... help,” a weak voice calls from inside.

“Sir, someone’s still alive in there!”

“Go, go on in,” the ranger says, waving his companions inside. Reluctant but knowing what I have to do, I follow them. Inside, the smell of death fills the air. Arms and legs dangle from chains, while the pieces they were once connected to rot on the floor.

“They’re saying this is the work of one man? The Constrictor? More like a butcher. What man could do this twice?” one of the officers remarks, stepping over a pile of human casserole.

“You’ve seen the manifesto, right? Son of a bitch takes pictures and sends ‘em to the media.”

“Sweetheart? Sweetie, can you hear me?” the officer calls.

“No, no please!” she cries through dried cracked lips.

“No, no. It’s okay, we’re here to help.”

“Leave me alone!” she screams. “I’m not your fucking sweetheart!”

“Raymond? What’s going on?”

“She’s delirious, sir. Let’s get her down.”

She’s not delirious. Sweetheart... a word Marx throws around a lot.

“Sweetheart? Can you talk to me?” Raymond continues.

“Don’t! No, no!” she keeps screaming, kicking at him.

“She thinks I’m the killer, sir,” Raymond says. “Look into my eyes, girl. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

She stares at him, slowly calming down, likely realizing that he—unlike Marx—still has two of them.

As her breathing slows, Raymond tries again. “What’s your name, hun?”

She shakes her head. “Sweetheart,” she breathes. “He calls us that.”

“He does? We’re gonna get you down from here and you can tell me who he is, okay?”

She shakes her head even more vigorously. “He’s one of you!” she finally spurts out.

“One of us? A ranger?”

She nods. “The Nazi ranger.”

“Nazi...” Raymond mutters. “Sir, what was the name of that ranger who got booted? The one spoutin’ all that Nazi propaganda?”

“Oh, that asshole?” the queasy ranger answers. “Marx? Yeah, Dolph Marx. The Hitler-lover. What about him?”

“I think he might be our new number one suspect.”

As the rangers place their newfound puzzle piece, the killer starts to make sense to me. Dolph Marx, an American Nazi turned Texas Ranger, using his authority to kidnap and murder innocent Jewish girls. All too convenient that the person who took his eye, Morty, died in combat, leaving him to take vengeance on Tori.

As the rangers spread out, searching the place and helping the victim down, they start to fade. A door in the back opens with a slow groan, and fog filters the sunlight that once shone through the open shutter. Soon, my breathing is the only remaining sound.

I take a step into the pool of blood. It’s warm. Fresh.

A whimper breaks the silence to my right, followed by the rattling of chains and, finally, a thud. A body drops beside me, still wrapped in chains. I know I shouldn’t help her. The fog, the darkness, the silence... the balance has slipped. I’m not just a witness here, and as the girl rises, staring at me with ghostly white eyes, the hunger of the preta hones in on me once more. The girl hobbles toward me, her skin raw and red, not cold and gray like the Whistler’s victims. Slowly, her mouth hinges open—too far, her tongue lolling out—and from the pits of her throat comes a terrible scream that bounces off the thick, rusted walls. I put my hands to my ears, but her scream pierces flesh and bone.

As she screams, a spotlight beams on me, sounding the killer’s alarm. Several preta emerge from the darkness. The first lunges on broken legs, whipping her loose chain, snarling my wrist with bloodstained metal.

The other preta add their collective screams, drowning out the alarm, the sound burrowing into my head until there is nothing else. Dimly, I tug away from her chains, unable to hear my own thoughts. A door hangs open, but it seems so far away, the walls shaking, that scream... somehow, I make it out. As the cold iron slams behind me, I fall, my body shaking. I know I haven't seen the last of the shrieking women.

X

I don't know if the sounds I hear are the screams of the bodies on the other side of the door or mere echoes playing out in my head, but I crawl up regardless, trying to get my bearings. I stand on carpeted floor, a row of large, multi-pane windows leaking moonlight upon it from across the hall. This isn't some dump in the middle of nowhere; I'm not in the same building.

A bang against the door confirms that those things are still in pursuit. I lurch forward several paces, unable to rest for even a few seconds—I have to find the next piece of the puzzle, but I have no idea what that is.

To my left are several doors. I dash over to the first. It's numbered 116, but it's locked. I move onto the next one, 117, which is also locked. These numbers must indicate... could I be in a school? Tori's university?

I push forward, but stumble as the next door bursts open, a girl falling to the floor. Her short hair tells me she isn't Tori, but she doesn't look like a preta either: no blood, no chains.

She rolls over, still alive, blackened and bruised face begging for help. My instinct says to keep moving, but as more bangs echo from the door-portal to the warehouse, I protectively kneel down.

She looks at me, barely managing to get the words out of her lips. "He... he got Tori," she chokes. Deep purple bruises line her neck. This isn't the Constrictor's usual method. If he got her, this was done in haste.

"Tori... my roommate. I heard..." she breathes, but she stops as she sees my understanding. Tears well up in her eyes. "I called... police box... he came." She turns her head toward the ground. "*He* came back. Can't call for help."

The door groans behind us. It can't sustain their continued assault.

"Can't call for help," she repeats. "No one will help." With those last words, her head falls forward.

The Constrictor didn't have time to capture her. He went back and killed her, intercepting her police call. He was desperate.

The door bursts open and a powerful draft pulls me back toward the doorway, toward the horrific shrieks that now reverberate through the halls. I resist the wind and crawl forward, leaving the short-haired girl behind. Just as my ears began to calm, the preta's shrieks tear from behind me, louder than before. The glass shatters from the windows beside me, forcing me to crawl through broken shards.

I can't let myself look back, but I can't crawl through this hall. I grasp the doorframe beside me and manage to pull myself up to a standing position, ignoring the blood that now leaks from my arms. I try the door but, like the others, it's locked. When I pull on the handle, an embedded shard of glass digs deeper into my palm. I cringe, loosening my grip, but before I realize my mistake, I am already stumbling backward against the current. I hit the ground, landing in more glass, and grind backward through the shards. I stop against the girl's corpse. The door from which she emerged is open.

I lunge and grab the frame, enduring the pain as I pull myself in. It takes every fiber of muscle to fight through the doorway, rise, and slam the door shut, muffling the ear-splitting howls behind yet another door.

I collapse as blood leaks from dozens of minor cuts—these little nuisances I can ignore, unlike the head-spinning tinnitus. I can barely convince myself to keep moving. The only thing that motivates me is the fact that this door won't stay closed forever. I sit up, waiting for the dizziness to pass, finally managing to stand once more. I fumble around the wall for a light switch, flicking it on.

As the overhead lights illuminate the room, I raise my bloodied hands, shielding my eyes. I'm in a large auditorium: not the small classroom I'd expected. This dimension I'm occupying seems somehow fragmented: these rooms don't connect in an orthodox way. The auditorium is empty but for the stage, podium, and the numerous rows of seats behind them.

Unsure where to head next, I hobble up the few steps on stage and approach the podium. On it rests a handful of newspapers and flash cards. I pick up the first newspaper, examining the front-page headline: *Thirteen Found Dead, Dismembered at Mason's Hatchery*.

It's dated June ninth, 1949. Another time jump. I look at the second newspaper, dated the thirteenth: *Horrific Photographs Mailed to CBS. Murderer Confirms More Victims to Follow*.

A discreetly packaged envelope found its way onto CBS's doorstep over the weekend. A mix of photographs inside graphically details the gruesome murders of the thirteen women previously found at the abandoned hatchery last Thursday. While the photographs are far too graphic to be displayed to the public, a manifesto inside confirms that the killer—the

self-proclaimed Constrictor—specifically targets younger women affiliated with the Jewish community. Because of his distinctive method of operation, it is likely that the killer stalks his victims well before apprehending them. Sheriff Preston warns the public—

A slight shift catches my peripherals. I look up, dropping the paper, my mouth falling open—the seats have filled with hundreds of figures. It's still dark, and the people aren't quite... people. They're frozen in place, seeming somehow distorted. As I stare them down, clapping fills the room, though no hands move. I stumble back, further agitating the glass that clings to my flesh. A cold front moves through me as a pair of legs passes through my body.

“Attention people,” the speaker begins in a familiar voice. “I get it. Many of you are badly shaken, and I ain't got much better news for you. You've all seen the headlines. There's a real... bad... monster out there.”

I'm already crawling off the stage.

“Not long ago, we found thirteen bodies... in pieces. All holed up in some old hatchery. Wasn't long after that news got out of photographs showing what exactly happened. Some monster watched, waited, and then snatched up all these young women.”

I cannot breathe. The air tastes sickly and my heart escalates to a rapid vibration. There are double doors up a mountain of stairs at the end of the auditorium.

“He doesn't just hurt their bodies. He gets in their heads. When they end up in his clutches, they're starved 'til their stomachs shrink to nothing and their bones are brittle. Then, when the time is just right, he plays an alarm that drowns out all sounds but their screams. While that sound is playing, he takes his chains, and like an anaconda... he tightens 'em till their bones snap. When he's done with one, he turns the lights on just long enough for them to see what happened, and then he leaves until it's time to repeat the cycle, leaving the rest of them terrified of the inevitable. Imagine what the very last one of them feels when that alarm comes on. I can't show you the pictures... but if you don't believe me, this is a recording that was mailed in. The media hasn't gotten ahold of this yet.”

An audio recording blares out—the familiar shriek sounds even more terrifying when degraded by the tape. The exact cries and screams I've heard countless times ring through the sound of an alarm.

Where are the authorities? This is practically a confession, an explanation of his psychotic methods. I run up the stairs, or rather walk as fast as my tired and bloodied legs will carry me.

“But”—he stops the tape—“beyond the grittiness, we know he's got a motive, a method to his madness. Most, not all, but most of the victims were affiliated with local synagogues: Jewish girls. It's possible that the killer and Roosevelt don't see eye to eye very well. But,

with that in mind, it's recommended that any Jews in the area take heed and watch their backs. The war may have ended across the world, but for this man, the battle ain't finished. Rumor has it, Texas ain't his first rodeo."

The crowd is eerily silent as I pass by them. They aren't murmuring, asking questions, gasping, or reacting—they're frozen like mannequins.

How could Dolph Marx—the actual Constrictor—get on this stage? How was this not obvious to anyone?

I reach the top of the stairs when a face to my left catches my attention. I stop.

It's Tori. She stares at Dolph upon the stage, frozen in time like the others, but the slightest movement of her breathing shows me she's likely the only one here who can move. With icy slowness, she turns to me, and it's only now that I realize this speech, this glorified manifesto, has ceased. How could he get so close to Tori? Watching her inspire people on stage to having her watch him terrify those same people, undoing the hope and ambition she spread, both of these strangers moving from New York to Texas. This, this happening. Their lives. Their encounters. The murder... it's all more than mere coincidence.

I turn back at the stage. A mistake. Dolph is looking at me. He is transformed from the monster in Texas Ranger garb I've always seen him in—now, he presents himself in a well-fitting business suit, appearing as a respectable authority figure to the naïve students he brainwashes. The only part of him so much as hinting at his sadistic nature is the eye patch that covers his gruesome wooden eye.

Even from this distance, the pride and malice in his gaze are clear. He draws energy from the people who know and fear him, but he's just clever and manipulative enough to fly under the radar whilst doing his damage.

A wave of pain rolls through my head, forcing me down, but I catch myself on Tori's bench. When I look up, she's flickering. Many of the frozen audience members are gone, and a handful, maybe four or five, flicker just like Tori.

They're all girls, and they all flicker in their frozen form, their eyes fixed on the podium, from which Dolph too has faded from existence. They've changed too. They're... oh God, no... I step over to the double doors. They're not just girls. They're victims.

I am through the doors before I hear their screams, already sprinting down the next hall. Unsure of which way to run, I take a wild guess, letting my legs carry me halfway down a corridor before I hear doors burst open behind me. They're looking for me, just like Maven said: in every memory. In every place, I'm looking for something. I'm learning something. That one girl I found, the unintended victim—she appeared for a reason.

She called for help, but only he came. Am I supposed to fight him? I may not know anything about myself, but I know I'm no real fighter, especially not without a weapon. *A weapon.*

When I fought the Whistler and his drowned preta, I picked up a pistol, but who would have a pistol in a university? When I shot the Whistler, I knocked the star off his helmet, and that star was what I needed to summon Atraiu to help.

Maybe that's what I need... This new killer, Dolph, has a star from the Texas Rangers. Maybe if I get that, I can summon Morty? I look down at my wrist. Among the dried blood and scratches, I have his dog tags with the family photo tightly tucked underneath. Back then, I had the locket, the prayer beads, and finally the Whistler's star.

I stop my running in front of a chained preta hobbling in the distance. I duck around the corner, doing my best to remain quiet. Around this wall, there's a door. I open it, cringing at the loud groan. Another gasp, and then footsteps rapidly pad against the floor, getting gradually closer.

I dip inside the room—a lab of some kind—and run inward, slipping underneath a table. Hoping the chairs and the darkness will hide me, I hold my breath. The creature's chains drag against the floor as she skulks around the room. I can't see much outside of the moonlight emanating from the window, but it's enough to watch her bloodied body bob in and out of sight. Her arms are held to her sides by chains, forcing her to hug herself as she walks. Her bare legs drip blood that leave puddles in her wake. Another chain hangs loosely around her neck, dragging against the ground.

She circles the room before wandering back out. As the chain's scrapes fade into the distance, I risk crawling out from my hiding spot. I walk back over to the door, but my foot slips against the blood on the ground and I fall against a desk, knocking several beakers over.

Glass shatters, cueing a much louder, more assured gasp. I scramble to my feet and slam the door shut. The light snaps on. I can feel the preta outside hurling herself against the door, her desperate gasps for air as painful to my ears as her screams.

My back to the door, I scan the room. Nothing... nothing except for rank upon rank of motionless students gazing clear-eyed past me. There: that short-haired girl I held not too long ago. She jerks into sudden life, raising a beaker while her lab partners fiddle with some equipment.

The monster beats on the door from the other side, breaking its top hinges. That lock won't hold, and I definitely can't hold it shut. I don't know if it's sweat or blood, but I wipe away whatever runs down my face before it gets into my eyes. I want to barricade the door

with something, but then I'd just be trapped in here. I swallow hard. I can't stay here for too long—the fog will come back, I know it. Maybe this short-haired girl has the answers.

Picking my poison, I leave the door and run over to the girl, the door beginning to buckle behind me. I reach out to touch the girl, hoping that I don't just pass through her, but before I touch her, she flickers, fading into the bloodied mess I left in the first hall. Her position doesn't change, the beaker still clutched in her hands.

"Sweetheart, calm down. Help is on the way." Dolph's gritty voice echoes through the air.

"Okay, please," she says, "I don't know who took her, but he just left. You can still catch him."

Her lips don't move. Her body doesn't move. This whole conversation comes from the air itself.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, listen. I am almost at the school and we'll work from there. What's your name, doll?"

"C—Christine," she answers.

"Okay Christine, just go back up to your room. I'm coming for you."

The door bursts open and the lights shut off. The preta is in. She sees me.

The people in the lab disappear, and the vial the girl held drops, shattering. The liquid splashes onto my shin, burning me. Some type of acid.

The preta takes a deep gasp, then lets out a scream that shatters almost every other glass in the classroom. A glass near me has cracked, but inside it... a liquid of the same color.

Before her screaming can shatter everything, I throw the cracked vial at her. Her flesh sears as the acid consumes her. She gasps a couple times, but the scream returns even louder and angrier than before, shattering more glass in her wake.

I duck down, already knowing that my hands won't protect my ears, but I keep trying. There's glass everywhere, but I move, ignoring the cuts that reshape my feet—I have to get some distance between us. As I move, I spot a package of tools. One of them... some kind of medical knife. My vision swims and my eardrums seem to burst in my head. I have to hurry.

I sweep up the knife and charge, but this preta is stronger and heavier than she looks. My tackle doesn't even knock her over, but I at least knock the wind out of her, cutting short her scream.

As she inhales, I reach out and grab the chain that dangles from her throat and pull. The chain tightens, choking her, stifling her screams. She pulls against me, only tightening the chain. For a starved victim, she has a lot of strength, but the chain eats at her skin like scissors through paper. I pull as hard as my broken body will let me, closing my eyes,

nearly losing my stomach as the chain caves in, nearly decapitating the preta. I fall on top of her, taking two deep breaths too many. I don't hear the pattering of feet as more run around the corner, but I hear the first shriek boom through the hall. I grab the knife and push myself off, running like mad in the opposite direction. What am I looking for? The Constrictor. How have their screams not led him to me?

Unable to think with their cries shattering my skull, I keep running, until another preta cuts me off around the next hall. I default into the nearest doorway, a stairwell. Up or down? Chains rattle from above, so I run downstairs, stumbling several times as my torn legs give way.

I exit the next doorway into a large, main hall. There, on the other side: double doors marking an exit. The screams quieten as I cross the hall. I've outrun them... unless they're herding me. As I slam the doors open, pain attacks my temple. Christine is running toward a large post on the street corner. A phone rests against it. She picks it up, frantically dialing, waiting for someone on the other end before fading, leaving the phone hanging.

I know what to do. Biting my lip, hoping I'll forgive myself for my stupidity, I make a break for the call box. At the post, I take up the phone, shakily holding it to my ear.

"Now, now," Dolph's voice says, "don't you worry. Help is on its way, sweetheart."

XI

As that same boxy police car pulls up, the knife in my hand feels smaller and smaller. I need a better weapon. There had to be something better than this puny surgical knife in that school, but it's too late to run back inside. My ears can't take any more shrieking.

As Dolph emerges from the car, even bigger and burlier than I remember him, I do my best to not hyperventilate.

"Finally given up, have you?" he asks.

I start to mouth some words, pointing at the school with my free hand as my voice fails.

"Now, now, no need to play dumb with me. I know exactly who you are." His victorious gaze fades into a venomous leer as he steps toward me. "I reckon you're tired of this nightmare. Need me to put ya to sleep for good. Why don't you get in the, *oof*—"

I pull the blade free and plunge it in again, watching the silver disappear into his stomach. As he keels over, I rip the ranger star from his shirt.

"Little fuckin' bitch!" he growls.

I take off running, but down the street there's only fog. That can't be the way.

He pulls out a thick bowie knife, prowling toward me.

I got the star—what else do I have to do? What did I do last time? Atraiu intervened, and I was able to reach Ada— where's Morty?

No... I escaped last time. I ran out of the police station and into the fog. I had three artifacts. I only hope this is all of them. I turn and keep running. I have no idea where the fog will take me, but it won't be anywhere safe. When the fog fades back into the campus I've just emerged from, I don't stop running. The only thing in between Dolph and me now is his car, which gives me an idea.

The door is still open, so I hop inside the driver's seat and take the wheel. I hit the gas, but the engine only stalls. The car doesn't move. I look at the knob in the center and realize that I don't know how to drive this old thing. Before I can cut my losses and run once again, something pounds in the trunk. Someone's alive in there.

When he killed Christine, it was because he was the first responder to her emergency call. If he came straight back from snatching Tori, she might still be in the car.

“Nowhere for you to run, little bitch,” he growls, slamming his fist on the hood, my knife still in his stomach. The handle of his knife alone is bigger than the one I stabbed him with. Not a chance I can get this trunk open before he stops me.

I shut the door and lock it as he comes around the side. Instead of just breaking the glass, he raps his knife against the driver’s window, a grin playing on his face. I crawl away from him over the gearstick. As he begins tapping louder and louder, every second threatening, I spy the handle of a pistol underneath the dashboard.

The second I look at it, the glass breaks. I lurch forward, grasping for it. I pull on the hammer, point toward the window, and fire, but the deafening boom of the gunshot isn’t what hurts me. The harpy screams of Dolph’s sweethearts have already done enough damage to my ears. A warm, burning pain leaks from my insides as the bowie knife finds a home in my back. Dolph lets go, staggering from the gunshot wound. “Try as many times as you want. Your bullets won’t save you!” he roars.

Feebly, I peek out, but he’s gone. Apparently, even when the balance is in his favor, he can still be wounded. As I struggle to breathe, the knife dug deep into my lung, the person in the trunk knocks again.

There has to be enough life in me left to finish this. I take the key from the ignition in my free hand, pop the lock, and crawl from the Ford. I drag myself across the pavement, teeth clenched against the pain, blood smearing on the road beneath me. The beeping of the heartrate monitor echoes in the back of my head as my vision swims. Around the back of the car, I put my left arm around the fender and try to lift myself, but my strength is fading. As my back groans in protest, the blade slick with blood, I put my left arm and then my right on the fender. I fight just hard enough to get a knee up, and then both knees, and finally I’m high up enough to open the trunk. I slip the key in... turn it... and take one brief look in Tori’s eyes before my head flashes more aggressively than ever, the pulsating pain in my temple blinding me to even the knife dug into my lung—as my own mind flays my flesh, the other wounds cease to exist.

As the spinning stars in my head slow and my body recalls some form of life, I awaken to find myself trapped in a fetal position. It’s dark but loud. The rumbling of an engine is apparent from outside. I’m locked in the trunk. How did he still get me after I shot him?

I check to make sure I still have the star in my hand. I do, and the picture is still tucked underneath the dog tags wrapped around my wrist. I took the hint; I fought him as I was supposed to. I guess Maven was wrong.

The car stops, and I hear footsteps circle the car. The hatch opens. I flinch, waiting for the Constrictor to leer down at me with his portentous glare, but it doesn’t happen.

After accepting that no one is here, I slowly creep out of the trunk, relieved that I'm no longer in any pain. I survived the transition. I'm on another plane, or the balance has shifted or... Maven owes me some answers.

Putting both feet onto the hot dirt road, I find myself in front of a familiar building. The Constrictor opens the shutter, apparently unaware of my presence. Half-relieved, half-cautious, I follow.

I enter the building to the sound of a menacing laugh I know to the note. It freezes me. All around me lie dead women, some on the ground, some with parts still hanging from chains. In the middle, the last living person, is Tori Gale. The color has drained from her face. Her body is a thin, hollow shell, atrophied from weeks of starvation. It wasn't long ago that I was quite literally in her shoes. The death and suffering I endured immediately after witnessing the rally is the death she actually suffered.

His speech at the school... he mentioned how the last surviving person must have felt the worst when the alarm rang... he selected Tori to suffer that pain. Vengeance for his lost eye during the riot at the Nazi rally all those years ago.

I won't let her suffer this pain. I look down at the objects in my hand and close my fist. Exhaling, I run straight through Dolph, heading for her.

As I pass through him, he notices me.

My head starts to hurt again, and the room grows darker, but I don't stop. I run right up to Tori and pull against her chains, trying to find some way to free her.

I work to untie her, desperately attempting to ignore the footsteps approaching behind me. The chains are so expertly set that I don't get an inch of movement before Dolph grabs my shoulder, aggressively jerking me away.

He turns me around, but a gunshot blows a hole in the concrete at our feet. We both look up to spot a shaky silhouette aiming down from the upper levels.

"Let her go, or I'll take your other eye!" Morty shouts from above.

"Ooh, I love a challenge," Dolph responds, drawing his pistol and aiming upward.

Both of them fire missing shots before the world flashes, and in an instant they're both gone. I spin round—Tori still dangles from the chain, numb and silent. After much guesswork and tugging, I manage to loosen the chains and she drops onto me, so light and frail that even in my weakened state, it's hardly a struggle.

She puts a hand on mine as I lay her down.

I give her the dog tags and the picture, knowing that there's nothing more I can do to save her.

She looks up at me, lips curved into the slightest hint of a smile before she begins to disintegrate into nothingness along with the room around us.

“She’s starting to stabilize,” a woman’s voice announces. I open my eyes, not remembering when I’d closed them. I’m in the hospital bed. The room hasn’t changed a bit, except now it’s sweltering.

“Her temperature’s abnormal,” another voice remarks. “Fever of 105?”

“No, she was fine ten seconds ago,” the first voice says, an edge of panic behind the words. I step off the bed, reminded of the pain that remains here. The voices disperse as I crawl away.

The heat... it has to be from this room. The sheet tile floors burn my palms and knees as I progress. The rhythmic beat of the heartrate monitor accelerates as I crawl closer, but even outside the room, the heat doesn’t relent. I struggle to breathe. My eyes sting as I look up at the exit sign. Just as I crawled toward the elevator, I now crawl toward the exit, sweating like a faucet, the liquid dripping into my eyes. This heat is killing me, not leaving me with a second to reflect, but if I take another exit, it’s just another killer, right? It’s happened twice. I can’t face another killer. I can’t suffer another brutal death. I can’t keep fighting like this. I have no idea where I’m crawling when a voice erupts into a high-pitched callous laughter behind me. It’s a woman’s voice, but the manic edge is no less frightening than the Whistler’s ominous scale. As she laughs, my hand fails to find floor. The stairs. I’ve crawled into the stairway, and as my body’s momentum continues, bouncing from step to step, I feel no pain. I’ve already blacked out.

THE DIRECTOR

XII

I jolt awake, drenched in sweat, but it's no longer hot. I take a few breaths before trying to move. Not hurting, I stand, shaking my limbs out. It's surreal, suddenly transitioning from overwhelming suffering to normal, and there's no way for me to know how long I've actually slept.

In the middle of a deep hallway with carpeted floors, I stay in place, listening carefully for any sound that isn't my own breathing. I turn, seeing nothing but a window at the end of the hallway. Again, I pause, this time holding my breath. Nothing but my quickening heartbeat. I step forward toward the window that leaks moonlight into the hallway. I cringe at every creak of the floorboards beneath the carpet, but I know that whatever I can expect from this nightmare will make itself apparent when it wants to. I have to be on the lookout, but this time, I cannot let them capture me. Drowning at the hands of the Whistler was a terror no person should ever have to suffer, but the violent, sadistic, and prolonged torture the Constrictor forced me to endure... I pray nothing can be worse than that.

If I were anything but a ghost, the trauma alone from either one of those deaths would have left me catatonic, but now that I've moved forward, those experiences seem so distant. I struggle to recall minor details about those deaths, as if they were but faint memories...

I take a few more steps toward the window, ears perked for danger and thankfully no longer ringing from the Constrictor's preta. I pass by a staircase shrouded in darkness and refuse to look down, instead passing to the window, which I have to stand on my tiptoes to look through. I set my arms on the windowsill to help me rise, but it doesn't take as much effort as I anticipate. My hands and arms seem stronger than before.

In the window, I still see no reflection, but I quickly turn away lest I summon Maven and whatever killer is stalking her. Without a reflection, there's no indicator for what else might have changed, though I suppose I still wouldn't have a starting point to reference. Still, I need to learn about this place, and perhaps as long as I look through the window and not at the reflection, Maven won't come.

Outside the window, I glimpse the tops of hundreds of trees. I'm in a building out in the woods, on the third or fourth floor. I'm not exactly sure what this place is, but it's definitely isolated.

I drop down as something knocks below me, not like a door knocking, not an aggressive bang... just a bump in the night. I step back and hazard a glance down the stairway. Nothing but pure darkness. Even the scattered moonlight struggles to touch it. Although downstairs would surely lead to some form of exit, I can't help but try to avoid any ominous sounds, and another knock—more of a thud—coerces me to move on down the hall. I try to ignore the creaks that ring out at each of my footfalls by picking up the pace, but I don't make it far before a jabbing pain stings my leg and trips me. I fall over with my legs still elevated.

Biting my tongue, I look back at the culprit. Barely visible in the limited light, barbed tripwires line the path, but that's not the worst of my troubles. That knocking sound is coming faster. Footsteps.

Doing my best to ignore the blood. I pull the wire from round my legs, stand up, and continue moving down the hall. I turn the corner to find my face inches from several strands of barbed wire spider-webbed across the passage, blocking my path. I crouch down through a gap and take a wide step over another pair of wires. It's like some type of twisted, sadistic obstacle course, something I'm supposed to run through quickly, running from... the hall is darker, and the thudding footsteps have stopped.

I turn around, my heart skipping an entire bar. A single silhouette stands between the window and me.

I don't know exactly what it is, but it has a head, shoulders, and bellows a raspy, chilling roar as its eyes light up with a fiery glow. A new preta.

I turn back, making my way through the barbed wire, catching myself several times as the creature stomps after me. It's not running. It's not fast, but it's loud, and I don't think this wire is meant to stop it. It roars again as it encounters its first obstacle.

I hazard a glance. Its leg is torn down by the first wire, but the flesh under its blackened skin glows orange like hot coals. It tears against the wire, knocking it out of place as it comes for me.

I take the first door to my right, not sure if I should be thankful that it opens. I run in and shut the door behind me, spotting a lit lantern on a shelf to the side. I pick it up and feel desperately for a lock on the doorframe, which I find and quickly bolt shut.

I run to the other side of the dresser and start pushing it in front of the door, surprised at how easily the dresser moves. My shoulders have some strength to them, some force, and soon the heavy dresser is in front of the door.

With the door blocked, I turn around the room, silently berating myself for trapping myself in a place with only one way out. I could always take the window, I figure, though I doubt I'd survive a three-story fall. The room has a small bed in the corner. A dormitory

room? There's a hole torn into the wall leading to the next room along. This place has seen better days.

As I search the room, not finding any sort of newspaper, picture, or weapon, the creature bangs against the door.

I duck into the next room and catch myself moments before I stumble into a hole in the ground. This place is falling apart. The door bangs again. Metal clangs as the lock falls from the doorframe. I look over at the next door, wondering if I can somehow elude the creature and escape back into the hall as it enters, but it has been boarded shut from the inside.

With another bang that moves the dresser a few inches from the door, I look down at the hole in the floor, hoping I can make the jump, but I'm not given much of a choice: the floor I stand upon groans and caves in, throwing me forward as the once-level flooring becomes a steep incline to the room below. I slam against the wall, shattering the lantern, oil splashing on the wall, setting it momentarily aflame.

I back away, deciding to take my chances and move through the empty doorway. By the time I'm through, the fire has spread up to the next level. In the hallway, I have to cover my mouth to protect from the smoke, but... I look back at the fire. It's still behind me. How am I already dealing with smoke? My throat burns... it isn't the time for questions. By the added firelight, I spy no barbed wire, but there are more holes in the floor. I step around the first one, dodging the black smoke that rises from its depths. There must be a fire below.

I keep moving toward the stairway, stumbling as the floor caves in behind me, but I don't stop. I reach the stairs and start running down, sprinting as I reach the lobby to find the grand double doors locked—but not only locked. It's barred shut with a large chain and padlock. I beat the door with my fist, gritting my teeth. There must be a back exit. I set off back the way I came, but a hacking cough emanates from the doorway behind me. From the room beyond, a large, barely humanoid creature emerges. It coughs aggressively, and with each cough its body glows orange, black smoke rising from its gaping mouth.

More preta? If everything follows the pattern I've seen before, then how this creature died relates to its current incarnation, but this cumbersome monster stumbles as it approaches, barely able to walk in a straight path—what was it? How did it die? Embers from its exposed kneecap catch on the fur rug, which quietly catches fire like a dry twig. The flames lick higher, enveloping the creature, but still it comes on.

With the firelight, I get a better look at exactly what it is I'm up against. Its flesh is completely blackened and charred, the embers that decorate its exposed bone the only source of color. From its neck, two heads extend like moaning tumors. Its torso is broad, with two arms fused directly into the chest and a third longer arm reaching for me. Its three

legs are each different sizes: the right one seems longest, and is perpetually bent at the knee, whereas the left one drags on the floor, broken and twisted. The middle one is grotesquely broad, like a tree trunk.

It trawls through the fire, moaning softly, and I turn and run through the corridor to my left, flinching as a wall caves in front of me, fire and ash raining from above.

The ashes won't settle in this smoke, and with the preta behind me, I can't wait. I hastily climb across the rubble, ignoring the searing heat, grateful my hospital gown isn't especially flammable.

As sweat pours and smoke clouds my eyes, I probe forward, turning into a large auditorium overlooked by multiple balconies. There are no chairs in the stalls however, but the bloodstains on the ground surrounded by rubble and old furniture forms a sort of crude coliseum. A show took place here.

Rebar, barbed wire, and several tools lace the area. A fire axe rests among the rubble. I seize the heavy axe and wrench it from the debris as coughing and wheezing echoes in the passage behind me. Another creature rises and, as it does so, bright lights from above illuminate us. They come from two stage lights suspended in the rafters, arranged around what looks like a large camera or projector in between.

The creature coughs, rolling about before finally managing to stand. It's another conjoined creature, but this time, the two bodies have merged facing each other, as if they were fused while mating. Its free hands claw at each other, as if trying to wrench themselves apart, but barbed wire tears deep into their flesh, binding them tight. They... it... this abomination is too distracted fighting itself to attack me, but a roar from above reveals a new threat. The preta I evaded on the upper floors stares down from the balcony. It's a singular human, and as it drops, it sets fire to the pile of overthrown chairs and tables. It won't be long before the entire room is in flames.

I raise the axe to fight it, but it lunges past me, throwing itself at the other preta, tearing into its conjoined body. I don't know what's going on, and I don't care to stay and see. That camera above... what's going on here?

I cover my mouth to filter the smoke and run toward a backstage stairwell. I follow the stairs up and exit to the balcony, one of the overhead lights flickering off as I arrive before shifting, rolling, and finally falling to join the chaos below. More fire is eating through this place. I run over to the camera, but it burns to the touch and I jerk my hand away, thinking that maybe I made a mistake—when, slowly, the scene below me fades. The fire dims and I jump backward as a woman walks through me. It's certainly not Maven.

“Gentlemen, my brave warriors. How pleased I am that you could join me!” she announces. The sarcastic tone she carries... she can't be...

She lets out a laugh. It's high-pitched and penetrating, and it's one I've heard before. This is the killer. She is...

"You all came to fight for me. You let your curiosity get the better of you, but that's not a bad thing. The real question is: which one of you deserves to escape?"

Trusting that this is just a vision and that she can't see or attack me, I stand up and peer over the balcony. Below are two young men, and the rubble isn't just rubble—there's method to the madness. The chairs, the tables... the barbed wire and the weapons... they're all arranged, like some insane arena. Each of the young men has a leg tied to a long chain.

"Ms. Donna? What the fuck is going on?!" one of them roars, managing to sit up.

"What are you doing to us?" the other weakly calls.

The woman—Donna—laughs again. "I'll be the judge of your courage boys. I've offered you weapons of all sorts. I've given you a grand arena." She motions around the room. "You'll find this theater school offers more than just a few lessons on how to entertain." She turns the camera on.

"What is this?! Why can't you let us go?!"

"I've locked you all in. If you wish to escape this building in time... let's just say there's only *one* key to my heart. Well... two, actually. Unfortunate news is, you've both swallowed them in what can only be described as a drug-induced stupor."

"What are you saying?!"

She giggles. "This isn't all smoke and mirrors, boys, but hey. Something's got to light a fire under your asses. Here." She reaches over and displays a small green canister. "A gift, from your friends in Vietnam."

There's a soft click, and as soon as the canister drops, a deep cloud of green smoke billows out: a smoke grenade.

Within seconds, the two men below scramble. One of them shouts as he hits the floor, possibly torn upon a length of barbed wire. I crane my head. Are they fighting already? Over smoke? By now, the cloud has reached me, but as the orange color returns and my throat burns, the vision clears.

Donna is gone, but a new creature stands before me. This one is a lone humanoid like the first, but one of its arms is twisted back, a curved blade protruding through the palm like a sharp talon. The creature roars, exhaling black smoke. It charges.

I step back, raising the axe defensively as the creature flails its broken arm like a whip. Its arm hits the haft and curves around, gashing me across the ear. I fall to the right, spinning onto my back. I'm surprised its knife didn't get a hold of my hair, but of course, I don't have long hair anymore. Something has happened to my body.

The preta steps over, grabbing my stomach with its good hand, the blackened fingers digging deep. I bring the axe down handle-first, knocking the creature back and rising my knees up to kick, and as it staggers, I'm amazed at the power this new body contains. Charred flesh sloughs from its body, revealing embers smoldering beneath. The smoke in the air tears down my throat.

With a grunt and a heave, I force the preta back a step and curl up. Reflexes, instinct: it's all here. If only I could see myself in the mirror—maybe Maven can explain the change. However, if the preta and the killer are already upon me, then perhaps summoning Maven is even more of a risk.

I dash to the left and retreat to the stairs, which are now totally obscured by smoke. The heat alone is enough to burn my skin, but before I can turn around, the first preta I encountered emerges, apparently triumphant in its battle down below. With its burned, blackened face and my eyes tearing up with smoke, I can't tell if it's glaring at me, but with an angered wheeze erupting behind me, it's all I can do to sidestep, narrowly avoiding the two burning husks as they collide with one another, burned flesh splitting.

Donna pitted these men against each other. She mentioned keys in their stomachs... keys that might open the padlock out front, if I could even get back down there.

Knife-hand, the slightly larger of the two, grabs at the first creature's stomach, staving off a headbutt. As the creatures tussle, more ashen skin crumbles to the floor.

I heave with an aggressive cough, mouth salivating like a water faucet. My time is fading.

Wishing I could at least curse, I run in, throwing my weight behind the axe. The blade rises and falls, my ears ringing, fire and flesh whipping around me. At some point, I think I start to aim for their chests, but my axe takes a course of its own with each swing. Finally, the head gets stuck in the back of the first creature, and as I tug, its entire midsection crumbles away.

I swing to the knife-handed preta, throwing myself forward into a full-body tackle. Its flesh burns my shoulder, but the impact sends it staggering onto the banister, which breaks away, sending the monster down to the fire below.

I drop down and root through the sooty remains of the creature I felled, ignoring the burning in my hands, the pain nothing in comparison to the smoke searing my nostrils and clouding my mind.

Frustrated and barely able to see, I drop the axe and dig through the body down to my nails, hoping for something besides hot ash to brush my fingertips. A dull growl stops me in my tracks. The creature's eyes flare open, its arms snaking outward, seizing my wrist. *How is this thing still alive?*

I jerk my elbow back, wrenching the ashes from the monster's fingers, sending a flash of silver clattering to the floor. The key!

I scoop it up, heft the axe, and look around for an escape route. Hot, heavy smoke leaks from either stairway. I run over to the opposite side, peering over the banister, but the smoke is too thick. I'm turning away when the banister gives way beneath me, sending me plummeting to the ground below.

I tense as I fall, taking in all the pain of each scratch, each splinter of hot wood. I cough—it won't be long before I hear the monitor beeping in my ears if I don't escape this smoke. I get the feeling that, were I not already dead or dying in a hospital bed, this smoke would have ended me by now.

I rise, using the axe to support myself as I climb through the rubble. The aches, the pains, the burning... all signs that I'm still breathing. I'm almost to the door when my leg snags on a long strand of barbed wire. I keel over. Donna... I thought no one could be more sadistic than the Constrictor, but the traps, the pre-meditation... the games this woman plays...

I jerk away from the wire, step over it, and limp out the doorway. I hobble through the lobby, all but ignoring the three-legged monstrosity that reaches for me, and make it to the padlocked door.

The lock clicks and releases, and with a dry sigh, I jerk the chains away. I'm not outside at all, but in another room. I slam the doors behind me, but no smoke or flames pursue. My throat still burns, and my body still bleeds and aches, but I'm sure that the worst is over.

I collapse onto the wooden floor, not ready to deal with any more danger, when a leg walks through me.

"You're late," a light male voice says.

Weakly, I roll over to see an ethereal blond teenager whittling away at a table. I sit up as the chubby man who walked through me approaches him.

"Yeah, Leon. They got me," he says to the teenager. The man sits down at the table across from him, wearing a reflective vest, t-shirt, and cargo pants.

"Who?" the boy, Leon, asks.

"Letter came in the mail a month ago. I threw it away. Policemen came and harassed me at work today."

He tosses a sheet of paper over to Leon.

The boy sets his knife and figure down, picking up the letter. He only reads a few words before looking back up.

"Military? Armand, you've been drafted?"

“Yeah... officers arrested me and made me sign the paperwork right in front of them before they’d let me go. I’m due in... well, way too soon.”

“How can they even do this to you?! We’re not even from here. How can they make us fight?”

“Our parents weren’t from here,” Armand corrects, rubbing at his black beard, itself jarring next to his greasy blonde hair. “But we were both born here: American citizens. Nixon says jump, we jump—or we go to prison.”

Leon slams his fist on the table. “But they can’t take you! Isn’t there some law? I have to have a guardian, right? You’re my guardian. What, are they gonna send me to foster parents with you gone?”

“I told them this when they arrested me. I don’t know why they choose who they choose. I guess because I waited so long, they didn’t feel like giving me time to appeal. They forced me to sign the papers. Practically at gunpoint. These police were not nice men.”

“Well can’t you call a lawyer or something?”

“I don’t have money for that, I—”

“You said you’ve been saving for us.” Leon rises, his mouth open. He clenches the table, looking away from Armand to hide the tears forming.

“I have, and that’s why I bought you this.” Armand drops an envelope on the table in front of Leon. “It’s a school. Boarding school, they call it. They do arts, and theater, and English, and... all the stuff you like, but you can live there. Got a room all to yourself. Room 204. That’s more than you have here. They’ll take care of you, and I’ll know where you are.”

“But I won’t know where you are, besides fighting an endless battle in Vietnam.”

Armand chuckles in response. “This war is as old as you are, it feels like. But I have been meaning to put you in a better school, and with the money I’ve saved, plus the money I will make out there, we can pay for this easy. And I know you’ll be safe.”

“You won’t be safe. What happens to me if something happens to you?”

“Look, Leon”—Armand sighs, picking up the figure Leon had been carving—“I don’t want to go, but I told Papa I’d do everything it took to make you safe, and I mean to.”

Leon doesn’t answer, but after a few seconds, he flings his whittling knife at the wall, breaking the handle.

“Yeah, that was how I felt,” Armand admits. “This is nice. What is this?” He holds up the figure.

Leon shrugs and shakes his head. “It’s a... it was supposed to be for your birthday. I got so good making little people, little toys for the kids in that orphanage we lived in... I was making a worker. A little something for you. Guess now I’ll make it a soldier.”

“Your work with a knife is admirable... tell you what. Finish it before I leave and I will take it with me.”

Leon looks deeply into Armand’s eyes, wanting to protest further, but finally concedes and nods his head.

“And here, looks like you need this,” Armand adds, removing a curved knife. “It’s called a karambit. Curved like a claw. It’s a weapon, but I don’t know—maybe you could make some cool carvings with it.”

Both figures disperse.

The pain returns all at once. I guess I got so lost in their conversation that I forgot about it. It’s only now that I look around the room that I see that this is nothing like a boarding school—I’m in some shoddy apartment.

I stumble around, finding the bathroom. There’s a dirty mirror above the sink. I close my eyes, wondering if it’s worth the risk to summon Maven, but... the creatures are already outside, and I have no leads to go on.

With a quiet sigh, I open my eyes. Still no reflection. I wait for a few seconds, but Maven doesn’t appear either. As my throat burns, I look down at the sink. At least there’s water. I take a sip to settle my throat and rinse my face, rubbing my hands across my face. I’ve grown stubble. This body... it’s a boy’s. That’s why I feel so different.

“What have you learned?”

Daggers split my mind as Maven warps into existence. My heart skips, jumps, and dives off a bridge, but knowing I’m safe for a moment, I turn to her behind me. She wears an expectant look on her face.

I motion to my body, touching my chest, my shoulders, my hair and stubble.

“Your vessel in each plane is only a vessel. Temporary. Why do you think your pain doesn’t follow you? What’s important is that you remember that the killer pursues me, wherever I am. You can’t keep summoning me. You have to think on your own. What have you learned?”

I look back into the room where the scene with Leon and Armand played out. Leon... that boy, he must be one of her victims. I felt a connection to him and his brother, who was going to war. Armand is going to die.

“They’re both dead,” she continues. “And you know how.” She walks even closer to me. “You know Armand dies in battle. You know this. You need to think. What happens to Leon?”

If it’s anything like the scenarios that played out with the Whistler and the Constrictor, then that woman kills Leon.

“He gets murdered by the same killer who haunts me. Because it’s the same. It’s a pattern. It’s a cycle. And you know what to do next?”

I start to think, but my pain hasn’t faded. I can’t see myself going back and dealing with that fire. There were no artifacts left behind. Maybe there’s a journal to read that will—

Before I can respond, the mirror cracks. Maven turns back to me. “Go! The balance is turning, but there’s still time.” The mirror shatters, and Maven is gone.

XIII

Donna's laugh rings in my ears. I stand before the apartment door, which I presume leads back into the boarding school. How much destruction can she really cause? I didn't see a weapon like the Whistler's sledgehammer, and she didn't look insanely strong like the Constrictor. I open the door. I'm somewhere new—not in the same lobby. There's no fire.

I step forward, listening for the sounds of the killer or her preta, but only the floor beneath my footsteps makes a sound. I'm not on the first floor, that's for sure. I go slowly, on high alert for barbed wire traps, and pass a door marked 216.

A thought dawns on me. Armand mentioned something to Leon about a room 204. It must be on this floor.

Carefully and quietly, I sneak down the hallway, wincing at my every step as my cuts and burns throb. 208, 207... there: 204. The door is ajar.

I step inside to a cluttered mess not unlike the apartment. I'm looking for a curved knife—this much I know. Among the scattered carved figures, school papers, and general mess, I don't see so much as a flash of silver. A knocking sound echoes from down the hall. I'm not alone here. The balance is slipping and those preta—her hounds—are on the lookout.

Going so far as to hold my breath, I rifle through everything, finally spotting a handwritten letter—a good sign. There's always been a letter.

Leon, I hope you are still faring well at school. Life out here is a nightmare. I haven't seen any enemies myself, but I hear horror stories from the other soldiers here. We've toured villages, camped in the rain, and been bitten by every bug known to man. I regret ever complaining about having to work outside in America. At least there I knew I had a warm bed to look forward to. But enough complaining—I don't want you to worry too much. Rumor is they are loosening up out here, and maybe before long I will be back. If everything goes like this, maybe I won't have to fire a bullet. Who knows? Ha... well, I know the mail system sucks and it's hard to get back to me, but I will see you before long. Stay safe and have fun.

P.S. Your toy soldier has been my best friend out here. Thank you. Love you.

Another loud boom rings out. A gunshot.

I whirl around, but the world melds around me, dropping me into the trees of a jungle. The sounds of battle I anticipate are absent, and a heavy silence hangs over the forest. Finally, another gunshot rings out, followed by a moan, and someone to my left calls, "Please... please, no."

As the world finally settles, several soldiers emerge, walking through me. A couple of them laugh and start jeering in a language I don't understand.

These men are in black uniforms and straw hats. Where is Armand?

A gunshot silences the next cry for help. I turn around to see a group of Vietnamese soldiers encircling a few bodies.

I start to walk over, attempting to push a branch from my face before realizing I can pass right through it. The ground is the only thing I can touch, and as the leaves and grass refuse to crunch beneath my feet, I have to double check to ensure I'm actually walking.

I get closer to the men, and more cries and pleas for mercy ring out. The Vietnamese soldiers bask in their apparent victory, and as a man screams in the distance, I catch a glimpse of a Vietnamese soldier ripping a bayonet from a fallen American's stomach.

If I weren't but a ghost, a witness, my stomach would surely turn, but at least here I'm in no pain; a respite of sorts. When I reach the group, I spot them pulling away at several corpses.

Armand is cradled in a prone position, barely moving, but the Vietnamese know what they're looking for. They know he's playing dead. One of them jabs their bayonet into Armand's groin. He bolts up, screaming.

"Agh! Please!" he cries.

They all start laughing, jeering at him in their native language. I start to turn away as the soldier twists the bayonet, corkscrewing Armand's pelvic region, causing him to scream bloody murder even louder than the Constrictor's preta. As I turn, I catch a glimpse of something.

Even as the Vietnamese pin him down, Armand doesn't let go of Leon's figurine. Two other soldiers bring him up, holding him on their shoulders as his insides fall through the new opening in his body.

He's stopped screaming now, but even after evisceration, he still holds the figurine. There's something else too, something small clutched in his other hand. A soldier shouts, gesturing wildly, and I realize with a start what it is. Armand has a grenade. The nearest soldier lunges, snatching it and holding it aloft, jeering. He pulls the pin and grabs Armand's throat, smashing the grenade into his mouth.

The soldiers drop him, and another throws the body of one of Armand's comrades over him. A muffled boom sends the other body flying off in two pieces, and bloody chunks of

meat rain down on the laughing soldiers. Armand finally releases the figurine, but I'm too stunned to move. The brutality of what I've witnessed here... it's insane how humans can do this to each other. I feel as if the Whistler, the Constrictor, and Donna aren't the only evil I've witnessed.

I reach down and grasp the figurine. It's wet, muddied, and almost unrecognizable, but Armand held it to his last breath. It's important that I bring this to Leon. I know the pattern: once I connect this to Leon by matching it with the knife, Armand can come and fight off Donna. Then I'll be able to move forward.

As soon as I grasp the toy, the fog rolls in. I don't react to the pain that tears through my head; I'm used to it. Maven told me that I don't have much time, that the closer I get, the more tenacious the killer becomes.

Even knowing what it is that I'm supposed to do, I can't help but stay frozen. I'm not ready to face any more danger. I just want to stop, sit down, and rest, but I come to before another padlocked double door with no axe, no gun, nothing but the figurine in my grip. The only chance I'll have to rest is death.

I step forward and pull against the chains at the door.

"The west wing is off limits, boys. You know that." Donna's trill, accented voice rings out from behind.

I don't turn around just yet.

"But why exactly? What's in there?" a boy asks.

"It's under construction and is rather unsafe. There's nothing for you there."

This time, I hazard a look at her face. Her skin is rough like a shark's, caked with cheap foundation that gives it the texture of a dry lake, and her face narrows into a reptilian curve that matches her sleek and oily black hair. Worse still are her eyes: the same noxious shade of green as the Whistler's and the Constrictor's. Around her neck she wears a bright silver necklace that ends in a five-pointed star with an emerald center... another recurring symbol.

"But we saw smoke the other night, and we heard things. You said Troy and Tony are missing? Maybe they snuck in and got hurt." I spot Leon among two teenage boys.

Donna looks at him, a slight wince betraying just a hint of frustration, but she immediately masks it with an illustrious twirl of her hair. She meets his gaze with a smile so sinister that I'm amazed the boys don't break and run.

"The only people who can possibly enter the west wing come through with me. As far as Troy and Tony are concerned, we received a phone call from the Newport police station. They were arrested for criminal trespassing and... well, everything beyond that is out of my hands."

Leon is silent for a moment. “Christian,” he says, looking up, “didn’t you say the nearest town is like ten miles from here? How did they get out that far?”

Christian shrugs, but Donna uses the opportunity to offer one of her wince-inducing laughs. “What I’ve learned as Director here is that nothing truly obstructs the tenacity of vibrant young men such as yourselves. Surely, you could make a ten-mile trip if you were set on causing trouble.” She puts a hand on Leon’s shoulder with a veiled smile. “Maybe if you play your cards right, I’ll take you both on a private tour over the weekend? I’ll let you see for yourselves what kind of trouble you can get into back there.”

My eyes widen. That last comment was so over the top, but these boys nod along, too young to understand. She’s not even trying.

“Sure thing, Mrs. M,” Christian agrees.

“Miss. I am not yet married,” she corrects, causing both Christian and Leon to pass a glance to each other. I almost feel ashamed for them, but I know I’m connected to Leon in some way and, as a teenager, he doesn’t know any better. But these killers... they’re all so good at what they do.

The Whistler took over as head constable and used his position to stalk, kidnap, and murder innocent Indians. The Constrictor acted as a public servant and targeted young Jewish women, making them all suffer for days... but this one, this Donna, she doesn’t stalk—she lures. She manipulates. She makes them fight each other.

As Donna heads off, Leon and Christians’ figures disperse. Donna’s doesn’t. Tentatively, I follow her.

She walks down a hallway that darkens with each step as we pass farther from the windows that filter the moonlight. I all but forget the barbed wire normally strewn about this place, but with her present, no traps obstruct my path.

Donna enters a large office at the end of the hall. It’s large, with a window that takes up the entire far wall. From the light, I read the nameplate on the door: *D. Machiavelli, Head Director*.

She sits alone at a maple desk inside, but I am hesitant to enter. I am positive I need to get my hands on her necklace, but is she even touchable here? She hasn’t noticed or attacked me, and if she does, how am I to defend myself? The last two times I stole a star, I had a gun. Should I look for one, or do I need more clues? The star was always the last item I got ahold of. I don’t know if I am following the patterns to the letter, or if every little bit is part of the pattern, but as the large windows at the end of the room crack, she smiles.

“It’s rude to stare. You should really knock on my door before entering, naughty one,” she says, finally looking up from her desk. Her body is no longer translucent. She’s real. I put one foot back and clutch the figurine, wondering if it’s solid enough to use as a weapon.

“Ah-ah-ah!” she taunts, taking a step toward me. She vanishes suddenly, appearing inches from my face.

I stumble back against the wall, frozen. I stare into her deep green eyes, my body stiff. I fight against my arms, but they shakily rise and loop around her hips as she draws in. Where is the figurine? I had it seconds ago. I know I didn’t drop it. My hands press against Donna’s hips. *What am I doing?*

I will myself, trying to pull my arms away, but it’s a lost cause. She puts her cracked, leathery hand on my face, raising goosebumps all over my body, and my head, my skin, my face... they all flash with pain. Her touch is almost electrifying, tearing at me from the inside—and yet my hands, they embrace her.

Desperately, I try to reach for that necklace, but as my hand moves upward, it relents at her chest, exploring the shapes underneath her blouse.

With another flash of pain, my head starts spinning, and with her free hand, she raises a small shot glass filled with a yellow fluid that reeks of alcohol. When did she get that glass? I try to look around the room, but it’s difficult. The room seems hazy, and these eyes have a mind of their own. I never touched Leon, but I’m losing myself to his will.

“I think you’re enough of a man to have a small drink. It puts you in the mood.”

Involuntarily, my mouth opens as my hand accepts the shot, and as I pour the burning poison down my throat, my stomach boils from the inside. The room spins around me, and soon I find myself lying on my back. Donna is no longer upon me, but Christian is. He offers a hand to help me up, but when I take it, I realize what I’ve been sucked into. Just as with Ada, with Tori... I am witnessing Leon’s death from within him.

“Ah, my beautiful boys,” Donna calls from above.

We both look up at her. She stands on a familiar balcony, a white Noh mask on her face and a large camera in her hands.

“If you’re wondering what happened to Tony and Troy, you’ll find them around you. They didn’t quite live up to my expectations... but one of you two might.”

“Wait... what?” Christian calls.

Leon’s head turns, taking in the scene, and he jumps back after finding the corpse of another teenager. His back hits a strand of rebar jutting out from a block of concrete. He winces, doubling over, the pain more intense than either of us expected.

“What’s going on, Mrs. M? What’d you do?” Christian keeps on.

“I need to see which of you truly desires your freedom. I need to see who you both are on the inside, and maybe like your last two friends here... maybe I’ll see both your insides.”

“Mrs. M... are you—are you going to kill us?” Leon asks.

“Oh... well, Christian here might. You see, you’re both locked in this room. The only exit is that door over there, but there’s a catch. You can’t reach it.” She shines a light on the door to the auditorium I so recently escaped.

“In your sleep, you both swallowed a small block of ice that contained an even smaller key. The key in your stomach unlocks the padlock that your friend is chained to. You’ll have to find some way, maybe using one of the sharp tools around here, to get it from your partner’s stomach. Then you’ll be able to escape in time.”

“In time?!” Christian jumps. “In time for what?!”

She raises her hand, dropping what I already know is a smoke grenade. As it spews a vicious wave of green smoke, Christian and Leon look at each other.

“I’m sorry,” Christian says.

“No,” Leon protests, “wait!” but Christian is upon us, hands around our throat. We fall back onto the ground and snag our neck on some barbed wire, but Leon manages to loosen Christian’s grip with a sharp kick to the groin.

“Wait...” Leon repeats, holding his hand out to his friend. “There’s another way!” Leon puts his fingers down our throat. The smoke is already rolling in, but as Leon retches, I feel the key starting to rise up.

Christian comes on regardless. A fist flashes through the smoke, catching Leon in the head.

“I’m sorry!” he yells.

Leon, knowing that Christian is the stronger of the two, puts a hand in his pocket and pulls out the curved knife Armand gave him. He flicks it open, moves in close, and stabs Christian in the hand.

Christian howls. Leon, still retching, grabs the stabbed arm with both hands and twists with expert intent. There is a grotesque snapping sound. He shoves Christian off of us and returns to gagging, desperately trying to get the key out of our throat. Finally, he spits, the key glistening in a pool of bile. Frantically scooping it up, he tries the lock on our ankle. It doesn’t work. Leon turns us to face Christian, who defiantly limps toward us, one hand on his broken arm that twists behind his back like a.... like a whip. That creature. The whip-armed, knife-handed preta that attacked me.

“Wait!” Leon chokes, pleading one last time. He jumps over and puts the key to the chain on Christian’s ankle. It clicks, and Christian is free.

“There, now you do it. Just put your fingers in your throat!” Leon asks, but Christian doesn’t hear. He’s already storming off, fleeing toward the chained doors.

“No, please!” Leon begs through coughs. The smoke is unbearably thick.

An ember sparks in the distance, and soon the tapestry over the banister catches fire.

Christian screams in the distance amid a crash. He must have fallen over some rebar or barbed wire, but Leon hasn't pointed us in a direction to see it. He instead tugs at the chains and, knowing they won't break in time, gets one last idea. His teeth gritted, he shatters his ankle against a piece of concrete. I would keel over from the pain, but I am just a witness—I have no control. His adrenaline masks the pain enough. He slips his ankle through the chain and starts crawling, but only makes it about five feet before he becomes tangled in a spiral coil of razor wire.

Finally, Leon gives up. As sensation leaves his body, as his blood and oxygen seep away, he dies.

A dark hand seizes my arm. It's not a creature; it's Maven. She drags me through a mirror and I collapse on the ground at her feet, choking as I suck in the fresh air. I've experienced three different deaths at the hands of three different killers. I can't do this again.

I look up, and her head appears to leak trails of blood. I wipe the tears. That's not blood. Those are cracks—like a mirror.

"Don't stop running. It's coming. *He* is coming," she mouths, disappearing in a painful flash that reverberates through my body. The mirror she pulled me from shatters behind me, showering me in glass as I curl up on the floor.

Maven is gone.

XIV

If he has Maven—and I'm not certain who *he* is—then I am at last truly alone. The thudding footsteps outside the room remind me that I have at least one form of company.

I rise, finding myself in a large bedroom. The shattered mirror behind me offers no shards of glass suitable for use as a weapon. I slowly creep over to the door, trying to focus on my escape, but my mind is so torn. My head throbs, my heart pounds, and my body sweats profusely. The wooden figurine! It's in my hand already, connected to me like a spiritual magnet.

But that thing is coming, and I have to fight it. I have to take that knife and that star. I still have to fight.

The knocking footsteps sound again, this time a bit further away. I can't stay in this room forever. I peek outside. I'm in room 204 again. The locked door led to the west wing, so if I can figure out where I am in relation to that door, I can surely find that monster—but first I need a weapon.

I creep down the hallway, scanning for barbed wire and listening for movement. It isn't long before I reach some stairs. Deciding to explore, I climb the creaky steps to the next level. The first obstacle I'm greeted with is a massive hole in the floor that leads back down to the floor below. There's just enough footing to creep around it; beyond that, more rooms. The entire corridor is in disrepair: broken floorboards, smoke-stained walls, and, around the next corner, a caved-in ceiling. Moonlight and fog emerge through the hole. To my right is a small door. It's barely open and, when I peer inside, I am met with a metal spiral staircase winding up into the darkness.

I take the first step. It responds with a metallic thud instead of an aged creak—a quieter sound, but no less mortifying. The staircase is narrow and, as it curves around, I know that no one much larger than me could even get up here. At the top, there's a room with about ten square feet of space. The tower is surrounded by gated windows and in one corner there's a scope, presumably for people to peek through. All I can see from the windows is fog. There is no moon, no sun—the dim twilight seems filtered through layers and layers of cloud. Beneath me is the roof of the surrounding building.

I approach the scope, and a voice breathes behind me. “What's that?”

I jolt, but it's just Leon and Christian. "Is that... smoke?" Leon asks.

"That's black smoke... and a lot of it."

"No, it's greenish. That can't be a fire, can it?"

"I dunno man," Christian responds. "Maybe Tony is up to his shenanigans over there. Look. That's from the west wing."

"They weren't lying," Leon adds. "The roof is caved in way over there. The place is falling apart. Should we tell someone?"

"Nah, we should check it out first."

The two boys disappear. I peer over to where they were pointing. In the roof of the building a hole yawns out, still leaking the green smoke from Donna's smoke grenades. If I've learned anything, it's that I'm supposed to head over there and face whatever awaits me.

As my heart accelerates, the tower groans and begins to lean.

With adrenal instinct, I make a break for the stairs, but as I descend, the tower topples. Bricks break from the walls, showering the staircase, and beams split above with terrible screams. It's too late to make it out, so I hang onto the steps with my legs and hands. The tower hurtles downward. Debris falls, scraping me as I hang on for my life. I can't die again. There is no Maven to save me now. I clutch the staircase, biting my tongue at stone that bounces from my back.

It's a near-eternity after the dust settles before I remember I'm alive. As my body throbs, I shrug off the rubble, climbing out from between the jutting stairs. I find Armand's figurine dropped among them and retake it, thankful I haven't lost it.

I sneeze dust several times as I move away from the site of the collapse. It looks as if the tower fell back into the main building.

The lecture theater I find myself in is full of broken desks. I shake my limbs out. There's pain and blood, but nothing more than a couple of scratches.

A growl emerges from outside the room. One of the preta has come to explore the ruckus.

I spot a metal rod protruding from the broken stairs. I tug at it a couple of times, breaking it free. Bent but sharp metal. The creature makes its way around, and from its lopsided gait, I recognize it as the three-legged monstrosity from before. It coughs smoke as it struggles to enter the room.

It's closing in, melted eye sockets fixed on me, hungry for the key it thinks is in my stomach. I step around the fallen debris and lunge, lodging the metal rod in its torso. The creature groans and staggers, and I slip through the doorway. This must be the ground floor. I look right and left, and turn toward the west wing. I start to move through, but am engulfed

by a noxious cloud of smoke exhaled by the hobbling three-legged creature behind me. My insides burn and I break into a pained run, stumbling down the hall, running stomach-first into a strand of barbed wire hanging across the corridor. I fall away, metal spikes ripping half-inch cuts into my abdomen, and crawl underneath.

The creature belches a cloud of smoke at me that burns like a furnace. That metal rod only succeeded in aggravating it.

I keep crawling, blinded by the burning smoke, and stumble into the large lobby that leads to the locked doors of the west wing. I turn around, spying the monster behind me, the barbed wire trailing from the creature's deformed torso, snagged in the metal rod.

I distance myself as it breathes another wave of smoke, nearing a large, carpeted staircase where, at the top, a silhouette obstructs the moonlight. With a throaty roar, it identifies itself as a monster, and by its dangling, deformed arm, I realize who it is. The roar is met by a cacophony of discordant wails from the two-headed abomination behind me.

I run around the stairs, taking cover around the side, hoping that neither of them see me as a common enemy.

Christian's mangled body leaps down the stairwell, intercepting the smog-spitting duo. I don't know which of the two I'm rooting for. Hopefully they'll kill each other.

The two collide, limbs flailing. Christian's incarnation digs into one of the duo-creature's necks as the other hisses a cloud of smoke, biting at him. Duo claws at Christian, who smartly maintains a small distance, fighting to avoid the metal rod. That gives me an idea.

While the two monsters tussle, I creep out. Heart pounding and mind screaming at me to just run, I bite my tongue, half-close my eyes, and run at the knife-handed manifestation from behind.

I duck as it whips its arm back and forth, digging the blade into its opponent's thigh, and shove with all my strength, pushing it into the other creature. The iron spike erupts out of Christian's back, flames licking around its head. Though its flesh burns like hot coals, I don't stop there. I have the advantage now. I grab the barbed wire that dangles behind the two-headed monster and pull them around Christian's back, spinning them around the metal rod to tangle them and absorbing a few more cuts in the process. Smoke spews out from the both of them, but I hold my breath and grab the knife handle from Christian's whip-arm. I jerk at it, tearing it clean through the hand, a volley of hot ash spurting out, but there's still one more thing I need: something Christian should have offered to Leon.

With all of my panic and adrenaline channeled into this vessel's masculine rage, I use the knife to hack and slash into Christian's back, carving past the glowing embers until I

spot the hot metal key in his stomach. I shove my arm in up to the elbow, wincing as the fire skins me, and wrench out the key. With that, I turn and sprint toward the door.

When I'm finally clear of the smoke, I hunch over, drop the key on the ground, and resume breathing. I take several seconds to catch my breath as the creatures behind me roar and struggle.

I can't believe I did that. In every one of these phases, I've had to fight the victims in some way, but these have been the hardest to deal with by far... and yet, their weaknesses are so apparent. Still... this battle isn't over. I have to face Donna.

I take the key back up and unlock the large padlock on the door, pulling the chains away. The doors swing open.

The west wing isn't the derelict mess I expected. Before me is a large white wall, and as the doors close behind me, a projector in the opposite corner flicks on. Footage of two bodies struggling to fight each other flickers on the wall. As I get closer, I recognize them. That fight... it's Leon and Christian. I see Christian on top, then watch his arm snap, and see Leon free him. I shake my head as Christian runs and stumbles on a piece of concrete, falls, bashes his head, and fails to get back up.

The screen grows redder and brighter before finally sputtering out. Donna's fire.

I walk over to the projector, spotting a newspaper right next to it. *Lee Hardy Boarding School Closed Down after Mysterious Fire. Arson Suspected.*

The second headlines reads, *Bodies of Two Suspects Found Near Source of Flame.* I look closer at the newspaper. *The bodies of Leon Burns, 15, and Christian Reynolds, 16, were found in a closed-off, restricted section of the school. Head Director Machiavelli said the school had locked all entrances to the area, but was unable to contain what she described as 'rambunctious youths.' Forensics analysts found the fire was linked possibly to a homemade fireworks device that ignited worn tapestry within the building. Both boys failed to escape the area, apparently injuring themselves on the scattered debris left by the caved-in roof...*

"Not a single person suspected me," Donna says, her voice cold.

I do not turn around. I twitch my fingers a little to see if I still have control of this body. I do.

"And that's the most poetic part of it all. Everyone played their part in my film: live-action actors who danced just the way I intended on my set. While this was my favorite part of the journey, the school was only a temporary—ahh!" she cries.

I interrupt her monologue with a back swing of Leon's knife, lodging it in her side. I corkscrew the knife, just as the Vietnamese soldiers did.

"You've grown..." she hisses.

Without looking at her face, I rip the knife free and thrust again. She catches my hand with both of hers, but as she pushes, I smack her temple with Armand's figurine. Pulling back, I snatch her star necklace.

She strikes me in the face, but I use the momentum to turn away and run. I have the star necklace and Armand's figurine in one hand and Leon's knife in the other—everything I need. Now I simply need to escape.

I run through a doorway, but freeze as Donna's laugh echoes through the hallways, setting the entire corridor ablaze.

She is close behind. Deciding she is a tougher poison than the wall of flame, I duck my head and sprint through. The fire burns and the smoke strangles me, and I run so fast that when I hit the barbed wire, I tear it out of place. I burst through a set of doors, barbed wire still dangling on the floor behind me, and find myself in a familiar arena: this is where Leon died.

Donna materializes in front of me.

I lock eyes with her. Something's wrong. My muscles seem to freeze... there's something about this body, despite all of its strength... it freezes at this woman's gaze.

"Give me the knife," she instructs.

My arm starts to rise, but I fight against it. She smirks as sweat glazes my forehead. My arm is shaking but rising, the knife just inches from her hand... when two hands grab her shoulders from behind, and Armand's chubby face appears. He throws her back, and as soon as she hits the ground, the both of them disappear.

The fire hasn't relented however, and a weak whimper sounds nearby. I trudge over to find Leon stuck in a coil of razor wire. I lean down next to him, wondering how I can possibly get him out. He just looks up at me, confusion written on his face. He doesn't know how or why any of this has happened to him. I'm of the same mindset. Like Ada, like Tori, and like me, he doesn't deserve any of this. I place the knife down on his chest and hand him the wooden carving.

His eyes close as he fades, as do mine. The fire darkens around me. The smoke disperses, and the many burns and cuts I have picked up on the way leave me. Have I made it?

###

I open my eyes and find myself in a void. There is nothing but darkness. I look back and see in the far distance a red light: the exit sign in the hospital, pulsing like a beacon.

A door opens behind me. It's another hospital room, but there's no light inside. With a mighty draft, it begins to suck me in, and as it inches me closer, the beeping of the heartrate monitor rings louder and louder in the back of my head.

Flailing, I manage to brace my legs against each side of the doorframe, but as the pain in my genital region resurfaces, I realize I've lost my male form. I'm back in my weakened hospital state, and it's all I can do to crawl against the current. As it pulls, I put my hands against the doorway. One arm slips through, but there, the doorknob... there might be a chance yet. I grasp the handle and pull, using my entire body weight to inch the door closed. It tears against me, but finally slams shut. I go sprawling backward into the hall.

There's blood on the inside of my thighs. It leaks out from the burning pain below, but before I can take more than a couple of breaths, the door bangs loudly. I crawl back a couple of paces as it bangs again. Whatever is in there wants out. It wants me. I crawl back farther and farther. The door bursts open.

The vortex howls, but I'm far enough away to turn around and crawl to my knees, then to my feet. I stumble past my own hospital room, passing the three exits I've already taken. The final exit, the once-bolted door, hangs open. It's the only place I have left to go.

THE FATHER

XV

The door slams closed behind me, and as I descend a cracked and mossy stone stairway, heart pumping pure desolation through my veins, I wear a blank face. Everything I've been through... this pattern I've seen three times will likely repeat itself. If I overcome this without letting whatever killer lurks around the corner with his hungered victims consume me, can I be free? What is a nightmare without a chance to wake up?

I hold onto that thought. The idea that this might be over soon, that I'll learn more about who I am and why I'm connected to these victims... it leaves me with just a sliver of hope.

But even that shred of hope fades as I descend the final step onto a plain of dying grass sullied by mounds of dirt near hand-dug craters. At the head of each hole are crudely constructed crosses. *Graves.*

I walk up to the nearest grave, afraid that a hungered victim awaits below, but as I draw near, the name carved upon the cross catches my attention: "Maven Stone".

So this is it. This is why she appeared to help me. If this is the last exit, then is she the last victim? If so, how has she been able to contact me? I look down into the shallow grave, finding my questions answered. At the bottom of the grave, a puddle of water rests. In that puddle is my reflection—my first reflection. In that mirror, matching every subtle movement, revealing to me both the shock and the terror on my face, is Maven.

I look at my hands. The skin: light brown in complexion. The hair: the wavy, black strands of the girl who offered me so much cryptic advice. My head starts to throb. She always appeared through a mirror, and she always knew that I had to press on, to learn... to remember. Is Maven, as I saw her, a manifestation of my own self? Is she *my* preta? If she is a part of me... then how does she know things about the other victims?

My head flashes, the pain pressing deep. I fall forward on my hands, trying to steady myself, but the earth gives way and I tumble into the grave, through the puddle, and down into an abyss. As I fall, my head continues to pulse, and with each flash I see visions. Memories?

I see flashes of a woman, slightly older, but very similar in appearance to me, only her head is shaved. "Bellona," I mouth. My sister. She's saying something to me, showing me something. My mind cuts to her arm. It's a tattoo. A bird. A raven.

"Maven the Raven," she says. "So I'll always have ya with me."

“No!” I try to call, but air refuses to escape. I’m deep in the pit, buried. I lose the sensation of falling, and as my head returns to a slightly less agonizing state, it warns me that I cannot breathe. I push with my arm, digging away at the mud underneath the puddle. My fingers do all the work, my nails clawing through, searching for pockets of air. I crane my neck, try to turn my head from side to side, inhaling anytime I think there’s a gap—but every time I do, a pocket of wet dirt seeps through. I choke on it, coughing as it clogs my nostrils and throat, but every time I cough, I breathe in more dirt. My head seems to inflate, clinging onto every morsel of oxygen it can find.

“Help!” I try to scream. Nothing beyond a dry rasp escapes. I push harder and harder, using my arms, elbows, knees, and nails to dig through. Any movement helps. Every shift frees up just a bit more dirt. It’s a shallow grave, I remember. I don’t have to get far.

“Bellona!” I try to scream, not caring that I have no voice. She’ll hear me. She has to. Someone has to help me.

With one final thrust, my hand penetrates the soil, fingers licked by a cool breeze. I push further, forcing out my entire arm, then my shoulder, and finally my head. I gasp, blinking as the light finds me, coughing up mud and choking on the cool air. I’m blinded by the mud on my face, and the dirt clinging to my hands only makes it more difficult to wipe off, but as oxygen returns to my brain, I notice a soft rain rinsing the stinging mud from my eyes.

I look up. I sit up. I rise, blood returning to my legs just enough for me to lean up against the wall of the grave. Dirt and roots slip as I crawl out, but I make it. The once-dug graves are now filled, but in the mud sits a stainless steel pistol.

At first, it seems an odd convenience, something I’m bound to need dutifully provided, but as I kneel down to touch it, I know... it’s mine. My head flashes as more memories return.

“Hey...” Bellona says. “I’m not supposed to have this.” She shows me the pistol.

“How did you get this?!” I ask.

“It’s Chris’s Colt 1911. Do *not* get caught with this.”

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“Me having this is another charge, a felony, but it’s for protection. I’d rather go to prison than a morgue, and with me gone...”

“Gone?! But you just got back.”

“Back from Basic... but now I’m fresh blood. I’m off to Iraq with the rest of ‘em.”

The pain in my head subsides.

The pattern. The sibling. My sister, shipped off to war. She dies. But then, while she's at war, the victim, me... I get killed by... I look back at the grave with my name on it. If I die here, then what is the meaning of the hospital?

I step away, looking at the name on the next grave, but it's illegible. A muffled scream echoes. I crouch down and put my ear to the ground. Another scream. I'm not the only one buried alive out here. I set the pistol down and start digging away at the ground, when a hand bursts out and grabs me by the hair. It pulls me down, my scalp on fire, and I scrabble in the mud, fighting back a silent scream. I root my elbows in the dirt and grab the arm by the wrist, digging my thumbs through its fingers. As I pull away, part of a head emerges, still screaming, still reaching for me. I crawl away and seize the gun, but as I back up, another hand reaches out and grabs me by the arm.

It pulls me back, but I bash at its fingers with the butt of the pistol. Bones snap. I stand up and carefully steer clear of any graves. More hands emerge, sprouting from the earth like grotesque flowers. Like zombies breaking free, they're reaching for me. This makeshift graveyard is much larger than I'd realized; there are dozens, dozens of hands reaching out of their graves, muffled screams of this killer's preta humming through the soil. I run, vaulting the fence and moving down a dirt trail. Trees on either side whip at me with loose branches, but as my breath runs short, I stop and lean against a trunk. I suck in breath, the wood cool and pleasant behind me. A suppressed scream tears through me, a pair of arms reaching out. They tear at my chest as they pull me against the tree. Its bark trembles and caves as the preta within wrestles its way free.

I pull outward and lean away, turning as I go, gazing upon the body embedded deep within the trunk. With fear in its eyes, the creature reaches for me, unable to escape its earthbound prison.

I stumble down the trail before another graveyard comes into view, this one gated and marked with traditional headstones. Two graveyards back to back? I look behind me, but the forest I ran through is no longer here. An open street slowly fades into fog.

This new graveyard leads up a hill, where a large church hails at the top. I pass through the open gate, cautious of walking too close to any of these graves.

As I move forward, an open grave catches my eye. Pain flashes from my head to my eyes as night turns into day, and a body of ethereal people appear, surrounding the grave. I spot myself in the center, crying over the grave. I know the name on the headstone before I even read it.

Bellona Stone
Beloved Sister, Soldier, and Follower of Christ

Died Fighting in the Name of our Country
Operation Iraqi Freedom
February 29, 1984 – March 1, 2007

I knew it. This wasn't just a guess, not just the end of the pattern—I knew it. It's a memory, once lost and now recovered. I lost my sister, just as Ada, Leon, and Tori all lost their siblings to war... but they all died. If I'm the fourth... all of the steps I've taken just lead to the memory of my death. Does that mean I truly am a ghost, and this series of nightmares is my hellish afterlife? No... it can't be. It doesn't explain my connection to the other victims, or the pattern.

Just before the crowd disperse, I catch a pair of eyes. I don't know whose eyes—or at least, I don't in this life—but I *know* those eyes. The killer's vile, green eyes. The killer was at my sister's burial. The killer was near me. A part of this church.

I look back past the graves up to the church at the top. All my answers are there. The answers to this pattern. The answers that either will break the cycle, or lead me to suffer my inevitable death.

I leave the cemetery behind, heart throbbing as I near what appears to be the rear entrance. White pillars support the awning over a stairwell that descends down to a set of large wooden doors. As I pull against a pair of circular brass handles, the doors groan, inviting me inside to a violet-carpeted subterranean hallway lit by triangular sconces, stone walls decorated with extravagant depictions of religious scenes.

As I step down the silent hallway, muffled cries leak through the walls, the floors, and the ceiling, as if the buried victims stalk my every step.

"Now, Bellona," a man's voice says from a doorway next to me. I creep against the wall; it's an office. "Of anyone, I can understand the need to steal to provide for yourself, especially with your underage sister involved."

"I know, Father, I'm sorry. I'm a lone woman providing for two, and I don't get tipped enough at my job. They'll take my sister away. Times are hard."

"And we've provided you with several donations. Blankets, food, and cash," the man says. "Still, masquerading as a volunteer only to steal from charity... that speaks volumes about your character. You may find yourself poor, but our service provides for people even less fortunate than you."

"I know, Father Malveaux. I don't need the lecture. I'll pay it all back."

I peek into the room to see Bellona sitting in a chair with her hands in her lap. A security guard stands watch.

"I'm afraid I can't let you off with a slap on the wrist for this."

“But Father! I’ve done so much good for this church.”

“Are you still with that dreadlocked fellow? The one who sits in the back in a hoody?”

“I don’t know what Chris has to do with any of this.”

“I’ve advised you to stay away from the likes of him. I’m sure your late mother married your father to get away from that type.”

“That,” Bellona scoffs, choking on her own words, “that’s a little prejudiced, Father. Just because my mother and father were interracial doesn’t mean they had a problem with their own races. And they gave to this church too.”

“I’m not saying anything against your color. I just don’t believe your mother would approve of you stealing and running around with known felons.”

“He has *one* misdemeanor,” Bellona cries. “He has *one* battery charge because he got carried away in defense of my sister! He beat up a pedophile who groped Maven in a grocery store.”

“He hospitalized the man, who reasonably mistook Maven for an adult.”

“He has helped us so much. He gave us his roof! Are you actually defending the man who assaulted my sister?! Even if she were of age, those actions aren’t appropriate.”

“I can tell by your argumentative state that you aren’t exactly open to compromise, so I’ll give you a counteroffer,” Malveaux continues.

“Compromise?! Are you telling me leave Chris in exchange for dropped charges?”

“No, I already know how that conversation would go.”

“Then what are you—”

“Leave Maven in the care of our orphaned youth program. You go and join the military. I already know the offer Judge Harper would give you: jail or the Army. He’s a friend of mine. If you want, we can organize this without the police.”

“You want to separate me from my only family? You want to separate Maven from *her* only family.” She says the last sentence flatly, asserting his intentions.

“I want to separate Maven from this malignant path your footsteps are inevitably leading her down.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Bellona snaps, leaning back against her chair. “I can’t just leave her behind.”

“You’re either going to jail or going to boot camp. Either way, you’ll be leaving her behind. Only one of those options comes with a paycheck.”

As I lean in further, I get a glimpse of the man behind the desk, and my throat drops into my stomach. Those eyes—the forest green framed by dark circles beneath baggy eyelids, which spread out into dark wrinkles that look like crooked roots. The only color on his ghostly white face come from his green eyes and the red sunburn on his balding scalp.

Father Malveaux is unmistakably the killer, but not only does he get me this time, he sends my sister to her death.

As the revelation hits me, he turns from Bellona and looks directly at me, infecting me with the poison-tipped daggers in his gaze. The glass behind him breaks and Bellona and the security guard disappear in a flash. When the world finally stops spinning, Malveaux hasn't left. He stands up.

I look down the hall from whence I came, but the lights are gradually flickering off, engulfing the hall in a placid darkness, so I sprint deeper into the church.

A hand bursts through a wall and grabs me, while another emerges from the floor, snarling my ankle. I kick away and turn, stumbling down the stone pathway. More hands punch through the stone, revealing moaning faces and unmasking the muffled screams of those buried beneath the floor and between the walls.

Father Malveaux walks toward me at a casual pace, carrying a large cane topped with a four-pointed star, the southernmost point extending the longest, giving the star the appearance of a cross. The Star of Bethlehem.

That's part of the pattern. I need that—don't I? The only artifact of sentiment I've seen so far—and it isn't even an artifact—is Bellona's tattoo of me. No way I can get that. There has to be something else.

As Father Malveaux advances, I return to my senses and scramble away, ducking in, out, and around the many buried victims who desperately try to pull me into their graves. Toward the end of the hall, there's a stairwell leading up to the main assembly room. As I run by the benches, they fill with people, all of them frozen in time, unable to help me, and as I turn to look for my pursuer, I find myself alone. Father Malveaux has already materialized at the podium.

"You think it a coincidence, don't you!" his voice growls, his tone monstrous. This isn't just Father Malveaux speaking. I stop and stare at the podium.

"You understand nothing. You question your existence. You fight, not knowing the futility of your endeavor. What are you fighting for? Life? You're already dead. And in your next life, I'll kill you again. And again... and again."

His voice seems to echo from all directions.

"Amen," the voices in the audience agree.

"I am not just the father here. I am everything you fear. My spirit has gone down in history. I am the wolf who leaves the sheep scared in their fields. They never find me. They never stop me. But I always find you."

He finishes with a laugh that echoes directly through my head, splitting my skull as fragmented memories flood my mind.

Memories of Ada—no... memories *as* Ada. I am not connected to Ada, I *am* her. I *was* her... in a past life. Experiencing her death was a memory. Saving her was just...

“An illusion of hope. That’s what you gave yourself. Fighting through your memories, recovering your past, experiencing your demise over and over again, all whilst struggling to free yourself from my grasp... it feeds me. It heals me from the pitiful wounds you’ve tried to carve. Your pain is what I live for.”

I try to look away, scanning for an exit, but his voice is overbearing. I can hardly move.

“Every time you reached into yourself, you found my hand on your leash. You can’t escape me.”

“Amen,” the voices ring. Not a single person moves when they speak.

“So you can stop prolonging your suffering. You and I are locked in eternity together. You are fated to die at my hands in this life and the next.”

“Amen.”

I want to speak, to yell at him, to tell him he’s wrong, but I have no voice.

“The dead don’t speak,” he growls, reading my mind. “You fail to realize that you don’t have a say in this matter. You will always be my plaything. My victim, for eternity.”

“Amen.”

I point the Colt at him, but the stained-glass windows shatter. I duck away, shielding my eyes, and Father Malveaux materializes directly in front of me. I fire a shot that wisps through his ethereal body, and before he can touch me, I bolt.

He lets me run. To him, my escape is impossible. I shove the doors open, tears mixing with the rain as I sprint down the steps and the path beyond. He appears again in front of me, green eyes wide, so I change directions. He warps again and I make another right turn past the church. He appears to my left and right repeatedly, herding me like the shepherd he claims to be.

My vision blurs as I run, head sparking with on-and-off flashes. Even when I cannot see, I don’t stop running. When the pain stops for long enough and my vision returns, I find myself running through the forest of hands and screams as Father Malveaux’s previous victims jeer me on to my impending death, hands reaching out, threatening to pull me into their earthy graves should I stray too close. I’m back at the hidden graveyard, and as I near my own grave, he materializes before me once more.

“Go on. Get inside,” he offers, pointing to the pit.

My skull seems to implode into my brain. I am now living my most recent, most horrific memory, what is possibly my latest death at the hands of this reincarnated demon.

“No, I don’t understand,” I involuntarily cry as my past actions take over my body. Just as I lived Ada’s death, Tori’s, and Leon’s as an involuntary witness, I now witness my own.

Father Malveaux grabs my tank top, something I wasn’t wearing initially, and shoves me back into the grave. A purse, my purse, hits the ground next to me. He drops in, using his star-capped cane as a walking stick. His clothes have changed too. No longer dressed like a pastor, his boots, pants, and vinyl rain jacket make him seem like a gravedigger.

He butts me in the temple with his cane as he kneels down and rakes the star against my top, tearing it.

“Stop!” I scream, grabbing his jacket, but with the rain, my nails slip off the vinyl.

“You stop,” he growls, voice no longer edged with the monstrous undertone. “You’re only going to make it last longer.”

Ada, Tori, Leon, and now Maven... all are mere vessels to my spirit. The killers are just vessels to this evil. The evil wants me to suffer, but the vessel, Father Malveaux... he wants something far more primal.

“No!” I cry as he strikes me again. I keep trying to scream for help, but he shoves a fistful of mud into my mouth as I struggle. He strikes me again and again until I raise my arms to protect my face. With great force, he pins me as he undoes his pants with his opposite hand.

I writhe underneath his grip, trying to bite his arm through the vinyl, but he shoves my head deeper into the mud. I’m going to drown in this rain.

He relents for just a second before jamming the butt of his cane so heavily into my chest that my ribs crack into my lungs beneath the pressure. Immediately afterward, my own pants slip down past my thighs. I tighten my legs together, but he beats his cane into my stomach until I relent.

“That’s it,” he hisses. “Let it happen and it will end that much quicker.”

When he forces himself inside me, my body rejects him, trying not to let him in, but he pushes, tearing against my own defenses. Warm blood mixes with the rain as he ravages me, each thrust forcing me deeper into the thickening mud. I can’t cry loud enough to hear my own sobs without drowning in the water. I can’t scream. I once again have no voice, but then, my hand feels something—my purse. A memory hits my mind. Bellona gave it to me.

“This zipper right in the bottom? It’s a hidden compartment. Put the gun here. Whenever your life is threatened, hold it close like you’re scared, put your grip on the pistol like this, and you can shoot the fucker right through the purse.”

I gasp, breathing in more water as he tears a deeper hole inside me. I fumble for the purse's zipper, not able to find it quickly enough. Every second is a lifetime of pain. Every thrust causes my hand to cringe, but at the end of my line, I find it already halfway opened and the familiar handle of the Colt inside. I only have one shot at this. Praying he doesn't already see me, I tug the weapon, blindly point it in his general direction, and fire.

His attack stops, and I use his pause as a chance to push back up out of the mud.

"Stupid fucking bitch!" he cries, holding his leg. "Fucking cunt!" He climbs from the grave, pants still down to his ankles, and tries to cover the blood gushing from his thigh. With his free hand, he starts shoveling dirt into the grave, burying me alive before he can treat his own wound.

I choke on blood gushing into my lungs from my broken ribs. It hurts so much to move at all, and as the dirt piles up on top of me, the beeping of the heartrate monitor resounds in my ears, progressively getting louder and louder.

"Do you know her blood type?!" a woman's voice assertively asks.

"O positive. Same as her sisters," a familiar voice answers. It's Chris, Bellona's boyfriend. Memories of his apartment—*our* apartment—leak into my brain as wheels scrape against the ground.

"Okay, we're taking her into ICU, I need you to—"

They fade, but I'm still moving down the hospital halls on a gurney. The place darkens, but the wheels keep moving.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," another familiar voice begins. It's Atraiu.

He appears in full combat uniform, following as the gurney takes me deeper into the hospital.

"You were such a good person. Always compassionate toward others. Selfless, never pitying yourself. I saw in you a quality I never had. I fought for you. Maybe that makes me the selfish one. But I failed. He got you."

The room flashes, needles piercing my mind as I wake up in my familiar hospital bed in the dark room, heartrate monitor still beeping away. I glance around for Atraiu, but Morty stands in the corner.

"But it didn't just get you. It claimed you. The perfect evil, marking the most selfless soul as its host," he begins. "I didn't want to leave, but I thought we'd have a better chance if we found our parents. That wasn't a part of his plan. They say evil souls are punished in their next life, and good souls are rewarded with peace..." He walks into the hallway before fading away.

What is happening? I stand up, ignoring the pain I've grown so used to as I follow him. The heartrate monitor still beeps in the corner, but... haven't I done it? Have I survived? Morty doesn't greet me in the hallway.

"He knows what he deserves. It's Hell," Armand says, tucking himself underneath my shoulder, supporting me as he guides me toward the darkness. I look back at the exits to find that the red sign is no longer glowing. "His evil is neutralized by your good. His sins are hidden by your heart. You moved neither forward, nor backward, and because he held onto you, you were both fated to repeat the cycle. In every life, he came for you."

As he explains this, we keep moving toward the door that almost sucked me in. "I tried to stay with you, but fate worked against me. It's no coincidence I was drafted." He disappears as we reach the door, but Bellona catches me as I fall over. I didn't get to see her death. I didn't get to find her artifact, or take Malveaux's star... he just got me.

"When there was no draft to whisk me away, he sent me off personally. But, like him, I never let go of you either. My love for you is selfish, not good or bad in the light of karma, but there was always a slight edge," she explains. "Every incarnation, I grew closer to saving you. I kept you with me." She points at her Maven, the Raven tattoo.

"And this time, I left you something you could actually use." She holds up the Colt. "He didn't count on me."

She turns over and opens the door. There is no vortex this time. I move to go forward, but Bellona holds me back, leaning me against the wall instead.

"No, I promised and I failed to save you every time. You fought to save yourself long enough. You leave what's in here for me, and you hang on until you feel him let go. Do you understand me?"

I look at my sister and nod before she comes forward and embraces me. "I don't know what awaits us in the next life, but remember, I'll never let you go. I will always love you."

She releases me and sends me off with a nod before entering the room, closing the door behind her.

I turn away, slinking against the wall. An ethereal figure rushes by me.

"Doctor! Send help to room 113!"

"The priest's room?"

"Yes, somebody come, help!"

He *is* in the hospital. That gunshot wounded him as critically as he wounded me.

As a frigid draft passes through me, my eyes waver, but Bellona told me to hold on. He has to die before I do... otherwise, this all happens again. Despite my thoughts, I catch myself slipping, and open my eyes. I'm in my hospital bed.

Sunlight slowly bleeds into the room, but not just through the window. The entire room gradually starts to illuminate as the light eats the darkness hugging the wall, as if the darkness itself were being sucked back into its own pit, and as it retreats, a great weight lifts from my shoulders.

I hear shouts as they frantically try to undo whatever Bellona's done to Malveaux.

"What's going on?" a nurse asks at my door.

"Duke Malveaux just passed," another answers.

"I thought he was expected to make a full recovery?"

"Some complication we didn't foresee. An anomaly."

"Sweetie?" the voice says. I hadn't realized my eyes were closing, and I try to open them again.

"Sweetie, are you awake?" she asks again.

The room is even brighter, flashing before me.

"We need help in here!" she calls, but she's wrong. I'm free now. Free to rest in peace, and as my eyes close for the last time, I let a slight smile curve upon my lips. Finally... nirvana.

THE AUTHOR

Photographer: Samuel Grahn



Dex is a Southern-born Seattle author and model. Home-schooled after a diagnosis of mild Asperger's, he learned to play to his strengths as an energetic, creative artist. He began writing at the age of fifteen, and published his first novel two years later. Outside of art, Dexter spends his time gaming, studying, and socializing with other ambitious minds. As an army brat, he attained a pragmatic sense of discipline that he uses to balance his artistic endeavors with his academic ones. Dexter's ultimate goal is to contribute to the subjugation of humanity by artificial intelligence.