

In The Shadow Of Mount Moriah

By Mantrid Brizon

What horrors lurk in the shadows?

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Chapter 1: Night Terrors

The engine of the 2010 Dodge Challenger R/T roars as it cruises down the two-lane blacktop. Harry taps his left hand on the outer door panel, his fingertips caressing the metallic black paint as he cradles the steering wheel with his right hand. The Caucasian human listens to his music as he drives down the desolate Michigan road, heading for a town he had never been to or seen before. Patches of brown fall leaves swirl as he rides down the lonesome road. The black haired human gazes into the rear-view mirror with his gray eyes, scratching his neatly trimmed beard.

Harold 'Harry' Bennett is on a quest to find his friend, a quest brought about by a series of terrible nightmares. They had haunted the man as he slept peacefully in his Florida home, beside his girlfriend Cybil Kaufmann. Every night, for the past two weeks, he has awakened to the sounds of screaming within his head, drenched in sweat and trembling uncontrollably from an unseen terror. Cybil has been very patient and understanding, always there to comfort him. The twenty-six-year-old canine Voeldahn would hold her lover close, her broad snout resting alongside his face and her arms wrapped tightly around his body.

She has never complained as she inadvertently wicked away his sweat with her soft fur. If her bushy tail were long and flexible enough, she would wrap it around him as well,

doing all she could to let him know that he was not alone and that he was cared for. Harry is thankful for her everlasting compassion and benevolence. When he returns home he fully intends to propose to his girlfriend of two-years, but first he needs to uncover the source of his accursed nightmares. As far as Harry can tell, the source is Michael Garland.

The thirty-year-old human hasn't seen Mike in nearly ten years, though they were once the best of friends. Harry and Mike had grown up together, a human and a Voeldahn with rabbitesque features. Once inseparable, living in the same suburb of Detroit, they have grown apart. A decade is a long time and many things have changed. Mike should be thirty-one-years-old by now, and his daughter Mia should be nine, if she was even born at all. Harry regrets that he cannot even remember Dahlia's age, Mike's wife. She had become pregnant and recently discovered the fetus' gender before they lost touch; Mia was the name they had considered.

Harry sighs, looking sullenly at the road ahead. The sun slowly dips behind the tall trees and the large hills that dot the landscape, his eyes weighing heavy. He has been driving for nearly fourteen hours, stopping only for bathroom breaks and to refuel. The day before, he had driven for nearly thirteen before finally stopping for the night. He glances down at his GPS, mounted onto the dashboard of his muscle car. He is nearly at Amanita, the town where he

hopes that Mike and his family live. It was difficult enough to even find the town.

It took Harry several days of digging through old photos and a faded address book, back when people still wrote things down, as well as a thorough search on the internet. He discovered his friend's village, listed in the white pages, though he could not gather an address. None of the Garlands had been using social media, only serving to make the search that much more difficult. Harry, however, is a determined man; stubborn is putting it mildly, as Cybil often says. He needs answers. Why is Mike haunting his dreams? Why is a little girl crying? Why do they plead for help?

As he stares at the road, he begins to lose focus, gently swerving over the dotted white lines. He blinks hard, trying to maintain focus. He will be in Amanita within the span of a full-length movie. He glances to the GPS once more, only for a blaring horn to startle him. His fingers grip the steering wheel tightly as he swerves to the right, slamming his foot on the brake pedal. Where did that car come from? He had only looked away for a second, or so he thought. Unwilling to risk his life to make time, he drives only until he reaches the nearest town.

He passes a sign welcoming him to Typha, a village in Kalkaska County. With a population of only three hundred and eighty, he hopes that he will be able to find a place to

stay for the night. He sighs in relief as he spots a small motel along the side of the U.S. highway he is driving upon. The reddish-pink neon signs buzzes, oscillating 'vacancy' as he pulls into the thin parking lot. Elation washes over him as he pushes down on the clutch, shifting the car into neutral before pulling the parking brake and turning off the powerful, purring V8 HEMI engine.

He opens the car door, stretching out a leg. As he begins to climb out, he hesitates. Turning back to the passenger seat, he opens the glove box, revealing the Glock 23 handgun that sits within. The forty-caliber pistol is shrouded in a holster meant to be hidden behind the waistband of his pants. With a license to carry a concealed pistol in Florida, he knows that he has reciprocity. He takes hold of the pistol's grip, slipping the holstered weapon behind his faded blue jeans and pulling his gray t-shirt over it. He steps out of his car, stretching his muscles before walking into the office.

As he enters, he is taken back by the sheer amount of taxidermic animals that line the walls and shelves. Copious amounts of small birds, rodents, cats and dogs create a visual cacophony. The front desk sits unattended, a screeching cat perched on the countertop and facing the front door. He turns to the plate glass window behind him, glancing impulsively at the sign outside. 'Bart's Motel' glows faintly in blue neon above the vacancy sign, giving him a brief moment of amusement. He wonders how he had not noticed it earlier.

“Can I help you?” A voice cuts through the silence.

Harry turns back, glancing at the speaker. A Voeldahn man now stands at the formerly unattended front desk, his clawed hands resting flat atop the counter on either side of a ledger which also was not there before. He has a feline appearance and is rather short in stature, with a slender frame, dark gray fur, vibrant orange eyes and black hair in a stereotypically geeky bowl cut. Harry raises an eyebrow at the man, standing five feet and ten inches tall, looming over the short Voeldahn.

“Yeah, uh... I’d like a room for the night.” He begins.

The man points to the ledger, tapping on a line with a glossy black claw. His long and slender tail sways behind him as he stares at the human. Something about the cat man is very disconcerting, though Harry can’t put a finger on it. He rests the pen on the paper, hesitating to write down his name and address for the ledger.

“Do you take cash?” Harry suddenly asks.

“Of course we do. \$60, up front.” The man replies.

“Good.”

Harry promptly writes down a false name, the first that comes to mind, following it with an invalid address. He removes his wallet as the clerk spins the ledger around. Harry sets three crisp twenty-dollar bills onto the countertop. The clerk turns back and takes an old, worn key from a cubby hole, marked '#9'.

"Here you are, Mr. Donahue. I noticed you parked at the far end. This room is directly in front of your car." The clerk says in a polite monotone.

"Thanks. Have a good night." Harry nods.

"You as well..." The clerk grins.

Harry quickly exits the office, heading directly for his room. As the clerk had said, room number nine is directly in front of where he parked. As he slips the key into the lock, he briefly wonders where the clerk was hiding to know where he had parked. As he swings open the door he remains aware of his surroundings, his eyes carefully scanning the room as he turns on the lights. He closes and locks the door behind him. As he turns to a cheap table and chair in the corner, a gut feeling forces him to act. He drags the chair from its place, jamming it beneath the door knob.

He walks toward the single, double sized bed in the room. Turning to the antique analog clock on the nightstand, he sees that it is nearly midnight. He takes out his holstered pistol and cell phone, setting his gun on the nightstand and

quickly calling his beloved. After only one ring, Cybil answers the phone.

“Hey, baby! I miss you.” She happily exclaims.

“I miss you too, Cee.”

His lips curl into a wide grin as he hears her voice and her excited tone. He stretches out on the bed, staring at the ceiling as they talk. The lovers speak for nearly an hour before they are both too weary to continue. They say their goodbyes and Harry hangs up the phone, quickly setting his alarm. He places his phone on the nightstand, trading it for his pistol, which he slides underneath his pillow. Though the bed isn't the most comfortable, he soon succumbs to exhaustion. Sleeping atop the covers, the only article of clothing he has removed are his shoes.

He tosses and turns, groaning in his sleep as he runs through a cavern lit by wall mounted torches. Though not one to scare easily, he runs from an unseen horror, a grumbling beast that slithers behind him. The sounds of a little girl crying echo loudly throughout the cavern. While trying to escape the shadowy creature that creeps up behind him, he runs into a large cavernous hall. In the center is a large, dead tree. Before it rests a stone altar, bearing Mike's putrid corpse. The brownish-gray fur covers his entire body, with the exception of his tall ears, stubby snout and fluffy tail, which are black.

He turns around to face the beast that bears down upon him, its massive shadow flickering with the fire of the torches ensconced on the wall. As he spins, the hazy creature vanishes, leaving behind only an empty tunnel. His heart races, the fear overwhelming him.

“Harry...” A sepulchral voice calls out.

The man nearly jumps out of his own skin as he turns around, facing the reanimated corpse of Michael Garland. Mike stands before him, his head tilting to one side. The sound of creaking bones echoes in the cavern as his long and ponytailed black hair hangs low, following the pull of gravity. His eyes are completely absent from his skull, his dark colored flesh tinted a sickly off-green, visible on his nose and inner ears. Mike reaches out for Harry, clutching his shoulder painfully and with incredible strength.

“Save me!” Mike screams.

Harry yells as he is jarred awake, gasping for breath as sweat beads on the burning flesh of his forehead. He has nearly lost count of how many times he has experienced the same dream. Reaching for his phone, he presses the button to activate the screen but the phone has died. Glancing at the antique analog clock, it reads the same time as when he

last looked. It must be broken. Though the lights aren't turned on, the natural glow of the sun illuminates the room. His eyes scan the room, moving toward the window by the door.

His heart stops as he sees a crack of daylight squeezing in through the gap of the door and the frame. The chair is wedged tightly between the door and the floor, tilted slightly from inward force. Harry slips his hand underneath his pillow, taking his Glock and holding the handle tightly as he steps off the bed. He keeps his eyes focused on the door as he slips his feet into his shoes. Harry ties his shoes, holsters his pistol, grabs his phone, and leaves the room key on the nightstand.

After struggling to pull the chair away from the door, he exits the room. Swiftly climbing into his car, he does not bother to check out, turning the key as the engine roars to life. Shifting into gear, he squeals the tires and jumps the short curb, racing down the highway. After driving for twenty minutes, he crosses into Antrim County. He cruises at fifty-five miles per hour for another hour, finally driving by a large road sign. The fall leaves swirling before the faded green and white rectangle which reads 'Amanita. Population 941'.

He looks around at the terrain, wondering why Mike would live somewhere so desolate. He hasn't seen another car since yesterday, before he entered the tiny town of

Typha. As he enters the village of Amanita, he is amazed by the vintage architecture. The old town is populated with brick and mortar structures of various colorations, some with tall facades. Edwardian pillars line the front a police station that sits adjacent to a strange, three-sided parking lot in the form of a right triangle. In the center of the grassy spans sits a large stone gazebo. He pulls forward into a vacant space.

Parking the Challenger, he sits in the car as the engine purrs. He raises an eyebrow as two human locals walk sluggishly past the front bumper. They glare at him with unusual stares, as though they were witnessing a green alien driving the muscle car. He turns his eyes to the digital display of his radio. Oversleeping cost him considerably, arriving in town at nearly two in the afternoon. Harry looks side to side, making sure that no one is watching before removing his handgun from his waistband and slipping it into the glovebox. He sighs, turning his eyes to the police station.

“Let’s get this show on the road.” He murmurs.

Chapter 2: The Hunt

He walks across the grass, over the asymmetrical land, then over the thoroughfare. The lack of moving vehicles is startling to him, even though he can see several parked throughout the town. The street is nearly deserted, with only a few citizens roaming listlessly. He walks beyond two gargoyles that sit atop meter high pillars, stone-cut and with square edges. The gargoyles, about the size of a seated Great Dane, are intricately detailed. Their eyes seem to follow him as he enters the police station, opening the old oaken double-doors with stained-glass windows.

His athletic shoes clomp loudly on the wooden floor as he passes the foyer, approaching a large crescent shaped desk in the main hall. He looks around at the police station, which is exceptionally well decorated. It feels more like an art museum than the office of civil servants. He approaches the front desk, a pale-skinned human sitting behind the counter. The uniformed officer stares blankly at a computer screen, but the reflection in the man's fashionable glasses reveals that it is not turned on. Harry clears his throat, hoping to garner the officer's attention. He sits still, his gaze fixed on the black monitor.

"Pardon me, officer." Harry finally speaks.

The officer's head turns slowly toward him, his eyes empty and soulless. Harry struggles to keep from shuddering as the man stares wildly at him.

“Can I help you?” The officer asks in an eerie monotone.

“Yes. I’m looking for someone.” Harry answers.

The officer slothfully takes a slip of paper and a yellow pencil, preparing to take notes. As he leans forward, Harry notices that the officer’s duty belt is sparse and his holster empty. How could a police officer forget his sidearm? Harry gives the officer Mike’s name, raising an eyebrow as the clerk tries to write with a blunt pencil. The sound of a door slamming echoes throughout the large central hall, though only Harry jumps. He turns to face the source of the sound, an older Voeldahn officer standing to his right and holding a blank white coffee mug.

Harry watches as the man slowly steps forward, the claws of his digitigrade feet clicking on the wooden floorboards. This officer isn’t even wearing shoes! His vibrant green eyes are narrowed, his bushy canine tail barely swaying as he steps ever closer to the civilian.

“This man is... Looking for someone...” The clerk groggily explains.

“Who?” The Voeldahn cop asks.

“Michael Garland.” Harry replies.

The officer's eyes grow wide, his fingers clutching tightly to the handle of the coffee mug. His lips curl around his snout into a strange sneer while his ears prick.

"What do you want with that asshole?" The officer growls.

"He's a friend. He went missing." Harry replies.

"Good riddance." The officer grumbles.

"Do you know where he lives?" Harry asks.

"Yeah." The officer replies.

Harry raises an eyebrow, waiting patiently for the officer to tell him. When he does not, he outright asks, but the officer doesn't answer, merely turning and shuffling away. He returns to the door to the right of the hall, his mug smacking the frame and shattering as he slips through. The officer doesn't stop moving, leaving the pieces of the mug lying strewn on the floor amidst a pool of a milky liquid. Harry turns back to the clerk, posing him the same question. The sleepy looking officer merely shrugs his shoulders before returning his gaze to the blank monitor.

Harry can't believe the incompetence of the officers but hesitates to press the matter. He obviously won't learn what he needs from these men. He decides to try a more

subtle approach. Turning back, he leaves the police station. His eyes scan the town's center, noting the various shops and stores. The interconnected buildings bear small businesses, all locally owned; there is not a chain store in sight. It would be rather quaint, if it weren't so eerie. He walks down the sidewalk and toward the nearest store, the hanging bell ringing as he steps into the café.

Several patrons sit, staring into Styrofoam cups. He watches them for a moment, his brow furled as he examines the citizens. They appear to be in a trance, gazing into the rippling black liquid of their cups. Many of them do not even blink after what must be a full minute. He approaches the front counter, attempting to initiate conversation with the cashier. They do not answer. He holds up a hand, waving it mockingly before the cashier's face. The feline woman stares blankly at him, as still as a statue. After a long pause, the woman suddenly blinks and shrieks, startling Harry. She rests a hand on her chest, breathing heavily.

"Where did you come from?!" She asks.

"I... I've been here for a while." He replies, perplexed.

"Have you?" She tilts her head to the side.

Harry turns around, looking at the patrons of the café who all lift their cups, taking sips. One cringes as he sets down the cup.

“It’s cold! It wasn’t cold a minute ago.” He complains.

Confused and alarmed, he exits the café, returning to the street. The few citizens there now move at a normal pace, one stopping to admire Harry’s car. He returns to the police station where the clerk turns on his computer. The officer turns to Harry, cheerfully greeting the man.

“Hello! Can I help you sir?” He asks.

Harry opens his mouth to speak when the Voeldahn officer emerges from the room to the right, nearly stepping on the bits of broken coffee mug.

“Who the hell dropped their milk? And where did my shoes go?” He asks the clerk.

The officer at the front desk merely shrugs his shoulders.

“This isn’t funny, Steve!” He barks at the clerk.

Harry slowly backs out of the foyer and through the double doors, spinning around and quickly returning to his car. A horrible feeling envelopes him, as though a dark cloud were manifesting from thin air and shrouding his body. A breeze flutters his short black hair, blowing rich brown leaves past him, skidding along the ground and barreling over the hood of his Challenger. He spins around, half expecting someone to be standing directly behind him. Unsurprisingly, there is nothing there except empty air. For a split second, Harry considers returning home and ending his search early.

He rests his buttocks against the driver's side door, turning his eyes to the asphalt. He hears children laughing in the distance, but when he turns to look, he sees no one. The sound forces him to reminisce of the time he spent with his friend. From age five, until they both married at barely twenty years old. Harry's wife dragged him away to Florida, where he quickly lost touch with Michael. His marriage didn't even last, ending in divorce only two years later. Should he have returned to Michigan then and reconnected? The guilt weighs heavy on Harry's mind as he slides down, sitting on the hard ground beside his car.

Though other forces drove a wedge into their friendship, he has already come this far. He won't betray his friend by abandoning him now, not when he is so close and when Mike may very well may need him. Undaunted, he rises from the ground and enters his car. He reaches for the cooler that contained the three days of food that he had

packed away for the trip. He lifts the lid but finds it empty. Long hours on the road had built up his appetite, and he had consumed the food and drink earlier than he had expected he would.

He locks the car and spins around, looking at the various stores. He sees a larger store on the corner, filling two different facades. This single store is a market, and the closest thing to a grocery store that he has seen. He crosses the street, which grows busier with each passing moment. An electronic bell chimes as he enters, taking a hand cart from a stack beside the door. As he enters, he is immediately drawn to a human woman of Asian descent. Though young and attractive, possibly in her early twenties, what draws his attention is her strange behavior.

She nervously glances at the other shoppers, her hand held close to her chest as she clutches a fist tightly. Her hand tremors as a customer approaches to purchase their provisions, which contain, among other things, several formerly frozen dinners. The customer appears quite confused as she looks over her thawed and soggy boxes. Harry walks swiftly through the store, collecting the things that he will need before approaching the line. He makes sure that he will check out last, allowing a straggler to cut into the line. The cashier notices, glancing over to Harry repeatedly.

When it is finally Harry's turn to check out, he sets the basket atop the counter. The few cold items within are not thawed out, and the girl, though keeping her head pointed downward, regularly glances up at him apprehensively. As she scans his items, he sees the sterling silver cross dangling from around her neck.

"Pardon me, miss." He quietly begins. "I'm not from around here, and I'm looking for a friend."

"Yeah... Who?" She asks in a whisper.

Her eyes dart around, as though worried someone may be listening to their conversation. As soon as Harry speaks Michael's name, her eyes grow wide and she turns her head up to him, clutching her silver cross tightly. After a pause, she finishes scanning his items, bagging them as she tells him the sum total. He takes a fifty-dollar bill from his wallet, handing it to the girl. She opens the register, but hesitates, looking up at the man. She sighs, placing the money in the register and removing his change.

"My shift ends in at three o' clock. Meet me at that gazebo, and I'll tell you what I know." She whispers.

He looks down at his watch, content to wait the nearly thirty minutes for her to speak with him. He nods, holding out a hand to her. She hands him his change, motioning with her

head for him to leave the store. The unfettered fear on her face is disconcerting, but Harry will not succumb, or be dissuaded by whatever she has to tell him. He returns to his car, opening the door and setting his bags on the passenger seat. He opens the cooler in the back, which sits beside his earth brown M1936 style musette bag, containing his personal effects and a single change of clothes.

He dumps a bag of ice into the cooler before placing the cold food and a twelve pack of Coca Cola into it. The dried and canned food he leaves in a single bag, which he ties shut. He exits his car, walking toward the impressive stone gazebo. Taking a seat on a carved stone bench, he watches the storefront, and his car, from a safe distance. Regularly looking to his wristwatch, he sees that it is ten minutes past three o' clock. He wonders if the girl is going to show up, or if she decided against their meeting for some reason. He rises from the bench, prepared to look for her, when suddenly she emerges from the store.

Car keys in hand and a wad of money in the other, she pockets the cash and dashes across the street. She looks absolutely terrified as she approaches the gazebo. Her shoulder length hair, as black and shiny as a raven's feathers, flutters through the air as she races up the path toward him. She stands before Harry, looking side to side before glancing up at the man.

"Are you alright?" He asks her with concern.

“I will be as soon as we’re done talking.” She replies.

They sit down on the stone bench, an awkward silence hanging between them. Harry asks her about the money that she pocketed, and she explains that today was her weekly payday. Having asked for her check to be given to her in cash at the store, the elderly owner and manager obliged. The girl has already cleared her meager bank account and packed her car with what little she cares for; she plans to leave town as soon as they have finished speaking. Harry is surprised and perplexed by her frankness. Without asking her, she immediately begins explaining the strange occurrences in Amanita.

It began with Michael Garland’s claims of a cave system beneath his home, a grand old manor built during the turn of the twentieth century. The Edwardian mansion was purchased by the Garland’s, after Michael had amassed a moderate fortune trading in the stock market. They moved to Amanita from Royal Oak Michigan, not long after Harry had moved to Florida, and solely to live in the home that had remained vacant for nearly twenty years previous. The Garland’s were pillars of the community, living quietly and raising their daughter, whom they did, in fact, name Mia.

However, last year Mike’s wife Dahlia died from a strange fever, passing away in the nearest hospital nearly fifty miles from Amanita. Michael, though once visible and friendly, became reclusive and chronically depressed. He

and his daughter were only ever seen when they ventured into town to buy supplies for the week, a trend which continued for many months. Nearly two months ago, Mike began to appear in town more frequently, looking into the records of the old house, and asking older residents for details into the home's history. He became obsessed with uncovering the origins of the manor.

Barely a month ago, he made claims of a cave system underneath the mansion, a claim he had dreamt up and considered fanciful by many of the townsfolk. Everyone had assumed that he had simply cracked under the weight of his sorrow. When the day came for Mike and Mia to arrive and buy their weekly provisions, they were strangely absent. Several days passed, yet no one heard from them, nor would they in the following weeks. They had simply disappeared. As suddenly as the Garland's vanished, the locals began to experience strange occurrences, beginning with those who lived nearest the manor.

Insomnia, night terrors and bouts of sleepwalking morphed into waking trances that last for hours. Statuesque residents have no memory when they finally come too. Though only a few were affected at first, arousing the interest of the locals in Amanita proper, it suddenly washed over everyone. Overnight the entire town suffered the trances, amnesia washing the incident from their minds like an ocean wave over footprints in beach sand. Harry stops the girl to ask her why she is strangely unaffected, but as

she clutches her silver cross, she can only shrug her shoulders.

The trances had occurred sporadically for the past four days, and out of fear that she may soon succumb as well, the girl has decided to flee. Though she warns Harry not to stay in Amanita, urging him to turn around and leave as she does. He refuses. He is determined to discover Mike and Mia's fate. Realizing that he will not listen to her pleas, she gives him a slip of paper from her pocket. As though she were worried that she wouldn't have the liberty of speaking at length, she had the foresight to write down both the full address of Garland Manor, and simple directions to it.

Harry thanks her for her assistance, wishing her well on her journey, but she is quick to depart. She rises from the bench, glancing back to the man before dashing down the path and toward the shortest edge of the triangular ground. He stands from the stone bench, watching as she races toward an old, rusted Chevrolet Astro minivan. He can see that the maroon colored vehicle is packed with bags, and even small pieces of furniture as the woman climbs inside. The tires squeal as she drives hastily away from the town center and toward the same highway that brought Harry there.

Something is happening in Amanita. Though it drove the girl to flee, Harry is more curious than afraid. He returns to his car, using his dash mounted GPS unit to input the

address. To his frustration, the address appears invalid. Perhaps she wrote it incorrectly? Undaunted, he reads the instructions. He turns the key in the ignition, the Challenger roaring to life. Holding the instructions between his index finger and thumb, he bends the paper to keep it open and legible. He shifts into gear, pulling out of his parking space and returning to the road.

He drives slowly down, following her directions carefully. He looks over to a Michigan state road atlas that sits in the passenger's side door panel, thankful that he brought it along. He will get to the bottom of this, one way or the other...

Chapter 3: The Manor

The Challenger's wheels shift the earth and loose stones beneath them, the crunching echoing throughout the forest around him. He pulls slowly into the long and winding driveway leading up to the impressive home. It has taken Harry much longer than he had anticipated to arrive at the manor, as the directions were written from the perspective of someone familiar with the locale. Having never been to Amanita before, he was forced to stop often, pulling to the side of the road to examine his atlas. Though it took him some time, the directions were accurate.

He gazes upon the massive home, all of three stories tall, with a forth story consisting of a singular tower. From a glance, it appears to house the bell of an old church, but tinted windows suggest that it is some sort of loft. The light green paint is pristine, its soft hue blending in wonderfully with the forest behind the manor. A faint white trim around the roof and windows compliments the primary color. The sharp, squared edges, and the rigid angles of the roof remind him of photographs of similar historic homes, such as the 'Antrim House'.

The windows are not perfectly clear glass, with a faint blue tint. The small square pieces form a series of three rows of three vertical lines, with nine blocks of glass in all. Crowning each window is a single sheet of glass that spans the width, and custom made to fit. They are semi-circular in appearance, like a half-moon sitting above each window, with the flat edge resting atop the three squares of blue glass. The home does not have a wraparound porch, as he was expecting to find. Instead, it contains a large covered porch with a triangular roof not dissimilar to Greek and Roman architecture, with square pillars supporting it.

He parks his car in a large rectangular patch of compressed soil, beside a dirty, silver Land Rover. As he prepares to pull the parking break, he has a gut feeling, looking into the rearview mirror. He shifts into reverse and spins the wheel, performing a three-point turn as he backs

the car into the parking space, the front bumper facing the earthen driveway that leads back to the road. He parks the car, retrieving his Glock 23 from the glovebox and holstering it before stepping outside. He turns to the Land Rover, which sits to the right of his muscle car.

He circles the Land Rover, examining it carefully. Small patches of grass sprout around the wheels, curling over the rubber that touches the ground. The wheels have begun to sink into the earth. The rear wheel on the driver's side is flat, though there are no visible signs of damage. Peering inside the car, it is quite clean. There is no blood, strange stains, dust, or even empty wrappers or cups within the vehicle. It appears to be well maintained. A gust of wind sends a shiver up his spine, and Harry turns to face the house. It looms over him like a terrible beast.

He approaches the front porch, examining the statues which stand on either side of the base of the steps. Two soldiers in medieval looking armor bear cruciform swords, the tips plunged into the ground with the cross guards at their waists. Their hands grip the elongated handles, while helmets with intimidating visors shield their faces. He cannot help but take a moment to look over the highly detailed sculptures. The statue to his left appears to be a human, while the statue on his right has a long, slender tail. The visor is longer, and the helm allows for short and pointed ears, like a feline Voeldahn.

He climbs the steps, nine in total; the same number as every panel of each window, excluding the half-moon at the top. A pair of solid oak doors guard the entrance of the home, the hinges of each door on the far end. They connect together without the use of a central pillar, much like a cargo van, allowing for furniture as large as a grand piano to be brought into the mansion. Though the doors are somewhat plain, they bear raised square patterns with circles carved into each square. Inside each circle is a simple diamond, formed by turning a square onto its point.

With a sigh, Harry extends his hands, taking hold of the hook shaped door handles. He attempts to depress the buttons above the handles, but they do not move; the doors are locked. The keyholes appear antique, with a design nearly identical to classical cartoons. He reaches into his pockets for anything he can use. As he takes out a small paperclip, he wonders if Mike had really protected his manor with doors held shut with antique pin-and-post locks. He straightens the paperclip with his fingers before inserting it into the keyhole. His lips curl into a little grin.

“Smart man...” He mutters.

The locks only appear antiquated. As he feels inside the mechanism, he realizes that the locks are modernized and custom made. They are not even tumbler locks, as he can feel not tumbler pins within it. Instead, several posts in the shape of a triangle sit within the keyhole. Though he

can only guess at this point, he assumes that one or more of these posts needs to be fitted to a specialized key and turned at once. Though not as advanced as an electronic keycard, it is nearly as secure, as conventional tools simply cannot pick the lock.

He considers his options and begins to examine his surroundings. The porch does not reach the nearest windows, and decorative wrought iron spikes are bolted to the underside of the edges of the overhanging roof. These spikes prevent Harry from standing on the railing and climbing up to the second floor via the overhang. Walking down the steps, he wanders around the manor, noting that all of the windows are too high from the ground to easily climb into. The home is not exactly true to its origins; all of the ledges having been removed.

He looks at his wristwatch, noting the time as fifteen minutes past four o' clock. He takes a deep breath and begins calling out to Mike, asking if anyone is home. He circles the house twice, looking carefully at every window as he calls out. No one answers, nor do any of the drawn curtains sway. He returns to the porch and knocks loudly. After a pause, he knocks again, before balling a fist and pounding several times on the doors. His efforts are unrewarded. At four-thirty he turns and sits on the steps, resting his arms over his upper legs.

He takes a moment to remember his childhood years with Mike, scouring his mind for any subtle clues. He rises to his feet, his eyes wide. Could it be so simple? Mike's parents often hid a key in a special clay pot that Mike's mother had molded herself. The large vase held a live flowering plant, but the base had a secret lid, hiding a compartment that housed a spare key. Perhaps Mike has a spare key hidden outside? He jumps from the porch, looking all around the house for anything that could be potentially used to hide a key.

He fails to find pottery of any kind. Perhaps he used something else? Harry tips over every rock within three meters of the house, before running his hands along the entirety of the porch railing; he finds absolutely nothing. Having wasted nearly an hour, he looks to the sun as it dips behind a large hill in the distance. The hill, nearly a mountain, will soon block the glowing rays of the sun and leave him in darkness. Again, he sits on the steps of the porch, wondering what he has done wrong. What is it that he missing?

Again, he has an epiphany. When they were children, they often played now collectable PlayStation games. Mike's favorite series was Resident Evil, in no small part because of the puzzles the series contained. He turns his head, looking over his shoulder and toward the front doors. Rising to his feet, he quickly approaches the doors and scours them for clues. Looking closely at the handles and locks, he notices that the detailed decoration of the handles

and lock covers consists only of diamonds. Perhaps this is a clue?

He turns back to the statues at the base of the steps, examining them methodically. He laughs aloud when he notices that the cuirass of the human knight bears a decorative diamond pattern, as opposed to the circular pattern on the Voeldahn knight's cuirass. He runs his hands around the statue, jokingly apologizing to the stone figure as his hands grope the inner legs. As his fingers slide down to the tip of the sword, he feels something give way. Looking closer, there is a small notch in the stone where the tip of the sword enters the ground at the knight's feet.

Poking the stone with his finger, it shifts slightly, but he cannot simply lift it. Taking out a pocket knife, he depresses the button at the rear and the spring assisted blade swiftly swings out, locking in the open position. Taking the tip of the knife, he reaches between the statue's sword and the knight's feet. He pushes the stone toward the knight's feet, slipping the tip of his knife blade into the notch near the stone sword. After several attempts, he jimmies the stone from the statue, revealing a compartment within. He closes the blade and returns his knife to his pocket before reaching into the hole.

He grips an object with his fingers and removes a key, set vertically within a carved space; the key's base is shaped like a diamond. The key appears to be made of

titanium. Harry can't help but laugh aloud as he holds the key in both hands like a prized possession. He places the stone back over the compartment, concealing it once more. He dashes up the steps and returns to the front doors, taking a moment to look over the key's design. The key is shaped as the keyhole and is a perfect fit. The front of the key has holes drilled into it, allowing for two of the three posts to fit into the front of the key.

He inserts the key into the slot, feeling the metal posts sliding into the drilled holes. He notes the level of force needed to turn the key and open the lock. To his surprise, the lock does not function as others do. In order to open the door, the key needs to be turned and then held open while the button is depressed; releasing the key returns it to its original position under spring tension. Harry pulls the door open slowly, noting the incredible thickness of the wood. The average home defense sidearms would find it difficult to penetrate these doors.

He slips the diamond key into a pocket before stepping inside the home, pulling the heavy door closed behind him. The home is quiet and dark, with no lights turned on anywhere within the home. Using what little sunlight he has left, Harry passes the short foyer and enters the first room to his right, calling out to Michael and Mia as he steps through. This first room appears to be a conventional sitting room, with several antique chairs and a long, dated couch. He finds a semi-spherical brass fixture with a toggle switch in the center. Flipping the switch, the electric wall sconces

and chandelier light up. A comforting amber glow radiates from the bulbs.

The room is entirely covered in wood paneling, with highly polished wooden floors. He takes a seat on the couch and looks around the large room. For a moment wonders if it would be proper to bring his things inside, but as he recalls his situation he trades the appropriate for the prudent; if Mike and his daughter are still home, he can explain himself later. Quickly leaving the home, he returns to his car, where he retrieves his musette bag, his bag of dried and canned food, and his small, ice filled cooler of drinks and cold food.

Using his key fob, he locks his car before returning to the manor, bringing his belongings inside and setting them beside the old couch. After sitting to rest for a moment, he decides to begin his search. He notes how cool the house is, with the hallway thermostat still set for central air conditioning. That would have been more appropriate last month, before the start of fall. He adjusts the temperature, flipping a switch from air conditioning to heat. Unsure of what he may find, Harry slowly draws his Glock from his concealed holster.

He holds the grip tightly as he moves from room to room, first walking directly across the hall from the sitting room. Here, he finds a more conventional living room with an obscenely large, wall mounted flat screen television, a modern video gaming console, and several other expensive

entertainment devices. In a corner sits an easel and canvas. Approaching the canvas, he sees an intriguing yet grotesque image of a tree in the form of a man, their tendrils reaching out towards the viewer. Behind the tree-man is a small group of figures, bent over as though in worship.

After a moment he turns away from the peculiar image, continuing his search. He calls out Mike and Mia's names as he enters the hallway. Though he is only wearing convention athletic shoes, they clomp loudly on the wooden floorboards with each step. He passes the first few steps of the grand staircase, determined to check each floor in turn. He stops at a full-sized door along the base of the staircase. Opening it, he discovers a storage room packed with cardboard boxes. He looks through the nearest box, finding only Christmas ornaments inside.

Closing the closet door, he moves slowly down that hall and into the nearest unchecked room. He holds his weapon near his leg as he pokes his head inside the ajar door. Turning on the light switch he discovers a private library, the likes of which he has only seen in old movies and photographs. Bookshelves are built into the walls, wrapping around the entirety of the room and stretching from floor to ceiling. The size of the room is as impressive as the integrated bookshelves, all of which are packed from end to end with books of various type and condition, some antiquated and others modern.

Stepping inside, he glances over the books. Every genre of fiction sits atop several whole bookshelves, with three devoted exclusively to horror. The shelves bear categorized collections of many authors: Stephen King', Peter Straub, Dean Koontz, Jonathan Maberry, Ramsey Campbell, M.R. James, H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, Algernon Blackwood and Edward Plunkett. One bookshelf is entirely children's books, obviously set aside for Mia. The remaining shelves contain all manner of cookbooks, do-it-yourself instructional manuals, and science and medical journals.

In the far corner is a vintage wooden desk with an upright case. It is surrounded by several picture frames, with a brass desk lamp with a green, glass shade attached and sitting on the opposite end of the desk. Beside the lamp is an antique desk fan, the body painted in the original black with brass blades bearing a fine patina. The shield over the blades consists of four wavy bars, allowing someone to easily place their hand in the way. Behind the desk is a rather comfortable looking chair covered in red leather with brass buttons sewn in, giving the back padding a diamond pattern.

The armrests are only partially padded, leaving the polished cherry wood visible on the first and fourth quarters. As he walks around the desk, he sees that the feet of the chair are carved in a manner similar to the animalesque feet of a vintage bathtub. Looking closer at the desk, he sees a book contained within the case and

shielded by glass; a recreation of the Necronomicon from 'The Evil Dead' film trilogy. Impressed by the décor, Harry considers taking a moment to more carefully examine the contents of the room but quickly decides against it.

Leaving the lights on, he exits the library and continues down the hall. Entering a room to his left, he flips the light switch on. A crystal chandelier lights up, as do nearly a dozen electric wall sconces, illuminating the impressive dining room. The walls are covered partially with wood paneling on the lower half, while the upper portion is a rose red and black pinstriped wallpaper; it looks original to the house or is at least an effective imitation. Also leaving the lights on, he walks through the room and enters a door on the far end of the wall and to his right.

Stepping through, he finds himself within a thinner hallway which is attached to the end of the primary hallway. A door before him is shaped differently, with a rounded top as though it were a bulkhead. Opening the door, he enters the room and turns on the lights, discovering that he is in a bathroom. The walls are entirely wallpapered, with a pine green pinstriped and a light green primary. The floors are ceramic tile in a sickly pale green, though it somehow accents the walls. The sink, toilet and bathtub are white porcelain, or a matching paint over metal.

The sink does not sit atop a storage cabinet like a modern house, but the basin sits on a stalk that conceals

the pipes which must come through the floor. The stalk is decorated like a Roman or Greek pillar, with highly polished brass fittings and faucet. The bathtub has animalesque feet molded into it, sitting nearly three full inches above the ground. A stand holds a green fabric shower curtain, with the stand, curtain rings, shower head and stalk all being constructed of brass. Even the toilet is odd, with a fancy wooden lid and unpadded wooden seat, both made of cherry wood, and a suspended tank near the ceiling. The chain and lever are brass.

Moving on, he reenters the thin hallway and walks toward the last remaining door of the first floor. Entering the room, he discovers that he is inside of a kitchen. Unlike the rest of the house, the kitchen appliances are quite new, and the older articles are so well maintained that they do not show their true age. The walls are paneled with wood as the main hallway and sitting room are, though the floor is tiled, much like the bathroom. The tiles are contrasted, one half white and one half a strange bronze color that nearly matches the wood paneling of the walls.

He looks around the kitchen, finding two doors worth exploration. He opens a door to his left, which is offset and near the kitchen entrance, placed into a large rectangular structure. Opening the door, he discovers a staircase leading to the basement. With no desire to backpedal, he closes the door, opting to enter the basement later. He moves to the door to his far right and opens it. To his surprise, he discovers it is a walk-in pantry that runs the

length of the house and sits behind the library. At the end of the pantry, a large pile of coal sits on the floor and draws his attention.

Walking to the end of the pantry, he gently kicks the peculiar heap. He cannot understand its purpose. Does the manor still burn coal in its furnace? Why would the pile not be in the cellar? A few pieces of coal roll away, scattering on the wooden floorboards and revealing a box underneath. Kneeling, he holsters his Glock and pulls out the tan cardboard shoebox. As it tilts, he can hear metal shifting inside. He brushes the dust from the lid before opening it and revealing the contents. He is further surprised to find a revolver and a small box of defensive grade thirty-eight special ammunition inside. He takes the Charter Arms Undercover revolver, noting the intriguing color scheme.

Unlike most common revolvers, it is not blued, or made of stainless steel. Instead, it has the earthborn finish. A rich brown, darker than coyote tan, covers the anodized aluminum frame; the remainder of the revolver is anodized black. The green and gold box of Remington hollow point ammunition looks new, as does the revolver itself. Harry takes hold of the black rubber grip of the weapon, pushing the black button and swinging open the black cylinder, revealing five live cartridges within. He places the revolver into a pocket and opens the box of ammunition. A plastic holder bears twenty rounds, with five empty holes present.

He dumps the rounds into his hand, slipping them into his jacket pocket, opposite the revolver. Leaving the shoebox on the ground, he holds the revolver instead as he continues his search. He returns to the kitchen and reopens the basement door. Flipping on a light switch near the top of the staircase, he walks down the rickety wooden steps. In contrast to the rest of the house, they appear quite weathered. The stairs creak as he works his way to the compacted earthen floor below. He reaches the base of the steps, keeping the revolver held close to his stomach as he looks around the room.

The basement is dank and musty, with dark gray, brick walls wrapping around the soil beneath. The cellar contains no windows of any kind, but several electrical wall sconces and a few hanging bulbs illuminate the room. In one corner sits a massive and antiquated furnace, with a wrought iron body and tarnished brass fittings. A large and more modern water heater sits adjacent. He wanders the room, looking over a large wine rack that sits alone along an otherwise blank wall. Behind the staircase is a humble workbench, with several hand and power tools strewn about, some old and some quite new.

After several minutes, Harry sighs in frustration. He returns to the kitchen and continues his search. He enters the main hall and climbs the stairs to the second floor, noting the lack of any family photographs, or paintings hanging on the walls. Moving from room to room, he quickly scans each as he calls out to Mike and Mia. Every room of

the second floor is a bedroom with an attached bathroom that matches the bedrooms décor; a large room with no furniture, possibly a ballroom, is the sole exception. With no sign of the father and daughter, and still left with no answers to their whereabouts, he continues to the third floor.

Climbing to the third floor, he takes a moment to look down the gap in the center of the grand staircase. He gazes down to the first floor below, noting the eerie stillness within the house. Though the warm amber glow of the wall sconces and central chandelier light his way, the lack of any sounds is unnerving. The manor makes no discernable noises like many other homes or apartments, and the floor boards do not even creak as he takes each step; the only sound is the thumping of his own feet. He searches several more rooms, finding a modest guest bedroom that may once have been servants quarters. He searches a small study, a gym, a child's playroom, and a large storage room.

He does not find a single sign of the family anywhere, or any evidence of foul play. Setting the revolver on a windowsill, Harry takes a seat on an old and dusty stool sitting in the storage room. Peering out of the window, he glances down toward the vehicles below, though they are now completely shrouded in darkness. Without the aid of a porchlight, he might as well be gazing into the lonely abyss of hell itself. He unlatches the window and pushes it open, a cool breeze rushing into the room. It chills his face, stinging

his nose. He turns his head, training an ear on the void outside.

A chill runs down his spine; not a single sound is coming from the forest. The owls don't hoot, the nocturnal predators don't growl, and the crickets don't even chirp. He cannot be certain whether the wild life is deathly still, or if they are absent altogether. He pulls the window closed and latches it shut, taking up the revolver as he returns to the hallway and back to the grand staircase. As he walks down the steps, he jumps as his phone loudly rings. He takes a deep breath and exhales as he pulls out his phone, checking the screen. A picture of Cybil's smiling face warms his heart. He swipes the screen with a thumb and brings it to his ear.

"Hey babe!" He says cheerfully.

"Hi!" She chirps. "I was getting a little worried about you. Are you alright?"

"I guess..." He sighs.

"You don't sound too sure."

"Maybe I'm not." He murmurs.

"What's going on? Talk to me." She pleads.

Harry begins to explain everything to her as he climbs down the staircase to the first floor. He returns to the sitting

room, setting the revolver down on an old table that sits before the antique couch. He walks toward a window and glances outside, moving the curtain aside. He notices several trees that seem unusually close to the house. The moonlight barely illuminates their twisted and leafless forms as they sway in the frigid wind. As he speaks to his beloved, he turns back to the couch, wondering if he should sleep there, or in one of the upstairs bedrooms. He turns back to the window, his eyes growing wide as he stops speaking mid-sentence.

“... Sweetheart? Are you there?” Cybil asks.

“The trees are gone...” He chokes out.

“What? Are you alright?!” She asks him, her voice tense.

“Y-yeah. I uh... I’m fine... I guess I’m just tired; my eyes are playing tricks on me. What was I saying?”

“Harry...”

“Yeah?”

“I want you to promise me something.” She begins.

“What?”

“If anything happens, if you ever aren’t okay, I want you to give up your search and come straight home...”

“Cee.” He starts.

“Whatever you might find up there, it... I just want you to come home safe. Please promise me that.” She says softly.

“Sure, Cee. I promise, and you know that I don’t make promises I won’t keep.”

Chapter 4: Portend

He speaks to his beloved for nearly two hours and shares every detail, however insignificant. Harry never keeps anything from Cybil, nor her from him. After wishing each other goodnight, he hangs up the phone. He takes a large battery pack and USB cable from his musette bag, charging his cell phone with the power pack and setting them on the table beside the revolver. He stretches out, opting to sleep near the front door of the house. As he looks around the dimly lit room, he glances back to the window where he saw the strange trees.

He sits up, wondering if he should take another look outside. Rising to his feet, he takes a step toward the window. He stops and scans the room, looking over at all of the other windows with their curtains drawn. Perhaps that could be the reason? Stepping back, Harry sits down on the couch. He reaches for the revolver and takes hold of the weapon, resting it underneath his pillow as he stretches out and lies down on his side, facing the window. Though he isn’t sure of what he saw, one thing is certain; he will be sleeping with his shoes on tonight.

That night, Harry is tormented by the same nightmare that he has had every night for the past several weeks. As Mike's icy corpse grabs hold of his arm he is jarred awake, nearly rolling out of the couch and falling onto the floor. He quickly reaches out, catching himself with the table. His hands tremble as he sits up, resting his head in his upturned palms. Taking a deep breath, his body shakes as violently as his breath. Running his fingers through his black hair, he grips his skull tightly as he tries to calm his frazzled nerves. He turns his head toward the throw pillow, before reaching out a hand and moving it aside.

Exposing the loaded revolver, he stares at the handgun for a moment. He turns back to the window, noting the faint yellow light glowing underneath the curtain. He stows his power pack and USB cable in his musette bag, slipping his fully charged cell phone into his pants pocket. He makes a simple meal near the couch with the food that he brought with him, collecting a drink from the cooler, which is now filled almost entirely with frigid water. After eating and drinking, he takes hold of the revolver that sits on the couch and rises to his feet.

He briefly retires to the bathroom before continuing his investigation. Without a definitive place to start, Harry decides to search the manor more thoroughly. Beginning in the library, he takes a seat in the elaborate red leather and cherry wood chair behind Mike's desk. He rests his hands

atop the desk, looking it over. Harry takes a moment to look over Mike's framed photographs, one being a large portrait of his late wife, Dahlia. The other pictures are primarily Mike and his daughter Mia. Harry had never actually laid eyes on Mia before; she is the very image of her mother.

He takes hold of a set of joined picture frames. Each half of the hinged, book-like frames contains a color image of the father and his daughter. As he looks more closely, he can't help but raise an eyebrow at one of the images. The backdrop is the old wine rack in the cellar; not a very appealing place to take a family photograph. He places the connected picture frames back in their rightful place before looking over the drawers of the desk. A thin but wide drawer pulls open, revealing absolutely nothing. A faint impression in the dust shows that something once sat there, perhaps a laptop.

With a frustrated sigh, he closes the thin and wide drawer. Several more drawers sit on either side of it, six in total. He pulls open the top-left drawer, seeing only two articles contained within; two books bound in light brown leather. He removes the books, noting the customized covers. The embroidered stitching reads 'Journal: Volume One' and 'Journal: Volume Three'. He looks over the books, flipping through the pages. The first volume is entirely filled, whereas the third volume is void of script. He sits back in the chair, his lips curling into a little smile.

“Well... That was easy!” He thinks aloud.

He sets the books aside and continues rummaging through the desk drawers, finding only irrelevant paperwork and stationary supplies; ‘Volume Two’ is nowhere to be found. Leaving the third journal atop the desk, he begins reading through the first.

“Day 3,

I have begun keeping these journals because of the nightmares I have had these past few nights. Perhaps it is a side effect? Had I known that, I might not have done it, or perhaps I would have. No matter. Nothing will stop me once I have set my sights. It has become so difficult; living without Dahlia is unspeakable. Neither Mia and I can bear it. If it weren’t for my precious child, I would have probably used the gun on myself a long time ago. Hopefully I am doing this right, and then it will all be over. Side note, I need to see the mechanic about my car. The wheel still leaks air around that damn air pressure sensor, and I am getting tired of re-inflating it every weekend.”

“Well that explains the car.” Harry thinks aloud, flipping a page. “But if you didn’t drive away, where did you go?”

“Day 7,

I thought about killing myself again last night, but Dahlia came to me. She emerged from a tunnel as I walked alone in the woods. She beckoned me inside. When I followed her, I realized that we were under the house, though I never actually saw it. Inside a large cavern lit with torches, there was a tree. Before this tree was an altar of stone, about navel high. She disrobed and lay atop the altar, posing for me. I climbed atop her and felt her against my fur. It felt so real, so right. I caressed her ample-”

“Okay!” Harry exclaims, skipping ahead.

“Day 10,

I understand now! The cave system is far older than the house, which was built over the primary entrance. I could never find the caves hiking through the woods because those passageways are either blocked, or many miles away. The oldest blueprints I found of my house are quite out of date, except for the cellar. The wine rack is the door, it has been since the manor was built! The notes are hard to read, but there seems to be a mechanism I can unlock to open it. I will then be able to thoroughly explore the tunnels. I swear, if I find a cave with a tree and a stone altar before it...”

“What the hell?” Harry murmurs.

He scratches his head and flips back to the previous page, wondering if there was something he missed. No pages are missing, and the dates are consistently several apart. Harry sighs in frustration as he returns to the next entry.

“Day 12,

I still can't open the lock on the wine rack. Hopefully I can simply break it off. If that fails, I'll buy a chainsaw and cut a new entrance through the wood. That would be a shame, because then I'll have to set my wine on the ground. Side note, I had to hide the gun. After performing last night's ritual, I had a nightmare where Mia took it, shot me in the head several times, and began to feast on my brains. I felt it. Brain's don't even feel pain; they don't have those nerves, but I still felt it. I found a place where she would never think to look, just in case.”

Harry sets the book down on his lap, leaving a finger buried within. He can't believe how far Mike has slipped. Could he have snapped, murdered his daughter and then killed himself? Are their corpses rotting in the woods and his nightmares are some form of psychic connection trying to

help him find their bodies? Harry rises from the chair and collects the blank third volume, taking both books back into the sitting room. He slips the blank journal into his musette bag and makes himself comfortable on the old couch before reopening the first book and returning to his place.

“Day 14,

I have done it! I nearly resorted to the chainsaw, but my patience and determination saved me a perfectly good wine rack. The mechanism finally detached and the wine rack opened. Mia saw it, so I will have to shut it and come up with a new locking mechanism. Something elegant, yet simple... Simply elegant! Though I wanted to explore the dark cave behind it, Mia was afraid of it and I had no choice but to close the door and comfort her. It took her hours to fall asleep. As I write this, I am too tired to move myself, and I can barely hold the pen. Tomorrow... Explore.”

His throat dry and his energy already depleting, Harry takes a can of Coca Cola from his cooler of cold water. Pulling the tab, he opens the can and takes a drink of the refreshing carbonated beverage. After several sips of delicious effervescence, he sets it down atop a coaster on the table. Flipping to the next page, he continues reading the journal entries. After several sentences, he reaches for the can for a second drink, but to his surprise, the can is warm. Confused, he takes a sip, nearly choking on the drink.

Not only is it warm, it has lost its fizz! He sets down the can, suddenly noticing how dark the room has become.

His eyes scan the room, which is quite dim. Looking toward the curtains, the morning sunlight no longer glows. Is it cloud cover? He walks toward the window, his stomach suddenly cramping from hunger. Pulling open the curtains, Harry is met with a veil of darkness and a moon slowly rising into the sky. How can this be?! He looks down at his wrist watch, realizing that it is nearly ten o' clock at night. It wasn't even ten in the morning a few seconds ago! Retrieving his cell phone, he sees a substantially drained battery and a clock that also reads '9:41 pm'.

"What the hell is going on here?" He asks himself.

Panicking, his heart begins to race. Taking a deep breath, Harry calms himself down. Somehow, he simply fell asleep and he simply doesn't remember it. That is the only logical explanation. Feeling that the room is rather stuffy, he swings out the window before him, allowing the cool air to flow in from outside. He returns to the couch and prepares a meal for himself, opening a fresh can of Coca Cola. Suddenly and irrationally, Harry becomes unnerved. He retrieves Mike's revolver and his Glock, setting them both atop the table beside his food. After eating, he returns to the journal, killing some time before he calls his beloved Cybil.

“Day 15,

It is here... The tree, the altar, everything! Even the sconces and unlit torches were right where I dreamt they'd be! I must have attained this knowledge when I summoned Shevoth, a lesser 'Old One'. Shevoth, the black seed, who can reform my Dahlia and bring her back to me. Now I just need to find a way to get Mia down there. The next ritual will require the blood of the young. Not much, of course, but she hates knives and needles. I wonder what will happen if I simply tell her the truth?”

“Holy shit, Mike... You have lost it.” Harry murmurs.

“Day 16,

I told Mia about the cave and the rituals; she believed me. She has suffered identical nightmares of Dahlia dragging her into an icy cold and watery oblivion. Her tentacle-like arms grasp her throat and her hollow black eyes chill her heart. I did not have the heart to tell my daughter that those nightmares were my fault. Had I not hunted down a copy of the real Necronomicon, none of this would have happened, but then again, we wouldn't be so close to reviving Dahlia. She is not pleased with the idea, but as she so eloquently put it, 'I just want mommy back'.

Hearing her voice utter those words ripped at my heart and I nearly cried; it took all of my strength not to. It won't be much longer. That is not dead, which can eternal lie. And with strange aeons even death may die."

Harry closes the book, resting it on his lap. He leans back and stares at the ceiling for a moment, unable to believe what he is reading. How could Mike slip so far from sanity? Was his grief that extreme? As he wonders this, his mind is flooded with images of Cybil, the beautiful canine Voeldahn who waits for him back home in Florida. Turning his eyes back to the book, he wonders if he would do the same thing if he were in Mike's place.

"Well, Mike... I guess you aren't so crazy after all. If I lost Cybil..." He quietly admits to himself.

As he reopens the book he hears a strange noise outside; creaking and rustling, but not like the rustling of the wind in the trees. No, this sounds more like someone falling through the branches. Turning toward the window, he is horrified to see a being trying to climb in through the opening. A large hand grips the interior wall as it slowly pulls itself inside. In a panic, he takes hold of his Glock 23 that sits atop the table and quickly takes aim. Squeezing the trigger twice, he fires two rounds at the being, who jumps back from the window and darts into the woods.

Their heavy footfalls echo loudly as it flees. Racing for the window, Harry gazes outside, leaning partway through the opening. There is no blood, or anyone to be found. Is his mind playing tricks on him? He pulls the window closed, quickly latching it shut. As he draws the curtain closed, he notices scratches on the interior windowsill and part of the wallpaper, as though cut by sharp claws. His heart sinks at the revelation; he is not alone here, and whatever it is, it was decidedly not Mike or Mia. He slowly returns to the couch, keeping his weapon close as he retrieves his phone.

Cybil answers quickly, ever pleased to hear from her mate. She immediately notices the tone of his voice, demanding to know what has happened. Unwilling to lie to her, he shares every detail. The journal entries, the missing time, the intruder, and even the scratches. She pleads with him to return home immediately; to give up his search and be done with it. This is not worth his life. Knowing that she is right, Harry promises that tomorrow will be his last day there. He will not spend another night, no matter what he may or may not find. This promise pleases both parties; Harry is as eager to be rid of this burden as she is to see him return home.

That night he struggles to sleep, lying on the couch for many hours. After what happened, he is taking no chances; he wears his clothes and shoes, his musette bag is packed, as is a bag of food and drinks, the revolver sits underneath the pillow, and his Glock is held in his hand. He won't risk being caught off guard. Though he wants to sleep, every

time he comes close to the edge, he is certain that he hears a faint tapping on the window. Tempted though he may be, he never dares rise from the couch to check it. He lies still in the darkness for some time, listening to the tapping until his body can stand it no longer, shutting down from pure exhaustion.

Chapter 5: The Caverns

Waking the next morning to his phone alarm, a very groggy Harry rises from the couch. Drenched in sweat from another horrid nightmare, he rubs the sleep from his eyes. Wasting no time, he quickly prepares a simple meal and drinks a room temperature Coca Cola before taking both weapons and their spare ammunition and leaving the house. Walk slowly around the perimeter, he stops at the window where the intruder had attempted entry the previous night. He carefully examines the ground, noting strange depressions in the soft earth.

Though they appear to be footprints, they are unlike anything he has ever seen before, appearing to be impressions of deer antlers. Drag marks and depressions lead away from the window but stop just before the tree line of the forest, the soil of which is tightly packed and mixed with gravel. With no leads he wanders the edge of the forest, walking in a circle around the manor. As he walks

past the opposite side of the home, a mere corner away from returning to the front face, he stops dead in his tracks. His eyes grow wide in shock and horror as he sees something that he cannot rationally explain.

Approaching a tree roughly eight feet in height, with a trunk about the size of a man's, he finds two long branches that reach out like arms. The short, spiky branches are reminiscent of the clawed hands that clutched the interior windowsill, their nails scratching the wallpaper. As he steps closer, his heart sinks deep into the pit of his stomach. Gently touching the tree trunk, he finds two bullet holes plain as day, spaced roughly three inches apart. He can't help but admire the grouping before he comes to the conclusion that somehow, in some way, this tree must have been the intruder.

Bringing up a weapon, he quickly jumps back from the flora. His Glock in hand, he raises it to chest level as he glares apprehensively at the tree. A gust of wind simultaneously flutters the branches and his hair, causing his heart to skip a beat. He steps back from the tree before walking sideways toward the corner of the home. The trunk of the tree slowly twists, panicking the man who turns and darts back to the front porch. He struggles with the unique key as he continuously looks over to his left, waiting to see the sentient plant approaching him, though it never does.

Entering the house, he slams the heavy door shut behind him. He is tired of playing games with this house and the dark forces surrounding it; he already knows where to look. Taking a flashlight with an angled head from his pack, he clips it onto his belt and heads for the cellar. Inside the dank cellar, he examines the wine rack for the latch that unlocks it. He chuckles as he sees that Mike had carefully removed a small square mechanism built into the side of the wine rack and replaced it with a large metal loop. An identical metal loop is screwed into the wall beside and underneath the loop attached to the wine rack, the passageway held shut with a large rusty railroad spike that fits through both loops.

Taking the railroad spike from the loops, he tosses it aside and pulls open the door. He turns on his flashlight as he walks around the wine rack, expecting the tunnels to be black as the night. To his surprise, a faint light glows from within, flickering as though it belonged to a torch flame. On the ground is a book identical to Mike's journals. Kneeling down, Harry collects the book, which reads 'Journal: Volume Two'. He quickly opens the book, reading the only entry within.

"I have failed to control the forces that I have called forth. Shevoth is a terrible creature; the black seed that corrupts all that he touches. I thought I could control a lesser god, but even the weakest of the old ones is far too powerful for me. It has taken Mia; she serves him like a slave. I escaped and locked her within, but as I sit in the

cellar and write this entry, I know that I must make this right. I cannot let Shevoth claim my daughter! If I don't fix this, we'll both die in the shadow of Mount Moriah."

Harry sighs, shutting his eyes and the book at once.

"Mike... You son of a bitch..." He murmurs.

Before continuing, Harry seals the tunnel and races back upstairs where he stows the book in his pack and checks his weapons. Quickly returning to the cellar he reopens the tunnel, jamming the railroad spike underneath the wine rack and pulling it toward him to wedge the door open. He walks slowly and carefully through the cavern, lit by fresh torches that are held in place with wrought iron wall sconces. The horizontal shaft winds, turning several times but never splitting. After some time, he enters a large cavern, with multiple tunnels attached to it.

His eyes grow wide and his mouth hangs open. Before him is a massive cavern that is part of the small mountain. In the center of this cavern is a tree at least fifteen feet tall, with a substantial trunk and four branches, two on each side and several feet apart. They have the appearance of multiple arms. As his eyes scan the tree, he is left horrified by the sight of a stone altar built before it. His eyes well with tears and his bottom lip quivers as he steps toward the altar, looking over the fetid and decaying corpse of Michael

Garland. The rabbit Voeldahn appears to have been dead for quite some time, his milky eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling.

Harry stands before the altar and drops to his knees, resting his head on the stone and near the stinking flesh of Mike's arm. He weeps for what seems like an eternity before finally regaining his composure. Rising to his feet, he begins to apologize to his friend for not coming to him sooner. As Harry speaks, the milky eyes appear to shift. His words catch in his throat, sitting painfully in his larynx. A faint ring is all that remains of Mike's eye color, the remainder being as white as the snow. The ring shifts as his rotting eyes turn toward Harry.

The man steps back, unable to believe what he is seeing. Is Mike somehow still alive?! Suddenly, the creaking and crunching of bones is heard as Mike's head begins to turn, maggots falling out of his gapping mouth. Harry reels and vomits from the horrid sight before him, dropping to his knees. Turning back, he can see a fifth branch near the base of the tree. It reaches to the back of the Voeldahn's head, tendrils piercing the base of his skull and buried deep into his brain. He struggles to rise to his feet but is startled by a hideous and terrifying feeling.

Icy cold branches grip his upper arm, scratching his skin as they squeeze him. Spinning around, he jumps to his feet and yanks himself from the grasp of who or whatever is

behind him. Standing before the distraught and terrified human is a little Voeldahn girl, rotted away until much of her skeleton is visible, including her hands. Tall ears, once rigid and proud, are now soft and decayed. They hang limp and frame the mutilated face of the putrid Mia, her zombified body audibly creaking as she slowly steps towards him.

“Oh God, no!”

“God?” Mia says in a sepulchral voice. “I am the only god here.”

“Who are you?!” Harry demands, stepping back from her.

Mia’s demonic laugh sends shivers down his spine, the rancid stench of her body defiling his nose. The sound of her creaking bones molests his ears, more painful than nails on a chalkboard. Her eyes glow a sickly pale green as she steps closer.

“I am Shevoth, the black seed. This fool summoned me through the Necronomicon thinking that I would return his wife to him. After tasting the blood of his daughter, I took her body as my vessel, forcing the fool to make a choice; give himself to me for her freedom, or surrender his daughter to me forever. He believed me; I kept them both anyway.” The possessed Mia laughs.

“You monster...”

“Your friend and his daughter gave me enough energy to revive, though I still cannot fully control the halfwit villagers, or yourself. Perhaps you noticed the missing time...”

“Release them right now!” Harry yells.

“Hah! Have you seen them? The only thing I could do for them is allow them to die, so that they no longer feel the rot.”

Harry cannot believe his ears. Mike and Mia must be in agony, unable to speak as the maggots crawl through the bodies and the skin falls from their bones.

“The dreams...” Harry murmurs.

“I used your friend’s memories to call out to you. I was not certain that I had enough power to gather worshippers to complete the ritual and bring me fully into this plane of existence; I am tired of serving under Cthulhu. I was strong enough, but you will feed me well regardless.” Shevoth bellows through Mia’s possessed body.

Harry’s back strikes the earthen wall of the cavern, a torch sitting several meters from him. Mia’s body contorts as the large tree behind the altar appears to shift as though watching him. Slimy and fetid tentacles emerge slowly from the little girl’s back, swaying like the tail of a feline Voeldahn. With an unearthly roar she lunges for Harry who

swiftly draws his Glock and fires once. The round rips through one of her glowing eyes, tearing into her brain and destroying it. Released from the old one's grasp, her dead body and now equally dead brain collapses onto the ground.

The shuffling of feet and hideous screams from the other tunnels snaps Harry out of his daze. Racing to the nearest wall sconce, he takes the torch it bears and destroys Mia's carcass with fire. As her body is engulfed by the cleansing flame, he rushes to the altar to Mike's body. Mike's eyes follow him as he holds the torch in one hand, his Glock in the other.

"I'm so sorry, Mike."

Aiming and pulling the trigger, Harry executes his friend with a single shot to the head. Shevoth will no longer use Mike as a conduit. Harry drops the torch, holsters his gun and drags Mike's icy corpse from the altar before kicking the stones away and breaking it down. Not yet satisfied, he picks up the torch and sets fire to both Mike's body and the large tree behind the altar. As the fire touches the first branch, the tree reaches out for him, startling the man and causing him to fall back.

Shevoth tries to pull his roots from the ground, struggling to free himself from the earth as the fire spreads.

A shrill cry emanates from the tree as pieces of charred lumber fall to the dank soil. Harry grins and chuckles proudly as he watches the evil deity succumbing to the flames. No one will worship this ancient god ever again. The tree's branches reach out for him, still living and struggling for survival. He turns to flee, trusting that the fire will do its job. He stops as he sees several of the possessed townsfolk standing within the tunnel openings.

These possessed worshippers are not deceased, their bodies still living. A man is dressed in strange garb as though he were a priest, while the coffee mug wielding Voeldahn from the police station stands beside him. Now looking more closely, he can see that this officer is of high rank, perhaps even the station's commander. They slowly step toward him and the officer slowly reaches for a gun in his holster. Realizing that he has no choice but to defend himself from Shevoth's drones, Harry takes the Charter Arms revolver from his jacket pocket.

Harry fires five rounds in quick succession, emptying the revolver into Shevoth's high priest, and the police officer. As they both fall dead onto the moist earth of the cave floor, Harry swiftly opens the revolver, tipping the weapon upward and ejecting the spent shell casings. He reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out a handful of fresh thirty-eight special rounds. He rushes past the bodies and down the long cavern he had come from, reloading the revolver as he approaches the manor's cellar. He can hear the shuffling of several more possessed townsfolk

shambling toward the broken altar to worship their dark god.

He stops in his tracks as he sees several shadows before him. Some of Shevoth's servants have moved through the house, using the hidden cellar entrance. How did they enter the locked house? Turning back, he can see the shadows of several more worshippers approaching; Harry is surrounded. He would hide himself away, if there were any alcoves or empty barrels lying about. He moves the revolver into his weak hand, drawing his Glock from his holster. As the figures hobble slowly toward him, their shadows become more detailed. Though there are only a few slaves before him, the cacophony behind him would suggest that there are far more at his rear.

The drones slowly move around the corner and into his view. These half-dozen slaves of Shevoth are horribly deformed from the sinister influence of their ancient and dark master. Perhaps they were the first to succumb to the mind fog? Their arms are distorted, their bones broken and shifting beneath the flesh. Their limbs sway as if they were tentacles, the entirety of their eyes as black as charcoal. Slimy putrescence oozes from their mouths as they screech in a way that no human or Voeldahn should. Holding both weapons before him, he fires quickly yet carefully, dropping four of the six and startling the remaining two.

The slide of his Glock locks back and the revolver clicks empty as he runs past the creatures. Shevoth's slaves attempt to reach out and grab him, but he is far too swift for them to catch. Running through the cave, he holsters his empty pistol and reloads the revolver with the remaining rounds. As he enters the cellar, he takes hold of an old oil lantern that hangs near the secret entrance, left behind by one of Shevoth's servants. He retrieves the railroad spike and closes the entrance, sealing the wine rack over the opening and returning the spike to the loops. Clutching the revolver in one hand and the lantern in the other, he bolts up the stairs to the ground floor.

Harry dashes through the kitchen, and past the library as he enters the sitting room. The front doors have been broken open with axes and power tools, which sit on the floor of the foyer. He quickly collects his musette bag from the old couch, which contains his belongings and Mike's journals. Slinging his pack over his shoulders, he turns to the front door. Three more of Shevoth's servants slowly inch their way into the house and past the shattered wood, grumbling and uttering an arcane language. Enraged at the sight of the sickening creatures, he swings his arm, bringing the lantern over his head and lobbing it at the feet of the demonic hosts.

The glass shatters, an impressive fireball erupting from the lantern. As the creatures burn, he turns back to the window that once bore the intruder. He runs toward the window, holding an arm before him to shield his face as he

fires a single shot with the revolver, shattering the glass. He dives through the broken window, landing with a loud thud on the damp soil on the other side. He quickly rises to his feet, finding the yard filled with the possessed citizens. By the grace of God, a clear path leads directly to his car. Taking his keys from his pocket, he bolts toward his vehicle. He fires his four remaining rounds at the creatures that lunge for him, using the remote to unlock the car doors from a distance.

He yanks the handle, quickly pulling open the door and leaping inside. He slams the door closed, locking it as a slave heaves their body against it, shifting the entire vehicle. His heart races as he struggles to rip off his pack and set it down on the passenger seat before slipping the key into the ignition. The headlights beam as the Challenger roars to life. Shifting into gear, the creature slams its heavy arm against the window, cracking but not breaking it. He pops the clutch, throwing up a large cloud of rich brown soil as he takes off. He swerves past the shambling, zombie-like citizens as the old manor becomes shrouded in the cleansing flame.

The rubber of his tires squeal as he hits the smooth asphalt, racing away from the growing inferno. He looks into the rear-view mirror, barely able to contain his elation. As he flies through the now deserted town at breakneck speed, he takes out his cell phone and speed dials Cybil. She answers after a single ring.

“Baby?! Are you okay?!” She worriedly asks.

“I am now! I’m coming home, Cee, and I’m not leaving you again!”

His fingers grip the wheel as he races past the large rectangular sign welcoming travelers to Amanita. He does not know if the fire will engulf the manor, if Shevoth’s tree beneath has succumbed, or if the other creatures will be destroyed, and he honestly does not care. He has a new quest: Return home and put the horrors of Shevoth behind him.