

The house was one of the few not totally razed to the ground. Three walls still stood and only part of the roof had been torn away. They approached slowly, watching for signs of squatters, stepping cautiously around piles of rubble and puddles of black rain. They heard nothing. Only the soft wind sifting through trees choked by pulsating creepers. To the east, a magenta twilight glazed the horizon. In the distance, what looked like storm clouds gathered in the blue-black sky.

Peering through the ruined wall, the interior seemed relatively intact. He told Ellen to stay outside despite her protests. A twinge of doubt made him pause; it was getting dark. But he didn't know what lay deeper within the house. Didn't need another incident after what had happened at the County Center. He passed her his revolver then left her, annoyance and budding fear evident on her face.

He entered what may have been the living room. A flat-screen TV with a cracked screen on the floor, a ripped sofa, a crushed game console. Overturned shelves, DVDs and books and school sports medals strewn across the carpet. Beneath the damaged roof, a pool of black rain churning with creepers that fortunately hadn't spread through the house. He passed through a dim corridor into the foyer and stopped.

There was a body lying on the welcome mat. No...two. The woman was in pieces. The man was crushed into the corner, limbs bent at grotesque angles. His lower half was nearly severed, his body twisting in the shape of a U curved at the exposed backbone. Spilled innards mixed with pieces of sensory tendrils and serrated grasping arms. He noticed the ax clutched in the man's stiff hands. At least the poor guy had gone down fighting.

He slipped on rubber gloves and turned the corpses over. He knew what he was going to see, only needed to confirm it. A gaping ragged hole at the base of the skull, wet with leaking spinal fluid and blood. The shattered bones felt loose, spongy under his fingers. The telltale work of a

piercing arm.

He wanted to throw up.

Ellen's voice snaked through the darkening halls, calling his name. He glanced through the front door's transom. A crimson pencil line traced the horizon. With a sigh, he rose, walked back through the house, joined his wife outside. She was clutching the electric lantern with cold, trembling hands. He held her hands in his, brought her close.

"I haven't checked the basement yet but it seems safe enough. Just...well it's not pretty in there."

"How many?"

"Two." He paused.

She touched his face. "It's okay. We'll be okay, Neil."

"I know." He stepped away with a shuddering breath. "We have to go in now."

Ellen nodded. She understood. "

The coming night at their backs, they entered the house

The rain came in torrents. It fell in inky black sheets down the skylight, visible even against the night sky. Neither drizzle nor thunder heralded the deluge. There was only the whispering breeze, the heavy humid air thick in his throat, then the heavens opened up with vengeance and released their hellish payload upon the landscape.

They huddled in the main hallway. Barring the basement, it was the safest part of the house. No windows, centered in the middle of the building, access to multiple exits if they had to run. He hadn't ventured downstairs yet. Wasn't ready to face that windowless dark. Not yet.

They ate stale bread and drank filtered puddle water in silence, the electric lantern between them.

They held each other for a while in the barely-illuminated dark, the roaring downpour drowning out any chances for conversation. Rolled out their sleeping bags. They would sleep in shifts, one keeping watch while the others drifted off for a few hours. Neil took the first watch.

“How chivalrous.” Ellen gave him a soft smile and quick kiss before she went to sleep.

Neil sat against the wall, rifle across his lap. Framed photos of the house’s former owners adorned the walls. A wedding picture, father and son playing football, a photo from what looked like Aruba or maybe Bermuda, Disney World. Proud smiles and cherished memories frozen in time. Neil tried not to look. Seeing those pictures churned icy razors in his gut.

Two hours crawled past. A quarter past one. Still the black rain fell in a relentless roar. Then the house shook. Beyond the cacophony of the storm came a deep moaning, a rumbling bellow that reverberated within his chest like a stereo with the bass cranked way up. Like something you’d think a whale would make, only a thousands times louder and tinged with malice.

He knew what it was.

In an instant he was alert and on his feet, clutching the rifle with white knuckles in one hand and shaking Ellen awake with the other. She came to with a groggy sigh. That unearthly sound shook the house again, louder this time, and her eyes snapped open.

“Oh god...ohgodohgod...” Her fear-strangled whispers cut through the dark.

“Come on. Hurry.” Barbed wire constricted his heart, tighter with each passing second.

“Come on Ellen, come on...”

“I know!” Cursing she kicked the sleeping bag away, hefted her pack onto her shoulders. He followed suit, grabbed the lantern, and they rushed through the house. Past the bodies in the foyer, jumping over the festering swamp of black rain and creepers that was spreading through the living room, to the basement door. He wrenched it open and despite the panic and fear, he froze at the threshold. Utter blackness swallowed the electric lantern’s light.