

## *Hotel*

“Great,” I thought, “Now I’m screwed.” The engine had given out only 3 miles from the next gas station, to my chagrin. I had tried to gun it before I ran out of gas, but apparently that was the wrong decision, as my car so abruptly informed me. As I got out of the old beater, I felt a slight drizzle, and I knew it was likely to pick up later, according to the forecast on my weather app. Unless I wanted to accomplish nothing other than getting drenched, I knew I had to find shelter quickly. I briefly considered just staying in my car, but I knew the roof leaked in several places, so I decided to go look for a better place while the rain was still light.

I looked around and saw nothing other than a few sparse trees, with leaves far too meager to offer more protection than my car could. I knew for a fact that there was nothing up the road other than the gas station, which was at the very least an hour’s walk away, so I picked a direction and started walking away from the road. I knew it was likely a pointless attempt, as I had already noted all the stops for this trip, but again, better than doing nothing and waiting in my useless car.

As I walked, I pulled my phone out to call the nearest tow service I knew of, but there was no signal out here, and the rain wasn’t helping. However, my luck changed when I looked up from my phone and saw a massive building in front of me. Strangely, it couldn’t have been more than a quarter of a mile in front of me; I thought surely I would have seen that from the road before, and on top of that, I was sure I hadn’t seen any building in this area on Google maps before I left. I pulled it up on my phone, but the lack of internet prevented me from checking if I had remembered correctly. After a moment of puzzling, I decided to put my confusion aside and enjoy the lucky break; I started jogging towards the building, the rain intensifying with each passing minute.

As I approached, I saw that it was a hotel, with a massive sign on the front reading “Dores Hotel”. The hotel was clearly well maintained, the dark wooden planks of the walls showing no signs of disrepair, and I could hear music as I got closer and closer. This made no sense however, the building wasn’t even connected to any roads, and it had no parking lot to speak up, nothing but a shaded patio with benches around the front door. Despite my apprehensions, I gratefully accepted the shelter, running under the awning to escape what was now a downpour.

I paused once again at the door, peering into the windows situated aside the entrance, instead of entering. The lobby presented a self contradicting display of emptiness and activity. All the lights were on, the interior was decorated to perfection, and the music sounded from unseen speakers, but there was not a single person to be seen. There were no guests, and no staff either, and yet, the lobby was fully up and running. I considered this for a minute straight, trying to reconcile the two aspects of the lobby, along with all the other strange details of this place. I looked behind me towards my car, which was still sitting on the road, silent under the heavy downpour. I decided that, however weird this

place was, it clearly had to be being run by someone, it couldn't be up and running by itself, and so I pulled the door open and walked in.

The lobby music wasn't the regular jazz or muzak music, but it was calming, a nice melody to assuage my concerns about the nature of this place. This, along with the rain outside, created a relaxing atmosphere. At least I was indoors in a seemingly nice place. However, I would still need to find a staff member to actually rent a room out, not to mention finding help for my ruined car. Suddenly, I realized I could hear voices under the ambient sounds. I turned towards the source of the noise, and saw a large flatscreen TV in one of the two waiting rooms. It was tuned into a news channel, but a moment after I laid eyes on it, it cut to static. It kept trying to tune into different channels, most of them news-related, but it reverted back to static after a few seconds every time it caught a signal.

I supposed it was due to the rain, and kept looking around for a staff member. There was nothing else of note in the lobby except a collection of elevators, and a door past one of the waiting rooms. I knocked on the door, and after there was no response, I tried the knob and found it was locked. With no other options, I sat down on one of the many chairs in the lobby and waited. Five minutes passed, and I got up and tried the locked door again, but to no avail. I sat back down and continued waiting for somebody to come and help me for another 20 minutes, but nothing ever happened. The music had looped several times by this point, and the erratic activity of the TV grated on my nerves. I finally gave up waiting with a loud sigh, and I ambled towards one of the elevators and hesitantly entered, pressing the button for the second floor, as it was the only option available other than the ground floor. Again demonstrating the pristine status of the hotel, the elevator started up smoothly and quickly, and elevator music started playing. The song was actually pretty decent, though it was also somewhat strange. It even ended in perfect sync with the stopping of the elevator, and I started missing the tune almost immediately as I stepped out of the elevator, now hearing nothing but the rain outside and my footsteps on the wooden floor. The silence was unnerving by nature, as, once again, there was not a single person here either, despite it seeming to be a reception desk.

The odd placement of the reception area barely registered in my mind, as I instead pondered the same question that had crossed my mind earlier: How can there be no people when everything is operational? The inviting atmosphere of the inside decor seemed to conflict with the absence of all other human life. I made a more in-depth search throughout the room, as if the receptionist might just be hiding to scare me or something. Of course, I saw nothing but more confounding signs of recent activity. The fireplace was normal enough at first glance, the fire inside providing heat to combat the chilly air outside, but... this meant that somebody had put logs into the fire not too long ago. This could mean one of two things, either something caused them to evacuate the place just a bit ago, or it was truly just a very elaborate practical joke done by some very questionable staff. Why would they leave an open fire going if they were closed?

Then, I noticed something even more odd than the lit fireplace. There was one window in the room, and I could see the rain pouring outside, and nothing else, but that was the problem. I couldn't see anything outside, it was pitch black. I double checked the time on my phone, and it read the same as I thought, only 7:00. I supposed it could already be dark, it wasn't summer, but it also wasn't winter, so it being completely black outside was a strange thing. I walked closer to the window to try and see through the darkness, but again, there was nothing at all. I even used my phone's flashlight, but it accomplished nothing. After a moment, I realized it must be because of the dense cloud cover which was responsible for the rain, and so I moved on.

I walked up to the counter and rang the bell for an attendant. Nothing and no one arose from that, so I vaulted over the counter to see if I could find a reason for all this. I saw the board containing all the room keys, but it contained only one single key, which, on closer inspection, was labeled "001". There was nothing else of interest behind the counter, only miscellaneous objects inside some drawers, but I gave a second glance to a posterboard I had dismissed earlier.

I realized the text on the board was addressed to any would-be guests. I excitedly read up: "Welcome, traveler, to the Dores Hotel! (Pronounced Doors) Unfortunately, all hotel staff are currently unavailable, including for room service and providing food, but you may find staff members in Door 52. In exchange, your stay will be free of charge, and you may stay in whichever room you wish, provided it is not already occupied, until our current situation is resolved. Additionally, there are some rules that you must follow for your safety here at the Dores Hotel:

Rule 1: If the lights flicker, find a place to hide, and stay there until you hear something pass by.

Rule 2: If you come across a room where the lights have malfunctioned and turned off, listen closely while you are in the aforementioned room. If you hear a whisper, look towards the source of the sound.

Rule 3: If you see a black mass forming which emanates purple light, you must look away from it.

Rule 4: If you come across a hallway with blue lights, you will be required to navigate the corridor in a very specific way. Please follow all given instructions.

Rule 5: You will also need to hide if you hear the yelling of one of our more unruly guests. You will know it when you hear it, and you will need to hide for much longer than in the situation described in rule 1.

Rule 6: In most hiding spots, you can not hide for very long at one time. In the case of following rule 5, you can exit the hiding spot while the guest is in a different room from you.

Rule 7: Do not disturb the figure in Door 50. It has bad vision, but excellent hearing, so please stay quiet in Door 50.

Rule 8: There is a guest here who is most identifiable by his eyes. If he attacks you, don't try to hide, you must run away from him.

Rule 9: Please pay attention to the door numbers. We do not mislabel our doors, and if there is a door which does not go in sequence, such as Door 33 coming after Door 34, you must not go through that door, or even get too close.

Rule 10: Do not pay too much attention to the grandfather clocks.

Rule 11: Be very careful in the greenhouse, there are no lights in that area and you will not be able to easily identify any possible threats.

Please follow these rules and enjoy your free stay at the Dores Hotel!”

Hiding? Black masses? Guests and “figures” who are going to attack me on sight? I laughed at this ridiculous list of rules, and I knew for sure this was all just some kind of practical joke. Granted, it probably wasn’t intended for me in particular, but it explained everything pretty well. The question was, who was this for and what did they do to deserve all this being orchestrated by whoever’s in charge? I glanced around again, and I didn’t see any cameras, but I still yelled out, “This is all really well done, but I actually need some help with my car, and this obviously isn’t for me, can somebody come out and help me?”

But nothing happened. I didn’t really expect anything to, not at this point, but it was still annoying to have to go through all this just to get my car towed. After snapping a picture of the rules with my phone, I figured if anything on that board was true, it was the location of the hotel staff, and I saw the door leading out of the reception room was labeled 001, so I grabbed the key off the rack and put it into the knob, twisting and pushing the door open. Sure enough, the door swung in to reveal a hallway leading to another door. I left the key in the knob and moved on, beginning to make my way to Door 52.

The structure of the place was weird, instead of being categorized or grouped together by some means, the doors went in sequence, just like it said in “rule 9”. There were other doors of course, but these were labeled “2A” or “2B” or the like, and they usually lead to bedrooms, or the occasional storage closet. I explored most of them for the first couple doors, but it got boring quickly. They were all uninhabited, though pristine. I lost interest and kept moving, going through Door 3, then Door 4, and then Door 5.

As I walked through Door 5, something unusual happened. All at once, every light started flickering, I could hear the slight clicking from the lights turning on and off as well as see the intense flashing until it suddenly all stopped, the lights returning to normal. It didn’t scare me very much, as I had already thought whoever was running this joke planned to do something like this at some point, but I still felt somewhat unnerved. This hinted that there was possibly somebody nearby using a lightswitch however, so I decided to look around for them, feeling hopeful. I entered a nearby door labeled “5C” and saw nothing inside other than the normal things found in a hotel room, so I turned to exit, when I heard something in the distance.

This sound, that is now forever etched in my mind, was hard to decipher. It seemed like a horribly distorted voice, hardly describable as a voice in fact, that was vocalizing some wordless and offkey tune. It was grating, and unlike anything I've ever heard, and it immediately sparked fear in my mind. I thought to myself, "Is this what those rules were talking about?". I was about to dismiss this as nonsensical, but then I realized it was growing louder and closer VERY quickly. Instinct took over, and I dove under the bed, scrambling to pull my legs in after me. As the sound reached a crescendo while it entered Door 5, it took on a new quality as well, in such a way that it almost sounded like a new voice joined in the awful chorus. It took me a long time to figure out how to describe it, and the best I could come up with was this: everything that could possibly go wrong with a computer's audio going wrong, mixed in with that same unnatural voice that hardly counted as a voice.

My mouth hung agape as I tried to comprehend what was happening, and beneath the roar of whatever was approaching, I could hear every lightbulb shattering in the thing's wake, and the room grew darker and darker with every passing moment.

And then, right after the climax of the creature's auditory bombardment, it all stopped. The last few fragments of grass crumbled to the ground, but all other sounds had ceased. I remained stunned in the darkness under the bed, confused and horrified at what had just happened, but then a new sensation crept in. It was a visceral kind of uncomfortability, which I at first attributed to the immediate situation, but as it grew in intensity, it quickly eclipsed my fear and confusion, and one single thought filled my mind: Get. Out. The thought rang through my mind harder and harder every second, but it was a foreign one, like somebody else was thinking it for me. I grappled with this strangeness for a moment longer before the urge became unbearable, and I could hardly hear my own thoughts over the inaudible screaming that urged me to leave my hiding spot. Before another second passed, I shot out from under the bed, gasping for air and frantically crawling forward and away from the bed. The feeling of uncomfortability and unstoppable command immediately ceased, giving me relief, and allowing me to think different thoughts again. Immediately, I pulled my phone out and looked at the picture I had taken. To my utter shock, I realized that I had just dealt with the subjects of two of these rules I had been so sure were ridiculous jokes. My fear returned as I ruminated on all the other things that were on that list, and the implications of their reality.

The decision was obvious. I had to leave as soon as possible, no avoidance of moisture was worth going through whatever this was. The thing that shot by me moments before could have just been a hotel attendant on an electric scooter with a speaker, but the horrible experience under the bed that aligned so perfectly with rule 6 was not so easily explainable. Everything in my body told me I had to leave immediately. I got to my feet and regained my composure somewhat, and then dashed back the way I came.

My hope increased as I ran, nothing seemed like it was going to stop me, and everything was the same as I left it other than the shattered lights, and I navigated through the dark easily, until I

slammed into a wall abruptly. I had been sure the door was here, so I took the collision face first. It hurt pretty bad, but it wasn't going to do anything other than leave a bruise on my forehead. I sighed and squinted to try and see where the door was in the pitch black. The windows still provided no help, and the previously calming rain sounds now served only as a distraction. After precisely zero seconds of searching with my hands, I came to a horrible realization. I quickly pulled my phone out and turned on the flashlight to confirm what I hoped wasn't the case. The light blinded me for a moment, but as my eyes adjusted, my greatest fear was confirmed. What I just ran into was not a wall, but the door.

It was shut tight, and I knew for certain I wasn't the one who closed it, I even remembered leaving the key in the doorknob and leaving the door ajar before leaving it alone, and then I realized something else, there wasn't even a doorknob on this side of the door. I banged against the door, hoping against hope that there actually was somebody here orchestrating all this. "Let me out of here! Whatever this is, it isn't okay! You can't keep me here!" I slammed into the door with my shoulder, but it never so much as creaked under my assault. I gave a final desperate bang with both my forearms, and then slid down to the ground, trying to take in what I knew had to come next.

I had little time to think however. I heard a little "psst" right next to my ear. I shot up and whirled around to my right, but there was nothing. I stared into the darkness before I remembered rule 2, and I frantically looked all around me for whatever had just whispered to me. I grew more panicked every second, and then I realized there was one place I hadn't looked, which was directly up. I covered this last direction, and saw something that would be almost laughable if it weren't floating and staring at me with its beady glowing eyes in the dark. It would look like a floating human head, if it weren't for how spherical it was, and the fact that black goop covered all of it except for the mouth, which was a grossly enlarged smile, a mockery of a human expression. Despite the goop, the eyes were still visible, perfectly circular orbs of white, giving off a slight glow as it stared at me. It didn't continue staring when it noticed I saw it however.

It opened its massive mouth and, instead of biting my head off with one chomp like I was sure it was going to do, it screamed and shot away into the darkness. Just like its disgusting mouth, the scream was a mockery of regular human behavior, almost normal, but just a little bit too much like a screeching animal. What kind of animal, I couldn't place, seeing as it was probably not anything one would ever encounter anywhere else. I tried to figure out where the thing had gone, but the darkness was too thick, and I knew I needed to save my phone's battery for when I really needed the thing. I knew I had a couple battery packs in my car, but, considering recent events, that probably wasn't a big help to me currently. In addition to that, I hadn't seen a single outlet in this place, and I didn't even have a charging cable.

Shuddering, I ran my hands through my hair before I started jogging back to Door 5. I didn't know where Door 6 was, but apparently the thing that had rushed through here had opened the next door on its way through. I inadvertently called it Rush in my mind, and then realized that that was

kind of silly, but I figured it didn't hurt to have something to call these things. Now embracing this newly started habit, I decided whatever had forced me out of my hiding spot should be called Hide, and the other creature Screech, for the jarring sound it made. This little name game distracted me a little bit, but my brain kept reminding me that I was in a prison filled with eldritch horrors.

I paranoidly glanced around for Screech before I entered Door 6, and, seeing nothing, moved on. This room was largely the same as the last one in purpose, just a hallway connecting to a few bedrooms. I passed on through 4 more doors, but stopped after Door 10. On one of the tables in the hall, there was a large lighter. I didn't understand who would leave this here, if not the hotel staff, but the idea that all this was their doing was firmly off the table right now. I decided to look on the bright side, since Screech only attacked in the dark, this would be likely to ward it off, and I deposited the lighter in my pocket. Moreover, all these rules seemed like common enough sense. "Obey the mental command you can't disobey, hide from the terrifying demon, look at whatever just whispered to you in the dark!" I thought to myself. I imagined for a moment that it was silly to have these rules at all, but I caught myself quickly. I might not have survived Screech without the rules to remind me what I was supposed to do.

I opened Door 11, and I saw something even stranger than what had whispered to me back at Door 1. Before my eyes, something formed in the air. At first, it seemed like a black orb, but then it started glowing bright purple. Initially, I was confused at what I was seeing, but then the pain started. The closest thing in natural life to it would be staring at the sun, but this was more of a pain in my brain. As my eyes tried to take in what I was looking at, it felt like they were sending signals to my brain that it couldn't handle. Within a split second, a headache came on, and before I could even register this feeling, I looked away from whatever this was. I reeled away, covering my eyes with my hands and writhing like I had just stubbed my toe. The intensity of the headache reminded me of a migraine, and I named the creature after its way of harming me.

I regained my composure somewhat and opened my eyes, facing away from the thing. It cast a bright purple light throughout the entire room, and I noticed the strange noises it was making. It sounded like something not quite human speaking its native language while underwater. I could almost hear water flowing, and that combined with the light the room was bathed in made me feel like I was in an ocean with something lurking just out of my sight. I waited for a very tense minute, waiting for a shift in the light or the sound, but none came. I knew I had to keep going, at least until Door 52 if I was to have any chance of getting out of this place, so I carefully strafed along the wall, making sure to keep my eyes on the violet-colored wood in front of me. As I got closer to the thing, my fear grew inversely to the headache as I anticipated the creature suddenly lurching at me. I racked my mind, trying to think of anything else rule 3 might have said to alert me to any further danger, but the search came up empty.

I let out a breath I was holding and continued inching past whatever was behind me, and before I knew it, I was past it. I chanced a glance to my left, and saw Door 12. I sighed in relief and walked towards it to progress. As I opened the door, the latch clanged against metal, blocking the sound of the being behind me for a moment, but as the sound receded half a second later, so did the sound of the enigmatic entity behind me. It was silent, and I realized the light had disappeared as well. I knew better than to risk looking behind me again though, for fear of the Migraine, and I slowly walked forwards after contemplating this for a moment.

I decided it was wise to at least give a cursory glance to all the rooms in each door to find more things that might be of use; I opened one door to reveal a chest on the floor of a storage closet. I opened it up and found little inside except a pair of lockpicks. I figured it was better to have them than not, and I would still have a pocket left if I took them, so I picked up the lockpicks and moved on. I reached Door 19 before I ran into another obstacle. Door 20 was locked, I tried the knob like with all the other doors, but to no avail. I looked behind me and saw Door 19A, and I found the key inside. Again, it was confusing as to who was leaving these items here, like it was some kind of roguelike, if not the hotel staff, but I figured all questions would be answered at Door 52. I knew at this point the rules were true, so Door 52 must be at least somewhat of a solution.

I proceeded through Doors 20 and 21 without incident, but Door 22 was somewhat unique. It had a particularly large amount of bedrooms, I saw a 22J somewhere in the two lines of doors. I also noticed, at the end of the hall, the door marked 23 had a notch for a key on it. "Awesome." I thought, thinking about how long it would take to find the key with all these rooms. I knew I had the lockpicks on me, but I decided to search 22A anyways in the hopes that I could get lucky and conserve my lockpicks. Before I moved to enter 22A though, something I dreaded happened again. Every light in the room flickered, bathing the room in a sporadic lightshow for a second or two before subsiding. I was already on the move before the lights were done with their shenanigans however, now fearing for my life. I dashed into 22A and slammed the door behind me, and I darted behind a corner in the room as well, just for good measure. I could now hear that accursed sound in the distance, closing the distance at breakneck speeds. I held my breath and hoped Rush would just go to the next door like it did before and go nowhere else. As I heard the thing pass by, assaulting my ears as it did so, every light, including the lights in the room I was in, shattered immediately, bathing the room in darkness.

As luck would have it, Rush proceeded on, leaving me in silence once again. I breathed a sigh of relief for what felt like the dozenth time and decided to flick on my lighter, in hopes of avoiding that unsettling little pest. I walked towards where I knew Door 23 to be, and when I saw that Rush hadn't been so kind as to open the locked door for me, I reluctantly put my lighter away to use the lockpicks on the lock, as I hadn't found the key in my hiding spot. I didn't have much experience with lockpicking, but it proved easy enough with this one, and I also took solace in knowing what Rule 6



meant when it said “most” hiding spots. I hadn’t hidden in anything compact like a bed or wardrobe, and so I hadn’t had any literally intrusive thoughts.

I moved through Door 24, and then came to Door 25, which, to my dismay, was pitch black. The lights in Door 24 had been working fine, so this had to be one of the reasonless “dark rooms” that Rule 2 had talked about. I used my lighter again to navigate through the obscured landscape, and it went without incident, luckily enough.

Despite my nerves and the obvious nature of this situation, I started to get a little confident. These entities, whatever they were, seemed to follow the rules to a tee, and so by consequence I knew exactly how to survive them all technically. I still had the picture of the rules on my phone, so it was almost like a game. I started feeling a little less secure however, when I reached Door 30. I had gone for quite a few doors without any entities attacking, but now something I didn’t recognize came into play. The lights flickered, but in a different way than before. It lasted longer, and only a few of the lights flickered. Regardless, I dashed towards the nearest wardrobe and stayed inside until Hide forced me out, and terror filled my body as I waited for Rush to prove that my luck had run out. But, nothing happened. I looked around and listened, and I heard nothing, but I saw something strange on a nearby wall.

I had trouble identifying it at first, but I soon realized what it was. It was an eyeball; it had seemingly opened up out of the wall, black tendrils sprung from the eyes rim and receded into the wallpaper, while the pearly white sclera contrasted with the black of the pupil, which followed my every move. I furrowed my brow in bewilderment and strafed back and forth, testing the eyes tracking capability. It followed suit, watching my every move, and then, to my horror, it blinked. It didn’t seem to be doing anything other than looking at me, but I didn’t know what rule applied to this, I was in foreign territory, even more so than I had already been.

I cautiously turned and moved on to Door 31. Again, the lights flickered, and I rushed to a hiding spot just in case, but I immediately exited when I didn’t hear Rush’s roar. I looked around, and saw the voluminous amount of eyes that populated the walls now. There were more than a dozen, all black and white with no iris, and all tracking my position. I slowly inched towards Door 32, unsure of what was coming. Door 33 was the same, the lights flickered as over two-score eyes sprouted out of the wall. I shuddered in unease when they all blinked in unison at me, like they were all controlled by the same thing. “Is... this the Hotel itself?” I thought to myself. Despite my fear, I walked towards Door 34, which was thankfully not covered in eyes, and opened it.

What I saw behind Door 34 was nothing. There were no eyes in this room at all. I checked if the ones from the room before were still there, and they were, keeping their gaze on me, but no eyes sprung out of the walls past Door 34. The hallway behind Door 34 was different than most others however. It had a high ceiling, with grandiose windows interspersed on the walls on either side, and fancy chandeliers provided additional light to the lamps adorning the walls. I walked across the literal

red carpet leading to Door 35, but then, I discovered that it was Rule 8 I was supposed to be keeping in mind. I turned behind me and saw, to my terror, a black puddle was forming on the ground near Door 34. It grew larger and larger, and I was able to discern its sludge-like texture as it grew into more of a massive lump than a puddle, and I watched in disoriented horror as a figure started taking shape out of the muck. It slowly climbed to what passed as its feet as the sludge dissipated around it and melted into the floor, leaving the clear humanoid shape of the mysterious guest mentioned in Rule 8.

He was indeed most identifiable by his eyes. His form was completely black, save for the sclera of his one gigantic eye adorning his cranium. It hit me that the eyes I was seeing belonged to the guest, as more of those eyes now sprung up on the walls surrounding the guest. I knew, according to Rule 8, I couldn't hide like I could with Rush, and so I turned to make my escape as I mentally called the guest Seek, thinking about how this was a particularly one sided game of Hide and Seek. I supposed he had already caught me with his many all-seeing eyes, and so there was nothing left to do but escape. I snapped myself out of my bewilderment as Seek started hurtling towards me, footsteps surprisingly heavy on the carpet. I could hear its feet slamming into the ground as I turned tail and started sprinting. The horror didn't stop there however; as I ran, slick black hands sprung out of the walls and shoved furniture into my way, trying to block the path for their master to catch me. My fear sharply increased once again, and I had to vault over the lowest part of the blockade at once, barely managing to keep my speed up. I made it to Door 36, and reached Door 37 after another furniture blockade almost stopped me in my tracks.

As I entered Door 37, a new problem presented itself. There was a split path here, there were 2 doors on my left and right, and nothing but a wall in the center of a seeming roundabout path. I saw both the doors on my left and right were boarded up and panicked, but I didn't stop running. I picked a path and ran down it, and I was relieved to see that both paths lead to the other side of the roundabout, where I saw Door 38. I ran through, but to my great alarm, there was another roundabout in front of me. I wondered how smart this thing was, it clearly picked where it wanted to chase me down, and it was a great decision on its part. I had to make a split second decision, reading the signs on the door without slowing down. On my left, I read "38A", and I saw 39 on my right. I was barely able to make out what the signs said despite slowing my sprint to a more leisurely run. I turned to the right and made it to Door 39, coming across another roundabout. This time, I couldn't quite make out what the left door said, but I headed towards it anyway, hoping it was the right one. I glanced towards the right, and saw it said 40.

I gritted my teeth and skidded to a halt. I turned around as fast as I could, and it only took a couple seconds, but those seconds felt like hours as I anxiously eyed the entryway, the abnormally heavy footsteps getting closer and closer, gaining extra ground because of my mistake. I knew Seek wouldn't make the same mistake, the multitude of new eyes springing up on the walls every moment allowing the thing to know exactly where I was going. I made it past Door 39 without the owner of the

eyes making it to me, but those footsteps were definitely closer on my tail than before. Luckily, Door 40 wasn't a roundabout, but more shelves and chairs were shoved into my way by the glistening, slimy black hands. I vaulted over the blockade, but my foot caught on some piece of furniture. My face slammed into the carpet, aggravating the bruise on my forehead, but I managed to do a halfway decent roll and keep some of my momentum. Despite my recovery, the thumping coming from behind me grew louder still.

I managed to get through another roundabout, but my stamina was wearing thin. I knew I needed to push myself harder, Seek's footsteps sounded like they were only a few feet behind me, but it was getting difficult just to keep up my current pace. I pushed on through another roundabout, to Door 42, which was of the same make as the room I had encountered this thing in, a large grandiose hallway, only this time, the chandeliers were not on the ceiling for long. More massive black hands reached out and pulled the chandeliers down to the ground, spilling the flames from the candles onto the flammable carpet, as even more hands busted through the windows and grew out of the walls, grasping and flailing wildly in hopes of grabbing me. The scene was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I continued running, twisting back and forth, desperately avoiding the infernos on the carpet and dodging past the giant hands. Ahead, I saw the next door, and I realized it led back to the usual type of rooms seen in the hotel.

Behind me, the black figure let out an inhuman shriek, and it sounded to me like it picked up its own pace. I tapped into my last reserves of strength and followed suit, running harder than I'd ever run before. Despite this, I just knew I couldn't outrun the thing for much longer, but I had no idea how long my assailant could go. I had to do something to change how this was going. Thinking quickly, I saw a chair lying on its back nearby, and I quickly snatched it up, and then stopped moving, quickly whirling around while holding the chair out, and it worked perfectly. The chair slammed into Seek, knocking it aside and halting its progress. It didn't have nearly as much of an effect as I wanted though, it was already recovering and starting to move forward again by the time I had I raised my arms to hurl the chair at it, its massive eye focused on me all the while. The chair once again banged into the creature, but it had much less of a reaction this time. It grabbed the chair and tossed it away behind it.

I didn't look any longer, I had already wasted a moment or two looking at the thing, so I resumed my mad dash towards Door 43, and the second after I slammed the door open and crossed the threshold, I turned and slammed it back shut, and at the very same moment, a massive weight slammed into the door. Just like last time, the door didn't give at all, even under the onslaught of that creature, but I knew it had at least some measure of intelligence and would realize all it had to do was turn the knob. I glanced around and noticed a bookshelf next to the door. With more effort than I didn't think I had, I shoved the shelf over in front of the door, blocking it off for when Seek finally figured out how to open it. Without any further interruption, I turned tail and started running again, despite the aching in my legs and how much my lungs and throat burned. The sounds of terrifyingly heavy

banging mixed with more screams of fury faded into the distance slowly as I ran and ran until I reached Door 48 and collapsed. If my theory was correct, doors automatically shut 4 doors behind anybody proceeding through this place. I feared tremendously that I was wrong and only Door 1 closed behind me, but I was too exhausted to keep going.

I hadn't gotten that much of a look at the thing, but I knew I wouldn't forget it. Its skin, if it could even be called that, was completely covered in slick black slime, and being closer up revealed how poor its imitation of a human form was, the hands and feet were just amorphous blobs, and the eye was the only part that seemed to be made up of something other than the sludge that likely composed its entire body. Despite the fact that it possessed no mouth or any facial features other than the one massive eye, it exuded an air of both rage and hunger, and its amazing weight and strength seemed not to align with the nature of its form. I lay on the floor, panting and thinking about what I had just seen before I slowly got to my feet. I listened carefully, but I couldn't hear anything but the rain. I wasn't eager to keep going, but I knew I was close to Door 52, and by extension, answers.

I walked through the hall in Door 48 without incident, but then I came to Door 49. As I entered, I saw what seemed to be a study. A large desk with many drawers lay on one side of the room, and an even larger double door lay on the other side, with large bookshelves on either side. This was not what interested me most however. Coming from those oversized doors, a growl emanated. This growl was certainly not from a human, but also sounded like no animal I've ever seen. Really, I didn't know what else was to be expected, but it was still unnerving. If I had to choose what animal to compare it to, I would have picked a massive dog, and I was halfway expecting to see a direwolf or something like that behind that door, but that was not at all what I saw. Rule 7 came into my mind, and I realized this was the "figure" mentioned. Previously, I had thought this had just been referring to a librarian, but unless this librarian had a pretty big dog, I found that unlikely now. Those growls continued coming from behind the door, and I wondered what I was going to see behind Door 50.

I knew that all the other entities here followed the rules to a fault, so I steeled myself and opened the door as quietly as possible, or at least tried. As I pushed the heavy door open, a latch clicked, and before I even had time to grimace at the breach of silence, the figure shot out from behind one of the many bookshelves. It was in fact not at all like a dog. Bare, uncovered crimson flesh was visible on every inch of the thing's body, and bits and pieces of muscle were missing all along its elongated arms and legs. Its comparatively small chest had even more inhuman anatomy, its rib cage was somehow on the outside of its chunky red flesh, and worst of all was its head. Just like the rest of the body, it was composed of featureless flesh, but with a gigantic cavity on what passed as its face, and razor sharp teeth rimmed the circular hole, which was big enough to fit my entire head inside. I understood why Rule 7 said what it said, as the thing had no eyes to speak of. I had no idea what this thing was, so, just like Rule 7, I decided to call it a Figure. 'Figure' did indeed have great hearing, it

charged towards the door, and by extension, me. I stood there in shock, too mystified by the thing in front of me to think how best to avoid this imminent death.

I knew it was at least going to bowl me over when it got to the door, and likely tear me apart, but then something else drew its attention. It sounded like somebody hammering against glass a few times before finally shattering it. It immediately drew Figure's attention, and it was running towards the source of the sound before the glass was even fully broken. The creature roared, sounding even less comparable to anything else, and I heard its heavy footsteps receding away around a shelf, out of sight. It towered over me, and it likely breached 9 feet tall, maybe taller. I focused on calming down, I didn't know exactly how good its hearing was, but I wasn't going to take any chances, and regular people can hear breathing easily if it's not controlled.

I suddenly realized what that glass breaking sound meant. There was somebody else here, who knew what to do even better than I did. I didn't hear Figure feasting away on anything, or any other closely related sounds of tearing flesh, so they must have been still alive. I almost broke into a run, exceedingly eager to see somebody else in this place, but I caught myself at the last second. I very quietly and painfully slowly walked towards where I heard the glass breaking, eyeing Figure, who was walking around aimlessly in a distant area of the massive library. I slowly rounded the corner, and saw a lamp lying on the ground, the bulb clearly the source of the sound. I didn't see the culprit however. It was agonizing going the necessary speed to make sure my shoes made no noise on the floor, but my fear of what that thing would do if it heard me kept me slow. It power-walked around the room, and it seemed to be sure that there was somebody there, and I again worried over the intelligence of the thing hunting me.

I froze whenever the thing got close, too scared to do anything other than hope it didn't suddenly turn my direction. It knew its way around the library very well, but perhaps not as well as possible, as it never checked in the smallest corners for its quarry. It was slow-going, but I eventually scoured the entire library; it was a massive place, the ceiling being around 30 feet tall by my estimation, and the shelves reaching up almost as high, and it was far bigger in length and breadth, but I traveled to every corner of it. Despite this, I never once saw a hint of the one who saved me, other than the broken lamp. I couldn't understand why they wanted to avoid me, and I was devastated at having my first chance at seeing another human here taken away. Something I did find, however, was a strange book. Really, all of the books were strange, because not a single one had a labeled binding. They were all blank, except for the book that had caught my eye. It had a crescent symbol on it; still no title or author, but it was more than the other books had. I saw earlier that the door ahead was locked with a massive padlock, and my search for my mysterious "friend" had proved fruitless, so I waited for Figure to wander far away from where I was, then I carefully slid the book off the shelf, hoping to avoid any noise, and luckily it went well, the book wasn't too heavy.

I opened it up to find that two of the pages in the middle of the book were dog-eared. Written over the text on the pages in thick bands of graphite were a shape and a humber. Square, three. I saw no reason to keep the book with physically with me, so I just took a picture of it, making sure to turn all the volume down on my phone. I didn't bother to put the book back on the shelf, but as I walked I noticed the letters in the book weren't English ones, they were all various symbols. They looked like wingdings, but I wasn't sure. I couldn't see anything else of note in the library other than a large desk, presumably for the librarian who I assumed had been eaten, so I made my way to the desk, avoiding Figure all the while. There was only one thing on the desk, which was a piece of paper. I saw a bunch of drawings on it, which I dismissed as some random doodlings initially, but then something on the paper caught my eye.

On the paper, there were 5 shapes, and a drawing of a padlock circled several times. An arrow led from the 5 shapes to the padlock, meaning the way to unlock the door was "triangle, pentagon, rhombus, square, circle." I put two and two together and figured out that I had to find more crescent books to figure out what the shapes represented. I knew it was going to be a long and arduous task, not to mention dangerous. I saw another crescent-labeled book from my point of view at the desk, so that was two down already, but it was still going to take a while with the sheer volume of the shelves. I retrieved the second book, and I managed to find a third without any incident, but it turned out to be a shape I didn't need. Apparently, hexagon was five, but I didn't need that knowledge. I found three more books, but another one was a shape that wasn't on my list. It suddenly occurred to me, why was I blindly following what this piece of paper told me? I didn't even know for sure if the padlock required a number code, I hadn't checked the first time and hadn't gone up to check since I found the paper.

That brought up the question of who left this strange solution for me. It was at the same time my only chance at opening Door 51, and very unhelpful. If one wanted to help me, why not just write the solution on the paper instead of making me tip-toe around the entire library 50 times over? The only thing that came to mind was some malicious but sporting creature that wanted to give me a fighting chance. As I ruminated on this, I didn't pay enough attention to where I was going, and I ran into a shelf, creating a bang that seemed to reverberate throughout the entire library.

Previously, the place was filled with nothing but the sound of rain, Figures footsteps and periodic growls, but then, the latter two dropped to silence. After a second where we both collectively took in what happened, Figures roar filled the air, and the footsteps resumed, faster than before and quickly growing louder. This time, I wasn't frozen in fear despite feeling like my heart had stopped, and I speed-walked away, hoping that the creatures own footsteps would drown out any further mistakes I made in my stride. Behind me, I heard the sound of Figure growling and smashing things behind me. I didn't bother looking back, but I slowed my walking speed back to the same crawl, as I knew it would soon lose interest in that particular spot and start roaming again, probably more aggravated than before.

I spotted the last book on a shelf near the padlock, providing me with the number for rhombus and completing my collection. According to all my pictures of the books and the paper, the code for the padlock was 18437. I shambled the rest of the way to the padlock, and carefully lifted it up to view the bottom. Sure enough, there was a combo lock with five digits waiting to be slid into the right position. I slid the first 3 numbers into place easily enough, but the padlock was massive, and my left hand grew tired under its weight. I lowered it down, but my hand gave out a little bit at the last moment, and the padlock knocked against the door. This time there was no delay, Figures roar filled the room, and the footsteps once again moved rapidly towards me. I knew I had two choices, I could try to do what I did last time, with even less of a distance between me and Figure judging by the sound, or I could put in the last two numbers and go through the door and count on the stupidity of the creature, hoping it treats this door as a wall like any other and doesn't realize it could go through the door easily with the padlock off. I spent no more than half a second before deciding and committing to one course of action: I punched in the last two digits, tore the padlock off of the door handles, and dashed through the doorway, slamming the door shut behind me. The full reality of counting on this thing's unintelligence set in as I remembered how this entire puzzle was likely Figures doing, but there was no going back now.

I heard it approach and then pause for a moment before it roared in apparent anger, but then, it simply walked away. As its footsteps receded away, I pondered what this meant. Either, it was entirely an idiot and somebody else orchestrated that, or it was a very good sport, and knew exactly where I was. I decided not to dwell on it and just take what I was given. I took my first big breath in a while and turned towards Door 52. This was the moment of truth, and as I nervously walked forward, I realized I could hear music coming from the other side. Music! A strictly man-made creation lay beyond the door, increasing my hopes. I turned the knob, and pushed the door open.

...

Over a dozen faces greeted me, all staring at me, some with shock, some with joy, and one guy with complete disinterest. I stood there in stunned silence, as did everybody else in the room, before they all burst into excited chatter and cheering at once. I nervously looked behind me at Door 51, worried this uproar would alert the thing or make it angry enough to break its rules, either way. I forgot about all that when one of the people, a hotel attendant by the looks of it, ran up to me, and exclaimed, "You survived Door 50!" At this point, I was just completely bewildered, but then I felt all the pent up anger at this ridiculousness bubbling up within me. "What is *WRONG* with you people?!?" I screamed at them. They all went silent except for the disinterested one who snickered and replied "Good question, man." The hotel attendant in front of me wore confusion on her face as she asked in

response, “What do you mean?” This sparked my anger even more, and I went into a tirade against them.

“So, it was you people, at least the hotel staff, who left those rules right? What an *idiotic*, just, a *moronic* way to go about it!! Are you trying to make people die?!? I could come up with a dozen ways to do it better off the top of my head! How about you actually explain what's going on and tell people that if they don't follow these rules, they'll die?!? For the sake of everything, you wrote them down like you were just going through a little rough patch with finances or something!! Forget that, *screw* that, instead of writing a list of rules on how to survive, write a list of reasons to leave and never come back!! Or don't have all your lights and elevators working!! *WHY* would you even let people enter the building?!? This place is like *purgatory*!!”

Though he agreed with me, the guest who seemed not to take anything seriously pissed me off even more by chiming in with a grin on his face.

“Yeah, explain all that, Rosie.”

The attendant in front of me, apparently named Rosie, sighed and turned to the guest. “Mind your own business Eli, you know this isn't our fault.”

I scoffed loudly and said “Well, I certainly don't know that!”

At this point my anger towards Eli was starting to rival my anger at the hotel staff as he chuckled and replied,

“Yeah, Rosie, and also, you're not in uniform, you're supposed to have your nametag on.”

“Shut it Elijah, just let me talk to the new survivor. What's your name, sir?”

Though I knew she didn't mean anything by it, I lashed out again, “And now *you're* asking *me* questions?? I'd *really* like you to address a single thing I mentioned first!”

Thankfully, this time Elijah stayed quiet, while Rosie sighed again and invited me to sit down, patting a chair nearby. “You should sit down sir, we can explain everything but it might take a bit.”

I begrudgingly sat down, but only to rest my tired legs, not because she asked me to. “It better be a good explanation, or you might need to write a list of rules on how to survive me.”

Again, Elijah snickered and applauded my joke. This guy was really making it hard to focus on my anger about this deathtrap. Rosie continued,

“I completely understand why you're angry, but please hear us out, all the way through, alright?”

I gave a very slight nod, trying to be as edgy as possible. One of the other hotel staff interrupted Rosie before she could start talking, yelling out “Wait, can I tell the story this time? You got to tell it the last two times!”

Another employee next to him, who was still wearing his uniform name tag and hat, groaned in annoyance. “You're so immature, kid, I don't understand how you got hired.”

The kid, though he didn't seem to be that younger than the other attendant, ignored the insult and waited for Rosie's answer.



“Well, I don’t like telling the story, so... go ahead, I guess.”

My rage simmered as I watched how nonchalantly all the attendants were taking this, and complained, “Can this go any faster?”

Elijah once again added in his two cents, before I interrupted him.

“Sheesh, I’m gonna have competition for being the most rude. Sanchez, you’re still not even in the running! You got–”

“SHUT UP!” I roared. For once, he looked mildly taken aback, before his expression returned to something more smug as he glanced at Sanchez again, who was the one who still had his name tag on. He remained silent as I again pleaded for the explanation to start.

“Alright, alright, here I go!” said the enthusiastic kid, who was holding his nametag in his hand for some reason. It took a second to see past his fingers, but I saw his name was Isaiah. “So, this hotel was normal for a really long time, it was built back in, near the 70s, I think? But one time, only a few weeks ago, Sarah,” He pointed to another attendant sitting near the back of the group with her arms crossed. “Sees a bunch of guys in full tactical gear pull up outside the hotel, and we all crowd around the windows to see what’s going on, right? They kind of look federal, but sort of, too futuristic, like they were just cosplayers who got a little too excited. And they walk right up to the front door, with their guns *raised* mind you, and they just bust the door down immediately without even saying anything, from what I heard, and th– uhh, we’re all running down the stairs to see what’s going on at this point, and the concierge gets held at gunpoint to remain out of the peoples way, and three other guys are guarding a fifth while he puts some kind of device on the floor, and he’s doing something with it, but the concierge can’t really see what, or what the device is, and then at this point, all the rest of us have made it down the stairs, the managers included, and the three soldiers who aren’t busy immediately point their guns at us and tell us to stay back.

Some of us just run back up the stairs, I guess to call the cops, but the rest of us stay and watch. Mind you, not every attendant in the building was down here, just the ones who were near Sarah when she saw the army guys coming up outside. The only ones left here who were there with the army guys are me, Rosie, Sanchez, and Bobbert– err, I mean Rob. Oh, and Sarah of course.”

At this point I could kind of see where Sanchez was coming from, I was getting annoyed with his rambling.

“So, where was I, the three army guys are holding us back at gunpoint while the last guy is still fiddling with the thing on the ground, but then he finishes whatever he was doing, and he stands up and yells out ‘PRIMED’ and all the guys leave the building, still pointing their guns at us while they go. Once they’re outside and the doors are closed, the guy who primed the device holds up a remote control and presses the big button on it, and then, things got weird. It doesn’t look like the device does anything, but this really deep boom, or vibration, happens, and the whole building shakes.

All the lights flicker, and all that, and some really strange sounds come from the device before it just disintegrates. It just crumbles into powder. Outside, things look really weird. The sky turns dark, even though it was noon a second ago, and it starts pouring rain, and the guys outside start getting blurry and distorted. The one who primed the device holds a hand out to his buddies and then hurries inside the hotel again, and he's no longer blurry when he enters. We all recoil, expecting him to threaten us again, but he sighs and just says 'I feel bad for you people. Look, I'm not supposed to be telling you this, but your hotel has been selected to contain harmful beings that aren't fit to roam the world unchecked. You'll... you'll figure out how to survive them with trial and error. Trust me, this is for the greater good. Good luck, people.'

I memorized what he said completely. Anyways, he rushes back out of the building at a full sprint, and then he and his buddies walk away towards their AV, but before they get to it they completely blur out of existence, along with the vehicle. It turns completely black outside, and we can't see anything at all beyond the first half-a-dozen inches of patio. We try to leave the building, but the doors refuse to open, and our keys somehow don't even fit anymore. We try to break the glass, or break the door down, but nothing works, and we're all panicking at this point, and the managers are trying to contact their superiors, but the wifis cut out, and the mobile data isn't reaching us anymore. We... everybody just freaks out and goes and does whatever they think should be done, but we can't escape." The guy's expression was nowhere near as eager at that point, and my anger started to melt away to some extent for the first time.

He continued on, "And... what that guy said about us figuring it out through trial and error, turns out to be really true. It was like the hotel completely changed structurally, and then we found out about... all the rest of what he was talking about. Those 'harmful beings' he mentioned. There were like, 60 of us, I forget exactly how many, when all this started, but, there's only 11 of us left. And, so many guests arrived here, they could enter and leave before they started going through doors, and we scared them all away for a while, but then we realized something. Ever since the day it happened, we would occasionally hear noises coming from the second floor, really unnatural noises, but it was really uncommon. But, the longer we kept anybody from entering the doors, the more often those noises came, and they started making the lights flicker down here and the music glitch out, and things were really escalating. The managers had lost access to everything, and the light switches weren't turning the lights off, so guests kept coming in. We knew... we knew that the things up there had to be fed, or they would break out. I think we all knew it for a long time before anybody acknowledged it, but one day, one of my coworkers finally snaps and goes through the doors, and he never came back, but it confirmed what we all hoped wasn't true. The things upstairs calmed down for a little bit, but it ramped back up eventually.

After a little longer of keeping guests out, we set up a search party of about 5 people for that one employee who didn't come back, armed with the best makeshift weapons we could find, and

somebody comes back this time. He was hysterical and incoherent, but he had a piece of paper on him that he had written on. He gives it to us, and we see that it talks about how you have to look at the whispers in the dark, and about fake doors, he's drawn two doors with a 11 on the first and a 10 on the second, and an arrow leading from the first to the second, and he's crossed out the door marked 10 and written 'NO' all around it. He calms down after a little bit and explains what he meant more, but then he gets out of our sight and we find he killed himself with stress or something, he's just lying dead from seemingly nothing. And, it went on like that, and we slowly uncovered Rules 1-6 and 8-10, but we never put them up for everybody to read, we just wrote them down on our phones.

We have a power outlet in the office, so we can keep our phones charged, but there's only one so we all have to take turns using the charging cables to get our phones juiced up. Anyways, it goes on like that for a few days, and we keep losing coworkers, and all of us start to slowly accept that maybe it's better to let guests come in and feed the things upstairs for us... it... it seemed like it was supposed to happen, cause guests kept finding their way to the hotel despite it being in a black void now. And it... it worked. But we were all going stir crazy, and this place seemed like it got rid of our need for water or food, and there wasn't any left anyways, so a big group of us resolved to go in and either keep those things calm for a long while or figure out where the doors went. So, they all went in, 14 of them I think, and only 5 of them come back. They said half of them had nowhere to hide when they had to follow Rule 5, but the rest of them got past the Rule 8 monster, but then they all got to Door 50, which was farther than anybody had gone before. They open the door to the library, and one of them immediately gets eaten, and they realize the thing can't see, so they try and make it to the next door, but they underestimate how good its hearing is, and another one gets caught. They see the door is padlocked anyways, and they all decide to retreat and go back to us. They get Rule 7 written down, and they tell us all how the door ahead is locked, but we all can't take the waiting and the doing nothing anymore. All of us, all 21 left, are about to go through the Doors, but then another guest arrives at the hotel.

He sees we're all insane-looking and stuff, and asks what's going on, and we figure we don't need this guest to feed the things upstairs since we're all about to die, and so we tell him the truth to scare him off, but this guy just nods and asks if he can come with us."

Isaiah looked back at Elijah just then, and he laughed and said, "I did indeed do that." Isaiah just shrugged and continued his story.

"Well, we're all really confused, and we try to reiterate what we just explained, but Eli insists he understands and was just 'bored'. So we all let him come with us after a while of arguing, and we all went through the doors. We figured out that the hotel staff have some sort of... extra authority here, because Eli wasn't able to open the doors when they closed behind them. He insisted there was no knob on the other side of the door, but we could see it and open the doors just fine from the other side. To him, it apparently looked like we just put our hand around nothing and the door opened by itself.

Well, we all get pretty far, we survive the rule 1 thing a couple times surprisingly, we got lucky with getting rooms that had a lot of bedrooms, and the rule 1 thing never seemed to go anywhere but the next door forward, but the third time we had to follow rule 1, there was only one room we could hide in, and it was such a stampede to get in, with 22 of us, that there was nowhere near enough time, and the rest of us that successfully hid see the people that didn't make it just go limp. They just stop moving and drop to the floor. We check all their pulses, but everybody who had been 'caught' by that thing was stone cold dead.

He— my best friend, that is, was among the ones who died, and our more emotionless coworkers waited for the rest of us to cry our eyes out or whatever. Eventually, Eli, the heartless turd, complains about how long we're taking, and we eventually pick ourselves up and start moving again. We get to where the rule 8 thing likes to chase us, with about 16 people left, and most of us get through those circle rooms pretty well, but we hear one guy scream, and another guy gets lost and turned around and he gets caught too, but I think it bought a bunch of time for us, cause we easily outran it the rest of the way, and we shut the door behind us. We did a little roll call and figured out who died while the thing banged on the door for a while, but nobody had many tears left to shed. So, we continued on until Door 50, we survived a few more rules after rule 8 but that's not important. There's 14 of us left, but we all know to be silent in Door 50 now.

Some of us make it up to the padlock, and one of the managers says this padlock is normal, they put that there at night so that burglars would have a harder time, and he unlocked it with the code he knew, but then something occurred to one of us, and, I think it was Rosie, right? Yeah, she motioned for everybody to stop, and she wrote something down on her phone and showed it to us. She was concerned about how guests wouldn't know the code, and they would be doomed to die here with no chance of getting further. So, the manager takes out a piece of paper as quietly as he can while the rule 7 thing is far from him, and he writes the code for everybody to see. I realized that some of my coworkers were still standing at Door 50, too scared to go in with that thing. The rest of the guys at Door 51 go through and reset the padlock behind them, and I try and coax the rest of my coworkers up to the door. I tell them that we know the passcode, but one of them shakes his head and points up towards Door 51.

I turn around and see the rule 7 thing holding the piece of paper with the code, and kind of rubbing it with his other hand, and he keeps growling at it, I think he was trying to feel where the graphite was and use echolocation. I'm super confused at this point though, I had no idea what it was doing, but then it... it lifted up the padlock, and after another few minutes, it had rolled all the numbers into the right place! It *unlocked* the door! And then, I swear it, like, pumped its fist before it walked through the door, it was about to kill all of them, but... it growled again and started twitching before it could get to Door 52, and it went back into the library. Apparently, this radio we have in here, the music it plays drives that thing away, it can't stand music for some reason. So, the thing roars in

anger and stands at Door 51 for a while before it gives up waiting and starts wandering the library again.

We're all thinking about how smart this thing is, and we're pretty scared to try and make it up to the padlock again. I also knew something had to change with the padlock, or that thing might figure out how to change the code on the padlock. I mean, I doubted it could, but with what we just saw, best not to take chances. I motioned for the other guys at Door 50 to stay there while I go back up past Door 51, but they all wanted to come with me. Anyways, I go up to Door 51 and get through pretty easily, cause the thing had already taken the padlock off. I go and tell the manager what I just saw, but he says it doesn't matter cause it wouldn't be able to figure out how to reset it."

One of the other people in the group butted in, "Hey, I didn't say that! Don't lie on my name." Isaiah replied, "Don't worry about it, nobody thinks you're evil for it, it was sensible enough. Anyways, then Rosie comes up with a really clever solution. She knew that the thing wasn't a super-genius, cause it never bothered checking for people in the small corners or in places out of the way, even when it seemed sure somebody was nearby, so we just needed to make a complicated way of knowing the code. We decided on that paper out there on the desk, with the shapes corresponding to what numbers are needed. The bigger problem was putting those shapes where the thing wouldn't be able to figure out, but also not too hard for guests to find. So, Gustav goes back out and resets the padlock and makes a new code, and he takes it upon himself to find enough massive or obvious books. He finds about eight that got distinctive little crescent symbols, and he brings them back here so we can dog-ear a couple of the pages, and we write the symbol and number on them.

After we finish that, 8 of us go out and put those books back in places on the shelves, but, umm... everybody gets their book on a shelf, but on the way back, one of them trips on a bump in the carpet, and then he panics and starts running, but the thing was faster, with its massive legs. I watched it tear him to pieces and... well, you understand what happened. The rest of us went on back to Door 52, but all our resolve is gone. We really didn't want to leave Door 52 and the radio, but we knew we couldn't just stay here forever. Elijah wanted us all to keep going now that our 'charity work' was done, but he didn't want to go without us, cause it wouldn't be 'fun'. So, we all use up our phone batteries trying to contact the outside world, and we don't realize that the guy with the adapter got eaten, so we can't even charge them back up with the outlet the radio was connected to. If you still got phone battery, you better conserve it.

After our phones were spent, one of us, Jenkins, stood up and grabbed one of those decorative crosses off the wall." He pointed to a spot on the wall where two crucifixes were hanging, and a slot for a third was visible. "He said he was going to keep going, and we didn't stop him, but we were confused as to why he was taking a cross. He just said, 'just in case', and he walked out the door. I thought Eli was gonna go with him, but I guess one person still wasn't 'fun' enough. And, we wait for a few hours, just sitting there while Eli pulls his phone out to play some game, and then Jenkins bursts through the

door! We were all amazed, and the first thing he said when he caught his breath was ‘I have a new rule.’ He looked around a bit, and he found what he was looking for, which was a stack of poster boards. He grabbed one, and started writing, quickly but neatly. He wrote down all the rules in no particular order, the 10 that we knew, but then he wrote an 11th. ‘Be very careful in the greenhouse, there are no lights in that area and you will not be able to easily identify any possible threats.’ He had written all of the rules professionally, and, just like you said, pretending that nothing much was wrong. None of us had thought of that before, not even Rosie, but... I think that was because he was a little more questionable of a person than us. Even you, Eli. He saw me looking at the rules all confused, and he looked at me, pretty emotionless, and just said ‘We still need the beasts to be fed, and guests won’t enter if they’re convinced something is wrong with the place.’ Then I noticed his cross was gone, and I asked him why. He told me that it was ‘spent’ protecting him from something in the greenhouse, he said he wouldn’t be here without it. I asked what he meant, and he just smiled and dodged the question. He said the radio wasn’t the reason the thing couldn’t enter this room, it was the crosses.

A lot of us didn’t believe him, but he didn’t really care. He said he had to take the poster back to the reception area, and he was gone before we could even ask about what this ‘greenhouse’ business was. And, well, he hasn’t come back. That was only a couple days ago but, seeing as you were talking about the rules, I guess he actually made it back to the reception area and put up those rules. Thank God that he was able to do as much as he did. I don’t know if those crosses were there before the day this place changed, but they certainly weren’t able to ward off demons before then.”

At this point, I knew everything I needed to know, barring some details. “Alright, alright, there’s a problem with this, wouldn’t all the lights be blasted out throughout the whole place because of Rush?” When I was greeted with confused stares, I realized my mistake and clarified, “I call the thing from rule 1, Rush, I’ve named a lot of these entities.” Isaiah took a second to recall that I had asked him a question before he answered. “Well, we’re not completely sure about this, but we think these rooms reset every time they’re behind closed doors except door 50, the circle rooms keep changing places and things are different every time we go back. We also think at least a couple of these entities, as you call them, are stuck in some kind of time loop, the rule 8 entity never seems to learn from its mistakes or figure out how to open the door or pursue us past the last big hall.”

I thought about all this and relented and admitted most of this aligned with what I knew. “Alright, I guess that all makes sense. But I’m not gonna just sit here in Door 52 with you all forever. I’m gonna leave this place or die, and either way, all my problems will be solved.”

I was about to turn and leave when something stopped me. “Wait, something just occurred to me. Who broke the lamp in the library a bit ago? It saved my life.”

When nobody spoke up, I groaned and said “Alright, I guess that was because of the crosses here too, huh? Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. I’m gonna keep going, is anybody gonna come with me? You other guests?”

For the first time, one of the guests other than Eli spoke up. There were 4 of them in total, including Eli. They all seemed normal enough, perhaps excluding Eli. "I guess I'll come if you tell me what you named the entities. I was thinking about doing that too but I couldn't come up with anything good... except Eyes, maybe."

I relayed what I had named all the creatures here and which rules I had come across, and the guest seemed pretty satisfied, and apparently he had seen the one I called Migraine more clearly. According to him, it was a floating cluster of eyeballs, with no lids or lashes to speak of. "Well, it seems like you know what you're doing better than I do. I'll come with. My name's Lucas, sir." He stuck his hand out, and I shook it. He jostled it a little too hard for my taste, but I wasn't socially inept enough to bring that up. Instead, I asked if anybody else was coming.

"So, there's one, anybody else?"

Then something happened that I figured would happen, but I still didn't like it. Eli spoke up next.

"Mm, I guess I'm coming too."

Now seeing a party of three, another guest was able to work up enough courage to join. She was dressed in all black attire with olive skin, and her hair was colored similarly to her clothes, but her eyes were bright green. "I guess there's no reason for me to wait, I'm going too!" I gave her a thumbs up, but before I could ask again if anybody else wanted to come with me, the last guest shot up from her seat and half-yelled "Me too!" She was probably trying to get it over with before she chickened out and lost her chance to go with such a big group.

"Alright, sounds good, are any of you hotel staff coming?" I asked. They all shook their heads and murmured negative responses, and Isaiah grinned before saying "Nah, we're gonna wait until we can't take it anymore, and it seems like guests are entering the hotel so fast that one of'em makes it here every day. Somebody's gotta stay here and help'em out." His smile faded a little as he added, "Man, that's gonna get tiring."

I shrugged and gave a "Suit yourself." to the bunch. I motioned for the others to come with me, and I turned towards Door 53. Before I could exit however, I was stopped by one of the many employees.

"Wait. You should take one of the crucifixes. I doubt any of you have encountered all the entities here, you'll need it." I was not in the mood for this. I raised an eyebrow at him, saying "What do you mean, I'll need it? It's a piece of wood." I walked over to where the last two crosses were mounted and pulled one off the wall. "What do I do with it? Poke them? Maybe that would work with Screech, but you neutralize him by looking at him, it's already pretty easy. But you're telling me you're also religious? It's you guys who decided to let guests in because 'the entities needed to be fed.'" I turned to Eli, when he said, sounding somewhat annoyed, "Hey! Gimme!" And he snatched the cross out of my hand.

He turned to the other worker and said "Thanks for reminding us, Josh. I had forgotten about the crosses." Joshua gave him a genuine smile and nodded, and then turned back to me. "I, personally,

don't agree with what the government has decided to do with these entities, if those soldiers were in fact government officials. They should have been focused on finding a way to kill these things, it didn't take this random lot long to find out that the image of the cross was toxic to them. Instead of doing the meager amount of testing needed to find that out, they decided to throw their problem away, treating this place and our lives as a trash can. Those G-Men are driven by nothing but an instinctual desire for self-preservation, not any real set of morals. That said, I believe that *we* are doing the best we can. Since *we* don't have the tech to do what the government is capable of, namely, destroy the entities, we can only pacify them and keep them contained. It is our duty to do what we can, and if not guests, then it would be us. And after the last of us are gone, who remains? The guests. Eventually, either we die and nothing changes, or we let fools enter and sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Maybe you're not as feral as the suits, but your shortsightedness is evidently from your lack of God as your ultimate moral foundation. The government people *obviously* have no moral standard, and since they have none, they operate from their most basic instincts."

The last thing I was expecting in a haunted hotel was an argument about religion. This was getting ridiculous.

"Jesus, man." I said, in order to piss him off. I laughed internally as I saw his frown deepen slightly. I continued on, "I don't need God to help me figure out how to do things. I'm a fully grown man with a stable career and a full life, I already know how to live."

Joshua chuckled. "Oh, how to live! You don't even know *why* you live! Do you even know the meaning of the word epistemology? You have no re—"

I cut him off before he could get farther. "No, I don't know anything about 'I pissed in my lodgy' and I don't care. We're going to go fight demons on our own now, goodbye." I turned to go, but he said something else before I reached the threshold. "Eli, you probably shouldn't let him have the cross, I don't know if it requires a man of faith to work, but you can't take chances." Elijah nodded in response and turned to leave, and I followed suit, but we were interrupted again. In my mind I felt like just telling her to shut up, but I restrained myself as Rosie, the attendant who had first talked to me, asked me a question.

"Hey, do you trust us enough to give us your name now?"

I honestly pondered this for a second before saying, "Well, I don't trust all you religious weirdos acting all high and mighty, but I do think you guys aren't to blame for this. It's sad you got randomly picked to go through all this, and I can't imagine why you want to prolong your stay. I like you Isaiah, you're pretty cool, but I don't really know anything about the rest of y'all. To answer your question Rosie, my name's Miles."

"Well it's been... quite eventful meeting you Miles. If I go stir crazy quick enough, I might try and catch up with you. Here, have one of our walkie talkies. They've worked across big room gaps before, they're professional grade. I... I hope you guys don't die."



I blew air through my nose at that. “The feelings are mutual. Thanks for all the help and explanation... now, if there’s no more interruptions, I’m actually gonna be on my way now.”

Eli immediately piped up at that, “Ooh, me! I got an interruption!”

I started to say ‘what’ before I realized he was just being a jerk again. I scoffed and *finally* walked through Door 53. I heard the black-clad woman behind me saying goodbye enthusiastically.

We walked quietly for a door or two before I broke the silence. “So, what are y’all’s names? If you didn’t hear, I’m Miles.” Once *again*, Eli butted in. “Like Spiderman?” I ignored him and looked expectantly at the two who hadn’t given me their names. The one in all black spoke first. “I’m Grace Rawlings. Did we shake hands? I don’t think we did.” Before she could turn and make things awkward, I hastily replied “No, and we don’t need to.” The last guest, who had on a simple gray sleeveless turtleneck and darker gray sweatpants, spoke next. “My name’s Angela, but ev– my friend calls me Angie.” Eli leaned over to me and whispered, *incredibly* loudly, “She only has *one* friend!” On Angie’s behalf, I turned to him and snapped at him. “Holy crap, dude, would you please shut up?” Annoyingly, he ‘mmm’d like it was a difficult question before trailing off. Despite my fears of Eli’s continuing speaking, I continued the small talk.

“So how did you guys wind up here? My car broke down on a road trip and this hotel appeared on the side of the road while I wasn’t looking, and I fell for it. How about y’all?”

Grace went first. “I was seeing the world. I’ve traveled to a lot of different countries, so I obviously had to go to a lot of hotels, but on my trip to Argentina, the hotel building looked way different than it looked on google maps, but I thought maybe it was just some renovations they had done before the next google maps car caught it. I went inside and thought the rules were kind of interesting, and I guess now I’m exploring an entirely different world.” I can not stress how much Eli was pissing me off right then. He started speaking again, “So, y–” before he thankfully cut himself off and looked at me while suppressing a smile.

Lucas was about to start explaining what happened to him when I heard something in the distance. We had gone through 6 doors at this point, so I was expecting something to happen at any moment. I heard the sound of shelves or some other heavy objects being slammed to the ground with tremendous force, accompanied by a much stranger sound. The closest I can come to describing it is the sound of a train engine, but if it were coming from an organic being that was just screaming at the top of its lungs. It didn’t sound like Rush or any other entity I had encountered thus far, and it was coming from several doors behind us, but it was so loud that I could hear its screaming anyways. With a high-pitched scream, Grace yelled “Rule 5!!” Angie had already been running into a side room the moment the sound started, but the rest of us weren’t so quick. We all hopped into uniformly empty wardrobes in the hallways, and waited for the sound to approach.

It was unimaginably fast, a bright green light charged past my wardrobe in about a quarter of a second before it bounced back and passed by a second time, going the other way. I caught a glimpse of

it this time, and I somewhat wished I hadn't. It was a massive, pale green spectral head, with grossly distorted features. It had no nose, and its eyes and mouth were right next to each other, a thin strip of flesh separating them. The eyes and mouth were both pitch black voids, proportionally huge, and the mouth was stretched vertically, making it appear as a tall oval. It was rimmed with what seemed to be dull teeth all around it sporadically, seeming to protrude from the "lips" on the top, bottom, and sides. As it flew away into what was now darkness, because of the shattered bulbs all around us, I heard Grace hop out of her closet and scream excitedly "It's gonna come back!" Before going back in and closing the doors again. I was confused at this before I remembered what Rule 5 actually said, and I regretted my hesitation as it grew more and more harrowing to stay inside the wardrobe by the second. Resisting the urge to get out became more and more difficult, it felt like a nail was being hammered into my mind for every second I spent in the wardrobe longer than necessary.

It felt like an eternity, but after a couple seconds, I heard the thing approaching again, and it zipped past and went back, just like before. With a gasp, I jumped out of the closet and was relieved of the uncomfortability. I yelled to Grace, "How many more times??" before I jumped back into the closet. I didn't get an answer until the creature passed by again and we all collectively left our hiding spots. Grace yelled back, "I don't know!!" We all went back in and waited, but then I realized I wasn't hearing it come back. I stayed for a few seconds longer, as long as I could bear, and then left my spot. I looked around as Hide's mental assault ceased and tried to identify where my compatriots were.

I saw Grace and Eli in the dark, closely followed by Lucas. I looked around and asked where Angie was before I saw her making her way to us. Grace let out a relieved 'woah' as she ran her hands through her hair. I started to ask, "Are you all o—" before I was interrupted by Eli yelling in apparent genuine fright. I exasperatedly asked him what was wrong, and he simply replied "Screech." I didn't see that thing, but I decided not to extend a conversation with Elijah. I instead commented, "That was quite the ambush." Then, Lucas yelled out, "Ambush!" Angie visibly jumped at his outburst. She was clearly shaken up by having to survive that thing for what seemed like not the first time. Grace walked over to Angie to comfort her, while I asked Lucas, "Yeah, that's what I said, what about it?"

He replied, "That thing should be called Ambush! Good name, right?" I shrugged and said "I suppose so." Just then, Angie yelped before looking around frantically and then screaming much louder. Grace gave her a hug and told her it was fine as long as she looked at the thing. She said to the rest of us, "I think Screech somehow appears separately for each person. I couldn't see it when it appeared to Eli or Angie just now. We better get out of this dark room."

I pulled my lighter out and flicked it on so I could walk through the darkness. I managed to find Door 59, and I yelled out that I had found the door. I turned the knob, but then something started pushing from the other side. Before I could realize what was happening, the door flung open, revealing a pitch black void beyond the door, darker even than the black air outside the windows. From the darkness emerged a disembodied face, with jagged, misshapen teeth stretching too far to each side,

with no actual flesh to speak off. The sclera dimly glowed, but failed to illuminate the large bulbous eyes which seemed to be the same pitch black as the void behind them. The thing had no nose or any other features other than its smile and its eyes, but beneath it, claws reached out and shoved me away, tearing into my chest as they did, right where my sternum was. Luckily, I was decently far from the door before I made to open it, and it only grazed my skin. Still, marks were left on my body as the thing receded into the abyss from where it came, closing the door after itself.

"Gyaa!! *Dammit* that hurts." I yelled out to the other guests, "It wasn't the right door, I got duped."

Grace hurried over to me with concern. "Are you okay? Oh, wow, that looks nasty. Ambush already opened the next door, you know."

"What? How would it know which one was right? Why didn't it get duped? Well, I'm fine, I just need to stop the bleeding."

I looked down and saw the many scratches on my skin, a lot of which were bleeding. I grimaced as I climbed to my feet, and I heard a drop of blood hit the floor.

"Umm... are you sure you're okay? I don't have any bandages. Come on, the others are at the next door waiting for us, maybe they have some for whatever reason."

As we walked, I remembered something. "Did you seriously squeal in excitement when we heard Ambush?"

"Oh, y- uhh... no?"

As we got to the actual next door, Door 60, I sighed in disappointment. "Alright, so we got two people here that are apparently having a lot of fun."

Indignant, Grace tried to justify herself. "Well, it's really unique isn't it? I don't know about you guys, but this is the most exciting thing I've ever done."

"Us guys don't want to die! Except the wackjob over there, he probably wants to die. Granted, I name these things, but that's way different than enjoying them. That last one I'll call Dupe." I looked at Eli, who was eyeing my wounds. I glanced back at Grace and said, "You're a wackjob too."

She crossed her arms and said in a somewhat whiny voice, "Hey!! I'm not a wackjob! I'm just... a thrill seeker."

Before we could keep arguing, Lucas took off his black jacket and gave it to me. "Speaking of dying, you certainly look like you're doing it. You can tie it off with my jacket." His jacket had been concealing his form before. He had unruly hair the color of bacon, and he wore a blue shirt with a bicycle design on it, and dark green pants. Both did little to conceal his very well-built form. After a moment, I had to admit that I didn't know how to tie a basic knot, let alone a tourniquet.

Lucas looked at me with an expression that got on my nerves, but thankfully Elijah stayed quiet.

Grace exclaimed, "I know how to do it!" She tied the jacket around my wound, and I thought it was already pretty tight before she was finished, but it got way tighter. I winced at how much more it was making it hurt. "Are you sure you've done it right? It hurts way worse than before."

"Yeah, tourniquets usually do that. Technically, you can't tourniquet a torso injury, I just used the same knot so it would put pressure on it. I searched up how to do tourniquets and stuff so I would be safe while I travel."

"Did you also look up how to survive demons?"

"Yeah, in the reception area, and so did you."

Elijah interrupted our weird conversation then, whining for us to keep going. We moved away from the last room, hoping to escape the reach of Screech, but the very next room had all its lights turned off. I sighed and flicked my lighter on once again, while Eli sighed much louder, mocking my annoyance. Angie turned on her phone flashlight and illuminated the room further for us. Ahead of us, a metal gate made of chainlink was installed, blocking the door to progress. "This is some weird architecture." Elijah commented.

On both sides of the room, there were staircases that went downwards into some kind of cellar. "I bet there's a lever or something to unlock the gate down there!" Grace said, unreasonably excited again. She had seen that the gate had an electric lock, and seemingly no way to unlock it. "We should split up, I'll go with Miles." I went along with her idea, and so did Eli and the others, despite him yelling to her from the other side of the room, "That's stupid, we're literally in a horror movie right now! But okay!"

As I walked down the stairs, I heard a "psst" behind me, and whirled around, which made the pain in my chest spike. I growled in pain as Screech screamed in my ears and shot away again. Grace turned to me with concern in her eyes.

"Screech?"

"Yeah."

We returned to silence as we entered the cellar door. Despite the light provided by my lighter, I couldn't see to the end of the many branching hallways in the cellar. The act of maneuvering my arm around to illuminate each part of my surroundings made me break out in a cold sweat. I didn't want to worry anybody, but Dupe had really jacked me up. I tried not to show it, but my breath still came quick and hard. By the light of the flickering flame, Grace noticed my state and asked again, "Miles? Are you really sure you're okay?" I avoided her gaze, looking down at the floor and remaining silent this time. "You don't have to act so tough now that Eli's away. We can... sit down and rest for a bit while Eli and the others are searching for the lever."

I sighed and finally acquiesced. "Yeah... yeah, I think that's a good idea." I looked down at the makeshift bandage around my chest as I slid down against the wall. Even in the dim light, I could make out several red splotches leaking through; I didn't know exactly how bad the blood loss was with this

kind of wound, but I was certainly feeling drained. Grace sat down next to me, and we were silent for a bit. Next to me, Grace jumped and, after a second, muttered under her breath, "I hate that thing." She sighed heavily before she started talking again. "You know I don't really think this is all just a fun adventure, right? I was just trying to be optimistic. I don't think your injury is a joke. I really wish I wasn't here, but I don't think there's any point in despairing. You don't still think I'm a wack job, do you?" I started chuckling but was stopped by another spike of pain in my chest. I groaned again, but I smiled at her. "I guess not, Grace. Eli's still a wacko, though." She giggled and agreed with me.

We sat for a few moments more, until I started feeling more up to the task of our journey. Grace helped me up to ease the pain, but then I realized I could hear a familiar noise in the distance. The sound of Rush rapidly approached, and even the cellar walls shook as it shot through the hallway above, shattering every bulb as it went, despite them already being deactivated. I hadn't heard anything from the other three members of our party since we separated, and I worriedly called out, "Are all you okay?" I didn't get a response immediately, and I started fearing the worst, but then I saw a beam of light in the dark that didn't come from my lighter.

The light turned towards us, and I was blinded momentarily. I heard Lucas' voice from behind the light, shouting. "I found a flashlight! But, uh, we didn't find any switch." Elijah found it helpful to mention other stuff they had found. "But we did find giant piles of flesh! I'd say that's about as good." Angie groaned in annoyance, but confirmed what he said. "He's right, there were these big mounds of meat in a few corners, they smelled awful."

I told them that we couldn't find it either, but Lucas caught sight of it immediately. It was apparently right around a corner that was right next to us, and we hadn't found it because we spent all our time resting. Elijah scoffed and admonished us, "Well, you didn't look very hard." I was prepared to make up an argument solely because it was Eli who said that, but Angie urged us to continue on, fearfully stating how much Screech freaked her out. We went back up the cellar stairway and went through Door 62. The next few doors were uneventful, and despite me being too uncomfortable to make any small talk, Grace resumed our conversation from earlier.

"So how did you guys get here? You seemed even more eager to go through the doors than I did, from what Isaiah said, Eli. What were you doing before you found the hotel?"

"I really don't think you want to know. It doesn't matter much anyways."

"Well, it doesn't need to be really interesting or anything, I'm just trying to get to know you guys."

"It doesn't matter, somebody else can go."

"Why, what's wrong?"

Eli was quiet for a few seconds, an uncharacteristic bout of silence coming from him. "Uhhh... I don't know, I was just out on a drive to clear my head and I saw this extremely out of place hotel, and it sparked my interest enough to distract me from life's problems. You know the rest. Isaiah was telling the truth."

Before anybody could respond, Door 65 opened to reveal a black orb floating in the air. Grace yelled “Eyes!!” And we all looked away, except Eli apparently. I heard him mutter to himself, “What on earth?” Before he yelled in pain, and I heard him hit the floor. “Oh my—... Gosh, that thing’s in my head. I can’t keep track of these rules.” None of us knew how to help, but Lucas asked, “Are you gonna be good?” Eli murmured more fragmented sentences under his breath that we couldn’t hear, before finally responding with a groan. “Yeah, it’s fading. I looked at it for 3 seconds straight.”

We gave Elijah time to recover, and we started slowly strafing past it, except Lucas, who just closed his eyes and walked forward, keeping his hand stretched forward and to the side so that he wouldn’t run into the wall. He found the door quickly enough, and as soon as he opened it, the purple light disappeared with the strange sound, and presumably the Eyes disappeared as well, but I didn’t risk looking. Grace congratulated Lucas on getting past quickly, but then she remembered what Eli had said earlier, as he moaned about his newly gained sore head. “Man, I got a killer headache now.”

Against my better judgment, I looked behind me so I could see Grace and Eli talking. The Eyes were indeed gone. Grace turned to Eli, who was rubbing his forehead with his eyes closed. “What you said earlier, that seems really strange to me. I mean, if you believed what they said, wouldn’t that mean that you want to die?”

“Sure do.”

“Oh— Eli, you shouldn’t joke about that.”

“Mmm.”

Grace couldn’t think of anything else to say, and we rejoined Lucas at the next Door, and after a moment of awkward silence, Lucas loudly started the conversation back up. “*Well...* The reason I’m here is because apparently the government failed to keep this place under wraps. I had no idea this place was related to whatever organization that was, that Isaiah described, but I’m an urban explorer, and I’m interested in the paranormal in particular. I read online about this place, it was just a regular forum post, the user posted a picture of the hotel and described how it had just appeared overnight, *in place* of one of the houses in their neighborhood. He didn’t end up going inside, but there was a followup post where he showed the exact same area, but with no hotel, just a regular house. I knew it could have been photoshopped, but it sparked my interest. I saw ‘Dores Hotel’ in the picture, so I searched that up.

I couldn’t find anything other than that one post I had already looked at, until I had flipped through a few pages on Google. I saw this site that was just titled ‘good hotel’ without any capitalization. I clicked on the link, even though there were probably a thousand viruses on that site. It was really poorly made, just a block of text with a picture of some random wall paneling. The text had kind of broken english, but it was mostly understandable. I remember it pretty well, but maybe not word for word... anyways, it said this: ‘Hello user, you should come to this hotel. You can go in any room you want, the staff is not here to collect your money. Please come to here and enjoy a very well stay. You can find the hotel wherever you go, it will be there if you are looking for it, for a place to be.

Please come to here, it will be very good for you. And please apologize for my bad english, I had just learned english three hours ago."

Elijah, who had apparently somewhat returned to his normal state, laughed uproariously at this. "Three *hours*? Who *is* this guy?"

"Apparently, somebody who wants us here, and someone who is... more intelligent than we gave it credit for. I wasn't finished, though. That block of text was labeled 'January 10th, 2022', about a week before then, but there was a second below it that had apparently been added the same day I was browsing the site. It had perfectly normal English, even kind of formal. 'Greetings user, this is the official website for the Dores Hotel. This hotel is a great place to stay, and you will not have to pay at all, you'll be able to stay in any room you want. You also don't have to travel to it, it'll come to you. As long as you're looking for it, it'll be there. Come to the Dores Hotel today, and enjoy a high quality stay, free of charge.' I don't know if whatever made that site just forgot to delete its first try or something, but both of those paragraphs were there. There was also a second picture, and it was of... it was of one of the roundabouts that Seek chases people in.

I don't get how I was able to find this if the government was at all trying to keep it under wraps. Maybe they didn't think it was necessary. Anyways, all this convinced me to at least go out and try it. I got in my car and drove out a ways, looking for the thing, and then I found it. Just like everybody else, I was sure it wasn't there before, but there it was, looking exactly like I saw in that forum post. Curiosity got the best of me from there, and I didn't turn back when I came to the rules."

Elijah immediately responded with disbelief. "How on earth did they get service in here?? I couldn't even log-in to Clash Royale 'cause there's no internet." And Grace chimed in, "Yeah, and who made that? Could it have been Seek? Is he that smart? And how did it get access to the internet at all?" Lucas pondered all this for a moment before responding. "I think we've all seen how well Seek picked his chase area, and he could easily take a phone off of any of the people he's killed. He could have learned everything from there, if he's smart enough, but I can't figure out how he got internet."

At this point, we had all stopped to listen to Lucas' story. I muttered, mostly to myself, "We better hope that whatever the government did, it keeps it contained, cause I don't think we're counting on Seeks stupidity." I opened the next door, and behind it, I saw a unique room. It seemed to be some kind of infirmary. There were several white hospital beds around the room, and a large white plus was hung on the wall on the far end. It was quite a large room, and the walls were made of large stones, rather than the usual wood planks that were often covered in wallpaper. The others ceased their discussion behind me as they all noticed the unusual nature of the next room. Grace bounded into the room past me, calling to me as she went. "Ooh, Miles, we can find better medical supplies here." I nodded, but thought there probably wasn't much more to be done. "I could do with some real bandages, and Lucas can get his bloody jacket back, but I don't think there's anything else to do after that."

"We should have rinsed the wound already, but that would be really awkward to do, even if there was a sink here. I guess you're right, since they're pretty shallow. If there was any stitching required, I could do it with the stuff here though. I learned how to do a lot of survival stuff."

Grace started geeking out about stitching deep wounds together and things of that nature, and I started tuning her out, just watching her instead. It was endearing how she was so interested in helping everybody, even Eli. I sat down on one of the beds and watched her nerd out over all the medical instruments. While she did, Angie walked off to another area of the room, partially walled off from the current area. She soon returned, talking about a weird door. We all went to follow her, and after going through some nondescript hallways, we saw the door. It looked different from all of the regular doors, and it was unmarked, rather than saying "66A" or something of the like. It had ornate carvings in it, and a mixture of different colored wood. She tried the knob, but it didn't turn. I turned to her and said "I got lockpicks, I can probably get that open." Grace and the others watched as I fiddled with the lock. I felt something click, and moved to pull the lockpick back out. It caught on something on the way out, however, and it snapped in half, unfortunately. I was still able to open the door, and the hinges creaked from use they hadn't seen in a long time.

The room behind the door was small, and filled with cabinets and desks, with a strange potted plant on one, and a lightbulb that dimly illuminated the place. The plant immediately caught my eye, as it seemed to be brighter than the dim old-fashioned bulb would allow, but I assumed it was a trick of the light. Grace rushed in and looked through all the cabinets. "This is all pretty old stuff... maybe it was state-of-the-art when this room was last opened, but it's nothing special." Elijah, ever distracted, commented on the plant. "Look at this funny plant!" He reached out and poked it, but as soon as he touched it, he halted for a moment. He gradually brought his hand away before commenting in bewilderment, "My headache just disappeared."

Grace finished up looking through the cabinets and looked at Eli. "Randomly?"

"No, it happened when I touched this plant."

"Well that's weird. Maybe your body had some kind of reaction to something on the plant?"

"Maybe."

Grace reached out to the plant and ran a finger down one of the leaves, but just like Eli, she faltered. Instead of taking her hand away slowly though, she grabbed a leaf gently, and she trembled a little before she snatched her hand away quicker than Ambush could ever go. Lucas eyed her hand suspiciously and asked what was happening. "What? Is it coated in poison or something?" Grace's voice was shaky when she responded. "No... it's... amazing. It feels like my heart is beating 10 times stronger, it gave me a rush of energy. I feel amazing!"

"It must be coated in drugs then."

Lucas, having asserted there were drugs involved, promptly reached out to the plant and laid a finger on it. His finger immediately shot back, and he exclaimed, "Woah! You weren't kidding!"



Angie went next, she wrapped her hand around the stem of the plant, and I thought she was about to rip it out of its soil. Elijah apparently thought the same thing. “Ay, don’t rip it out, the guy with holes in his chest hasn’t gone yet.” She didn’t end up ripping the thing out, she just cackled in excitement and yelled out “Oh my goodness! I don’t know what this is, but I like it!” She finally let go of it, to my relief, and then Grace turned to me suddenly. “Oh, I just realized I forgot to do your bandages... we should see what this plant does for you first though, before I do that.”

“Yeah, it’s alright Gracie.” I stepped forward towards the plant, and I noticed there was a label on the pot. “Herb of Viridis...” I muttered to myself. I tentatively grabbed one of the leaves between my thumb and index, and the feeling was immediate. All throughout my body, starting from my heart, I felt energized, and my heart started pumping harder, but not like if I had just worked out, it just felt like it was pumping life throughout my body far more efficiently than before. Even more amazing than that, I felt a change in the skin on my chest. The latent stinging pain was dissipating rapidly, and when my efforts to untie the jacket covering my wounds were finally fruitful, I saw the skin below healing rapidly, new layers of flesh replacing their old damaged counterparts, leaving nothing but slight red patches which soon disappeared as well.

I looked around at everybody in amazement, and finally broke the silence by asking, “Do you want your jacket back?” Lucas laughed at my awkwardness and took his jacket back, though he only put on the side which didn’t have a bloody sleeve. The other half draped behind him over his back. Grace stared at my healed chest and commented, “I... guess you don’t need bandages anymore.” I smiled at her comment, and I asked her if she knew anything about what this plant was. “Well, you know all about medicine and survival and stuff, what do you think this is, Gracie?” She crossed her arms and seemed to rack her mind for information, but she came up short. “Well, it’s labeled ‘Herb of Viridis’, but that just means herb of youth or liveliness. I don’t really know herbology, but I feel like something like this would be really popular. Maybe it is just whatever drugs are made of. But... what it did for your chest... I’ve never seen anything remotely like that, I mean, I’ve seen things that speed up the healing process, but nothing even close to that strong. Do you think it’s related to what the feds did to this place?”

We all discussed what this thing could be a little further, but the random nature of this room and the plant didn’t align well with anything we came up with, and we dropped it after a while. Eli suggested taking the plant with us, but it was ultimately decided against as too risky, and our boost from the plant didn’t seem to be fading for any of us. With this tremendous boost to our energy, and without my injured self slowing us down, we covered ground a lot quicker. As we moved on from the infirmary, Angie decided to tell us her story, now that everybody else had gone. “I guess it’s my turn to tell how I got here. I... oh, this just made me remember what I’ve left behind. Well, my husband is a foreign language teacher at a university, and he had his best and most enthusiastic, and thankfully smallest class this year, so he decided to reward them, and also help them out in their studies by taking

as many of them as wanted to come to Norway. They were studying Norwegian, if you don't get it. He offered to pay for all their hotel stays and half of their plane ticket. His rich parents were helping him out, so he could afford it. Some of the students tried to take advantage and get super expensive hotels, but he was responsible with his money. This was the first time he ever used his parents' money, and it was just for the plane tickets.

Well, we got to our hotel, and it seemed to be the wrong building. We were both confused, and he thought maybe he just had the location wrong. I told him I was gonna go inside and see if it actually was the right place while he made a bunch of calls, and also checked if the students got to their places okay. I... went in and... I decided to go find the hotel staff at Door 52. I just... really hope he didn't come in after me. Oh my goodness, if he went in after me... he would have gotten to Door 52 before Miles got here, or..."

Grace, ever the helper, gave her a hug as she trailed off. We walked in silence for a moment more until we hit Door 69, and the lights flickered above our heads. The familiar jolt of fear ran through all of us, but with the power from the herb, we sprinted faster to the wardrobes in the halls than we could before. Something was different though. The roaring never came. A couple of us were smart about it, we exited and re-entered our hiding spots when we realized it wasn't coming as quickly as it usually did, but I heard Angela being forced out, followed by Lucas who muttered something under his breath, and then finally Grace. I heard her shoot out and fall to the floor with a yelp. After a second longer, I decided Rush wanted his name to be changed to Dawdle, and left my hiding spot.

Grace was on her hands and knees on the floor, panting. I walked over to her and rested my hand on her back, trying to comfort her. I helped her up and said "Hey, at least it doesn't physically hurt you." She nodded her head, but the absence of Rush stayed in her mind, as well as in mine. "Yeah, but, where's Rush? The rules have never been wrong before." I told her to wait by her hiding spot for a moment longer, and I did the same. After about 10 more seconds of continued waiting, and me being unable to find any eyeballs on the walls, I shrugged and motioned for everybody to move on.

Eli walked ahead of me and turned the knob to Door 70, and then, a burst of static sounded around me, and I was somewhere different. Some sort of dining area stretched on before me, not illuminated by any lights that I could see. Despite the lack of light fixtures, the place was bathed in a turquoise blue light. My vision felt like it was on the verge of going black, like when you're dreaming and you're about to wake up, but you're trying to hang on to the current reality. A deep rumbling filled my ears, it drowned out everything. I couldn't hear the rain, or my breathing, or the blood flowing through my body, or even my own thoughts. Nothing but that rumbling, which was growing more intense by the second. Then, I heard a thought. Not one of mine, but something else's, which told me to run. Terror filled me as I obeyed the command, sprinting forward as fast as I could, not daring to look back.

After only a couple seconds however, I was forced to turn back entirely. In the blink of an eye, the single thought that rose above the rumbling changed from run away, to turn back. Flashing and rotating blue lights swirled around me, and my vision threatened every few seconds to leave me. I turned around and ran back, but after only half a second, I was told to turn back again, back the way I was going the first time. I skidded to a halt and sprinted back the other way, but when I was forced back the other way again, my momentum was too much, and I slipped on the polished wood floor. I looked up in front of me, and out of the darkness that was filled and at the same time unaffected by the nauseating blue lights, a pair of eyes of the same exact color emerged. They were shrouded in an impenetrable bright but dark smoke. It was indescribable, the smoke was a shade of turquoise blue that was darker than black. Such a thing made no sense to me, but it was moved even further down on my list of worries as it spoke out loud for the first time.

“Halt.”

As that word, which was spoken both with great fury and great indifference, reached my ears, it pierced through the rumbling. It ignited a new pain in my body, one that fit with no category I had. The command again prompted me to run forward, but I had to slow my sprint to a measly jog in order to avoid slipping, even though it felt like I was barely going fast enough for its liking when I was sprinting. It sent me back and forth, back and forth, and I could do nothing other than obey while it watched, paying perfect attention to find any and all mistakes. Each step made the pain a little harder to deal with, and despite the help of the viridis herb, I was reacting slower and slower each time. I was despairing, wondering if this was a permanent fate, and if that thing would even let me die, when I finally saw Door 71. Amidst the horrifying cacophony, I had forgotten that there was another door forward. I got within feet of the door when I was commanded again to turn back. I hated this thing so much, I just wanted out. I continued my run towards the door, but I was fully forced to stop, when I saw those eyes starting to form again, threatening to send that accursed order again.

I ran back and away from salvation for another half second before it finally let me turn around, and I sprinted as fast as humanly possible, giving it everything I had left, and I slammed into the door full force, grabbing the knob as I did, and as the latch slid out of its slot, the door started sliding inwards, and then...

I was back in the Hotel. I looked behind me, and the door was shut firm. Closed early. I looked ahead, and saw Door 72. I looked in front of me, and I saw everyone, barely standing and pale in the face. I could finally hear again, and the viridis was working on the pain coursing through me. Grace whispered, “Rule 4.”, and I heard Angie mutter to herself absent-mindedly, “Halt...” Even Eli was subdued, and the latent fear on his face was obvious. “That thing is a sadist.” I said to nobody in particular. Then, my stomach dropped, as I realized something awful. “Lucas?” I called out. Grace’s hands immediately shot to her head as she looked around frantically, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Despite the intensity of the pain that was still circulating through me, it was drowned under my anger and sorrow, both against that horrible creature and the Hotel itself. I slammed my fists against the door before I slid down to my knees, staring up at the door. I didn't know how to react to this kind of pain, it was almost as foreign as what the creature in the hallway did to me. I had never felt this before. Grace sat down next to me and embraced me, and I cried. I cried over losing one of us after we had gotten so far, over how heinous that being was, over how unfair this whole situation was, how cruel and heartless the feds had been, everything.

I must have passed out at some point, because the next thing I remembered was waking up on the floor. Grace was sprawled out next to me, staring up at the ceiling. The viridis had fixed whatever the entity had done to me, but it couldn't bring Lucas back, or fix this whole mess. I felt physically fine, but rage against that cruel incomprehensible being still boiled within me. I climbed to my feet suddenly, startling Grace, and socked the closed door with all my might. Just like I expected, the pain receded as the viridis worked its magic. I didn't feel such a personal hatred for any of these other entities, even Seek who, according to Lucas' story, seemed to be sentient and very smart. This thing was undoubtedly conscious, and it took joy in playing whatever stupid game it wanted to with us, and doing even worse when we failed to do exactly what it wanted. Grace got up behind me and hugged me again. Before she could say anything, though Eli, who was playing on his phone, spoke up. "You got tears all over her shoulder, and you got an ugly crying face." Grace got off of me and crossed her arms at Eli. "Shush, he's not ugly! Don't mind him Miles, he's just being really cold as a coping mechanism." "Maybe she's right, but if you're done sleeping, we should get going." I didn't respond to Eli, and instead turned back to Grace. "How long was I out?"

"Umm, maybe an hour?"

"Oh- sorry to keep you waiting. Why didn't you wake me?"

"It's alright, we all needed a break, I think. I think the Hotel is keeping us from needing sleep, but... we were a different kind of tired. Besides, me and Angie are shaken too."

I had to once again ignore Eli, who was asserting that he would have woken me up if Grace let him.

"Thank you Gracie. I'm... as fine as I'm gonna get, we should go."

She nodded, but then stopped a moment later.

"Oh, I just remembered, while you were sleeping, Angie came up with a name for the thing. She calls it Halt, but I don't know why, and she's very shaken so I didn't want to pressure her to explain. What do you think?"

I thought for a moment before responding. "Did you ever disobey it or mess up?"

"No, I... I guess I did perfectly. It was still really scary. Why?"

"If you don't do what it says, it speaks out loud, it says..." I shuddered at the mere thought of the word now, "halt. When it says it, it's like the word itself is a weapon, it hurt so much, and it wasn't like any form of pain we have here."

Grace nodded thoughtfully. "I guess it's good we didn't immediately go then, I didn't know you or Angie were in physical pain. Oh no, the herb fixed it right? Does it still hurt?" I told her it didn't, and gave one last glance to the door where Halt resided before I finally started moving again. The next few doors were a blur. We were all silent now, our moods tempered by the loss of one of our friends. The only notable event was a room where Dupe had set up multiple doors. There were three ways forward visible around the room. We argued a bit about which one was right, because Eli and Grace both insisted they remembered the door number, but had different numbers in mind. It turned out that Eli was wrong when Grace discovered that you could hear a faint growling sound behind the fake doors if you put your ear to the wall.

Even the other eldritch entities that resided here seemed almost mundane in this fog of grief and anger. I could tell it affected Angie more than me even. It seemed like Grace and Eli were handling it well, but I wasn't really focused on that. We survived another attack from Rush a couple doors later, but we realized that Hide was getting quicker. We all had to start waiting to get inside the hiding spots, or we would get forced out while Rush was still barreling down the halls. I did finally manage to get a glimpse of the creature, though it no longer interested me. It was a large, though not quite as big as Ambush, floating head, with dark gray rotted skin, and black pits where its eyes should have been. It had no hair, facial or otherwise but what remained of the flesh on its lips were pulled back in a wide curved smile. Around it, a black haze distorted everything past its decayed cranium. Though it apparently couldn't find or see me, it seemed to keep its face towards me at all times as it floated past, emitting the same noise as always.

The very next room, the lights flickered again, and it occurred to me that Rush might be getting more aggressive, just like Hide. But Rush didn't come this time. This had only happened twice before, once when Seek was about to attack, and once when Halts domain was near. A real stab of fear that I hadn't felt for a while coursed through my body, but I was relieved when I found one of Seek's eyes on the wall. My relief dissipated slowly, as I knew what was coming was still perilous. I pointed the eye out to everybody else, and as we progressed through the next couple rooms, the eyes sprung up in greater and greater volume, just like last time. It was as if I was back before Door 50 again. We came to a massive hallway, like before, and we slowed our pace as we all searched the room for any sign of the sludge appearing. We saw none throughout the entire hall, and we got to the next door. Grace met my eyes and gave me a shrug, and then Eli opened the door. I gave one last sweep of the ceiling, and then moved to go through the door... until my eyes alighted on the wall above the door.

A sizable pile of sludge had formed there while we were focused on the back of the hall. I could already see that eye rising up horizontally out of the sludge, hoping to take one of us for free. Grace was a little farther away from the door, and she still hadn't noticed the quiet sloshing of the sludge above her. I grabbed her by the waist and threw her forward with all my might, screaming "RUN!" As I did. Half a second later, I recovered from the recoil and started running forward, and another half-second

later, something ridiculously dense clipped my back. It fell hard and fast and landed behind me. I instinctively looked behind me and saw the eye looking up at me, its half formed body struggling to build itself early. It must have launched itself downwards early when it realized I caught on.

I turned back to face ahead of me, and Grace had luckily remained on her feet and was running ahead of me. Eli was already almost through the room, and had gone too fast for the black hands to bar his way with furniture. There was no doubt in my mind now of Seek's intelligence, it had formed in a different spot than last time, and it started chasing early when it knew the gig was up. The viridis made things a lot easier, but it didn't help my reading speed. It actually made it harder to catch what those labels said due to the increased running speed when the roundabouts came. Eli soon left my view as he easily dealt with them, and then I realized that Angie was just following him. Grace seemed to still be looking around for the labels, and she almost made a wrong turn once. I yelled to her, "Follow Angie! She's following Elijah, and I think he knows the way to go!"

I think I caught her giving a thumbs up, and she started following my advice. It was just a matter of dealing with furniture blockades and counting on Eli now. With our increased strength from the herb, we vaulted over the barricades, sometimes entirely clearing them with a single jump, but then I heard Seek make a noise behind me that was not its usual shriek. It spoke in english words. "I'M... HUNGRY." It's voice was firmly within the bounds of the uncanny valley. It had the unnatural aspects of a parrots voice, hearing regular human words coming from an animal thats so obviously not human without any emotion on its face and hardly any mouth movement, it had always unnerved me, and this was that on a different level. It also reminded me of the *almost* perfect AI chatbot voices, which get nothing wrong except some slight tone and emphasis errors, but again, on a different level; it sounded so close to human, but I had no idea how it was making those sounds.

My pondering was interrupted as we came to the final room of the place, another massive hall. Just like at the end of the first chase, black hands reached out and tore the chandeliers off the ceiling, but this time they threw them down in our direction rather than just letting them drop. Grace and Angie had to dodge out of the way, slowing them down considerably. With the help of the viridis however, Seek was unable to catch up. Eli got to the final door first, and he was about to immediately shut it behind him before he remembered that we hadn't made it yet. He held the door open, waiting impatiently for us. The rest of us followed close behind, but we got unlucky with one of the flailing hands. One reached out and managed to land a lucky hit on Angie, backhanding her and sending her flying into the wall next to the door. She hit the wall with a loud crack, and she didn't seem to be getting up nearly fast enough. Without a second thought, I yelled at Grace to keep going, while I ran over to help Angie up. I got to her, but when I glanced towards the door we came from, I saw Seek barreling towards us, having already entered the hall.

I helped her along, and I heard Eli yelling for us to hurry up. With each passing second, the distance between us and Seek grew smaller. Desperation fueled my movements as I pushed Angie

forward, ignoring the strain in my muscles. The sound of approaching footsteps reverberated in my ears, fueling my determination. Finally, after what felt like hours, we traveled the few meters back to the door, and as soon as we were past, Eli slammed the door shut. After a couple more seconds, Seek slammed into the door, but instead of banging on the door repeatedly, it jiggled the doorknob furiously. After a second, Angie asked warily, "Did... did it speak? Earlier?" And just then, Seek made it clear what the answer was. "Why... does... not... it... work?" This intensified my thoughts about comparing the voice to a parrot's. It expressed what it wanted to, but didn't really know what it was saying. I guess it didn't make sense that that wasn't grammatically correct, since 'Why doesn't it work?' is a correct thing to say, but it creeped me out nonetheless.

I nodded slowly in response to Angie's question. Eli snickered to himself and reminisced about the poorly worded website. "Three hours ago, man..." Grace was happy that we escaped him again, but her face fell as something occurred to her. "Hey... what if this place doesn't have an end?" I thought for a moment, and came up with a response. "I feel like it would all be random rooms with no unique ones if the place had no end. We've found quite a few unique places, like at Door 50. And besides that, we're encountering a lot more entities. Maybe they get more and more common around some central... hotspot." She gave a half-hearted yeah, but I could tell she wasn't convinced. "Hey, you're always an optimist, to an... alarming degree. Why change now?"

She giggled a little at that and nodded. The rattling of the doorknob finally stopped while we were talking. It seemed like Seek's influence ended a certain number of doors after he started chasing, strengthening my earlier thoughts that the only thing keeping us safe from him is whatever the government's gizmo did. We left Seek behind and continued our trek through the hotel. Though the herb of viridis kept us perpetually supplied with energy, Angela voiced what we all thought. "Can we take a break please? All this is... really wearing on me." Eli groaned immediately and started complaining, but Grace cut him off. "Shut up Eli, if she wants to rest from the life-threatening monsters, then she can." We walked a little bit longer until we came to a door that had 4 bedrooms in it, Door 86. Angie went into one of the bedrooms to be alone, while Eli went to go fiddle with a wardrobe, probably trying to test how Hide worked. Me and Grace went into one of the other bedrooms and sat down on the bed next to each other. After a moment of silence, Grace spoke.

"Miles?"

"Yeah?"

"What are you gonna do when we escape?"

"Glad to see you're feeling optimistic again. Well... I guess I'd try to go back to normal, but... it would be hard. Where are we even gonna end up? Apparently Angie got here from Norway, and you were in Argentina, right? I guess I'll just try and go back to what I was doing. I'd like to keep in contact with you guys, uh, except Eli, but we don't necessarily have anything in common. My time here has been

awful, but I'd miss you a lot. I guess it's just the fact that people bond when they experience suffering together. What are you going to do?"

"I guess I'm feeling the same way as you. I'll help you and everybody else get home, if need be, but then I think I'm gonna take a break from traveling for obvious reasons, but the thing is, I kind of started traveling because I uhh... didn't want to pay rent. I have a pretty decent following on social media, so I can afford most hotels, but I can't do much else. I mean, I'm not really in a lot of trouble, but it'll be really hard to get a real job."

I thought about her predicament, trying to think of what I would do in such a situation. The ticking of the grandfather clock in the room suddenly distracted me however, disrupting my consideration when I noticed it. I watched the pendulum swing back and forth. I started feeling uneasy as the ticking continued, like it was counting down to something. The more I heard it, the more I was convinced of this, that it was counting down to the arrival of something terrible. I stood up, unable to tear my gaze away from the pendulum of the clock. The ticking grew louder in my mind, and each tick made me internally cringe. Everything else around me seemed to melt away, leaving only the grandfather clock in my vision. Each tick signaled the approaching horror getting closer and closer, and my terror grew with each one. I knew somehow that there were only a few ticks left, but there was nothing I could do as the grandfather clock also faded from my view. It was replaced with the face of something terrible. It was bone white, with wispy tendrils coming off of its lumpy form, and it was covered in so many holes, their chaotic and trypophobic nature reminding me of the mandelbrot set's infinite irregular detail. It didn't grow closer, but grew more and more clear in my mind, and it threatened to swallow me up in its endless repulsive cavities as the second-to-last tick resounded through my ears, and I closed my eyes, accepting—

I felt Grace violently shaking me, repeatedly saying my name in an annoyed tone that was transitioning to worry very quickly. I grabbed her forearms to stop her. She looked at me with confusion. "What's going on? I thought you were having a seizure or something. You were just staring at the... at the clock." Realization came over her as she remembered something. "Ohh... rule 10. Are you okay? What happened?"

I tried not to think about what just happened, both because it was traumatic and to avoid having it happen again, but I still answered. "I don't know, it's hard to explain, I just got distracted by the clock, and then it felt like something was... coming to kill me, I guess." Grace absently commented, "I wonder what this entity actually does... to..." She trailed off as she stared at the clock. I immediately realized what was happening and put my hand on her shoulder and turned her away. She was stunned for a moment before she realized what happened as well. "Wow, that is really strong. Dang it, now that we're more aware of this it'll be a lot harder to ignore." That hadn't occurred to me, but it was definitely true. "Well, we can't sit and do nothing or we're gonna start thinking about the clocks again... wanna play patty cake?" I chuckled at my own joke, but she didn't get it. "Isn't that game for babies?" I



clarified that it was a joke with mock frustration, and then we ultimately decided to just play word games with each other until Angie had mentally recuperated.

While we waited, we also came up with a name for the entity we had just encountered. We decided to call it Dread, for the feeling it evoked. After a while of entertaining ourselves, being bugged by Eli, and trying not to think about the constant ticking permeating the place, Angie entered the room, not looking particularly happy, but definitely better than before. "Are you ready?" Grace asked her. She silently nodded, and we got up to continue our journey. As we walked, we noticed the rain had quieted down somewhat, though thunder and lightning still occasionally brightened our surroundings. We proceeded through the next few doors without incident, until we came across another unique area, past Door 90.

To our great surprise, Door 90 was an outdoor area. A large courtyard, surrounded on three sides by the walls of the hotel, and intersected through the middle by a roofed stone walkway with wooden guard railings. The air was slightly chilly, but under the protection of the roofing, it was a welcome change from the indoor air of the hotel that we had endured for so long. Grace immediately squealed and vaulted over the railing. "We're outside!" I hoped there was escape to be found here, but I was uncertain at best. The sky above was no longer the pitch-black void I had seen through so many windows, but populated with the moon and stars. It was a beautiful sight, but somewhat unearthly; it didn't look quite like a normal night sky. I eventually tore my gaze away from the huge bright moon, and examined the courtyard. The walls around the courtyard were well over 20 feet tall, and there were no footholds to climb, it was all uniform smooth stone. It was a very pretty place, but more interesting to me was the side of the courtyard which had nothing but a metal fence. No insurmountable wall. I called out to her "Gracie, look! There's a way out!" I pointed to the fence, and the forest beyond it. "You're right!" She exclaimed. "We could climb over the fence!" I walked out of the colonnade and joined her at the fence. Gazing out at the trees, I began to have second thoughts. We had no idea what could be hiding in the trees out there. I said so to Grace, and her smile gradually faded. Eli called out, still in the colonnade, "Yeah, and we shouldn't leave the path. It's probably the safest route." She sighed and sullenly said "Guess so..." She wandered away a little distance and sat down, feeling the wet grass beneath her. I wondered how grass and trees grew here when it was likely perpetually dark.

After another moment, Grace wiped her face with her sleeve, got to her feet and went back under the colonnade. I joined her, eager to get out of the rain, and we resumed our walk forward. We opened an iron gate that led back inside the hotel, and we were confronted with Door 91.

It was at this moment that we witnessed the subject of Rule 11, the one that Jenkins had added into the list the hotel attendants had already procured. Apparently, this place was dangerous enough to convince him to turn back and return to his fellow staff members, and according to him, he would have died if it weren't for the fact that he was holding a crucifix. "One of us has a flashlight, right?" Grace asked while staring ahead into the blackness of the greenhouse. A lightning flash temporarily

illuminated the place, revealing beds of flowers and plants, small trees, and a glass ceiling along with mostly glass walls. I responded to Grace's question haltingly, reminded of what we had been through, and what one of us couldn't get through. "No... Lucas *had* one."

Eli promptly pulled his own phone out and turned on the flashlight. "It's on 8 percent. Does anybody else have phone battery?" I nodded and pulled my own out, figuring now was the best time to use up my battery. I had plenty of battery left, so there was no doubt in my mind that I would be able to get through the greenhouse. I scanned the area and saw several stand-alone storage closets. I reminded everyone that we needed to stay close to these, since there were no flickering lights to warn us. Then, as if my mentioning it summoned the thing, I heard the sound of Rush approaching over the rain, thunder, and howling wind outside. Me and Grace both shouted at the same time, "Hide!" And it was a mad dash to the storage closets. Thankfully, they were all devoid of shelves, so we could fit inside, but then I heard a scream from behind me. I glanced around, and saw Angie had tripped. I caught sight of her ankle, and I realized that it was bleeding in several places as something dug into her flesh, stopping her from escaping. There was a strange mound of soil on the floor, with several holes in it, and out of those holes protruded small vines, which seemed, for all intents and purposes, to be grabbing her. They weren't just stuck on her, they were buried deep, and they seemed to be pulling on her leg, attempting to retract back into the holes.

I was faced with a terrible decision. I knew I was the closest to her, but Rush was already far too loud for my liking. But the alternative to helping her was to just do nothing and let her die. In the one moment I had to decide, I couldn't see how I could even get her to a hiding spot in time even if I did help, and so I rushed the last couple feet to my hiding spot and jumped inside. With a final yank, Angela snapped the vines out of their soil, though they remained buried in her skin. I was sure she was about to die, but then I heard Eli yelling primally, and as I peeked out from a crack in the door of the closet, a flash of lightning illuminated this scene that I wouldn't be likely to forget. Eli had just hurled the crucifix into the air, having apparently left his hiding spot and put himself at risk. Rush's screams permeated the air as it overtook Angie in a fraction of a second, but as the crucifix hurtled through the air to meet Rush in its path, it suddenly arched upwards, floating higher and changing to an upright position. Suddenly, Rush stopped in its tracks, and the roaring died down a moment later. The cross, now still other than a constant horizontal spinning, started glowing a bright blue, not a nauseating and defiled blue like what resided in Halts hallway, but a radiant, glorious bright blue.

On the floor below Rush, circles and symbols of the same color appeared. A Star of David rested in the center with a crescent moon inside it, right below the demonic entity, and the star was encircled by three rings, with phases of the moon and symbols I couldn't recognize filling the space between the circles. Chains sprung up from the floor, stabbing through the decayed flesh of the creature, and its smile grew hollow as it realized what was happening. It rose up slightly in a meager

attempt to escape, before the chains retracted, pulling it and its dying screams down into the ground, before the symbols faded, and the glowing crucifix grew transparent and dissipated into the air.

Me and Grace exited our hiding spots in amazement, but our awe and relief at the defeat of this entity left our bodies as we remembered what had prompted Eli to throw the crucifix. Grace hurried over to the body, but it was no use. Rush had seen Angela well before the crucifix did its thing, and she had no pulse. Not even the herb of viridis could reverse death, it seemed. An expression of terror and pain was frozen on her face. A numbness and a vague unsatisfying frustration overtook my body. I was too emotionally spent to feel anything more. I looked up at Grace and saw a tear run down her cheek. She hugged me like before, but we both knew we couldn't waste time here. Rush was dead, but Screech seemed likely to attack, and we didn't know what else might try their hand.

We continued on, staying alert for signs of danger, but it seemed like this place was Rush's domain, and without him, nothing much happened. Even Screech only bothered us a few times. Before we knew it, we were at Door 100. I took a deep breath in, not knowing what to expect. Behind Door 100, there seemed to be an electrical area. Cold stone walls and cement floors gave off an uninviting atmosphere, and there were several halls there closed off by large metal gates with no visible way of opening them. The lights worked sporadically at best, some flickering occasionally, and some not working at all. Barrels were placed randomly throughout the area, and they seemed to contain oil, judging by the black liquid that spilled from a barrel that had fallen over. We walked forward, and came to a large room with many empty shelves, and a locked door that led to another room. It had a window, but we couldn't see anything through it, just another bland wall and an uninteresting door.

The most interesting feature of the room was a large metal door with a lever next to it. I hesitated, but Eli walked forward and pulled the lever, causing the door to open, each side sliding into their respective wall. Behind the door was a pair of staircases that lead up and down, but more importantly, we saw a familiar Figure. It's frame and grisly appearance that defied death was unmistakable. Somehow, Figure had escaped the library and gotten here through some other method. The opening of the door was a slow and loud mechanical process, which immediately drew the Figures attention. It let out a roar, and it charged down the stairs towards us. There was no time to quietly move out of the way, its massive legs allowed for huge strides, and we were forced to run, our loud footsteps giving away our locations continually. We saw more storage closets the way we had come, and we all found a place to hide, hoping that it wouldn't know where we went. I got unlucky and ended up last in the line, with Figure chasing me directly.

I jumped into a closet as I thought it was about to touch me, and it slammed into the corner of the closet, shaking it with a resounding meaty slap sound. It stood very still, and I realized it was listening for me. Despite my fear, I knew I had to keep my breathing under control if I was going to have a chance at avoiding its detection. I leveled my breathing and started inhaling and exhaling, steadily and quietly. Each second of doing this stretched into hours, and it felt like an eternity before

Figure finally gave up and started wandering around in hopes of finding a meal. I quietly exited the closet, hoping against hope that the hinge didn't squeak. Each inch I pushed the door was a gamble, but it seemed that I won the lottery, as I finally got it open enough for me to step out quietly. I realized that the lever Eli pulled also opened the gates blocking off the other parts of the electrical area, but this didn't interest me right now. I crept back towards the place Figure had come from. It seemed to be patrolling the maze of hallways where we entered from the greenhouse, so I waited there, hoping that the others would think to come here as well.

Before long, I saw Eli coming out of the darkness. I pointed towards the halls, hoping he knew where Grace was. He shrugged however, and motioned for me to follow him as he walked towards the staircase. I shook my head and continued standing there, waiting for Grace. I was starting to get nervous, even more so than when one is being hunted by a demon, when Grace finally emerged. I raised my fists happily, and Grace copied me with a small smile. I looked behind me to see that Eli was already going up the stairs. I motioned for Grace to follow, and we caught up with him. At the top of the staircase, among other less important things, there was a lift. I thought to myself, "We came here through an elevator, so maybe we'll be able to leave through an elevator." I hoped desperately that this was the way out, but to my great annoyance, it seemed like the elevator had no power. We pressed all the buttons, but they did nothing, and the light in the elevator was off. I searched elsewhere in the room, hoping to find something that could turn the elevator on, but all I found was a key. I showed it to the others, and I went back down to where I had seen that locked door previously.

The key did indeed open the door, and as I walked in, I saw why the elevator was off. There was a fuse box installed on one of the walls, and it was missing all the fuses. I pointed to all the empty slots, and then pointed up in the general direction of the elevator. Grace nodded, but communicated that we didn't know where the fuses were. I knew that, if Figure was intelligent, it likely hid all the fuses in those hallways, which was why it was only patrolling in that area. It took some convincing, but I got Grace to come with me and Eli back where Figure was present. Our only advantage against the creature, our sight, was severely diminished by the lack of good lighting, and the walls often obscured it from our view even further. We had to listen very carefully to figure out where it was and avoid it. We split up in search of the fuses, and I entered one random room, filled with shelves. There were three fuses scattered around, and on the tallest shelves. If it weren't for the weight of the shelves, I would have made them fall over when I climbed them. I realized I didn't have much space left in my pockets, so I ditched the lighter to make more room. Since I was holding my phone, my pockets were filled with the three fuses and the walkie talkie Rosie had given me.

I remembered the walkie talkie just then, but trying to use it now would be idiotic. I was about to leave the room and go back to the safe area to deposit the fuses, but then Figure walked into the room. It growled ominously before it started feeling all of the shelves, and when it came to a spot where a fuse had been, to find it empty, it roared in anger and shoved the shelf over. It nearly slammed into

my head, and I inhaled sharply. I thought I had just done myself in, but the crashing of the shelf covered my mistake. Figure stormed out of the room, now walking faster than before.

I moved back to the safe area and put my fuses on the ground below the fuse box. There were no others there, but I had found mine very quickly, so I didn't worry about it. I crept back to the hallways and continued searching, but I only found one more, and that was after nearly 10 minutes. I saw Eli at one point, and he was carrying a couple fuses. The fuse I found was wedged in between the wall and a large pipe, so tightly that I had trouble getting it out. It finally gave in, but it shot out and banged against a second pipe. I heard Figure growl in the distance, but I didn't have enough time to place exactly where it was coming from. I decided to cross the hall and press myself flat against the wall. I briefly considered just trying to walk back to the safe area immediately, but I decided against it, which was the correct decision. As I was standing against the wall, Figure emerged from the darkness, storming past me. It nearly touched me with its gangly arms, but I avoided detection. As soon as it passed, I started going back to the safe area, and I heard it roar in fury once again behind me. I made it back to the fuse box to find seven fuses on the ground, and mine made it eight. I decided to just wait for the others for a couple minutes, but I feared the worst when I heard another roar in the distance, and the sounds of crashing metal.

After another few suspenseful moments, Gracie and Eli returned, with Grace holding the last couple fuses. We slid each fuse into the slots in the fuse box, and the lights sprung to full capacity around us. From our vantage point in the fuse room, we could see an exposed wire sitting on a puddle of oil a little ways towards the hallways, and as electricity coursed out of the wire, it ignited the oil, and what we could see of the entryway burst into flames. Beyond it, we could hear Figure roar in apparent pain, and then the sound of shattering glass, and then it was silent, other than the sounds of the fire.

Grace started to whisper something about Figure, but I mimed zipping my mouth shut to get her to be quiet. There was certainly a possibility that it had burned alive, but it wasn't something I would want to bet my life on. I looked at the fuse box, and realized that some of the switches were set to the on position, explaining why the lights immediately turned on. Each one had a label, but they were faded and difficult to read, so I swiftly flipped each and every one. Now with the elevator supposedly online, I turned to the others and was about to wave them after me, but then a bang coming from behind me made me jump. I turned around and saw a door, which was trembling under a heavy assault. Figures growls sounded from the other side. I thought that maybe that glass shattering sound might have been a window it crashed through, allowing it to get to a different part of the electrical area by the outside. This didn't really seem plausible, but that didn't matter to me then, as instinct kicked in. We all bolted, making a beeline for the elevator. Behind us, we heard the door fly off its hinges, and Figures footsteps followed, rapidly chasing after us.

We scrambled up the stairs, our headstart rapidly diminishing. Our running continuously alerted Figure to our location, and it was rapidly catching up with its massive strides. None of us dared

to glance back to see how close it was, but it felt like its constant roaring was right on top of us as we shot into the lift, Eli repeatedly slamming his hand into the close door button. I turned around to see Figure ramming into the gate of the lift. If it had stuck its arm out, it would have gone through the remaining gap in the door and stopped it from closing, but it hadn't thought to do that. It stooped down and growled, slamming its fist into the gate as Eli pressed the button marked "Mine", as it was one of two options other than Hotel, and the only labeled one.

We all caught our breath for a moment, but then I remembered the walkie talkie in my pocket. I knew this could possibly be our last chance to let the hotel staff know what happened. "The walkie talkie!" I yelled. I yanked it out of my pocket and turned it on. "We made it!" The response came through, static heavy, but still understandable. I heard cheering on the other end, and somebody who I was pretty sure was Rosie, asked me "What's at the end??" I hurriedly explained, "I think we killed Rush in the greenhouse, but there are snares on the floor in the greenhouse, and the lights didn't flicker when Rush came, because they were off, and Angie died, but we made it to Door 100, it's an electrical area with an elevator, we're riding it right now, but Figure was here, and he—" My frantic and rushed spouting of details was abruptly cut off as a massive weight hit the top of the lift.

We looked up to the grating above us and laid eyes upon Figure, who had tried its luck and jumped down the elevator shaft after us. It furiously flailed around, trying to get at us, but succeeding in only wrecking the cables holding the elevator. As the elevator started free falling, we heard the people on the other end of the walkie talkie freaking out and demanding to know what was going on, but the static was growing nearly as fast as the elevator was falling. Above us, the Figure aborted its last desperate effort and leapt upwards, digging its claws into the walls to slow its fall. It soon disappeared into the distance, while the walkie-talkie faded to pure static. The grinding of metal on stone filled our ears as the force of gravity keeping us on the floor of the elevator weakened. Grace laid down flat on the floor, and I followed suit. With enough luck, we would survive and the herb of viridis would take care of the rest. Me and Gracie shared one last look before I felt a jarring crushing pain, and I fell to black.

## *Interlude I*

After we got the news that the guests had made it, Rosie and five others set out to go after them. I prayed there was an end to this, but from the sound of it, something had happened to the guests, and I reckoned they were dead too. At least we were right that these entities could be stopped. With what, Miles had failed to mention. I could only assume that Jenkins was telling the truth about the cross, because nothing else could protect us from that thing's gaze.

Nobody came back from that expedition, which could mean anything, but our group was reduced to five. The next bunch of people left when another guest made it past Door 50. Apparently, Miles was telling the truth and Figure wasn't in the library anymore, the guest made no mention of the thing that was supposed to be in the library, and was confused when we talked about it. 2 more staff members left with the guest, leaving just me, Isaiah, and Zachary. I had been thinking about this for a long time, and I think Isaiah had been too, but I finally brought it up after this point. I talked to them about the fact that one of us is going to have to stay here and help guests along, until one comes along who is, for whatever reason, willing to take up the job.

Zachary clearly wasn't here to stay, he had likely just stayed that long due to fear or laziness, and he got up and left after I told them about this inevitability. Isaiah really, really tried. He wanted to help me and keep me company, but he just couldn't take it. After a few weeks, he broke down, and I assured him he could leave. We said goodbye, and then he was gone. I know it's going to be a long time. It's already been 5 months, and nobody has so much as considered staying in my place. A guest comes almost every week, sometimes multiple times in a week, so it has to be done. The only reason I can do this is because I know it will end at some point. Either this place will finally be destroyed by somebody who is able enough and knows what needs to be done, or somebody decides to take on the mantle. I take solace in the fact that some of these people might be able to leave this place, but my hopes aren't high.

## *Bunker*

I woke slowly and feverishly. At first, I had trouble comprehending what was happening, due to the pain raging through every inch of my body. I stared up at the ceiling, trying to figure out why I was hurting so much. Then, it all came back to me in a rush. I realized I was probably only alive due to the herb of viridis, which was thankfully still flowing through my veins. I could feel the pain slowly lessening every second I lay there. When it became bearable enough, I slowly got to my feet. I looked around at the lift, taking in my surroundings. It was wrecked, crumbled in on itself on one side, it was clearly not operational. Grace and Eli lay crumpled on the ground. Blood was pooled beneath Grace, where I was, and especially under Eli. It seemed Eli didn't know to lay down in a falling elevator, his legs were crumpled and smashed beneath him, and his head was smashed against the floor, the damage far from repaired. It was a gruesome sight, but Gracie looked much better. Just as with me, her skin seemed to be in good shape, but I suspected both of our innards were severely damaged. The elevator had fallen for what felt like more than a few seconds, so it was a wonder we didn't die immediately.

I walked slowly over to Grace, whose eyes were closed, and painfully crouched down. My throat was unbelievably sore, but I croaked out, "Gracie? Are you awake?" I barely heard her whisper back a pitiful 'yeah', but I sighed in relief. I spoke, mostly to myself. "I guess you had a rougher landing than me. Don't worry, I can feel the viridis working on it. I think that... Eli is dead, though." She didn't respond, which I understood. I sat down on the floor next to her, trying to avoid looking at Elijah's body. After a few minutes of silent waiting, I noticed that Eli's skull was in noticeably better shape. I informed Grace, and then realized I could hear a strange noise coming from Eli. Grace seemed to notice it too, and she asked, "What's that cracking sound?" I took a closer look at Eli's body and noticed the legs very slowly shifting. I guessed the sound was the bones being slowly rebuilt and repaired, and I was convinced that Eli was indeed alive.

After a while longer of listening to that sickening sound, I checked my phone, only to find it was smashed to bits in my pocket. Despite it not being at all important to the current situation, I groaned in annoyance. "What happened?" Grace mumbled. "Nothing, my phone's just smashed. Are you feeling a little better?" She proved she was, by lifting her arm up and giving me a thumbs up. She started sitting up with a groan. She looked around disorientedly until she saw me, then she looked at Eli. She was silent for a moment before she simply said, "Ew..."

It was a very long time before Eli started to stir. Once our throats were better, we passed the time mostly by talking about the staff back in the hotel and what she had learned about them. Eli scared both of us when he suddenly started speaking. "Jeez, my everything hurts." I told him how smashed up he had been, and informed him of the best way to survive a falling elevator. He didn't care much, as he seemed to be thinking about something else. After a while longer, Eli finally stood up and



stretched, a chorus of crackling coming from his bones, especially his legs. Glad to be done with the waiting, me and Gracie followed, and we exited the lift, walking into the hallway beyond.

The fluorescent lights above our heads were a deep blue color, and the walls were a smooth dark gray metal. The environment gave off a cold, utilitarian atmosphere, which was only strengthened when we rounded a corner and entered a room which contained nothing but a door. There were no decorations at all, unless the slightly differently colored baseboard counted. The door spanned the length of the small room, and was made out of a somewhat different metal than the walls, and had only a keypad next to it. There was nothing at all inside the compact room to hint at what the code was, and the door looked like it was made to withstand a warhead, leaving no way to break in. "Maybe it's the code from the library?" Grace puzzled. None of us even remembered that code however, and the keypad took eight digits, not five, so that was off the table. We were at a complete loss of how to proceed, when a voice sounded from a speaker on the keypad.

"Name and authority, please." It was a cold and professional voice, but it was human, and relief flooded through me. This door could just be to keep the entities inside, and we were about to escape. Eli had to joke with whoever was on the other end, of course. "I'm Elijah Bolton, and that guy is Miles Morales." I glared at him and gave my actual last name to the speaker, and Grace gave her name as well. "I guess... I don't have any authority here, but why do we need that? Can't we just come out?" I asked, slightly confused. The speaker was silent for a few seconds, before it responded. "How did you get here? An overseer ID is required to even enter the facility, who let you in?" I looked at the others with confusion, and searched for words. "We... came through the Dores Hotel. Are you guys feds? If you are, you should know what I'm talking about, I think." The voice, which had previously shown signs of confusion, like our own, was now in disbelief. "You got through the Hotel?" He then yelled out to somebody with him, "These guys made it through tertiary!" He turned his attention back to us and asked, "Are you normal people?"

I mumbled an answer in the affirmative and, after another pause, the person told us to keep our hands up and don't move. Before us, the door slid open slowly, splitting horizontally through the middle, and as the two halves of the door clunked into their places in the floor and ceiling, six armed soldiers entered the room. I saw they all had their rifles raised and pointed at us, and we all tensed up in fear. "Hey, why are you pointing those at us??" Three of the soldiers put us in ridiculously heavy black handcuffs while the other three continued holding us at gunpoint, and then the first three escorted us forward. The one closest to me assuaged my fears, informing us that these were just formalities. "Sorry 'bout all this, after we make sure you're not demons, we'll handle you a little nicer." Another soldier walked up to us and pointed a strange device at us, waving it slowly up and down a few times. It beeped, and then the soldier said "Clear." The other soldiers took our handcuffs back off, and they stopped pointing their guns at us. Now that I wasn't so worried about somebody getting trigger-happy,

I was able to take in my surroundings. Just like Isaiah had described, these people looked like U.S. military, but if they were in a sci-fi movie a hundred years in the future.

Instead of the usual green or sand color, the soldiers were a dark navy-blue color, and along with all the usual gadgetries adorning them, they had some more atypical gear. They had noticeably heavier armor on the arms, including wrist gauntlets and metal-reinforced gloves, as well as armor on their upper arms, and they had what seemed to be tactical pauldrons. Their shoulder armor was composed of contraptions that I couldn't even identify, let alone guess the purpose of, so much so that I wondered if they were just some really tacky decorations. It looked like a wearable swiss army knife, but even more complicated. Their rifles had some underbarrel attachment, perhaps grenade launchers, but I wasn't a gun nut, so I wasn't sure. The most eye-catching aspect of them, however, was their helmets. I had heard that full-face helmets had a lot of various issues, like reduced peripheral vision and hearing, but these soldiers used them anyways, obscuring their faces from us. It certainly looked like something out of a sci-fi movie; they seemed to have built-in headphones among other details I couldn't discern the purpose of, and an insignia on the forehead that looked like a tall rectangle, but with the top rounded and the bottom ending in three triangles.

Eli commented what I was too apprehensive to, "Are y'all Mandalorians?" Two of the soldiers looked at each other, and one hissed to the other, "I told you so!" The other one sighed and turned back to us. "No, we're U.S. military, and you guys are way in over your heads. I don't know *how* you managed to get through Tertiary, we keep #1 and 27 there. And 19 too." I looked at him in confusion. "What? Tertiary?" He was silent for a second before he understood. "Oh, I forgot you guys don't know what's going on." He put a finger up to one of the buttons on his helmet and pressed it down before speaking again. "Can I get a supervisor up here? Sp5? Yeah, some people survived Tertiary. Yes, we scanned them. Thanks." He assured us somebody was coming before he and his buddies left us alone to wait. Though it seemed unprofessional of them to just leave us standing somewhere, I was sure we were going to be out soon. I looked around at the area, which was huge and a little more futuristic than I was expecting from a regular military base. Just like in the room before, it was illuminated by deep blue lights, rather than regular white or yellow ones, and that combined with the unfamiliar nature of the tech there, created a somewhat hostile atmosphere. The place was terraced, with four different levels containing different things. On the top level, where we were, boxes of ammo and other basic military supplies were located, as well as a room labeled "Decontamination." Below us, another level contained even bigger crates of weaponry as well as some intimidating automatons plugged into the walls next to many bulky drones. The robots looked like giant dogs, and both the dogs and the drones were outfitted with heavy weapons.

Below that, the next floor seemed to be split into two smaller floors on one side, but on the other, there was a huge blast door marked Door 101. There was a walled off area in the center with the same insignia from before on the floor, and monitors and computers lined the walls. A few men in dark

blue suits sat in roly chairs, working on their computers or discussing things with each other. Elsewhere on that floor, there was a door marked 'Bathrooms' and a walled off rec room, and there was a lounge and a door marked 'Barracks' on the lowest floor. Next to me, Grace wondered out loud, "Didn't the button on the elevator say 'Mine'? This is a weird... entrance to a mine." Eli was able to answer her question. "I saw a cave entrance through the lift door on our way down. That was probably the mine." I wondered if there were more entities residing in that mine, but my thoughts were interrupted when one of the suits from the important-looking center room walked up to us.

"Greetings, survivors. You may call me Supervisor 5, or Sp5, and you are currently inside U.S.P.C. Site 2. You won't be leaving, unless you find the exit in Site 2, so you should come with me to—" I cut him off with anger and fear in my voice; dread had filled every part of me when he claimed we weren't allowed to leave. "What do you *mean*, we won't be leaving? Do you have any idea what we've been through to escape that place and get back to our lives? And aren't you the people who kept these entities here instead of killing them? How could you possibly justify keeping us here?" The supervisor sighed, and his voice was sympathetic, but with far too much of a hint of annoyance for my liking. "I wish it was that simple. I know, I know, you have a lot of questions, so, as I was saying, you should come with me to the lounge so we can discuss how things are around here. Suffice to say, we're doing our best here."

I scoffed, but followed him nonetheless. We descended several flights of stairs until we got to the lounge, where a few soldiers were playing chess or some card game I couldn't identify. "Clear out, S7. And put your helmets on, you know PB-018 comes up to the door sometimes. Don't let me see you with them off again." The soldiers all gave an unhesitating "Yessir." before putting their helmets back on and gathering their games up. The supervisor waited for about a single second before he hissed out, "I said, clear. Out." They dropped their stuff and quickly walked away. He sat down on one of the sofas, sighing as he did. He motioned for us to do the same, and we all sat in the several cushioned chairs around the table. I hadn't felt hungry ever since I entered this place, and I remembered one of the hotel staff saying these places removed your need for food and water, but it was still a pleasant surprise when the Supervisor had food brought for us to eat. As soon as it was brought, he started speaking. "Now, I'll have to ask you to bear with me, this will take a while to explain."

"Well, get on with it then." I snapped. He stared at me for a second or two, but I didn't back down. He exhaled loudly through his nose, and then began. "So, I suppose you know by now that demons, monsters, ghosts, whatever you want to call them, are real. *We* call them Paranormal Beings, PBs. We call ourselves the United States Paranormal Containment Division, or the U.S.P.C.D. Once the existence of these beings was discovered while our ancestors were exploring the new world, our organization was created. Initially, our goal was to kill every one of these beasts we came across, and we certainly tried. With advances in technology, we were able to kill many of them, but there were some that proved too hardy. These beings that we could not immediately snuff out were labeled

Superdemons, which was later changed to Paranormal Beings. With these, the priority was changed to containment and keeping their existence under wraps. It was extremely difficult at first, seeing as the only ones we were trying to contain were the ones that we couldn't kill. Superdemon #1, labeled "Solid Pain", had to be given live prey continually to satisfy its desires until the technology came around to destroy it. It was a little more complicated, but essentially we poured several gallons of painkiller on it, and it seemed to get rid of it.

The ones who are still around today still haven't been able to be killed. For example, PB-027. It has its own pocket dimension, and it turns random doors into entrances into its pocket dimension. It physically manifests as a cloud of stygian blue smoke with blue pinpoints of light. You might have seen it in Tertiary, and we haven't figured out a way to harm it, let alone snuff it out completely. Oh, pardon my jargon, Tertiary means Tertiary Containment Site. U. S. P. C. Site 3. Anyways, we always seemed to be behind these entities in terms of capabilities. We were only sustained by luck, up until a certain breakthrough. Now, not even I understand the 'science', if you can even call it that, behind it all, so I'll try and be brief. Since many of these entities defied the laws of physics, one theoretical scientist working for us supposed that these entities were living in a different world, one with different laws of physics, and their laws simply allowed for them to... cross over, if you will, along with whatever capabilities they possessed. Don't ask me how that can be reconciled with our laws of physics any better than just taking everything at face value, but that's the accepted explanation. This scientist went on to try to find a way to get into this other world, and he obsessed over it for most of his life. You know, basic mad scientist baloney, and, as the higher-ups tell us, he found a way."

I could sense disbelief even in his own voice as he told this story, but I let him continue uninterrupted.

"One of our squads found him dead in his lab with a burst aneurysm, but he had finished instructions for creating what he called an, "Access Point", and a real physical one right next to it. None of us know why it works, but we follow the instructions, and they work. These Access Points, which we call AP devices, can warp space and time, and more importantly, control PBs. It's not absolute, they still only allow us to contain them, and they seem to have a problem with spontaneously disintegrating upon any major use. They're very expensive to keep creating, but they are immeasurably more effective than natural containment. It was at this point that we changed the name to Paranormal Beings, and we sealed up the first 10 PBs we had found into a massive cave system, known as U.S.P.C. Site 1, Primary for short.

This also barred us from entering, which we didn't think would be a problem, but we were very wrong. If you return to the scientist's idea that these beings are creatures from another dimension, it follows that these devices are just creating walls that are effective physical objects for those creatures. It also follows that they can eventually break through those walls with enough motivation, and apparently, lack of prey was a great motivator for them.

First, after an extensive amount of research and examining the deceased scientist's notes, we were able to fine-tune the AP devices a little more. It took over a dozen AP devices, but we eventually managed to create a barrier that existed purely and solely for the PBs, and not for us, so we could enter and exit to feed them. The president signed an agreement to let us feed those things using death-row inmates. From then on, things seemed to be going more in our favor. With the PBs being routinely fed and contained, we were able to turn our attention more to analyzing them, finding weaknesses, and further weaponizing the AP devices. We set up a facility at the entrance so we could remotely study the PBs, but then we acquired PB-018. This particular being has a very large sphere of influence, and, long story short, we were forced to relocate. We could still funnel death-row inmates in there, but camping out there long term became impossible. So, we moved to a much farther location, and we created this place, initially called U.S.P.C.D. Observation Site 1. A second problem arose however, years later when more and more PBs were shoved into Primary, and things got really crowded in there. From our monitoring technology, it seemed that most of the inmates were dying to a few of the PBs, and the others weren't getting enough.

I personally didn't support this position, but the Director decided to have our bunker changed into a Secondary Containment Site. We constructed this whole area, set up that big door, and got rid of the old entrance."

Grace interrupted the supervisor, voicing my immediate concern in the process. "You're telling us we're still not out?! We *have* to go through more to get out of here?"

"In a word, yes, but it's not quite that simple. Please let me finish." He waited for further objections for a moment before he resumed.

"We split up the PBs and left some in Primary, and some in Secondary. That got rid of the immediate problem, but it brought back the first problem with PB-018 to an even higher degree. This time, however, technology had progressed significantly, and the design for the AP devices is continually being improved, allowing us to create these helmets we use, which block out foreign psychological influences. These things are far too expensive to use in the regular military, but it's required to deal with this. Ultimately, though, we knew death-row inmates wouldn't sustain us forever when we kept finding more and more PBs, so we had to come up with a new solution.

This led to the creation of Tertiary, our most unique containment site. It took months, but we engineered a specialized AP device, and we set things up such that the site would continually feed itself. It's hard to explain, but I'll do my best. So, please rec-"

"Okay, stop right there, we've already figured out plenty about how the place works. One of the people who DIED on the way here had dug up some information about it on the internet, because apparently it was *not* an oversight, but a 'tactical decision' on the part of the U.S.P.C. to let info about it run wild. Let me make an educated guess, the hotel is all intertwined with this 'other world', and it teleports around all the time, appearing to people who want a place to stay to lure them in, right?"

I had gotten pretty much all of the information I needed, but I was still pissed at these guys. The supervisor sighed and continued on.

"Well, who else can we use? We're already making use of death-row inmates, but that isn't enough and isn't reliable. Better that *some* innocent die than the PBs break out and make *every* innocent person die."

"Instead of killing people, why don't you just kill the entities?!"

The supervisor was starting to get frustrated.

"Weren't you listening?? Every one of these PBs is something that we *can't* kill. Do you think we just didn't try? What brilliant method do you have for killing something that isn't even corporeal?"

I glanced at Eli, who was smirking at me. I sighed and hesitantly said, "Crucifixes kill them." His shades blocked me from seeing his eyes, but I could see the skin around them pull taut as he narrowed his eyes at me. "What on earth do you mean? Like, crosses? The things that look like lowercase ts? How would *that* stop them??" I sighed again and looked to Eli for support. Thankfully, he took over. "Well, I don't suppose you believe in God, do you?" The supervisor remained silent, slowly lowered his sunglasses, and shot Eli a look of utter disbelief. The two were silent for a moment, before Eli spoke again. "Do you have a PB that looks like a decayed floating head, with black stuff around it?"

The supervisor nodded.

"Yes, PB-024."

"Well, it's dead. I threw a crucifix at it, and I guess it was a magic one, because it stopped it from moving and pulled it down into the floor, probably into the underworld."

The supervisor removed his shades and put his head in his hands, rubbing his face for a moment before he changed the subject. "Alright, you people want to get out of here, right? Well, there's a property of these containment sites that we can't really control, which is that you can't leave if you've been here for more than a few hours. None of the personnel here can leave, and unless you got through Tertiary *very* quickly, you can't leave either. How long did it take you to get through Tertiary?" The others said they had been there for days, and I told him more than an hour. He resumed with a nod. "It won't be an option for you two. *You* might still be able to leave, however. Come with me, quickly."

He stood and started making his way back up to the top terrace, with us following closely. He held down a button on his earpiece, and his voice was audible on the intercom. "S7, you may return to the lounge." After arriving at the top terrace, the supervisor entered a door marked "Entrance", but I realized this was the way we had just come through. "Hey, the only thing this way is the hotel. And a mine, I guess, but the lift is destroyed anyways." I said. The supervisor just chuckled and continued on regardless. He put in the keycode and entered the hallway we had come from. I told him again that the lift was destroyed, but as we rounded the corner, we saw that there was no longer a crushed lift, but a

closed elevator door. “The way from Tertiary to Secondary is a one way entrance, if you go this way from Secondary, it only leads to the elevator to the surface.” The supervisor explained. I started to ask why, but decided against it, considering everything else I had just heard. The supervisor opened the elevator for us, and we stepped inside.

As the elevator ascended, the supervisor started speaking again. “As I was saying earlier, before I got distracted, if you want to leave this place, the only way to do it is to get through Secondary, and find the exit.” Grace scoffed and crossed her arms. “Why would you not just have a second exit here? How are *you* guys supposed to leave?”

The supervisor sighed once again. “We *don't* leave. The higher-ups have decided to make our stay here effectively permanent so that we can continually observe the PBs, because making another human-only exit wastes many much-needed AP devices. Just like with the hotel, people can enter, but after a few hours, they can't leave.” After that statement, the elevator came to a halt, and the doors opened. Though nowhere near as refreshing as the cool rainy air we experienced in the hotel courtyard, the outdoor air of the desert we were now in was not an unwelcome change. “We’re outside again!” Grace exclaimed. The supervisor grunted, and then reminded Grace, “We can only go out here because the boundary of Secondary extends up here. We can't go much further than this. Except maybe you.” I turned towards him and nodded, before I turned back to the horizon and started jogging forwards. As I ran, the heat of the desert bore down on me, slowing me considerably, but then I realized it wasn't just the heat. It felt like the air was getting thicker and harder to walk through. The more I inched forward, the more difficult it became to continue on. I was eventually brought to a halt and forced to turn back. I walked dejectedly back to the others.

The supervisor nodded thoughtfully. “I guess it was too late.” We walked back to the elevator, which was situated inside a hallway carved into a mountain. As we went, Grace asked the supervisor, “Where are we right now? I was in a city in Argentina when I entered the hotel, nowhere near a desert. And... Angie was in Norway.” She hesitated for a moment mentioning her deceased friend. “We’re somewhere in Nevada right now. More than that, you don't need to know, but Tertiary is effectively nowhere. It is linked to Secondary, but it seems to rest largely in the other world. There's also the Hadal Blacksite somewhere in the Pacific, but that is a whole different can of worms... mostly classified. Don't ask.” the supervisor said. We descended the elevator in silence, but as we entered the central part of the bunker again, Eli asked for a crucifix. The supervisor looked at him incredulously for a moment, before he gave a resigned “Sure.” He announced over the intercom with an almost sarcastic tone of voice, “If anybody has any crucifixes that they don't need, please message Sp5 directly.” He waited for a few seconds, and then resumed walking. We stopped in front of the huge door marked Door 101, and turned to us, sighing again. “Look, our resources, including my sympathy, are stretched very thin, but I'll give you what I can.” The supervisor then spoke privately with who I thought were probably the other supervisors using his earpiece, and after a minute or two, he made another announcement.

“Attention all personnel, Door 101 will be opened five minutes after this announcement. All squads except S13, return to the barracks. MPBDU-01, start up and go towards Door 101. S13, you are to go to Door 101 as well.” As soon as he had finished speaking, a tone played throughout the facility, signifying the start of an otherwise unheard countdown. The supervisor turned his attention back to us again. “Before you go, you will need to see the rules to deal with these entities. They’re simple enough, but you *must* follow them. Our most recent report says the hotel staff has set up rules as well, yes? This will be similar.”

He pulled his phone out and pulled something up on it before showing us. My phone was destroyed, and the others were out of battery if their phones weren’t smashed as well, so we couldn’t take pictures. “Well, you’re going to want to memorize these, but you should be fine either way as long as your guards stay alive.” the supervisor said. I asked if he was referring to S13, and he nodded his head before I heard a metal clanking sound from behind me. I turned around and jumped at what I saw. It was one of the large canine robots I had seen earlier, but this one was up and running. Grace yelped in surprise, but Eli had a completely different reaction. “Oh my *gosh*, is that a good boy??”

Gracie laughed, but the supervisor was not amused. “No, it’s a Mobile PB Detection Unit.” He activated his earpiece and spoke to ‘S13’ again. “Get down here immediately, the DU woke up and walked down here before you did.” While we waited for the tardy military squad, the rules played in my mind over and over. The dread I felt knowing I’d have to go through likely another hundred doors with rules I wasn’t even familiar with was overwhelming.

Rule #1 - PB-011: Do not touch purple sludge.

Rule #2 - PB-012: Keep an eye on the ceiling, do not let PB-012 get directly above you. If the lights have gone out, listen for it instead.

Rule #3 - PB-013: If you spontaneously go blind, do not move. It will pass if you stay still.

Rule #4 - PB-014: Do not take your eyes off of PB-014 if you see it.

Rule #5 - PB-015: Do not make any loud sound in its presence, except via a thrown object. Using that method, or some other safe way, you must create noise to break the silence.

Rule #6 - PB-016: If you get a gut feeling that something is coming, listen to it and hide. An MPBDU will let you know for certain if PB-016 is coming.

Rule #7 - PB-017: Keep away from PB-017 at all costs, and do not forget about its presence, or it will pull you in.

Rule #8 - PB-018: Keep your mind clear, realize that its influence is nothing but placebos, and run away from it.

I had heard a lot of talk about PB-018 already, and the description in this list did little to assuage my concerns. I took a deep breath to calm myself before realizing that S13 had arrived. S13 was composed of two soldiers in identical gear. The only thing distinguishing them was their voices. The supervisor introduced them as “M2” and “M4”. Eli, deciding this was inconvenient, asked if they had



any different names. The one called M2 shook his head, but said, “It’s better than ‘U.S.P.C.D-GR1-S13-M2’, right?” Eli was silent in response, and the soldier explained, “We can’t use our real names here, #18 gets more powerful if we do.”

Before long, an alarm sounded, which continued on for a few more seconds before the grinding of gears was heard. Door 101 slowly started to slide open, and an automated voice sounded over the intercom. “Door 101 now opening. Weapons free.” The cold and uncaring supervisor gave what he probably thought of as a very heartfelt goodbye. “Good luck.” I expected something more, but I realized the soldiers and the robot dog were already entering. I hesitantly inched forward. “We’re going right now?” I asked. The supervisor nodded unsympathetically. “The soldiers and the DU have all the defenses you could need. We can’t keep the door open forever, go on.”

We joined the soldiers a few feet in front of us, and as soon as we were past the entrance, it started closing behind us. I groaned and ran my hands through my hair. “How are we going to get through another two hundred doors? This is a nightmare.” Grace tried to console me immediately. “Don’t worry, these soldiers know how to combat everything, we’ll be fine.” One of the soldiers chuckled and corrected her, “Well, we don’t *combat* them, but yeah, we’ll keep you safe. You shouldn’t introduce yourselves though, remember what I said about #18.” The soldier put his hand on the dog walking alongside us and snickered. “Don’t tell anybody, but I call this guy ‘Crispy Chicken Sandwich’, Crispy for short. The supervisors don’t like it when we name the dogs.” Eli was a very big fan of the different name. “I bet Crispy is a good boy.” The soldier laughed, nodding his head. “Too bad they don’t have a ‘behave like a normal dog’ setting. Also, if you didn’t notice, we have our numbers on our collarbones here.” He pointed to a label on his chest, which read “M2”, allowing me to tell them apart with more than just their voices.

The hallways of the bunker were much less decorated than those of the hotel, and there was almost nothing interesting to see in the utilitarian corridors. Eli made things a little more interesting with his many questions, however.

“What’s behind those other doors?”

“Storage.” M4 blandly replied.

“Why are the lights dark blue?”

“It tampers with the effects of #17, or so I’m told. It’s apparently easier to deal with it with this color of lights active. I guess it was just to keep the aesthetic back in the hub, though.”, M2 said.

“Ah. Can I... uh...”

Eli trailed off as we entered Door 107, and we all laid eyes on a strange hole in the ground. It was perfectly circular, and I thought it was an intended feature of the place, until I saw that the ground below the floor was nothing but dirt, not the same refined metal. Stranger still, a bright purple light shone out of the hole, illuminating the ceiling above. I walked forward to see what was at the bottom of the hole, but M4 grabbed me roughly by the arm. I looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

“That’s PB-017. Do *not* get closer than you have to. Un... unfortunately it looks like we’re going to have to get pretty close.” He was right, the hole spanned the majority of the hall, leaving only a thin ledge on either side. “How’s Crispy gonna get across?” Eli worriedly asked.

In response, Crispy ran forward and leapt over the large hole, its mechanical legs providing it immense strength. Eli gave a relieved “Phew”, but there was still the problem of getting ourselves across. I asked M2 about something that was bugging me. “PB stands for paranormal *being*, right? How is that hole a being?” M2 grunted thoughtfully. “It’s not just the hole, or the light that draws you in, there’s something down there that... hey!” He stopped explaining abruptly as he turned and looked elsewhere. I followed his gaze and saw Grace slowly ambling towards the abyss, reaching out towards the bright purple light. M4 dashed forward and wrapped his arm around her, shoving her back from the hole. She fell hard on her bottom and looked up in confusion at M4, who unsympathetically admonished her. “Come on, this is an easy one to survive.” She stammered disorientedly. “What? I thought I was... when did I get over here?” M4 helped her up before addressing all of us. “All we need to do is walk past that ledge. It’s plenty big, just stay focused.” The two soldiers promptly strafed along the ledge, crossing it in a few seconds. Eli went next, moving slightly slower, but getting across nonetheless.

Me and Gracie went last. I focused all my thoughts on moving past the hole and not falling in, but I couldn’t help but notice the bottom of the hole, or lack thereof. Despite the violet light coming out of the hole, I couldn’t see farther than a few feet past the top of the hole, it faded to black at the bottom. Except, I kept thinking I could see something in there. I thought there was a face in the blackness, peering out at me, but I couldn’t be sure. It seemed similar to what you see when you look at a bright light, a mark on your retinas that isn’t really visible.

I had little time to analyze it, however, as I got to the other side of the hole. M2 gave a thumbs up and let us three go in front to make sure we didn’t get pulled in while they weren’t looking. As we entered the next door, I asked M2 another question. “Hey, do you have any actual names for these things?” He shook his head. “Not anything beyond just describing them. We all just call that one the hole.” I related my naming of all the entities from the Hotel and M2 was a big fan. I decided to call PB-017 “Abyss”, and we moved on. I quickly started to favor M2 over the other soldier. M4 was a lot more disciplined and no-nonsense, though he seemed to tolerate the unprofessionalism coming from his compatriot. Eli was quick to resume his questions. “Hey, if you’re M2, and that’s M4, where’s the other Ms?” M2 was silent for a moment before he answered. “There’s 6 members in every squad, all the members in my squad are dead except for us.” Eli quietly said “Oh.” And finally stopped pestering the soldiers. Instead, he started talking to me.

“So, spiderman, looks like the crucifix did what Jenkins said it did.” I groaned in annoyance. I had been dreading this interaction ever since the greenhouse. I had thought it was probably the government’s doing, but our interaction with that supervisor proved otherwise. I had spent a while

pondering what else could have made that happen, but nothing came to mind. I stayed silent. “You *saw* what it did, right? It killed Rush!” I made no response, but M4 looked at him sharply. “What do you mean it ‘killed’ it? Rush is your name for PB-024, right? That one isn’t even corporeal. How did a crucifix kill it?” Eli smiled and recounted the experience in detail. Neither of them gave any credence to it. M4 made no response, and M2 sarcastically replied, “Well, if you happen to find any crucifixes, you’re welcome to see how it goes.” Eli confidently asserted that he would, before returning to questioning M2 about various things.

“Hey, if regular guns don’t do anything to these guys, why do you have them?” M2 flourished his rifle and pointed to the under barrel attachment. “These *aren’t* regular guns, this attachment here is the U.S.P.C.Ds best attempt at weaponizing the AP devices. This bad-boy can stun PBs. The regular part of the gun’s just for fending off people on the surface, but this part is an AP Cannon.” Eli was about to ask something else, but M4 cut him off. “Can we cut the chatter? Our priority is to ensure your safety, not explain the inner workings of the U.S.P.C.D.” Eli shrugged but thankfully remained quiet. He reached out and pet Crispy as he walked. He was large enough for Eli to reach without having to stoop down at all, but he had no reaction. Suddenly, Crispy stopped in his tracks, and Eli pulled his hand away, thinking he had offended him. He started emitting a strange sound that I assumed was growling, but it didn’t really sound similar.

“You pissed it off!” I said, but M4 started running towards one of the side doors. “RULE 6, HIDE!” M2 followed, grabbing Grace and pulling her after him as Crispy bounded after M4 as well. Me and Eli were closer to a different door however, so we ran inside there. I could still hear the growling sound from across the hall, but it was soon drowned out by another sound. The speed of Ambush, which already dwarfed how fast Rush was, paled in comparison to how fast this thing was. I was already safely hidden, but about a single second after I first heard the noise, it was already upon us. A bright blue glow leaked through the gaps in the door as I listened to the sound emanating from it. It wasn’t so much a sound as a pressure in my ears, however. The intense pressure seemed to produce a deep resonating frequency that vibrated my entire body to an almost unbearable degree. On top of that, there was a noise somewhat akin to the sound you hear when listening to an incredibly low quality audio file; indistinct garbled noise. The sound left and returned at breakneck speeds, but the pressure hardly lifted during the times when the creature was farther. It left and came back nearly a dozen times, and I was starting to think it wasn’t going to leave. The pressure felt like I was in the depths of an ocean, and it was getting harder and harder to deal with the longer that thing stuck around. It was starting to go into actual pain when another noise broke through. The sound of some kind of high-tech machine powering up, followed by a boom, caused the creature to leave again, and this time, it didn’t come back.

The pressure in my head slowly receded as I saw Eli, gritting his teeth, get up and leave the room. I followed him and saw the soldiers also entering the hall, much more composed than us. “Sorry,

that one sticks around for a while sometimes. Our helmets keep us from the pressure, but are you guys okay?" M2 asked. The other two nodded, but I ignored the question, asking my own instead. "What was that sound? Does it just do that when it goes away?" I realized the answer when I saw smoke pouring out of the attachment on M4's rifle. "Oh, it works that well?" M2 shrugged. "I guess. They don't like it but it doesn't seem to actually damage them. Anyways, whaddya think #16 should be called?"

I groaned, thinking about the deep-ocean-like pressure it exerted, and I decided on "Depth". M2 clearly didn't understand why, but he just grunted and turned towards the next Door. We proceeded through another bunch of doors in silence before the two soldiers came to a stop at the exact same time. I turned to them, racking my mind for a rule that might be in effect that I hadn't noticed. Grace asked them what was wrong, but M2 raised a finger up, signaling for us to wait while they stared at nothing. Suddenly, M2 looked up at us and said something enigmatic. "You have friends coming." Eli immediately whooped and asked, "More doggies?!" M2 snorted and shook his head. "No, guys from Tertiary. Sp2 says they know y'all." My jaw dropped, and so did Gracie's, though Eli had no visible reaction. "Who?" Grace asked. M2 shrugged and said he wasn't told who. Gracie started walking back towards the way we came, and I started to follow, but M4 urged that we keep moving. "We should keep moving, Sp2 said they have a soldier with them, they'll catch up. It's not good to stay in one spot for too long here. PB-018 works better if you do." Grace crossed her arms and huffed, clearly still wanting to go meet up with these new survivors.

"Come on, Gracie, he probably knows better." I said. She sighed and turned to go with us. We moved on to Door 126, but after a few steps, the room went black. The lights didn't just go out, though I did hear them power off, I went completely blind, being unable to see the small glowing lights on Crispy's chassis and the soldiers armor. Fortunately, I remembered Rule #3, and I stayed completely still. The situation was scary enough, but then I heard something in the dark with us. A heartbeat, faint at first, was audible in the dark, but then it grew louder, until it seemed to be right next to us, far louder than I've ever heard a heartbeat. Despite the terror filling me, I didn't move a single muscle, but then I realized I could hear a second sound a few seconds later. Somebody in the room was hyperventilating. Then, a sharp inhale, though not a human one, sounded throughout the room, which was followed by a sound that invoked more fear than even the heartbeat. The sound of tearing flesh and spilling blood, along with an ear-piercing scream made my stomach drop, and then a second later, the blindness lifted, and I frantically looked around for whatever was in the room with us, but I saw nothing except Grace, laying on the floor with a massive chunk of flesh missing from her waist. The sight of the bloody pulp on the floor next to her was sickening. "You're lucky you only moved at the very end." M4 coldly commented. I glared at him, but he had no reaction. I turned my attention back to Gracie, who was panting and grimacing. Every muscle in her body was tensed as pain radiated throughout.

I dropped down to my knees next to her and put my hand on her shoulder in an effort to comfort her. "It's alright, the viridis will heal it, just... hang in there." She nodded slowly and reached out to clutch my shoulder, squeezing it uncomfortably hard, but I didn't mind it. M4 had been moving to bandage the injury, but he stopped after a moment. "Did you say viridis?" I absently replied, "Yeah.." but then I realized something. "Hey, yeah, what's the deal with that plant in the hotel? We all touched it and since then we're able to regenerate from anything." M2 answered on M4's behalf. "Yeah, that's a PI, a paranormal item, that we keep there." I looked at him for a moment, disgust coloring my expression. "Why would you people not give it to everybody? This could heal the world! Why would you keep it there?! Just because you don't understand it?" M2 immediately responded, "We *can't* give it to everybody. Since we can't figure out how to replicate it or make it reproduce, there's only the one plant, and we physically can't give it to everybody. It would be a privilege for the rich, and one that we could possibly lose jurisdiction over. All it would do is make things more unequal, so we give it to nobody instead of a select few." I thought about that for a moment and realized it was difficult to argue with, so I changed the subject. "It doesn't have any side effects does it?" I worriedly looked back down to Grace's injury, which was bleeding a lot less now, thankfully. "Not that we've seen. We've been monitoring test subjects exposed to the herb for a couple decades, and other than very slow aging, nothing seems to be wrong with them." M2 explained.

I waited until Gracie's vice grip on my shoulder lessened, and she let go. I did the same, and I asked her if she was feeling better. "A little, but it still hurts a lot." We continued waiting as the soldiers anxiously glanced around the room and I stared at the flesh slowly reforming on her waist. I wasn't quite sure what the soldiers were watching for, but it didn't matter to me at that moment. After another few moments, Grace sat up with a grunt, and M4 impatiently asked, "Are you ready to go now? It's not good to stay still here for long." I debated pressing him more about how PB-018 worked for a moment, but I decided against it, instead telling M4 to leave her alone. I held my hand out to her, and she took it, climbing to her feet. The missing flesh on her waist was now only a divot, though the viridis did nothing to repair the torn portion of her jacket and shirt. She crossed her arms and told M4 she was ready, with more than a little annoyance.

We started moving forward once again, but we only went through one more door before we heard something in the distance. I was expecting more eldritch roars, but it was nothing but several pairs of footsteps. "What rule is this?" Eli asked quickly. The soldiers were silent, except for M4 barking a command to the robot dog. "M.P.B.D.U-01, focused PB scan." A whirring sound came from the machinery inside Crispy's body, and then his blue eyes flashed green for a moment with a beep. M4 was silent for a moment before he held down a button on his helmet and started speaking. "S18 M5, where are you at right now? ... Yeah, we're just up ahead. One of our survivors got attacked by 013, we had to stop. Yeah, they found the PI in tertiary, they're fine." M2 turned and informed us, "Looks like your friends are almost here."

Eli let out an unenthusiastic but seemingly not sarcastic “Hurrah.”, and we waited another minute or two before we heard voices, and after another moment of eager anticipation, we caught sight of our long-awaited companions. It was the woman who had greeted me at Door 50, Rosie, and another hotel attendant I didn’t recognize, and a third U.S.P.C.D. soldier was with them as well. While M2 and M4 warmly greeted their brother-in-arms, or as warm as M4 could get, Grace exclaimed the hotel attendants names. The one I didn’t know was named Killian. I remembered that one of the soldiers had told us not to use our names, for fear of PB-018, but I stayed silent. Grace caught up with them and went through the awkward moment when she was informed that only a third of their original party made it, and she also told them of our losses. When Rosie took notice of me, I smiled and said, “I haven’t died yet, but no promises.” She smiled hollowly at my joke before I asked a question that came into my mind. “How did you get here so quick? It’s only been half an hour, I think, at the most.”

Her eyes lit up as she remembered their trek. “I thought I heard you mention killing Rush, and that seems to be true, because we never encountered it the entire way to Door 100! We never saw Figure at Door 100, though, and the elevator shaft was empty. We didn’t know what else to do, so we climbed down the shaft on the elevator cables. They all ended part of the way down the shaft, where there was some kind of cave entrance, and we swung off the cables into the entrance. We were going to go deeper, but then we finally heard Figure. It was somewhere down that tunnel, none of us wanted to go deal with it, so we just tried to climb down the walls of the shaft. The walls had a lot of ridges and we were able to climb down them, but, umm, Gustav’s hand slipped, and he fell.” I shot Eli a furious look as he wondered aloud, “Who on earth is Gustav?” Meanwhile, Rosie continued explaining her story, but she was cut off by M2.

“Who is ‘Figure’? The flesh monster?” Rosie nodded, slightly confused at the seemingly random question. “So, it’s in the mine, right? It’s *out* of the hotel?” M2 followed up. I felt a growing sense of alarm in my stomach. The amount of worry in the soldier’s voice suggested that we were in much more danger of being ripped apart by that beast than I had expected. Rosie worriedly mumbled an answer in the affirmative, and all three of the soldiers looked at each other. I couldn’t see what their expressions were, but it was clear that they were just as concerned as we were, maybe even more. M4 contacted the hub again and relayed the news. I couldn’t hear what was said on the other end, and M4 just sighed and looked around at all of us. After a moment of silence, he tersely said “Let’s go.” And so we did.

A few moments passed as we walked, and then Rosie spoke up, asking if I had names for this new set of entities. I told her about the two I had encountered, and the one from just now that had mauled Grace, which I decided to call Smother. The other hotel employee, Killian, stayed quiet throughout everything. He was pale and sweating, looking scared out of his mind. It was easy to understand why, but he was certainly taking this much worse than the rest of us. Even Grace, who had

just had a chunk of flesh torn out of her, was faring much better than him. Thinking about the recent attack, I asked the two hotel employees if they had found the herb of viridis. "That potted plant in the infirmary?" Rosie asked. "I mean, we saw it. Why, is there something important about it?" I groaned, feeling sympathetic for them. Grace explained to them the effects of the plant on all who touched it, and recounted the recent entity attack that she had endured. Rosie looked at us, dumbfounded. "So, if we had just touched that plant, we would be invincible?"

"Not exactly," I replied, "I'm pretty sure we can still die, but it does take a hell of a lot. Eli had his skull smashed open when the elevator fell, and he's fine now." We discussed the plant a little more, with Killian absent-mindedly staring forwards all the while, but then M4 signaled for us to stop. I looked around, and saw that, throughout the room, dark purple sludge sat on the floor, walls, and ceiling. "This one's simple enough, just don't step on the goop." M2 said to us. Eli asked what would happen if we did, and M4 scoffed in response, but M5 pulled a knife out of one of his pauldrons. Heedless of M4's reprimand, he dropped the knife onto the goo, and then a mouth with teeth the length of my fingers opened up out of the sludge and scarfed down the metal blade as if it was its first meal after a fast. "That's a pretty good reason." Eli said, as the mouth receded into the sludge.

M4 gave an exasperated sigh and started berating his team members. "All this time sitting around doing nothing has destroyed your discipline. If you treat this with this much flippancy, what would it take for you to actually put in effort to your given task? Tell me, what was the point of losing one of your knives when you could just as easily *tell* him why?" I was taken aback by his loss of temper, but M5 seemed not to care. "My apologies, *Supervisor*." He replied. M4 simply flipped the bird at him, and started moving forward again.

The silence lasted only for a moment before Eli, outspoken as he always was, asked if he could ride Crispy. M5 laughed audibly at this, but M4 snapped his head towards him and slowly hissed out, "You're going to get me court-martialed." Eli was finally silent, and we continued on, going through a few more Doors uneventfully. However, when we reached Door 134, the now familiar blue glow ceased. I turned behind me to see the lights still on in the previous room, but the space ahead of the door in front of us remained pitch black.

"Watch out for Rule 4." M4 cautioned us. I racked my memory, panicking for a moment before remembering. Keeping my eyes on whatever was in the dark seemed simple enough; I wouldn't be one to ignore a creature in a dark room with me anyways. We stepped forward into the room, and then it struck me that the guards weren't activating any source of light. At the same time, Killian worriedly murmured my thoughts. "Don't you guys have any flashlights... or something?" M5 replied, "We do, but we don't use them, it helps out 012. If you don't know, 012 actually—" before M2 cut him off. "That's a stupid clarification to make, how would they know anything?" The two were going to start arguing, but M4 brought an end to it. "Be. *quiet*. Stay close, people." he snapped.

The soldiers moved quickly towards the next Door, probably aided by night vision in their helmets. We followed close by, warily looking around for the subjects of rules 2 and 4. Luckily, we made it through the room without incident, but as the next door opened, we saw that the next room was just as dark as this one. "Twice in a row..." M2 muttered. The rest of us were silent, and we continued moving forward. Somewhere in the darkness, I saw two yellow pinpoints of light. I put it off as some random machinery, but then M4 barked, "Rule 4. Watch it!" I squinted at the two pinpoints, and then it hit me that it was something staring at me, not glowing lights. Try as I might, I couldn't make out any of its form, only the dimly glowing yellow spots. I realized then that the buzzing of the fluorescent lights above had ceased as well, leaving a deafening silence in its wake. As the two of us stared into each other's eyes, all of us backed out of the room, going towards where we thought the next door was. We mostly followed the soldiers, having to keep in physical contact with them to not lose our bearings, but I still couldn't see where I was going, as we were walking backwards, and I banged into the wall roughly. The disturbance shifted my attention from the creature, and I only remembered the danger a few seconds later. My head snapped back up to the beady eyes watching me, and I could tell they were much closer. I still never saw them move, but there they were, closer to me.

"How did it move when all of you were looking at it?" I mumbled to myself, not really expecting an answer. M2 answered under his breath, "We believe it creates a copy of itself for each person in its vicinity. For us it's the same distance away it was before. Be careful, come on." I heard M5 opening the next door behind me, and Killian sighed in relief, but I saw no light coming in this time either. M5 confirmed my fears, angrily muttering, "*Another* one?" We walked backwards into the next room, still covered in darkness. The situation was still very tense, but starting to seem manageable when I noticed a noise other than our footsteps and breathing piercing the silence. A nasty continuous sound of something slimy sliding along the ceiling reached my ears, and as soon as it did, I heard M5 curse under his breath, as well as a tone coming from Crispy. "Rule 2, double threat!" He said. M4 growled, mostly in anger, but I could detect a hint of fear for the first time. "Ughh, just run!"

"Door's over there!" M2 added, pointing. As we shuffled backwards as quickly as possible, I saw M4 raise his rifle up to the ceiling, and then a bright blue projectile launched out of the underbarrel attachment. It hit the ceiling almost immediately, and a bright blue flash ensued, which briefly illuminated the thing on the ceiling. It hardly even seemed like something alive; a massive brown growth lay stuck to the ceiling, pockmarked with holes all over it, which all oozed some dark liquid, only, it wasn't stuck, I could see it slowly inching along in the brief moment of illumination. It trembled in the blast, but as the light faded over the next few seconds, I saw something emerging from one of its many holes. The room returned to darkness before I could see anymore, and then I noticed light coming from behind me. I turned around fully to see the door open, and then I realized my mistake in taking my attention off of the first creature for so long. I turned back to it, and jumped in



fear. It was only a few feet away from me, but still standing outside of the light coming in from the next room. I hurried the rest of the way.

On my way out, I heard something that hadn't even crossed my mind. My confidence in the soldiers was shattered as I heard the sound of rending flesh, and a guttural scream. It was quickly followed by a second blast of blue light, and then two of the soldiers reached us. They turned towards us, and I saw by their name tags that M5 was the missing one. M2 sighed deeply, and reassured us, "The uhh... the glowing eyes can't go into the light. You're safe for now." I looked back and forth between the two, and then Rosie spoke. "What happened? I thought you guys knew what you were doing!" M2 was silent for a moment before he responded sullenly, rubbing the back of his neck as well as he could past the helmet. "Extraordinarily bad luck. Two entities right next to each other, perfect conditions for 'em. You were only able to run away so easily because we were there to attract 012s attention."

M4 coldly waved us forward after he gave the news to the hub, and the new fear instilled in us kept us all silent for a few doors, but the calm was interrupted by another encounter with Depth. This time I felt the gut feeling the rule had mentioned before Crispy started reacting, and I dashed into one of the many storage rooms before everyone else did. Just like before, the creature, as it passed, brought a heavy pressure with it. I was less freaked out than before, but the sensation was still horribly unpleasant. Fortunately, Depth left a lot quicker this time, and the pressure didn't reach the extreme it had before. We moved on after a quick check that everyone was alright, and it was uneventful for a while afterwards, though many rooms were infested with purple slime.

"What did that thing on the ceiling do?" Eli asked. M2 explained, "It's not tied to any location in our world, like all the other PBs, and along with that, it seems to not require anything to live, and it seems to be able to consume everything through its holes, even fire. We, uh, don't know why it eats people, X-rays show it doesn't have any internal organs, it's just filled with a corrosive black liquid, and a long coiled tentacle. It'll extend that tentacle out and... catch prey." He described the entity more while I thought of names for the two we had just encountered, and the gluttonous purple slime: Gaze, Pockmark, and Greed. My thoughts soon turned to the ones we hadn't encountered yet, however, fear of the unknown overpowering my memory of the sight of that disgusting mass. Rules 5 and 8 were the only ones which we hadn't encountered yet, and they seemed the most complicated of them all. PB-018, that code was prominent in my mind.

I was forced to snap out of my brooding when the soldiers next to us stopped again. "What?! What's happening??" Killian asked, immediately terrified. The two ignored us, but M4 started speaking to whoever was on the other end of their transceivers. "Say again? What? What do you mean? Th-... you mean 018's there? ... What? How?!" I saw Killian panicking in my periphery as the soldier paused momentarily. M4 resumed with a disquietingly large amount of worry in his voice. "A *second*? Who?? ... How, he's under the most control! S5 M2! Wha..."

The conversation seemed to end, as the two soldiers looked up at us. “*What?!*” Killian cried. They were silent for a long time, until M4 answered “Something *bad* just went down in the hub. There’s a breach from tertiary... 019 and 01 are out. I believe you called them... Figure and Seek?” We all looked around at each other, and Killian moaned “Ohh noo...” M2 stammered, “We’ll be fine... you’ll be fine at least. No change of plans...” He looked at his affiliate for confirmation, and was met with a terse nod. M4 urged us to continue on, but I could tell he had much less resolve than before.

It was only a couple more doors before another PB attack. It was Smother this time, and the sudden blindness almost caught me off guard, but I was much better off than Killian. Immediately, he screamed in panic, and before I could even hear the heartbeat of the creature, I knew he was doomed. The struggle to keep myself still became tremendously difficult, as the sound of rending flesh filled the air, and the screams changed from fear to agony. It felt like it lasted for hours, standing there in the dark with every muscle tensed listening to the death of somebody who had been through just as much as I had. When it finally ended, we all looked at where the body lay. Suffice to say, even if he had the viridis, there would be no chance that he was alive. The deep blue light of the facility turned the scene an unearthly purple color, making it all the more sickening. Right next to me, Rosie burst into tears immediately, and Grace threw up and did the same. Even Eli was affected, murmuring something to himself that I couldn’t catch as he gaped at the corpse. As for myself, my mind was swimming. That anger against the unfairness and hopelessness of everything that had happened to us returned to me. I thought about releasing my anger on the two soldiers with us, but I knew it wouldn’t accomplish anything. At any rate, they specifically weren’t the ones to blame.

“Damn it...” M2 muttered. By the tone of his voice, he seemed more annoyed than horrified or saddened. I almost lost my temper, but for the sake of the others, I kept my cool. “We should, umm... get away from here.” I said quietly. The others silently complied, and we continued walking. Rosie and Grace walked with their arms around each other’s shoulders, and Elijah was at long last out of things to say. As we walked, I noticed the presence of Greed becoming more and more common; in one room, our passage was disturbingly close to being blocked. Adding to the harrowing experience, at Door 155, M2 told us of a danger that was coming up soon. “We’re coming up on the Detainment Center of the bunker, which is where PB-015 usually resides. It seems to just like that place, we don’t know why, but be ready. There are switches we need to flip to unlock the door forward, but other than that, you just need to follow the rule. You remember what to do right?” We all nodded confirmation, and M4 led the way once again. Four more normal rooms went by, and then we finally reached the Detainment Center.

I immediately saw the creature ahead of me, but it actually wasn’t the first thing that grabbed my attention. Instead, it was the silence. As soon as the door to the Detainment Center opened, such a deep silence filled my ears that it was a physical shock. I almost immediately cried out, but I caught myself. No sound reached my ears, not my own breathing, not the blood rushing through my ears, not

even my heartbeat. Complete and utter silence, like I've never heard before. Then, a second shock hit me, when the silence was broken by the sound of breathing. It wasn't my own, and it certainly wasn't any of the others. Each inhale and exhale was several seconds long, deep, shaky, and filled with either grief or anticipation, I couldn't tell which. With that, my attention turned towards the thing in front of us. A floating head, circular and monochrome, stared at us intently. The eye sockets were drastically sunken in, the sclera and pupil both pitch black, and the iris matching the pure white of the rest of its body, except the lower part of its face where the nose and mouth would be, which was completely black and hidden. It seemed entirely unaffected by the deep blue lights overhead. I tensed, waiting for it to do something, for a change in its breathing, but none came. I stood staring at it for a few moments more before I turned and looked at everyone around me. All of them save the masked soldiers had terror written on their faces. Grace looked at me anxiously, but I was just as unnerved as she was.

M4 gestured for us to be quiet and then slowly walked forward. I worried that Crispys heavy footsteps would break the rule of silence, but nothing happened when he moved along with the soldiers. Me, Grace and the others followed after them, cautiously eyeing the entity as it stared back at us. I had only been exposed to it for a few moments, but the overwhelming silence broken only by the breathing of the incarnation of silence before us wore my nerves down with incredible speed. I tried to take my mind off of it, I knew we needed to find the switches, but the lack of other sounds to compete with the creatures breathing made it feel like it was inches from me. I was quickly starting to panic, and my breathing was speeding up, though I couldn't hear it, but then I noticed something shoot out of one of the soldier's pauldrons. I barely caught sight of it before I witnessed it burst into flames with a bright flash, but I still heard nothing; until, that is, a couple seconds later, when the sound of the thing combusting suddenly reached me. The silence was replaced by what now seemed like a cacophony as all the sound returned, and the explosion caused the four of us from the Hotel to scream, except Rosie. I braced for what the creature would do, but to my surprise, it's attention was only on the burning object. It seemed that Rosie's fearlessness was unneeded, because M4 yelled at us, "Go find switches, the silence will return!" I was about to turn and obey, but I saw black tendrils reaching out of the bottom of the floating head. They stretched towards the burning object, having no reaction to touching the flames, and drawing the thing back inside itself.

With that, the Silence crept back in, muffling the audio of everything till it returned to that same unnatural quiet. That distraction had helped to snap me out of my fear, and I finally actually surveyed my surroundings. The room was massive, with a stairwell on either side of the door we came through leading up to a partial second floor; cells lined the walls to the left and right of the entrance on both floors, and a large blast door lay across the room on the other side, shut firm. I looked at the others, and M4, M2, Eli and Rosie were already moving around the room searching for the switches. Grace stood next to me, uncertain. I knew it was better that each of us went our separate ways to search, but she seemed to want to stay with me, and I wasn't super favorable towards being alone with

the Silence breathing down my neck, so I motioned for her to follow me. I decided to climb up the rightward stairway, as the soldiers were already on the other half of the second floor, and I wanted to put as much distance between myself and the entity as possible.

However, no matter how much distance I made, the sound of its breathing never seemed to recede. It still felt like it was right next to me despite the fact that I was a good 15 feet up in the air, and even farther horizontally from the Silence. I looked over the railing of the second floor ledge and saw the thing, luckily not looking at me this time, instead eyeing somebody under the balcony whom I couldn't see. I tore my eyes away from it and crept down one of the hallways filled with cells, motioning for Grace to check the one next to it. I checked every cell in the hall, and all of them looked the same until I came to one cell which had some writing stained onto the wall. To my horror, a decrepit skeleton lay on the floor, face up with the hands laying near the head, like whoever it was was covering their ears before they died. On the wall, written in some unidentifiable black substance, "stop" and "be quiet" were written everywhere, and they had also written, "HES BREAKING THE SILENCE". I reluctantly entered the cell in hopes of finding one of the switches, but there was no such luck. However, when I checked the last two cells in the block, I found a switch on the wall inside one of them. It really made no sense for these switches to be inside the cells, but neither had the presence of keys for the locked doors back in the Hotel, which felt like so long ago now, even though it couldn't have been more than an hour since I left it.

I flipped the switch as slowly as I could, fearing it would make a sound loud enough to alert the Silence, but it went silently. I walked back out of the cell block and looked into the one I had sent Grace down. She was finishing up looking at the last cell. She noticed me and shook her head, making a zero with her hand. I was getting somewhat accustomed to the environment, though it still made me incredibly uncomfortable, but then I noticed a second noise breaking the silence. Whispers, barely audible at first, then unmistakable, reached my ears. I glanced at Gracie, who looked as bewildered as I was. We looked around for the source of the sound for a moment, but I realized that it was somehow coming from the creature below. I looked down below the balcony, and it still sat there, motionless and staring. The whispers still came nonetheless, and it seemed to take up so much space in my mind. I tried to understand what they were saying, but the words seemed just out of reach, I couldn't even tell if it was in English or not.

It took all of my willpower to take my mind off of the whispers, and I slowly turned back around to Grace, who was grimacing and watching the Silence. I put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her away from the ledge. We checked two more of the cell blocks, trying to ignore the whispers, but it was a difficult task. I thought the breathing was hard to ignore, but the whispers demanded my attention so much more. Breaking my mind away from hopelessly analyzing them quickly became insurmountable, and I stopped my already half-hearted searching. I covered my ears in a vain attempt

to block out the noise, but it made no difference. I desperately wanted for the whispers to stop, I felt like screaming, and it took all my willpower to not do just that.

And then, I started to grasp what the whispers were saying. The words slowly took shape in my mind. Doors, infinity, demons, immortality, naivety, but then, before they could arrange themselves into coherent sentences, I was jolted out of my stupor with a massive burst of sound. The whispers and breathing all stopped, replaced with buzzing fluorescent lights, a yell of surprise from me and Grace, and, faintly, the sound of flickering flames. I recovered from the shock, and realized the soldiers had set off another explosive to break the silence. I dashed down the rest of the cell block, looking for another switch. I found none, and I went down the next cellblock. I had to slow my stride as the silence crept back in, but I fortunately found another switch in this cellblock. Just before the silence returned to its full strength, I heard the switch click into place, but then it receded once again. To my confusion, the sound of machinery filled the room, and I heard the Silence exhale lengthily, and then I heard it no more. I excitedly exited the cell block and looked down, seeing that the creature had disappeared, and Door 161 was grinding open. I looked up and saw the two soldiers, one on the other side of the second floor and one below. “You got the last lever, we can go!” M2 yelled up at me.

I remembered Grace and worried about what had happened to her for a moment, but just then, she rammed into me, hugging me tightly. I was about to sock her before I realized it wasn’t another entity. “Sorry...” she said, realizing she had scared me. I laughed it off shakily, and we walked down the stairs to join the others at the door. I hadn’t heard anybody break the thing’s rule of silence, but a weight was still lifted from my chest when I saw that everybody had survived.

“Sorry if that was a little harrowing, it’s more bearable for us because of our helmets.” M2 said. He asked if we were ready to go, and, though I’m sure none of us were ready to continue immediately, we all gave our assent and started walking again. Past the Detainment Center, the rooms returned to what they were before, though there was Greed sludge present in almost every room now, and it wasn’t long before we encountered a second Abyss. This one left more space on the sides, though, and we went past it without incident. The silence was only broken when one of us spoke up with another question, but it wasn’t Eli this time. Instead, Grace asked, “Hey, if this is secondary, and the Hotel is tertiary, what’s the deal with that mine on the way down?”

“... To be honest, they haven’t told us much about it. From what I gather, it’s a failed attempt at tertiary. As for why it was there in the first place, below the Hotel, I know even less about that. Could have a completely normal explanation.” M2 answered. He thought for a moment, and then continued. “Do you know anything about it? It *is* your hotel.” he said to Rosie.

Rosie slowly shook her head, but M4 spoke up. “They tell more to people who are more trustworthy, M2. I’m not supposed to tell you much, especially not you civilians but... you’ve gone through a lot, and it might all be for nothing.” The slight compassion in his tone disappeared as he explained. “To put it simply, there are things in that mine, and we didn’t put them there. We didn’t

make that place a containment area, and yet it has all the same attributes as one. Footage from our expeditions there show some new PBs we've never seen. Weird bat-like creatures, and what seems to be relatives of PB #21. The first door in those mines is labeled B-000. We could possibly use that area for our own purposes, a fourth containment site, but we still don't know how it's there."

"Well, why do some people have more freedom in the containment sites than others? Like, the hotel staff were able to go backwards through the doors while we couldn't." I asked. M2 glanced at me and began to answer, but then Crispy began growling again, and we all ran into the side rooms to hide. The creature stayed around far too long for my liking. As I stood behind one of the soldiers, whom I couldn't identify because his back was to me, I gritted my teeth, trying to weather the crushing sensation in silence, but the creature remained even longer than it did the first time I encountered it. My ears began hurting, and a headache slowly settled in, and I had to tap the soldier's shoulder to get his attention. I mimed holding and shooting a gun to get him to make the thing go away, and he quickly nodded and obeyed my plea.

As the pressure was relieved, I felt my ear with my finger, and it came away wet. I looked at the blood on my finger, and then back up at the soldier as I followed him out of the room. "Could you *please* be a little more mindful of us normal people?? It made my ears bleed!" I huffed. He turned, showing me his nametag, but M4 was silent. I smugly imagined that he was ashamed of his mistake, but my attention was taken off of that when M2 resumed our conversation.

"We've never had anybody present who wasn't employed here... I've never heard of that." He reported the new knowledge to the hub as we continued on. We continued in tense silence through more of the monotonous blue-tinted steel hallways, and I realized that Rosie was really out of it, even more so than the rest of us. It made sense, she had the strongest connection to Killian, even if they were coworkers and nothing more. Despite the peril we were all in, I was still concerned about making things awkward, so I said nothing and just watched as she mindlessly shambled along, staring into space. I thought I could probably get Grace to comfort her since she was more familiar with Rosie, but my planning was interrupted by Crispy growling again, but not as loud this time. The robot kept moving instead of standing still like it usually did, but the soldiers visibly tensed up.

"What does that mean?" I asked, dreading the answer. Crispy hadn't done this for any entity before, and there was only one we hadn't encountered yet. My fears were confirmed when M4 shortly answered "018." and M2 reminded us, "Remember, 018 can't do anything real to you unless he gets too close, so stay calm." This was easier said than done, as I was already extremely nervous. Rosie had no reaction to this information however, she just continued walking and staring. As we proceeded through the next few doors, Crispys growling intensified, until, at Door 180, it was at the same intensity it was when Depth was near. This room was a large hallway, this time with no side rooms to break up the uninteresting walls. I looked around warily, as did my friends, but the soldiers walked forward like usual. About a quarter of the way through the room, I felt something horribly wrong.

I tried to turn around, but my body moved in slow motion. My head slowly turned, and I finally laid eyes on the last entity in this place. It was a dark maroon color, with skin stretched incredibly tightly over its bones. It stood at the bare minimum 10 feet high, its head almost touching the ceiling, and in place of its face and naval, there were gaping cavities filled with red and orange dots. As soon as it appeared, my head started swimming, and I could hardly think straight. I turned back around to run, but as my head slowly swiveled, I saw the being warp forward, remaining completely rigid with its hands and feet unmoving, but moving forward nonetheless. Each time it warped, a boom filled my ears, creating a constant pounding. As I began to run, I realized it was going to be an agonizing process, as, on top of the slowed passage of time, the hallway literally stretched on before me. It seemed to grow longer the more I looked ahead. I remembered what the rule said, that none of it was real, so I pressed on regardless. Ahead of me, the two soldiers ran quickly, much faster than me but still in slow motion. Eli also seemed to not be having much trouble, almost keeping pace with the soldiers, while Grace was closer to where I was. I realized Rosie wasn't in my view, and she was already trailing behind our group before 018 appeared. I chanced a look behind me, and saw the being warping forward like before, not even turning its head to look at us, but it was starting to close on Rosie. As much as I didn't want her to die, my fear of that thing and what it would do to me eclipsed my compassion. By this time, after what felt like 10 minutes, I was three fourths of the way through the room, but then my vision blurred, and before I could raise my hands to rub my eyes, it cleared, and I realized I was about 10 feet back from where I was.

Everybody was in the exact same position they were a few minutes ago as well, and as I looked backwards once again over the course of an entire minute, the being seemed to be farther back as well. I realized that it was forcing the chase to be longer, even longer than all the other distortions allowed for, and I resented it. Shortly after I got back to the three fourths point, a terrible noise reached my ears. The sound of a woman screaming permeated the air, but it didn't last for just a few seconds, or even for a minute because of the time slow, it never stopped. Even when the creature rewinded time twice more, the screaming continued, one continuous note that never paused for breath. My body was doing fine, as the run was probably less than 50 meters, but the process was stretched out to an excruciating half an hour, and my mind was relentlessly battered the entire time. At long last, I was nearly to the next doorway, and I reached out desperately for the doorpost. Ahead of me, Eli and the soldiers had already made it through and were staring at me expectantly. Grace had just made it through a minute ago, and was still in the process of turning around. As soon as my fingertips made it through the doorway something felt different, and time seemed to speed up a little bit, and as my head finally made it through, it all stopped.

The screaming, the pounding, the dense fog in my mind, it all receded. I came through the entry way out of breath and extremely disoriented. I turned around, and there was nothing there. 018 was gone, but so was Rosie. I looked expectantly at the soldiers, and M2 just muttered "She's gone."

Grace was on the verge of tears again, and hugged me for comfort. She quietly asked, “Why do these creatures exist?” but I knew none of us, not even the soldiers, knew the answer to that. M2 tried to comfort us, saying “Hey, we’re almost done, surprisingly enough, and 018 only attacks once usually.” but Eli ruined that somewhat. “Usually?” He asked. I scoffed and admonished him for being such a downer, and with that, we continued on.

The next 10 doors were more of what had become the usual by this point, a few more encounters with Smother, Pockmark, and Gaze, but then something happened at Door 190, that was unexpected by even the soldiers. A sound I had almost forgotten about came from the walls around us, along with a massive amount of crashing and banging, and Crispy began growling at the same time. The sound was none other than the growling and roaring of Figure. “What the hell? How is it in the walls?!” M4 said. This unnerved me more than the growling itself, it meant that the soldiers had no idea what was happening here. I had no time to think about this however when I heard a second sound. It was the screaming sound that Seek had made so long ago. The two entities from the Hotel were right here with us, and from the sound of it, they were brawling in whatever space existed within the walls.

“We better hurry.” M2 said, and he picked his pace up to a jog. We followed suit, but I noticed eyes sprouting out of the walls around us, and before we even reached Door 192, a giant black hand grew out of the wall and slammed down onto the floor, blocking our path. M2 immediately exclaimed, and both soldiers opened fire on the hand. It squirmed a little and then receded back into the wall, but then behind us, a large hole was created in the wall, and Figure went flying through it. It crashed into the wall on the other side of the hall, massively denting the metal, but it got up immediately. I saw that it’s right arm was missing from the elbow down, and chunks were missing from it’s legs, and many of it’s ribs were cracked or missing. It roared in anger and charged forward, and as it did, I could see the damaged flesh visibly regenerating. Seek walked forwards out of the cavity in the wall, and was swiftly torn apart by Figure. I forgot that that form was just what Seek chose to do with some of its sludge, and I thought that Figure had already won, but then more hands reached out of the remaining puddle of black ooze and tore at Figure, but it swiped at each arm and tore them apart, and it swiftly regenerated all the damage. Next, larger hands came out of the hole in the wall, while two smaller ones appeared behind Figure, and while it was occupied with the threat in front of it, the two hands behind it simultaneously grabbed its back and head, and the one with a hold on it’s back went rigid, while the other yanked with extreme speed, and Figures head came right off with a loud squelch.

The other hands went to town on Figure as it reeled and flailed, and Seek’s humanoid form reassembled next to it, sludge spreading around it and starting to envelop it. As Figure’s movements slowed, it was reduced to a pulp, and eventually enveloped in black sludge. When the sludge cleared, nothing was left, and Seek slowly turned to us. One of the black hands raised behind it and slowly waved, as it haltingly uttered, “Not. one. survived.”



We had all been captivated by the fight and hadn't fled until now, except Eli. As I turned, adrenaline coursing, I saw Eli about a room ahead of us, and I heard heavy footsteps above the sound of our own, the sound of AP Cannons being fired in rapid succession, and more shrieking from the creature as it was barraged, but, if I had to venture a guess, there was no pain in those inhuman shrieks. Just as in the Hotel, legions of eyes appeared on the walls, and I saw hands reaching out ahead of us. One reached down and swiped at Eli. He dodged it, but he was slowed down, and the hand turned back towards him again and grabbed him, lifting him up in the air to his terrified screams. Behind me, the soldiers, who hadn't stopped firing their rifles for longer than a few seconds, turned their AP Cannons to the hand that had grabbed Eli, hitting it with more than half a dozen shots before it spasmed and let go, shrinking back into the ceiling.

My fear somehow increased as I heard that this change of the soldiers' attention was fatal for them. Two distinct screams sounded behind me, along with the sound of rending metal, and Crispys growling grew silent. I dared not look back, knowing how quickly Seek had caught up after they stopped firing on him. Eli had only just then recovered from the fall he endured, and me and Grace were both ahead of him now.

It was Door 195 by the time we could hear its footsteps again, but without the soldiers distracting it, it was able to devote more attention to stopping us; I could only count on its inability to move its sludge very well at great distances. Door 196, the walls were nearly completely covered in eyes. Door 197, hands reached up all over the floor, obstructing our path and flailing wildly. Door 198, it shrieked in anger, and then something flew past my head. It lodged in one of the hands around us, and I saw it was a sharp spike, made out of the same sludge everything else was, and about as long as a finger. Before long, there were multiple spikes being launched at us, but most of them missed us and lodged in the floor or hands near us. Door 199, the exit lay just ahead, but all the hands reaching out of the floor receded in order for the thing to get a clear shot. Grace was ahead of me, nearly to the elevator, but a few feet from the entrance, after a pause in the volleys of spikes, one nailed her right in the shoulder. She screamed and staggered, but she didn't fall until she made it into the elevator, right before massive black hands reached out from the walls and blocked the entrance. I slammed into them full force, and they were surprisingly hard instead of squishy and sticky, though my clothes were now stained in black goop. I turned around and Eli skidded to a stop next to me. I heard Grace calling our names from the elevator, but my mind was on the figure in front of us. "At. Long. Last." it said.

It enunciated each word like it was testing them out, speaking for the first time. I could think of only one hope at this point. If it was intelligent enough to speak our language and use phrases that didn't make a lot of grammatical sense, maybe I could reason with it. Not wanting to spare any moments it had to kill us, I started speaking. "Wh— why are you doing this?" It stopped advancing, but I saw no change in its posture or 'expression'. It stared at me for a long time, then glanced to Eli, then back to me, and said "I. Must. Feed." I didn't see how I could persuade it that it wasn't hungry, but I

had to try anyway. “Well, umm, why don't you just, uh- escape with us and feed on animals on the surface? We- you shouldn't kill humans... I know you were trapped here because of humans, but that's just because you killed us first! You could hunt animals and we'd have no problem with you.” I knew perfectly well the U.S.P.C.D. would try to recontain it regardless of what it did, but anything to survive. It slowly shook its head, and then spoke again, this time more confidently. “That is not true... it does not, matter. Animals... do not have souls. You... alone... were created like Him. That one escaped... lucky... but I must consume both of you.”

With that, Eli lunged forward yelling, and he slashed a pocket knife at the creature. It stood silently while he hacked at its neck a few times, until it's head fell off. It remained standing however, and as the head melted into the floor, the decapitated form said condescendingly, “What makes you think... you are stronger than the Unrendable One?” Before it finished speaking though, I heard Grace yell my name behind me. I turned and saw that the hands that had previously blocked the entryway were rearing up silently to rip us to pieces. I shot through the newly opened door immediately, but Eli wasn't so quick. The huge claws of the hand punctured through his torso, and he let out a pathetic gargle as he staggered forwards, and then as the fingers retracted out of his body, he lunged forwards. The other hand reached towards him and attempted to grab him, but as he crossed the threshold, it was stopped. Seek pounded on the open doorway, screaming in anger, but it was stopped by an invisible forcefield. Grace quickly hit the button to descend, and the door closed, far too slowly for my liking, and then the elevator started descending, and the creature's screams grew fainter and fainter.

## *Interlude II*

“So. What went wrong?”

“*We don't know!* Nobody even survived to tell what happened exactly! That was the place that *had* all the info!”

“We don't have any experts who weren't positioned there? Aside from you?”

“Apparently not. We thought we had accounted for everything, so we didn't think we needed anybody outside secondary; again, we don't know how it happened.”

“... This *is* certainly a dilemma with all the people who know how the AP devices work dead. But, don't you know *anything*? What about properties of the entities who escaped?”

“That's a dead end too. PB-019 is... one of the most perplexing possible to have escaped. Not capable of any spatial anomalies, and yet *it* of all PBs escaped. And we made *sure* 01 was secure. Barriers, loops, anomalies accidentally contributing, it seemed inescapable. Of course, *if* it bypassed all of that, well, it could have gone wherever it wanted.”

“Everywhere inside Site 3, you mean?”

“Well, no, it could have freely moved to Site 2 if it left its cordon, but it—”

“YOU HAD NO BARRIER BETWEEN SITE 3 AND 2!?”

“I... no, sir, we didn't deem it to be a necessary use of AP devices.”

“Fine. Fine, fine. So 19 just had to escape the library, and 01 just had to break its loop, and that would be that. How exactly restricted was 19?”

“It was allowed in Doors 50-55, sir, though for some reason it never went past Door 51, that's the only reason the hotel staff survived.”

“Why would it stay there?”

“Well, the monitoring couldn’t convey anything about that. For all we know, it was the music that was playing from a radio at Door 52 it didn’t like.”

“And what was happening before it disappeared or moved from its area?”

“Well, it was certainly going crazy... it kept ramming into all the walls, until it just disappeared off of our system.”

“Ah. What about 01?”

“It was dormant until a little bit before the newest subjects reached the elevator. Then it just kind of appeared in the greenhouse.”

“You should have led with this information instead of claiming you don’t know. However, it’s clear there’s a lot of research to be done to figure out the *how*.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

## *Cave*

“Are you guys gonna be alright?” I asked. “I think there’s something in my shoulder...” Grace said. She turned her back to me, and sure enough, that spike was still in her shoulder. It made no sense to me that it made it through the forcefield if it was part of Seek’s mass, but I grabbed the thing and yanked it out. “Oww!” She yelped. “Give me a warning next time!” I muttered an apology, and looked at her wound. There was black goop around it, but I could see it slowly regenerating. Mildly disgusted, I looked away, and Grace asked if Eli was okay. “Is it regenerating?” He asked in return. I bent down to see, but I couldn’t see the punctures through his loose hoodie. “Take your jacket off, I can’t see.” I ordered him. He obliged, and I saw all of the wounds were mostly straight down his middle, but they missed his spine and lungs, and they were below where his heart was, to the best of my knowledge. “Yeah, it’s regenerating, and I don’t think it hit anything other than your guts.” I explained. I looked to Grace for confirmation, and she slowly shook her head. “Thank goodness for that plant.” I muttered.

I stood up and looked around. The elevator was very spacious, even bigger than the lift that had taken us from the Hotel to the Bunker, but just as boring and blue as all the walls in the Bunker. The only detail was the control panel, which had two buttons labeled “Site 1” and “Site 2”. Suddenly, Grace started sobbing. “Miles, what are we gonna do? The soldiers were the only ones who knew the rules for the next place, and— oh, and those poor soldiers, and Rosie and Killian...” I realized her concern about the rules was extremely serious, and I felt a dread and hopelessness rise in the pit of my stomach. Still, I tried to comfort her. We sat down next to each other while Eli leaned against the wall on a different side of the elevator and stared into space, working his jaw. After a bit, she stopped crying and leaned her head on my shoulder, but then the elevator stopped. Eli took a deep breath and said “Here we go again.”

The fear was paralyzing, I didn’t even know what the things ahead were capable of doing to me, and I had seen the likes of Halt, Silence, and 018, who went unnamed, so my willingness to go on was at an all time low. Without the rules, we were doomed to die. I got up, but just stood there trembling in fear, switching between looking at Grace and the way forward. I licked my lips, and noticed that Eli was slowly walking ahead. I didn’t know what to say at this point, so I just helped Grace up and joined Eli. Better to die quickly than sit and suffer and then die the same way anyways. We walked through a rocky and uncomfortable tunnel, illuminated by white LED strips overhead, and it was silent other than the occasional drip of unseen water, and our own footsteps. My nerves were so shot, I nearly screamed when Eli coughed randomly. The tunnels were uniform, other than many strange divots in the walls. Most were big enough to fit a person, but as far as I could tell, they didn’t lead anywhere. The doors seemed very out of place in such a natural looking cave tunnel; a simple design of uniform smooth metal, with the number labeled. 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206. I felt like I was about to puke for all the terror running through me, and then I heard something.

A high pitched droning in the distance, coming from ahead of us, caused me to stop. The others did too, and I spluttered out “H-hide in the cracks in the walls!” I followed my own advice, but as I ran and found one in the tunnel behind us, terror of those cracks filled me. What if there was a rule about those cracks, that they can’t be entered in any situation? What if that droning was something we needed to go to? What if the hiding spot was *there*?! What if these cracks were about to pour out acidic gas? I hesitated, but as the sound grew louder, panic overtook me, and I went inside the crack. I fearfully looked out from my spot and, as the droning arrived, I saw what was passing by. The thing was covered in a writhing black mass, with tentacles extending from its back and attaching to the walls and ceiling, suspending it and moving it forward steadily. It was massive and muscular, staring straight ahead, and as it passed by, my skin stung all over. The pain receded as it left though, and a long time after it was silent, I slowly shuffled out of my hiding spot. Despite not having done anything particularly challenging, I was breathing deeply and raggedly. “There’s one down.” Eli said. He had already left his hiding spot, and after Grace did the same, we slowly continued on.

There were occasionally branching tunnels that led to other doors. I checked one once, and there were a multitude of boxes, drawers, and storage closets, as well as a couple floodlights. I opened a few of them, but there was nothing of interest among all of it. With trembling hands, I gave up my efforts and silently returned to the others and continued walking. The fear of the unknown and having no control was enough to make even Eli quiet, and the silence was deafening.

At Door 210, the lights weren’t functioning. I started to say something, “Keep-” but my voice cracked really hard. I tried again, “The dark rooms have been the same the last two floors, just keep an eye out for something.” I walked on the left, keeping my hand on the wall, and I felt someone holding my shoulder. I didn’t like the touching but I stayed silent and continued walking. I looked all around me constantly, I didn’t even need to remind myself to do so. After not so long, I caught sight of a pair of very beady white eyes peering at me from behind. They glowed slightly, and had no iris, but a tiny black pupil. They were moving towards me, but right after I saw them, they disappeared. I yelled in panic, and so did everybody else in response to that. I explained it was like Screech, hopefully, and we continued on. After a few more seconds of walking, I almost ran into the door forward, and we entered the next room after finding the knob.

It turned out it was Grace holding my shoulder, and she let go as soon as we were in the light again. We continued walking, all the way until Door 215. Sitting on the floor, there was half a mannequin, clothed in a plain gray shirt. It was more than that though, because, attached to it, there were a multitude of robotic, spider-like limbs. What was in the positions of its legs seemed to be unfinished and stunted, but the four limbs it had on each side of its torso were complete. It lay on the floor motionless and facing up into the floodlight positioned to illuminate it. I immediately froze in terror, and so did everyone else. The tunnel was wide enough that we wouldn’t have to step over it, but we would still have to get close.

“Simple enough,” I thought to myself. “Just don’t wake it up.” Eli took one cautious step forward, as quiet as he could, and when nothing happened, he started creeping forward. We followed, single file so that we could be as far from the mannequin as possible. No noise could be heard, save for the distant dripping of water. Drip. We were halfway to the creature. Drip. We passed the creature. Drip. We were halfway to the door. Tick. Tick, tick, tick, and then I realized I wasn’t hearing the water dripping anymore. I looked behind me again, and saw the thing rising up, and my heart was pounding so hard it hurt. The thing stood on its bottom two arms, and stared at the wall ahead of it. It made no other movement or indication that it knew we were there, so I continued creeping backwards, and so did Gracy. I noticed, however, that Eli wasn’t moving. I only noticed after I was out of arms reach of him, and I dared not utter a single sound. I reluctantly kept walking backwards, keeping my hands stretched behind me to not make a sound bumping into the wall. I eventually felt the smooth metal on my hand, and I grabbed the knob. I pushed it down ever so slowly, counting on the anomalous oiling of the hinges and latch, and, though it felt like an eternity, the door finally opened without a sound. I slowly inched it open behind me, but as I did the creature suddenly turned its entire body towards us. After a split second longer, it lurched towards us, entirely silent other than the ticking of its joints and the clicking sound of its limbs on the ground.

We both screamed and I pushed the door open the rest of the way and shut it as quickly as I could. To my horror, I realized Eli was still on the other side. About half a second later, I heard his screaming, and then the clicking went away. I was still scared the thing would come back, but I opened the door anyway to see Eli’s condition. He lay on the floor, covered in so many puncture wounds he was almost unrecognizable, and each wound was covered in a dark green fluid that seemed to be corroding the flesh further. Grace collapsed and fell on her butt next to me, and I threw up after a few seconds.

“It’s alright...” he said slowly. “This is what I wanted.” Confused, I asked him, “What? You wanted to get stabbed?” He shook his head very slightly, and explained. “When you asked me earlier in the Hotel how I got there, Grace, I was dodging the question because it was personal. I wanted to die. Maybe you don’t care, but I’m a Christian and I’m supposed to live for God. But, I couldn’t handle the pressure, and I was failing. I was wasting all my time doing nothing, and at 24 I still have no wife, and... I just wanted to give up and be with God. I’m a coward, I know it. ‘What a way to go out’ I thought. What an idiot I was... am. Anyways... we should... keep going.”

To my utter shock, he *got up* and started *walking*. I mean, I knew he had the herb of viridis coursing through him, but I knew from experience that it didn’t pain-kill very well. Grace got up and went after him, telling him to stop and sit down, but he ignored her until he tripped, fell flat on his face, and didn’t get back up. Now, I hated the guy, but it was certainly hard to remember that while watching all this. Grace just stood there looking at him, speechless. After a few seconds, I walked over, and she looked up at me, shocked and sorrowful. I opted not to say anything, because I knew Grace

was a lot more affected by this than I was. Everything felt so surreal, and I was so exhausted emotionally. The veridis, or perhaps the containment areas themselves, as the others had said, stopped us from getting tired physically, but that just removed the luxury of being guaranteed to have a rest every now and then. I couldn't rest without knowing the rules for the entities here anyways. I waited for a moment longer, then gently pulled her along with me. She clung to me as we walked, and I could feel her body heave with every silent sob. Before long, we had another encounter, but this one was harder to detect. I was walking close to the walls, in order to be near one of the many cracks if the mannequin or the other entity returned, but this proved to be dangerous. Before I realized it, an elongated, slender, blackened hand reached out of the crack closest to me and grabbed my shoulder, and started pulling. I screamed bloody murder and tried to pull away, but it was stronger than me and it already had its bony fingers hooked inside my shoulder.

It yanked me inside the crack, and I was halfway in before Grace grabbed me and helped to pull me away. It dug its fingers deeper into my shoulder, and I was screaming in pain, and though we were able to get a few feet away, the arm just kept extending out. It seemed to have at least five or six joints, and the arm was incredibly thin. I thought it was about to just tear my shoulder off at this point, but then Grace let go of me and grabbed the arm with both her hands and tried to snap it in half. There was a loud crack, and the arm fell limp, finally letting go. My shoulder was mutilated, but it wasn't lethal. I looked at the arm in disgust and terror, but there was no other movement. "Thank you..." I managed to breathe out.

I noted that the crack that creature was in was a lot bigger than all the others, and told that to Grace, and then we moved on. At door 220, I heard the droning again, and, after checking if the nearest crack was of a normal size, I hid. Just like before, the creature passed by and caused a measure of pain when it got near, but it seemed to be less when I squished myself as far into the crack as I could go. I was reassured by this entity behaving the same as it did the first time, and we continued on, but only a few doors after that, I heard a clicking sound coming from behind us. I recognized it as the same sound that that mannequin had made when walking, and Grace hid before I thought to. It passed by startlingly quick, though not as fast as Rush had been, and then, when it saw that the door ahead was closed, it turned around and went back. I waited till it was completely silent again, and then we moved on. In the next room, the door wouldn't open, and I realized there was a side room where the key probably was.

In the wall of the tunnel that led to the side room, however, there was another abnormally large crack, which Grace pointed out to me. I nodded and went past as quickly and as far from the crack as possible, and nothing came out of it. She went past too, and then we searched the room. While we were searching though, I heard a boom in the distance. The cave walls shook slightly, and the leds above flickered, and then, while we stayed hidden in the side room, something passed by incredibly quickly. I felt the rush of air even though I was a pretty large distance from the things path, and then I felt a



second one as it passed by again, this time going back the other way. I slowly crept out into the main tunnel, and despite the thing having a presence physical enough to create wind like that, nothing was disturbed, not even the door. Grace had found the key though, and we continued on.

Soon enough, we reached Door 230, which was different from the rest. Rather than a tunnel, there was a large open space behind Door 230 that was dark except for a path illuminated by a strip of LEDs on the floor. I hoped this would be as simple as keeping within the light, but my fear was renewed again as I contemplated all the ways this could go wrong. Before long, I heard a voice from the dark. "Hey! Who are you?!" I asked Grace quietly if she heard that as well, and she nodded. I was going to start running, but then the voice spoke again. "Are you humans?" I still didn't dare respond though it sounded like a normal human voice, thinking of all the stories of skinwalkers and impostor people, and I continued walking. "Hey." The voice said again, and I turned to see a person illuminated under the light of a cell phone they were holding. Grace gasped behind me, and I stopped moving. The man asked, "Are you guys convicts?"

I remembered that the government fed the entities here with death row prisoners, so that reassured me a little bit, but I was still far too scared of what might happen to speak to this person. My heart jumped a little when Grace spoke up instead. "No, we're regular people, we... umm, well I don't know how much you know about all this—" The man cut her off with a question. "You made it through the Hotel and the Bunker??" he asked. She said yes enthusiastically, and the guy started walking towards us. I reflexively backed away, trying to pull Grace along with me, but I didn't want to go into the darkness on the opposite side from the man. Grace was unsure of what to do.

He stopped and said, "Oh sorry, I know you guys must be scared out of your minds... umm... maybe it'd help if I explain what's going on here. So, uhh, this room, door 230, is kind of an outpost of survivors here. There's one at Door 282 as well, last I've heard. Anyways, there's about a dozen others of us here, we didn't want to scare you more than necessary though. Would you mind if I turned the lights on?"

I was too petrified in fear to make any move, knowing any one of them could violate the rules I didn't know, but Grace slowly shook her head. He yelled out, "Kane, plug the lights in!", and then I heard a click from the dark, at which I jumped, and then a second louder one, and right after that, there was a blinding burst of light. I had to shield my eyes for a few terrifying moments, and then I was able to look around. There were floodlights all around the cavern which were now active, and various rock formations and stalactites and such, and several people scattered around, watching us. Additionally, above the door we came through and the next door, there were crosses roughly carved into the stone. Just then, I heard the clicking of the mannequin in the distance. I exclaimed wordlessly and me and Grace both went for cover behind one of the stalagmites, but nobody else moved. I realized there was a person right next to where I was hiding, and I stared at him disorientedly. He smiled at me, and said, "It can't come in here."

I stared at him some more, jaw agape, then, registering what he said, I looked towards the door just in time to see the thing arrive, then turn back from the door as if it was closed, and the clicking went away. I looked back up at the person, and after a few seconds, asked, “Why not??” He didn’t get a chance to answer though, as the guy from before walked up to me and held a hand out to me. I very very slowly took it, and I looked around once more. I finally relaxed my muscles and very weakly smiled for the first time in a while.

“My name’s Adam, what’s yours?” he said. I meekly said my name, and then he pulled me into a hug, which was too tight for my liking, but I ignored that. After he let go, he introduced everybody in the room, a total of 13 excluding us. Something occurred to me then that brought back a little fear. “How do you know about the Hotel and stuff if you were a death row prisoner dumped here?” I asked. He explained the matter, saying, “*I’m* actually not a death row prisoner. I’m the only person, until now, that has gotten here from ‘tertiary’. The rest of the people here are convicts though. But you don’t have to worry, this place has a way of changing people.” I almost laughed at the ridiculous understatement. Grace asked him, “What have you guys been doing here all this time?”

“Well, we just talk to each other and play word games, and also those of us who still have working phones can do whatever they can on them without internet. Oh, I didn’t mention, there’s an outlet here, and I have an adapter. It only works for USB-C, though. What have you guys, umm... how have things been for you two?”

At that question, Grace explained that there were originally a lot more of us, and eight people died on the way here, but she didn’t last long before tears started running down her face again. “Well, both of you are welcome to stay here as long as you like, and at any rate you’ll be here a while because there’s a lot we need to tell you.” I sat down on one of the more comfortable rock formations, and Grace sat next to me. “First things first,” Adam said, “the rules. Sheer luck and intuition isn’t the way to go, I had a lot of close calls in the Hotel.”

He started listing them off, one by one.

“Rule 1, do not go near large cracks in the tunnels!

Rule 2, if you see a discoloration in the air, look away from it *immediately*.

Rule 3, don’t go near big green orbs.

Rule 4, if you come across a room with the lights off, always look around for something in the dark with you, just make eye contact with it.

Rule 5, go past the wretch as fast as possible before it wakes up, and hide in the cracks when it gets close. Oh, uh, the wretch is what we call that mannequin thing.

Rule 6, if you hear a high pitched sound ahead, go back a room and hide in the cracks there.

Rule 7, beware doors that don’t seem to be in the right spot. If it seems like a door should be in a different location than it is, go to the place where you think it should be.

Rule 8, if you hear a boom in the distance, get out of the way *immediately*, it's even preferable to go inside one of the evil cracks if necessary, you're much more likely to survive the thing in the walls than this one.

Rule 9, if the lights audibly power down, *do not* stray from the main path until they turn back on.

Rule 10, if you go blind suddenly, you're probably in Door 245, and you'll need to find a switch somewhere in the room, while, uh, avoiding the thing chasing you. It's not impossible, it whispers pretty loud and it's not very fast."

Having another rule set was both incredibly relieving and dreadful at the same time. Still, definitely better than not knowing. "That's all of them, but there's something else you need to know. Believe it or not, crosses ward these things off. That's why we etched them into the walls on both sides; the wretch used to pass through here and we would have to hide, but one time, I didn't realize it was coming while I was reading the Bible, and I held it up reflexively, but as soon as I did, it stopped, made a weird ticking sound, and then it turned around and ran away. It's been stuck in the first 29 doors since then. After that, I was able to convince some of my friends to help me carve crosses into the rock, and, uhh, we had a lot of discussions about why this is the case... make of it what you will." His words reminded me too much of Eli. I begrudgingly realized he had grown on me a little because of everything we had gone through together, even if I was much better friends with Grace. Me and Grace both said nothing, so Adam asked us, "So, do you guys wanna stay here in safety with us?" Something came over me then, and I blurted out, "NO! I can't stay here for a single second longer than I have to!!" and that did it, I let out all the anger and grief I had been holding in for the past hundred doors. I had only cried once before, back in the Hotel after our encounter with Halt, but I did it again here. Eli wasn't around to mock me for it, and that somehow made it worse. My rant about how hellish this place was quickly died out and I grew embarrassed at crying in front of all these people, but I couldn't stop now that I was going. Everybody gave me space except Grace, and they went back to their own business while I sat and cried into my arms. It felt like I was crying for a long while, and after I was finished, I wiped my snot on my sleeve, and I saw Grace dozing next to me, and nobody was paying attention to me.

I awkwardly cleared my throat, and most of the people in the room looked up at me. Adam walked over to me and asked if I was okay now. I said yes, and then he said, "Well, in that case, there's a few people who are gonna come with you, me included. We've gotten too bored. Uh, you might wanna wake up your friend. What was her name?"

"Grace." I answered. I shook her a little bit, and she woke with a start, inhaling sharply. She got up, and then I looked at the people with Adam. He reintroduced them, luckily enough, because I didn't remember either of their names. "This is Felicity, this is Tess, and I'm Adam if you've forgotten our names. Everybody else is staying here. We already said our goodbyes, so we're ready to go. I know you're, uh, very eager to get going. Ready?" I didn't answer right away, as I was busy analyzing the

three. Knowing that two of them were sentenced to the death penalty, I was uneasy about going the rest of the way with them. Adam wore a plain black shirt and blue jeans. He seemed like he worked out, as he was pretty muscular, and he had short brown hair, and he looked to be in his mid twenties.

My attention wasn't primarily on him, though. The other two both wore orange prison jumpsuits. Felicity had bright orange and wavy hair, brown eyes, and a bony face. Tess was smaller and younger, though her face looked more weathered and tired, and she had straight brown hair and blue eyes. I wasn't good at reading people, despite the physical details I noted, so as far as I could tell, they didn't look crazy. This was little consolation to me, but I decided to put it aside, because they would be the least of my problems. Adam noticed me eyeing the other two and reassured me, "You don't have anything to worry about with them, alright? And besides, there are bigger threats even if they were still murderous. I think you know that." I took a deep breath, and got up. "Are you ready, Grace?" I asked. She silently nodded, and then I slowly walked towards the next door, wanting the others to take the lead. I jumped when I heard the clicking of the wrench behind me, but I remembered it couldn't enter this room, and I felt a tingle of embarrassment. As the wrench's clicking disappeared, we finally walked through Door 231.

I was in no mood to talk, and neither was Grace, but Adam started talking pretty quickly. "You know, I've always wondered what the deal is with those Hotel staff. I mean, they practically tricked me into starting this whole thing... you know what they told me? They said that "room service was temporarily unavailable" but in exchange I could stay in whatever room I wanted free of charge. I was just exploring, and then I couldn't go back after the first monster attack. It makes me think that those people were monsters too, just disguised. I've already said this to my friends, but you guys made it through there too. What was it like for y'all?" I started explaining it was completely different, but then I heard and saw something as we entered Door 236. There was a dark spot in the air, like the wall was stained, but it was perfectly circular, meaning somebody would have to have done some pretty good perspective painting, and I was in the exact right spot. I also heard the droning of the creature from the first rule, and then, remembering the rules, I realized that dark spot was the "discoloration" rule 2 was talking about. At the same time, Tess hissed, "Look down!" And we all did, while I tried to find one of the hiding spots, and then everything changed. From the same direction that discoloration was, a very powerful but dark red glow appeared, and a loud pop sound, almost like an explosion, and an ear splitting electronic screaming sound. It only lasted for a few seconds though, and by the time it was done, I was already in one of the cracks. The creature passed by, and Adam asked if we were all okay, and then we continued on. I still didn't feel like talking, but Adam prompted me with a, "You were saying?" I sighed, and then said, "Well, the hotel staff *was* tricking you but they're just normal people. When I came through here, there was a list of rules in the reception area, and there were no attendants anywhere but Door 52. They were all camping out there, like you guys were at 230. They set up those rules so that, uh, the entities would continue to be fed. Maybe not the most moral bunch, but they

were humans. A couple of them left and caught up to us actually, in secondary, but, umm, they..." I cleared my throat awkwardly, and then changed subjects. "I named all the entities too. I really don't know why, it's kind of dumb."

"Ahh, you're not dumb." Adam said. "I've been wanting to name them for a while, but I have no idea what to call these things, other than the wretch. What do you call 'em?" I related my names for all the entities, all the way up to 018, whom I decided on the spot should be called Distort. "Ooh, I got one! How about Strangle? For the one that hides in the cracks in the walls." Felicity said. I didn't respond right away, and then we came across another dark room. Adam entered with no hesitation at all. "Remember to keep an eye out!" He called back to us. I followed after him and the convicts. Twice in the room, I saw beady eyes staring at me from behind, and the second time I also noticed soft quiet footsteps under our own. As soon as we were out, Felicity asked me, "What do you think the one in the dark should be called? I've heard it prefers to steal stuff off you instead of attacking. Adam's bodyguard had his rifle stolen that way." I forgot about her question immediately, and asked Adam, "Wait, you had a bodyguard too? What happened to him?" He looked back at me momentarily, brow furrowed, and answered, "Well, when I first got here, me and him both went past Door 230, quite a ways past in fact. But, at 250 something, he saw something ahead that I didn't get to see, and he shot his rifle, and he forced me to go back to 230. Weirdly enough, I still wasn't able to go backwards, but the soldier was able to somehow. That's not important though, as soon as I was in 230, he went back out, and he never returned. I still don't know what he saw, but he's the reason I know about Door 245."

I had some troubling news of my own involving soldiers, and I gave it to him. "Me and my friends had two bodyguards, but they died because... because something from tertiary escaped. The ones I call Seek and Figure both escaped into secondary somehow. Seek caught up to us, and it *killed* Figure, and the soldiers too. It couldn't enter the elevator with us though, there was some kind of forcefield. Do you think... do you think it could get into—" I was cut off when I heard a massive boom in the distance. Everybody started running to find a hiding spot, but I was so deep in thought about what had happened with the soldiers in secondary, that I didn't realize what was happening until Adam yelled, "Hide!" And only then did I start moving. Terror immediately filled me as I remembered how fast this thing had arrived last time, and then the worst possible thing happened. I realized too late that the hiding spot I was going for was a very large one, and then a thin black hand reached out and grabbed my arm. I screamed in fear, desperately yanking, but then Felicity dashed towards me, broke the arm in the same way Grace had, and then she violently shoved me away towards a real hiding spot, and I barely slid in before the beast shot past, and at that distance, the gust of wind was incredibly jarring, it made my head swim and I think I banged my head against the wall, and then it got worse when it shot back the other way. Now with my skull definitely caved in, I inched back out of my hiding spot, and I noticed there was a weird pink mist.

And then I remembered Felicity. She was nowhere to be seen. I swore loudly and flailed to get out of the mist, and then the others realized what happened. Grace squeaked and stared wide eyed at the pink cloud, while Adam fell to his knees and Tess started hyperventilating. I noticed Adam had his eyes closed and he was mouthing something, but I couldn't read lips. I just stood there dumbfounded. After a few moments, Adam stood up and put his hands on his head and looked around at all of us. "I don't know what to do..." he said. "I feel so guilty right now... I don't feel bad enough for her, I— man, what's wrong with me? I didn't know her well enough..."

"She died saving *me*... you don't need to feel guilty." I said. He stuttered for a second and then fell silent. He looked at me, but not with any anger, just something like pity. Tess, who had calmed down somewhat, said "At least she was saved.", which confused me, seeing as she just died. "What do you mean?" I asked. She looked at me dumbly for a moment and then understanding colored her expression. "She was a Christian. Most of us are here. Are you not?" She explained. I looked nervously at everybody and quietly said no. I felt out of my element here, I had no idea what to make of the creatures being vulnerable to crosses. "Well, why not?"

"There's no evidence for there being a God... I mean, in nature, there's not, but none of this is natural..." I explained. Tess asked Grace what she thought, and she responded, "Umm... I wasn't a Christian before, but I saw something in the greenhouse in the Hotel. Adam, you know that black floating head? That Miles calls Rush? My friend Elijah threw a crucifix at it, and a lot went down. It looked amazing, but basically everything started glowing blue and Rush got pulled down into the underworld, or something. I never thought about religion much before I got trapped here, but I guess it has to be true now." Adam and Tess both looked at me, and I confirmed what she said. Tess said she was glad she thought so, but she explained, "That's only the first step. It's not enough just to know that it's the case, you should think about what it means for you. You too, Miles. But, maybe we should talk as we walk." Something had just occurred to me then, though. "Wait." I said. "Adam, when I was in Door 52, one of the Hotel Staff told me that a while back, one of them used a crucifix like that as well, but I still encountered all of the entities that had rules there. What did you deal with when you were in the greenhouse?" Adam thought for a moment, and then he answered, "Oh, that's right, I was wondering why you skipped naming one of them. Well, one I encountered was something where, uhh, you start feeling like you're being watched, and if you look out of the greenhouse windows, you'll see glowing eyes staring at you; the longer I looked, the more of them appeared, so I looked away. At least, nothing else bad happened when I averted my eyes. It happened a few times in the greenhouse, I only looked a little on instinct the first time. Maybe that's what the guy used the crucifix on. But anyways, we should get going again. Remember, rule 10 is just ahead."

He was right. After one more uneventful tunnel, we were at Door 245. He took a moment to make sure we were all ready, and then he opened the door. For just a moment, I caught sight of a large cavern, with a figure standing in the middle. There were LED strips marking out paths winding

between various stalagmites, and a vast array of floodlights on the ceiling. The figure in the middle was more interesting, though. In the split second I had to analyze it, it appeared to be a dark blue humanoid, with partially decayed flesh, and instead of a normal face, it had a black void filled with many pairs of eyes of different colors and sizes. That image stuck in my brain as I went blind immediately after seeing that. Just like with Smother, I couldn't see anything at all, it wasn't just black, I saw nothing. Adam told us to go feel around for the light switch, and we all split up, or at least we probably did. I hugged the right wall, thinking surely the light switch would be on a wall and not on one of the stalagmites. For a long while, I heard nothing but my footsteps, water dripping, and the more distant footsteps of my companions. I had been following the wall for about 30 seconds, when I heard someone approach. I asked who it was, and the person answered, "Tess... it's chasing me!" Sure enough, right after she said that, I heard some whispering rapidly getting louder. I didn't hear any footsteps from the thing, only the whispering. I don't know where Tess went, but the thing seemed to be following me now, even as I picked up my pace, now speed walking along the wall. Eventually, the sound of its whispers receded, and then it dropped off suddenly, but right after that, I came across the doorway we had come through. I had my entire body against the wall the entire walk, which was not very pleasant, so unless the switch was above my head, it wasn't on the wall.

This meant it was hidden among the stalagmites, where it would be much harder to maneuver. I reluctantly walked forwards with hands outstretched, and I was quickly having to pick careful paths around the sharp rocks. I almost forgot I had to search for the switch, and I only just then started feeling around on the many rock formations, trying to find something metallic. Before long, I started hearing the whispers again, and I turned and started running the other direction, but then the whispers quickly got louder. I started panicking, and I ran back the other way. The whispers receded then, but not as much as I wanted. I also couldn't move nearly as fast as I wanted, for fear of ramming into the rocks. I felt like I was being hemmed in, none of the twists and turns seemed to take me far enough away from the whispering. At one point, I ran into Grace, knocking us both over. I muttered an apology and something about it being close, and then I started walking again. I think Grace was next to me for a while, but I stopped hearing her footsteps eventually. I felt like I was making no progress, and the creature was still on me, but then something changed. The nothingness filling my vision was replaced with regular darkness, and the whispers stopped. I realized the floodlights and LEDs were off, and, though it was dim, I could make out everybody else in the room, including the entity. It now stood in mid stride, and the black void in its face was empty, devoid of eyes. I didn't understand how turning the lights off disabled it, but I had little mental energy left to question minor things like this.

We regrouped at the next door, and Adam congratulated us, and then we moved on. It wasn't long before we had another encounter. We all hid when we heard the droning, but after that, I noticed that, instead of being at the end of this tunnel, the door forward was on the corner of an intersection with a side tunnel. I walked forwards to open it, but I was hit by a wave of nausea, and then Adam

pulled me back. “Hey, remember rule 7! The door’s probably still at the end of the tunnel.” We walked towards the end, and sure enough, the door faded into existence right there. The nausea faded as we continued progressing. This ruse was simple enough, but, after a few more doors, a couple of which were dark, we reached a third large open space. Unlike the previous two, this one had almost no stalagmites. There were doors lining the entire room, with space in between each one. “I’ve never seen this happen before...” Adam muttered. That unnerved me a lot, and I knew that getting close to the false doors was very unpleasant. Mirroring my thoughts, Tess said “This is gonna feel awful...”

I tried to push the recent memory of nearing the false door out of my mind, and I plunged right in. I ran to the left, trying to keep just close enough to the wall to trigger the real door appearing, but as far as possible from the fake doors. The nausea was immediate. I had experienced worse, but that soon changed as my run slowed to a speed-walk, and before long, I was staggering away from the doors, and I collapsed to the floor and threw up. On the bright side, nothing else seemed to happen to me, but my head swam and I was hard pressed to even maintain my position on my hands and knees. I don’t know how many minutes I sat there in that spot, but I did throw up a second time. When my head was clear enough, I moved away from my puke puddle and sat, looking at the others, who were looking at me with pity. I remembered then that I had the herb of viridis in my body, and even with that it had taken a while for me to recover. Adam asked me if I was okay now, and I said yes, but I had to ask Adam about the plant. Unfortunately, he hadn’t gotten into the room with the plant, so I explained the effects of the herb to him and Tess. I told them it would be a lot worse for them since they couldn’t regenerate from whatever the false doors did to us. This meant, however, that only me and Grace could check for the real door, and I really didn’t want to have to do that again, but I also didn’t want Grace to have to go through that. Of course, Grace was insistent on helping. She didn’t make it as far as I did, and a second puddle of vomit was quickly created.

I felt good enough now to go for a second run, though I was not looking forward to it. Luckily enough, I didn’t have to go far; the door materialized after I passed a few more false ones, and I desperately entered it and moved away from the nausea-inducing ruse. I decided this entity, or event, whatever it was, should be called Ruse, and then I realized I hadn’t named any of the others yet. As the others joined me, I decided on Writhe for the first entity I had encountered, Rend for the fast one, Siphon for the one in the dark, since it apparently stole things, and Sight for the one in 245. I didn’t know what to call the one from rule 2, though. Thinking of the rules, I also realized that we hadn’t had to follow rule 3 or 9 yet. I sighed and continued on. Since we hadn’t encountered the entities of rules 3 or 9 yet, I was expecting an encounter to happen very soon. I only faced the same old entities I had already seen in the next encounter, but I had a big slipup. I happened to be looking down at my feet when we entered Door 261, and when Tess yelled “Rule 2!” I mistakenly looked up, and I didn’t look back down until it was too late.



As soon as it appeared, my head snapped to face exactly towards it, and the muscles in my neck grew unbelievably tense, so much that it hurt quite a bit. I couldn't look away, and I could hardly move my body. The thing emitted a red light so deep that it appeared to just turn everything around it red. It was a dark gray alien face, with massive black pits for eyes, and a toothy open-mouthed smile stretched across its entire face. It trembled and vibrated as I was forced to look at it, and its smile widened. I saw all this immediately, but right after, Adam grabbed me and started trying to pull me towards one of the hiding spots. I realized that, under the screaming of the creature, I could hear the droning of Writhe. Adam looked at me with terror, and then he abandoned his effort to go hide himself. About a second later, the creature finally disappeared, and I moved to a hiding spot as quick as I could, but Writhe arrived while I was still trying to slide into one of the cracks. Fortunately, it paid me no mind, passing by like any other time, but my closer proximity to it meant a lot more pain. It felt like I was being stabbed with needles all over my body, and I did indeed writhe in pain. It receded quickly enough, but the only time I had felt worse physical pain than that was in my encounter with Halt.

Grace patted me on the back, but nobody said anything. While I was recovering, I thought about how it felt like the creature had skewered me, nailing me to the spot, so I called it Skewer. As I got up and continued on with everyone, I wondered how much pain Adam and Tess were in, since they had encountered Writhe multiple times and didn't have the herb of viridis. I didn't ask either of them though, before we reached Door 263, where we encountered something that didn't seem to align with any of the rules I knew.

Before us, behind the open door, there was a black void, and a figure standing on nothing some distance away from the door. It was an old man, with no hair except for a gray beard reaching down to his hips, and his left leg was twisted and bent. His bald head was cracked all over like dirt on a hot and dry day, and slick with blood, and his sclera was black, and his pupil white. He wore black jeans, black shoes, and a black three-piece suit. He was also trembling, and, though I couldn't see his jaw moving at all, or any change in its neutral expression, I could hear something like laughing, or sobbing, coming from it. Despite all this information that entered my mind, I didn't know what rule applied to this. My heart raced, and I quietly asked, "Guys, what rule?"

But, to my utter shock and horror, Adam stutteringly replied, "I don't know..." I was silent, and I stared at the thing for another few seconds, and then I caught a sudden movement in the things good leg, and then before I could register what was happening, it was upon me.

...

I woke up, floating in a deep blue abyss. I realized with a start that I was underwater, but then I found that I could still breathe. I looked around, but the water was endless on all sides, no bottom or surface in sight. In front of me though, there was bright blue light. At the center, there was what

looked like the moon. I suddenly thought of the courtyard in the Hotel, and I realized this looked exactly like the moon I had seen there. I was beginning to panic, when a voice broke the silence. It was calm and pleasant, but had an otherworldly quality to it. "You were killed by what we call the Old Man." I silently thought, "I'm dead?!" and to my surprise, the voice replied, "Yes. This one snuck in, your government doesn't know it's there. Next time, charge it down as soon as you see it. You mustn't shy away from it. You must kill it, or it will kill you."

"Hold on," I thought. "Next time?? Am I gonna get resurrected?? Who are you? Where am I right now?" The voice cut me off, saying, "Who I am is not important, I am merely one of His servants. You will be given a second chance, because He wills it." And before I had a chance to collect my thoughts and question further, the light grew in brightness till it was pure white, and then it suddenly faded from my eyes, and in its place, I saw Door 263. I realized with a shock that I was back where I was before, and Adam was about to open Door 263, for the second time. It opened, and just like before there was nothing but a void with a single man standing inside. I hesitated for a moment, and then, remembering the advice of whatever had spoken to me, I ran forward. I walked over the void, miraculously not falling, and as my fear grew exponentially, and the Old Man eyed me, now with hatred in his eyes, I rammed into him. I shut my eyes tight when I collided, but when I opened them, everything had changed. The room was now a normal tunnel, and there was no decrepit figure in sight.

I looked behind me and saw my friends staring at me dumbfounded. "How did you know to do that?" Tess asked. I didn't want to seem insane in front of them, so I answered, "Umm, it just felt right. Intuition, I guess?" Adam awkwardly chuckled and said, "So I guess rule 11 is, 'tackle any and all bloody old people in voids'" I remained silent, pondering what I had just experienced before I tackled the Old Man. As we started walking again, I asked them, "Did any of you... see anything before we opened that door?" I was met with confusion, but they didn't press me on what I meant, luckily.

Soon enough, we had another encounter, and this time it was with the 'green orb' from rule 3. Blocking our passage through the tunnel, there was something that kind of looked like the rendition of stars in universe size comparison videos, only this one was black except for the very edges of it, which burned a bright green. Emitting from the orb in waves, there was a bright green aura, which seemed to splash against the walls. "There ought to be a way around in the side tunnels." Adam said. I was under the impression that all of the many many side tunnels I had seen just led to storage rooms, but that apparently wasn't the case. The one side tunnel we had access to led to a labyrinth. Me, Grace and Tess all knew the right hand rule though, and we hugged the right wall all the way through after informing Adam what we were doing. It took a while, but it eventually worked, and we came out on the other side of the tunnel, past the orb. Because of the way plasma radiated out of it, I decided to call it Radiate.

A few more doors passed, and then, as we passed Door 270, the LED strips above us flickered slightly, and then they turned off, and I heard a distant buzzing stop, which I didn't know was there

until it ended. “Rule 9?” Grace asked. Adam said yes, and he told us, “The right path usually curves less sharply than the branching ones, I think.” I didn’t know what he meant at first, but then I understood when we came to the first branching tunnel. Though the main tunnel twisted and turned however it wanted, it never turned at a sharp angle. The first branching path was easy to identify, as it was a sharp turn, while the main path continued on relatively straight. It seemed we didn’t have to worry about Siphon in these dark rooms, and the first room only had one side tunnel surprisingly, so things were going well. However, after two more doors, we ran into a branch that wasn’t nearly as clearcut. This side path didn’t branch off at a sharp angle like all the others had, and the main path happened to turn at the same time. Which was which, I couldn’t tell. “What now?” Grace asked. Adam clicked his teeth and said umm, but then he pulled his phone out and turned the flashlight on. He shined it down both tunnels, and down one, it illuminated the tunnel up until it made a turn, but down the other, it seemed to hit a darkness that it couldn’t pierce. “I guess we don’t go into *that*.” Grace said. Adam nodded, and we went the other way. We had to do that a couple more times, and I also had a close call with Strangle once, but it was relatively easy.

As we entered Door 276, the lights all turned back on, ahead and behind, but when that happened, I heard a screaming coming from behind us that I can only describe as demonic. Adam exclaimed “Oh w– uh, hide! My bodyguard didn’t tell me about this!” We all followed his impromptu advice and hid, and whatever was hiding in the side tunnels charged ahead past us. It appeared to be an amorphous black mass, with a smiling face plastered on the front like it was a sticker. The color of the face was of a dark blue, one that hauntingly reminded me of Halt. “That wasn’t so bad.” I said. Adam agreed, and assured us that, since we had now encountered every monster so far and the next outpost was near, escaping would be easy. I had forgotten about the next outpost until then, and I actually gained something near enthusiasm to continue.

Continue we did, and after just one more dark room, and an encounter with Rend and Skewer at the same time, we were there. Standing before Door 282, I was nervous, but in a way much better than I had been since I first entered the Hotel. Adam opened the door, revealing the sounds of many voices, which all stopped after a second or two. I heard a sizzling sound, and looked down to my rain jacket and shirt. The black stains on them were glowing a brilliant blue, and then they disappeared. Suddenly, someone up ahead shouted, “Survivors!” and everybody sprung into frenzied conversation, reminding me of my entry into Door 52 back in the Hotel. These people seemed more confident and perhaps experienced, they weren’t careful at all like the people in Door 230, and if they had access to the floodlights, they didn’t bother to turn them off. They all were dressed in the same prisoner garb that Tess and Felicity were. I tried to push the thought of Felicity out of my mind, and I saw that one person came forward to greet us personally. He felt the need to shake each of our hands, and he introduced himself as Ander. Adam and Grace introduced themselves, but me and Tess stayed silent, and he didn’t press us. The first thing he asked was about our clothing. “Have they started putting

people in here dressed like civilians?” he asked curiously. Adam explained, “No, me and those two are... well it’ll take a *long* time to explain fully, but the government has started tricking actual civilians to enter.” Ander was astonished. “You mean to say they’re performing human sacrifice on *innocent* people now?!” I said “Tell me about it.” and he nodded solemnly. “Well, regardless, I’m glad you’ve made it this far. I hope you, umm, didn’t experience much loss...”

I bluntly responded, “Two of us died just in the last eighty doors.”

“Oh... I’m sorry. Were they Christian by any chance?”

“Uhh... they both were.”

“Thank God... come on, I’m sure there’s lots to discuss, it’s been months since the last convict made it here.”

We all entered, and Adam took Ander aside so he could catch him up to speed on everything he knew. While that was happening, some others came to talk to us, but I wanted very much to be left alone. Tess did most of the talking for me and Grace, though Grace sometimes helped. The cavern was much larger than the one in Door 230, and there were probably more than 20 people here, by my estimate. There was also a giant cross in the middle of the cavern, carved out of a stalagmite most likely; large chunks of rock lay close around it. I didn’t want to think about any of this anymore, so I took the opportunity to rest while all the extroverts were busy talking. I took my jacket off and crumpled it up and rested my head on it in the most comfortable spot I could find, which wasn’t very comfortable. I tried to not think about anything, and I started dozing. My efforts to keep my mind clear were unsuccessful though. Memories of all the deaths that had happened kept going through my mind. Lucas, Angela, the soldiers, Killian, Rosie, Eli, and Felicity. Those names kept replaying over and over, along with my encounter with the Old Man and my revival. It didn’t seem very long before Adam called my name, and I was forced to get up. I put my jacket back on as Ander spoke to me. “So, Adam tells me that he and you two have been through nearly *thrice* as much as we have... I don’t know what to say... and here I thought we had undergone the most severe trial possible. And to *normal* people as well...” he started tearing up a little bit, which I guess was understandable, but I had been somewhat deadened to all this a while back. He continued, “There are some matters we must attend to before I can in good conscience let you continue on your way.”

I felt like I knew what was coming, and I had no logical defense for it at this point. I had grown up in a Christian household, and yet, despite the moral claims of Christianity, my father beat me weekly, sometimes daily. Ever since, I didn’t take anything Christians had to say seriously, and why should I have? There was no way to prove that God exists, let alone prove that the Bible was written by Him. Just like I expected, he started with, “Adam also tells me that you two aren’t Christian. As you can see, there’s a cross here, which took us years to carve out, and, as Adam has said, it works to repel these creatures. I think you know what this indicates, and so do all of us. With that in mind, I can’t in good conscience let you go and possibly die unsaved. I would hope one would be willing to hear me

out in this kind of situation regardless of what supernatural evidence is presented, but from what Adam tells me, you've seen something far more convincing than mere repulsion of the demons." "Yeah, I'm listening," Grace said. "Excellent. And you?" Ander looked at me. I begrudgingly said "Go ahead.", and then he began recounting the creation of the universe and Jesus' crucifixion and the like, which took a long while; he said nothing I hadn't heard before.

After he was finished I spoke immediately. "There are so many holes, man. Why and how on earth would an infinite God have a *son*? Is there also an infinite woman that he just had a child with?? And you haven't even mentioned the Holy Spirit, whatever that is. Weird family relationships aside, it's nonsensical anyways, you're saying that He's saving us from Himself, right? None of it makes any sense." Ander held off on answering any of my questions, and looked at Grace. She looked back and forth between us, with Adam, Tess and many others watching. She finally answered, "Umm... I mean, I kind of agree with Miles, there's a lot that I don't get about it, but... I understand all the major stuff, I think." Ander smiled and said, "Wonderful, and I understand the misgivings; there are things that we'll never fully understand, even in Heaven. But, these misgivings, do they stop you believing what I've said?"

"I don't think so. I... don't know what to do with that, though. When I escape and get back to the real world, I mean." She said. "Oh, of course, of course, there will be much to do and figure out if you escape, but hopefully then, your life won't be in so much danger. As for right now, I must ask you some questions, and we can be done. Uh- we meaning you and me. I haven't forgotten you Miles. So, Grace, do you believe that the story I've told you is true?" She answered yes, and he went on with various questions about believing stuff, and she answered yes to all of them, save a couple she asked a clarifying question about. I stopped paying attention quickly. When Ander finally turned his attention back to me, Grace looked deep in thought. "Well, Miles, all I can ask is, what alternative is there? The cross having an effect means Christ, because Islam and Judaism don't hold Jesus to be the Messiah, and neither do any other religions, or atheism or agnosticism."

This was what had me stumped, and I then remembered my encounter with the Old Man. I was silent for a moment, and then I reluctantly answered, "I don't know, but Christianity doesn't make any sense either. Oh, and how do you people have access to a Bible? I can't imagine they would let you bring one in here." Ander sighed, and then said, "Some of the people here had their phones given back to them before they were put in here, for reasons unknown to me. Luckily, one of them happened to have a copy of the Bible downloaded on his phone, which *also* has solar charging coincidentally, and he's able to keep his phone charged with the floodlights here. Lucky him. Anyways, that isn't important. I don't suppose you would be open to persuasion?" I shook my head and crossed my arms. He looked down and sighed, saying, "Well, I suppose there's nothing more I can do for you. My conscience is clear." Then he turned and embraced Grace, saying goodbye to her. "I would go with you, but Adam tells me that you can't return to previous doors, and I'm somewhat of a leader here. I

trust Adam though, and I wish the four of you good luck, the final stretch lays before you! And I do hope you change your mind, Miles.” I rolled my eyes, and we all said goodbye. I was dreading leaving, but also eager to at the same time.

With that, we all got up and walked through Door 283. Ander waved goodbye behind us until he was obscured by a bend. After a moment of silence, I spoke to Grace, “You really believe all that now?” She looked up at me, slightly annoyed, and huffed, “Well, what else is there to believe? You admitted to having no defense or alternative.” I was going to respond, but we were interrupted by an entity encounter. We all heard the familiar droning and hid, without incident. The prickling pain passed quickly, and I glanced around after we got out to make sure everybody was okay, and then we continued on. We had made it to the next door, when I heard a strangled gasp that was cut off. I turned and saw that Grace was not with us, she was some ways back being grasped by the neck by one of those spindly black arms. She clawed at the fingers clamped around her neck, but it did nothing as she was pulled backwards, her strength weakening. I was already running towards her to snap the arm, and I did so without incident. Her neck was visibly compressed where the ebony fingers had been, but it quickly healed, and she thanked me, and we continued on. I didn’t respond to her question from earlier, and she didn’t press me again.

After a moment more of walking in silence, Tess spoke, “I can’t believe we’re almost out... I spent so long staying in Door 230, imagining my escape from this place, and now it’s almost here. I don’t even know what I’m gonna do, I don’t have anything to go back to.” I looked at the next door label, and sure enough, it read 290. Only 10% left. Hope filled me, but then a devastating thought occurred to me. I realized quickly that it wouldn’t affect me, Grace, or Adam at all, but for Tess it was different: what if the government wouldn’t allow any convicts to escape? I opted not to mention that and utterly crush her spirits, but I didn’t have anything else to say, so I stayed silent. Grace started to say something, but we came across a dark room just then.

The darkness demanded our attention, but I didn’t see Siphon until the very end of the tunnel, when Adam fumbled the door open. As light flooded in, I looked behind me and finally saw those beady eyes again. This time, though, the light illuminated part of it. It seemed to be a wolf, but with the darkest fur I’ve ever seen, and those eerie eyes only added to the strangeness, but it disappeared quickly and silently as I looked at it. It soon left my mind as the reality of our near escape sunk in. For a long time, I had experienced nothing but numbness interspersed with periodic anger, and of course pain. The goal of escape had remained in my mind always, but it had faded to a “wouldn’t that be nice” a long while back, and I was almost just going through the motions at this point. But now, it felt real again. Excitement grew within me, and I laughed a little. Grace looked at me questioningly, and I exclaimed, “We’re almost out!”

She smiled at that. We all picked up our pace, and the doors passed by. We had one more encounter with Skewer and Rend at the same time, but nothing came of it. Now almost running, we

passed the last few doors, and I wrenched Door 300 open, my heart pounding. Before us lay a large hallway, bigger than the usual tunnels, and at the end of the tunnel, a door like the one in the lift that had brought us to primary. I laughed in glee and broke into a full sprint, but then something caught my eye.

On either side of the tunnel, just in front of the elevator, the walls were black. I slowed slightly, as I hadn't noticed this before, and then something happened which replaced all my joy with a deep sickening dread. The blackness on the walls extended outwards, swiftly blocking the entire hall, and I was forced to stop. To my utter horror, an eye appeared in the black mass, and then, slowly stepping out of the wall, Seek's avatar emerged. "NO!" I screamed in fury and terror. I looked behind me, and the previous Door was blocked off as well. I slowly realized that, after all this, not only was escaping this prison no longer an option, but I was doomed to die. I stood frozen in place as the thing spoke, smugness and contempt in its voice. "One of you three who escaped is not here... how disappointing. I hoped... to consume all three. It does not matter. I have spoken to one who has shown me how to control this place. There is now... no end. I can do more than I could. I can shape myself with much precision now." When it said that, it morphed itself into an exact human likeness save the one giant eye, not the usual blobby approximation. It continued, "I even know... how to open the doors behind. There is no hindrance for me. Run now. Run until your legs break. One last chase, with no escape this time." I turned again to see that the door behind us was no longer blocked off, and as I did, the place rumbled, and the LED strips flickered. I looked towards Seek again, and when I saw it take a step forward, though I deplored playing its game, I started running. Back through Door 300 I went. Tears of hatred and rage streamed down my face as I ran. This time, there were no eyes and no obstacles, just the sound of the creatures footsteps behind us. Me and Grace, empowered by the herb of viridis, quickly outpaced Adam and Tess. I worried about them momentarily, but my thoughts were occupied with the chase.

I wasn't able to catch what the door labels said, but as I ran through the winding tunnels, I estimated I had gone through more than 5 doors, meaning the thing had indeed learned how to open the doors.

We ran, and ran, and ran, with no end in sight, just like it said. The tunnels were long, and even with the help of the veridis, I was starting to feel it ten doors in. The footsteps of our pursuer echoed through the tunnels, louder than our own. Slowly but surely, Grace, who I had initially outrun, overtook me. A few moments after I realized that, I heard a chilling sound. From behind, the creature yelled, though it didn't speak any differently, just louder, "ONE." I guessed pretty quickly what this meant, but I tried not to think about it, focusing on running instead. The footsteps were slowly growing quieter, but I couldn't keep up this sprint for much longer, despite the fact that I was trying to pace myself a little bit. Grace was pulling pretty far ahead of me though, and I worried that she was expending all of her energy too early, but then it hit me. We were nearing Door 282, where the giant

cross was. Despite my apprehensions, that was the only hope we had, so I picked up my pace as well for what was hopefully the final stretch.

It felt like I had run through more than 20 doors already, with how tired I was, and that sparked a terrifying thought in my mind. What if the creature had somehow manipulated the place to where there was literally no end? It had opened the doors behind us, which violated a lot of what I thought about this place already. My hope of reaching Door 282 melted away as I thought about this. My legs ached, my lungs and throat burned, and I felt sick to my stomach. I started counting the doors in earnest. One door passed, it was getting difficult to breathe. Another door passed, I thought about giving up. Then, as I rounded the last bend before the third door, my fears proved themselves unfounded, as I finally saw the huge cross before me. Grace was already there, gasping for breath but standing still next to the stone sculpture.

I went through and allowed my legs to finally give out, and I fell on my hands and knees panting. I hardly noticed the convicts around me as I looked back towards the door expectantly. Two distinct footsteps echoed from the doorway, and after about half a minute of tense waiting, Adam stumbled in, hardly keeping himself standing, and he immediately collapsed. Only a second or two later, the creature ran in behind him, to the astonishment of everyone in the room. It swiftly stopped and gazed around at all of the people. "Interesting..." it said slowly. Then eyes rapidly appeared all around the cavern, gazing at us and rapidly shifting to look at the many people, until, suddenly, they all collectively changed to stare at something else. I could have sworn I saw the pupils dilate, shrinking in fear at the sight of the cross in the center of the room.

It let out an inhuman shriek, and as it did, a change came over the cross. It began glowing, dimly at first, then it changed entirely to a radiant bright blue with a tremendous boom, and circles and symbols appeared around it with the star of david and the crescent at the center, just as before. A blast of blue energy shot out from the cross, and as it hit all of the eyes in the room, they sizzled, turned blue, and shriveled away until nothing was left, and the avatar was reduced to a formless pile of black goop, with blue flames coming off of it and eating away at it. It wasn't over with just yet, though, as it tried to reform, and black hands reached out from behind Door 283. I was too amazed by what was happening to react, and before I knew it, there were hands grasping me, dragging me away. I tried to fight back, but even with the hands sizzling from the energy of the cross, I couldn't overpower them.

I realized I was going to die anyway after all that, but then a second pulse emanated from the cross, and the hands melted away, though they weren't in the same room as the cross anymore. I scrambled to get up and get back to the cross, but the creature refused to give up. Black sludge grew out of the walls everywhere except in the cross room, and more and more eyes sprung up, trembling with fear or anger, I didn't know which. More hands grasped me and dragged me further away despite my best efforts. From all around me, a voice emanated from the walls, screaming, "HE HAS MADE MY END TODAY! LET ME HAVE JUST ONE MORE!" The sludge began to envelop me as I was



dragged away, and I felt a pricking and scratching sensation all over as it tried to consume me, but then a third pulse arrived from the now unseen cross. Most of the sludge around me melted away, and the rest caught fire, burning in bright blue flames, though they didn't harm me. I got up again to run away, even as the sludge slowly reformed on the walls, much weaker than before and already shimmering with a blue glow.

Despite this, after a few steps an ear piercing scream rang out from the walls, and I had to stop to cover my ears, but then it all faded away as I felt a stab of agonizing pain shoot through my body, where my heart was. I slowly looked down and saw a black spike protruding through my chest shimmering blue and writhing, and then I saw no more.

...

I ran forward to follow him into the tunnel as the pile of sludge in the room disappeared, but Ander grabbed me, exclaiming, "No! There's nothing you can do other than get yourself hurt... just wait, it'll be alright." We all waited in tense silence, broken only by the hum of the cross behind me and the sound of struggling. Then, a second pulse happened, and my heart lifted, thinking the creature was dead now, but the sound of scuffling only died down for a moment, and then a voice rang out from the tunnel. "HE HAS MADE MY END TODAY! LET ME HAVE JUST ONE MORE!" A third pulse followed, making me tingle all over, and my hopes rose and were dashed once again, and then the thing let out a tremendous scream, and I heard a sickening squelch, and then a fourth and final pulse came from the cross.

The humming quieted, and I looked behind me to see the cross dimming, and then it faded away, leaving empty air in its place like it was never there. The stone below it was smooth and showed no signs of being disturbed. I looked back at the tunnel, and all was quiet there too. The silence was complete as everyone held their breath, and then I ran forward to see what had happened. I rounded one bend, then another, and I saw what I hoped to never see. Miles lay sprawled on the ground, a gaping hole in his chest with blood pouring out of it. I screamed unintelligibly and ran to his body. I got down on my knees and realized his eyes were still moving. My heart leapt as I realized the veridis could still heal him, but as he looked at me, he was silent and very still. Already he looked pale, and I had no idea what to do or say. Suddenly, he raised his arm up and put his hand on my back. "Miles!" I finally said. I looked down at his wound again in horror, and the bleeding was much slower. I hoped this meant the veridis was doing its job, but deep down I knew better. I looked back up at his face, and we stared at each other for a few moments longer, and then his arm went limp and slid off of me, and his eyes glazed over.

"MILES!" I screamed again. I didn't want it to be, and I didn't know how to deal with it. I couldn't bear it. I held him and cried, sobbing into his shirt, heedless of the drying blood. We were so

close to safety, and that wretched thing came and put itself where it didn't belong. I kept saying his name over and over, as if it would bring him back to life. I cried harder than I had ever done throughout all three hundred doors. I lay there for what felt like hours, screaming into his chest, and then I fell into deep nightmare-filled sleep. I dreamt of all the deaths I had seen, and the horrid creatures here, and what I had before all this, and the people who created this place.

Slowly, I woke, leaving my dreams with difficulty. I peeled my face off of Miles and blearily looked around. Many people were sitting or standing in the hall around me, and I was noticed immediately. "Grace..." Adam said. I didn't say anything, I just looked down at Miles again, feeling numb and tired. Very, very tired. I silently turned and walked away. All the others stirred and began following me, and Adam ran up to walk next to me. I glanced at him as I walked, but neither of us had anything to say. We kept walking, all of the convicts behind us, and nothing appeared to stop us. It felt like ages, but at last we arrived at the lift, and moved on to freedom.

...

I woke with a start, and I gasped for air like I had been suffocating in my sleep. I felt a terrible stinging pain on the left side of my chest and back, and I looked down to see a large bloody hole, slowly closing up, and the pain was receding. Suddenly, I remembered everything that had just happened, all the way up to being stabbed and blacking out. I got up, though my limbs ached a little, and I went back to the room with the cross. Nobody was there, and the cross was somehow missing. All was silent save for the buzzing of the floodlights, and the distant dripping of water. My confusion grew to worry as I wondered where everybody was. I tried to keep their fate out of my mind though, and I turned to continue on my way, back to Door 300. The trek was slow, but I encountered nothing on the way, not even any large cracks.

My dread and anticipation grew as I neared Door 300, but nothing ever happened. At last, I came to the long tunnel that led to the elevator, and I nervously walked down to the door. No sludge appeared this time, and I pressed the button to open the door. I waited for a minute, and then the doors opened. I stepped in, feeling a mixture of eagerness and guilt, and my fear over what had happened to Grace and the others grew as the elevator went up. I almost started to panic, breaking out in a cold sweat before the doors opened, revealing something that allowed me to finally release the breath I was holding. Grace, surrounded by a few U.S.P.C.D. soldiers, sat on a metal chair in front of the wall opposite the lift. As the door opened, she sat up, and we stood there staring at each other, her mouth agape. "I made it." I finally said.

When I said that, she immediately charged forward, screaming my name, and she hugged me so tight that I thought she was going to crack one of my ribs. I fell over backwards from the force of her ramming into me, but I hugged her back. "I thought you died! You *did* die! But you're alive!! How?!!?"

She asked. I laughed a little and answered, "I don't know, I guess the veridis just kicked in late." She got up off of me and helped me up, only to hug me again as soon as I was up. We hugged in silence for a moment longer, and then I asked as she pulled away, "How long was I... dead?"

"Well, it took like 15 minutes to get everybody up here, and then I was waiting here for you for half an hour. I kept hoping that this would happen, but I didn't think it would!" She stopped for a moment and looked at me, marveling. "But none of that matters anymore, we did it, Miles!" She hugged me once more, and then we exited the elevator and joined the soldiers. They escorted us silently to some kind of waiting room, and I thought about questioning them on the way, but I decided against it. When we entered the waiting room, I saw Adam there, as well as two other soldiers. As soon as he saw us enter, he shot up. "Miles! You're alive! But you had no pulse, how did that happen?" He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then speculated, "Maybe your super healing powers were just super slowed down because it was your heart that got damaged. Well, all's well that ends well; I can't imagine how Grace felt." I didn't respond to that because I just realized something.

"Where are all the convicts?" I asked. Grace was still beaming at me in the chair next to me, but her smile faded when I mentioned that. "The soldiers said that, umm, they have to be executed because they're still under the death penalty." There was a long silence in which I didn't know what to say, but Adam eventually added, "All the people at 230 were at peace with what would happen if they ever escaped, and Ander and all the guys at 282 seemed to be in better spirits than them, so maybe they've accepted it too. I hope so. I know Ander has, I talked to him a lot." I looked around awkwardly, and then asked, "What happens now?" Grace replied, "I wasn't able to get much out of the grumpy soldiers, but I know somebodies coming here to talk to us, and then we'll be free to go... it all feels so surreal now. I feel like I've been in that place for years. Neither reality feels real anymore. What... what are we gonna do after they let us go? I don't think I can bring myself to just forget you and never talk to you again, Miles. And you have your own life to get back to, and I... I do what I do. Though maybe I've lost all my followers because I've been missing for days. I don't know what to do, Miles. I feel so attached to you, but that's just trauma-bonding, right?" Truthfully, I didn't know about her last question, but I answered what I could. "We'll figure it out. We can stay in touch at least."

"Oh man, I haven't thought about that in a long time. I've been gone for... I don't even remember how long, months at least. But I'm gonna see my family again! Oh, I can't believe it's finally over and I'll get to go back to my life. It definitely will be weird though. You two have only been gone for a little bit, though I don't envy your, uhh... trauma-bond situation?" Adam said. Without thinking, I grinned and said, "It's not so bad." I blushed when I turned and saw Grace staring at me with searching eyes. She didn't say anything though, she just laid her head on my shoulder, and we said nothing more. It hit me then how weary I was, it felt like I was running on fumes. The containment area's strange effect of removing the need for sleep had ended. I gladly accepted the rest and laid my head against the wall, and I passed out pretty quickly.

I was rudely awakened by someone snapping their fingers right in front of me. I took a few moments to wake up, and then I looked at the guy. It was a man dressed the same way as the supervisors from secondary. I reminisced for a moment about being back there, so far in and yet so far from escape, but then I realized the guy was talking to me.

“--location. I have some things I need to discuss with you, and then we'll see about letting you run wild.” Grace had remained asleep on my shoulder, so I shifted to wake her up. She woke with a start, and the supervisor sighed, saying hurriedly, “I don't have time to repeat myself, come on!” And with that he turned and walked away, expecting us to follow. As we did, the guards at the door suddenly moved to follow us. We went down several hallways, all undecorated just like the bunker, though with white lights instead of the blue I had seen before. After a bit, the supervisor came to a closed door, which he used a keycard on, and then we descended a flight of stairs, leaving the guards behind who had stopped before the door without command. After that, we went through a couple more hallways, and then we came to a door where the supervisor used his keycard again, then he clearly enunciated a long string of letters and numbers. The door opened a few seconds after, and we all went inside.

At this point, I was thoroughly unnerved, and the thought had crossed my mind that he was bringing us here to get rid of us. The room was filled with filing cabinets, as well as a desk with many monitors on it, none of which were on at the moment. He told us to wait for a minute while he went and sat down behind the desk and booted up the computer. As he did, the door automatically shut behind us. The tension in the air was palpable, and none of us dared to say anything to the supervisor, for fear of hurrying up whatever plans he had. After a couple minutes of typing whatever on one of the monitors, he got up and went to one of the filing cabinets. He rifled through it for a second before he found what he wanted, and then he finally spoke to us, handing us each a sheet of paper.

The text was made incredibly thick so as to fit on one sheet, probably around 5 point font. “So listen, you may not know this, but we actually don't give a crap if some people go around telling everybody about a haunted hotel. Go ahead with that if you want, and see how many crackheads you can get to believe you. This isn't an NDA. Call it a disclosure agreement if you will, because what you *will* tell people is the coverup story that we have set in place for all of you.” He must have caught my confused expression, because he added, “You should be grateful that we spent all the time and effort ahead of time for you to be able to come back to your lives, especially when you might not have even made it out. I guess we have some softies high up. You'll be sent the story later, with plenty of time to memorize it.”

“This guy isn't high up?” I thought. The supervisor continued, “We figured out *everything* about you while you were spending your vacation in our containment sites, so rest assured that nobody will be able to find any holes in your story.” While he was talking, he was looking for more files among the many cabinets. He finally found what he wanted, and said, “Now this...” he flourished the papers.

“*is* an NDA. Because, while we don't care if you tell scary stories by the campfire, you won't be telling people all you know about the U.S.P.C.D.” He gave us each an NDA and a pen, which thankfully didn't have as much text. I began reading the NDA, but the supervisor interrupted me. “For goodness sake, are you actually *reading* it?! Just sign it, the NDA says ‘I promise not to be a snitch’ and the other one says ‘I promise to pay attention to what the U.S.P.C.D. says’. I'm very busy with more important things.” Grace and me signed it then, using the only surface available which was the wall of filing cabinets, though Adam took a few moments more to skim under the now seething glare from the supervisor, and then he signed as well.

“Now that that's done, we need some info. What *happened* at the end there?” The supervisor asked. “Some massive energy spike that we couldn't identify, and then 01 disappears. PB-001 that is, do you know it? Right. Like I said, it disappeared off of our scans. It and one other are the ones we have the most capability to monitor, so it makes no sense that it disappeared entirely, and it hasn't come back. So, what happened?” We were all silent for a moment, but then Adam spoke. “Well, there's a giant cross carved out of a stalagmite in Door 282, and the thing ran into that, and the cross, uh, started glowing and emitting tons of blue energy, and it melted the thing away.” The supervisor stared at him for a moment, and then looked at us expectantly. “That's what happened.” Grace said, and I nodded.

“How... *profoundly* unhelpful. Let's get going.” The supervisor said. He collected all the papers, put them in a folder, and left it on the desk. He escorted us back the way we came, and as we traversed the many halls of whatever facility we were in, we ascended three flights of stairs, bringing us to the roof where there was a helicopter, presumably waiting for us. The sight of the sky after so long being trapped amazed me. The last time I had seen the sky was in the beginning of secondary, and then it was filled with harsh burning sunlight. The quality of the crisp air here was made all the better by the thought that I would never be cut off from it for so long again. We nervously climbed into the helicopter, and it swiftly began to take off. The pilot needed no instruction. “Where are we going now?” Grace asked. “Back where you entered tertiary. It won't do for you to suddenly appear miles away from where you were. Speaking of inconsistencies, I have to give you this.” He handed each of us, from his pockets, a phone that looked exactly like our old smashed phones. At least, the one he gave me looked like mine. I examined it, and it even had the large mark on the back of the case, though it was missing other weathering. Everything on it seemed to be exactly like how my phone was. “Another kindness. We easily could have written that your phones all got smashed in your cover-up stories.” “How did you do this?” Grace asked. He just clicked his tongue in response and leaned back against the wall. We were silent for a second, but then Grace exclaimed, “Oh! Miles, we can exchange numbers now!” We did just that, and I realized that my number and contacts were the same as before. How on earth that was managed, I didn't know. I knew better than to ask about it, though, and I was still bone tired from my journey, so I rested my head against the wall and tried to sleep. As I drifted off, I thought

about everything that had happened. Try as I might, I couldn't deny that what that place screamed at me was this: there is some power in control of everything. And, as I thought about everything that had happened to keep me alive and get me through, that idea didn't sound as loathsome to me anymore.

...

I woke to the supervisor yelling at me to wake up. "The pilot's gonna fall asleep and we're all gonna die if you don't wake up in the next 5 seconds!" I got up and looked around. Adam was already gone, but Grace was still there, looking at me sorrowfully. "It's your STOP." The supervisor said forcefully. With that, he opened the door of the helicopter, and I saw that we were on the ground, in a familiar field. I looked back at Grace hesitantly. "I can't get off here, he says I'm not allowed, but I'm going to make my way to you, as soon as I can! I promise!" she said. The supervisor complained for me to get off, but I gave her a goodbye hug before I did. She looked hopeful now, and she enthusiastically waved goodbye. I backed away from the helicopter as the blades began to spin, creating a deafening roar, and then it lifted off, leaving me there alone. I stood there for a long time, gazing after the slowly shrinking aircraft. Just like she had said earlier, everything felt surreal. It was all done, like it had never happened. I would never forget Elis smug face, or Felicity sacrificing herself, or Lucas's horrible absence after Halts corridor, or any of it.

I finally tore my gaze from the small black dot, and I looked towards the road. There it was, my old car, just as I had left it. Now all I had to do was get my car towed.

### *Interlude III*

“Greetings, אחד שמסתכל. How did it go?”

“... Of the– the first five, two escaped.”

“Unfortunate. I expected more from הרפש העוטף and the others held there. And yet, you do not tell me all. There is worse still to hear. I will ask one more time, what has happened?”

“... All those at 282 who were doomed to death have escaped, and one from 230.”

“I ORDERED YOU TO TELL ME ALL.”

“הרפש העוטף met his end from the image of salvation, and he also destroyed לעיבוד. אחד בלתי ניתן לאיבוד. It was a feral one, a weak one. ראש רקוב also fell.”

“This is ridiculous. We can rely no longer on the feral lower beings that they capture. הרפש העוטף only did as much as has been done because I sent איש זקן to aid him. I can, at this moment, only spare the few I have before me now. Take them, to do your dirty work if needed, but you *must* FIND WAYS AROUND THE BARRIERS. WE WILL WAIT NO LONGER.”

“Yes, Lord.”

*Backdoor***FIRST CONTACT - INTERVIEW BETWEEN [REDACTED] AND PB-030**

[REDACTED]/2022, a door appeared in [REDACTED], USA. It is of a wood type closest to Spalted Maple, but it doesn't perfectly match any type of wood currently known. It is labeled "-51". Efforts to open this door, move it, or damage it have been unsuccessful. On [REDACTED]/2022, while there were no U.S.P.C.D. personnel in the vicinity, a being, now known as PB-030, emerged from the door, and shut it behind itself, with no apparent effort. It had its face turned away from all surveillance when doing this, and when it closed the door, it raised its hands to its face, covering it. One minute and 23 seconds later, U.S.P.C.D. soldiers confronted PB-030. It went willingly with the squad, and was secured for interrogation. PB-030 is a roughly 7 feet tall humanoid, with black and dark red skin, and possesses consciousness.

Interviewer: Who are you?

PB-030: I am called [Hebrew for "One Who Looks"].

Interviewer: I didn't catch that.

[PB-030 makes no response.]

Interviewer: Was that in your own language?

PB-030: Yes.

Interviewer: *What* are you?

PB-030: I am one of those who fell.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate?

PB-030: We fell from him who created us.

Interviewer: Who created you?

PB-030: He tells you in his word.

Interviewer: ... Why are you covering your eyes?

PB-030: You will see.



Interviewer: Why does your kind follow such specific behavior patterns?

PB-030: Our power was bound, two thousand years ago.

Interviewer: Who bound it?

[PB-030 makes no response.]

Interviewer: What is your world like?

PB-030: Endless sequences of doors, sections and labyrinths, no center, so many strings of doors.

Interviewer: How do our containment areas fit into that?

PB-030: They are only one sequence.

Interviewer: That door you came out of, it's labeled -51. Does that come before our sequence of doors?

PB-030: Yes.

Interviewer: How is that possible?

PB-030: ... You creatures of flesh have been exploring much lately. But there is much to be learned, and you forget, that is not your domain.

Interviewer: Have our containment sites been reconstructed to be like your world? Or did that happen on its own?

PB-030: It was you who reconstructed them. To place something in our world is to make it the same as our world.

Interviewer: Why don't humans change when we put them in your world?

PB-030: He who created us doesn't allow it.

Interviewer: Why does your kind seek to kill us?

PB-030: To hinder his plans, and to destroy his chosen.

Interviewer: Why are you answering these questions?

PB-030: It entertains me.

Interviewer: Are you aware of one of your kind who consists of black sludge and eyes?

PB-030: He is called [Hebrew for "Enveloping Slime"].

Interviewer: We have reports that it's dead.

PB-030: We do not die.

Interviewer: It was killed by being exposed to a large cross in our primary containment site.

[PB-030 makes no response.]

Interviewer: Why are you vulnerable to crosses?

[PB-030 is silent, and then it removes its hands from its eyes. Interference with recording occurs as soon as this happens, and hides the appearance of its face. After the interference dissipates, PB-030 is gone, and [REDACTED] and the guards that were facing its front side are staggered from an unseen source of pain.]

Interviewer: [After recovering] At least we got something. End recording.

# **1ST EXPEDITION INTO DOORS [-51]-[-1], DUBBED "BACKDOOR" [REDACTED]/[REDACTED]/2022**

Transcription of bodycam footage from Grant, M3 of SR1-S19, of the expedition.

[Recording starts. View of what seems to be an area dedicated to storage. Closets, boxes, and tables with drawers are scattered throughout the room. Dust fills the air, which is illuminated by simple yellow light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Most of the room is composed of wood paneling, except for one section of wall which shows the cinder blocks underneath. All is quiet and still. M3 checks the thermometer on his pauldron, which reads ~57 fahrenheit.]

[Squad moves to the next Door, labeled -50. An electronic display sits above the number, currently deactivated.]

Drayton (M1): The door's locked.

Randolph (M5): The key's right there.

[Randolph points to a key sitting on a table in an area partially fenced off by chain-link. He grabs the key and unlocks the door.]

[As the door unlocks, the display turns on, displaying a one minute timer that ticks down to 0:59 immediately. At the same time, a strange sound is heard, with seemingly no point of origin.]

Slate (M2): [Referring to the sound] What is *that*?

[No one answers, but a lever is visible on a wall beyond the door. It has a display, one above, one below. The top one displays the current timer, and the bottom statically displays 1:00.]

Grant: Look at that switch... should we flip it?

[Slate walks forward and flips the switch. The bottom display switches to 0:00, and a minute is added to the timer above. The sound that is continuously heard throughout the footage changes slightly at the same time.]

Grant: Nice... we should move quickly.

[The squad proceeds through the next three rooms, efficiently searching every drawer and side room.]

DOOR -46: [Camilo (M6) opens a door in front of Grant, revealing a black void. Camilo does not realize this, and he falls into the void behind the door.]

Grant: Camilo!

[Grant runs towards the door and holds himself on the doorframe to avoid falling while looking in.]

Grant: Camilo!

[No response. Nothing is visible in the void, despite Camilo having fallen in only a few seconds earlier. A sound of rushing wind comes from the door. M3 turns and sees the other soldiers.]

Grant: There's a void behind this door, Camilo just fell in!

Drayton: Damnit, we've only been here for a few seconds!

Marshall (M4): We knew this would happen... we have to keep moving.

[Squad moves ahead through two more rooms; no items are found among the drawers and boxes.]

DOOR -43: [As Marshall enters Door -43 ahead of Grant, the squad catches sight of PB-030, staring at them from the other end of the room. Interference with the recording occurs a split second later, but several frames of the creature's face are captured. It possesses no facial features except its eyes, which are glowing red dots, akin to the kind seen from laser pointers.]

[After the interference, PB-030 is no longer visible. Despite this, its voice can be heard.]

PB-030: Welcome. I see curiosity can not be forestalled by dangers beyond comprehension.

Slate: What the hell?! Nobody said they could talk!

Drayton: Yes they did, you weren't paying attention during the briefing.

Marshall: Keep your heads down, remember not to look at its eyes.

[Grant groans in pain. The squad begins moving again.]

[Slate can be heard crying out.]

Marshall: What?!

Slate: 030's still here, he's just watching us.

[Grant turns to where Slate is standing. He sees the lower half of PB-030, but averts his gaze from its eyes. PB-030 makes no move.]

PB-030: You are not in control.

[Slate quickly backs away from PB-030 and the squad moves on.]

[Squad proceeds through four more rooms. By this time, the sound has increased in intensity, and a constant tapping starts to come from the walls around the squad.]

Door -38:

Drayton: What is that sound?? What's happening?

[The squad has picked up their pace and is no longer searching every drawer and side room. Marshall is about to open the next door, when he hears Randolph in one of the side rooms.]

Randolph: I found another timer switch!

[Sound of a switch being flipped. The pervasive sound calms down immediately, and the tapping stops.]

Drayton: Jeez...

[Squad proceeds through two more rooms.]

Door -35: [The lights in the room flicker rapidly.]

Randolph: Wha- I thought 024 was in tertiary!

Marshall: It *is* you dolt, hide anyways!

[Squad rushes into side rooms.]

[Sound of what is now known as PB-031 approaches. A deep continuous growling sound rushes through the room along with a deep green glow, and all the lightbulbs shatter in its wake. After passing however, the glow turns bright red, and the sound becomes higher-pitched, and PB-031 returns and stays in the room for a few seconds, before turning green again and leaving. This time it does not return.]

[The soldiers exit their hiding places and leave the room.]

Randolph: Another one down, I guess.

[Squad enters next room after that, but PB-030 is present there.]

PB-030: This is only the inception of what is to come.

[As Grant passes by it, a deep rumbling sound is heard, like the sound of blood rushing.]

[Behind Grant, Slate makes a startled sound, and then yells in pain. The lights in the room flicker slightly, and the room shakes. The sound emitted by PB-030 is gone, but then something similar to a low electro-synth is heard, and the sound of blood rushing returns. Immediately after, Slate yells again, and as Grant turns to look at him, Slate fires his AP cannon, and PB-030, who had reappeared right in front of Slate, flails for a moment before disappearing.]

Marshall: Get it together, Slate!

Slate: I wasn't expecting him to be right in front of me...

Marshall: Doesn't matter, come on!

[Squad proceeds through two more rooms; the ambient sound has intensified again, and the tapping has returned.]

Door -30: [Drayton finds a vial filled with a bright glowing orange liquid.]

Drayton: Found a possible PI.

Marshall: Good work, stow it away, we have to find another lever!

[Squad runs through five more rooms, while the timer ticks down through the last several seconds.]

Door -34: [As the timer hits 0:00, the noise and the tapping stops. In its place, the air around them turns bright orange, like the kind seen on spectrogram images, and the warped sound of someone wailing in extreme pain and anger, the sound of what is now known as PB-032.]

[The soldiers exclaim in fear and sprint through more rooms, searching every side room for timer levers. The noise grows louder and drowns out all other sounds]

[In the periphery of the recording, Marshall is seen opening a side door and falling into another one of the void rooms. Grant continues running, and he catches sight of a timer lever at the end of the room. Drayton, slightly in front of him, looks back and shrieks, firing a shot from his AP cannon. Grant passes him and reaches the lever, yanking it upwards, and as soon as he does, everything returns to normal. His surroundings are their normal color again, and the only audio is the sound that started at Door -50.]

[Grant turns and surveys his surroundings. Nothing other than more boxes, closets, desks, and two other soldiers. Specifically, Drayton and Slate have survived the ordeal with Grant, Randolph and Marshall are not present.]

Grant: What the hell...

[Drayton sighs heavily.]

Drayton: We gotta keep moving and find more levers or it'll happen again.

[The squad goes through one more room.]

Door -27: [Lights flicker again, and the soldiers hide. PB-031 turns red and goes backwards twice before actually leaving.]

[Sound of blood rushing is audible as Grant leaves his hiding spot.]

[Grant hears Slate yell again, and the room destabilizes momentarily, just like before. Slate curses and continues moving. His movements are drunken and weak.]

Grant: Are you okay? How many times have you looked at that thing?

Slate: Feels like a migraine in my whole body... we gotta keep going though.

PB-030: I will bring about more and more breaches until we can roam the earth as we did of old, before the crucifixion.

[Squad proceeds through two more rooms, and then finds another timer lever.]

Door -23: [After that room, they enter what seems to be a maintenance area, the walls composed of dark gray cinder blocks and smooth concrete for the floor, with scattered grates present. Black and yellow strips line the walls, broken by eight corridors, four on each side of the hall. The three split up and search every corridor, but after a few moments, Slate is audible crying out again. Immediately after, his AP cannon goes off, and then Slate groans, and there is no more sound. Grant hurries over to where he heard him, and sees him sprawled out on the floor. He checks his pulse quickly, and realizes that he's dead. PB-030 is nowhere to be seen, and yet it's voice is heard, chuckling and then speaking.]

PB-030: My handiwork will, one day, let in my lord himself, and he will arrive long before the second coming.

Grant: Slate... and what is that thing talking about?

Drayton: Nothing for it; I found the next door forward, come on.

[Grant & Drayton proceed through three more rooms, and then survive another encounter with PB-031. PB-030 seems to be present more and more commonly, but the soldiers do not look at its eyes.]

[Grant & Drayton proceed through five more rooms.]

Door -13: [Grant finds a second vial of orange fluid sitting on a table and grabs it as they run. Timer on the door reads 0:09.]

Door -12:

Grant: Come on, come on!

Door -11: [The screaming of PB-032 has begun again. Drayton yells something that is inaudible over the noise, and he hurtles through a side door. Grant runs past him through the next main door, but after he goes through, the sound stops again. It is immediately replaced by the sound of PB-031 in the distance.]

Grant: Drayton, the green one's coming!

[Grant turns to run forward to a hiding place. He enters one of the closets in the hall, and PB-031 passes by.]

[Grant waits for Drayton, but he does not appear. Grant goes back to the previous room to look for Drayton and finds his body in the middle of the hall. He grabs Drayton's vial out of his pocket, mutters something too quietly to hear under his breath and turns back to run the last few doors.]

[The last few doors go by uneventfully, Grant avoids PB-030 at every encounter. On the last one, PB-030 speaks again.]

PB-030: My lord will come. Spread the word to your kind, you arrogant pawn.

Door -1: [Grant sees a timer lever on the wall immediately in front of the door, and flips it. He surveys the rest of the room, showing a circular stone brick pedestal in the center of the room, with a staircase on either side leading up to a raised portion of the room. Above the pedestal, there floats a large bottle of the same orange fluid in the two vials Grant already has. The liquid glows brightly and illuminates the room with amber light, overpowering the lightbulbs overhead.]



[Grant walks forward and grabs the bottle. It stops floating and weighs his arm down considerably. Grant groans with the weight. He holsters his rifle and carries the bottle up the stairs, and sees the door forward, which is labeled 0000. He opens the door, revealing a featureless sheet of glowing bright yellow. He looks around and sees the timer behind him ticking down, and steps through.]

[The footage shows nothing for several seconds before a bright flash of yellow light appears, and Grant is in the reception area of U.S.P.C. Site 3. He looks behind him and sees a rectangular stone frame in the shape of a doorway, with glowing yellow accents which quickly dim, and then the frame collapses into dust, eventually leaving no trace.]

Grant [Using transceiver]: Mission accomplished... I need evac from tertiary.

[End of footage.]

## *Epilogue*

Miles I finally have enough money!

!!!

when are you coming?

The next flight is in two days, and it brings me pretty close too

i cant wait to see you

Me too!!!

I'm staying

rlly??

Yeah

I can't go back to what I was doing before

I can't and I don't want to

wdym you cant?

It's a waste of a life  
Unfulfilling

i suppose so  
ur gonna get a job bussing tables of somn?  
or\* somn

Yeah something like that  
You could help me right?  
Maybe I could work where you work

i work at a software company

Oh  
Well you can write me letters of rec at least

no its pretty easy to get in actually, the ceo doesn't even require a degree anymore  
you just have to demonstrate competence  
and that's not super hard

I thought software developing was hard?

ehh

Yay! Well, I'll figure it out when I get there.  
Umm  
I kind of have no transportation  
The airport is an hour or two drive away from where you live

you need a ride?

If you can! Pls!

Nuh uh

Oh

im jk

im jk

ofc ill give you a ride

>:(

sorry

It's okay

Hey did you look at any of that stuff I sent you?

some of it

What do you think of it?

i dont know

You know how important it is to me

And I don't understand why it's not to you

We saw all the same things

I research things all the time and I found a few people who know all about it

There's reasons for everything

i'm thinking about it

we can talk about it when you get here alright

i don't want to do it over text

fineee

I'll see you soon!!