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MUKTO

DEADMAN

ALIVE



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Dead Man Alive

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DEAD MAN ALIVE

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For **Uncle Hasan,**

Who heard it first

Prologue

I have always regretted this moment. The moment of death. I am a dead man alive, and I may end my story here. Just kidding!

You - my brave reader - may hold this book in your hands, but the power of the mystic dead remains hidden within these pages. Unholy, unworldly, and undesired forces have seeped deep into the core of this story. Paper can conceal some secrets. Dark, terrible secrets. One cannot, and shouldn't, interfere with such cryptic dimensions. Events without source; powers without meaning; endings without time - these are merely illusions in our realistic, material world.

Oh no, no, no.... I'm not describing any cult or the "Illuminati" or whatever. That was barely an introduction for curious readers like you. For my part, my advice is : stop

reading. You may read on, but I may meet you face-to-face, on one unlucky day.... after you die.

Ughh.... I suck at "introductions", so enough of all this nonsense. Time to cut to the chase.

My name and age are of no matter to you, but I can spare them - for a friend. I shall unveil my personal information bit by bit, fragment after fragment.

For the time being, follow me to my past.

I was a NYPD desk officer, bored to death by having pillars of paperwork eradicated every screwed-up day of my life. I was considered a bottom ranker 'cause of my inattentive behavior at times. One thing was clear about me - I was a major slacker.

So there was this one day when I left for a vacation in Virginia, to spend some time in tourism (and to be alone from the chaos-

and-pollution factors of the NY concrete jungle).

Everything was smooth and perfect, shining like the rims of the '**Bentley Continental SS**' I had recently managed to afford.

Before even reaching my destination, nature spelt out "k-a-r-m-a" for me.

The sky turned darker than a criminal's guilty facial expression, and thunder boomed like the 80s bass among the shadows. Those shadows - you could almost sense them tracing your movements.

Rain showered down, hard. The roads were deserted. I couldn't figure out why. Had I taken the wrong route? The screen of my car's GPS shockingly flickered. And my phone's battery was down (only 2% charge remaining). Damn. Shouldn't have wasted too much time on Wattpad.

Even my non-living car could sense something defile stirring in the environment. Simultaneously, the deafening dubstep beat of thousands of raindrops hammering on the windshield, plus the car roof, catalyzed the effect of being "lost".

I just didn't 'feel' being lost. I truly 'was' lost. Lost and lonely to such an extent, I just didn't feel lost any longer. Or was that quite weird of me?

Nevertheless, I kept driving ahead. I paused a moment to check the time.

My watch read : **[10:03 pm]**

Only two hours till midnight. No vehicles in sight, no people either. Just me. Me and my consciousness.

But my car's engine suddenly flopped. I didn't replace my foot off the accelerator, in order to continue the movement of my car for as long as friction didn't conquer it.

I heard another roar of thunder - nature's rockstar. Unfortunately, it sounded closer, much closer, this time.

Something heavy just dropped on the road in front of my car.

Pressing on the brakes, I prayed for not colliding with that '*thing*'. The tires slipped on the wet surface. Luckily, my car just stalled an inch away from that '*thing*'. Hopefully, my prayers were accepted.

The windshield wipers spun into action and I finally saw what the '*thing*' actually was. Something big, long, massive, and *organic*.

A tree, damn it. A tree had created a sort of blockade in front of the road.

Without warning, my car's engine sputtered and died. The car keys didn't work.

I studied the surroundings. The darkness spawned in all four directions other than a small road-side café. A café that sold all sorts of coffee, judging by the neonlit billboard sign. Coffee, yes. A little touch of caffeine could relieve my mind from the stress.

No path ahead on the road, thanks to the fallen tree log. And surely no turning back now.... 'cause the engine of the car was dead.

Maybe I could find a person inside who might help me find a suitable motel for the time being.

I ditched my ride and tasted some of the heavy "beat"-iful rain pouring down on me, drenching my Harris Tweed jacket.

The café seemed to be "open". I knocked on the wooden double doors but they silently slid open without my word. That sent a frightening dose of "uh,oh" sensations

down my spine, freezing it to solid ice. I didn't know the reason. Was it the chilly aura of the freakish rainfall, or the fact that the café was deserted? Yep. The café was empty. Fully silent.

Not a soul in sight. Only some flickering lights and empty tables and chairs. The place looked lonely. Too lonely. What was wrong with this suburb? Did an apocalypse wipe out the citizens? Was there a curse regarding the location? Had a deadly virus or disease broken loose? My mind demanded answers. Every second, it screamed at me, "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? ..."

After a minute of silence, I heard footsteps.

"Hello?" my voice began an echo that reverberated all the way across the hall. I didn't expect anybody to reply.

"Yes, sir?" a female voice startled me. I turned towards the direction and found

myself staring at a blonde waitress."How may I help you, sir?"

"Um....uh...." my mind was quite blank after that wave of chills down my back. I managed a few words, whatsoever.
"Please....can....you....serve....coffee?"

"Sure. Which type?"

"Plain capuccino or a latté, please."

"As you wish, sir. Please have a seat. I'll be back with your order," she turned back into the emptiness and realms of shadow.

I found the nearest chair, composed of ebony. The flooring was polished hard wood, so shiny that it reflected my own reflection in brownish chromes. This place seemed kind of....strange. Creepy. The café was so well-furnished, but I wondered why weren't there any other customers. Was it because of the rain, or what? I had no clue.

More than two-thirds of the café was bathed in darkness. The meagre number of fluorescent tubes on the ceiling weren't sufficient to provide good illumination.

And where did this waitress go? She was taking too long. I thought it was wiser to leave instead. The rainfall was calming down anyways.

Right as I was deciding to leave, the waitress walked out of the veil of blackness from the back of the hall, nursing a tray of plastic. On it, stood a ceramic cup containing fresh steaming coffee.

"Your coffee, sir."

"Uh....thanks," right as I was holding the cup in my hand, I glanced at the waitress' eyes. They seemed blank and black. Indeed, they were dark and empty - so unnatural that I almost dropped my cup.

"Careful, sir," she advised, with courtesy deeply scented within her voice. I looked at her eyes again, but found them perfectly normal. Ordinary blue eyes."Just a minute, sir."

She returned back to the shadowy section, leaving me solitary again.

I got back to my seat and laid the cup on the round teak table. I watched the smoke dissolve into wisps in the air, steam emanating from the strong coffee.

Ready to try a sip, I noticed something move across the ceiling, in the reflection of the thick soupy brown liquid. Looking up, but seeing nothing. Nothing interesting.

Yet again, about to drink, I spotted a shapeless creature move across the ceiling. I gazed upwards. Nothing but a plain ceiling. Something was definitely NOT 'right' over here.

On the third time, I saw nothing stir in the reflection though. Nor did I notice anything in reality. Well, the situation was exceeding the limit of 'creepiness' and too out-of-place for me. Immediately standing up, I left the cup of coffee untouched.

About to leave, a familiar voice whispered into my ears, "Sir, you've left your coffee. Please pay up."

Without turning my head in any direction, without thinking twice, I drew out my wallet and threw as many \$10 bills as I could, before quickly escaping from the confines of this chaotic café. Now....That wasn't a 'cool' experience at all!

I yanked my car door open, and inserted the car key. I hardly had a second to lose; there was no time in hand to understand the meaning of what's going on.

I twisted the key, expecting no result. But miraculously, the car engine revived back to life.

Stranger still, the fallen tree wasn't there anymore. There was barely a sign of the tree. Not even a single leaf. What could've happened? Who could've done this? That, too, so fast?!

My watch read : [10:18 pm]

So I was halfway between New York and Virginia. Didn't know where I was exactly. Didn't know which pit of Hell had I just fallen into. I was certainly in a lost area or maybe a quarantine zone, devoid of citizens, pedestrians and vehicles on the streets. Yet, no normal person was found so far.

That's strange, 'cause the rain had also stopped.

I drove along for about twenty more minutes, before parking my car under the shadow of the *Leafy Nut* - a local motel.

The building looked more like an urban version of a classic condominium complex. In a matter of time, I got acquainted with the owner.

The owner was a 24-year old youth who lived in an apartment on the 2nd floor. She escorted me to the softly-lit lobby, where I stored my Remington 870 shotgun and two briefcases (one case was crammed with fugitive documents, licenses, etc. And the other was a stash of American cash).

After a swift conversation with the woman, I learnt a handful of facts about her. Her name's Catalie Leanut. Her parents had passed away, so they had left her this motel as an estate. She seemed cute and her behavior was motivating, kind, and chatty. I kind of found her spiritual nature "interesting"....more like "attractive".

She led me along a hall of doors (a corridor) and handed me the key to my chamber. I was surprised to find out that I was going to be her neighbor, i.e. her room suite was next to mine.

"Thanks," I bade her good night and shut the door. Ah....a relief. I shrugged off my Harris Tweed and relaxed on a soft bed. I laid my M9 pistols from the personal holsters, on a bedside table. I thought of turning ON the LCD 16" TV, but changed my mind.

The bed was too cosy.

I woke up to the disturbing sound of someone knocking on my suite's door. It wasn't morning yet, I knew. Who could it be, at this late hour? Was it Catalie? Did she require any help or something?

I found the answer when I was just about close range to the door. Someone slid a photograph from under the door.

Puzzled, I picked it up and flipped it over.

The photo was of me, smiling at the café....holding that coffee cup. I didn't remember smiling like that. Maybe some Photoshop geek had edited the picture. And probably the sinister waitress had clicked this photo from the shadows. Who knows? You couldn't trust people.

I felt something wet and sticky drop on top of my head. When I touched it, my fingers were tinted red. Blood. It was blood. Maybe a butcher lived upstairs, and the blood was only leaking down from the ceiling.

But the ceiling was blank when I peered above. Not a single sign of wet patches or anything. No holes or cracks either. Then how the hell did blood leak out?!

Strange.

I looked back at my photo, and almost got stabbed in the heart with fear's dagger as I noticed the changes.

In the photo, my photo-face turned depressed and tensed. My photo-hand wasn't holding a cup anymore. And my photo-eyes were dark. Dark as sin. Dark as the eyes of the waitress when I had first glanced at them.

Someone knocked on the door, again.

First Light, First Fright

Feeling brave and optimistic, I slowly pushed the forsaken door open. There wasn't a sight of anybody's presence. No one stood behind the door.

The white fluorescent lights were flickering all of a sudden. I could've sworn that the lights were all OK when I had last seen them.

Then I noticed the presence of something else. Something that I had been dreading all my life - loneliness.

All the apartment doors along this corridor were open, wide open. But no light entered and no light escaped. Every door on the 2nd floor corridor - including Catalie's - was ajar, though they all shared a similar emptiness. Black portals. Black holes. Was it

a nightmare being streamed in my head? I couldn't tell.

I decided to hastily head to the lobby for my guns. There were elevators docked at one end of the corridor, and also stairs. But on the way along the corridor, I stepped on something shapeless and sticky. A gooey substance. Without warning, a drop of blood dripped onto my forehead. This chance, I glanced up. But I wished I hadn't.

I saw Catalie. Catalie's body. Stuck to the ceiling by the weird, gooey adhesive stuff. Her eyes had gone dark like the waitress's. Blood streamed from holes in her neck, and from her mouth (or what remained of it). Sorry....too many gross details. I had to run. I had to hide.

My fear was killing me, consuming me like addiction, ripping me apart from the inside. Why was my luck so awful?

When I set my focus at the door of the elevator, my eyes met the goddamn waitress from that café. Where the hell did she spawn from? Why was she here anyway? Seriously....had she been tracking me?

Her appearance in the eerie silence sent an iron nail through my nervous system.
Damn.

Her eyes were dark (obviously), her face displayed a set of small bizarre tattoos, and her fingernails were scissors riddled with specks of blood. By any chance, she didn't look like a friendly neighbor who's just come here to borrow a packet of sugar.

Her facial expression was indecipherable; it hid so many emotions all at once. No doubt that even the (considered) world's best emotion and mind readers, i.e. satyrs, would be cowering in fear at the sight of her malicious aura.

"No....don't....don't try to," the words were lost in my throat. My legs automatically backed away....upto a point.

My legs didn't budge. It must've been the gooey substance preventing me from walking away any further. Oh, come on! I needed my damn pistols atleast. How frustrating it was to realize that I left them back at my chamber. Damn the universal laws! Damn gravity and friction. Screw you, Isaac Newton!

The waitress slowly paced towards me. As for my legs, they were drunk and had fallen asleep due to that mysterious lucid substance. Oh great!

She innocently blinked her dark eyes, and in those black bottomless pools, I saw myself. I saw my own reflection, trying to deceive me.

While I was distracted, the waitress pounced forwards, and sank her scissor-

like fingers into my neck. I met the gaze of her sweet, sentimental elfin face mixed in with and continuously switching to the current demonic one. I wondered how she must've felt living here. She must be lonely, too. But also very violent.

She cleaved through my jugular vein, blood spilling out from cuts in my neck. Blood flooded the floors with red - the color of hatred, the color of love.

Kindness blinded my mind so much that I hardly felt an ounce of pain. Everything blurred in bokeh and blacked out, and all was clear.

The morning sunshine streaming through the window shutters burned my eye lids. I awoke panting, my heart playing drums, my breath running low, and my adrenaline pumping.

It might've only been a dream. A nasty illusion of a nightmare. A delusion.

But I began to think otherwise, when I found the same photo resting on the bedside table. My M9 pistols were gone; not a trace left.

What was I observing? What was I thinking? Was I just imagining all of these? I deserved to know.

A knock at the door distracted my thoughts. Wow, another knock....for the 'third' time! I didn't want to scare the shit out of myself by taking a moment to inspect the photo on the table.

I headed for the door, instead. Bracing myself for a fight, I jerked it open - too fast.

The person on the other side was knocked to the floor. I took a slight peek from the edge. Well, I hadn't expected it to be Catalie.

"Oh....sorry, sorry, sorry!" I apologized as I helped her back to her feet."Deeply I apologize, ma'am. Are you hurt? I thought it was someone else."

"That's fine....I'm okay," she used her hand to brush away the dust from her garments."I understand. Thank you for the apology, mister...uh...."

"You can call me Jucas. I'm Adam Jucas, desk operative at NYPD. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Leanut."

"Pleasure to meet you too, Adam," she giggled."Are you feeling unwell? Grippped by a sense of nausea, is it? I know a place where you can be relieved from your pain. Why not pay a visit there?"

"Sure. Sounds good to me. What's the place's address?"

"Oh, the place? You mean the café?"

For a moment's pause, I felt a breeze slice through the corridor air. Catalie hardly seemed to notice, before continuing. "Well....I suppose you're new here. So you aren't familiar with most of the local addresses, I assume. Take me with you, show me your car, and I can guide you to your destination. "

"Um....okay....?" I didn't know what to tell her or how to reply. Could I trust her? She seemed alright. This was the first time experience where I was about to go somewhere with my car, with a girl. "Okay."

"Okay. See you at the lobby in five minutes, then."

She gracefully walked back into her apartment. Somehow I felt attached to that girl. She was a woman to the world, and an angel to my eyes. Flowers bloomed and blossomed in the garden of my soul whenever I stood close by.

Suddenly, I wasn't feeling lonely anymore.

"That's the place?" I made the Bentley halt beside a roadside café. It appeared to be the one I had been to, last night. But doubts were piled up in my mind, waiting for an opportunity to kickstart a rush of adrenaline and shock.

"Yep. This is it," Catalie examined the exterior view from a seat parallel to mine (i.e. the backseat). "A wonder palace, where tonnes of stress can be removed by a few sips of the distinct quality coffee."

Coffee, coffee, coffee, coffee....

The word rang like a row of monastery bells, in my ears. The familiar feeling of elusive creepiness was tracing back to my memory. I wished I had never come here. Worse, I wished I hadn't brought her along with me. If I turned back now, she might be

upset. Upset and disappointed because I didn't heed her advice. Girls' minds are really fragile. A single negative impact could shatter whole ideas of friendship, relationship, and dreams.

There was no choice but to agree to her conditions.

"Hmm....okay then, let's-let's go," I got out of the car just in time to help her out in the process of opening the car door, like a real gentleman. (First impressions always count, dear male readers!) This was my first-ever quality time with a woman, so I needed a premium impression to impress her. She was cute.

A foreshadowing sense of *déjà vu* hit me. The café double doors were exactly matching those of last night's crucible. No doubt, it's the same café. But this instance, I could hear some mumbling voices wafting from within. What if the place was roaring wild with zombies? What if the waitress

was waiting in there, blade in hand? I didn't give a shit if I fell into a trap. Catalie's presence granted me confidence plus courage.

But as I pushed through the doors and anxiously peeked in, I found my eyes tricking me. Was I seeing things? Was I dreaming in daylight? Or was it true that the entire café was now bustling with customers?!

People - so many of them together. Nothing appeared to be out-of-place here. If I narrated my tale of what I had experienced here last night, people would mark me off as a lunatic, a madman.

Me and Catalie took two empty seats by the window. These suburbs were totally awkward. A regular residence by day; a paranormal wasteland by nightfall. I knew something was up.

Finally! I've got my hands on an investigation case which I might actually 'enjoy' decoding, I thought.

Whatever was the cause behind these occurrences, I couldn't stop till I had found that out.

The evening was late and the world was painted in yellowish-orange lighting. After escorting Catalie, safe and sound, back to her apartment, I guessed it was 'show time'.

I retrieved my Remington 870 shotgun from the lobby, claiming it to be part of a 'police duty' I had been assigned to. Catalie didn't seem fooled.

"Well....there have been no thugs in these parts for like....ages. The little population who live here are all gentle folk, so I see no need for violent acts," she said."Have a good night, anyways."

I simply pretended not to notice her and shrugged my shoulders. What I was bound for hunting tonight was *far far worse* than any ordinary street gangster.

I set out with my Bentley, back to that devilish café. The location was merely a couple of blocks away eastwards.

When I arrived, I parked my car across the street. Calm weather, so no trouble with rain.

I approached the doors again. Boldly, I thrust the doors open - just wide enough to let me peek in, narrow enough to conceal myself.

The sight unlocked confusion for me. There were people still drinking coffee, dining and having a chat. Strange as that!

I turned back and was about to leave with my car, when a suggestion hit me. Since I

had come this far, why not have a sip of some Espresso, instead?

On the second time in opening the doors, though, revealed a complete change of scenario. I knew I had made a big mistake. In an instant, the entire café was now deserted. Just those flickering lights. Damn!

I closed the doors, then opened them again. No change. Still the same as last night. How did this happen? And *why* was it happening?

I realized that the sun had almost set. The final rays faded in the horizon.

I shut the doors again, and reopened them. The breath was knocked out of me by the abrupt change : the lights were out. Complete darkness settled inside.

I closed the doors. Before I even opened them wide again, my reflexes were stunned. I shut them tight in a fraction of a second.

The reason : I just spotted the demonic waitress standing there, the same textures and appearance as I had experienced in my dream. Or was it even a dream? I didn't believe so.

I literally dived towards my ride, my car, my exit ticket. I snuck in through the door, landing on my seat and grabbing hold of my shotgun.

That was so frighteningly close!

I could've sworn I had arrived here alone. But I felt a hand touch my shoulder from the back. From the backseat.

Lured By Her Shadows

I slowly yawed my head around, and found....Catalie?!! What was she doing here? How the hell did she even get here?

I didn't know. I didn't understand.

"Jucas," she chanted. Catalie was dressed in white, and an enigmatic light beamed from her eyes. But her eyes... her eyes... they were grappling onto me. For some reason, I couldn't breathe. "Jucas."

"Do you....only kn-know....that word-d??" I could feel my soul detaching from my body. I no longer felt in control of my physical movements.

"Jucas," she gestured at me to come closer. As if on a reflex, my body obeyed. I was being hypnotized.

'This can't be real,' I thought. I couldn't believe this. I knew Catalie was back at her motel. But this woman resembled her perfectly. It was too good to be true. I didn't want to believe my eyes, but my eyes made me believe.

"Die, bitch!" I tugged on the trigger of my gun and sent a pack of bullets through her, without any hesitation. I shot at her again, ignoring the pitiful shrieks and distressed screams.

My eyes were closed. I couldn't bear the sight of my dead girlfriend's body. But it had to be done. I only hoped that this wasn't the 'real' Catalina Leanut.

When I reopened my eyes, I saw the waitress there instead of dear Catalie. I kind of felt a surge of relief and satisfaction by wasting that lousy bitch's life. Ha, served her right!

The blood and gore made my car dirty. Who knew how unpleasantly it could stink and reek after a while? I evacuated from the car immediately.

On foot, I began heading back to the *Leafy Nut*. I toted the shotgun, in hand. Tonight, there'd be no second chances. I didn't care what sort of freak town this was. I only wished to get out of there, ASAP.

The motel's windows were all boarded up. Pitch black in the sky and no light was visible through the windows.

Moreover, the main entrance door was also boarded up with wooden planks. This was seemingly disturbing and strange, 'cause it would take about three or four hours to board up the whole building. Whereas, I had been hanging around the café for only about half an hour. It wasn't only wrong - it was impossible.

No cars in sight. No light except for four street lamps flanking the street, teeming with flies hovering. If you were in my position, I wondered what you would feel at that moment.

No home to go to - I couldn't enter my apartment.

No other apartments or motels in sight, either. Only the ominous dark trees were silently sentinel, surrounding the streets like a dense floral border.

And my shotgun suddenly began to gain weight. I didn't know why. I guess this puny suburban 'town' was integrated with mystic 'unworldly' forces. The place clearly disobeyed a handful of laws of physics. Had this town emerged from the nether?

I felt like I was being trapped in some other world far from peoples' reach. I was trapped in another dimension.

Was I going crazy? Did anything make any sense any longer? Or was I being toyed by spiritual parasites?

Looks like the only surviving option was to return back to the café, that bloody café. Maybe this was it! The café! I must've activated a channel to this out-of-place area when I had first entered the café by mistake. Or maybe the choice of coffee was a password to be initiated into this abstract world of horror. Could it be possible that the café was the birthplace of this unholiness?

The longer I lingered and remained here, the deeper and tighter the knots of delusion, confusion and revulsion intertwined.

It wasn't a choice but I retraced my steps back to the café, aiming my gun for any sign of hostile pedestrians. Speaking of which, was I the only human alive? Rest of

them were probably illusions. Illusions, apparitions and what-not.

I wondered whether Catalie was an illusion as well. I better hoped not.

I noticed my car there, still intact at the position where I had abandoned it. I checked the condition of the interiors but got startled by what I discovered, midway; the waitress was gone. As expected.

The temperature of the environment dropped without a caution. So I entered the car and switched ON the radiators. Keeping an eye out on the café, I waited.

After almost fifteen (boring) minutes, a sweat drop dripped onto the steering wheel.

After thirty minutes, I swatted a mosquito and ignored the unusual blue blood oozing from its corpse.

After a total of forty-five minutes, I saw a woman enter the café. Probably Catalie. Hang on....Catalie?!! If she was here, then it meant that....that perhaps the motel had been unlocked again!

With no time to lose, I couldn't sit still.

Strangely, the motel appeared to be back to its 'initial' state - or so it seemed to me. Most importantly, the wood planks had vanished and none but all the windows of the building were draped by black emptiness behind the glass panes. Hang on, was I the only resident at the *Leafy Nut* other than Catalie??

Damn, it was transforming into such a weird and volatile night. Or had night fallen too early here? Ho shit....where the *hell* had I landed? What sort of a cultist nation was this?!

A distant whirr of an engine interrupted me and my occasional stream of thoughts. I suspected it to be my car....being driven unauthorized by Catalie or the waitress or somebody else. Well, my car didn't matter; I needed to survive.

Just then, a speeding pick-up truck roared from a corner in the street, heading towards....me?! Son of a --

I dived aside, out of its rampage direction. The Toyota missed critically hitting my foot, only by a hair's width.

As for the bloody drunken truck, it collided with an electric pole.

Whatever happened next occurred over such a short span of time, I hardly understood what exactly took place.

The deceased electric pole landed on the truck's roof, falling over clumsily like a giant sequoia freshly sawed off. The

connections to wires on the pole tore free apart, after a momentary struggle with their elastic nature. The 'free' wires dangled this way and that, sending sparks of 250 V a.c. in a sprinkler manner. Tragically, a single spark landed near the truck's fuel reserve (tank). Systematically, the fuel tank ignited and went ablaze as I watched the ill-fated vehicle (and the driver onboard) burst vigorously like a firework.

Shrapnels of metal whizzed away from the fire, followed by a sonic wave of an explosion.

Then everything hushed up gradually and the truck's ashen carcass was burning down to its final embers. What about the driver? Was there someone driving it? Practically, from my experience of the queer events in this town, I didn't think there was anybody onboard.

Oh, what distraction AND destruction!

I relapsed my attention back to the motel, back to my survival, back to my "getting out of this forsaken sandbox" scheme.

The main entrance door wasn't locked. But it felt to be heavier than before. It took me a great deal of a shove to push it open inwards.

Darkness awaited inside.

As expected.

Maybe Catalie had turned OFF the power when she left. Maybe the electric supply was handicapped by the split wires of that pylon. But there was something else. *Someone* else. Some other guest, too.

Thick dense suffocating clouds of a hazy dark smoke wavered in the entrance hall. I knew there were no stoves or cooking equipment down the path. Never spotted them. Taking a whiff, I couldn't recognize any burning stench either.

Just as I placed one more step forward,
somebody shut the main door behind me.
Great, not a single lumen of light was
available now.

My eyes were struck with blindness. And I
had no flashlights with me. Speaking of
which, my phone's battery died last night
and I totally forgot to recharge.

Shortly, I heard a scrape of metal on leather
- somewhat similar to that of a blade being
drawn from its scabbard.

In the dark, suffering from this temporary
blindness, I loaded my shotgun.