

(WARNING: FOLLOWING STORY IS INTENDED FOR MATURE AUDIENCES ONLY, AS IT DEALS WITH GRAPHIC SUBJECT MATTER THAT IS NOT SUITABLE FOR YOUNG OR SENSITIVE READERS.)

"Phallaceae"

2119, 1945 days since the Fall of Oregon

"Come on, Charlie! I found another one!" screamed Billy, the pudgy dark-skinned boy bouncing up and down off the roof of a moss-eaten car. The skinny fair-skinned ginger tween was stirring awake in another car's carcass, facing the bouncing boy. *He's just five. He's. Just. Five...*, Charlie groggily reminded herself in her own head, *once he's older, he'll mellow out. He'll learn the value of sleep.* Charlie wasn't much older, but being twelve meant she could hold a gun, and nowadays that's all that mattered.

Funny thing was, she'd been twelve for a while. Hopefully, Billie wouldn't stay five.

She checks the handcuff locked to her wrist. The LEDs were green, so the infection was in check. For now, anyway. Billie had one too, but it was fixed to his ankle. Harder for him to take it off, and easier for Charlie to ignore. Her lithe legs clad in jeans carry high-top sneaker shoe covered feet to her brother. "What color did you find this time?" Her Mechanix

gloves, however small they were, made fishing her pockets a small chore.

"Blue! DARK Blue!" Her points, but never touches. To touch would be suicide. If there was one thing he knew, it was that.

What would be so dangerous?

A pitch black Mycenaceae fungus, which faintly glowed blue the closer Billy's finger crept. The "Alien", "Death's Paw", "Floaters". It's one of the cavalcades of horrors decimating the human world. If the economic crashes, rising sea levels, heat, and the Big Shake softened humanity up, the Floaters were the knock-out blow.

"Not too close, Billy." Barked Charlie as she lifts a small camera.

"But it's glowing! I can hear it calling me!" The inner curiosity was screaming inside Billy, Charlie could hear it. "Don't make me bury you, Bill." Aiming the camera, she could see his small hand retreat. Slowly, but it was backing off.

CLICK It was the fifth hotspot she visited this week. Knot Hope (Formerly Portland Oregon) was surrounded by dense woods and overgrown buildings, plenty room for Floaters to fester and grow.

NW 29th street & NW Raleigh St. Black Trip-Floater. The

squeaks of permanent marker filled the void, aside from Billie's small boots hitting wet dirt.

Charlies stuffed the photo into her backpack, a thick canvas piece stuffed with water-sacs, MRE bars, and various survival tools. Biggest of the tools were the Marlin1887 SBL Lever action rifle holstered on the backpack, and the Glock 17 pistol stuffed into a side-hip holster. And, of course, a switchblade stuffed into her right pocket. As her handler said, 'emergencies only'.

How Charlie managed to carry such heavy loads, Billie would never understand. As far as Charlie knew, this was something she, and many unfortunates touched by Death's Paw had in common. Not to say Billie wasn't gifted, but it wasn't in the same way. "Let's go, Billie." She says, heaving the load on her back. "We gotta reach the old shoe store by Upshur Street before 12. Don't wanna be runnin' back to Slabtown when it's dark, do we?"

Hiking the wastes with a five-year-old wasn't too scary. At least, not when BILLY's the five-year-old. He could smell Floaters from a half-mile away, and anything else even further. *Sweet as vanilla ice cream*, as he'd put it.

This in mind, the face of the apocalypse was quieter than expected. Greener too.

Whatever wasn't crumbled, the plants climbed. Flowers, non

alien shrooms, and tall grass littered the remains of man's streets, not that Charlie would've been there to see it any other way. There was the occasional small mammal. A squirrel, maybe a deer, would be roaming the ruins with them. Most around Portland were infected, tainted by the Floaters. The longer these creatures spent eating floaters or tainted ground, the more... bizarre they became.

"Sweet...Sweet...Sweet..." Billie's silent whispers turned into mumbles. Soft, but audible, like a gentle breeze. "Where from, buddy?" Charlie always kept a hand near her pistol. Most of the time, she'd never need to fire it. *Most of the time.*

"Ahead. Ahead. Sweet from ahead." A small trickle of blood left Billy's nose, and his breathes became quick and shallow. In a moment of panic, Charlie pulls Billy close and makes him kneel. His ankle cuff was flashing green, and a single red LED. Billy wouldn't relapse yet, but the longer he was without a filter, the worse he'd feel. She pulls a gas mask from her bag and puts it on Billy.

Ahead, Charlie thought, and so she looked. The Montgomery Park building, and its eponymous sign, is what she saw. Nine floors, and many rooms. She was always told it was dangerous during Fall, and completely untouchable during Winter.

But, she also heard there was a pretty penny for anyone who DID manage to get in and get out. Alive. With scout-work, no less.

Could use a pretty bullet to trade, nowadays. Pondered the wistful Charlie. *And Billy'd love some extra pay for his hard work. He'd waste it all on ice-cream, but at least it'd be his bullets to waste.*

"Slow, okay? Take it in slow." Charlie wasn't good at consolation, but it was enough. He was taking slow, deep breathes. The blood trickles have ceased, but the red swelling was starting to show. "We're gonna get as close as we can, okay?"

The boy nods, guiding her by the hand.

His head was on a swivel. The closer to the Montgomery Park building they came, the worse his reactions became. His eyes would roll back, the mumbling becoming faster and faster.

Once they reached an entrance, Charlie took a photo of its entrance.

Now, the door itself wasn't all that interesting. The floating car chassis smothered in Floater shrooms was.

"Sweet-Sweet-Sweet-Sweet. SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-SWEET. **SWEET SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-SWEET.**" The words keep spilling out of

Billie's mouth. He wasn't mumbling anymore. He was yelping. "Wait here for me, okay? Do you remember our promise, buddy?" She kneels, making sure she can see into his eyes. They're starting to get bloodshot.

"Stay still. Stay quiet. Stay hidden." Billie drones between gasps for air, like an involuntary reflex or anti torture mantra. She rustles his hair and smiles.

"Good. Won't be too long."

The Montgomery building's atrium welcomed her with a reddish mist and levitating tables and chairs. All were encrusted with moldy stone and writhing fungal tentacles that shimmered in the bright red.

The cuff was orange. Charlie could feel the spores swimming through her bloodstream scream and itch from under her skin. Luckily, she wasn't affected by spores like Billy was, and was basically immune compared to anyone in Slabtown. Sadly, she couldn't see far through the miasma, just like everyone else. As she ascends the escalators, she can see the floaters line its every step. Sickening, wet crunches plague every step. "Grosssss..." Puffs of spores and sticky white fluids are the dying ejections of each mushroom crushed. "That better not be Floater jizz or something."

The irony of her literally breathing in mushroom baby

powder in the air wasn't lost, and she hated it oh-so-much. As she reached the second floor, she hugs a wall, equally smattered with Death's Paw, letting that itchy feeling in her brain guide her to the epicenter of the miasma. The big catch. "Can't see shit. The king-shroom's gotta be close." The deep red fog forced her to hug any wall, any solid surface to get a sense of direction. The sweeter the fog smelled, the closer she knew she was.

The cuff was now blinking orange and red, slowly. Charlie's sense of coordination popped in and out for a moment, but nothing she hasn't pushed through before.

Animal carcasses began to appear, open rib cages with fungi bursting out from within. Skulls caved in, with bloated bodies and glowing innards. "Jesus." It wasn't uncommon to see poor animals killed by their noses and curiosities, but the sheer amount began to form small hills. Each hill was a pile of corpses.

Floor after floor, the higher she climbed, the more there were. Some were blocking her way, others stuffed into the many desiccated offices and alleys. A rare two settled on the overpasses, with a large fungal flower spewing off spores on a 10-minute interval.

Charlie took snapshots, one of each placement. It was her

job to, and she did it well. The photo-taking slowed down once she reached the 30th floor.

Human corpses, brutalized and torn to pieces, began to dot each mound. Each mutilated body had a constant: decapitation.

Eventually, only humans filled the dead. For lack of skin, they were covered in boils and moldy, almost barnacle-esque, growths that shined in the crimson abyss. It became impossible to tell where one person ended and another ended. Almost as if the mounds became one solid mass of wet meat, crunched bone, and glowing, writhing fungus.

Holy shit, Charlie wasn't comfortable vocalizing anymore. Small pouty lips stay shut, but her eyes let slip her anxious mind. Pulling her camera, she snapped a photo. *Montgomery Building. Body Pile??* Was quickly scribbled on the back. Then she saw it. Or rather, them.

A shadow crept along the walkway with heavy thuds. The faint crunch and tearing of flesh can be heard whenever it passes a corpse mound.

The Shape was large, big as a black bear, if Charlie had to guess.

And it was coming closer.

With its approach came a new cacophony of aromas and putrescine smells: a lemony musk mixed with the sweet air, with

faint traces of spoiled milk finding its way to her nose.

Charlie had her hands on her throat, barely stifling the array of coughs and gags as she slowly backed away. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see her cuff frantically flash red.

Small eyes desperately scan her surroundings: an open store, window, anything to get some solid cover.

Then she saw it. One of the offices to her right had one broken window. Completely shattered, no sharp glass on where her hands and feet needed to be.

After a quick peek at the tall shadow, she scrambles and two hand vaults into the office. The Shape lets out a bass shriek as it hears Charlie.

Around her is a maze of cubicles, the odd corpse and chair pile littered its alleyways.

Heavy footfalls quickly came through the haze behind Charlie. A large bloody hand slams into the pane of glass, creating a black smear. *WHERE?* Charlie's blood went cold, and her breathes quickened. The voice was coming from everywhere, and nowhere. A message from The Shape but heard from within her own head. ***WHERE ARE YOU?***

Shit! Definitely an Ogre! Charlie hushes in her head, backing from the window. Pulling the rifle from its holster,

switching off the safety, and keeping it raised, the tween keeps her eyes on The Shape.

WHAT IS YOU? The voice shook from within the depths of her skull. As the beast hugs the window, its grotesque features are on full display. A shambling, moaning octo-pedal horror whose spore sacs glowed a bright yellow amidst the red fog.

Each "footfall" was made by one of the eight human arms propping the behemoth above the ground. **I SEE SMELL.** Three massive fungal Blooms erupt from three head out of the eight conjoined corpses: an elk, a cougar, and a woman. **I SMELL**

WOMB.

I AM HUNGRY. YOU BE WOMAN? WHERE IS FOOD? WANT KNOW MORE. COME CLOSER.

The more hands pressed, the more the window cracked, until it came crashing through. Hellish yelps of pain emanate from the three heads as the beast leaves a bloody string of viscera in its wake.

As Charlie crawls along the ground, the beast slams into cubicles and stumbles over chairs. **YES. YES.** The voice purrs, making Charlie feel queasy beyond measure. Forced away from the window she came in, Charlie scans her environment for any exits. **YOU ARE ME. SAME. SAME. COME TO ME.** The voice purrs again, breaking Charlie's focus.

The door was still closed, so opening it while that THING was still in earshot's a no go. The area it busted into was covered with broken glass, which again, earshot.

Slowly, she works her way around the office. So close to where she came in, she can FEEL it. **NO GO OUT. COME. COME TO ME. WE ARE FAMILY. WE MAKE MORE. MORE TO FIGHT. MAKE MORE SOLDIER.**

FIGHT BAD ME. KEEP BLUE SHROOM AWAY. The Ogre, on the other hand, was becoming impatient. **DON'T RUN AWAY. YOU RUN AWAY? COME HERE. WHERE ARE YOU?** Using its many hands, the beast smashes and slams into the cubicles, like an angry bull.

The moans and cries turned into godless growls, hisses and screams.

Slowly, Charlie lifted herself over and back out the window. She could see the heads twitch and the body convulse as it hears her small feet hit the floor amidst the chaos of its own making.

FOUND YOU. The deep voice boomed from within her skull, loud as the roaring thunder. Charlie, rifle in hand, bolted for the walkway.

Then came the loud crash and hellish screech behind her. The Ogre just broke out. The heavy patter of hands marked its fast approach.

Slamming into the walkway's handrail, Charlie

frenziedly scanned for any lower floor she could reach.

There! Charlie backed up, angling herself slightly to the left. **GOOD. COME CLOSER.** The Ogre was close.

With that, Charlie made a mad sprint, using the handrail as a makeshift springboard. Three of the Ogre's hands narrowly miss her backpack as she sails through the air.

The concrete floor forms a small crater as Charlie's side slams into it. Dazed, sore, but otherwise unbroken, Charlie limps toward the staircase.

COME BACK. I PROTECT YOU. BLUES KILL YOU. REDS MAKE STRONG. The baritone whispers were growing fainter. Limping and hopping, Charlie makes her way down to the first floor.

Blackened veins slowly spread throughout her neck, pulsing with her heartbeat. The limps faded away, but now she was hungry. **VERY HUNGRY.**

She could see it. The Atrium entrance, with Billy nervously waiting outside. His nervousness visibly changed into shock and fright the closer Charlie came. The chairs and tables that were once floating violently slam into the ground. "BEHIND YOU!" He screeched.

Suddenly, Charlie felt herself hit the ground and get dragged back. **YOU STAY WITH ME.** "GET OFF ME!" **YOU WILL STAY. MAKE MORE OF US.** "FUCK YOU!" Large hands clamored over her, one

readying itself.

With an earsplitting crack and deafening boom, the Marlin rifle in her hands sent a 45-70 slug ripping through the beast. It scuttles back as a mixture of blood, spores, and effluvial slime spill out of its chest and back.

What begins as a mad wriggling toward Billy turns into a wild scramble. "BILLY, RUN!" The Beast behind her howls in three voices. **WE. ARE NOT DONE. WITH YOU.** "RUN!"

Billy started to run, albeit keeping his head on a swivel. He didn't wanna let Charlie get hurt if he could help it, no doubt.

Charlie just barely clears the gate, collapsing onto the street. She rolls onto her back, leveling her rifle again. As a hand peeks through the mist, she sends two slugs. There's a sharp scream and sound of flesh slamming into solid floor. The sound fades.

Charlie slowly rises and looks around. "BILLY?!" She moves toward an easily visible spot. "BILLY?? I'm OK! I'm OK." Billy peeks from behind a bush, then tackle-hugs Charlie. "Can we go home now? I-I think we got enough." He sheepishly blurts.

"Yeah. I'm hungry as it is." Charlie checks her cuff: reds and greens, alternating like a wave. "Come on. Back to Slabtown!" Taking Billy's hand, they trek the vacant street.

Slabtown, and the rest of Hope Knot city, was less of a city and more of a castle. High cement walls rife with unreachable scaffolding and gun-turrets encircle everything Charlie can see. One wouldn't recognize it as the US-30 if they saw it now.

As she approaches the checkpoint, a soldier dressed in a bright yellow hazmat suit raises his hand. Charlie stops, Billy stops, and the other soldiers raise their M4 service rifles. "Cuff. NOW." The soldier barks, Charlie complies. Limply raising her arm, letting the man roughly snatch and manhandle her wrist. "His ankle cuffs. Show me." He barks again, the other soldiers getting antsy. With the snap of her fingers, Billy raises his pant-leg.

His cuff's green, Charlies cuff's red and orange, with one green light.

As roughly as he snatched it, the soldier shoves the arm back down. He fishes two plastic muzzles and hands it to them. "You know the drill. You're red."

Charlie first puts the muzzle on Billy, whose fiddling with fingers, then on herself. The soldiers lower their weapons as soon as she does. The soldier speaking with her relaxes his

shoulders.

"Good. The White Room's waiting." He says, audibly more at ease. His hand slowly pushes Charlie through the gate, while keeping his front facing the outside world.

The "White Room" was both a room, and its surrounding building.

It was a massive square structure built on the remains of the Benson Polytechnic Highschool. All white concrete and sharp angles. In the encroaching dusk, the sides that didn't meet the gaze of the dying Sun turned pitch black. Upon seeing Charlie and Billy, men and women in bright red Hazmat suits rush her down. Hands gripping and feeling her down, the mob pull her into the building. Billy got much of the same treatment, albeit with a façade of personal concern, showered with "Come, come in!" and "Are you ok? Feeling hot?" This was nothing new.

Everyone had a reason to be paranoid around the Infectees.

A thorough sterilizing and shower later, she was finally here: The White Room. Wall to wall was a hard marble shine. The walls, tables, chairs, even the lights and doors were a solid white. The small dome cameras blended in with the walls. Only Charlie's plastic hospital gown wasn't white: it was a semi translucent yellow.

"How are you feeling, Charlie?" The one other thing that wasn't white was dressed in a pitch-black Hazmat suit: her Handler, Joel. Charlie didn't respond, instead fiddling with her cuff.

The token acts of defiance were less aimed at the White Room staff, and more at Joel.

"Charlie. I know you can hear me. How are you feeling?" Her eyes gaze up for a moment.

"Hungry." She keeps her eyes away, that gnawing in her stomach starting to grow. She couldn't see any of his features now, but the mere memory was making her stomach twist and knot.

"Can you tell me more about these?" While her gear was confiscated and being sterilized, the photos were placed into a Ziploc baggie. Joel slides the baggie to the center of the table. "Where did you find the Red Stage 3?"

"You mean the big corpse fucker?" she sits up, crossing her arms.

"Yes." Joel stifles a chuckle. "The big corpse fucker. The 'OGRE' as you'd call it."

"Montgomery Park building. Shot it a few times. Babbled something about the 'Blues' or something."

"Like the blue growths you found NW 29th street & NW Raleigh

St.?"

Charlie nods. She can feel the scientists and military personnel argue past the one-way glass. The fungal growths never come this close, to each other or to humans, without a reason.

Like two different molds trying to claim the same space. Fungal competition doesn't mean good things, not for anything NOT a mushroom.

Joel slides another Ziploc baggie across the table. It's a food-ticket, and 45 5.56 bullets. "We'll need you operational by next week. Think you'll be ready?"

"And Billy?" Charlie locked eyes with those under the black hazmat suit.

"Billy stays. He's earned his R-and-R, wouldn't you agree?" Charlie doesn't respond, only letting out a sigh of relief, sagging into her chair. Joel rises, photo Ziploc in hand. "I'll get these back in for another round of decontamination. Have a nice night."

Waltzing through the White Rooms' hallways in only a hospital gown wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't cold all the time. Making her way to the uppermost floors, and down the west wing, Charlie comes to her room: C-47. Using a keycard, the door switch flashes a bright green and she pushes it in.

It's less of a room and more of a narrow hallway. A cot, a

toilet, sink, and thickly barred window. Small doodles and baubles litter the floor, crayon stains and innumerable tally marks.

Sinking into her cot face first, Charlie buries herself under the sheets.