A Monstrous Tomorrow

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Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in English at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

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A Monstrous Tomorrow

(TITLE)

BY

Ty Noel

THESIS

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Dedications

This thesis is dedicated to the people in my life that have supported my decision to be a creative writer and have dealt with the pains and struggles that come along it:

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A Monstrous Tomorrow: The Introduction

When I enrolled at Eastern Illinois University, I came in as an undergrad looking to study journalism. I held the jaded belief that the only area a writer would be able to make money was by working at a newspaper or other news outlet. I worked hard within my field, but the more I worked, the more I found that writing on the news was not something that appealed to me. I took a couple of creative writing courses, and during that time I found an outlet to share my feelings on the current events that I was studying. It allowed for me to put a creative spin on the world around me and to provide a commentary in a way that I felt audiences would be more receptive to.

During that time, I was encouraged to pursue a Master of Arts degree in English. I originally came in with the plan of going into professional writing. It still seemed to be the appropriate thing to do if I wanted to make money. As I continued along though, I found myself always trying to enroll in literature or creative courses over professional writing. I was nervous to go into the creative writing field since I held the belief the only job I would be able to get was in teaching. It wasn’t until I took a creative nonfiction class that I decided to switch my field and began experimenting with what I wanted to write. As I began to write, I found that I still had the urge to use my writing to commentate on society, so I decided to focus my thesis around writing on problems I saw. These issues mainly stemmed from the way people treated one another and the world that they lived in.

I spent a lot of time looking at the world through social media and seeing people viewing the planet ending in disaster. My friends and family were divided on just about...
every social, political, and scientific issue that has been presented in the twenty-first century. These conflicts didn’t just stem to the network of people I knew either. Strangers that I spoke to at parties, out at a bar, or even just in classes were divided as well. These conflicts that I spoke with people about had left many with a negative view of the future. It was some of these ideas and beliefs that gave birth to my thesis.

My writing focuses around the dystopian future that people predict. Within this collection of stories, I have taken some of the ideas I saw on social media and extended the narrative in the most extreme circumstances. For example, even though no one predicts that monsters will rise up from the destruction of our environment, using monsters as a metaphor allows the reader to understand the importance of protecting the environment before it becomes too late.

I have focused my writing on several different themes that have played a big part in the discussion of our current world. I wanted to explore what would happen if the future ended in disaster. I first looked at religion and the extremism that has become more prominent, along with the effects that it has on our culture. I looked at the government and focused on the power it wields and how people would respond to a singular world power. There was also the focus on the environment, as problems with global climate change stay at the forefront of discussion. Finally, a common theme that I highlighted was whether or not the monsters in each of my stories are truly the evil in the world, or if it’s man.

Within my thesis, there is a belief that the world has found peace. However, I focused on creating a society in one small town that still has not learned from the mistakes of its past and still resorts to violent solutions.
This thesis was written as a way to help express my doubt and dissatisfaction with not only our government, but with society at large. The growing amount of nationalism in the world has led me to worry about the decisions that will be made by powerful individuals. Most countries now sit with weapons of mass destruction, and while there is always hope that a war that uses them will never be fought, I found that now is not the time to ignore that they exist. This collection focuses on a future that takes place one hundred years from now, in a time where every major city has been wiped out by people with power to launch those very bombs.

Each story that I have written is based around a collection of people that are living in different walks of life. Whether the characters are just down on their luck and having fun, people working mundane jobs for the government, or just a casual civilian trying to live their life, these stories were written to help make sure the reader can put themselves in the character’s shoes.

Finally, I wrote this collection to be a homage to the authors that have inspired me throughout my academic career. I pulled aspects of horror from Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, and Edgar Allen Poe, as they were the ones that helped bring about my love of the supernatural and of monsters. I created a feeling of paranoia in my pieces based on the writing of Ray Bradbury and Philip K. Dick, both of which helped my interest in conspiracy theories and general distrust to those in power grow. To finish, this thesis was written for those that want to believe in a better tomorrow. Despite the dystopian world I have created, it is a reminder that we do not have to go down this dark path, but instead can work with one another to help bring about a future we want to live in.
Why We Didn’t Care

I’m writing this now because I know the new world government that has taken over will be beating down my door at any moment. Little do they realize that because of us and our actions, they are now in power. We orchestrated everything, not as barbarians or monsters, but to usher in a world of peace. However, I know that we will still be written in your history books in the same breath as Hitler.

The attacks that were launched were agreed upon by three different parties. There was a group that saw them as a means to an end. Terrorism was on the rise, countries building armies they didn’t need, and the population was growing dumber by the year. This group believed that if God would not intervene to wipe things clean, then those in power should.

Then there was the second faction. This faction was filled with extremists and nationalists. It was their belief that every country wanted to see the United States destroyed. They were under the impression that we were seen as weak and insufficient, the laughing stock of the rest of the world. They wanted to prove a point. They wanted to show we were still a power to be reckoned with.

Finally there was a third group, the group which I led. We believed that with the arsenals that countries had built and the never ending conflicts that kept emerging, it was time for a reset. We believed that out of the ashes of our decision, peace would emerge like a phoenix. I’m happy to see now that my faction was correct.

You have to remember that we knew these bombs wouldn’t spread the radiation and disaster that the old ones did. Across the world, we had signed a treaty for mutually
assured destruction. We supplied the information to every nation on how to create a nuclear bomb that

Paralysis

The moon, waning and yellow on a cool November night, bore witness to the Earth lazily from its position in the sky. Its light was shed dimly over a suburb outside of a former metropolitan area, long since destroyed after the third major war. Beyond the irradiated rubble, a small community was prepared for sleep. Lights faded out. The sound of a few animals, the ones that survived the Mad Adams dropped across the world, lamented quietly to one another. A single home within this suburb had refused to follow the guidelines of the evening, however. The backyard was neatly kept with a pond and a small forest laid in the background. The roof had dead leaves in its gutters and a Frisbee that was trapped on the worn brown shingles. The lights in this one story home were still on, as the couple inside the home had decided to stay out that evening and were the last in the neighborhood to get back to their home.

---

Something fell next to the leather couch that Wayne was sleeping on. He stirred from his slumber but as he tried to raise his head, he found he was unable to do so. His blue eyes widened as he found his other extremities were glued down to the couch as well. The lights glared brightly in his face and blinded him. He laid motionless as he thought he heard a door open and close. Thump, Thump, Thump. Thump. He had begun to panic. The only one that was supposed to be in the home was Karen, but he knew she would be asleep by now. He tried to open his mouth to shout, but to no prevail. Thump. Thump. Thump. He knew it definitely wasn’t her. The steps were too heavy, too
loud. Karen was tiny and he could never hear her when she walked. He began to struggle his way into some form of movement. Still nothing. Each limb was dead weight. All he did was lie there and listen. *Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.* Whoever it was entered the living room. Each thump brought more and more sweat to his brow. He fought harder, doing anything he could to try and get his body to just do one thing his mind requested. Nothing. *Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.* The steps were at the couch, and still he could not move. A shadow, in the corner of his eye. Wayne’s heart raced. Soon the intruder would be able to touch him. Ready to strike. Ready to kill. A hand reached over his face. Reached for his throat. His mind threw everything he had into breaking free.

Another loud sound caused Wayne to sit upright, looking crazily around him. The lights were dimmed and he found no one in the room. He got to his feet, his average sized frame pulled him up with ease. He scanned the room again, his t-shirt and shorts stuck tightly to his body with sweat.

“What the hell happened?” he said out loud. He plopped back onto the couch. His heart rate slowed. He thought for a few moments before reaching for his phone. He didn’t find it. He looked at the couch where he was laid and at the mixture of sweat and drool that had already begun to stain the throw pillow he and Karen had bought only a few months before.

Wayne reflected on that moment. It reminded him of when he and Karen had first bought the house. They had been engaged for several months and the marriage loomed big and bright in their future. Their family had tried to encourage them on holding off on buying the house until their lives were more stable. They ignored the request. They had both felt the apartment they lived in was too small. They wanted to begin on starting a
family right away. Both believed it was their duty after the war to continue bringing the population back to normal.

"Where is it?" he muttered to himself. Wayne looked pitifully at the camera up in the corner and waved his hands, he hoped it would notice that he was awake. It didn’t. The cameras had been installed in everyone’s home after the war, much to the mass population’s disapproval. To stop terrorism and defend against nationalism. A matter of worldwide security. The new global government was as big of a joke as all of the ones that preceded it.

Wayne remembered the sound that woke him and looked down on the floor. His cell phone was under the oak coffee table. He reached down and scooped it up before holding it to his eye. A little light flickered by the camera before the lock screen opened up. Clicking the "home" app, he found the lights for the living room and swiped right and flooded the room with light. He selected the television next and hit the on button. The curved Samsung flickered to life. A relic from before the war. It was still on the history channel as a narrator spoke in detail about World War 3.

Wayne scoffed and shook his bald head. World War 3 was nothing like the other two. It was launched by nationalistic zealots and nothing more. Each country believing they were better than the others. Each tried to force the belief that their government was the right government. Finally, someone snapped. A new bomb was made. The Mad Adam. It had the power of a nuclear bomb, but without the blast radius of radiation. The bombs could be programmed to calculate the size of a major city, how big the population, and to drop in the area that would cause the most casualties. The bomb would lay waste to that area and coat it with radiation, killing everyone and leaving the area uninhabitable
forever. However, the contamination only spread as far as the people that launched the bombs wanted it, leaving suburbs and rural areas clean and livable. Wayne tried to understand the science of it all, but he was no scientist.

As the tv droned on, a new noise came from the kitchen. Wayne remembered his dream and got back up. His instinct told him it wasn’t a nightmare. Everything was too vivid. Too real. He started walking toward the kitchen. He walked on his tiptoes, trying to catch whoever was intruding in his kitchen. Phone in hand, the hallway was lit up with another swipe to the right. His heart rate had begun to accelerate as he closed in. He looked around for a weapon, something to render the intruder unconscious. A picture? No. Knick knacks on an end table? No. Wayne let out a frustrated sigh. There was nothing to use. He balled a fist after swiping right on the kitchen lights. He dropped his stealthy entrance and charged, only to find the kitchen empty. He blinked and looked around in confusion. There was no one. Nothing was in disarray, no pantries open, no mess. He looked to the window and saw it cracked open. He walked over and shut it. The glare from the lights made it impossible to see outside and he felt as though he was being watched. He let the blinds slam down onto the window ledge as he pulled the cable.

Wayne looked down at his phone and the remaining rooms. He swiped on each light throughout the house, save the bedroom. He turned the volume up on the television so it was just loud enough to hear in every room. He began making his way to the bedroom. As he entered, he looked at Karen asleep in their bed. Her tiny frame was hidden under a large comforter, hidden from the chill coming in from the open window. Wayne walked cautiously over to her, doing his best not to be too loud. He debated shutting the windows to help keep out any intruders, but shook his head no. He felt Karen
would find his fear irrational and would be angry with him for shutting the window when the cool air helped her sleep. When he got close to her, he pulled the covers to the side, checking to make sure she was okay. A quiet snore put his worried mind at ease. Still, he was not convinced he was alone in the home. He shut the door silently and headed to the bathroom.

Wayne thought back on his time with Karen as he walked. His fondest memory was when the two of them first began living together in their old apartment. They had each brought an unlabeled box, something from their previous life apart that they were to share with one another. For Wayne, it had been a box containing his favorite television shows and movies from before the war. Most of it was horror movies and science fiction. In the world they now lived in, people tended to shy away from those two genres. They both knew the world felt too close to what they portrayed. Karen had smiled and laughed, a laughter that was music to Wayne’s ears, and took his hand. She said it was nothing to be ashamed of. She understood the importance of fiction.

She passed him her box next, letting her hands with the blue colored nail polish slide softly across Wayne’s grizzled hands. It had sent goosebumps throughout his body and she knew it. She gave him another smile, her nose crinkled up and dimples showing. He lifted the box and thought it felt heavy. As he opened it, he looked to her face and saw that the smile had slowly gone and a look of worry had spread across it. They were sitting in their empty living room cross-legged, sharing their secrets to one another. Although she had accepted his, would Wayne accept hers? Wayne peeked inside and saw the contents before he looked back up at her. He gave her a smile. In the box were notebooks, letters, and photos. All from family members, past boyfriends, and lost friends. He had
understood the importance of this box. Karen had always felt people left her and this was a way to keep them around. A slight blush came to her face as Wayne set the box to the side and gently kissed her cheek.

The sink and mirror faced toward the door and as Wayne entered, he heard the house creak again. His mind began to race as toothpaste hit toothbrush. He brushed his stained teeth, too much coffee and cigarettes, and kept eye contact with himself in the mirror. *What are those noises?* He was positive that he’d never heard them before. *Maybe the house is haunted.* He looked away from the mirror to spit and as he lifted his head he stopped. *What if the house is haunted? What will be in the mirror?* He had seen enough of the classic scary movies to know that something would appear in the mirror. He slowly lifted his head, praying to a God he didn’t believe in, that nothing was behind him. As he looked, he saw nothing. But the paranoia was getting to him again. He turned to pee and as he turned his head he was confident that he saw something move in the hallway.

“Hello? Karen is that you?” He called out to no answer. He decided it was better not to check, and to pee as fast as his pulse was beating. He finished and expected the worse, but the most that happened was a missed toilet bowl from his shaking hands. He flushed and stepped back into the hallway. He opened his phone and tried to shut everything down, but as he did the app froze and the living room remained well-lit along with the television that babbled away about World War 3. He raced down the hallway to the living room. He dreaded turning things off the old fashioned way. As he entered and looked at the television, the scream of what sounded like a young woman came from outside. He looked nervously at the sliding back door.
Should I go check... was the first thing that came to mind. He flipped on the switch outside and the backyard was illuminated. Nothing was moving. Nothing was there. He looked to the woods, to the path he had walked before down to the railroad. He knew children would sometimes go there to play, and as he listened, he could hear the sound of a train going by in the distance. His gut tightened. He knew he should go investigate. He stepped away from the door and went to the closet where his golf clubs were and selected a 5 iron. If it was lucky on the course, maybe it would bring him luck here. He slid into his flip flops and opened the door.

Outside the air was cool and as he began heading to the trail, he flipped on the flashlight built into his phone. He looked to the sky. It had begun to get cloudy and the clouds had a green tint from them glowing in the light of the waning yellow moon. Wayne sped up, he already felt vulnerable.

On the trail, every noise had made him jump. He began to sweat as the air caressed his body. Each twig that snapped was a killer waiting in the woods. The rustle of leaves was his assailant getting closer. Twice he took his 5 iron, sliding in his wet palms, and swung it at the brush alongside the trees. The invisible enemies fell to his mighty swing. Wayne didn’t realize it, but his pace had sped up with every step, until he was close to running when he reached the tracks. At first, there was nothing. He looked to the left and saw a dark path where the train had passed. Probable a train straight to hell his frightened mind thought. Wouldn’t I still see it if I had just heard it go by? Definitely something foul is happening in these woods, he thought. He glanced quickly to the right, ready to take off when he saw it. White and black, with red splattered next to the tracks.
“Oh my God,” he said under his breath before he ran over to the body. He had no idea what it was. He could tell it wasn’t a child, way too furry and small. As he approached, he jumped from the smell and appearance. Before it had looked to be a raccoon, but on closer inspection he could tell it was not. He rubbed his eyes and pinched his nose before getting a closer look. The body was swollen to the size of a pig, but very lean. No tail. Its head was what had goosebumps popping up all over his body. The eyes were an off yellow and had the black coloration of a raccoon underneath them. However, the snout and mouth had been warped. Instead, the mouth looked as though a Venus fly trap had taken its place. The top and bottom of the mouth extended out and rows of jagged teeth ran the front of the lips all the way back toward the throat. The tongue was the worst part. It snaked out several feet and was pale white. It appeared to be a tube and at the end it branched out into four prongs with a needle looking thing in the middle of them. The smell that came from it was putrid, nothing like Wayne had ever smelled before. The smell that emitted from the creature was more than just the normal stink of a rotted corpse. It was as if someone had mixed expired milk, meat that had sat out for weeks in a hot sun, and the remains of a skunk into one horrid odor.

What the hell is this thing? What do I do with it? I should report it.

Wayne’s mind raced as he backed up from the body and back towards the path. As he turned another scream, the same sound as before, echoed from the woods in the direction of his home. Wayne was in a full panic now as he moved down the path. He couldn’t will himself to run. He pushed himself to stay alert. He stepped on a branch and whirled wildly around. Is there another one behind me?! He dropped his club when he turned and stared down at it in disbelief. He debated leaving it. If there was something in
the woods like he believed, it would surely get him when he bent down. He couldn’t allow himself to move forward without his weapon though. He leaned forward and kept his head up, despite the pain that came from this awkward position. Another twig snapped in the woods as he snatched up the club and he turned to run for the house.

*Whatever that creature was, there is more and they’re after me!* He ignored the obvious as he ran, such as the wind blowing or the twigs that were scattered across the path kept crunching under his feet.

He reached his porch and almost ran straight into the door. He was panted heavily and could see his breath as he fumbled to try and pull it open, He used the reflection of the door to guard his backside as he slid it open. There was nothing there. As he let himself in, another branch broke in the woods and now his mind swore that maybe he did see a second creature in pursuit. He stumbled inside before he slammed the door shut. He looked out across the yard, and after he saw nothing more, let out a slight chuckle.

He looked down at his flashlight and remembered it also served as a phone. He pulled the blinds across the door and plopped back down on the couch, letting his body cool down and the tension leave. He searched for the number for the police. Dead monster or not, it was best to report it. As he found the number, the phone died. The charge battery icon appeared. *Great. What was that thing?* In the forest he had believed he had found an alien. A being drawn to the planet from the radiation. Now he wasn’t so sure. *Maybe it was a raccoon that wandered into the contaminated zone. Could be from a long exposure from radiation.* Then a more panicked thought. *If that was the case, maybe the Mad Adams weren’t as contained as they had believed.*
Wayne stood and tossed his phone onto the table. *No sense in caring about this now. The thing is dead. I’ll call tomorrow once the phone is recharged. It will be easier to find the thing in daylight.* He wobbled over to the television, legs still tired from his run, and was disappointed that everything would have to be turned off by hand. He had begun to walk back to the bedroom once he returned his weapon to the closet. He turned the lights on to the low setting to light his way, he would turn them off in the morning. He turned the corner to enter his room when he heard it. *Swffft. Swffft.* His body wanted to go into fight or flight mode again, but he couldn’t. He was too tired. He tried to rationalize. *Probably just Karen breathing heavily in her sleep.* He turned the lights on in the bedroom when he saw it.

There was another monster in the room, very much alive. It looked up and stared at Wayne. Its eyes were an off yellow and it watched him intensely. It stood on top of Karen, its front legs on her breasts and back on her stomach. Her body was pale and her head lolled to the side, tongue hanging out and her eyes that were wide with fear. The monster’s tongue was at her throat, the prong dug deeply into the middle. It cocked its head as it stared at Wayne and Wayne stared back at it. He couldn’t move. He tried the best he could to scream. His legs were lead. His arms dangled limp at his sides. His mind screamed for him to do something, anything as the creature began to withdraw its tongue. It stared at Wayne for another moment. Wayne trapped in his paralysis. Wayne hoped he was asleep again. Wayne knew that he was not. The monster
Neurosis

William had watched as Heather walked out of his life. It had broken him to see her go, but as the time wore on, he knew it was best for her safety. It was only a matter of time before the GGE would begin to target her at work for questioning about his behavior. He didn’t want to see her life destroyed because he wanted to see the government burn.

William had also watched as his friends began to leave him one by one. They all cited various reasons as to why they could no longer be a part of his rebellion. Their excuses ranged from fear of being captured to a weak stomach for violence. Some just said they had better things to do. It didn’t matter to William, he had seen plenty of films where a single rebel could make a difference.

William constantly paced his tiny house looking for any surveillance that may be in it that wasn’t sanctioned by the government. He had spray-painted each camera in the home and wrapped American flags over the lens so that they could no longer watch his every move. Lamps had been smashed. Outlets were pulled out from the wall. Light bulbs were broken. He checked everywhere the old television shows and movies showed hidden surveillance. He never found anything, but that hadn’t helped William’s manic thoughts. During the course of his destruction his dog had gotten loose, but at this point William was more concerned about the GGE.

Things boiled over for him when he caught wind that the neighbors Heather and he had befriended were killed under mysterious circumstances. The police had told the hooded William that someone had broken into the home and killed Wayne and Karen, but
he knew better. He had seen their bodies before they were covered and there were odd markings on their neck and

The Anatomy of...

She walked up to his house and saw that it was no longer occupied. The green carpeted rug, which for a long time had been an eyesore on his cement steps leading up to the front entrance, had been ripped out. The white storm door had the glass smashed in and was flapping noisily against the black metal rail and the chipped frame that it used to sit in. The heavy wooden door, one that used to keep intruders out and his dog in, was now hanging by its hinges at an awkward angle. It was a surprise that the man behind the boot print on the white paint hadn’t been able to kick the door all the way into the home. She looked at the windows and was astonished to see that the blinds still hid what was inside, although no one remained there.

Heather had received a letter from William informing her that a few months after she had moved from Galena Park, their friends Wayne and Karen had been murdered during the night. She had found it odd that William chose to send a letter, something nearly impossible to do in these modern times. What was even stranger was the fact that he had been convinced that it was a government conspiracy. She knew he had hated the Global Government of Earth for reasons he would never state, although she believed he just wanted things to go back to how they were before the war. Why he wanted that, she would never understand. The world peace they enjoyed now hadn’t existed before the bombs went off.
They had been together for over a year and a half. During that time his obsession with rebelling against the GGE and a belief in conspiracy theories that held no ground had grown. William never spoke of them in the privacy of the home they shared, no, he would force her to go on walks to share these thoughts. In their house they watched what they said. They viewed movies that the government considered to be “harmless” classics from the times leading up to when the bombs dropped. The Global Government of Earth didn’t want people to believe the world would be better going back to separate countries. Heather had enjoyed these movies, they were simple and fun, something to relax and enjoy when she wasn’t working for the GGE on monetary accounts. Heather’s job was to help keep track of the funding sent to the Midwest Region that they lived in. She would divide the funds up to different departments and ensure that employees got paid.

William hated the GGE. As the time passed and he began making new friends, she grew suspicious of these people. They were men and women garbed in traditional American clothing. Everything was red, white, and blue. Every hat they wore, including the silly berets, were red and had an old slogan about making the country great again. She had always known when these people had been over to visit. American flags or other items, like their bookcase, would block the cameras in their home. Eventually she had enough. She had gotten in an argument with William over some conspiracy that he and his friends were hunting down. They were going to “discover the truth” and “wake up the world” to the atrocities that the GGE were committing. Whether the atrocities were true or not, Heather said, she did not care. The world had its peace, why ruin it? That night she packed up and left Galena Park, leaving him, the newlywed neighbors that they had befriended, Wayne and Karen, and took off to live in the country with her family.
This had been over two months ago. Now, she stood in front of their old home, holding the letter that fluttered gently in her hands. She looked down at it with a flush of anger. Anger at the fact that William had known where she ran off to. Angrier at the idea that this was his way of saying that he never cared for her as well. She never told William where she had gone after she left, and yet he knew, and hadn’t bothered to go after her. She contemplated tearing up the letter and the message it contained, willing to leave William to whatever fate happened to him here. It was curiosity alone that wouldn’t allow her to walk away. She found it curious that he knew any electronic communication could be followed by the GGE, since it was something she never told him, and she believed that even his rebellious friends would not fall in line with the type of “crazy” he was spewing in his letter. That was probably the only reason he tried to contact her.

Standing in front of their former home, she looked down at the letter in her hand and read it once again. She felt goosebumps form across her dark skin, not from the chilly wind rippling through her clothes, but from the message he sent and the destruction of his house. It read:

_Heather,

I do not have much time to explain since I fear they are onto me. Karen and Wayne are dead, declared a murder by the GGE. I do not believe it for a second. Although I didn’t see the bodies, I have spoken with the other neighbors. They swear some kind of monstrosity attacked and killed Wayne. Mr. Brevard says he shot something that was on top of Wayne. He’s told me in whispers it was some kind of raccoon, only not one at all. He was shaking. When I asked for the description of the beast, he shook his head furiously_
before he said that it was all he knew. I find the whole thing suspicious. When I left our home to see what had happened, the GGE had a van parked in front of Wayne and Karen’s. It’s as though Karen and Wayne never existed. I dug in on my own, hanging around their house and travelling the woods behind it. I have found the creature Mr. Brevard said and words cannot begin to describe the horror it brings. I have killed several now and have begun to study them. You are the first I have told since you are the only one I trust. I fear the GGE will be here soon to silence me. Please, as soon as you receive this, come back home and see what I have found. You work for them. After I can teach you what I’ve learned, you can convince them of the threat and maybe, just maybe, they will let the public know what is happening. Come soon.

-Will

The sincerity with which the letter was written was the only reason Heather had returned. Or at least that’s what she told herself since the idea of still caring for William seemed absurd. However, seeing his home, at least the outside, in such disarray led her to believe her impulse to come back to Galena Park was valid. She let go of the letter and let it float in the wind. She was still unsure of entering the home now. The cameras would surely see her and the GGE would pick her up in no time on accounts of conspiracy. She took a deep breath and glanced around, looking for any spies that may have seen her on the darkened street in the middle of the night, and saw no one. Heather’s feet began moving before she knew where she was going, and before long, his white door that hung
crookedly with a black boot mark in the middle, fell to the side as she entered her former home.

Heather was surprised to find that the lights had been left on, despite the fact that the house had been torn apart. She thought that maybe someone had come in before her, but shook the idea away. The home had been quiet since she arrived. She stood in the large living room and was awed by the mess in front of her. Caked across the oak hardwood floor were muddy boot prints. There were several of them and they tailed off in different directions, some towards the bedrooms and the others towards the kitchen. Wayne’s first half of the living room had papers scattered across the floor and some of his favorite items, specifically the Star Wars memorabilia, looked as though they were thrown to the floor and destroyed intentionally. In her head Heather could see the GGE, in all black gear, breaking these items. They were banned in the new world since the themes of the movies centered on rebelling against a central government. William’s model Death Star and Millennium Falcon, both made out of the old children’s toy called Legos, had met the fate of gravity. Heather went to move forward before glancing at the cameras in the room. Two of them had been spray painted black to make it impossible to see, while the other two had been wrapped in layers upon layers of American flags. Heather had told William it was a waste of money to buy those things, and she took a small pride in the fact that she was right.

Seeing now that William had been just as paranoid as when she left him, she moved forward in confidence, knowing that he had at least kept the GGE from invading his personal home through their Big Brotheresque watch. Although she appreciated the privacy she would get searching the house, she knew the blocked cameras was probably
the reason he was raided. In the second half of his living room she found his ancient 90 inch Samsung T.V. lying on the ground and smashed to pieces. Nearby was the case to Star Wars: Rogue One. It had probably been the last movie he watched before the GGE showed. She looked around the room to find that he had become even more extreme. His bookcase, now toppled over, was filled with historical texts that took place before the war, which had been forbidden on the grounds of preaching nationality. He had American flags and other patriotic symbolism lining his walls, save for an empty spot above the couch. There, he had spray painted onto the egg shell wallpaper, “IF PEOPLE DO NOT FEEL FREE, THEN REBEL. THIS COUNTRY WAS BUILT BY REBELS.” Heather doubted this was a historical quote, but rather something William had created in his own mind. As she neared the writing on the wall she looked in the direction of the bedrooms. The lights were off, but she felt the need to check there just in case. She didn’t know whether or not he had actually been taken by the GGE, despite the evidence piled in front of her.

In the spare bedroom she found the same mess that had awaited her in the living room: items strewn about, things knocked over, and junk taken from their homes. She turned away and peeked into the adjacent bathroom. In here, despite the limited attempt to keep it clean, it looked the same as always. She walked a little farther down the hallway and into his bedroom. What caught her eye was the picture that was tossed haphazardly onto the bed. Heather walked over and picked it up. It was a photo of them from when they had first started dating. William still had his long hair and it was whipping around his face while he laughed. Heather saw herself as well, hair blowing as she leaned back into his arms smiling and looking up into his face. The photo had been
taken in a park not far from the home. William had asked her there for a picnic, something that no one really did anymore. He had tried to make them a beautiful lunch, but his cooking skills, or lack of them, left them hungry instead. A tear left her eye as she thought about the good times they used to have. She tossed the photo down and went on with her investigation.

Heather walked back into the living room and headed for the kitchen. There, a horrible smell attacked her nostrils. The smell wasn’t that of spoiled food, no, she had smelled that plenty of times in her life. Instead the stink seemed to be something closer to a dead skunk that had cooked in one hundred degree temperature on the side of the road. Heather swallowed down the urge to vomit and ignored the accelerated heartbeat in her chest telling her to run from this place and never look back. She was worried that down his basement, she would discover William’s body. Heather had never seen a corpse and as much as she didn’t want to now, she couldn’t leave William without a proper burial. She pushed through the tiny kitchen, hand plugging her nose shut, and moved aside the broken door leading to his garage and basement. As she moved down the stairs, one heavy step at a time, she failed to notice that the cameras that were in the kitchen and in this hallway were uncovered and moved with her.

As she walked down the stairs she found that with each step the old pine would creak and moan. She remembered hating going down these stairs, she felt there was always a chance one would break and she would fall and die trying to get down to do the laundry. Down in this dusty old basement there was only a single light bulb, or that’s what she believed, but now it looked as though several work lights had been set up and
left on. As she neared the bottom stair, she nearly tripped and cracked her head on the cement floor after seeing the horror show that was in front of her.

In the center of the room a large metal table, like the ones morticians use, had dried blood running down the sides of it. Whose blood it was, Heather wasn’t sure, and she didn’t care to find out. To the left there was a white folding table that had jars of what appeared to be organs. Despite her best efforts, Heather found herself walking to them. As she approached, the stench got stronger, and she looked at them, praying that they wouldn’t be human. She picked up one jar, the yellow embalming chemicals splashing back and forth like a tiny ocean of death, and peered inside. The thing that was in there appeared to be a heart, but it was one that Heather had never studied before. It looked as though it was missing valves and chambers. She remembered from her high school classes that those parts of the organs were important for any living thing to survive. She gingerly set the jar back down.

On the other side of the room she saw a similar table set up, only this one had a pile of notes scattered across it. Heather walked over, skirting away from the bloody metal table, and began to pick up some of the papers. As she began reading, she had found that William had been conducting his own search into the deaths of Wayne and Karen, and upon accident, he had found a monster. He said that it was found in the woods behind their home and he had been lucky to be carrying his pistol on him in fear that the GGE was tracking him. Heather threw this paper to the side and picked up another. Here William began describing the creature he had killed. It possessed a large fork like tongue that opened up with a prong in the middle. William theorized that it worked in some manner to allow the creature to drain blood from its prey. The mouth looked like that of a
Venus fly-trap, wide and with snapping sharp dagger teeth. He believed that the two dots on the top of its mouth may be nasal holes, although for that he was not sure. The eyes were a sickly yellow, as if the creature had once been diseased. Heather flipped the paper over and found more. As she did, she didn’t notice the footsteps that marched above her towards the basement, she was too engulfed with what William had found. He wrote that the body of the creature was close to being the same size of that of a pig. The colorations of the creature, along with the screech he heard when he found it, made him believe that it was some form of a genetic mutation gone wrong with raccoons. William theorized it was possibly from radiation that the bombs had left. Heather set this aside and looked at a picture he had drawn. Here William had broken down each part and tried to give names and theories to the organs he found within the monster he dissected.

Heather began to feel nauseous again as she remembered the stink that drew her down here. Looking to the far back wall she saw the chest freezer they had bought together. She walked over to it against her better judgement, feeling as though she was hypnotized to see what was in it. Heather reached the freezer and stared down. At the top of it, near the door, blood had oozed out of the sides and down to the floor. She found her hands were pulling it open. As the lid popped she felt the muzzle of a gun press into her back. She lifted her hands into the air and didn’t move, she was too shocked by what was peering up at her from inside the freezer. A voice behind her told her not to move, and she obeyed. Several more footsteps came down the stairs as Heather stood and cried, terrified of the monster’s cold dead eyes staring blankly up at her inside the chest freezer. The body had been ripped all the way open and had been scraped empty by an amateur mortician. Heather wanted to say something, anything. She knew the people behind her
All or Nothing

“We can’t just do nothing!” Robert shouted at his friends. Ever since the disappearance of William, he felt it was the group’s fault for abandoning William. There was a time where they all had supported his ideas. They believed that the Global Government of Earth had too much power and that control needed to be given back to the people. However, as William had become more and more radicalized, the less they wanted to do.

“It’s our fault for his disappearance!” Robert continued. “We should have stayed with him instead of just giving up. He had the right idea and now they’ve taken him!”

Robert stood above everyone on an ottoman he decided to use as his platform. He was decked out in an old American army uniform, one that he had found at a local thrift shop. Robert kept his hair constantly buzzed and allowed for no facial hair to dirty his face. He liked to play pretend, an army man trying to lead his troops to war. So far Robert hadn’t been successful. With the disappearance of William, who was considered the former leader, he was beginning to gain traction with the underground group he had assembled.

“There ain’t no reason we shouldn’t mobilize against the GGE,” he raved on. “We’re up to what now, twenty, maybe thirty people. They ain’t got many people here to stop us.”

“You’re being generous with your numbers again Robert,” Cynthia said. She had been dating Robert for a while and knew if someone didn’t knock him back down to Earth, he would go off the rails. Cynthia was clad in a military uniform that she had found with Robert. The irony of her situation was that neither she nor Robert had actually
looked at a history book. If they had, they would have known that Cynthia’s “military uniform” was nothing more than an old Halloween costume. Because of this, Cynthia’s chest and legs tended to spill out from the outfit. Cynthia was one of only two women that consistently went to Robert’s meetings, and because of this, no one ever bothered to correct the bob-cut blonde.

“Shit. Just because people ain’t showing up to our meetings doesn’t mean that they don’t wanna join our cause,” Robert replied.

“Well if we go ahead and do something, what do we do?” asked Charles. He was the youngest of the group and was sprawled out on a black leather recliner, his lanky frame too big for the small seat he inhabited. Although he was officially considered an adult, his long, greasy black hair and acne didn’t help him to get taken seriously. Charles had joined the group after being neighbors with William. He had loved the ideas that William had presented, and was the last to leave him and the first to find out that William had disappeared.

“I say we try to investigate whatever it was that made the GGE go after him,” Samantha chimed in. She sat next to Cynthia, as was her habit. She was bigger than most girls, both in height and weight, and her stomach splashed out from underneath the tie-dye shirts she was apt to wear.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Robert said. “My questions are this: what was he going after, where did he find it, and how can we get it? His house is under surveillance, so we ain’t going to be able to go there and look.”

“We do have the black beret outfits William gave us, maybe we could wear those?” Jay replied. He was one of the last people to join the group. William had been
unsure of him, as Jay had tended to stay in the shadows during the meetings. In truth, Jay was never really sure about anything. He had recruited himself into the group when he felt out of place at his job at a local store. The group had come in and was buying vintage United States memorabilia. He had felt that he should follow the law and call the GGE to report on how much they had purchased, but hearing William talk about how there used to be countries and how the one they lived in was considered the greatest, he changed his mind. Instead he asked if he could spend time with them to hear more about the former United States and William, at the insistence of his friends, agreed.

“That won’t work,” Robert quickly replied. He tended to regard Jay in the same manner as William used to, with distrust. “Inside and out is under surveillance. We need a different strategy.”

“What if we follow William’s strategy? Start getting propaganda out to the public. With William missing and that couple that lived by him killed under mysterious circumstances, it may be worth trying to get the public riled up,” said Saul. He was the oldest of the group and the most intimidating. The group knew when they needed to find him he was either at a recently opened gym, something the GGE pushed for to help with public health, or at home sleeping. Saul was completely bald and towered over most of the group. He always wore clothes that would show off any new muscle he had put on during the week and had no problems intimidating anyone who crossed an idea that he believed was good. The only reason Robert was okay with him being around was because he was at least on their side.

“Not a terrible idea,” Robert began. He hesitated to say more in case Saul felt this was the only route. When Saul’s face refused to betray his emotions, Robert gulped and
went on. “Until we know the facts, it may be best to wait, we don’t want to get
discredited as phonies when our rebellion is just gaining steam.”

“Fine,” Saul said. “So how about we tail a GGE agent or two that have been doing
work in the woods? With any luck, we may find what they’re trying to hide.”

“It would be a perfect time to wear those outfits William gave us,” Jay said. Jay
loved the outfits just because William had sewn in patches on each one of them, showing
a symbol for their rebellion. It was an all-red American flag and behind it were two
assault rifles, also red, crossing one another.

“We could try to catch them at dusk, that way we can use the cover of night,”
Cynthia added.

“I’ve still got that small arsenal of weapons William was scared to hold onto in
my basement as well,” Samantha stated. “Hell, it’ll be better to get them out and make
sure they work over letting them collect dust. Makes me nervous having them anyway.”
Samantha looked around the room and saw everyone nod in agreement before they
collectively turned and looked at Robert. They could see he was trying to work
something out in his head, some reason this was a bad plan. But that was his way. Any
plan that wasn’t his he rejected. That’s why their group had been treated as nothing more
than a talk-first, no-action type. Robert let out a visible sigh before straightening himself
to his full five foot three height.

“Deal. We ain’t got a better plan, so that’s the plan we go with,” Robert said.
“Tomorrow night we’re supposed to be close to having a full moon. That will give us
enough light to follow any of the bastards that may trek out into the forest. We’ll meet at
Samantha’s right before dusk to select our weapons. We’ll head out from there, tail any
GGE vehicle we see, and find where they go.” Robert looked around and saw several nods. “Alright then. Meeting adjourned.” Robert began to hop down from the ottoman as people began to leave. “Oh! One more thing, and hopefully this will make ya happy Jay, don’t forget to wear the outfits that William made for us.” A smile crept over Jay’s face as they filed out of the room.

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The next night the group huddled around in Samantha’s basement. All of them were in the gear that William had given them. Black combat boots, baggy black sweatpants, black t-shirts with the rebellion sigil on the right shoulder, and black berets adorning their heads. No one would admit that they all hated the berets. They thought of them as nothing more than stupid hats, accessories that William was fond of. However, after abandoning their comrade and having him disappear, they decided it was best to wear them, just in his honor.

They all stood around a trunk that sat in the center of Samantha’s basement. The room was damp and void of anything but spider webs. Samantha’s hands fumbled as she struggled with the lock. Now that the time had come where they were finally taking action, she was nervous. Robert had tried to give them all a speech about how this was the right thing to do and how they should feel excited for an opportunity to make their first strike against the GGE. His voice had a quiver to it when he spoke, and the speech fell flat.

“Do you just want me to smash the damn thing open?” Saul asked, making sure to flex as he did.
“Nope! Got it,” Samantha said stepping back. Inside a variety of weapons awaited the group. There was a double-barreled .45 ACP 1911 pistol, a sig P226 pistol, a sawed-off shotgun, several rounds of various ammo, a katana, nun-chucks, a couple of throwing stars, and a pair of brass knuckles. Everyone looked at each other nervously. None of them had used a weapon before but they didn’t want one another to know. They also knew if they were caught with one it would mean heavy jail time.

“Well it’s all or nothing,” Robert said, and taking a deep breath he reached into the trunk and pulled out the double-barreled pistol. The rest soon followed suit with Cynthia grabbing the sig P226 pistol, Saul pawing up and then sliding on the brass knuckles, Charles grabbing the katana, Jay snagging and swinging the nun-chucks, and finally Samantha, letting out a big sigh, scooping up the saw-offed shotgun. The rebels looked around at one another, a mix of terror and strength illuminating their faces. Terror for the fact that they were now holding something that could take a life, strength in the belief that they had power over someone else.

“Come on then, let’s go find what the GGE is hiding!” Robert shouted, pumping his hand in the air that was holding the pistol. He turned and led the group up the stairs, out of Samantha’s house, and into the street. None of them knew how to safely hide their weapons, so they sprinted across the street and into the nearby woods. Samantha only lived a few blocks away from where William use to live. The woods that surrounded Galena Park and ran behind his house were across the street from her home. They made their way down through the mess of trees, brush, and garbage, doing their best to stay out of site from the street, until they were behind William’s house.
“Okay everyone, make sure to stay far enough back in the trees and spread out,” Robert whispered. “Keep your eyes and ears peeled for any GGE vehicles or personnel. If we can get one or two of them on their own, we may be able to knock one out and question them.” Eyes shifted from one another after the idea of taking a member of the GGE captive was mentioned. Jay and Cynthia both looked posed to question this idea, but Robert had already disappeared into the thick of the forest. The two of them shrugged at one another and the rebels disbanded into the woods.

There the group sat for over an hour. Robert had picked a location where he could clearly see William’s house and the two GGE members that were stationed there to watch it. He made a mental note of how they alternated every fifteen to twenty minutes to step outside to smoke. Cynthia, from her spot, could only see a path that led through the woods. Every branch that snapped and every shuffle of the leaves that had fallen during the change to autumn, made her wince and point her gun in the general direction. Saul had found a tree that wasn’t facing towards any point of interest and so he used it as a way of doing wall planks as a workout while he waited for some action. Charles and Samantha had opted to stay together and crouched behind some bushes, facing towards William’s house. Both weighed the pros and cons of their mission and questioned if it was really worth the trouble. Jay had dipped farther back into the woods and was enjoying swinging the nun-chucks at anything that he could reach.

The night wore on and Robert was close to calling his rebels together and heading home. He began to slink out of the bushes when he saw someone from the GGE come out from William’s home and begin walking back towards the woods. Robert’s body tensed up as he watched the man head in his direction. His hand began to sweat as it tightened.
around the gun. He was prepared to shoot if the GGE operative found him. The guy passed him without a second glance. Up close Robert could see he was wearing tactical gear and carrying an assault rifle. The man was soon falling out of Robert’s sight. He wanted to signal to someone to follow the guy, but he realized that he had no idea where the rest of the group was.

“Fuck,” Robert said under his breath. “Guess I’ll have to do it alone.” With that he began slinking behind the operative, following him in the pale moonlight from above. Robert continued this way for about half a mile before he saw the operative stop and look up into a tree. Following his gaze, Robert saw, to his amazement, a surveillance camera mounted to the trunk. *I don’t believe it, they’re monitoring the fucking woods now!* The GGE operative slowly looked around and Robert slid into a bush, hoping he wasn’t detected. As he peered out, he heard a blood-curdling howl bounce off the trees and into his ears. Beads of sweat began to pour onto Robert’s head as he frantically looked around. He had no idea what made that sound and as he looked back to the GGE operative, the man was now in a crouch and was pointing his gun off into the distance at a large shadowy figure.

The sound of an automatic weapon reverberated through Robert’s eardrums as he began moving towards the shadowy figure that the GGE operative shot. His pulse was racing and his body trembling. A panicked thought crossed his mind that it would be one of his friends. It didn’t take long for him to approach the thing that lay dead in the wet leaves that scattered the ground. Robert had forgotten to be stealthy as he approached. As soon as he got close, his stomach turned, and the meal he had consumed hours ago came up and landed next to the monster that lay before him.
What once looked like a red fox had warped into something that could only haunt Robert’s nightmares. The top portion of its head had been blown off by the GGE operative, exposing grey brain matter that was mixed with a thick green pus. The mouth of the former fox no longer had a snout or nose, but instead it formed more of a beak now, with several layers of teeth crisscrossing all the way back into its throat. Its body had grown out of proportion, and where it should have stood at a relatively small height, it had grown to be the size of an adult moose. The fur on the monster had welted and begun to fall off, with the coloring changed from red to a sickly greyish brown. Its stomach was bloated, showing that it had recently consumed and killed some form of prey. The tail of the monster had changed to look like a large razor shaped leaf.

 “Halt! Drop your weapon and turn around with your hands up,” the GGE agent barked at Robert. Robert slowly turned, puke and saliva still running down his face and shirt.

 “What is this thing?” Robert asked raspily. “What are you hiding from us?”

 “Sir, last time, put the weapon down and not another word,” the GGE agent said. This time he raised his gun and pointed it at Robert.
Trial and Error

I let my body fall heavily into the old leather chair that was designated as “my spot.” I was the last one to arrive at this meeting because an intern spilled coffee onto the files I had prepared to discuss today. No one seemed to pay attention to my tardiness as the director continued to speak about things that were happening in the Midwest. It was the section of the Global Government of Earth I worked in. My reports were mostly dull, covering wildlife in the area and other effects of the environment.

The room felt brighter than usual as I shuffled my documents around. The old laminated cedar table that we were situated around had all sorts of watermarks staining its once beautiful design. It was apparent that even before the war, federal employees did not seem to care for the beauty of things man could create. Pictures that pushed the agenda of the GGE hung on the yellowed walls. There were posters of cartoonish medical equipment exclaiming that there was health care for all. Another showed several animals and pointed out that there would always be food for everyone on the planet. A third promoted peace around the world, with people of different ethnicities holding hands and the main GGE building looming ominously behind them.

“Economically, the Midwest is faring about the same as the rest of the world. We need to start finding some promotions for people to travel. Orders from above say that many people have become too close to the areas they have been born in...” the director continued, her voice pushing an agenda that I myself wasn’t concerned with. It wasn’t really important to me whether or not people travelled, and, in fact, I found it nice that they didn’t. With people refusing to explore the world, it helped with issues that were
taking place in the environment. I took a sip of my coffee and leaned back in my chair, waiting to give my report.

“And Mr. Triko, now that you’re here, would you like to give us the update on any environmental concerns you may have?” the director said. “We are all waiting with bated breath to hear your newest theories.” She got a chuckle from the assembled men and women around the table. Most of them didn’t care about what I had to say. They still believed that when the old government said the bombs were contained, they were contained.

“Well my preliminaries haven’t found anything to out of the ordinary. I did find some oddities with radiation levels near Galena Park,” I started. I knew that if any of the public was here, listening to our closed door meeting, the bomb shell I was ready to drop would have them rioting. However, with this lot, I knew they wouldn’t care.

“I’ve also found some interesting creatures that have emerged from some of the irradiated areas. Although I have yet to find the body of one, I believe it may be pertinent to get a group in to investigate the matter,” I said as the director cocked her head, her shoulder length black hair swishing against her pantsuit.

“Really? And outside of seeing these things with your own eyes, do you have any evidence? Any photos, videos?” she inquired. I looked about the room and could tell that most of the people were paying no attention to the two of us. They were shifting uncomfortably in their seats, either looking at their notes or at an interesting spot on the ceiling. The other agencies never listened to what I had to say because they didn’t care. I could stand on the table and tell them the earth would explode in a week and they would
just yawn and turn their heads. They believed my position was strictly there as a public relations move by the GGE to keep the masses happy.

“I don’t have any yet, but it’s why I believe it’s important to get people into the area right away. If we don’t and these things are for sure mutating, who knows what it would do to the environment, let alone the people in the area,” I tried to say with as much authority as I could, but already I wanted to hang my head in defeat.

“Well, until we have solid evidence of your claims, there will be no way I can put in a petition to the capitol requesting a recon team into the area,” the director said pointedly. “Get me some proof and maybe things can change, but until then this business of mutated animals is tabled. Is there anything else you would like to discuss Mr. Triko?”

“No, ma’am,” I replied as she had already begun to move onto other business. I followed my colleagues lead and began to tune back out of the conversation taking place. The rest of the departments were just going to be blowing smoke up each other’s asses, bragging about how great of a job they’ve been doing and how great the GGE is for the world. I focused on my notes, writing in reminders of areas to visit and additional tests I would need to do.

The meeting lasted another hour before the director released us all. I was the first to shuffle out of the stuffy room and down the long corridor. I dropped my notes off at my office, an area that felt like it was once a broom closet someone had expanded to make habitable for work. I went to the restroom and took a moment to fix myself up in the mirror. I looked into my brown eyes and tried to give myself a pep talk. It went something along the lines of not letting my job weigh me down and to keep fighting for
what I knew was right. I fixed my tie, black to match my black suit, and headed back to
my office. When I arrived I found a note had been left in my plastic mailbox.

“Come to my office at your convenience. I need to show you something you’ll
want to see.” The note was signed by the head of our science department. I peered into
the doorway of my office, seeing the disarray of papers on my desk, the overflowing
trashcan, and the stale food that had been sitting out for the last few days. I felt now was
convenient as any other time to head that way.

The head of the science department was a man by the name of Dr. Phillip
Manchu. Dr. Manchu was one of a handful of men in the world in charge of finding
various breakthroughs that would lead us further along human evolution. Although it was
never completely clear what his work entailed, the GGE felt that it was important his
work always be continued. I had always been envious of the amount of money his
department received, and as I came closer to his office, I began to wonder what it was he
would have for me. I rapped my fist on his door, hoping he would have something to help
me persuade the GGE to pursue the mutated creatures I had been hearing about.

“Come in, come in!” he shouted behind the pine. I pushed the door open and
found him pacing in his lab coat behind his desk.

“Ah, Mr. Triko. I was not expecting you to come in such a timely fashion. I
assumed that you would have other work to do before we met,” he said. “Please, have a
seat.” I walked over and let my lanky frame flop into the red leather chair he had
positioned in front of his desk. Unlike my office, his was spacious and had a nice window
view out into the courtyard. Several bookshelves lined the wall, showing off his vast
collection of medical books.
“And what is it that you have to show me today, Dr. Manchu?” I said. “It’s been awhile since we last spoke, but as far as I knew, you weren’t quite in the business of environmental affairs.”

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong Mr. Triko,” he replied. “Humanity is a part of the environment, and the environment has just as much of a lasting effect on us as we do on it.” I nodded in agreement, although still not sure why I had been invited to his office. He had turned his back to me and I stared at the bald spot on his head as he shuffled through some papers on the window ledge.

“Tell me,” Dr. Manchu said, “Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure.”

He turned back to me, his eyes lit up, and he tossed a photo on the desk in front of me. I looked down at the black and white image. On it was a picture of small woodchuck that had been captured on a hunting camera. However, the woodchuck’s face was pushed tightly back and its eyes resembled that of a cat. The coloring of its fur looked odd, almost as if it was more of a camouflage than the normal browns and greys. Finally, its tail looked as though it was now barbed, and there was something dripping off the back that I couldn’t quite distinguish.

“Where did you find this?” I asked incredulously. “And why didn’t you speak up at the meeting that you had this evidence? This is the kind of break I need in order to get some funding to look into these events taking place!”

Mr. Manchu let a smirk slide across his face, twisting up towards his small ears.

“Because, as I said, it is a secret. Come Mr. Triko, let’s take a drive. There is something more I need to show you. Can you spare the time today?”
I sat for a minute, trying to let my anger dissipate before I responded.

“Yeah, but it better be something I can use. This change in nature isn’t something I can let the government or people just ignore.”

“Of course, of course.”

He began walking forward, grabbing his keys off of a hook. “Let’s go then, we don’t have all day.”

I followed behind him and we walked out of the building and into his car. We drove in silence, not saying much and listening to the radio. He had an oldies station on the whole time, playing songs from past artists like Lady Gaga, Ed Sheeran, and Bruno Mars. We eventually pulled into a large mansion that sat at the top of a hill. I knew the place belonged to a Dr. Munaz. He was a respected physician who worked outside of the GGE’s healthcare system. He often provided care to people who couldn’t wait the amount of time required before visits. I looked curiously over at Dr. Manchu and he smiled back.

“Dr. Munaz is an associate of mine. Although he has no ‘official’ title with the GGE, we pay him to do some work that the government wouldn’t want to be directly responsible for,” he said. “Now come along, I have a key down into his lab, I think you’d be interested in the work that he’s doing.” With that, Dr. Manchu stepped out of his vehicle and began walking around to the back of the mansion. I scrambled out of the car and slammed the door behind me. The gravel under my feet crunched and kicked up under my shoes as I walked with Dr. Manchu. We arrived at a storm door down to the basement that was locked. The doctor pulled out his key ring and fiddled for a few minutes before finding the correct one for the padlock. With a swift and delicate motion
he had the lock open, chain tossed to the side, and was pulling the doors up and towards us. There was a dark wooden stairwell that led below. He started to descend and I followed cautiously behind.

We reached another iron door and when Dr. Manchu opened it, I saw before me the things of my nightmares. It was a large lab that was dimly lit. There were several stasis tubes that held various mutated animals in them. Each had some vicious deformity. Each was equipped to make them killing machines. I turned to Dr. Manchu in horror.

"Have...have you two been doing this?" I asked. I had believed that they had been working towards human evolution, but this, this was something that seemed created to do the opposite.

"No, we have not done these," he replied, shaking his head. "These are some of the creatures you had seen coming out of the contaminated zone to the north. We’ve been collecting them and studying them to see how these mutations came about."

"If I had to guess, it’d be the radiation from the area," I replied. I took a swallow before continuing. "However, what doesn’t make sense is how they’ve adapted...they look as though they’ve evolved to be carnivorous and deadly. They should have debilitating deformities, not...this."

"That was our thought exactly Mr. Triko," Dr. Manchu said. "Which is why I brought you here to see this. As far as we can tell, there is no discernible way these mutations should be taking place, and even our human trials have gone awry."

I had been nodding in agreement, stunned, when his words struck me.

"Human trials?" I asked. There was no way the government would allow that was my only thought. But as I looked at Dr. Manchu, and the grim and sinister look that
shadowed his face, I knew I had not misheard. He stepped next to me and put a hand on my back, leading me further into the lab like a horny teenager leading his date to bed.

“We have done several tests to see if these mutations could happen to the human population,” Dr. Manchu said. “So far what we’ve discovered is that unless the DNA of these ‘monsters’ are spliced with the DNA of a human, no changes take place. But that’s why I wanted to bring you in on this project. Your insight into the environment will be beneficial to determining whether or not our species is at risk.” We stopped at a stasis tube that was in the center of the room. In it was a pale white humanoid figure. At first, I believed it was a human. But the more I looked at the thing, the more I could tell that if it had been human, it wasn’t anymore. It floated in a sky blue liquid with its eyes closed. Its head still appeared normal, but the skin itself had gone to a sickly grey. Its shoulders had begun to slightly protrude out from its back, almost as if it were in the beginning stages of growing wings. Its nose had begun to deteriorate and its hands and feet had claws that were beginning to form.

“Is...is...this one of the human test subjects?” was all I could stay. I stared at the creature, my mind racing at the harm and destruction it could do if it grew to be half as deadly as the other monsters that were in stasis.

“Yes, but it’s harmless. As of right now we have it in a temporary coma,” Dr. Manchu said stroking the glass. He stared at the creature for a moment, almost affectionately, before turning back to me. I stood there shaking as he spoke again.

“Now, here are your options. You can collaborate with us. I will put in a petition immediately saying that you will be helping with our classified work. You’ll get the
funding you need, but you’ll be under some of the most extreme gag orders you’ve ever seen, understood?”

“And what if I don’t like that option?” I replied. My gut sank as soon as the words fell from my lips and into the humid room.

“Well that’s simple. Your position at the Midwest GGE region will come under my control and you’ll be ‘relocated’ to another branch,” Dr. Manchu said with a sneer. “I feel it should go without saying, but in case you’re still in shock, let me rephrase that for you--Dr. Munaz always needs more human test subjects.”
What Lurks Below

The Global Government of Earth, or the GGE as we call it, recently decided to put out a commissioned expedition of some of the quarantined areas around the planet. Each territory, or country as they used to be called, was required by law to send a team in to examine the region. Those that are successful will be given a fat bonus check to the monthly funds given out. I jumped at the opportunity. It had been close to one hundred years since the war had taken place, and it only took about a year before this new government had been installed. Many of the survivors were too numb from the amount of loss to even recognize what had happened. By the time the dust had settled and the world began to pick up the pieces, the GGE had already established itself.

None of the former world leaders had made it onto this government, and if they had, it more than likely would have failed. Instead, the ones that survived succumbed to one of three fates. The first was taking their own life. These were the extremists, the ones that knew that they were guilty for the catastrophe, and if they stuck around, there would be hell to pay. They must have ignored what the Bible said about people that committed suicide and where they would spend the afterlife. The second group is what was considered to be the smart group. They were the ones who fled into hiding. The ones that were successful in concealing themselves from the world managed to die in peace, or at least whatever peace their conscious would allow. The third group, well they weren’t so lucky. They were brought in to the GGE to be made an example of. Public executions were held within five years, each voted on by the world and death sentences determined
by the survivors. It was a grisly affair, and one that my generation is not proud of, but it was seen as something necessary in order to move on.

Most of these things are public knowledge, a verbal history that has been passed down. Historians are few and far between at this point in time. Every person that has lived after the war has spent their lives trying to find a way to rebuild our society to what it once was. I decided that path wasn’t for me. Instead, I felt it was imperative that we have a better understanding of what happened. What events led up to this? Has there ever been a time in history where the world seemed so dismal? How can we avoid repeating our mistakes? My time has been mostly spent in the libraries in my surrounding area, searching for any book worth reading. I avoid my yearning for the fiction section and take notes on everything that seems important from the world’s history. My hope is one day I can put in a petition to join the GGE, and maybe, just maybe, I can help remind them of our past mistakes so we may not repeat them.

I was in the library when I had received a call from Brandon telling me about the GGE’s recent announcement. He had known for a while that I was interested in being able to explore Chicago, one of the closest quarantined areas to us.

“So do you think you’ll try to find a way to get on the expedition Addi?” He asked. He always had a tendency to ask things he already knew the answer to.

“You know I will,” I whispered, “and I know you wouldn’t waste your time calling me while I’m in a library if you didn’t have a way for me to join the team.”

“Why are you whispering? I know as well as you do that the library is empty. You’re about the only one I know in the area that still gives a damn about history.” He was right too. I was alone in the library, and truth be told I had broken the glass door to
get in months ago. No one had bothered with stopping by to repair it. Why did they care?

Everything that could be read had gone digital, a part of the process that was close to complete before the war. From what I could tell, the only reason many of the libraries stayed open were for the elderly that didn’t want to join the age of digital reading.

“More of a reason for me to go on this expedition,” I retorted, no longer speaking in a whisper. “So do you have a way for me to go or not?”

“I do. As you know, I have an uncle that works for the GGE.” This was always something he liked to share. “I had been talking to him about the expedition, assuming he would go since he leads a fairly large team in capturing these monsters that keep appearing. He said that they were mainly going in for proof that the environment in the quarantined zones was causing the surviving animals to mutate.” He gave a long pause for dramatic effect. “Anyway, I asked if that was all the team was supposed to be doing. He mentioned that technically they should be documenting what they could find about the people that passed away there, some B.S. tribute thing the GGE wants to put together for this year’s anniversary. However, since they didn’t assign him anyone from another agency he just has hunters and scientists…”

“Brandon, if you didn’t recommend me to accompany him, my small feet you make fun of will be connecting with your genitals within the next four hours.”

Threatening him was needed to get the point across. Even though he was my best friend, sometimes a threat to one head got a message through to the other.

“I did! I told him about your studies and how you plan to petition to the GGE to join soon.”
“And what did he say?”

“He said you could come on one condition.”

I felt the air leave from my chest. Even though the GGE preached equality for all, and granted they had been able to keep a level of world peace so far, the sexism that I’ve read about from years ago still existed within the world. I was sure there would be some excuse of me being a burden or even worse, not being able to take credit in the mementos I may find.

“He said that you’d have to have an armed guard with you,” Brandon stated. “The area has been quite active over the past year, and I guess it’s that way around the globe. Luckily, that’s where I come in. I was able to convince him to let me finish my training early and have this be my first assignment in the field.”

“Yeah that seems smart,” my voice dripped with sarcasm, despite my best efforts.

“Well I’d have my S.O. with me as well,” he said in a whiny voice. “But if you want to do this you need to leave the library soon and pack up. I’ll call my uncle and let him know, but they’re planning to roll out soon.”

“Let him know I’m in,” I said. “I’ll give you a call when I’m home and ready. Can you pick me up?”

“Sure can. This is so exciting!” He said. “I’ll talk to you soon,” and with that, the line went dead. I felt the blonde hairs across my body stand as goosebumps spread across my back and arms. I shut the book that laid in front of me, *Voices from Chernobyl*, and stuffed it into my purse. As I walked out the door, shattered glass crunching beneath my feet, I glanced back into the library. I wondered if I should snag anymore books before I left, but decided not to waste any time. I turned and took off back towards home, excited
to begin gathering things for the GGE. *If I do this well, maybe I could just send my petition in with the work,* I thought.

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We ended up flying into Chicago with two different helicopters. Mine was filled with a few scientists, our personal armed guards, and Brandon. He and I shared nervous looks as we approached the remains of Union Station. It was hard to see much through our hazmat suits, the ugly colored yellow ones that had been left over from after the war. Everything I had read said in 2066 they had been wearing high tech white suits, but for whatever reason, the GGE either couldn’t find them or didn’t care to. I looked out my window and wondered what this supposed great city had once been like. I had seen the pictures and videos that people had left. The celebration of the Cubs winning multiple World Series, the river that was a clear instead of an algae colored green, and the massive buildings that seemed to shimmer in the sunlight.

All of that was gone now as I looked around. The massive buildings that once stood were crumbled to the Earth. Iron beams seemed to twist towards the sky from the ground like deformed tentacles trying to capture their former grace. Where there was blue sky and sunshine in the pictures and videos I had viewed, it now disappeared behind the tint of a greenish grey smog that seemed to smother the entire city. The area that once held a bustling array of people was now empty. Cars that would take people to work, home if they were too drunk, or even just to get food, sat piled up. As the choppers descended, I pulled out my camera, a relic from the past, and began shooting photos the best I could. We landed with ease and as we piled out, Brandon’s uncle pulled us together to remind us of our assignments.
“Listen up!” he shouted. Even with the city destroyed and empty, it reminded us why it was called “The Windy City” as a gale of wind through dust, debris, and garbage our way.

“You all know your assignments here. My party will spread out into groups of two and three heading in every direction. Make sure to use the communicators if anything suspicious occurs. Travel for about a mile on foot and look for the bastards that have been attacking our community. Anything that we cannot bag back home, tranq it and bring it back immediately. As for the rest of you, make your way North. Lake Michigan has not been friendly to the city and its waters have made their ways up to State Street. Do not, and I repeat, DO NOT enter the water. We don’t know how contaminated it is or if any of those creatures have learned to live in it as well. Any questions?” He looked around at us with a glare. He was here for business and he made it clear, the sooner we got done, the sooner we could return and get the extra funding we wanted.

“Good. Head out!” We began to depart. My group began moving north, and as we did I snagged Brandon, who in turn grabbed his S.O. Both towered over me and it took me a moment to remember that I was in charge of my own expedition. I looked around and pointed to a Starbucks nearby.

“Let’s go in there. I want to see if there was anything worth grabbing for the GGE.” Both of them nodded, with Brandon looking a bit uneasy after assessing the place. As we crossed the street and prepared to enter, I saw why. The roof of the building had begun to sink in, as the floors that were above it were blown out and collapsing. The place was dark and hard to see into. As we approached, Brandon’s S.O. took his heavy twelve foot boot and slammed it into the door. We both jumped back as it fell off its
hinges and slammed across the tiled floor. He signaled to Brandon to lift his gun and turn on the light that was attached to the top.

As the two men led the way, I followed close behind them. They went about checking the building to ensure that none of the monsters were present. As they did, I began to scan the area. At first, it appeared as though nothing of use would show. But to my horror, I saw the remains of a person sitting in front of a notebook. The remains looked as if the skin had been melted to the flesh, or what remained of flesh. The body was twisted and the face looked to me as if it were in a mid-scream. As I examined the room again, I saw several other corpses and jumped as one was illuminated by the light on Brandon’s gun. I looked into his face and saw beads of sweat drizzle from his forehead towards his mouth. Brandon’s mouth twisted into a grimace as he continued his march forward searching for monsters. It was clear that the true monsters, however, the ones that had launched the bombs, had struck this city over one hundred years ago.

As I made a move towards the notebook the corpse was holding, I had begun to gag. I swallowed hard, doing everything I could not to puke into my hazmat suit while I was in it. As I approached I turned my head and reached gingerly for the notebook. It broke away along with the hand that was sitting on top of it. I let out a yelp and jumped back. Both the lights on the guns flashed in my direction. They saw the hand, still clasping the remains of a pen, fall and hit the ground in front of me.

“What did you find?” Brandon asked as they walked over.

“It’s a notebook,” I answered. “Here, give me one of your bags to put this in. I’m afraid to hold it for too long in case it starts to deteriorate and it’s lost forever.” Brandon looked to his S.O. who turned and allowed him to reach into a backpack he was wearing.
He fished out a bag and handed it to me. I slid the notebook in and looked at what the first page said. It was a grocery list. Milk, cheese, eggs, cereal, bread, and other items that were common for the time period were scrawled in poor handwriting on the page. All three of us stared at it in disbelief. It wasn’t only unusual to see a handwritten list, but one as simple as this. Was this what people were really doing before the bombs dropped? Did they truly not know that within a matter of minutes their lives would end? As we struggled to look away, a voice came through on the comms. It was one of the female scientists that had headed for Lake Michigan.

“All units report. I repeat, all units report to Lake Michigan immediately.” We all looked at each other. Brandon’s S.O. was the first to speak, letting his growl of a voice out for the first time since we landed.

“It’s your call Adayah,” he said. “Technically we are here for your work as well.” I had begun to tell him that we should go when her voice came through again. This time a tinge of panic.

“Hurry! There’s something very strange in the water. We don’t know what it is...it looks like it could be a downed building, but our maps indicate nothing of its size was notable in the area. Lot of activity around this location as well. Requesting back-up.” Brandon and I looked at each other, and we could both see the nervousness within each other’s eyes. I looked to his S.O. but he was already sliding the notebook into his bag. He looked to both of us and shook his head.

“Your mission is officially on hold. Both of you follow me. I’ll take point and Brandon you cover the rear.” Without waiting for us to respond he began pushing his way
out of the building. We had no choice but to follow. It took us a good twenty minutes to arrive to where the rest of the team was huddled.

At first, I was too short to see anything but the wall of people in front of me and the lapping waters of Lake Michigan now residing on State Street. The water that was once a beautiful turquoise blue on summer days was now a murky black. Even through the hazmat suit the smell of dead fish wafted through. Where the water ended, a large pile of fish carcasses laid in waste. Much of it was down to just the bones, but the ones that had recently died were in a disgusting disarray. The scales seem to be falling off many of them, and defects such as extra body parts glared as a stark contrast to the images I had studied before.

I elbowed Brandon in the ribs to get his attention. I wanted to see what it was that everyone was looking at. He motioned his head to the left, and we both began walking around the crowd, leaving his S.O. to talk to his uncle. Once we got to the last of the people gawking and staring ahead, Brandon and I began to do the same. About twenty five miles out a large structure, which was onyx in color, lie jutting out of the water. There were lines that ran the length of the entire thing, looking as though they were artfully cut into it. It was hard to tell if the object was made of stone or metal, although it appeared as though the glow of a white light was emulating out from between the lines. I was dumbstruck at what I was looking at. In my head, I assumed the thing had to be reaching at least three hundred and fifty feet into the air, the size of a small skyscraper. As I stared ahead, the crowd started to point towards the water that was near it.

At first it appeared as nothing more than the waves beginning to pick up as a result of the northern wind that assailed us. But the longer we looked, the more the white
on top of the water changed. No longer did it look like it was a giant wave forming from
the wind, but rather from something swimming. I remembered back to videos I saw of a
dolphin coming to the surface of the ocean, and how the water seemed to ripple around it.
This was the same thing, but on a much larger scale.

The men that came to guard the scientists and myself yelled for everyone to move
back, but we were all too dumbfounded to follow their orders. Brandon’s uncle
assembled his team and together they began shoving us back. We were in a retreat, the
guards included, as a monster began to come out of the water. I pulled my camera out and
began preparing to take a picture, but before I could it fell to the ground and shattered as
my whole body began to shake in fear.

The monster’s head was the size of a bus and it was the first body part that
emerged from the depths. Its face was void of anything but a mouth. The top and bottom
of its jaws were covered in large, jagged teeth that seemed sharp enough to tear through
the biggest of monsters that had been discovered back home. On either side of its head
were two large red eyes that moved spastically around, every once and awhile locking
onto us. Its body was about the size of a bus and was sleek, grey, and void of scales. As it
came forward, muscular legs that mirrored those of a crocodile’s began to propel it past
the shallows of the water. At this point gun fire rained through the air but I failed to stay
and watch. Brandon and I had already began to run towards the choppers with the
scientists.

As we ran, the screams of the men that stayed to fight echoed in our ears. Screams
of pain as their bodies were impaled undoubtedly by the massive teeth that filled the
monster’s mouth. The gunfire became less and less, as though signaling the life going out
of each person as they tried to stave off the beast. I turned once to look back, to see if Brandon’s uncle had followed. To my horror, I saw that he was still in retreat, the last of the men battling for his life. I grabbed Brandon’s arm and spun him around and pointed. He froze, brown eyes glazed over at the scene in front of him. I reached and pulled the gun out of his useless hands and began firing at the monster ahead.

“Run!” Was all I could scream at his uncle. I did my best to ignore the shredded yellow suits that were lying limp on the ground or stuck between the creature’s teeth. He turned around and began to run, but the monster was closing in on him fast. I saw the look of fear in his eyes as he knew he wasn’t going to make it. I stopped running and put the gun to my head and pointed to him. He knew what I was suggesting. I turned and ran back towards Brandon as I heard the blood curling “no” escape from his throat and out of the suit. A single gunshot, the last fired from the fight, echoed through the air. I grabbed Brandon’s arm and pulled but he was glued to where he stood. I pulled the gun forward again and pointed it in his face.

“He’s dead! Move before you are too,” I screamed. I saw his eyes shift from the gun to the creature that had slowed its pursuit. He went to make a grab for the gun but I yanked it away.

“Stay and die or run and maybe you survive,” is the last thing I said. I shoved the weapon into his arms before taking off again. As I ran I heard a few shots pop off but I could no longer
The Galena Park Tribune
The Global Government of Earth announces the emergence of monsters throughout the world

George Bernstein, The Galena Park Tribune
Galena Park, Midwest Region -- The director of the Midwest region for the GGE announced today at a press conference the existence of monsters in the area. The announcement comes after a series of deaths have taken place in the Galena Park area. An investigation led to the existence of these monsters.

The director said that the current belief is that the monsters are animals that have escaped from the irradiated areas that are closed off to the public: “The emergence of these monsters comes as a surprise to all of us. After looking into a couple of the mysterious deaths that have happened in our area, our sector has concluded that they occurred from attacks from these monsters that emerged from the quarantined area formerly known as Chicago. We have men and women on the ground combing the Galena Park area looking for them. At this time, the origin of how they came about is unknown.”

The GGE is currently urging residents to use caution when travelling. When asked if a curfew would be put into effect to help limit the killings taking place, the director opted to provide no comment.
When a Monster Calls

The thumping on the door brings me back to my senses. It has been going on for
several minutes now. The repetition of the knocks bang against the thumping in my skull.
I look down at the gun, the same one that was used to kill earlier this evening, and
wonder if it wouldn’t be worth using on myself as well. They’ll think my story is crazy.
They’ll tell the public I was a product of these monsters haunting our world; I couldn’t
help but kill because they are driving people mad. I am not insane.

I look around my messy living room. Beer cans are scattered and crushed on the
table. Food has spilled out of the boxes and onto the floor -- the place hasn’t been clean
for months. And why do I care? I’ve had no guests, no one that worries about me and
what I live like. It was just Ron and me, and Ron never came to my place.

The thumping on my door grows louder as the officials outside begin to yell for
me to open the door. They claim they just want to talk, but I know the truth. There won’t
be any talking, not between me and them. If they enter, I shoot. Whether it’s myself or
them remains to be seen, but they have to know that I’m not crazy. What I did was out of
self-defense and nothing more. They’re concerned because I’ve shot out all the cameras
in my house. I refuse to let Big Brother peer into my life. I didn’t support the government
before the war, and I sure as shit don’t now.

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I showed up at Ron’s at 9:00 a.m. to follow our usual routine. I had kicked the
door to my rust bucket of a truck open and hefted my bulk out of the driver’s seat. In the
bed of the truck I grabbed the usual, two 30 racks of beer, for each us to begin swigging
down. It was our tradition to put down a case during the day. Ever since the war had
ended, even after one hundred years had passed, there was still no jobs to be had for the uneducated like ourselves. We worked whatever was available, often shit-work, and this led to our bachelor life. Made sense to just drink away what tiny funds we had and enjoy what little in life was left for us.

I had kicked my foot at his door several times, my way of knocking with beer in hand. His mangy mutt had barked and barked and I heard a loud yell, followed by the slap of a can against the wood. A few seconds later and his toothless, grinning face led me inside.

“About damn time ya got here ya sonofabitch!” He wore the hat of a former politician on his head, one that supported the president that started the war. His father had been mighty proud of his vote back then. His shirt was white and covered in holes and it was too short to hide the enormous belly he had gained over the last few years. I shouldn’t have judged it, mine was just as large.

“Well shit, if ya kept your damn house stocked with beer every once and awhile, I wouldn’t hafta run late pickin’ this up,” I replied. We both sauntered over to his couch, the floor moaning and groaning under our combined weight. We plopped down together and kicked our feet up on the table. His house was just as tragic as mine. There were cigarette burns in everything, cans scattered around, and dog fur giving a salt and pepper look to his off white carpet.

“You see da news lately?” Ron asked.

“Ya know I don’t own a damn T.V. That’s why I’m here so much” I said. “It sure as shit ain’t for ya’lls company.” We each pulled a beer out of the case and popped the
tabs. There was a hiss as foam sprayed out and covered our hands. Ron took a big swig before saying anything.

“They was talkin’ about dem monsters. Say it’s getting worse.” he said.

“Well I could have told ya that. What’s the problem with dem now?” I replied.

“They’re beginin’ to come into residential areas.” He said, taking another big swig of his beer. “Government says they’re going to start putting together a team to capture ‘em and study and whatnot. You ask me, it’s a dumb ole job they’re creatin’ to give their friends more work.” He chugged the rest of his can and threw it idly behind him. I could hear the scurry of feet as his dog ran over to lick whatever spilled out.

“Well hell, we might as well apply,” I responded. I took a couple of big pulls from my beer before continuing. “We already are great at huntin’ and the damn things are just somethin’ new to shoot.”

“Aw well shit, that’s the beauty of it! They sayin’ no more huntin’ the creatures! They want to take as many as they can alive so they can study ‘em!” He was about to get passionate about the subject. Anytime the government would intervene into daily life, even with it being a global force, he had an opinion that said they were wrong. We both enjoyed our life as it was.

Ron ended up talking my ear off for a good hour on the subject. He hated that they wanted to create jobs for people to study the monsters. He didn’t care if they were alien or products of the nuclear waste or any of the other nonsense they spewed out on the cable news. What he cared about was getting to kill them. He already had trophies mounted everywhere of the normal creatures that we would hunt and kill. Animal heads
and guns were the only things that lined his walls. On his truck, he had mounted a pair of antlers off a buck he swore lived after he shot it in the head.

As our day progressed and the beers kept flowing, we began to forget about our discussion that morning. We watched whatever came on the television, which was mainly pop culture bullshit that centered on two themes: Finding a utopia or facing the apocalypse. Not much in the way of entertainment had changed after the war.

We continued to sit and watch the tube, only taking time to stand if it involved going to take a piss. Neither of our hefty frames made us want to do much more. The dog continued to lounge and hide, and it wasn’t until it got spooked as dark began to approach that either of us had said anything meaningful to the other.

“What the hell he barking at?” I asked Ron. Behind his home was nothing but woods, and although I assumed it was just an animal, it gave us something new to talk about.

“Oh I’ll be damned if I know,” Ron said slurring. “Honestly if the rotten thing wasn’t such good company, I probably would have got rid of it by now. Neighbors down the way have a kid that likes ‘im alright.”

“Well shit, what if it’s one of dem monsters finally getting around to our area?” I slurred back. My mind had been in a fog from the beer, and I had no idea what asking this question would do.

“Ya know what?” Ron asked. “Ya just might be right.” His eyes were a bit glazed but flickered to life as he thought about the monsters. “I think we oughta grab a gun or two and go investigate.” He had begun to smile. We had both become bored with our
routine although neither of us would admit it. Change was awful and why ruin the good thing we had going?

“Well ya know I’m always good for a little fun and shootin’ now and again,” I said with a grin. I lifted my bulky frame up and as I did I kicked an empty box of beer aside. “I bet I even got my huntin’ gun out in the truck.” I knew I did.

Before Ron could say anything I had begun to sway my way towards my truck. I had flung the door open and headed outside. Looking around I saw a few lights on in the neighborhood. Ron lived in an old cul-de-sac that people were trying to repopulate after the war. I opened up my truck door that was never locked, and pulled out the shotgun that I had brought just in case. Usually if Ron and I went out to “hunt” it was in the morning. I always brought the gun here if the opportunity arose to use it, like it had tonight.

As I swayed back in I was clocked in the head with a flashlight and I went reeling back before falling to the carpet. Ron’s bellowing laugh echoed through the house as his dog had ran over to lick my wound.

“Hoo boy, how ya expectin’ to shoot any of dem fast monsters if ya can’t even catch a flashlight?” Ron asked between laughs. I rubbed my head and stood back up, bringing the flashlight with me.

“I reckon I’d still hit one before ya do,” is all I could say. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet. “Hell, I’d be willin’ to bet ya this $20 that I do.” Ron looked at the money and for a second his face passed from being amused to serious.

“Oh ya got yourself a deal then,” is all he replied before opening his backdoor. I followed behind him, being sure to keep the dog in the house as we left. Ron had begun
making his way down the front porch and to the path that led from his yard to the woods. I trailed after and soon we were walking together and hunting for monsters.

We both walked for about a mile, maybe more, in silence. The cold air whisked around our faces and it began to have a sobering effect. Ron had grumbled about wishing we had brought some beer and I couldn’t help but agree. We had soon found his usual hunting spot, a small cleared out area with some boulders scattered across the land. When we were younger, Ron and I use to come out here with his father. He would tell us a story about how the boulders had appeared in the woods.

“Long ago, there had been a demon that lived in these here woods. It was said he would come out once a month in search of prey. Now this demon, unlike many others, cared not for the lives of mortals. No, his care was with the animals. This demon had prided itself on being the best hunter in all of Hell, and no one could argue him. Why would they? Each month he would come up to the Earth and would return with a large animal that he killed. Little did the other demons know that this was the place where he would appear. The mortals he swore he didn’t care about would prepare a sacrificial killing for the demon. He would take the sacrifice and claim it as his kill. However, if the mortals would fail at doing this for him, then he would kill one of their children as penance and take it to Hell instead.”

This story had always scared Ron and myself as children, but as adults we began to treat it as nothing more than a tale designed to spook us as kids. However, as we sat on the boulders, guns in hand, things felt dreamlike. Almost as if the story we were always told as children were true.
The wind had picked up while we sat and watched for monsters. It swirled around us, gripping at any exposed body parts like a hand from the grave to chill our insides. Above us, we could see through the tree limbs that exposed pinkish/green clouds, unusual for this time of the year. We could hear the quiet breaking of branches and the crushing of leaves in the distance. Our eyes strained to see what was causing the commotion but we failed to do so from a lack of moonlight. We sat for a little over an hour, watching and waiting. Hoping something would come. Just about anything. I thought back again to our hunting trips.

There had been a time once when Ron and I had been left alone as his father went in search of a different spot. It had been a cloudy summer day, and at the time we had been learning to use traps as well. We were both sitting on the boulders, chatting about the girls living in the neighborhood, when we heard the clang of metal. Ron and I both jumped and looked at each other before remembering we had a trap laid for any rabbits in the area. We sprung up, ran over, and sure enough, one had been ensnared in the trap.

At first I had turned away, a bit disgusted since I had never seen anything dead before. Most of the hunting trips we went on with Ron’s father ended in us leaving empty handed. The rabbit had been caught across the midsection and its insides had spilled across the ground. When I looked back, I expected Ron to be looking away as well, but he hadn’t. Instead he was already crouched down by the animal, hunting knife out, and poking around with a knife. I remember asking what he was doing, but had gotten no response. He began to pry the knife into the insides and pulling them out, examining them with a chilling curiosity. Soon he began to stick the blade into the rabbit’s head, pulling first the eyes out, and then digging deeper. He was working as though he was a
mortician or scientist, trying to discover what made this animal go. I heard a rustle in the woods and knew that his father was coming back. I grabbed him and pulled him away.

His father had found the rabbit and asked what the hell had happened. Ron quickly placed the blame on me. He didn’t want his father to think he was psycho. And that’s how our friendship continued until now. Ron would do these things, these abnormal things, and I would watch. If we were caught, I always took the fall. It was just how our system worked, even if it was fucked up. There was no sense in Ron taking any blame after that, I had already been deemed the mentally unstable one and Ron was the one that kept it in check. What did it matter that it was actually the other way around?

“Well, there don’t seem to be no monsters, maybe it’s time we head back,” said Ron, breaking my train of thought. I could hear the shaking in his voice. “I got an ole bottle of whiskey that would warm us right up.”

I began to shake my head in agreement when there was a shriek that pierced into the night sky above us. It was loud and sounded like the screeching of tires on pavement. We had both looked to the sky and saw the silhouette of the most ghastly of creatures. The wings were larger than any known bird in the area, they were as long as a human toddler. Two talons could be seen, and even at a great distance above, they looked larger than my size 13 boots. It let out another large shriek as it circled around and now Ron and I both were in a panic. We stood and began trying to make our escape to the path.

We lumbered forward, as fast as our large frames would let us, while being hunted by the monster in the air. As we moved, the silhouette of another monster came barreling onto the path. We had made a mistake. We should have listened to the warnings. Would I be blamed again for Ron’s ideas and actions? This monster was the
size of a child and above its head, two things that looked like antenna swung fiercely. I fell back onto my ass and scrambled away. Ron managed to pull his shotgun forward and bellowed a battle cry as he fired. The recoil knocked him onto his own ass, the alcohol not out of his system as much as he believed it was. The creature circling overhead took off towards the trees and the one beginning to attack fell with a dull thud to the ground.

“Yahoo! Well I’ll be damned, I got one!” Ron said from the ground. His voice still quavered as he tried to sound like all this was intentional. “Now lemme go get my trophy.” He heaved himself up and with fake bravado, he strutted over to the thing on the ground and flipped on his flashlight. As soon as the light shone on the monster, the flashlight tumbled out of his and to the ground.

As soon I saw that Ron had not shot a creature at all, I knew the blame was headed my direction. As I stood and walked over blank-faced to Ron, a sinking feeling in my gut began to form. A look began to form on his face, the one that always did when he was prepared to say it was my fault. Lying on the ground was the child Ron had mentioned earlier that had loved his dog. Why the child was wandering the woods in the night I’ll never know, but all we could do was stand there, dumbstruck on what had just occurred. The child’s face lay open in shock with his arms lying above his head, as if signalling someone had scored a touchdown. Where his chest had been now showed a giant hole, exposing several torn up organs. I quickly turned away and began throwing up in the forest as Ron picked up his flashlight and turned it off.

Overhead we heard the shrieking of the monster and knew that the monster was back to feast. I looked to Ron, who was preparing to tell me some plan that involved me shooting the child instead of him. I wasn’t prepared to accept the blame and was ready to
argue when behind me, near the boulders, I heard movement. I flipped my flashlight in that direction and saw two of the monsters that had been circling overhead, now on the ground and creeping towards us.

Both monsters eyes had shown yellowish green in the light of the flashlight. They both had the heads of an owl, but the beaks were no longer there. Instead, large gaping mouths showing fangs were dripping with some sort of black substance. Their wings were about the size of the dead boy behind me and the talons were even larger than I guessed, with giant claws that could kill a human with one gash. I looked over to say something to Ron, but saw his gun now pointed at me.

"I'm sorry man, but ya killed the boy," he began to say. What I decided to do next was born not out of insanity, but out of sheer fear.

I turned and grabbed Ron's gun and threw it to the ground. Behind me, the clacking of talons moved across the boulders. I fired a warning shot at the monsters, who backed up while cocking their heads, then turned and grabbed Ron before he fled.
The Rise

There was once rumor that an elite group of people had met for a party. A single survivor of this narrative swears on his life that it is true. He has created a new faith, The Church of Aliente, based on the events that he witnessed. It has grown in size, and the more the lone survivor preaches, the more people listen and believe in his faith. Here is his story:

The new wealthy of the world, wearing suits and dresses reminiscent of the twenty first century, began to meet once again. This was a thing that had happened in the past, something that had been long forgotten after the war. It had been assumed that no one had significant money in the new world people lived in. The belief was most of the money and power belonged to the Global Government of Earth and private sectors no longer existed. However what people forget, like they often tend to do, is that there is always a way to build money and power outside of government.

The people that gathered were an assorted mix. There were those like Mr. Flaggston, a man whose family had profited from the destruction and chaos of the bombs going off. His family was rumored to help in the design and making of the new weapons. After the war, his grandparents had taken their money and hidden it. In small intervals they changed it to the new world currency, and now their grandson was amongst the wealthiest in the world. Then there was Mr. Porton, the banker. Someone still needed to help people protect their assets and with no global bank established yet, private individuals could grow fat off the profits reaped off the unexpecting. There was Ms. Jackson who acquired her money and privilege as a traveling saleswoman. She ran caravans that supplied towns with essential items they needed: food, water, materials to
build homes. While she gave the appearance of someone kind hearted and giving, what
she would never admit is how much of a markup in price she would add so that she could
line her own pockets. There were many other individuals just like this who attended the
party. They had all become rich, and not one had treated others fairly.

They had met at the home of one Dr. Munaz, a man who had gained his wealth
from treating people outside of the universal health care that the Global Government of
Earth supplied. It’s not to say that the health care provided was poor or even expensive to
those that used it, it was simply time consuming for those that needed quick fixes. When
they did not wish to wait a few days to have a mild ailment taken care of, Dr. Munaz’s
side business allowed for them to be treated quickly. They understood that some of the
treatments he gave were considered “experimental” and that he charged an arm and a leg
to give an expedited procedure. Due to this way of doing business, the doctor soon
amassed a fortune and built a mansion on top of a hill, looking down over the rest of
Galena Park.

On the night of the party, the air was sticky with humidity and the moon had
begun to wane. The clouds that passed in front of it were illuminated with a greenish tint
mixed with a pinkish hue. The lone survivor of the party claimed that the clouds had
increased as the night wore on and had been threatening to bring about one of the rare
chemical storms that happened after the bombs had dropped. Scientists were baffled, as
the clouds of these storms were no longer grey or black, and often these storms would
produce a dazzling bright green lightning and rain who’s PH had risen significantly
towards the acidic side. Although scientists were unsure of the effect of this change, they
still suggested to the people to stay indoors when these storms came. When the lone
survivor escaped, he preached to his new followers that it was a symbol from their God that everyone at the party should have stayed home that evening.

The wealthy of the world had begun to arrive at 7:30. Each one prepared to pretend as though the world hadn’t gone to chaos years ago and that they were much better off now than how things had been. When they walked into the mansion, each was greeted by the same butler, a Mr. Mordecai. He was dressed in a formal tuxedo, although it was small for his large frame. As the guests were admitted into the home, they wondered why Dr. Munaz had not forced this Mr. Mordecai to stay in the tradition of being clean cut. The man had a full beard and long black hair that toppled over his shoulders and down over his back. He spoke little and his pale blue eyes failed to connect with the people he was letting in.

Once the goosebumps left from meeting Mr. Mordecai, the guests walked down a long hallway that sported glossy black and white tile. The marble walls gleamed and were bare of any paintings or portraits. Instead there were Greek podiums lining the walls on either side. The objects in this hallway seemed random to the people that passed by them, and none had seemed to think they were simple indicators of what was in the rooms they flanked. On both the left and right side there were six oak stained doors, each with iron rings to pull them open or shut. The items that sat on the left side of the walls went as followed: A stuffed crow, a bald eagle, a raven, a King James Bible, a book on Scientology, the Quran, a civil war pistol, a diffused torpedo, and a knight’s helmet. On the right side the items included an old film reel, a VHS of The Dark Side of the Moon, a DVD of Alien vs Predator, a vinyl disc, an iPod, a Walkman, a stethoscope, a large
syringe, and a robotic hand. None of these things had made sense to anyone except Dr. Munaz, who used them to help remember what hid behind the heavy doors.

As the guests made their way through the large archway at the end of the hall, they had found their way into the ballroom. Much like the hallway, this room had also been made of marble, but instead of a black and white tiled floor, it was now a faded blue and tan checkered color. On the far east side of the ballroom a string quartet played classical music for the guests to dance to. Lining the entire room were tall tables covered in white table clothes for people to chat around, while the center had been left open for those who wished to dance. Servants, many that had been hired previously that day, glided around the room with hors d’oeuvres and drinks. In this room, paintings and photos still remained absent from the walls, save for the large tapestry embroiled with the flag of the Global Government of Earth, which hung above the archway leading into the ballroom. The other walls held stained glass windows, each portraying some form of abstract art, and in the center of the ceiling, a large glass dome had been constructed to allow any ambiance the night could give to the party. There were several doors on both sides of the room as well and were much like the ones that surrounded the hallway: heavy with iron rings and stained the color of oak. Near the far back wall there was one doorway that was open, but this was one that the servants glided through like ghosts, an indicator of a kitchen the guests would never see.

An hour passed and everyone invited had arrived. Some had broken into small groups around the tables, speaking idly on the success they had gained or their problems with the GGE. Others danced in the middle of the ballroom floor. Amongst all of them was the same whispered question: where was Dr. Munaz? All had expected him to be in
the ballroom when they arrived, yet none had seen him. Some thought he may have been with a last minute patient while others believed he was still getting ready. A few even believed he may have taken an early arrival on a tour of his home, only to end in his bedroom. However, as the food continued to flow and the alcohol continued to be consumed, the question of where Dr. Munaz was had fallen off their tongues.

Nearly another hour had passed before their host had finally appeared, and with him, an army of servants at his back. His grey hair had been slicked back and his crooked yellow smile beamed out at those that saw him. His short stature and plump body moved swiftly through the crowd, and behind them, his army of servants began to hand out masks. When everyone in the room had received one, the doctor began to speak.

"My thanks to those that have made it here tonight!" he said, his voice had failed him in being as loud as he wanted. "I had a last minute revelation as those of you began to arrive. Why were we simply having just a party? If we wish to be like the elites from before the war, surely this party must become a masquerade!" He paused, waiting for cheers and applause that never came before continuing. "So go ahead and put your masks on and continue your night, and enjoy!" The guests were convinced that Dr. Munaz had missed the point of a masquerade, but followed his request so they would not be seen as rude.

So the party continued, now with the wealthy masking themselves in the same way they masked how their fortunes were made. They continued to dance and talk, eat and drink, and some went about finding ways to help each other’s businesses grow. While these events had gone on, no one had noticed the storm that began to roll in. Nor did they see the mutated figures that began to perch at the windows and on top of the
glass dome. They did not hear the scream that issued from the front of the home, where one Mr. Mordecai laid mutilated on the floor after hearing a rapping on the door. They did not notice the creature that came jumbling into the ballroom, at least, not at first. The lone survivor of this messy ordeal had stated that it was not until a Ms. Butler screamed at the site of the thing that the music stopped and everyone turned.

The monsters that the wealthy had heard rumors of were only that: rumors. They did not believe these creatures were roaming freely through the world. Yet here one was, in all of its grotesqueness. The beast stood on only two legs and resembled a human. The monster’s head was bald and mutated, with its skull bulging out as if its brain were trying to explode. The eyes were sunken in and pure white. The nose was gone and in its place was a single slit. The monster’s mouth was home to jagged and broken teeth, which were dripping with blood as it snarled. Its shoulder blades jutted out of its back, as if they had tried to break free to form wings. It stood with a hunch, grey skin that stuck tightly to its thin body, showing the mutated bones lying underneath. The hands and feet had jagged and sharp nails the color of vomit.

As the monster began to enter the room, it lurched forward shakily. Each step was like that of a child just learning to walk. The crowd parted as it moved forward, the monster’s head snapping back and forth, as though it had been looking for a certain person. Ahead of it, Dr. Munaz didn’t part with the rest of the crowd. He gawked at the creature, astounded by how such a thing could be alive. When the creature made eye contact with the doctor, it quickened its pace. In a matter of moments the two of them stood in front of one another, the doctor looking up into its face as the monster straightened itself up to its full height.
The lone survivor of this whole affair had sworn that Dr. Munaz did not flinch away once from the beast. He did not shake and did not cower. No, he stood and stared, as if he were guilty for the monster being in his home that evening. As Dr. Munaz stood and watched the creature in awe, the monster let out a screech that sounded like a tormented soul trapped in hell and swung a jagged hand across the throat of the doctor. Dr. Munaz stood there, grasping his neck as blood spouted out like water from a hydrant and onto his hand and the monster. He tumbled to the ground with a sickening thud. The creature lurched after him and began to bite and chew at his face before the party understood what was going on and tried to escape.

The lone survivor swore that the monster raised its head and gave a screech that echoed through the room. He believed that the noise had been an invitation for the other monsters of the world to descend upon the party. The glass surrounding the room broke and poured down onto the party members. Several birds, if they could be called that, swooped in and attacked the crowd. Some appeared to be owls, except that where beaks had been, now there were gaping mouths filled with tiny daggers of teeth. There were birds that looked like pigeons, but their bodies had bloated and grown bigger, and sharp eagle-like talons had replaced their tiny feet. Other birds swooped in from the openings, with disfigured eyes and beaks, swollen bodies and enlarged wings, all to feast on the party below.

Those that were able to escape the wrath of the birds were greeted by a parade of monsters striking at one another to be the first to enter the ballroom as they rushed forward. The items sitting on the Greek podiums in the hallway fell, shattering and scattering across the floor. The first to see these monsters was Mr. Flaggston, who was
mauled by a form of a dog. It had the long snout of one, but its eyes were bloodshot and was missing a tongue. The monster had 6 legs, each of which had sharp claws that ripped through Mr. Flaggston’s skin like it was Kleenex. Other monsters soon followed in after this, looking like mutated raccoons and foxes, deer and bobcats, and several that the lone survivor could only describe as “alien” since he could find no animal in nature that resembled such a thing.

As the massacre took place, the lone survivor swore he took refuge by piling several fresh corpses, some of them friends, on top of himself. He listened to the screams of the new upper class disappear as quickly as they appeared. He heard them banging on the doors that surrounded the room, each locked and barring their escape. He heard screams in the distance as the servants that had hid in the kitchen were devoured with the food that had been prepared for the guests earlier in the night. He laid there and listened, barely breathing and crushed by the bodies on top of him, and waited. The lone survivor swore that it lasted for over an hour before he finally heard it. There was a guttural sound, something that sounded like speech but no language he knew, being growled and gurgled. He heard the monsters in the room grow still, none of them feasting

Faith

She walked downtown in Galena Park. Her cardigan blew gently behind her. Since the war, people no longer took leisurely strolls. The road was absent of cars, and few stores were open. She looked idly about, keeping a slow pace. She had kept her head down, not wanting to look at people. That was her mistake.
He slinked up, wearing the black clothes of his order. They were thick and made him sweat. He was supposed to find new believers. Since the aliens had descended from the heavens things had changed. No other organized religion was needed. These beings that came from the sky had created everything. He was sure of it and so was his order.

She bumped into the man garbed in all black. He was bald and sweated profusely. His eyes were a dull green, like the color of some of the monsters. He appeared to be middle aged and when he looked at her, a twisted smile came to his face. He held a pamphlet to his paunchy stomach, then stretched it forward. She knew what it was and who he was with, and she hated him for it.

He assessed her as he prepared to ask her to join their order. She was young, maybe in her twenties. She had long brown hair that flickered gently behind her. Her face was still void of any signs of age and he considered her beautiful, save for the crooked nose she had. He thought it detracted from her good looks. She wore a striped tank top underneath her cardigan, and he felt it revealed a bit more than it should. No difference, his order would teach her respect.

"Excuse me miss, have you heard of the Church of Aliente?" his voice cracked as he spoke.
Gospel

His words gripped us from the beginning. Many of us believed in what he was saying. These creatures. These beasts. These monsters. They’ve terrorized and murdered without mercy. They’ve crept into our every thought and haunt us in every dream. We as a people have failed those that created us. It is the only plausible explanation.

He had told us the story of the elites. How each and every one of them, in their lust and greed, had been slayed by the monsters. He told us how it was our overlords from the stars that were seeking their revenge for the despicable behavior of humans. The monsters were the tool of destruction sent down from the heavens to punish those that did not perish when the bombs went off.

Those that questioned his words, his gospel, were never shunned away. Our leader, the great minister Westboro always asked them one simple question: If there was a God, why would he kill with ravenous monsters over the traditional plagues that are found in the Bible? For some, this question didn’t satisfy their needs and they left. If only for a short time. For others, this question resonated deep inside of them. They quickly came over to the order.

Minister Westboro pushed the simple truth that rang through from the cosmos. He told of another world in another galaxy, far from the reach of mankind. This world had become so advanced before humanity had been created that they grew bored. The aliens of this planet believed that they could create life in their own image and so they set out to try. Earth was the only planet they could find that their experiment worked. The
conditions were close to what they lived in and soon they descended from the stars and set up secret labs across the world.

They manufactured humanity at a primal level, since their past attempts at advanced life had failed on other planets. When we had learned to walk and talk, they took their labs and left. They always stayed near and along the way gave a guiding hand to our kind when we needed it most. As time passed we made them proud, made them flaunt their accomplishments to one another. Then the war struck. We destroyed ourselves, and in turn, their own success. These aliens, these gods, grew angry and vengeful for what we had done to one another. Soon they began crafting our destruction.

The monsters that plague our world now are the answer to the question on how to punish us, as determined by our alien gods. They placed them on our planet and taught them to feed off the radiation in the quarantined zone. These monsters grew in size and strength, bred to hate humanity and to conquer our world. When the monsters had fully grown, our gods released them upon us. There are leaders amongst them as well, according to Minister Westboro. Figures that look human but are not. They are there to remind humanity of its failure. Those of us that now turn to these monsters and worship them will be given a peaceful life. Those that do not will suffer at the jaws and claws of their destroyers.

Minister Westboro tells us this story at every meeting. He reminds us that it is important that we understand our origin and do what we can to live long and prosper. After he preaches his gospel, he sets about tending to the new followers. At the moment we are fifty strong and growing. Each of us wear all black robes with a single medallion hanging from our necks. The medallion holds the image of Ka’ra Ba’la. It is he that
minister Westboro says he answers to. Ka’ra Ba’la’s shape and form is incomprehensible to the human mind, and minister Westboro has explained that not even he has seen its true form. So the medallion is shaped like a twisting circle of tentacles. Each squeezing and forming tight to one another. In the center is three eyes that peer out. One is red, to show the anger Ka’ra Ba’la has towards humanity. Another is black to show his hatred towards the destruction of the earth. The last is yellow, to remind us of the monsters that will punish us. We are told it is the last thing we will see if we stray from the faith.

Once the new followers have been given their robes and medallions, our congregation is then served a ceremonial dish and drink. The dish is several different foods smashed together into a form of a porridge and served in a golden bowl. The porridge has a foul taste and is bitter to eat. Minister Westboro says the smell is to remind us of the foul misdeeds of our past. The bitter taste he says is the same taste the murderers from the war had in their mouth before they set the bombs off. No one knows what the porridge is made out of. The drink is served in a gold goblet. It is blood red and has a peculiar taste. Minister Westboro says it’s the blood of the unrighteous, a reminder to us that it’ll be all that remains if we turn against our monstrous gods. The drink tastes like copper, so we are inclined to believe that it may be blood.

After the ceremonial dish and drink, Minister Westboro begins splitting our congregation into groups. The men in the congregation are forced to stay bald and clean shaven, a sign of respect to our gods. Minister Westboro says it’s as close to their own image as we can get. During this time the men check each other for any hair that may have been missed and help one another to shave themselves clean. For the women, Minister Westboro encourages each to go to the communal showering area in the back of
the hall. He preaches that Ka’ra Ba’la has a hatred towards women and if he can smell them, he will kill them with the monsters. The soap Minister Westboro has is made directly to hide the stench of women from Ka’ra Ba’la. What he uses, we have no idea, we just know that the women tend to have a putrid smell to them after they emerge from the showers.
Bag 'em and Tag 'em

We had jumped at the first opportunity to work for the Global Government of Earth again. There was an air of excitement around the job, as it was advertised as a “new and exciting position!” Both Sharon and I had been out of work for a few weeks after the announcement of monsters running rampant through the local forests. Both of us had worked for the Midwest National Parks sector and were stationed in Galena Park. We had always found it a bit odd to work in this area, since there wasn’t really a national park in this location. Our jobs had mainly been focused on making sure teenagers weren’t smoking pot or getting drunk in the woods, or that the local rednecks weren’t hunting during the offseason. It had been a decent job that paid well and required little effort. After the monsters appeared, we were soon tasked with gating off the surrounding forests before being let go.

We had arrived at the GGE’s office a few weeks later after receiving a call from a friend that was still with them. He was the head of the environmental department and we had often traveled out in the woods with him while he conducted his research. He had tipped us off that the GGE would be looking to open a new position to hunt down these monsters and take them to a safe facility. We were told that the hope was that if the GGE was able to safely capture these monsters and study them, they might find a way to stop the mutations occurring and return them who is the the monsters to being harmless woodland animals.

Sharon was a bit nervous as we pulled into the parking lot. She was under the impression that they would not hire us back, despite my insistence that Mr. Triko would
not have called us if he didn’t think they would hire us again. I even reminded her that we
were skipping ahead in the interviewing process and moving straight to the final round
with the director. She had let out a sigh and nodded her head in agreement before opening
the car door and stepping out in the glaring daylight. We crossed the black top and
walked into the old municipal building that had once held the local government in Galena
Park.

Inside, the fluorescent lights helped to whitewash everything within the building.
The once white walls and dirty white floor tiles helped to bounce the light off of
everything, making the interior of the building seem like an entranceway to some
heavenly place. Sharon and I did not make eye contact as we trudged down the hall
towards the director’s office. On the way, I peered into Mr. Triko’s office, hoping to
speak with him once we left, but he was nowhere to be found. We continued our march
onward, looking like two members of the men in black in our black suits. When we
reached the director’s office we found the door closed, so with a halfhearted smile I
turned to Sharon before letting my large knuckles rap upon the door.

“Come in!” a voice proclaimed from the other side. I grabbed the handle and
twisted it and pushed forward.

“It’s a pull door, stupid,” Sharon said with a nervous giggle. I pulled the door
towards me and we entered the office. It was rather large in comparison to the other ones
we had passed. There was a large window that encompassed the entire wall with red
drapes on either side of it. In front of the window was a large mahogany desk with a
black rolling chair that looked like something a Bond villain would sit in. Lining both
sides of the beige walls were several bookshelves stocked full of literature concerning the
Midwest area. In front of the director’s desk were two red leather chairs, worn down from use and time. The director gestured at them and Sharon and I sat. On her desk were several papers, scattered pens, a few picture frames turned away from us, and a snow globe that appeared to depict a destroyed city from years ago.

“So, let’s cut right to the chase” she said. “You two both come highly recommended from Mr. Triko. I read over both of your files and you both did impeccable work before you were let go.” At that I noticed Sharon cringe. She was still upset about the fact that we had been fired after there was no longer a need for us in Galena Park. Neither of us had missed a single day of work and had put in transfer orders to another location before things had gone south.

“Now correct me if I’m wrong, but you two are married, yes?” the director asked.

“We are. Have been for the last 12 years to be exact,” I said. My voice had shaken with the answer. People had always seemed to have a problem with Sharon and me working together.

“And how is it that you two were able to become partners?” she asked. “It never occurred to me to investigate this until you were recommended for the job from Mr. Triko. GGE rules clearly state that married couples should not work as partners in any hazardous work areas, in case of any accidents.” She raised her eyebrows at us. I looked over at Sharon, trying to get an idea of how to answer. Her face had gone stone cold and her eyes glared straight ahead. I knew what she was thinking. Since the GGE provides universal healthcare, they would have on file that Sharon was unable to have children, which helped us to circumnavigate that policy. If there are no children that need a surviving parent, then the rule didn’t apply to us any longer.
“Well as our files indicate, I can’t have children,” Sharon said, her voice cutting the invisible tension that had started to build with our silence. “The head of the national parks service had given us a waiver to work together once that information had come to light. Is that waiver no longer permitted?” I turned and looked at Sharon, stunned that she had become so brazen in the interview.

“Your permit ended with your employment with the GGE, but if I determine you two are a proper fit for the job, I will immediately sign a new one,” the director said, ignoring the tone in which Sharon spoke to her. “Now I imagine that Mr. Triko has informed you of the work that you will be doing?”

I answered before Sharon could give another one of her sharp responses. “He has. He told us that some of the monsters that the GGE reported on are to be captured and brought to some kind of facility to be tested.”

“That’s correct. We wish to have these monsters captured in the wild. By doing so, it will help to reduce the population that has been attacked by these things simplify the previous and in return we will be able to study them.”

“So our job would be just to bag them, tag them, and bring them in?” I asked. I knew the answer was yes, but it still felt important to ask.

“Yes. I’m inclined to give you both the job based on your files alone, but I want you both to tell me the experience you have with dealing with dangerous animals before I give this over to you two.” Out of the corner of my eye I caught Sharon glancing at me, waiting to see who would answer first. I had decided I was going to speak first but Sharon was already sharing her story before I could speak.
“I grew up in an isolated area near the Smoky Mountains. My family had retreated to some cabins there before the bombs went off. My grandfather had taught my father how to survive in the woods by capturing and killing his own food. In turn, my father taught that lifestyle to my siblings and myself. I hadn’t agreed with trapping and killing animals, which is why I went into the National Parks program, to help preserve and protect them. However, I understand the need to get rid of these monsters, since I’ve heard the reports of several attacking and killing members of the community.” Sharon’s face remained emotionless once she finished speaking and she turned her head to me. The director had scribbled some notes on a paper before turning her attention my way.

“Before I worked for the National Parks service, I worked as a type of bounty hunter in some of the more fringe areas to the south and west. My primary job was to find people that may have had a hand in the war and had escaped the initial round up by the government. You won’t find any of this in my files, it was a secret operation, but contact some of the higher up members of the GGE and they may verify some of that for you. I never killed any of the people that I caught. My job was precisely what you’re asking for now. Find people, bring them in alive, and let the GGE do the rest. I remained in the program until the government decided to cut it, which is when I was transferred to the National Parks program, where I met Sharon.” I sighed and pulled a handkerchief from my pocket to dab at the sweat from my forehead. Sharon and I both knew we would have to reveal our pasts to get the job. I had looked at the director, who had been scribbling notes down on the same paper. She gave us both a stern nod before she began to speak again.
“Ok. For now I’ll give you both the job. You will be provided with a modified animal control van to place the creatures you catch into captivity. The GGE will also provide protective gear for you to wear, although until a couple specimens are caught, we will not know exactly what you need. Your starting salary will be the same as when you were released from the GGE but will have added incentives for the various monsters you catch. Are there any questions?” The director looked back and forth from Sharon to me, but we just shook our heads. “Okay, you’re free to leave, report back here next week to get started.” We both stood up and shook the director’s hand before leaving the room. Once we had walked out we both let out a sigh of relief before smiling at one another. We had done it.

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We were both excited to be back out patrolling in the woods. At the house we had always joked that nature was our first home and that where we resided was just a resting point. The day we went out was relatively cool. An autumn breeze had been rustling through the leaves that were dying and falling to the ground. Our van had been parked in a small cul-de-sac where two different reported cases of monster attacks had taken place. The first one involved a recently married couple that had been killed by one of the creatures. The man had run out of the house screaming and woke the neighborhood. The second incident had involved a nearby neighbor. We had been told that he was part of a group trying to form a rebellion against the GGE. We were also told the man had been killed after trying to capture and study the monster on his own. Sharon had felt it was as good of a place as any to start.
We had spent most of the day walking a worn path behind the house of the couple that had been killed by one of the monsters. We were told that it looked like a raccoon, only it wasn’t, and that was about all the information we were given. When we pressed for a sketch or photo of the beast, the director had told us that we would “know it when we see it.” There had been indications of some type of monster lurking in the woods. When we had reached the abandoned railroad tracks about a mile away from the home, there was blood splattered on it and a stench that could not be identified. We continued onward until close to dusk and were about to give up before seeing some fresh tracks ahead. Sharon was the first to spot it.

“Did you remember to bring the flashlights?” she asked. She had been carrying the large cage we had with us all day while I had been in charge of carrying the bag that had two tranquilizers, two flashlights, gloves, and a first aid kit.

“Nope!” I responded with a smile. “I decided the best way to find a monster is in the dark. I brought an inflatable bed for it to hide under though so we can find it easier.” She laughed, tossing her head back and letting her long brown hair flow gently behind her in the breeze.

“Okay smartass, let’s stop here and dig them out. We’ll follow this trail and see if it leads to one of our monsters. If it doesn’t we’ll head back for the night.”

“Aye aye captain!” I said with a smile and salute. Sharon shook her head before walking forward a bit, trying to get a read on the tracks she found. As I dug through the bag, pulling the tranquilizer guns out, the ammo for them, and the flashlights, I heard a loud “Shit” reverberate off the trees and towards my direction.
“Everything okay up there?” I shouted. I hurried to get the items together and slung the bag back over my shoulder. I ran in the direction she had shouted from, clumsily trying to carry everything I had pulled out of my bag in my arms. When I reached her, I saw her sitting on the ground, boot in hand, and a giant pile of feces sitting in front of her. She looked as though she was about to cry.

“I had just bought these boots,” she said. “I stepped in whatever that mess is and now it is smeared all over them and no matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to get it off!” I chuckled and tried not to point out the irony in her yelling shit. Instead I loaded the tranquilizer guns and handed her one, along with a flashlight. While she continued to try and clean her boot, I crouched over the stool sample in front of me and examined it. The sample reeked to high heaven and seemed to have bones of various small animals in it. I ran through my head the list of predators that roamed these woods, trying to determine if it would be from our monster or just a normal animal. Sharon soon slipped behind me while I crouched over it, lost in thought, and she pointed to something peculiar in it.

“How many animals do you know have diarrhea that still has bones in it?” she asked. “Also, this has mucus and blood running through it as well. Isn’t that a sign of radiation poisoning?” I thought back to the classes we had as children. We were taught the signs of radiation poisoning in case the radiated areas that were bombed would ever seep out. During the war, it was guaranteed that the nuclear bombs could have the radiation contained to the destroyed cities. However, as time passed and trust in this science dwindled, the population was taught to watch for signs of radiation. As far as we knew, no one had been affected.
“It does appear that way,” I said. “Maybe the monsters we’re hunting are mutations from the irradiated zones?” I looked at Sharon as I said this and saw her give a grim nod before pointing at the path ahead. I stood up and with the weight of this information on my shoulders we moved on, guns in hand and flashlights out, watching for any signs of the monster. We didn’t have to go far before we found a large tree with a gaping hole near the trunk. Outside of it we could see bits of fur, bones, and other miscellaneous items from the forest that the creature had gathered up. Sharon clicked on her flashlight and shone it into the abyss that was formed into the tree. We both took a step back in fright as three sets of eyes, growing a radiant green, peered back at us. I looked around and found a few decent size rocks lying on the ground and carefully picked them up. Sharon watched as I let my eyes fall off the monsters hiding in the tree. I knew it was better for us to capture them outside of their nest. I began to throw the rocks at the monsters.

The first rock nailed the biggest of the three monsters between the eyes. There was a loud hiss and we saw it back further into the tree. The other two were small and I threw a rock at each of them. Both let out tiny squeals before receding farther in. I looked at Sharon, who shrugged her shoulders as she kept her eyes and gun trained on the hole. I decided to take a few steps forward, hoping to lure them out. As soon as I did, the largest of the three leaped out from the hole and struck me square in the chest.

The monster was about the size of a pig, only instead of fat there was only muscle. It was missing a tail and its body and head had fur that was the same coloration of a raccoon. Under its yellow eyes, the black coloration of a raccoon was there as well. The difference was that the mouth and snout had warped to look like a Venus fly trap.
Rows of jagged teeth slashed at my face while I used my forearm to keep its head from getting close. In its mouth I could see a pale white tongue beginning to lurch forward. At the end it opened like a flower, revealing a pronged tip that looked as though it planned to puncture me. I let out a scream, which shook the horrified Sharon into action. I heard a series of pops go off above me and soon the creature was lying unconscious on top of my prone body. As I wrestled to get the stinking mass off of me, I heard a yelp before a few more shots were fired from Sharon.

I stood up and saw that she was bleeding from both of her legs. Lying on the ground in front of her were the two babies of the monster that attacked us. Both had their tongues sticking out and had tranquilizer darts protruding out from the tops of their skulls. It appeared as though they were dead. Sharon was panting heavily and her hair was scattered across her face and sticking to her from how much she was sweating.

“Well it looks like we’ll only be getting a bonus for snagging one of these things alive,” I said. “Way to go Sharon.” I laughed, hoping if I lightened the mood quickly, she would be able to revive herself from the horrors she just faced.

“What the hell did we sign up for?” was all she could mutter.
Old Faithful

She was tired of seeing that damn dot flickering in the camera that was stationed in the corner of her house. In fact, she was tired of seeing it in every room of her house. She wished, more than anything, to buy some spray paint and just cover them for good. *What the hell do they need to see from an old bag like me?* she often wondered.

Her house was as ancient as she felt. At ninety-five, there wasn’t much that Mimi wanted from the world and felt that it shouldn’t want anything from her either. Her wooden floors creaked as much as her joints did when she walked. Most of the furniture was shredded apart from when the stray cats would take refuge in her home, something Walter had absolutely hated. Outside, the appearance of the house showed its age. The shingles were missing in places, the gutters were either clogged or hanging badly from the roof; they were ready to fall off with one good gust of wind. Most of the siding was weather worn or broken, compliments of the cheap shit they called vinyl. Her wardrobe was just as worn and old as her and the house. Most of her clothes were either sewn together with patches or were faded from several years of washes.

Mimi let out a sigh before she lowered herself onto the flower patterned couch. In front of her was a big television, compliments of the GGE so everyone globally could keep up to date on the latest news. Not like she cared for the news, she just enjoyed her silly game shows.

“On!” she said to the television. Nothing happened.

“I said on!” this time she said it louder and with more conviction.
“Oh come on, don’t make me use the damn phone to do this,” she said, looking directly at the camera. Still nothing happened. With another loud sigh and a flip of her middle finger to the corner of the room, she grabbed her phone and opened the lock screen. It took her a better part of a month to realize the damned thing had to look at your eye in order to let you do anything around the house. When the phone popped open she nearly dropped it from the light that seared her old eyes through her glasses.

“For fuck’s sake,” she mumbled picking it up. The next five minutes were spent with various things turning on and off throughout the house. First the lights turned off in the living room, and then went from semi lit, to finally bright. Next, sinks throughout the house began spouting out water and before she had a chance to stop them, she had managed to turn on other lights throughout the home. From outside, any neighbors that were watching would have probably been enjoying the light show from Mimi’s home. Finally, the television roared to life in a deafening cry of triumph with the volume being set to eighty. For anyone else, it would have been way too loud, but with her hearing close to gone, it was just right.

The weather channel was the first thing on and so she sat and watched with concern as she saw a storm was rolling in from the northeast.

“Well that explains the damn aches throughout my body,” she said, and just then a boom of thunder shook the house, as if Mother Nature was responding. Mimi played with the gadgets on her phone a bit more before finally being able to get the television on the game show network, one of her favorites. On the screen there was a man/woman/who knows hosting a show that involved some sort of thing with a computer. There was another clap of thunder before a new noise entered the home, a rapping at the door.
“Who the hell could that be?” Mimi pondered out loud. She let out a loud groan as she stood and reached down to grab her 20 gauge off the floor. The GGE had forbidden anyone from having a gun that didn’t have a hunting license, but Mimi just wanted to see them try and take her gun away. She moved slowly forward, holding Old Faithful between her arthritic hands, while she struggled to tighten her faded pink robe. It took her a few minutes to get to the door and during that time the rapping happened once more. She unlocked two of the three bolts, leaving the chain still there. Cautiously, she poked the barrel of the gun out into the gale that was beginning to form. Her head peaked out and she found that the front patio was empty.

“Damned kids.” She closed the door and as she locked it, another clap of thunder reverberated through the house. Again there was a rapping at the door, but this time it came from the rear of the home. Mimi’s began to sweat and it slid from her recently permed hair. She wasn’t sure if it was because she was afraid of who may be in the rear of her home or if it was because it took a lot of work to get from the living room to the front door. Mimi decided maybe she would call her grandson Walter to come over. Half the house was up to no good because of the phone anyway -- it’d be a good reason for him to stop by.

She was making her way through the foyer when once again she heard a rapping from the back of the house, and this time she was sure it on the glass of her back door.

“Go away!” she said in a croak. Her voice, much like the rest of her body, had slowly been going and getting loud was always a struggle. In the living room she picked up the phone after guiding her body to the couch and resting Old Faithful on her lap. How she wished she had a dog to deal with hooligans.
“Hello...Walter?” she said after three rings.

“Hello grandma, what can I do you for tonight?” he replied, his voice sounding so strong and reassuring to Mimi.

“I was wanting you to come over and help me with this blasted stuff the GGE is making me use,” she said. “Everything is on in my house and no matter how hard I try I just can’t get it to turn off.”

“Grandma,” there was a sigh and she could hear it in his voice, no matter how bad her hearing got. “I’ve shown you plenty of times how to turn those things on and off. Do you want me to text you the video again?” No, I want you to come here and scare away these damn hooligans is what I really want, she thought to herself. But her pride would not allow for it.

“No, that’s okay,” she said. “I’ll just struggle through the damned thing until I figure it out. Don’t worry about your old grandma. Or the money that would go with helping her out.” She knew money was always a good incentive of getting her grandchildren over. That and baked desserts. Another sigh came forth from the other end of the phone.

“Alright Grandma Mimi,” he said. She knew he never used her name unless he felt annoyed or defeated. This time it was both. “I’m currently visiting with the parents but I can be over in twenty. Does that work for you?” She wanted him here sooner, but couldn’t say so.

“Absolutely,” she replied. As she said it another clap of thunder shook her home. “Love you and drive safely.” He responded the same and hung up. She turned her attention back to the game show.
Within a few minutes she could hear the patter of rain on her roof and the claps of thunder to accompany the sound. She was already starting to feel better when she heard the rapping on wood once again. This time, it was from somewhere in the house. She glanced up at the camera, nerves beginning to fray her already elderly face.

“Well,” she said, “are you good for nothings going to do something to help me or are those things useless?” Her body quivered as she moved to stand up with her gun back in her hands. She stood and listened for the rapping on some door or wall. A clap of thunder pounded through the rain and for a moment nothing happened. She began to assume that it may just be something that was coming loose from the home, until she heard the noise again. This time, it came from the door leading out to the garage.

“If they’re not going to help an old woman like myself,” she said aloud, “then the blood that’s about to follow is on their hands.” She began to hobble down the hallway that lead to the kitchen. She passed the stairs that were carpeted a bright red, but were now closer to burgundy from years of mud and greasy footsteps. Past the white walls she went, with pictures of her surviving family after the war nailed to them. She looked with leaky eyes at the picture of her husband, a man that passed a few years too soon. She wasn’t sure if her eyes were leaking in seeing the picture or from fear of what she’d find when she reached the kitchen. Another clap of thunder reverberated through the house and now, yes now she was certain, the rapping was coming from the door leading to the garage.

She hefted her gun up more and prepared to fire as she passed like a ghost through the kitchen and to the door. When she reached for the lock to let herself in where her old jeep lied dead in its grave, the rapping at the door stopped. No more rapping, no more
tapping, no more wapping at the door. It was if whatever waited on the other side knew she was approaching and stopped its effort.

She flung the door open as quick as she could muster, wanting to have her gun ready for whatever was waiting. The door caught her off-guard and she lost her balance, nearly spilling to the floor and surely ready to break a hip like those dreaded commercials that played on the oldies station always warned of. She used Old Faithful to catch herself and did her best to get into a position to point it at an intruder once again. But there was no one.

Instead, she saw that her garage door was completely open. She assumed the worst at first, someone had managed to gain the code to the outside and had let themselves in. She felt around for a light switch before she remembered that they were no longer required with the tech upgrade to the entire house.

"Damnit!" she said under her breath and waited for a round of lightning to show her the assailant lurking in the shadows. And the lightning did come, bright and flashy, like a camera going off in the garage but accompanied by another roll of thunder. She took it all in at once. Her old rusted jeep sitting idly in the middle of the room. Her husband’s old work bench covered with tools. The grandkids old toys scattered through the rest of the area. Everything seemed in order at first, except her old jeep. She looked at it again and saw to her horror a shadowy figure sitting on top of it.

She took a step back and aimed Old Faithful at the figure. Soon enough, another light burst through the air and as she pulled the trigger there was a screech from the thing sitting perched on the jeep. It flopped and shook before hitting the ground. It made grotesque noises as it crawled towards Mimi. She had fallen further back into the kitchen,
the recoil from the gun being more than she remembered. As it crawled into her home, smearing blood across her white tiled floors, she was dumbstruck by the creature before her.

The creature, or monster as the blasted reporters called them, seemed to be some sort of hybrid between a squirrel and god only knew what else. Its eyes were slitted like a cat’s and yellow. Its face was longer and looked closer to that of a rat, with a long jaw and two buck teeth in the front. It was completely white from its head down to its body, although the body seemed greatly disfigured, and not just from the gunshot wound it took. The whole thing was swollen to three times its size, as if it managed to inherit the body of a possum as well. There was only the stub of a tail, like that of a boxer dog, and it slowly wiggled back and forth. It looked up at Mimi with what seemed like some form of intelligence, but all Mimi saw in its eyes was hate.

Mimi hefted up Old Faithful again and as the thunder clashed she brought the butt of the gun down on its head. A sickening crunch sound echoed through the kitchen and for one last time, the sound of rapping came into Mimi’s ears. The paws, which were no bigger than that of any other squirrels tapped the ground a few times, before the intelligence and life left the slitted yellow eyes. Yellow beams of light began to flood the garage as Mimi stared at her kill, out of breath and tiring greatly. Walter’s door open and slammed shut as he ran into the garage and stared at the dead thing on the floor.

“Don’t worry Walt, I got it,” Mimi said before letting herself slide to the floor. Her head fell to a rest against the wooden island in the middle of the kitchen and everything went black.
When Mimi awoke, she was lying on her couch and Walter was sitting in the chair nearby. A flurry of people from the GGE were hard at work. She worked her way up, noticing the afghan that was helping conceal her and her robe, the only clothes she had on.

“What the hell are THEY doing in my home,” Mimi spat towards Walter. She hated them.

“Grandma, you know I work with the GGE,” he said. “What came into your home last night, the thing you managed to kill, is new to us.” He looked at her with sympathy, trying to understand why she was upset.

“I still don’t get why the hell they have to be in my home,” she said.

“It’s because after you went down, I found a few more of the monsters,” he said. “They had a nest in your attic, basement, and garage. How you had not managed to find one until now is beyond me.”

“So what, are they just exterminating them now?” she replied. She began to cool down. As much as she hated them, if they were clearing those creatures out, good on them.

“They’re collecting the monsters,” Walter said. “The organization I work for is relatively new but we’ve been assigned to capturing these things for study. The nests that you’ve found are helping us to better understand them.” Mimi looked at him with little interest. She didn’t care what the GGE was doing with them, she just wanted them out of her house.

“Alright, well don’t leave until they’re done,” she said. “I don’t want any of them in my home without you. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to try and get some more
rest. Maybe next time you’ll come visit just to visit and not just because I needed help.” She gave him a smile that made him wince before snuggling back into her couch.

She awoke that evening feeling refreshed. She looked around and saw that Walter had turned on the television for her, despite the volume being far too low, along with several of the lights. She worked her way up to a sitting position and began to look for Old Faithful. That gun was more than just her protector, it also helped with her standing and sometimes walking. It was nowhere to be found. The GGE must have taken it. Damn them. Mimi began to reach for her phone when she heard it. There was a rapping at her door. She froze. It started at the same place as last night, towards the front. The rapping upon the door continued. She tried to stand but found she couldn’t. The absence of Old Faithful made her woozy.

She grabbed her phone and tried to dial out but the “charge battery” icon was flashing at her. She looked at the camera and yelled for help. This time the rapping didn’t stop on the door, but settled in on the backdoor as well. She swung her head in that direction but as she did, she began hearing a rapping on the garage door as well. The tiny thrum of paws smacking on each door made her eyes well up in tears. Soon it began in on the windows. Then it was above her from the attic. It started to come from the basement too, a rapping on that door as well. She sunk into the couch and pulled the afghan over her head. She laid there and cried, tears of fear and
A Hard Line

A few months had passed since the rebellion had lost Robert. Only two of the members had continued to meet. It was during this time that Saul and Samantha had begun to raise an army. Robert had been declared missing by the Global Government of Earth, despite the protests from the rebels that he was murdered. Cynthia, in her mourning, had rushed to the municipal building in a fit of rage and tears, calling them liars and murderers. Samantha had gone with her to try and stop her, but to no avail. By Samantha’s account, she was lucky she caused such a big scene and drew a crowd around her, otherwise Cynthia would have been another missing person from Galena Park.

Saul had tried his best to try and rally Jay and Charles back to their cause, but the risk was now deemed too great for them. Instead, Saul began recruiting in other areas of Galena Park. He no longer spent his time in the gym, but instead perused the streets looking for anyone that might hear his tale. Saul had never been great at public speaking, but he had become empowered to lead the rebellion. Soon the meetings he and Samantha held in her basement continued to attract members. They had amassed a group of thirty to forty people. Some believed that disappearances of William, Robert, and Heather were not due to just the monsters. Others were people fired from the GGE who were disgruntled with how they were handling things. A few were there with no purpose other than to fight and rebel. Saul and Samantha knew the time was coming to mount an assault.

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“So what is this guy’s name again?” Nicholas asked. Sharon turned and shook her head at him.

“I’ve told you a thousand times!” she said. “His name is Walter. He was very adamant with the director that he be allowed out into the field instead of cleanup duty.” Nicholas shot a confused look at Sharon, trying to convey to her that he remembered there was something else with this kid, but he couldn’t remember what. “He was the one that just lost his grandmother to that mutated species recently discovered.”

“Oh yeah, poor kid,” Nicholas responded. “Where are we supposed to meet him at or are we picking him up?”

“We’re supposed to pick up at the GGE municipal building in 20 minutes,” Sharon responded. “The director is briefing him on how the two of us go about our work and the other fine details bagging and tagging the monsters. Once she’s done, we have a special assignment.”

“The Munaz house?” Nicholas said. Sharon nodded. Dr. Munaz was a prominent doctor in the area that had gone missing. Although it was assumed he just up and left Galena Park for a better job, it wasn’t believed by everyone. A cult with a growing number of followers had begun to form in the downtown Galena Park area. The leader, a minister Westboro, had been preaching a story of a mass monster attack that took place in the home. No one had been brave enough to go up there, and the GGE had been more inclined to ignore the Church of Aliente instead of feeding into their frenzy. However, with the number of member’s multiplying, the GGE had decided to debunk the story once and for all.
“I’ve listened in on Minister Westboro’s story,” Nicholas said. “If it is true, the only thing we’ll find up there is a lot of blood and carnage and no monsters. So why send us?”

“Because,” Sharon responded, “everyone else is terrified to go near the things.”

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“Saul, what’s our plan here?” Samantha asked. The two of them had just finished their most recent morning meeting, and, as per usual, they stressed to members to recruit more people and to spread the word of the evils that the GGE was doing behind closed doors.

“What do you mean?” Saul replied. He knew she wanted a coherent plan of action, but he wasn’t quite ready to let the words roll out from his mouth quite yet.

“You know what I mean. The people here are getting restless. They’re tired of just talking and building up our ranks. What is the point in getting a large group together if we don’t take action?” Samantha stared hard at Saul. Ever since the death of Robert, she had been exercising with him, and she was beginning to look more like an Amazonian warrior with each passing day.

“You’re right, you’re right Samantha,” Saul said. “We need to take action. I have an insider at the GGE, maybe I can talk to him and we can plan some kind of raid or truth finding mission to hold people over. I just know we’re in no shape to take on the full force of the GGE.”

“I realize that,” Sam said. “Just try to find something, alright?”

“Yeah. I’ll call my guy that’s in the GGE. He’s a new recruit and is already unhappy with his job. I’m sure he can give us a lead. Give me a few minutes to get a
private line to call him. Once I got something, I’ll let you know.” Before Samantha could
answer, Saul bounded up the stairs and out her front door. He jogged a couple of blocks
down the road and kept his head on a swivel at all times. He fingered the pistol that he
took from Samantha’s. Ever since they had seen the monster in the woods and the
announcement was made that they were swarming the earth, Saul hadn’t felt comfortable
out in the open. He skipped up the stairs to his apartment two at a time until he was
inside. He grabbed the phone that he had connected to the wall and made sure that the
security jack he installed was still in place. He punched in the numbers and the phone
began to ring.

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Walter was waiting on the steps of the municipal building waiting for his new
partners to arrive when his cellphone began to buzz. He looked down, expecting to see
Grandma Mimi’s name appear across the front of the phone, asking him to come fix that
damned television again. Then he remembered that it couldn’t be her --the monsters the
GGE refused to kill had murdered her. Walter swiped right to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey this is Saul. I need your help.” Walter cringed hearing the name. Although
he had agreed to join the rebellion and had gone to a couple of meetings, he never
planned to be a part of it in any official capacity.

“What is it? I’m at work right now,” Walter growled.

“The group is getting restless. We need you to give us something, anything.” It
sounded as though Saul was begging.

“I have nothing for you.”
“Please man. You came to us after the GGE did your grandmother wrong. We want to get her the justice she deserves.” A tear slid down Walter’s cheek as he thought of his grandma Mimi. He thought about the assignment he had for the day. He was supposed to travel up with Sharon, Nicholas, and a small armed guard to the Munaz house to investigate the claims of a rampant number of monsters that were said to have killed him. A chill ran down Walter’s spine as he looked around. So far he had only handled the small monsters, but if the rumors were true, it wasn’t just big monsters that would be there, but intelligent ones.

“Listen, I don’t have much time. We’re headed up to the Munaz house today to investigate the story that minister Westboro has been passing around. It’s a small crew headed up there. Gather as many of your people as possible. No weapons. Just bring cameras. It should get you some evidence. I have to go.” With that Walter shut his phone and watched as a large black van pulled up. Inside Sharon and Nicholas gave a friendly wave. Walter responded with a smile and jogged down to the van, making sure to check for anything that may have been lurking around the corners of the building.

***

Within an hour Saul had a group of about twenty rebels that were organized and ready to go. They met at Samantha’s again, this time opting for the smaller but furnished living room over the larger but damp and unfurnished basement. Saul had run to the local store and bought as many disposable cameras as he could afford. As he passed them out he began to address the group.

“Listen up! This is a recon mission only. One of my guys on the inside has promised we should get some decent dirt on the GGE if we head up to the Munaz house
right away. Make sure to stay out of sight. They will have a small number of guards with them. I was advised not to bring any weapons, but seeing the world we live in, I say we bring them anyway.” A cheer went up around the room and Samantha bustled down to the basement before emerging with the small arsenal she had compiled since Robert’s death.

“Anyone that knows how to use a gun, take one,” she stated, “anyone that doesn’t, grab a weapon that you can use without killing yourself. Any questions?” As everyone began swarming around the trunk, Samantha pulled Saul to the side.

“What are you expecting us to find up there?” she asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know. My guy in the GGE isn’t quite sure there is anything, but this is the only lead we’ve got.”

“Seems pretty thin to me,” Samantha said. “They’re following a lead on a group of monsters that a cult made up. A cult. Hell, for all we know Dr. Munaz is still up there and just retired without telling anyone.”

“I know,” Saul said. “However, even if nothing did happen, we’re still getting to unmask the GGE.”

“How so?”

“They’re wasting time and money on a wild goose chase,” Saul replied. “And hell, they allow freedom of religion, but in my view, by going to debunk the Church of Aliente’s story, they’re going to suppress the church’s views instead of letting them continue on.”

“You got me,” Samantha said. She turned and faced the group that was now fully armed. “Alright everyone, load up into the two white cargo vans. We’ll park at the
bottom of the hill near one of the shops to make it look like a casual delivery. Spread out as you make your way up the hill and remember, head on a swivel. Last thing we need is a blown cover because you let one of those damned monsters sneak up on you and kill you.” A nervous chuckle issued through the room as eyes darted to the windows and beyond. Saul gave a clap of his hands and started heading out the door, keys in his meaty fists. The rest of the rebels followed suit.

***

Up at the Munaz house, the GGE guards had set a perimeter around the building after backing the black van up to the front door. Sharon, Nicholas, and Walter slid out from the front, each with a tranquilizer gun in one hand and a cage in another. Looking at the door, their worst suspicions were true. Minister Westboro was telling the truth. The front door looked as though it had been ripped and clawed at and bloody prints stained the white marble floor on the inside. A decomposing corpse with long hair and a torn up tux greeted them at the entrance.

“Well, at least Dr. Munaz made sure he had his butler here to let us in,” Nicholas said with a nervous chuckle.

“Sir, would you...would you uh...lead the way?” Walter had gone pale as he put his hand on one of the armed guards carrying an assault rifle. The man didn’t say a word, he just shrugged Walter’s hand off of him, pushed him to the side, and began walking in.

“Nice fellow, that one is,” Nicholas whispered to Sharon.

“Hush, at least he’s brave enough to lead us inside.” The three of them continued forward and into the building. They passed the odd memorabilia that Dr. Munaz had collected and displayed in the hallway. When they got near the opening leading to the
ballroom, all three started to gag from the stench inside. The arm guard raised a hand and ushered for them to move back. He walked through the door and peered inside. Before him was a mass grave. Bodies were strewn everywhere and in the advanced stages of decomposition. He shook his head at the sight and pulled the door shut.

“There’s nothing for you to study in there but death,” the man said. “Come back out, we have our answer.” The guard began leading them out the front door when another came rushing up.

“You three, come with me, there is something you’ll want to see. Someone bring the van around back with us.” Walter, Sharon, and Nicholas shared a curious look before following the guard to the back.

***

Dusk was beginning to fall as Saul and Samantha began to lead their two squadrons up the hill. It had taken some time for them to set up a sufficient way to coordinate getting there without looking too suspicious. Samantha and Saul had declared themselves squad leaders and both stayed in communication with one another through walkie-talkies. They didn’t want the same mishap from the last time they went to take on the GGE.

Saul had been nervous because he had been expecting some sort of communication from Walter to let them know what was going on. Although he trusted the man, he wasn’t sure he knew him well enough to not lead them into a trap. It was too late as they continued to push up the hill. From the corner of his eye Saul could see the sweating and shaking coming from the men and women in his group. Their eyes constantly darted, looking for unseen monsters. This was the only place so far in Galena
Park where monsters had struck outside of the woods, if it even happened. Saul wanted to try and comfort them, but even he was afraid of what might be working its way towards them as dusk began to give way to night.

Samantha was having similar problems on her end but was unwilling to admit it. As scared as she was to be leading a group of people, a certain rush was coursing through her. She had never been trusted with so much responsibility in her life. She kept turning back to people and bringing her fingers to her eyes and then pointing to the left and right, reminding them to stay alert.

As both sides began to see the mansion at the top of the hill, a loud screech emitted from underneath the house. Startled, the rebels pulled their weapons and began charging at the mansion in full force.

***

Nicholas, Sharon, and Walter had been led to the basement of Dr. Munaz’s mansion.

"Is this what I think it is?" Walter stammered. All around him were test tubes with various monsters floating inside of them. The three walked around the room peering into each one, viewing the monsters floating in a yellow liquid, suspended in the middle of their stasis chambers.

"They all appear to be dead," Nicholas said to no one in particular. He was fascinated staring at the rat like monster that had several dead babies emerging from it. Nicholas concluded it must have died giving birth. Suddenly, he was grabbed violently and turned around to face Sharon. Walter began moving farther back into the room.
“Something doesn’t add up here Nicholas,” she said. “We only began our work a week ago. Many of these creatures in here we haven’t even encountered and yet somehow Dr. Munaz has a far larger collection than what we could have imagined.”

“So what?” Nicholas replied. “The man was wealthy. Maybe he heard about the monsters and hired a private firm to collect them so he could study and run tests on them. It isn’t that big of a stretch.”

“It’s still weird,” Sharon said shaking his head. “There’s something we’re missing here, I just don’t know what.”

“You guys need to get back here right away,” Walter’s voice echoed from the back of the room. The two jogged back to find Walter staring at a cylinder that was large enough to carry something the size of a human. There was dried fluid all over the floor and the glass had been broken in an outward direction.

“You don’t think Dr. Munaz was experimenting with humans and these mutations do you?” Walter said. His eyes had grown wide and Nicholas could see that he was quavering.

“Surely not,” he said, trying to comfort him. “It was a big specimen that must have just gotten free.” Nicholas turned away and looked back to see several of the guards standing and waiting for orders. “I want you gentleman to see if you can start grabbing some of these vials carefully and get them into the van. Radio down to the GGE and tell them we need additional vehicles to haul this away.”

As the men began to go about their business a loud screech echoed out from behind the human sized vial. Nicholas, Sharon, and Walter froze in terror as a child sized
monstrosity came whipping around from over the top and dived into a fray of wires on the wall beside it.

The creature was a hellish beast that looked as though a sickly child had been mutated with a capuchin monkey. Its face was smashed in and wrinkled, and where a nose should have been there was just a hole. Its mouth was missing several teeth and the ears were huge while its eyes had cataracts, showing that the monster was blind. Its body was wrinkled and its chest cavity was caved in. The monster had elongated arms and legs and it appeared as though it had hands for its feet as well. A long tail with a barb at the end lashed around as it struck the wires. The power flickered for a moment as the monster screeched again, then died. As it did, the vials began to drain and the monsters inside began to come to life.

A flurry of gunfire began as Nicholas, Walter, and Sharon stood in shock. The guard closest to them shouted above the fray: “Run!” They took off for the outside.

***

Saul and Samantha, leading both their groups, got to the top of the hill near the house and took the few remaining guards by surprise.

“Don’t shoot!” Saul yelled, pointing his double-barreled pistol at the head of the first guard he saw. “There are more of us than of you. Lay down your weapons and let the people know what you’ve been hiding.” The guard blinked for a moment before raising his assault rifle. A gunshot went off from somewhere behind Saul and the guard was slinking to the ground, blood oozing down from the opening in his head.

“Who shot?” Saul whirled in anger. Samantha stood there, gun raised and pointed at the guard.
“The time for games is over Saul. They’re hiding something and we’re going to get to the bottom of it now.” Just then they heard another screech from behind the building and rapid gun fire taking place. The rebels tore off in that direction, surprising a few of the remaining guards along the way. After Samantha had opened fire, the rest of the rebels followed suit, yelling and shooting the GGE guards before they could turn and face the rebel army.

***

As Walter, Nicholas, and Sharon raced up the stairs they heard more gunshots from above, along with screaming and yelling.

“What the fuck is going on out there,” Nicholas screamed as he stopped inches from going out the door. Behind him the monsters began to tear apart the guards inside.

“It’s the rebels,” Walter panted. “I tipped them off that we were coming here.”

“You what?” Nicholas yelled, swinging around at Walter. As he did he saw a few of the monsters making their way towards him. He grabbed Walter and started shoving him up the stairs. “Get them to hold their fire.”

Walter stumbled forward with his arms raised, only to be greeted by a circle of screaming rebels with guns pointed at him. Behind him, he was being pushed forward by Nicholas and Sharon, who were popping tranquilizer shots back at the small militia of monsters headed their way.
What Comes Next?

Abraham knelt with his knee pressed firmly against the monster’s chest. Lying on its back, it screeched and hissed, gnarled teeth gnashing at Abraham’s hand. He had his hand closed tightly across the monster’s throat, choking the life out of it. The creature swung tentacled arms at his face and back, sharp dagger like quills tearing at Abraham’s clothes. He ignored the pain and stared the beast down, looking into its black eyes with his own blue ones, teared up in the rage at what the creature had done.

Thirty feet away Rocky began to stiffen and grow cold in the grass near their home. His tongue hung loosely to its side. All four legs had been snapped by the monster’s tentacles and around his neck his fur was rubbed away to the skin. He had been old, but he had been with Abraham when he lost first his wife, and then his sister Karen. He had taken care of Abraham through everything and now the guilt of being unable to return the favor surged back into his hands.

The monster’s eyes began to fog over as it gave its last efforts to break free from its assailant. A tentacle had shot up and wrapped itself around Abraham’s throat and pushed the quills lying on the underside into his neck. Abraham let out a grunt of pain as driblets of blood began to flow. He pressed down harder with both knee and hands. The tentacles soon fell loose, tumbling to the ground in small breaking motions, like twigs breaking free from a dead tree. Abraham stood up and reached into the breast pocket of his flannel. He pulled out his matches, often used to light his cigarette when he would go outside with his best friend, and lit one. He tossed it down on the creature and watched the flames begin to engulf the body.