

# **When the Clouds Roll In**

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*this book is dedicated to no one...  
except maybe spiders  
cause screw you, mosquitos*

## **The Day**

*The wind does not care  
whose corpse it whistles  
through*  
—Phaedrus of Alethia

### **Sugar Pointe, Texas 7:19 p.m.**

It's a Tuesday evening on a suburban street in Sugar Pointe, Texas. The neighborhood is white-collar, mainly wealthy-but-not-rich Texans and consists of a straight-line road with newly-painted ranchers and manicured lawns on either side, and it ends at a doorway to the desert. The last three houses of the neighborhood are clustered together but secluded and far off from the rest, with a few hundred open, grassless feet in-between where, many years back, a large stretch was demolished by fire, cleared away, and never rebuilt. Duragard owns one of the three houses. He's a curmudgeonly war vet deep into his 60s. Across from his house is the McLuster family—two boys, mother and father—with the newlywed Ann and William Francis in the house next door. Duragard had lived there since before the fire that segregated his house from the many others; the McLuster pack picked the house specifically for its seclusion, so Mr. McLuster could, without distraction, brainwash—uh, home-school his boys (and wife, if need be) in the good Lord's name; and young Ann and William Francis, the most recent to move in, chose the locale for its cheap market price.

Each household keeps to themselves, mainly.

Duragard sits at his bedroom window, binoculars pointed out toward the border as a quiet, windy dusk settles over the desert. His rifle lays across his lap, loaded but with the safety securely off in case it becomes necessary for him to immediately fire. The window is open for this exact reason. His golden Labrador, Biscuits, rests on the floor beside him, tired and old like his owner. There's a heavy, thick wind in the air and Duragard mentions it several times to Biscuits.

„Dry wind ain't kicking down none. Keeps pickin' up, seems,” and then Duragard looks over, down at the dog. Biscuits keeps his head to the floor but glances up, unimpressed. „Eh, well...”

He stands from his chair, stretching his shoulders and thick chest with the rifle between his arms and behind his head. Bending down to pull a beer from the cooler, Duragard sees the McLuster boys through his front window. They're passing the football to one another in the street.

„Pfffft,” he blows a raspberry toward the two Nancys tossing the pigskin underhand. Like everything else in their life, they seem to be misinformed. (Duragard does feel a ping of sadness as, had he been younger and more able-bodied, he might have gone down and showed them boys a thing or two.) Before hobbling back to his chair, cold beer in hand, he checks for the boys' father, whom he detests. Man's a Nazi, as far as Duragard is concerned.

Back in his seat, the old man peers out into the wind. He twists off the bottle cap (Biscuits lifts up his head, as the KATEECH always gets his attention) and Duragard looks out toward the desert with narrowed, somber eyes, sipping his beer—but he cuts it short, a small spurt of carbonated brown liquid bursting from his lips. He squints. It's getting darker but there's plenty sun left and no clouds; well, no clouds except those approaching...

„Well look't them clouds, would'ya,” he says and looks down at the dog. Biscuits keeps his head to the floor but glances up, unimpressed. „Eh, well...”

And so goes their routine.

Duragard continues watching these approaching clumps of cloud with growing fascination. They're low and thin, weaving with the wind, dense and moving quickly over the desert. They dip and raise, a procession of rotund plums like cotton candy, ebbing and flowing with the wind. It isn't until they're right on top of him that Duragard realizes something unnatural about the clouds.

„What in the blazes...” he mumbles, leaning forward.

As they get close enough to reach, Duragard can tell that these aren't clouds but something tangible, like giant floating cotton balls. And then they begin landing, two shy of the house and one seemingly just above his window.

A fourth lands several feet outside the bedroom window and sticks to the ground as if glued. Duragard sticks his head out to inspect it. He notices that the mound of white fluff is pulsating—„Nope, nope, no way.” He instantly shuts the window before traveling to each room and insuring that each window is closed and locked. Prolly some goddamn Muslim releasing goddamn chemical warfare. He returns to the bedroom and notices the window over the cooler is still open. He shuts and locks the window and sees that the McLuster boys have stopped poorly tossing the football; instead, they're inspecting one of the rounded, fluffy cocoons that landed in the street. Duragard also notices that several more of these dense clouds have landed on the other two houses and that one on top of the Francis house has popped like a balloon and deflated. There's a static that shoots through his body, a panic coursing through his bloodstream. *Something definitely ain't right.* His eyes revisit the two boys inspecting the large white ball, one of them poking it with a stick. He wants to tell them to leave it alone but he doesn't want to open the windows...and he's a bit curious to see what happens when it gets poked with a stick.

The screaming starts far off. It stops the boys from poking the thing with a stick. Duragard can hear it even through the window. A woman's scream. Loud, passionate. The door to the Francis house opens and Ann runs out swinging, stripping off clothes, running her hands through her hair. She looks like she's on fire, without the fire. She has her shirt over her head, her black nylon bra exposed. The two boys are thoroughly distracted by this.

Unable to see with her shirt over her face, frantic and running full sprint, Mrs. Francis runs head first into one of the McLuster boys. He's knocked back hard, stumbles, and together they fall onto the large white ball of fluff in the street.

Duragard hobbles over to his chair, get's his binoculars, and hobbles back to the opposite window. The boy and the woman are struggling in the white fluff, the other brother standing back, watching panicked. The white fluff blows out like a piñata, spilling a thicket of furry brown over furry brown. Through his binoculars, Duragard can see that the two on the ground are being swarmed by something, dozens of somethings. Their bodies disappear under a moving blanket of brown. Upon seeing this, the other brother dances around frantically, hopping as if the ground is on fire. Finally, he runs for it, sprinting the opposite direction, running as fast as he can.

And then Duragard sees what it is and he sees it large, right into its face, right into its beady eyes. Horrified, he steps back and almost falls down. The spider hangs from a single silk thread as it dangles just outside the window. The species is large, with eight spindly, gently curling legs. It continues to lower to the windowsill. Another follows alongside, faster. Duragard is appalled. He turns and finds his other bedroom window already enshrined in a thin layer of web. There are so many spiders on his roof that, now joining the sound of his heavy breath, he feels like he can hear the soft brush of a thousand tiny legs shuffling.

He checks out the front window once more. Half a dozen hairy brown spiders now crawl and dangle outside his window; just passed, he finds that the other two houses are taking on a thin white sheet overtop them, webs encircling windows and doors, garages and rooftops.

He hears clinking, something in the pipes—*they're in the pipes. Which pipes?* He thinks a moment. *Not the sewer line.* And then it dawns on him—the stove-pipe. He hobbles quickly, forgetting the pain in his bad knee. The stove continues to clink. He cracks the oven door—two brown blurs dash out, leaping faster than the eye can follow, both landing on the kitchen floor. He yelps low (*Glad no one can heard that*) and slams the oven door shut. Before dealing with the trespassers scurrying across his floor, he sets the oven temperature to 400 degrees.

he clinking in the stovepipe turns to a distant sizzling.

„Suck on that, you bastards,” he growls, turning to face the two hairy monsters on his floor. They're both on the linoleum, side-by-side and still as plastic figurines. The first leaps. Duragard quickly moves, the spider passing and landing against a low cupboard—and the SQQQUISH is satisfying beneath the heel of his boot as he stomps the thing into the wood.

There's a tickling on his shin, the second spider already crawling up his calf. He dances, shimmies, yelps again, and flings the spider off...but not before he feels the acute sting of a spider bite. It hurts but it's a short-lived pain, dissipating against the adrenaline coursing through him. Duragard already has a toaster in

his hand, unplugged. He wraps the chord taut around his fist, watching the spider bastard scurry right, left, watching it cross the floor. He lets the toaster hang by the wire around his hand, waits an extra moment, swings the toaster gently... forward... back... forward... back... the toaster gaining momentum as he backs a step—and SLAM, he smashes the toaster onto the second spider so hard it explodes.

Again, this is satisfying.

Duragard knows that there's a significant chance the spider was poisonous and that his only chance of survival is to immediately get to the nearest hospital. After grabbing a few things from around the kitchen—hunk of putty cement, lighter, aerosol can, and a hunting knife tucked into his boot—he tears off a section of his dish towel and ties it as a tourniquet around his leg, just above the bite, tight enough to hurt; then, he approaches the front door knowing full well he can't just open it. While he thinks of his next option, the stove sizzles louder, almost screeching, and a thin black curtain of smoke wafts from the oven lid.

There's a scratching sound coming from the base of the front door and, as Duragard inspects it, several baby spiders pour in through a small crack in the wood base frame of the front threshold. Fumbling with the materials he grabbed under the sink, Duragard points the aerosol spray down and holds in the button, covering the baseboards and baby spiders and floor in a foamy white liquid; then, he uses the red Bic lighter to ignite the aerosol and a jet-stream of orange flame sprays out in a foot diameter. The babies burn and curl and wither and sink and disappear into ash.

Then he plugs the hole with cement putty.

„Not today, sons'a b—”

Biscuits whimpers from the bedroom.

„No!”

Duragard dashes, no hobble, and sighs in relief as his dog is merely whimpering at the webbed catacombs now surrounding their rancher windows and the dozens of spiders just outside. „It's fine, boy,” he reassures him.

There's the sound of pressure on glass, a slight fracture.

Biscuits continues crying and Duragard leads him to the living room. Unlike every other day, today he lets Biscuits up on the couch next to him. He pets the golden Lab behind his ears. Biscuits rests his head on Duragard's lap. „Guess I could'a let you up here all this time,” he says of the couch. *It was a silly rule*, he realizes.

A window breaks inward, the bathroom window—it already had a long crack and easily gave way under any pressure. „I'm glad it's you I'm with, 'cause this next part is gonna suck,” and Duragard keeps petting Biscuits behind his ear. The wall and carpet nearest the bathroom door shifts, wobbles, moves, as dozens of long-limbed, hairy brown spiders crawl over every surface. „You've always been such a good boy.”

Biscuits keeps his head on his lap but glances up, unimpressed.

„Eh, well...”

## Shady Maple

**7:39 p.m.**

Sugar Pointe, Texas is a couple hours south of San Antonio.

It's not an especially large county, with only a few thousand residents either in the borough or occupying the sparse desert landscape around the short mile of commerce. It's a dusty red area and it's too bright and aggressively humid most of the time, with very few newcomers. And the sun descends this Tuesday night to a steady, heavy breeze in the neighborhood of Shady Maple.

Gale Clarkson is rooting through her youngest daughter's closet in preparation of tomorrow's school day. „Just one short-sleeved size 7 in pink, why is it so hard to find?” she grumps to herself. She's tired; it's been a long day. Tossing a pair of tiny jeans onto the bed, the cartoon bed sheets catch her attention. For a moment she thinks something moved, then dismisses it as a trick of the eye from being overly tired; and she takes an extra moment trying to remember the name of the cartoon character on the sheets. She can't and gives up with an, „Ugh.”

Gale exhales before returning to the closet. She pulls aside one shirt, another, another, each sliding along the rack with a loud, metal-on-metal clank. She twists the shoulder of the third shirt and checks it over—black with silver lines could work—when something tickles her fingers... Her hand retracts from the closet, startled. She leans her face close to the shirt behind the shirt she had been checking. It's sandwiched between the other clothes in the closet but she can make out two fuzzy brown lines reaching out from the center of the shirt; they were the culprit, had brushed against her fingers and tickled her. She laughs at having been so startled, mistakenly thinking the brown lines are a furry design on the shirt. Her laugh is short as she recognizes the shirt—straight black, the one she dropped chocolate on—and knows with certainty that it has no design on the front.

It's in the moment she reaches to pull the silver-lined shirt in front that the thick furry lines move ever so slowly, tensing like fingers, and a third, thinner leg appears. By then it's too late and the silver-lined shirt is out of the way, exposing the little hairy monster on the black shirt behind. It takes a brief moment for her to register that she's come face-to-face with the eight eyes of a very large, very hairy spider. Before the scream of terror can make it from her lungs to her lips, the spider jumps—leaps forward, a flash of brown fuzz, both front legs up while the back six curl to better latch on to the skin of the frightened woman's face.

## **Sugar Pointe Fire Department**

**7:43 p.m.**

„I don't understand what I jus' seen.”

„It's called twerking, chief.”

„And that's Billy Ray's kid?”

„Yup.”

...

„...I still don't understand what I jus' seen.”

„It's like dancing—”

„Chief,” a head pokes in the doorway, „you got a call on line four. Keeps sayin' it's urgent.”

The Chief turns away from the computer and picks up the phone.

„This's Chief Stenson.”

The other man in the room is Assistant Fire Marshall Mike Hansel. He watches the expression on Chief Earl's weathered face wrinkle and frown. Hansel's been around long enough (21 years long) to tell when the old man has just been freshly annoyed. The Chief puts the phone against his chest and calls back the head that had recently poked into the doorway, „Tiny!”

Tiny Pete can be heard scurrying back down the hallway. He's a tiny man for a firefighter but that didn't stop him from beating the time of every other man at the Run Drill: a mile long sprint up three flights, across an apartment building, up three more flights, back across the building, down six flights, then a straight line dash, all while strapped with a 50 lb. weight to simulate the double-jacket attack hose they use most often on home and vehicle fires. Though Tiny Pete is fast, he had near the lowest score in every other testing field, especially cognitive. Chief Earl had appreciated the 20 year old's tenacity and he trusted him, a value of utmost importance to the Chief.

„Tiny,” the old man growls as Tiny Pete again pokes his head around the corner of the door, as if purposely obscuring his body beyond the door. „This man is speaking Mex'can.”

Tiny Pete nods.

„I don't speak Mex'can.”

Tiny Pete looks dumbfounded.

„He just kept sayin' 'urgent' and then that Spanish so I thought—”

„Go get Tommy,” the old Chief orders. „He's the only Mex'can we got here.”

Chief Earl spits a quick “No ablo Mex'can!” into the phone and returns it against his chest. He shoots Hansel an incredulous look, who responds with a shrug that says, *What did you expect?*—they knew the kid wasn't too bright when they hired him.

Another set of footprints can be heard walking down the hallway, this one longer in stride, heavier, more confident. Tommy knocks on the threshold of the open door as he enters. Chief Earl gives him a disapproving once-over before handing him the phone. It's a glance to which Tommy has become accustomed.

No one speaks and Tommy, with a questioning glance to Hansel, takes the phone. He starts the conversation in broken English but quickly switches to broken Portuguese and, after several curious exchanges, sets the phone against his chest in the same way as the Chief. This similarity makes the Chief huff out a sigh.

„What's he sayin' in that Spanish?” he asks in a gruff drawl.

„Portuguese. I do not speak Portuguese but I know he says spiders. They come our way.”

Unlike his impression of Tiny Pete, Chief Earl never trusted him; but, Tommy had passed every test, even those leveled against him (like the time they added an extra 25 lbs. to his Run Drill). Tommy took it in stride as he was used to the

selective hazing and, as his family needed the money, he willingly put himself through the ringer for the job. The Chief saw it as a foreigner shoving in his face the fact that, not only was he equal, in some cases he might be better. But unlike the Chief, Tommy never holds a grudge—*Things are the way they are*, he reminds himself during the hardest struggles—and in that, he earns the slightest inkling of respect from Chief Earl... though not enough to save him from all the crappy jobs handed down to him. *Things are the way they are*.

In relation to the phone call, the Chief chuckles.

„What’s a Portugueses?—sounds like a practical joke.”

He reaches over the desk and pins down the hook in the receiver cradle before Tommy can respond; then he holds his hand out expectantly, waiting for the receiver back.

No sooner has Tommy done exactly what Chief Earl silently requested that Tiny Pete pokes his head around the corner a third time. „Chief, Gale Clarkson over in Shady Maple called the police in hysterics, something about a spider attack. The police would like a Marshall to accompany the paramedics. They’re about fifteen minutes out.”

„Tiny! We have an intercom!” Chief Earl scolds. „You can buzz me about calls, you ain’t need—” and the Chief haphazardly tosses a book out the door, missing Tiny Pete (who had long ago learned to keep his body out of the doorframe and protected) just barely to land in the hallway with a dull hump.

„Spider...?” Hansel joins the conversation.

„It ain’t uncommon!” The Chief is already getting worked up. Too many things are annoying him at once, including the lingering presence of Tommy. The old man tries to breathe in deeply, tries to relax, lower his blood pressure like the doctors have been telling him to do. More certain, calmer, he adds, „Just a coincidence.”

The fire alarm sounds, wild and blaring.

„Who sounded the goddamn—” and the old Chief drags his arm across the desk nearest him (Hansel’s desk, to be exact), cursing a breathless blue streak as he angrily flings everything to the floor. Tiny Pete ducks his head out of sight in anticipation of flying debris. Tommy and Mike Hansel just sort of stand back, watching – this isn’t abnormal behavior and it’s no longer shocking, more commonplace. And then, as always, Fire Chief Stenson is in control again. There is an emergency and it’s his responsibility and he’s ready. Hansel can see it in the Chief’s eyes. Those in the station house (and even the town entire) forgive him his many faults because Earl Stenson is, first and foremost, a damn fine Fire Chief.

„You,” to Tiny Pete, „stay on dispatch and you radio the second anything comes through the line.”

„You,” to Hansel, „go see why Gale’s bitchin’ over a spider. You can get there in five, head off the paramedics. It’s probably just some desert spider wandered too far, make sure everything’s alright, then you call off the paramedics, save their time for somethin’ impor’ant—but if there’s anything weird,” he holds out his finger, accusatorily, „anything out of the Goddamn ordinary, you radio.”

„You,” he says to Tommy as if it were a bad word, „suit up.”

And then, under his breath, he grumbles,

„What’n the Sam hell’er the Portugueses wantin’?”



## **Brazil**

### **7 Days ago**

Edward hated being called Eduardo, his birth-given name.

Throughout his years in an American college, everyone called him Edward. He felt secure as Edward. Eduardo sounded like a scared immigrant name. It sounded foreign; it sounded like it didn't belong. Edward had come to pride himself on the fact that he fit in with the Americans. It hadn't even been especially hard to assimilate, just an American-sounding name and minimal accent, something he practiced prior to college and eventually perfected in his first year (only to find out, after college and in his mid-to-late twenties, that American girls absolutely love the accent). He fit in with the white collars, as Edward. Of course, his older brother didn't know this and hollered „Eduardo!” through the small airport.

The brothers embraced in the airport lobby as an attendant carried Edward's duffle bag and tossed it toward them and then left to go smoke weed behind the empty terminal. Miguel seemed genuinely appreciative to see his younger brother home. Edward was unsure how to feel now that he was back. It had been so long, and his memories weren't especially fond. It was also a surprise, as he had asked a driver from his company to meet him there and take him directly to the site. He kept checking around the small airport lobby but they were literally the only ones there.

Standing side-by-side, they couldn't have looked more different. Miguel was four years older than Edward, only 32, but he looked to have aged an extra twenty years in the ten since Edward was last home. His face had become grizzled, stubbly and unkempt; the rest of his head was completely absent of hair. (His bald head always reflected a glare, even inside.) Edward's face, on the other hand, was young and vibrant, clean-shaven, his short black hair styled. He was also well-dressed, wearing a cream-colored Polo shirt with the collar up and light slacks. His brother Miguel was in sweatpants and a sleeveless shirt that was brown-ish, though it may have originally been white. (And he was inexplicably barefoot.) They shared little resemblance aside from their father's nose: Miguel was wide, muscular, imposing; and Edward was skinny, 5'9, his brown eyes and father's nose hidden behind designer glasses.

Miguel offered to drive (he had actually called his brother's company and, pretending to be his brother, cancelled the driver) and soon they were speeding down the thin, winding roads leading down to the highways of Sao Paulo in a rusted Chevy built two decades earlier. Even with the windows down and the music loud, Miguel excitedly yelled to his brother the entire drive, asking questions about America and gossiping about people Edward hadn't seen since childhood (some he wasn't even certain he'd ever met). It became more and more apparent Miguel was on drugs, though Edward was unsure which exactly. It made the drive much more terrifying, especially since Miguel never really slowed, not for stop signs, or red lights, or pedestrians.

Edward repeatedly asked to be taken to a rental car agency but Miguel would just nod, smile, and say (in Portuguese), „No worries, brother. I'll be your driver.” He was volunteering, trying to help, to spend time with his little brother. It was literally the last thing Edward wanted but, after a fourth attempt at jumping ship, he decided there may be no other way for him to get where he needed right away, so he gave his brother an address.

„Where the hell is that?” Miguel asked in Portuguese.

„Paraty. On the coast, like four hours,” Edward answered in English.

Miguel slowly turned his head and stared wide-eyed as if Edward had just blasphemed. (He continued driving, fast, only now his eyes weren't on the road.) English wasn't the devil's language but Miguel spoke only Portuguese and he didn't much like the people he encountered in his country that spoke English. Edward quickly spat a panicked jumble of English and Portuguese at his brother, commanding him to look forward, pleading to be dropped off at a rental car agency, begging for him to pull over and just drop him off on that street right here, right there, anywhere.

Miguel let out a deep giggle, faced forward, and promised his brother all would be well.

Edward quickly noticed that they weren't headed toward the address.

They were headed home.

Edward was momentarily livid. He had work to do, important work. Work that might save lives, work that involved other people, work that had to be dealt with immediately—mom could wait; this had to be done as soon as possible. His voice slowly rose until he was angrily screaming. He stopped trying to explain the depth of the emergency at hand and just shouted insults, reverting right back to their childhood. This wasn't a fun-time family visit; it was a serious matter. Miguel just nodded, peacefully, and informed his younger brother that there was no other option but to first say hello to mom, and eat the meal she had been preparing since sun-up, and then they could go wherever Eduardo needed to, for however long he wanted.

The house was north of the city, where everything became crowded and narrow and overrun with people and homes were right up against one another. Miguel parked against the curb several blocks shy and the brothers got out. Edward had successfully avoided home for 10 years and now, being back, it was like entering an old, vague dream. The details were faded, different but the same. The smell of fried eggs and sweat. Crowded streets. A lack of visible sky. The street was thin, stacked row homes on either side, clothes and clothes' lines hung up between.

They made their way up the dark concrete stairwell leading to the second floor apartment where their family had lived for decades. It was all so familiar yet so distant, like he had forgotten these things were ever even real. They got to the front door and Miguel paused. He lifted his chin and smelt the air deeply. Even out on the landing, with the front door closed, the mouth-watering scent of food was overwhelming. Edward had been grumbling like an old curmudgeon but, at that moment, he lost all his anger as the scent overwhelmed him. He had to stop himself from drooling.

They eagerly rushed inside, briefly getting stuck in the doorway shoulder-to-shoulder.

Their mother had a veritable smorgasbord prepared, all of it spread across the small kitchen table in decorative dishes. There was so much food that there wasn't any room to set plates: feijoadas and virado à paulista and pastels (a specialty of his mother's) and tutu de feijão and wine and coffee and more. The entire apartment smelled of sautéed kale, frying oil, and pork. Edward was instantly grateful to his brother for forcing him home, as it had been a long time since he had had his mother's cooking... actually, he hadn't had a home-cooked meal in quite some time, often opting for the deli near his work for all of his meals.

The house was exactly as it had been ten years earlier. Dark, even with the windows open and the daylight sun shining overhead (the windows really only had a view of the Teuz family's living room on the other side of the street). No piece of furniture had been changed or even relocated within the house. It was as if the place had been preserved by a curator. It was an unending Déjà vu, eerie, like he were visiting a memory and not a legitimate place. And his mother looked the same after all these years, though he had seen her dozens of times in the last ten years. He may have refused to come home but he always paid to fly her out most holidays. She would occasionally have to refuse, though, as Miguel never left their city for any reason, ever, and without her around to take care of him and make him food, he'd likely starve.

Edward greeted his mother briefly before she ushered him to the table of food and encouraged him to eat, as was her way. She always worried about Eduardo's weight, always asked if he was eating enough, if he wanted her to leave him with food, if he was hungry, if she should cook more, etc. Their talks usually devolved in a barrage of dietary-themed questions. Miguel was big and broad and built like a line-backer, and he ate like a horse. Edward, on the other hand, was skinny and appeared frail and ate sort of like a bird, picking at this and that and seldom finishing his plate. He had worked up an appetite on his trip, though, and the brothers sat down to eat heartily as their mother watched with joy. (She seldom ate very much and was, like her son Eduardo, frail-looking and slender.)

As was their custom, nobody spoke much while they ate.

Afterward, Miguel quickly ran out for „a short period.”

Once they were alone, Edward's mom patted his back proudly and thanked him for agreeing to take Miguel on his journey—

Edward's mouth dropped open.

He was ready to argue, as he had agreed to no such thing. (In fact, since his brother had just left, now was the perfect chance to escape.) But his mother was proud, and she was thankful he was including his brother...

Crap almighty! he thought, realizing he was now resigned to do it.

It was a terrible mistake, and instantly so.

Right off the bat, Miguel didn't return home for nearly two hours (just before nightfall). Edward had grown more furious with the passing of each quarter-hour and had even called a cab when Miguel burst through the door—

Sweaty and overly-excited, he grabbed his brother by the shoulder and collar of his Polo shirt and physically pulled him out the door, down the stairs, a block down, and into the car parked alongside the curb. The whole time he dragged his younger brother to the car, he repeated, in a volume sometimes loud, sometimes soft, „Here we go, off on an adventure.”

Sometimes he'd even sing it.

Edward was angrier than he had been in some time, disrespected and physically assaulted and ignored. He hollered and protested and fought against his brother's manhandling but Miguel just ignored it, got him into the car (by practically tossing Edward in through the driver's seat, over the shifter, and into the passenger's) and then he took off like a shot.

\* \* \* \* \*

„What d'you mean ‚gone?’”

Edward was growing more impatient, irritated.

„Gone where? Gone? Gone how?”

There was only a single person at the work site, and he wasn't an employee. All of the supplies, gear, tents, volunteer workers, and any of his company's staff—all of it, gone. Packed up, no trace, no sign that anyone had even been there aside from one local, who apparently lived in a nearby raft anchored a couple dozen feet out on the water, and who repeatedly spoke the Portuguese word „Foi”. Gone. The haggard man said many others things but he spoke a torn dialect which Edward had a hard time understanding. He would have asked Miguel to translate if it weren't for the fact that Miguel had begun their journey with a feverish level of excitement only to have it slowly drain, then quickly drain, until Edward had to assume driving while his brother slept in the rusted Chevy's stained, garbage-strewn back seats.

Edward called a regional executive from his office.

The man answered, grumpy at the lateness of the call.

„Where is the Brazil site?” Edward spat. He was high enough up the ladder that he could lash out at pretty much anyone except the CEO, CFO, or board without incident. It had taken only four years after his master's to reach the head of their South America division (though he often suspected the only reason he got the job was because he was from the continent) and he liked to wield the power that came with such an immense position.

The regional exec cleared his throat and thought a minute.

„Who is this?”

„Edward. I'm in Brazil. On a beach. In the middle of goddamn nowhere. Alone! There's supposed to be a team out here. I have to learn that everyone's gone from some terrifying local who smells like an adult diaper—”

„They were flown out earlier this week.”

„You say that so casually, as if it's common knowledge,” Edward took on a more sarcastic tone and gave a precocious chuckle. „Yet here I am, the end of my travels—or what I thought was the tail end—and I'm finding out, hey, no one's here. Hilarious. They were flown out. Ugh, of course they were. And earlier this week. More than enough time to tell me, definitely before I even got here.” His tone took on more anger. He recognized that some, if not most, of the anger rising to the surface was over babysitting his dangerous, drugged-up goddamn brother but, at the same time, he was okay venting it at the incompetent goddamn exec (whose soul goal is to facilitate regional travels within the company—of which this particular trip should have been priority). By the end of his rage scream into the

phone, the exec had chartered a private plane to a local airstrip for Edward. It would be there before dawn.

He tried to learn exactly where it was that everyone headed but the location was so deep in the Amazon he'd never heard of it.

He tried to learn why the team headed so deep into the amazon but the details were vague.

He tried to learn anything of value from this goddamn exec but nothing of goddamn value ever left his goddamn mouth.

Edward hung up his cell phone.

It was dark.

The only light was that of the car's headlights, which he left on.

The ocean was calm that evening, the crystalline water gently licking against the shore. There was a moist, salty breeze in the air. It was brighter along the beach, in that nowhere he found himself. It wasn't darkness and mystery out passed the headlights, more gentle shades of blue. He could see all the way down the shore, see the coastline, all of it quiet. It was supremely calming.

Edward noticed none of it.

*How was I left in the dark?* he asked himself, considering both the situation and how he was literally, physically, at that moment, completely alone, in the dark, in the middle of nowhere.

Well, he wasn't entirely alone...

The ocean-dwelling local was still wandering around the nearby area.

Edward had been put off by the local and completely unwilling to speak with him until the man happened to say the name of Edward's company, one of the few things Edward could actually make out from the local's peculiar Portuguese dialect, which he spoke lightning fast. His hate-rant into the phone had scared the local off a bit but the slender local stayed close, pacing in the nearby sand, his left hand moving as if he were having a conversation with himself. Edward looked over at him and the haggard local looked up and the two men stared at each other. *He's mumbling to himself*, Edward thought—and that was enough to scare him off entirely so he turned and headed back to the car—

He could feel the local running at him.

Brave Edward did as he'd learned in the self-defense class (that someone from work got him for secret Santa) and he clutched his keys between his knuckles and swivel-jumped around, on wobbly knees, wincing, frightened, swinging wildly, sort of screaming...

The keys fell from his hand into the grass, and he opened his eyes.

The local was standing nearby, sort of leaning back. He was well-away from Edward's flailing. Even outside of the headlights' beam, Edward could tell the thin local wasn't especially impressed or surprised. (It looked like he was un-phased entirely, as he'd proly seen weirder things.) Edward, now truly staring at the local for the first time, in the beams of the headlights, realized the man couldn't have been older than nineteen or twenty. His face was scraggily, patches of beard. His eyes were aged and knowing but still somehow young, vibrant, curious. His arms were thin. His clothes were tatters.

The two, again, just stared.

And then the young local held up his hand and made a wide-fingered gesture, spreading and wiggling his fingers, and he said one word Edward knew.

„Spider?“

„Yeah yeah yeah,“ Edward agreed, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. „Spider.“

He stared at the local, quizzically.

„Come, come,“ the local nodded, surprising Edward by speaking English.

The local ran up a nearby embankment and behind some trees.

Edward pretended to follow him only to quickly turn back when the local wasn't looking. Beyond the shore was a dense forest full of who-the-hell-knows-what and Edward in no way wanted to come into contact with any of it (including one of the most poisonous spiders in the world, indigenous to this area AND nocturnal hunters); nor did Edward want to follow a crazy local into said dangerous forest.

It was silent but for the rush of the ocean over the shore and a rustling breeze...

Edward wasn't calm.

The stillness and silence were making him nervous. Curiosity had kept him there to see what the local was doing but his fear soon outweighed his curiosity. He didn't like stillness. He didn't like calm. He was used to the sound of traffic out his bedroom window and voices yelling down the hall and phones ringing and news channels and jazz music and the sound of clicking—text and keyboard and mouse and ATM machines and everything, everything clicked. He missed that. He missed the sound of incessant clicking. *Screw this place and screw that local and I hope my brother isn't dead, I should probably check—I'm out*, and he turned and bent down and found his keys in the nearby grass pile (*and screw that self-defense class, it was full of b.s.*).

A sound came from the forest.

It scared him, like a child that's heard a noise in his dark bedroom closet.

The sound was peculiar, not someone walking. It was long, slow.

It was a wide, with a whole lot of scraping.

It did not sound like the local.

Edward dropped his keys again.

He looked to make sure his brother was still nearby because he was definitely about to start screaming and running as if he was on fire—

The local emerged from the woods dragging something wide and heavy.

Edward's fear subsided but he didn't move an inch to help the local drag the giant object down the embankment toward the headlights.

As soon as it was close, Edward caught a whiff of its putrid scent. He instantly held back a gag.

The local was a dead carcass by its front and back legs.

Finally, the object was clearly laid out in front of the car.

It was the long-dead carcass of a large calf, one so rotted it barely held together by the spine. Its eyeballs were sunken in and black. Its tongue was dangling from its lips, also black. If that wasn't gross enough, the entire midsection of the animal had blown outward so hard the rib bones were bent outward and jagged; inside, the animal had been hollowed out entirely.

Edward couldn't hold it back any longer and vomited all over himself, the ground, the local's shoes, even the half-exploded dead animal.

The local ignored the vomit and kept saying the same thing over and over again. A short sentence but one Edward didn't know well. He didn't much care though, as he had picked up his keys (shaking off the puke) and hustled back to the car and got in and drove off. Minutes later, he was on a desolate back road heading towards a nearby airstrip. And the only thing running through his head were the words the local had been repeating. It became a mantra in his mind, like a song he couldn't get out of his head.

Suddenly, he slammed on the brakes.

His brother let out a loud grunt as he fell in the crevice between the front and back seats; then, he groaned.

„What's it mean when someone says...” and Edward repeated as best he could what the local had been repeating.

Miguel sat up in the seat and leaned over, nauseous.

He rest his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes.

„It means...” Miguel paused for a deep sigh, and then rolled down a window and spit out it, „...it means, like, ‚Nowhere's safe.‘ Like a warning. There's nowhere you can go. Why does it smell like vomit in here? Did I puke?”

## **Neighbourhood of Shady Maple**

**8:05 p.m.**

Assistant Fire Marshall Mike Hansel winds around the neighborhood of Shady Maple in his Chevy truck. The station had a truck for trips like this but Hansel likes his own personal truck much more. He flips on the headlights and makes a right turn. Darkness has begun its slow blanket and hints of blue are fading from the sky. He radios dispatch for an update on the second alarm.

„Dispatch, come in.”

„Dispatch here,” Tiny Pete chirps over the tiny box on the floor of the truck.

„Why'd the alarm sound?”

Hansel had left straight from the office without hearing the details behind the sounding of the fire alarm.

„There's an emergency is at the other end of Shady Maple, at old man Duragard's place.”

This information causes Hansel to stutter with an inordinate amount of questions. „Where? Where I'm go—wait, Dura—did he shoot another Mexican?! Where?” he asks again, this time to himself as he slows his car momentarily. He looks over in that direction, toward the three houses set apart from the rest of the neighborhood, where Duragard and the McLusters and that husband and wife whose name he can't remember live. It's about a kilometer off and there isn't much in the distance but darkness, and maybe the silhouette of the faraway houses. Nothing on fire but he can't see much. „Connect me to the Chief's radio.”

Chief Earl comes on the radio a minute later.

„Go.”

„Hey, I'm nearly—”

„...ugggh...”

Hansel stops speaking as the Chief's hand clenches the receiver tighter and the line stays open an extra second and captures a familiar grunt, the one Earl always makes when he climbs into the passenger seat of the fire truck.

Finally, the Chief gets comfy and lets go of the receiver.

„What was the emergency?” asks Hansel.

„Old man Duragard sent a repeating S.O.S. to the emergency channel on an old C.B. line. Deputies couldn't reach 'im by phone, couldn't reach the McLusters neither so they're takin' it seriously. Can you see anything?”

„They're a kilometer off, and dark.”

Hansel and the Chief had been to the plot of land just short of Duragard's house, had fought mightily against the fire that wiped out a good portion of the houses in-between. Several people hadn't made it from their homes before the fire began, and the torrential blaze spread mighty quickly, but the S.P.F.D. managed to salvage a majority of the western houses, as well as the three to the far east of the neighborhood; it had been a tragedy nonetheless.

„I don't see anything.”

„Eh, old man prolly saw a Mex'can. You know he sits starin' out toward the border with his rifle on his lap, just waitin' to shoot any spic he thinks is crossin' illegally?” The Chief laughs, probably because Tommy's within earshot.

„No, you don't understand,” Hansel interrupts. „I don't see anything. No lights in the windows. I can't even really see the houses, nothing. It's weird.” A moment's pause. „I got a bad feeling about this.”

„You always got a bad feeling. You at Gale's yet?”

„Pulling in now.”

„Over and out.”

Hansel pulls into the driveway, gets out of the car, and crosses the lawn. *There's a chill on the wind*, he notes. It had been bone dry weather but now there's a shiver in the air. He turns once more to give a glance back out to the distance, to the homes of Duragard and the McLusters and the married couple—something grabs him from behind.

Hansel quickly turns.

A frizzle-haired woman stands in the yard, her make-up smeared from crying. She shakes, petrified. It takes several minutes of hugging and rubbing her shoulder and calming sounds before Hansel can get the woman to speak, though she answers in few words the questions Mike Hansel tries peacefully to ask.

„Were you bitten?”

„N-a-na-na-nooooo.”

„Is your husband and daughter home?”

„Na-na-nooooo home.”

She's in shock, something Hansel has seen before (though never caused by a spider) from his early years as a medic, before he jumped ship for the fire department soon after. He was better suited for the fire department, always ready to leave and put himself at risk. This behavior, the risk and adrenaline, had had an adverse effect on his love life, though. He never settled, never put himself out there, never risked anything for them. The longer he stayed with someone, the worse it always became. He had foregone serious relationships long ago. He knew his effect on women, knew that they found him attractive. The station occasionally



received calls specifically requesting the Marshall and, as he arrived, the door would open to reveal a woman in yoga pants and something low-cut. Simple, in and out. No date. No personal information. And it was with the married women that he felt most comfortable, as they had a home, a family, and they only needed him for simple gratification; in fact, Hansel half-expected Gale to answer the door in lingerie but now he knows with certainty that, to her, this is a real emergency.

„Come back inside, show me where you saw it...”

Gale’s eyes light up, even more terrified at the prospect of re-entering her house, but she nods in agreement, cowering behind him, shaking, holding the scruffs of the short sleeves of his polo shirt as if she may blow away. Hansel hesitantly enters through the front door and looks around, checks behind corners... He’s caught up in her fear, overly cautious, careful with every step, when it dawns on him that he’s not there for an intruder, or a carbon-monoxide leak, nope—*oh, that’s right, it’s just a goddamn spider*. He shakes his head smiling and moves a little quicker, as there is a possible danger on the other side of the neighborhood. He checks through the bedrooms, bathroom, and living room areas, looking in corners and under furniture and in the closets, but there’s nothing.

„Whatever it was, it’s probably gone.”

Hansel calmly escorts Gale to the kitchen. It takes a good deal of effort to get her to let go of his shirt, as if she were a child that’d just seen her first horror movie and expected a monster to jump out at any moment. He uses both hands to pull her hands off and he clutches her shivering shoulders, turning her around and steadying her into a chair at the kitchen table. „Every light in the house is on, every corner lit,” he reminds her, heading over to the stove to boil water for tea after she’s finally seated. *Tea always calms people*, he had learned long ago. *Just making it signals a return to normalcy*. He asks if he might also have a drink and she nods and he pulls a can of Diet Coke from the fridge for himself, pops it open, taking several massive gulps (half the can) before setting it on the white porcelain countertop.

Now that she’s become a bit more relaxed, Hansel edges the story out of her detail by detail. Gale describes how she had been going through her daughter’s closet when a large, hairy, eight-legged devil spawn jumped at her. She had screamed and run into the hallway, where the spider continued to follow her. It mostly leapt instead of scurrying across the floor, sometimes attaching to the wall and leaping from there. She had run out of the house and down the street, assuming the spider was right behind her. When she slowed, she calmed long enough to call the police before, yard by yard, returning to her driveway.

„Well, good news is that it was large. Often times it’s the smaller ones you gotta worry about.”

„Wh—why?” Gale asks, hesitant for the answer.

„Well, sometimes small means babies. Spiders, scorpions, snakes, they have the inherent ability to save some of their venom when they bite, usually only about a third, but when they’re babies, they don’t know this so they use a higher dosage. No control, more lethal.”

„How do you know this?”

„I used to be a paramedic. Any ambulance ‘round here has most of the anti-venoms you need. Get a lot of rattler bites out here, some scorpions. Not many

spiders, though. They're out there but they're not as common because they don't go out of their way to attack humans. If you saw a spider, believe me—he was much more afraid of you than you were of him.”

„Somehow I doubt that.”

Hansel unhooks the radio on his belt and radios dispatch and informs Tiny Pete to alert the paramedics en route that the situation's been handled.

The water boils and he turns his back to her as he fixes a nice cup of hot tea.

Gale has her purse in front of her, fishing out a mirror to check her make-up. She complains about how she must look hideous but Hansel tosses the comment aside, assuring her that she's beautiful.

*Maybe this'll turn into one of the other types of calls after all, he thinks.*

Neither of them notices several small, pink baby spiders crawling on the porcelain countertop. One leads the other two as they cross the counter, stop, start marching forward again, zigging and zagging until they finally end up at the can of Diet Coke.

The first climbs the can, followed by the second.

Hansel pours the steaming water into a mug he pulled from the cabinet and steeps a teabag as he walks it over to Gale. She shoves the mirror back into her handbag, having successfully fixing her make-up back to its former glory.

The first baby spider climbs into the narrow hole atop the Diet Coke can as the third climbs toward the top.

The second spider follows the first into the can.

Hansel turns to face the counter. If his eyes had been on the can, he would have seen the third spider climb in but he's not looking at the can, he's looking at a picture on the counter, of Gale and her husband and their daughter.

„Where's Hank and... your daughter, what's your daughter's name?” he asks, picking up the can of Diet Coke off the porcelain countertop. He crosses the kitchen and takes a seat across from Gale at the table.

„Amanda. They're at the library fundraiser tonight.”

„When do you think they'll be...”

Gale cups the mug of hot tea with both hands, brings it to her face, sniffs it, and goes to take a sip—

„Don't... move... a muscle...” Hansel quietly commands her.

His eyes have already begun searching the table for something to throw. He had been prepared to throw the soda can clutched in his hand but decides the napkin holder in the center of the table has more weight and will make a better weapon.

Each of the legs twitch against the wall just behind Gale's head.

It's slowly climbing, sneaking.

It's hairy and brown and a lot bigger than she had described, a body diameter near 10 inches—like a hand with too many fingers.

Hansel knows immediately that, wherever this spider had come from, its home isn't Texas. He's never seen anything like it, that size and color; the closest thing is a desert tarantula but this is different, much different—of that he's certain.

It climbs the wall a few inches higher, cautious in each movement upward as if studying the people in the room, careful to remain unnoticed.

Hansel releases the can.

His arm slowly crosses the table. His hand grips the ceramic napkin holder (a colorful pig in farmer's clothes) and waits.

The spider scurries a few inches higher, this time quicker, but it stops dead once more. It's as if it knows it's been spotted and, like Mike Hansel, it's preparing for the perfect moment to strike.

Gale is frozen in terror, her eyes wide and watering again, squinting from the anguish of waiting, make-up again ruined. She can feel its presence behind her, feel it moving up the wall.

*vvvvvvvvvmm...*

A noise emanates from the wall, from the spider.

It's low and sounds like a tiny motorcycle engine.

Hansel jumps up to his full height—

—the spider leaps—

—and in one fluid motion, Mike Hansel chucks the napkin holder at the wall, narrowly missing Gale's head.

His shot is dead-on, catching the spider mid-air.

There's an explosion of ceramic and spider guts as the two smash against the wall, the impact cracking the tiling behind Gale.

There's a moment when the room is silent but for the landing of debris...

Mike Hansel breathes a sigh of relief.

„Got it,” he assures her, then chuckles.

Gale gasps and whimpers, still scared, and she gradually turns to look behind her at the mess on the wall. There's a green smear of dripping goo and a large dent in the wall. She can see the mangled remains of the intruder on the floor and, though horrified by the sight, she also sighs in relief.

„That was close,” Hansel laughs again.

He grabs his soda and takes a long, celebratory gulp...

Immediately, something's wrong, his soda is chunky—there's a sharp pain in his mouth and Hansel spits the fluid across the table. There's a ringing in his ears and the world goes silent. The liquid on the table moves. He doesn't hear Gale scream at a second spider, even larger in size, climbing the side of her cupboard; he doesn't even notice when, on his way out, a third spider jumps from the wall and attaches itself to the back of his shirt. He's panicked, searching, running, running for the door, for the air of the night, running toward the street, running. In the distance, he can see the lights of the fire truck as they shrink down the road toward Duragard's house. He tries to scream in their direction but his tongue is swelling and he can't hear anything besides an endless ringing. His blood feels hot, hot as it spreads through his body, hot as if boiling, as if his skin is melting from the bone. He falls to the ground in agony, a low gurgle erupting from the back of his throat in one final attempt to scream. His muscles spasm so hard that he nearly bends in half backward, so hard that he's completely incapacitated and unable to defend himself as an especially long-limbed, gangly spider crawls up his neck and crosses his ear on its way to his face...

## **The Empty Road of Shady Maple**

**8:15 p.m.**

It's been a long, silent couple of minutes inside the firetruck.

They've been parked in the middle of the road, dead-center the stretch of nothing and still some ways off from Duragard's and the other two homes at the end of Shady Maple. It's been several minutes of nothing but the sound of breathing: Chief Earl's congested, nasally breathing; Tommy's short, patient breaths; and, in the back, Adam's deep inhales and husky exhales. The windows had begun to fog so Tommy, in the driver's seat, turned on the cold defrost. Now the breathing is joined by the sound of air gently flowing through the cabin of the truck. (At first it's better at circulating the body odor of the three men than it is defogging the windows but, over time, the windows clear once more.)

Chief Earl reaches his stubby, thick arm and gently picks up the firetruck's console radio, handling the small, black plastic square as if it were delicate. He squeezes the trigger-like transmitter and speaks low:

„Tiny, come in.”

The squeaky voice of young Tiny Pete comes over the line instantly. He's seated at the Comms Room desk, back straight, eyes ahead at the tan painted cinder-block wall. He'd been in that position all night, as always. Alert and ready to focus when the time came but, until then, he was a blank slate. His mind had occasionally wandered, to thoughts of a sunny field of posies and butterflies or an oddly decorated snowman he'd once seen far up north. He'd smirk, then realize himself off task and refocus on the wall ahead, posture straight.

„Here, Chief. Over.”

„Find a way an' get a hold of that Spanish fella that called earlier about the spiders—”

„Portuguese,” Tommy corrects him.

Normally this would have infuriated Chief Earl but today he appreciates the correction and nods.

„—yes, the Portuguese fellow, get him on the line, put 'em through to me ASAP. And then find out why Hansel ain't respondin' to his radio.”

The Chief had radioed Mike half a dozen times over the last several minutes.

„Copy that.”

Tiny Pete disconnects from the line.

Wisps of thin, white thread dance in the headlights of the firetruck, swaying with the winds of the night. The sirens of the truck were silenced minutes earlier but the roto ray and top lights still spin and flash, highlighting the endless webbing in a glistening red and glowing blue. It looks like satin in the air, blankets and strips and thread. The floodlights shine atop the side view mirrors on each side, their propulsive lights firing into the darkness left and right. They find only more webbing the deeper they search into the empty surroundings. It's in every direction except the way they've come, above and on all sides.

They're on the precipice.

Chief Earl is genuinely haunted by the surreal beauty around him. The dusty, vacuous landscape has a blanket of calming white, one that radiates the colors of

the flashing emergency lighting. Threads and sheets pirouette up, caught in the heavy gusts of unending breeze.

A ways behind them, two police cruisers and an ambulance enter the Shady Maple neighborhood. Chief Earl sees this in the rearview and it reminds him of something („Damnit!”) and he rolls down his window and hollers for Chuck in the back to „ge’off the turntable and cram in”; then, he rolls his window up mighty quick.

Chuck had been sitting on the top-ladder, his mouth hanging loosely as he stared out over the winter-like surroundings. The scene alongside the road reminded him of the night his dog had torn apart the couch. Feathers and fluff lingered in the air even after he got home from work that night...although, unlike before, instead of being upset with the situation (though he could never stay too upset at his puppy-whuppy), this time it crept the bejesus out of him. The warm breeze was ending and it somehow carried with it a vacuum of sound. His view was even better than those of the men inside the truck, and Chuck could clearly see just how dark the road ahead lie. It appeared as if they were the sinewy entrance of an abyss. Though he also had the very distinct feeling that something moving out there in the darkness; or, more accurately, everything was moving out there. It was as if the earth and sky ahead joined into one large, pulsating mass of blackness.

He shuddered...

—and then a loud pang startled him so bad he froze and made a stupid face.

It was the passenger window.

He was being summoned inside.

Chuck opens the back door, steps inside, and takes a seat next to Adam in the back. Though he had been a bit nervous atop the firetruck, sitting across from his closest friend makes them both more fearless... if not also a bit cramped. They share many similarities, Adam and Chuck, but none more obvious than their large frames, like two lumberjacks stuffed into a tight space. They’re actually so similar that everyone always mistakes them for brothers, which is understandable. The men have crewcut brown hair and brown eyes, both always seem to have a perpetual five o’clock shadow, and they have stern demeanors that come with childhoods in strict households, as both had fathers in the military. Chuck has an under-bite (which causes him to have a slight lisp) and Adam is two inches shorter, at 6’2, but they are otherwise nearly identical. They’ve been exercise buddies, roommates, drinking partners, and co-workers for many years now, and nothing’s ever put a strain on their friendship.

The four-man team resume a silence broken only by the gushing air-vents and cautious breathing as they each stare out the windows of the truck cabin. Every so often there’s the soft squeak of nomex as Adam or Chuck shifts in the cramped back seats.

„—zzz Chief?!”

Each of the men shake in their seats, all of them startled by the abrupt static of the CB radio.

Chief Earl sighs a short relief and picks up the radio.

„What is it, Tiny?”

„I haven’t had any luck yet,” the young man informs them. „Over.”

The men groan at the uselessness of the information.

The Chief sets the radio back down and speaks very low to Tommy:

„Move the truck forward, get us to the houses. Slowly. I don't want any surprises.”

Tommy releases the break and puts the truck in gear, accelerating very little, letting the truck roll forward 10 yards, 20, 30...and then he abruptly stops. Chief Earl, Adam, and Chuck all jolt forward at the sudden stop and the Chief's irate instinct takes over—

„What'n the SAM HELL'er you try'na...”

—but then he sees the reason the truck stopped suddenly.

In the middle of the road is a massive clump of white, one at least three foot high, maybe six foot wide and four long. If that isn't bothersome enough, there's an odd, circular splatter design on the ground around the enormous mound, one similar to the chaotic blood-spray of an exit wound.

Tommy's attention turns out his window.

„Ay dios mio...” he whispers.

Normally this short spurt of Spanish would have sent the Chief off on another tirade but he doesn't notice. His attention joins Tommy's to stare out the driver's window. Chuck and Adam lean forward (practically crushing Tommy in order to give the Chief space) and they, too, look out at the windows on either side.

„What... is th—that?” Chuck asks, his increasing fear causing the lisp to become more audible.

The Chief uses an internal lever to move the flood lights stationed on top of the passenger side-view mirror. They used to have to roll down the window and manually turn the floodlights by hand; for the moment, Chief Earl thanks his God that the new truck has this upgraded feature because he's quite certain there's no way no how he'd roll down the window to stick his hand outside right now.

„Casa de les nubes...” Tommy mutters, under his breath.

*House of the clouds.*

They're flanked on either side by gothic structures cocooned in webbing, top to bottom. There's nothing recognizable as a house, only shrouds, each a monument of defeat.

And, for the first time, the men see their enemy.

They're just flecks in the light, shadows skittering across their newest conquest. The hordes have backed off from the flashing lights and strong beams of the fog lights on either side of the car, but they grow braver with each passing second, a quivering line of brown at the edge of darkness.

The men are outnumbered hundreds-to-one.

„Dear God,” Chief Earl quietly exclaims, sharing Tommy's previous sentiment.

They pause a moment.

There's a sound somewhere outside the car, like a thumping.

„What is that?” Adam asks, concerned.

The men listen carefully.

„Thounds like... muthic...” Chuck answers.

„Led Zeppelin,” Tommy clarifies.

The muffled music is emanating from inside one of the cocoons.

„Back the truck up, slow, stay slow,” the Chief tells Tommy, firmly. It’s the voice he uses when navigating crises which, in their line of work, was often.

He radios dispatch.

„Tiny, come in?”

„Here, sir. Spider guy, he called from the hospital—”

„Which hospital?”

„Our hospital, sir. I’m in the process of finding the room now. No luck with Assistant Fire Marshall Hansel. I’ll keep trying—”

„Forget that a moment, patch me over to the Sheriff.”

The line turns to static a moment.

Sheriff Roy Jacobs’ gruff voice comes on the line.

„Go ahead, Earl.”

He had been sitting in his office, picking his fingernails with an ivory-handled knife.

„Roy, your deputies are closin’ in on Duragard’s place—tell your deputies to stop, tell them to stop now, where they stand—STOP!” This final stop is directed at Tommy and Chief Earl swings his arm out across Tommy’s chest, as if to stop him from walking further.

The fire truck stops dead.

The road is beginning to flood.

Chief Earl continues speaking into the radio as all of the men look out at the water pouring over the road. “You need to call... someone, everyone—get them out here, Roy. And you need to do it now. Somethin’—somethin’ bad’s going on out here, get specialists, I don’t know—”

„Well, what is it?” Sheriff Roy croaks over the line.

The water passes under the truck.

In the back, Chuck asks anyone listening, „Did we busth the internal rethervoir?”

Chief Earl points to the source of the water.

It’s sprouting out of the lawn on the house to their left, Duragard’s place. If that hadn’t been enough to answer the question, a horrible stench rises. It’s the sewage line.

Finally, the Chief answers the Sheriff’s question...

„Spiders, Roy. Alotta Goddamn spiders.”

„You sure?”

„Yeah, Roy, pretty damn sure,” the Chief responds in a measured, serious drawl. „Radio the ambulance in Shady Maple and tell them to head to Gale Clarkson’s place immediately. Tell them to be very careful. Then send another unit to wait on the east edge of Shady Maple. Tell them to keep their windows up and their doors shut. Keep the hospital on stand-by. Over.”

„Copy.”

Adam begins to gag, choking out, „Ah, it smells like a port-a—”

There’s a massive explosion, so heavy and hard that the fire truck shakes.

The front door, awning, and a portion of the wall of the house to their left, Duragard’s place, burst into the street as something hefty propels out, crosses through the air, over the street, and into a house on the right, where it blows an enormous hole through the roof. A residual fireball licks up out of the gaping hole

in Duragard's house, one reaching dozens of feet into the sky before dissipating in the dark winds...

—for a moment, the hordes become visible in the light—

...and as soon as the light of the fire has vanished, sparks burst out from the roof of Duragard's house, and then out in broad fireworks across his front yard, brilliant white/orange bursts like bottle rockets. The muddy liquid flooding the lawn and street sizzles and smokes in the opaque reflection of the fire truck's emergency lighting.

The fire truck begins to move—

„Don't!" the Chief yells at Tommy.

„I'm not!" Tommy yells back, panicked.

The fire truck sinks to the right, then the left.

A brief static blares from the radio before it shuts off completely. The truck's engine idles a moment before dying. The lights go out, all of them except the flood lights as they run on battery power. The smell of burning rubber joins the stench of sewage inside the car. The sparks die down, fizzle out, and stop completely. The street ahead is dark.

The men await orders from their Chief.

He doesn't speak.

There's a noise from the street in front of them, a slopping, squishing sound that grows louder.

The Chief grabs the floodlight lever and twists it to face the street and—

All four men scream.

## **Amazon to Colombia** **6 Days Ago**

The regional exec didn't tell Edward that the flight would be on a tiny four-person plane and that the flight would be absolutely terrifying. Edward had planned to sleep in the back two seats during the two hour flight.

That didn't happen.

The pilot was a dirty, sweaty little man covered in bushy hair: on top of his head, on his face, even in tufts popping out the top of his shirt and on the backs of his hands, like a little fur ball. He met them at dawn on a small tarmac at the end of a single-lane dirt road. Edward hadn't felt more in the middle of nowhere in his whole life as he did at that „airport." There was no hanger, no signs, only oil drums and a long stretch of empty, flat land. (Driving there, he had had to use the exact GPS coordinates to find it.) The pilot was polite enough and greeted them; then he took a hearty swig from a glass bottle of Puerto Rican rum. Miguel, who was hardly awake and still visibly sick, asked for a swig. The pilot reluctantly handed over the bottle and then watched disappointedly as Miguel chugged a fair amount in consecutive gulps.

Even in the early dawn light, Edward could see the plane was covered in rust and hadn't been manufactured this century. Inside, there was a back seat cramped with machine bits, and comfortable passenger and co-pilot front seats. It



smelled of old beer. Edward climbed into the back seat still foolishly hoping to get some sleep; it was instantly painfully and too cramped. The seatbelt was trapped under what looked like a small carburetor. His knees touched the seats in front so hard he had to lift them up. Miguel climbed into the copilot seat which, even though he was much larger than Edward, still seemed pretty comfortable. Edward asked that Miguel move his seat up a bit, maybe give him some room; Miguel pretended to search the seat for a way to do so but gave up, citing it as fruitless and impossible.

It took the pilot three attempts to start the propeller.

Soon after, the pilot climbed into the cockpit, chuckling to himself. (Edward was pretty sure he ducked out of sight to finish the bottle and then tossed it in the grass behind the plane.)

The plane reversed to the back of the runway. Every rock and hump it hit jolted everything. Edward thought he was terrified before the plane had even taken off, only to realize real terror as the plane began to take off. It drove right back over the rocks and humps (which jolted everything even harder than it had the first time) only to lift, lower back to the ground (the pilot was cursing and pulling on seemingly random things around the cockpit), and then lift again...though not as quickly as it should have. They were fast approaching a line of trees and only at the last second did it appear they were going to clear them. Edward was going to be sick again. He tried to breath but all he could smell was rum cloaked in body odor.

They weren't in the air five minutes before Miguel pulled a joint and showed it to the pilot, who nodded approvingly, and to Edward, whose eyes grew wide with fear. The pilot cracked his window, letting in a hectic stream of air (which successfully blocked Edward's protests), and soon the entire plane was filled entirely with marijuana smoke.

Even with all of the fear and anger, Edward felt himself calming. It was probably from breathing in the weed, something he hadn't smoked in years. Little by little, as the smoke began to fade from the air inside the cockpit, so did Edward begin to doze. His eyes grew heavy. His thoughts scattered. His head began to nod—

„Jesus, we're going to die!" Miguel screamed.

The plane took a nose dive.

Edward woke up, his heart racing.

The air was screeching through the window.

The pilot was dead or passed out.

The plane was going faster, at a steady decline.

He choked, trying to say something or scream or cry out—

Miguel laughed and pulled back on a lever over his lap.

„I'm just kidding," he laughed.

The plane leveled out.

„Wha—what about the pilot?" Edward asked, still in shock.

„I told him he could sleep for an hour." Miguel flicked a compass. 2We just gotta head northwest another hour and a half."

Miguel lit another joint and cracked his window, letting in an extra stream of air.

It took several minutes for Edward to stop hyperventilating.

By then, he had no response, not that it would've been heard.

Edward just set his head down on the machine bits beside him (which he quickly learned had a fresh, thin layer of motor oil) and tried to forget about everything, like that his brother was high and flying a plane without any training, or that the pilot was in a drunken slumber. His body was shaking but, by then, he had experienced enough traumas that it was becoming the norm.

Eventually, the pilot woke grumpy.

Edward continued to tune out the world. His eyes were closed. He was thinking of girls he had dated, things in his apartment he appreciated, the amount of money in his savings account (and how it would grow from the massive amount he was going to request for his troubles on this trip), and any other thing that crossed his mind that he liked about his life. He didn't think about his last breakup or that he was single. He didn't think about his last couple of dates, which had been horrible. He didn't think about his coworkers, as they were rude...

Once again, the stench of smoke filled the cabin—

„Can you stop smoking?!” Edward finally screamed.

„That's not us, bro...” Miguel responded.

The pilot cursed.

Edward opened his eyes and looked out of the plane.

There was a vertical wall of gray, a willowy partition that rose to the clouds.

An epic curtain of smoke encompassed a large section of the forest and sky in the nearby western horizon.

And there was no fire.

„How do we pass it?” he asked the pilot.

„Pass it?” the pilot asked, quizzically. „That's where you're headed.”

And the plane suddenly took a sharp decline. (Edward suspected the pilot made the dramatic shift just to mess with him.) There was a long, slim patch of land that had been recently cleared for an airstrip. Edward closed his eyes and breathed through his nose and squeezed the bejesus out of the seat cushion while the plane went faster and the whoosh of the wind picked up and Miguel hooted and hollered and held up both hands as if it were a roller coaster, and the pilot laughed manically (Edward was starting to suspect him of being the devil incarnate).

Landing succeeded in scaring him even more than the take-off; so much so, in fact, that he lost consciousness for about 45 seconds.

The hairy, short-and-pudgy pilot was out of the plane before anyone else and running (well, shuffling quickly) for the nearest secluded area to relieve himself. Miguel exited shortly thereafter, in fine spirits. He stretched and yawned and smiled and admired the dense wall of forest surrounding them. He'd never been out this far; it felt like a beautiful new world. Edward was last, forced to wedge himself passed the passenger seat and crawl from the plane. Once he was standing on solid ground, he felt an electric tremor of spinal pain, the direct result of his cramped seating the last two hours. He hadn't slept in weeks, it felt like. And now he was breathing the fiery air of the amazons. It was extremely hot and supernaturally humid. Sweat had formed on his brow the moment the plane stopped and now it was swamping his armpits and groin—and there were bugs, everywhere bugs, hundreds of different bugs swarmed in every direction.

No one was there to meet them.

Hell, he didn't even see any roads leading away from the cleared strip.

Miguel wandered off a bit to check out the surroundings and smoke another joint.

The pilot was disappeared (grunting was coming from nearby brush).

Edward checked his phone and found five missed calls and numerous voicemails, text messages, and e-mails. He wasn't sure if he had missed everything because of the noise in the airplane or due to bad reception. Reading them over, listening to the voicemails, each detail made him groan...

At least he was receiving current information, finally.

„Back in the plane,” he called out to Miguel, who was inspecting the leaf of a very large plant. He had found some weird bug and was blowing weed smoke on it, but turned when Eduardo called him back.

The two had a brief conversation that they had to leave and head north; then, how Edward thought his brother's behavior thus far had been inappropriate. They had a brief argument in Portuguese.

„Can't you stop doing drugs for like five minutes?”

„Of course I can stop, why?”

„Yeah? I don't think I've seen you sober since I've been here. Unless you count sleeping.” He paused, thinking of their mother. „You ever gonna act like an adult?”

„Ten years, you're back home one day...” He wanted to say more but found only a single sentence. „You don't know anything about me.”

„—Maybe I don't want to... and this isn't home.”

The words took a moment to settle.

Miguel had meant it as an invitation, for his brother to learn about him, for them to learn about each other, for them to get back to their roots—it was the point of joining the trip; Edward, on the other hand, reverted to his roots, becoming defensive.

Their childhood hadn't been sunshine and rainbows.

The conversation would have continued but the pilot came from out of the nearby brush, pulling up his pants and wiping his hands on his sweaty clothes. The sweat-soaked, pudgy pilot gave a disingenuous wave goodbye and headed back to the plane—

Edward ran over, stopping him, and hurriedly explained the situation.

The pilot took out an old cell phone and dialed a number and walked off to speak privately with someone, presumably a boss or whoever had hired him for his services.

Edward, standing closer to the plane, was about fifteen feet away from his older brother. They stared at one another for a moment and Edward felt a familiar desertion: just as it was when he was alone on the beach with the slender local the night before, Edward felt as if he was totally alone and staring at a stranger. His brother, on the other hand, felt a great deal of sympathy for his younger brother. Both men, oddly enough, were thinking the same thing about one another:

*He's lost his way.*

And then—bumps jolting the tiny plane—Edward cramped, hyperventilating—stench of booze and sweat—more goddamn weed smoke—sheer turns—

...the flight onward, to Colombia, was four terrifying hours of déjà vu.

Edward's blood-pressure had never been higher by the second landing.

This time, however, an outdoorsy-looking man was waiting for them beside a jeep just away from the next landing strip. The athletic, tan-skinned man was dressed in cargo shorts, a button-up, short-sleeved, green bush shirt, and a wide-brimmed cap, with sunglasses. His name was Derrick and he greeted them, laughing, „I hear you went all the way to the coast.”

Edward was glad to hear English again. „Why the hell am I so far behind on information?” he asked, careful not to be harsh, merely curious. He liked Derrick, who had only recently become the assistant project coordinator.

„This is a bit more hush-hush than usual,” was his ominous answer.

Derrick checked to see if anyone was near them.

The pilot was off into the brush again (and grunting).

„Who's that burly drink of Brazilian cachaça?”

Derrick was talking about Miguel, who had walked away to take a piss. Even at a distance, Edward could tell his brother was pissing into the breeze. Miguel must've also noticed that he was getting some feedback on his urine stream because he stumbled a bit, recovered, and turned to piss in a different direction—the direction of the other two men, coincidentally, causing him to inadvertently expose himself to Derrick and Edward. (Miguel freed one hand to give a friendly wave to the newcomer, noticing both men were watching him piss.)

„That's... my brother,” Edward admitted.

(Derrick sort of waved back.)

„Truth is, we don't know the situation,” Derrick continued. „Big wigs are keeping a lid on it until we do. Seems you got trapped outside the lid for a bit.”

Miguel formally introduced himself soon after (Derrick rightfully refused a handshake) and then they were off in the jeep and speeding down a dirt road deeper and deeper into thick forest. It was horrifically hot there, even hotter and more humid than their last stop, but the sight of a co-worker and air through the topless jeep began to calm Edward. They were still speeding too fast for his liking, and every bump into the road led to a jolt (much like the airplane) but now he felt a bit safer, a bit more secure. He wasn't untethered anymore, and slowly adjusting into work mode.

Derrick went on as they drove toward the destination.

„The area's being evacuated. Most of the team's already flown north. There's only a few of us still left here.”

„Just tell me what the hell's been going on...”

„How about I just show you?”

They were fast approaching a makeshift checkpoint with two armed guards. Derrick pulled up, spoke to the two men briefly, and then continued on.

„What was that? Did we cross into Colombia?” Edward asked, as the guards were local and not from their company.

„We're already in Colombia, yeah, but they're from the Columbian government. They've quarantined the area and they're gonna torch it, just like Brazil.”

Edward thought a moment.

He felt he had small pieces to a large puzzle.

Nothing made sense.

„Start from the beginning,” he finally prodded.

„What about your brother?” Derrick responded.

Miguel was in the back of the jeep, admiring the jungle around him.

„He wouldn't listen even if you told this directly to him. And he's stoned. And he doesn't speak English so, I'd say it's safe.”

„Well, the beginning, that was some time ago. We were doing our bi-annual field checks on coastal predators about two years ago and we got to a coastal spider of the genus Phoneutria. Second most poisonous spider on earth. Nicknamed 'cocoa spider' by the locals because of its fuzzy brown color, diameters as large as 14 inches. Incredibly venomous species but it's otherwise unspectacular. Basic habits include nesting in the trees and bananas. Nocturnal hunters. Migratory within a coastal perimeter of maybe a couple dozen miles. Pretty standard. So we get there and they're gone. Without a trace.”

„Okay, so... I'm assuming they're not extinct?”

„It was a possible conclusion at the time. The coastline had risen a bit and it was driving the spiders deeper into the forest, a habitat they weren't exactly accustomed to. So, the assumption was that their containment area had changed from the coastline and we couldn't find them. From there, we can't do much. Species either adapt or die. So we moved on. Cut to, a month ago: Deep village in the amazon was found...” Derrick breathed heavily a moment. He'd never seen Derrick act so particularly bothered, like a haunting nightmare that never quite left the back of his mind. His expression reminded Edward of an article about soldiers with PTSD. „I saw it... just before they burned it all, I saw them...” It took him a moment, and recollecting the story had a very real physical reaction. „Everything was webbed. Thick like cotton candy webs. And it was,” he drew a large circle in the air with his index finger, „all around the village, nest radius of a quarter mile—I've never seen anything like it before. Impenetrable until we got some serious equipment...”

*Derrick and the older Ops. runner McCoolidge got an extensive order flown to them straight from operations headquarters. They dressed in hazmat suits and hacked into the thickets of web with gas-powered saws and machetes. It was dead silent in the nest, as if they were in a soundproof booth.*

*They found the animals first, floating in the webs as if frozen in water.*

*Then, there was a small human body.*

*The trees overhead disappeared as the two men went deeper and deeper. It was like they were lost in a bright white and opaque fog.*

*More bodies.*

*It took hours before they reached the village...*

„They must've been there for weeks, maybe months. Worst thing I've ever seen. Bodies... Once we made it to the village, the bodies were everywhere. Some had run and we, uh, we found them.” *Derrick didn't mention that he suspected the spiders had built a parameter around the village to catch any fleeing prey. It was a theory, unproven, but he would bet his money on it, that they had in some way trapped them.* „All of them... every person we found, each of them, when we cleared away all the webs out of their faces, they all had the same expression.” He

was staring ahead but no longer concentrating on the road. “Their mouths were open and twisted like... like they were-were between screaming and yawning. And their skin was blue—some were gray. Bloodless but... preserved.” He was visibly disturbed and growing more so.

Edward asked him to talk about something else.

Before continuing, he added one more cryptic detail. „Men, women, children, they were all just, they were all so... Whatever happened, none of them saw it coming.”

Derrick sighed it off, shook his head, and returned to a calmer state.

„The initial emergency was—we didn’t know what we’re dealing with. Anytime life is lost, people want to point fingers. At first, we were just covering our ass. It was sheer luck that we even got wind of this first. McCoolidge’s group was about six hours north so he personally responded to Brazil first. I was second, while a response team was assembled and sent. There was evidence...”

They were able to capture a few and positively identify the species.

Derrick began explaining the research they were able to briefly conduct before the Brazilian government burned everything to the ground, and Edward caught some of it but a lot went over his head.

„We begged them not to burn it.”

„How many did you find?”

„Of the Phoneutria? The majority were gone. No trace. So the threat was mostly gone. We caught a few but they were almost dead since the food supply had been exhausted. And the ones we caught were smaller, on average. Or wounded.” He sighed. “There were a lot of answers buried in that mess and they just burned it.”

„How have they migrated so far?”

„How indeed...”

Edward turned around and reached into a bag in the back seat of the jeep. He was surprised to find his brother there—he had momentarily forgotten Miguel was still with them. He turned back in his seat and opened a map. „Just in Brazil that’s over 3,000 miles north, northwest... then northwest,” he continued to map the trajectory he himself had been taking, „another 1,000 miles? That’s not possible.”

„We think they’ve been using a form of aerial migration,” Derrick answered, partly morose at the idea of spiders in the air but, also, a bit excited at the prospect of such a peculiar, spectacular form of adaptation.

Edward chuckled, looking over the map.

„Flying spiders, huh?”

„Not quite.”

Edward hadn’t initially taken him seriously. He looked up, curious.

„Now that we’ve gotten large quantities of their webbing...”

Derrick science’d the conversation again, losing Edward in the process.

He noticed and quickly loosened his vocabulary.

„Their webbing is unlike anything I’ve ever seen—no, no, it’s like nothing that’s ever existed on Earth before. Their silk makes them... more than unique. The protein fiber has an elasticity—and durability, it’s like, it could be the future of cloth. It’s got to be the key to how they migrate so far.”

„So they’ve changed, they’ve... adapted... right?”

Derrick guffawed.

„Yeah, they adapted. They adapted to climate change. They adapted their hunting patterns. Their nesting habits. Literally everything we knew about them two years ago is now inaccurate. They’ve changed so much, we have to start over.”

They hit a curve in the road and stopped.

Miguel stood up in the back seat and stared ahead, his mouth agape.

Edward was speechless.

„We found this site because we could actually see it from a satellite,” Derrick explained.

Ahead of them was a wall of webbing, one that cut off the road, one so dense they couldn’t see into it, and it extended to the very tops of the trees.

„Whoa-whoa whoa, that’s close enough,” Edward panicked.

He suggested they back up a good distance.

„You’re much more likely to find something dangerous out here. I can guarantee, in there, everything’s dead.”

## **Duragard’s House**

**7:51 p.m.**

A window breaks inward, the bathroom window—it already had a long crack and easily gave way under the pressure. “I’m glad it’s you I’m with, ‘cause this next part is gonna suck,” and Duragard keeps petting Biscuits behind his ear. The wall and carpet nearest the bathroom door shifts, wobbles, moves, as dozens of long-limbed, hairy brown spiders crawl over every surface. “You’ve always been such a good boy.”

Biscuits keeps his head on his lap but glances up, unimpressed.

„Eh, well...”

The sun is setting outside.

Nightfall is fast approaching.

Or maybe it’s just the web entombing the house.

„You know, one day they’re gonna say, ‘You ‘member the day when the clouds rolled in?’“ he tells his golden Labrador while fishing for the stereo remote. It’s squished between the cushions like always. Duragard zones out when the music’s on, though he’s never able to turn it up as loud as he’d prefer—the McLuster family (the father specifically) had been especially vocal on the volume of the bass when Duragard blasted his „devil music.” So Duragard would play it at a moderate volume, and he’d zone out, absentmindedly setting the remote at his side only to forget about it and sit on it later.

He finds the remote and lifts it to his eyes. Even though he’s used it a million and a half times, he still needs to check the buttons.

Biscuits whimpers at the imminent danger they’re in.

Duragard’s joint muscles are tense, sore—a normal pain for him, of course, except this was different; he had been bitten only moments before by a large, probably dangerous spider... venom is now coursing through his body, and it caused a much more pronounced feeling in his aches and body throughout. Oddly

enough, his most common, debilitating pain—his knee—is gone, and he’s noticing that, little by little, he’s... completely ache-less. He hadn’t recognize the species of spider that bit him (he did recognize, however, that it certainly wasn’t a homegrown-Texan spider), not that it matters—more are coming, many more, dozens, crawling and pouring in through his broken bathroom window.

His rancher’s already covered in web, like a giant puff of cotton candy. The Francis- and McLuster-family houses are also ensconced in thick webbing, though he can no longer see out the windows to verify just how ensconced. Once the spiders had blown into this end of the neighborhood, each house (and those unlucky enough to be outside) had succumbed to the swarms.

„A little mood music,” he chuckles, continuing to squint down at the many small buttons on the damn remote, trying to—he hits power and the stereo system lights up. It’s a Sony, possibly the most expensive thing in the house.

The spiders have overwhelmed the back portion of the house. Pictures hanging on the faux-wood paneled walls crash against the floor. The walls and floor crawl in dashing, leaping browns and the low patter of a 1,000 furry feet thumping. The living room and the bedroom adjacent are the only two areas yet occupied but the tiny army passes the kitchen and front door...

They reach the living room threshold and enter without hesitation.

Biscuits lifts his head. Crossing the carpet is an especially big, mean-bastard looking one, brown with wide, grotesque black lines along the body. Until now Biscuits had been scared, confused. He had cried, knowing full well something was approaching. But he didn’t know what. And his master’s been weirdly calm. This worries Biscuits most, as his master complains about everything, at great length, all the time. Seeing that hairy, long-legged bastard cross the living room carpet, however, really pisses Biscuits off. This is his house. His teeth bare. A growl low blusters low in his belly at first but rises in volume. And then 10 more—not one and then another and then another—10 more ugly, fuzzy, googly-eyed spiders scurry along the wall and carpet, with more following.

Some stop and stare from the wall.

Some crawl over others.

„Here we are...” Duragard says, calm as a cucumber, and he hits the play button on the remote.

The venom, though killing him, has provided an extreme sense of euphoria (at least in its initial stages) and an overwhelming numbness has spread through his body. He can move his arms and legs but he can’t really feel them, like field-ration morphine from his days in the army. It’s amazing. The dying has actually caused him to, momentarily, feel less pain than he has in months—maybe years. He feels clear-headed. Serene.

*There’s a moment’s pause between hitting the button on the remote...*

Biscuits has his head off of his master’s lap. He’s not really laying, either; he’s low, tensed, ready to jump and bite and chew on as many of these hideous things as he can.

Several of the spiders leap forward as several dozen more enter, enough to coat the already-brown wall in fuzz and beady black eyes. Those that leap don’t land on the couch, where Duragard and Biscuits sit, but the coffee table and around the



room, scattering, climbing behind things, under the table, behind the stereo, up the giant speaker box.

...the stereo registering the command...

Duragard is ready to get this over with...

Biscuits is ready to pounce, and he barks a warning for these little assholes to leave before it's too late...

...And the music plays.

The opening chords of Led Zeppelin's *Bron-Y-Aur Stomp* blasts from the speakers. On any other occasion, volume at this level would almost certainly illicit a call to the police by the McLuster father. *Not enjoying things must be a prerequisite for a religious zealot.* The thought makes Duragard smile.

The music is so loud, the bass thumps heavy in the walls and floor.

„Josh may be an asshole but at least he got his taste in music from me,” Duragard tells his dog. He's talking of his son. He could have been a better father to the boy but, then again, maybe Josh could have been a better son. And it was the boy who had bought him the stereo, and the album that's currently playing—Led Zeppelin's *III*, his favorite.

And then it happens, a moment of clarity...

Duragard stares at the wall, his face somber. A thought crosses his mind. He looks at Biscuits. His face gets stern, which Biscuits knows signifies his owner is deep in thought. The old man looks back at the wall. Down. At the spiders. A tiny smile crosses his lips, and he pulls the knife from his boot.

Several of the spiders nearest the stereo, at the bombastic thumps of the music, begin to twitch and stop moving entirely. The others, those that had been in the room, stumble and jumble confusedly, shaking left and right like crabs.

It's the vibrations from the music; the heavy bass shakes the floor, the walls, the ceiling—the whole house, every inch shivering like an internal earthquake, like every note is a small explosion.

„Can't balance when the world's shakin'?” Duragard mumbles under his breath; then, louder, „Can't ya, ya little bastards?!” and he laughs, not really paying attention to the spiders anymore. He has the bitten leg bent over the other knee so that his calf and the spider bite are visible. His leg below the tourniquet has grown bluish. With the knife from his boot, he slices an X over the bite and struggles, bending down to suck the poison out. Ironically, if it weren't for the numbness in his extremities caused by the venom of the bite, Duragard never would've been able to accomplish even this feat; however, because his joints no longer ache and his bones are no longer as intensely brittle, he bends with ease, partially lifting his leg up, sucking at the wound and spitting the poisoned blood to the floor. He does this a few times until he feels he's gotten as much out as he can; then, he puts his leg down without dressing the wound, letting it bleed further.

He checks his watch: 8:00 p.m.

By his estimates, he has maybe half-hour before his entire body shuts down.

Half-hour, if that...

...half-hour to make it out of the house and out of the neighborhood and to the nearest hospital...

He needs a notebook.

His attention returns to the spiders. He stands and, though Biscuits wants to follow, he motions for the dog to stay on the couch.

*SQUISH-SQUISH-SQUISH*—Duragard stomps (using his better leg) on the spiders closest, those most disoriented and unable to retreat from the heavy vibrations of the living room. Goo mashes into his carpet and the bottom of his slippers. Some try to jump, flinging themselves into the wall. Unable to latch onto the vibrating walls, each falls unsuccessfully, landing disoriented with a thud.

Duragard sticks his hand into the closet between the living room and front door.

„I'ma get each'a ya bastards,” he giggles manically, and pulls out a metal snow shovel.

He twirls the snow shovel upside-down with a certain sense of glee and goes to town stamping the hell out of the spiders. He smashes the wall. Turns it sideways like an axe and hacks at the unstable horde. They're shifting, trying to retreat back towards the bathroom from which they came. Duragard's just buying himself space, though enjoying himself thoroughly as he does so.

He carefully checks the kitchen floor and down the counter, to the sink, and it all appears free of spiders. He sets the snow shovel against the porcelain counter.

There's a notebook on his kitchen's wrap-around counter and he stands a moment between the counter and the front door. He grabs a felt-tip pen in a nearby jar and begins scrawling on the first blank sheet of the pad. It had been unused for so long, as there hadn't been many messages to transcribe—aside from his numerous doctor appointments. Duragard looks at his stove (which is still smoking black from the cooking spiders inside), then back over to the ceiling above the front door. He turns back to the pad and adds angles, with their degrees included. It's crude (his old Lieutenant never would've accepted it) but it'll do for this. He holds his thumb out, one eye closed, and sizes up the distance between the center of his kitchen and the ceiling about a foot in front of the door, nearly over his head but for a few feet forward.

Finished, he holds up the diagram and admires it.

*But first!* he thinks to himself.

„It's gonna get wet,” Duragard yells to Biscuits.

Not that the dog could hear him over the music, or at all, ever, anyway. The golden Lab had long ago gone deaf. The only sound Biscuits still seems capable of hearing is the opening of a beer bottle, as it must do more than make a noise when that pressure is released.

With his good leg, Duragard kicks out the pipes under his sink. Water sprays in all directions, across the floor and up through the sink, on the kitchen counter, out towards the door, everywhere.

This is a problem common to all the houses in the area, the thin piping. On top of that, because of the easy flooding, each house has the capacity to flood their own septic tanks, which rest under each house and front lawn. Something about the overflow and added weight of flooding water causes the main septic hose to burst; then, the lawns of each house will overflow with liquid sewage. It's happened on many occasions in the neighborhood, a result of cheap planning by the city and cheaper supplies from the contractor. The housing is old, of course, but the new mayor has cut back on a lot of the town's infrastructure, including

Waste Management and the Public Works. Duragard still likes the mayor's austerity measures, as they work toward job creation and lower taxes, eventually.

Duragard exits the kitchen with a jaunty two-step, kicking up water as he makes his way to the closet once again to pull out his yellow rain slicker. He loves this song. *Bon-Y-Aur Stomp...*

*as we walk down the country lanes, I'll be singing a song  
hear me calling your name  
hear the wind within the trees  
telling Mother Nature 'bout you and me*

On the top shelf of the closet, next to his hunting caps, there's an old roll of duct tape. He grabs it and also one of the masks that he used to wear when he'd winter hunt in the Dakotas, the one with black mesh over the mouth for easier breathing and eyes cut out in a large, cylindrical hole for goggles. It's also got a long sleeve for the neck, to tuck it under a winter coat and long johns and prevent that chill from sneaking in; once the cold got in, it never left. During his winter hunting, he would spend hours against the ground, waiting, watching. The ground, snow, the wind, the sky... that cold would be creeping from every angle. And then a doe would cross the field and he'd breathe slowly...

Duragard shakes these thoughts from his head and grabs a pair of work gloves from the floor of the closet.

The house had been cocooned in webbing so exhaustively that no light from the outside could get in. It had gotten dark, then darker, and darker, until Duragard couldn't tell if it was even night outside. He turns on as many lights as he can.

On the way to the couch, he stomps on the last few disoriented spiders still stumbling around.

Biscuits looks up, still curious.

„It's gonna get wet. And loud,” he hollers over the music.

Biscuits nods.

There's a moment while they stare at one another.

Duragard's adrenaline is pumping so hard he had expected more of an acknowledgement. He snaps out of it and leads the dog into the bedroom and onto the bed. And then he looks down at his old friend. With a motion and a few soft words, „Lay, old boy,” Biscuits does as he's shown. Then his master surveys the bedroom.

Seems to be spider-free.

With the flip of a few switches, he turns on his C.B. radio and sets it to repeat an emergency S.O.S. signal in Morse code; then, he undresses. He puts on deodorant and a pair of fresh socks and underwear, just because fresh socks and underwear always feel so good and if he's goin' out, he's goin' out in a pair of fresh socks and underwear. He bends down and reaches deep into his dark closet—one of those goddamn bastard spiders leaps from a back corner of the closet. Duragard, showing a surprising flexibility, falls back as the creature hops clear over him (there's a moment where time feels as though it's moving in slow motion and Duragard can actually see the underside of the leaping beast)—Biscuits snarls and barks—and as the furry, long-limbed son of a bitch lands square in the center

of the room, Duragard rolls with his fall and swings his left hand over, in which he's was clutching the top edge of his knee-high fishing boot—

There's a thick *SPLAT* and a cyclone of green-ish goo that reaches as far as the curtains.

Duragard and Biscuits just stare at the remains.

It had happened so fast that Duragard was just as surprised at his nimbleness as Biscuits, and the side of the boot had slammed so hard that both were caught off guard. „Still got it,” Duragard brags to Biscuits, trying to sound confident that he knew he was still capable of such things, though doubt remains audibly present in his voice.

He quickly searches for any more spiders and doesn't find any.

He pulls out the other knee-high fishing boot. Hanging on the rack is a turtle neck sweater and a pair of black gore-tex fishing trousers, complete with suspenders, and he grabs them, too.

It takes him three minutes to dress.

Biscuits watches, enrapt, as his owner disappears behind layer after layer of clothing. Thick, plastic, water-proof fishing trousers. Creepy camo face mask. (Biscuits can still see his owner's reassuring eyes.) 30 year old brown turtleneck sweater. Yellow rain slicker, hood pulled up. Work gloves. Rain boots. Then he duct-tapes around the sleeves, the boots, even his neck.

The newly-armored Duragard checks himself over. Again, he admires his work. He looks down at Biscuits. Biscuits gives an inquisitive look back. Duragard gives the pup a final sympathetic glance and then turns to his dresser, grabbing one item, then another, and then he bends beside his precious best friend.

„Hey, buddy,” he says, soothingly. „I'm just going to apologize now 'cause this is probably gonna suck, boy.”

—and Duragard brings both hands forward.

In one, he has cologne; in the other, baby oil with vitamin E and aloe vera that he'd been using to hydrate his skin. Biscuits tries to back away as Duragard sprays one and dumps the other all over the dog; then, all over himself. When he's done, he stops a moment and, a bit late, out loud he asks himself, „Wait, can spiders smell?... am I thinkin' a snakes?...”

*Does it even bother snakes?*

He looks at the cologne, entirely unsure.

*Eh, either way, they'll have a hell of a hard time with us.*

„Stay.”

He calms Biscuits and then heads back to the kitchen.

The water's still spraying from the kitchen, drenching the floor all the way to the outer lining of the living room carpet. It's only a matter of minutes before the water weight will cause the septic tank to burst and flood the front yard with sewage.

Duragard pulls the black gas stove out from the wall, careful not do disconnect the gas line; instead, he pulls the wire-tubing from its wall ties (making a *snick-snick-snick* as it breaks off the plaster); then, he better maneuvers the stove and angles it back. Water from the sink is spraying everywhere but he just ignores it. He refers to the diagram on the kitchen counter, poking his head up to see the

angles he drew and the degrees he labeled them with—only to get water on his face. His attention returns toward the front of the house, at the main circuit breaker just passed the kitchen threshold. It's higher off the ground and several feet over from the front door. Duragard grabs things from around the kitchen to prop the back-bottom of the stove up. Everything's wet. He bends down to face it and holds his thumb and forefinger out, trying to measure in his mind the trajectory of the stove. When he feels that he's successfully angled the gas stove to hit the circuit breaker, he pulls out the metal gas cord from the back of the stove. The cord itself is a thick aluminum but still malleable to a degree, like an old payphone cord but sturdier. It's still mounted to the ceiling but pulled out from the wall. He opens the oven, which is full of the cinders of spider corpses, and he keeps it set to 400 degrees, and he angles the jagged end of the metal tube spewing natural gas (he can smell the methane immediately) at an upward angle toward the inside of the open stove front, letting all the flammable gas fill the oven's hollow cavity and kitchen.

Duragard grabs and unplugs his toaster before moving to the living room.

First, he plugs in the toaster (luckily it had been too far under the top cabinets and behind the faucet and pipes to get wet); then, he lifts the stereo higher off the ground as water is everywhere and flooding more so each moment. (He can smell the sewage already.) The whole front would be flooded in minutes, and then the street. Duragard always blamed the Mexican day-laborers that probably built the house for such easy, disgusting flooding, though sometimes he recognized that maybe the city or construction company was partially responsible. Right now, however, he's thankful it's so shoddy and fast.

There's a *Guns and Ammo* magazine on a nearby shelf and he shoves it into the toaster and presses down the handle. It'll heat, hopefully catch fire, and then ignite the gas when it reaches the living room, which should dart back to the source, thus blowing the stove out through the breaker box.

End result:

The main wire harness will loosely swing down and drop into the flooding waters of the kitchen, which will increase the amps and electrify anything within 60-some yards of the house (or as far as the water extends, if it doesn't reach a 60 yard parameter).

Once he's back in the bedroom, as he and Buscuits curl up together on top of the box spring, and he pulls the mattress over them—keeping it firmly between them and the doorway—only then does Duragard laugh at the absurdity of his plan. Maybe it was all dementia, from the spider venom coursing through his blood. He hugs his dog close.

And he waits for the explosion.

## **Mexico 2 Days Ago**

Edward seldom left the hotel. He began working feverishly the moment he had a foothold in the situation. The curtains were closed 24/7 though every lamp was

on. Each wall had a map on it. The room adjacent was Miguel's, the door in-between the rooms always open so Edward could keep track, but his older brother disappeared most of the time they were in Mexico. Edward didn't much care where his brother was, to be honest. He didn't have time to and he didn't care about anything except work, as was the case when he got a serious project. It was time to work, obsessively, and food and sleep and family and life would just have to wait. He barely even stood up from his makeshift desk, only to check maps, place markers, or infrequently use the bathroom. Hours and hours he sat at his work station, which was actually a weak table built into the corner wall. His eyes shifted from screen to screen to tablet to phone as he sat amidst the tangled, zig-zagging black wires of countless electronic devices, such as the portable wifi to keep his data encrypted, a laptop with a secondary screen that only displayed footage from U.S. and South American news, a printer-slash-fax machine, two cell phones, and various other things.

„The site in Colombia was burned soon after I got there,” he was telling his Asian counterpart, who was currently working near Indonesia. (The two men had the same jobs, for the same company, just in different regions of the world.) Edward paused as the man spoke, then continued. „I got as close to the situation as I felt comfortable—I'm not a spider wrangler, I'm regional director... Just—just tell me one thing—do you know what we were doing with the species before they disappeared from the shore two years ago?” His voice lowered a bit now that he had gotten to the reason for the call, as he felt just a tad secretive. „I've been neck deep in our old paperwork as far back as twenty years but I can't find why this species was so big on our radar...”

His company had manufactured the antidote for their venom, something it did for many species; this particular species, however, had remained a priority long after the antidote had been synthesized in bulk and sold. It had remained a priority even in the years since the species was gone and possibly extinct. It wasn't just uncommon but unnecessary, superfluous, almost suspicious.

His Asian counterpart (whom he knew as Henrico, though Edward was certain it was an incorrect pronunciation so he never referred to him by name) relayed a story that he felt was similar, about a species of jellyfish that had been discovered in a secluded Japanese river. Like the spiders, it had been one of the most venomous creatures in the world. Initial studies were unable to find an antidote as the jellyfish poison immediately caused irreparable damage to the nervous system—and then, suddenly, the jellyfish were gone. Years had passed and they were still gone—presumed dead after a nuclear reactor leak in Japan (even though the leak happened long after their disappearance).

Edward did a quick check on a private company database and found a species of Japanese jellyfish still listed as a priority.

„So then the question is,” he finally asked, „why are these species still considered so important to us? What were we—or what are we utilizing them for? Or why are we still looking for them?”

His coworker didn't know, didn't venture a guess, told Edward he'd best drop it, and they soon hung up.

Edward had theories that he'd yet to voice to anyone.

*Something's up*, he kept thinking.

The more he dug, every new detail...  
*Something's not right.*

Edward was exhausted and lost in his own head, where answers only led to more confusing questions. He stood and walked over to the wall-sized map of the Americas (from Brazil to Texas) plastered to the wall. His eyes searched the markers where there had been evidence of the spiders, from the coastline of Brazil to the amazons to Colombia and up through Honduras and finally into Southern Mexico, where the trail stopped...

The species had yet to reemerge.

And he had no idea when they'd pop up again.

*Could be today, or tomorrow, or next week...*

*They could've taken a wrong turn and ended in the ocean.*

*They could be in the middle of a nowhere desert, dying; or, they could be snacking on desert creatures while gathering their energy.*

*Could be tomorrow, or next month...*

—the computer buzzed with a webcam call.

Edward found himself sleeping on the edge of the bed, unsure how much time had passed. A brief check behind the front curtain and he was able to determine it was daytime...

*Was it daytime when I checked the map? What day is it?*

He couldn't remember, still groggy.

The computer buzzed again with a webcam call from Derrick.

He must have fallen asleep while staring absently at the map.

He returned to his seat to click accept.

Derrick's face appeared, a gray lab in the background.

Neither man greeted the other but instead went right into business.

„I've finished gathering the information you've asked for and I, uh, I sent it," Derrick began. „You... you okay, Edward?"

„Hmm? Yeah. Of course."

Edward pulled up an encrypted e-mail file and decoded the message. There were three videos marked: Lab Test 1, Lab Test 2, and Outdoor Test 1. He printed out a long text file, looked it over... rubbed his eyes... looked again... and then asked that Derrick explain it to him, as he hadn't had coffee.

„No coffee?" Derrick asked, smiling. „Looks like no shower, either. No sleep. No life. Man, after this is over, you need some R & R."

„Agreed. But until then..."

Derrick grabbed a sheet of paper near him but seldom referred to it, as he had the information memorized.

„Of the thirty-five Phoneutria genus spiders we've captured, all thirty-five physically match the species we used to study. But, our research from the antidote synthesis and trail stages are gone—or I can't find it, whatever. It's been a stone wall getting our old—whatever, for whatever reason, I'm hitting a wall with corporate. We have initial research and final synthesis but I can't say with a

hundred percent certainty that they're the exact species because I don't have the original DNA composite. Phoneutria means murderess, in case you're interested."

"So there's a possibility that this is a different species?"

"Possible, yes, but only by a fraction of a fraction of a percent. The PhTx3 venom is identical so, yeah, it's possible they're a species long-ago descended from the species we used to study, that've somehow remained completely hidden for centuries, but I'd say it's highly doubtful. In my professional opinion, these are the exact same species, adapted to the nth degree."

"Give me a rundown on why they're do different. How different?"

"Oh, um, completely. They work together, hunt and nest together—which isn't totally uncommon for a species of social spider except, unlike any of the twenty-three known species of social spiders, these bastards are hyper-aggressive predators. So that's new. Migration is new. They're still nocturnal."

Derrick clicked a few times, replacing the web-chat and his face with a video of a large, well-lit lab. (Boring, like every other lab he'd seen—white and gray and sterile.) Edward thought the video was on pause. A shiver went down his spine as he realized that it wasn't paused and he could see, quite clearly, that the far wall was half-covered in brown spiders. They were crowded where the two far walls met the ceiling.

"They've undergone a genetic mutation, one that must have originated when they went from building webs in coastal sea air to building webs in a humid jungle. Their silk is an entire dissertation unto itself, as I told you before. I got a complete write-up on it for you with theories as to how they'd utilize it to migrate. This is... I could write a book on this species. I'm not sure we've ever witnessed a species' adaption this vast or unique—or quick. I mean, we're only talking two years."

On the video, the edge of a door opens and closes at the bottom of the screen. The camera changed in real-time to a second camera showing the alternate side of the empty room.

A cat had been let into the room.

Derrick continued talking, no longer giving any attention to a video he'd already watched and studied and scrutinized several dozen times.

"We believe that small groups of them stay behind to spread layers of webbing across the tree-line, which they secure to individual nests. The nests leave when the wind picks up like parachutes. Or so we hypothesize. It's been documented before in species of spider—we call it ballooning—but never to this extent. We can't even recreate it in a lab setting."

"How many per nest?"

"We estimate twenty since, any more than that and it would be too heavy for the wind. But we don't know. Theoretically, just a few of them would make it too heavy but that doesn't stop them. It's like trying to figure out how a bee flies—it just doesn't gel with what we know of physics. Doesn't matter to them, though, because they're doing it."

"How many of these things do you think are out there?"

"No idea."

"Take a guess."

"A thousand."



„Since they began? Since Brazil?”

„No, right now. The site in Mexico was so large, might be more.”

„So how many have they lost?”

„Lost? None. They reproduced exponentially at the Amazon site. Nest the babies in paralyzed, warm, living prey—something they’ve always done—but we only find remnants. Carcasses burst open and hollowed out ab-ab-abdominal cavities.” He paused a moment, as he inadvertently recalled the image of a young woman who had been used as a birthing vessel. „From the start, each time they show up, they’ve grown in size by at least a quarter.”

On the video, the cat remained against the wall farthest from the spiders and, though it was making noises, the video was on mute. The spiders hadn’t moved. Nothing was happening but Edward had a hard time taking his eyes off the screen—and then the lights went out in the lab on the video.

The cameras switched to a green-cloaked night-vision.

„You’re about to see a scientific miracle. Just watch...”

The video switches between the two cameras, both highlighting everything in green night-vision: from one angle, the cat isn’t visible and the spiders form a black area around the wall and ceiling nexus; from the other, the cat is visibly distraught and against the wall farthest from the spiders. It’s back is arched and it’s obviously under serious duress.

It starts with a single spider.

One black speck jumps off the wall so quickly that it’s invisible until it lands in the center of the floor.

Another follows, landing near the first—so fast that they seem to just appear out of thin air.

The cat backs away, cornering itself.

„Sudden decrease in the volume of blood in the legs, contraction of cephalothorax muscles, and they can propel themselves as far as a dozen feet, as fast as 15 miles per hour. You can’t see it in this video but, when they’re ready to kill something, each time they jump, they secure a silk dragline to the substrate beneath them. It’s how they spread their webs so fast; once they start hunting, they never stop webbing until everything’s dead.”

Suddenly, like a tiny blanket, all of the black in the ceiling corner—each and every one of the spiders against the wall—falls to the center of the room...

„Together, as a pack...”

...and then they leap individually, sporadically, erratically, some of them landing on the cat, some landing on the floor, some overshooting and hitting the wall, where they remain still (as if watching, Edward thinks, creeping himself out). The cat run and dogs and swats its’ paws and runs around the room (it quickly turns back at the sight of a few spiders still in the center of the room) and it tries to shake off the webbing and a spider crawling on its’ back—the spiders grew more frantic, chaotically leaping in every direction.

„Looks disorganized, right?” Derrick asked.

Edward didn’t say anything, astonished by the speed with which the spiders were covering the cat (and the far side of the room) in webbing. Even in the darkness and green of the night-vision, a beaming white quickly overtook half of the room, eventually covering the view from one of the cameras.

The angle switched to the far side once more.

A four-foot nest of webbing spread out against the floor.

The cat was no longer visible.

„They’ve destroyed everything they’ve touched,” Derrick went on. „*Every* species—bird, insect, jaguar, human... When their surroundings became dangerous to their survival, they learned to live in the forest. When their prey grew in size, they learned to inject more venom. When the food on the ground ran out, they went to the trees. When the food in the trees ran out, they migrated. They’re a vicious pestilence. And we’ve been extremely lucky that they’ve only landed in isolated places because, you know...”

For the moment, neither man wanted to say more than that.

Edward sighed, shaking his head. He desperately hoped Derrick would say something helpful but, instead, he shook his head no. So, once again, he stood and silently crossed the room to hopelessly stare at the large swath of red near the top of the map. He had used the distance and bearing between each previous attack to calculate a probable area for their next landing, an area that spanned as far south as Monterrey in Mexico and as far north as San Antonio, in the United State of Texas.

It was hundreds of miles in scope.

Dozens of towns and cities.

Millions of people.

*Luck, like time, is running out*, he thought to himself.

—oddly enough, the thought of limited time brought to mind his older brother, Miguel, and that he hadn’t seen him in maybe days.

Edward snapped out of it.

Again, he had been staring at the map for an endless amount of time.

*Could’ve been minutes, could’ve been hours...*

Derrick had disconnected the web-chat. Edward vaguely remembered hearing his voice in the background, though at the time it had just been white noise to him.

*Did I fall asleep again?*

Edward wasn’t even sure.

Miguel’s room was still empty.

Edward checked his phone—no messages or missed calls.

*On their second day in Mexico, Edward had been on the phone and pacing when a loud noise startled him. Miguel was in the doorway, making a rare appearance.*

*„You startled me—not you,” Edward quickly said into the phone. He held up a finger to Miguel, returned to the work station, unplugged one of the phones, grabbed the charger, and handed both to Miguel; then he set his own phone against his shoulder. „Next time you vanish, keep this with you. If there’s an emergency, and I can’t find you, I’m going to leave you. So keep this with you, and charged. Cool?”*

*He had expected the spiders to show up at any moment...*

*Edward realized he said everything in English and repeated it in Portuguese, staring into his brother’s bloodshot eyes—they were barely open. The man looked*

*run-down and smelled of whiskey and cigars. His lips were half-smirked and he wobbled a bit, trying to stay steady.*

*Miguel took the phone and charger, put them both in his pockets, and told his younger brother, „I love you. And I’m glad we’re family—”*

*Edward already had the phone back to his ear as he ushered Miguel back into his room, dismissively mumbling „yeah yeah yeah” as he shut the door on him. (He may have caught a glimpse of a half-naked woman in Miguel’s bed but he wasn’t certain.) That may have been the last time he’d seen him, or maybe he’d seen him once or twice since. All time seemed to collide, causing it to feel as if it were standing still while it was actually passing quickly.*

Edward dialed the number to Miguel’s phone and it rang with no answer. *No surprise*, he grumpily thought, and then opened the GPS program he had intended to use to keep track of his brother... but his brother had nothing to do with work and so it had been forgotten entirely and he’d yet to ever use.

His brother was outside the city, somewhere off Route 2.

Edward checked a map.

It appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, just desert leading to the Rio Grande.

Satellite strength on the phone was weak and it gave a mile radius.

Somewhere within a mile of desert was his brother.

Edward called the phone again and, again, it rang with no answer.

For a moment, he felt a pang of concern for the safety of his brother.

After a quick shower (the first in days), Edward forwarded everything to his phone, grabbed his charger, got into the rental car, and set out into the Mexican dusk. He was off to find his older brother, partly out of concern but also, just a bit, to make amends.

By nightfall, though, his mood had drastically changed for the worse...

What started as an attempt to find his older brother and maybe get dinner quickly turned into an angry hunt. Darkness fell quickly and Edward learned the true meaning of Piedras Negras and just how goddamn pitch-black the nights were out there. Worse still, turning off of Route 2 had led to a labyrinthine of twisty dirt roads rounding the desert, all of which dead-ended at the Rio Grande or just continued into infinite nowhere. Edward had given up after an hour but soon learned several more disconcerting facts, in rapid succession:

...his phone had zero reception (the portable wifi was still in the hotel), which caused him to become desperately lost without his cell phone GPS map.

...his brother’s phone hadn’t actually reported recently; the GPS location Edward had been using to pinpoint his brother’s location was inaccurate by nearly six hours—meaning, his brother could have been out there hours ago but that there was nothing guaranteeing he was still out there. His phone could have reported its location and died shortly after. His brother could be anywhere, even back at the hotel.

...finally, and maybe worst of all, the rental car was out of gas.

It sputtered out in the middle of a dark desert nowhere.

Yet again, Edward found himself in the middle of nowhere.

Alone.

Now, one could debate Edward's luck at this moment, whether it had run out entirely or not, as it would depend on one's perception of the events that followed, which, as serendipitous as they were, could be viewed as either extremely lucky or quite unfortunate...

## **Duragard's House**

**8:22 p.m.**

There's actually a good minute-and-a-half while Duragard rests with Biscuits, his golden Lab. He notices that his mattress needs to be flipped, even though it's currently curled overtop them and crushing them, all in preparation of the imminent explosion; he also notices an odd stain, from Lord knows where. His dog needs a bath. Biscuits is close against Duragard's waist and chest, his head down. They're waiting. It's getting stuffy trapped under the mattress for the two of them, Duragard with his back pressed against the base of the wood bedframe, both of them curled against the box spring. The music's long since faded out and stereo's probably short circuited from the splashing, spraying, all-encompassing water.

Biscuits forgets everything prior to this moment and enjoys a rare moment to snuggle his master. He's been relinquished to the floor at the foot of the bed his entire life so, first on the couch, and now sort of on the bed, he's enjoying his moments with his master. His heart beats fast because there had been danger—and there was still danger, probably, but now he was with his master, arms wrapped around him, close against his master, and Biscuits closes his eyes.

„No worries, bud—”

The concussive blast hits against the mattress first, followed by the volcanic explosion of the stove. Duragard keeps his arms around Biscuits, his body cushioning the dog as they're violently shoved. The old man smacks the back of his head against the wooden bedframe, hard. He's momentarily stunned and finds himself fighting to remain conscious. The stench of burning gas engulfs the room. A tidal wave of pain fills his body, all of the pain stored up, held at bay by adrenaline—it now washes over his body, first like sliding into a warm bath, then a scalding hot shower, and it only gets worse.

His blood is on fire.

He howls so loud that Biscuits whimpers. (Aside from peeing a little, the dog is fine; coincidentally, the explosion had startled Duragard enough to make the old man pee a little, too.)

The struggle to remain conscious becomes top priority.

The physical tussle to push the mattress off them becomes a close second.

Duragard only has so much strength and now, well... now he's low on time, on stamina, on will and on hope. The spider bite is wearing on him, overtaking him much like the overpowering stench of burning plastic and black smoke. The euphoria is gone. The pain, once a distant throng, now screams a ringing in his ears, throbbing and growing and spreading like cancer, draining his adrenaline, sucking the life from him. It is blinding, this pain, and it's the only thing he can think about. He wants to give up, wants to sleep, to die.

This is the moment Duragard's always feared:

Not that he was about to die but that the moment had arrived where he welcomed it.

*Being tough doesn't always beat the house*, his father had advised him many years ago. To this day, Duragard still isn't certain what the hell that means, but his father's gruff warning pops into his head nonetheless. It helps. Pushing with his forearms, using the strength of his back against the wall, he rolls the mattress onto the flooding floor of his bedroom while muttering curses at his dad. Anger still pounding from his youth helps fuel his energy, his strength... but the fuel is momentary, burnt out once the mattress is off them and they're surrounded by the utter darkness of the house.

*Only a few minutes left before death is certain...*

Darkness is a sign of success, even if it is horrifying.

Anything could be around them, climbing the walls, floating in the water now half a foot up.

And he can't get up.

Duragard just can't find the strength to stand up.

He's still curled on the box spring, his back still pressed against the headboard. Biscuits is standing but, in the sheer blackness of the cocooned rancher, the dog is invisible. The bedroom door itself is splintered, partially open and blown mostly off its hinges. There's the hint of light on the other side of the door, down the hall, where a fire is probably raging in the kitchen. So the next obstacle would be the broke-down door to the bedroom; the next threat, smoke inhalation; and, all the while, he couldn't break or go out a window as any spiders not on the ground and in the water are still a threat.

In fact, threats are still everywhe—

Biscuits cries in the darkness.

And Duragard stands.

With support from the bed's headboard and his bedside table, he stands.

A metal spike stabs him in the leg, specifically in his knee, a thin, needle-like spike slid under his patella, deep into the arterial cartilage, and it's being wiggled and jagged and pushed around by some invisible sadist—or so it feels. It takes him a moment to realize it isn't a new wound, that he hadn't walked into something, that something hadn't hit him; no, it was his normal ache magnified exponentially.

Duragard groans and nearly falls onto something fuzzy—Biscuits.

He bends and lifts his crying dog into his arms.

A searing pain spreads all the way to the back of Duragard's skull as he bends. Biscuits excitedly climbs into his arms, whimpering with a good deal of joy. The golden Labrador licks at his master's face. He could no longer see his master but he knew the hobbling, the weak knee, and could feel his master's endless cursing as a breathless thump-thump-thump in the air.

Smoke is quickly filling the bedroom.

The door, through the door...

Duragard steps off the box spring, Biscuits in tow, but as his feet land in the water flowing over the carpet, more pain follows. Every step is painful, some

equally as, some much worse. But he walks forward. The bedroom is dark, pitch-black, a void, but as soon as he's at the door, as soon as he's able to see passed the half-collapsed door, a pathway is illuminated. The foyer is gone, blown outward. No front door; even most of the closet is gone. A fire rages in the kitchen, splashed across the far wall and climbing into the ceiling. The smoke is thicker, everywhere.

Duragard isn't sure how long the electrical current had lasted in the water, probably an instant, but the stove/missile had been a direct hit. The heavy wire harness that had once been attached to the fuse box now hangs through the ceiling of his kitchen, knocked out and down through the tiles and straight into the water. The harness had been relatively unsupported in the ceiling, another result of cheap Mexican labor or poor city planning, whatever; it had been a complaint Duragard had lodged several times.

He's able to see better the hurdle preventing him from leaving. The door had been blown inward, pulling away from the top and bottom hinges, but it hadn't fallen straight, it was twisted, jutting inward, and caught in the center hinge. Duragard can tell its' weak-point: that middle hinge, and the awkward angle. It's a simple fix, were it to be any other person encountering it... Just a simple kick to the center of the doorway, forcing it straight so that it can fall flat through the threshold. Just a simple kick... Just a simple kick to the spot in the wood most held firm.

Duragard thanks the darkness, as it spares himself the humility of his dog getting a clear view of the sad, hopeless expression on his face... then he remembers the ski mask over his face, and the hood, and the duct tape, and that none of his skin is visible. It's goddamn hot in the getup, as well. Goddamn hot. He breaths in once, keeping his face low to breath less smoke and more air... and again, he breaths a second time, deeply...

With a steadfast poise, his left leg forward and planted, Duragard swings his momentum forward in an attempt to bring the tip of his boot squarely into the center of the door. He's impressed with his mobility at first but it's short-lived as the tip of his boot just barely touches the door. There's no hard impact; hell, there's hardly any impact whatsoever. He grunts, frustrated. Then a thought occurs to him. He turns sideways so that, while holding Biscuits, Duragard is able to just pull at the edge of the door, correct it in the doorway, let the weight do the work...

*Work smarter, not harder*, his Lieutenant had once told him.

He hated that man but, at that moment, he had a point.

It takes several gruff pulls but the door gives way, falling through the threshold and landing solidly against the ground, angled on by the doorknob on which it lay.

Duragard gives a triumphant nod and crosses over the door.

He passes the living room, which is lit against the raging orange flames in the kitchen. The smoke is blinding outside the bedroom but he keeps his head low, just above the stinky fur of Biscuits (*I should've given him a bath yesterday*, he briefly considers) and on through the crumbled, gaping hole where his front door had once been.

It's at this point that he can feel things hitting against his shoulder and back. There's a moment when he thinks it might be hailing but then, nope—he

remembers, it's giant, venomous spiders. They're trying to jump on him, trying to land on his body, to bite, but he's doused in cologne and Vaseline. They hit the plastic of his rain jacket and slide down, or they never land in the first place, bouncing off like ricochets. Duragard uses his shoulders to hunch over Biscuits, careful that nothing can land, and nothing does.

Fresh air makes him choke once he's out of the house—no, wait, it's the raw, overflowing sewage in his front yard. He chokes a moment, then gags, but he never tops moving. It doesn't help that the facemask makes it harder to breath. His eyes are teary, his head swimming, ears still ringing with a distant *eeeeeeee*. He makes it into the street, into cleaner air. As his sight clears, he checks the ground and his body for spiders, wiggles his neck a bit to make a bit of extra room in his hood—nothing, at least in close proximity. He can see it clearly because—there's a bright beam of light on him. He turns toward it, toward the source, Biscuits draped across his arms and helplessly turning with Duragard's movements.

An odd sound follows, one muffled but distinct...

It's the sound of four men screaming.

Duragard's plan is to head to the other end of the neighborhood, toward the rest of Shady Maple. If he can get to a house, a phone, a car, he can get to the hospital. In front of him, though, parked dead-square in the middle of the street, is a fire truck.

Four firemen scream inside the truck are screaming in horror at his appearance. To them, he looks like a psycho-killer-slash-monster kidnapping a dog in the middle of a ghost street. (Coincidentally, one of the men in the truck—one who shall remain nameless—pees a little in fright.)

The firefighters stop screaming.

Chief Earl squints, turning the floodlight on the fire truck's side mirror down so the focus isn't solely on the creepily-garbed man in the street.

„Duragard?” he asks himself quietly, then repeats it louder; then, he rolls down the window a crack and asks it louder.

Duragard approaches the driver's side door. He's breathless, aching, and swollen head-to-toe in agonizing pain. He also keeps saying something but no one inside can hear him. The people inside keep saying something to him, too, which he can't hear.

Chief Earl rolls down the window further.

„Duragard?”

Duragard lifts up the lower half of his face mask to speak clearly.

„You guys god'amn idiots? Extend yer topside ladder, release your internal reservoir, and run, yah assholes!”

Inside the truck, Chief Earl rolls up his window.

„Well it's definitely Duragard...” he mumbles, turning to his crew.

Tommy, Adam, and Chuck stare intently back at their chief.

„I'm gonna flood the internal reservoir,” he tells them, back in full commander mode, „and we're gonna make a run back to the police and ambulances in Shady Maple. Pull up yer collars...” The Chief stares one-by-one into the face of each man as he speaks (and only with the Tommy the Mexican does he give a distressed, almost angry glance), then looks out the windshield to catch Duragard disappearing into the distance of the street ahead. His hand moves over the red

lever to release the truck's internal reservoir of water. "Button up. Get ready, on three. One..."

Each man has on their helmet and in their fire-fighting, bunker gear, with thick boots and double-layer turnout pants and jackets. Little of their skin is visible.

Chuck adjusts in his seat and curses (with his trademark lisp), "Ah, I pith myself a little."

„...two..."

The Chief releases the internal reservoir.

A tidal wave of water rushes out from under the truck, spreading out in all directions.

„Three!"

All of the men break from the car and run.

In the distance, police lights flash and lights shine from the houses and streetlamps of Shady Maple... but there's a long stretch of black, one without definition or light or anything, a lengthy, dark road between here and there. As Chuck, Adam, Tommy, and Chief Earl round the front of the fire truck, several giant brown splotches jump from the top of the hood. Several land in darkness but two catch on to Adam for a moment before sliding off the rubber. The men sprint, with Chief Earl bringing up the rear. He's older, stout, but still spry, still quick; the others are just a little bit faster, with the exception of Tommy who is far ahead. The distance between Tommy and the crew grows greater with each of his strides, but Tommy slows as he finds old man named Duragard kneeling in the street. The old man still has the dog still in his arms but Tommy can tell he's having trouble.

Duragard is done, spent. Whereas before it only took motivation, now there's nothing, no amount of anger to drive him, no amount of adrenaline or hope, nothing. He's done. The venom courses through him and he can feel it in his face. Sounds fade. The ache is so excessive that his body painfully constricts, no longer in his control. Every bone under the skin stings, some quitting outright. Even though he looks up as the firefighter approaches him, his eyes are unable to focus. The scent in his nose is fresh-cut grass, but it's fake, presumably synapses randomly firing in his brain as he dies. He has the flash of an image...

His son on a swing, one in Tennessee, where they lived when his son was a young boy and he was a younger man. It had been in a playground behind their house, part of the community. His son would disappear, even as young as six, and walk out the back and go to the playground. They would find him there, swinging silently, a stern look on his face. Only his son would have a serious look on his face when playing on a swing. One time he came out there and he found his son, alone, no older than seven, swinging silently. Duragard, being a younger, more patient man, didn't yell at his son; nah, instead he took the swing next to him and they both went back and forth, higher and higher, each trying to outdo the other, both of them silent, both of them with serious expressions—

Tommy picks up the old man in much the same way that Duragard had picked up Biscuits. The weight – 160 lbs. for the man, another 40 for the dog—slows Tommy, forcing him to walk quickly instead of run, but he musters as much strength as necessary to get the old man to safety.

Chief Earl lets out a bloodcurdling howl.

It's far back.



Chuck and Adam are nearest and they stop, turning back.

Chief Earl had been slowest, bringing up the rear, and the spiders had seen it. They moved together, as a pack. Like hunters. All of 'em had gone after the weakest of the group, crawling in from the desert, from out and around the houses, from every direction they could, until they had closed in on Fire Chief Earl Stenson. They leap from every which way. No amount of clothing or armor could save him. The howl hasn't barely left his lungs before it's too late. By the time Adam and Chuck head back, Chief Earl is on the ground, on his back, lying in the center of the street. The spiders swarm, and they continue to swarm, a moving blanket pulling itself over him. His final motion is slow, just a lift of his spider-covered arm and a flick of the hand, telling his men to go on without him.

Tommy was already moving, nearing the line of police and EMS waiting for them in Shady Maple.

Duragard's eyes blink up at the man saving his life. His consciousness quickly slipping out of reach, leaving him, and death almost certain. In that final moment, he finds just enough strength to say one word to his savior.

„Spic...?“

## **20 Miles S.E. of Piedras Negras**

### **Last Night**

The couple is young, the boy no older than fourteen. The girl lied when he asked her age, telling him, „Tengo quince años.“ She's really just thirteen. They've only known each other four days and the approaching dawn is to bring their fifth together, but the boy is already certain of her, of this...

*Amor eterno.*

They travel the wide, endless breadth of desert to the southeast of their city. Americans long-ago nicknamed this stretch „the dark flats“ for two reasons: for the coal deposits in the area, which also accounted for the name Piedras Negras, or Black Stones; but the nickname stuck because nightfall blankets this stretch of desert in an eerie, impenetrable darkness. Tonight is no different, a thick black in every direction except forward. There's a fog-light mounted (with duct-tape) to the front of the faded-gold dirt bike and, even though it only gives them a sparse 10 feet of forward visibility, this doesn't slow the boy. He keeps his speed near 30 mph, the front tire pointed straight as an arrow, the engine occasionally revving. The girl maintains a tight, fear-induced grip around the boy's waist even as the experience is exhilarating, one of the best in her life. She, too, is certain of the boy...

*Amor eterno.*

They pass the final wheeze of shanties and mobile homes spread across the outskirts of their area. The boy slows the bike, turning off the pavement of Route 2 to head down a dirt road, toward the Rio Grande. The river is their destination but

they have no intention of crossing it, as neither child has a high opinion of what lies on the other side.

The girl has a simple opinion of America, best summed up in a single phrase:

*Cada idiota está enojado con un arma.*

(That is to say, every idiot with a gun is angry.)

She's had family cross the border and never return.

The boy's opinion of America is based on two things:

Most frequently, his mother's long rants about how „every piece of news in America has been filtered through a government subjugated by money-hungry politicians—none of whom care for the poor—and then-then-then theatricality and local bias distort everything even more so and then Americans—America the brave, ha!—they just start stupid wars and stream an endless supply of Hollywood violence so that the real shootings and the real atrocities don't look so bad when they sit on their fat asses and eat their poison fast food and watch their evening news—it's all slanted and so wrong and close-minded but—and you're too young to remember this but—there was once a time when America asked for the tired and the poor, when America was believed to grant dreams—nope, now it's known for prisons and their poverty isn't much better than here, it may be even more so since we're only nineteen on income inequality and they're number forty-two! Forty-two! Worse than Brazil and Panama! They aren't a democracy of states but a lumbering militia suffering from an epidemic of itchy-trigger-fingeritis—and don't even get me started on their hatred of homos and Mexicans and blacks...”

His mother can go on for hours. Her tirades are the only time she speaks English, as it's more gratifying to insult a country in its own tongue. She had been a south-Texas girl for the first 35 years of her life and even gave birth to him in the U.S. His father disappeared before the second trimester, though, and this caused his mother to endlessly struggle until, one miserably humid night when he was three, they were so destitute that she was forced to head toward the only family left, her older brother in Piedras Negras. So desperate and broke were they that she crossed the border with nothing more than a crying child, a stroller, and a trash bag full of their clothes.

The boy has no context to understand her long-winded rants about slanted news or American politicians or even „income inequality”—she might as well rail against the climate on Mars, as he has as many memories there as he does of the U.S.; but, he understands exactly what he needs to, that his mother blames America for everything she lost, a lifetime of possessions and memories, all of it gone, foreclosed, gone.

The other half of his opinion is based on a shorter, more succinct story that his uncle likes to tell, about a trip he made while working for the Policía Federal Ministerial. In cooperation with the U.S., his uncle crossed the border to scout a presumed drug route and, as he was casually strolling through the desert, an old guy shot him with a rifle aimed out his bedroom window.

No matter the politics, the boy understands that America took everything from his mother and then shot his uncle just for walking.

Not that Piedras Negras is a utopian haven. There are occasional flash floods and even a tornado once, and just last year there was a mass-exodus of inmates that escaped the local prison, an event that has kept the downtown streets

brimming with crime. Luckily, their casita is tucked away in a secluded patch of nowhere just outside the city and they've been spared much of these dangers; though, especially lately, the boy and his mother are completely alone while his uncle has begun to disappear for days, sometimes weeks, and never with an explanation. When his uncle does stumble in through the front door, his body is usually covered in grime, his eyes bloodshot, his skin bruised, and he'll collapse anywhere to sleep for hours and hours, sometimes over a day. The boy is no longer certain if his uncle works for the criminals or the Policía—or even if there's much difference anymore. His mother's nightly prayers are most audible when they are for her older brother and, no matter what side his uncle is on, the boy knows that she's certain he will leave one day and not return.

The girl holds a bit tighter as the boy slows the bike in anticipation of a curve he knows to be ahead. They're nearing a spot along the riverbank, one he's visited alone many times before. That morning, he had begged for the girl to come out with him, begged for her to wait for her parents to fall asleep, for her to sneak out, to trust him, join him, come with him to this place.

The boy hadn't needed to sneak out. He spoke in direct sentences, as always, and told his mother where he would head, who he would head there with, and he even gave her the exact time he intended to leave and return. She nodded in a somber agreement; knowing every detail was better than waking to find her son gone. His uncle believed there was no controlling a teenage boy even though, time and again, his nephew proved him wrong by listening, by obeying her rules and working harder than men triple his age. Her eyes look upon her first and only child not as a boy but as a man, and she often speaks to him as such. His silent nature hides a wisdom well beyond his young age.

She would still stay up until he returned, however.

They approach the curve in the dirt road and the boy slows the bike, no longer out of caution for the terrain but because, in the short distance to the left, something has caught his attention...

The dirt bike stops completely.

The boy draws out the kickstand with his heel, struggling against the girl's grip to stand and look out over the black desert. Behind him, the girl is talking a mile a minute but it's all muffled under the helmet. Her grip gradually relaxes from his midsection but it takes time before she's comfortable enough to let go entirely.

The boy continues to stare into the distance to the left.

Finally, she lifts the helmet's visor and a plethora of excited words pour out, so many it's as if they had been building up since the moment he secured the helmet over her head. Her voice is quick, adrenalized, and she speaks nonstop—explaining the thrill of the ride, asking if something is wrong with the bike or if they're there, mentioning that her grandmother lives near here—until she's out of breath and has to stop.

The boy listens but his focus is elsewhere and the girl notices, her eyes following his gaze until she sees exactly what's stopped them. She hadn't been able to see it through the visor but now it's clear. Her breath catches in her throat. The boy asks a question but the girl doesn't respond, frozen by the sight to their left. He asks again, receives no response, and then asks again. On the third try, she acknowledges that she's heard the question but she doesn't know... It could be her

grandmother's house that they're staring at, or it could be someone who happens to live nearby.

He asks a final question and they agree...

If it were a dangerous fire, there would be flames.

There's a bold look—a cross between obligation and courage – in the boy's eyes, and she catches it just before he reaches back to shut her visor; then, he straddles the bike once more and steadies it off the kickstand. Caught off-guard and now terrified for several reasons, the girl scrambles and clutches at the boy until she's wrapped her arms around his midsection even tighter than before. He struggles against the surprising strength of her grip, twisting the throttle enough to bring the engine back to life and revving it twice before slowly pushing forward. He goes slow, searching, then finding a dirt path that heads off toward the left.

When the girl first took notice of the boy, she had called him fearless. Hours before that, he had passed her on his walk to the grocer. The bike didn't have enough gas for the six miles round-trip but they needed flour and rice. The girl had been hanging wet clothes on a line behind her house and, though she was aware someone was on the road, paid little attention as he passed. The boy didn't even notice the girl, too lost in formulating a plan where he could obtain gasoline with neither a container nor money. He had enough for the supplies but nothing extra, and gasoline was expensive. It was dusk when he passed again. Sure enough, he strolled home carrying a sack of flour and a sack of rice in one hand and a two-gallon canister filled with gasoline in the other. She had been in the back yard again, this time pulling the clothes down before dark. Once more, she noticed someone on the street but was otherwise preoccupied with the clothes. She unclipped a bed sheet and went to set it down when a large snake slithered and swirled around the bottom of the woven laundry basket. It had been left outside all day and the large snake has made it his home since. Though she gave little fuss when encountering the many scorpions and tarantulas and lizards in the area, it never got easier with snakes, not since one bit her as a child.

The girl's initial reaction to the snake in the basket was a bloodcurdling scream; then, she tossed the blanket in her hand over the rim of the basket; and, finally (and still screaming), she blindly sprinted in the other direction, toward the street. The scream jarred his train-of-thought and the boy turned just in time for the girl to run straight into him!—He flinched, expecting to be bowled over, but the girl stopped a few inches shy and just whimpered against his chest, her body shaking, her arms together and between them. He was dumbstruck a moment, his arms held out as he was still clutching the flour, rice, and gasoline. (Her father snuck a peek from one of the windows and the boy noticed, giving a bewildered shrug in his direction... but the old man just disappeared back into the house.) She calmed quickly and explained that she couldn't help it. Any time she saw a snake, her immediate reaction was to scream and run away; only after a moment could she gather herself enough to get rid of the vermin, which she often did herself since her dad was a bumbling drunk and her mother worked long hours in the city. This time she had help, though, and the boy calmly walked over to the basket, pulled back the bed sheet, carefully bent down, and then he quickly dashed both hands inside. The girl gasped in shock at the audacity of the boy. With a proper hold of it, he lifted the snake from the basket and escorted it to the edge of the girl's back

yard, where he tossed it as far as he could. It didn't matter that it was just a large gartersnake, she repeatedly told the boy that he was fearless.

But that was the beginning...

Now, however, the girl regrets the boy's fearlessness as he drives them straight toward the nearby residence. There's a massive spotlight in front, the only source of light, the only reason they can even see what it is they see. It's eye-catching, the white beam of light headed straight up into the night sky; though what worries them is the immense cloud of smoke illuminated by the light. There's no fire, just smoke, endless, lingering smoke; either they're there just in time to stop something, or maybe they're too late.

He approaches carefully and stops the bike a good distance away. Surrounding the light, there looks to be the silhouettes of three individual trailers spread out around the perimeter. He pushes down the kickstand and steadies himself. With his left hand, he reaches back over his shoulder to lift the helmet visor and politely request that the girl release her vise-like grip so that he might again breathe normal.

Reluctant at first, she does as requested.

For the fourth time, he asks if this is her grandmother's house.

Her face is distorted, frozen with fear, but she shakes the helmet right and left. *This is someplace different.* The boy asks that the girl stay behind and, even though she agrees, there's the sound of a tiny breath in, and the feeling of her body as she leans forward, her chest against his back, and she rests the chin of the helmet beside his neck. She gently whispers in his ear. His eyes widen a bit with wonder and curiosity but his mind is made up and he reaffirms this with the girl. He goes to stand and lift his leg over the bike when they almost fall over. Her grip, though looser, remains linked around him. With a good deal of maneuvering, he stands and brings a knee up and over and turns a full 180 within the loop of her unbroken arms until he's straddling the bike backwards and they're face-to-face. Her arms embrace him more as a hug now, out of comfort and less for safety, more tender, and he lifts the helmet off her head. There's a moment where they stare at each other. Both wait to hear what the other has to say but neither speaks, nor moves, nor looks away. He leans forward. She doesn't move. His lips touch her cheek. His kiss catches the edge of her lips. He doesn't back away, though, not yet; instead, his cheek brushes along hers, and he uses his words to caress her ear.

„Besarte es como ver las estrellas.”

A shiver crosses her body.

Backing away, their eyes lock once more and he notices something different, something new. There's a boldness emblazoned in her eyes, one of obligation and courage.

„Soy feliz de compartir cada,” whispers the girl, her head slightly tilted down, her eyes focusing solely on his, „instante de mi vida a tu lado.”

He accepts her words as having two meanings:

As they are together now, so shall they always be together...

And she's not going to sit alone and wait for him to investigate whatever the hell is happening 40 feet from where they now sit.

Together they walk hand-in-hand toward the large spotlight. Its beam is pointed straight up into the sky, a narrowing strip of white in the black night air reaching out maybe 100 feet. The smoke wisps over the light and it reminds him of cigarette smoke around the rim of a flashlight in the dark.

There's a person sitting in a lawn chair near the light, his back toward the kids. They approach and she whispers something to him that causes them both to stop moving.

*It isn't smoke.*

There are three trailers behind the light. Each one is warped, beaten, broken. They're partly covered in white foam or something, which is blowing up and out into the air like thin, stringy cloth. From a distance, it had appeared as smoke. It's floating everywhere, more and more the closer they get. Some is stuck to the rim of the spotlight and waves in the beam, causing shifting shadows.

Even though he's brave, this scene horrifies the boy to his core.

*Something is definitely not right.*

The person shifts in the lawn chair.

The girl yelps and squeezes the boy's arm and points.

The boy yells out, letting the person in the chair know that he's there, that he doesn't want to startle them and that he means no harm; he just thought there might be a problem and wanted to help.

The man in the chair continues to shift but doesn't acknowledge them. He's slouched as if napping, the hood of his windbreaker pulled over his head. It all moves, shifting, but the person doesn't turn around.

The girl clings to the side of the boy and he again asks her, quiet and polite, to wait for him. Her eyes glance up, terrified but determined. She brings up a valid point, which is that there isn't a fire and there's no danger; to which he also brings up a valid, awful truth, which is that something here is not right. They can both feel it in the air, thick like a hot, dirty breath on the skin of your shoulder. Something's not right.

Together they continue to approach—

One of the trailer doors open and two men walk out, arguing in Portuguese.

They're moving quickly, obviously in a rush.

One is obviously not from around there, dressed in a burgundy polo shirt with pressed khakis and thin-rimmed glasses. The other is bald, bigger, with a weighty, slumped frame, and he's dirtier, well-traveled and worn, his loose clothes torn and stained. They're not screaming or violent, just bickering. As they exit from the trailer, one runs to the next trailer while the other hurriedly jogs around back, where their vehicle must be parked. He's carrying a large black case under his arm.

*This is a drug deal,* the boy realizes.

There's a yelp.

It comes from the man heading around back, his black case falling from under his arm.

The girl squeezes the boy's arm even harder.

The man's seen the children.

The other man, about to enter the middle trailer, turns.

He doesn't yelp but his scowl quickly turns concerned. He immediately hollers out a warning in Portuguese, holding up both hands toward the kids, as if to say don't run. Neither child speaks Portuguese but they understand the hand motion...

They were already stopped so it didn't really apply.

The boy is thinking of a way to tell the girl to get ready to run without panicking her.

The skinny, polo-wearing man at the entrance to the middle trailer switches to English, which the boy understands (as his mother taught it to him so that he could understand when she cursed America) but the girl does not. „Don't take another step this way,” he warns. A look of alarm overtakes his face. „It's very dangerous. Turn around and go home immediately!”

The other, bigger, bald man, nearer the kids, releases an unending stream of Portuguese while gathering the black case under his arm once more; he's not speaking toward the kids but to the younger man.

The man in front of the trailer switches between an annoyed spat in Portuguese with the other man and telling the kids off. He switches to Spanish, which both kids understand, and he hollers, „You need to go back, turn around—” then he rolls his eyes in response to the second man's persistent questions and goes back to arguing in Portuguese.

A phone rings in the trailer behind the man.

The person in the lawn chair continues to fidget.

The man at the trailer opens the door, hops into the darkness, turns on a light, and then comes back out carrying a rotary phone, the head-piece cradled between his head and ear. He hangs up the line and dials a new number.

The second man disappears behind the trailers and comes back around, without the black case. He rushes toward the kids, careful to keep a distance from the person in the lawn chair, and he tries to shoe them away. The boy wants to run, as does the girl—but they're frozen. They had been startled by the emergence of the men, and the extremity of the warning had caused them to worry, but, now, there was something else. Now, they were absolutely terrified. The boy had been ready to grab the girl and run to the dirt bike but the man had flicked on the light inside that middle trailer... and it was what they could see inside the trailer, which the other two men had yet to notice, that terrified them so. The kids are a ways off, several dozen feet from the person in the chair, several more from the trailers...

But they could both see it.

The man had opened the trailer door, entered, and turned on a light. He had found the phone beside the door and turned around too quickly. He didn't see what was behind him, didn't see what they saw, because he wasn't looking for anything but the phone.

The wall inside the trailer moves.

The man had walked back outside with the phone but, inside the trailer, behind him, a fuzzy section of the wall was shaking, moving, and the kids can still see it, see behind the man and in through the doorway—the wall crumbles.

There's a new noise in the air, a gentle, staccato thumping.

Everyone remains still.

The second man, the more burly of the two, had been a few feet from the children, ready to physically escort them away, but he stops. He turns toward the man in the doorway.

The boy points his finger but is unable to speak.

The girl screams.

It pierces the silence like a wrecking ball.

The man in front of the middle trailer, phone still cradled against his shoulder, slowly turns around. It's too late. Long-limbed creatures jump from within the trailer. His polo torso covers in spiders. The man screams and backs up as more climb and leap onto him—and then he takes off running in an attempt to shake them loose, throwing off the shirt until he's bare-chested, kicking off his pants, running, screaming, as if he were on fire.

The second man, standing with the children, watches helplessly a moment before realizing that spiders are literally pouring out of the trailer, scurrying out of the doorway in droves, dozens, and headed in their direction. They're cut off from the other man, as he's run toward the car, and the spiders are moving up the middle, in-between them, dividing them.

„Ah, bastard!” angrily yells the young man's voice from the darkness behind the third trailer. The keys to the car are in the pants he threw off, which are now covered in countless spiders. „The raft, the raft, get the kids to the raft!” Then, he repeats it in Portuguese, verbatim.

„Run!” hollers the bigger man with the children, his first English word.

The big man gets behind them and grabs the scruff of the children's collars and ushers them forward, into the night air, north of the trailers, straight into the desert. The kids are too frightened to do anything but run and hold hands, keeping a quick, even pace together.

Soft thumps follow them into the darkness. Some sound as if they're right beside them; others come from a few yards ahead. It's blindingly dark but they can feel things moving through the air, landing against the ground, then moving forward, tracking them, stalking them, chasing.

The big guy releases his grip on the children and they take off faster, keeping an even pace together as they leave the men behind them. The boy glances over his shoulder and he can make out the figure of the second, half-naked man running in the same direction, not far behind.

The big guy is already slowing, winded.

But the boy and the girl, they continue toward the water, unheeded.

Soon, the dark, soft thuds have stopped.

The threat is gone, for the moment.

The air feels wet as they approach the shore of the Rio Grande.

The boy and the girl slow and stare out over the thrashing water. It is now that the boy remembers his dirt bike. He had been so scared that he forgot it entirely. There's a chorus of wheezing behind them as the two men, both out of shape, struggle to get to the shore. The moonlight is brighter near the shore, for some reason, and the boy can make out the figures of the two men better. Behind them, back toward the trailers, the darkness is thick everywhere but the spotlight.

Again, it looks like smoke overhead, a fire without flame.



The two men stop and talk to each other. They speak a low Portuguese as they inspect the torso on the man now only wearing tight black undies. They point at several areas and, for the first time, they're not arguing. They're speaking quietly, tenderly. When the bigger, bald gentleman notices the children watching their conversation, he points them down the shoreline. The boy follows the point and sees a raft pulled a few feet from the water. The bigger man shoes them toward it as he continues to check the half-naked man.

The boy nods and, with the girl's hand in his, they run to the raft.

Several minutes pass before the boy has enough calm to think. By this time, all four of them are on the river—the bigger man in the back right, steering the motor, and the shirtless man in the front right. The raft is fighting the rapids as the river pulls them faster and faster forward. The boy and girl are seated in the middle, in the space on the floor between the two seats. They remain huddled together. A small amount of water sloshes up over the sides and on them. Their butts are wet. Now, they watch and shake and tumble against one another as the raft bouts over the river, flowing the current. Luke warm water splashes up on them and it feels good. One of the men—the one in front, with no shirt or pants—shouts to be heard against the gushing river. He says, in English, that they will reach a new shore soon. They will find a phone. They will return the kids to their houses in the morning. Nothing is wrong; they're safe.

His expression, on the other hand, conveys the opposite.

He looks scared, sickly, dejected...

The girl has her arms around the boy's waist, and the boy has his arm around the girl's shoulders, and they begin to relax. The rapids slow. The raft glides. The men are silent. The moon only grows brighter. The air is, once more, calm. Her head is against his chest and, as the atmosphere of danger lifts, the boy rests his head on top of her.

And he doesn't worry so much about the shore.

## **Sugar Pointe Hospital**

**9:51 p.m.**

Duragard wakes in a hospital bed. His eyes are groggy but shapes take form. People, several of them. They're crowding around a hospital bed across from his own bed. He recognizes Sheriff Roy's back but the rest are doctors and strangers—one of 'em is a Mexican, though, and he's standing next to the head of the hospital bed. Half of his gear is off but the young man is unmistakably in dressed-down firefighter gear. His face, as it comes into focus, is vaguely familiar to Duragard—though he can't place where he knows the immigrant from.

The occupant of the hospital bed is obscured by the people around the bed but Duragard can hear the voice (which is deep and male) speaking one of those gobbled-guck foreigner languages. The bedside Mexican is translating the words into English for everyone gathered around the bed, but even he's having difficulty understanding the man in the hospital bed.

„The man says... they are coming.”

The Mexican and the bedridden foreigner attempt to converse further, one in Spanish and the other in Portuguese.

„Poisonous. Deadly,” the firefighter goes on. „They invade like an army. Eat. Leave on... the wind?”

The two converse for an extended period.

The firefighter turns to everyone.

„Whatever we saw out there, whatever nightmare we witnessed out at those houses... he says that was just the beginning.”

The man in the bed says something else, pauses, then adds something extra.

The firefighter translates.

„The rest are coming... if they aren't already here.”

## **The Night**

*Humanity thinks themselves master of world, bute they are quite wrong. The day will come when the masters of theis world take humanity to task for exceeding their allotted place. It will be a dark night, a night of blood and fear. Nothing will be the same, for humanity.*

—Phaedrus of Alethia

## **University of Oklahoma Recently**

Two doctoral students sit in a back office, their attention glued to the shifts and rapid fluctuations of a live broadcast from the weather satellite TRS-3. Both of the men remain motionless; watching, waiting, hoping. A tear drops from an eye, not out of sadness but because he's so intently scrutinizing the screen that he's forgotten to blink. It might be a glitch in the satellite readouts, they initially thought, and it was an idea they'd bounced back and forth since the day it started...but enough time's passed to rule out equipment malfunction, and the broadcast isn't changing, so the men feel the time has finally arrived for them to panic.

And panic they do.

Months have been wasted, they moan.

Their funding is going to get cut, they whine.

They'll have to start all over, they whimper.

And, maybe most troubling, they worry about the lack of an answer, that there aren't any theories, no reasons, no explanation, nothing; the well of speculation has run dry—the end.

The men *had* been working to publish an article titled *The Versatility of Weather Satellite Tracking in the Nocturnal Migrations of Bird Species*, and they were nearly

done, too, back when everything was just fine. A couple days later and the world's become nonsense, utter goddamn nonsense. The model they created doesn't fit the scenario they're observing; therefore, the model is inaccurate and must be rewritten—except, what's unfolding on the screens in front them isn't possible—it just isn't! It's something that's never happened, not once in all of recorded history.

„So what do we do?”

„It's not too late to become theater majors.”

„I didn't know you were funny.”

„I'm not.”

„There's gotta be an explanation.”

„Yeah, we've been wrong for the last six months and what we're looking at isn't what we thought we were lookin' at.”

„Maybe there's something else...”

„Something else? Something else?—like what? What else could possibly influence two dozen bird species to suddenly change their inherent navigational skills. They're betraying centuries of conditioning—hell, if this was peculiar, that'd be one thing. It's not. This isn't weird or strange—it's impossible. It defies the fundamentals of Darwinism, biology...”

„Well, accepting that the satellite isn't broken...”

„...which we have to...”

„...and what we see, that's what's there...”

„...which it has to be...”

„...then, maybe we're not asking the right question.”

„Which is?”

„What's causing all these birds to ignore the most basic laws of nature?”

## **Sugar Pointe, Texas**

**10:16 p.m.**

A block from the Sugar Pointe Town Square and part-ways down Painter's Alley (between Crew St and Turnover Ave), an older gentleman and a younger woman are tucked behind a blue dumpster. He has her against the brick backside of a deli while they make out like high-schoolers—and, like most teenagers, the older gentleman's heart is beating fast and he's excitedly thinking, *This is gonna happen!* It's been a long time for him, you see, years and years now, but the dry spell looks to have an ending in sight. *Greatest night ever!*

They had only met a couple hours earlier. The older gentleman was planted in his favorite local bar and drinking alone when he noticed a woman at the other end of the bar, also alone. Her next drink was on him, he told the bartender. This led her to sit beside him and they had a nice conversation. (They already had something in common as they were the only people drinking at 4:30 p.m.) Hours and drinks passed by and he offered to ~~stumble her home~~ walk her home, which she allowed. They stopped in the Town Square for the library fundraiser and drunkenly discussed books—she hadn't read any since high school (which wasn't THAT long ago) and all of his opinions were based on the cover art. They continued

on and, one block down, the older gentleman took a risk, snared the younger woman by the arm and led her on a detour into the alleyway. She was receptive, which delighted him, and they kissed for the first time.

He wants her so bad, and the young woman can (sorta) feel his excitement pressed against her belly. She had been day-drinking since noon and (sorta) wants him, too, even though he's old-ish, like, 20 years older than her, maybe more, whatever—she's been lonely lately and this feels good, his desire for her, to feel wanted, to be taken, to inspire passion in someone so thoroughly... though she also wants pizza right now and that desire might take precedence over this; she's too foggy to be certain.

Her chin is lifted, long brown hair covering the side of her face, and their lips detach to pull her shirt and bra up. He twists her around, her ass out, her hands against the wall, her back arched, and he lifts the back of her dress up. He's unzipped and partly reaching into his pants—

„What's that noise?” she asks.

He briefly stops.

There's a whooshing noise overhead.

„Just-just the wind, it's nothing.”

The young woman agrees and decides she might as well have sex (*pizza's next, on him*) so she uses a hand to pull her underwear out of the way before changing her mind (I like this pair too much) and instead pulls her panties down to her knees—

There are screams in the nearby distance.

She stops him again, just before anything can start.

„What—what's that?” she asks, a bit apprehensive.

All of this starting and stopping is causing the older gentleman to feel like he's going through a goddamn personal tragedy—so close... He thinks something up quickly in the hopes of continuing.

„It's-it's just because of, uh, they're just celebrating because the library probably reached its goal—it's nothing...”

There's a few more screams but they die down.

The older gentleman aggressively resumes kissing the back of her neck and eagerly pulls his small manhood through the zipper of his pants, so ready for her, for this, hasn't had it in years and he's so close that it's right in front of him. *The world would have to end for me to stop*, he decides (with no idea how close he is to that scenario).

A dead bird lands beside them—he can see it but she can't and, when she tries to look, he forces her against the wall even harder. The distractions subside and the younger woman readies herself, spreading her legs as wide as the panties around her knees allow. Her head faces away from him, her eyes on the ground. He can feel her stubbly skin against his most sensitive area, positioning himself for a sexy insertion, when the power goes out on either side of the alleyway. The older gentleman notices this and rolls through a list of plausible answers, except the younger woman doesn't see (her head is down) and he's glad he doesn't have to come up with an excuse—

The firehouse siren wails in the night air.

„What's that?” she asks a third time, equally as worried as the times before.

„It’s um, just, you know, the whole town... is excited... for, you know, the library fundrais—”

And then,

*Boom, entry!*

„Stop, that tickles,” she giggles.

„Uhhh,” the older gentleman mutters, thinking to himself, *definitely not what I expected to hear* (though he’s had women giggle before, in similar situations).

„What?—stop what?”

He stops thrusting.

„Not that, keep-keep doing *that*, just stop tickling my n—ouch!”

He resumes thrusting and believes the pain to be a result of his (tiny) sexual prowess; then, he hears a noise, something he hadn’t heard before because his breathing was too heavy from all the excitement. It’s a low hiss from the girl, one similar to a tea kettle at the start of a boil.

The girl thrusts in an odd, frantic way, but that doesn’t stop him.

He keeps going, harder.

He grabs her shoulder for better leverage, to steady her. His eyes raise from the girl’s butt crack to the back of her head, where it takes his brain four long seconds to comprehend what he’s looking at. It’s dark but he’s close enough to make out the details:

Lighter strands tangle in the girl’s dense brown hair, like highlights, except each of these strands are thicker, and they have tiny, knuckle-like joints, and they move independently.

It’s also hissing, angrily.

And it’s got a bunch of fuggin’ eyes, too—

*Oh, I’m inches away from the biggest goddamn spider on Earth.*

It’s a weird realization to have, made even weirder by the fact that he’s realizing it mid-coitus. His gyrations endure, unhindered, while he processes the information—and that’s when a deep-rooted, primal fear fills his chest. In what might be considered an ordinary, knee-jerk reaction—the same reaction anyone on planet Earth would have in a surprise confrontation with a large arachnid, in close proximity, in the darkness—the older gentleman yelps, blasphemes, and disconnects from the younger woman with a sideways leap.

*Did he just yelp?* she wonders, staying bent against the wall. *Wait, did he already pull out?—not that he’s large enough to tell.* She smiles at his expense and stifles a chuckle.

The older gentleman isn’t even behind her anymore. He takes off in a short sprint (without fixing himself) and makes it out of the alleyway and onto Turnover Ave. He leans against a tree (already winded by the 30 ft. run) and turns back toward the alley.

She’s still there, against the wall, half-hidden behind the blue dumpster.

*Maybe I shoulda warned her,* he wonders...

There’s a moment when he wants to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

The young woman had grown increasingly bewildered, first when the older gentleman felt like he placed a third hand on the back of her head, then the fact

that he started hissing and the brief sting of pain (she thought he had pulled her hair a bit too hard) but then he firmly grabbed her shoulder, which she kinda liked, and—*wait, where is he?* The young woman waddles backward, her panties still around her knees, and she pokes her head out from behind the dumpster. The older gentleman is staring back at her, and the street is completely dark, all of which confuses her even more—a low hiss is so close behind her that it's more like a delicate whisper in her ear.

Something big moves in her hair.

The younger woman screams bloody murder, a sound that rips through every block of the town, echoing. She panics and flails and swats at her head and freaks out over the giant creature caught in her hair.

*The fuzzy bastard's mainly just annoyed by the situation—too tangled in the hair to escape, too shaky to attack properly, and so loud he's kinda panicking, too—so it hisses in frustration.*

The older gentleman watches the younger woman's thrashing from the safety of the street, and he briefly contemplates running over to aid the woman—but, instead, he waits to see what happens...

It's a decision that will prove fatal.

*A thin line of silk gently lowers from a branch just above his head...*

The younger woman attempts to run toward the older gentleman, even with her underwear down—but she stops, suddenly, dead in her tracks. He can't tell what's stopped her—maybe the underwear, or she sees that he still hasn't fixed himself and re-zipped. For a moment, he thinks she got the spider out of her hair and now she's upset with him for running away. He wants to keep having sex (and realizes his tiny manhood is still out) and he opens his mouth, thinking of a way to maybe persuade her back into... starting over...

Her face is frozen in an expression of pure horror.

Her eyes are vacant.

*...the thin line of silk sways with the wind and lowers, lowers, lowers, just beside his head...*

„Did you get it out of your hair?“ he asks, feigning concern.

She doesn't answer.

She doesn't move.

The spider had bit her scalp and neck a half dozen times and she's already dead, in a way, trapped in her own body. All of her muscles are constricted so tight that she's literally locked in her final stance, stuck in place—it keeps her standing in those final moments, even as she goes into cardiac arrest and her body systems shut down. Everything she's ever been, everything that made her unique, every hope and dream and memory, all of it fades from her like a match burning out, flickering, dimming... Her brain receives its final signals: regret over her decision not to get pizza instead, and her peripheral nervous system relays the touch sensations of a spider as it crawls from behind her neck and onto her shoulder. The older gentleman sees this and, even in the darkness, he's pretty sure the spider is staring at him...

...the thin line of silk moves so calmly, a long strand dancing on a current of air, lowering, lowering, until it finally connects with a nearby wall and sticks. If someone were to look for it, they may have seen it—what looked like a loose piece of string stuck from wall to tree—but it's easy to miss...

The woman falls to the ground, stiff as a board and dead as a nail.

The older gentleman finally fills with a genuine concern for the younger woman but, since that huge goddamn spider is still on her collapsed body, he decides to get help instead. Pushing off the tree to run in the direction of the hospital and *the line of silk hanging from the tree catches his shoulder, pulls—*

Spiders leap from the tree and all over the older gentleman.

He yelps, blasphemes, and sprints, in an identical fashion as his first encounter with the eight-legged monsters. Two of the more determined spiders cling to the back of his shirt while a few fall off, hit the ground, and chase after him, jumping.

The older gentleman rips off his shirt and dashes into the street but it's just so dark, and the move so abrupt, that the driver of an oncoming truck has no time to react to the shirtless man with the (tiny) exposed penis that's just darted in front of him. The driver violently swerves, side-swiping another car—sparks burst red and orange—in an attempt to avoid him but it doesn't work. The older gentleman slips under the truck and he's crushed—*thump*—by the front right tire. The vehicle slams on the brakes—*thump*—and the driver loses control, swerving left and plowing through a fire hydrant before smashing into the front porch of a row home at the end of the block—and then the real chaos begins.

## **Town Sqare** **10:04 p.m.**

There's a rivalry in the Sugar Pointe Town Square tonight, one that started as a disagreement, which turned into an argument, then a fight, and now it's become a full-blown, down-and-dirty war between Sugar Pointe Mayor Eric Emerson and Sue Gabbestag, the head of his Parks & Recreation department. And, at a four past ten, the war is about to reach its climax in the center of the new Town Square.

The rotund Mayor Emerson has a satisfied smile across his lips as he pushes passed the lobby door, emerging from the Town Hall and into the heavy breeze of the night air. He's preoccupied, reaching and searching under the side of his light blue blazer until, happily, he withdraws the victory cigar he had tucked in his breast pocket that morning. Leisurely, he strolls down one step, two, three stone steps from the building to the sidewalk. As his yellow teeth gnaw on the end of the Buenaventura, the Mayor's eyes lift and look across the street, to the new Town Square.

Bright lights, colorful banners, a wide crowd of people...

His eyes widen with surprise, narrow to confusion, and finally glare.

His upper lip curls with rage.

„I'm gonna..." the Mayor snarls, leaving the threat unfinished. Indignation takes over. *The unmitigated gall*, he thinks to himself. (That's actually paraphrasing it

as, in his head, the words are extremely rude and much less articulate—all of it R-rated and quite impolite.) It's all the more insulting that she's doing it in his new park...

The Town Square had been renovated over the last few months—well, more accurately, the building that had been there was completely bulldozed to make room for a park and playground and a fast food restaurant at the far end. The block had originally been a homeless shelter that Hank Rubbins, the previous Mayor of Sugar Pointe (a post he held for nearly 20 years), had made his first project. The three-story shelter had been built by the able-bodied men of Sugar Pointe on the block across from the Pointe Street Town Hall, to serve as a constant reminder of the government's devout fight to help those in need. Once completed, word spread across the surrounding counties and the shelter became a beacon for the cause, a shining example of positivity to those in dire straits. It was a grand gesture by a quiet man but Mayor Rubbins shrugged off any praise. His job was to be a „a servant of the public,” he always told his constituency.

But that was many years ago, all of them quite peaceful.

Tragically, 66 year old Mayor Rubbins fell ill and passed on at the tail-end of the previous fall, leaving void a position that hadn't had an opposing contender in nearly two decades. Elections were held and nearly a dozen candidates spoke in the old town hall auditorium. Some of them were plain crazy, the fringe-types that hid on the outskirts of town, while others were young and inexperienced. Ultimately, the most credible candidate was an out-of-towner named Eric Emerson. His background was in business, having spent most of his professional life expanding the estate of the second wealthiest man in Texas, Raul Hulio. It was as if Eric Emerson just appeared out of thin air with a mission to help their town, something he expressed thoroughly (in a vast and expensive campaign), passionately conveying to the residents of Sugar Pointe just how dedicated he was to their cause, and how he'd better their economy, and bring jobs, and try to lower local taxes, and stand for moral, oft religious values.

He won the vote by a landslide.

(Ironically, like the previous Mayor, the newly elected Mayor's first order of business involved the block across from the Pointe Street Town Hall. He wanted the homeless shelter gone, right off the town map ASAP. It took several speeches to wear away the town's fondness for the shelter, something Mayor Emerson did slowly, meticulously. He suggested a lower local tax, except it would require tearing down the shelter. When that didn't work, he planted doubt by suggesting that the shelter was drawing a seedier crowd and that the poor were lazy criminals, that crime might lower if the shelter were gone. He speculated, prodded, questioned, and, little by little, there was a shift in the tide. Persistence and suave persuasion won out. Mayor Emerson gave the contract to an out-of-town construction company owned by Raul Hulio and leveled the shelter; then, he used Hulio's landscaping business to plant grass and assemble a playground. The land's mostly empty but for a line of trees spotting the perimeter of the block, just a grassy knoll with a small playground on one side and a barren patch of blocked-off land in the far corner. It's currently an unsafe mess of rock, dirt, and remnants from the demolished shelter, but the land had been sold to a fast food chain—also



owned by wealthy entrepreneur Raul Hulio—but they had yet to begin construction.)

Sue Gabbestag watches the portly Mayor cross the street, smirking. His angry scowl flips into a pleasant smile as he wades through the crowd. She knows he's searching for her but she ain't hiding, nor would she ever hide from that fat oaf. She stays put at her station, behind a half-dozen bins of used children's books that're for sale. This is her fundraiser and she's not going anywhere. She had been planning it for over a month and it had been a source of contention between her and the Mayor.

But it was earlier that day when the conflict exploded...

When his office door slammed opened without a knock, the Mayor was certain it was his Parks director. He remained seated behind his large oak desk, asking „Yes, Sue?“ while pretending to read a document. He just wanted to make sure that she knew she didn't have his full attention.

„So what's tonight's emergency meeting about?“ Sue began, her voice cautiously heading toward an irate tirade.

The Mayor had just called an emergency town hall meeting for 6:45 pm, just fifteen minutes before the library fundraiser was set to start on the other side of town. With a population hovering around 2,000, most everyone in Sugar Pointe that didn't go to the town hall meeting was certain to remain home, either out of disinterest or simply because they were unaware.

The Mayor had been an adamant opponent of the library.

„Well, it wasn't my intention to—“

A brief effort toward calmly resolving the issue but, then again, the Mayor really didn't care since he'd already won.

„Uh huh,“ she cut him off instantly, sick of his voice. He'd only been Mayor a few months shy of a year; she'd been there 14 years. „People are gonna figure you out.“ Her index finger stuck out at him, accusatorily. „Blowing through the town surplus, now you want to close the public library?“ Her voice grew loud. „What is wrong with you?!“

Without waiting for an answer, she stormed out.

The door slammed behind her.

Sue spent the next several hours coordinating the relocation of the fundraiser to the park just outside Town Hall. She granted the library a permit for the event and extended the hours to 11 p.m. so they could catch every council member and attendee of the emergency meeting when it ended.

Unaware of the situation outside, Mayor Emerson took to the podium in front of the packed and newly rebuilt Town Hall auditorium (his second project) and poised the question, „What should we do with businesses that don't raise enough funds to cover the new borough tax?“

This had been a question the Mayor had been asking for some time.

His proposal was to substitute them with franchises.

One of his examples, coincidentally, was the failing library. If it should go under, as it lacked the funding it once had („I'm not in the business of handouts, gotta stand on your own two feet,“ admitted the Mayor), the library could be remodeled and sold to a conglomerate book store; that way people could still have access to books and it would create jobs for those left unemployed by the closing

of the library. It would boost the economy by making money, and possibly increase revenue for other local businesses. He even assured the town that there was very little risk in his plan, as wealthy entrepreneur Raul Hulio had promised an investment in the property if the library did indeed shut down.

By the end of the meeting, most of the town had been persuaded.

Oddly enough, the meeting served to boost peoples' interest in helping the library. The Mayor had talked in terms of „last resort” and not that anything in particular was closing; so, as the townspeople left the auditorium and inadvertently came face-to-face with the library fundraiser, most of them saw it as a clever ploy by the Mayor, and they used it as an opportunity to help a struggling business.

It actually turned out to be a nice event, and surprisingly successful. The shift in locale had greatly benefited them, and less people would've probably shown up if it weren't for the urgency of a town meeting. Even now, at just past ten, the crowd remains large, with people roaming and buying cheap books and socializing. A large group of kids play on the playground. (Mayor Emerson had yet to add streetlights to the park so Sue had to arrange for a generator and four spotlights to shine on the playground and booths.) This also benefited them, as the children didn't want to leave, thus forcing the parents to stay longer, causing them to wander the bargain book bins out of boredom, which gave the library staff ample time to solicit extra donations.

The Mayor secretly fumes as he maneuvers through the event. The damned library fundraiser relocated to undermine his plans of defunding the damn stupid library. He's certain Sue's somewhere in the crowd and he's eager to confront her. People pass the Mayor and smile, some nodding in acknowledgment or polite greeting, and the Mayor keeps his disdain hidden. He graciously smiles back, his gait slowing so as not to seem too excited, but his eyes fervently search for the culprit. A younger man blocks the Mayor's path, reaching out to shake his hand and congratulate him on his plan to help fund the library.

The Mayor is flabbergasted by the suggestion that he'd planned this.

For a moment, he wants to hit the young man in the face.

Instead, he accepts credit and keeps moving.

Sue takes a good deal of pleasure watching the Mayor struggle through the crowd, confronted by the many people he sought to shut down. Sue's best friend Verbecca stands beside her. Whereas Sue is fair-skinned, rail-thin, and tall, her friend is short and curvy, with dark hair and especially kind blue-green eyes; both women are just shy of 40 and rather attractive, though Verbecca is married with two children. Sue is single, has been for years, ever since her relationship with Assistant Fire Marshall Mike Hansel came to a fiery end. Neither she nor Mike had had a serious relationship since. All men are cheaters, as far as she's concerned. (And in Mike's case, she was right—though she didn't even know the full extent of his infidelity. Mike slept around a lot. Even Verbecca had been with him—she was one of the married women who used to call the firehouse with false issues, just so Mike would come over.)

Sue briefly wonders what Mike Hansel was up to these days...

Mayor Emerson is again side-tracked, this time by two council members. Even with dozens of people and an ocean of noise between them, Sue knows that the

council members are congratulating the Mayor on his efforts to save the library. If it wasn't for his meeting, the fundraiser never would've made so much money. This makes Sue giggle. Recognition isn't her game. Right now, all she cares about is keeping the library open for another season.

*I'm sure this isn't over*, though, she concedes.

Verbecca notices her friend staring into the crowd and locates the root of Sue's fascination. "You'd think they'd be talkin' about crime goin' up in the tri-county area ever since he closed the shelter."

Her voice has a deep southern twang, more so than most.

„Take away the homeless shelter, people get desperate,” adds Sue, almost absent-mindedly. It's disparaging to think about but, then again, so was the event. The loss of the shelter had been a terrible blow to Sue and a few other like-minded coworkers (and the town itself, in her opinion). The wound's still fresh. To take her mind off it, she busies herself by tidying the books in the bin in front of her.

„At least we beat that ole' weeble-wobble at his own game, right?” laughs Verbecca, trying to cheer up her friend.

A stern voice cuts in.

„Do tell: What kind of game does a weeble-wobble play?”

Neither woman had noticed Mayor Emerson standing opposite them, on the other side of the bargain bins. He's rounded in the middle, and slow, but goddamn if he isn't sneaky.

His voice is smooth yet menacing, even as he maintains a placid smile.

Verbecca thinks a moment, a bit flustered.

„Um, I—I don't know...” she stutters.

„Evenin', Mayor,” Sue nods, smiling. „Nice night for a fundraiser. How was your meeting?”

The Mayor's smile widens, a maniac's twinkle in his eyes.

„I didn't mean that you reminded me of a weeble-wooble,” Verbecca continues.

„Is that right?” asks the Mayor, his attention stuck to Sue.

Verbecca's eyes light up.

„Nah,” she goes on, rejuvenated, „you remind me of the dildo in my bedside table 'cause yer both stuck-up twats.”

Sue guffaws, loudly.

The Mayor's face doesn't shade, nor do his eyes leave Sue.

It doesn't faze him one bit.

Verbecca doesn't care. She hates the Mayor. He's an asshole. Assholes get what's comin' to them. And that was that. She slowly, and very deliberately, plants a seductive kiss on Sue's cheek before heading off toward the playground in search of her children.

„Love her.”

Sue smiles during the silence that follows, mainly to herself.

„I would like to schedule a meeting with you first thing tomorrow.”

The Mayor speaks through gritted teeth.

The synthetic smile never fades.

„Oh? What about?”

Sue uses her most patronizing tone.

„You know damn well... what... I...”

The Mayor stops and looks around.

There's an odd sound in the air.

Sue notices it, too.

Everyone gradually stops what they're doing.

In the air overhead comes a whooshing.

As one, the crowd's attention lifts toward the dark night sky.

„What in the Lord's name..." the Mayor wonders aloud, backing away from the lights for a better view.

„It's... it's a flock of birds," calls a voice from within the crowd.

The person is incorrect.

It's not a flock of birds but, rather, countless flocks of bird, all of them mixed together, each species indistinguishable amongst the group—bats with finches and American crows, swallows and wrens, all of them flying out of formation in a bedlam sky—

A loud thud.

Another.

Blur of black.

A hollow thump.

Blur of brown.

A window shatters.

Whether due to exhaustion, or starvation, or disoriented by the darkness, or maybe just because they no longer feel as though they're being chased—whatever the reason, a number of the birds smash into roofs and against the sides of buildings and through windows, even square into one man's face (though he's an asshole so it can be chalked up to karma).

Screams—everywhere, it's a maelstrom of birds.

The Mayor pushes people out of his way and runs for it.

Parents scramble frantically to find their children.

Finches kamikaze straight down, dive-bomb the concrete and bounce. There's a burst of sparks and smoke as one hits the bulb in a spotlight—the playground goes dark. This leads two Hispanic teenagers (a boy and a girl around the age of 14) to wrangle together the remaining children still unsupervised, keeping low to the ground as they rush them away from the Town Square, toward cover—suddenly, they're forced to stop as a group of wrens pass in front of them like arrows slung from a bow at the front door of a nearby house—*thwap-thwap-thwap-thwap*—and the youngest cry louder at this but the two teenagers continue pushing them forward, toward shelter, bringing up the rear to make sure no children are left behind. For a moment, it becomes a sort of game to some of them—like tag or dodgeball. Instinctually, two of the kids in front lead the pack on a familiar course, toward a specific destination, one only a couple blocks from the Town Square, one that they consider secure...

The rest of the townspeople stay put, ducking low.

Lovers hold hands and strangers ban together.

Some huddle under a tree when, nearby, a fruit bat tangles wings with a sparrow and both plummet from the night sky. The sparrow hits the ground limp but the bat lands, recovers, and attempts to fly, only to discover it's wounded, at which point—screeching and flapping its' wings—the fruit bat careens into the

center of a cowering group. This elicits more screams, and more panic, as does what happens next—

A large crow flies into a power-line breaker box and explodes in a fiery ball of golden sparks. (The smell of barbequed bird lingers in the air.) That block and a few of the surrounding blocks go instantly dark, including the Town Hall. Luckily, the spotlights for the fundraiser remain on, as they're powered by a generator, and some areas of the park are still lit. There's a terrifying moment when a majority of the townspeople can't see much around them, only hearing thuds and flapping wings and screeches...

The overhead whooshing slows, stops...

The sky clears.

And then, silence.

Little by little, the townspeople stand. The entirety of the block is dark but the generator keeps the three remaining lights shining bright. People turn the lights straight up, so that they aren't as blinding, while small crowds gather around them, almost like campfires. People from the surrounding homes come out to check if others had lost power and, seeing the park lights, join the crowds to find out what in the blazes had just happened.

The Mayor's gone, Sue Gabbestag notices, searching the crowds for her friend. She finds Verbecca mingled in with one of the groups, a crying daughter cradled in one arm and her son's hand in the other, as he stands solemnly beside her.

„What'n the hell?" Verbecca asks as Sue approaches.

„I have no idea," she shrugs.

„Where's the Mayor?"

„Probably trying to make money off the situation," laughs Sue.

„Yeah, well, he should be here hel—"

The firehouse siren wails in the distance, echoing through the town.

„Bit late," Verbecca mumbles, trying to shush her crying daughter.

There's something about being together, congregated around a single light, that feels comforting, that feels safe, and the townspeople share a momentary reprieve. The mood lightens, with everyone joking and gossiping (Sue Gabbestag starts a rumor that the Mayor is a hermaphrodite), and it's a good time, considering. One man works for the power company and explains that the main office will quickly reroute the power to circumvent the downed power line, and that it's best to just stay put until that happens—otherwise you run the risk of being hit by a car or injuring yourself in the darkness.

So everyone just waits...

*At least the worst is over,* they nervously laugh to one another.

They don't know it's already too late...

*The spiders had arrived earlier in the day.*

*A couple nests landed prematurely, in Piedras Negras, and some drifted north, into a residential area, but the vast majority of them hit near an abandoned drilling rig south of town. It was there that they took shelter from the sun and fed the females, though food was scarce. They nested together and patiently waited and, at the fall of night, they headed north, in the direction of the most pronounced shifts in air pressure...*

*They could literally feel their prey.*

*The hordes were spread over a quarter-mile by the time the first wave reached the edge of town. Before them lay new terrain, a brick and mortar jungle, but they found it no more difficult to invade than their previous victories. Females paired with male protectors while the majority set out alone. They invaded like knowing conquerors; silently, with purpose. Some crawled into the sewers, where they stumbled on a few rodent snacks on their way back to the surface. Some climbed up buildings and leapt from structure to structure. Some boldly marched right in, disguised by a dusty camouflage from the desert they'd just traversed; in the darkness, against the dirt, they were practically invisible.*

*And they spread like cancer.*

*The Phoneutria fera had finally arrived in Sugar Pointe, Texas.*

The invasion had been so successful that, even when the lights were on, the townspeople didn't realize that they were outflanked by a dangerous predator.

(The spiders remained still during the bird chaos, ready to attack if need be but wholly unprepared for the situation. It was a common occurrence for them to find bird carcasses in the vicinity of their landing and, in some of the more desolate places, it had been their main source of food. This was, however, the first time they were present when the flocks actually crashed, though it was by no coincidence the birds and the spiders had arrived at the same event, at the same time: the birds had been flying every which direction until they headed toward the powerful spotlights, while the spiders went toward the movement of the townspeople.)

While the townspeople remain clustered around the lights—surrounded by darkness, waiting for the power to return—the spiders crawl ever closer, across roof tops and scurrying up trees. Some cocoon bird carcasses while others climb in open car windows and up ledges and beneath porches and down chimneys. The females stay behind (never to enter a battle unless absolutely necessary), as do all of the weakest males, in preparation of pouncing on fleeing prey. More climb from the sewers to hide in plain sight, curled below bushes or splayed in the dirt or across the front of walls, their shadowed legs like cracks in a building's façade. This new blanket of darkness has provided them the perfect cover, and the horde advances from every angle...

No one notices.

They're talking about movies.

Everyone does become quite silent when a woman's bloodcurdling scream echoes through the town. Sue and Verbecca turn in the direction of the scream, as do the dozen people around the light beside them. It's a couple blocks away, near Painter's Alley.

But, no one can see anything—it's all darkness and shadow.

„Sounded a few blocks away...” Sue worries aloud.

„Yeah,” Verbecca nods, calmly, „someone just stumbled on a flock of dead birds or something. Welcome to the party, stranger.” Her reasoning seems to placate the grown-ups (though her daughter is still crying) and the conversation slowly resumes.

„I’m surprised so many people stuck around,” Sue tells her friend, looking out to the other spotlights and the people around them. There’s still a good thirty people hanging around. „Library staff has to stay to clean up, wonder if everyone else’ll help...”

Of course, as soon as she says that, a small portion of the crowd farthest from them disperses. One man crosses the street, and he pulls out his keys and unlocks the driver’s side of his small sedan, and he opens the door and climbs into the seat—right into a dense thicket of web. Another passes under a tree, where a thread of silk catches on his shirt and pulls. A third doesn’t even make it to the street.

„What do you think the Mayor will do with all this? Think he’ll hire Raul Hulio’s dead-bird clean-up crew?” Verbecca asks Sue as she repositions her crying child.

Sue chuckles.

„Only if there aren’t enough desperate people to do it for pennies—”

A horrid noise pierces the air, startling everyone—brakes, squealing, and metal, scraping, and a monstrous smash, as if the front of a nearby house has just exploded. A few curses slip out from the group. Everyone’s a bit shocked, their collective focus toward the sound.

In the background, at the spotlight on the far side of the block, someone starts struggling—but it’s so far, Sue and Verbecca and others can’t hear the panic spreading through the distant group. One second, everyone’s there; the next, they’re gone, disappeared into the darkness.

„That—that definitely sounded like a car accident,” Verbecca speculates, craning her neck to see the accident. It’s too far and too dark. She wants to investigate but her daughter is still cradled in her arms, crying, and her son is still standing beside her, solemn.

„That’s why you stay put,” warns the man from the electric company.

„I’ll check it out,” another, much older man announces, adding, „I used to be a paramedic.”

He jogs in the direction of the crash.

„I hope no one’s hurt,” Sue says, watching the retired paramedic vanish into the darkness.

The firehouse siren is a good distance away, and the bloodcurdling scream was a couple blocks away, and the car accident had to have been on the edge of the nearest cross streets, but the next sound they hear is no more than ten feet from them, in the same direction that the retired paramedic had jogged toward...

A pained howl lumbers out of the blackness.

Sue grabs Verbecca’s arm, surprising her. They both curse. Her daughter cries a bit louder and all else is silent but for the child crying and the distant firehouse siren.

Tension fills the air so thick that Sue has trouble breathing.

„You alright?” Verbecca calls out.

It’s sickening, the sounds that answer—especially hearing so close the *thudthudthump uhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmm* sound of a slow collapse followed by a long, haunting groan... one that ends as if it’s being muffled by gauze.

Someone on the other side of the spotlight leans down and tilts the beam into the darkness. Sue’s first thought is a memory of Christmas—but she doesn’t have

much time to think about it. Her gaze follows the spotlight and her heart nearly stops when she realizes that the beam is settled on the retired paramedic, who's lying on the ground—a horrified expression frozen on his face, his eyes open but vacant—with a dozen spiders crawling over his half-cocooned body.

The power comes back on.

Buildings on all sides of the block light up, further illuminating the vast webbing that surrounds the park. It's everywhere—long, silver, flowing silk, and it reaches out in a glistening patchwork strung from rooftops to cars and trees and hydrants and windows and grass and everything in-between. She was right, and it did appear a bit like Christmas, snowy, with bright white “tinsel” around the trees, and the mass panic of any normal Black Friday—except for the wiggling lumps in the „snow”, and the frozen bodies with the horrified expressions.

Death is in the air.

Sugar Pointe's Town Square has become one giant spider web.

It's still dark in parts of the square and Sue almost wishes the lights would go out again. She can see shadows, tiny shadows, crawling and leaping across the ground, dangling from trees, shadows everywhere—but she has a difficult time finding the sources of each shadow, as they move too fast, scurrying across the ground amidst the darkness, everywhere—they're everywhere!—and she's overwhelmed and panicked and frozen, not from a bite but in cold fear, in absolute, abhorrent horror.

Townpeople scream and panic and run, and they're the first ones to die—well, some of them are just incapacitated for the moment, preserved for the greater good. The spiders dart so quickly that a bunch of the residents of Sugar Pointe don't even realize they're covered with gangly, fist-sized creatures until it's too late. The fuzzy bastards practically fill the air, like sleet, springing off the webbing and the ground and the trees and, for those lucky enough to make it to the street, they vault off building fronts, from under porches and cars and bushes, even off rooftops. There's screaming—some muffled, some gurgled—as people drop right and left. Three bites and the body shuts down, locks up. Some die immediately; others are alive but frozen inside their cocoon. The webs are so quickly laid that the spiders can blanket anything within a couple minutes, sometimes faster if they work in conjunction.

With a crying daughter in her arms, and her son right beside her, Verbecca makes a run for it. They race toward Town Hall in the hopes of making it inside the building. Her son is the only one to make it as far as the street, where he stops and checks over his shoulder for his mother and sister; he makes it no farther than that.

Sue Gabbestag is in shock and backing slowly. Had she run, they would have climbed her body and pierced her skin and shot her full of venom much quicker... but she's slow, gone, backing step after step as she watches the grisly scene unfold around her. She doesn't notice what's climbing up her back...

Inside the surrounding houses, none of them farther than two blocks from the Town Square, people are beginning to realize—not just that there's something going on outside but that there's a very real threat in their bedrooms and bathrooms and living rooms. One woman climbs into the shower (as she had been waiting to bathe since the lights went out) and while her face is covered in soap, a



large spider climbs up her shower curtain from the outside, the silhouette reflected against the wall behind her. Another woman goes to blow-dry her hair only to have a group of baby spiders sprayed right into her face. (They had climbed in much earlier to take refuge in a dark, warm space.) A man is sleeping peacefully, dreaming of ice cream, when an especially large spider climbs under the sheets right beside his left foot. Three teenagers are playing videogames (*finally! they had been so bored during the power outage*) while spiders corner them—one climbs the couch beside their heads, another sneaks into the bag of chips they're all eating from, and a third crawls across the ceiling, just overhead, beginning to lower itself...

It takes the spiders less than half an hour to cover the Town Square in a network of gossamer webs. They trap more than thirty people, each stuffed into their own private sarcophagus of webbing (and now similar in appearance to the spider's own cloud-like nests). Some of the captured prey is designated for eggs; holes are left open in the face, stomach, thigh, and buttock regions so that female spiders can take their time implanting soft, fatty tissue with babies.

They rest will eat and nest and reproduce...

And then they'll leave, to do it all again.

## **Sugar Pointe Hospital**

**10:13 p.m.**

Duragard lays in his hospital bed.

He had overheard a spat about a bunch of bird-related injuries. At first, he was certain the birds were because of the spiders... but then he wondered if it might not be relevant, if maybe it was something unrelated... and then, finally, he accepted he had no idea what a „bird-related injury” entailed, exactly, nor what the hell was happening outside the hospital. *Were people hurt by birds, he asked himself, or are there a bunch of birds that need medical attention and only the hospital can provide—wait... why would a hospital help birds?—wait, who the hell cares about bir—why am I—what the hell is going on here?* His thoughts were a bit scattered from the medicine they had given him for the spider bite but he was still mostly there, cognitive, focused. He also heard that some windows had been busted, though he didn't know why or how. *Maybe I dreamed that bit, or maybe it was a wounded bird seeking medical attention, or maybe...*

Now, the firehouse siren's blasting and has been for a minute, maybe two.

Duragard is silent, thinking, planning. Across from him, in another bed, is a Mexican or Portuguese or whatever (*it ain't from here* is all he knows) and the old man hates sharing a room with it... but the immigrant had said some serious stuff, had said that there were more of them fuzzy sum'bitches coming. And even though he doesn't trust a word outta the mouth of a foreigner, something about it, about the things he had seen earlier that night, about the things the bald man had said... „*Whatever we saw out there, whatever nightmare we witnessed out at those houses... he says that was just the beginning.*”... „*The rest are coming... if they aren't already here....*”

It all has Duragard plenty worried.

*I wonder if Matt's still got that*—Duragard isn't halfway through his thought before he realizes there's another person in the room, and that the person is standing beside his bed and talking to him; that the person had probably been there awhile, talking, talking to him and only him for quite some time, just a few feet away. *Jim*, reads the young man's nametag, with the subscript *Poison Control Specialist (Intern)*. Duragard looks young Jim over, his furrowed brow somewhere between inconvenienced and annoyed, and tunes in only long enough to realize the inexperienced whippersnapper is giving him safety tips—„Yeah, yeah, I got it,” the old man grunts, getting out of bed. He doesn't much care for whatever young Jim has to tell him and, when the young man goes on, Duragard interrupts by telling him as much. „I ain't worried 'bout no medicine, no spiders, and none'a your words. Worry 'boutcher self, young'un. Army put all the hair I need on my fleshy coin pouch.”

Jim stares back, uncertain. (He's stuck on the term fleshy coin pouch.)

„I'm sayin' I ain't scared, buckoo. Save your warnin's for someone else. I been savin' lives and buildin' bridges in war-time since before you was a solid, so you calm that sissy-talk down. Work gotta be done.”

(*Before I was a solid?* That also catches young Jim off-guard.)

„Sir,” Jim goes on again, doing his best to get out some information. „If you go home and get bitten again, there won't be any antidote.”

„What'sat mean?” Duragard asks, standing—and quickly supports himself with the bed. *A bit weak, okay, okay*, he acknowledges, finding it hard to stand and stay on his feet. He's also in a hospital gown, which he doesn't remember putting on.

„If you're bitten again,” Jim the poison control intern explains, „we can't give you another dose of the antidote. It doesn't work like that, with repeated bites. Anything more than one dose in a short period is lethal—”

„Yea, yea, oogie boogie, young'un. I'm terrified,” chuckles Duragard, sarcastically, as he searches for his possessions—but then he stops and stares at the goddamn immigrant man in the other bed. „And that Portumexigece over there better stop eyeballin' me or I'mma put some air in his I.V.”

Young Jim, the poison control intern, didn't even realize the other man was awake, let alone looking over. But Duragard is right and the bald, bedridden Brazilian is watching the exchange, interested but also visibly unsure, puzzled even. Maybe it's because he can't speak English; or maybe it's because he, too, can hear the siren still ringing out from the local firehouse; or maybe it's because he, too, knows something bad is fast approaching.

„You and your kin bring them spiders here?!”

Duragard doesn't really ask it as a question, more loudly demands it at the other hospital patron, an accusation more than anything.

The bald foreigner doesn't respond.

„Mr. Duragard, if there's a danger out there—”

The poison control intern deters his attention from the man in the bed.

„Sonny!” Duragard squares up with the shaggy-haired young man and, even in his old age, he's quite intimidating. „You hear that?” When they stop talking, the siren can clearly be heard in the distance. „You hear it? That means trouble. And

if that pickled squash is right,” he motions toward the bedridden man (who notices he’s being referred to, renewing his curiosity), „then you better be damn sure I’m gonna go do somethin’ ‘bout it ‘stead’a layin’ down like them freeloadin’ welfare blacks. Now I seent these bastards and I got some ideas, so get tha’ fug outta my way ‘fore I trounce you.”

The young man realizes that he’s standing between Duragard and a bag of the old man’s clothes, all of it bagged and hung up in the hospital closet. (They had to bag each article because it was coated in goo and stank to high hell of cologne.)

„What bastards? Sir, where are you going? What are you trying to stop?”

Young Jim asks questions and learns no answers.

Duragard suddenly grabs the intern’s arm and gruffly asks, „Where’s Biscuits?”

„Biscuits?” the startled young man responds. „You can probably find some in the cafeteria...”

„Not Biscuits—my dog, my dog Biscuits?”

„What dog?”

Duragard pushes the young intern out of the way. None of the situation makes much sense and, now that the old man’s completely dismissed him, Jim goes to leave—when the bald Brazilian in the other bed asks, “Edwardo? Irmao?”

„He’s in the I.C.U.” Jim answers; then, he uses his fingers to spell the letters as he repeats them more distinctly, “I.C.U.”

Duragard lets out a moan and pushes the young man out the door, closing it behind him, and then he proceeds to dress in his earlier, protective attire.

Gortex trousers.

Fishing boots.

Camo mask.

Rain slicker.

Gloves.

He doesn’t have duct tape this time but he’ll manage.

The only two men left in the room lock eyes in the final moment before Duragard leaves. The bedridden foreigner is baffled by the old man’s choice in attire, and Duragard glares back through the creepy hunting mask. The old man lifts his arm and points a menacing finger at the bald man. And then he leaves (the Brazilian man in the hospital bed rubs his eyes, unsure of what he’s just seen) and exits the room to find a hospital brimming with tangible panic. Nurses scurry and run. The P.A. system calls out for one doctor, then another, then sends an „All come to E.R.” message. A doctor in scrubs runs by, holding the stethoscope around his neck. Another. More nurses pass.

Everyone’s in a hurry and headed somewhere.

Duragard recognizes the setting—it’s a scene of war. Whatever the enemy, this is the side-effect of battle. Panic, tension in the air, panic in the eyes, triage, and the disquieting acceptance that life may not be alright—that nothing may be alright again...

It actually makes him more comfortable.

He checks the hallways for the stairwell or an elevator or an exit but, the farther he travels, the more lost he becomes. The hospital is only three floors, with two exits on either side, the ER entrance in back, and a main entrance in the face of the building—yet he’s still somehow lost. And more people continue to pop up, an

unending procession of the sick and infirmed, all of them scared, hopeless. The rooms are so full that people line the walls. A group of nurses begin checking anyone they can, working their way down the hallway, seeking out those that need immediate attention—the first signs of triage. Every so often, they encounter someone frozen in place and they rush them off as a priority.

*Those fuzzy g'damn bastards made it...*

Duragard walks faster. The pain in his knee's returned and he hobbles a bit. Overcrowded places are an annoyance and he wants out, quickly. Everyone's just in his way, dying or not. He pushes through the growing mass—one becoming increasingly panicked, loud, and hysterical—toward a stairwell. The old man shiftily hobbles down a flight of stairs to the first floor and then out into a crowded hallway before leaving out a side door and into the fresh breeze of a Texas night. People are running toward the hospital, he sees, dozens of them, all of them scared or crying, running. It looks like the world's ending.

*Everyone is coming from one direction, he notes.*

„Well played,” he nods, appreciatively.

*You gotta respect the opponent if you wanna beat 'em.*

The one thing he doesn't see, at least not yet, are any goddamn spiders.

Duragard sees a man running toward the hospital, and it's a man he recognizes, so he calls out, „Hey Ted, what happened?”

Ted stares at the oddly dressed man that's just spoken his name, momentarily bewildered.

Duragard pulls up the ski mask.

„Duragard? You crazy bastard,” the man named Ted screams over, „what're you in that getup for?”

„To protect myself, dumbass!”

Ted thinks this over and gives an approving nod; then he answers the initial question just before he disappears into the hospital.

„Goddamn Town Square is a spiders' nest.”

Duragard had intended to ask more questions but it happens so fast, the man's gone and he's again left alone to observe the mob, his eyes scouring the faces for someone else he knows, anyone. His house is far away but his car is parked there—except it's best not to head back there, as it would waste too much time, and there're spiders all over the place, and his car probably wouldn't work anyway as he blew up half his house. He needs a vehicle first and foremost, though, any vehicle, and then he can stock up on supplies...

There's a plan he's been working over since the moment he woke up, just pieces of a plan—destinations, supplies, a partner—but he'll put it all together somehow, one way or another. He's not certain if it'll work but he knows enough to be sure he can help.

And then, with one sound, everything changes—

A low bark and a whimper.

„Biscuits!” squeals Duragard, filled with joy.

He turns around and carefully bends at the knees and very nearly cries as the golden Labrador runs over and leaps into his arms. He pulls up his camo mask so

his best friend can lick his face. It's been a long time since he's been this happy; either of them, really.

„It's a miracle. How'd you get here?“

„Sir, you okay?“ a voice asks.

A man approaches and Duragard recognizes him instantly, with dismay.

„The spic?!—I mean, you... did you...“

Duragard had seen the man in the hospital not too long ago, the firefighting Mexican that had been translating the lazy Portuthing's warnings from his bedside, but then it snaps into place—and Duragard remembers, he remembers that moments before he fell unconscious, he had seen this man's face. It makes him go silent. The words just aren't there; he can't bring himself to say where he remembers the firefighter from, that his last image before the hospital is this man's face, carrying him and his dog to safety.

„No-no—Tommy,” the man corrects him.

Duragard isn't sure if the man is being facetious or serious.

Tommy's face is made of stone, showing no signs of emotion. His body is unreadable, as well—strong, muscular, but without character, without telltale signs of wear or compromise. His arms remain at his sides and he has good posture and cleanly cut dark hair.

*It's like trying to read wallpaper,* thinks Duragard.

„Tommy, eh?“ the old man mumbles, leery, „what'd you do to Biscuits?“

He's accusatory, annoyed.

„Do?“

„You feed him? You get him water?“

Tommy nods.

Duragard doesn't like this situation one bit, that someone he doesn't respect had been watching his dog without his knowledge or approval; but it's too late now and he gives Biscuits one final kiss before standing to take note of the scene. The last of the townspeople are running up to the hospital entrance and it reminds him of refugees he'd once seen, wary and beaten souls in need of shelter and safety. The final few are limping, some are carried, others walk with support. These are the wounded from ground zero, he supposes, those from the spot where it happened. After the last of the people enter the hospital, the night becomes eerily still, even as it's a bit windy.

Quiet, so quiet that Duragard can feel it in his bones.

There is *war* in the air, death en mass.

*Whatever just happened, it's bad.*

Duragard sighs and turns to Tommy, the Mexican firefighter that had saved his life and the life of his dog. „You got a car nearby?“ he asks, almost hoping the man says no.

Tommy nods.

„Where?“

He points in the direction where everyone had just come running.

„The spiders are here,” Duragard tells him.

Tommy nods again.

There's a silence while Duragard works up the nerve to be courteous, even if only briefly, as it's something he considers supremely important.

„May I use your car?“

Tommy nods again.

„Goddamn it,“ grumps Duragard, and he sucks at his teeth.

He does his best to think of a better plan, or any other plan, really.

Nothing comes to mind.

„Goddamn it,“ he repeats, and then adds, „well then, we better get on.“ And he grabs the scruff of Tommy's shirt and impolitely leads him back into the hospital.

Biscuits follows close behind.

The hospital is packed. The sound of misery and pain fills the air so thoroughly that even the PA system is hard to hear. Duragard ignores all of it and, with his hand tight on Tommy's collar, leads them through the immense crowd to the hospital locker room. He releases Tommy and checks the janitor's closet in the back of the empty locker room (probably the only empty area in the hospital) and finds exactly what he needs, the final ingredient: duct tape. He wraps the tape around his own collar and wrists and legs so that the sleeves don't hang open, so that nothing can get in; then, he breaks open each locker in search of clothes. The old man tosses shirts at Tommy, then a hooded jacket, an extra pair of surgery pants, anything he can find that might help protect him.

Tommy catches each article of clothing but doesn't move otherwise.

„Put it on,“ Duragard orders.

Tommy nods.

Duragard stops.

„Do you ever do anything 'sides nod?“

Tommy nods.

„Goddamn it,“ Duragard curses again. He walks over to Tommy and, once the clothes are on, duct tapes each pant leg and sleeve, pulling the hood over Tommy's face and duct taping the collar. Finished, he stands back and looks for bare skin but finds none other than Tommy's face—and for that, he gives him a surgical mask.

*It'll have to do for now.*

They exit the locker room and Tommy heads toward the exit.

Duragard stops him.

„Not so fast there, Nods.“

Duragard leads once more, this time directing them toward the x-ray wing. He leaves Tommy and Biscuits in the crowded hallway as he ducks inside an ultrasound room and returns with a tube of viscous goo. He douses both Tommy and the dog in the goo, smearing it all over everything. People crowding in the hallway stare with curiosity, and the show briefly quiets those around them.

Now they're done, and Duragard leads them back out into the dark, windy night. Tommy and Duragard check their surroundings but don't find much. Silence, a still night sky. No spiders. A haunting scream in the distance, from the center of town.

„Gotcher keys?“ asks Duragard, ready to complain.

Tommy reaches under the extra clothes and into his pocket and pulls them out.

The old man bends and picks up his dog.

„Quiet, buddy,” he calmly tells his oldest friend, whispering in a soothing voice, „we’re gonna make a run for it. And this might get hairy. But I got you. Safest place for you right now is in my arms.” He has the camo mask pulled back down over his face but stares into his dog’s eyes. Biscuits is deaf; he knows that. But saying these words are important.

And then he looks over to Tommy.

„You ready?”

Tommy nods.

„Goddamn it.”

## **Sugar Pointe Elementary School**

**10:31 p.m.**

Mayor Emerson runs as soon as the birds take over the sky, pushing and shoving and darting blindly in whatever direction proves least resistant. He gets a block away and then another block and huffs and puffs and slows. His running had been more of a shambling gait than actual sprint but now, the sky is clearing of birds. A stillness is returning. He leans against a tree and chuckles at the absurdity at it.

*It’s not that I was scared...* the Mayor tells himself, pausing to think up a justification that’ll make him sound heroic... *it’s that I’m... going for help, to alert the authorities, because they’ll—ow!* A spider lowers from the nearby tree and bites his hand. The Mayor pulls his hand back, leaving the withered creature still hanging in the air—and proceeds to uppercut the dangling beast, sending it flying off into the night air. He’s a bit stunned but resumes walking.

The firehouse siren blares, which concerns him.

*Prolly because of the birds and power outage.*

Screams in the distance cause him further apprehension.

Self-preservation swiftly enters his mind and he searches for safety.

The flagpole in front of the elementary school is visible only a few blocks away, the American flag waving in the gusts of warm night air, and he picks up his shambling run toward the front of the building. The brick school is dark black inside, as it’s been shut and locked for hours now. The Mayor crosses the grassy front, passed the flagpole, and up to the three sets of double-doors in front. His eyes search for a rock to smash the window, and he finds one, picks it up, lifts it over his head (looking momentarily like a maniac) and rushes at the nearest front door—when he sees that the door is ajar, unlocked and partly open. He stops and looks around. He opens the door and looks in but can’t see anything. Too dark. It’s also quiet.

The Mayor moves slowly as he enters the school. He doesn’t have a flashlight and the school is dark so he mainly navigates by waving both hands out, blindly. Just after the front door is a narrow foyer between inside and outside, with a second set of doors, and he enters the lobby of the school. The front office is on

the left, with the auditorium entrance to the near-right, and a hallway leading forward and branching off to the many dozen classrooms.

In the darkness of the lobby, the Mayor stands frozen, staring around, looking for any movement in the shadows. Really, all he can see is darkness so even if there was movement, there'd be no way to see it. He remains still, unsure of what to do next. The sound „Uhhhh....” escapes his lips as he thinks of a next move—Cell phone! The idea pops into his head and he reaches for his cell phone and pulls it from his pocket and opens it (it's a flip-phone, long outdated) and the screen lights up in neon blue.

There's a skittering nearby.

The Mayor chokes on a gasp and quickly turns his phone light forward, just in time to see something small move behind a distant corner. His hand shakes. Something's in the lobby hallway with him. „Hel—hello?” he calls out, terrified that the loud, booming voice of a bird or spider might respond...

*That's... that's probably not possible*, he reminds himself.

The neon blue of the phone works as an eerie flashlight and he can focus up the hallway a half-dozen feet—

There's further skittering.

Noise.

Tiny scraping like whispers in the darkness.

Shadows move—and he can see it...

The lights to the school come back on with the power.

The Mayor screams, then stops.

There's a child standing in front of him.

Another kid pokes his head from around the corner. And then another. And another. And then a bunch more. They step out from their hiding spots from behind lockers and in the nooks of classroom doors, all of them grouped in front of the Mayor, maybe twelve in all—mostly younger but with two Hispanic teenagers in front.

„What'er you kids doin' here?” asks the rotund Mayor, harshly.

The teenage boy can understand English a bit because of his mother but the girl doesn't understand a word of it. The boy bends beside one of the children next to him and whispers, „Help. Talk.” The child, a pretty blonde girl no older than eight, nods and proudly steps forward to assume responsibility. They form a three-tiered protectorate, with the little girl standing in front of the two teens who stand in front of the other nine children.

„We ran,” the little girl answers innocently.

The Mayor does his best impression of a teacher, keeping his belly out and his voice authoritative as he stares down at the children. (He'd been married three times but no kids, never wanted them, never liked them—in fact, schools are just a burden on single, childless taxpayers.) The kids are relieved to see an adult but a bit apprehensive, as there's sure to be some sort of repercussion for breaking into their school. The Mayor studies the girl, then lifts his gaze to look at the teens, then leans to the side to inspect the children cowering in back, and then goes back to eyeballing the Hispanic teens.

„You illegals?” he asks them—



But before they can answer, his phone rings. The caller ID lights up with Raul Hulio's name (2<sup>nd</sup> wealthiest Texan in Texas) and the Mayor curses under his breath before hitting the green SND button on his phone.

„Hello, yes, Mr. Hulio?“ His voice sounds much less authoritative on the phone than it does with the kids (or anyone else, for that matter).

A growl erupts out of the phone and the Mayor has to hold the phone away from his ear. It's a scolding. The Mayor tries to apologize but, each time, the growl interrupts even louder.

The teenage boy turns to the girl and whispers. The girl whispers back. They're holding hands. The boy bends down to the group behind them.

„Is anyone bited? Spider bited?“ he asks them.

Some of the kids say no, some shake their head, some don't respond.

They had had a brief encounter with the spiders on the trek from the Town Square to the school, much like the Mayor did. They had been running when several seemingly dropped out of the sky and nearly onto them. The boy took off his shoe and swatted them away. As they kept running, the spiders didn't put up much of a chase.

„No one bited then?“ he asks a final time.

None of them answer; their wondrous eyes just gaze up, helplessly.

The boy points to three kids. „Close. Windows. Doors.“ He pantomimes closing a window and door, then points up and down the hallway to every door he can. „All. Close.“ The kids stare back up at him and he shoes them. „Ändale.“ The children break off and run down each of the hallways, shutting all the classroom and administration doors, bathrooms, janitor closets, any doors that are still open. The Mayor notices the kids running off and lowers the screeching receiver from his ear—

„Eh! What're you doin'? Hey, all y'all get back here—“ he calls out to the kids but then quickly lifts the phone back up to his ear, „—no, Mr. Hulio, there's no one here. I know they're on their way, and I'm sorry I didn't call sooner, there was a delay—“

Some of the kids stop and return, as the Mayor had directed, but the teenage boy shoes them away again, reminding them of their task. This time, the Mayor's too distracted with the phone call to notice.

The boy whispers something to the girl and then he heads into the office.

After the Mayor apologies several more times, the screeching abruptly halts and the line hangs up—then, just silence. The Mayor turns back toward the group of kids to find just two, the young blonde girl and the teenage girl behind her. Everyone else has run off. He's momentarily confused.

„Wh—where'd everyone go?“ he asks, confused.

„We was playin' at the playground and then there was birds everywhere,“ the girl responds, scratching her ear as she recites the story, „and we could'int find none of our mamas so we run oft here and this girl and her boyfriend,“ she giggles at the boyfriend part, „helpt us and we got us in here and now they's off closin' doors and callin' the police and makin' sure nothin' can't get in none'a the hallways an' such.“

„Get in? Like the birds?“

„Spiders,“ the child answers.

This catches the Mayor by surprise and he looks at the wound on his hand.

„Spiders?”

„Y’sir,” responds the small blonde girl.

„Wait—police?”

The Mayor storms off into the office and comes back out pulling the teenage boy by the scruff of his shirt.

„You—you speaka el Englisho?” the Mayor asks, condescendingly.

The boy nods and does his best to relay the story that had led him there, the things the men that he’d been with had said, what he’d seen, their encounter with the spiders on the way there, and that he thought it might be best to stay indoors until the police could rescue them.

The Mayor’s surprised by the second mention of spiders. He checks his hand and the bite, inconspicuously (the boy notices) before sneering, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at the boy. It’s a look the boy isn’t familiar with, one of contempt and distrust.

„You let me handle the police. And for now, well, looks like this is a safe spot, ain’t it?” chuckles the Mayor, with a mischievous hint. He looks down at the young blonde girl kindly and suggests, „While we wait, maybe we can see if this place got any food, ice cream, candy...”

The young girl smiles.

They aren’t safe, however...

*You see, in the last resettlement, the spiders had inadvertently picked up a predator that was hazardous even to them—a species of *Acanthaspis Petax*, from the *Reduviidae* family, and most commonly referred to, simply, as the assassin bug.*

*These horrid creatures are black as night (they do have a dab of color in the sparse white whiskers poking off their body), with lateral fangs, narrow necks, and six legs on a sturdy black body. When bare, they’re similar to an oblong black beetle, except their faces are always angry—not just angry but fuming, raging, irate, like tiny New York cab drivers. These insects are rare and dangerous, ambush hunters with venom that has no cure—a stab with its proboscis, an injection of paralyzing saliva and tissue-dissolving enzyme, and their prey is dead within minutes, at which point these tiny black fiends sucks out the innards...*

How do they have anything to do with the spiders? How did they arrive in Sugar Pointe, Texas? How are they already at the Elementary School? How-how-how? you ask. Well, that’s a very good series of questions but slow down, for Christ’s sake, one at a time. (And though I appreciate your participation, I’ll ask that you hold all questions until later.)

*These spindly bastards have a unique m.o. of infiltrating other species, even living amongst their unknowing enemies, by camouflaging their body with dead bits of their hollowed-out prey. They literally disguise themselves in the corpses of the species they eat, as was the case with the spiders. They had been wearing spider suits and living amongst the species for some time, as they were one of the only species able to maneuver through the spiders’ webs with ease. Since they stayed secluded, and were eating such a small percentage of the ever-growing spider population, they had remained unnoticed.*

*This pack of assassin bugs had accidentally migrated with the spiders. Inadvertently caught in a ball of web, they were which forced to leave behind their homes and extended families. They ate all the spiders in that nest as they floated on the wind, which changed the weight and blew them faster and a bit off course from the rest of the horde, though not by much. They landed on top of Sugar Pointe Elementary School during the early afternoon, while it was still in session. They grouped like ants and crawled into a dark ventilation duct, which led down into the building.*

*A young child in Mrs. Eggers' second grade class had heard the bugs pouring into the vent—a series of faint, metallic pings—and he had raised his hand to tell his teacher that it was raining in the vents.*

*Mrs. Eggers laughed, thinking the comment quite peculiar.*

As the Mayor watches, and the kids shut all the doors, further boarding themselves inside the elementary school, the nest of assassin bugs crawl from out of a vent and into a classroom.

## **The Rio Grande** **Just before dawn**

Their goodbye was brief, and they pulled the raft into the water, letting the kids hop in first. Edward sat in front. Miguel steered from the back. The children huddled on the floor in-between. The rapids were rough at first but they slowed. Luminescent rays reflected off the water like glimmers of white gold. The water shushed, the raft gently swaying. There was a light breeze. And a moment arrived just long enough for Miguel to have a final conversation with his brother.

„You're starting to look like me,” Miguel told Edward, motioning toward the beard.

Edward hadn't shaved since the beginning of the trip and his face had grown a bit scraggly. He was visibly shaking, his skin pale. Sweat dripped off his forehead. With the last of his strength, he warned his brother (and the children) of the oncoming threat, that a ton more of those damned spiders were headed toward Texas, that people needed to be called and warned, that they weren't safe anywhere. *If Miguel saw anything peculiar in the next day or two, warned Edward, it would be a precursor to their invasion.*

Dawn was approaching.

„Tell mom...” Edward began, and he gave a nod as words were no longer going to come out of his mouth. His eyes widened and his body tightened and he convulsed—and would have fallen right off the raft, into the water, if Miguel hadn't jumped forward and pulled him in, resting him on the floor of the raft next to the kids.

Ignoring the heartache, Miguel knew his brother would die if he didn't get medical treatment ASAP, this was certain—so he did the only thing he was certain would get them attention, and he steered the raft across the river, which itself was a border between countries, and they illegally entered the United States.

The raft rushed up on the shore and they swiftly disembarked, climbing the stiff embankment (Edward draped across his brothers' big arms) and the group got no further than 30 feet onto American soil—shifting Edward over his shoulder, the two teenagers close behind—before the U.S. Border Patrol had them surrounded by three trucks and a dozen rifles. Miguel set his younger brother down, pleading, begging in Portuguese for a hospital.

„Emergency. Policia. Med-a-sin.”

The faceless men laughed from their trucks.

Miguel pointed to his brother and continuously repeated, „American. American. American.”

The men laughed more.

„He don't look American,” one called out.

Another man stepped forward, thin, dressed in denim. He rolled over the shirtless, pants-less man on the ground and looked him over, feeling for a pulse.

„Fella's been bit by something,” he called back to the men in the trucks. „And he ain't got much life left in'im.” He thought a moment. „Call an ambulance.”

„Russell,” complained a gruff man from the back, „toss 'em back into that boat and ship 'em back—”

„Yeah, Terrance? And what if he is an American citizen? Call the goddamn ambulance please!” his voice was tired, annoyed.

Miguel approached the man bending next to his brother, his hand extended in appreciation—BOOM!

One of the men in back fired his rifle.

Everyone ducked their head.

A bullet pierced Miguel's shoulder and went straight through, into the ground behind him.

The big man dropped to the ground.

There was a silence.

Someone in the back apologized for shooting the Mexican...

„Better make sure that ambulance has room for two,” Russell called over his shoulder.

Miguel cursed from the ground.

And, in the hours that followed, he did his best to follow his brother's final instructions—even though he was wounded. He warned the paramedics in the ambulance that something dangerous was appro—they gave him a sedative to calm him down and it knocked him out for hours. When he came to, he tried again to warn the doctors and a nurse; they didn't know what he was saying, nor did they seem to care. After repeated requests, the nurse brought him a phone and he called the police—and was immediately transferred to the fire department dispatch. That didn't work. It wasn't until nighttime that people seemed to take an interest in him (and he could only assume it was because the spiders had arrived). He repeated his story and his brother's words repeatedly, to little effect. Finally, they brought in a Mexican to sort of translate (one that sounded vaguely familiar), which worked the best of all his attempts—he relayed as best he could what had happened, and he did his best to tell them everything his brother had told him, and that was it. Finally, he had done what his brother had asked. His job was over. And he felt accomplished as everyone left the hospital room. Well, everyone

left except an angry old man in the hospital bed across from him—but even that guy put on some strange outfit and left.

Now that his brother's life is saved, and everyone is warned, it's time to relax. Miguel stands from the hospital bed and it creaks from the release of the big man's weight. His right arm is in a sling and he's lost some blood but the bullet passed through meat, with minimal damage. They also doped him up well enough to function yet feel no pain. (In fact, he loves the painkillers so much that he does a quick search around the room to see if there's any lying around—and he doesn't find any, though he isn't sure he'd know what it looks like if he did find it.) His clothes are near his bed and he begins rummaging through them. The hospital gown he's in carries a breeze, as he's naked underneath, but he doesn't dress—just removes one of the joints from the back pocket and a lighter.

There are loud noises from the hallway and, exiting the hospital room, he learns why—there's an entire town's worth of people in the hospital, all of them jabbering in English and whining or groaning. He maneuvers through the crowd, unsure what's happening, exactly—he assumes it's spider related, as the injured seem to be nursing bites, and it makes him hesitant to leave the hospital. He finds the stairwell and, instead of heading toward the front exit, he takes the stairs up and out onto the roof.

It's a nice night. Breezy but warm, and silent but for the firehouse siren wailing in the background. Miguel lights the joint and puffs off it and thinks about his brother. The Mexican translator had relayed a message from the doctor, informing him that his brother was alive, that he was in the I.C.U. and had been given the anti-venom to the spider bites but that it came so late that the poison had already affected Eduardo, and they weren't sure what the lasting repercussions might be.

*I'll go sit by his side, make sure baby bro is okay, let him know he ain't alone.*

He walks to the edge of the building, staring out over the town.

*Looks peaceful...*

A loud buzzing interrupts the calm. An explosion of sparks burst upward from a few blocks away. There's a second explosion of sparks even closer, and a third, orange embers blasting from overloaded breakers as the surge follows along the power lines. Miguel is enthralled by this, watching as the streetlamps go dark, then the houses, block by block, until a blackout has spread throughout the entire town. He's not even sure the hospital's lights are out until, reflected below him, a brief darkness is replaced with bright emergency lights—and that's when he sees it, something that horrifies him, that shakes him to his deepest core, something that frightens him more than anything he's ever seen in his life...

Naturally, he takes several rapid puffs off the joint, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs, and flicks the tiny roach over the side, and he runs back inside the hospital, to find and protect his brother.

### **Three Blocks from Town Square**

**10:43 p.m.**

The closer Duragard and Tommy get to the Town Square, the more everything is laden with webbing—store fronts and houses and cars and trees, all of it thicker and thicker the farther they push toward the nest. They can't see any but the spiders are audible, thudding as they jump, the faint brushing of a thousand tiny, fuzzy feet—it's everywhere, on the rooftops above down to the ground on either side... but, the spiders remain elusive, hidden. The nest had settled in the Town Square and that's what it looks like—the webbing headed toward the nest.

Every step is tense and careful but, for now, uneventful.

Finally, they reach the block of the truck and Tommy, keys in hand, points them at the vehicle, hitting the unlock button, and the car lights up in its parking spot against the curb—Duragard snatches the keys. „Better if I drive,” he tells him, and it's partly true. Only Duragard knows where they're heading, so Tommy nods. (Duragard winces, as Tommy speaks little but the nods are starting to feel patronizing.) He would've left Tommy at the hospital and just taken the car, if he could—but he knows there will come a time when he might need the strength of another man (his strength had diminished) and, as there was no one else around, it was up to them.

„Stop, shh!” Duragard holds his hand out.

Tommy stops.

Biscuits is in his master's arms, quizzically looking forward.

Quite a few spiders are ahead of them, almost as if they've formed a battlefront. They had spilled into his living room earlier in the day, and he'd come face-to-face with a couple of them, but this is the first time he's seen them in the open. They're scattered around the end of the block, with the truck almost directly in-between. Some of them mull around the street or wander the sidewalks but most are unnervingly still, perched on top of cars or curled against walls, prepared to jump. The two men face an immense army, one with aerial superiority, one that doesn't need to attack from trenches, one that's only just begun...

„Goddamn Operation Overload,” he whispers, mainly to himself, as the situation reminds him of a warped version of the allies invading Europe. (He hadn't been in the great war, only seen every documentary about it.) He looks around for something in the environment that might help them and, to his surprise, he finds something. „Them breaker boxes are shoddy and they spark if they're hit.” He points to the breaker box attached to the pole of a nearby power line. „Might cause a distraction, give us a chance—ah ha!” Duragard finds a few solid rocks in the bed of a nearby tree and he picks them up, commanding that Tommy „follow close, and keep yer head low, boy!” (Tommy nods but Duragard doesn't see it.) He quickly hobbles toward the truck, his dog in his arms, Tommy at his side, and, as they get close, he holds Biscuits with one arm so that he's able to chuck a rock at the power-line breaker set against the top of the pole, just passed the truck...

The rock misses its target.

He curses and throws another, missing a second.

Tommy searches for some rocks of his own and finds a few.

As Duragard misses again, Tommy stands still, statuesque, just staring at the black, rounded breaker at the top of the power-line... and he brings his hands together in front of him, a rock in the right, and he aligns his body with the box... and he lifts a leg, much like a pitcher, and chucks the rock so hard that it hits the

breaker-box, dents the side—sparks fly everywhere—and the entire box falls off and hangs against the pole, entirely dislodged but still strung up by wires.

„Wo—holy hell, boy—goddamn cannon, I was just trying to tap it—”

The streetlights go dark, as do the lights inside all the surrounding buildings, but it doesn't stop there—sparks burst from the breaker-boxes a block ahead and a block behind them, continuing down every block in bursts of vibrant sparks, as all of the lights systematically go out, a block at a time in every direction, until every light is out in Sugar Pointe, Texas.

„That's not quite what I had planned,” admits Duragard.

*And it may have done the opposite of what I wanted*, he realizes shortly thereafter, while standing in the middle of a pitch-black street. The darkness actually helps amplify a distinct new sound. Instead of scaring off any nearby spiders, it seems to have alerted more of them, even riling them up a bit, and a tremendous amount of them can be heard aggressively advancing, thumping in every direction as they leap toward the two men and one dog.

Duragard and Tommy run full-speed toward the truck.

The street is in absolute darkness but they can feel things moving around them, across cars, the ground, crawling up and out of everywhere. The night air becomes chaotic, dense with sound and motion. Both men keep their heads down and Tommy reaches the driver's door first, opening it to climb in and shuffle to the passenger seat. Biscuits is practically thrown in and Duragard climbs in last—two thumps against his back feel like someone just threw bananas at him and they bounce off. He quickly sits in the driver's seat and he closes the door and sticks the key in the engine. The headlights come on—

Both men flinch at the sight of a giant spider on the windshield.

They turn on the interior light and make sure nothing else made it inside the car with them; nothing did. They sigh in relief and take an extra moment to breath and relax. There could've been a million of those furry sum'bitches outside the car but they weren't getting in, no siree bob, so the men take a much needed breather.

Ready to go on (*what other choice is there?*), Duragard backs the car up and casually pulls out of the spot, driving three blocks deeper into town, toward the nest. The webbing is more and more prevalent as they go, block by block, until they reach the block of the Town Square and the web stretches from one side of the street to the other, like a silk wall. It's the scene of a nightmare, so clouded that it's practically impenetrable, even with the truck's high-beams shining into it. Duragard pushes forward—he wants to see his enemy close-up, get a read, find a weakness, something, anything useful... but there's just so much web that there's hardly anything to make out. They enter the block of the Town Square and pass through wall after wall of webbing, pulling large chunks of it onto the car. The windshield wipers run overtime but barely clear the view. Tommy never stops praying in Spanish, mostly under his breath. Duragard is too preoccupied to notice (though it may have been one of the few situations where he wouldn't have been angry to hear Spanish). They go over bumps, probably people but they can't really tell. Every so often he thinks he can see a human-shaped white lump on the ground (and he's really not certain but some of them may be moving a little). They reach the other side of the block and Duragard accepts that nothing useful can be

gleaned from their drive-thru, as it all just amounts to more proof that they're up against an enemy unlike any other.

Duragard makes a solemn promise.

„I'm gonna kill every last one of them sum'bitches.”

But first, they're going to need supplies.

## **Sugar Pointe Elementary School**

**10:50 p.m.**

Mayor Emerson has already eaten a hearty portion of sliced ham and is rooting through the fridges for a drink and possible dessert by the time the boy and girl lead the children into the cafeteria. Rectangular tables and dozens of chairs fill the area, with sporadic columns and trash bins, and a counter lines the head of the area, with the kitchen just behind. The far wall is mostly glass, with two doors leading to the outside playground, with only one other door leading back into the school. The whole area smells of old macaroni and cheese, as the school children know it to everyday, but it's familiarity is reassuring to them.

They enter one-by-one, formed in a line as if it's a normal day in school, and each one takes a seat around a single table. The boy and girl remain standing, as they're about to find food, but a faint buzzing in the air causes them to pause. Everyone tenses. The young children rush close to the boy and girl. The Mayor freezes with a biscuit stuffed in his mouth. Suddenly, the lights shut off—and are quickly replaced by the bright white emergency lights lining the walls. The wide cafeteria is still filled with light but this scares the children nonetheless.

Mayor Emerson resumes his search for a suitable meal. For a fleeting moment, he actually wishes he had worked to increase the state budget on school lunches (instead of lobbying for the opposite) since the „ham” had been absolutely gross and the pink „meat” patties in the freezer aren't edible under any circumstance, not even if they're burnt well-done on a grill. The veggies are also disgusting, as are... well, pretty much everything in the elementary school kitchen except, of course, the „store brand” snacks supplied weekly by a retail affiliate of Raul Hulio. The Mayor picks up several packages of Ho Hos and has an internal debate weighing the potential spike in his blood sugar level against his hunger at that moment. He keeps the Ho Hos with him, still undecided which is more important (he'd really decided to eat as many as he could and was just waiting to justify it to himself). After chugging a second milk carton in a few quick gulps, and grabbing a third carton to potentially wash down the Ho Hos, the Mayor waddles from behind the kitchen counter and to a nearby table, several down from the children, where he drops his snacks.

The boy and girl calm the children and ask them to return to their seats around the table—when the Mayor gets everyone's attention by rubbing a hand over his rotund belly and flicking his belt buckle, while also sucking ham from his teeth. The children stare at him and he returns a hospitable wink.

The boy and girl are still standing, unsure what to do.



„Why don't all y'all young'uns take a seat over here, with me?“ he requests in his polite drawl. He's a charmer, it's undeniable, and it's how he gets things done. (Hell, if it weren't for his wit and charisma—and his bewildering moxy—he never would've made it to the Mayor's office or done so many good things for the state. Without him, they might've let women get addicted to abortions or given healthcare to the poor people too lazy to make money. He had even been the spear's head in a dogged war against homos gettin' married, a battle he fought, hard, with a grace and eloquence he seldom displayed anymore; in the end, after millions in taxpayer money, the fight was won, he had won... but then those goddamn liberals in the Supreme Court said it was „discrimination“ and unconstitutional and now traditional marriage is forever tarnished—still, he got paid.)

The children remain where they're seated.

„Boy, hey, you!“

The Mayor snaps his fingers and gets the boy's attention.

„What were you sayin', 'bout them spiders?“

The boy nods, unsure about the question.

„Them spiders, you see 'em?“

The boy nods.

„Giant brown bastards, right?“

The boy nods.

„They poisonous?“ asks the Mayor, checking the back of his hand. (Again, the boy notices—and this time he's certain the Mayor's been bitten.) It had swollen and looked like it should hurt, though he felt just fine—in fact, he's feeling pretty good, euphoric even. (This is a side effect of the spider bite, when only a small amount has been introduced to the bloodstream.)

„Very,“ the boy answers, careful to use an English words (the last man he had seen speak a foreign language in America had been shot).

„Okay, so here's what we're gonna do now, so listen up, lil'uns. Before we do anything else, one'a y'all is gonna need to run the six blocks to the hospital and pick us up some anti-venom in case... you know... just in case someone gets bit,“—the Mayor sees the Ho Hos out of the corner of his eye—“and some insulin, with a needle. So, we got any brave volunteers to run to the hospital? I'll give the person that does it a bravery medal... for being so heroic...” The Mayor never takes his eyes off the teenage boy and, without a chance for anyone to say anything (not that they would have), he points a finger at the boy. „Alright, you it is.“

The boy looks from the Mayor to the children, worried.

Again, the boy brings out the pretty blonde girl to talk for him.

He whispers in her ear.

„Why aren't you going?“ the 8 year old blonde girl asks the Mayor.

„Well, sweetie, I'm so big and slow, it'd positively take me ages. Plus, you need someone to watch over you and I'm the only adult here, sooooooooooooo...”

The boy whispers in her ear again.

„He says that he'll stay here and watch us while you go get medicine.“

The young blonde girl fidgets with her dress as she speaks.

„No-no-no,“ he shakes his head, smiling, „I need one of you.“ He makes eye contact with the boy. „Run. Fast. Quick. Soon.“ He rubs his belly. „Me—fat. Slow.“

This,” he spreads his hand out in a grand sweep, „Emergency. Need. Now.” He sounds like a Native American.

The boy really doesn't like the sound of this.

He whispers to the little blonde girl.

„He don't know where the hospital is,” she says, shrugging.

„No problem,” the Mayor laughs and stands, walking to the group of children. He wraps his arm around the boy's shoulder and it appears to be a warmhearted embrace but, really, the Mayor's just getting a grip so he can use his strength to force the boy toward the nearest door. „You're gonna have to go 'round the school, to the front, and go four,” he holds up the fingers, then points directly behind them, toward the front of the school, „blocks that way. Then two,” he holds up his fingers, then points right, „blocks right. Got it? Sure you do, you look smart. I *am* sorry that I can't give you a bravery medal since you're an illegal but that don't mean you ain't brave—you got it, good luck. And don't come back without it because I won't let you in.”

The Mayor opens the back cafeteria door and shoves the boy into the night air and swiftly closes it behind him, checking to make sure nothing got in. Nothing did. Then he turns back to the kids.

„Who's hungry?”

Several kids raise their hands.

The Mayor takes a seat at his snacks and pulls out his phone.

„Food's that way,” he mumbles, pointing over his shoulder, toward the fridges. „And don't be afraid to try the beef patties. I'm not even sure you need to cook 'em.”

## **Sugar Pointe Hospital**

**11:01 p.m.**

Miguel pushes his brother's gurney with one hand and wheels his IV with the other, wounded arm, calling out Portuguese warnings as he maneuvers down the crowded hallway. Feet are run over, toes squished, asses nudged or straight pushed out of the way. The emergency lights give an eerie glow to the corridors (*like we're in outer space*, the high part of Miguel suggests) and it's made everyone panic that much more. But he doesn't care, and he pushes through them, and he makes it to the elevator and pushes the gurney in and follows behind it with the IV.

„Hey,” screams a doctor from down the hall, chasing after him.

(He'd just stolen his brother from the I.C.U.)

The hallway is chaotic and loud but Miguel can see the doctor running toward the elevator, closing in, and even though he hits the Door Close button repeatedly, it still takes an extra few seconds, and the doctor closes in, shimmying through the crowd, so close—

The elevator doors close.

Muzak plays.

Eduardo is in a deep, peaceful sleep.

„I'd have left you in there, bro,” confides Miguel (in Portuguese) to his unconscious brother, „but it was way too open and I gotta get you somewhere safe.”

The elevator doors open and Miguel shoots out, pushing the gurney with one hand and, with the other arm in a sling, clutching his brother's IV close against him. Again, people are in the way; again, he shouts Portuguese warnings at people, ramming them out of the way and running over toes as he speedily steers through the labyrinthine hallways toward his hospital room from earlier that night (since it's the only room he's certain has weed in it). The door to his hospital room is open and Miguel worries that the old man in the weird outfit might have come back; instead, he looks in to discover something far worse—the small room is crammed with two nurses, a doctor, and eight or nine sickly people.

*Too late to change my mind.*

He pushes the hospital bed into the room and closes the door behind him. The people try to tell him there isn't room even after he's pushed the gurney against the far wall, between the window and his hospital bed from earlier. The doctor asks something but he doesn't know what she's saying. A nurse touches Miguel's shoulder to get his attention, as he isn't answering anyone—

„Spiders!” he yells.

Everyone quiets.

The doctor approaches Miguel and asks, slowly and clearly—some question he doesn't understand. She points out the window to illustrate her question and then she points at the ground, asking a second time. He assumes she's asking if the spiders are there, at the hospital, so Miguel points at the ground.

The people in the room, including the nurses, whimper at this news.

Miguel gets the doctor's attention once more and points out the window. It's dark outside but she can make out the same thing that had scared Miguel no more than ten minutes earlier. She squints out the window at a nearby house and can clearly see the roof moving, flowing like water. Behind it, in the blocks between the hospital and the Town Square, a white blanket is spreading over the town, one that's several blocks long but only a block and a half wide (*It looks like mother's doilies*, Miguel thinks) and it's being pulled directly toward the hospital.

*The spiders are following the extreme shifts in air pressure that're caused by cramming a couple hundred panicked townspeople into a three story building. Most had eaten but many had been ready to move on and head out, away from the Town Square—there wasn't anything left for them there, anyway. The females have enough flesh to impregnate with the next generation (something they're just about finished doing) but the leftovers weren't enough for the ever growing population. So they decided to continue, since there's so much more food only a few blocks away. And now that it's dark again, they advance—except this time is different. They've already invaded, already conquered and nested (in record time, no less), so now they're prepared to finish the war. They move as a single unit more so than before, literally crawling over one another and leaping forward into their own rushing throngs. They're not flanking their prey, as they did before, nor are they hiding. The horde is nearly a block wide and more than a thousand strong and they're heading*

*straight for the hospital. Fluid and never slowing, from the street to the rooftops and back down, climbing up and over anything in their way, spreading their web with every step...*

The doctor calmly turns around to find herself the source of intense scrutiny. Everyone but Miguel is staring at her intently, waiting for an answer, a reason, an explanation, something. She's the doctor and that's her role, of course, the educated authoritarian with a cure for whatever ails them—except, this time, she's not sure she can help anyone. She keeps her bedside manner, remaining collected and emotionless, but she says nothing.

Meanwhile, hunched beside his brother's head, Miguel sings a lullaby:

*Mirandum se fué à la Guerra  
Mirandum, Mirandum, Mirandela  
Num sei quando benerá.*

This roughly translates to:

*Mirandum went to war,  
Mirandum, Mirandum, Mirandela,  
I don't know when he'll come back.*

## **Route 281 North 11:01 p.m.**

After leaving town, Duragard pulls the truck over and stomps on the spiders in the truck bed, scaring many of them off into the desert, and he scrapes all the webs off the windshield so he isn't as blinded, and then they continue their journey forward, the truck exceeding 85 mph as it flies down a desolate stretch of highway. He drives in complete silence while Tommy sits in the passenger seat, perfectly still; so still, in fact, that it's unnatural and creeps Duragard.

Biscuits sits in between the two men, laying to groom his nails.

More silence, with Tommy so motionless it's as if he's dead.

„Ah!”—Duragard cocks a fist and punches Tommy in the shoulder.

Tommy flinches, worriedly looking from his sore shoulder to Duragard.

„Thought you were goddamn dead for a second,” the grizzled old man lets him know, his brow furrowed with annoyance. He rubs the golden Labrador behind his ear, then reaches forward and turns on the radio—loud Spanish horns blare, startling Duragard, and he quickly turns down the volume and changes the station to the oldies rock. It's a commercial. He turns the radio off again.

More silence.

There's a low ring and Tommy pulls his cell phone from his pocket and answers. He has a quick, rather hushed conversation. Duragard can tell it's to a family member. He can also make out the Spanish words „I love you” when the conversation ends (though he'd never say the words or admit to knowing any

Spanish). With the radio off, and a stillness overtaking the cab once more, Duragard (sighing with his decision to speak) breaks the silence by asking Tommy, „That family?”

„Yes,” Tommy quietly answers.

„They in Mexico?”

Tommy fishes in his wallet and pulls out a picture and hits the overhead light and holds it up. Duragard’s eyes dart between the picture and the road but he can clearly see a handsome child sitting in the lap of a gorgeous woman, both of them smiling as they sit in the grass on a beautiful day.

Most notable to Duragard is that the skin color of the woman and child.

„They’re whi...” Duragard clears his throat, „...beautiful. You got, uh, you got a very beautiful—” and he clears his throat again, nods his head, turns off the overhead light, and turns the radio back on. It’s still a commercial and he goes to change it—when Tommy gently slaps his hand away.

Duragard is flabbergasted by the action. He glares, incredulous. His face grows flush with a boiling anger. So many livid thoughts fill his head and he’s ready to growl one of them but he can’t—there’s just too many. Tommy, on the other hand, doesn’t notice any of this, as he’s busy flipping through a CD booklet he fished out from under his seat. It’s an eclectic collection, with hundreds of hours of music spanning the last fifty years, but he’s eagerly searching for something specific, something he eventually locates and removes and pops into the CD player.

„Boy...” begins Duragard, shaking his head, ready to scold and holler... though he hadn’t figured out anything more to say than „Boy...” yet. In his heart, he’s certain the words will come—*except they don’t*, because Jimmy Page’s *opening chords to the Immigrant Song thoroughly shut him*. Robert Plant’s echoing scream follows shortly after. Tommy had put in a Led Zepplin album—and not just any Led Zepplin album but III, Duragard’s favorite.

„We hear this playing in your house before.”

A full sentence, probably the most Duragard had heard Tommy speak.

The two men become silent though neither is listening to the music.

Tommy is saddened by the loss of his boss, Fire Chief Earl Stenson. He didn’t know they’d lost him at the time, as he’d been in the front with the old man and dog in his arms. Once the paramedics took the old man, and Tommy found himself stuck with the dog, he had turned back to see Adam and Chuck emerge from the darkness but no Chief. The details of what had happened out there, as relayed to him by both Adam and Chuck, unnerved Tommy—he couldn’t stop picturing it in his mind, and it bothered him greatly, and it would probably bother him for the rest of his life.

Duragard, meanwhile, is thinking of his son, Josh. They hadn’t spoken to one another in some time and it was both their faults but, *you know, maybe I should call him, too, in case this all goes to pot...* It hurts his heart to think that his son might not answer. Even knowing it might be the last time they’d speak, his son might not pick up. *He’d be happy that I’m gone, he sulks, stewing in self-pity. In fact, everyone’d prolly be a bit happy if I’s gone.* The old man realizes that he’s still petting Biscuits, and that Biscuits would miss him, and this causes him to snap out of it. „This is real music,” he says, keeping himself out of the funk he had just found himself in. „Last real band. Broke up in 1980. October 10<sup>th</sup>. John Bonham

died. Fuggin' travesty." This also bothers him a bit, the pain of Zeppelin's breakup, and a hint of pain is evident in Duragard's voice, but it isn't the same kind of sadness. This kind of sadness is manageable. „Greatest band of all time.”

Tommy nods.

Maybe it's because, had he talked, it would have interrupted the music, or maybe Duragard's just acclimated to the silence of his „partner”, or maybe he's still a bit sad and doesn't have the strength to be angry; for whatever reason, it's the first time Tommy's nodding doesn't annoy the old man.

They quietly listen to the music.

Suddenly, Duragard brakes and swerves hard right down a dirt road, bumping and hopping and jerking as they barrel over the rough terrain of solid Texas soil. It's an old, forgotten route, unkempt and abandoned, and the two men blare Led Zeppelin as they travel further and further down it, toward the middle of a desert nowhere. Fifteen, twenty minutes pass and the road dead-ends at a handwritten NO TRESPASSING sign stuck to a barbed wire fence. Behind the homemade sign and fence is a dirt-covered trailer and the mouth of a dark cave.

„We made it.”

„We did?” Tommy wonders, unsure of where it is exactly that they'd made it.

Duragard never thought to tell Tommy where it was they were headed during the trip there, and now it's just easier to show him. He parks the truck at the fence but keeps the headlights on and pointed at the trailer (Led Zeppelin continuing to blare).

„Stay here,” he orders both Tommy and Biscuits.

Duragard exits the truck to check the bed once more, for any hangers-on—nothing. He circles around, examining any nooks and crevices for sticky spiders that had outlasted the vehicle's speed—nothing. Just webs he hadn't been able to get off, a whole lot of them, on the hood, the roof, the truck bed, the headlights, the tires, everywhere. He stands in front of the truck and opens the barbed wire gate, which is only held closed by two wooden clothes hangers. With the gate open, and no spiders in the vicinity, Duragard motions for Tommy to turn off the truck and get out and follow him, along with Biscuits. The three of them join together and walk to the door, with Biscuits close behind him but Tommy hesitant and keeping to the rear, clueless as to their whereabouts and purpose.

The door opens on the second knock.

„Matthew!” exclaims the old man, a modicum of happiness in his voice.

Matthew steps out of the trailer and onto his front stoop, shoving his thick glasses up the bridge of his nose to squint out into the night. First (and maybe the only) thing anyone needs to know about this nebbish fellow is that he has the greatest goddamn mullet the world's ever seen—dark haired business in the front with a long, flowing party in back. It's quite amazing, and might possibly be the paramount of his existence, though he's also got thin extremities and a massive (beer-induced) potbelly, giving him an unusual body shape. Otherwise, Matthew's pretty unspectacular, sorta dull, kinda dumb, a bit greasy, and he's got an epically bad sense of fashion—tonight, his jarring ensemble consists of colorful, neon green shorts, a soot-stained tee under an unbuttoned, short-sleeved blue-and-black Hawaiian shirt, and knee-high black dress socks, with sandals.

„What’n the hell?” Matthew hollers, backing away in fear so quickly that he stumbles and falls—then, his hand reaches behind the door for his rifle.

Duragard lifts the ski mask off his face and calls to him.

„Matt, it’s me. Sorry, forgot I’s wearin’ the ski mask.”

„Duragard? Christ and Chriminey, I thought y’all’s was a bunch’a aliens. Or the government. Either way I’s about to start shootin’, ask quest’ins later. What’er you wearin’? What’er you doin’ out in these parts?—” Matthew checks his watch, „—and at this time. Ain’tin you know what time it is?—”

A very large woman with broad, curly hair, and dressed in an extremely skimpy outfit, appears in the doorway of the trailer behind Matthew.

„Who’s interruptin’ our special time?” she grumpily demands, obviously upset by the late night distraction.

„I’ll be back in a minute, darlin’,” answers Matthew in a placating tone. Then, to Duragard, „What’n you want at this hour? The wife and I’s about to sex.” His eyes move from Duragard to the unfamiliar truck and then Tommy, who’s also removed the medical mask—Matthew violently backs up and stumbles again, reaching for his gun once more. „Mexican!”

Duragard holds up a hand.

„He ain’t no illegal,” (he shoots a brief glance at Tommy with a look that says *you better not be*) „he’s a Sugar Pointe firefighter.”

This doesn’t calm Matthew.

„You-you got a Mexican with you?! No Mexicans!” he calls out in a voice no more threatening than a child’s.

Duragard exhales noisily.

„He’s... I need his help. We need his help.”

„Doin’ what? Ain’t nothin’ need doin’ that I need help with that a lazy-ass Mexican can do and I can’t help... do...” Matthew’s own wording momentarily confuses him and he stops talking to think about it.

Duragard is becoming annoyed.

„Damnit, Matt, he’s fine. He...” Duragard inhales deeply, hating the information he’s about to admit, „...he saved my life earlier today. Biscuits, too.” Admitting this causes him to wince. „Tommy, say something in English.”

„Something in English.”

„No,” Duragard turns toward Tommy, „not say, ‘Something in English.’ I meant say to some—nevermind.”

Tommy nods (with a knowing smirk) and, just like before, it annoys the old man.

Matthew’s still frightened by the presence of a muscular Mexican but Duragard doesn’t have time for this and steamrolls right through it. He explains the spiders, the evening, how his house and neighborhood were attacked first, how he nearly died, the hospital, and then the spider’s assault that destroyed the Town Square and much of the town.

„Sounds like the A’rabs finally figured out a way to weaponize spiders,” Matthew posits with an expressive nod. (The conspiracy is already working itself out in his head.)

Duragard uses the silence that follows to quickly add one last thing.

„Also, Tommy accidentally knocked out the power to the whole town.”

Matthew and Duragard shake their heads, disapprovingly.

Tommy shrugs.

Duragard continues.

„I got no idea what those spider bastards are gonna do next but I can promise, it ain't good for no one. So, you're gonna get your lovely wife Bertha—”

„Beth,” corrects the potbellied Matthew, „her name is Bethany.”

„Yes, that's right. Pardon me. You're gonna have Beth call up the National Guard and get them here ASAP—”

„National Guard?” Matthew practically spits, stunned, and he goes on in a voice of deep concern. „Ain't you heard that the National Guard been runnin' top-secret drills in Louisiana?”

This does peak Duragard's interest.

„What?”

„Yeah, for real. The National Guard's been runnin' anti-Christian drills 'cause'a the Muslims.”

Duragard believes it but the details seem unclear.

„What about the Muslims?”

„'Cause, you know... the Muslims... they're always behind this anti-American..... you know?... Muslims...”

Matthew gives another serious nod, as if he's just shared a profound truth.

Duragard bloody hates Muslims, possibly more than anything else in the world, but right now he doesn't have time to figure out the inner workings of the evil government and it's many Muslim conspiracies.

„We're just gonna have to take the risk,” concedes Duragard, only a little worried that a bunch of Muslim soldiers might show up. „Muslims or not, we need their help. Have Berth—Beth, have her call the National Guard, get them down 'ere quick. This is an absolute National emergency.” Biscuits is wandering around the open land, sniffing things, but he notices Matthew and causally walks over. Matthew bends down and pets the dog. „Also,” Duragard continues, as much as he doesn't want to, „you think it might be possible if Biscuits stays here tonight? I-I hate the idea of leaving him but this is gonna get serious and I... I don't want nothin' to happen to him.”

This kind of talk, oddly enough, calms Matthew down a bit.

„Sure, he can stay here.”

„Okay, well, let's put him inside before we head into the mine.”

Matthew is visibly confused by this and asks, “Why the mine?” before the reason dawns on him, and his excitement quickly blossoms. „—OHHH, no way!”

Duragard grins.

„This might be the greatest night'a my life,” Matthew confesses, tossing back the mullet to keep his hair off his shoulders. „Just an FYI but, rattlesnakes. There's gonna be a lot of 'em down in that tunnel.”

„Eh, no biggie.”

The old man brushes it off, nonplussed.

Tommy, however, is quite alarmed by the FYI, and it also concerns him that the other two men don't seem to care.

„Rattlesnakes?”



„Eh, don't worry,” Duragard says in a pacifying tone, „they're more scared of you than you are'a them. Ain't that right, Matt?”

Matt answers with a shrug and nonchalant, „Prolly?”

Duragard walks over to Biscuits and gives his best friend a hug. The golden lab licks at his face, grateful for the companionship. He whispers his goodbyes and promises that they will see each other again, either in this life or the next. (A tear forms in the old man's eye.) Another lingering hug. Several kisses. And, just before he's willing to part, he tells his friend, „You've filled my life with more joy and happiness than I thought possible. You be a good boy.”

Matthew leads the dog into the trailer and disappears for a moment.

The old man does his best not to cry.

Matthew returns, alone, and the door shuts behind him.

„Alright, so I just talked to Bertha—Beth! Damnit!” Matthew curses Duragard for making him confuse her name. „My wife's gonna call the National Guard and tell 'em whatcha said, though she got the same concerns I do... you know?... Muslims...”

„Well, we've wasted enough time. Now we get to work. Is Enola still running?”

Matthew nods, smiling.

„Engine's smooth as a baby's fart.”

„I'm... not sure that's a sayin', Matthew.”

„Oh? Then, uh, yeah. Enola's still running. Used her to fly to San Antonio two days ago. She got fuel but the bed's empty.”

„Good, good. Then we better hurry.”

Matthew claps with a giddy eagerness.

„So, what's the plan?”

In Duragard's old Army days as a civil engineer, to accomplish any goal the objective had to be clearly defined:

*Get from Point A to Point B.*

*Re-design an object so that it can be propelled at a certain velocity.*

*Breach a secure compound in 4 minutes using specific equipment.*

Or, in this case,

*Eradicate the vermin infestation in Sugar Pointe, Texas without harming others or destroying the town.*

Once the objective is defined, every possible method to execute said objective must be laid out in full—these are called directives, and the one to pick must be the most comprehensive, with the least convoluted by risk. Sir yes sir.

Duragard hadn't come up with a single plan, no; he came up with four.

And, as he sees it, they're going to do all of them.

Simultaneously.

## **Sugar Pointe Elementary School**

**11:01 p.m.**

There's a hushed conversation in the Principal's Office and it goes like this:

„Mr. Hulio?”

„Yes, Eric.”

„Yes-yes-yes, Mr. Hulio. My apologies for the delay earlier. I hit a slight snag, there was a delay—I know I told you I’d call at eight but there was a town meeting and-and-and everything’s alright. The town is, uh, is still ready for the drop.”

„So you’re confirming that everything is on track?”

„Absolutely.”

„Good. I want you to oversee the drop tonight.”

„What? Me? Why?”

„Dirt and trash is a part of making money, Eric. There’s a reason they call filthy rich.”

„Yes, sir, uh, it’s just that I haven’t done it before.”

„You will meet three gentleman somewhere quiet and you will make sure that they hand a briefcase to a man from Mexico—that’s all. If that’s too much, I can send my men to San Antonio—”

„No-no-no, I’m—I’m totally ready. I even have the perfect spot in mind, right on the edge of town. Quiet, no one’s here,” lies the Mayor.

„You’re already at the spot?”

„Yeah, it’s the elementary school. I had to come here for, uh, for Mayor stuff.”

„At eleven at night?”

„Yeah, well, no one’s here.”

„You already said that.”

„I-I know.”

„Are you sure you can handle this? I got a call in to San Antonio.”

„No no no, they’ll just delay you more and you got men already coming.”

„Half a percent commission—since you’ve delayed me. I’ll confirm and have my drivers set it up. What’s the address?”

The Mayor lowers the phone and holds up a triumphant fist before giving the address. He advises that the driver „makes sure to take Spruce Street all the way in—leads right to the school, avoids town, quick and easy.”

That way they’d avoid town entirely.

## **The Mexican-American Border Earlier**

After the Brazilian brothers were in an ambulance and off to the hospital, the teenage boy and girl were put into separate police cars and driven straight from the shores of the Rio Grande to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, where both were greeted by stern, stolid Americans.

The interrogations were brief:

„How did you get here?” „Who were those men?” „How old are you?” „Why are you here?” „What time did you arrive?” „Where are you from?” „What is your purpose here?” „Where were you born? Is it South America?” „Who were those men?” „Where were you yesterday?” „What did you intend to do in America?” „Did you come here for a reason? What is that reason you left South America?” „When do you expect to leave?” „Who were those men?” „Do you have any family nearby?”

„Are you from South America, really?“ „Why are you here?“ „Where are you really from?“

The teenagers answered honestly and requested that they be sent back home to Piedras Negras; however, due to a clerical error (caused by the fact that they had entered the country with two Brazilian men), both the boy and the girl were listed as Brazilian refugees and promptly shuttled (separately) to the I.N.S. Shelter for Dispossessed South American Children—a building that looked like a deserted high school in the middle of nowhere, with nothing in any direction except the vacant horizon, cacti, rock, a road, and so much red-dust in the air that the skyline appeared a bloody orange as the sun set.

The teenagers were kept separate, in same-sex holding areas, but it was made clear to both of them that they weren't being held against their will, that they were free to leave whenever they wanted, so long as a US resident came to sign them out; though that last bit was more of a guideline. The staffing was so minimal that it was nearly impossible to force any rules. The shelter was like a daycare center run amok, with children outnumbering the adults 42 to 1—not because there wasn't a need for more adults (the opposite was true) but because there had been a recent influx of children fleeing Honduras. The many children's shelters along the border had become increasingly overwhelmed and understaffed and this one was no different; in fact, their shelter only had enough food to feed each child only six more meals before supplies ran out. (Another delivery wasn't expected for days. FEMA had been contacted, as had the National Guard, but nothing had come of it.)

The girl left the shelter first, after persuading a beleaguered staff member to let her sign herself out simply by nodding a lot, occasionally pointing to the exit, and speaking Spanish as quickly as she could. Outside, the landscape was depressingly barren and she found nothing to do but pace around the building. She didn't know how to get home or what was happening. She was frightened and pretty sure that she had been misplaced, like she had gotten on the wrong school bus and it had taken her to another planet. She was terrified that the rest of her life was going to be spent in this place and that the boy had been returned home and she'd never see him again.

The boy left shortly after the girl. He didn't have to put on any theatrics, didn't have to give any misdirection; he just waited until no one was looking (which was often) and he walked out. The sun was a blood orange in the western horizon. The air was gusting heavily, though it came with a crisp warmth. The boy circled the corner, headed for the female holding area, when he found the girl nervously biting her fingernails as she paced along the far side of the building. He stepped back behind the corner and watched her for a moment. She had lied about being fifteen and he could see her young age: in the way she held herself, cradling one arm; in her eyes, which were scared and naïve; in the subconscious way she'd bite her nails, then pull her hair over her face, and alternate between the two. She was very much the scared girl fleeing a snake he met that first, fateful day.

When he finally revealed himself, the boy began to say something—but the girl interrupted, running over to hug him with her entire body. There was electricity to their embrace and they bumped against the wall and she kissed the boy with a passion so intense that she'd never experienced anything like it before. The boy

was helpless, entwined, kissing back. *It was the first time either had felt someone else's tongue in their mouth...*

This is what the girl is thinking about as she sifts through the cafeteria fridges. The boy's only been gone a few minutes but she already misses him. She almost feels abandoned, just like when she was pacing alone outside the children's shelter. The Mayor had also disappeared, and she hopes he doesn't return—he isn't going to help them. He pushed the boy out the door and told her, in several different ways until she understood, that no one was coming. Before running off, he carefully, and very clearly, ordered everyone to remain in the cafeteria until he came back.

*This is just how it is.*

The remaining children are gathered around a table, coloring. She had found a bucket of dull crayons and some blank paper in a nearby room and asked them to draw her pictures of the things that made them happy. The children were a bit grumpy at first, as it's well passed their bedtimes, but the project lifts their spirits. Some of them even become jovial, laughing and joking with the others.

There's a disquieting silence.

„Miss, I think Brendan is sick.”

The girl isn't sure what's said but the voice is so soft and upset that it instantly concerns her and she hurries over to the table. One of the boys has his head down. She leans in close and whispers to the boy, shakes him a little. He's breathing but unresponsive. Thick, foamy saliva coats his lips and drools out onto the table. She releases a torrent of Spanish, alternating between curse words and prayers, as she lays the sick child on the table and begins searching his body. It doesn't take long for her to find it, as there's a fair amount of swelling. The spider bite is on his thigh, partly hidden by his shorts. The girl shoots a questioning look at the other children and it's obvious she wants to know why he didn't tell anyone.

„He was afraid he'd be punished,” confesses one of the kids.

\* \* \* \* \*

The boy had been pushed onto the patio behind the school and, at first, he just stood there, thinking. Ahead was a playground. It was dark. He was supposed to head to the front of the school and then it was straight for six blocks (or was it seven?) before turning right for two blocks (or was it three?). He turns back and stares through the window one final time. The girl stares back. He holds his hand up to the glass and she lifts hers in the air, mimicking him—then he takes off like a shot, crossing the field, circling the building, then onto the nearest street, and he runs full sprint for five straight blocks.

He stops.

Tiny flickers of movement on the block ahead.

The boy resumes his sprint, cutting right a block early and keeping to the center of the street, his eyes seeking out any movement, anything small, anything dangerous, anything. All of the lights are out—no streetlamps, no house lights, nothing. It isn't so much the lack of lighting that troubles him; it's the silence, the complete absence of all the many white noises that surf through a town on any given night—actually, it doesn't feel absent but snuffed, smothered. Like there's noise everywhere but it's being held back, choked. Two blocks pass and he catches

the blacked-out lights of the ER entrance. Several ambulances are pulled up along the curb, their red-and-blue lights endlessly flashing. All of the hospital windows are lit from within by the emergency bulbs, and they illuminate the dozens of spiders crawling over the building's façade.

The boy doesn't know it but the spiders had only just reached the hospital, from the other side. He's in the back, at the ER entrance, but had he gotten lost and ended up another block over, he would've been killed.

This might be the last opportunity to enter the hospital—and there's a chance he might not be able to leave, but he doesn't think about that. He's busy hoping that the awning over the ER entrance will provide enough protection, and he takes off running towards the doors and, to his surprise, he makes it to the double glass doors without incident—well, except that the automatic doors don't open. He pounds on the glass. *Something lands in a bush nearby.* He jumps on the sensor and pounds on the door more. There's another set of automatic doors just past these and, on the other side of those doors, he can see dozens of people inside the ER. None of them are looking, though, and no one can hear him through the glass. *Something falls to the grass nearby.* The boy begins pounding on the glass and screaming and jumping up and down and flailing his arms in an attempt to get the attention of someone, anyone inside. He can hear faint, gentle tapping somewhere to his right—the noises he's making seem to be drawing the attention of the nearby spiders. A man inside the ER notices the boy and hurries over. The inside set of automatic doors open and this man enters the foyer, a single wall of glass between the boy and safety. The man grabs at the door, trying to pry it open, and he's screaming for others to help him—more people run into the foyer. *Something hits the concrete with a soft thud behind him, out beyond the awning,* and the boy makes the terrible decision to look over his shoulder. They're in every direction, on either side and behind him—he's trapped. One leaps forward and nearly makes it under the far side of the awning. Two more scurry across the shadows in the grass. Another one dangles by a thread, lowering from the awning overhead not four feet from the boy. Those are just the ones he notices at a glance. The boy turns back around to find a group has formed in the foyer but they're no longer trying to pry the doors open. They're just staring at the boy, not doing anything to help. They stare with gloomy expressions. Several of them have their hands against the glass, just as he had done with the girl—only their gesture is mournful, apologetic. The spider continues to lower from the awning above and the boy can hear it hissing (almost like wheezing) gently. There's too many, he's surrounded—there's no chance to run. Slowly, the boy turns around, his back against the glass doors, and he faces the spiders, preparing himself for the onslaught, for incredible pain, for death. The spider hangs from the awning, completely still, no more than two feet from his face. It's curled, so close that he can actually smell it—an overripe banana peel with dirt on it, that's how this one smells. And this dangling harbinger of death carefully unfurls, stretching its legs to showcase a massive 9 inch span, eight legs as long as two fingers stuck together by a brown, bone-like knuckle. Eight black eyes stare from behind two vampire-like fangs. It hisses, gently, like a tire losing air, and the beast gradually spins on its thin web, proudly showcasing the underside of its' bulbous abdomen. The hiss intensifies and the boy can actually see it vibrating. There's a stillness in

the air in that final moment—when the spider is ready to attack, when the boy is ready to give up—and he can feel the creature tense up, its legs tightening like a hand preparing to catch a baseball, its eyes watching, its body prepared, and then it—

## **Sugar Pointe Hospital**

**11:27 p.m.**

Miguel sits against the side of his brother's bed inside the crowded hospital room. They're against the window, in the space beside another hospital bed. The doctor is preoccupied with an older woman's face, which was bitten and swells more with each passing moment. Two nurses stand side-by-side near the only door out, whispering to one another. The other people are crammed in the room, doing their best to remain comfortable, all of them in various stages of pain. Some are sitting on the floor while others lay cuddle in the two unoccupied beds that had once been Miguel's and Duragard's. The blinds have been drawn so the webbed shroud masking the outside of the building isn't quite as horrifying. The overhead lights are out, as well, only a single, bright white emergency light overhead—just as it is in all of the hospital's hallways and rooms.

Someone groans.

The nurses continue to whisper.

Every so often a person speaks, and there's a discussion amongst the group, but Miguel has no idea what it's about.

The doctor calls to the nurses, backing away from the older patient—the entire right side of the older woman's face is swollen, so much so that her right eye is a tiny dot surrounded by puffy pink flesh. Miguel's pretty sure the doctor's name is Shedlauskas and the older woman's name is Dorothy. He feels bad for Dorothy; hell, he feels bad for the doctor and nurses and the other sick people but, eh, what can he do. He doesn't feel especially bad for himself, though the painkillers are wearing off and his arm is starting to hurt again. He instinctively rubs the sling, afraid to touch his actual arm as it had been extremely sore before the drugs.

Since he's fairly certain he won't be getting any painkillers any time soon, Miguel maneuvers through the cramped hospital room, to the bed that had once been his, and he shuffles up to the chair with his clothes draped over the back. Someone is in the chair, slouched and visibly ill, but they lean forward so he can reach into his pants pocket and pull out a joint and lighter; then, he returns to the seat on his brother's hospital bed.

The doctor is speaking with the nurses, writing a bunch of stuff out on a prescription pad—when she curiously sniffs the air and looks over. Miguel smokes a joint from his seat on the hospital bed, beside his brother. He puffs off it and blows the smoke down, onto his brother, hoping it will ease his suffering and provide him with happy dreams.

The doctor walks over to Miguel and pulls the joint from his mouth and drops it to the floor, stomping on it. She points up at the sprinklers and tells him, "Agua," while using a motion like rain.

Miguel nods his head, understanding.

He points to his arm and makes a face like he's in pain.

The doctor nods and writes something extra on her pad.

„Why does it smell like weed?“

His voice is weak, and his eyes are barely open, but Eduardo is awake.

Miguel gives a hearty laugh and bear hugs his little brother against the bed.

Eduardo asks a few questions and, at first, has a hard time remembering what happened in the desert outside Pedras Negras...

\* \* \* \* \*

Edward stepped from his dead car and into pure darkness, as if he'd been blindfolded. The Piedras Negras desert was blisteringly dark. Using the flashlight on his phone (which, he knew, was rapidly draining his battery), the 28 year old set out for the Rio Grande and, after reaching the river shortly thereafter, began following it toward Piedras Negras.

For the first hour or so, Edward thought of every choice he had made that had led him there. Not just his brother but everything that had led to that assignment, that had led to that job, that had led to that college, that had led him away from Brazil—but before his soul searching could lead to any life-changing epiphany, fate struck again...

His phone was out in front of him and he was using it as a flashlight when a loud ring and vibration startled him and he dropped his cell phone. Of course, picking it up, first thing he noticed was that the screen had cracked.

The caller was Miguel.

Edward answered the phone but didn't speak.

„What's up, bro?“ his brother hesitantly asked, unsure if he'd called the right number. even though Edward had programmed his name and number in the phone when setting up the GPS. (To Miguel's credit, he wasn't accustomed to seeing to seeing it spelled as Edward.)

„Hold on, stay on the line,“ commanded Edward, calmly, as he was working hard to hold back his many frustrations.

The phone had reception.

He pulled up a map of his location.

As much as it felt like he had traveled to the gulf, in reality Edward was less than ten miles from the city of Piedras Negras. Between where he was and where he was headed (though much closer to him), another signal continually pinged on his map.

„Where are you?“

Miguel tried to answer but really didn't seem to know.

„The desert?“

„Is there anything around you?“

„Three trailers. A spotlight...“

„A spotlight?“ Edward thought it absurd before realizing it could be helpful.

„Can you turn it on?“

„...sure? Why?“

Miguel was confused.

„Because it looks like you’re only a mile or two away from me and I got myself stranded out here and just do it, just help me, please!” Edward was exasperated. A part of him wanted to curl into the fetal position and bawl his eyes out. He was hungry and mentally exhausted and lost and a little afraid (though his tolerance for fear in extreme situations had grown since the beginning of the trip).

„You got it, bro.” There was a loud click in the background. „Light’s on. I’m here with Old Cisco, we’ll wait for you. Just call if you’re—”

„Stay on the line with me?”

Edward swallowed hard.

Miguel heard vulnerability in his younger brother’s voice.

„You got it, bro.” He lowered the phone, told someone nearby that he’d be right back, then returned to the phone. „You still there, Ed—Eduar—Ed—Edward?”

Miguel hated calling him that but the phone had reminded him.

„Yeah.”

Silence followed.

„So,” Miguel began, „what’s up? You okay?”

Edward wasn’t sure if it was the fact that he finally gotten his brother on the phone, or if he had finally reached a mental breaking point, or if it had just been too long since he talked honestly to someone, but the young man began pouring out his frustration and dread and pain and regret to his older brother... only to hear a beep indicating the call had been dropped, reception was gone again, and most of what he had said was to dead air.

The cell phone battery died shortly thereafter, taking the flashlight with it.

Luckily, in the distance, Edward could see a beam of light shining straight up into the sky, and he tripped his way through a half mile of darkness to reach it. The spotlight sat in front of three dilapidated trailers and Miguel was crouched near it, next to a man with a hat over his face slouched in a lawn chair.

Smiling, Edward expressed his relief at finally finding his brother—only to have Miguel shush him, quietly explaining that Old Cisco had fallen asleep in the chair and that they shouldn’t disturb him. He led Edward into the trailer on the left and opened the door. The smell was instantly overwhelming. As they stepped inside, Edward was certain he’d accidentally entered a parallel dimension. Tin foil lined all the walls and ceiling and windows. Heat lamps were strung up overhead, illuminating the trailer with a luminescent white light. And, in three vast rows, fully grown, fluorescent green marijuana plants lined the trailer front to back. It was as if a bright, pungent forest had sprung up through the trailer’s floor.

Edward took one look and turned around and left.

Miguel exited soon after (he took an extra deep breath first).

„Is this why I’m out here?!” his younger brother screamed.

Miguel was taken aback.

„I honestly have no idea why you’re out here.”

„I was trying to find you.” Edward let out a pathetic sigh. „I can’t—I can’t do this...”

„Dude, work’ll be okay,” soothed Miguel, in an attempt to keep his brother from going off. „It’s just a job.”

„It’s not the job. It’s you.” Anger flared in Edward’s eyes once more. „And it’s just a job? Just a job? What do you know about a job? You ever have a job? A real



job? Right now, my job is to save thousands of lives—that's my job. My company manufactures products that don't always do what they should. My company has assets that apparently get out of hand and kill people. My company has given me the job of making sure we fix these issues before they happen, before people die, before there's mass hysteria and unnecessary destruction and the stock price drops a percentage point."

"Are they... are they evil? How many people have they killed?" Miguel interjected, genuinely unsure.

Edward let out a psychotic laugh.

"Evil? My company's saved more lives this week than every doctor in America in the last month, combined."

"Why's that? Does America need better healthca—"

A primal scream erupted from Edward's everything—his heart and gut and diaphragm and blood and soul—and it didn't end until his face was red, his body shaking, his breath gone...

The man in the chair rustled but didn't wake.

Silence followed.

Miguel eyed-up his younger brother.

"Feel better?"

Edward felt silly and kicked at the dirt.

"A little," he sighed.

"Eduardo, look at me." Miguel stuck out his finger and pointed it into Edward's wandering gaze, then up so that their eyes would meet eyes. "My job is to take care of Mama. It's not glamorous—"

"Ah, don't give me that bull. She said you'd starve if she weren't there."

Miguel chuckled and admitted that that was probably true.

"Who do you think gets her groceries, though? Her medicine? Who do you think cleans the house? Fixes the window when a kid knocks a rock through it?—Papa's been dead almost twenty years. You," he wiped his hands in a dramatic gesture, "you left, gone. Good. Do well. Be safe. We're all proud of you." That was the moment, that specific line, that choked up Edward. "And every time I see that side of you that's a bitch, it reminds me of that time you took Caesar's bike. You remember that?"

He nodded.

"I'm sure you do. I found you hiding in that gross alleyway and I was bigger and scary and about to beat the hell out of you to teach you that stealing was wrong and what'd you do? You argued with me. You remember that? You said that Caesar didn't deserve the bike because he was always so mean to that weird kid at the end of the block. You said you took it as justice and you know what? I believed you. It was sincere. And you remember what I did?"

"Yeah," laughed Edward, a tear falling from his eye, "you beat the hell out of me."

"I did, because stealing's wrong. But I also beat Caesar the next time I caught him messing with that weirdo at the end of the block. Even back then I remember thinking, you don't belong here, with us..."

Miguel trailed off.

Edward thought he was being sentimental until the dry wind caught his attention, too.

Something had changed.

Something was off.

It was too quiet.

It felt like they were being watched.

Like they weren't alone.

Edward noticed Miguel was looking up and joined his gaze.

Overhead, no more than forty feet up, the beam was reflecting off a solid, flowing white surface. Neither man knew what they were staring at, nor did they move or speak. They just watched, dazed. It was the damndest thing, as if a blanket of bubbly clouds was being pulled across the sky.

—then it was gone.

The sky was vacuous and black once more.

„Oh my God, you've got to be kidding me..." groaned Edward, finally realizing what it was they'd just seen. He briefly felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner but it had been so sudden and unexpected, and it was such a peculiar sight, he'd been momentarily thrown off. The object overhead would've been indistinguishable from a cloud if not for the light reflecting off it. In fact, Edward wasn't certain he'd seen what he thought he'd seen so he bent down beside the floodlight, which was on a spinning hinge, and began turning and shining the light in any direction he could, searching for more.

„Can I have your phone?" Edward whispered to his brother, positioning the floodlight in another direction. Miguel handed the phone down and Edward reached up—and they froze.

Neither man took their eyes off the sky.

„Is that...?"

Miguel didn't know how to finish his question.

„It is."

The sky had an elegant shield, one rolling with the grace of a low-tide ocean. Webbed cocoons plagued the air, dozens, maybe hundreds spread across a vast section of the sky. Some of them floated alone while others stuck together to form larger mounts.

He had found them.

*I found them*, he thought, equally honored and horrified.

Both men were so concentrated on the sky that neither of them noticed two cocoons were much lower than the rest, ducking and weaving with the wind as they came closer and closer to the earth's surface. It was poetic, in a way, nimble and odd. One of the cocoons disappeared behind the trailers while the other continued toward the light, not ten feet away but still partly obscured by darkness.

„Should we run?" asked Miguel, worried.

„I think we're safe..."

And, with that, both men slowly lowered their heads and noticed the cocoon floating around eye-level only a few feet away. They were frozen once more, this time in fear, as the cocoon gently floated between them like a delicate soap bubble,

close enough for them to reach out and touch it. Up close, Edward could see that it was pulsating—and then he could see more close behind, flying low.

„Get to the trailer,” Edward whispered.

Both men took off running as the cocoon hit the floodlight.

The white ball cracked like an egg, split, and then burst with a dozen brown, long-limbed spiders. Another cocoon quickly dropped from the sky like a kamikaze and smashed against the roof of the middle trailer, where it burst and more spiders spilled out.

The brothers ran inside the trailer.

Edward watched as Miguel locked the door behind them.

„Glad you locked it, in case they try the door.”

„Never too careful,” his brother responded, dead serious.

The two men checked outside the windows.

A small group of the spiders were climbing over the man in the chair.

Miguel cursed—he forgot Old Cisco was out there.

Edward said the spiders wouldn't bite him so long as he didn't move. (In reality, Edward believed the old man wasn't sure that was true and partly believed that the man may already be dead.)

The two men quieted a minute.

Miguel suggested that, if all else should fail, there was a car out back.

„Where are the keys?”

Miguel pulled them out of his pocket.

„Old Cisco had me drive him around earlier. There's also a raft on the Rio Grande shore, not far off. It's really nice.”

Edward was momentarily dumbfounded.

„A raft?”

„Yeah, it's got a motor and oars. We were on it yesterday.”

„Wait... why didn't we run to the car?”

Miguel thought a moment and then nodded, conceding that that was a better idea than the trailer. Edward snatched the keys out of his brother's hand and pulled an edge of the tin foil off the window and checked outside. The spiders were everywhere, moving together in groups like tiny herds of buffalo, each sect a rug crossing the desert floor. They weren't jumping but crawling forward, one over another.

It made Edward's skin crawl.

Miguel began walking the rows of marijuana plants, inspecting each one.

At least we have a phone, Edward thought, pulling Miguel's cell phone from his pocket. After several unsuccessful attempts to turn it on, Edward called over to his brother.

„Your phone, it's dead, isn't it?”

„Yeah,” Miguel answered. „I was wondering why you asked for it.”

Edward dropped the phone in disbelief and hung his head.

„Is there a phone in here?”

Miguel thought a moment.

„Nah but I think there's an old rotary in the middle trailer.”

Edward looked outside again.

„They’re hungry,” he reassured himself, „and if there’s no food here, they’ll leave. It’s night and they’ll go hunt and we can run.” A chuckle turned his attention away from the window. His brother had discovered a black case between two of the plants and opened it to find two solid bricks of marijuana in airtight plastic. Miguel was so excited he hugged one of the bricks, then stuffed it back inside and closed the case and kept it close beside him.

Edward felt hopeless. Leaning against the wall, he let himself slide down until he was sitting on the floor, his knees against his chest. Miguel joined him, legs out, the case held firmly under his arm.

*We’ll just wait them out,* he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eduardo remembers bits and pieces from the night before.

Miguel explains everything he’d done, everything he’d told the town, how he warned everyone, and Eduardo beams proudly; then, he tells him everything that had happened in the town, according to what he’d learned. Eduardo asks the doctor to come over and introduces himself as Edward and he speaks English to her as Miguel watches, captivated. (A part of him has been wishing he’d learned the language.) The two of them speak for some time.

„The doctor needs supplies,” Eduardo relays to his brother, in Portuguese.

Miguel nods.

The doctor and Eduardo look at him.

„What?”

„She’s sending a nurse to get supplies but the nurse is gonna need help...”

Miguel nods.

The doctor and Eduardo continue to look at him.

„What?” he asks again.

„Everyone in here is sick. The doctor and the other nurse need to stay and keep an eye on everyone...”

Miguel nods.

The doctor returns to the patients in the room but Eduardo continues to stare at his brother, waiting for it to register.

„Wait,” Miguel says, realizing. „Me? They want me to help?”

„You’re the only one that isn’t sick.”

„But my arm,” he holds up the sling.

Miguel explains how he’d been shot rescuing him.

„You still have one good arm,” interjects his younger brother. „Look, you just need to follow the nurse to the E.R. and pick up some supplies from the closet with her. Put it in a bag, carry it with your good arm—that’s it. You’ll be helping everyone in here, including me. And yourself—she said you’re gonna need a painkiller, right?”

That last bit gets him to agree wholeheartedly.

Miguel stands up and follows one of the nurses to the door. People snicker behind him and, as he heads out of the hospital room, his brother calls out to him, „Your ass is out.” Miguel mistakes this as a word of caution, and he tells his brother, „I’ll keep it safe, bro, don’t worry,” without realizing that the back of his

hospital gown was open, and that everyone could see his ass. He leaves the hospital room and gets on an elevator with the nurse.

The doors open and Miguel pushes his way through the crowd, following the nurse toward the E.R., when he runs square into a short person. Not only is the person shorter but lighter, too, and they fall backward. It isn't until he bends down to help them back to their feet that Miguel realizes it's a kid he knocked down; then, he realizes that he knows the kid—it's the boy he met the night before, in Piedras Negras. Miguel asks questions in Portuguese and the boy says a bunch of stuff—in English and in Spanish—but neither understand anything the other is saying, except one word:

„Anti-venom.”

He motions for the boy to follow him.

They enter into the chaos of the E.R. and do their best to keep out of the way of the many doctors running around. The nurse disappears into a small room in back, leaving Miguel (and the boy she'd yet to notice) in the dimly lit bedlam. The emergency lights are on but there's still a good deal of shadow in every corner and under each beds, all of them filled. People are everywhere, sick people crowded around sick people and doctors and nurses trying their best to help; cries and moaning and pleading, people in gurneys rushing passed, a scream from another area of the hospital, echoing down the hallways, and someone collapses onto the floor. It looks like anarchy, like a hopeless situation.

The nurse returns from the back room briefly, with a bag full of things.

She notices the boy.

The boy says a few things and the nurse fishes around in the bag and removes a vial before shoving the bag into Miguel's good hand—then she disappears into the back room once more, briefly, before emerging with two capped needles. She gives them to the boy and says a few stern words, which seems to satisfy both of them, and then she returns to the back room, finished with their interaction.

The boy turns his head left and right, searching for something—bed sheets, folded neatly on a closet shelf. The boy walks over and pulls out several and he wraps a sheet around one leg, and then a second sheet around his other leg, and one around each arm and hand (the vial in one and the needles in another). He hands the edge of one sheet to Miguel, who takes it, amused, and the boy twirls so that the sheet wraps around his midsection. The last sheet he wraps around his face and head like a hijab. Finished, he gives a thumbs up (Miguel can't tell because there's a sheet wrapped around his fist) and the boy begins to head into the crowd—when a chilling silence fills the E.R. Something is happening. Miguel and the boy look over to the source of everyone's attention, and they see an unconscious person convulsing in a nearby bed. A doctor and two nurses circle the patient, blocking their view...

A new level of chaos follows.

Something happens in that bed, to that convulsing patient, that causes an ear-piercing scream, and everyone scatters, rushing, running away from the person in that bed. Doctors, nurses, patients, anyone near that bed, that's capable of moving, they all scream and run and stampede over slower, weaker people, spreading out in every direction away from that bed, toward any exit from the

E.R., even if it leads outside. One of the doctor kicks open the fire exit and books it outside—only to be overwhelmed by spiders.

The nurse comes out of the back room, carrying another bag, and Miguel grabs her by the elbow, leading her toward the E.R. exit—still uncertain of the threat—when he notices the boy's gone. As the fire exit doors shut, Miguel can see that the sheet-ensconced, marshmallow-looking boy had seized the opportunity and run out the exit. First, he thinks the boy is stupid and worries for his safety—but it's immediately after the boy disappears from sight that Miguel witnesses firsthand the true horror around him, and his mind changes, and he considers the boy smart, and lucky, and wishes that he, too, had run away when he had had the chance.

## **The Lignite Mine Midnight**

Nearly half an hour they walk, further and further into the tunnel, deeper and deeper underground, a wall of darkness in the distance ahead and no real end in sight. They're surrounded by rock, with support beams every dozen or so feet, and yellow lights strung up overhead, keeping everything surprisingly well lit. Every few hundred feet they pass a generator, which Matthew starts, and more bulbs light up, illuminating another couple hundred feet ahead. Duragard (hobbling) and Matthew stay in front of Tommy, conversing back and forth about the motivations and reasoning behind a previously discussed theory involving Muslims and their infiltration of the U.S. government.

„Sharia law,” confirms Duragard, nodding.

Both men had been using the term „Sharia Law” repeatedly, though Tommy notices it's a bit vague when they say it—more as a term uniting all the evil and misdeeds of the Muslims than as a practice of the religion itself.

Matthew gives an acknowledging flick of his mullet.

„Yeah, Sharia law... Muslims, you know?...”

A conversational lull follows and Duragard decides to use it to explain the mine to Tommy, spouting details over his shoulder and pointing around as if he's a tour guide talking to a child. „I use ta work in this here mine,” the old man begins, fondly. „I's hired as an in-de-pendent contractor—this was after my days in the army, ya see. They offered me a good deal of money to stay for about eight months—eight months and the lignite mine would've been finished, and I was gonna return home up north, but they shut 'er down when the mole, uhhh, what're they called?”

„The TBM? It was called Chugger.”

„Yeah,” recalls Duragard, „the tunnel borin' doo-hickey—Chugger. We got so deep and far into this here mine that this big machine—it was a beast, churnin' rocks and pushin' on—it started causin' tremors on the surface from here on well-passed Sugar Pointe, so they suspended construction for a bit, shut it all down.” He chuckles. „They were supposed ta start up 'gain within a couple weeks but weeks turned into a months and that was, what, fifteen years ago?”

Matthew nods, adding, „I been guardin’ it ten years, e’er since I’s nineteen.”

„Funny, the places we end up...”

Matthew looks at him, confused.

„How so?”

Duragard answers in a reflective, modest tone.

„I only stayed here awaitin’ the job ta startup ‘gain, which it didn’t. Never left, neither—stayed put. Don’t think Josh ever forgave me for leavin’ him up north with his mama’s aunt—and he’s rightly justified in that anger. And now—now we’re back in the mine. With a Mex’can, no less. Takin’ him to our stash. Cause spiders took over the town—it’s all just silly, just... funny, the places we end up.”

Every so often, they pass a dark tunnel veering away from the main path.

„This mine’s still rich with lignite,” continues Duragard. „Prolly make a pretty penny comin’ down here, diggin’ it up ourselves.”

„Tried,” Matthew responds, „but it’s goddamn impossible. I’d have to start up Chugger a’gin, too, if I’s—”

Duragard cuts him off.

„Chugger still works?”

„Yeah. Part of the deal is that I gotta oil it up every so often so it doesn’t rust. Thing’s more valuable than the mine, these days.”

„Interesting...”

The men reach a new generator and Matthew bends down and pulls the rip-chord, and the generator sputters to life, except instead of lighting the path further forward, it illuminates a secondary tunnel, one that veers off to the right about 30 yards before dead-ending—two tall figures stand at the end of the tunnel, facing the men. Tommy startles before realizing that the figures are actually hazmat suits hanging against the wall; it’s because of the quick fright, however, that it takes an extra moment to register everything else in front of him.

Tommy’s jaw drops and remains open.

„We’re here,” Duragard announces.

## **The Dawn**

*Empires rise and empires fall. Species rise annd dominate and then are snuffed  
like embers falling from a distant inferno.*

*This is the way of life, and you are not immune to it. Humanity will die one day, just  
as did all those who came before, and still the enemy will brood in the beyond.*

*Still will the void lust for the stimulation of thought. In short, the world will not notice  
that humanity is no longer there.*

—Phaedrus of Alethia

## **Sugar Pointe Hospital Midnight**

The door slams behind them.

Out of breath, their eyes are wide and darting. Miguel keeps his back against the door. The nurse begins hyperventilating. She drops the second bag of medical supplies in the seat of a nearby chair on her way to the bathroom. There's a click as the door locks behind her, followed by the sound of vomiting.

This alarms everyone, of course.

Dr. Shedlauskas had been talking with Edward. Spiders currently surround the hospital like a tactical SWAT team. Long ribbons of web cling to their window. Down below, the ground is white. They're trapped.

The doctor hurries over.

„What is it? What happened?“

Miguel shakes his head repeatedly.

The doctor looks him over.

„Are you hurt?“

Miguel shakes his head more.

His back remains plastered against the door.

„What happened? Did the spiders get in?“ Edward asks him in Portuguese.

Miguel answers simply enough.

„Sorta.“

Dr. Shedlauskas asks what's going on but Edward raises a finger, politely requesting that she hold on a minute; then, he calmly asks his brother to tell him everything that had happened. Miguel doesn't say anything. He takes shallow breaths. His eyes stop darting and lower. He checks and double-checks the door handle for a lock (something that frightens Edward, as he knows his brother likes to lock the spiders out). Slowly, and rather dazed, he moves away from the door. The first bag of supplies is still in his hand but he takes a few sluggish steps to the chair and bends to pick up the second bag. The doctor is just behind him and he gradually turns, handing her both bags. His eyes don't lift from the floor. The burly man looks defeated, heartbroken—less terrified and more like his dog had just died. He slumps into his seat on the bed beside his brother.

Everyone silently watches, shaken.

Edward had never seen his older brother like this.

„Will the sprinklers go off if he smokes weed?“ he asks the doctor. Had everyone not been so scared, this might have been funny, as she had warned about such hazards not twenty minutes earlier.

„Yes, the emergency power is reserved for essential life support systems, the sprinklers, and lighting. If there's smoke, the sprinkler will go off in here.“

„Can you give him a painkiller then? Please.“

Dr. Shedlauskas fishes around the two bags of supplies, pulling out the contents of both to line everything along the windowsill. There're vials and gauze and sutures and hypodermic needles and stitches and stitching hooks and tubes of ointment and everything else from her list. She takes one of the vials and inserts a fresh needle into it, pulling the plunger back before holding it upright to flick any oxygen bubbles to the surface, and then she shoots a small stream into the air. She approaches and gently takes the big man's good wrist, carefully



twisting it to expose the veins in his forearm. She isn't entirely convinced that Miguel is aware of his surroundings. He stares at the ground with abject eyes, unblinking. She goes to prick him with the needle—and he stops her, shaking his head again, this time only once. Dr. Shedlauskas caps the needle and sets it aside. With a penlight from her breast pocket, she checks his pupils. „He's in shock,” she states, matter-of-factly. „Rub his back. Tell him nice things.”

Edward scoots closer to his brother and rubs his wide back. He's about to say something happy, something funny, but a new round of retching from the bathroom interrupts him. In the pause after, while he waits for the puking to stop, Edward realizes that tears are dripping off the tip of his brother's nose. Of all the awful things that had happened, this bothers him the most.

„Please tell me what the hell happened out there,” Edward pleads.

Miguel lifts his head to focus on his younger brother. His face has an unmistakable expression, one of pity and sorrow, as if all is already lost. He knows something the rest of them don't; well, except the hyperventilating nurse that's currently vomiting in the bathroom. Only two people seem to know what's going on and, of those two, one's in shock and the other's violently ill—all of which is quite disconcerting, to say the least. Never mind the fact that Miguel's eyes glance around the room as if he's surveying a tomb. Because we're already dead. The thought is so obviously on his brother's mind that Edward can practically hear it.

Dr. Shedlauskas carries some of the supplies over to the hospital bed that had once been Duragard's, where a middle-aged woman now lies cuddled beside Dorothy—an old woman with a face so swollen that it consumes the entire right half, chin to forehead. Her right eye isn't visible, hidden beneath a thick layer of purple, puffy flesh. The doctor goes about applying ointment to the blackened bite mark on the old woman's temple—

„You shouldn't eat chocolate before riding a bicycle.” The words are in Portuguese so no one knows that the first thing out of Miguel's mouth is utter nonsense except Edward.

He stares at his brother, confused.

„Huh?”

Miguel snaps out of it. A memory had popped into his head and it was so real—but then it's over. He notices the tears and wipes his eyes and face clean, then gives a disoriented scan of the many faces around him, as if he's just woken from a dream. He clears his throat, shakes his head, and turns back to his brother.

„What happened, bro?—was I asleep?”

„No, you were in shock.”

„I was?”

„Yeah. You and the nurse went to get supplies. Do you remember what happened?”

It doesn't take long for „the incident” in the ER to resurface—Edward can tell the very second his brother remembers, as his face loses some of its color and he fidgets.

„Yeah. I, uh, I do.”

The doctor is about to wrap Dorothy's head in gauze when she stops and turns to the brothers. It's dead silent except for the brothers, and dry heaving in the bathroom.

„What happened?”

Miguel is solemn.

„Pandemonium. Death. It was awful—it was the worst thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

„What was? Did the spiders get in?”

„Sort of.”

Miguel tells his brother one thing, one piece of information—that’s it—and Edward’s face loses color, though it doesn’t stop him from asking more questions. Miguel answers as best he can but, truthfully, it had been absolute anarchy in those last few minutes so there’s a level of uncertainty regarding the extent of the damages and its repercussions—Dr. Shedlauskas interrupts the brothers’ conversation, too eager to learn what the hell’s going on.

„Would you please tell us what happened?”

„Um,” Edward tries his best to figure out how to explain what his brother’s just said without panicking everyone, „he says that there was an incident in the ER... and people panicked, and ran... Some of the people tried to leave the hospital and, in doing so, may have let some of the spiders in—but he isn’t certain, it was too chaotic for him to be certain.” People gasp but Edward is quick to calm them. „We’re on the second floor. Unless spiders learn to open doors or use the elevator, we should be fine until help arrives—which could be any minute now. Just, in the meantime, no one goes out that door.”

Everyone tries not to panic but the air is tense.

„What was the incident?”

Edward shoots Dr. Shedlauskas a glance suggesting that the question she’s asking is a question she might want to hold off on, until they can talk about it elsewhere, in private. She accepts this, nods, and turns back to Dorothy, about to wrap gauze around the old woman’s forehead and gray hair... when she notices the swollen area is throbbing. It could be nothing, just a vein that engorges with each heartbeat, or possibly a spasm of the myofacial tissue layer in her cheek—syke, that’s definitely not what’s happening.

„Oh deary, that ointment works miracles. I feel so much better.”

Dorothy sits up in bed and gives the doctor a warm smile. The swelling on her face comes down—a little, initially, but all of a sudden it dramatically decreases, deflating as if it’s a balloon and someone just let the air out. The right side of her face droops as if it’s melting from her skull, the flesh sagging into a pulsating pocket of excess skin. Her right eye, which had been hidden under the swelling, becomes visible again.

The gauze falls from the doctor’s hand and unrolls across the floor, stopping against Miguel’s foot. She stands from the hospital bed and casually backs away from the patient. Her bedside manner is gone and, right now, there just aren’t any words. Her expression is, at first, apprehensive, but it progressively distorts into horror.

„Sweetie, I want you to stay right there,” the doctor says softly.

Dorothy can tell something’s up by the way everyone’s looking at her. Each face is a cross of fear and disgust. The middle-aged woman lying next to her leans up and over to get a glimpse—and immediately falls out of the hospital bed; then

she's off, scurrying backwards on her hands and feet to the other side of the room, where everyone else has congregated against the opposite wall.

„What's... what's happening?“ cries the old woman, trembling.

No one answers.

Dorothy's right eye is black and wilted, and it throbs as if something is inside the eyeball itself. She gently touches the flaccid skin hanging over her temple, her brow, her cheek—and the sagging flesh promptly reacts, pulsating so hard that her cheek puffs out in a bright rouge. That's when she feels it, the grotesque sensation of some-thing or -things crawling just below the surface of her skin and inside her head. She's embarrassed by her appearance, and frightened, and so alone. Her lips quivers and she begins to weep, saltwater tears falling from her left eye; something else entirely leaks from the right, a viscous, mustard-like fluid. A surge of excruciating pain causes her to scream—putrid yellow liquid explodes out of her right eye socket as the pink, pulsating skin of her face splits open like cheap fabric, tearing from cheek to forehead, and a handful of baby spiders pour out of old Dorothy's face.

Miguel had picked the gauze up off the floor while everyone else watched the horrific ordeal. Taking a page from the boy's playbook, he wrapped his good hand (using his bad hand) with a loose, impenetrable layer of gauze. Before anyone else has time to comprehend what's going on, Miguel is up and standing over the old woman as the hairless baby spiders spill out of her face and onto the bed sheet, each one no bigger than a quarter and looking as innocuous as a common house spider.

They land and scatter, attempting to flee, but there's little hope of escape.

Miguel swiftly pounds his fist into the bed over and over—trying his best not to hit Dorothy's legs but not always succeeding—and he smashes each and every one of the baby spiders into bits of legs and chunks of greenish goo.

Dorothy goes limp and her head falls back on the pillow.

Miguel catches two spiders scurrying out from under the open skin flap of the old woman's face and, instinctually, he squishes them with a single, open-handed slap—and immediately regrets it, as he's just hit an unconscious old woman in the head. He apologizes and then searches her hair, around the pillows, behind the bed, the floor, but finds no more baby spiders—not that he'd really see them, since they're so small, but he's relatively confident that they've all been turned to squishy hunks of goo.

Miguel begins unwrapping the goopy gauze from around his hand.

Everyone gawks, dumbfounded; now it's their turn to be in shock.

The „incident“ that took place in the ER is explained shortly after.

„He was afraid it'd cause more panic telling you but that obviously didn't work,“ Edward explains, and then translates his brother's words. „One of the body's in the ER sort of... burst open...“ He asks his brother a few questions, to clarify. „...he doesn't know how many—more, a lot of baby spiders—and it was like they were everywhere, all over everything. People panicked and ran.“

„How is that possible?“ Dr. Shedlauskas asks, stunned.

„Well, the females don't fight but if they see someone weak, it makes sense that they'd use them to carry their babies. And the babies only need a short period to incubate, something warm and fatty for them to chew on before they... hatch, I

guess you'd call it—it's more like the females give birth into... the..." Edward really doesn't want to finish the sentence, as all of it's so icky.

After that, time passes without incident.

Dorothy is near death after the traumatic ordeal but, while unconscious, Dr. Shedlauskas gives her painkillers, antibiotics, stitches her face, wraps a majority of her head in gauze, and pretty much saves her life. Bruises form on her forehead and legs where Miguel hit her but no bones had been broken and the only permanent damage is to her right eye.

Somehow, somehow, the tough old woman will live on.

The nurse finishes in the bathroom, cleans herself up, comes out, curls up in a chair, and passes out.

„It's weird, I want to smoke," Miguel tells his brother at one point. He pulls out a joint and lighter from somewhere on his body (which is amazing considering he has no pockets), „but I also don't, really. I'm not thinking about it as much."

„Maybe you're growing up?" jokes Edward.

„Nah," Miguel chuckles. „My dick grows up. I stay laid back."

He sets the joint and lighter on the windowsill beside the hospital bed and forgets about it.

Cell phones are passed around so people can call loved ones. They learn that the National Guard has been alerted and that they're currently en route.

There's a short discussion about leaving the room but it's decided that they'll stay put until sunrise; then, if the National Guard still hasn't arrived, they'll figure out a plan.

Edward finds a deck of cards in a table drawer and offers to play with anyone interested. Two others join him, all of them sitting cross-legged on his hospital bed, with Miguel (who's too big) seated on the edge, and they play several rounds of poker using whatever's in their pockets or IOUs written on plies of toilet paper as currency. Edward's gaze occasionally drifts from the game and settles on Dr. Shedlauskas. She's in unflattering hospital attire, blue scrubs under a white long-sleeved jacket, but there's something sexy about a woman in uniform. Her deep black hair is a few shades darker than her skin and frizzed out. She doesn't smile much considering the circumstances but, in the one or two times he's seen a happy expression on her face, it's caught him off-guard. She has a guffaw instead of a laugh, too, he's discovered.

Miguel notices Edward's gaze.

„You like her?" he asks.

„Like who?"

„Doctor Stedhoffs-kins or whatever."

Even though they're speaking Portuguese, the name „Stedhoffs-kins" catches the doctor's attention and she turns to the brothers—both of them quickly pretend to study their cards.

Edward blushes.

Miguel smirks.

„You do."

„Don't. Not now."

„Just do me a favor and marry her so I can pronounce her last name."

„That's not funny."

It's the last round of betting and everyone folds except the brothers. Edward takes a sheet of tissue paper and writes a sentence in Portuguese and tosses it into the pot. His wager reads: DROP IT. Miguel also takes a sheet of tissue paper and writes: ASK HER OUT. The men are heads-up and they call the other's bet, then reveal their cards...

Edward has two pair, threes and nines.

Miguel as a straight, nine-to-king.

„I'll give you," Miguel checks his bare wrist as if there's a watch on it, „until dawn to ask her on a date. Fair?"

Edward soundlessly pouts.

The next hand of poker begins.

„She keeps looking at you, too," adds Miguel, his eyes focused on his cards.

A tiny grin crosses Edward's lips.

The card games soon end. Some of the people cozy up together on the hospital beds while the rest lay blankets on the floor and sprawl out. Heavy breathing and snores fill the air. As 2:30 a.m. rolls around, the only people still awake are Edward, Miguel, the nurse that didn't pass out, and Dr. Shedlauskas, who pops up from time to time as she checks the vitals of each person in the room.

Miguel stands from his brother's bed.

„I'm gonna try and sleep in the bathroom."

„You sure? You could probably fit on here."

Miguel chuckles and crosses the room. He taps the doctor on her shoulder and points to Edward's hospital bed and tells her, in Portuguese, that there's plenty of room and that his brother thinks she's beautiful and that her last name is a disaster, and then he heads toward the closet for extra blankets. The second nurse is seated at the foot of one of the hospital beds, observing the doctor, but Miguel gives a low whistle and she looks over at him. He lifts the blankets and points at the bathroom. She shakes her head emphatically and continues observing the doctor.

*Worth a shot.*

Miguel enters the bathroom and closes the door behind him.

Dr. Shedlauskas leans close to the nurse and whispers something in her ear and they both approach Edward. His eyes are closed in a fake sleep but he opens them, pretending to be surprised that the ladies are beside him.

The doctor has a sly look in her eyes.

„Do you mind if we share your bed for a few hours?"

„Nope!"

Edward answers with a greater deal of enthusiasm than he had meant to.

Dr. Shedlauskas smiles and, once again, it catches him off-guard.

The women remove a few items from their pockets before climbing into the hospital bed. Edward skootches to the edge, with the doctor in the center, and he does his best not to touch them inappropriately—or at all, really. His breath probably smells and this makes him terribly self-conscious. There isn't much space and he's forced to lay on his side so he turns to face the window blinds, away from the ladies. A hand slithers up his midsection and a slender female body presses against his back. Her lips are next to his ear as she whispers an apology, explaining that it's necessary to embrace since there's a lack of space in the bed.

The nurse is snuggled against her, too, she whispers, adding, „And human contact helps during periods of duress.”

„Just so you know,” Edward warns, „I have a tendency to sing in my sleep.”

The doctor scoffs.

„I’m not kidding,” he goes on. „Ever since I was a kid. My friends stopped inviting me to sleepovers ‘cause of it. Ask Miguel, I used to wake him up with Brazilian rap.”

„What does Brazilian rap sound like?”

„Like American rap, just more violent. And without the misogyny.”

„How’s that?”

Dr. Shedlauskas sounds genuinely curious.

This was fast becoming a conversation.

„Brazil’s a violent place but, you know, we’re Catholics. We love our moms.”

„Interesting...” The doctor yawns and he can feel the conversation ending as quickly as it began. „Well, goodnight, Ed—”

„Do me one favor,” interrupts Edward, unwilling to stop without one last piece of information.

„Yeah...?” she asks, hesitant to agree.

„What’s your first name?”

She guffaws, and he can feel her warm breathe on his neck.

„My name is Kara.”

„Goodnight, Kara.”

„Goodnight, Edward.”

They slowly drift off, cuddled against one another.

—a shriek wakes them.

Kara and Edward jolt upright and twist toward the noise so suddenly that they accidentally knock the nurse off the edge of the hospital bed. She lands on a person and there’s a groan from the floor while, under the glow of the single emergency light, the other nurse leaps from the chair she had passed out in a few hours earlier. Her hands frantically grab at her scrubs and she squeals in horror but there’s nothing—at least nothing they can see. She howls in pain and her hysteria increases, more spastic, her fingernails tearing at her sleeves and collar as she pulls open the hallway door and she runs out of the room. The door is left wide open behind her.

From the floor beside the bed, a groan suddenly jumps in decibels to become a glass-shattering scream. There’s a quick *déjà vu* as the remaining nurse shoots up off the ground to frantically scrape her clothes, exactly as the other nurse had done a few seconds earlier. In both cases, it’s as if the women are covered in invisible fire and they’re trying desperately to put themselves out.

„THEY’RE EVERYWHERE!” squeals the nurse as she climbs onto the hospital bed opposite them—which appears to be a bad choice as she instantly freaks out even more and, like a cat, springs toward the open door. Landing with a soft thud, she, too, runs out of the room and disappears down the hall.

Everyone else in the room is silent, still. Even with the yelling and commotion, they do not stir. Not one of them.

„Oh dear God,” Kara cries, standing on the bed.

Edward does the same, leaping to his feet—and then he can see it, like an illusion, a trick of the eye. Sheets on the other beds gently shake as if the fabric is restless. The floor shifts ever so slightly. The walls thrum. The people around them—their skin literally crawls.

Baby spiders, hundreds of them.

They're climbing up their hospital bed, up the wall near them, across the ceiling overhead—and they're damn near impossible to see clearly, tan specks scampering this way and that, creeping over the sheets at their feet. Kara kicks the pillows and top blanket off the bed, delaying the tiny bastards for the moment. Edward spins around and tries to stop them from climbing up the foot of the bed, when he catches several scurrying along the windowsill—and then he sees it, the answer.

He bends down and picks up both items.

The flint sparks, ignites, and the fire causes Kara to flinch. She watches in disbelief as the tip of the joint lights up and Edward inhales deeply—into an instant coughing fit. (It's been forever since he deliberately smoked weed.) But, still, his chin lifts and—choking out plum after plum, tears in his eyes—he blows a cloud of smoke into the sprinkler overhead. It doesn't work so he does it again, coughing less the second time, and finally he just shoves the lit end of the joint right into the sprinkler sensor. A strobe light starts flashing as water bursts out in all directions, over everything. It's overpowering, torrential, gallons of water spewing out in a relentless storm of fat drops. The ceiling and walls wash clean. Fabric drenches. Puddles form on the ground, each growing bigger and bigger until they connect around the motionless bodies, soaking them. A quarter inch of water covers the floor, some of it flooding out into the hallway.

The babies drown and float like bits of pulp.

Edward jumps from the bed and dashes to the bathroom, throwing open the door—he wobbles and then collapses entirely, body limp, hitting the floor with a wet thump. His devastation is total, sobbing so uncontrollably that it becomes a primitive howl of anguish. His forearms cross over his face and he falls forward, weeping without breath. The spiraling rain splashes up and rises under him so much so that he's breathing equal parts water and air. Brazilian rap mumbles out through breathless tears, to wake his brother up, just as he had when they were children.

Kara stands behind him, staring into the bathroom.

Miguel is on the floor, a peaceful expression on his blue face...

Her body slinks to the ground and she embraces the shattered man as best she can, wrapping her arms around Edward's crumbled frame. Her tears are soft. One thought repeats itself over and over, over and over, over and over...

*They're all dead.*

Everyone except them.

They sit there, just as withered as the drowned baby spiders around them, until enough time passes that the sprinkler shuts off, along with the strobe. Everything drips. The emergency light sparkles with reflections of water on the bulb. It's silent once more. Kara lifts her head off Edward's wet back just enough to peer through the open doorway—it's quiet and empty, a ghost town. The hallway is still occupied by the eerie shadows and ominous glow of the emergency lighting but, at

the far end of the hallway, there's something new, a luminescent white light, one so bright that it's almost blinding. Struggling to her knees, and leaving Edward on the ground, she uses the last of her energy to stand. One foot after the other after the other and she stumbles out of the hospital room, soaking wet and freezing cold, droplets of water falling from her hair and clothes and skin. It's dead silent in the hospital corridor. Every door is open. Every room is empty. She loses balance and steadies herself against the wall—when a hand entwines fingers with hers.

Edward is beside her.

„Let's get out of here,” he tells her, his voice strong, confident.

Her eyelids blink slowly, dazed, and she nods.

„Wait... are you dry?”

She's right, Edward's completely dry. He gives her a knowing smile.

„Follow me,” he says, leading her deeper into the hallway—

„Kara?”

A familiar voice comes from behind her.

She turns around to find Edward standing in the doorway, soaking wet.

He's staring at her, horrified.

Kara's having trouble differentiating the venom-induced hallucinations from reality. There's flashes—Edward beside her, handsome and smiling—and then she sees the large spider in her hand, its legs tucked between her fingers, and the webs around her—it had been a bright white light at the end of the hallway, but no, it's not, it's webs, walls and walls of glimmering web and she's walked right into it, stumbled through them, spiders all around her, crawling through the webs, lowering, climbing her arms and legs. *There's a fire outside. The heat. Flowing reds and flickering orange, overwhelming. It's time to be taken. The hospital is being swallowed into the pits of hell and these things, they aren't spiders—these things are goddamn demons, and the last thing Edward sees is the underside of a giant spider, legs spread wide, leaping through the air towards his face—*

—Edward's eyes are open. He had been crying, and rapping in Portuguese, and begging Kara not to leave (she wasn't), all of it spoken in a hazy mumble. Sometimes he'd hush up and look around, unable to see what was actually around him, and then he'd scream in terror at something only he could see. Now, he's shouting about hell, how the hospital is being pulled into hell, how the spiders are demons, all of it fever-induced and purely imagined.

„Eduardo, please,” Miguel repeats over and over.

They're in the hospital bed and his younger brother is cradled in his arms and he's just trying to calm him, praying this passes, that his brother will be alright... but the fevered hallucinations only seem to get worse (even his hallucinations are having hallucinations).

Dr. Shedlauskas is beside him, tears in her eyes.

The rest of the room watches, silently. Both nurses are awake and ready to help, if there's something they can do—but, sadly, there isn't much that can be done. Edward had been bitten while they slept. The doctor had also been bitten, on her shin—SMASH, she awoke as her reflexes took over. What was left, on her leg and the sheets, was a goddamn baby spiders. One had slipped by, somehow. (Miguel blames himself, thinking that he hadn't killed all the babies that had poured out of poor Dorothy's face. That isn't the case, however, as a bunch of baby spiders



had climbed into a wide vent on the first floor. Several couldn't make it up the steep climb. Others went off to adventure elsewhere. A couple actually made it to the air vent behind Edward's hospital bed but only one was small enough to fit through.) The doctor woke everyone up, including Miguel, and they checked themselves and the room for more, but found none.

Dr. Shedlauskas made it clear right away that, if they were to administer any more anti-venom, Edward would die—flat-out, right away, dead. There's nothing they can give him, nothing that can help. Even painkillers or sedatives could send him into cardiac arrest. The only option is to wait and pray that the anti-venom already in his system prevents the poison from killing him.

There's no guarantee.

Miguel looks at her with pleading eyes.

She's pained by the answer. „I can't do anything without... killing... him...” But it's her answer that causes a wicked thought to cross her mind, one that might help—

A reddish light filters through the blinds and fills the room.

Dr. Shedlauskas stands and draws the blinds.

„This is hell,” mumbles Edward.

Outside, the world is on fire.

## **Sugar Pointe Elementary School**

**12:15 a.m.**

Mayor Emerson stares out the front doors. He's beginning to feel nauseous from the spider bite and it's causing him to sweat profusely—the euphoria is gone and not it feels like the flu. It's causing him to reflect on the situation he's gotten himself into. *I lied about being alone, so what? They'll be in and out and they'll never know there's a cafeteria full of kids. And the money, even though it's only .5%—that's still a fair amount of cash.* He doesn't even know how much cash it is, really; nor does he know who he's meeting or what's being exchanged or anything. This is the closest he's ever come to a hand-off. They could be selling government secrets or trafficking humans or buying cocaine or making illegal business transactions. These secret deals are rare, maybe one every few months, and usually the Mayor is asked to setup a quiet location and ensure that there aren't any police around, something he accomplishes by revoking PD overtime for the week and decreasing weeknight staff to a bare minimum (it's a trick he pulls frequently, with several agencies, to supplement the dwindling town surplus); he listens in on their dispatch, as well, just to be certain.

Tonight, though, the police are busy.

The school is quiet and far enough from town.

The Mayor wipes his brow and prays the whole thing starts soon and ends quickly. Lucky for him, it isn't long before a black Lincoln pulls up and parks against the curb. Three men step from the car, each with slicked-back hair. They're dressed in tailored suits—one in gray, one in deep blue, and the one in black is carrying a briefcase. They walk to the front doors and the Mayor quickly

lets them in. He stutters and stammers and introduces himself and asks about the men's trip in an attempt to make small talk and alleviate the tension—the three men ignore him entirely, speaking only to one another as if the Mayor doesn't exist.

„In there?“ the one in deep blue asks the other two (though the question seems more directed at the man in the black suit), motioning toward the main office.

The three men head into the office.

The Mayor follows like a lost puppy.

„We're here,“ the man in the gray suit says into his cell phone before hanging up. (The Mayor didn't even see him dial a number.) He tells the other men, „He'll be here in an hour.“

All three men check their expensive wristwatches.

„An hour?“ the Mayor coughs, stunned; he had expected this to be over in minutes.

For the first time, one of the men addresses the Mayor.

„Eyes down,“ the man in the black suit says, pointing an index and middle finger at the Mayor's face before pointing to the ground. Very few people had seen his face and continued to pump blood.

Mayor Emerson does as he's told and stares at the floor.

They enter the principal's office and, before the men take seats, one smashes the only emergency light in the room while the one in black sets the briefcase on the desk and opens it. Two of them pull chairs behind the large desk while the one with the briefcase takes the principal's chair, and they sit behind the desk, in the dark room, staring out the windows, their unblinking eyes scouring the street in front of the school for police or passers-by or anything strange—they find nothing, no people, no cars, no lights, nothing. Just silence and darkness.

A moment earlier, just before they had begun staring out the window, the boy had crossed in front of the school. He passes the playground and approaches the back cafeteria doors, removing the sheet from his head so that he doesn't scare anyone. The run from the hospital had been better than his arrival there, when the people inside were forced to wait for whomever had the keycard before they could let him in. Literally opening the door at the last possible second, he fell backwards into the foyer, saved, and they locked the door behind him, causing the automatic doors to shut—two spiders hit against the glass, arriving a second too late to their meal. Leaving had been easier. Several spiders jumped on him and landed on the thick sheets wrapped around his legs and back when he ran through the fire exit. They continued to jump on him or towards him from most angles but he ran faster and faster and stomped and twisted and swatted one off his chest and another off his leg and, luckily, they were unable to bite him or keep up. Reaching the blocks around the school, there didn't seem to be any spiders behind him or on him or around him, hiding, since the vast majority were either in the Town Square or hospital.

Two children let the boy in through the back cafeteria door and he immediately notices that the girl isn't around; neither is the Mayor. And then he sees a child laying on the table, unconscious. The other kids are gathered around, sullen, and the boy learns that the sick child had been bitten earlier, and had hidden it, and that the Mayor had disappeared to find help, and that the girl had gone to find the

Mayor once she learned that a child was sick. The boy removes the rest of his protective garb while listening to the children, and he administers a single dose of the spider anti-venom to the sick child—just as the nurse had instructed. He ducks below the table, unlocking the wheels on the legs, and then orders the rest of the children to stand up and follow behind him as he uses the table as a makeshift stretcher, pushing it out of the cafeteria. „Nurse’s office,” he requests, as there are sure to be actual beds there, and the children lead him to a large, dark room in a hallway parallel to the main office. He lifts the child off the table and carries him into the nurse’s office, laying his tiny, frozen body on one of the many cots. It’s darker than the other rooms, as the only emergency light is in the back, so everyone fumbles around in the darkness, settling in. The boy has the other children lay in the remaining cots, some snuggled together, while he locates a bundle of blankets in the closet.

Tucking them in one-by-one, he tells a brief story...

*Alesander had been stuck in many an unfavorable situation but none was worse than the time he was trapped inside the Tijuana compound of an evil man. The circumstances leading him to that moment had been nefarious at best but—the past was the past, mistakes had been made, and there came a point in time when Alesander woke in a dark basement. His hands and legs were tied with rope and he was hanging from a ceiling beam. „Bad sign, all a bad sign.” Next to him was the man that had accompanied him on the trip, dead and hanging limp from the same beam. (The boy leaves that part out.) It was then that something overtook Alesander – passion, energy, rage, hope, all of it combined into a single, startlingly potent focus. His life was in danger, and the odds of surviving were slim, but it was his will to live, to not give up, that would keep him alive. Despair was the worst weapon against him; if he was to survive, he would need to stay alert and positive.*

The boy’s story is in broken English, and some of the kids don’t understand much, but the point is clear—they would need to be tough, strong, just like the man in the story, who also happened to be the boy’s uncle. This was one of the many stories his uncle shared with him, to the dismay of his mother, and it was the boy’s favorite – as it went on, his uncle sounded more and more like some big-shot Hollywood action hero. (The story had probably been embellished to the point of being false, though his uncle always swore every detail was true.) Mostly, his uncle’s stories of Mexican crime and justice were vulgar and violent and generally inappropriate but this one...well, it was about a time when his uncle worked for the Policía Federal Ministerial. These days, the boy isn’t certain if his uncle works for the criminals or the Policía – or even if there’s much difference anymore – but in this story, he’s the good guy. The boy likes to think of his uncle as the good guy. Lately, his uncle had been leaving for longer and longer periods until, recently, the boy hadn’t seen him in months. His mother wasn’t sure he’d come home this time.

The boy is about to get to one of the story’s best parts—*Alesander’s daring escape from the basement*—when he notices that the kids are asleep. Even without an audience, he contemplates continuing the story. It gives him strength. If his uncle could live through that, maybe the boy would live to see another day... with the girl by his side. *Where did she go?* he wonders, sneaking out of the nurse’s office, gently closing the door behind him, and heading off to search for her.

In the principal's office, the Mayor finds that he needs to excuse himself, as the nausea is so bad he's afraid he may vomit. (The three dark-suited men, in no way, acknowledge that the Mayor's said anything.) He walks out of the principal's office and the main office, back into the hallway, and he leans against the wall, breathing in deeply. The bite on his hand had been shallow, right at the base of his thumb, but enough poison had gotten into his bloodstream to make him ill. He'd probably survive without the anti-venom but—*where the hell's that damn boy?*

The man in the black suit walks out of the office.

He hands the Mayor a small stack of bills.

„Point five percent. Mr. Hulio has informed us that you may be dismissed before—”

The dark-suited man is facing the Mayor—but he twists and, in a quarter-second, his gun is drawn (so fast that it's unclear where it had been holstered) and aimed down the hallway. The Mayor turns around to find the girl standing in the middle of the hall. She nervously looks from the dark-suited man to the money to the Mayor and back.

The man lowers his gun and quickly hides it behind his back.

„Hey, sweetie. You scared me,” the man says in a scarily sincere, gentle voice. „What're you doing here so late?”

„She don't speak English,” the Mayor grunts, stifling back a dry heave.

The man switches to Spanish and asks the girl several questions, learning the truth of the situation.

„There's a dozen kids here?” growls the dark-suited man.

The Mayor is so sick that he doesn't much care.

The dark-suited man motions for the girl to come closer, so that he may hear her better, and he gently calms her with promises to help. She doesn't move, giving both men a hesitant, suspicious glance. There's something distinctly off about the man in the dark suit—aside from the gun, he's too helpful; it's the first time an adult in the U.S. has been nice to her so, naturally, she's worried that something's wrong. He asks her questions about her parents and who's out looking for her—surely, someone's worried sick. The girl answers with the truth, that her parents are in Piedras Negras and that that's her home and she's just wants to go home.

„Why don't you take me to the other children?”

The girl agrees and the dark-suited man walks over to follow her. She turns around to lead him down the hallway, and she catches sight of something at the other end of the hallway that fills her with joy. As she calls out—a bright flash, stars that only she can see. The butt of the gun strikes the back of her skull and knocks her unconscious. The dark-suited man catches her limp body as she falls, picking her up in his arms to carry her into the main office, to discuss with the other two men what they should do about the immigrant that had seen his face while money exchanged hands... but he's quickly stopped.

„Yahiaral!”

The scream is so loud that it echoes through every hallway and classroom in the school, even momentarily waking one of the children. So thunderous and

surprising is the scream that it causes the Mayor to vomit all over the hallway floor.

The boy freezes in place.

He had been at the far end of the hallway, had seen the girl and the two men, and he had been about to run over—when she was struck in the back of the head. Screaming her name had been a reflex, involuntary.

The dark-suited man shuffles the girl's body in his arms, diligently watching the boy, curious what he'll do next. Hearing the scream, the other two men rush out of the office with their guns drawn. Neither of them shows one hint of surprise at the unconscious girl, or the sweaty, pale Mayor hovering over a massive puddle of vomit, or the frozen boy at the other end of the hallway. The men stare at the boy, and the boy stares at the men... and then the boy's gone, running down the nearest hallway. Before disappearing into the main office with the girl's body in his arms, the dark-suited man coolly whispers two words, almost as an afterthought, to the other men:

„Get him.”

*The pack of Acanthaspis Petax, from the Reduviidae family—and most commonly referred to as the assassin bug—have dropped into one of the classrooms. They're only eight of these spindly bastards and they've spread throughout the room. The door is shut and there doesn't appear to be any other way out so they're waiting, patiently, hidden in various spots—on the chalkboard behind a pulled-down map of the U.S., between books on the library shelf, in a desk, etc. Something's bound to come into the room, sooner or later.*

The boy runs down the nearest hallway and ducks into the first classroom and gently shuts the door behind him. It's dark but he can see well enough to look for a weapon. *„When you're in trouble, always look for a way to defend yourself,” his uncle had told him. „Anything can be turned into a weapon. Be resourceful. Anyone can win a fight against someone bigger if they just grab a rock.”* There's a full bottle of hand sanitizer on top of the teacher's desk and a small screwdriver in one of the drawers. Pencils. A yard stick. Tape. Books. Chairs. Desks. Chalk. A coffee cup. *Think! What would my uncle do?—he wouldn't need a weapon, he'd just figure out a way to punch them in the face.* This gives him an idea and the boy grabs the tiny screwdriver.

Outside, in the hallway, the gray-suited man runs passed. His gun is drawn and he's checking the hallways, getting a layout of the school, and then he'll backtrack and check each of the classrooms. He reaches the end of one hallway and the start of another but, at the other end, he sees the blue-suited man.

Both men turn around, as they've circled the perimeter.

The Mayor's also wandering the hallways, violently ill. His fever has spiked and his hallucinations are about to begin but, for now, he's shuffling down each corridor, covered in sweat and puke. He just wants to find the boy, ask him if he's got the medicine. It's gonna be hard, though; he has to one-eye the hallway to improve his balance, and he's mumbling to himself.

The gray-suited man heads back to the first hallway—a classroom door shuts around the corner and he runs toward the sound. Reaching the general area, where several doors line either side of the hallway, he raises the gun and jogs

lightly, his head on a swivel. The distinct smell of alcohol fills his nostrils, and just as he thinks it odd—his legs are up in the air, slid out from beneath him, and he's falling through the air until the ground comes up hard and fast and he hits it with a dense thud.

The floor's wet, covered in hand sanitizer.

The boy had used the small screwdriver to remove a metal leg from one of the desks. He runs from behind a nearby corner and swings the blunt metal instrument like a bat, clocking the fallen man square in the temple—and repeatedly strikes him in the head until he's certain the man won't be getting up any time soon. He grabs the gun and runs—just as the blue-suited man turns the corner behind him, running toward the scuffle.

The Mayor stumbles into the hallway at the opposite end and sees the boy. He calls out, in a hazy voice, „Hey you boy where medicine?” and dizzily rushes forward.

The boy's cornered and takes an immediate left, into the gymnasium.

The blue-suited man had his gun raised but wasn't prepared to fire, not just yet, as gunfire would certainly bring a lot of unwanted attention on the school. He slides through the hand sanitizer, careful not to fall, and pursues the boy into the gym, with the Mayor stumbling after.

The gymnasium is well-lit by several emergency lights but it's empty.

A door on the far side creaks, closing.

The blue-suited man chases after.

The Mayor stays back to vomit on the polished gym floor, having overexerted himself.

The door leads to the gym teacher's office and the blue-suited man enters slowly, gun raised (he's definitely ready to fire now, if necessary), but the room is empty. There's a second door, labeled Boiler Room, and it's ajar. Boy's trapped, he thinks, and pulls the door wide open. It's dark inside, extremely so, but he heads into the boiler room nonetheless, cautious, his gun following his line of sight.

*„And whenever possible,” his uncle had told him, „use the environment.”*

The boy climbs out from his hiding spot under the gym teacher's desk and slams the boiler room door shut, quickly tucking a chair under the handle to tightly barricade it. Careful not to cross in front of the door itself (in case the man trapped inside fires wildly), the boy runs back through the gym again—but hesitates. The Mayor is leaned against the wall. The boy approaches slowly. It's pretty obvious that the Mayor won't be making any sudden movements so the boy runs passed, as if he isn't even there.

In the principal's office, the dark-suited man has his eyes out the window. The street is still quiet, no signs of life. The girl is on the floor, unconscious. He's been debating what to do with her. She might fetch a hefty sum if he sold her as a slave, since she's young and pretty. Or he can dump her in the trunk and kill her in the desert and leave her body for the buzzards. Decisions, decisions...

His phone rings. The briefcase is open and on the principal's desk, and the phone rests on the stacks of cash inside it. He reaches over and gruffly answers.

„What?”

„I'm locked in the boiler room. Goddamn kid locked me in here. I need you to come let me out.”

The dark-suited man scoffs.  
*Boy's got some balls, that's for sure.*

He leaves the principal's office and heads toward the gym, finding his unconscious associate on the way. He's out cold, even after several slaps. The dark-suited man sighs and leaves him, entering the gym and ignoring the sick Mayor as he goes into the gym teacher's office to remove the chair from the door. The blue-suited man walks out of the darkness and neither says a word, their guns drawn as they head back to the principal's office.

The Mayor leaves the gym with the other two men, intending to follow them back to the office, but his illness is overwhelming and he quickly ducks inside the first classroom he passes. There's nothing left for him to vomit so, instead, he collapses on the floor, sprawled out. There's an odd scratching sound from behind him, and another from the chalkboard, and another from the bookcase, and that's about the time that his hallucinations take hold. Rolling onto his belly, he lays his face against the ground. A tiny group of angry-faced demons crawl out of the shadows and across the floor. Mayor Eric Emerson is too weak to move or scream so he's completely defenseless—laying on his face, fully conscious—as *the assassin bugs swarm their warm meal and feast...*

The two men pass through the main office and into the principal's office. The dark-suited man steps over the unconscious girl and peers out the window. A second car is parked alongside the curb.

„He's here.”

The dark-suited man prepares to meet their visitor at the door when something catches his attention and he curses.

The boy had watched through the crack in a classroom door as the dark-suited man left the principal's office. This gave him a brief window to save the girl but, bending down, he wasn't strong enough to lift her. Even if he could, they'd surely see him leaving, or find them if he hid—so it turned out to be a bad idea. He still had a gun but ambushing them out probably get everyone killed. And then he saw the open briefcase filled with cash on the principal's desk.

The two men discuss a plan, where one will greet the visitor and buy time while the other searches each classroom for the kid and briefcase—but it proves unnecessary.

The boy is waiting in the hallway outside of the main office.

A gun is in his right hand but he's pointing it down.

Both men keep their guns at their sides, as well.

A brief negotiation proceeds, in Spanish...

„Give me the girl and a cellphone. I'll let you know where I hid the briefcase when we're safe.”

The dark-suited man sneers, stunned by the boy's courage.

„I'll tell you what, kid. You tell me where the briefcase is before the gentleman outside reaches the door, and I'll let you and your lady leave peacefully. Cross my heart.”

The boy shakes his head no.

„Boy, you see that man?”

The dark-suited man steps closer to the man in blue, out of the way of the front door windows. Behind them, an older gentleman is walking toward the front doors with a duffle bag under his arm. He's in a tan outfit, with a tan, long-brimmed hat, but it's hard to make out his features.

„That's a very dangerous man. And the second he learns that you've hidden his money, which he's just traveled a good deal to pick-up, he's not going to hesitate killing you. The money doesn't even matter—it's the principle.”

It's silent.

The man in tan gets closer and closer.

„So drop the gun. And tell me where the briefcase is.”

The boy shakes his head no.

The two men are growing nervous.

The man in tan opens the first door, crosses the foyer, opens the second, and stops just inside the school. The boy is in the center of the hallway, on the far side and facing the front doors. The two, well-tailored men are to the side, in-between. They form a wide triangle. Everyone stares at one another and the man in tan moves first, dropping the duffle bag to reach under his shirt, to his waistband, and pulls out a gun. Like everyone else, he keeps it pointed down, unsure who to shoot first. His fiery eyes glare out from under the long-brimmed hat. The boy can tell he's Mexican.

„Where is my money?”

It's Spanish, and the man in tan speaks with a menacing drawl.

„The boy hid it,” admits the dark-suited man.

The man in tan and the boy stare at each other for a long period.

„What're you doing here?” he asks the boy.

„It's a long story,” the boy answers, wearily.

„Put your guns on the floor.”

The boy does as he's asked.

„That means you, too.”

His voice is agitated.

The well-tailored men are surprised by the request but they do as they're asked, setting their guns on the floor in front of them.

The dark-suited man explains the situation.

„The Mayor set—”

Two gunshots echo through the elementary school corridors. Brain and blood and skull blow out behind each of their heads and all over the wall. Bullet casings bounce off the floor. The two well-tailored men fall to the ground, dead.

The boy flinches but quickly recovers.

The man in tan doesn't move.

„Does your mother know where you are?”

The boy shakes his head no.

„She's probably worried sick,” his uncle sighs. „Go grab the briefcase and you can tell me how the hell you ended up here on the drive home.”

When the girl wakes to a blue dawn horizon, in the back seat of a moving car, the boy is curled up beside her, asleep, and the city of Piedras Negras is in the distance ahead.



## Sugar Pointe Fire Department

2:43 a.m.

It's an antique, the old record player—a Victor Phonograph Gramophone from the 30s, complete with a tin horn elbowed to the needle and turntable. Fire Chief Earl Stenson kept it in his office as more of a decoration. Only on the rarest of occasions would he pull from the closet his collection of records and fish out something nostalgic to play over the loudspeaker. Duragard is carefully, respectfully rummaging through the records in the closet—and then he finds it, a prized possession that the Chief had lorded over him for years...

A first edition Led Zeppelin *III* vinyl.

Duragard's intention isn't to steal it but play it for the town, in memoriam. He posts the record player's horn right next to the megaphone speaker that blares the firehouse alarm (which has been silent for an hour now). This is the first time something other than an alarm will sound through it.

The needle drops.

Duragard is in the one-piece, banana-yellow hazmat suit that had been in the tunnels. The head is causing him some issues, as it's shaped like a cylinder with a clear window but no peripheral vision. Also, as the suit isn't tight against his body, there's an airy layer inside that's discombobulating. Getting used to this is taking a good amount of focus and effort, though it doesn't stop him from doing something he's always wanted to do—lining up with the fire pole, but slowly and carefully, he wraps his body around the bronze pole, hugging it, clinging to it. A hole below him leads straight down 20 ft. to the first floor garage. He glances down, unable to see anything because of the stupid hazmat suit and its limited view. It also seems to be made of a material that's all friction and grabby and in no way slippery, so he remains hugging the pole, unmoving... but he'll be goddamned if he's gonna quit. With a good deal of effort, the old man „slides” down the pole; really, he releases his legs' grip of the pole, drops a sudden foot, tightens out of reflex (afraid he's falling, which he sort of is), and then he does it again, foot-by-foot.

Adam and Chuck are at the bottom, watching the ordeal with equal parts concern and amusement. Duragard drops a foot, and another, and another, and he goes to drop another when he accidentally reaches land, his legs unprepared—and because of the air in the hazmat suit, making his body bigger and more clumsy, the old man twists around the pole until falling onto his butt. He struggles to his feet, pretending to stretch, and he turns to the two men, whom he's only just met.

„I...meant to do that. Just, uh, testin' durability and uh, makin' sure—oh screw off.”

(He can't tell because of their masks but both men are smiling.)

Spirits are beginning to lift, finally.

Morale had been low when Tommy and Duragard first got there. Tiny Pete had cried himself to sleep on the couch. Adam was laying in his bed, wide awake. Chuck was quietly sitting at the kitchen table. They were rightfully gloomy, as

their leader had died a few hours earlier, but Duragard gathered them together and let them know, with a stern voice, „You ain't got time to be sad. There's work to be done.” The firehouse hadn't lost power like the rest of town (it runs on an outdated power grid connecting the old generator in the basement to an underground power matrix—the entire system a remnant from decades earlier) so Duragard gave Tiny Pete the first task of alerting the public, something the skinny young man took to with great aplomb.

The town has a system they use to send mass voicemails—usually warning residents of flooding—but he has to update the call list before using it, just to make sure everyone's included. Finally!—he gets to utilize his knowledge of MS Excel. He gladly downloads a spreadsheet of every phone number on the Sugar Pointe registry, all the contact info on the town's Disaster Warning database, even the cell numbers set to receive School Closure Notifications; after combining them on a single spreadsheet, he excel's the hell out of it and easily erases the duplicates and updates the system with his new calling list. The young man records a message asking residents to board up their homes and stay inside, and the system takes over from there, like a telemarketer—dialing a number, playing the message, and then disconnecting to do it again.

Adam and Chuck have a different job.

They've just finished cutting the bottoms out of two thick plastic cups.

„You two gonna be ready?” Duragard asks. He refuses to single them out because it's impossible to tell which is Adam and which is Chuck. Both are similar in size, with large, muscular frames (though Adam is two inches shorter than Chuck), and they're wearing the same things: tan jackets with neon hazard strips and a turtleneck, full-body protective gear underneath, boots, gloves, smoke mask, and helmet. One of them is saying something from under the mask but it's too muffled to make out.

„You don't need yer masks on yet.”

Adam and Chuck lift up their masks, exposing their faces.

„Are you thure thith'll work?” Chuck asks. His lisp and under-bite are the only differences between the two men, as far as Duragard can tell.

„Nah, it might not work. We may be heading into certain death—no way to be sure.”

The two men stare at him, speechless.

Tommy's on the other side of the empty garage, leaned against a table and talking on the phone. His conversation is so hushed that Duragard didn't even notice him until he moved. He's woken his child to wish him well and ask that, for the time being, his son take over as the man of the house—eat his veggies, listen to his mother, treat others as he wishes to be treated, don't judge anyone for being different, and any other life advice he can think of. His son is too tired and young to understand and he just yawns, “Lu-yah.” Tommy wishes his wife well, and promises to take her out for an entire night, promises to treat her mother better, promises to listen and write every important date on a calendar...

Every other sentence, he reminds her that he loves them dearly.

„Where's his family at?” Duragard asks.

„They're in San Antonio,” Adam answers.

„Why so far?”

„This was the only job he could find so, he didn't have much choice.”

„I think he's trying to get them to move here.”

Duragard smirks at the man's speech impediment before taking one last glance around. The garage is vacant since the fire truck's still in Duragard's neighborhood (and totally destroyed, what with four melted tires, its dense web cocoon, and several dozen fuzzy occupants). Without the massive truck in the way, the space feels more like an unused warehouse than a firehouse garage. The absence of the fire truck's vibrant red further emphasizes the sterile white of the walls and floor and ceiling, obnoxiously so.

*It's time, the end draws near...*

## **Initializing**

Inside the lignite mine, the short tunnel was lined with metal gun racks on either side, each rack holding a dozen rifles—sniper rifles and hunting rifles and assault rifles, in varying calibers. Past the racks was a large piece of plywood displaying several dozen handguns, from a WWII Browning to a silver-shimmering Desert Eagle and nearly every gun in-between. The showmanship was incredible, as well, each handgun level and hung on two hooks, with a black outline traced on the wood so each had its own designated spot. Three wooden crates were stacked on the floor below the handguns, each of them marked with one black word: EXPLOSIVES. Two 30 gallon drums of gasoline were on either side of the hazmat suits; more boxes were scattered on top and in front and next to the industrial drums, all of them containing some exotic weapon—grenade launcher, 50 cal. machine gun parts, harpoon gun, and pretty much anything else one could use to lethally harm another human being. It was as if the tunnel had led through a back door into some small nation's reserve armory.

Matthew giggled with excitement.

Duragard looked upon his treasures proudly.

And Tommy... well, he was shocked.

„You know,” explained Duragard, briefly, „just in case we need to overthrow a tyrannical government.”

„Yeah, bear arms—rawr.”

Matthew scratched at the air like a meager cat.

Duragard sighed.

„It's not 'bear arms' like a grizzly bear's arms, it's 'the right to bare arms'. How many times...”

Matthew had already stopped paying attention.

A small notepad hung on a hook in the top right corner of the wooden handgun board, a pencil tucked in its plastic ring binding, and Duragard grabbed it. For a solid five minutes he scribbled, page after page, note after note. Sometimes he'd draw something. He made fourteen lists that were almost identical. Every so often he'd stop and ask a seemingly random question: „Enola's tank is what, 500 gallons?” „Sugar Pointe is approximately what, 7 miles from here? And it's on a westward slope?” „Firefighters, how many you think are left? They still at the

firehouse?” „Anyone know the wind m.p.h. tonight?” „What temperature does glass melt?” Tommy and Matthew did their best to answer him but most of it was outside their depth. (It also seemed that Duragard had a fairly steady grasp of everything he was asking.) Finishing his notes, both Tommy and Matthew expected a litany of commands; instead, Duragard had just one:

„Set the modified M9s in the main tunnel for us to grab on the way back.”

He pointed to two piles of metal canisters.

Tommy bent down to pick one up and was surprised to find the canisters firmly held together. It also had straps, in case someone wanted to wear the entire thing as a backpack, though he wasn't sure why someone would do that. He turned it over, put his ear against it, shook it—

„Whoa!—it's a flamethrower!”

Duragard had panicked, then expounded.

The M9 was a type of flamethrower used during the Vietnam War—though these two were „completely different than the original models.” Duragard had, years ago, personally modified the two M9 flamethrowers: he tweaked the pressure regulator to increase the width of the fire spray; and he adjusted the butane tank for longer bursts; and he replaced the fuel tanks with bigger, lighter containers so there'd be less time refilling them; among other changes, some of which he didn't even remember.

Since the modifications, he had only used one of them.

Once.

*And it worked... all those years ago... sooooo, it's proolly fine...*

At the firehouse, as he straps the modified M9 to his back, Duragard wishes that he'd done more field tests—or, at the very least, he hopes that the one on his back is the one that had had the successful field test. Adam removes his gloves and helps slip Duragard's arms through the straps and pulls the flamethrower tanks over his shoulders like a backpack. There's a hose-like tube attaching the tanks to the flamethrower itself, which had also been modified to look more like a prohibition-era Thompson submachine gun (an alteration that served no purpose other than to make it look super badass, which it definitely did). The flamethrower is a glistening black, with front and back handles and two triggers: the back trigger releases the fuel and the front ignites it.

Both M9s are full of fuel and butane.

The AA batteries inside the front handles had been replaced.

*Everything... should be in working order...*

Tommy walks over. He had been wearing the second hazmat suit but, once they got to the firehouse, he changed into the same outfit as Adam and Chuck—tan jacket with neon hazard strips and a turtleneck, full-body protective gear underneath, boots, gloves, smoke mask, and helmet. He pleads with Duragard to change out of the hazmat suit and into something more appropriate for battling fire but the old man shushes him, reassuring everyone that the hazmat suit is flame retardant and properly insulated to protect from immense heat—not to mention, it has a fan along the hip, recycling air and regulating his body temp,

and, on top of it all, the whole getup is made of a tougher, lighter material than what they're wearing.

In a rare display of humor, Tommy keeps moving to Duragard's side while the old man goes on and on about his amazing hazmat suit, forcing Duragard to turn his entire body in tiny baby-steps (*pit-pit-pit*) to keep sight of Tommy, as the rectangular view from the hazmat's cylindrical head doesn't have any peripheral vision. Adam and Chuck snigger but Duragard doesn't notice, still going on and on. „I paid top dollar to make sure...” Tommy pretends to check something, moving further to the side; and Duragard baby-steps, following with a *pit-pit-pit* „...this suit'd survive everythin' short of a nuclear winter—and I have a bomb shelter...” Tommy bends down to check the laces on his boots; Duragard has to bend at the waist to look down „...in those tunnels for that occasion, so...” and Tommy stands and walks all the way around Duragard, who follows with a *pit-pit-pit-pit-pit-pit*—there's no real reason from him to circle the old man, and Tommy does it for no other reason than to confuse him, which works.

But the fun and games are over...

Tommy lifts the modified M9 flamethrower off the floor and asks for help. Adam obliges, strapping the metallic pack over his shoulders and onto his back, something Tommy does reluctantly. It's heavy, weighed down by flammable contents in compressed containers. Jet fuel and butane—the thought that he's wearing an explosive on his back actually terrifies him. He would've gladly passed the job to someone else but no one volunteered, and it wasn't something to force on someone. Like so much before, this task had fallen to him and, for that reason, he'll do it.

Plus, if that old man could risk it all to save this town then so could he.

Adam and Chuck put their gloves back on and disappear for a moment. Both men return, each carrying a heavy duty, ratcheting hydrant wrench in their right hand. The two men rest the weight of the metal tool against the top of their right shoulders as they tuck a thick plastic cup inside their jacket pockets.

Tommy closes his eyes...

*Tonight, my responsibility is to set fire to Sugar Pointe, Texas.*

He opens his eyes, ready.

The four men stand side-by-side facing the giant, white garage door.

Duragard holds his hands out as if steadying himself.

„Is the ground moving?”

The other men share quizzical looks.

*Pat-pat-pat...pat-pat-pat-pat.*

Duragard recognizes that he must look crazy.

„Never mind. Guess Plan C didn't work.”

The three firefighters pull their gas masks down over their faces.

The tommy gun-like flamethrower is holstered against the side of the tank on Tommy's back, a modification Duragard had forgotten about until he sees it. Tommy reaches back and pulls the flamethrower up and over his head. (It reminds him of the weapons in a funny movie he'd seen with his son, where the heroes used backpack-lasers to catch ghosts.) Now that it's in his hands, the weapon

does look and feel pretty badass, which surprises Tommy a little—it's solid, sturdy, and almost feels like a real gun.

Duragard looks down at his weapon, then the garage door.

„Time check.”

Adam looks down at the watch overtop the clothing on his wrist. He says something indistinguishable under the mask. No one moves. Duragard turns (*pit pit*) and glares. Adam realizes the issue, lifts up his mask, and repeats.

„3:00 a.m.”

„We have twenty minutes until Matt's here.”

„We ready?” Duragard asks, turning to look at Adam and Chuck.

They nod.

*Pit-pit-pit-pit-pit.*

He stares into Tommy's eyes.

„We ready?”

Tommy nods.

*Pit-pit-pit.*

„Let's remind these bastards why you don't mess with Texas.”

The garage door opens.

*Friends* by Led Zeppelin begins...

## **Phase One — Fire**

Tommy heads down High Street, with Adam following behind.

Duragard heads down Gay Street, with Chuck following behind.

They're a block apart, following parallel to one another, walking forward. The firehouse is about six blocks from the hospital, and another six from the Town Square—their destination. The flamethrowers spark to life, revving like engines. There's a joy that comes with the flicker at the end of the tommy gun flamethrower, a sense of power, of finality. They're ready to burn the bastards block by block... but, in the blocks leading away from the firehouse, they don't encounter a single spider, no webs, no shadowy movement, nothing—no sign of the little assholes until they see the hospital.

Like a plumb of cotton-candy, the hospital is ensconced in an opaque net.

They don't have radios, and neither duo can talk to the other, but neither group needs an update, nor do they need a command. Their sole objective is to burn the webs, burn the spiders, burn every one of these bastard until they're floating ash—then and only then will Duragard let them leave, let them float away.

*Roll in as clouds but you're gonna leave as embers, as dust.*

The men flash their flames into the air, testing the distance, the strength, the blow-back. Duragard's impressed with his handiwork (even if it had been in his slightly-younger days). The flamethrowers are weighted but not too heavy, and the tanks are filled but not cumbersome, and the flames twist out the barrel-esque

nozzle in jets of spiraling deep orange and vibrant red, spraying out a dozen feet, then back down when the trigger is released. All of the lights in the borough of Sugar Pointe are out, snuffed, black, and so the flames are their flashlights. As both groups cross a block closer to the hospital, they can see one another by the flames licking into the sky like heaving, hulking dragons in the darkness.

The spiders are in that last block before the hospital.

The men let loose.

Fire flashes, trees and awnings burn, tires melt.

It isn't until the collateral damage starts that the back-up firefighters rush into action. Keeping a good distance behind the flamethrower, Adam is first—the store front to a haircuttery caught fire and continues to blaze. He runs to a nearby hydrant, removing the nozzle cap on the side and then opens the flow valve. Water gushes from the hydrant, splashing all over the sidewalk, and he leans beside the violent jet, shoving the thick plastic cup in front—and then, directing the spray through shifting the aim of the cup, he uses it as a makeshift hose. (There just weren't enough hoses, nor enough time, to set up a fire hose on each block, so they're improvising.) Adam puts out the storefront and shuts off the hydrant just in time to see a second fire in need of his attention—spreading from a tree to a car.

One block over, it's the same situation.

And, as they get closer to the hospital, and webs are more and more prominent, the fires spread faster, wider, larger.

The spiders don't burn, no—they're retreating. The warning is everywhere. They sense the danger, even blocks away. Intense fluctuations in pressure, heat, the ranks retreating. Those in the surrounding blocks are the weakest, the scouts that stay at a distance, advancing only on prey that flees or anyone stupid enough to approach. But now, this time, they're only jumping away—running, leaping into things as if blind.

It's their goddamn turn to panic.

The men close in on the rear ER entrance of the hospital. The awning, ambulances outside (so covered their flashing lights aren't visible), even the grass—it's all hidden under a fresh layer of fluorescent white. It only takes a few sprays from the flamethrower and the edges of the webbing ignite—and shoot forward, spreading toward the building. Duragard continues flashing his flame, searching the dark street around them, keeping an eye out for any spiders trying to flank them—which there are, many of them hiding under cars parked along the block.

*They're covered in spiders*, he realizes.

Chuck, standing behind him, has a bunch of spiders crawling over him but his outfit is too thick for him to notice. Duragard can't really look down but he assumes there's a ton of spiders on him, since the goddamn hazmat suit isn't slick at all.

Tommy watches the fire spread with a deep sense of regret—it's a brushfire, the flames moving faster, brighter and quicker and so intense that the men have to back up, then back up more, then back up to the end of the block. Duragard has stopped checking behind them to pay attention to the massive fire growing in front of them. Flame sprints across the grass and follows the silk, enveloping the hospital, starting at the base, from the grass and bushes and straight up the walls

in a minute flat, so tall and radiant that it could be seen from the atmosphere. They're unable to help, unable to stop it from growing, the fire too large to be quelled by a hydrant and plastic cup, even two or three or four hydrants—hell, they couldn't stop it with two fire departments and several teams of men.

This had been involuntary.

The people inside the hospital wouldn't be able to breathe...

Just like that, the plan failed—

## **Phase Two — Water**

The gauges are good. Fuel is mostly filled. The tanks are full. The engine starts and Enola hops, hops, hops on the waves of the Falcon Lake Reservoir before lifting into the night air to soar amongst the clouds. It's calm up there, in the consolidated PBY Catalina. Matthew stares out the window, the control pulled against his potbelly but sliding left in a turn eastward, toward Sugar Pointe. He's got an old fashioned pilot's hat covering the top of his amazing mullet and silver-framed goggles over his eyes, more evidence of his terrible fashion sense since neither article is useful. He flips a switch.

Talk radio fills the plane's cabin.

„Feminism allows unattractive women access to the mainstream. It gives them a voice. It's brought about the age of the feminazi. These women, all they want is to fornicate—sluts, if I may be so bold. They're all sluts. They thirst for men and they don't care about consequence—why would they? They can get as many abortions as they want. ‚You want a choice?‘ I ask these women—and they're everywhere, they are—‚You want a choice about your body?‘ No they don't. They want attention. They want sex. They protest what they actually want—they want to be sexually harassed.”

Matthew nods his head, with an amen.

„There's a reason that men make up eighty percent of the House, and eighty percent of the Senate. We don't bleed. We don't get moody. We're level-headed. Not to mention, ninety percent of Congress is white. We're not acting on immigrant needs or minority needs. We're not a shifting tide—no! Who better to make laws about women's reproductive rights than the learned, wise, white males of Congress? No one. It makes complete sense. There's no argument against it—literally no argument that holds water.”

Matthew nods his head, with an amen.

„And that's why we need to shut down the government until the baby killing factories get shut down—I don't care how much healthcare they provide to low-income women. You kill babies, you lose. Shut down the government until we get the cuts we need. Cut down...”

It goes on and on.

Matthew gives a vehement nod, screaming, „Shut that bitch down!—tha hell?” Fire looms in the distance, high enough to be visible miles and miles ahead, a beacon of orange in the middle of complete blackness. He curses under his breath and prays he isn't late (though he did get there as fast as he could), and he



decreases his altitude, flying steady. The plane levels out a few hundred feet over the ground. The building is coming up quickly, a bonfire in the darkness of the town, one nearly a block wide and six or seven stories tall—it's the only landmark that he's even reach Sugar Pointe.

Matthew rests a finger on the tank release—and flicks the switch in the seconds before passing the building. 500 gallons of water pour from the bottom of the water-bomber and drench the blocks leading up to the blaze, and then (he's shocked to recognize the hospital) the massive fire is extinguished. Swerving the plane in a large, westward circle, heading back toward Falcon Lake Reservoir, Matthew tunes back in to the radio.

On the ground, Duragard and Tommy are in the midst of an anxiety attack as, not a moment too soon, the water engulfs the blocks leading toward the hospital. Both men cover their flamethrowers as tons of water gets dump on them, the buildings, the hospital, everything, everywhere, from four blocks back to the blocks beyond the hospital.

The fire's out not two minutes after the hospital's been consumed.

„That was lucky,” Duragard yells from inside his banana-yellow hazmat suit.

Chuck, who's near, can't hear a word and just nods in agreement.

Spiders are in the grass and on the ground, wounded, disoriented, legs broken from the water, bodies burned by the fire. Those still alive twitch and attempt to jump, or crawl, flee however they can, but Duragard is careful to burn them, burn them all, even the dead ones. Tommy circles the building on the other side, doing the same—the spider's fuzz singeing, their legs curling black, their torsos popping. The exterior of the hospital, on both sides, is a scorched black, but the fire destroyed the entombing web—and everything in it.

On the other side of the block, Tommy and Adam are already on High Street and making their way toward the park. Duragard and Chuck follow suit. The blocks are now imbued with foot upon foot of webbing—except, now, the silk is wet and doesn't burn as quickly. As they burn the blankets of web stretching from street to car to roof and back down, the material doesn't catch and spread—no, it wilts into nothing but steam, dissipating like heated cellophane, splitting and shrinking into microbes. The remaining spiders, the ones that hadn't been wounded—that are still capable—they continue to retreat, running back to the nest in the Town Square—but they're stopped in place.

The ground is shaking.

### **Phase Three — Earth**

They had been deep inside the lignite mine when Tommy's phone somehow found reception long enough to buzz with a missed call from his wife. Duragard and Matthew were ahead of him, arguing about the merits of creationism as they neared a wall of metal at the end of the main tunnel. Tommy stopped (the men didn't notice) and tried to return the call. His reception was low, zero bars, but every so often one bar would pop up—and he found that, in one of the many

tunnels branching off from the main, his reception was slightly better, even if it meant he had to stand in the dark.

„I’m just sayin’, it’s dumb,” Duragard was arguing, this being one of the few points of contention between him and Matthew.

„It ain’t dumb—there’s evidence. Dinosaurs walked with humans. Fact.”

The two men kept going, their voices fading, as Tommy paced in the darkness of a side tunnel. He didn’t venture too far in, as it was pitch black, only far enough to see if the tunnel would increase his reception—it didn’t. His phone did softly ring, even without reception, except it was an unfamiliar, peculiar ringtone. It reminded him of his son, as a baby. The phone didn’t light up, either. And the sound was closer to the ground than his hand. In fact, it sounded much more... like...a...

He had wandered into a den of rattlesnakes.

„Earth can’t be four thousand years old, that ain’t impossible—it ain’t even make sense. If that was true, what in blaze’s do we have radiocarbon dating for? That a conspiracy from the 40s?—to hide what? Just plum silly.”

Duragard was annoyed but he enjoyed the verbal joust with his friend.

„Who even knows what that is?! I think the whole thing is a conspiracy,” Matthew retorted, satisfied with his answer.

„Who knows what what is?”

Matthew gave him a blank stare.

„What you jus’ up’n said, ray...”

„Radiocarbon dating?”

Matthew nodded.

„It’s...it’s the measure of decaying radioactive carbon isotopes.”

Matthew scoffed.

„Sounds like hocus pocus wizard nonsense—which is EXACTLY why we should be teachin’ creationism in school. You ever measure a radiotactin carsotope?”

Even though he sounded stupid, Matthew had a point.

„No...”

In the tunnel behind them, Tommy straight leapt out of the side tunnel. In what could only be described as a spastic dance, he desperately hopped and kicked his legs and moved from side-to-side—a snake slithered out of the tunnel after him and he ran backwards. A tough guy, sure, but not that tough, and he was freaked out to high hell by the slinking creature, doing his damndest to out maneuver it. The snake was persistent, though, and it followed without much difficulty, pursuing him down the main tunnel, away from the two men.

Duragard and Matthew had no idea, too busy arguing. They had also reached the conclusion of the tunnel, which appeared to end in a wall of metal; however, it wasn’t, not exactly. It was Chugger, the Tunnel Boring Machine that had once dug the tunnel they’re standing in, and the many tunnels branching off behind them. Rounded, the side facing them was covered in gears and levers and switches and dials and gauges. It was still in good shape, even after all these years, due to Matthew’s diligent work.

The man with the potbelly and glorious mullet did, indeed, do a good job on his many odd tasks, working as a sort of back-alley handy-man for the town of Sugar Pointe and many others in the tri-county area. Shortly after an honorable discharge from the US Air Force, he had been penniless and living in the town’s

homeless shelter, along with many other military vets, when a wealthy Texan named Raul Hulio took him under his wing. This wealthy, idealistic entrepreneur explained the world to the then 23 year old, and he bought the young man a trailer, and he asked him to do a favor, just one favor, that's how it started—watch the mine... and, well, keep the TBM oiled, as the piece of machinery was worth millions. So two favors. And, in exchange, Matthew could own the piece of land around the mine, tax-free, and live on the property, in the trailer, and the deal even included a monthly stipend (of 40 hours a week below minimum wage, since he was technically a contractor). This extra cash was lucky since he'd have probably starved to death without it, as his only other source of income was a monthly disability check. Since Matthew had been a pilot in the Air Force, Hulio bought him Enola—an amphibious aircraft—on their fifth consecutive year together. This was in lieu of a raise, of course, something Matthew had only received twice in his years of servitude (and only in increments of one dollar); and, the plane came with a new task, as well. It was to stay in the Falcon Lake Reservoir, where Matthew would fill it's tank and transport water, as often as necessary, to wealthier areas when they were suffering through a draught.

The two men looked over the machine called Chugger.

„Does it still work?”

Duragard hadn't really seen it up close in some time, uncertain if he even remembered how the damned thing worked.

„Yup,” nodded Matthew, proudly, flicking his mullet over his shoulder.

„How long will it run?”

Matthew checked the gas gauge.

„It's got a quarter-tank so, probably... I don't know, two hours, tops. We can put more gas in it, if'n—”

„No, two hours should be fine. That'll be, what? Four in the morning?”

Duragard turned back to ask Tommy what time it was—only to find him gone. He looked left and right, as if the Mexican were being sneaky and hiding behind some nearby corner, even though there weren't any corners to hide behind.

„Where'd he—”

Matthew's question was cut off by two echoing gunshots.

Duragard and Matthew got low.

„It's the National Guard!—Muslims!”

Duragard shook his head.

Two more gunshots, then two more, then one for good measure, and then silence. Once the gunfire had quieted long enough, the two men returned to the cache of weapons in the adjacent tunnel to find Tommy, out of breath and sitting on his knees, in the dirt, with a dead rattlesnake sprawled out in front of him. It was riddled with bullets and blown to pieces.

The two men stare at this a moment before Duragard turns to Matthew.

„You really never took chemistry in school?”

„It wasn't on the equivalency.”

Both men head back toward Chugger.

„Okay, so, assuming for one second that dinosaurs and men were livin' together on Earth, what about...”

The men turned Chugger on shortly after that.

Matthew started the engine but stood back to let Duragard operate the machine. *It's been awhile...* the old man thought, uneasily.

Almost at random, he reached out and pulled a lever—  
The machine shut down.

Duragard cursed.

It took a good fifteen minutes of this before Chugger's face was spinning and the wheels in back were pushing the beast forward. It was self-sustaining after that, continuing forward a bit at a time. It was so slow that, by the time the hospital had been doused with water, Chugger had only traveled four feet deeper—but now, just as it had so many years before, the ground below the town shakes as if there's a small earthquake, because Chugger's hitting against something that reverberates through the surface soil for miles. It's the reason the tunnel was shut down, and it stayed closed after that since there was no way to circumvent the issue—hell, geologists weren't even sure what it was exactly, if it had something to do with a fault line or some unknown danger or what. All that was certain then, however, appears to be just a true today: if Chugger's running in that tunnel, the ground's gonna tremble for miles. The tremors aren't that bad, per se; they're more like an unending aftershock, a tiny reverberation that doesn't really cease.

They've incited a perpetual earthquake.

Duragard is again moving down Gay Street, Chuck behind him.

Tommy is one block parallel, on High Street, with Adam behind him.

The blocks are dry once more, as Enola hadn't spread water that far.

They're closing in on the Town Square.

The shaking Earth discombobulates Duragard more and he wobbles, accidentally spraying fire in a hundred and eighty degrees—from in front of his feet to over his head. Chuck rushes beside him, supporting him, keeping him on his feet. Duragard gives an appreciative nod and gets his bearing. It's not just the shaking earth but also a combination of the hazmat suit, and exhaustion, and old age, and more, even. He's tiring, losing strength and energy.

*Stay strong, the mission is nearing an end.*

The quake may have thrown Duragard off a moment but the spiders are destitute. Some are frozen, unable to move, and some leap into walls, cars, trees—but, landing, they move sideways and not forward, disoriented, imbalanced, and without webbing. Those that had been climbing over Chuck fall to the ground.

The spiders are off their bodies and defenseless.

„Checkmate, you sons' a bitches,” Duragard growls.

And, for the moment, he's right.

The spiders are screwed. They can't run or jump or hide. Now, they're stuck in place—no more webs, no more attacks, no more. The flames stick to their hairy brown bodies and the heat instantly blinds their eight eyes. Their legs wither. Their bodies explode from the sudden temperature change; or, they screech and cook to a crisp. Duragard and Tommy also light up the silk webs, which burn quickly once again. Adam and Chuck hang back, opening hydrants to direct the high-pressure streams toward any burning trees or stores or power lines or cars, anything possibly explosive or dangerous or unsafe. They leave some fires burning,

as they don't have the time or maneuverability to put out everything. Enola will catch it all on the next roll by.

Standing in the intersection at end of the final block, on both streets, the men stand before a sheer wall of webbing as high as the buildings on either side. It's dense and filled with death and Lord knows what else—the goddamn nest. Duragard turns to see, a block over, Tommy facing him. They flick flames into the air so that they can clearly see one another in the darkness. Even though they're unable to speak to each other, both of them share the same thought. The men point their weapons forward—*fuck you, spiders*—and they burn it, they set fire to the whole goddamn nest. Like the hospital before it (only much, much faster this time), the flames eat into the cocoon around the Town Square and spread in every direction outward, every line of silk a fuse lifting the fire to the heights of the web and higher—and the flames head deeper, farther, lower, swirling around the trees, the street and sidewalk and grass on fire. Their separate flames join together near the edge of the park, forming a giant inferno of red and orange. Cars lining the street are instantly engulfed. One explodes near Duragard and the concussive blast knocks him to his bad knee—he howls in pain. Chuck is, again, at his side, lifting him to his feet, and the heavily built firefighter attempts to pull Duragard further away from the fire but the old man refuses. He wants to watch it, every second of it. The firestorm is amazing, beautiful even. It swells and swallows everything, so much so that the flames are solid from the ground up twenty, thirty feet. The surrounding houses and buildings, including the Town Hall, are covered in a climbing, relentless fire, their rooftops ablaze that scatters in the direction of the webs. Windows shatter. Black smoke wafts into the air.

Duragard lifts his flamethrower, as there's movement nearby—

In the light of the Town Square bonfire, he can see people.

The townspeople that had been hiding in their homes are now forced to flee entirely, once and for all, as first there was an everlasting earthquake and now their homes are consumed by flames. The old man wants to apologize for burning their houses down but, on the other hand, it'll get rid of the spiders—and Enola will be back to pour more water over everything. The townspeople don't even seem upset. The spiders aren't attacking—no, the spiders are burning.

They cheer.

Everyone stays behind Duragard but keeps to the middle of the intersection, as there could be anything in the shadows around them—except (and they don't know this), since the ground continues to shake, no spiders can attack. Duragard can see a block over, can see by the light of the fire that townspeople are collecting behind Tommy, as well, watching the nest burn with glee.

The fire burns over half an hour.

The crowd grows as people come from other directions.

Duragard sneaks away and walks a block over to Tommy.

„Let's head to the edge of town, make sure we kick the last of these bastards out.” Tommy signals that he'll go straight and that Duragard can keep down Gay Street but the old man quiets him down. „We'll go together. Circle around the square and comb the town, block by block. Push them north if we can, west if we have to. Okay?”

Tommy nods.

Duragard grins.

Not ten minutes after they leave, Enola passes overhead once more, dumping five hundred gallons of water over the Town Square and drenching everyone still watching, as well as all the surrounding buildings. *Job well done*, Matthew congratulates himself, flicking back his mullet. He makes a wide turn, heading back towards the Falcon Lake Reservoir. For the moment, he loses focus of the talk radio, as he's too busy pondering if maybe, just maybe, humans once had dino-pets—and if maybe he had a pet Stegosaurus in a former life...

Shortly after, the tremors stop and the world becomes still once more.

A peaceful, deep blue dawn approaches as the two men walk up and down the blocks, using up the last of their fuel to burn stragglers and flush out dark areas. Shadows fade with the coming daylight and the villainous vermin become easier to spot. Duragard is exhausted, sure, but to him, this is a victory lap. Spiders are still in the town, obviously, and not every single one is dead or gone. Some still scour the sewers and hide in houses and they could still be anywhere, really—but they've lost. They won't be able to leave, to rebuild, to grow. The vast majority is either burned or gettin' pushed out into the desert. Since the ground isn't shaking, the survivors have no trouble jumping anymore. The flamethrowers are running low so the flames aren't as wide, or as intense. As they near the beginning of the desert, a group of remaining stragglers are herded together in the middle of the street. The flames lick at their heels as the vermin do their best to survive—running, jumping, leaping away from the fire, trying to run. Duragard and Tommy leisurely stroll behind, keeping the leftover nest in one lump sum. When the spiders try to climb under something, or up something, or behind or into something, they're immediately scorched off and either die or rejoin the rest.

The two men have become spider wranglers.

They reach the desert and stop at the town's edge.

With the last of the fuel, both men do their best to burn up the last of them but they aren't successful, the throwers now running on fumes. There's no worry, though, and they holster their weapons.

The spiders keep going, keep running, disappearing into the heat and void of the Texas desert. Duragard had wanted to push them south, back towards Mexico, but it would've been a much farther, longer trip in the opposite direction. North's fine, though. They're not just spider wranglers but the leaders of a spider relocation program, apparently. He disconnects the head portion of his hazmat suit and Tommy pulls his mask off and both men stare out into the desert.

Duragard laughs to himself.

„The homos and Jews in San Antonio can deal with 'em now.”

Tommy chuckles, then thinks a moment—

„Qué?”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Cut to black.*

*Cue „Don't Carry It All” by the Decemberists.*

